



Colorado Families Need Help Affording Child Care

Insights from the Baby & You Survey Program



KEY FINDINGS

★ About one in four parents of 12-month-olds (23%) would have preferred a different child care arrangement than the one they had.

★ Policymakers must take steps to help all families afford child care that meets their needs and preferences.

More than half of Colorado parents had no regular or routine care arrangement.

PARENTS WITHOUT REGULAR, ROUTINE CHILD CARE FOR THEIR 12-MONTH-OLD

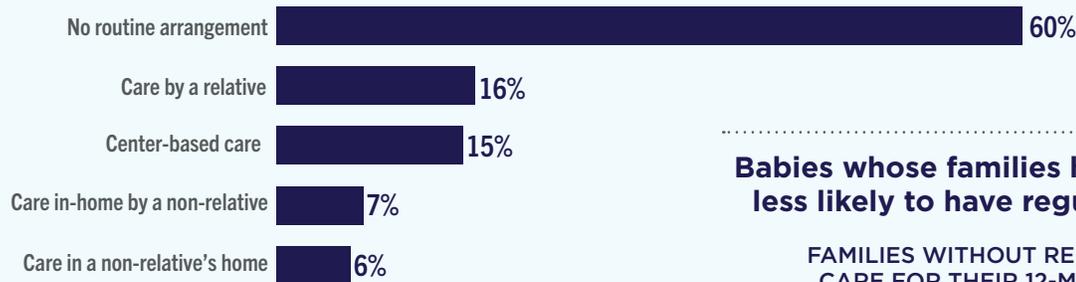


Cost was the most common barrier to using preferred child care arrangements.

COST LISTED AS A BARRIER, AMONG PARENTS WHO WANTED A DIFFERENT ARRANGEMENT

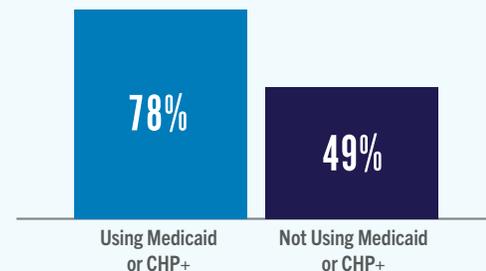


CHILD CARE ARRANGEMENTS IN A TYPICAL WEEK FOR A 12-MONTH-OLD BABY



Babies whose families had lower incomes were less likely to have regular, routine child care.

FAMILIES WITHOUT REGULAR, ROUTINE CHILD CARE FOR THEIR 12-MONTH-OLD BY INCOME



About the Data:

The Baby & You Survey Program, administered by the Colorado Department of Public Health & Environment, offers a snapshot of Colorado families' child care arrangements and experiences. This report highlights key findings from the program's 12 months postpartum survey for the 2023 cohort, which the program refers to as Survey 2. The survey was administered between January 2024 and February 2025 to parents who gave birth in 2023.

Source: Colorado Department of Public Health & Environment (2024-25), Baby & You Survey Program, Survey 2, 2023 Birth Cohort



Child care is an important part of how families support their children's growth and balance work and other responsibilities. But parents often face challenges in finding an arrangement that fits their needs, desires, and budgets. Nearly one in four (23%) Colorado parents of 12-month-old babies did not have a child care arrangement that matched their preferences, according to the Colorado Department of Public Health & Environment's [Baby & You Survey Program](#).

The high cost of care and limited options made it difficult for families to use the child care arrangement they wanted, whether they preferred a child care center or a more informal arrangement. Nearly three-quarters of parents (73%) who were not using their preferred child care arrangement said cost was the biggest barrier, and nearly half (48%) reported challenges with options or availability.

The survey finds that families meet their child care needs in a wide variety of ways. A majority of families did not have a routine arrangement for care, and many of those who did have routine arrangements relied on relatives or other trusted adults to provide care.

Colorado has made significant progress in helping families afford licensed child care in recent years. **But Colorado's policymakers must take steps to help families afford and access the type of care they want and need**, both in formal and more informal settings.

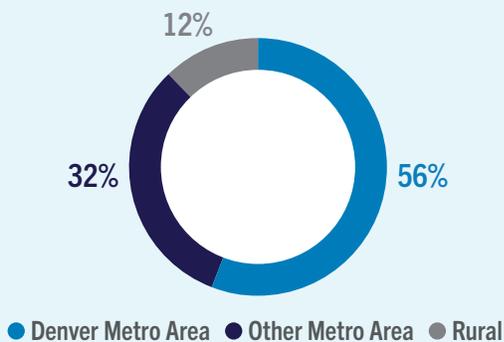
Data

Through the Baby & You Survey Program, a representative sample of parents who give birth in Colorado were invited to participate in four surveys throughout the first three years of their child's life. Surveys are administered when the child is 3-4 months old, 12 months old, 2 years old, and 3 years old.

This report analyzes data from Survey 2 for the 2023 birth cohort, which was administered to parents between January 2024 and February 2025 when their child was around 12 months old. There were 999 responses from birthing parents out of the 1,529 parents (65.3%) in the 2023 cohort who were still living in Colorado.

