

# Parents' Reasons for Searching for Early Care and Education and Results of Search

## An Analysis Using the Access Framework

### Introduction

Using data from the 2012 National Survey of Early Care and Education (NSECE) Household Survey, this snapshot examines the questions:

- Why did parents with young children search for a care provider?
- What percentage of parents found a new care provider?
- Why did some parents' searches end without using a new care provider?

The findings presented in this snapshot illustrate some of the factors that drive demand for child care for children under age 6, not yet in kindergarten. Findings also describe the challenges that parents face when searching for providers for the first time or when looking for a new provider. When the sample size permits, findings are presented separately for parents with younger (birth to 36 months) and older (36 to 72 months) children; and for parents from lower-income (<200% federal poverty level (FPL)) and higher-income ( $\geq$ 200% FPL) households, allowing for a more fine-tuned understanding of the needs of parents with children of different ages, and from different household income backgrounds.

### Key Findings

- Almost half (46%) of all parents reporting about a child under age 6, not yet in kindergarten, searched for care in the two years prior to the 2012 survey.
- Two out of three parents (66%) searched for care for reasons related to meeting parents' needs (e.g., so that a parent could work or attend school), 30 percent searched for care to support child development (e.g., to provide the child with educational or social enrichment), 2 percent searched for reasons related to affordability, and 2 percent searched for other reasons.
- Almost two thirds (60%) of parents who searched for care enrolled their child with a new provider.
- Parents who searched for care for reasons related to parents' needs were more likely to enroll with a provider (64%) compared to those who searched for care to support child development (53%).

### Glossary

**Younger children:** This term refers to children under 36 months of age.

**Older children:** This term refers to children who are between the ages of 36 months to 72 months, but not yet in kindergarten.

**Lower-income households:** This term refers to households where the total income is less than 200% of the federal poverty level (FPL).

**Higher-income households:** This refers to households where the total income is at or above 200% of the FPL. We are not suggesting that households with income that is at or above 200% FPL are high income.

## Findings Across Household Income

- Parents from higher-income households were more likely to search for care compared to parents from lower-income households (51% vs. 41%).
- Among parents who searched for care, those from higher-income households were more likely to enroll with a new provider compared to parents from lower-income households (70% vs. 54%).
- Parents from lower-income households were more likely than parents from higher-income households to cite a lack of affordability as their main reason for not enrolling with a new provider (39% vs. 24%).

## Findings Across Child Age

- Parents with younger children were four times as likely to report searching for care to meet parents' needs than to support child development (77% vs. 19%); while parents with older children were more evenly distributed in their reasons for search.
- Parents with older children were more likely to enroll with a new provider compared to parents with younger children (66% vs. 55%).

## Data and Methods

The 2012 NSECE consists of four integrated, nationally representative surveys that characterize the supply of and demand for early care and education (ECE) in the United States. This snapshot uses data from the Household Survey described below.

### Household Survey

The Household Survey was conducted with a parent or guardian (hereafter, parents) of a child or children under age 13 and characterizes the ECE needs and preferences of households across the United States. Data were collected from 11,629 households. With survey weights applied, the Household Survey is representative of the 28,082,701 households with children under 13 in the United States in 2012. Each parent was asked about its most recent care search for one randomly selected child.

### Sample

This snapshot focuses on the responses of parents reporting on a child under age 6 (not in kindergarten) who searched for care in the 24 months prior to the administration of the survey. There were 2,003 respondents who searched for care; with survey weights applied, these parents were representative of 5,770,294 parents. When the sample size allows, findings are presented separately for parents with younger children (i.e., birth to <36 months) and older children (i.e., 36 to 72 months, not in kindergarten); and for parents from lower-income (i.e., <200% FPL) and higher-income (i.e.,  $\geq$ 200% FPL) households.<sup>1</sup>

### Measures

This snapshot presents:

- parents' main reason for looking for care;
- the result of parents' most recent search, categorized into:
  - enrolled with a new provider considered during search;
  - did not enroll with a new provider considered during search (this includes parents who remained with their existing provider, or decided to use parental care); or

- other;<sup>2</sup> and
- parents' main reason for not enrolling with a new provider considered during their search.

This snapshot uses the Access Framework to categorize parents' reasons for looking for care and reasons for not enrolling with a new provider (see text box on page 4 "Categorizing Parent Survey Responses Using the Access Framework - Main Reason for Searching for Care").

<sup>1</sup> We use the term higher-income as a point of comparison to the lower-income category. We are not suggesting that families with a household income that is at or above 200% FPL are high income.

<sup>2</sup> Included in the "other" category are parents who responded: Other or Don't Know/Refused.

