

“Where My Child Is Loved”: Grandparent Child Care Is Fundamental

A Study of Family, Friend, Neighbor (FFN), and Nanny Care in California - Part Three

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Introduction

Child care preferences are as diverse as California’s families themselves. According to one California parent, the ideal arrangement for her preschooler would be “a nanny that is embedded in our lifestyle and available for evenings [...] but I will still like to keep our child in preschool for socializing.” For another parent, the ideal child care provider for her toddler would be “like another grandma or grandpa.” And these two parents are not alone: family, friend, neighbor (FFN), and nanny care is a deeply respected and valued choice throughout the state.

From a policy perspective, however, FFN and nanny care struggles for attention. California, like the nation, tends to focus on licensed early care and education (ECE) settings, like child care centers or family child care (FCC) providers. State and federal regulations define FFN and nanny care as “license-exempt” care, an oppositional label that emphasizes what these caregivers do not offer rather than what they can provide. Similarly, policy work often characterizes these arrangements as “informal” care that exist outside the definition of high-quality ECE. This framing erases the depth and consistency many such caregivers provide, and it devalues parents’ own understanding of quality. Additionally, the “FFN” category within “license-exempt” or “informal” care creates ambiguity for the status of professional nannies and obscures grandparents (most often grandmothers) as the most common and vital FFN caregivers.

To develop a richer understanding of FFN and nanny care, the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment (CSCCE) conducted a study of California parents and their caregivers between 2022 and 2023. Our study was the first statewide exploration of parents’ child care preferences, FFN care, and nanny care, and it incorporated a series of surveys and focus groups to explore this type of early care and education from numerous angles.

The study’s findings affirm that both parents and caregivers desire greater recognition of and support for FFN caregivers and nannies for their role in early care and education. For some parents, particularly those with infants and toddlers, this form of care is not informal, but foundational; yet unpaid arrangements prevail, often at great cost to caregivers from low- to moderate-income households. While regulations may downplay their expertise, our study shows that caregivers know their worth—particularly grandparents.

This report is the third and final release of our series. Our first report explored the types and combinations of caregiving arrangements that parents’ use for their young children, as well as the factors that drove their choice of caregiving arrangements, based on our 2022 parent survey (Powell et al., 2023b). Our second report shared data from FFN and nanny caregivers themselves, drawn from surveys and focus groups: in addition to describing the scope and duration of caregiving arrangements, we took a novel look at caregivers’ self-perception and well-being (Powell et al., 2023a). In this final report, we describe the findings from our final survey, a 2023 follow-up with parents who joined our study sample in 2022, and synthesize the findings from the study as a whole.

Clarifying Early Care and Education Terms

Early care and education (ECE) terminology can be confusing. In this report series, we have used the following terms to describe the ECE options in California:

- **Center-based care:** Licensed and regulated early care and education housed at a facility or school. Programs include Head Start or faith-based nursery schools as well as other child care centers that may be referred to elsewhere as “daycare.”
- **Family child care (FCC) provider:** A licensed and regulated ECE business that provides care in the home of an ECE professional.
- **Nanny, nanny share, or au pair care:** Often simplified as “nanny care,” these terms all refer to a paid arrangement with a professional caregiver who is not otherwise connected to the family.
- **Family, friend, or neighbor (FFN) care:** Care provided by any family member other than a parent or by a nonrelative who is not a professional caregiver. Care may be paid or unpaid, and some caregivers receive payment through a subsidy.

In this report, we will be separating **FFN caregivers** into three groups: **grandparents, aunts or other relatives**, and **friends or neighbors**. We use these groupings in order to explore differences in arrangements. Nannies remain a separate category. Some parents may regard a family member or friend as a nanny, as well. The results in this report reflect parents’ choice of label for their caregiver.

Study Background

In 2022, CSCCE launched the Study of Family, Friend, Neighbor, and Nanny Care in California. We recruited study participants through broad outreach, with intensive support from the California Child Care Resource & Referral Network, Parent Voices, and the Parent Institute for Quality Education (PIQE). CSCCE partnered with the RAPID Survey Project at the Stanford Center on Early Childhood to implement the survey components. Additionally, Parent Voices worked with CSCCE to convene a six-person Parent Advisory Group to support the study design and the interpretation of our findings.

Our study aims to expand the knowledge base regarding the utilization and nature of FFN and nanny arrangements, as well as the experiences and well-being of the caregivers themselves. Existing research on these topics are relatively limited, especially when compared to research on licensed ECE. This study also seeks to inform policies that are both parent- and caregiver-friendly.

Methods

In our first report in this series, we discussed survey findings from our 2022 sample of 1,310 parents of children under age six in California (Powell et al., 2023b). In 2023, we contacted our original sample for a follow-up survey designed to further explore family, friend, neighbor (FFN), and nanny care, resulting in a sample of 328 returning study participants. This survey included approximately 40 core questions, with additional questions for parents with multiple children under age six or multiple arrangements of FFN or nanny care (for instance, both grandparent and nanny care on a weekly basis). Participants could complete the survey in English or Spanish.

Our survey reached a convenience sample that does not necessarily mirror the population of California parents as a whole. However, we did capture parents' household income and race and ethnicity, which allows us to explore how attitudes towards FFN and nanny care may vary among parents of different backgrounds. We also compare responses based on parents' recent use of FFN or nanny care.

Race and Ethnicity: Our sample of 328 respondents included 129 White parents, 60 Asian parents, 50 Latine parents, 41 multiracial parents, 25 Black parents, 16 parents of another single race, and 7 parents of unknown race and ethnicity. However, our survey included questions for parents based on their use of FFN or nanny care, so sample sizes for each question were smaller. For instance, 10 of the 25 Black parents in our sample had used FFN or nanny care in the previous three years. Due to these small sample sizes, we report findings for parents of color in aggregate.

Household Income: Because California is such a large and economically diverse state, we group households into two categories: “below 80 percent of area median income” and “at or above 80 percent of area median income.” This categorization allows us to account for the differences in cost of living by county in many figures in this report. We use 80 percent of area median income as a threshold in order to distinguish households with low incomes from those with moderate or high incomes. Our survey included 132 parents living below 80 percent of area median income, 135 parents at or above 80 percent of area median income, and 61 parents who declined to state their income.

Recent FFN or Nanny Care: Finally, we frequently group parents' responses based on whether or not they have recently used FFN or nanny care. In our survey, “recent FFN or nanny care” included parents who have arrangements with family, friends, neighbors, or nannies currently or in the preceding three years. Our sample included 195 parents with recent FFN or nanny care and 133 without this type of care arrangement.

Core Findings

FFN and Nanny Care Through Early Childhood

- For children under 12 months old, FFN or nanny care was the most common care arrangement among our study sample. When children are around age two, parents using center-based care begin to eclipse FFN and nanny care users. Finally, FFN and nanny care dropped for four- and five-year-olds but resurged for six-year-olds.
- Grandparents are the most common FFN caregiver, and nearly one third of parents with a child under age two reported using grandparent care. As a result, grandparents are the primary form of early care and education that parents use for this age group.
- Parents who did not use FFN or nanny care in the past three years most often cited “FFN and nanny care are not available to me” (55 percent) as their reason. Very few parents avoided FFN or nanny care due to concerns about the quality or safety of care (less than 10 percent each).

Enduring Preferences for FFN and Nanny Care

- In open-ended questions, parents of infants and toddlers most often describe their ideal ECE setting as a safe, loving environment. Parents with preschool-age children more often emphasized specific content or styles of learning.
- Around one half of parents with a history of FFN or nanny care considered it ideal for their child. Additionally, one third of parents who had no recent FFN or nanny use still considered it to be ideal for children under age three, along with one quarter of parents with children age three to five.
- Many parents hope to extend their FFN and nanny arrangements, particularly in the case of grandparent care: 60 percent of parents hoped the arrangement would last three or more additional years. Nearly one half of White parents hoped for five or more additional years.

Factors in Selecting Early Care and Education: A Closer Look

- With regard to **cost**, parents most often chose to pay “the highest quality I can afford,” with parents with recent FFN or nanny care and those without recent care agreeing (41 and 42 percent, respectively). This choice was also the most common among low-income parents, whose second most common choice was “an expense close to \$0” (34 percent).
- When considering the **language(s) spoken** with their children, parents preferred a provider who “speaks our home language(s),” except for Spanish-speaking parents, who had a stronger preference for “bilingual instruction” (46 percent).
- With regard to **cultural background**, most parents looked for a provider who “respects the culture of different people and instills the same value in my child.” However, parents with recent FFN or nanny care were at least twice as likely to select “celebrates our family’s cultural heritage and practices” or “embeds cultural activities and traditions into their routine.”
- Parents tended to agree that care “**feels right**” when “I see my child feels comfortable, happy, and safe.” Parents with recent FFN or nanny care selected “I have complete trust and faith in them” more than twice as often as other parents.

- The majority of parents selected “a safe and secure physical environment” and “good hygiene practices and cleanliness” as indicators of **health and safety**. There were minimal differences between parents with or without recent FFN or nanny use in the top choices for this factor.

Features of FFN and Nanny Care

- While most caregivers in our study were unpaid, parents who provided cash did not always use a fixed rate: while 90 percent of parents paid nannies a fixed rate, only two thirds of parents in other paid arrangements (for instance, 64 with paid grandparent care) did so.
- Parents with grandparent care reported passing on more responsibilities: cooking was the most common additional task, followed by transportation (including walking, driving, and public transit). Grandparents were most likely to take care of both meal preparation and transportation (83 percent and 53 percent, respectively). They were also most likely to be responsible for the bedtime routine (31 percent). We found little variation by parental income.
- Parents reported a variety of play and learning from their FFN and nanny caregivers, with “outdoor play and exploration” as the leading option. “Reading books and fostering a love of reading,” “teaching them to communicate,” and “eating healthy” were features of grandparent care more than half the time—and more often than any other caregivers. Grandparents were also most likely to foster “family cultural traditions,” particularly for families of color (twice as often as White families).
- Nannies were the most likely to provide “learning a language besides English,” “positive interactions and play with other children,” and “managing big emotions and other behaviors.”

