

And the search begins . . .

When asked to describe their experience looking for child care for their babies, parents responded with similar sentiments - emotional, frustrating, scary, exhausting, shocking, complicated, overwhelming, terrible, painful - indicating just how hard the process truly is.

Their stories confirmed what our research revealed - for infants, space is limited. "I realized I didn't have a lot of options because there wasn't a lot of spots," stated one mom.

ACNJ's research found pockets of child care "deserts" in high-need communities where few, if any, centers exist that provide care for babies.² Because of this shortage of infant care, parents reported having to start the search for child care early, with many looking into options during their pregnancy in order to ensure a spot was available when they returned to work.

Parent Voices: When to begin? #NeverTooEarly

"You have to do it before you conceive!"

"I didn't realize how much in advance you needed to secure a spot. I went to a few day cares and they [said] we have one spot left and there were all these other families touring ... you have to make this huge decision and you have 24 hours to make it!"

"I put my name on waiting lists before we even moved here."

"They (child care center) were my first call, they were the first people after my family to find out I was pregnant."

Parent Focus Groups

ACNJ held six parent focus groups between September and November 2017 in a variety of communities across the state including Paterson, Montclair, Newark, Trenton and Dover. Individual interviews with parents unable to attend the focus group were also conducted during that same time period. To participate, attendees had to be a parent or guardian who needed child care for an infant or toddler within the last three years so they could work.

ACNJ spoke with a total of 60 parents from varied economic, ethnic and racial backgrounds representing the diversity of the state. Interpreters were used for three of the focus groups and one of the interviews. Participants had between one and five children with an average of two. The ages of their children ranged from 3 months to 18 years with an average age of 5.

The majority of parents reported being employed full-time; one participant was a full-time college student and another was in high school. Annual household incomes for participants ranged from under \$30,000 to more than \$90,000, with most reporting earnings less than \$29,999 per year.



Right From The Start NJ, led by the Turrell Fund and The Nicholson Foundation, in collaboration with Zero to Three, Advocates for Children of New Jersey and the Caucus Educational Corporation, is dedicated to ensuring the resources and services are in place so that infants and toddlers in New Jersey can achieve the highest level of cognitive, emotional, and physical development possible.

The **Right From The Start NJ** campaign focuses on three areas:

- Expanding opportunities for high-quality early care and education;
- Supporting parents as their children's first and best teachers; and
- Ensuring access to appropriate health care.

Learn more at RightFromTheStartNJ.org.

2. View an interactive map of the state's child care centers that offer infant-toddler care at <https://acnj.perseeventures.com/map>.

Parent Voices: The child care shortage #ThisIsAProblem

"I panicked. I remember being in the bathroom at work because I didn't want anyone to hear the call with the child care center and saying, 'What do you mean there may not be spots?' and like, 'What else am I going to do?' I have to go back to work because it is not a choice."

"I waited until I had the baby and she was about 4 weeks old and I thought, I guess, I gotta figure this out. I started going around and I was like, Ohhhh this is like a problem!"

"I was hysterically crying on the phone with the director because we were on the waitlist and I was like I have no other options!"

"I was supposed to go back to work right after my six weeks was up ... Once I started looking into child care I found there were at a lot of places that didn't take babies."

"When I was pregnant, I started asking friends. It took me two years to find a program."

"First I was offered part-time care at Head Start - that didn't help me because I had to work but I was told if I didn't take the spot, I would lose a full-time spot when it became available."



Parents working non-standard hours (nights, weekends or rotating shifts) reported facing even greater challenges finding child care. That's because the majority of licensed child care programs only offer care for parents working the traditional 9-to-5 hours Monday through Friday.

According to the National Survey of Early Care and Education, just two percent of child care centers nationwide offer evening care; six percent provide overnight care and three percent have weekend hours.³ As a result, parents working non-standard work schedules need to rely on relatives, friends or other unregulated child care options to meet their needs.

