

CHILD CARE NEEDS

in Northeastern Minnesota



On behalf of the United Way of Northeastern Minnesota, Wilder Research conducted a child care needs assessment for the service territories of Upper Saint Louis County and parts of Itasca County, excluding the cities of Duluth and Grand Rapids. The purpose of the study was to determine the needs and issues regarding child care in the region from parent, provider and employer perspectives. This information will be used by the United Way of Northeastern Minnesota and its partners, and hopefully the broader community, to address emerging issues and needs with child care in northeast Minnesota. This report focuses on the following questions:

- How do families find and use child care?
- What are child care challenges and needs?
- What does early childhood education look like in Northeast Minnesota?
- What should the United Way of Northeastern Minnesota do to address emerging issues and needs with child care?

Recommendations are provided to United Way of Northeastern Minnesota at the end of the report.

Findings



How do families find and use child care?

The availability or access to child care has a strong to moderate impact on family decision-making, particularly whether to have additional children or to continue living in the area (Figure 1).

1. CHILD CARE AVAILABILITY OR ACCESS IMPACTS “A LITTLE” OR “A LOT”...

	Household phone survey (N=297)	Web survey (N=244)
Decision to have children	22%	31%
Decision to have additional children	37%	31%
Decision to continue living in Upper Saint Louis County or Itasca County	31%	50%

When considering the best resources or supports in the community to help families find child care, referrals by friends, neighbors, relatives and co-workers (46%) are the most frequently reported source. The next best source, according to a representative sample of parents/guardians in the area, is social service agencies in general (13%). Web survey respondents report internet searches as the next best source (12%).

The vast majority of families indicate awareness of early childhood screenings and most are aware of child care subsidy programs (Figure 2). About one-third of families are aware of the regional child care quality rating system (Child Care Aware of Northeastern Minnesota) and about 1 in 10 are aware of the statewide quality rating system (Parent Aware).

2. ARE YOU AWARE OF...?

	Household phone survey (N=302)	Web survey (N=242)
Early Childhood Screening	91%	95%
Availability of state or county subsidy programs	72%	62%
Childcare Aware of MN NE	33%	38%
Parent Aware	12%	9%

A majority of families (68-75%) contacted more than one child care provider before choosing their current child care arrangement. Two in five (40-42%) families contacted four or more child care providers before their current arrangement).

The top three sources through which families learned about their current child care arrangement were: through personal referrals by friends, neighbors, relatives, and co-workers (51% for both the representative sample and the opt-in sample), they knew the provider personally (14-24%), or they used the Child Care Resource and Referral (CCR) service (8-10%).

Qualities that families deemed “extremely important” in their child care provider are illustrated in Figure 3.

3. EXTREMELY IMPORTANT CHILD CARE QUALITIES

Household phone survey (N=303)	Web survey (N=251)
Knowledge about children’s changing needs as they grow and develop (92%)	Knowledge about children’s changing needs as they grow and develop (92%)
Programs of children’s social and emotional development (87%)	Programs of children’s social and emotional development (90%)
Reasonable cost (85%)	Caregiver or provider who has special training in taking care of children (82%)

Many families use a combination of child care arrangements. When asked what types of arrangements they *used at all* within the last two weeks, the top three types of care used are: licensed child care in someone else’s home (40-43%), child care or babysitting in someone else’s home (40-42%), and child care or babysitting in their own home (37-40%).

The top three types of child care *used most often* include licensed child care in someone else’s home (36-41%), a child care center, nursery, preschool, or pre-kindergarten (29-32%), and child care or babysitting in their own home (13-17%).

Some families have relatives outside their household who are available and willing to care for their children on a regular basis for more than five hours per week (39-47%); a few rely on individuals like neighbors or friends (8-16%).



What are child care challenges and needs?

Finding a child care arrangement that has all the features that are important is either “very hard” or “somewhat hard” for a majority (62-79%) of families. Families indicate lack of flexible scheduling (26%) and lack of quality child care (20-21%) as their top difficulties. About one-fifth (22%) of parents/guardians from the representative household survey also mentioned lack of child care options, whereas about one-fifth (20%) of opt-in web survey respondents mentioned child care was too expensive.

Approximately one-quarter of families would change their child care provider, if they could (21-27%). Most would prefer a child care center, nursery, preschool, pre-kindergarten, or a licensed child care in a home (Figure 4). Opt-in web survey respondents were more likely to say they would care for the child themselves, if they could.

4. PREFERRED TYPE OF CARE (OF THOSE WHO WOULD CHANGE THEIR PROVIDER)

	Household phone survey (N=33)	Web survey (N=36)
Child care center, nursery, preschool, pre-kindergarten	45%	25%
Licensed child care in a family child care home	24%	33%
Care for child myself/parental care	12%	31%
Something else – unspecified	12%	0%
Head Start	0%	11%

The majority of families (69-78%) used paid child care within the last two weeks and their weekly cost of child care varied from \$0 to \$200 or more (Figure 5). The \$0 refers to parents who do not pay family/friends who help with child care. Web survey respondents reported higher cost of child care than the representative sample of parents/guardians in the area. Few respondents received government or outside household support for child care.

