Early Care and Education Is an Essential Component of the Foster Care System:
A View From Arkansas

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Early care and education (ECE) programs play a vital role in supporting children in foster care (CiFC). These children face substantial risks of poor social-emotional, behavioral, and learning outcomes due to trauma and separation from primary caregivers (McLeigh et al., 2021; Olson et al., 2019). High-quality ECE programs can provide a developmentally supportive environment that reduces risks associated with early adversities (Merritt & Klein, 2015; Sciaraffa et al., 2018). Research shows that CiFC enrolled in ECE programs are more likely to have stable foster care placements and experience positive developmental and school readiness outcomes than CiFC not in ECE programs (Meloy & Phillips, 2012; Merritt & Klein, 2015).

Despite the clear benefits, participation in high-quality ECE among CiFC remains limited. Recent studies indicate that, across the United States, only about 19 percent of CiFC were enrolled in Head Start (Lee, 2020), and less than a third of CiFC under 6 years old were enrolled in center-based ECE (Klein et al., 2016). Furthermore, CiFC are less likely than children from low-income households to attend accredited ECE programs (Dinehart et al., 2012).

This brief is part of a collaboration between the Arkansas Department of Education/Division of Elementary and Secondary Education/Office of Early Childhood (OEC), Arkansas Department of Human Services/ Division of Children and Family Services (DCFS), SRI International, the National Center for Children in Poverty, and the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences. The collaboration team is focused on learning about the supply, quality, and stability of ECE settings for CiFC, as well as factors that promote or reduce access to high-quality ECE.

This brief expands on previously reported findings from focus groups with foster parents and ECE providers conducted in fall 2023 (see Chow et al., 2023). While the focus groups provided qualitative insights into the challenges foster parents face in accessing child care, this brief presents new data from a statewide survey that explores how access to child care may limit the availability of foster care in Arkansas.

Methods

This project employed a mixed-methods approach to gather focus group and survey data on Arkansas foster parents' efforts to access ECE for CiFC. The project team developed an online survey that took approximately 25 minutes to complete. The survey focused on foster parents' experiences in searching for and receiving ECE for their most recent CiFC from birth to 5 years old. DCFS partners distributed online survey invitations to all Arkansas resource parents (N = 1,942) via email in May 2024.[1] Parents answered screening questions at the beginning of the survey to determine if they were eligible to complete the survey (that is, if they had accepted new CiFC under age 6 during the past 12 months and had sought ECE for CiFC during the past 12 months).

A total of 105 foster parents completed the survey. The project team set quotas to ensure representation across different types of foster parents. The sample included 66 DCFS traditional foster parents, 24 DCFS relative or fictive kin foster parents, and 15 Private Licensed Placement Agency foster parents.[2] This stratified sampling approach helped capture diverse perspectives from across Arkansas's foster care system.