Public Funds for FFN and Nanny Care

- In open-ended questions, parents reported great interest in the use of public funds for possible subsidies or tax breaks supporting FFN and nanny care. Parents tended to describe using funds to start new paid arrangements (frequently nannies), although some said subsidies or tax breaks would allow them to pay a currently unpaid caregiver. Some parents called for a broader pro-family policy package.
- Looking at existing tax credits and benefits like the Child Tax Credit, usage was higher among moderate- and higher-income households (who more often receive credits that are non-refundable).
- Latine parents were more likely to select “don’t know” about all of the tax credits, suggesting they may be missing out on benefits available to them.
- In our open questions, parents emphasized the current burden of child care costs. Other parents discussed the challenge of finding the right care, and some focused on the need for choices that fit different families’ needs.

FFN and Nanny Care Through Early Childhood

In our first report, we estimated that 26 percent of California parents with children under age three rely on a family, friend, or neighbor caregiver, along with 29 percent of parents with children age three to five. Nanny, nanny share, or au pair care was less common in our sample: around 12 percent of parents with children under age three, along with 9 percent of parents with children age three to five. When examining by race and ethnicity, we also found that Black parents were most likely to use FFN care. Finally, we concluded that families using two or more forms of care were nearly always incorporating FFN or nanny care (Powell et al., 2023b).

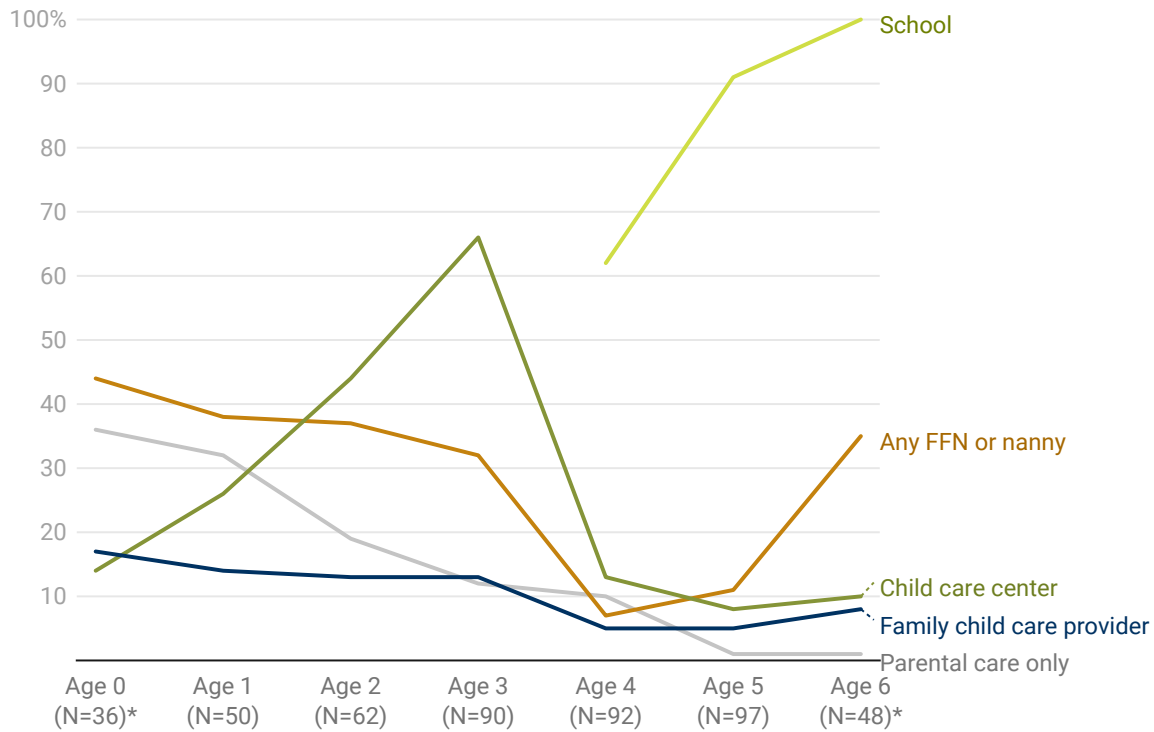
In our follow-up parent survey, we went deeper in our investigation of FFN care by asking parents to identify care arrangements for each child under age seven. **Figure 1** shows parents use of the following options: FFN or nanny care; licensed child care settings (child care center or family child care provider); school; and parental care only.

School was an option for parents to select for their children age four and older. For children under 12 months old, FFN or nanny care was the most common arrangement, followed by parental care only. Around age two, parents using center-based care begin to eclipse FFN and nanny care users, though around one third of the sample reported one of these arrangements for two- and three-year-olds. Finally, FFN and nanny care showed a sharp drop for four- and five-year-olds, followed by a resurgence for six-year-olds.

In **Figure 2**, we show which forms of FFN or nanny care parents reported. For all age groups, grandparents were the most common caregivers, typically twice or more the rate of any other type of caregiver. Nearly one third of parents with a child under age two used grandparent care, as well as one in four parents with a six-year-old. Nanny care declined as child age increased, while other FFN caregivers like aunts or friends were highest for six-year-olds.

Figure 1. Care Arrangements, By Child's Age

California Parents, 2023



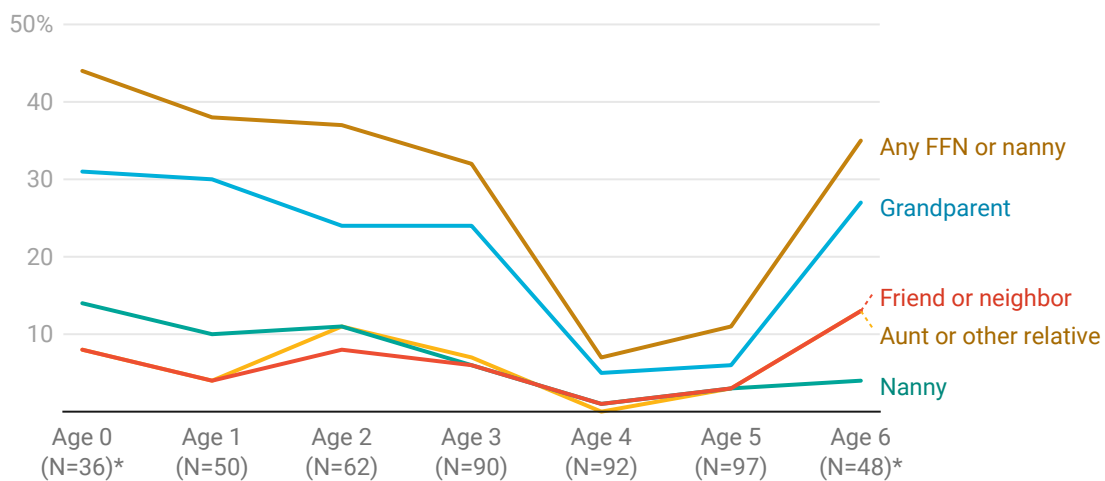
Source: Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley

Note: With the exception of “parental care only,” parents could select multiple forms of care for each age group.

*Interpret with caution (fewer than 50 respondents).

Figure 2. FFN and Nanny Arrangements, By Child's Age

California Parents, 2023



Source: Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley

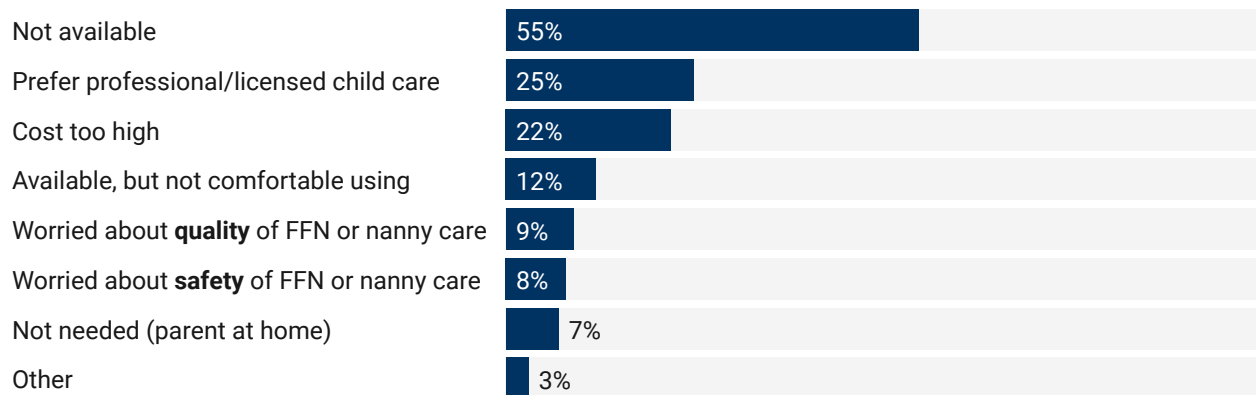
Note: Parents could select multiple types of caregivers for each age group.

*Interpret with caution (fewer than 50 respondents).

We asked parents who did not select one of the options represented in **Figure 2** whether they had used FFN or nanny care in the preceding three years. This question helped us identify parents with no recent use of FFN or nanny care. We also asked parents to select their reasons for making a different choice (**Figure 3**). The most common choice was “FFN and nanny care are not available to me” (55 percent). Very few parents based their choice on concerns about the quality or safety of care (less than 10 percent in each case). Parents who selected multiple reasons were more likely to include a preference for licensed care.

Figure 3. Reasons Parents Have Not Used FFN or Nanny Care

California Parents, 2023



Source: Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley

Note: Respondents could select multiple reasons.

N=116

Enduring Preferences for FFN Care

In our first report, we found that families have vastly different definitions of their ideal child care options, and many parents did not characterize their current arrangements as ideal. For parents with children under age three, however, those with FFN or nanny care were somewhat more likely to consider their existing arrangements to be ideal (Powell et al., 2023b).

