



FAMILY VOICES

Driving Quality Child Care Choices

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INTRODUCTION

Every week in the United States, nearly 11 million children younger than age 5 are in some type of child care arrangement. While all families with young children can benefit from having high-quality and affordable child care options, the ability to secure safe, healthy, developmentally appropriate care can be challenging, especially for families facing adverse situations. Families with low incomes, or who are otherwise vulnerable, experience significant barriers that limit their child care options. These barriers may be surmounted, however, when we determine the distinct child care information needs of families, the most effective places to meet, and the most respected child care information delivery vehicles to build shared knowledge of child care options.

In this paper, we reveal the comprehensive child care information needs of families facing vulnerabilities (defined herein as low-income, racial and ethnic minorities, families with children with special needs, families experiencing homelessness or linguistically diverse households), as relayed by families themselves and service providers who partner with families with young children. Early childhood system professionals, such as Child Care Resource and Referral (CCR&R) agencies and state health and human service agencies, also will gain insight into strategies to enhance their efforts to put families in the driver's seat of making the child care decision that best meets their needs and advances their family goals.

Background

An initial step to gaining a better understanding of pressing factors impacting the child care consumer information needs is to clarify the circumstances under which a family may be considered to be vulnerable, and potentially at risk for having limited access to child care information supports and quality early childhood program placement.

Families with Low Incomes

There is concern that families with low incomes are financially unable to access high-quality providers and benefit most from additional support to navigate the complex child care and social service support systems.

Due to cost constraints and child care urgency, the child care options for families with low incomes, indeed, often are limited. On average, parents with low incomes make child care decisions quickly.

As many as 41 percent of parents with low incomes make choices within one day (1) due to work/schedule demands and learn about their

child's provider from friends, family members and neighbors. This quick turnaround in child care decision making may be attributed to sheer circumstantial need, but also may be due to lack of awareness about no-cost child care search services such as that offered by CCR&Rs situated across the nation. A limited availability of time to search for child care not only may lead to limited knowledge of available options but also to a limited understanding of the quality of each option before making a selection.

Racial and Ethnic Minorities

Early Head Start, Head Start, and Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG)-supported early care and education programs serve families with diverse vulnerabilities. However, access to these programs is limited for many minority families. Findings from a 2016 Center for Law and Social Policy report demonstrate an opportunity to enhance awareness of such programs through consumer education. This report found that

Hispanic/Latino children had sharply less access to CCDBG-funded programs. Compared to 13 percent of all eligible children ages 0-13 and 21 percent of eligible Black children ages 0-13, only 8 percent of eligible Hispanic/Latino children are served through CCDBG. Because of the large number of state policies that impact access to subsidies it is possible that state processes and eligibility requirements make particular groups of children more or less likely to obtain child care assistance. No more than 6 percent of eligible children in any racial/ethnic group have access to Early Head Start. (2)

Families across the United States are facing a child care crisis. African American families especially are hard hit by the rising cost of child care and limited options for working families. The average annual cost of center-based child care for infants to 4 year-olds is \$10,408 (3), which amounts to 26 percent of the median income for a typical African American household. (4) African American parents are more likely to work yet they earn 61 percent less on average than non-Hispanic white families. (4) This information reveals the particular difficulties African American families may face when finding and utilizing child care. In addition, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, the majority of children under age 5 now is composed of what traditionally has been considered racial and ethnic minorities. (5) Non-Hispanic whites will cease to be the majority group by 2044. (5) Finding child care information for this growing family type will become a mounting issue for time to come.

Children with Special Needs

Families with children under age 5 who present special needs make up less than 1 percent of children under 5, but represent 4 percent of all the American population with disabilities. (6) It is difficult for families with children with special needs to find accommodating and regular child care, such as is more widely available to families whose children do not have special needs. Families may have difficulties finding beneficial resources simply based on the fact that their specific needs may not

be common and child care professionals may not be equipped to care for their child. Furthermore, families with children with special needs under the age of 5 face several other factors that may make their experience finding quality child care different. Children with special needs also are affected disproportionately by factors such as persistent “toxic” stress, extreme poverty, abuse and neglect, and severe maternal depression that can hinder the developing brain, leading to lifelong problems in learning, behavior, and physical and mental health. (7) High-quality early intervention services, however, can change a child’s developmental trajectory and improve outcomes for children, families and communities. As such, families with young children with special needs have a unique set of considerations and information needs that go into the process of finding quality child care.

