

Improving Participation in High-Quality Early Care and Education for Young Arkansas Children: Perspectives of Resource Parents and Early Childhood Educators

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STUDY PURPOSE

High-quality early care and education (ECE) provides a developmentally supportive environment for children in foster care that can help address early adversities. The 2014 reauthorization of the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) recognizes the benefits of ECE for children involved with child welfare, but recent studies have shown low levels of ECE participation among these children (Klein et al., 2016; Lee, 2020). To address this important issue, the Arkansas Office of Early Childhood (OEC) is collaborating with SRI International, the National Center for Children in Poverty, and the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences. The partnership team is focused on learning about the supply, quality, and stability of ECE settings for children in foster care, as well as the facilitators and barriers to children in foster care accessing high-quality ECE.

This brief presents key findings from focus groups and interviews with resource parents (that is, foster parents), ECE center-based program directors, and ECE home-based providers about their experiences caring for children ages birth through 5 in foster care. We

provide suggestions for how these findings can inform strategies to increase the participation of children in foster care in high-quality ECE. Appendix A provides information about study methods.

Key Findings

- Working parents report that they cannot accept placements for a child in foster care if they lack child care and that children benefit from the developmental supports of high-quality early care and education (ECE).
- Resource parents struggle to find child care on their own, with many relying on informal networks of support (e.g., social media, faith-based communities) to find child care.
- Even when a child can be enrolled in a quality program, their ECE placement is often disrupted during transitions (e.g., reunification).
- Resource parents and ECE providers report challenges related to using and accepting child care vouchers (e.g., delayed voucher payments).
- ECE providers recognize that providing care to children in foster care requires deep commitment and specific skills, and they want specialized training and support to do this.

FINDING 1: CHILD CARE IS A MUST-HAVE, NOT A NICE-TO-HAVE, FOR MOST RESOURCE PARENTS

For many resource parents, access to child care is a primary factor in determining whether they can take in a child. Although this is particularly true for families in which all adults work outside of the home, nearly all resource parents indicated that the ability to enroll a child in ECE programs is also important because they want to support the child’s cognitive and social development.

Child care availability affects resource parents’ ability to accept new children in foster care

Several resource parents noted that difficulties in finding child care have limited the number of young children in foster care they can care for in their homes. One resource parent shared, “We’ve had to turn down a placement before because ... they do not have child care. ... So we’ve had to say no, to two placements.” Another resource parent said,

“We have to work. And you want to say yes. Saying no because you don’t have child care, it sucks.”

Echoing these concerns, an ECE program director with a family member who works for a foster family agency explained, “Sometimes they will have foster parents who can only foster if child care is available because they work full-time. And so they will help them try to find placement in child care.” Likewise, one resource parent shared, “I know several of my foster friends who work have the daycare director’s phone number, and they can text on the weekend and say, ‘Hey, I’m thinking about taking a placement. Can you fit my child in?’ ... if they can get them in, then they can take it [*the*

child]. If not, then they can’t take that placement.”

Additionally, some ECE program directors and providers (including home-based, public center-based, and faith-based center-based providers) said the Arkansas Department of Human Services (DHS) has reached out to them to inquire if they have open spots in their program, particularly in case of an emergency.

ECE programs provide children in foster care with important support for their development

Resource parents also described how ECE programs have helped children obtain services and therapies targeted to their unique needs. One parent shared, “We got him into an EIDT [early intervention day treatment] ... so they were able to notice that he needed therapy ... it was really important to get his therapy started ASAP.” Another resource parent related, “We’re in a facility that offers OT/PT [occupational therapy/physical therapy] ... that was really important to us.”

Educators, too, highlighted the role of ECE programs in connecting children in foster care with services and supports such as occupational or speech therapy. For example, a public center-based director explained, “So anytime that we have a child that we are aware that is coming into our center as a foster child, we make sure that we get in contact with everyone for screenings. ... We have the early childhood special ed program that comes out and screens all of our children at the beginning of the school year, and then HIPPPY [Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters] puts on a health fair at the beginning of the school year. So they get their vision, hearing, all of those things

checked just to make sure that we can provide them with all the services that they need here.” A home-based provider shared, “We’re affiliated with a co-op, and whatever services we need, they send them to be evaluated, and if they qualify for a service, whichever therapy or service that we need, they send it to my home free of charge for the child.”

Some resource parents praised ECE programs for supporting their children’s development

In addition to therapeutic services, many parents reported that participation in ECE programs promoted their children’s development and overall well-being. In one case, a resource parent said, “With my kiddo, with her being four, she wasn’t right on her milestone for her speech. ... So, being in daycare and being around other kids and talking, just in the two and a half months, is totally different.

“And so, without daycare, I don’t think she’d be quite where she’s at with her speech, and that’s a really big positive for that.”

