



NEWS RELEASE

December 8, 2010

AMHERST H.
WILDER
FOUNDATION
ESTABLISHED 1906

EMBARGOED UNTIL 5:00 P.M. DECEMBER 9

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Here for good.

Child care use in Minnesota: New study highlights challenges and choices

St. Paul – A new study on child care use in Minnesota reports that families are challenged to knit together child care that fits their preferences, needs, and is affordable. Parents rate high quality as one of the top reasons for choosing child care; however, nearly one in three says they have to take what they can get, sometimes sacrificing quality. Four out of five families reported using two or more providers.

Of the nearly 500,000 households in Minnesota with at least one child age 12 or younger, 76 percent use child care. The study, “Child Care Use in Minnesota: Report of the 2009 Statewide Household Child Care Survey,” paints a detailed picture of child care choice, satisfaction, and affordability throughout the state. It was commissioned by the Minnesota Department of Human Services and conducted by Wilder Research, who surveyed 1,209 randomly selected households. The study updates similar studies conducted in 2004 and 1999.

“Families need child care to find and keep jobs to support their families. They want quality child care to ensure their children are well prepared for school. This report helps inform our decisions as we offer families the supports they need to become self-sufficient and prepare their children for the future,” said Erin Sullivan Sutton, assistant commissioner of Children and Family Services for the Minnesota Department of Human Services.

Parents rely on family, friends and neighbors most for their primary child care (43 percent), followed by center-based care (31 percent), licensed family care (13 percent), supervised activities (12 percent) and self-care (2 percent).

According to Wilder Research’s study director Richard Chase, “ Whatever type of care is chosen, a caregiver rated as high quality is a very important consideration, more so than a reasonable cost. Similar to 2004 survey findings, 88 percent of parents say they would find it helpful if their community had a child care quality rating system that would give them information they could use for selecting the highest quality care.”

Additional key findings from the study include:

Child care use is complex and varied

- Twenty-four percent of working parents’ schedules vary from week to week.
- In addition to standard weekday hours during the school year, 43 percent of children are regularly in non-parental care during weekday evenings (6 p.m. to 10 p.m.), and 33 percent are regularly in non-parental care on weekends. Seven percent of children are in non-parental care after 10 p.m. on weekdays, and 9 percent before 7 a.m. Family, friends and neighbors are the usual caregivers during these times.
- During the school year, more than two-thirds of children are in the care of family, friends or neighbors at least part of the time (69 percent), followed by center-based care (50 percent), supervised activities (46 percent), licensed family child care (14 percent) and self-care (14 percent).
- During the summer, more children use family, friend and neighbor care (77 percent) and fewer use center-based care (31 percent).

Low-income families have greater child care challenges

Twenty-eight percent of children age 12 and younger live in low-income households (at or below 200 percent of the federal poverty level – about \$44,000 for a family of four).

- While the average cost for Minnesota families using child care for one or more children is 12 percent of their income, families making less than \$20,000 a year spend 29 percent of their income on child care expenses.
- Child care problems prevented 20 percent of low-income families from accepting or keeping a job, compared to 9 percent of other parents.
- 35 percent of low-income families say they lack child care choices.

According to Chase, "Parents with child care subsidies are more likely than other low-income families to report their child care helps prepare their child for school. Research clearly shows the value of early learning for a child's later success in life. Efforts to rate and improve child care quality must go hand-in-hand with improving access."

Wilder Research, part of the Amherst H. Wilder Foundation in Saint Paul, is one of the nation's largest nonprofit research and evaluation centers dedicated to the field of human services. Wilder Research issues nearly 150 reports per year that help improve the community's understanding of major social issues and identify effective ways to strengthen individuals, families and communities.

The Minnesota Department of Human Services provides or administers a broad range of services, including health care, economic assistance, child welfare services, child care, and services for the elderly and people with disabilities.

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