

Understanding Child Care Access Challenges Requires Family-Centered Solutions

Sarah Daily, Ashley Hirilall, Cassandra Gerson, and Katie Richards

Child care access challenges are widespread across the country, but the scale and complexity of the problem can make it difficult for policymakers to know where to begin. Traditional measures of access focus primarily on comparing an estimated demand for care with the number of available “slots.” However, this approach does not adequately capture the preferences, needs, and tradeoffs families must consider every day related to things like affordability, quality, location, and hours, along with whether the care arrangement is able to support their child’s development.

To better understand access from a family’s perspective, the newly launched [ECE Access Center](#) at Child Trends designed a national survey of parents with children under age 6. The survey used a measure called the Misalignment Index, which identifies the gap between the care families need and want and the care they are using. The Misalignment Index offers a practical tool for understanding where current child care systems and policies could be strengthened to improve access to the types of care families seek. By identifying these specific gaps, early learning leaders and policymakers can gain actionable insights that provide a more nuanced understanding of possible pathways to addressing access challenges in ways that are responsive to the needs and preferences of the children and families they serve.

Key Findings

- ▶ **Almost two thirds of families using any type of paid or unpaid nonparental child care arrangement¹ (64%) reported moderate to high misalignment between their current child care arrangement and their family’s needs and preferences (referred to as their “ideal” arrangement).** This pattern was consistent across families of all income levels and suggests that challenges extend beyond access alone. Even families who are able to secure licensed child care often felt their arrangement did not meet their needs, while families relying on relatives or friends likewise reported substantial gaps between their current and preferred care arrangements.
- ▶ **Affordability is not the only challenge families face: Families also seek care that simultaneously meets multiple needs.** Among families with moderate to high misalignment, their current arrangement did not fully:
 - Provide a high-quality setting that supports their child’s development and learning (82%)
 - Reflect their family’s beliefs and ways of caring for their child (81%)
 - Fit within their budget and/or accept financial assistance (72%)
 - Match their preferred setting type (for example, a center, school, or home setting) (61%)

The Misalignment Index compares families’ priorities (such as cost, schedule, and quality) with their current arrangements.

- **Low misalignment** means most needs are met.
- **Moderate misalignment** means some tradeoffs.
- **High misalignment** means many needs are not met.

- ▶ **The primary drivers of families' searches for new care arrangements are affordability (40%), finding a program that better supports their child's learning (35%), and proximity to home or work (28%).**
- ▶ **High levels of misalignment contribute to instability in child care arrangements.** Nearly one quarter (23%) of families who reported moderate to high misalignment also said they were actively searching for a new child care arrangement; in contrast, only 6 percent of those with low misalignment were searching. However, many families facing moderate to high misalignment may not search for care because they were unable to identify suitable alternatives in earlier searches; or because changing care would require additional tradeoffs, such as higher costs, longer commutes, or the need to coordinate care for multiple children. As a result, many families may remain in care that does not fully meet their needs.
- ▶ **Families consistently identified quality and cost as non-negotiable features of their care arrangement.** Families were asked to identify the most "crucially important" features of their child care arrangement, meaning they would not consider options that lacked these features. The most frequently identified features included care that:
 - Supported their child's social-emotional development (62%)
 - Had staff with the needed educational qualifications (57%)
 - Was within their budget (56%)
 - Supported their child's unique developmental needs (55%)
 - Spoke their child's home language (55%)
 - Offered opportunities for individualized attention (52%)
- ▶ **Families with lower incomes who did not have access to a child care subsidy face an especially constrained set of choices in finding care that meets their non-negotiable needs.** Families with incomes below 200 percent of the federal poverty level (FPL) who did not receive a child care subsidy had significantly higher levels of misalignment and were significantly less likely to find multiple care options that met their non-negotiable needs (e.g., care that was within their budget, close enough to home or work, fit their work schedule) during their search, relative to families with higher incomes.

