Going to Preschool

Understanding Families' Decisions About Preschool Enrollment

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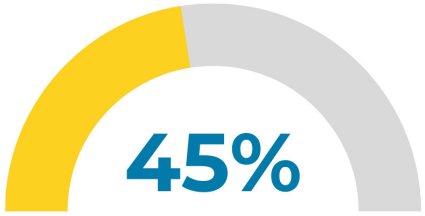
READY REGION Southwest

The Landscape

Access to childcare continues to be a challenge for communities across the nation. In Southwest Virginia (SWVA), there is a 30% childcare gap: an estimated 5,000 children ages birth to five are in need of childcare and cannot access it[1,2] .

An estimated 30% of children in the region

are in need of and cannot access childcare



45%

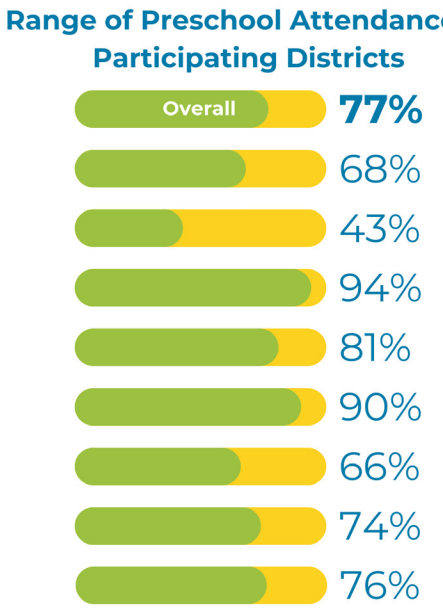
of centers report struggling to fill their slots

Childcare challenges vary depending on the child's age. Families with infants and toddlers often face high costs and long waitlists due to a lack of slots, limited tuition support, and limited options as fewer providers offer care to young children[3]. In contrast, care for preschoolers is more widely available along with greater tuition support and typically lower costs. Although estimates suggest that half of preschool-aged children lack access to licensed care, actual demand for care does not always reflect this high need. A recent survey[3] conducted with childcare providers in the region found that 45% reported difficulty filling their slots.

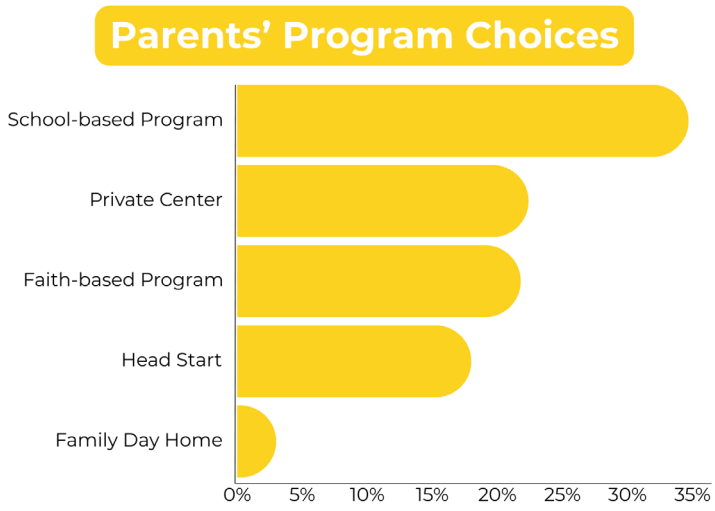
To best support families in our region and understand the need for childcare, it is essential to understand their choices around preschool enrollment. Parents are tasked with making the choices that best suit their family while juggling values, paying the bills, and caring for their young children. The current report reviews findings from a recent survey with parents in the region, whether or not they sent their child to preschool, and their reasons for their decision.

Data in this report was collected in the spring of 2024. Surveys were sent home to parents of current kindergarteners in 8 school districts. Participating school districts reflect the geographical diversity of the region with both rural and semi-urban districts participating. The survey sample consists of 763 parents.