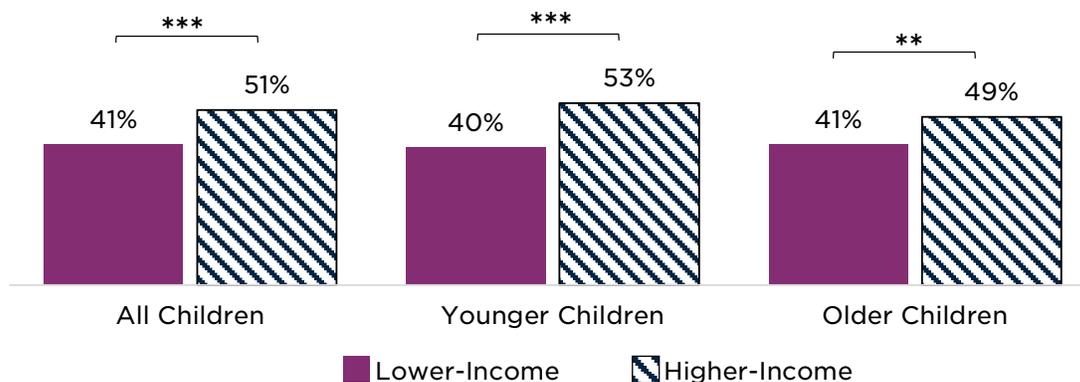
## Landscape of Parents Searching for Care

In 2012, slightly under half (46%) of all parents reporting on children under age 6 (not in kindergarten) reported that they searched for child care in the 24 months prior to the administration of the Household Survey.

### Parents from higher-income households were more likely to search for child care compared to parents from lower-income households

As shown in Figure 1, more parents from higher-income households searched for care compared to parents from lower-income households (51% vs. 41%). This pattern was consistent for parents with younger children (53% vs. 40%) and for parents with older children (49% vs. 41%). Parents with younger children and those with older children had similar rates of searching for care (46% and 45%, respectively).

**Figure 1.** Percentage of parents who searched for care, by household income and child's age



Source. Authors' analysis of NSECE 2012 Household Survey

Note. Sample includes parents with children under age 6, not yet in kindergarten. Younger children (<36 months); Older children (36-72 months, not yet in kindergarten); Lower-Income (<200% FPL); Higher-Income (≥200% FPL).

\* p<0.05, \*\* p<0.01, \*\*\* p<0.001

## Reasons for Searching for Care

Parents were asked about their main reason for searching for child care. To facilitate analyses, parents' responses were categorized into the Access Framework dimensions, a family-centered approach to defining access to ECE (Friese, Lin, Forry and Tout, 2017) (see text box on page 4 "Categorizing Parent Survey Responses Using the Access Framework - Main Reason for Searching for Care"). According to the Access Framework, access to ECE means that parents, with **reasonable effort**, can enroll their child in an **affordable** arrangement that **supports the child's development** and **meets the parents' needs**.

# Categorizing Parent Survey Responses Using the Access Framework | Main Reason for Searching for Care

Table 1 shows the responses of parents in the sample to the survey question, “What is the main reason that you were looking for child care at that time?” The survey provided a list of response options, but also allowed parents to provide an open response if their main reason for searching for care was not listed. Parents’ open-ended responses were coded and are indicated with an asterisk in Table 1.

A team of Child Trends researchers and Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE) staff used a consensus-based process to categorize parents’ responses into the four dimensions of the Access Framework.<sup>3</sup> Not all parent responses fit into the four dimensions, so we developed a fifth category of “Other.”