For our follow-up survey, we returned to the question of ideal arrangements in greater depth. For parents of infants and toddlers, a safe, loving environment was the most common theme in open-ended responses about ideal early care and education. One parent from Central California described ideal care as “a place where my child is comfortable and happy, where my child learns new things, where my child is loved.” Another parent from Central California wrote, “My ideal caregiver is like another grandma or grandpa from another mother to my kids.”

A few parents with preschool-age children echoed that same theme. More often, however, parents described the specific content or style of learning they hoped their preschooler would experience. One parent wrote:

“My ideal is care that can provide programming and fun. One that is safe and dependable. One that allows youth to explore new things and feed the imagination. One that can also watch my kid when I have an emergency or I’m late from work.”

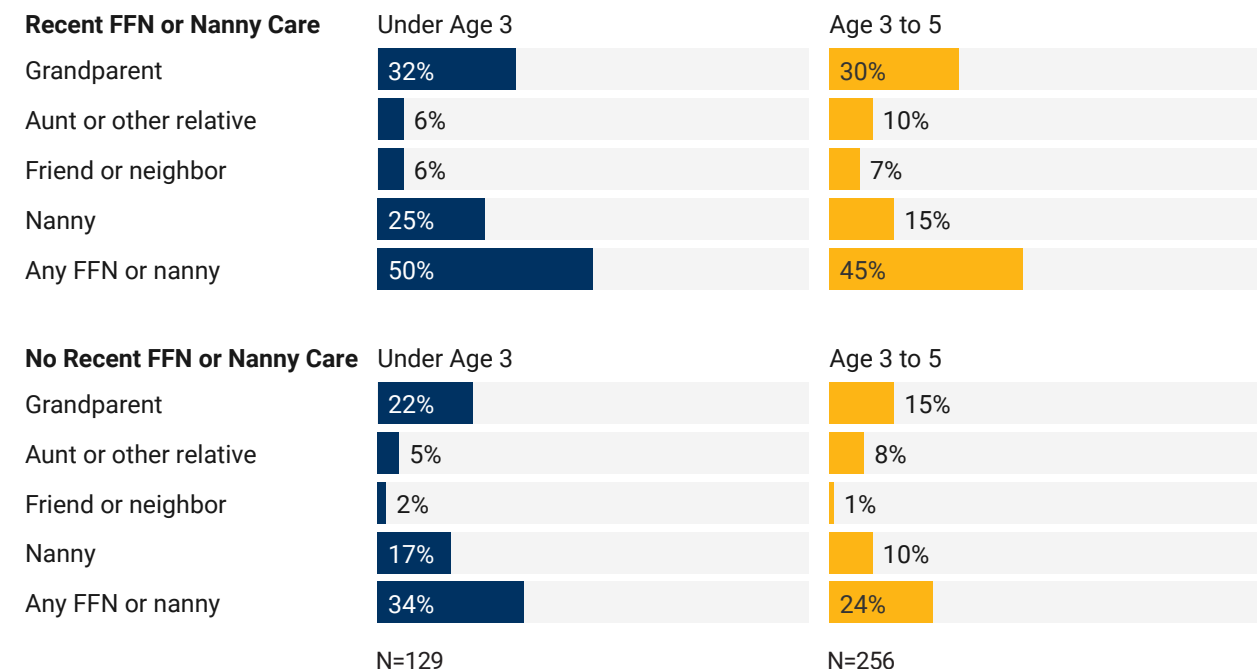
— Parent in Southern California

FFN and nanny care was sometimes a secondary feature of ideal care for preschool-age children. For example, one Bay Area parent preferred “partial days in a play-based preschool program and some grandparent care for bonding time.” A parent from the Northern region wrote, “I would love for my child to have a consistent visit with grandparents and aunts and uncles each week. I also want my child to attend school to make friends and socialize as well as learn.”

Our survey also asked parents whether specific FFN or nanny caregivers featured in their ideal ECE arrangements (**Figure 4**). Parents with a history of using FFN or nanny care were more likely to characterize it as ideal: 50 percent of parents with children under age three and 45 percent of parents with children age three to five.

Figure 4. Parents’ Ideal Care Arrangement, By Child’s Age Group

California Parents, 2023



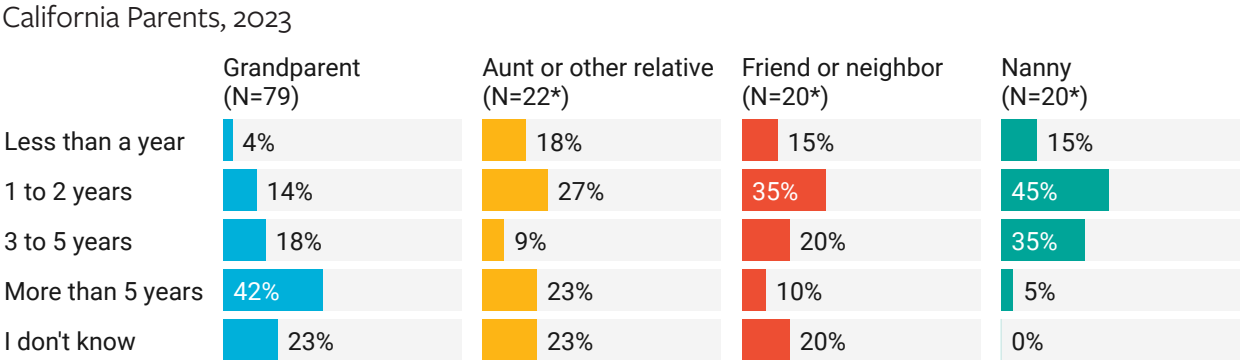
Source: Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley

Note: Our survey defined “recent care” as current or within the past three years. Additionally, respondents were also able to select licensed care (center or family child care provider) or parental care only.

This finding aligns with a 2020 study of parent preferences conducted by the California Child Care Resource & Referral Network, which found that current users of FFN care were most likely to consider it ideal (California Child Care Resource & Referral Network, 2020). However, our study also demonstrates that one third of parents who had not recently used FFN or nanny care still considered it to be ideal for children under age three, along with one quarter of parents with children age three to five. In each case, grandparents were most likely to be considered ideal caregivers among license-exempt providers.

While usage of FFN and nanny care may ebb and flow over time, our study suggests that parental preference for this type of care persists. Our survey also prompted parents with a current FFN or nanny arrangement to describe how much longer they hoped it would continue (**Figures 5.1** and **5.2**). Most parents with grandparent care hoped it would continue for more than three years (60 percent), with the greatest share hoping for more than five years (42 percent). The share of parents who hoped for more than five years decreased as the caregiver’s kinship became more distant: 23 percent of parents with aunt or other relative care, 10 percent with friend or neighbor care, and 5 percent with nanny care.

Figure 5.1. Parents’ Hopes for Continued FFN or Nanny Care



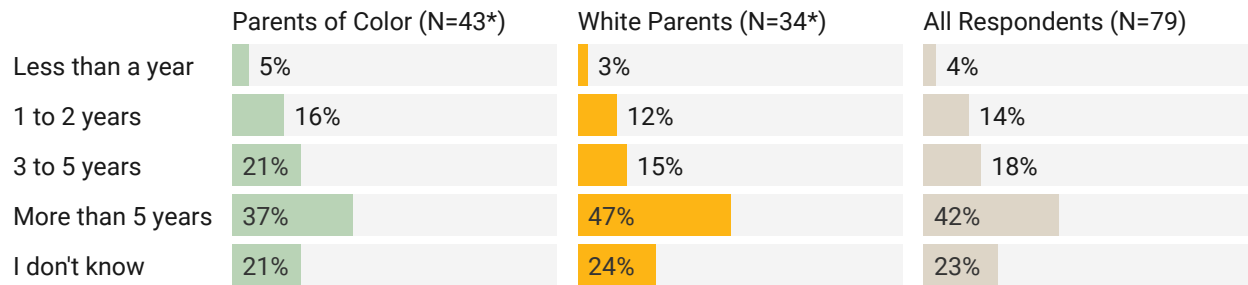
Source: Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley
 *Interpret with caution (fewer than 50 respondents).

In the second report in this series, we discussed the results of surveys and focus groups with FFN and nanny caregivers themselves. Three years from now, about one half of grandparents expected to be “still looking after the same children.” However, a minority of other caregivers expected to be caring for the same group: only 33 percent of other relatives and friends (who are reported on separately in **Figure 5.1**), along with 13 percent of nannies. Instead, these caregivers had a mix of plans: some envisioned caring for a new group of children; others considered joining the licensed ECE workforce (Powell et al., 2023a). The data from our second study suggests that parents are hoping for a similar continuity of care or perhaps an even longer commitment than grandparents and, in particular, nannies may want.

Figure 5.2 looks more closely at parents who currently use grandparent care. In our follow-up survey, we found that White parents are more likely to hope for more than five additional years of grandparent care (47 percent), compared to parents of color (37 percent).

Figure 5.2. Parents’ Hopes for Continued Grandparent Care, By Parent Race and Ethnicity

California Parents, 2023



Source: Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley

Note: In the category of “parents of color,” we include respondents who selected any option other than White, either alone or in combination.

*Interpret with caution (fewer than 50 respondents).

Many of the caregivers in our focus groups discussed their aspirations for the future. Grandparents in particular expressed feeling open to continuing while they were needed. For example, a grandparent from Kern County shared, “If they do have another little one, I mean, I would consider it because they’re my grandbabies.” Another grandparent from Los Angeles County described uncertainty about the future but openness to evolving with the family’s needs: “Honestly, I wouldn’t know what to say exactly.... I may continue looking after the younger boy, like taking him to school and picking him up.”

By this measure, parents’ desired duration of care may be longer for FFN and nanny care than for other options. Center-based care, for instance, likely serves children for no more than five years (and often only covers two to three years). In other words, continued care is often a goal for both parent and caregiver. Moreover, when we asked caregivers about their motivation in our previous survey, most caregivers identified “helping parents” or “helping children.” In an open-ended question, several caregivers elaborated on their enjoyment of caregiving and feelings of fulfillment; several grandparents also mentioned their role as a protector or safe harbor (Powell et al., 2023a).

