



# Still Struggling

## Colorado Families' Views on Child Care and Hopes for Universal Preschool

To better understand families' current challenges and perspectives related to early care and education, Early Milestones Colorado fielded a Spring 2022 survey of 2,200 Colorado families who have at least one child under age 6.

Since 2020, a global pandemic has strained both families and an already-precarious child care system. Families have been coping with this crisis for nearly three years. The impacts are still very real. In this survey, Early Milestones found that 44% of families report recent difficulty paying monthly bills.

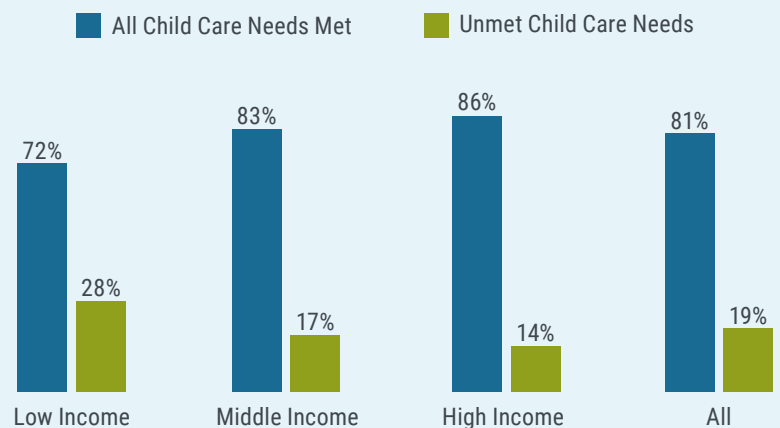
### Families Don't Have the Child Care they Need

In times of financial hardship, having affordable, accessible child care is especially critical for families to be able to work and meet their family's financial needs.

Overall, 19% of families surveyed report that they do not currently have the child care they need for their children, with a higher percentage (28%) of low-income families reporting that they do not have the child care they need.

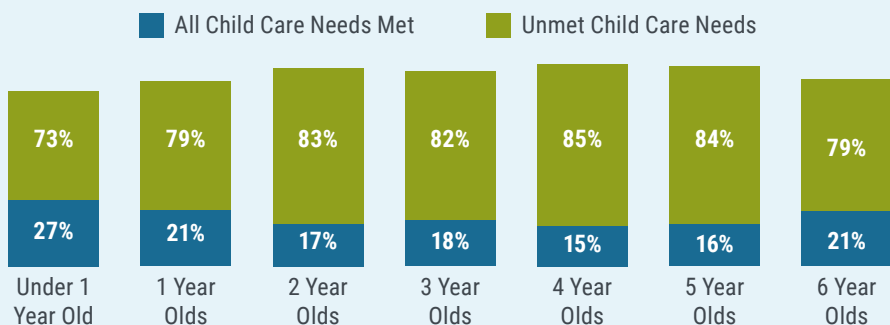
Families of babies had the highest degree of need. Nearly one in three families of children under age 1 do not have the child care that they need to work.

PERCENTAGE OF FAMILIES WITH UNMET CHILD CARE NEEDS  
BY FAMILY INCOME (N=2,174)



Unmet child care needs decrease by age group, with 21% of families with 1-year-olds reporting unmet child care needs. This drops to 15% of families with 4-year-olds. However, families with 6-year-olds who have aged into elementary school and may need before- and after-school care, show bigger gaps in child care needs.

PERCENTAGE OF FAMILIES WITH UNMET CHILD CARE NEEDS  
BY CHILDREN'S AGES (N=2,174)



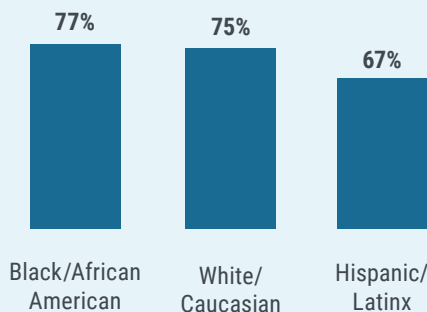
## Finding Child Care is a Challenge for Families

A clear majority of all families surveyed (73%) reported that it was difficult to find child care for their young children. Hispanic/Latinx families report less difficulty finding child care than white and Black families.

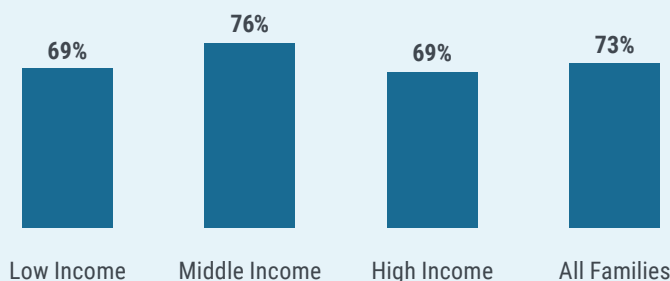
While most families, regardless of income, said finding child care was difficult, middle-income families reported the greatest difficulty finding child care. Middle-class families' experiences echo findings in other states.<sup>1</sup> Low-income families can sometimes access subsidy programs from their city or state, as well as support from social workers or resource centers

in finding available child care spots. High-income families may have greater flexibility in their budget for child care, so cost does not constrain their search. However, middle-income families are in a position where they do not qualify for income-based child care subsidies and supports, which may limit their choices in a high-priced child care market.

