

Easy Read

Strengthening Federal Government Coordination to Help Families with Disabilities Access Child Care

September 2024 | GAO-24-107735



U.S. GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY OFFICE

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Introduction

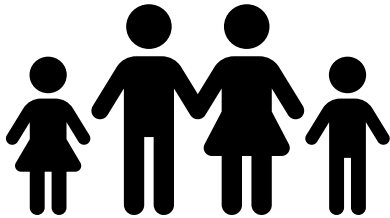


This is an **Easy Read** version of a report we wrote. **Easy Read** is a way that some groups have made their written information easier to understand. This can include shorter sentences or simpler language.



Some words are **blue**. These are links that will go to GAO reports and other websites, which have more information.

Why is GAO creating this document?



We wrote a report to describe the challenges children and parents with disabilities have finding and using child care.



We created this Easy Read version to make our work more accessible to everyone, including certain people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. This document is one way we are working for full inclusion of people with disabilities.



You can see the **full report** on our website.



To prepare the full report, we collected information several ways. We:

- Looked at survey data,
- Talked to parents,
- Talked to child care providers about their work and visited their programs,
- Talked to experts, and
- Reviewed the work of agencies.

Agencies are federal government offices.

GAO and Congress



What is GAO?

The Government Accountability Office, or GAO, is part of the legislative branch of the United States government. We are an independent agency that works for Congress. We help keep Congress informed about how agencies are working. If we find ways agencies can work better, we can make **recommendations**.

Recommendations are ideas of changes agencies should make to improve their activities.

What was GAO asked by Congress to do?

Congress asked us to look at the challenges children and parents with disabilities have finding and using child care.



The Federal Government's Role



What is the U.S. Department of Education?

The U.S. Department of Education (Education) is an agency that works to provide access to quality education for Americans of all ages.

The Office of Special Education Programs is part of Education. It works to support children with disabilities, including young children in child care.



What is the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services?

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) is an agency that works to support the health and well-being of Americans.

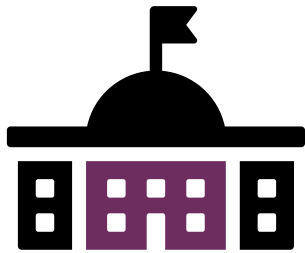
The Administration for Children and Families (ACF) is part of HHS. ACF oversees money child care programs get from the federal government.

Child Care and Families with Disabilities



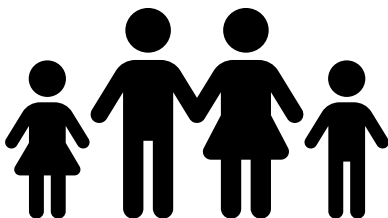
What is child care?

Child care is any program children attend away from home. Programs are for children aged 5 and under. The person or group that runs the program is a child care provider.



What are federally funded child care providers?

Federally funded child care providers get money from the federal government for their child care program.



Who are families with disabilities?

Families with disabilities have a child or a parent with a disability. A disability may be physical, intellectual, or developmental. In some cases, both a child and a parent may have a disability.

Federal Disability Laws

What is IDEA?

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is the nation's special education law. This law says states must find, screen, and help children with disabilities find supports.



What is ADA Title III?

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) Title III protects people with disabilities from being excluded from a privately run space that is open to the public, including child care centers. This law states these spaces must do their best to make buildings and programs accessible to all.



What is section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973?

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 prevents any person with a disability from being excluded from any program that receives money from the federal government, including child care programs.

This Report

What is in this report?

This report looks at four things:



1. How many children and parents are there with disabilities in the U.S.?



2. What challenges do children and parents with disabilities face with child care?



3. What do child care providers say about serving children and parents with disabilities?



4. What information do federal agencies have for families with disabilities and child care programs?

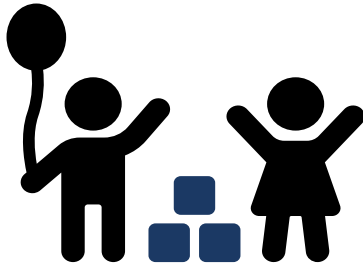
Number of Children and Parents with Disabilities



How did you find the number of children aged 5 and under with disabilities?

We looked at Education’s 2019 Early Childhood Program Participation (ECP) survey. This survey includes information about children with disabilities and their participation in child care programs.

The estimate on the next page is based on a sample of people in the U.S. We use sample surveys when it is difficult or impossible to ask everyone in the population about the topic. A different sample could result in an estimate that is higher or lower. See the [full report](#) for more information.



How many children aged 5 and under in the U.S. have a reported disability?

We estimate 2.2 million children aged 5 and under have a reported disability. This estimate may be low because some disabilities are hard to recognize when children are under the age of 5. The most common types of disabilities children have are speech or language impairments and developmental delays.

Do parents of children with disabilities always find out that their children have a disability before the age of 5?



