![Child Care Aware of America logo]

The Search for Child Care

Summary of Findings from Family Voices Focus Group: *Mississippi*

September 2016

Background and Objectives

In July and August 2016, Child Care Aware® of America undertook qualitative research on the consumer purchase decision for child care. Focus groups were conducted in four locations, in partnership with Child Care Resource Referral Agencies (CCR&Rs) and other similar state agencies who organized parents to attend the discussion groups. Information obtained through the focus groups was intended to gain the perspective of families to inform the development of a child care consumer education resource suite.

The primary goal of the Family Voices focus groups funded by the W. K. Kellogg foundation and described herein was to obtain a deep understanding of the child care consumer information families from diverse backgrounds need and desire along with the best vehicles and formats for child care consumer information delivery and receipt. Focus group results will be paired with information gleaned from literature reviews, a parent poll and key informant interviews with child care and health and human service professionals to develop a child care consumer education resource suite and boost understanding of best practices for the application of child care consumer education targeting tactics for diverse populations by child care resource and referral agencies.

Methods and Participant Composition

The research sought to better understand how families go about shopping for child care, the factors that matter in their decision-making, and how they gather and evaluate information about possible child care providers. Respondents were guided through an activity that structured their thinking about the definition of a child care consumer and were probed about the key points of the child care consumer pathway. Among the areas explored were:

- What it was like to initiate a search for child care;
- Information and resources respondents found;
- How the information and resources found were applied and what role they played in securing a provider;
- Ideas about the support families need when transitioning to a new child care arrangement.

In Mississippi the Early Learning Network assisted in the coordination and hosting of the focus group. The focus group was composed of 12, mostly rural parents. This group contained a range of ethnic and racial backgrounds and included three parents providing licensed in-home child care, young mothers and parents with children with special needs.

The focus group was facilitated by staff from the Family & Community Engagement department of Child Care Aware® of America (CCAoA).

Due to the small sample size, non-random selection and qualitative nature of focus group research, the findings reported here cannot be projected to the larger population. They are a snapshot of the insights gained during the focus groups. Throughout this report, verbatim quotes from the research participants appear in italics and are used to illustrate the findings.

Insights from Families: Mississippi

1. Finding child care is a top-of-mind consideration for most parents interviewed and anecdotally, some parents in Mississippi mentioned that child care was a decision made after their child was born while others started searching while pregnant.

2. The search begins with word-of-mouth. The decision to put a child with a provider is an emotional one, and recommendations from trusted family and friends go a long way to raising a parent's comfort level.

3. Word-of-mouth is not restricted to in-person conversations. Social media plays an important role for parents when searching and reviewing options for child care in that it is another way to get recommendations for options from trusted sources and to gather feedback about options they are considering. In fact, Facebook was the single most mentioned online resource in the discussion. Digital word-of-mouth on child care was happening through their own social media pages as well as social media groups they've joined. However, there were no mentions of using a provider's sponsored social media page to get information.

4. Most parents who turned to online resources such as Google and Yelp in their most recent search for child care and were generally unsatisfied with the results. As far as they know there is no single, curated website at which to get information about providers in their area. They use Google and Yelp to find providers and look at online reviews to weed poor ones out. However, while they are using online sources, they don't trust the information very much

5. At the end of the day, parents say there is no substitution for going to the site and speaking with the care provider in-person. Respondents in Mississippi place a high value on one-to-one conversations with other parents as well. That said, across all locations included in the study, there was a strong desire for web-based information on facilities to be consistent, thorough, vetted and reliable.

Detailed Findings

Timing and Triggers

- **The search for childcare often begins while mothers are still pregnant.**
  Many respondents in Mississippi began to search for childcare options while still
  pregnant, whether to be more prepared to go back to work or to get a head start
  on waitlists. Most respondents agreed with the following parent:

  "When I first found out I was pregnant."

- However, some parents in Mississippi waited until their child was born. Some
  parents assumed they couldn't afford care and made other plans with family
  members or arranged for other less expensive options.

  *"I waited until the last minute… I didn't really think about it until my mom had
  mentioned something to me."*

Gathering Initial Information

- **The first step in search for a provider starts with word-of-mouth from
  friends and family.** Parents in Mississippi said their first step in finding the right
  child care arrangement was to ask around to friends and family. Social media
  placed a role in widening word-of-mouth searching through Facebook, whether
  on personal pages or through groups on the site. The table below shows the
  number of mentions for each of these sources in Mississippi, compared to other
  cities included in the study.

	Kansas/ Missouri	Maine	California	Mississippi	Total for Each Source
Facebook	11	7	23	8	**49**
Yelp	3	4	14	4	**25**
Google	8	1	12	6	**27**
Internet	6	5	9	10	**30**
Total Online Mentions in each Discussion	**28**	**17**	**58**	**28**	

- Representative comments from participants include:

"I just posted on my personal Facebook and asked if anybody knew of daycares. Then once I got a list of daycare names, I just went from there. So, I started by asking friends and family online."