Factors in Selecting Early Care and Education: A Closer Look

Our first report in this series compared parents’ attitudes towards 10 factors in their decision about early care and education, including availability, convenience, and personal connection. We found that parents using FFN or nanny care rated “cultural background” and “language(s) spoken” as very important to their decisions more frequently than parents using other types of care. Meanwhile, factors such as “health and safety,” “close to home or work,” and “it just felt right” did not vary much by care arrangement. Black and Latine parents with infants and toddlers were more likely to agree that “cultural background” was very important. For children age three to five, “learning opportunities” were most often “very important” to Asian and Latine parents (Powell et al., 2023b).

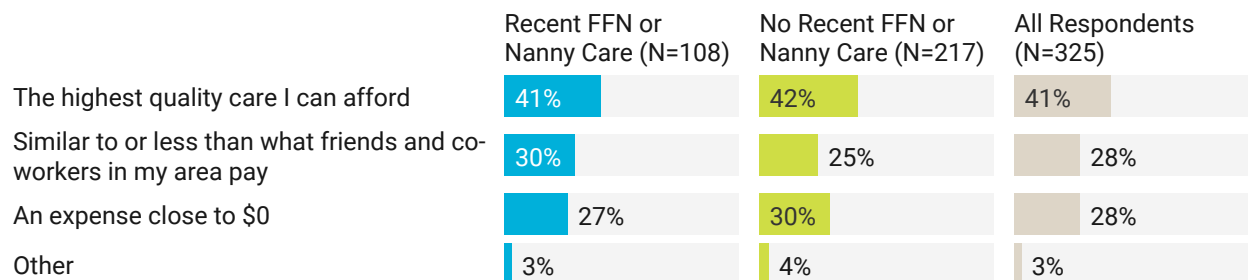
In reviewing early data in this study, our Parent Advisory Group suggested exploring these topics in greater detail. In our follow-up parent survey, the third and final stage of our study, we revisited five of the factors to probe their meaning and/or context: cost; language(s) spoken during care; cultural background; care that “feels right”; and health and safety. For the first four factors, we prompted parents to select the option that best described what they were looking for. For health and safety, we allowed parents to choose multiple options.

Cost

Our first report found that cost was “very important” to 67 percent of parents with children under age three and 57 percent of parents with children age three to five (Powell et al., 2023b). **Figure 6.1** shows how parents responded in our follow-up survey to the question of how cost factors into their child care decision. Among the four choices, parents most often selected “the highest quality I can afford,” (more than 40 percent), while the remaining parents were fairly even split between “similar or less than what friends and co-workers in my area pay” or “an expense close to \$0.”

Figure 6.1. Cost as a Factor in Choosing Child Care, By FFN or Nanny Use
California Parents, 2023

“I’m looking for child care costs that are....”



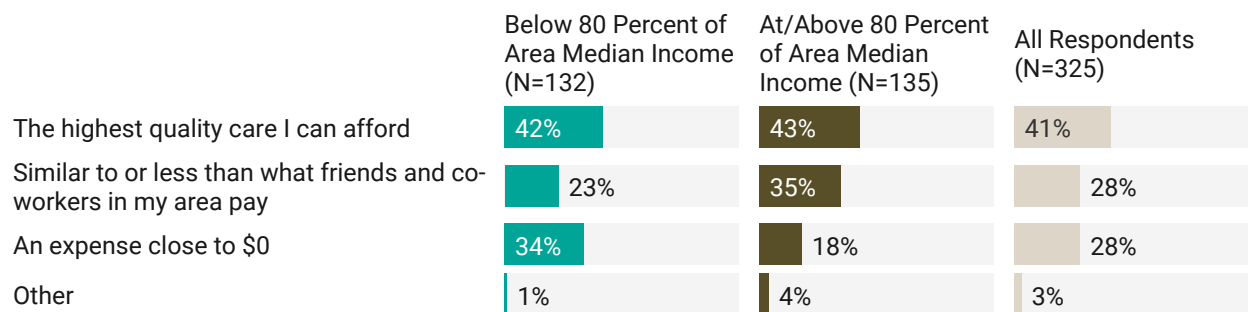
Source: Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley
Note: Figure includes respondents who currently use parental care only.

Figure 6.2 compares responses based on household income. Most parents chose the highest quality of care they could afford, regardless of their income. However, parents with low incomes (below 80 percent of area median income) were more likely to choose “an expense close to \$0” (34 percent), while moderate-to-wealthy parents would choose to child care that was “similar to or less than what friends and co-workers in my area pay” (35 percent).

Figure 6.2. Cost as a Factor in Choosing Child Care, By Household Income

California Parents, 2023

“I’m looking for child care costs that are....”



Source: Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley

Note: Figure includes respondents who currently use parental care only.

Taken together, these findings suggest that families may use different mental benchmarks for cost (for instance, similar costs to peers versus costs closest to \$0), but “the highest quality I can afford” is the most common framing.

Language(s) Spoken During Care

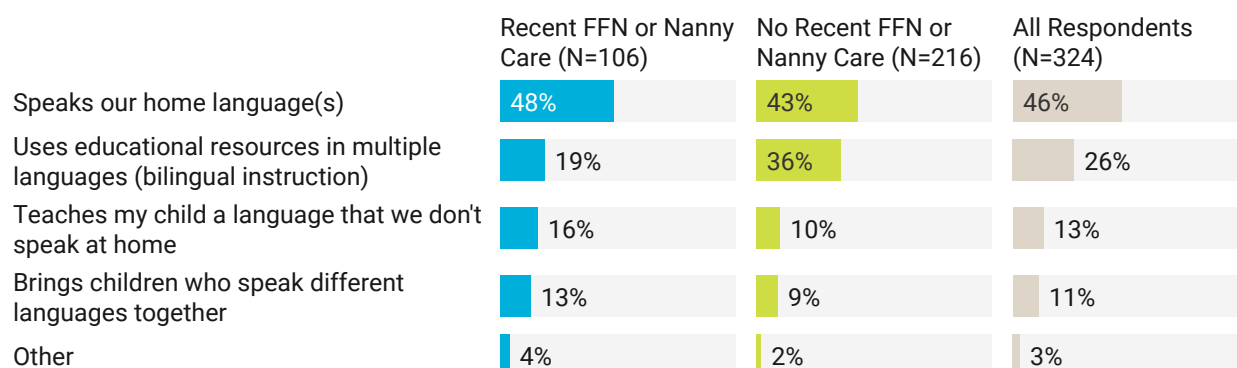
In our first report, we found that a minority of parents considered the language(s) spoken during care to be “very important”: 36 percent of parents with children under age three and 40 percent of parents with children age three to five. As with cost, “not at all important” was the least common response, selected by only 14 percent of parents with children age three to five. For this age group, 43 percent of parents using FFN or nanny care viewed the language(s) spoken during care as “very important” (Powell et al., 2023b).

Figure 7.1 shows how parents responded in our follow-up survey to five descriptions of language as a factor in choosing child care. The survey asked: “How do the language(s) spoken factor into your child care decision?” Parents most often selected a provider who “speaks our home language(s).” This option was chosen by slightly more parents with recent FFN or nanny care (48 percent), compared to parents with no recent FFN or nanny care (43 percent). The second most commonly selected option was “bilingual instruction,” with more parents without recent FFN or nanny care marking this choice (36 percent).

Figure 7.1. Language as a Factor in Choosing Child Care, By FFN or Nanny Use

California Parents, 2023

“I’m looking for a provider or caregiver who…”



Source: Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley

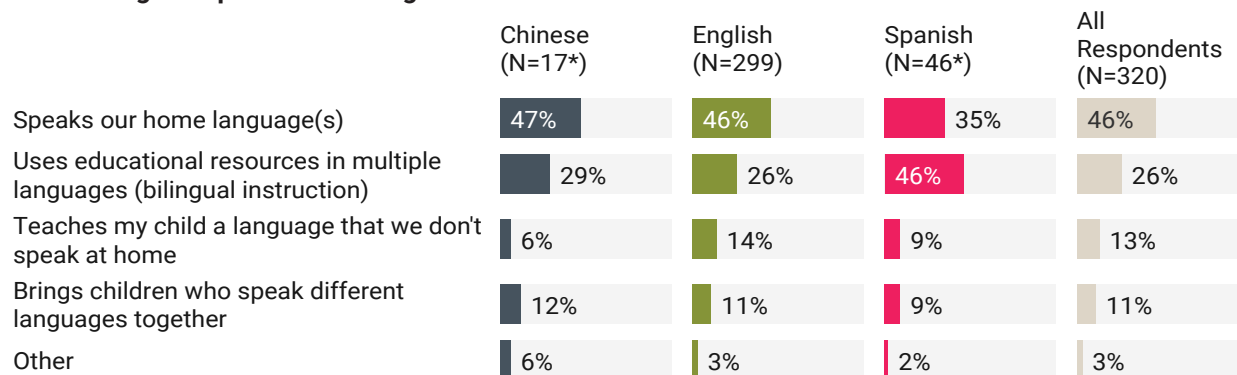
Note: Figure includes respondents who currently use parental care only.

Parents who spoke Spanish had different preferences (**Figure 7.2**): 46 percent selected “bilingual instruction” as the best description of what they were looking for when weighing language as a factor in choosing child care. The responses of Chinese-speaking parents, meanwhile, were similar to those of English-speaking parents. However, there were only 17 Chinese-speaking parents in our sample, so readers should interpret these findings with caution.

Figure 7.2. Language as a Factor in Choosing Child Care, By Parents’ Language(s)

California Parents, 2023

“I’m looking for a provider or caregiver who…”



Source: Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley

Note: Figure includes respondents who currently use parental care only. Parents who speak multiple languages are counted in each category.

*Interpret with caution (fewer than 50 respondents).

