



WILDER RESEARCH, CHILD TRENDS, SRI INTERNATIONAL,  
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# MELF Report: Parental Preferences and Reasons for Choosing Licensed Early Care and Education

## Overview

Every year from 2008 to 2010 the Minnesota Early Learning Foundation (MELF) funded a survey of a select group of parents with preschool-aged children receiving primarily licensed childcare in the Twin Cities metro area. Parents were asked a variety of questions on topics such as: their child care arrangements, beliefs about the importance of the different aspects of child care, and demographics, among other topics.

One of the biggest initiatives funded by MELF was the evaluation of the Parent Aware Pilot, bringing to Minnesota a Quality Rating and Improvement System for early childhood education (ECE). Although many states are now adopting a QRIS, limited information is available about how parents make the choices they do regarding early childhood education and what qualities parents find most important in their ECE programs (Weber, 2011). The current literature offers some suggestion that parents make decisions about ECE programs based on multiple factors and individual constraints (cost, convenience, quality, family and work considerations). There is a growing interest in studying how these decisions and preferences vary by families from different income levels and different cultural backgrounds (Barbarin et al., 2006; Leslie et al., 2000; Obeng, 2007; Rose & Elicker, 2008). The MELF parent survey provides a unique opportunity to look at these questions about preferences with families who are mostly low-income and who used licensed ECE. It is important to note that this sample is unusual as families living in poverty are less likely to be using licensed ECE settings (citation?). This report highlights some of the findings from the parent survey with a focus on parents' preferences when choosing ECE and how those vary by ethnicity, language, and poverty status.

## Research Questions

- 1) How do parents' preferences and reasons for choosing licensed ECE settings vary by poverty status, home language and race?
- 2) How parents' preferences and reasons for choosing licensed ECE settings vary by the type of ECE setting used?

## Method

The findings presented here are for the 869 parents who participated in MELF-associated initiatives and whose children used licensed ECE at least part of the time. The two parent survey items which were examined for this report include: 1. the number one reason why parents chose their ECE program; and 2. Parental ratings of the importance of various characteristics and qualities of ECE settings that are frequently considered by "experts" to identify high quality settings (see Table 2 for the specific items).

## Respondent Demographics

- 62% of parents under 200% of the poverty line
- 40% below the poverty line
- 85% of respondents were the mother of the child
- Respondent average age: 32
- 22% of respondents speak a language other than English at home
- Primary ethnicities: African-American (26%), Caucasian (45%), Latino (13%), Asian (11%), and Other (5%).
- Just under three quarters of the families (74%) in the survey were using ECE programs that were participating in the Parent Aware Pilot.
- Out of 869, 728 responded that they used Head Start (12%), center-based care (70%) or licensed family child care (18%) most frequently. The other 141 were either using Family, Friend and Neighbor care most, or didn't answer the question.



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**Research Question 1: How do parent’s preferences and reasons for choosing licensed ECE settings vary by poverty status, home language and race?**

Parents across all ethnicities and income levels were most likely to answer that quality was the most important factor when choosing a licensed ECE setting and convenience was the second most likely response. This finding is consistent with other findings in Minnesota which also found that parents of preschoolers most consistently rated quality as one of the most important reasons they chose their ECE setting (Chase & Moore, 2007; Chase & Valorose, 2010; Forry, Blasberg, Tout, Isner, Carlin, & Davis, 2011). This is also consistent with other studies outside of Minnesota that illustrate that characteristics of the care environment are highly valued by parents (e.g., Shlay, Tran, Weinraub, & Harmon, 2005).

**Table 1.** Top three answers given for why parents made ECE choice by ethnicity and by income.

	First (%)	Second (%)	Third (%)
African-American:	Quality (50%)	Convenience (32%)	Affordability (10%)
Caucasian:	Quality (64%)	Convenience (26%)	Affordability (6%)
Asian-American:	Quality (48%)	Convenience (38%)	Benefited child (7%)
Latino/Hispanic:	Quality (62%)	Convenience (10%)	Benefited child (8%)
Below poverty:	Quality (51%)	Convenience (32%)	No choice (7%)
Below 200% of poverty:	Quality (56%)	Convenience (29%)	Affordability (10%)
Above 200% of poverty:	Quality (64%)	Convenience (24%)	Affordability (7%)

Asian-American and African-American families were slightly more likely to choose convenience as their top reason and slightly less likely to choose quality than were Caucasian or Latino families (Table 1). This may be because Asian-American and African-American families were significantly more likely to be in poverty than were Caucasian families, and poverty level also relates to slight differences in parents’ reasons for choosing certain characteristics of ECE settings. Parents not in poverty rate quality as their top reason slightly more often than families below the poverty line. Families below the poverty line are more likely to choose convenience as their top factor than are families above the poverty line, and to report not having a choice at all.

In order to better understand the families who were choosing quality, we examined whether more of the families who stated quality was the number one reason over affordability were receiving child care subsidy assistance. However, use of child care assistance was unrelated to families’ stated top reason for choosing child care. This may be due in part to two factors: 1) The social desirability of identifying quality as the reason a parent would choose to send their child to a particular ECE setting, and 2) because this particular sample was chosen primarily from programs that were participating in Parent Aware, it is possible that the awareness about quality among families in those settings was higher than might otherwise be expected.

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The vast majority of families answered that each of ten ECE characteristics was either extremely important or somewhat important to them in making their child care decisions (Table 2). This did not vary by ethnicity, home language, or poverty status. The relative ranking of the ten characteristics remained the same across these varying characteristics of parents, with the “provision of a warm and caring environment with positive relationships” most consistently rated as extremely important. This finding is also consistent with other studies that examined parents’ ratings of the same characteristics of ECE settings among families with low-incomes in Minnesota (Forry, Blasberg, Tout, Isner, Carlin, & Davis, 2011).

**Table 2.** The characteristics and qualities of ECE settings parents were asked to rate.

**How important is it that they...**

1. Provide a warm and caring environment with positive relationships between teachers and caregivers and children
2. Have staff that are warm and friendly with your child
3. Have a lot of books and learning materials.
4. Help your child get along with other children
5. Have teachers and caregivers with formal education and training to work with young children
6. Use a curriculum or planning tool for teaching
7. Track your child's learning and development using an assessment tool
8. Enroll children from different backgrounds (for example, race, ethnicity and religion)
9. Talk with you each day
10. Have caregivers or teachers who speak your family's native language with your child

We examined the differences between parental preferences in families with different racial backgrounds, incomes and home languages on the two items related to diversity (#8 and #10) with the expectation that parents with different cultural backgrounds may have different preferences. When exploring the item, “Have caregivers or teachers who speak your family's native language with your child”, we found that families who spoke a language other than English rated this quality as less important than did families who spoke English. This may be because these families are intentionally sending their child to ECE settings that provide their children the opportunity to learn English.

With respect to differences based on the racial background of families, Asian-American families were significantly more likely than families from all other racial backgrounds to rate having a provider who speaks to the child in their native language as not important. Additionally, Latino/Hispanic families were also less likely to rate this quality in a provider as being important than both families who identified as Caucasian or African-American.

There were few differences among families of different backgrounds regarding their rating of the importance of enrolling a diverse group of children. The only exception was that African-American families were

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significantly more likely than both Asian-American and Caucasian families to rate that quality as extremely important.

Families of varying income levels did not demonstrate any significant differences on either the importance of an ECE provider using their native language or the importance of enrolling a diverse group of children.

### **Research Question 2: How do parents' preferences and reasons for choosing licensed ECE settings vary by the type of ECE setting used?**

Parents reported using three primary settings: Head Start (12%), center-based care (79%) and licensed family child care (18%). Again, regardless of the type of ECE setting used, families were most likely to report quality as the most important reason for choosing the setting they did (Head Start families, 48%, center-based care, 62%, and licensed family child care, 57%). Families who reported using Head Start most often were slightly less likely to report quality and more likely to report convenience. There were no differences on the ratings of important characteristics of ECE settings by the type of setting families chose.

### **Conclusion**

These findings contribute to the growing literature on parental decision-making, indicating that particular aspects of a family's cultural and language background shape their preferences for an ECE setting, at least among families who are primarily low income and who use licensed ECE. In summary, there were consistent similarities in parental reasons for choosing an ECE setting across racial/ethnic groups, home languages, and income levels in this large, multiethnic sample. Indeed, families from all backgrounds named quality as the most important reason they chose their ECE setting. This was also true for families in this sample regardless of whether or not they were receiving a subsidy for licensed care. Although it is notable that this sample did include families who were primarily using ECE settings that were voluntarily participating in Parent Aware, the state's pilot quality rating and improvement system, this finding is consistent with findings from other studies, including two studies of parental ECE preferences and choices conducted in the same state (Chase & Moore, 2007; Chase & Valorose, 2010). These findings reiterate that for parents who choose licensed care, quality is of primary importance. Thus, from a policy perspective, because parents are seeking quality, it is important to develop and implement policies to promote quality early care and education, and help increase the supply of quality care.

Furthermore, the cultural and language backgrounds of these families did affect their preferences for some of the characteristics of care that were important to them. Programs may want to consider parental preferences for language and diversity and be more intentional about supporting cultural preferences. Because the families in this sample used licensed ECE, there was little variation in the type of setting they chose and no relation between the type of setting they chose, the reasons they chose it, or their preferences in ECE characteristics. Future research on this question should include families using unlicensed care as well.

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