Another resource parent praised an ECE program’s support for their child’s motor development: “They worked with him so hard on his core and walking that he was able to start walking when he went.” Expressing her gratitude to their ECE program staff, another parent said, “They’ve just gone above and beyond. They’ve helped us get people to come in, and observe him, and try to figure out what’s going on with him, and where we need to go with trying to get 504 plans and IEP [Individualized Education Program] plans. Get him ready to go to kindergarten, and he’s got his two very special teachers that just love him, even though he is so hard to love. But they do, they just dote on him and they love him.”



FINDING 2: RESOURCE PARENTS STRUGGLE TO FIND CHILD CARE ON THEIR OWN

Several resource parents shared challenging experiences with searching for child care. Their challenges involved navigating confusing websites, leaving messages at several programs, and even driving around town to ask about child care availability in person. One resource parent summarized their experience as “you make a list and you make calls and you mark a bunch of names off.” Another parent explained their experience in more detail: “So they say, ‘Just go to the website.’ Then you have to find the website, so you go to the ...website, not easy to navigate ... you get there and you finally pick around ‘til you find it has to be a Better Beginnings daycare, or a Head Start. For [our] county, there’s not very many, so you see those. Then, they each got a number, so you call the number. No one answers. You go by. No one comes to the door. You call again, you leave a message. Finally, maybe it was 2 weeks later, a person called me.” Finding care for infants is an even greater challenge. A few resource parents related that “especially with infants, the openings are very rare” and that “the day we get a placement, we start looking. It’s hard with infants. In our area, there’s not a lot.” Resource parents overcame these challenges by using a

range of strategies that involved accessing informal communities of support.

Social media is a key source of information

Some resource parents reported turning to social media for help with finding child care. One resource parent shared, “I typically post on Facebook women’s groups and ask for any daycares that people know of that have openings that take vouchers. That’s the first thing that I do.” Another resource parent said, “I literally had to go on Facebook and ask questions, ‘Who has been to a daycare in Little Rock, White County, or Pulaski?’” Similarly, a parent who shared they were part of several informal online foster networks and communities said,

“I will see just this constant, ‘Does anybody know of a daycare provider who’s taking vouchers in Little Rock or Pine Bluff or wherever?’ So, I know it’s a common challenge.”

Many resource parents lean on faith-based communities for support

Several resource parents described how they relied on faith-based communities for support. One resource parent described that their church provides a “Foster Parents Conference ... a day of training and equipping and encouraging. ... And so foster care is a pretty big part of what we do here at the church.” A parent who had fostered children for 4 years expressed, “It was just like we had a new caseworker, and then the next minute, we had a different one. So, there was really no support there. So, it was through our [faith-based child-placing agency] that we have had support.”



Caseworkers provide varying degrees of assistance

Resource parents reported varying degrees of support from DHS or their caseworkers in finding child care. As one resource parent put it, “You’re at the mercy of whatever caseworker you have ... it depends if they’re familiar with your area as well.” For example, one resource parent reported having a good relationship with their caseworker, who was able to offer support in finding child care close to their home. This parent stated,

“[I] lucked into a daycare that had availability within two blocks of my home. So, I just think it was starting now with that caseworker, and then just having that relationship that helped it along a little bit.”

Similarly, another resource parent shared, “Our county’s been really great at saying, ‘Okay, here’s this child. You can take them here [an ECE program] in the morning.’”

However, other resource parents recalled experiences in which their caseworkers did not provide assistance with finding child care. These parents remarked that the caseworkers “don’t even ask questions” or respond with “No, we don’t do that” when they ask for help with finding child care. A few resource parents also shared challenges in getting their children connected to needed therapies and additional supports (e.g., occupational and physical therapy) at their child care programs. One parent related, “I don’t have a lot of support from [the] caseworker on that.”

Some experienced resource parents rely on connections with ECE programs

Several resource parents described accessing child care through connections with specific ECE programs that had been supportive and helpful with accepting and working with children in

foster care and resource families. In some cases, parents leveraged these types of relationships with providers when deciding whether they could accept a child. One experienced resource parent explained that he communicates with the director of an ECE program to see what ages the program has openings for to decide on the children he can accept. In one instance, this parent noted,

“[I] just said ... ‘What ages do you have availability for?’ And she let me know really just babies. She really didn’t have anything for 2- and 3-year-olds. So we ... narrowed our focus to that age, knowing that she could do that.”

