

Balancing Priorities: Foster Parents' Child Care Search and Selection Process

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Early care and education (ECE) plays a vital role in supporting children in foster care (CiFC). These children face substantial risks of poor social-emotional, behavioral, and learning outcomes due to trauma and separation from primary caregivers (McLeigh et al., 2021; Olson et al., 2019). This brief is part of a larger collaboration between the Arkansas Department of Education/Division of Elementary and Secondary Education/Arkansas Office of Early Childhood (OEC), the Arkansas Department of Human Services/Division of Children and Family Services (DCFS), SRI International, the National Center for Children in Poverty, and the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences, working together to improve ECE access for CiFC.

A companion brief¹ documents how the lack of ECE access affects foster parents' ability to accept placements, with more than a third of foster families reporting they had to decline placement requests because of child care concerns. Building on those findings, this brief examines how foster parents search for and make decisions about ECE programs. This brief focuses on two key questions:

- How do foster parents navigate the process of finding ECE?
- What factors do foster parents prioritize when selecting ECE programs?

Understanding these aspects of the search process is crucial for developing effective strategies to help foster parents find and secure appropriate ECE arrangements. This understanding can inform efforts to increase the foster care system's capacity to place children in stable, nurturing homes.

¹ For detailed findings about how ECE access affects placement decisions and system capacity, readers are encouraged to review *Early Care and Education Is an Essential Component of the Foster Care System: A View From Arkansas* (Grindal et al., 2025).

Methods

The project team developed two online surveys. Survey A examined foster parents' experiences searching for, accessing, and receiving ECE for their most recent CiFC from birth to 5 years old. Survey B explored foster parents' preferences for different ECE program features through a conjoint experiment.² DCFS partners distributed online survey invitations to all Arkansas resource parents ($N = 1,942$) via email in May 2024.³ Parents answered screening questions at the beginning of the survey to determine if they were eligible to complete the survey (that is, if they had accepted new CiFC under age 6 during the past 12 months and had sought ECE for CiFC during the past 12 months). A total of 105 foster parents completed Survey A, representing 66 DCFS traditional foster parents, 24 DCFS relative or fictive kin foster parents, and 15 Private Licensed Placement Agency foster parents.⁴ This stratified sampling approach helped capture diverse perspectives from across Arkansas's foster care system.

In Survey A, participants indicated to what extent they prioritized nine factors when trying to find child care for CiFC during the past 12 months. These factors included, for example:

- The child care program location was convenient to my home or workplace.
- The child care program offered hours that covered my full work day plus time to get to the program.
- The child care program exceeded minimum required quality standards.
- Child care program staff have been trained to support children who have experienced trauma.

Participants rated the nine factors on a scale of 1 (*low priority*) to 4 (*high priority*).⁵

Following the completion of Survey A, the project team sent participants an invitation to complete a follow-up Survey B. In Survey B, foster parents ($n = 84$) were presented with a scenario in which two programs, differing on one or more characteristics, had immediate openings. Each program included information on four key features:

- Travel distance (convenient vs. inconvenient location)
- Hours of operation (partial-day vs. full-day care)
- Quality ratings (meets vs. exceeds minimum requirements)
- Staff training (trauma-trained vs. not trauma-trained)

Foster parents completed this evaluation eight times, with each iteration presenting different combinations of these attributes. The resulting analysis examined the probability that a foster parent would select a program with a given feature.

² This experimental technique, drawn primarily from market research, allows researchers to estimate the causal impact of multiple components simultaneously by presenting respondents with randomized profiles that vary across multiple attributes (Hainmueller et al., 2014). In a conjoint experiment, participants are asked to choose between two or more profiles with randomly varied attributes, and resulting data permit researchers to estimate the probability that respondents would select a profile with a given attribute.

³ DCFS (2024) uses the term "resource parent" to refer to "an individual or family, respectively, in those homes that provide a family-like setting on a twenty-hour (24) hour basis for children in the custody of and placed there by the DHS. The term resource home is used because these homes are designed to serve as resources to children in the custody of DHS" (p. 3). In this brief, we use the term "foster parent" because it may be more familiar to a broader national audience. The 1,942 survey recipients included fictive kin, foster, provisional, and relative placements.

⁴ Private Licensed Placement Agencies are private agencies that provide foster placement and foster family support services under contracts with DCFS.