Cultural Background

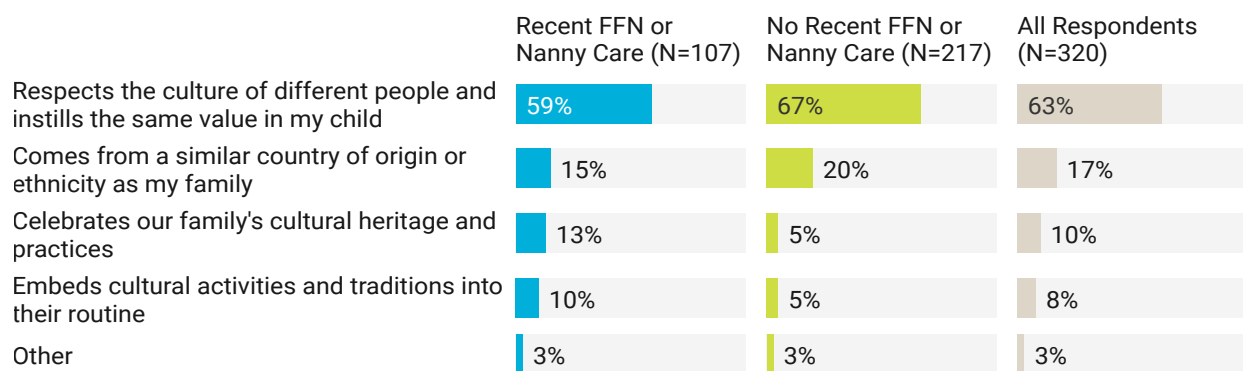
Our first report found that compared to the importance of the language(s) used by their child care provider, even fewer parents identified cultural background as “very important”: 29 percent of parents with children under age three and 32 percent of parents with children age three to five (Powell et al., 2023b).

Figure 8.1 reports on parents’ responses in our follow-up survey to the question, “How does cultural background factor into your child care decision?” Most parents selected “respects the culture of different people and instills the same value in my child,” though slightly fewer parents with recent FFN or nanny care chose this option (59 percent, compared to 67 percent of parents who did not have recent FFN or nanny care).

Figure 8.1. Cultural Background as a Factor in Choosing Child Care, By FFN or Nanny Use

California Parents, 2023

“I’m looking for a provider or caregiver who...”



Source: Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley

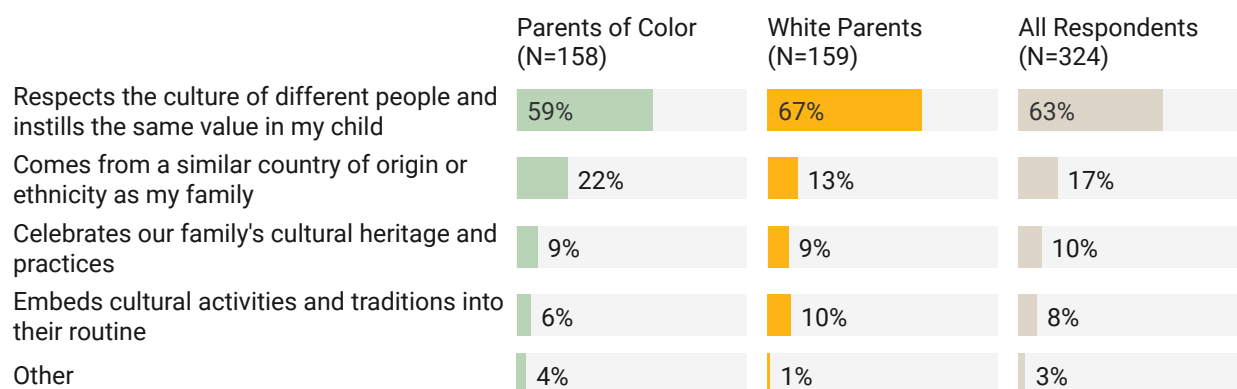
Note: Figure includes respondents who currently use parental care only.

When comparing responses based on the race and ethnicity of respondents, the top preference remained consistent (**Figure 8.2**). However, parents of color were more likely to select “comes from a similar country of origin or ethnicity as my family” (22 percent of parents of color, compared to 13 percent of White parents).

Figure 8.2. Cultural Background as a Factor in Choosing Child Care, By Parents’ Race and Ethnicity

California Parents, 2023

“I’m looking for a provider or caregiver who...”



Source: Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley

Note: Figure includes respondents who currently use parental care only. In the category of “parents of color,” we include respondents who selected any option other than White, either alone or in combination.

Care That “Feels Right”

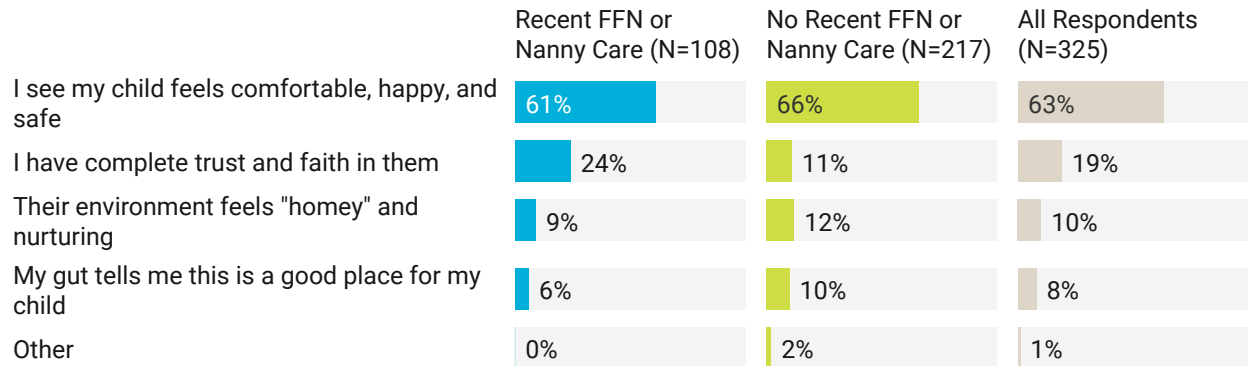
Our first report found that most parents felt it was “very important” to choose an ECE arrangement that “just felt right.” Approximately 72 percent of parents with children under age three marked this factor as “very important,” along with 60 percent of parents with children age three to five. There was little variation between parents using FFN or nanny care and those choosing other arrangements (Powell et al., 2023b).

Our follow-up survey asked parents, “How does what ‘feels right’ factor into your child care decision?” As shown in **Figure 9.1**, parents most often selected “I see my child feels comfortable, happy, and safe,” including a slightly greater share of parents with no recent FFN or nanny care (66 percent, compared to 61 percent with recent FFN or nanny care). As with other factors involved in choosing child care, parents differed on the next most frequently selected option. Of note, 24 percent of recent FFN or nanny users chose “I have complete trust and faith in them,” more than twice the share of parents with no recent FFN or nanny care.

Figure 9.1. Care That “Feels Right” as a Factor in Choosing Child Care, By FFN or Nanny Use

California Parents, 2023

“I know a provider or caregiver is right when...”



Source: Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley

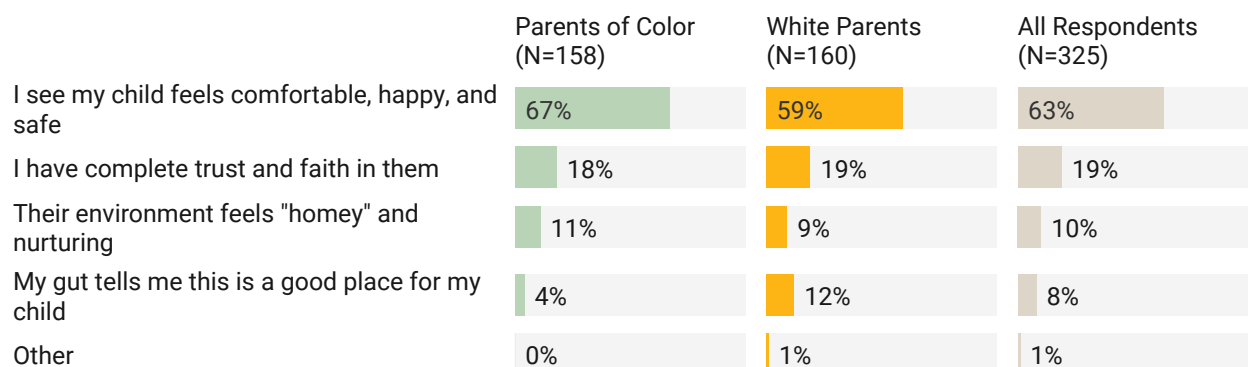
Note: Figure includes respondents who currently use parental care only.

Parents of color were particularly likely to resonate with the popular indicator, “I see my child feels comfortable, happy and safe,” at 67 percent (**Figure 9.2**). And while most White parents agreed (59 percent), they were three times more likely than parents of color to select the option “my gut tells me this is a good place for my child” (12 percent, compared to 4 percent).

Figure 9.2. Care That “Feels Right” as a Factor in Choosing Child Care, By Parents’ Race and Ethnicity

California Parents, 2023

“I know a provider or caregiver is right when...”



Source: Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley

Note: Figure includes respondents who currently use parental care only. In the category of “parents of color,” we include respondents who selected any option other than White, either alone or in combination.