Parents working part-time also shared concerns about finding child care that fit their schedule. One parent explained, "I work part-time and there are no part-time options in day care, so even if you don't work full-time, you're still going to pay full-time. I get it, because they have to have the same amount of staff every day whether your baby is there or not."

Some of these parents came up with creative solutions such as sharing a full-time slot with another parent. "I actually ended up finding someone else to split the full slot because I was part-time, so I found another person who also wanted that part-time so we split it; they were accommodating."

Parent Voices: Flexible hours #Unavailable

"One of my major problems is the majority of my background is sales, so people want to hire you for nights and weekends and I don't have weekend help at all."

"It depends on the kind of occupation that you have that determines the hours you need, especially if you work at night time... I guess you have to have someone you trust watch them at night time."

"We need a 24-hour day care and with shifts in it because some people work at night."

3. National Survey of Early Care and Education Project Team (2015), Fact Sheet: Provision of Early Care and Education during non-traditional hours. Retrieved from: <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/resource/fact-sheet-provision-of-early-care-and-education-non-standard-hours>.

The struggle to find quality child care

Many of the focus group participants said that they felt completely unprepared for the child care search, mostly relying on word of mouth from friends, neighbors or family members who had prior experience with a program/caregiver. Social media such as mom groups on Facebook were also mentioned as helpful resources.

Some parents said they looked online for child care centers, but often found the websites, if they had one, were unhelpful. "You get no information from their websites, so it really is going and interviewing and having the time to do all of that."

When asked directly, very few of the participants had ever heard of or used the local Child Care Resource and Referral agency to assist in finding child care. "They (CCR&R) don't advertise, I never heard of it" said one parent. "They should include information on the CCR&Rs in that packet you get when you give birth," stated another parent. "Now that's something that would be helpful!"

Participants were also not familiar with Grow NJ Kids, a rating and improvement system created in 2013 to help parents select a quality child care provider, but would welcome a resource that provides ratings for centers to help make the process easier. "There's really no guide that says here's the ten in your town or something like that to go online and find and I think that would be super helpful." However, many of the parents felt that even if there was more assistance locating child care or a rating system, "you're still stuck with the existing options."

Parent Voices: Quality child care #HowDoIKnow

"I don't know about child care, no one in my family ever used it so I'm like, alright so let's get the name, the phone number, are they licensed because if they're licensed they've got to be good. Once I visited my first (licensed child care center,) I was like hmmm that (a license) probably doesn't mean very much actually."

"You have no idea what you're supposed to be looking at."

"I just felt so helpless during that whole time period. If there was a secure door and people generally seemed happy that (child care center) was okay with me because I just felt desperate."

"I feel like a lot of us just didn't know what we were getting into. So literally, I remember just googling a list of questions to ask when touring day cares. So I would just pull that out and ask these people all these crazy questions. But then it just came down to how I felt about it."

"I just had a total lack of education. I was pregnant and I had no clue what I was getting into. I toured places and I brought my mom and she was [hesitant]. I'm like but this is my only option, this is it!"



What parents want

While it is difficult for parents with children of all ages to find a child care provider that they trust, when it comes to finding someone to care for their babies, parents feel the stakes are much higher. “Babies seem so much more vulnerable than a 3-year-old or a 4-year-old,” one parent said. “I think I was really sensitive to like how much time and attention they (child care provider) are giving to the babies, how many babies are in this room, does this baby room seem clean, does it seem like these babies are screaming and no one is paying attention, the teacher baby ratio, like all of that stuff.”

“You can’t really trust that they’re really going to care for your kids, especially the younger ones because [babies] can’t talk to you or tell you what’s going on,” another parent stated.

The increased vulnerability of infants led parents to make a range of sacrifices to ensure their babies were in a safe place. As one parent expressed, “I wanted my baby with someone that I knew, trusted and felt comfortable with. So even though it was a long commute, pickup would take me an hour and a half, I did it. I wanted my baby there.”

Parent Voices: What they look for in child care

#TheBestForMyBaby

Clean and safe environment

“It had to be clean, it had to be safe, it had to have good parent recommendations, and allow me to stay with her or watch over to make sure she does okay and pop in and out whenever I wanted to.”