**Table 1.** Parents’ main reasons for searching for care assigned to Access Framework dimensions

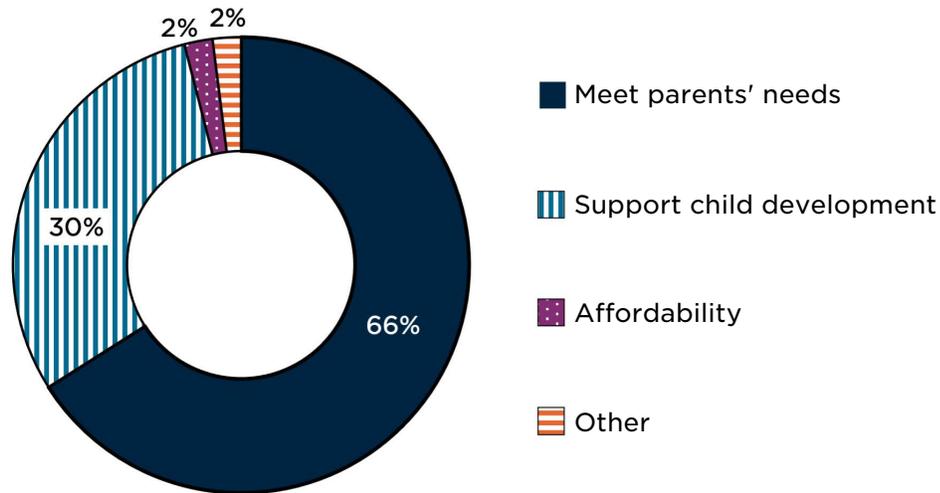
Access Framework Dimension	Parent Survey Responses to Reason for Search
Reasonable Effort	[No parent responses were assigned to the reasonable effort dimension]
Affordability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Wanted to reduce child care expenses</li> </ul>
Supports child’s development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To provide my child educational or social enrichment</li> <li>• Child no longer eligible for previous care (e.g., aged out or summer break)</li> <li>• A specific extracurricular activity (e.g., violin lessons, skiing lessons)*</li> <li>• Child needed a special kind of help (e.g., speech therapy, special needs, disabled, bilingual, etc.)*</li> </ul>
Meets parents’ needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• So that I could work/change in work schedule</li> <li>• To give me some relief</li> <li>• To fill in gaps left by main provider or before/after school</li> <li>• Wasn’t satisfied with care</li> <li>• Provider stopped providing care</li> <li>• So that I (or my spouse) could go to school/ school schedule changed*</li> <li>• Care during a temporary commitment by parent(s) (e.g., scrapbooking, meeting, PTA meeting, Bible study, date night, birthday party, weekend getaway, to run errands, medical or doctor appointment)*</li> </ul>
Other	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To learn what child care arrangements were available/to learn about other options in case I needed one*</li> <li>• Other</li> </ul>

<sup>3</sup> Due to the subjective nature of the process for developing categories for parents’ responses, future researchers might recommend that responses fall into different categories.

\* Indicates open-ended responses from parents that survey administrators coded.

As shown in Figure 2, the most common reason for searching for child care was to meet parents’ needs, with two thirds (66%) of all parents reporting a reason that fit into this category. Slightly less than one third of all parents (30%) searched for care to support child development. Very small percentages of parents reported that they searched for care for affordability (2%) or for reasons categorized as Other (2%). No responses provided by parents in the sample were assigned to the dimension of reasonable effort.

**Figure 2.** Reasons for searching for care, categorized into the Access Framework dimensions



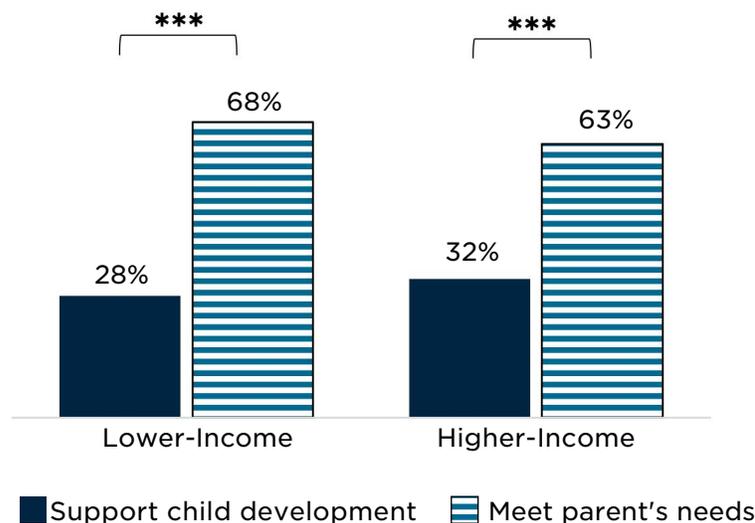
Source. Authors' analysis of NSECE 2012 Household Survey

Note. Sample includes parents with children under age 6, not yet in kindergarten, who searched for care in the two years prior to the 2012 survey.

### Reasons for searching for care, by household income

As shown in Figure 3, regardless of household income, parents were twice as likely to report searching for care to meet parents' needs than to support child development (parents from lower-income households: 68% vs. 28%; and parents from higher-income households: 63% vs. 32%). Due to small sample sizes, estimates of parents' responses in the Access Framework categories of Affordability and Other are not presented.

**Figure 3.** Percentage of parents who report searching for care to support child development or to meet parents' needs, by household income



Source. Authors' analysis of NSECE 2012 Household Survey

Note. Estimates for parents whose responses were in the categories of Affordability and Other are not shown due to small sample sizes.