Health and Safety

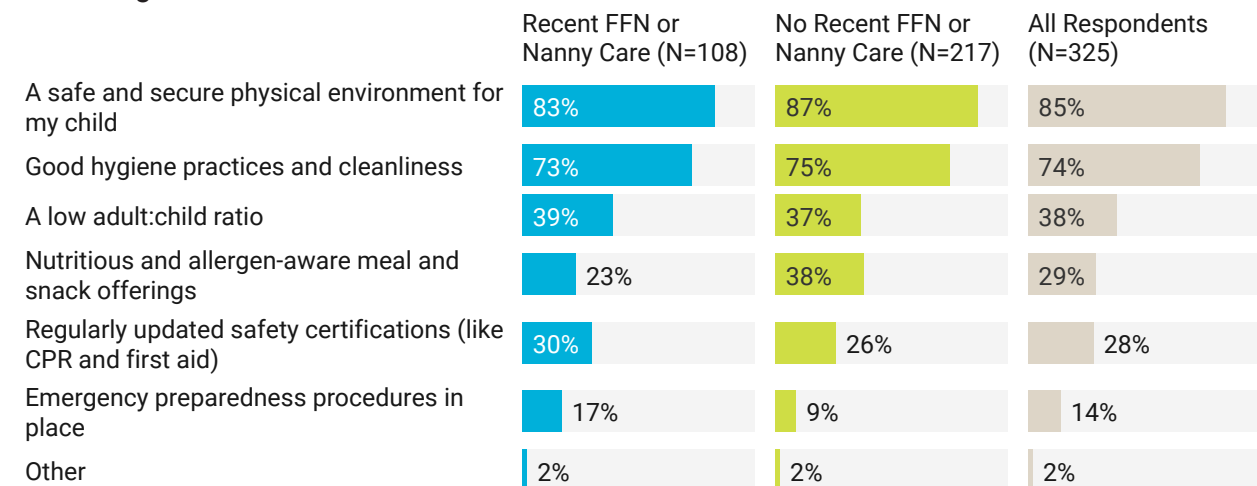
Our first report found that more than any other factor, health and safety was important to parents: 88 percent of parents with children under age three and 79 percent of parents with children age three to five selected health and safety as “very important,” and nearly all other parents indicated that this factor was “somewhat” or “a little important.” Parents relying exclusively on licensed care were even more likely to flag health and safety as “very important,” including 92 percent of parents with an infant or toddler in licensed care. In general, this factor received near-unanimous ratings of importance (Powell et al., 2023b).

In our follow-up survey, we provided a greater number of options to describe health and safety, and we also allowed parents to select more than one response (**Figure 10.1**). The majority of parents selected “a safe and secure physical environment” and “good hygiene practices and cleanliness.” There were minimal differences between parents with or without recent FFN or nanny use in the top choices. A less common option, “nutritious and allergen-aware meals,” was more often indicated by parents with no recent FFN or nanny care (38 percent).

Figure 10.1. Health and Safety as a Factor in Choosing Child Care, By FFN or Nanny Use

California Parents, 2023

“I’m looking for…”



Source: Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley

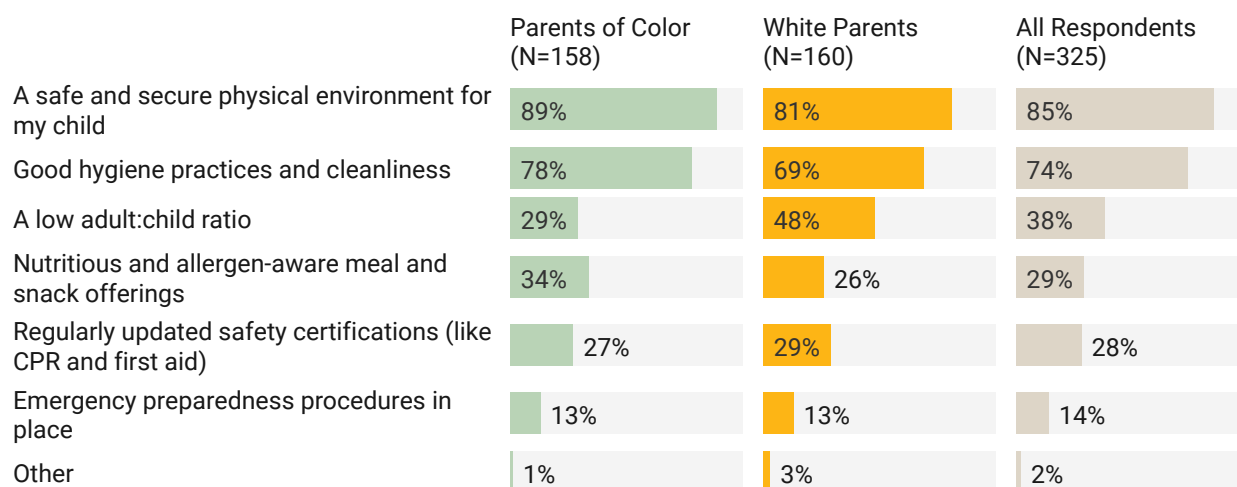
Note: Figure includes respondents who currently use parental care only.

The top two descriptions of health and safety were particularly important to parents of color (**Figure 10.2**). Among parents of color, 89 percent indicated the importance of “a safe and secure physical environment,” and 78 percent selected “good hygiene practices and cleanliness.” While White parents indicated the same factors as their primary and secondary concerns, they more often selected “a low child:adult ratio” (48 percent) as an important consideration for health and safety.

Figure 10.2. Health and Safety as a Factor in Choosing Child Care, By Parents’ Race and Ethnicity

California Parents, 2023

“I’m looking for…”



Source: Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley

Note: Figure includes respondents who currently use parental care only.

Features of FFN and Nanny Care

Our second report featured a detailed description of the logistics of FFN and nanny care: the hours, the pay, and the routine. We found that the majority of caregivers in our sample had either one or two children under age six in their care, not counting any children of their own. Caregiving hours ranged from five hours per week to more than 60 hours. For all three categories of caregivers, at least one half provided 30 or more hours of care per week. We reported that relatives more often provided care in their own home, while nannies more often worked at the parent’s home (Powell et al., 2023a).

Here, we take a closer look at paid arrangements, caregiver responsibilities, and types of play and learning. These data derive from our final survey of parents, building upon results in our earlier reports.

Types of Cash Payment

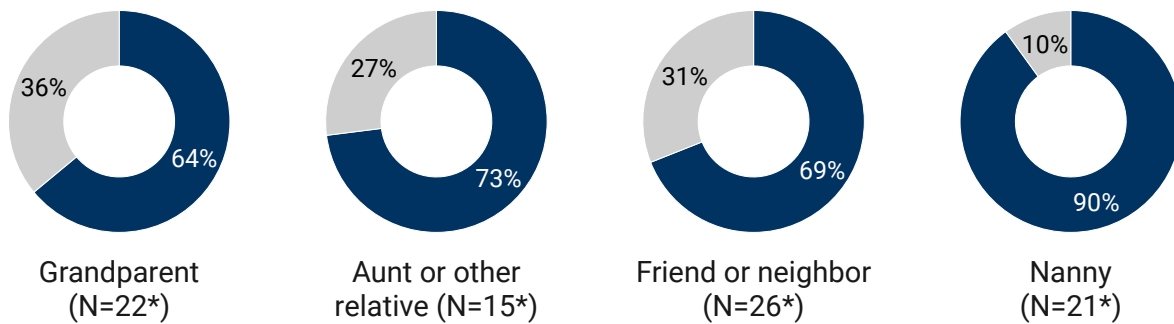
In our second report, we discussed how some caregivers receive payments through state programs such as CalWORKS and the Alternative Payment Program (CAPP). However, these subsidy programs are typically oversubscribed and cannot cover all eligible families. Caregivers may also be paid directly by parents or work in exchange for goods or services, but most caregivers receive no form of payment.

While some caregivers received nonmonetary support, typically in the form of food or supplies for the caregiver’s own use, other caregivers actually contribute to the expense of caring for the children. Relatives (especially grandparents) often covered expenses for transportation, supplies, food, and even diapers out of their own pocket (Powell et al., 2023a).

Our original focus groups with FFN and nanny caregivers revealed that some paid arrangements did not include a consistent amount or schedule. In our follow-up survey, we asked parents with paid FFN or nanny care to describe whether they offered a fixed rate or if they just paid caregivers when they could. **Figure 11** reports the share of paid arrangements with a fixed rate. While 90 percent of parents paid nannies a fixed rate, the same was true for only two thirds of parents in other paid arrangements. Our sample includes only a few dozen cases for each type of caregiver, so readers should interpret these results with caution.

Figure 11. Parents Paying a Fixed Rate to FFN or Nanny Caregivers

California Parents, 2023



Source: Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley

Note: Excludes parents who **do not pay** for FFN or nanny care.

*Interpret with caution (fewer than 50 respondents).

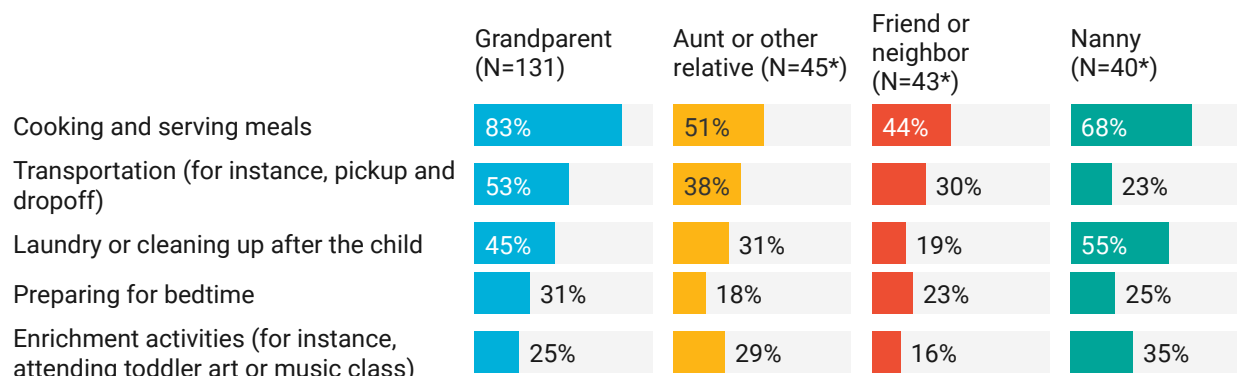
Caregiver Responsibilities

Our second report described how caregivers also shored up children’s routines, from making breakfasts to reading bedtime stories. Autonomy in scheduling and activity selection varied across the sample of caregivers. As one caregiver described, “My sister starts work at nine, and she usually has the kids over by like eight o’clock. I’m already awake, have coffee, usually have breakfast ready for everyone” (Powell et al., 2023a).

