

Supporting Families’ Access to Quality Care for Infants and Toddlers: A Systems Approach



Kathleen C. Gallagher and Cara L. Kelly
Early Childhood Education Institute, University of Oklahoma

Introduction

- High-quality early care and education (ECE) is essential for child development, family well-being, and community stability (NASEM, 2018; Chaudry & Sandstrom, 2020).
- Yet families’ access to quality ECE—especially for infants and toddlers—remains limited by affordability challenges, workforce shortages, and long waitlists (Malik et al., 2022).
- Studies suggest that families’ choices are shaped by shifting work and family needs, incomplete information, and constrained options.
- Many rely on multiple arrangements, balancing cost, convenience, and cultural fit, while navigating fragmented information systems and depending heavily on informal networks (Banghart, et al., 2020).

Systems Approach

- This study adopted a systems approach (Coffman, 2007) to build on recent research highlighting the complexity of ECE decision-making and access for parents of infants and toddlers (Cook et al., 2025).
- Using a systems-change framework, we aim to capture the experiences, challenges, and values of families navigating early childhood care systems.

Project Objectives:

1. Understand family decision-making and access challenges
2. Examine how system-level policies and capacity constraints contribute to families’ experiences
3. Co-design a replicable needs assessment tool with families and program leaders
4. Use findings to inform actionable, family-centered policy and practice

Learning from Families

Family Perspectives

Access to Quality ECE

System Leaders’ Perspectives

Family Survey

A public survey (Spanish and English) was distributed through partner channels examining families’ child care needs, their perceptions of quality, and issues related to their ability to access the care they desire for their infant/toddler, answering the following questions:

- What are families’ experiences finding child care?
- How do families define and seek quality care?
- How did families find care?
- How are differences among families associated with their access to quality?

Family Focus Groups

Family focus groups (Spanish and English) are underway to learn about families’ experiences and perspectives regarding accessing care for their infant/toddler.

Research Questions:

- What do quality and access mean to families?
- How do families make child care decisions?
- How is family life impacted by child care?
- How do parents build trust with caregivers?
- How are families’ needs different?
- What would families recommend for finding quality care?

Learning from Leaders (n=12)

Individual interviews with agency administrators and program directors at local, regional, and state levels are being conducted. Transcripts will be coded and analyzed to surface system strengths, barriers, and opportunities for improvement, focused on the following themes:

System Strengths and Supports. Leaders identify policies, programs, and funding mechanisms that help families access care in Oklahoma’s infant/toddler child care system.

Areas for Growth. Leaders describe barriers—affordability, transportation, workforce instability, and geographic factors.

Navigating the ECE System. Leaders reflect on how families move through multiple agencies (“stops”), the role of informal networks in decision-making, and how the current processes work for families.

Designing an Ideal System. Leaders envision a system where all families can access high-quality infant/toddler care and describe what families value most in defining quality. They also reflected on whether families use tools such as quality rating systems to make their decisions.

Systems Integration and Silos. Leaders note where child care systems remain siloed or disconnected and to suggest strategies to improve coordination across agencies and sectors.

Telling the Story

- Findings will be shared with the Advisory Committee, community groups, and agency leadership.
- A policy brief will outline potential levers for enhancing families’ access to quality care.
- Findings from this study will provide a holistic view of families’ access to care for their infants and toddlers.
- Findings will also inform practice and policy considerations to guide Oklahoma’s next steps in building a system that is accessible, coordinated, and responsive to all families.

This study is supported by Grant Number 90TP0094-01-00 from the Office of Early Childhood Development within the Administration for Children and Families, a division of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Neither the Administration for Children and Families nor any of its components operate, control, are responsible for, or necessarily endorse this study (including, without limitation, its content, technical infrastructure, and policies, and any services or tools provided). The opinions, findings, conclusions, and recommendations expressed are those of the Oklahoma Partnership for School Readiness and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Administration for Children and Families and the Office of Early Childhood Development.