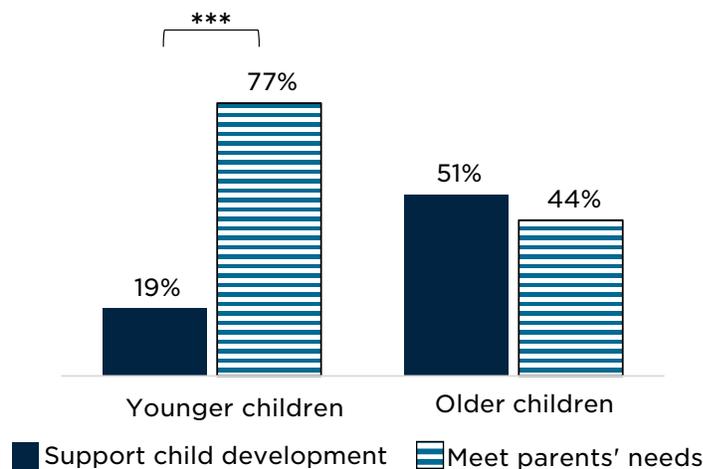
Note. Sample includes parents with children under age 6, not yet in kindergarten, who searched for care in the two years prior to the 2012 survey. Lower-Income (<200% FPL); Higher-Income (>200% FPL).

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

## Reasons for searching for care, by age of child

As shown in Figure 4, parents' main reasons for searching for care differed depending on the age of their child. Parents with younger children were four times as likely to report searching for care in order to meet parents' needs than to support child development (77% vs. 19%). In contrast, parents with older children were almost equally divided in their reported reasons for searching for care, with 51 percent reporting reasons related to parents' needs and 44 percent reporting reasons related to supporting child development. Due to small sample sizes, estimates of parents' responses in the Access Framework categories of Affordability and Other are not presented.

**Figure 4.** Percentage of parents who report searching for care to support child development or to meet parents' needs, by age of child



Source. Authors' analysis of NSECE 2012 Household Survey

Note. Estimates for parents whose responses were in the categories of Affordability and Other are not displayed in this figure due to small sample sizes.

Note. Sample includes parents with children under age 6, not yet in kindergarten, who searched for care in the two years prior to the 2012 survey. Younger children (<36 months); Older children (36-72 months, not yet in kindergarten).

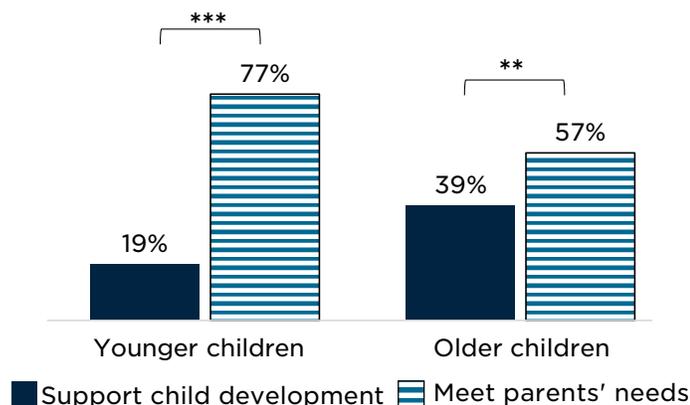
\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

## Reasons for searching for care, by age of child and by household income

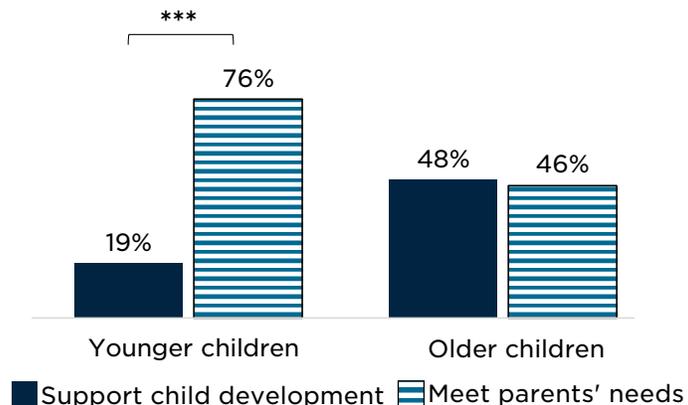
Figures 5A and 5B show parents' reasons for searching for care by age of child, looking at lower- and higher-income households separately.

As shown in Figure 5A, parents from lower-income households, regardless of the age of their child, were more likely to search for care to meet parents' needs than to support child development. In contrast, parents from higher-income households were more likely to search for care to meet parents' needs only if their child was younger. Parents from higher-income households with older children report searching for care to meet parents' needs and to support child development at similar rates (46% compared to 48%, respectively) (see Figure 5B).

**Figure 5A.** Lower-income households: Reasons for searching for care, by age of child



**Figure 5B.** Higher-income households: Reasons for searching for care, by age of child



Source. Authors' analysis of NSECE 2012 Household Survey

Note. Estimates for parents whose responses were in the categories of Affordability and Other are not displayed in these figures due to small sample sizes.