In our final parent survey, we asked parents with recent FFN or nanny care about caregivers’ responsibilities (**Figure 12**). Cooking was the most common responsibility, followed by transportation. Grandparents were most likely to take on both responsibilities (83 percent cook; 53 percent provide transportation). Grandparents were also most likely to be responsible for bedtime routines (31 percent). Nannies, meanwhile, were most likely to take care of laundry or clean up after the child (55 percent) and to offer enrichment activities (35 percent). Friends and neighbors held the fewest responsibilities, with less than one half of parents indicating each of the five options. Aunts and other relatives fell in between other caregivers, except they were least likely to prepare the children for bedtime (18 percent).

Figure 12. Caregiver Responsibilities

California Parents, 2023



Source: Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley

*Interpret with caution (fewer than 50 respondents).

Looking more closely at the responsibilities of grandparents, we found little variation by the parents’ household income. For example, parents below and at or above 80 percent of area median income were nearly identical in their responses on cooking and transportation. By race and ethnicity, however, there were minor differences: White parents were more likely to count on transportation (61 percent, compared to 48 percent of parents of color) and cleaning up after the child (52 percent, compared to 41 percent of parents of color) during grandparent care.

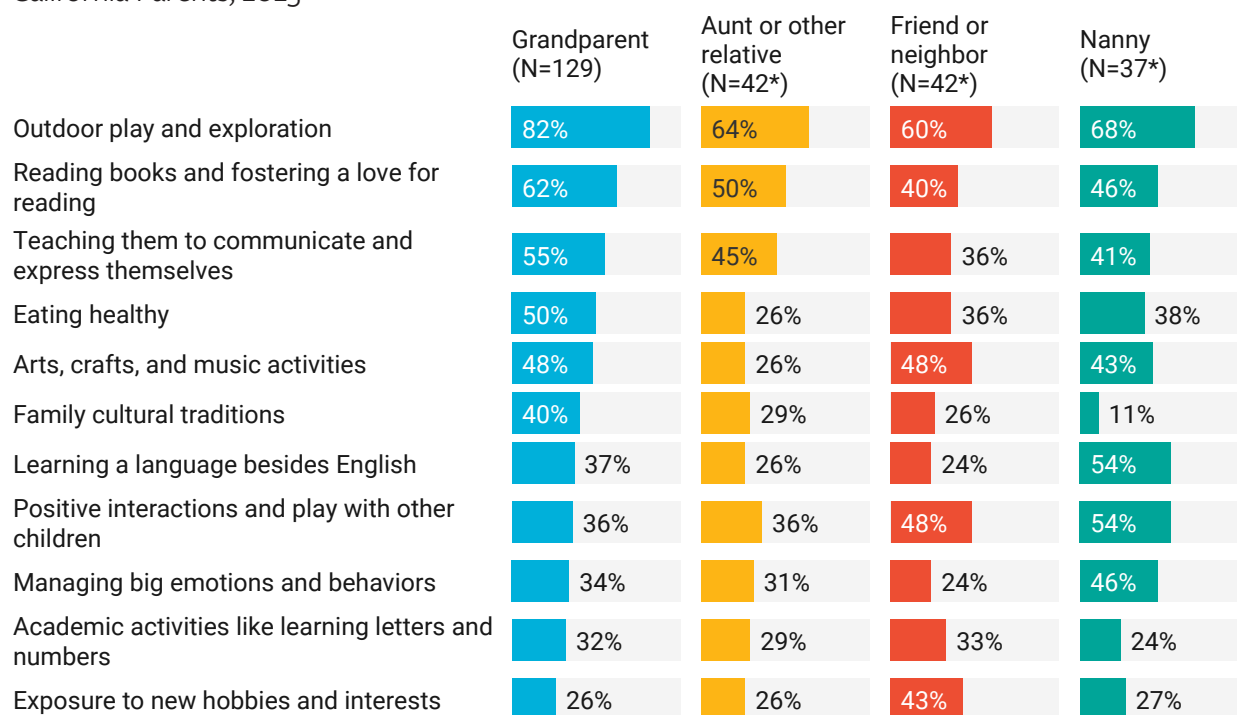
Types of Play and Learning With Caregivers

In our second report, we shared findings from focus groups with FFN and nanny caregivers. They described blending activities that engage children and attend to their basic needs. Inside activities range from reading to arts and crafts. Outdoors, they frequently walked to the park or visited local venues with programming for young children. Caregivers who were paid via a subsidy were particularly likely to connect with organizations such as a resource and referral agency, First 5, or a library. Our caregiver survey confirmed that parks and nature trails were the most frequently used community resource, with 49 percent going once a week or more (Powell et al., 2023a).

Our final parent survey asked parents about the types of play and learning their caregiver provided (**Figure 13**). Just as caregivers reported frequent trips to the park, the majority of parents reported that their FFN or nanny caregiver provided “outdoor play and exploration” for their child. Grandparents were the most likely to take children on such excursions, with 82 percent of parents reporting this activity. Similarly, “reading books and fostering a love of reading,” “teaching them to communicate,” and “eating healthy” were a feature of grandparent care more than half the time—and more often than any other caregivers. Grandparents were also most likely to foster “family cultural traditions” (40 percent). Nannies, meanwhile, most often provided “learning a language besides English” (54 percent), “positive interactions and play with other children” (54 percent), and “managing big emotions and other behaviors” (46 percent).

Figure 13. Types of Play and Learning With Caregivers

California Parents, 2023



Source: Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley

*Interpret with caution (fewer than 50 respondents).

In most cases, parents receiving care from aunts or other relatives and friends or neighbors reported fewer types of learning and play. Aunts or other relatives were somewhat more likely to help with “communication” and “family cultural traditions,” while friends or neighbors more often provided “arts and crafts,” “new hobbies,” and “positive interactions with other children.”

Looking more closely at grandparent responsibilities, there were some differences by parents’ household income and race and ethnicity. Parents living at or above 80 percent area of median income were more likely to have a grandparent “reading books and fostering a love of reading”: 66 percent, compared to 49 percent of parents below 80 percent area of median income. By race and ethnicity, grandparents fostering “cultural traditions” were nearly twice as common for parents of color (50 percent, compared to 27 percent of White parents). Parents of color were also four times as likely to report that grandparents offered “learning a language besides English” (56 percent, compared to 13 percent of White parents).

Public Funds for FFN and Nanny Care

Most ECE regulations in California center on licensed care providers and so does most public funding. However, FFN and nanny providers can participate in child care subsidy programs operated by the California Department of Social Services (CDSS). These caregivers can also participate in some support programs, such as the California Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation Network or the Child and Adult Care Food Program. Many resource and referral agencies also offer playgroups or support networks to small but tight-knit groups of caregivers.

Yet subsidies are the most vital artery of public funds. Tax credits and deductions can facilitate FFN and nanny care, but they do not benefit caregivers directly. Parents in our study supported the use of public funds for early care and education, including FFN or nanny care. As one parent from Southern California wrote: “Policymakers should explore avenues to reduce the financial burden for families through subsidies, tax credits, or other means.”

Child Care Subsidies

Parents enrolled in the Alternative Payment Program (CAPP) or CalWORKS gain access to a portable voucher, which they can choose to pay a grandparent or other caregiver. In this respect, California facilitates FFN and nanny care, even though subsidy programs like CAPP are typically oversubscribed and are not able to cover all eligible families. By contrast, other states like Wisconsin require parents to use their subsidy with a licensed provider (Wisconsin Department of Children and Families, 2024).

California also recognizes the union of home-based providers, Child Care Providers United (CCPU), and requires CDSS to participate in collective bargaining over subsidy rates to FCC providers and FFN caregivers. Additionally, California’s Master Plan for Early Learning and Care calls for recalibrating rates to align with the true cost of care. A state workgroup proposed shifting FFN rates to align with minimum wage (Capito et al., 2022). Reaching this floor, however, requires further action and approval by federal agencies that govern the funds.

In our survey, we included an open-ended question to prompt parents to think about public funding specifically for FFN or nanny care: “If your family was eligible for a subsidy or tax break for child care with a family member, friend, neighbor, or nanny, would you use it? How?” The vast majority of the 200 respondents were interested. Parents most often expressed eagerness for any financial relief, and a subset of parents expressed a greater interest in support for licensed ECE costs (particularly for preschool-age children).

Some parents said they would use a subsidy or tax break to provide payment to a currently unpaid caregiver. As one parent from Central California wrote, “Yes, it could be payment for grandparents as they often pay out of their own pocket for any of my child’s needs during their care.” But even more often, parents described starting a new arrangement. In some cases, parents referenced a family member they would ask. For example, a Bay Area parent stated, “My mother plans to retire in two years, and I would put the subsidy towards her for taking care of my child before and after school.” More often, however, parents referenced hiring a nanny when describing a new arrangement. As one parent in Southern California said, “I’d have a nanny at home so my child can stay in their familiar environment and follow their usual routine.”

A few parents expressed concern about the difficulty they would face in accessing a tax credit or uncertainty about whether it would help people who needed it most:

“Yes!!!! I would use it if it was easy to figure out. The mental load of being primary breadwinner, primary parent, and living paycheck to paycheck with no family nearby is so intense that finding time for complex paperwork is crazy.”

— Parent in the Bay Area

Finally, some parents expressed an interest in seeing such a benefit as part of a broader pro-family policy package. In particular, improved access to paid family leave and afterschool care arose as complementary needs. One parent wrote:

“Better paid maternity leave!!!! I’m past that point with my kids, but both mother and father need better support after a baby is born.”

— Parent in Southern California

Tax Credits and Deductions

The current budget for child care subsidies covers only a subset of eligible families in California. State and federal tax credits and deductions, meanwhile, have the potential to reach a much larger population of parents, and any eligible family can participate. In practice, however, these tax breaks may not support families with the greatest need and may be difficult to access.

