

What Is TK? Parents Are Playing a Guessing Game

Transitional kindergarten (TK) is rapidly expanding to become a universal program in California. By the 2025-2026 school year, every four-year-old will be eligible. However, TK remains a new option for many families, and there is little research on how parents are learning about it. To help bridge this gap, the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment (CSCCE) developed a mini-survey for parents of children under age six. In December 2023 and January 2024, we partnered with the RAPID Survey at the Stanford Center on Early Childhood to reach more than 500 parents about their understanding of TK.

This data snapshot highlights the inconsistent awareness that parents currently have about TK, including how they describe it, who it is for, and how they receive information about TK. The variation in parents' experiences aligns with our previous findings on TK: teachers report that local school districts are still developing their knowledge of [developmentally appropriate TK instruction](#), and many classrooms are still under-enrolled.

Key Findings

- Parents differ on how they describe TK. Around one third use the definition created by the California Department of Education (CDE): TK is the first year of a two-year kindergarten program that is free for all four-year-olds.
- Parents also differ in their expectations of “academic” or “play-based” learning. Only one third expect TK to be mostly learning through play, which aligns with California’s position that TK should leverage play-based learning to provide a developmentally appropriate experience.
- Parents learn about TK from multiple sources, and no single method of outreach is reaching a majority of families. The most common way parents get information right now is through advertisements (34 percent).

Parents do not have a shared definition of TK.

We asked parents with young children: “We are interested in your understanding of transitional kindergarten (TK). Which description sounds best to you?”

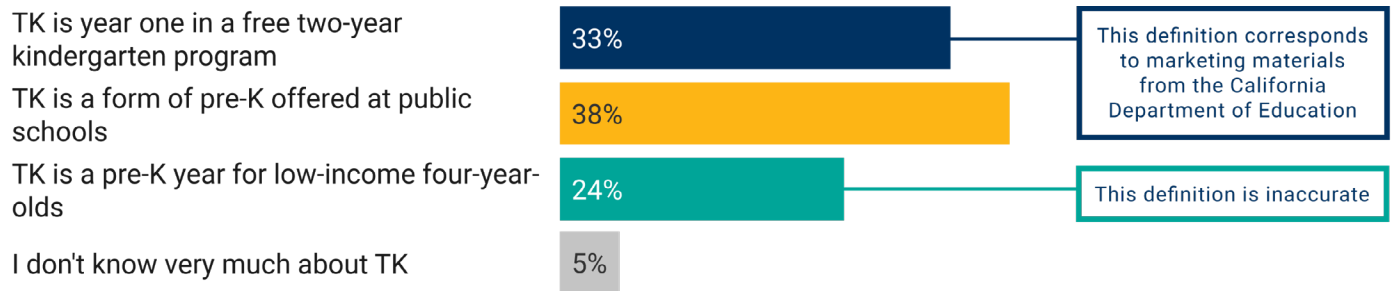


Chart: Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley
Authors' analysis of survey data from 550 California parents. All parents who participated in the survey had at least one child under age six. Respondents selected only one option. Data were collected in partnership with the RAPID Survey at the Stanford Center on Early Childhood.

Approximately one third of parents selected the definition that corresponds to marketing materials from the California Department of Education (CDE):

“What is TK? Transitional Kindergarten (TK) is the first year in a two-year Kindergarten program. Designed especially for four-year-olds, it will help prepare children to succeed in school, while also giving them an opportunity to meet new friends and provide care while parents work. TK is offered through the public school system. Classes take place at neighborhood elementary schools and are free to all students regardless of income, similarly to Kindergarten.”

—TK California, California Department of Education

Local school districts are not required to use CDE marketing materials, so we do not know if parents are confused about TK because of incoherent messages from districts or because district messages are not reaching them.

- When we look more closely, we see that parents with a child who is already age four or older more often select the alternate description, “TK is a form of pre-K offered at public schools” (43 percent, compared to 30 percent of parents with younger children only).
- Additionally, when we look at how parents responded by their race and ethnicity, we see that Asian parents were most likely to select the CDE definition of TK as “year one in a free two-year kindergarten program” (36 percent). Latine parents, meanwhile, were most likely to select “I don’t know very much about TK” (14 percent, compared to only 2 percent of White parents).

Parents are also divided on whether TK is mostly “academic” or “play-based.”