Families Experiencing Homelessness

Approximately one in 19 children under 6 years old experiences homelessness and just 9 percent are held a spot in an Early Head Start, Head Start or other early childhood program funded through McKinney-Vento funds. These funds are mandated through CCDBG to prioritize the enrollment of young children experiencing homelessness. (9) Families experiencing homelessness have a particular set of needs, specific to their unique family situation, that



require the proper mix of supports and services. During periods of homelessness, young children monumentally benefit from a stable early learning environment. For young children in early childhood education, school provides a steady and secure place; helps them escape poverty, if only for a short time during their day; is a place where they can learn, grow and thrive; and allows parents to engage in job training and other activities that move them toward a stable family living situation.

There are numerous long- and short-term issues that are faced by families experiencing homelessness. In general, children who experience homelessness and frequently change schools tend to fall behind and are more likely to drop out of school before they graduate. (8) Families with children under age 5 who are experiencing homelessness face destabilizing housing situations and a host of other limited resources. As a result, accessing information suited to their unique situation and finding quality child care can be extremely difficult.

Young Children in Immigrant Families & Linguistically Diverse Households

Families with young children and at least one foreign-born parent are likely to be impeded by cultural differences, language and other barriers as they embark on their child care information and provider search. One in four children under age 6 live in households that speak a language other than English. (10) Children of immigrants are 25 percent of preschool-age children not in school. (11) While culture and family preferences may have significant influence on a family's decision to seek out-of-home child care, the child care consumer landscape for new American, refugee and other immigrant families certainly could be more equitable and accommodating for these diverse households.

Problem Statement

In light of the fragmented U.S. child care system, we sought to understand the following with respect to families facing vulnerabilities:

1. What are the child care information needs of families?
2. In what places do families presently seek out child care information?
3. In what contemporary and innovative ways may early childhood care and education system professionals reach and engage families?



Methods

To obtain a clear picture of the child care consumer information pathway families facing vulnerabilities take, and how family voices are the driving force behind quality child care choice, a team at Child Care Aware® of America conducted four phases of inquiry, all of which were undergirded by a Family Voices Advisory Group made up of a diverse group of families and child care system professionals. The four phases of inquiry included a literature review, four focus groups with family members, an online child care information parent poll and key informant interviews with various leaders of community capacity-building organizations, early childhood education programs, human service agencies and CCR&R agencies situated across the nation.

Literature Review

To inform our work, we embarked on a comprehensive review of more than 220 existing research articles, reports and census data related to vulnerable populations, consumer education, and family engagement within the early childhood care and education field. Information gathered from the literature review provided a springboard for the development of questions for a focus group moderator's guide, key informant interviews and child care information parent poll.

Focus Groups

In 2016, Child Care Aware® of America staff conducted four focus groups across the nation with 43 families from a diversity of demographics such as urban and rural, racial and ethnically diverse, impoverished, homeless, dual language families, and new Americans.

Demographics for each state were studied carefully to determine prospective focus group locations that

reflected the characteristics noted above that may limit a family's access to child care information. To minimize potential for geographic bias, the project team ensured that at least one state in the West, Midwest, South and Northeast U.S. regions as defined by the U.S. Census Bureau was included as a focus group site. See Table 1 for additional focus group site information.

Child Care Information Parent Poll

The online child care information poll cast a wide net and garnered a total of 255 responses from parents of young children, ages 5 and under, with a range of family demographics (family size, educational attainment, income, etc.). Seventy-six percent of respondents had one to two children under the age of 18 in their household and the remainder had more than two children. More than a quarter of respondents had an educational attainment level equivalent to a two-year degree, post-secondary degree or lower (See Figure 1 in the Appendices). Twenty-four percent of respondents indicated a household income less than \$49,999 annually and 39 percent of respondents noted a combined household income between \$50,000 and \$99,999. The remaining 37 percent noted a household income above \$100,000 (See Figure 2 in the Appendices).

The poll explored:

- sources of child care information parents use, trust and recommend to other parents;
- preferred method for receiving child care information; and
- aspects considered most important during searches for a child care provider.

Findings from the poll offer insight into the preferences of families across various characteristics

(e.g., low to high parental education and income level, dual language, New American and children with special needs). The intent behind the child care information poll was to capture information on a variety of topics from families with a wide range of perspectives, including families with traditional child care experiences as well as those with vulnerability factors.

Key Informant Interviews

Key informants were engaged to elucidate current interactions with families facing vulnerabilities in their respective communities and to identify common information needs when seeking child care. Efforts were made to distribute key informants from leaders of: community capacity-building organizations, early childhood education programs, human service agencies and CCR&R agencies. See Figure 3 for a list of key informant regions/states and agency type. In total, 18 key informants participated in one- to two-hour long interviews. Each interview featured roughly 24 questions that

elicited information about outreach to vulnerable families, child care information needs, availability of existing child care resources and effective information delivery methods and strategies.