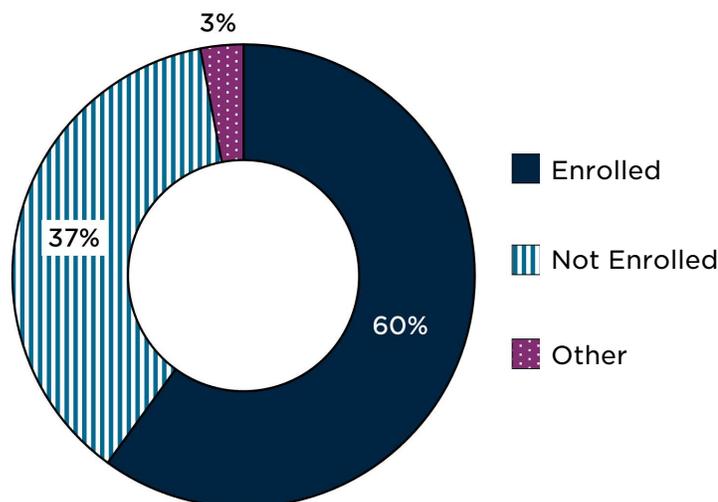
Note. Sample includes parents with children under age 6, not yet in kindergarten, who searched for care in the two years prior to the 2012 survey. Younger children (<36 months); Older children (36-72 months, not yet in kindergarten); Lower-Income (<200% FPL); Higher-Income (>200% FPL).

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

## Results of Parents' Search for Care

Figure 6 shows that 60 percent of parents who searched for care enrolled with a new provider as a result of their search. However, rates of enrollment differed by household income, child age, and parents' reasons for search.

**Figure 6.** Results of parents' most recent search for care



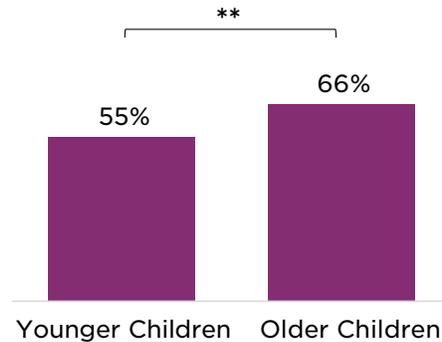
Source. Authors' analysis of NSECE 2012 Household Survey

Note. Sample includes parents with children under age 6, not yet in kindergarten, who searched for care in the two years prior to the 2012 survey. Included in the category Other are parents who responded: Other or Don't Know/Refused.

## Results of search, by child age categories

As shown in Figure 7, parents with older children were more likely than parents with younger children to enroll with a new provider as a result of their search for care.

**Figure 7.** Percentage of parents who enrolled with a new provider as a result of their search for care, by child age



Source. Authors' analysis of NSECE 2012 Household Survey

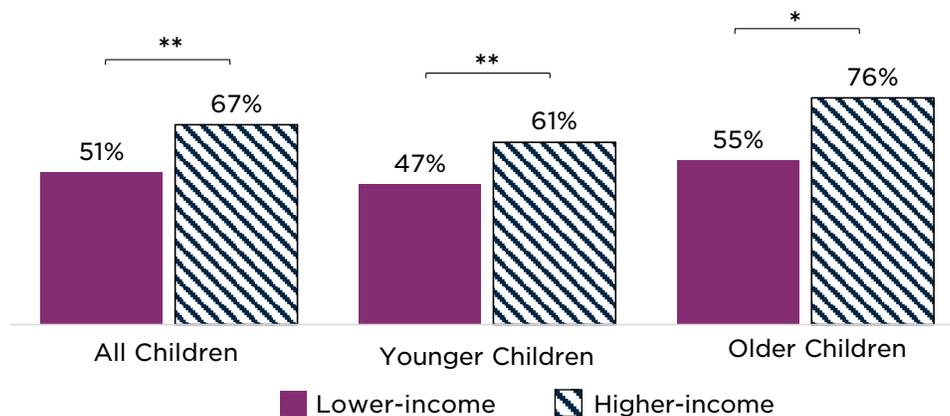
Note. Sample includes parents with children under age 6, not yet in kindergarten, who searched for care in the two years prior to the 2012 survey. Younger children (<36 months); Older children (36-72 months, not yet in kindergarten).

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

## Results of search, by household income and child age

As shown in Figure 8, more parents from higher-income households enrolled with a new provider considered during their search when compared to parents from lower-income households. Regardless of child age, parents from higher-income households were more likely than those from lower-income households to use a new provider (younger child: 61% vs. 47%; older child: 76% vs. 55%).