We asked parents to fill in the blank: “I expect TK would be…”

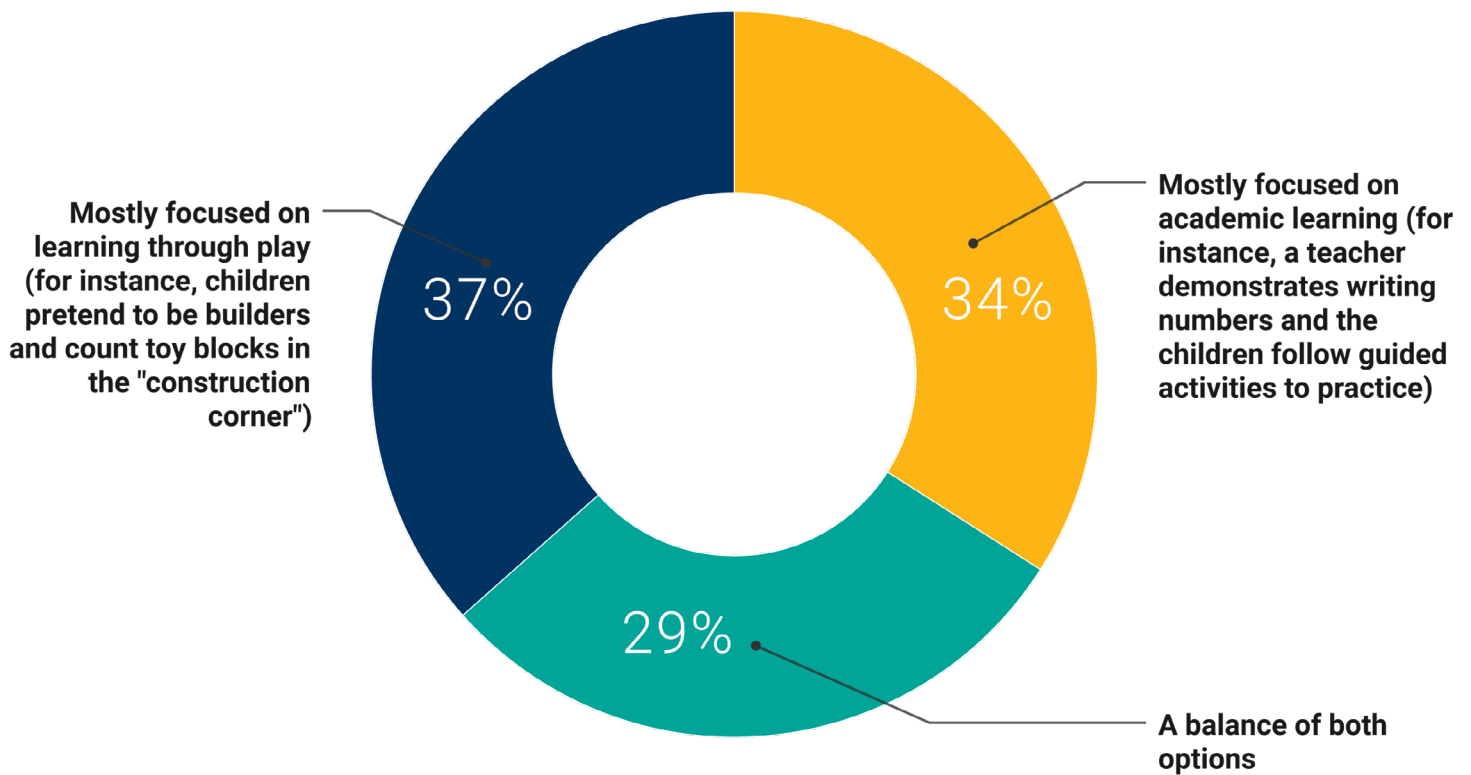


Chart: Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley
Authors' analysis of survey data from 517 California parents. All parents who participated in the survey had at least one child under age six. Respondents selected only one option. Data were collected in partnership with the RAPID Survey at the Stanford Center on Early Childhood.

- Parents with children younger than four were more likely to expect learning through play (43 percent).
- By race and ethnicity, parents who were Asian and Black were more likely to expect an academic focus rather than a play-based focus (42 and 40 percent, respectively, compared to 34 percent of all parents in our sample).

According to **TK California**, the CDE hub for information on TK, classrooms should use a “developmentally appropriate, play-based curriculum.”

- For example, CDE explains, “Young children learn these important foundations of mathematics while engaging in imaginative play, exploring the environment and materials, making discoveries, or interacting with teachers or other adults.”
- So far, there is no public data on the specific curricula that local school districts are using in TK. Preliminary data from CDE suggests that most districts are using curricula of their own design, which may or may not be play-based.

Parents are learning about TK from a variety of sources.

We were curious how parents are getting information about TK. Our survey data suggest that there aren't clear patterns across the state.