Findings

Families with vulnerabilities face numerous barriers when attempting to identify, secure and maintain quality child care. Singular and compounding vulnerabilities create a unique set of information needs and preferences specific to a family's child care experience. Based on what we've learned, the sections that follow lay out the types of child care information most beneficial to families searching for child care, the sources of child care information most often used by families and critical points where families desire to receive information.

Types of Child Care Information Most Beneficial to Families Facing Vulnerabilities

The type of child care information families need and

want varies. Families with low incomes have different constraining circumstances and considerations than their higher wage-earning counterparts. Likewise, family circumstances, such as parenting a child with special needs, teenage parenthood, or new American or refugee status, also may influence the type of child care information and resources most helpful for making child care decisions. For families facing vulnerable circumstances, information related to cost, type of child care options available, and quality and logistics may be of particular importance.

In our queries, respondents were asked what factors they find most important when looking for a child care provider. Among the options, factors related to quality and hours of operation (logistics) were ranked highest by parents.



Cost

Cost, often thought to be among a family's chief considerations, fell further down the priority list for our respondents. Similarly, in a study of low-income households, Forry et al. found that only 10 percent of families studied indicated cost as the most important factor in selecting a child care provider. (12) However, that study also found that families that had selected informal child care arrangements were more likely to report cost as the top priority. This suggests that while cost might not always be the most important factor considered by low-income families, it may ultimately determine the type of child care arrangement selected and thus is critical information for families to receive during their child care search.

Cost and financial assistance were top of mind for focus group participants across all four cities in which we conducted focus groups and also were mentioned as a chief concern for vulnerable families during key informant interviews. In fact, among focus group participants, cost was the most significant determinant of whether to seriously consider a provider and played a huge role in the final decision for focus group participants. Similar to the existing research noted above, many group participants indicated that the cost of child care resulted in their seeking alternative care arrangements for their child(ren).

Child Care Options / Type of Care

The type of child care options available to families was identified by focus group participants, key informant interviewees and child care information poll participants as another critical piece of information for families. While the National Survey of Early Care and Education Project Team found that cost was among the top factors considered in U.S. households with children under age 5, families under 100 percent of the federal poverty level were more likely to ask about type of care than other households and less likely to ask about fees. (13) This finding may be due, in part, to child care fee assistance, Early Head Start, Head Start and pre-K programs available to families at the lowest income levels.

Logistical Information

Key informant, focus group and child care information poll respondents commonly expressed that families want to receive logistical information, such as location convenience and hours of operation, to inform their child care choices. According to key informants, location and its convenience to home, employment and other places families frequent is critically important given the transportation difficulties many low-income families face. This finding was supported by results from the child care information poll which highlighted that

70 percent of respondents consider location to be among the most important factors explored when seeking a provider.

The hours in which a child care program operates is another logistical consideration for low-income families, especially for those with children under age 5 (13) and those in low-wage positions. Nonstandard work hour schedules (i.e., more than 50 percent of working time performed outside of the 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. timeframe or on weekends) are more common among low-wage workers (14) and the supply of nonstandard hour child care does not meet the demand. (15) Key informants cited fluctuating shifts common among low-wage earners as a barrier to finding and maintaining child care for their children. In fact, our child care information poll found that 76 percent of parent respondents considered provider's hours to be critical information needed during a child care search.

Additionally, locating a program with an immediate opening and with accessible transportation options are common inquiries made by low-income families, according to the key informants interviewed.

Quality

Key informant, child care information poll and focus group results indicate that other factors considered to be of high importance by families seeking child care speak to the quality of care provided. Quality often was characterized by elements of safety, degree of family engagement and educational environment within the program. Existing research shows that low-income families prioritize quality over cost and convenience when selecting a provider. (12) Nevertheless, quality often comes at a more substantial cost, so quality options are attenuated by what a family is able to afford.

Educational Environment

The child care program's environment is one of the most important elements considered by many families seeking child care. Our child care

information poll results indicate that roughly 80 percent of families are most interested in the availability of indoor/outdoor play and learning spaces, staff-to-child ratio, and certification of staff, all of which contribute to the overall child care environment. Furthermore, an existing study found that 80 percent of low-income parents consider support for social development and quality of classroom learning materials to be "extremely important" when selecting a child care arrangement. (12) Similar themes were found among key informants interviewed, indicating that parents consider the quality of the educational environment and daily activities offered to be critically important information for families during their child care search.

Safety

In addition to those environmental factors discussed above, child care information poll respondents also indicated that CPR/First Aid certification (83 percent), emergency preparedness (74 percent) and safety inspections (73 percent) were the most important factors to consider during a child care search. Concerns for safety also were prevalent during focus group discussions, as was a desire to know the condition and upkeep of the child care environment.