5. HOW MUCH HOUSEHOLD PAID OR WILL PAY FOR LAST WEEK, MONDAY THROUGH SUNDAY, FOR ALL CHILD CARE EXPENSES FOR CHILDREN AGE 12 OR YOUNGER

	Household phone survey (N=227)	Web survey (N=169)
\$0	22%	8%
\$1-\$49	18%	5%
\$50-\$99	18%	14%
\$100-\$149	18%	23%
\$150-\$199	12%	16%
\$200+	12%	34%

Of the families who paid for child care, one-third to nearly half (33-46%) used a child care arrangement that charges for a minimum number of hours per week, regardless of whether families used these hours or not. Please see Figure 6 for more information.

6. MINIMUM HOURS CHARGED BY CHILD CARE ARRANGEMENT OR FACILITY PER WEEK

	Household phone survey (N=227)	Web survey (N=169)
1-9 hours	14%	27%
10-19 hours	34%	22%
20-29 hours	17%	30%
30-39 hours	19%	8%
40 or more hours	16%	13%

Charging for a minimum number of hours has been problematic for families:

“The biggest complaint I hear from new clients is that they don’t like to be billed for time their child is not there.” – child care provider

Some child care providers charge both an hourly rate as well as a minimum number of hours. Child care providers who charge hourly rates only (without a minimum number of hours) assert their model is more affordable. They feel this model is both helpful for their business and responsive to the regions’ needs:

“It’s how we started – as the years went by, we realized how good of a marketing tool it was. Philosophically, if parents can spend time with their children, I want to encourage that.” – child care provider

“I feel it is fair to parents to do it that way. I know a lot do half or full day.” – child care provider

“We charge on an hourly basis because there’s so much shift work in this area. People that come from the Twin Cities that move up here are astounded.” – child care provider

The majority of families report their current child care provider is “almost always” or “sometimes” full and has a waiting list (66-82%). Child care providers echo many of the same concerns as families, recognizing issues with long wait times – up to one year. Only one child care provider (of the 13 who were interviewed for this study) indicated they had no history of a waiting list. Infant care is especially difficult to find, according to all but one child care provider. A provider expresses:

“I feel bad because I really can’t service as many right now. You work so hard to make families happy with your facility and then the word of mouth out there becomes so good that I have to say no.” – child care provider

Flexibility with child care providers was more commonly mentioned by families as an issue than flexibility with employers. None of the child care providers we interviewed provide evening or weekend child care hours for families. They state barriers of time, financial costs, and finding qualified employees:

“Financially, it would be very hard for me to expand my facility, because the more numbers, the harder it is to meet state standards and find qualified people to work.” – child care provider

“I think everybody finds daycare for standard hours. People on shift work, you have to make your own arrangements. People working evenings and weekends are probably in dire need if they don’t have family.” – child care provider

The child care providers who were interviewed for this study refer to county guidelines for infectious diseases in child care settings for their sick policies. They express a desire to follow policies, while acknowledging how these and other policies limit some people from entering the field:

“One of the biggest factors in our area in finding quality care is that there just aren’t many people available. And some of the people that look into getting licensed, it is expensive, especially if you need to make adjustments in your home.

Most respondents (72-85%) are “very comfortable” or “somewhat comfortable” talking to their employer about child care issues. However, many respondents reported experiencing problems with their child care that they felt was detrimental to their work or livelihood, such as missing an entire day of work, having to leave work early, or being late for work (Figure 7). Transportation did not emerge as a challenge to child care for most families.

7. IN THE PASTS SIX MONTHS, HAVE YOU OR YOUR SPOUSE/PARTNER HAD ANY PROBLEMS WITH CHILD CARE WHERE YOU...

	Household phone survey (N=303)	Web survey (N=238)
Had problems that prevented accepting or keeping the kind of job you want	20%	25%
Missed an entire day of work	28%	50%
Left early or were late for work	25%	52%
Had work quality suffer worrying about your child	13%	33%
Changed shifts or schedules	31%	48%
Quit a job or was fired	6%	7%

The 10 employers who were surveyed for this study do not directly provide employees with access to child care. During the interviews, they referred to general employee benefits such as Paid Time Off (PTO) to take care of sick children. One provider does offer a general flexible spending account that can be used for child care expenses, but was uncertain how many

employees use the program. Of the 10 employers who were interviewed, only one provided child care on-site – this is available only to school-aged children before and after school. Others are not interested in expanding on-site child care, stating:

“We do not feel that we have a large enough population to support on-site daycare. Because of cost factors, liability factors... we just don't feel we have a large enough population to support it.”
– health employer

“It's too cumbersome to try an on-site facility... lack of space.” – health employer

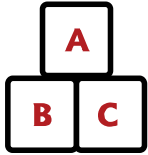
“Even if we had real estate, it probably isn't conducive to small children from a liability standpoint. We're governed by MSHA (Mining Safety Health Administration). In order to be on the property, you have to be safety trained through MSHA. So there are legal limitations that prevent us from allowing people of a certain age on the property.” – mining employer

Employers interviewed acknowledged that child care issues impact retention, work-life balance, and family decision-making:

“I don't think it's been a recruitment issue. It can be a retention issue... we see people take a hiatus. One spouse or the other stays home. They go on a reduced schedule or something like that.”
– health employer

“12 hour shifts – that's a long time for an infant to be in daycare... that would be the biggest challenge.”
– mining employer

“I've heard comments from some of the young employees that we have saying that they're going to hold off on starting a family” – mining employer

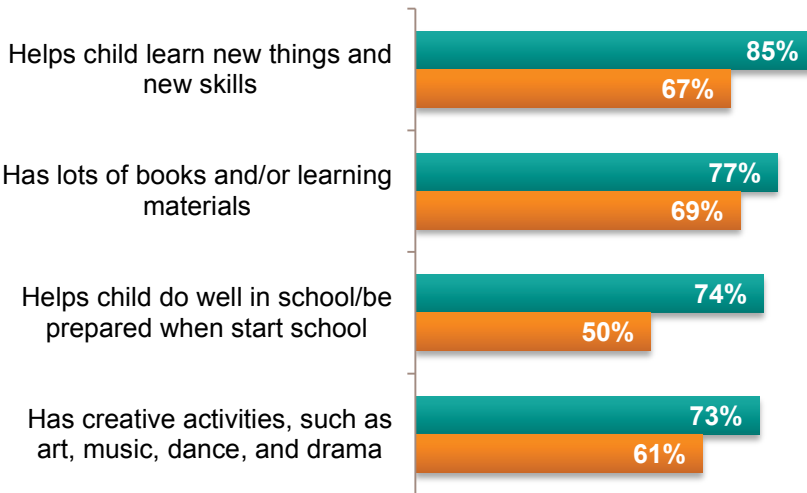


What does early childhood education look like in Northeast Minnesota?

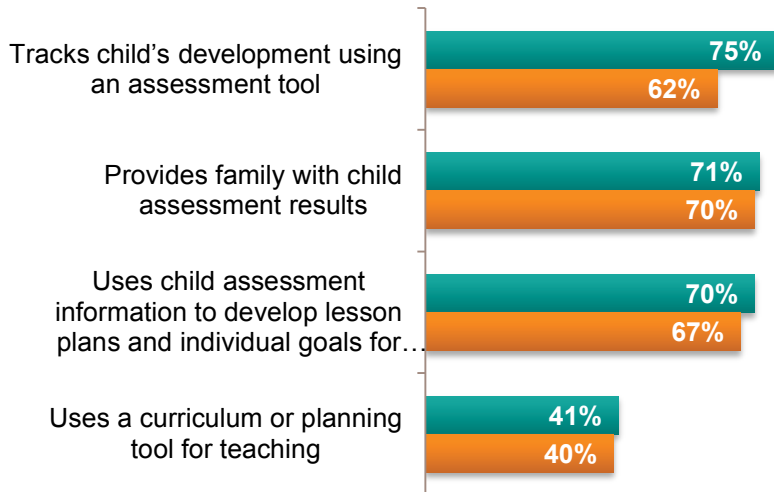
In terms of early childhood education, families report many child care arrangements incorporate informal early childhood education activities. However, according to these families, their child care providers do not frequently use formal strategies such as assessments, curriculums, and other lesson plans.

8. CHILD CARE ARRANGEMENT

Child care arrangement always or usually...



Child care arrangement rarely or never...



■ Household phone survey ■ Web survey

Most child care providers said they are interested in offering early childhood education and becoming accredited, but experience barriers due to time, cost, and finding qualified employees. A few child care providers are disinterested. A provider says:

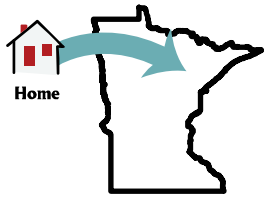
“I think part of it in our area is that we have some older providers and some really young providers. And they just don’t realize the new push. They’re still in the ‘kids are learning while they’re playing,’ which I don’t dispute. But they don’t realize that more is expected and some of them frankly just don’t want it.”
– child care provider

Many providers describe the informal early childhood education activities they incorporate, despite barriers to accreditation. Following are a few example comments:

“We don’t have canned curriculum... we follow the guidelines set forward by the state... families are interested in early childhood – much more than 10 years ago.” – child care provider

“We have gone by a thematic preschool curriculum. We get most of our ideas online. We pick a theme for the week, like say, Christmas Week. And we have art, dance, movement, games, writing, and reading projects... all around the one theme for the week.” – child care provider

“We try. I used to in previous years. We used to sit down and do a full schedule, with circle time, and all that. Right now, we have so many babies that we can’t do that. So now, when the kids sit down, we have around the table discussion about the color of their plates, etc. But it’s not as structured as it used to be. I have not used a brand name curriculum. I do have a teaching license, but I have never purchased a curriculum.” – child care provider



What should the United Way of Northeastern Minnesota do to address emerging issues and needs with child care?

Local support from the community at all levels, including families, employers, child care providers, as well as organizations, funders, and other community members is vital to United Way of Northeastern Minnesota's success in leveraging this data to help families meet child care needs. To build support, United Way of Northeastern Minnesota should use the results from this study to convene community gatherings throughout the service region targeted at each of the aforementioned audiences to review key study results, gather public feedback to the results, and discuss strategies for using survey results for future planning, programming, and outreach:

"They can help by doing just what they're doing. [Gathering] data from parents... then being able to put all that together is the best way to meet everyone's needs." – child care provider

United Way of Northeastern Minnesota should emphasize a close working relationship and regular communication with child care providers to help explore incentives for expansion and accreditation options for early childhood education and improve flexibility of offerings for families by incentivizing child care providers to offer hourly rates, evening, night, and weekend hours.

Child care providers suggest the following action steps to improve child care quality:

Geographically and financially accessible trainings

“Expand our knowledge of other programs. We could always use financial assistance.”

“Trainings that are state-mandated, first aid and CPR – those are expensive trainings.”

“Maybe hold some symposiums – like information-seeking workshops.”

“It would be wonderful to have more opportunity of training available. It is so hard to find training that isn’t online that I don’t have to travel to. I have requirements for training and it is so hard to find. I will find one, sign up, and it will be cancelled due to not having enough [people] sign up.”

“Anything [financial assistance] would be appreciated. Any free materials would be wonderful. Maybe helping with materials might entice more people. You are not going to get rich doing this. You have to entice people to go into this line of work. Help the providers to get interested in it. Maybe training and free materials would be helpful.”

“I think it’d be great to have some trainings on kind of mixing the school readiness component into the playtime because a lot of people – I don’t know why – are resistant to do the school readiness stuff. And it is hard to do it when you have such a mixed age.”

Incentives to increase the number of qualified child care providers

“I would like to see more people signing up to be a provider... there’s got to be people out there. We have a high unemployment rate, but they just don’t do it. It’s not always easy to have a house full of kids.”

“I do think there are some scholarships out there for that, if you want to go back to school. It needs to be more convenient, with shorter time commitments, because we do have our own families.”

Financial support for both home child care providers and child care center providers

“I would love to expand our infant and toddler programs, but I don’t have the space in the physical location I’m at. I want to serve the needs of those parents.”

“I think that something they could do to expand would be to help build capacity – maybe grants to child care centers that are willing to expand – brick and mortar type grants.”

“I’m fortunate that I have a large home and that I have plenty of space, but the equipment can sometimes be a burden, especially with the recalls and the restriction for car seats and cribs. A lot of times, we end up spending a lot of time on the equipment that we need.”

Methodology

This child care needs assessment used three primary methods to gather information from parents/guardians of children age 12 and younger, between May and September 2013:

- First, this assessment used a household phone survey, combining three sampling strategies to produce a representative sample in the service territories of Upper Saint Louis county and parts of Itasca county, excluding Duluth and Grand Rapids. Respondents were eligible for the study if they had children age 12 or younger in the household. If the respondent was a stay at home parent or had a spouse who was a stay at home parent, they were eligible only if they indicated that difficulty finding child care impacted their or their spouse's decision to stay at home. Respondents were eligible for the study regardless of whether they were currently using paid child care, as long as they met the aforementioned criteria. Sampling strategies included address-based sampling (randomly selected addresses in the area), targeted sampling (list purchased from a vendor, criteria include subscription to parenting magazines), and list sampling (from United Way's Imagination Library database). A total of 303 respondents completed this survey.
- Second, this assessment included a web survey (the same instrument used for the household phone survey) that was available to any interested parent/guardian of children age 12 and younger to opt in. Respondents were recruited through local media, the United Way of Northeastern Minnesota website, and via outreach to local employers in the area. A total of 251 respondents completed this survey.
- Third, phone interviews with child care providers and area employers were completed with 23 key informants. This included 13 child care providers and 10 area employers that represented the mining, healthcare, education and service industries.

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