A couple of other resource parents described how they developed close relationships with ECE providers who try to accommodate their needs. One parent shared that for their “current foster daughter ... they [the provider] pushed kids into different classes so that she could come and brought another teacher back so that she could go there. We had that because we had a relationship with them, but without the relationship with that daycare center, we would’ve been in trouble finding care for her.” Similarly, one ECE director at a faith-based program said she would get calls “on a regular basis from either DHS ... or [a private foster care agency]. ... So we try to accommodate them the best we can depending on the space availability. I have been able to sometimes rearrange children in different classes to make room for a foster child, by conferring with a parent of a currently enrolled child to see if it’s okay to move their child up to the next class if they are already old enough to do so to open up that spot for the children in foster care.” Another resource parent described the flexibility of an ECE program that has served over three of their children in foster care: “they will even take them before all the paperwork” and “are really easy to work with, really sweet people.”

FINDING 3: PROVIDING CONTINUITY OF CHILD CARE DURING TRANSITIONS TO NEW LIVING ARRANGEMENTS IS CHALLENGING

Children in foster care may experience multiple transitions involving placements with new resource families or returning to their biological parents. The instability of children’s experiences raises the question of whether there are opportunities for a child to remain in the same ECE program during transitions to provide some continuity of care. Staying in the same program can be beneficial for the child, especially when it is of high quality and the child has built positive relationships with their caregivers and teachers. However, several resource parents reported that continuity of care in ECE programs does not typically occur because of various challenges such as children moving across county lines and limited communication around transition supports.

Some resource parents talked about receiving “very little information” and having no idea if a

child was in child care before being placed with them. Others explained that having a child stay in the same ECE program may not be feasible if the child is moving to a different county. One parent commented that they did not think the topic of keeping a child in the same program “really comes up because they’re so desperate to find homes for these kids ... and most of the time you’re not getting your own county kids anymore.” Similarly, another resource parent said,

“We’ve been open for 3 years, and all of our kids that have reunified, none of them have been local. And so their school changes, their daycare changes, their entire routine changes when they go into care and also when they’re reunified.”



A couple of ECE program directors described how the biological parents of children in foster care also live in other counties or farther away and therefore “go elsewhere” after being reunified.

Some resource parents mentioned there is typically no transition planning or support from DHS for keeping a child in the same ECE program when they leave to be reunified with family. Some parents and program directors described these transitions as happening suddenly with limited notice. One private center-based director remarked, “The foster parent gets notified the night before or sometimes the day of.” Another said, “We’ve had foster parents drop a child off in the morning and DHS pick them up for a visit and they never come back ... it usually happens very, very quickly.”

Yet, in other cases, it is sometimes feasible or encouraged that a child stay at the same ECE program. For example, there may be written guidance from a judge, although it is not necessarily followed. Most resource parents indicated the decision is up to the biological parents. One parent shared, “Honestly, I mean, we try to keep local, take kids locally. And we’ve had where the judge will write that they need to remain in so-and-so’s school and continue their

therapies, be it speech or OT. But I will say that even though it’s written, once they get the legal custody back, they do whatever they want.” Another resource parent explained, “In our situation, the kids went back and the mother lived in a different town, but she could have driven, it wasn’t that far. But she didn’t want them there.” A parent who had fostered about 20 children noted a couple of cases where children continued to attend the same ECE programs after being reunified with their biological families. One center-based provider referred to a child who stayed in the program after being reunified, describing the situation as positive and the child “gravitated to the mom very well.”

A couple of resource parents noted that there seemed to be greater efforts to provide information when transitioning children with disabilities. For example, one parent said, “What we’ve noticed with the developmental schools, they’ll forward their stuff to the next one or the next county.” Another resource parent talked about trying to find a center that provided needed therapies for the child so that if reunified with the parent, the child could continue attending the center. However, the parent added that this ultimately did not work out because of logistical challenges.

FINDING 4: USING AND ACCEPTING VOUCHERS IS CHALLENGING FOR RESOURCE PARENTS AND EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS

Both resource parents and ECE private center-based program directors and home-based providers described various challenges related to vouchers. Challenges included difficulty in finding quality programs with open slots and vouchers not being renewed in a timely manner.

Resource parents express concern about finding quality programs that accept vouchers

Several resource parents discussed the difficulty of finding an ECE program that accepts vouchers and has enough space for a child. Numerous parents indicated they often cannot be picky about choosing an ECE program, noting the bar is often low with respect to program quality because of lack of availability.

As one resource parent explained, “I wish I could say that they’re looking for a rigorous curriculum or place for the kids to get ahead. I think it’s just strictly availability for the vast majority. We’re just looking for someone that can take care of them while we’re doing our jobs.” Similarly, another parent said,

“But it’s like we have biological children and then we’ve had foster children, and sometimes it’s like, oh my gosh, if that was the only spot that they have in a daycare setting that takes those vouchers, but would I send my own kids there? No ... sometimes you’re just kind of between a rock and a hard place.”

According to another parent, “You have extremely low standards because you don’t have any other choices, which is sad because we have to work.”

