



# Early Care and Education use among Young Children in New Jersey in 2024

AUTHORED BY

S. Barnett, K. Jung, M. Nores, A. Friedman-Krauss, & K. Garver

National Institute for Early Education Research

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## ABOUT THE RUTGERS CHILD CARE RESEARCH COLLABORATIVE

**W**ith funding and support from the New Jersey Department of Children and Families, the Center for Women and Work, the Heldrich Center for Workforce Development and the National Institute for Early Education Research have joined together to form the Rutgers Child Care Research Collaborative for the purpose of conducting research and facilitating community conversations that develop a broad and comprehensive understanding of New Jersey's child care landscape. Our research aims to increase understanding about the needs and interests of parents in New Jersey, the supply and motivations of the child care workforce, and the capacity of the child care sector to meet demand for child care today and into the future within our diverse state.



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## INTRODUCTION

The National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) has conducted since the spring of 2022 representative surveys of parents of children under age 5 (not yet in kindergarten) in which we ask about their use of (non-parental) child care and what drives those choices.<sup>1</sup> In the spring of 2024, 1,705 families responded to the survey. This brief highlights early care and education (ECE) patterns among children under five in New Jersey, and across family characteristics for 2024. The brief also provides information on hours of care utilized by families, the associated cost of care, influences on parents' choices to use a specific care arrangement, and the reasons for not using any ECE arrangement.

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## ▲ Key Highlights

- **Child Care Usage:** In 2024, 76% of children under five in New Jersey are in non-parental care, with usage increasing with age (64% for infants to 83% for four-year-olds).
- **Types of Care:** 30% of infants under age one are in center-based care, increasing to 68% for four-year-olds. Younger children rely more on relative care.
- **Employment and Household Income:** Non-parental care use is the highest among full-time employed parents regardless of age, as expected. Families earning under \$50,000 have lower participation in child care but higher rates of use of relative care than center-based care. Utilization of center-based care increases with income levels.
- **Family Structure:** Single parent households utilize higher levels of care than dual parent households, particularly for infants and toddlers.
- **Racial and ethnic differences:** White families use center-based care at higher rates than other families. Non-Hispanic Black and Hispanic families rely more on relative care.
- **Hours in Care:** Children spend an average of 22 hours per week in non-parental care, with children

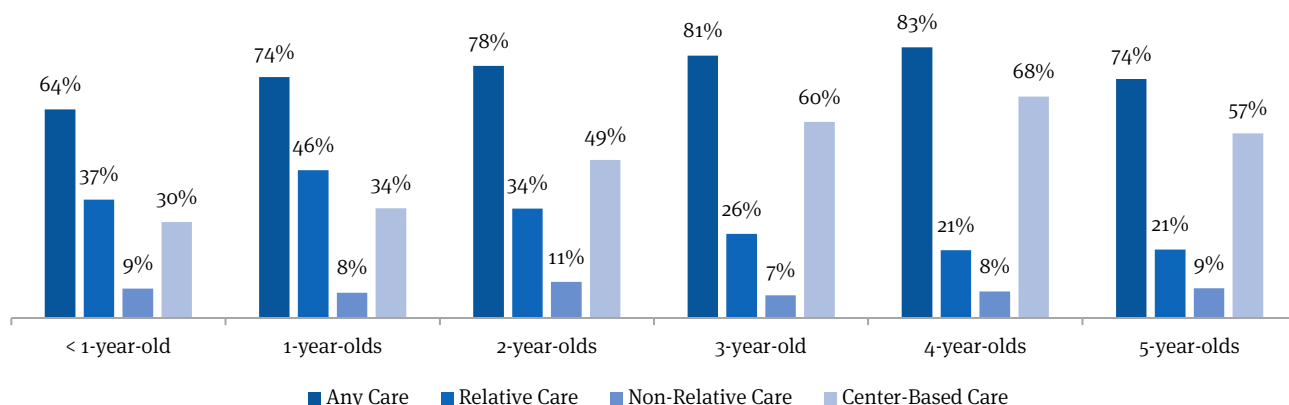
in center-based care having the longest hours. As expected, children whose parents work full-time spend more time in child care each week.

- **Spending on Care:** 32% of families paid nothing for child care (38% of families with infants and toddlers and 25% of families with children ages 3-5), and this increases for Non-Hispanic Black, Hispanic, single parent, and lower income families. Among those paying for child care, their average monthly spending is \$740 for center-based care, \$613 for home-based care provided by a non-relative, and \$429 for relative care (for the average 22 hours reported).
- **Financial Burden of Care:** About 50% of families in NJ spend more than 7% of their annual income on child care, surpassing the threshold on affordability defined by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.
- **Factors influencing choices:** Affordability, location and convenient/flexible schedules drive families' child care choices. Quality of care also influences choices for families with children ages 3 through 5.
- **Non-participation:** Families with stay-at-home parents and those citing high costs are less likely to use child care.

## ▲ Child Care Use

In New Jersey, 76% of children birth to age five years old (not yet in kindergarten) attend some type of non-parental care, above the national average of 60%.<sup>ii</sup> Use of nonparental care is higher for older children, increasing from 64% for families with children under age 1 to 83% for families with 4-year-olds. The percentage of children in center-based care is also higher for older children: 30% of children under age 1 up to 68% at age 4 (See Figure 1). Relative to NIEER's 2022 survey, use of care has increased more for infants and toddlers, from 58% to 72% than for preschool-aged children, from 78% to 81%.

**FIGURE 1. Percent of Children by Single Year of Age in Non-Parental Care in 2024**

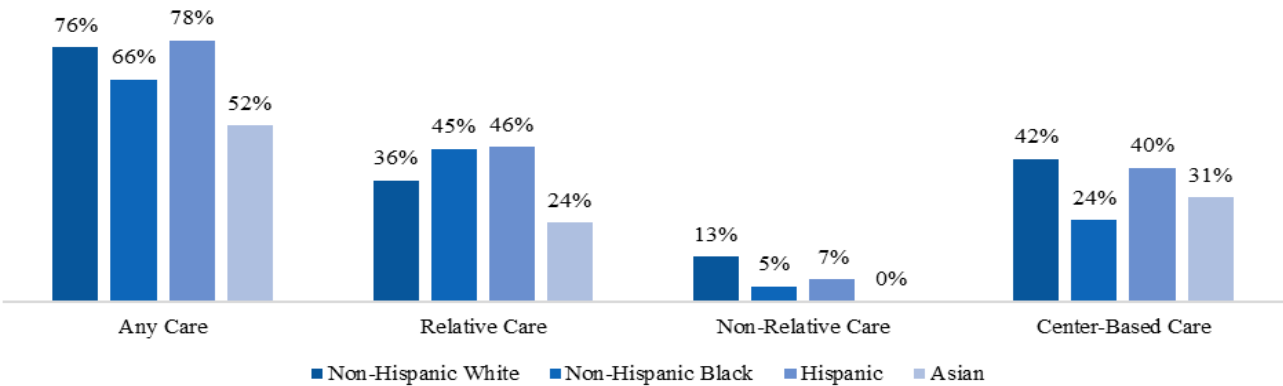


**Note:** Children can use more than one type of care. Therefore, the percentage of children enrolled in each type of care may add up to more than the total percentage of children in any care. The survey only includes 5-year-olds not yet in K.

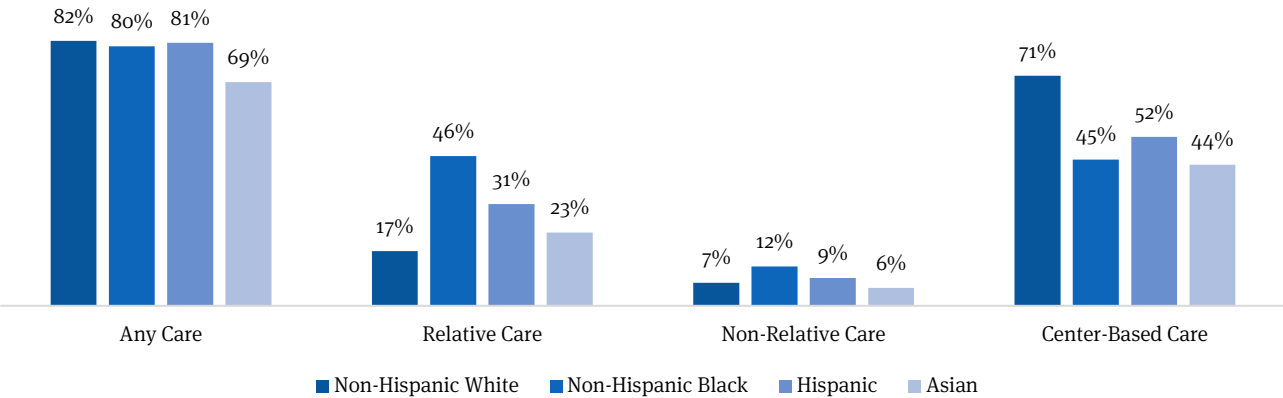
As might be expected, participation in non-parental care increases with parental employment, and participation in center-based care is higher for higher income households in the state. In addition, single parent households utilize higher levels of care than dual parent households, particularly for infants and toddlers.

The use of non-parental care also varies by race/ethnicity. For children under age 3 Non-Hispanic Black and Asian families use non-parental care at lower rates than Non-Hispanic White and Hispanic families. However, while they utilize center-based care less than other families they use relative care at a higher rate than Non-Hispanic White families (See Figure 2). There are no differences in the use of any non-parental care by race/ethnicity for 3- to 5-year-olds. However, there are meaningful differences, as shown in Figure 3, in the types of care utilized. Non-Hispanic White children are enrolled in center-based care at a higher rate than other children, while Non-Hispanic Black children are enrolled in relative care at a higher rate than other subgroups of children.

**FIGURE 2. Type of Care for Children Under Age 3 by Race/Ethnicity in 2024**



**FIGURE 3. Type of Care for Children Ages 3 Through 5 by Race/Ethnicity in 2024**



There are few regional differences in child care use and type between North, South, Central and Northeast NJ. The central region has higher rates of child care use of any type for children under 3 while the northeast region has lower rates of child care use of any type for 3- to 5- year-olds.

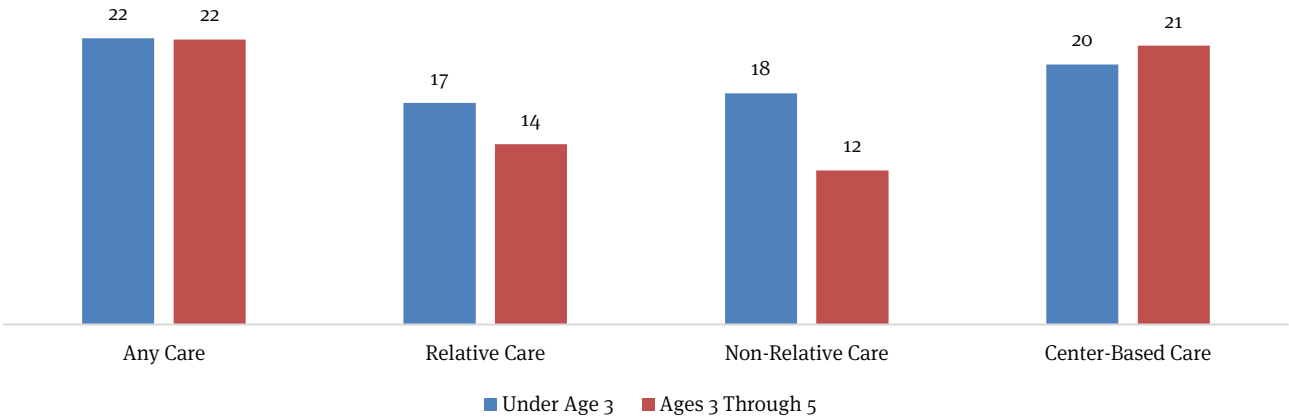
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### ▲ Hours of Care

On average, children under five in New Jersey spend 22 hours per week in non-parental care (See Figure 4). Children in center-based care spend the most hours in care, while those in relative care spend the least. Full-time working parents and higher-income families report the longest hours in care.

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**FIGURE 4. Weekly Average Hours Spent in Care by Children Under Age 5, by Care Type and Age Group in 2024**



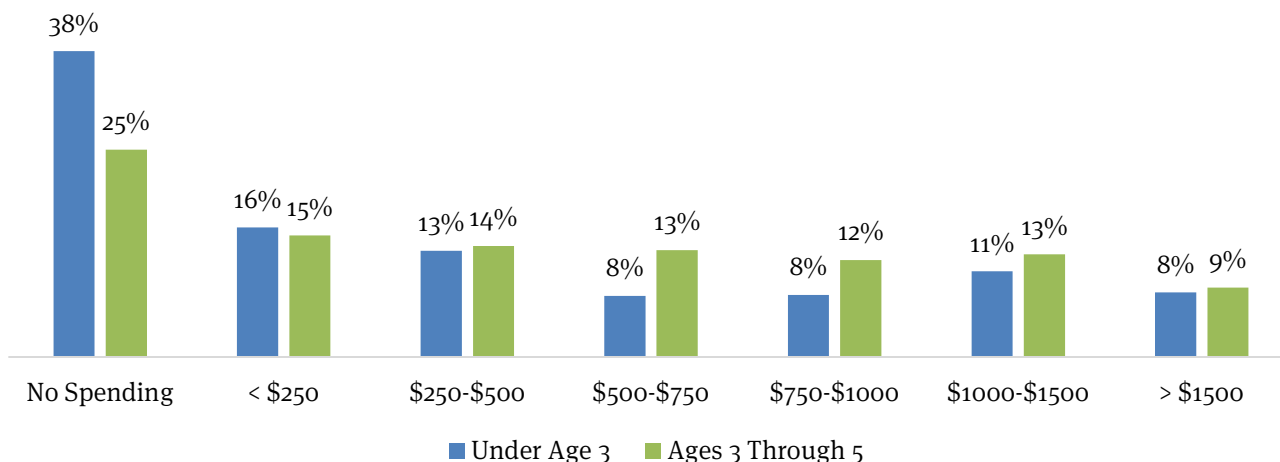
**Note:** Any care shows the average hours adding across all care settings for children in more than one type of care.

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### ▲ Family Spending on Child Care

On average 32% of New Jersey families utilizing any non-parental care report no spending on care (See Figure 5). The percentage of parents incurring no spending for child care is lower for families with preschool age children (25%) than for families with children under age 3 (38%). Families in the state are otherwise quite spread in how much they spend per month, with fewer families spending above \$500 per month for children under age 3.

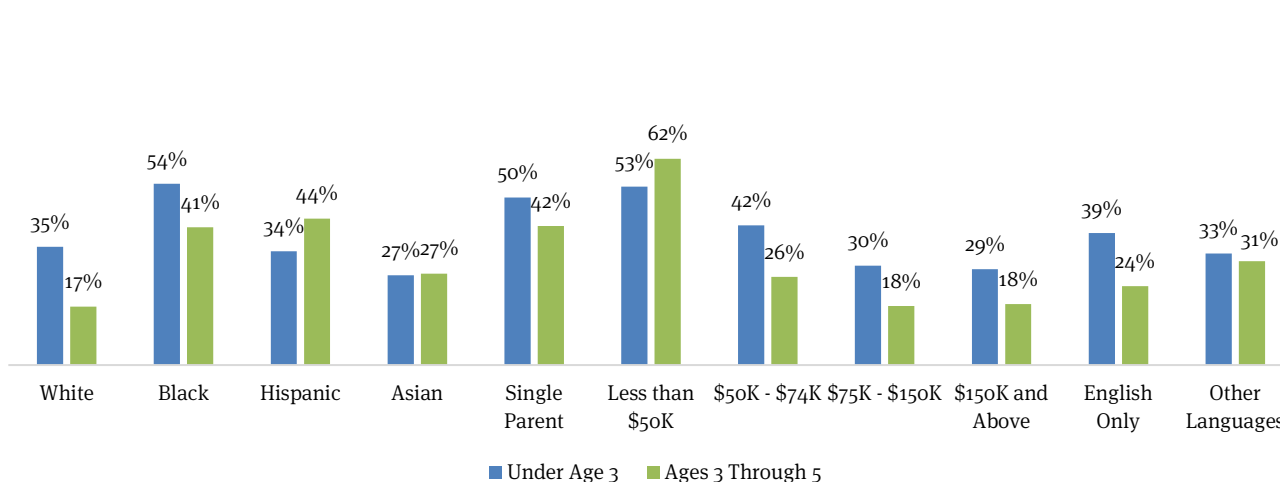
**FIGURE 5. Monthly Spending in Any Non-Parental Care by Age in 2024**



There is substantial variation by type of care in the percentage of families incurring costs of care. Relative care is the type of care most likely to have no cost for families, and this was more common for children under age 3 than preschool-age. Relative care is the most common no-cost arrangement for both age groups (52% for under age 3 and 53% for ages 3 to 5). Non-relative care without cost to the family is more frequent for children under age 3 (25%) than for children ages 3 to 5 (19%). The use of center-based care without cost is relatively low and slightly more common for children under age 3 (16%) compared to ages 3 to 5 (13%).

The percentage of families across various demographic groups not incurring any costs for care are shown in Figure 6. Overall, this percentage is higher for Non-Hispanic Black, single parent, and low-income families, regardless of child age.

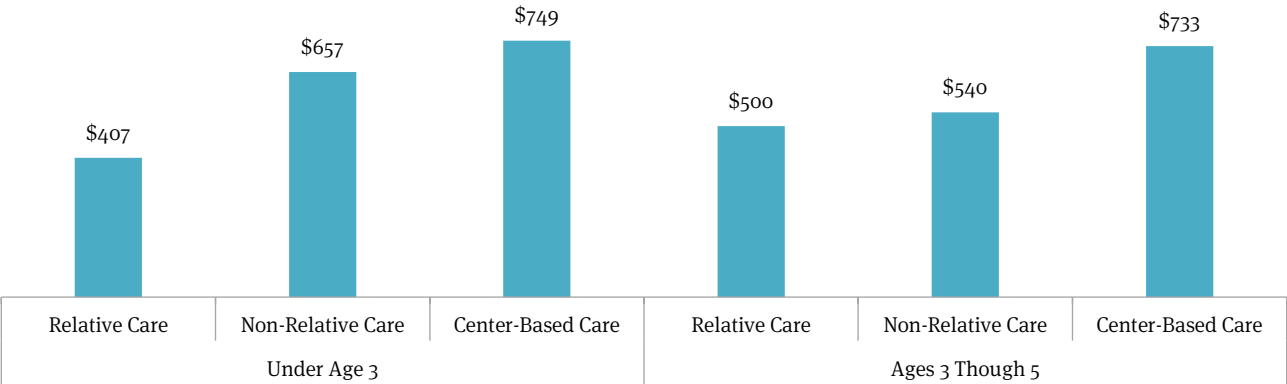
**FIGURE 6. Households with No Spending for Children in Any non-Parental Care, by Demographics, by Age, in 2024**



New Jersey families utilizing some type of paid care report average spending of \$740 per month for center-based care, \$613 per month for non-relative care, \$429 per month for relative care. These

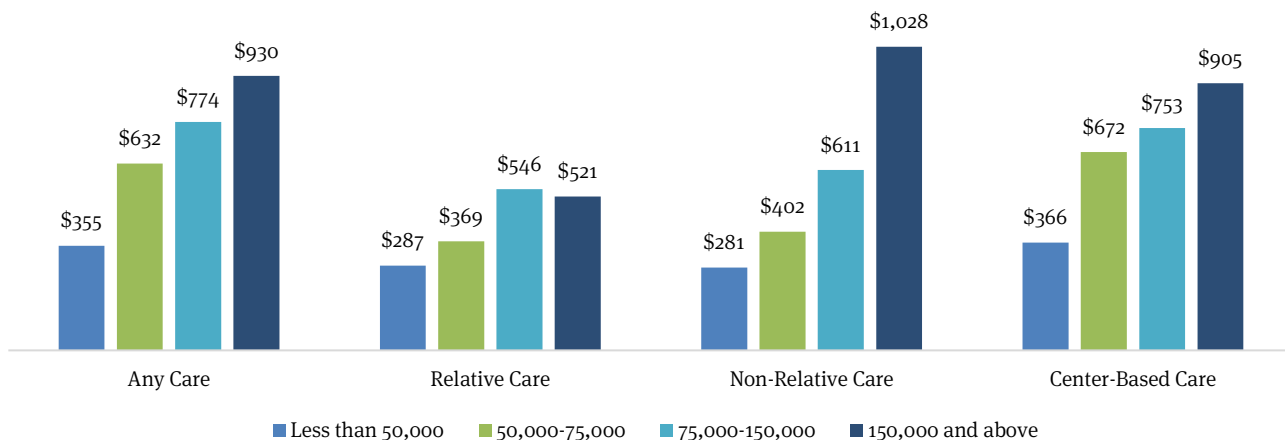
amounts reflect actual payments for the specific amount of care used and do not represent costs of full-time care. Parents pay on average \$355 for relative care, \$501 per non-relative care and \$660 per center-based care for babies under age 1, and these costs increase to \$429, \$719 and \$779 for toddlers, and \$500, \$540, and \$733 for preschool aged children, respectively (Figure 7). This would translate to annual spending between \$3,927 and \$10,010 across the different types of care and age groups for the 22 hours of average care families report utilizing (and for 11 months of care a year). These spending figures are lower than what is often reported as the price of full-time year-round child care. For example, the Women’s Bureau at the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) reports prices for full-time center-based care of between \$14,000 and \$18,000 for New Jersey.<sup>iii</sup> However, families in NJ report using on average 22 hours of care rather than the full-time and many families receive subsidies and use both unpaid and paid care.<sup>iv</sup>