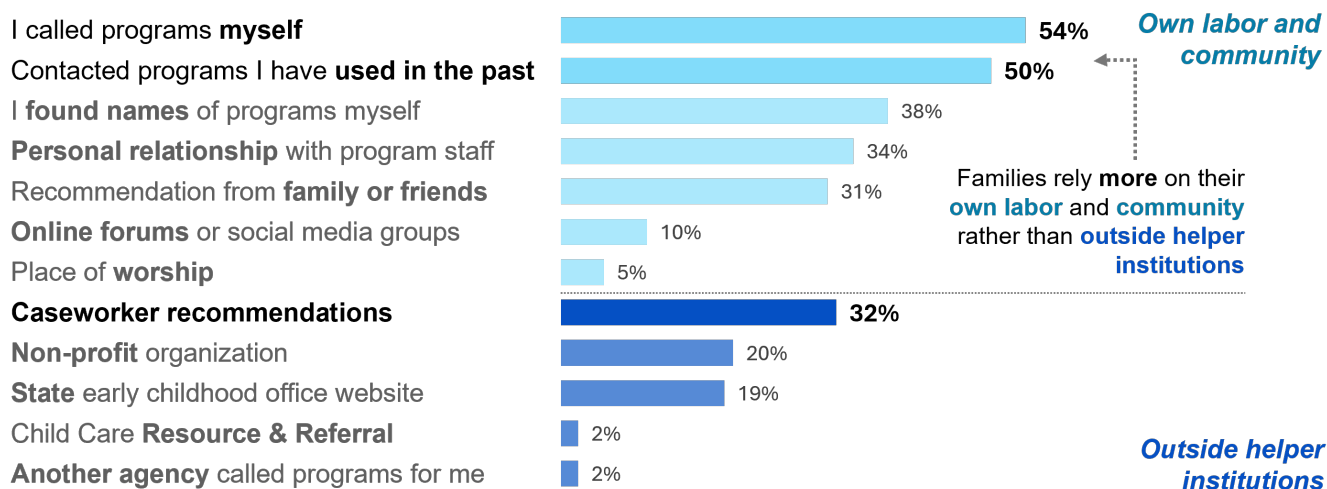
⁵ Participants also had the option to select "Did not consider" for any factor.

Findings

Foster Families Largely Rely on Their Own Efforts to Find ECE

Foster parents in Arkansas often navigate the complex process of finding ECE without formal assistance. Around half of foster parents reported directly contacting programs (54%) or reaching out to facilities they had used previously (50%), while about a third depend on personal connections or recommendations. While some foster parents (32%) reported receiving guidance from caseworkers, fewer than one in five reported other forms of support such as consulting state websites or utilizing Child Care Aware agencies.⁶

Families rely more on their own labor/community rather than outside helper institutions to find ECE programs



This reliance on individual effort rather than institutional support limits foster parents' awareness of high-quality ECE options. Notably, fewer than half of foster parents (42%) reported they considered or obtained information from someone about accessing care through Head Start, Early Head Start, or Arkansas Better Chance (the state's preschool program), despite these programs' potential to provide free, high-quality care for CiFC.

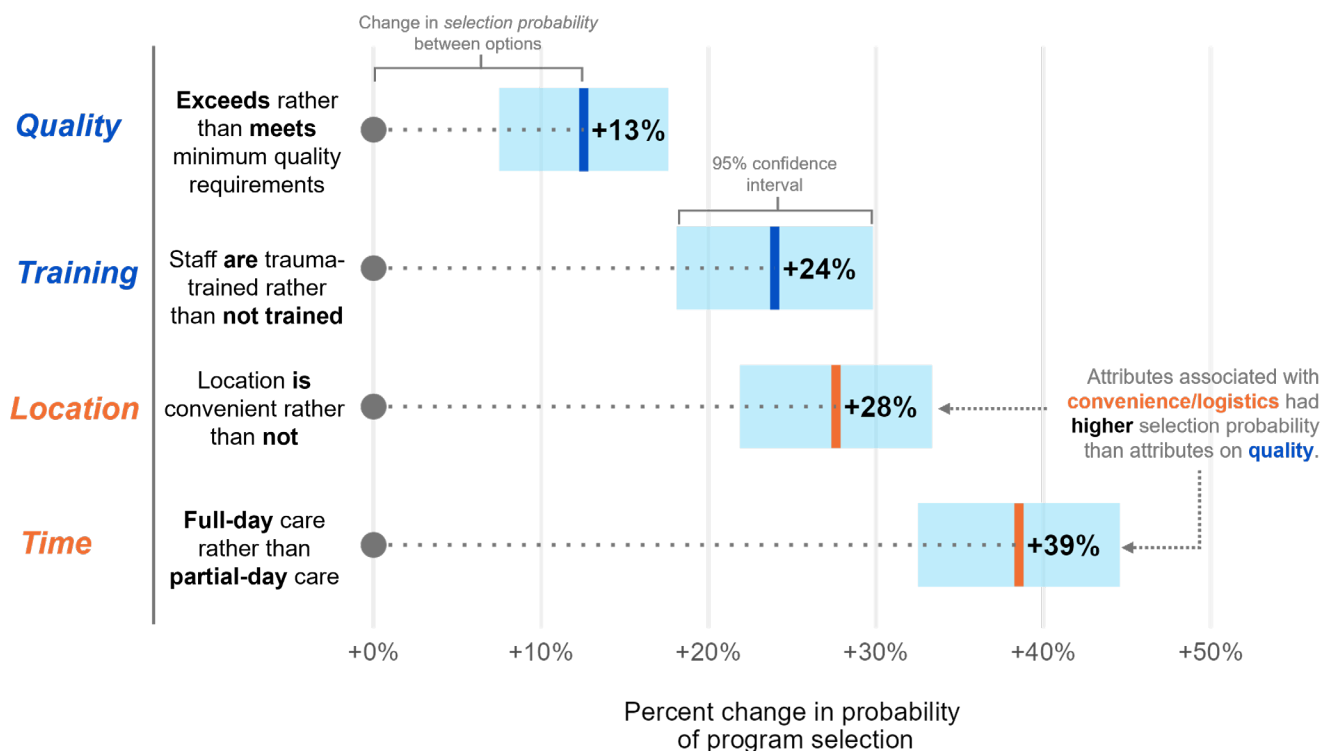
⁶ Local Child Care Aware agencies can help families find ECE options near their home or work (<https://www.childcareaware.org/resources/ccrr-search/>).