Family Engagement

Focus group discussions highlighted the eagerness of families to be active partners in their children's early care and education and to have a meaningful relationship with their children's caregivers. Family engagement was also emphasized in the findings of a study of low-income families. This study found that teacher/provider-child relationships, a warm and caring atmosphere and teacher/provider-home communication may be of high importance to parents seeking a child care arrangement. (12) Additionally, elements associated with quality family engagement practices, such as communication, use of family's native language and warmth of child care.

environment, may be associated with higher levels of parental satisfaction once a child care arrangement has been identified. (12)

These findings underline the desires of families to receive child care information that can be prioritized according to their needs, cultural preference, and wants. Key informants emphasized that families require information and support that helps them identify elements of quality and equips them with questions to ask during their search. Therefore, they suggested families become more aware of and access state-level information, such as

licensing requirements and quality ratings from reputable sources such as state Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS) to help inform their child care selection decisions. Key informants caution that many low-income and otherwise vulnerable families may need assistance navigating the child care system and support in identifying child care-related priorities when selecting a program. They may particularly benefit from help initiating and maneuvering through the subsidy process and identifying high-quality, accessible and affordable providers that will meet their family's needs.

Sources of Child Care Information Utilized by Families

Word-of-Mouth (WOM)

Research has shown that most low-income families rely on word-of-mouth information gained from peers, such as friends, family members and neighbors, to learn about available child care providers. (1) This finding was echoed by many of our child care information poll, key informant and focus group respondents. Parents across all four focus group cities said their first step in finding the right child care arrangement was to ask around to friends and family. Word-of-mouth was the most heavily cited source of child care information mentioned by key informants. Word-of-mouth was mentioned as the second most popular source of information used among child care information poll respondents whom identify themselves as ethnically or racially diverse and the most recommended source of child care information among poll respondents overall.

A significant number of families surveyed (71 percent) in a national early care and education survey who considered only one provider during their child care search already knew their chosen

provider personally or through family and friends. (13) Not only is word-of-mouth often the first source of information families use to learn about child care programs, participants in our focus groups often discussed how recommendations from trusted family and friends can go a long way in raising a parent's comfort level with a particular provider.



Social Media — An Extension of WOM

Word-of-mouth is not restricted to in-person conversations. In their 2011 study, Chu and Kim focused on the relationship between consumer engagement and word-of-mouth as it occurs on social media. They noted the higher the level of trust a social media user has in their contacts, the more likely they are to seek and give opinions as consumers and to pass consumer information on to others. (16) Our focus group respondents and key informants suggested that social media plays a prominent role for families during their child care searches in that it is another way to get recommendations and feedback from trusted sources about options they are considering.

Of our child care information poll respondents, 69 percent (N=141) indicated that they had used social media to obtain child care information.

(See Figure 4).

In focus group discussions, it was evident that social media played a role in widening word-of-mouth searching through Facebook and other sites, whether on personal pages or through groups on the sites. It also should be noted that networking on social media can extend to friends-of-friends when a parent is trying to fill a very specific need for a child.

Community Sources

Many families have established trusting, relationships with service providers, local businesses and other organizations within their communities. Child care information poll respondents that identify as ethnically or racially diverse reported using professionals during their child care searches more than any other resource. During focus group and key informant discussions it became clear that low-income and vulnerable families rely on connections within their communities, such as



health care providers, human service agencies, child care and education professionals, and community organizations to inform child care decisions. These findings suggest that families may learn about early care and education-related services when they are already involved with another supportive service partner or community group.

However, fragmentation within the child care system and the nature of many supportive services may prevent families from receiving adequate child care information when it is outside the organization's specialty. Some key informants raised concerns that even services housed within the same system fully may not know what services are offered by other internal branches or departments. For some state agencies, the pressure to conserve resources may inhibit them from referring families to other internal services or benefit systems. For example, families receiving Medicaid may not be linked to the office administering child care subsidy. Similarly, key informants voiced concern that cross-sector referrals also are not happening often enough to support the full range of needs families experience. Overall, the system intended to support vulnerable families often is unprepared to address the complexity of needs.

Nevertheless, working closely with community stakeholders to distribute information about child care offers a valuable opportunity to reach a diverse set of families through their existing networks and are convenient to where they live and work (17) Equipping businesses, service organizations, and other community partners with quality child care information and increasing awareness of CCR&R agencies' services will help bridge some of these gaps.

Developing a seamless digital referral network that connects service providers from different but connected disciplines is yet another prospective method to consider. On the other side of the coin, however, key informants also urged that strategies be in place to help those families that lack connections with service partners or who are without strong community ties. These families are among the most



vulnerable and in need of a reliable source of child care information. These findings affirm the value added by strategic partnerships that help infuse communities with quality child care information.