“A good environment where there’s no drug related things, a nice decent area, that will let the parent know that they (babies) are safe. You want to be sure your kids feel real safe in a nice neighborhood.”

“It should be up to date, cameras, the tools that are used to teach the child should be up to date, the toys, the furniture, everything should be up to date. And it should be in code.”

Nurturing and caring environment

“A baby should feel loved and safe.”

“Knowing the culture, I want to know that whoever is caring for my child understands my family, understands my child and fits in with how I want them to be parented because they’re doing a lot of the caregiving when I’m not around so I want to make sure that there is a fit.”

“Someone who was right for my child and right for my family.”

Qualified staff

“A place where you will find qualified people that will provide love, learning, teaching, safety – we just want to protect her and give her the best.”

If the teachers are qualified, they’re patient with the children, do they really hone into their skills, because all children learn differently, so how they adapt to each child’s needs.”

“Well one, the degree, two, do they have an understanding as to how the child’s going to react ... like you can have all the education in the world but do you know how to relate to someone as a human being?”

Hours, cost and convenience

“So your first thing is does this have the hours I need? Then it’s like location, proximity to my home, my transit. Then you start looking at reputation after that.”

“And then you have to think about transportation. So you drop them off at 7, are you going to be able to reach the job at 9 o’clock? So it’s a lot of factors.”

“I know a lot of people are trying to keep their head above water, and it’s hard, who to trust, who’s trying to rob you, or whatever the case may be. You might go to this person that’s going to charge you \$95 and you might go to another person that’s charging you \$40-50. They going to try to go to a [less expensive] person, but you also gotta look at the safety of the children, is it worth going there?”

Quality is expensive and hard to find

The quality of child care programs varies greatly. As of December 2017, with only 24 infant-toddler child care centers rated thus far through Grow NJ Kids, the state's rating system that assigns one to five stars based on quality, parents are left to use their own judgement to determine the quality of a program.⁴

During the focus groups, we asked parents about their experiences and satisfaction with the quality of care they encountered during their search. While some parents shared positive experiences, others shared "eye-opening and sobering" stories.

Parent Voices: Quality costs #WorthEveryPenny

"It is ridiculously expensive but they're teaching your children so much. I'm fortunate to have found what we found."

"I would say high investment but also high return. I think because of the places we've landed it's been very much worth it but painful to spend that kind of money."

"Sometimes I joke and I'm like thank God for them because they actually know how to raise children. You know you have educators raising your children as opposed to a parent who no one gave me that book."

"I always say [the teacher] in the baby room taught me how to be a mom. Because I [didn't] know, especially like starting to feed them solids, what am I supposed to be feeding him, what should I do and she would [say] try this, try that. I just [asked] what do you think this thing is on his face. She was just like an everyday grandma that I could say, what should we do? Because like our parents aren't nearby and so it was like every day, I had this maternal wisdom to turn to, to say what is going on here?"

"I like how Head Start works with the children and the parents to get to know the family, educate us more and have more patience."

Parent Voices: Quality missing #AreYouKiddingMe

Unacceptable environments

"They had dirty cribs sitting outside, trash, flies and all of that. All the strollers and everything piled on top of each other in the hallway."

"They were outdated. The hours were terrible, like 7 to 3. I need something longer. [It was] just unclean, very dirty, a lot of yelling at the kids, I didn't like that."

Inadequate supervision

"When I pulled up, there was a kid outside crying all alone by herself without any adult supervision."

"It hurt for my baby to come home with scratches on her face and not know what happened."

"Every time I come up there, there's a different teacher in his room. I'm like okay, who are you? You're not the person I met last week!"

"After about the third day he would start screaming. It was heart wrenching to walk away and leave him screaming there... The staffing was low, they didn't have enough staff and they tended to leave him in the high chair for long periods of time. He was wet and sitting in the high chair, and he hated that stuff, so [when] we found that out, we decided to pull him out."