The barrier for resource parents, one parent explained, “was just finding people that we trusted, daycares that we trusted, to take care of them, when so few places take vouchers, and some of the places that take vouchers are not great ... and that’s just a shame. ... Just because they’re a foster child, do they deserve less?” This parent went on to say, “Listen, not every daycare is perfect. ... I just wanted it clean and loving, because I knew, at the end of the day, that stability, a structure and having other people care for these kids besides me, was going to be really important for them.”

Some ECE providers may hesitate to accept vouchers because of misunderstanding DHS regulations

Some resource parents cited reasons for some programs not accepting vouchers. One resource parent said, “A lot of places won’t accept vouchers because DHS vouchers pay so little. ... And, a few other places that I called, I didn’t ask why, I just said, ‘Do you accept daycare vouchers for DHS?’ And they said, ‘No, because that would require us to change our beliefs, and we’re a Christian school.’”

An ECE home-based provider shared her views on why some home-based programs may not want to accept vouchers. She explained that they “don’t like all the DHS regulations” and that “they don’t want somebody else from somewhere else from who knows where coming in [to their home].” The provider also mentioned the potential to be audited and any additional intrusion as reasons.

Delayed voucher payments create stress and challenges for resource parents and ECE programs

Several resource parents spoke about the time it takes to sort out vouchers and the stress of dealing with delayed voucher payments. One resource parent expressed,

“I would say the biggest issue we’ve had honestly, is getting vouchers sorted out when we get a new placement. It takes so long.”

Another parent shared that “a lot of times, it’s a matter of emailing the caseworker, not hearing anything, emailing again, not hearing anything, emailing again and cc’ing a supervisor, and then all of a sudden it gets done. And it shouldn’t be this, us stressing. Hey, are they going to take her out of daycare because they haven’t gotten paid in a month?” Another parent said, “We’ve waited, I guess 4 months, one time, for vouchers to be approved and then they get back pay.”



There was also concern about potentially negative consequences of delayed voucher payments for children in foster care. One resource parent described reaching out to their new caseworker to add their 6-week-old baby’s voucher to the system, but the ECE program “still to this day, she’s 6 months old, [has] not been paid, even [though] they accept vouchers, they’re in the system. They’ve tried everything they can. So, that puts a bad taste in their mouth to accept foster kids in the future.” However, no resource parents or ECE program directors who participated in the study described a case where a child in foster care was denied services or removed from a program as a result of delayed voucher payments. One parent explained that her program director will ask her, “Hey, contact [County]. We need vouchers ... talk to your caseworker. Get that to us.” But the director has never told the parent they owe money unless they get the vouchers.

Some ECE program directors and home-based providers explained that voucher issues are typically resolved with time. One home-based provider shared, “I think people are reluctant to take children that are foster kids, not because of the child, but because CCDF [Child Care and Development Fund] does not pay in a timely manner. The provider added,

“It was a year one time before I got money from one that I had taken. And I don’t know how many man hours that I had to spend on it, just calling and saying, ‘Hey, I haven’t been paid.’”

This home-based provider’s most recent experience accepting vouchers for a child in foster care was more positive because “the mom ... stayed on her caseworker and said, ‘Hey, get it keyed in. I feel bad to drop my kid off and she’s not been paid yet.’” The provider also explained, “I expected to get paid, but if I didn’t it wasn’t

the child's fault, and I felt like they needed the stability that I offered them, and I was okay with that." Another home-based provider similarly commented, "It takes a little while for them to get them put into the system, so I went maybe a month and a half with no payment ... but they did back pay, but I still serviced the child ... they did work with me and they kept ensuring that they were working on it."

A private center-based director at a faith-based program said, "We do have on occasion where there's delay in payment, but for the most part they're really good. And if I am billing for the previous month and I find the child's vouchers ended the middle of last month, I can contact the foster parent, they can contact their DHS caseworker, and it usually gets resolved within a week or two. Sometimes I've had to find a contact at the home office of DHS and kind of escalated up a little bit. ... There's only been one situation where I never received the final payment for a child who left. ... I don't know what happened to that one, but that's been a few years back." Another private center-based director also reported experiencing delays with voucher payments: "I've had to contact people, 'Hey, I've got a foster care kid, the vouchers have expired, I need them.'" This director added that "usually within 2 weeks we can get voucher system to come through."

Attendance policies associated with vouchers are challenging for resource parents and have financial implications for ECE providers

Some resource parents discussed challenges related to the attendance policies associated with vouchers. They pointed out that if a child

exceeds their allowable absences, their spot may be given away. One parent explained,

"If you're foster care, the voucher only gets paid if your child is there. So when your child is sick and you have to keep them home, they're not getting paid. Then, we would get reprimanded because our child was not there, the vouchers were not coming through."

Another parent expressed that attendance rules related to vouchers can be particularly challenging for children in foster care: "If they have a weekly visitation, that leaves them very little time to get sick or to go on vacation with us or anything like that."