Online Sources

Insights from focus group participants suggest that once parents had an idea of a few child care options to explore, perhaps gained through word-of-mouth, looking for information online and visiting the child care center in person are the next steps families take. The use of online child care information sources was mentioned by key informants, focus group participants, and child care information poll respondents. More so than in the past, according to focus group participants with both older and early childhood-aged children, parents are turning to online resources to replace or supplement their searches for child care options. According to the child care information poll, online sources, such as Craigslist (#1), Social Media (#2), Google (#3) and Blogs (#5) are among the top five sources respondents use to obtain child care information. See Figure 4 for a list of all the information sources reported by child care information poll respondents. Focus group participants expressed that online information, particularly reviews, play a part in

helping to weed out the child care providers that do not seem to be a good fit or have several negative reviews, but are rarely the only resource used to make child care decisions. Online resources offer critical insight while families are gathering information, yet visits to the child care settings under consideration are ultimately the most critical step in evaluation and final decision making.

Most families use online resources to some degree. However, there are variations in how much and which web-based resources are used. A recent study suggests that more than half (54 percent) of parents want information from a website or blog led by child development experts. (18) When considering families with low incomes and special populations who participated in our child care information poll, Craigslist was the second most used resource by families of a child with special needs and those with an educational attainment less than an associate/technical degree. Among focus group participants, Google searches and Yelp reviews were mentioned as the primary online sources used to locate child care information. While focus group members from urban areas spoke about online sources of child care information with greater frequency, web-based resources were mentioned across urban and rural focus group settings.

Focus group participants expressed a desire for a single, curated website to find child care information about providers in their area. However, most were unaware of the existence of such a resource even though many of our focus group participants had an existing relationship with their local CCR&R agencies (all of which had child care consumer information on their websites). A similar trend was found during key informant interviews with human service providers outside of the CCR&R agencies' realm.

Additionally, while online resources may be a good place to start, they are unlikely to provide sufficient information to help vulnerable families make a final child care decision. Families in our focus groups pointed out that the information available online often is hard to navigate and out-of-date, making

it difficult to find needed information. Focus group members and key informants agree there is no substitute for going into the facilities themselves to look around and ask questions. In sum, while child care information obtained through word-of-mouth, CCR&R agencies, community sources and online may only go so far in supporting the needs of low-income and vulnerable families, a closer look is warranted at what can be done to improve the accessibility of quality child care information.

Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies

According to key informants working directly within the child care field, CCR&R agencies may have previously placed a greater emphasis on reaching parents through services offered to providers and community partners. Currently, many report a shift within states for CCR&Rs to do more outreach directly to families. As a result, these informants were quick to highlight that CCR&Rs are a support for families to learn about available resources. Likewise, a previous study found that households falling below 100 percent of the poverty level often rely on CCR&Rs, second only to word of mouth from family and friends, as a primary source for child care information. (13) Key informants often expressed that our nation's most vulnerable families may not recognize the benefit of seeking support for child care decisions or know where to turn to for child care information. Many indicated that more could be done to reach and engage families, which can be achieved through a greater understanding of how families learn about available child care resources.



Ways to Reach and Engage Families Facing Vulnerabilities

The Best Channels for Reaching Families

Not only is it important to know what type of child care information is most beneficial to families, the optimal timing for information sharing and the sources families use to locate information, it is also critical to understand what platforms, communication outlets and dissemination channels are most likely to ensure child care information reaches the families that need it most.

Channels for child care information dissemination can include direct and indirect communication outlets, which include community-based messengers. Many families want personalized support for child care decisions and rely on direct communication channels for information like email, text messaging, telephone and in-person contact. Indirect information outlets such as social media, mobile applications (apps), television programming, and websites, present an opportunity to disseminate information more broadly to a diversity of family audiences. Our research suggests families rely on a mix of direct and indirect channels to obtain child care information, though families prefer more direct methods. Additionally, utilizing community partners as natural messengers is an excellent way to reach broader range families through established informal and formal networks.

The following are the platforms and dissemination channels considered by our focus group members, key informants and parent poll respondents as the best for reaching families facing vulnerabilities.

Email

In general, many parents want direct access to information from trusted professionals. (18)

According to our child care information poll responses, 76 percent of families prefer to receive child care information via email (See Figure 5), which is a rate far greater than any other direct and indirect communication methods measured. Key informant and focus group participants also lauded email as a desired method of information delivery because it can be personalized and provide more in-depth information after other forms of contact with families have been made. Although email outpaces traditional mail as a communication channel, racially and ethnically diverse families and those who have child with special needs rated traditional mail among their top three preferred methods for receiving child care information.