"It looked nice. Everybody seemed nice. But that was not the case. My child was coming home with scratches on her face, scratches on her arms. And then when I asked the teacher what happened she said, Well I don't know. She wasn't crying..."

Inadequate early childhood stimulation

"I walked in and there were like 8 toddlers lying on the floor in the dark watching a TV show and I was like, Are you kidding me!?"

"During circle time, kids were strapped into chairs!"

"One lady I called said that she just sits the kids in front of the TV. This was an in home day care and I'm like, so what kind of activities do you do with the kids? And she's 'well like oh we just put them in front of the TV and we have some toys and just let them do what they want until their parents come.'"

4. As reported by New Jersey Department of Human Services, Division of Family Development in OPRA request dated January 2018.

A major household expense

Although parents of infants considered a variety of factors when selecting care for their baby, ultimately, the cost of care was often the deciding factor. As one parent explained, “It kills me to say this, but my top factor was cost and then safety.” Another parent said, “I really loved that school but it's just too expensive for us. I really wanted to put my kids there and we just couldn't afford it by ourselves.”

All the parents interviewed, regardless of household income, agreed that child care for infants is expensive – “painfully expensive,” exclaimed one mom. With the price for full-time center-based care for infants in New Jersey costing approximately \$14,000 per year⁵, a significant portion of a family's household income is spent on child care, much more than the 10 percent recommended by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Parent Voices: Unaffordable #StickerShock

“I'm going to be working to pay for child care - it's crazy!”

“What I paid in child care was what it cost for me to go to college for a year!”

“They were asking for rent for a month!”

“I only earn enough to cover the babysitter and food. If work is slow, I sometimes can't pay the babysitter so I have to stay home.”

“The cost is usually quite a factor. With two people having to work, one of them is just working for the babysitter.”

The high cost of infant child care often forces parents to make sacrifices, sometimes in the quality of their child care arrangement. Many participants reported having to place their child in a setting they were not comfortable with simply because there were no affordable options. “Sometimes you're just stuck and you gotta use it,” noted one parent. “I can't believe I put my kids in there. I can't believe I put my child in a place like that,” revealed another.

Still other parents said they just gave up and stayed home to care for their child during the early years because they could not afford to work and pay for child care. This was especially true for the low-income parents we spoke with. “They don't give you options; they're telling you oh okay go on welfare. That's what it is. So usually you just stay home with your children. It's almost like they want you to go on welfare!”

Parents are not the only ones affected by the high cost of infant child care. We also heard stories from parents indicating that centers in their communities have stopped serving infants due to the cost:

“The child care center where my daughter goes eliminated the infant care program— they just said in good faith they couldn't ask people to pay what it costs to provide infant care.”

“When I first started there, we had an infant program and it was there for maybe two years. Then they said it just got too expensive. I think the insurance is the reason why they had to let it go. Even with providing parents with a sliding scale, it's still too costly for them so they had to completely let it go.”

Lower staff-child ratios and additional facility accommodations – all necessary to ensure a safe and healthy environment for babies - make caring for very young children more expensive.

5. 2016 New Jersey Child Care Market Price Study, Rutgers, The State University. Retrieved from: <http://www.childcarenj.gov/getattachment/Resources/Reports-and-Statistics/FINAL-2016-New-Jersey-Child-Care-Market-Price-Study.pdf.aspx?lang=en-US>.

Limited assistance available

In New Jersey, there is limited financial assistance for families to help defray the cost of child care. While a federal child care tax credit exists, New Jersey remains one of the 25 states that does not offer a state child care tax credit.⁶

Families earning up to 200 percent of the federal poverty level (\$50,200 for a family of four) can qualify for a child care subsidy to assist in paying for child care while they

work or attend school. However, parents indicated that the current subsidy system is difficult to access and navigate.

Several parents also reported not being aware of the child care subsidy program when they initially began their child care search and thought there should be more publicity about the availability of this type of assistance.

For focus group parents that did qualify for a child care subsidy, finding quality child care was still a challenge.