Findings

The previous focus group research (Chow et al., 2023) highlighted that challenges in finding ECE sometimes prevent foster parents from accepting requests to place young children in their home. The survey results presented below quantify the scope of this challenge and its impact on Arkansas's foster care system's capacity to place children with foster families.
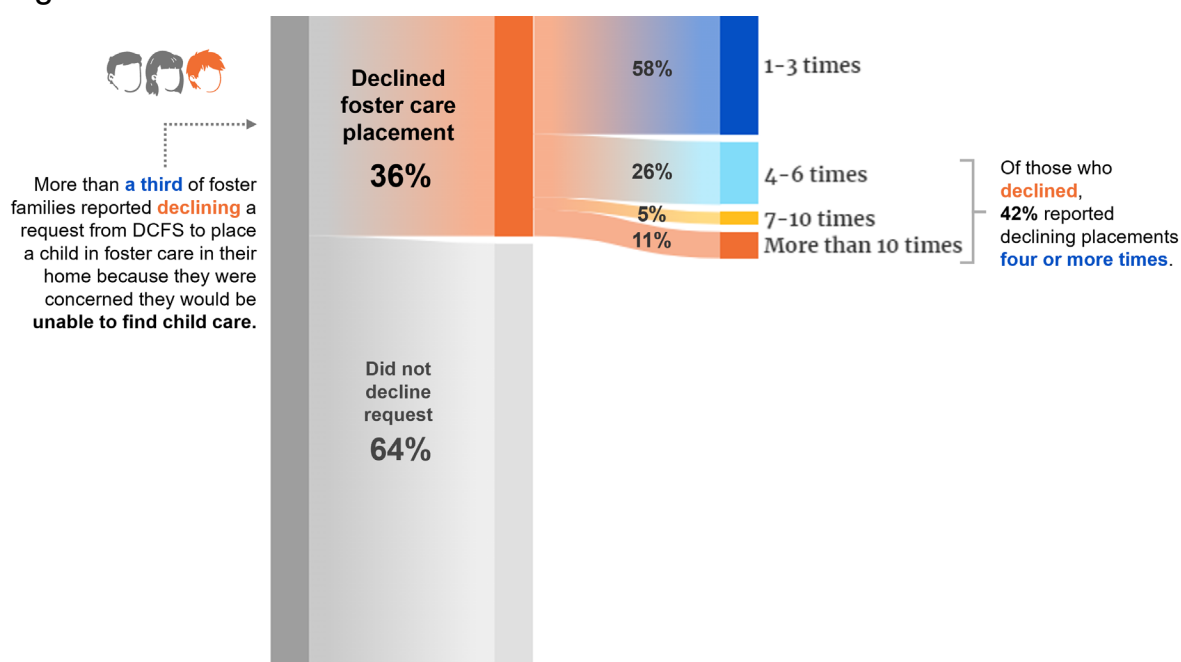
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[1] DCFS (2024) uses the term "resource parent" to refer to "an individual or family, respectively, in those homes that provide a family-like setting on a twenty-hour (24) hour basis for children in the custody of and placed there by the DHS. The term resource home is used because these homes are designed to serve as resources to children in the custody of DHS" (p. 3). In this brief, we use the term "foster parent" because it may be more familiar to a broader national audience. The 1,942 survey recipients included fictive kin, foster, provisional, and relative placements.

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

Many Foster Parents Decline Placement Requests Because of ECE Concerns

The difficulties foster parents face in securing appropriate ECE have direct consequences for the foster care system's capacity to place children in need. More than a third of foster families reported declining a request from DCFS to place CiFC in their homes because they were concerned they would be unable to find ECE. Among those who declined placements for this reason, 42 percent reported doing so four or more times.

Many foster parents decline requests to accept children in their homes due to concerns about finding ECE

More than **a third** of foster families reported **declining** a request from DCFS to place a child in foster care in their home because they were concerned they would be **unable to find child care.**

Declined foster care placement **36%**

Did not decline request **64%**

58% 1–3 times
26% 4–6 times
5% 7–10 times
11% More than 10 times

Of those who **declined**, **42%** reported declining placements **four or more times.**
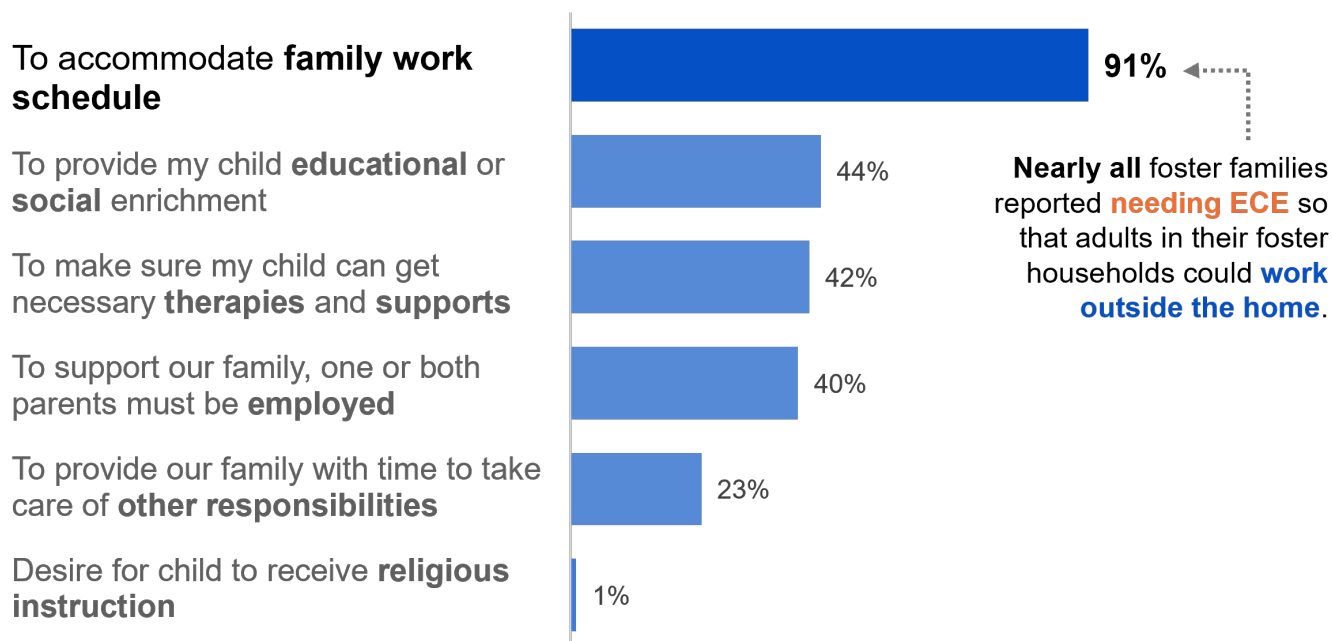
This situation places stress on the foster care system, which relies on available foster parents to provide homes for children in need. However, the challenges of finding ECE limits foster families' ability to accept placements of children in their homes.