PERCENTAGE OF FAMILIES REPORTING DIFFICULTY FINDING CHILD CARE BY RACE/ETHNICITY (N=2,174)



PERCENTAGE OF FAMILIES REPORTING DIFFICULTY FINDING CHILD CARE BY FAMILY INCOME (N=2,174)



Affording child care is especially challenging for families with multiple young children under 6 years old. Families with multiple young children had greater difficulty affording their current child care compared to families with just one child under 6. An additional challenge is that most families with multiple young children (93%) said that having their children cared for in the same child care setting is important. These families would be well served by

child care centers and family child care homes that can provide care from birth to age five in one setting.

We asked families what factors they consider when choosing child care. A program's hours and days of operation and location were the top two factors, with 94% of families rating those as important. The next most common factor was whether the provider had spots available for their child.

While families emphasized hours of operation and location as factors when choosing child care, 88% of families reported that Colorado Shines quality ratings were an important factor in their choice. Notably, a higher percentage of low-income families (93%) said that quality is important.

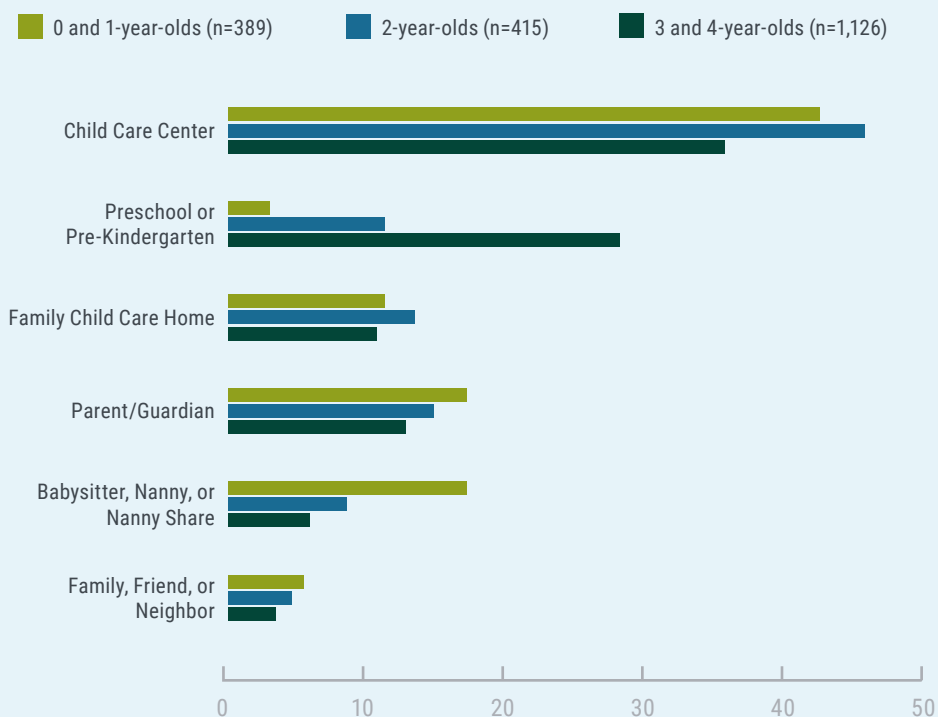
## Families' Child Care Preferences are Varied and Often Unmet

Among families who report having the child care they need to work, **59% of families have a child care arrangement that does not match their preference.**

Much of this mismatch comes from parents providing care themselves even though they prefer another setting. Overall, over half of parents who provide full-time child care actually prefer another form of care. However, they either cannot find or cannot afford it.

Families with babies under age 2 primarily prefer licensed child care centers, followed by parent/guardian care and babysitter/nanny care. Forty-six percent of families of two-year-olds report they prefer child care centers, but a newly popular preference for preschool emerges at this age, with 12% of families preferring preschool. Among families whose children are aged 3 and 4, 62% prefer a licensed child care center or preschool for their child(ren).

PREFERRED CHILD CARE PROVIDERS BY CHILDREN'S AGE



## Universal Preschool Can Meet Family Needs and Benefit Children

Responses to our survey clearly show that families see preschool as a form of child care. When asked how preschool would benefit their family, families

emphasized that preschool would allow them to work, would reduce their stress, and would enhance their child's development.

**Some families hope that universal preschool will make child care more affordable for them.** Reflecting on the possible benefits of preschool, for example, one white father of two told us, "My wife currently stays home with the kids but has put her career on hold due to the prices of daycare. My wife could finish school and start working again."

Families also noted the many benefits of preschool for their children. They noted social skills, emotional skills, and academic skills, as well as adapting to a group learning environment as things they hoped their children could learn if they had access to preschool. One multiracial mother of a 3-year-old said access to preschool would help her child "develop social skills and interact with other kids. I hope it will also continue to build on her love of learning."