Parent Voices: Child Care Subsidies #BrokenSystem

Few programs and quality not up to par

"The programs that they have available are always full and they have a waiting list - there's no programs available."

"I don't feel like there's a lot of quality day cares and it's kinda like factory run, especially low-income day cares. They're understaffed with too many kids and you can't really trust that they're really going to care for your kids, especially the younger ones because babies can't talk to you or tell you what's going on."

"All children should be treated the same way, even if you have a subsidy . . . they deserve to be in a safe place and they deserve to have resources available to them that make them feel comfortable and make them grow."

"They gave me a list of centers that took babies and the list wasn't very long. So I had to go with what I got."

Eligibility barriers

"They don't calculate how much you pay for rent, how much gas, how much do you pay for these things, they only calculate how much you make in total. Hey girl they're taking taxes out of that money! And I have to get gas, because if I don't get gas I'm not gonna get to work, or I have to pay for transportation and other stuff. I mean they have to be fair!"

"If you and your husband are both working, you don't qualify because you're not poor enough. It's a matter of it just being one or two dollars, just five dollars can put you out of the program."

"If you work at a restaurant or you get paid cash or paid in tips and then you can't prove your income ... the problem is that you need the subsidy but you can't prove it."

"I feel like they want you to be so far under the poverty line and it's like if you're a person who's trying to work hard and actually trying to get yourself established. They won't say, like 'okay these people have income but you know what, they're working and they're not trying to be on this forever.' It's almost like they want you to be extremely poor or they won't help you or you're just a little bit over that line because you are working hard and trying to get things established. They won't help you and what they don't understand is that we're still living pay check to pay check."

"They ask for too much and filling out their application is like you're writing a movie!"

"If you're not married to the father of the child and they require you to get the child support, and it's very difficult to prove that you need the subsidy."

6. National Women's Law Center(2017). State Child Care and Dependent Care Tax Provisions, Tax Year 2016. Retrieved from <https://nwlc.org/resources/state-child-care-and-dependent-care-tax-provisions-tax-year-2016/>.

Low rates impact quality

Because of New Jersey's low subsidy reimbursement rates, 42 percent below the 75th percentile of market rates for infant child care⁷, providers serving children that receive a subsidy do not have the resources needed to offer high-quality care. The rate is especially low for babies 18 months and younger because licensing standards require one staff person for every four infants. The lower staff-child ratios cost more to provide care, yet the rate does not reflect this difference.

Low payment rates force providers to decide whether to exclude this age group from their center entirely, lose revenue or charge parents the difference between the actual cost to provide infant care (what they would

charge private-pay families) and what the subsidy covers. The recent (January 2018) increase to the infant-toddler subsidy reimbursement rate, amounting to less than \$1.00 a day for providers not in Grow NJ Kids, will do little to help them meet and sustain quality standards.⁸

Challenges continue

Many parents continued to face child care challenges even after finding a suitable arrangement. Employers were not always understanding when it came to issues such as a child getting sick, child care provider reliability and transportation, sometimes resulting in the loss of employment.

Parent Voice: Challenges after finding child care

#TheJuggleIsReal

Employer sensitivity to child care needs

"I had to call out of work a lot and employers who don't have children just don't understand."

"If you're a working parent, there's only so many days that you got that you can call out before it starts to be an issue."

"Sometimes you have to choose....do I need my money... or do I need to choose my child? I was in the situation where I knew it wasn't gonna work out with one of my employers. My son was real sick at one time and I knew that, at some point in time, this man is gonna let me go and unfortunately, that's basically what ended up happening. I only had so many days to call out, but I don't want to keep him around other kids either. I'm not the kind of mom that's like oh well he better go anyways you know and affect other kids. I'm not that mom. And I also don't want my son to be just laying down all day while someone is trying to care for him and other kids. So I got released from my job because I had to keep calling out. But at the end of the day, I had to be a mom."