Preschool Decisions



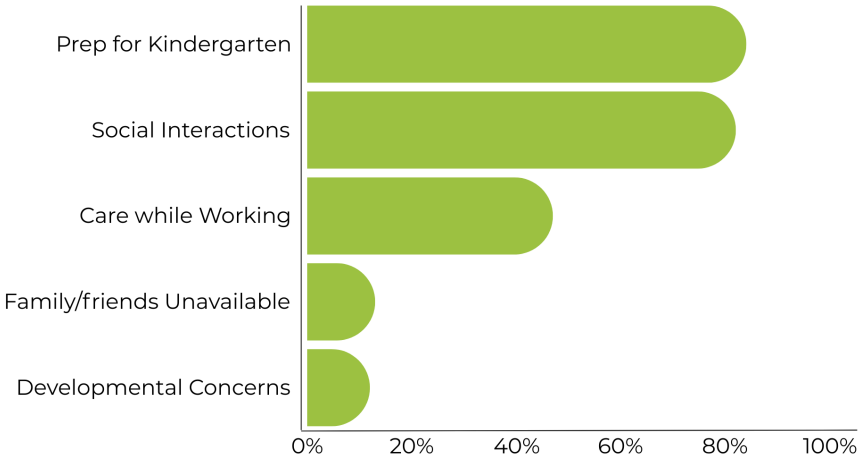
Approximately 3 out of 4 kindergarteners were reported to attend preschool at some point between the ages of 3 and 5 years old. These rates vary throughout the region. For example, just 43% of kindergarteners in a rural county were reported as having attended preschool compared to 94% in a more populated, semi-urban area.



Parents reported utilizing a variety of education and care options for their children's preschool experience. School-based program experiences were the most common (35%). 10% sent their child to more than one program during their preschool years.

Why Parents Choose Preschool

Top Reasons for Choosing Preschool



A number of factors influenced parents' preschool decisions. By far, the most common motivators were preparation for kindergarten (84%) and social interactions (82%). Parents also reported the need for care while they worked, lack of kinship care as a viable option, and developmental concerns for their child.

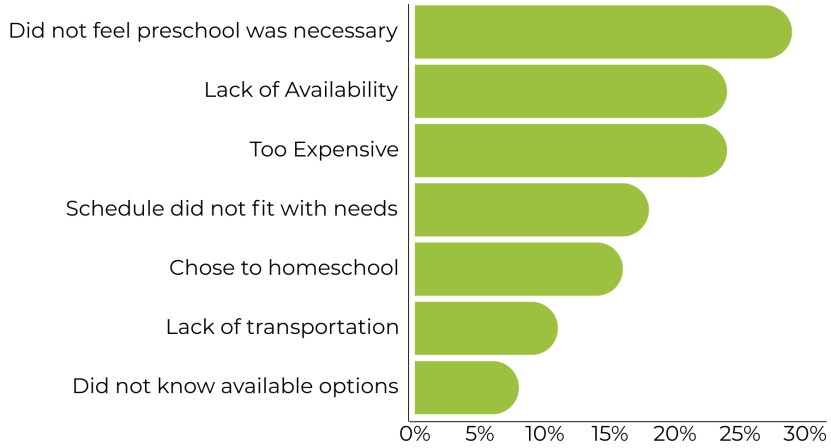
> **"Preschool through early intervention made a tremendous positive difference with our son at age 3. He was speech delayed, and it helped him socially, improving his confidence and independence."**
>
> -Parent

> **"As a mom who used to view preschool in a different light, we took a chance in sending his brother to pre-k and after such a wonderful experience and so much growth we knew we wanted to send [this child] too."**
>
> -Parent

> **"My son is an only child & needed more social interactions with other children his age."**
>
> -Parent

Why Parents Seek Alternative Options

Why Parents Stay Home or Rely on Family



> **"Day care was expensive, not open at the times I needed to drop off for my work hours. She stayed with family and friends when needed & socialized at brothers sporting events."**
>
> -Parent

For the one in four kindergarteners who did not attend preschool, parents overwhelmingly reported keeping their child at home with themselves or another family member or friend (80%).

Almost a third of these parents chose this familial care because they did not feel that preschool was right for their child (29%). Some parents chose specifically to homeschool their child (16%). At the same time, very real barriers prevent parents from choosing childcare. Lack of availability (24%), high costs (24%), and family schedules (19%) were commonly reported. Further, parents reported lack of transportation or simply did not know the options available to them. Without addressing these barriers, families must find alternative options for care.