Telephone and In-Person

While human service websites, including those for CCR&R agencies, may receive more traffic, key informants conveyed that families receive higher quality and personalized child care assistance during in-person and phone contacts with agency staff. Additionally, one-on-one connections and participation in local community events were perceived by key informants as most effective in building trust between families and supportive service providers. When combined, child care information poll responses indicate that in-person and phone contact are the second most preferred dissemination channel for child care information among child care information poll respondents.

Text Messaging

Text messaging is gaining popularity among organizations as a method to engage families and consumers. A recent study explored the usefulness of text messaging for the dissemination of health education. Nearly all low-income, rural mothers

surveyed reported that it was a useful channel for information dissemination. (19) When the messages used small, doable steps, participants were not only highly motivated to act on the suggestions provided, but were likely to share the information with other parents. (19) Key informants and focus group participants in two out of our four geographically dispersed sites discussed the value of using text-messaging to engage families that may be vulnerable. This reveals that the demand for text-messaging engagement is not a geographically limited preference, but one that can engage families across the nation.

Overall, 60 percent of child care information poll respondents reported using parent text messaging programs to gain child care information. Not only was it the most used resource for families self-identifying as low-income, but their responses indicate an overwhelming preference towards text messaging over other communication channels. Furthermore, key informants suggested that text messaging to distribute child care information is the wave of the future, citing the use of programs like Text4Baby, especially to reach and engage young families.



Mobile Applications (Apps)

Applications available through mobile devices often offer personalized support and allow users to customize content to their individual needs. Existing research suggests that more than half of parents have used parenting apps to obtain advice, information or guidance. (18) A similar finding emerged from our child care information poll respondents, with 61 percent indicating they use mobile apps to access child care information (Figure 4). Preferences toward the use of mobile apps as an information delivery method were highest among families with educational attainment of an associate degree or lower. Additionally, key informants remarked that apps have an advantage in delivering quality information to low-income and otherwise vulnerable families, citing programs like Baby Sense and Baby Center for their easy-to-understand content.

Websites

The internet is an excellent mass dissemination outlet that allows information to be shared in a variety of ways. Our research activities and existing reports have noted that websites, social media and online video are methods parents use to obtain child care information. Parents want and trust information from websites authored by industry professionals, but effective online content must address that many families find it hard to know which websites to trust in a sea of seemingly endless options. (18) On one hand, websites were the third most preferred method of delivery for child care information among the subset of child care information poll respondents that identified as low-income. On the other hand, key informant and focus group remarks suggest that some websites may be overwhelming to families or not considered a trustworthy source, which may explain why parenting websites and online reviews were the least used sources of information for poll respondents with low incomes.

Nonetheless, the need for consumer education via electronic access exists (20) and trends among

traditionally underserved families suggest that online access to consumer information is climbing, with families seeking customizable, robust features and functionality available on their mobile devices and in various languages. (21)

Social Media

Through discussions with families and professionals, it is clear that social media serves two functions as a dissemination channel for child care information. First, through outlets like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat and Pinterest, organizations and professionals can share generalized child care content with large audiences of families and consumers. Such content may include information about a specific program or notify families about an available service or child care resources. The second function of social media is as a conduit for families and friends to share child care experiences and resources, and recommend programs and services. Given the widespread use of social media among families with low incomes, both functions present an opportunity for child care consumer education to be extended through indirect marketing and by strategically encouraging word-of-mouth.

TV Programing and Videos

Another platform in the collection of communication channels that families use to access information is more traditional. Television programming, whether accessed online, via cable or over the airwaves, is another dissemination channel for child care information. Existing research found that a large portion of families (64 percent) reported they sometimes or frequently obtain parenting advice, information or guidance from television programing. (18) Response to our child care information poll also provided insight into the use of television programing to obtain child care information. Parenting programs on television were the second most used source of child care information reported by respondents (Figure 4 in the Appendices). When considered as a resource across families facing

vulnerable circumstances, television programming was the primary source used by families with a child with special needs and the second most used by families identifying as having a low income. Additionally, television was the third most used platform for child care information among respondents with an associate or technical degree and lower. It is important to note that although the use of television parenting programing was high among poll respondents, television programing and videos were the least preferred methods of information delivery overall (Figure 5 in the Appendices).