"Pickup is stressful. The years where I had to leave work to get to the kids, get them on time, I used to have nightmares that I was on the highway and my cell phone would die and it's 7 o'clock, or I'm at work and someone is like, do you have a second? And I'm like nope. Just 5 minutes? I'm like, nope not even 5 minutes. And you know the men at work don't understand that, like the concept of not even having 5 minutes, the stress is daily."

Unreliability

"I just started a job last week. I just started the training and the in home babysitter just texted me yesterday to tell me, oh sorry by the way I'm gonna be out all day on Tuesday. And I'm training so I definitely can't miss any work. It's hard, it's really hard. Dependability has to be there but when you're limited financially, you just gotta do what you gotta do."

"The home day care that he was in, she would tell us she was closing the day before when it's like I can't even call out because if I wanted to use my time, I would have had to do it two weeks ago so that's the only inconvenience about home day care."

7. National Women's Law Center. Retrieved from <https://nwl.org/resources/basic-facts-on-child-care-in-new-jersey/>.

8. New Jersey Department of Human Services, SFY 2018 Maximum Child Care Payment Rates. Retrieved from: <http://www.childcarenj.gov/getattachment/Resources/Reports/SFY-2018-Maximum-Child-Care-Payment-Rates.pdf.aspx?lang=en-US>.

Lessons learned

In every conversation, it was clear that parents everywhere are struggling to find quality, affordable child care for their babies.

Parents of infants want child care that is provided by trained caregivers in a safe, clean and loving environment that offers activities and social interactions to help foster growth and development. However, quality infant child care in all types of settings, is in short supply and expensive. Participants reported feeling forced to stay at home when their children were young because they

could not find affordable care. Still, others stated that they had to compromise on quality because they had to work and there were no affordable options. Parents seeking part-time or non-traditional hour care reported even more challenges and fewer options.

It was the consensus that the state and federal government as well as employers all need to do more to help improve the quality, availability and cost of infant child care. Parents would like more assistance to help pay for child care through subsidy reform and tax credits and more support services to help them locate quality child care.

Parent Voices: What needs to happen #ChildCareThatWorks

Accessibility

“Good options, like real options, not just more places. We need an actual substantive comparison that you can make, not feeling forced into a situation on a waitlist in tears. More options, good options, would have been less frustrating.”

“It would be nice if [there] was some way that they could work with the companies that people work for, to find, [child care] to try to, I guess maybe subsidize it, or find an easier way. Or if you work at this facility you have a day care that's within that facility, so as soon as you go to work your child is there. So maybe we need to look at the location, to change the demographics, that either you have a preschool next to it or inside, I think that would be easier for everyone.”

“With redevelopment it should automatically be within that property -- there should be a preschool set in it for families.”

“Make it more available. Because the issue here is not being able to even get to child care or have child care. Make it more accessible, more affordable, and less problems in the registration, less red tape, or just easier to register your child, so I guess with the subsidy.”

Accountability

“Once you visit the schools, you don't want to be there and it's a shame that they don't hold the facilities accountable. You know we need to hold each other accountable and make sure that our children are getting the best. I guess if it's free, they really don't care. And we need to change that or be able to

create more sustainable income for families so they could [pitch] in more, I think that's the biggest thing.”

“Let government know child care matters and that they recognize the strain on families.”

“Do more marketing to parents [about GNJK, R&R's and subsidy system.]”

Affordable child care that supports working parents

“Drop the prices!”

“Provide a subsidy or sliding scale for more working families.”

“A tax credit – especially for low income parents, every little bit counts.”

“You're either too poor or you're making too much and you can't get nothing. There has to be some type of middle ground or some type of system where it's like okay we see you working, we see you striving and we're still gonna help you until you really get to where you need to be.”

“It's a backwards system. Because it's the working parents that need child care for their children and are the ones that are denied because they make too much money.”

“I think everything should be subsidized by how much you make. So if you can't make top dollar, how do you subsidize the money that's needed? I think that they [should] do a lot of co-ops, so maybe if you could create more co-ops, maybe that would be more beneficial.”



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