**Figure 8.** Percentage of parents who enrolled with a new provider considered during their search for care, by household income and child age



Source. Authors' analysis of NSECE 2012 Household Survey

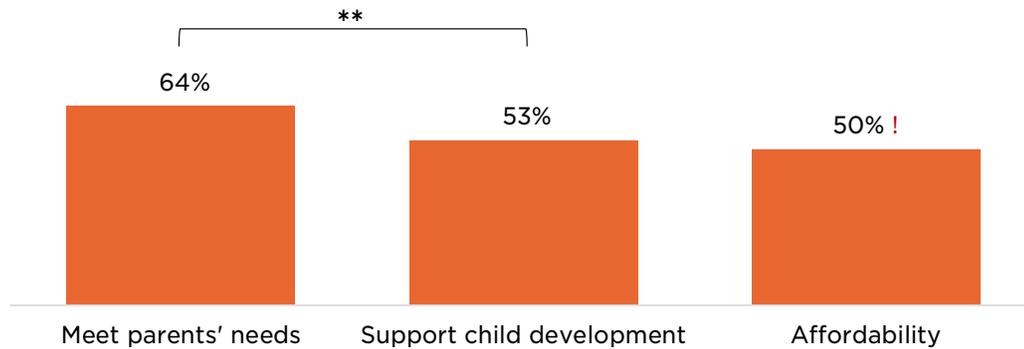
Note. Sample includes parents with children under age 6, not yet in kindergarten, who searched for care in the two years prior to the 2012 survey. Younger children (<36 months); Older children (36-72 months, not yet in kindergarten); Lower-Income (<200% FPL); Higher-Income (>200% FPL).

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

## Results of search, by reason for search

Figure 9 shows that parents who searched for care to meet parents' needs had the highest rate of enrolling with a new provider that they considered during their search (64%). Slightly more than half (53%) of parents who searched for care to support child development and half (50%) of parents who searched for care for affordability used with a new provider.

**Figure 9.** Percentage of parents who enrolled with a new provider considered during their search for care, by reasons for search



Source. Authors' analysis of NSECE 2012 Household Survey

Note. Estimates for parents whose responses were in the category of Other are not included in this figure due to small sample sizes.

Note. Sample includes parents with children under age 6, not yet in kindergarten, who searched for care in the two years prior to the 2012 survey.

! indicates that estimates are to be interpreted with caution due to small sample sizes.

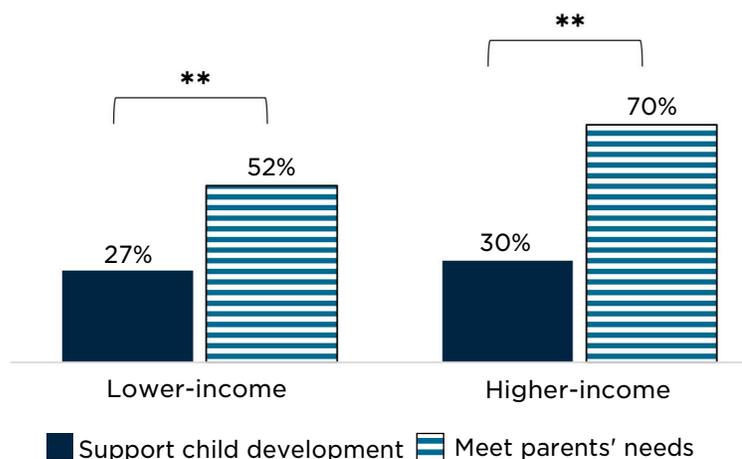
\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

## Results of search, by reason for search, household income, and child age

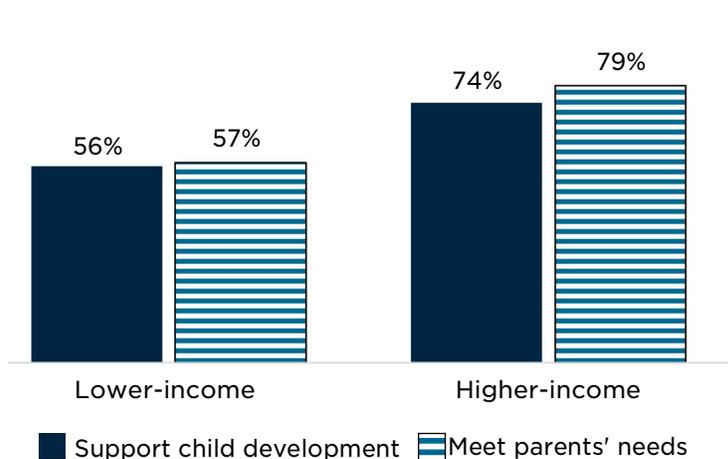
Figure 10A shows the results for parents' search for care for younger children for reasons related to supporting child development and meeting parents' needs. In both lower- and higher-income households, parents searching for care to meet parents' needs were more likely to enroll with a new provider, compared to parents searching for care to support child development.

Figure 10B shows the search results for parents' search for care for older children. In both lower- and higher-income households, rates of enrollment did not vary by the reason for the search.