ECE providers also face challenges with the policies. One home-based provider explained, "Through our QRIS [quality rating and improvement system], Better Beginnings, we are required to be closed a certain amount of days for vacation or continuing education, or things like that. And you do not get paid from vouchers if you're closed. So therefore, you are losing that money if you have voucher kids and you have to be closed for that day." The provider added, "Voucher children tend to miss more days than regular children because I had one, she missed I don't know how many days because she had to go visit her mom in jail. And after those 6 days in a month, you don't get paid for those days. And if it were a regular parent, you're supposed to bill them for it. But a foster parent, you cannot bill them for it."

FINDING 5: PROVIDING EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION TO CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE REQUIRES SPECIALIZED SKILLS AND DEEP COMMITMENT

Conversations with resource parents and ECE program directors touched on several of the unique situations and types of trauma that children in foster care may experience, such as transitioning to new foster families and going back and forth between resource parents and visitations with biological families. In some cases, trauma may manifest as externalizing (e.g., aggressive) or internalizing (e.g., withdrawn) behavior. To effectively serve children in foster care, resource parents and ECE program directors and home-based providers talked about having heart and passion coupled with appropriate supports and training.

Some ECE providers' commitment to serve children in foster care is rooted in their personal connections to the foster care system

Some ECE program directors shared that their personal commitment, passion, and mission for working with children in foster care stems from their firsthand experience with the foster care system as someone who was in foster care or who has served as a resource parent. For example, one private center-based director related that

“this is a super personal topic for me. I am a foster care child ... So [Program] was really created to help those people who are forgotten and they just need that extra step or that extra help and somebody just to be there and guide them through what could be a really challenging time.”

One resource parent talked about a teacher who was a child in foster care and understood their

child's background, which helped the program address behavioral issues in nonpunitive ways with redirection, positive reinforcement, and an active partnership with parents. They said, “One of our foster kids, his teacher stopped us one day and said, ‘Thank you so much for what you do. I was a kid in foster care.’ And so having the knowledge and education of what actually foster kids go through is big in helping understand developmental and behavioral, what’s going on in their world.” When other resource parents referred to programs they had a close and supportive relationship with, they shared that the providers were “foster parents themselves” or had “fostered and adopted, and ... understand.”

Many ECE providers see children in foster care as having special needs and concerning behavior

ECE program directors reported varying experiences related to the behavior of children in foster care. Some noted few (if any) differences compared with other children in their program, others cited examples of internalizing behavior, and some described challenging behavior that put the safety of the child and others at risk. For example, one public center-based director said, “We don’t really have a lot of issues with children in foster care that [are] what you would consider big behaviors. The majority of them are more to themselves, still trying to figure out where they fit in the situation, but there really hasn’t been a lot of issues. ... You really can’t see a difference between [a] foster child and then [another] child that’s coming in.” Likewise, one home-based provider said “there’s no difference” between the challenging behavior of children in foster care compared with those who are not in foster care. This provider also explained, “Not all

days are the best days, especially if you're dealing with children that [have] experienced trauma. Sometimes they will have meltdowns, and you just have to stay calm for them and help them breathe and help them talk it out." Another home-based provider commented that children in foster care she has worked with "really weren't a behavioral problem, but they were hard to reach ... they were standoffish. They were afraid to let me love them or to love me."

Several providers discussed how some children in foster care have experienced significant trauma and may have challenging behavior that is difficult to address. However, most program directors had not asked a family to leave. One private center-based director related that "as a foster kid myself, these kids aren't easy. Some of these kids come from extreme backgrounds. Although I feel like I am very trauma-informed and I can usually do my best to help these kiddos, we've got some kiddos that have come from pretty significant trauma here in Arkansas. It's not fair of us to ask our teachers to deal with that level of bullying and aggressiveness." Referring to the need for trauma-informed training to better support children, a center-based director used strong language to describe their perception of challenging behavior they encountered in the classroom. This director described a situation where they asked that a toddler in foster care who had extreme challenging behavior (staff felt this child put the safety of other children at significant risk) permanently leave their program. This provider talked about the challenges of balancing these types of situations with meeting the needs of private paying families "who do pay to be here and chose our facility and they're not going to stay if their child is getting attacked every day. Unfortunately, not everybody understands that people come from different backgrounds and people go through different things. So it puts us in a tough spot."

