

# Early Childhood Program Participation: 2023

First Look-Summary



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## **National Household Education Surveys Program**

**First Look**

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# Introduction

This document shows only the selected findings from the full report. The full report presents these findings and detailed data tables about children in the United States birth through age 5.

This report presents data on the early childhood care and education arrangements for children in the United States from birth through age 5 who were not yet enrolled in kindergarten by 2023. The report also presents data on selected family activities. Results are reported by child, parent, and family characteristics. Tabular findings are in appendix A of the full report. These data represent circumstances after the termination of most COVID-19 pandemic safety measures limiting in-person group activities. The President of the United States announced on January 30, 2023, that the COVID-19 public health emergency would end on May 11, 2023.

The data for this report come from the Early Childhood Program Participation (ECP) Survey, administered as part of the 2023 National Household Education Surveys Program (NHES:2023). The ECP survey collects data about children from birth through age 6 who are not yet enrolled in kindergarten. The ECP asks detailed questions about children’s participation in relative care, nonrelative care, and center-based care arrangements. It also asks about the main reason for choosing care; what factors were important to parents when choosing a care arrangement; the primary barriers to finding satisfactory care; what activities the family did with the child, such as reading, singing, and arts and crafts; and what the child is learning, such as counting, recognizing the letters of the alphabet, and reading. The ECP questionnaires were completed by a parent or guardian who knew about the sampled child.<sup>1</sup>

The ECP questionnaire asks parents to report about their children’s participation in three types of care arrangements—relative care, nonrelative care, and center-based care—in three distinct sections of the questionnaire. If the child participates in a regularly scheduled weekly arrangement for a given type of care, parents answer detailed questions about that care arrangement (e.g., information about the care provider, location of the care, and cost of the care). Since children could have more than one regularly scheduled care arrangement within a particular type of care (e.g., two relative care arrangements), the questionnaire asks parents to focus on the person or center that provides the most care of that type. This report refers to these arrangements as the “primary care arrangement” for each particular type of care.

Children can have multiple primary care arrangements if they participate in more than one type of care. For example, if the child has a regularly scheduled arrangement with a relative and another regularly scheduled arrangement at a center, then the child is considered to have two primary care arrangements. In this report, the term “multiple primary care arrangements” refers to children who have more than one regularly scheduled type of care arrangement. The questionnaire does not ask parents to identify which type of care serves as the child’s overall primary care arrangement.

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<sup>1</sup> Respondents to the ECP questionnaire are referred to as “parents” throughout this report, irrespective of their relationship to the sampled child.

The NHES:2023 used a nationally representative address-based sample covering the 50 states and the District of Columbia. The survey was conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau from January through August 2023. The 2023 administration of NHES included a screener survey and two topical surveys: the Parent and Family Involvement in Education Survey and the ECPP. The screener survey asked for an enumeration of children in the household and was used to select an eligible child to be the focus of a topical survey. For more information about the NHES:2023 methodology, please reference the forthcoming *National Household Education Surveys Program of 2023: Data File User's Manual* (Wan et al., forthcoming).

Although the NHES is a repeating cross-sectional survey, changes in the sample frame, data collection methods, and wording of some items have occurred over time. Because of these changes, caution should be used when comparing results in this report to those from prior NHES collections.<sup>2</sup> When weighted, the ECPP data in this report are nationally representative of children from birth through age 5 not yet enrolled in kindergarten. The total number of cases used in this report is 7,775 children, representing approximately 20 million children from birth through age 5 and not yet in kindergarten in the U.S. (data were also collected about roughly twenty 6 year-olds who are not included in these analyses due to the small sample size).

The ECPP unit response rate was 88.4 percent, and the overall estimated weighted unit response rate (the screener weighted unit response rate multiplied by the ECPP unit weighted response rate) was 53.7 percent. An analysis of bias in the NHES:2023 data, described further in the data file user's manual, detected some measurable bias in certain demographic characteristics and survey responses. The level of potential bias detected is considered to be low.

Results presented in this report are weighted. All statements of comparison have been tested for statistical significance using two-tailed *t* tests and are significant at the 95 percent confidence level. No adjustments were made for multiple comparisons. Some estimates that appear different may not be measurably different in a statistical sense due to sampling error.