> **"I was the only parent involved and as a first time, single mom, I didn't trust in others watching my child except my mother."**
>
> -Parent

> **"I have chosen to stay home with my kids during their early years, I believe at the age of 5 years old they are old enough to understand school and actually enjoy going. For my children personally I just feel that the age of 3-4 is too young to fully grasp the concept of school and my kids were not emotionally ready at that age to leave my side."**
>
> -Parent

The Importance of Preschool

Access to high quality childcare is essential for both children's lifelong success and broader economic development[4]. In SWVA, 41% of kindergarteners are going to school without the foundational skills needed for academic success. Preschool attendance makes a huge impact on children's school readiness: children in the region with public preschool experience are 39% more likely to enter kindergarten ready than those without, and the impact on students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds is even greater[5].

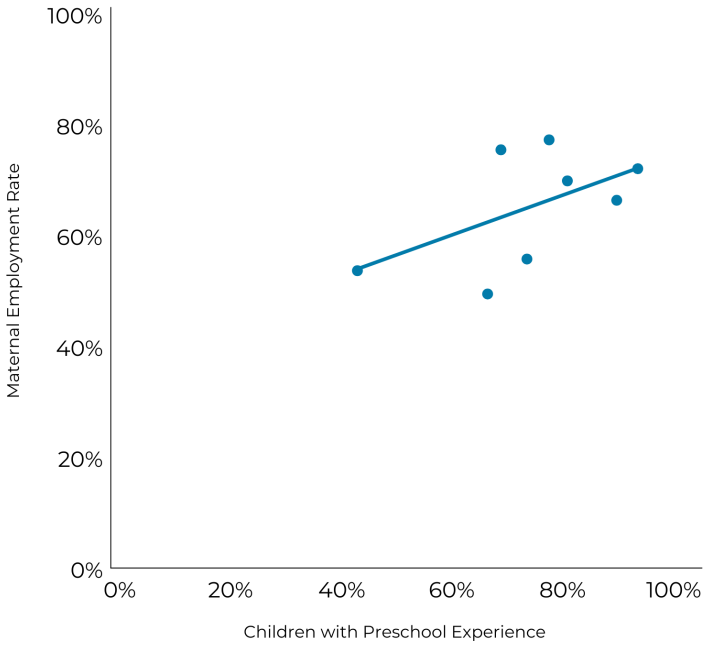
Kindergarten Readiness in SWVA

All Students 59%

Students with PreK Experience 64%

Students with No PreK Experience 46%

Preschool Enrollment and Maternal Employment



For financially constrained families, access to low- or no-cost childcare is crucial. In surveyed districts, there are more than 2,700 children[2] who are eligible for tuition support* but lack access to it. Still, access to childcare for all families is important. In 3 of the 8 districts surveyed, at least half of the available childcare programs had household income eligibility criteria. This means that families earning above a certain income threshold are ineligible to enroll their children in these programs. In fact, in the district with the lowest preschool enrollment, only income-restricted childcare options are available, leaving over one-third of children without any licensed childcare options[1,2]. Additionally, there is a link between preschool attendance and maternal employment[2]: in counties where more children attended preschool, maternal employment rates were higher. These counties also tend to offer more diverse program options. This suggests that having a variety of programs is key for parents, particularly mothers, to secure gainful employment and set their children up for lifelong success in the way that best suits their family.

*Households earning less than 200% Federal Poverty Level

Supporting Families and Ensuring Access to High Quality Early Learning

Access to childcare continues to be a top concern for families nationally and locally. To best support our families and children in the region, their decisions about and reasoning for childcare need to be known. While many preschool-aged children (77%) were reported as having attended a preschool program, barriers such as cost, availability, and transportation prevent many families from enrolling their children. Additionally, some parents who rely on family care may not be fully aware of the benefits of early education. Addressing these challenges is essential to ensure that all children, regardless of background or location, have access to the support needed for healthy development and future success. With Virginia's new focus on improving early childhood education quality through the Virginia Quality Birth to 5 (VQB5)[6] system, children in Southwest Virginia will benefit from enhanced learning environments. However, continued efforts are needed to educate families on the importance of early care and to remove the practical barriers that prevent full participation in preschool programs.

Sources

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READY REGION

Southwest