Serving children in foster care can require specific expertise

Some resource parents talked about the need for ECE providers to have specific training on supporting children who have experienced trauma. One parent commented, "We do have a couple [of ECE programs] that take so many foster kids ... but they're not generally trained in trauma. But they have maybe a bigger heart for it. So they may not know exactly what they're looking at, but they don't freak out at all the behaviors. But most of them are untrained, freak out, and discipline. ... Most of the time it's like you got to come and get them. They're freaking out, they're throwing stuff, they're hurting people, they're hurting themselves. You got to come and get them." Similarly, another resource parent said, "There were I think ... two times where we had to pick him up, but it was because they were concerned he was legitimately going to hurt somebody. I would gladly come pick up my child if you think he's going to hurt somebody. Because I don't want anybody to get hurt." In addition, another resource parent remarked that the lack of this type of expertise among staff led to significant challenges in that "our foster child is being extremely traumatized, every single day, and triggered to the point he is hurting and biting the teacher's aide and scratching. And hurting and biting and scratching himself."

While professional development and supports help ECE programs meet the needs of children in foster care, satisfaction with these supports varies

Some ECE programs (public center-based, private center-based, and home-based) reported being connected to professional development opportunities like Conscious Discipline and trauma-informed training that helped providers feel prepared to meet the needs of children in foster care. One public center-based director stated, "All our teachers have gone through the



trauma-informed care, so they know how to approach these kids that had been pulled from their home and steps to guide them and stuff and just to be nurturing with them. But the main thing is just routine and schedule and making sure that they can depend on the school that nothing's going to change when they are there.”

When asked what supports are most helpful in feeling prepared to meet the needs of children in foster care, a private center-based program director responded, “The fact that we partner with UAMS [University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences] and they offer all kinds of training. Also, with Better Beginnings. Our quality program has a vast opportunity for training for all aspects. Whatever a child needs or issues that you may encounter with children. They have the resources; they have the training.”

At least four of the ECE program directors who participated in focus groups talked about working with BehaviorHelp, Arkansas’ expulsion prevention support system. About half of these directors perceived the support as positive, and half felt dissatisfied. One private center-based provider described the utility of the support: “We’ve had BehaviorHelp come in and work with multiple children, some in the foster care system, some that have been adopted out of the foster care system, some that are not in the foster care system at all, but have extreme behaviors, come from lower income families and

are surrounded by a lot of things that they witness and see. And those behavioral health staff come in and they watch the children, and they’re not there to fix the children but they do model for the teachers how to handle those severe behaviors. And then they meet with the teachers for several hours on those days that they’re in. Just talking through ways to do things better, how to handle those big behaviors and keep the classroom safe in those situations.” The director also explained how BehaviorHelp staff “stay in constant communication” with both program staff and the child’s parents, and the duration of supports may span for weeks or months. Another private center-based director expressed that

“a lot of times, it does help ... it’s very helpful ... [it] has led to a child getting the necessary help that they need.”

In contrast, two private center-based directors expressed dissatisfaction with the support they received. They were frustrated with the number of steps required to access support from the state to address the needs of children in foster care, and how this process is stressful and negatively impacts providers’ mental health. They were also displeased with the response from state officials, given the extremely challenging situations their staff faced, coupled with low pay. One private center-based director stated, “I agree 5,000 times over. No child should be discarded. However, the caregiver should be equipped in a safe manner to care for them without getting abused themselves, whether that’s physical or emotional because both of those things are happening. Both of those things are happening. ... So we’ve got policies in place for these things, but we’re talking aggressive behaviors, and then we’re talking we pay these girls in my region anywhere from \$12 to \$16 [an hour].”

Some ECE program directors and home-based providers want additional support and training to enhance their ability to meet the needs of children in foster care

Some ECE program directors conveyed their desire for additional support (e.g., therapists, mental health professionals) and training (e.g., Conscious Discipline) to be better equipped to meet the needs of children in foster care, but described challenges to engaging in trainings. One private center-based director said, “One of the biggest needs for facilities is some type of therapy to support beyond OT, beyond speech. We need therapy support for these children who have experienced horrific trauma.” Another private center-based director said,

“I love these babies, but I’m going to be the first to continue to say on a broken record, I’m not equipped. I don’t have the skills. I’ve got the degrees. ... We need some additional training. We need some therapists to come in ... we need some mental health people in this building.”

This director went on to say, “We need Conscious Discipline. We need trauma-sensitive training. There’s nothing out there for us guys. We have to be here during the day to run our facilities. I don’t have an extra breathing body to send off-site to go to these trainings. So, we need something online. We need something on a weekend. We need something in a workbook or on a video that we can watch.” In addition, another private center-based director “would really love to get Conscious Discipline training, but they’re all during the workday and it’s hard to be able to get my staff at a place where we can actually attend without having to close the center.”

A couple of other program directors expressed an interest in specific trainings to learn more about the background of children in foster care. For example, one private center-based provider said, “What I would like to see is that they would offer training in the different aspects of why children are in foster care ... without having to go into their whole history. ... How will we communicate with a child that’s been verbally abused? And being verbally abused, dealing with social, emotional issues behind that?” Likewise, a home-based provider commented they would like training on how to work with children in foster care who have experienced trauma because it would be “really good for our staff to be able to understand the children.”