**Figure 10A. Parents with younger children:** Percentage who enrolled with a provider that they considered during their search, by reason for search and household income



**Figure 10B. Parents with older children:** Percentage who enrolled with a provider that they considered during their search, by reason for search and household income



Source. Authors' analysis of NSECE 2012 Household Survey

Note. Estimates for parents whose responses were in the categories of Affordability and Other are not included in these figures due to small sample sizes.

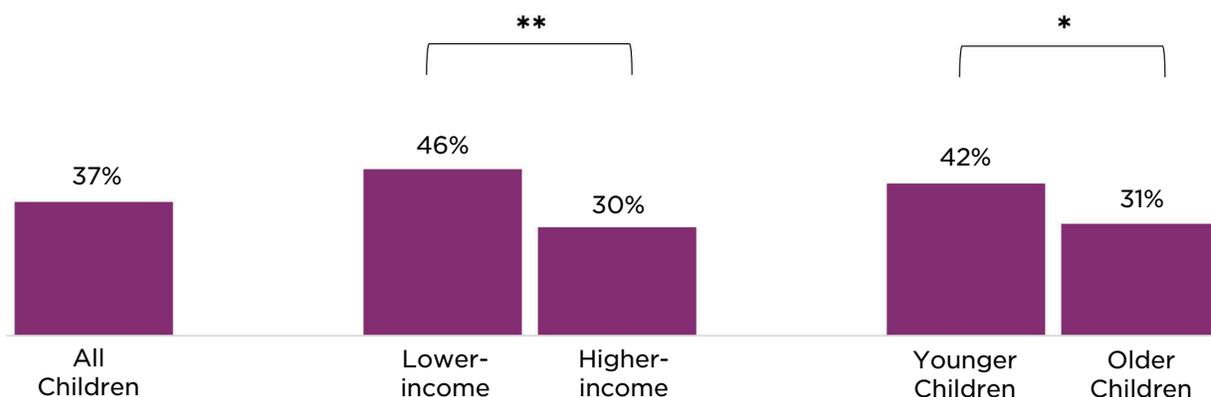
Note. Sample includes parents with children under age 6, not yet in kindergarten, who searched for care in the two years prior to the 2012 survey. Younger children (<36 months); Older children (36-72 months, not yet in kindergarten); Lower-Income (<200% FPL); Higher-Income (≥200% FPL).

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

## Parents' Reasons for Not Enrolling with a Provider Considered During their Search

As shown in Figure 11, just over a third (37%) of parents who searched for care did not enroll with a provider. Parents from lower-income households were less likely to enroll compared to parents from higher-income households (46% vs. 30%). In addition, parents with younger children were less likely to use a new provider compared to parents with older children (42% vs. 31%).

**Figure 11. Percentage of parents who did not enroll with a new provider considered during their search**



Source. Authors' analysis of NSECE 2012 Household Survey

Note. Sample includes parents with children under age 6, not yet in kindergarten, who searched for care in the two years prior to the 2012 survey. Younger children (<36 months); Older children (36-72 months, not yet in kindergarten); Lower-Income (<200% FPL); Higher-Income (≥200% FPL). \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

## Categorizing Parent Survey Responses Using the Access Framework | Reasons for Not Enrolling

Table 2 shows the responses of parents to the question “What was the main reason you made that decision?” among the sub-sample of parents who did not enroll with a new provider. The survey provided a list of response options, but also allowed parents to provide an open response if their main reason was not listed. Parents’ open-ended responses were coded and are indicated with an asterisk in Table 2.

A team of Child Trends researchers and OPRE staff used a consensus-based process to categorize parents’ responses into the four dimensions of the Access Framework.<sup>4</sup> Not all parent responses fit into the four dimensions, so we developed a fifth category of “Other.”

**Table 2:** Parents’ main reasons for not enrolling with a new provider assigned into Access Framework dimensions

	Reasons for not enrolling with a provider considered during search
Reasonable effort	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Had no other choices</li> <li>• Location</li> <li>• Provider had no spots available*</li> <li>• Still looking*</li> <li>• Waiting to hear back from program/not yet started*</li> <li>• Did not qualify*</li> </ul>
Affordability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cost</li> </ul>
Support child’s development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Quality of care</li> <li>• Concerns with program quality (e.g., safety, crowding, number of adults, etc.)*</li> <li>• Program’s ability to care for children with special needs*</li> <li>• Did NOT like the curriculum or lack of education*</li> </ul>
Meet parents’ needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Schedule</li> <li>• Household circumstances changed*</li> <li>• Did not find work, no job*</li> <li>• Transportation (or lack thereof)*</li> </ul>
Other	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Other</li> </ul>