**FIGURE 7. NJ Family Average Spending per Month for Children by Each Type of Care by Age**



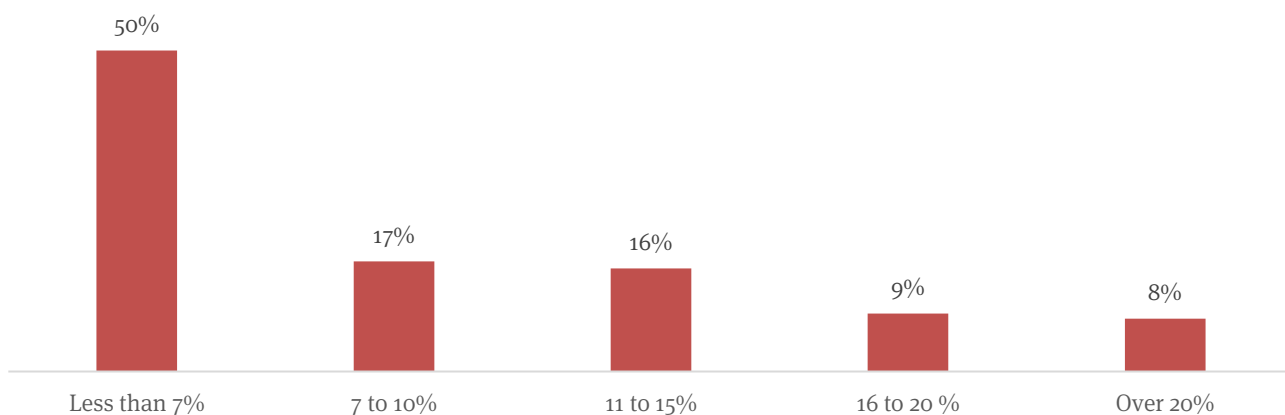
Families’ average monthly spending (among families that pay for care) increases relative to family income (See Figure 8), with families reporting an annual income under \$50,000 spending on average \$355 per month per child, and families reporting annual incomes over \$150,000 spending almost three times as much (\$930) per month per child. This pattern generally holds across all care types and it most pronounced for non-relative and center-based care. Estimated annual spending (11 months) levels vary between \$3,091 and \$4,026 for the lowest income group to between \$5,731 and \$11,308 for the highest income group; that is, between 85% and 181% higher.

**FIGURE 8. Average Monthly Spending by Care Type and Income in 2024**



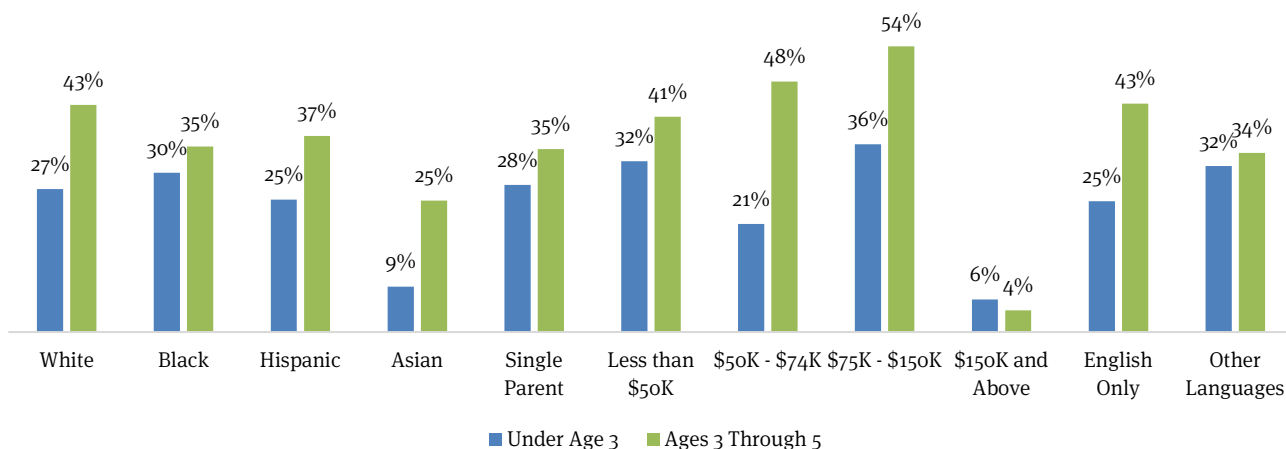
To estimate total annual expenses in child care relative to income, we multiply monthly spending per family per child times 11 months of care (assuming families do not pay for care during any vacation time) and estimate the percentage of their reported annual income this represents (Figure 9). Since the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) defined child care as affordable if it costs households no more than 7% of their income, we use this threshold in our analyses.<sup>v</sup> Across NJ families utilizing some type of care, 50% spend less than 7% of their income annually, 17% spend 7-10% of their income annually, 16% spend 11-15% and 17% spend more than 16% of their income annually on child care.

**FIGURE 9. Child care total costs estimated for full-time care as a percentage of annual family income in 2024.**



Across the state, 34% of families using any type of care report receiving financial assistance from the state of New Jersey (Figure 10) for child care (27% of families with infants, 27% of families with toddlers, and 41% of families with children 3 through 5). These differences are statistically significant. Higher income families (\$150,000 and above) are, as expected, much less likely to be receiving aid (28%) than lower and middle-income households (35% and 40%), respectively. Hispanic (32%) and Non-Hispanic Black (30%) families are less likely than Whites (36%) to receive financial assistance for child care.