One public center-based director sought guidance on the rules around accepting and working with children in foster care. This director said, “And I think that I need a little bit of guidance of at what point should we be accepting ... Because I’ve heard some people say, well, you have to accept that foster child even if you don’t have availability, if you’re going to be out of ratio. And now I’ve heard other people go, no, no, we’re under ABC, so we have to stay in ratio. So ... I would love clarification ’cause I’ve heard both things.” This director added that having resources for both teachers and resource parents would be helpful: “Maybe giving us some resources for when foster parents reach out ... just agencies or where to do certain things ... new foster parents, they’re just trying to figure it out with us. So if we had just an overall thing of this is the process of enrollment, this is the legal stuff, this is what you can say, this is what you can’t say, these are agencies where people that you can get some help.”

IMPLICATIONS FOR IMPROVING ACCESS TO HIGH-QUALITY CARE

The study team is using the themes identified from these qualitative data to develop survey items that will assess similar topic areas with a larger and more diverse sample of resource parents, ECE center-based directors, and ECE home-based providers in spring 2024.

The partnership team will also use the focus group findings to inform possible low-cost pilot strategies to improve the participation of children in foster care in high-quality ECE that the partnership can implement and test with small samples in 2025. Based on information from the qualitative data and a conversation with OEC and Division of Children and Families (DCFS) leaders regarding preliminary focus group findings, possible strategies include the following ideas.

Possible strategies to address Findings 1 and 2: Child care is a must-have, but resource parents struggle to find child care on their own

- Develop and package existing resources for resource parents about steps for finding high-quality ECE programs. These steps may include resource parents contacting their local Child Care Aware/Child Care Resource & Referral (CCR&R) agency for support. The Resource Parent Portal is one location where these packaged resources can be accessible to resource parents.
- Enhance the DHS [Find Providers webpage](#) to provide more information in a user-friendly format to resource parents searching for licensed child care providers that meet the criteria for serving children in foster care *and that have openings*.
- Renew work with Early Head Start and Head Start programs to explore how they can

support children in foster care and work through barriers that might hamper this.

- Regroup and strengthen DCFS-led resource parent support groups to share resources about finding high-quality child care and considerations when thinking about continuity of care.

Possible strategy to address Finding 3: Continuity of care during transitions to new living arrangements is challenging

- Develop guidance for ECE providers, DHS caseworkers, and resource parents about their roles in determining the feasibility and potential benefits of keeping a child in a high-quality ECE program upon placement in foster care, transition to another foster home, or reunification with biological parents.
- Disseminate existing resources from the [Project PLAY Child Care & Child Welfare Partnership Toolkit](#), which includes guidance on communication and support around transitions.

Possible strategies to address Finding 4: Using and accepting vouchers is a challenge

- Develop a system that allows resource parents to enter voucher information directly into the system (versus relying on someone else to do it). DCFS is working on a new Comprehensive Child Welfare Information System (CCWIS) that would allow for this functionality.
- Develop resources for resource parents and ECE programs that explain exceptions to voucher attendance rules and specify who in DHS to contact in these situations.
- Consider reserving child care slots for children in foster care by using contracted slots that the state pays for regardless of attendance (similar

to the model that other states like Massachusetts use). ECE programs with contracted slots could meet certain training requirements and receive additional resources and supports to meet the needs of children in foster care.

Possible strategies to address Finding 5: Providing ECE to children in foster care requires specialized skills and deep commitment

- Update, package, and disseminate resources to support ECE providers in meeting the needs of children in foster care. Resources can include information on the experiences of trauma for children in foster care, the impact of trauma, or classroom strategies to support children impacted by trauma. Existing resources to update and re-disseminate include Arkansas' [Child Care & Child Welfare Partnership Toolkit](#), a [brief for ECE providers](#), and a [brief for child welfare staff and stakeholders](#).
- Develop and disseminate resources for ECE program directors and home-based providers about recommended trauma-informed trainings (highlighting options available at no

additional cost to providers) and how to access these trainings. A key strategy of Arkansas's Preschool Development Grant is to disseminate trauma-informed care training to ECE providers, ranging from foundational to advanced, and culminating in new online modules that will be available to support future learning. Resources can also include information about BehaviorHelp, Project PLAY, and Array. Further, OEC may consider working with providers to address barriers (e.g., staffing issues) to accessing available trainings.

- Develop or update an existing Q & A sheet for ECE providers (e.g., guidance on ratios when serving children in foster care, flexibility in the absence policy for children in foster care, what providers can legally say or not say); a handout with DHS contact names, emails, and phone numbers for specific types of questions; and resources ECE program staff can share with resource parents (e.g., handouts with referral information to outside agencies for additional needs).