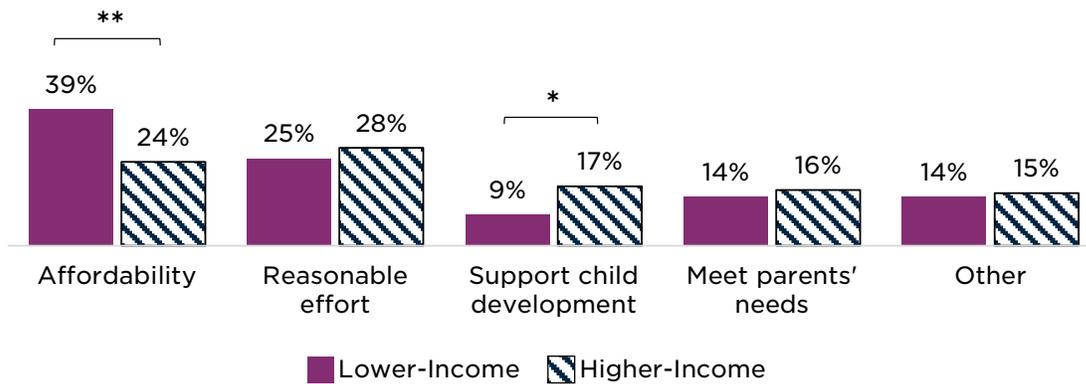
<sup>4</sup> Due to the subjective nature of the process for developing categories for parents’ responses, future researchers might recommend that responses fall into different categories.

\* Indicates open-ended responses from parents that were coded by the survey administrators.

### Reasons for not enrolling with a considered provider, by household income

As shown in Figure 12, for parents from lower-income households, the most commonly cited reason for not enrolling was affordability (39%). Only 24 percent of parents from higher-income households cited this reason. For higher-income households, the most commonly cited responses explaining why parents did not use a new provider aligned with the dimension of reasonable effort (28%). A similar percentage (25%) of parents from lower-income households also cited responses that aligned with reasonable effort.

**Figure 12.** Percentage of parents citing various reasons for not enrolling with a new provider, by household income



Source. Authors' analysis of NSECE 2012 Household Survey

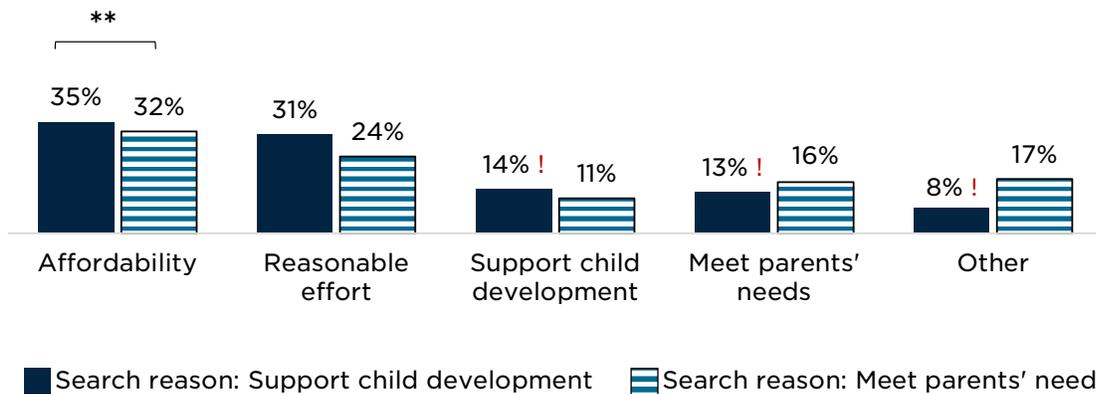
Note. Sample includes parents with children under age 6, not yet in kindergarten. Lower-Income (<200% FPL); Higher-Income (>200% FPL).

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

## Reasons for not enrolling with a considered provider, by reason for search

As shown in Figure 13, the most commonly cited reason for not enrolling with a provider was affordability: 35 percent of parents who searched to support child development and 32 percent of parents who searched to meet parents' needs cited this reason for their unsuccessful search. The second most commonly cited responses for not using a new provider aligned with the dimension of reasonable effort: 31 percent of parents who searched for care to support child development and 24 percent of those who searched to meet parents' needs provided this reason.

**Figure 13.** Percentage of parents citing various reasons for not enrolling with a new provider, by parents' reason for search



Source. Authors' analysis of NSECE 2012 Household Survey

Note. Sample includes parents with children under age 6, not yet in kindergarten, who searched for care for reasons related to supporting child development or meeting parents' needs in the two years prior to the 2012 survey. Estimate for parents who searched for care for reasons related to Affordability, Reasonable Effort or Other are not shown due to small sample sizes.

! indicates that estimates are to be interpreted with caution due to small sample sizes

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

## References

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Friese, S., Lin, V., Forry, N., & Tout, K. (2017). *Defining and measuring access to high quality early care and education: A guidebook for policymakers and researchers*. OPRE Report #2017-08. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

## Suggested Citation

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