Program Availability and Convenience Drive ECE Program Selection for Foster Parents

When searching for ECE, foster parents prioritize practical considerations that enable them to accept and maintain placements. Survey A data show that foster parents most heavily weighed program acceptance of vouchers (82%), immediate availability (75%), and hours that accommodate work schedules (76%) as a high priority. While many parents also valued the convenience of nearby locations (60%), fewer prioritized programs that exceeded minimum quality standards (45%) or offered specialized supports like trauma-informed care (43%).

Foster parents face difficult trade-offs when selecting programs. When asked to weigh different program features when selecting care for CiFC, foster parents reported that they typically prioritize practical considerations over quality features, even when they recognize the importance of both. For example, the probability of parents selecting a program with extended hours (7:30 am–6:30 pm) was 39% higher than choosing one with standard hours (8:30 am–3:30 pm). Location emerged as the second most important factor, with convenient locations or transportation increasing selection probability by 28%. While parents also valued higher quality ratings and trauma-informed staff training, these factors had less influence on program preference (increasing selection probability by 13% and 24% respectively).

Program feature effects on foster parents' preferences for ECE programs



Implications and Recommendations

The findings about how foster parents search for and select ECE programs suggest a need for stronger institutional supports to help foster parents secure appropriate ECE options.

Strengthen Search Support Systems

Foster parents' reliance on informal networks and individual effort points to the need for more robust institutional support. States should consider developing centralized resources to help foster parents identify and connect with available programs. This could include enhancing existing tools, such as an ECE provider database, to include real-time availability information and program quality indicators. Foster care support agencies may also consider raising awareness of organizations like Child Care Aware, which can help foster parents find appropriate care for their children.

Address Practical Barriers

The emphasis foster parents place on practical considerations suggests the need to align high-quality programs with families' needs. State and federal agencies could consider policies that encourage or support programs in expanding hours of operation, providing transportation assistance, and creating emergency ECE options for immediate CiFC placements. Additionally, agencies could directly establish priority enrollment policies in high-quality programs, particularly for CiFC.

Improve Information Access

The gap between stated preferences and actual choices suggests that foster parents need better information about program quality and available supports. States should ensure that foster parents and caseworkers have ready access to clear materials about quality indicators and their importance, create guides for navigating the ECE search process, and establish mechanisms for sharing information about program openings. Additionally, state agencies could provide additional resources to foster parents regarding how to access child care subsidies as well as how child care programs can facilitate access to key support services, such as behavioral or developmental interventions, to help meet the diverse needs of CiFC.

These recommendations complement the system-level changes suggested in the companion brief (Grindal et al., 2025), which focus specifically on supporting foster parents in finding and selecting high-quality care that meets their practical needs while promoting positive outcomes for CiFC. By implementing these targeted strategies alongside broader system improvements, states can work toward ensuring that all CiFC have access to the stable, high-quality ECE they need to thrive.

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