A diverse group of parents participated in Survey 2:

Parent Location



Parent Demographics

- 38% were enrolled in Medicaid or CHP+ (household income below 260% of the federal poverty level)
- 20% were a race other than white
- 32% were Hispanic
- 76% were married
- 68% had more than 12 years of education



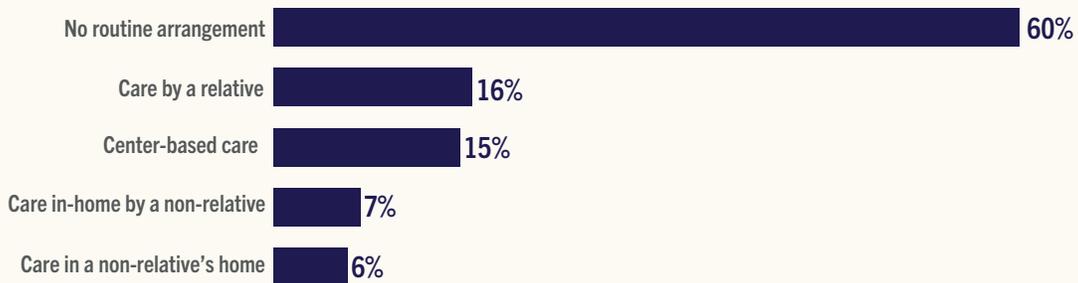
Child Care Arrangements

Parents use a variety of different child care arrangements in Colorado. More than half of parents who participated in the survey (60%) did not have a routine child care arrangement for their 12-month-old. These parents were likely staying at home with their child or piecing together care in different ways week by week.

Parents with a routine child care arrangement most commonly had a relative (16%) or center (15%) care for their baby. Seventeen percent of families were using multiple types of child care, often combining some form of relative and non-relative care.

About 71% of families with a routine arrangement were paying for care. Most families who did not pay for care had a family member caring for their baby.

Child Care Arrangements in a Typical Week for 12-month-old Baby

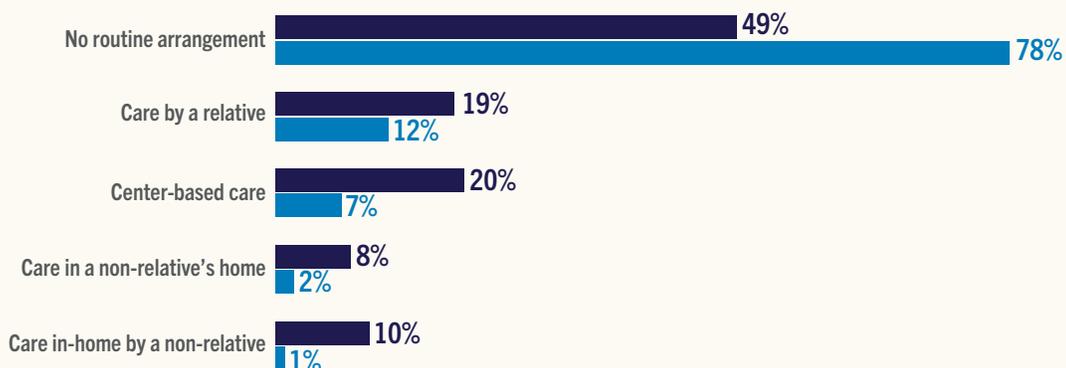


Source: Colorado Department of Public Health & Environment (2024-25), Baby & You Survey Program, Survey 2, 2023 Birth Cohort

Child Care Choices Among Parents With Lower Incomes

Parents with lower incomes were more likely to have a parent or relative care for their baby. Nearly 80% of families enrolled in Medicaid or CHP+ did not have a routine child care arrangement, compared with 50% of families who were not enrolled in public health coverage. Among families enrolled in Medicaid and CHP+ who did have a routine care arrangement, care from a relative was most common. About 35% of these parents had a relative care for their baby in the relative's home and 22% had a relative care for the baby in their own home.

Child Care Arrangements in a Typical Week for a 12-month-old Baby, by Income



Source: Colorado Department of Public Health & Environment (2024-25), Baby & You Survey Program, Survey 2, 2023 Birth Cohort



Most parents with lower incomes were using their preferred child care arrangement (80%), but high costs may have limited their choices. Many formal child care options are too expensive for low-income families.¹ In 2024, a family of four living in poverty would have needed to spend 67% of their income to afford infant care at a child care center.² For this reason, some parents may be forced to step out of the workforce to take care of their baby. This can have long-term implications for a family's financial security. A parent making \$60,000 a year who stops working for five years could have nearly \$100,000 less in retirement savings by the end of their career.³

About one in three parents (34%), across all incomes, said they had to either quit, change, or not take a new job or educational opportunity to meet their child care needs. This was most common in rural communities (43%). Parents with lower incomes were also slightly more likely to report this challenge than those with higher incomes (35% compared to 33%), however, both of these differences were not statistically significant.