No. It can be hard to recognize some disabilities in young children. Sometimes parents do not find out their child has a disability until they are older. Also, some families may not be able to get their children screened for disabilities because of long waits and high costs for screening appointments.



How did you find the number of parents with disabilities and children aged 5 and under?

We looked at the Census Bureau’s 2022 Survey of Income and Program Participation.

The estimate on the next page is based on a sample of people in the U.S. We use sample surveys when it is difficult or impossible to ask everyone in the population about the topic. A different sample could result in an estimate that is higher or lower. See the [full report](#) for more information.



How many parents with children aged 5 and under in the U.S. have a reported disability?

We estimate 3 million parents with children aged 5 and under have a reported disability. The most common types of disabilities parents have are cognitive difficulties and learning disabilities.

Challenges Children and Parents with Disabilities Face with Child Care



How did you find out about the challenges families with disabilities face with child care?

We talked to parents in interviews, group discussions, and through an online questionnaire.



What challenges did parents report?

Parents said finding and participating in child care can be hard for many reasons. The next few pages show the most common reasons parents told us.



Parents we spoke with said finding child care can be hard because:



- **Many child care programs have rules that make it hard for some children with disabilities to attend.** For example, some programs say children need to be toilet trained to participate in the program. Some children may find using the toilet hard because of their disability.



- **There are not enough full-time programs that could care for children with disabilities.** Parents cannot work a full-time job without full-time child care. Some parents had to leave their jobs because they could not find full-time care for their child. According to ECPP survey data, a smaller percentage of parents of children with disabilities said their child care covered their work hours very well compared to parents of children without disabilities.

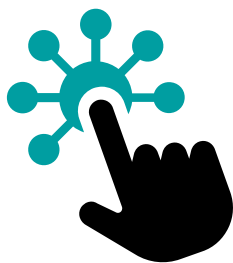


Parents we spoke with said finding child care can be hard because:



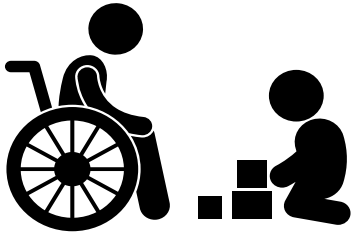
- **There are not enough programs that support children with disabilities.**

Parents sometimes had to wait a long time to get their child into a program. Sometimes parents could not find a program that met their child's needs. According to ECPP survey data, a higher percentage of parents of children with disabilities said they had a lot of difficulty finding the type of child care they wanted compared to parents of children without disabilities.



- **There is no single source of information about child care programs that support children with disabilities.** Parents often had to look for information in many places.

What challenges did children have participating in activities at their child care program?



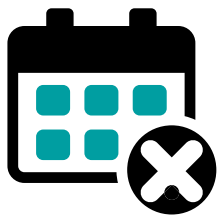
Parents told us their children with disabilities were not able to do some activities at their child care program for different reasons:



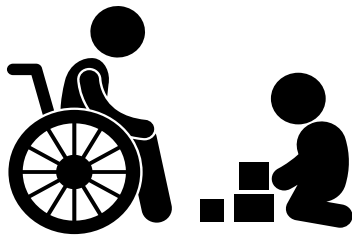
- **Not all the spaces were made for children who use wheelchairs.** This means some children could not get to some rooms or the playground.



- **Children were not invited to do some activities** like cooking or swimming. Children were left out of reading and writing lessons.



- **Children were asked to not come some days or to leave their child care program.** This often happened because of behavior like tantrums or not listening. It is hard for families to find other programs that have space when this happens.



Parents told us their children with disabilities were not able to do some activities at their child care program for different reasons:



- **Children had to leave their program for part of the day to get therapies they need.** This was disruptive for both children and parents.



- **Children had to wait a long time to get the therapies and other services they needed.** This means some children did not have what they needed to do all the activities at their child care.



- **Children did not get the care they needed** like getting diapers changed and staying warm.



What challenges did parents with disabilities have with their child care program?



- **Parents with disabilities sometimes had a hard time talking with their child care provider.** For example, someone with a hearing disability may need to text or email instead of talking on the phone or in-person. Sign language interpreters were not always available when needed.



- Some parents with disabilities **needed help getting to and from their child's program.** For example, a parent may not be able to drive because of their disability.
- Some parents in wheelchairs **could not visit rooms or playgrounds** because of stairs or uneven floors.



- **Some parents did not want their child care provider to know about their disability.** These parents worried that people might think they could not take care of their child.

Changes Made and Challenges Faced by Child Care Providers Serving Families with Disabilities

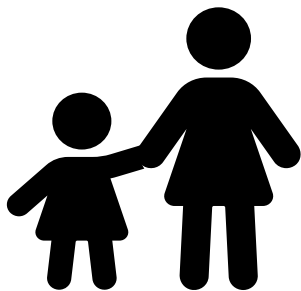


How did you find out about how child care providers are serving families with disabilities?

We talked to and visited child care providers who use federal money for their programs.