**For some families, preschool would not only support their child's development, but would also relieve a worry that**

Overall, families see preschool as positive and are enthusiastic to enroll their children, with 83% of families saying they would be likely to send their children to preschool if it were affordable for their family.

### FAMILY FRIEND & NEIGHBOR CARE, FAMILY CHILD CARE HOMES

About 12% of all families prefer a family child care home for one or more of their children. About 5% of all families overall prefer a family, friend, or neighbor (FFN) child care provider for one or more of their children. These providers are slightly more popular among parents of children 2 years and under.

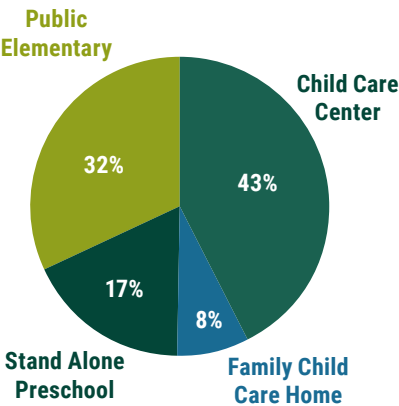
**children won't be ready for school because their child care choices have been limited.** One Latina mother told us that her mother-in-law cares for her child, but that she worried about the long-term effects of this child care arrangement. Thinking about the possible benefits of universal preschool, she said: "I would have a way to ensure my child is ready for school and be less worried about developmental delays. My mother-in-law does not know how to read or write so **I'm worried about how ready [my child] will be for school.**"



# Families Want Options for Preschool Settings and Hours

We defined preschool as an educational program that enhances children’s academic and socio-emotional skills in the year before kindergarten. This is a broad definition that encompasses service providers in a variety of settings—including family child care homes, standalone preschools that serve only 3 and 4-year-olds, preschool classrooms within public elementary schools, and child care centers.

PREFERRED PRESCHOOL PROVIDERS (N=1,365)



Our survey showed that families in Colorado have diverse preferences when it comes to preschool settings. Forty-three percent of families prefer preschool in a child care center; 32% prefer a preschool in a public elementary

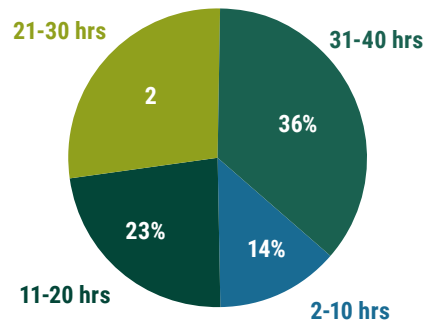
school; 17% prefer a standalone preschool; and 8% prefer a family child care home.<sup>2</sup> While preferences for child care centers, public schools, and family child care homes were similar across race and income categories, white families and high-income families were more likely to prefer a standalone preschool.

Families also have diverse preferences for the number of preschool hours they want. A higher number of hours of preschool will be helpful to families who need child care to work.

Most families (63%) want more than 20 hours a week of child care, and 36% percent of families want 31-40 hours of child care. Only 14% of families want 10 hours of child care or less. Program hours may vary by setting. While each provider is different, preschool classrooms in public elementary schools are more likely to offer a maximum of 6 hours per day of instruction. This amounts to 30 hours per week. Some public elementary schools offer part-day preschool for 3 hours per day, amounting to 15 hours per week.

Meeting families’ needs for preschool hours could help them to work and meet financial needs. A white mother of two commented that, if she were to get enough hours of preschool, she could work a job she enjoyed, rather than choosing a job based on child care opportunities and hours. Research has also found that more hours of preschool offer more benefits for child development, especially to children in low-income families.<sup>3</sup>

PREFERRED PRESCHOOL HOURS (N=1,370)



Overall, our survey findings show that the adverse impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on Colorado families’ financial security and access to child care are far from over. However, families are hopeful about the launch of Colorado’s new universal preschool program in fall 2023. Given that families have diverse preferences and see child care and preschool as similar and related needs, it will be critical for Colorado to take a robust, comprehensive approach to best serve children.

<sup>1</sup>Bouek, J. (2018). "Daycare and the Great American Divide." American Sociological Association.

<sup>2</sup>These numbers differ widely from the statistics reported in Early Milestones’ 2021 brief about Universal Preschool. We improved the wording of the question in our 2022 survey, to better align with words families might use to describe providers. We feel this estimate better represents family preference.

<sup>3</sup>Loeb, S., et al. (2007). *How much is too much? The influence of preschool centers on children’s social and cognitive development.* Economics of Education Review, 26(1), 52–66.

Stockstill, C., Freeman Cenegy, L., Mock, S., Nicolaou, K., & Thornton, C. (2022). *Still Struggling: Colorado Families’ Views on Child Care and Hopes for Universal Preschool.* Denver, Colorado: Early Milestones Colorado.

## PARTNERS

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## METHODOLOGICAL NOTE

For survey methodology or data requests, please contact us at [info@earlymilestones.org](mailto:info@earlymilestones.org).