Formal and Informal Networks as Information Delivery Channels

An array of conventional and unconventional messengers (i.e., stakeholders) can be tapped to disseminate child care information to a broad number of families through formal and informal networks. These networks are present online, mostly through social media, and in-person, with each environment offering a unique opportunity to reach and engage families. Word-of-mouth among family, friends, neighbors and the greater community constitutes an informal communication network, where personal experiences, advice and guidance are shared between peers. Conversely, formal communication networks exist between organizations or service providers and families. Key informants identified community-based organizations and entities in fields such as human services, health care and education as presenting an opportunity for stakeholder partnerships. Such partnerships can be utilized to create child care information hubs by leveraging the formal communication networks they have established with vulnerable families. Our key informant interviews strongly suggested that relationships with conventional and unconventional partners within communities can be used to cultivate “natural messengers” for disseminating child care information to a broader range of vulnerable families.

Effective Consumer Engagement and Education Approaches

Promising-Practice Strategies:

Approaches that effectively reach families and align with promising-practice recommendations put family preferences at the center of child care consumer information design and dissemination. Similar to quality family engagement, our research finds practices that foster strong relationships and trust undergird effective consumer education. Consumer education should be viewed as an ongoing process that bolsters the capacity of families to make child care decisions that match their needs and preferences. It is a process that starts prior to the birth of a child and continues until the family no longer requires care for their child.

Also a cornerstone of effective family engagement strategies, engaging consumers can be helpful when it pertains to being involved in the decision making process and can lead to consumers feeling like they have representation in their corner (22), a role ideally that may be played by CCR&R agency personnel. In addition to having the feeling of adequate representation, it also is important to provide families with specific, doable action steps that may be taken. This concept has direct applicability to co-planning with families actionable, bite-size, and feasible child care consumer steps.

Both focus group and key informant participants cited the importance of having in-person resources available through office visits, community outreach events and phone calls. In addition, being accessible via mobile devices, whether it is via text, email or mobile sites, also was cited by key informants as very useful. In fact, a 2014 study noted that mobile device accessibility has been vital in reaching out to a variety of families, including those who self-

identify as Hispanic or Asian American. (23) Media, through a diverse means of content distribution, can be an effective avenue to raise public awareness and promote consumer messages. (23) Earned media attention is often more effective than paid media.



Impactful Consumer Education Materials

Effective consumer education materials provide current, evidence-based information from well-known and highly reliable sources. The best consumer-education materials are easily accessible, with clear, easy-to-understand content, and use graphic formats that make the information easy to follow and comprehend. (24) Our key informants and existing reports agree that visuals and design are key aspects to consider during information delivery. (24) Information from both key informants and previous literature mention the following other considerations for effective consumer education resources and tools:

- Locally relevant and accessible
- Sufficient range and scope topics covered
- Culturally reflective (available in various

languages, with culturally sensitive graphics, and at appropriate reading levels)

- Nonthreatening
- Should be factual and operationalize information (i.e., go beyond telling families what to do or look for and give the why and/or how behind the information)
- Easy to use and understand, customizable and available in various formats
- Linked to other resources
- Personalization is key. Informational materials and decision aids (e.g., informational flyers, pamphlets and videos) are most impactful when they are personally relatable and relevant to targeted individuals and groups

Promising Outreach Practices

In their study, Hodges, Gerteis, and Mulligan (23) found that consumer education approaches that incorporated community-level outreach strategies were the most effective. They state, “The natural social groupings in which people carry out their everyday lives are most readily identified at the community level, and these groups, in turn, can be the vehicles for reaching and influencing individuals in the target audience.” Our key informants also asserted that relationships within the community can be leveraged to generate quality-driven word-of-mouth, distribute informational material and promote the value of being an informed child care consumer. At the same time, consumer education and outreach campaigns must recognize that families facing vulnerabilities, like those experiencing homelessness, special needs, early parenthood and economic hardships, as well as dual language speakers, refugees and new Americans, may be accessing different community networks than other families. Therefore, similar to existing research (7), key informants recommend using conventional and unconventional outreach messengers and delivery methods. This ensures a greater number of families facing vulnerable circumstances receive quality child care information that is relevant to their family situation.

In their study, Fowler and colleagues (25) explored successful community-based outreach approaches. In addition to families with low incomes, the study included child care-related outreach in urban and rural communities and with families across the spectrum of family vulnerabilities, including single, teenaged, homeless, marginally employed, unemployed, immigrant (English learner) and those lacking transportation. Overlaps between their findings and Child Care Aware® of America’s Family Voices Driving Quality Child Care Choices research efforts include:

- Development of sustainable collaborations within and across agencies to disseminate program-related materials and to fill service gaps. For example, impactful outreach programs that elevate access to child care also may build collaborations with social service providers to ensure that families are connected to other programs that help support and enhance family stability (e.g., housing programs, health clinics, supplemental nutrition programs, etc.).
- Successful programs challenge the participation mindset by moving from a program-centric practice orientation to family-centered approach, by taking services and resources directly to the families (e.g., home, communities and locations families frequent).
- Increased attention to services that match the preferences of families and that acknowledge their specific child care needs. For example, successful strategies may enhance professional development opportunities that help staff to identify and refer families to beneficial services and that encourage communication and coordination among multiple programs serving the same family.
- Successful outreach recognizes and addresses possible system barriers such as transportation and technology.