How Family-Centered Solutions Can Help Policymakers

Without a fuller picture of families' needs, it may seem that increasing child care supply is the only way to address access challenges. However, data on misalignment can help identify where more targeted strategies may be needed to ensure that the existing supply better reflects the kind of care families seek. For example, if families report difficulty finding programs that support their child's learning and development, policymakers might prioritize strategies that strengthen program quality, such as increasing compensation and professional development opportunities for the workforce, supporting quality improvement initiatives, or aligning subsidy reimbursement rates with the true cost of providing high-quality care. Alternatively, some families may want child care that offers greater flexibility in a smaller group setting. In response, policymakers could explore strategies to strengthen the supply of home-based child care by offering facilities improvement grants, start-up funding, technical assistance, licensing support, or business development resources to new providers.

To better understand access from a family's perspective, Child Trends partnered with national experts to develop a family-centered framework for understanding early care and education (ECE) access.² Grounded in decades of research, the [Access Framework](#) defines access from families' perspectives, recognizing that access exists only when families can, with reasonable effort, find and afford high-quality care that meets their preferences as parents and supports their children's learning and development.³ Building on this framework, the [Misalignment Index](#) is a tool that measures the gap between what families value and how well their current child care arrangements reflect those priorities.⁴

The ECE Access Framework and Misalignment Index can help policymakers move beyond broad counts of child care shortages and help them identify the characteristics of child care arrangements that are needed, which families are underserved, the barriers families face in accessing care beyond cost, where (geographically) gaps in alignment are concentrated, and which policy changes may provide the most support to the families they serve.

Three Key Takeaways for Policymakers

- ▶ **Affordability is a widespread barrier with unequal impacts on families, particularly those with lower incomes who do not have access to child care subsidies. These families have access to fewer viable child care options and a greater likelihood of needing to rely on care that does not adequately meet their needs.** Affordability challenges affect families across the income spectrum and shape whether they can access care that meets their needs. However, these challenges are especially felt by families with lower incomes who do not have access to affordable care or child care subsidies, leaving them with fewer viable options and higher levels of misalignment with the options that are available to them. As a result, families with lower incomes may be more likely to rely on care that does not fully meet their needs, have limited choices when searching for care, or make difficult household budget tradeoffs to afford care. Data on misalignment can help policymakers more precisely identify where affordability gaps are greatest, refine eligibility rules, and better target resources to ensure that investments reach families with the highest levels of unmet need.
- ▶ **Access is shaped by several interconnected factors for families, including cost, quality, and location. As a result, to meaningfully improve access, policymakers must better understand the unique constellation of needs and challenges experienced by the families they serve.** Families who believed that alternative child care arrangements might be available primarily reported seeking more affordable care, higher-quality care, and care closer to home or work. These factors are interconnected for families. Families may find care they can afford that is too far away, or nearby options that do not meet their needs or quality expectations. As a result, addressing any single factor in isolation may not meaningfully improve access.⁵ Policy solutions and supply strategies that consider cost, quality, and location together may be more effective in expanding options families can realistically use. For example, policymakers can consider aligning subsidy reimbursement rates and family copayments with the cost of high-quality care, investing in care in underserved areas, and helping providers maintain quality standards that meet families' needs and preferences.
- ▶ **Misalignment can contribute to changes in child care arrangements, which can create instability for parents, children, and child care providers.** Even when families can find child care, they must often balance affordability, care that meets the parents' needs, and care that best supports the child's development. As a result, families experiencing misalignment may continue searching for better options, leading to changes in care arrangements over time. This pattern can disrupt parents' ability to work⁶ and create instability for children, which can negatively affect their development.⁷ It can also create instability for providers who rely on income from consistent enrollment.⁸ Policies that better align care with families' priorities from the start can help reduce unnecessary instability and turnover in the child care market.

Using the Misalignment Index in Your State or Community

Child Trends' 2025 Child Care Access Survey demonstrates how the Misalignment Index can provide actionable insights into how well child care options align with families' needs and preferences. The ECE Access Center at Child Trends works with state and community leaders to apply this approach in local contexts. Through these partnerships, the ECE Access Center helps leaders collect and use data to better target investments, refine policy strategies, and strengthen child care systems so they better reflect what families need.

Interested in examining child care access from a family perspective or using the Misalignment Index in your state or community?



