

Who Cares for Infants and Toddlers? Change from 2012 to 2019 and its Implications

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Executive Summary

Although most children under age 3 are cared for only by parents and other family members, the percentage in formal care increases with the age of the child and has been growing over time. Between 2012 and 2019 there was a shift toward center-based care (from 18% to 21%) and a decrease in the percentage only in relative and nonrelative care (33% to 29%). The percentage of children under age 3 who experience only parental care (i.e., no regular weekly nonparental care) stayed about the same at just under 50%. The trend toward center-based care for those in nonparental care applies to each age including those under age one. However, the percentage in center-based care rises sharply with the child's age from about 13% before age 1 to about 21 percent at age 2. Policies to support early learning and development before age 3 should account for differences in care arrangements by age as well as how care arrangements change over time.

Method

Data Source

Data were obtained from the National Household Education Survey (NHES) 2012 and 2016 cohorts, which were conducted mainly through mail surveys using a two-phase sampling method by the U.S. Census Bureau. Survey respondents who reported that they have children from birth through age 2 were included in the current study. Although the 2019 NHES data are not available for analysis, some information from the 2019 NHES has been published and is used in this Data Snapshot.¹

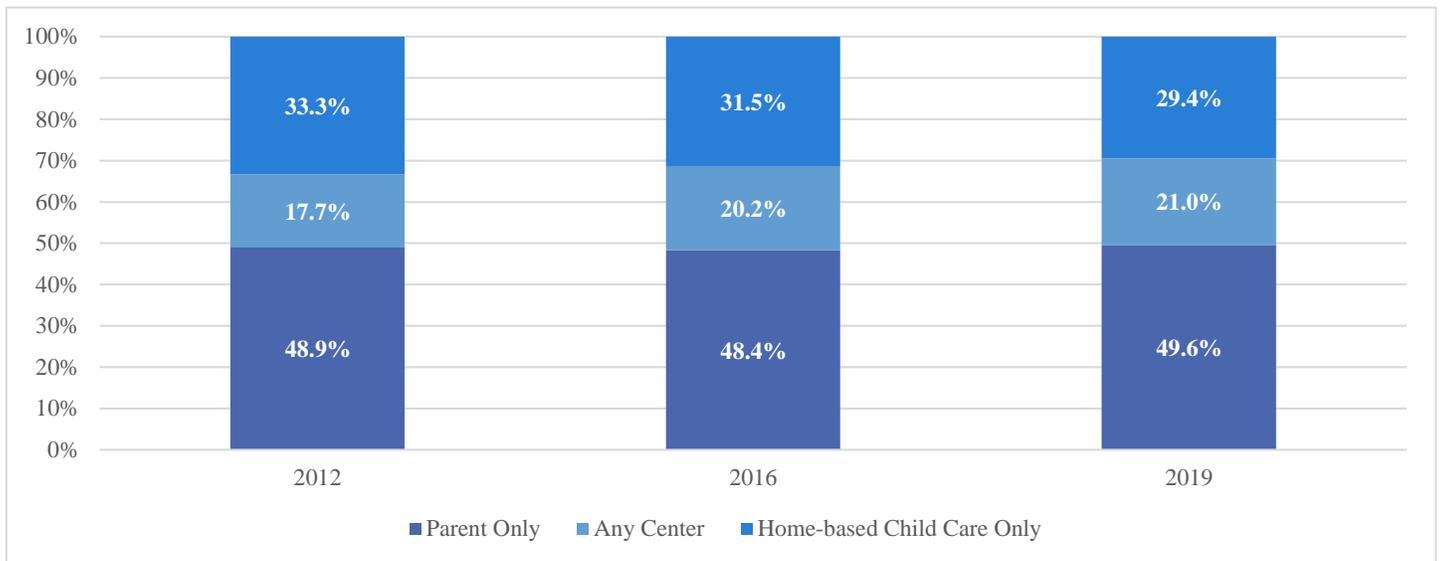
Analyses

To prepare data for analysis we coded weekly child care arrangements into three mutually exclusive categories: (1) parent only care; (2) any center-based program; and (3) home-based child care only. Some children coded as receiving center-based care also received home-based child care. We used weights provided by NHES in our analyses so that the results are representative of the population as a whole for the corresponding year. To test for significant differences, we conducted chi-square tests across years. Although differences in the use of centers and home-based child care are modest, they are statistically significant for children birth to age three.

Results

Figure 1 (below) shows the national percentage of infants and toddlers who remain solely in parent care has remained just under 50% for the past decade. However, for those in nonparental care, the percentage experiencing some center-based care increased from less than 18% to about 21%.

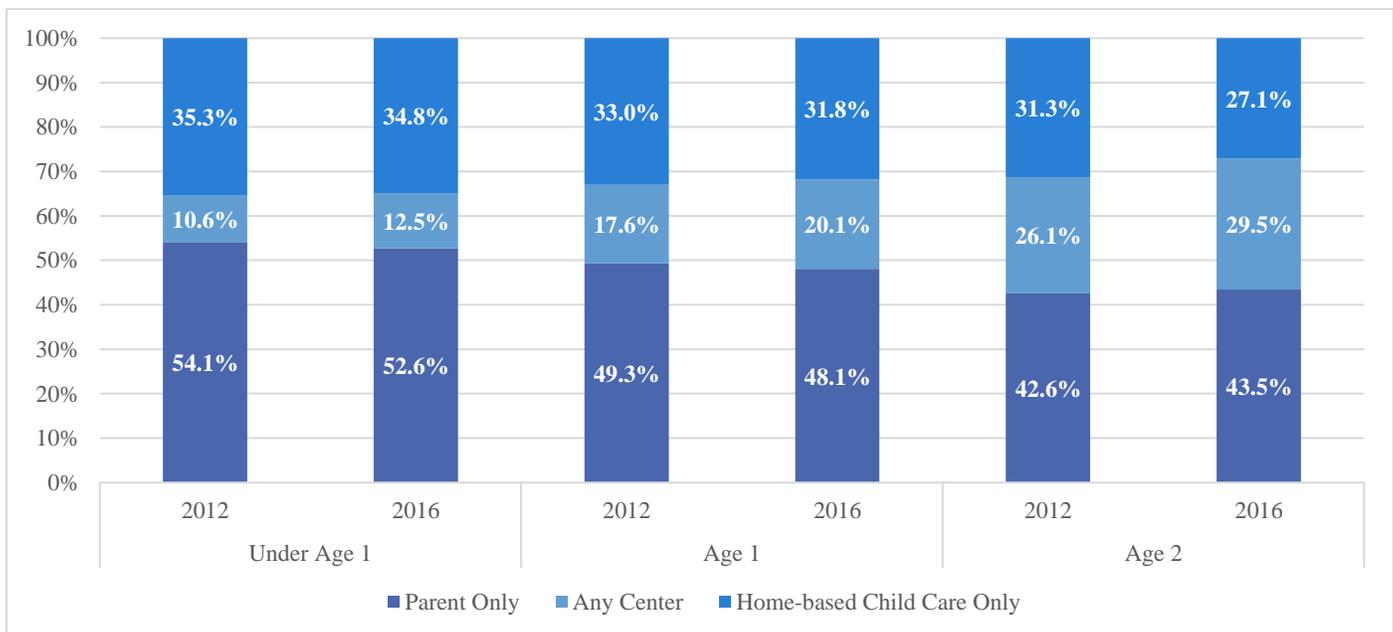
Figure 1. Infant and Toddler Care Arrangements in 2012, 2016, and 2019



Notes. Home-based Child Care Only is relative and non-relative care in a home only. The 2019 percentages were calculated from data in Cui, J., and Natzke, L. (2020).¹

Figure 2 and Table 1 present national estimates for child care arrangements of children under age 3 by single year of age for 2012 and 2016. (The 2019 data are not yet available for analysis so we cannot present the breakout for this year, but differences between 2016 and 2019 are quite small.) The distribution of arrangements is statistically significantly different at each year of age, and the same pattern of change over time is observed at each age. The percentage in centers increased while the percentage receiving only home-based child care declined.

Figure 2. Infant and Toddler Care Arrangements by Single Year of Age in 2012 and 2016



Note. Home-based Child Care is relative and non-relative care in a home only.

Table 1. Infant and Toddler Care Arrangements by Single Year of Age: Number and Percentage of Children

Age	Weekly Care Type		Cohort	
			2012	2016
Under Age 1	Parent Only	N	2,594,242	2,487,185
		% within Cohort	54.1%	52.7%
	Any Center	N	506,644	592,647
		% within Cohort	10.6%	12.6%
	Home-based Child Care Only	N	1,693,402	1,644,343
		% within Cohort	35.3%	34.8%
	Total	N	4,794,288	4,724,175
		% within Cohort	100.0%	100.0%
Age 1	Parent Only	N	2,203,754	2,220,078
		% within Cohort	49.3%	48.1%
	Any Center	N	788,402	925,110
		% within Cohort	17.7%	20.1%
	Home-based Child Care Only	N	1,476,015	1,467,809
		% within Cohort	33.0%	31.8%
	Total	N	4,468,171	4,612,997
		% within Cohort	100.0%	100.0%
Age 2	Parent Only	N	1,774,980	1,712,307
		% within Cohort	42.6%	43.5%
	Any Center	N	1,087,162	1,159,975
		% within Cohort	26.1%	29.5%
	Home-based Child Care Only	N	1,305,259	1,066,270
		% within Cohort	31.3%	27.1%
	Total	N	4,167,400	3,938,552
		% within Cohort	100.0%	100.0%

Note. Home-based Child Care Only is relative and non-relative care in a home only.

Conclusions

About half of all children under age 3 receive only parental care, a statistic that has not changed for the past decade. No doubt this reflects both parent preferences and the high costs of quality nonparental care for infants and toddlers. The most common nonparental care arrangement is still home-based child care, though it has decreased somewhat in the past decade. To improve early learning and development in the first 3 years of life for most children, policies must include measures that support parents and nonparental home care. However, it is also true that the percentage of infants and toddlers attending child care centers has grown. Center-based care is not only more common today but is now the most common type of child care for 2-year-old children not at home with parents. This suggests that increased attention be directed to public policies supporting the quality of center-based care for infants and toddlers.

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About ITC@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. ITC@NIEER is a unit within NIEER focused on early care and education policies that influence the learning and development of infants and toddlers.

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Endnote

¹ Cui, J., and Natzke, L. 2020. Early Childhood Program Participation: 2019. NCES 2020-075. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education.