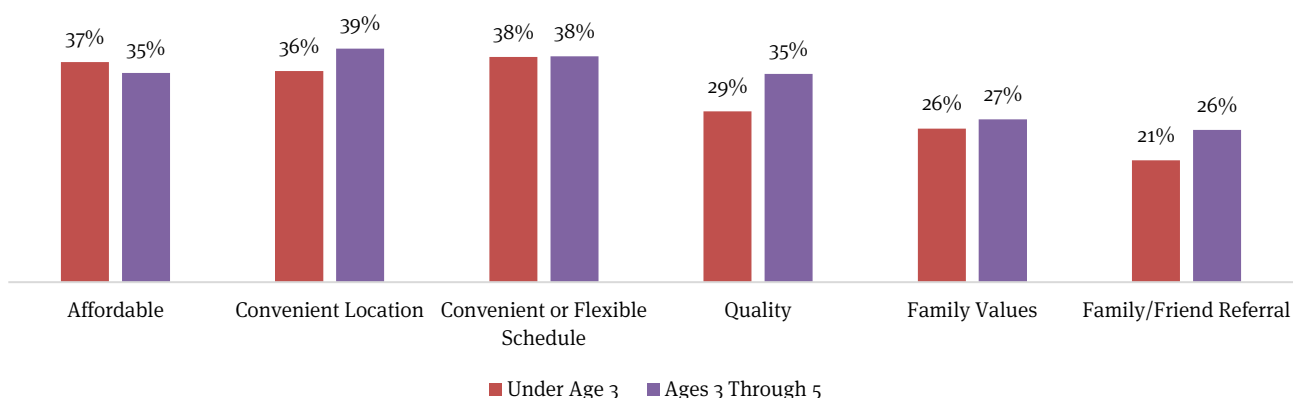
**FIGURE 10. Percentage of Families Receiving Financial Assistance by Demographics, by Age in 2024**



### ▲ Factors influencing childcare choices for families

The top three factors influencing child care choices by families (Figure 11) are affordability, location, convenience and/or flexible schedule, with over a third of families reporting each of these affected child care decisions. Child care quality (particularly for preschoolers), alignment with family values, and referrals from friends or family (slightly higher for preschoolers) are also common influences on families' decisions.

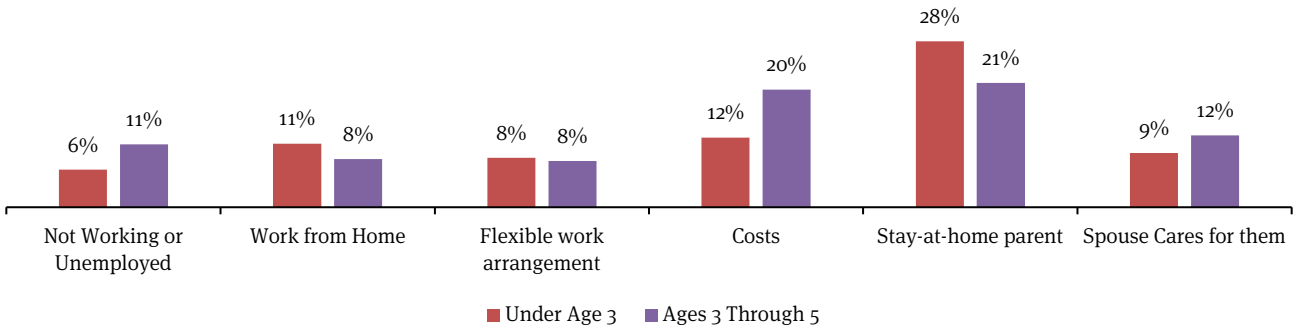
**FIGURE 11. Top 6 Reasons for Choosing Care by Age**



Families also reported reasons for not using any non-parental care. Figure 12 shows the main reasons why families do not use any type of child care. For families with children under 3, the most common reason is having a stay-at-home parent (28%), followed by concerns about costs (12%). Some parents also cite working from home (11%). For families with children ages 3 to 5, a stay-at-home parent remains a key factor (21%), and costs (20%) are mentioned more frequently than for younger children. Additionally, more families with preschool-age children rely on a spouse for care (12%) than do those

with children under 3 (9%). Across both age groups, a smaller portion of parents mention flexible work arrangements (8%) as a reason for opting out of formal childcare. Unemployment is also a common reason for not using non-parental care among low-income families with children ages 3 through 5, single parent households and Non-Hispanic Black families. Cost is also frequently cited as a reason limiting participation for Non-Hispanic Black & Asian families, as well as families in central and northeast NJ. Twenty-six percent of Non-Hispanic Black families report not being able to find care.