“
Child care is unattainable. I cannot find a child care center that is affordable, near my home, and does not require a 2/3+ year waitlist. I cannot enter the workforce due to inadequate child care.”

– Parent response, Baby & You Survey 2

Barriers to Preferred Child Care

Most families were using their preferred type of care (77%). This included parents without a routine arrangement, those who had a family member or friend care for their child, and those whose child was cared for at a center. But about one in four parents (23%) said they wanted a different type or place of care than they currently had. Among these parents:

72%

wanted care at a child care center

48%

wanted in-home care from either a relative or non-relative

38%

wanted care from a relative

26%

wanted care by parents only

Cost was the most common reason parents' child care arrangements did not match their preferences. Nearly three-quarters (73%) of parents who wanted a different form of child care said cost prevented them from using their ideal arrangement. Limited availability or options that met their needs were also common barriers, reported by nearly half of respondents (48%). About 31% of families said both cost and capacity stopped them from using their ideal child care arrangement.

Affording licensed child care has been a significant issue in Colorado for years. Colorado consistently ranks as one of the most expensive states for care. In 2024, Colorado was ranked the 12th least affordable state for infant care in a child care center, with an average cost of \$20,978 per year.²

“
I was not able to put her in daycare because it's \$320 per week. Technically, I can afford it, however I would not be able to make my other bills so... I can't afford it.” – Parent response, Baby & You Survey 2

Affordability was also the top issue for families who were looking for less formal child care like an in-home nanny or the ability to stay home with their child. Nearly half of families who did not have their preferred care arrangement wanted some form of in-home care, and a fourth wanted to have a parent stay home with their child.

“
I don't want to send my baby right after the birth to child care and I wasn't earning enough money to afford a nanny at home. So I had to quit my job to take care of my baby.” – Parent response, Baby & You Survey 2



Opportunities to Increase Child Care Affordability and Access and Support Family Choice

Colorado has made significant investments in early childhood in recent years to help families access and afford child care through Early Head Start and Head Start, the Colorado Child Care Assistance Program (CCCAP), and the Colorado Universal Preschool Program. However, there is more work to be done to make child care for babies and toddlers truly affordable for all families — including for those who may not currently qualify for existing state support but are still struggling to make ends meet.

As policymakers seek to improve Colorado's child care system, **solutions must help more Colorado families access and afford child care that meets their needs and preferences.**

Colorado leaders have many opportunities to better support families in accessing child care.

► Make child care more affordable through public investment.

The high cost of child care limits parents' ability to choose the child care they believe is best for their baby and family. Policymakers must expand and increase public dollars for child care, especially for families with children between the ages of 0-5.

► Expand the capacity of infant and toddler child care providers.

Some families could not access their preferred type of child care because there were not enough spots at providers that met their needs. Policymakers must invest in expanding providers' capacity to care for infants and toddlers in a variety of settings.

► Enhance data systems.

Policymakers need more information on existing programs, capacity, and child care demand. Leaders must create a comprehensive data system to track and report better information on the child care market at the local level to see where and how kids are being served and better target resources.

► Streamline regulatory systems

Policymakers must streamline regulations, licensure, and data systems to reduce administrative burdens and make it easier for providers to focus on delivering care. By simplifying and aligning these systems, leaders can create a more efficient child care system that better supports families' access and providers' ability to serve their communities.

► Expand and invest in other supports like paid family leave.

Many parents want the opportunity to stay home with their child, especially when they are an infant. Policymakers must continue to improve and expand programs like FAML I to make this an affordable option for more families.

STATE INVESTMENTS FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

- ★ **Colorado Child Care Assistance Program (CCCAP):** Provides subsidized child care to low-income families who are pursuing work or education. In Fiscal Year 2023-24, CCCAP served 25,864 children.⁴
- ★ **Head Start & Early Head Start:** Provides free child care and wrap-around services to low-income families. In Fiscal Year 2023-24, the two programs served 11,173 children.⁴
- ★ **Colorado Universal Preschool Program:** Provides 15 hours of free preschool per week to all 4-year-olds in the state and 30 hours a week of preschool to qualifying 3- and 4-year-olds. In its first year, the program served more than 40,000 children and saved families an average of \$6,100.⁵
- ★ **Family & Medical Leave Insurance (FAML I) Program:** Provides three months of paid parental leave to both parents after their baby is born. Between November 2023 and September 2025, more than 100,000 parents applied for paid leave through FAML I.⁶



Sources

- ¹ The Bell Policy Center. (2023). [Affordability of Care in Colorado](#).
- ² Child Care Aware of America. (2025). [2024 Price of Care: Child care affordability analysis](#).
- ³ First Five Years Fund. (2024). [Fact Sheet: Child Care and the Economy](#).
- ⁴ Colorado Department of Early Childhood. (FY 2023-24). Administrative data request.
- ⁵ Colorado Department of Early Childhood. (2025). [Colorado Universal Preschool Program: SY 2023-24](#).
- ⁶ Colorado Department of Labor and Employment. (2025). [FAMLI by the Numbers](#).

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