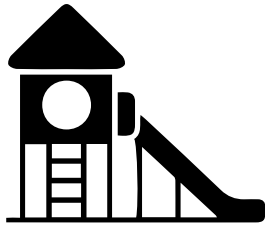
What changes and challenges did child care providers report?

The providers we talked to said they made changes to spaces and programs to help meet the needs of families with disabilities. Some providers also said certain challenges made it hard to fully care for families with disabilities.

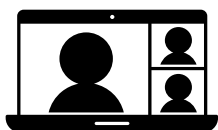




What changes were child care providers able to make to meet the needs of families with disabilities?



- Child care providers made **changes to spaces**. Some providers changed their playground equipment so children in wheelchairs could play. Some providers made quiet spaces where children can go if they need a moment to feel safe or calm.



- Child care providers made **changes to programs**.
 - Some providers added **one-on-one supports for children with disabilities**.
 - Some providers added **training for staff**. Trainings included ways to change classrooms to make them better for children with disabilities.
 - Some providers added **one-on-one supports for parents with disabilities**. For example, providers did pick up and drop off from the car instead of the classroom.
 - Some **changed how they speak** with parents to better meet their needs. This included offering virtual meetings instead of in person meetings.



What challenges did child care providers face in meeting the needs of families with disabilities?



- Providers said there are **not enough staff with special training** to care for children with disabilities.



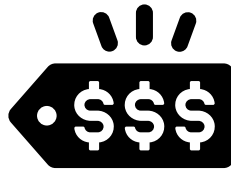
- Providers said **staff need more training** on caring for children with specific behaviors or challenges related to their disability.



- Some child care providers **cannot make their space accessible to all because the building or space cannot be changed.** For example, a window that is the emergency exit in a basement could not be moved. This is more common for providers that care for children in their homes.



What challenges did child care providers face in meeting the needs of families with disabilities?

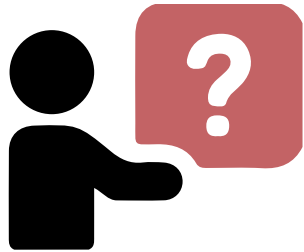


- Providers shared that it is **expensive to hire staff**. Providers also said it is **expensive to make changes to spaces**. In some cases, providers cannot make changes to programs because they do not have enough money.



- Providers may **find it hard to talk with families about disability**. Some parents may not want to discuss their disability or their child's disability. In some cases, providers did not know if a parent had a disability. Sometimes the providers did not know how to meet their needs.

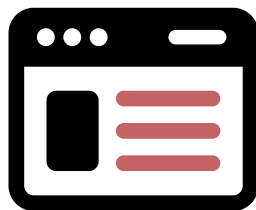
Information from Federal Agencies for Families and Child Care Providers



How did you find out about information from federal agencies on child care for families with disabilities?

We reviewed documents from the agencies about child care. We also interviewed officials from the agencies.

What kind of information do the agencies have?



The Departments of Education (Education) and Health and Human Services (HHS) have a lot of different kinds of information to help parents and child care providers. See the next page for some examples.



What are some examples of information the agencies have?

Education gives money to organizations to run information centers.

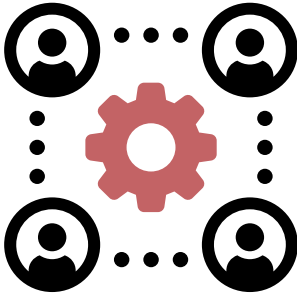
Two of these kinds of centers are called **Parent Training and Information Centers** and **Community Parent Resource Centers**. These centers help parents of children with disabilities know their rights. Every state has at least one. You can find yours at the Center for Parent Information and Resources [website](#).



HHS has an **Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center**. This [website](#) has helpful information for child care providers and parents.

See [GAO-24-106843](#) for more information.

GAO's Recommendations



Many parents do not know about Education's Parent Training and Information Centers that support parents of children with disabilities. Some child care providers also do not know about the centers. If parents and providers do not know about these information centers and the help they offer, they may miss information that could help families with child care.



We recommended that HHS and Education find more ways to work together to let people know about these centers and other information.

Both agencies agreed with these ideas.

GAO's Commitment to People with Disabilities



In line with GAO's core values, we work for full inclusion of people with disabilities. We show our commitment to the disability community through accessibility efforts for our employees and the public who read our reports.



Additionally, GAO has provided Congress with analysis of accessibility and disability issues in several areas, including veterans with disabilities, health care access, voting, disability benefits, equal employment opportunity, and more.

Appendix

GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments



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Staff Acknowledgments

In addition to the contact named above, Kristen Jones (Assistant Director), Jessica Mausner (Analyst in Charge), Myra Francisco, Abby Marcus, Maria McMullen, Michael Murray, Mimi Nguyen, Joy Solmonson, Curtia Taylor, and Adam Windram made key contributions to this report.

Additional Sources for Images

This appendix contains source information for images in this product.

	Department of Education
	Department of Health and Human Services
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