Contact Dr. Sarah Daily, Early Childhood Education Program Area Director, Child Trends at sdaily@childtrends.org or **visit us** at: <https://www.childtrends.org/research-centers/ece-access-center>



About This Survey

This survey was designed by Child Trends and administered through AmeriSpeak®, a nationally representative survey panel of U.S. households, created and operated by NORC at the University of Chicago. AmeriSpeak uses probability-based sampling methods in which households are randomly selected with a known chance of inclusion, rather than relying on self-selected or convenience samples. The survey was designed to provide scientifically rigorous and representative insights into the experiences and opinions of U.S. parents and caregivers of children from birth to age 5. Data were collected from November 20-24, 2025 using both an online survey and telephone interviews. A total of 797 parents of children from birth to age 5 completed the survey section, including 683 who were responsible for selecting child care arrangements for a focal child and were therefore eligible to be included in the analyses. All analyses in this brief are based on this weighted analytic sample of 622 parents and caregivers of children from birth to age 5 who gave valid responses to our key Misalignment Index survey questions. Children were not required to be in nonparental care to be included in the study. Survey weights were applied to align the sample with demographic characteristics of the Current Population Survey from the U.S. Census Bureau, including sex, age, education, race/ethnicity, and region, and to account for the probability of being selected as the focal child for Access Misalignment Index survey items. We used survey-weighted two-sample t-tests for equality of proportions to assess differences by income and misalignment group.

Suggested citation: Daily, S., Hirilall, A., Gerson, C., & Richards, K. (2026). Understanding child care access challenges requires family-centered solutions. Child Trends. DOI: 10.56417/2895y1066c

References

- ¹ Of those who responded to the survey, our analyses include the 61 percent of families who reported using any type of paid or unpaid nonparental child care arrangement (61%) and excludes families who indicated they were using parent-only child care by choice (39%).
- ² Friese, S., Lin, V., Forry, N. & Tout, K. (2017). *Defining and Measuring Access to High Quality Early Care and Education: A Guidebook for Policymakers and Researchers*. OPRE Report #2017-08. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. <https://acf.gov/opre/report/defining-and-measuring-access-high-quality-early-care-and-education-ece-guidebook>
- ³ Paschall, K. & Maxwell, K. (2022). *Defining and Measuring Access to Child Care and Early Education with Families in Mind*. OPRE Report #2021-232. Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. <https://acf.gov/opre/report/defining-and-measuring-access-child-care-and-early-education-families-mind>
- ⁴ Hirilall, A., Keaton, H., Davis, E., Tout, K., Cleveland, J., Warner, M., & Villegas, E. (2024). *Understanding Minnesota Families' Access to Child Care Choices that Align with their Priorities and Preferences*. Child Trends. DOI: 10.56417/1891g786l <https://www.childtrends.org/publications/understanding-minnesota-families-child-care-choices-priorities>
- ⁵ Friese, S., Lin, V., Forry, N. & Tout, K. (2017). *Defining and Measuring Access to High Quality Early Care and Education: A Guidebook for Policymakers and Researchers*. OPRE Report #2017-08. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. https://acf.gov/sites/default/files/documents/opre/ccepra_access_guidebook_final_213_b508.pdf
- ⁶ Ferreira van Leer, K., Crosby, D., & Mendez, J. (2021). *Disruptions to Child Care Arrangements and Work Schedules for Low-Income Hispanic Families are Common and Costly*. Report 2021-01. Bethesda, MD: National Research Center on Hispanic Children & Families. <https://doi.org/10.59377/605c3874s>
- ⁷ Zgourou, E., Holochwost, S., & Bratsch-Hines, M. (2026). Child Care Instability and Children's Developmental Outcomes: A Systematic Literature Review. *Early Education and Development*, 37(2), 310–335. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10409289.2025.2550061>
- ⁸ First Five Years Fund. (2026, April 16). *New survey emphasizes how child care affordability challenges destabilize both providers and families*. <https://www.ffyf.org/2026/04/16/new-survey-emphasizes-how-child-care-affordability-challenges-destabilize-both-providers-and-families/>