CONCLUSION

High-quality ECE is critical for enabling resource parents to accept placements with young children in foster care and is essential for meeting the developmental needs of children, particularly those who have been impacted by trauma. Resource parents generally rely on informal support networks or endure an arduous process to find ECE programs with open slots that accept vouchers. In several cases, resource parents may settle for care that is not ideal or of high quality because of limited options. As a result of logistical challenges and minimal planning during transitions (e.g., reunification with biological parents), children rarely experience stability of ECE, even when enrolled

in a quality program. Both resource parents and ECE program directors and home-based providers experience difficulties in using and accepting child care vouchers (e.g., rules and delayed payments), which add stress to already difficult circumstances. Children in foster care are exposed to trauma, which may manifest as both internalizing and externalizing behavioral challenges. Thus, ECE providers need access to trauma-informed training and additional support to provide high-quality care and meet the needs of children in foster care.

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APPENDIX A: STUDY METHODS

Researchers at SRI International and the National Center for Children in Poverty conducted this study as part of a U.S. Administration for Children and Families Child Care Policy Research Partnership grant focused on improving participation of Arkansas children in foster care in stable, high-quality early care and education (ECE).

The study team collected data from 21 resource parents and 10 ECE providers (5 private center-based directors, 2 public center-based directors, and 3 home-based providers) to learn more about their experiences caring for children in foster care. The team conducted focus groups as well as interviews when it was not possible to schedule multiple participants at the same time.

To recruit resource parents, the Arkansas Division of Children and Family Services (DCFS) sent its resource parent listserv a brief email informing them about the study and providing a link to complete a screening survey to participate in a focus group. The study team used the screening survey results to recruit a sample that was diverse with respect to whether participants were traditional foster families (not related to the child) or kinship resource parents (related or close family friends), and with respect to the organization that provided their training to become a certified resource parent (e.g., DCFS, faith-based group such as The CALL). Resource parents are a heterogeneous group with varying experiences and perspectives. The study team recognizes the small sample for this report does not reflect all views. The current sample includes a mix of first-time resource parents, experienced resource parents (e.g., 20 or more children in foster care over the past 8 years), heterosexual resource parents, same-sex resource parents, and resource parents who then adopt a child.

To recruit ECE program directors and home-based providers, the study team initially selected a recruitment sample of 120 programs with equal representation from three state regions (urban center/Northwest, Delta, Southwest) that varied in their capacity (high or low) to serve young children in foster care. Capacity was defined as the ratio of licensed ECE slots in programs with at least a Level 2 rating on the quality rating and improvement system [QRIS] per child in foster care under age 6. However, after a low response rate, the team selected a new sample of 85 additional programs, using similar criteria. Program directors and home-based providers who responded to the email invitation from the team participated in a focus group or interview.

The study team also recognizes that young children in foster care are a heterogeneous group. Children vary on many dimensions, including time in foster care, age, whether they are placed with a relative or a family they do not know, and reasons for entering foster care. While the experiences shared in this report reflect the experiences of a diverse group of resource parents, they do not represent the full range of resource families' experiences but rather a small sample of experiences.

Two members of the study team participated in each focus group or interview, with one member serving as the primary interviewer and the other as a secondary interviewer and notetaker. Interviewers used a semi-structured focus group or interview protocol to guide the conversation. Questions for resource parents asked about their need to find child care for children in foster care, their process of searching for child care, their preferred type of child care setting, their experiences with ECE settings that care for their children in foster care, what happens to a child's

ECE placement when the child leaves their home, and recommendations to state leaders about how to support their ability to access child care. Questions for providers asked about their program's capacity to serve children in foster care, considerations when deciding to enroll a child in foster care, their experiences serving children in foster care, what happens to a child when they change foster care placements or return to their biological family, professional development and other supports most helpful for serving children in foster care, and what other supports they would like to receive to meet the needs of children in foster care.

All focus group and interview participants received a \$50 Walmart gift card for their time engaging in a 50-minute conversation. With participants' permission, all focus group and interview conversations were recorded and transcribed for analysis purposes.

The study team used a rapid coding approach (Hamilton, 2013) to summarize the information from each focus group transcript in a template aligned with key areas of interest reflecting questions in the focus group or interview protocol. A team of three trained researchers, in consultation with the co-principal investigators (co-PIs) of the study, coded 23% of the transcripts to establish reliability and resolved

any differences based on consensus. For an additional 23% of transcripts, one researcher served as the primary coder and a second researcher reviewed the transcript and template to capture any additional information; the primary and secondary coders resolved any discrepancies based on consensus. For each of the remaining transcripts, one of the three trained researchers coded the transcript independently.

The study team reviewed and discussed the summary templates to identify key themes. After the team identified five broad key themes (described in the Key Findings box at the beginning of this report), two researchers reviewed each summary template to pull examples and illustrative quotes for each theme. The team then used this more detailed information to identify sub-themes within each broader area.

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