

Defining and measuring access to child care and early education with families in mind ^[1]

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Excerpted from introduction

What does access to child care and early education mean? Access is often measured in terms of supply (i.e., capacity) of licensed child care and early education (CCEE) centers and family child care (FCC) homes. Sometimes it is measured by counting the number of families who use different types of CCEE. In other cases, calculations are made based on the number of CCEE slots relative to the number of children in a given area. These metrics assume that a large supply of or high use of CCEE means it is accessible to families.

Recent research shows that these types of calculations overestimate families' access to CCEE because they do not account for what families search for, prefer, and need. For example, some families prefer providers who speak Spanish or another language spoken at home, and some need care during the evenings. The Access Guidebook introduced a definition of access that is centered on families and acknowledges four dimensions that families consider when choosing CCEE:

Access means that parents, with reasonable effort and affordability, can enroll their child in an arrangement that supports the child's development and meets the parents' needs.

The intersection between family needs and preferences and the characteristics of the available supply of CCEE represents families' experiences of CCEE access. Thinking more specifically about the CCEE available for families with certain needs or preferences can help policymakers develop a more accurate picture of access (compared to just examining available slots). It also highlights the need to increase the supply of various kinds of CCEE programs that families can find and afford and that meet their needs and preferences.

Region: United States ^[5]

Tags: access to child care ^[6]

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