**FIGURE 12. Top 6 Reasons for Not Choosing Any Care by Age**



### ▲ Summary of Findings

The New Jersey Child Care Report 2024, produced by NIEER, provides a detailed analysis of early care and education (ECE) usage among children under five in the state. Findings indicate that 76% of young children are enrolled in non-parental care, with participation increasing by age, from 64% of infants to 83% of four-year-olds. Compared to 2022, child care usage has increased more substantially for infants and toddlers than for preschool-aged children. While center-based care is the most common arrangement for older children, younger children rely more on relative care. Child care usage is highest among fully employed parents, and participation in center-based care increases with household income. Families earning less than \$50,000 are less likely to use center-based care, relying more on relative care. Some racial differences are present, with White families enrolling in center-based care at higher rates, while Non-Hispanic Black and Hispanic families depend more on relative care. Regional differences also emerge, with lower center-based care participation in central and southern New Jersey.

Children spend an average of 22 hours per week in non-parental care, with center-based care having the longest hours. Full-time working parents, as well as Hispanic and Asian families, report the highest weekly hours in care. About 32% of families pay nothing for child care and this is more common for Non-Hispanic Black, Hispanic, single-parent, and lower-income families. However, among those paying, average monthly costs are \$740 for center-based care, \$613 for non-relative care, and \$429 for relative care, with full-time working households spending the most. Costs are generally lower in southern New Jersey. About 43% of families spend more than 5% of their annual income on child care, highlighting affordability challenges for many families. Families prioritize affordability, location, and

flexible schedules when making child care decisions, with quality becoming a greater factor for preschool-aged children. Cost remains an important barrier for Non-Hispanic Black and Asian families, as well as those in central and northeast New Jersey. Parental unemployment is a key reason for not using child care for low-income families with preschool-aged children, single-parent households, and Non-Hispanic Black families. Additionally, 26% of Non-Hispanic Black families report being unable to find care, underscoring access challenges.

The findings from the New Jersey Child Care Report 2024 highlight both progress and persistent challenges in access to ECE across the state. While child care usage has increased since 2022, particularly for infants and toddlers, disparities remain based on income, employment, family structure, race, and region. Families with lower incomes, single parents, and Non-Hispanic Black and Hispanic households are more likely to rely on relative care and face greater financial barriers to accessing center-based programs. In addition, nearly half of families spend more than 5% of their annual income on child care. Regional differences seem to impact access, with lower center-based enrollment in central and southern NJ. Affordability, location, and scheduling flexibility continue to drive families' child care decisions, while quality becomes a stronger factor for preschool-aged children.

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## ABOUT NIEER

The National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) at the Graduate School of Education, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ, conducts and disseminates independent research and analysis to inform early childhood education policy.

Correspondence regarding this report should be addressed to Christina Stephens at the National Institute for Early Education Research. Email: [cstephens@nieer.org](mailto:cstephens@nieer.org)

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## ▲ Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> The survey was conducted for NIEER by the Fairleigh Dickinson University Poll (FDU), an independent, university-based research organization, which deployed the survey each year between the months of May and June in 2022, June in 2023 and May in 2024. FDU uses a nonprobability sample sourced from Market Knowledge Online. More information on the survey, and detailed findings can be found in the full report available at <https://nieer.org/rutgers-child-care-research-collaborative>.

<sup>ii</sup> Herbst, C. M. (2023). Child care in the United States: Markets, policy, and evidence. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 42(1), 255-304.

<sup>iii</sup> The Price of child care by county:

<https://public.tableau.com/app/profile/women.s.bureau.department.of.labor/viz/CountyFactsheets/Childcareinthecounties>. Downloaded February 2025. For methodology see, <https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/WB/National-Database-of-Childcare-Prices-Technical-Report.pdf>

<sup>iv</sup> In addition, our sample may underestimate spending on care because it may underrepresent the highest-income families likely spending more for care, although underreporting of income at higher-income levels likely attenuates this. Unlike the census, we ask respondents for total annual household income and do not specify aggregating across all potential income sources such as capital earnings; this type of question is known to lead to underreporting of earnings particularly for high-income earners (See “About Income”, US Census, <https://www.census.gov/topics/income-poverty/income/about.html>). In our sample only 17% of households report income above \$150,000 while in NJ 40% of families report household income above this amount as per the 2023 5-year American Community Survey. Given underreporting at the higher-income levels, our sample is likely more balanced. However, analyses by income levels provide important nuanced information.

<sup>v</sup> U.S. Department of the Treasury. (2021, September). The economics of child care supply in the United States. <https://home.treasury.gov/system/files/136/The-Economics-of-Childcare-Supply-09-14-final.pdf>