ECE Is Essential for Nearly All Foster Parents

The high rate of declined placement requests due to ECE concerns is largely driven by the necessity of ECE for most foster families. Nearly all foster families (91 percent) reported needing ECE so that adults in their foster households could work outside the home.

While employment is a critical reason foster parents seek ECE, they also value ECE for the developmental benefits it offers CiFC. Many families reported seeking ECE to support the educational and social enrichment of their CiFC (44 percent) or to access necessary therapies for their CiFC (42 percent).

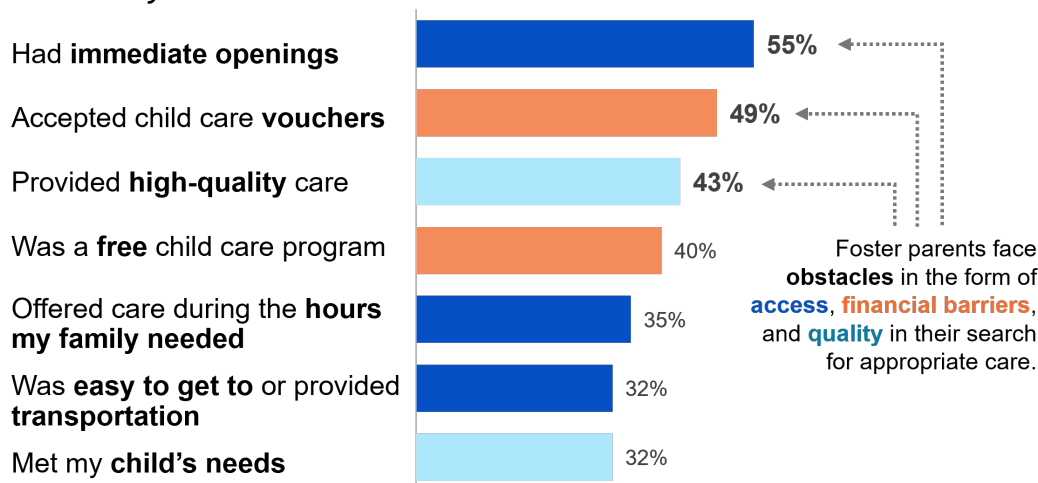Percentage of foster parents reporting why they seek child care

To accommodate **family work schedule**
To provide my child **educational** or **social** enrichment
To make sure my child can get necessary **therapies** and **supports**
To support our family, one or both parents must be **employed**
To provide our family with time to take care of **other responsibilities**
Desire for child to receive **religious instruction**

91%
44%
42%
40%
23%
1%

Nearly all foster families reported **needing ECE** so that adults in their foster households could **work outside the home**.

Foster Parents Face Serious Obstacles When Searching for ECE

The search for ECE begins almost immediately for most foster families. Most foster parents (83 percent) begin searching for ECE within a week of placement, with more than a quarter (29 percent) starting their search even before the child is placed in their home. This urgency often clashes with the reality of waitlists and limited openings in ECE programs. More than half (58 percent) of foster parents reported being turned away from ECE programs because there were no openings.

The search for suitable ECE often results in multiple challenges for foster families. The overwhelming majority (81 percent) of foster parents experienced some form of hardship due to the time needed to secure ECE. These hardships include missed work and financial strain, highlighting the ripple effects that ECE shortages can have on foster families' overall stability and well-being.

When accepting a child into their home, foster parents face several obstacles in their search for appropriate care. Quick access to ECE is the most pressing challenge, with 55 percent of foster parents reporting difficulty finding immediate openings and 35 percent reporting struggles to find programs that offer suitable hours for their families' needs. Financial barriers are another significant hurdle. Almost half (49 percent) of foster parents reported difficulty finding programs that accept child care vouchers, and 40 percent reported difficulty locating free options. Finally, quality and accessibility concerns are a challenge for foster parents. Forty-three percent reported difficulty finding high-quality ECE, while 32 percent reported facing issues with program location or transportation or with finding ECE that adequately meets their children's specific needs.

Percentage of foster parents who reported finding child care with the following characteristics was *somewhat* or *very hard*

Had **immediate openings**	55%
Accepted child care **vouchers**	49%
Provided **high-quality** care	43%
Was a **free** child care program	40%
Offered care during the **hours my family needed**	35%
Was **easy to get to** or provided **transportation**	32%
Met my **child's needs**	32%

Foster parents face **obstacles** in the form of **access**, **financial barriers**, and **quality** in their search for appropriate care.

Many foster parents face these challenges more or less on their own when searching for ECE. While a third receive guidance from caseworkers, fewer than one in five reported other forms of support such as consulting state websites and using Child Care Aware agencies.[3] About half of foster parents reported directly contacting programs or reaching out to facilities they had used previously, while about a third depend on personal connections or recommendations.

The survey results suggest ECE is an essential support for nearly all foster families who care for infants and young children. Yet these families face major challenges in finding immediate openings in ECE programs as well as slots in programs that meet their particular needs. One consequence of these challenges is that families may miss work or experience financial hardship. Another is that concerns about finding ECE lead many foster parents to decline requests to care for CiFC. Taken together, foster families' struggles to quickly access appropriate ECE for CiFC places significant strains on the foster care system and foster parents while reducing CiFC's opportunities to benefit from high-quality ECE.

Recommendations for State Leaders

State leaders seeking to improve ECE access for CiFC might begin by conducting a comprehensive assessment of their current landscape. This assessment should focus on two key areas.

Understanding Current ECE Program Participation

State leaders should analyze administrative data to determine enrollment patterns across different types of ECE programs, quality ratings of programs serving CiFC, participation rates in federal programs like Head Start, distribution of children across public and private providers, and geographic patterns of enrollment and access.

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

Identifying Barriers and Support Systems

State leaders should evaluate the process foster parents use to search for and secure ECE, including the types of assistance they receive and their effectiveness, financial barriers including subsidy access and copayment requirements, administrative hurdles in the enrollment process, and coordination between child welfare and ECE systems.

While the challenges and solutions will differ for each state based on its unique contexts and resources, several strategies could help improve ECE access and quality for CiFC.

- Certain features of the 2024 Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) Final Rule could be leveraged to increase ECE slots for CiFC. For example, a requirement that some child care providers be paid prospectively and based on enrollment and not attendance might entice more child care providers to accept vouchers. States could take up the option of waiving copayments for CiFC, a policy already in place in Arkansas. The rule also requires some use of contracts and grants for child care programs serving particular groups, including infants and toddlers and children with disabilities. Because a high percentage of CiFC fall into these groups, states might consider reserving slots in ECE that receive contracts or grants for CiFC.

- States could provide enhanced supports to foster families searching for child care through Child Care Aware (CCA) agencies and training for child welfare caseworkers about CCA agencies and other entities that can help parents find ECE programs. Enhanced support could include directly contacting ECE programs for foster parents to identify options and providing information about program supports that are especially important to CiFC (e.g., programs with staff trained in trauma-informed care and inclusion of children with disabilities).

- States might consider creating more formal and active partnerships between the child welfare and ECE systems. These partnerships could develop strategies for more easily identifying CiFC in the ECE data system in order to track ECE availability and enrollment for CiFC, streamline eligibility and enrollment processes, and strengthen program outreach to foster parents, especially if a state has low enrollment of CiFC in higher quality ECE programs and programs offering more comprehensive supports (e.g., Head Start and Early Head Start). For example, Arkansas developed a Child Care & Child Welfare Partnership Toolkit to help ensure CiFC get the best care possible.

- States could also consider strategies for increasing the availability of higher quality ECE slots to CiFC whose foster parents need full-day care. One strategy would be the use of grants or incentives to allow part-day prekindergarten or Head Start programs to extend their day. Another would be the provision of transportation from part-day programs to another care setting so that full-day hours are covered for families.

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