"I researched different child care websites."

"My mom bought me the 'What to Expect When You're Expecting' book and it really helped my search."

"Word of mouth. I knew somebody who had a facility/daycare and they knew another person who set me up with my current facility because they were full."

Factors in Decision

- **Online is a good place to start, but does not give sufficient information to make a final decision.** Even though parents in Mississippi listed different trusted resources, there was no substitute to going into the facility themselves to look around and ask questions. Online resources were generally a place to start for many parents, but in the end, trust is low among those types of resources.

  "I always go in myself. Somebody else's experience might not be the same as mine, you can't really know for sure until you see it yourself. I always go straight to the source."

  "I don't think I would recommend anything [to other parents]. You can Google and compile a list and tell them all these things, but if I'm going to bring my child somewhere, I need to see it, feel it, and know what's going on. I can't get that online or from someone else."

- **Online reviews help identify and weed out facilities**. When parents see a negative review online, it makes them less inclined to visit the site themselves. Positive reviews were helpful when trying to decide which facilities deserved further investigation.

  "I just googled daycare in my area and they popped up. I went through each one and saw their reviews and then I would visit in person."

- **Beyond price, parents in Mississippi want to know about the structure of their child's day. They were particularly focused on the caregiver qualifications and child-caregiver ratios.** Parents also are interested in the upkeep of the facility/provider space, curriculum, structure of the day, and so on. The environment (cleanliness) of the facility is especially important to parents in helping them to feel comfortable leaving their child there for the day. Parents in Mississippi also were very interested in licensing and the instruction the teachers/care-givers have received.

"Curriculum."

"Safety and how many children they accept at once."

"The child-teacher ratio."

"If they are licensed. Also, training the teachers may have had. I want to know that before they are keeping my child."

"Turnover - the rate that families come and go. Also, teachers, you don't want a facility where the teachers are constantly leaving. You want your kids to know them."

"How long the teachers have been working in child care. If they are CPR certified, if they do background checks on the people that work there."
"I worked in a daycare facility one time for three days and I saw a baby crawling around with their mouth all over the floor, I'm very OCD so I make sure my baby's safe and clean."

Supporting Parents' Search

- **Parents want to hear about potential childcare facilities a multitude of ways, but direct in-person contact was among the most desirable.** While online resources have the advantage of convenience, in-person conversations are seen as best for being able to answer any questions parents have and getting a feel for the provider. Parents in Mississippi also wanted to hear from other parents who have direct experiences with a facility and mentioned that a "family night" could help parents feel more at ease with facilities.

  "I want to receive information directly from them. When we started looking for daycares, the one that I chose, the director was actually at the center and able to talk to me. I liked that she was there and overseeing things."

  "From a person who has their kid there. They can tell you their experience with the specific center."

  "I think family nights could help. Maybe at the local school, just so people could get all the information they need without being embarrassed."

Bottom Line Trust of Sources

- **Parents in all four cities said they trusted themselves and personal experiences the most; there is no one better qualified or capable of making this decision for them and their child.** In addition to themselves, parents also try to hear from their children on their experience with a facility. Outside of that,

parents trusted other family members and friends who may have had their children in the same facility.

"I trust family. Especially since my sister has a master's in social work so she can give me really good advice."

"I trust Care.com, one of my cousins uses it all the time and always has a good experience."

"Knowing somebody inside the facility. They can give you input on what's going on."

- **Although they may be looking at online resources, these are not genuinely trusted sources.** When asked to name the resources they trust least when making a decision about child care, online search and reviews were top of mind for most parents. Social media sites had mixed reviews depending on whether the information was coming from a "friend" or just an online group. Often in the discussion, when one participant mentioned skepticism about Facebook or other sources, there was a lot of head-nodding and general agreement.

"I would trust Facebook coming from friends, but not just a facility's Facebook page. They could put anything they want on there."

"Newspaper ads. The ads in there can be misleading with how they're worded. Sometimes you go to visit and it's nothing like what you read about."

- **At the end of the day, parents say they need to rely on their own judgment and the "feeling" they get from the provider and the facility.** Lack of trust can linger even after the decision to place a child with a provider, and some speak of the need for surprise visits to put their minds at ease.

"You can Google and compile a list, but as far as, if I'm going to bring my child somewhere, I need to see it, feel it, and know what's going on. It's really to compile your list, Google it, whatever you want to do, but go into that place, meet with the people that are going to take care of your baby."

Implications

The data gathered in the discussion with Mississippi families align with other research in that the search for quality child care is not easy and once found, availability and affordability are additional challenges. As with other consumer services, parents want to gather information, narrow down to a 'choice set' and have the ability to compare providers. They want to be able to 'shop' online, based on the providers' services (facility, curriculum, etc.) pricing and independent reviews. Their actual search and shopping experiences fall far short of these desires with heavy reliance on word-of-

mouth, looking near home and work, and personal visits. There is demand and opportunity for independent online child care resources.

For related research, read our Family Voices Driving Quality Choices white paper.

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