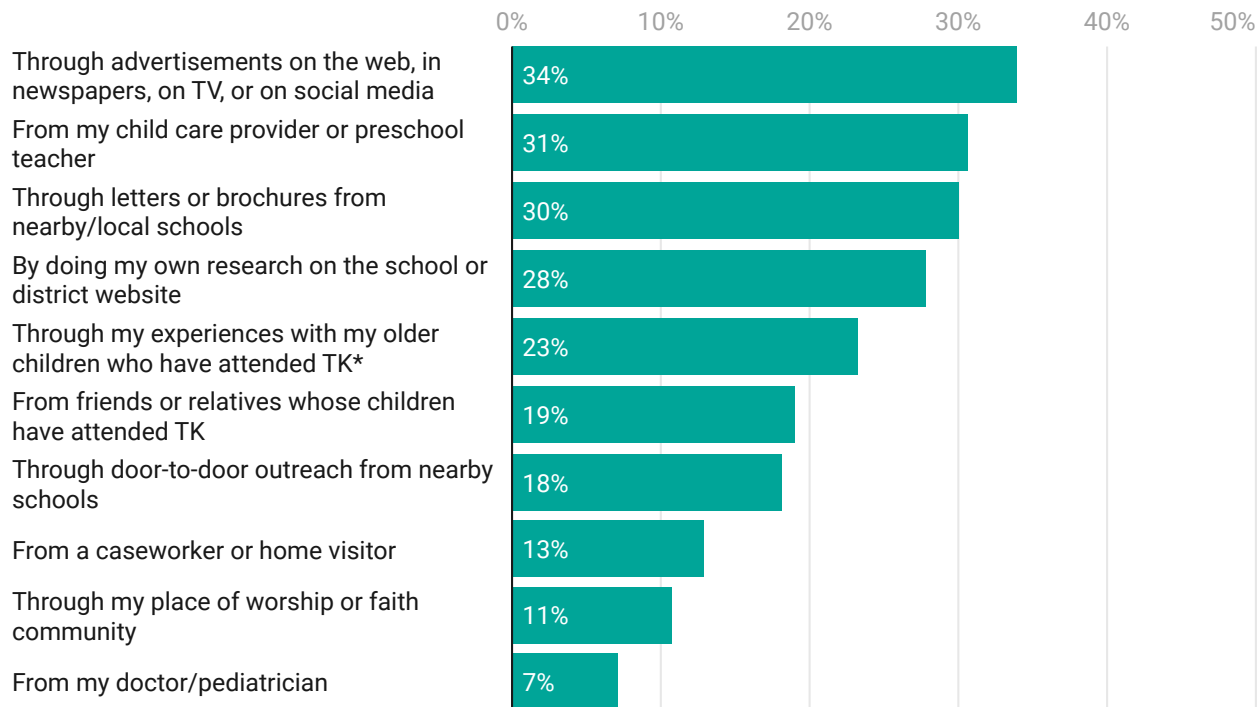


Chart: Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley

*Among parents with a child who has attended TK now or in the past (N=327).

Authors' analysis of survey data from 504 California parents. All parents who participated in the survey had at least one child under age six. Respondents selected all options that applied. Data were collected in partnership with the RAPID Survey at the Stanford Center on Early Childhood.

Many parents learn about TK from multiple sources, but no single method reaches a majority of parents.

- Parent most commonly found out about TK through advertising (34 percent), but they were nearly just as likely to learn about TK from a child care provider or a preschool teacher (31 percent) or from brochures from local schools (30 percent).
- Asian parents (46 percent) and Black parents (44 percent) were particularly likely to learn about TK from ads. Latine parents most often referenced letters or brochures (30 percent) but very rarely door-to-door outreach (9 percent). White parents were somewhat more likely than others to learn via door-to-door outreach (26 percent) or at the pediatrician's office (15 percent).

What can California policymakers do?

California needs better data on TK implementation.

- Local school districts are responsible for implementation, with a clear mandate to reach all four-year-olds by 2026. Policymakers at the state level, however, have few ways of tracking how most districts are faring. The CDE gathers data annually through a survey of all districts, but districts are unlikely to have information on parent perception.
- Moreover, California policymakers need information on how district leaders, school leaders, and TK teachers understand TK. Do they view TK as play-based, as CDE describes? Or do they share parents' confusion?

California should invest in research to close the data gap.

- CDE's data collection provides a crucial snapshot on staffing and enrollment, but local school districts may struggle to provide candid responses when mistakes can lead to [large fines](#).
- California's state budget is an unlikely source of funding for implementation research. Unless philanthropic partners step in, California will continue to fly blind during this crucial expansion period.

Finally, California must continue developing pathways for experienced preschool teachers to work in TK.

- Many [teachers of TK](#) previously taught kindergarten or elementary school. They are helping to shape TK within their respective school districts, and only some of them have previous experience teaching four-year-olds.
- California is launching a new teaching credential, the [PK-3 ECE Specialist Instruction Credential](#), to help build a skilled new TK workforce. Yet existing preschool teachers, who have the most experience, currently face barriers to receiving a credential.
- In order to grow a TK workforce with experience in developmentally appropriate instruction for four-year-olds, California must create on-ramps that honor the experience of the incumbent early care and education workforce without asking them to go back to school, incur new student debt, or accept assistant teacher positions in TK.

Suggested Citation

Powell, A., & Adejumo, T. (2024). *What Is TK? Parents Are Playing a Guessing Game*. Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley.
<https://cscce.berkeley.edu/publications/data-snapshot/parent-tk-perception>

Acknowledgements

This report was generously supported with grants from the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation and the David and Lucile Packard Foundation.

Editor: Deborah Meacham