In our survey, we asked parents if they benefited from any of the four common tax credits or deductions in 2022 (**Figure 14**). In 2021, all three credits were refundable as an emergency support for families during the COVID-19 pandemic, but that was not the case in 2022. Refundable tax credits are more effective in supporting low-income taxpayers, since they still receive payments even when

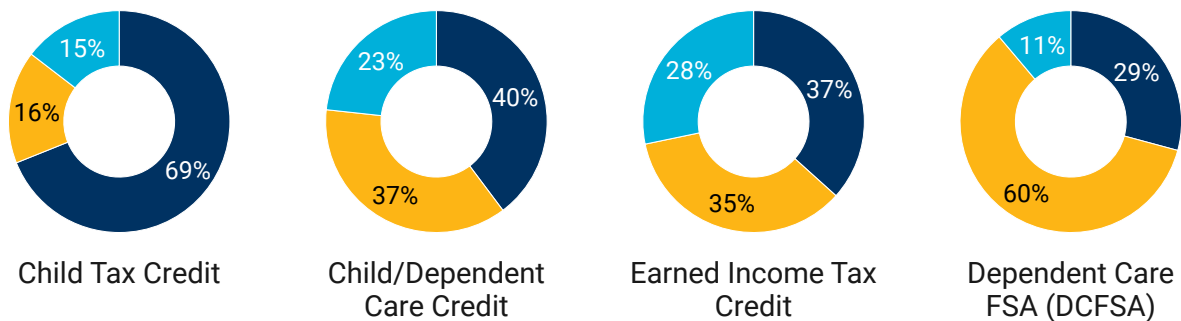
they do not owe taxes. Non-refundable tax credits, by contrast, benefit moderate- and higher-income households by reducing the amount of taxes they owe.

Eligibility for each credit or deduction also varies. For instance, the income limit for the Child Tax Credit (CTC) was \$200,000 per parent in 2022—around four times higher than the limit for the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC). Unsurprisingly, use of the CTC was far more common among our sample (69 percent of parents, compared to 37 percent who claimed the EITC).

Figure 14. Parents Benefiting From Tax Credits and Deductions

California Parents, 2023

■ Yes ■ No ■ Don't know



Source: Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley

Note: Parents responded about their use of these credits and deductions in the previous tax year (2022). N=322

As a non-refundable credit, the Child/Dependent Care Credit (CDCC) was more often a benefit to parents at or above 80 percent of area median income (47 percent). Usage of the CTC, meanwhile, did not vary by income group. For tax credits like the CTC or CDCC to reach parents with the greatest need, the federal government would need to make them refundable permanently.

Additionally, fewer respondents were unsure whether they had claimed the CTC, suggesting pandemic-era information campaigns were successful in sustaining high awareness. Strikingly, Latine parents were more likely to respond “don’t know” (26 percent). Other credits and deductions showed a similar trend: Latine parents were more likely to select “don’t know” for the CDCC (24 percent), EITC (36 percent), and Dependent Care FSA (20 percent).

As in the case of the CDCC, parents using a Dependent Care FSA (DCFSA) more often came from moderate- or high-income households (39 percent, compared to 24 percent of households below 80 percent of area median income). Unlike the other options in **Figure 14**, the DCFSA isn’t claimed on a tax return, but functions by setting aside a portion of a wage-earner’s income before taxes. If their employer offers this benefit, the DCFSA can help people maximize their paychecks by reducing payroll taxes without a bias or benefit reduction for low-income wages. However, the DCFSA requires

careful recordkeeping, which may be onerous for parents, and all available parents must be working, temporarily looking for work, or unable to work due to a disability. In an open-response question, one parent lamented:

“I paid \$5,000 into an FSA for dependent care through my work last year, but then life got overwhelming, everyone had COVID, and a loved one died. I never filled out the tedious claim forms for the reimbursements of the money I earned, so I forfeited \$5,000! That’s more than an entire month’s living expenses. The process should not have been so hard. Biggest financial regret of my life so far as a parent.”

— Parent in the Bay Area

While tax benefits and deductions can help ease the cost of child care, including FFN or nanny care. Free tax preparation services, such as Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) sites, are essential to improving uptake. The number of VITA sites, however, has declined steadily since 2013, and the vast majority of households continue to visit a paid tax preparer (Robertson & Gupta, 2022). In California in particular, supporting free tax preparation requires targeted outreach in Spanish to ensure Latine households do not leave tax return benefits on the table. Benefits like the DCFSA, however, may be too inflexible to provide mass relief to working families.

Parents’ Plea to Policymakers

The final open-ended question in our survey invited parents to speak directly to policymakers about their ECE needs: “We are interested in how California can better support parents in accessing the type of child care they truly want. What do you want policymakers to know?” Parents readily shared their needs and called on their elected officials to act.

More than one half of the 187 respondents emphasized the burden of child care costs.

“I don’t want to lose my job, but I’m paying half of my salary for child care. How is that okay?!”

— Parent in Los Angeles

“Make child care more affordable. Full stop. Prices are okay where I live in rural Northern California, but the quality isn’t great, and there’s not a lot of choices.”

— Parent in Northern California

Availability of child care facilities featured in roughly one quarter of respondents’ answers.

“Finding infant care is literally impossible.”

— Parent in Los Angeles

“Schools and daycares don’t cover the hours required for most full-time jobs and even less so for low-income workers who may be forced to work long hours or on weekends.”

— Parent in Southern California

Several women described negative repercussions to their professional lives.

“I had to wait three years to go back to work because I couldn’t afford child care. I had to put my career on pause.”

— Parent in Central California

“Child care is very expensive and impedes my ability to work as a nurse. I feel that there are not enough teachers in preschool programs, which [...] leads to caregiver burnout.”

— Parent in Southern California

Some parents referenced the negative impacts not only to themselves, but also to their ECE providers.

“Child care is not a sustainable business model when providers are earning poverty-level wages! No wonder there are not more licensed child care options.”

— Parent in the Bay Area

“The United States should want the best possible services for children, which means paying the people who care for them really good money.”

— Parent in the Bay Area

Parents’ responses also highlighted how families’ needs can vary. A parent in Southern California reminded us that, “It’s important to realize that daycare and preschool are not the right options for all families.” Additionally, when discussing licensed care, some parents reported frustration in their search for part-day options that suited their child’s stage of development, while other parents expressed frustration at finding *only* part-day options.

Recommendations

The following policy and practice recommendations are drawn from the entirety of our two-year study. Our findings call upon policymakers and other stakeholders to update their mental image of FFN providers and nannies and the nature of the care and services they provide. In particular, our findings point to the limitations of the FFN label, which obscures the central role of grandparents. Moreover, quality frameworks in early care and education struggle to align with the strengths of FFN and nanny care and consequently disparage the choices of many parents.

Supporting FFN Caregivers and Nannies

In our second report, which looked at surveys and focus groups with FFNs and caregivers directly, we published detailed recommendations on supportive strategies (Powell et al., 2023a). The findings of this report reinforce and deepen several of these initial recommendations:

- Fund robust public investments in the full mixed-delivery system, inclusive of license-exempt care;
- Ensure reimbursement rate reform raises subsidized FFN earnings to meet and ultimately exceed minimum wage for full-time care;

- Catalog and assess community resources available to FFN caregivers and nannies as cities and counties map their ECE landscape;
- Connect with FFN and nanny caregivers in parks and outdoor spaces, since these are the most commonly shared and valued locations for care outside the home;
- Leverage the prevalence of food preparation as a feature of FFN care, facilitating access to the Child and Adult Care Food Program and exploring recipes, food boxes, and cooking activity ideas; and
- Include family caregivers, nannies, and parents in policy discussions on license-exempt early care and education.

Supporting Parents Who Choose FFN or Nanny Care

Our study finds that parents differ in their preferences, but they share a common understanding of valuing the highest quality of care they can afford in a safe, hygienic environment. Parents who choose FFN or nanny care, however, are somewhat more likely to perceive an ECE arrangement that “feels right” as one with “complete trust and faith.” With this final report, we come full circle with some additional recommendations:

- Develop strategies in publicly funded early care and education that support families in their use of multiple forms of ECE services, recognizing that most families utilize some combination of licensed or school-based early care and education along with FFN care;
- Improve FFN subsidy administration and eligibility to fit the continuous care that FFN and nanny caregivers provide, rather than treating license-exempt care as episodic;
- Center grandparents as core providers of early care and education in policy platforms focused on infants and toddlers;
- Advocate for a refundable CTC and CDCC on a permanent basis; and
- Invest in targeted outreach to Latine families to aid them in accessing tax credits and deductions to reduce inequitable uptake of these resources, using multiple avenues and an emphasis on Spanish-language support.

Conclusion

FFN and nanny care is fundamental to California’s early care and education ecosystem. While arrangements can be fluid, they are more “fundamental” than “informal.” Grandparents in particular are vital providers of early care and education, despite the personal cost of fulfilling this role.

This study provides rich state-specific data to support ongoing policy development in the field of early care and education. It has also illuminated areas for possible future research. Some grandparents and other caregivers live in the same household as the children in their care. Nationally, the share of families in multigenerational households has doubled in the past 50 years. For low-income households, intergenerational caregiving is a core reason for cohabitation: while 51 percent

cited caring for an adult family member as a reason, 32 percent cited child care. By contrast, only 32 percent of upper-income households cited adult family care and only 9 percent cited child care (Pew Research Center, 2022). Our focus groups with FFN caregivers showed deep linkages for cohabitating relatives that were not merely financial: they also spoke to child care in the context of collective decision making. Further research could examine child care and employment decisions in the context of multigenerational family structures and their various living arrangements.

In addition, our study captures family, friend, neighbor, and nanny care in the context of a shifting funding model for child care subsidies. Further research will be necessary to understand how reimbursement rate reform impacts the stability of FFN and nanny care arrangements and the well-being of the caregivers themselves.

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“Where My Child Is Loved”: Grandparent Child Care Is Fundamental

A Study of Family, Friend, Neighbor (FFN), and Nanny Care in California – Part Three

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