Conclusion

The early childhood years before a child reaches 6 years of age represent a critical window of opportunity in which children develop at a faster rate than any other time in their life. It is the point in time that more than 80 percent of the brain architecture is developed, paving critical pathways to school readiness and lifelong success. Early learning settings play a crucial role in the development of more than 11 million of our nation's youngest. As such, quality early learning placement decisions are very important for families, especially those who face vulnerabilities, making accessing reputable child care information more challenging.

Child Care Aware® of America's multi-layered, mixed-method research informed by families, early childhood system professionals, and health and human service experts from across the nation uncovers the contemporary child care information needs, identifies the places families facing vulnerabilities presently seek out child care information and elucidates current ways in which child care system professionals may reach and engage families and serve as a supportive backdrop in service of optimal child and family outcomes.

Tuning-in to Families' Experiences

Consumer education and information programs that incorporate family preferences have better reach. Family perspectives and literature uncovered during our research suggest that the following consumer education strategies will help ensure a diversity of family experiences are supported.

Build in opportunities for families to engage with consumer education websites in ways that allow outreach and referral staff to connect/re-connect

with families in real time via chat, offline, or via electronic communications. Use online social media to “meet” families and drive them to reputable, relevant and family-friendly consumer education website options. Provide a diversity of information that addresses family needs and is in the preferred language of families. Ensure that non-internet-based opportunities for child care information delivery are available in addition to digital information resources (e.g., in-person outreach, television programming). Ensure family engagement-oriented relationship practices are incorporated, including culturally and linguistically responsive information that families need. Personalization is key.

Leveraging Community Partnerships to Reach Communities

Collaboration between multiple early childhood, and human service system partners is likely to enhance awareness of programs that support the child care consumer information needs of families. Key findings from our focus groups, online information poll and key informant interviews highlight the importance of leveraging relationships with conventional and unconventional community partners that are already trusted and entrenched in communities with unmet child care needs. Engaging community stakeholders and cross-sector partners are critical strategies for ensuring families facing vulnerabilities receive quality information to support their role as child care decision makers.

Harnessing the Potential of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies

Despite the existence of several avenues and sources through which to obtain child care information, families that have a low income or are otherwise

vulnerable continue to have needs that go unmet. Our research indicates that many families facing vulnerabilities are not aware of the support available through CCR&R agencies. Even more striking, most of the human service leaders interviewed from closely related industries also were unaware of CCR&R agencies and other resources available to support families seeking child care information.

There is a clear opportunity for CCR&R agencies to bridge the gap between service professions that complement one another in the early childhood education field and those that work in it directly. Cross-sector collaborations that include CCR&R agencies can strengthen and streamline the process families must go through to access the various economic stability programs available to them.

Child care resource and referral agencies serve as one critical touchpoint for families embarking on the child care consumer pathway. The more than 400 CCR&R agencies situated across the nation have a unique potential to establish enduring, trusting relationships with all families, even beyond the development of an initial child care plan.

Most CCR&R agencies provide initial and ongoing information about child care quality, family health, safety and child development. In particular, their outreach to families facing vulnerabilities has the propensity to pay off exponentially, given the sub-optimal developmental, social, emotional and long-term outcomes experienced disproportionately by children in vulnerable family situations that have been documented in the literature. Our research indicates the window of opportunity for agencies to initiate the foundation for a lasting, supportive relationship with families occurs during pregnancy through the child's first year of life, and extends to school-age and beyond. To reach and engage families experiencing vulnerable circumstances, organizations have to be creative and intentional in building relationships with families and service providers, as well as within the community.

Attending to the experiences and preferences of families, leveraging community partnership and

harnessing the capacity of CCR&R agencies may go a long way to ensure families facing vulnerabilities receive the child care information and support they require. Promising practices to engage families facing vulnerable circumstances require intentional focus on having available culturally and linguistically responsive information that families need, at the time when families need it, and on the platforms where families are present (in person, over broadcasting waves or the phone, and online). Nonetheless, without strategic focus on good family and consumer engagement relationship practices that put the child and family at the center of all efforts, even the most innovative consumer education practices will fail. Listening and incorporating systems and program-level strategies that put families in the driver's seat ultimately will be what drives quality child care choices.



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