This *First Look* report presents selected descriptive information. Readers are cautioned not to draw causal inferences based on the results presented. Many of the variables examined in this report may be related to one another, but the interactions and relationships among them have not been explored. The variables examined here are just a few of the variables that can be examined in these data; they were selected to demonstrate the range of information available from the study. The release of this report is intended to encourage more in-depth analysis of the data.

For readers interested in appendixes with tables of estimates, definitions of terms used in the findings and tables, and additional information about the survey from which the findings are drawn, please see the "View full report" link at <https://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2024112>.

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<sup>2</sup> For information about these changes, please refer to the data file user's manuals, <https://nces.ed.gov/nhes/dataproducts.asp>.

## Selected Findings

- Approximately 55 percent of children age 5 and under and not enrolled in kindergarten were in at least one weekly nonparental care arrangement, as reported by their parents. Among children with at least one weekly nonparental care arrangement, 66 percent were attending day care centers, Head Start Programs, preschools, prekindergartens, and other early childhood programs (center-based care), 34 percent were cared for by a relative (relative care), and 17 percent were cared for in a private home by someone not related to them (nonrelative care) (table A-1).
- Parents of 57 percent of children with at least one weekly nonparental care arrangement considered that the care arrangement where the child spends the most time covers the hours needed for work very well, as opposed to covering work hours well (24 percent), somewhat well (14 percent), or not well (5 percent) (table A-2).
- The average length of time that children had been in their primary care arrangement was shorter for children in center-based care (14 months) than for those in relative care (19 months) or nonrelative care (17 months) (table A-3).
- Among families with any out-of-pocket child care expenses for their primary care arrangement, the average per-child hourly out-of-pocket child care expenses were lower for children in relative care (\$10.94) than nonrelative (\$16.16) and center-based care (\$21.32) (table A-4). In comparison, the average out-of-pocket child care expenses in 2019 (adjusted to 2023 dollars) for relative care were approximately \$7.21, approximately \$9.23 for nonrelative care, and approximately \$9.80 for center-based care.<sup>3</sup>
- The most common location for children’s primary center-based care arrangement was a building of its own (47 percent). Other locations were a public school (18 percent); a church, synagogue, or other place of worship (16 percent); and other locations (19 percent) (table A-5).
- In choosing a care arrangement, the reliability of the arrangement was rated “very important” by parents of 88 percent of children in at least one weekly nonparental care arrangement, a higher proportion than any other factor, followed by the availability of the care provider (77 percent) (table A-6).
- Among children whose parents searched for care, nearly three-quarters (72 percent) reported that they had at least a little difficulty finding care,<sup>4</sup> and 11 percent said that they did not find

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<sup>3</sup> The 2019 costs reported in the publication, *Early Child Program Participation: 2019* (<https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2020/2020075REV.pdf>) have been adjusted to account for inflation between 2019 and 2023. This adjustment was made by multiplying the unit-level hourly cost for care by an inflation coefficient to increase to cost by the cumulative inflation rate (19.2 percent) for that timeframe. The inflation rate was obtained from the Consumer Price Index released by the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

<sup>4</sup> Parents responding about their sampled child were given a scale of response options from which to choose. Twenty-two percent reported having “a little difficulty”; 28 percent reported “some difficulty”; and another 22 percent reported “a lot of difficulty.”



the child care program they wanted. Seventeen percent said that they had no difficulty finding care (table A-7).

- Among children whose parents reported that they had difficulty finding child care or did not find the child care program they wanted, cost and lack of open slots were most often cited as the primary reason for the difficulty (34 percent of children each). Quality was cited for 12 percent of children, looking for specific hours or schedule was cited for 6 percent, location was cited for 5 percent, and other reasons were cited for 9 percent of the children (table A-8).
- Among children from age 3 through 5 and not yet in kindergarten, 84 percent had parents who reported that the children were read to by a family member three or more times in the past week. This percentage was higher than the percentages of children whose parents reported that family members had sung to them (74 percent), taught them letters, words, or numbers (67 percent), worked with them on arts and crafts (48 percent), or told them a story (42 percent) (table A-9).

## References

Wan, C., McMillan, A., Xia, J., Battle, D., Kincel, B., and Cox, C. (forthcoming). *National Household Education Surveys Program of 2023: Data File User's Manual* (NCES 2024-XXX). National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC.