



Report
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Child Care for Young Parents: A Missing Key to Intergenerational Upward Mobility in the District

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This report centers the voices of young parents to increase utilization of child care subsidies in the District of Columbia.



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About the Report

This report centers the voices of young parents to increase utilization of child care subsidies in the District of Columbia. The findings and recommendations provide a missing key to intergenerational upward mobility in the District. The report was prepared by Howard University, together with the DC Primary Care Association (DCPCA), as part of the DC Network for Expectant and Parenting Teens ([DC NEXT!](#)), a federally funded collective impact innovation network aimed at improving the health and well-being of expectant and parenting teens in the District.

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Table of Contents

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	4
Background	11
Approach	14
Initial Findings	16
Recommendations	35
Conclusion	38
Appendix A	40
Appendix B	43
References	45



The Challenge: A Lack of Intergenerational Upward Mobility

Close to one in four¹ children live in poverty in the District of Columbia, with rates as high as 38% in Wards 7 and 8 with predominantly Black residents. And while child poverty has declined² a bit – 29% in 2012 to 23% in 2021 – persistent disparities exist in key areas. In 2020³, the median income for Black households was about one-third the median income for white households; unemployment among white residents was 2.6% but 13.8% among Black residents; and college degree attainment was 90% among white adults compared to 29% among Black adults and 48% among Latinx adults. Across the US, mobility⁴ (the chance a child will earn more than their parents) has declined from 90% in 1940 to 50% more recently, and the chances of a child moving from the bottom fifth of the income distribution to the top fifth is one of the lowest in the developed world at only 7.5%.

The Opportunity: Ensure Young Parents Can Access Quality Child Care

The District has taken bold steps to address this challenge of child poverty and the lack of upward mobility.

These measures include provision of universal pre-Kindergarten for all three- and four-year-olds; passage of legislation to expand affordable or no-cost early learning and child care to zero- to three-year-olds; major investments in affordable housing; one of the highest minimum wages in the country; millions in new paid training and job placement grants; and, more recently, a monthly basic income for low-income families as well as baby bonds legislation to create a trust fund for low-income children.

Still, there is more that can and must be done.

One group of residents – those who become parents as teens – pose both a challenge and an opportunity to reduce child poverty and increase mobility. Children born to teen parents are more likely to live in poverty⁵. This is due in part to cyclic causality where teen parents are already more likely to be low-income⁶ before having children. Then, having a child may impede⁷ their ability to complete high school or college, which then impairs their ability to secure family-sustaining wages. This ultimately leaves their children in poverty and at greater risk of early parenthood again, continuing the cycle of poverty and poor health.



One group of residents – those who become parents as teens – pose both a challenge and an opportunity to reduce child poverty and increase mobility.

However, these challenges often overshadow an immense opportunity: Engaging young parents at this pivotal moment in their lives can change the trajectory of their future and the lives of their children too. Recent research by Wittenberg⁸ et. al, shows that, “In many cases, teen mothers describe pregnancy and motherhood as opportunities for important positive changes in their lives ... [and] that some teen mothers improve their lives because of pregnancy and motherhood.” This research also highlights that the experience of being responsible for a baby can inspire teens to organize and improve their lives.

Young parents are a deeply motivated population who, with the right wraparound support, are ready to break the cycle and move from poverty to prosperity.

This is where policy makers must come in.

One key intervention that could help young parents and their children succeed and end these cycles of poverty and poor health is access to affordable, high-quality child care.

Access to quality child care will enable young parents to finish high school, attend college, complete job training, or secure employment – all keys to building a better life for themselves and their children. In addition to helping young parents, early education⁹ and care is a critical good in and of itself for infants and toddlers whose brains grow fastest in the first three years of life and for whom nurturing relationships, early learning, and good health and nutrition lay the foundation for future success.

The District is leading the nation in investments in quality childcare.

From passing ground-breaking legislation intended to expand vouchers that ensure no family in DC pays more than 10% of their income on child care, to increasing pay for early childhood educators to rates on par with K-12 teachers, to investing millions in the Access to Quality Child Care Grant¹⁰ program to increase the supply of child care slots, to the Mayor’s recent announcement to increase eligibility¹¹ for subsidies from 250 percent of federal poverty guidelines to 300 percent, the District’s efforts are impressive.

However, there appears to be a gap between those who are eligible and those who actually receive subsidies.

In 2019, prior to disruptions due to the pandemic, there were 5,173¹² infants and toddlers receiving child care subsidies. However, according to the DC CFO, an estimated 11,406¹³ children were eligible to participate.

55% of infants and toddlers who were eligible for subsidies were not receiving them.

More research needs to be done to understand the gap between those who are eligible for child care support and those who access it; some reasons may be family members caring for a child or the parent choosing to be a full-time caregiver. Still, because child care is such a critical support, particularly for young parents to finish school and secure employment with family-sustaining wages, DC NEXT! wanted to understand why more young parents were not taking advantage of child care subsidies.

DC NEXT!’s Approach to Solution Driving: Centering Young Parent Voices

The DC Network for Expectant and Parenting Teens ([DC NEXT!](#)) is a federally funded collective impact innovation network aimed at improving the health and well-being of expectant and parenting teens in the District. With over two dozen partners across DC— all serving young parents—and a team of young parents serving as advisors to DC NEXT!, child care consistently surfaces as an unmet need.

DC NEXT! wanted to speak directly with young parents and those supporting them to understand their lived experience navigating the child care system.

DC NEXT! wanted to uncover why more low-income parents are not taking full advantage of child care subsidy vouchers¹⁴, and why those who are, were reporting challenges.

As part of DC NEXT!, Howard University together with the DC Primary Care Association (DCPCA), organized a design team. They used human-centered design and journey mapping to understand the experience of young parents accessing child care. The design team conducted 31 deep-dive interviews with 21 young parents (ages 17 – 25) and 10 providers assisting young parents in accessing support services, including child care. The young parents interviewed were majority Black (66%) and Hispanic (19%), and largely live in wards 7 (33%) and 8 (28%).

Initial Findings

The design team uncovered six initial findings. Outlined below are descriptions of each, but at a high level, several stand out.

First, young parents are deeply motivated to finish school and find employment, and they see child care as a key tool to achieve their goals.

- *“What motivated me to get childcare for her was a lot of people were saying ‘oh because you’re having a baby you’re not going to be able to finish school you’re not going to do anything with your life.’ So I wanted to prove to everybody that I can finish school, and prove to my daughter that I can finish school while being pregnant and being an example for her.” -Young Parent*

However, a number of interviewees reported not knowing about vouchers.

“A lot of people don’t know how to get a voucher or how to start looking for child care.”

-Young Parent

Additionally, many young parents reported not trusting child care providers.

- *“You see a lot of stuff about daycare centers and your kids, so it makes you scared to send your child with someone else.” -Young Parent*

While some may assume young parents would be willing to place their children with any provider, we found that young parents spend a lot of time searching for quality, affordable providers and are clear about what quality means to them.

- *“You don’t just want to put your child in any center, so you have to do your research.” -Young Parent*

Unfortunately, many parents reported difficulty finding care providers who met their standards and accepted vouchers.

“The child care that I wanted, I couldn’t have. I really wanted them to go to the one that had more learning things and activities they can do It was just so expensive. I was just like ... hopefully by next year, they can accept vouchers. They put me on a waitlist. That would have been \$1300 per month. I can’t afford that and rent and a car.”

-Young Parent

One of the biggest barriers to accessing care highlighted by parents interviewed is the confusing, overwhelming, and not-customer-service-oriented application process.

- *“It was too much The process of getting a voucher during the time I was in school ... it’s not an easy process.” -Young Parent*
- *“I’ve had youth who have turned 21 and had to get the voucher on their own and say, ‘I don’t understand this.’ They just felt like the process, the website, and what documents they were missing ... that process is challenging. They’ll say ‘I didn’t understand, they didn’t say what I needed.’” - Social Worker*

Young parents and staff supporting them reported the voucher application process requiring an overwhelming amount of paperwork; multiple, in-person trips; long processing times, sometimes for months; and sometimes a lack of empathy and customer service from staff, ultimately discouraging young parents from seeking support.

“The turnaround time, the people reviewing the applications need to be faster. This is people’s lives. They need this. That teen mom is being affected by this or using some subpar person to watch their child. We don’t need to make it extremely hard.”

- Social Worker

One young mom visited the DHS three times, and on the third time she said, **“Then they wanted more documents on [my daughter’s] dad about child support. I just basically gave up.”**

- “If I was just going to turn something in [to the DHS office], I would be there an hour or two. But if I had to go in and talk to somebody ... I was there all day and was going to miss school altogether.” –Young Parent
- “It was a lot of paperwork. I was only like 18 so I didn’t have anything under my name, so I had to bring my mom’s paperwork and her IDIt was just a lot of paperwork that I didn’t have It took at least six months.” –Young Parent
- “I feel like a lot of the workers, they aren’t very helpful or considerate. A lot of times when I call, I have to try to get in touch with somebody. They are really really rude. They talk to you like you don’t know anything. Like you are stupid. Speaking to anyone from DHS is always really difficult. If you don’t call by 8:30 or 9 am you will be on hold all day. You have to call as soon as they are open, it’s very inconvenient.” –Young Parent

“The biggest crisis children are facing is untrained professionals We’ll look at a young girl who did not fill out her application. But if she’s at home and she’s taking care of her siblings, and her mother’s an addict and her father’s an addict [They’re] calling her lazy and unmotivated. So now she won’t come in because [they’re] looking at her and calling her lazy. Number two is disrespectful, lack of training or understanding of staff.”

– New Heights Coordinator

Additionally, young parents and support staff reported difficulty accessing child care on nights and weekends when many young parents must work, resulting in forced resignations and firings.

- “At night there’s really no one to watch them. For my Nando’s job, I had to work from 5 pm to 10 or 11 pm at night. Daycares don’t run that late ... I got a job at night, but I ended up getting fired because I would always call out because I didn’t have anybody to watch my kids. So that got hard.” –Young Parent

Finally, work and school requirements to receive vouchers were reported as burdensome and confusing, with some young parents highlighting the catch-22 of needing child care in order to find employment, but being required to have employment in order to qualify for child care.

- “After I gave birth to my second They told me that I didn’t qualify [for a child care voucher]. I needed a job, but I couldn’t get a job because I didn’t have day care ... You have 30 days from when you get the voucher to get a job.” –Young Parent

Recommendations for Consideration

This report concludes with six recommendations for consideration, including fully funding the Birth-to-Three for All DC Act to ensure sufficient, quality, affordable child care slots; implementing a targeted advertising campaign to increase awareness of vouchers among those in need; ensuring the District’s child care quality initiative includes what young families define as quality; increasing the availability of child care offered at alternative hours for shift workers; eliminating or at least modifying the work and school requirements; and critically, funding and launching a human-centered design process to reform the child care voucher and application process to ensure it is short, mobile-friendly, and delivered with compassion.

Opportunity for Collaboration

DC NEXT!, led by the Howard and DCPCA design team, invites key policy makers who have the power to address these challenges to a shared table with young parents and the providers supporting them to work together to improve the child care application process. Together, we can ensure young parents are able to quickly and conveniently access the quality, affordable child care they and their children need to end generational cycles of poverty and thrive.

Initial Findings

Awareness Phase

1. Young parents are motivated to finish school and find employment, and see child care as a key tool.

- a. Child care is key to completing high school, continuing education, job training, and employment.
- b. Child care vouchers cover a cost young parents could not afford.

2. Some young parents don't know about child care vouchers.

Research and Selection Phase

3. Quality and affordability matter: young parents are dedicated to finding quality and affordable child care.

- a. Many young parents don't trust child care providers.
- b. Selection criteria most important to young parents includes: proximity, affordability and availability of voucher slots, quality of staff and services, safety of neighborhood (specifically gun violence).
- c. Young parents highlighted key qualities as: daily photos, children show affection for teachers, feeling listened to and respected, children meet developmental milestones, provision of supports such as food and diapers.
- d. Young parents and providers report a lack of high-quality slots that accept vouchers.

Delivery Phase

4. The voucher application process is not user-friendly: Every young parent interviewed needed assistance navigating the child care system and applying for vouchers.

- a. Young fathers felt particularly cut off from needed help.
- b. Interviewees highlighted specific challenges to the voucher application process including:
 - Long wait times at DHS office.
 - Needing to visit DHS office multiple times.
 - Long processing times from two weeks to several months.
 - Excessive paperwork.
 - A lack of empathy and customer service from some social service staff.
- c. Young parents who applied for vouchers through Level II providers (can process vouchers) and with New Heights assistance, report a better experience.
- d. Level II providers and New Heights staff still face challenges such as gathering needed supporting documents and lengthy applications.

5. The hours provided by child care providers often do not align with work schedules of young workers. Several young parents had to resign or were fired.

6. The criteria around work and school requirements are confusing and burdensome.

- a. The requirements to work, attend college, or certify job search 20 hours per week is burdensome and confusing.
- b. Infants and toddlers of young parents should be allowed to attend subsidized child care regardless of their parents' school or work status.

Recommendations for Consideration

- 1** | Fully fund the Birth-to-Three for All DC Act.
- 2** | Increase awareness of child care vouchers through a targeted advertising campaign including social media channels.
- 3** | Ensure Capitol Quality (DC's child care quality scoring system) aligns with young family definition of quality.
- 4** | Fund and launch a dedicated human-centered design process that directly engages with consumers to reform the child care voucher and application process, including:
 - a. Expedite certification of more Level II child care providers who can process vouchers and applications on-site.
 - b. Eliminate the need to physically go to the DHS office to apply for a voucher.
 - c. Make the voucher application available online, mobile friendly, and including smart logic and auto-fill.
 - d. Implement customer satisfaction survey to create feedback loop from young parents to service providers.
 - e. Incorporate trauma-informed care and ongoing anti-bias, youth-centered trainings for all government and child care providers.
 - f. Reduce the amount of paperwork required; simplify forms.
 - g. Increase data-sharing between high schools, medical providers, and child care providers to expedite access to child care.
 - h. Increase resources for New Heights and other programs to ensure sufficient support staff to help teen parents access child care.
- 5** | Increase availability of child care offered at alternative hours for shift workers.
- 6** | Eliminate or modify the requirement that parents attend school or work to receive a voucher.
 - a. Loosen requirements to "verify" job search with government agencies and ensure young parents can access child care while job hunting.

Author's Note

An advance copy of this report was shared with OSSE and DHS. OSSE shared that they are taking several steps toward adopting some of the recommendations in the report, including:

- Working to improve communications with parents about vouchers and how to access them;
- Developing an online application process; and
- Reviewing policy guides in order to streamline and improve the application process.

We are encouraged by these initial steps and stand ready to bring young parents and frontline support staff together with OSSE and DHS to ensure their planned actions align with the needs of those most in need of vouchers. We also look forward to continuing to engage OSSE and DHS as partners to advance the other recommendations in this report, given the urgency of the need to ensure parents have access to the child care they need to thrive.

Additionally, since the writing of this report, the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) proposed a number of rule changes to the Child Care and Development Fund that may help create more space for some of this report's recommendations. Proposed rule changes include expanding non traditional hours and making the enrollment and re-enrollment process easier and available online.

We strongly support these updates and encourage readers of this report to contact the Under 3 DC Coalition to learn more about the proposed rule changes and how to show support for these changes.





The Challenge: A Lack of Intergenerational Upward Mobility

Close to one in four¹⁵ children live in poverty in the District of Columbia, with rates as high as 38% in Wards 7 and 8 with predominantly Black residents. And while this number has declined a bit – 29% in 2012 to 23% in 2021 – persistent disparities exist in key areas. In 2020¹⁶, the median income for Black households was about one-third the median income for white households, unemployment among white residents was 2.6% but 13.8% among Black residents, and college degree attainment was 90% among white adults compared to 29% among Black adults and 48% among Latinx adults. Across the US, mobility¹⁷ (the chance a child will earn more than their parents) has declined from 90% to 50%, and the chances of a child moving from the bottom fifth of the income distribution to the top fifth is one of the lowest in the developed world at only 7.5%.

The Opportunity: Ensure Young Parents can Access Quality Child Care

The District of Columbia has done a great deal to support working families with young children, and is on pace to serve as a model for the rest of the country.

In 2009 DC began offering universal pre-kindergarten¹⁸ for all three- and four-year-olds. The District has also taken the bold steps of passing a monthly basic income¹⁹ for low-income families by raising a local match (the highest match in the country) to the Earned Income Tax Credit that will be paid out in monthly installments of up to \$560, and passing Baby Bonds legislation²⁰ that will create a trust fund account for children living in low-income households they can access when they turn 18. And in 2022, Mayor Bowser announced \$15 million in grants for employer-led training programs²¹ and job readiness training.

Many of these actions are already significantly improving²² the lives of families with young children as well as the lives and futures of young children themselves. For example, DC's universal pre-K increased maternal participation in the labor force by 10 percentage points from 2007 – 2016.

Young parents are a deeply motivated population who, with the right wraparound support, are ready to break the cycle and move from poverty to prosperity.

Still, there is more that can and must be done.

Despite the District's impressive actions, gaps still exist in the support needed to help parents, particularly young parents, end the cycles of generational poverty that continue.

One group of residents - those who become parents as teens - pose both a challenge and an opportunity to reduce child poverty and increase mobility.

Those who become parents while in their teens face particular challenges as they work to lift themselves and their children out of poverty and poor health.

Teen parents often experience:

- **Worse health**, in the form of increased risk of preterm delivery²³ and increased rates of depression²⁴;
- **Lower educational attainment**, with only 50%²⁵ of teen mothers receiving a high school diploma by 22, compared to 90% of those without children; and fewer than 2%²⁶ of teen mothers who have a baby before 18 earning a college degree before age 30;
- **Higher rates of poverty**, with 66%²⁷ of teen mothers who move out of their family home living in poverty.

However, these challenges often overshadow the immense opportunity engaging young parents at this pivotal moment in their lives can offer to change the trajectory of their future and that of their children too. Recent research by Wittenberg²⁸ et. al, shows that "in many cases, teen mothers describe pregnancy and motherhood as opportunities for important positive changes in their lives ... [and] that some teen mothers improve their lives because of pregnancy and motherhood." This research also highlights that the experience of being responsible for a baby can motivate teens to organize and improve their lives.

Young parents are a deeply motivated population who, with the right wraparound support, are ready to break the cycle and move from poverty to prosperity.

This is where policy makers must come in.

One of the key interventions that could help young parents and their children succeed and end these cycles of poverty and poor health is access to affordable, high-quality child care.

By ensuring young parents can access high-quality, affordable child care, they will be enabled to finish high school, attend college, complete essential job training, or secure employment - all keys to building a better life for themselves and their children. Additionally, high-quality early childhood education is critical from ages 0 - 3, when children's brains are growing fastest, and nurturing relationships, early learning, and good health and nutrition lay the foundation for future success.

Access to high quality, affordable child care relies on addressing several structural barriers preventing young parents from utilizing subsidies. These barriers include:

- **Demand for child care slots outstrips supply:** There are roughly 24,500 infants²⁹ and toddlers under age 3 in DC, and only about 12,200³⁰ licensed child care slots available.
- **The cost is too high:** The average cost of infant care for one child in DC is \$2,020³¹ per month, or more than in-state college tuition. This cost eats up 29% of the \$84,892 median income for families with children in DC, and a whopping 89%³² of income for a single parent with one child living at the poverty line. Additionally, 32%³³ of infants and toddlers live in a census block group where the cost of a center-based program exceeds 50% of median household income.
- **More families are eligible for subsidy vouchers than are receiving them:** In FY19, prior to disruptions due to the pandemic, there were 5,173³⁴ infants and toddlers receiving child care subsidies; however, according to the DC CFO, an estimated 11,406³⁵ children were eligible to participate.

The District is implementing several measures to address these structural barriers and is leading the nation in investments in quality childcare.

In 2018, the District passed the Birth to Three for All DC Act³⁶, which aims to ensure a) no family in DC spends

more than 10% of their income on child care, b) child care providers receive compensation equal to their peers in the public school system, c) subsidies to child care providers are increased to cover the full cost of care, and d) programs that are designed to help parents with young children identify their children's needs and connect with needed services, are fully funded. However, this comprehensive bill is not yet fully funded.

In 2022 the DC Council passed a series of tax code changes to pay for compensation increases³⁷ for nearly 3,200 early childhood educators. This important initial investment of \$75 million will play a key role in increasing supply of high-quality early learning providers. Additionally in 2022, the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) announced a \$10 million investment in the Access to Quality Child Care Grant³⁸ program to increase the supply of child care slots available.

Additionally, the District of Columbia currently offers child care subsidy³⁹ vouchers to families making 250% of federal poverty guidelines or \$66,250 for a family of four; receiving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF); participating in education, training, or employment; or are teen parents seeking a high school degree or equivalent. The Mayor also recently announced plans to increase eligibility⁴⁰ for subsidies from 250% of federal poverty guidelines to 300%.

These actions are impressive and important.

Despite these impressive investments in child care, DC NEXT! and our partners continued to hear from young parents and support staff how few parents were utilizing child care vouchers, and for those who were, how difficult the process was.

Further, it appears that in 2019, before the pandemic disrupted child care data, 55%⁴¹ of infants and toddlers who were eligible for subsidies were not receiving them.

More research needs to be done to understand the gap between those who are eligible for child care support and those who access it; some reasons may be family members caring for a child or the parent choosing to be a full-time caregiver.

Still, because child care is such a critical support, particularly for young parents to finish school and secure employment with family-sustaining wages,

DC NEXT! wanted to understand why more young parents were not taking advantage of child care subsidies.

DC Next!'s Approach to Solution Driving

The DC Network for Expectant and Parenting Teens (DC NEXT!) is a federally funded collective impact innovation network aimed at improving the health and well-being of expectant and parenting teens in the District. As part of DC NEXT!, Howard University, together with the DC Primary Care Association (DCPCA), began conducting a series of interviews and surveys to understand the needs of teen parents. Young parents expressed numerous unmet needs, but one that arose repeatedly was the need for high-quality, affordable child care.

With this in mind, Howard University and DCPCA, designed and implemented a focused project, using human-centered design and journey mapping techniques, to understand the barriers and opportunities to improve the process of accessing child care for young parents in the District.

Twenty-one young parents between the ages of 17 and 25, all of whom had become parents as teenagers, were interviewed about their experience researching and trying to access child care in the District. Additionally, ten providers who assist young parents in navigating the child care system were interviewed, ranging from Program Coordinators with New Heights to social workers, eligibility specialists, and fiscal specialists and Level II child care providers.

The young parents interviewed identified predominantly as Black/African American (66%) and Hispanic (19%). They also live largely in wards 7 (33%) and 8 (28%), although all wards were represented. The ages when interviewees had their first births ranged from 15 years old to 19 years old. Fifty-seven percent of interviewees had one child, 33% had two children, and 9% had three children. Approximately half had graduated from high school and half were still in school, with some in a self-paced program that allows students to graduate at their own pace. Most had worked or were looking for work, and most jobs were in the service industry including the food industry (Dominos, McDonalds, Starbucks), delivery services (Fedex, Amazon), and child care (various day cares). Most had ambitions to pursue additional job training programs (medical assistant, EMT), or attend college (Trinity College for pharmacy, George Mason for nursing, criminal justice with a focus on human services).

Approach



Human-Centered Design

The Howard University and DCPCA team used a design and management framework that develops solutions to problems, which puts the end user at the center of every step in the process. This approach to Human Centered Design (HCD)⁴² involves three phases:

- **Phase I** – Inspiration: Carry out deep dive interviews to thoroughly understand the needs of the people being designed for.
- **Phase II** – Ideation: Generate lots of ideas and prototype them quickly, sharing them with the end user, to collect immediate real-world feedback.
- **Phase III** – Iteration: Continue adapting solutions to suit the needs of the people being served in order to land on solutions that are effective and sustainable.

The research team completed phase I - inspiration - completing 31 in-depth interviews with young parents who have attempted to access child care in the District and frontline providers helping young parents navigate the system. The team also began phase II - ideation - by asking the young parents and the providers what solutions they recommend to address the identified challenges. The final section of this report includes a number of solutions recommended by the young parents and frontline providers interviewed.

Journey Mapping

Understanding that searching for and accessing child care should be as smooth as the process to find and access any other consumer good, the research team also used a journey mapping framework to construct the questionnaire and organize this report. Customer journey mapping⁴³ is a common tool used by the private sector to understand how their customers find, research, select, or don't select their product, and can also be applied to public services and products as well. Journey mapping usually has five stages (See figure 1).

The The Howard University and DCPCA team used a mixed methods approach for this project, applying Human-Centered Design tools, journey mapping techniques, and a thematic analysis.

Five Stages of Journey Mapping

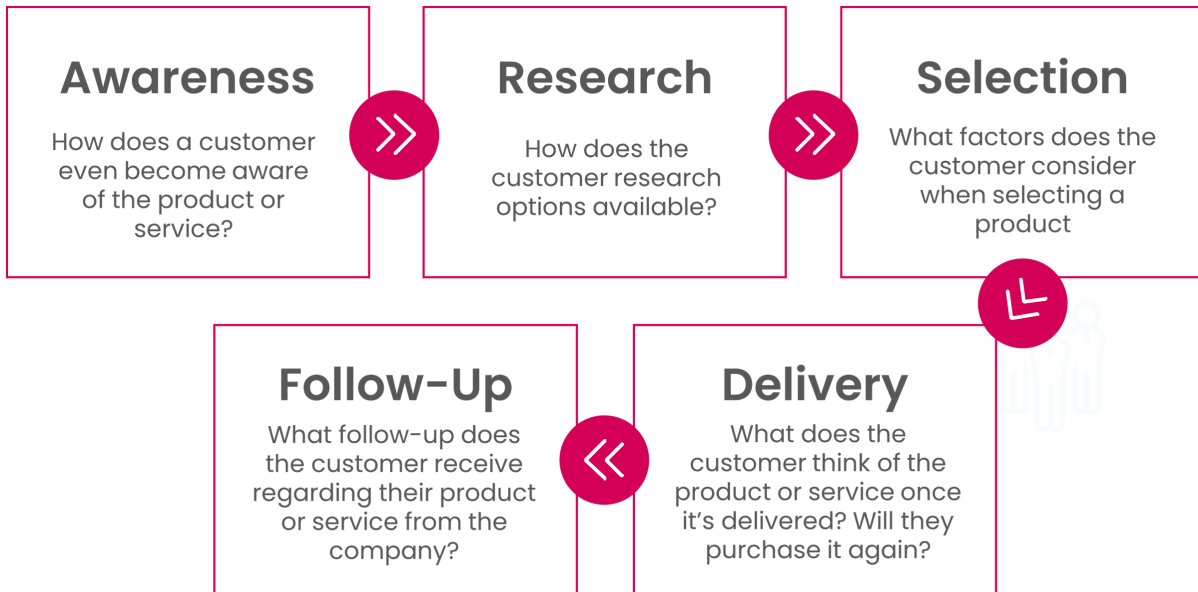


Figure 1

The research team organized our questions to interviewees into these five themes in order to understand where in the customer journey the process of researching and accessing child care is working well and where it is breaking down and preventing access. The findings below are also organized broadly into these categories, although it should be noted that deeper dive research into the exact actions taken by users to access, complete, and submit specific forms needed for child care registration and subsidies is needed to fully understand and update specific processes.

Thematic Analysis

Finally, once the research team completed all 31 interviews with young parents and providers, they

applied a thematic analysis, organizing the key themes emerging from the interviews into categories, following an inductive and deductive approach to pull out recurring findings for this report.

Limitations

This report offers a rich qualitative look at the experiences of young parents and the providers assisting them as they try to access child care in the District. However, we recognize that this is not a representative sample size and respondents who participated are largely connected with services and ultimately able to access child care. Additionally research is needed to understand the experiences of young parents who were not able to access child care.



Initial Findings: Awareness Phase

Finding 1: Young parents are motivated to finish school and find employment, and see child care as a key tool.

All young parents interviewed expressed a strong desire to finish high school and find employment or continue their education in order to build a better life for themselves and their children. Statements from those interviewed highlight their strong motivations and their realizations that access to reliable, quality child care is an essential support if they want to achieve their goals:

Child care is key to completing high school.

- “What motivated me to get childcare for her was a lot of people were saying ‘oh because you’re having a baby you’re not going to be able to finish school you’re not going to do anything with your life.’ So I wanted to prove to everybody that I can finish school, and prove to my daughter that I can finish school while being pregnant and being an example for her.” -Young Parent
- “I don’t think I would be graduating if I couldn’t have put him in daycare.” - Young Parent
- “I enrolled him [in day care] because I was 17 when I had him, I was just starting my senior year. I knew I wanted to graduate on time To me it’s important because education is always important to me, even before I had him. I want him to grow up and see that if I can do it, he can do it.” -Young Parent
- “I couldn’t at the age I was, I had to go to school myself. So her being put into a daycare was the best option for me so I could go to school.” -Young Parent
- “I had just found out I was pregnant when I started school. I told myself I needed to do this. I needed to graduate. I really focused and dedicated myself to finishing this I had to find babysitters. It was hard because I didn’t know them. That’s when I started looking into childcare.” -Young Parent

“I dropped out of school ... I didn’t go back to school after I had her. I tried to do virtual, but that did not work for me. When I put her in daycare I went to school more. School is what motivated me to put her in daycare.”

-Young Parent

Child care is key to continuing education and job training.

“I want a lot out of life. I don’t want to be stuck in one place. I’m young, I’ve got the time. I want more than the bare minimum.”

-Young parent going to school to become an EMT

- “The twins’ dad does MPD training. They are strict on being on time. And me in medical training school, it was very difficult to find someone to watch the twins throughout the day. We had a babysitter. I put them in daycare at nine months. It was a lot to find a babysitter. They cancel at the last minute. Then I have to miss school or he has to miss work.” -Young Parent
- “Having a voucher would have helped me go to school and continue getting my degree.” -Young Parent
- “[My kids’] grandparents have appointments and their own stuff to do. I didn’t want [my kids] to be the reason they missed. Or me missing work or school because they couldn’t watch them.” -Young Parent

Child care is key to employment.

“I realized I would need childcare when she was three months. I was a single mother. I just have to push push and try my hardest to give them a good life. I didn’t have a choice because I was trying to go back to work.”

-Young Parent

- “At the time my son was 7 months. I was working and it was just overwhelming. I didn’t know if I would have to take off of work and his dad was working too. I ended up getting fired from my job. During that time I realized I needed some type of daycare.” -Young Parent

- “It was after I graduated, I needed to work to make some income, I needed to find some childcare.” -Young Parent
- “I wanted a voucher, that way I could provide more for my kids ... I wanted to contribute.” -Young Parent

Child care vouchers cover a cost young parents could not afford.

- “[The voucher] made it easier so we didn’t have to figure out how to pay out of pocket for our daycare.” -Young Parent
- “[Child care] meant a lot because it was like a burden taken off my shoulders.” -Young Parent

What would your life be like without a child care voucher?

- “I would feel like I would really not be able to go to school or work. I know that childcare is expensive. I just know it would be more stressful than what I have with it being free and not being able to pay.” -Young Parent
- “I wouldn’t be able to finish school. I thank them for giving me this opportunity and helping me finish so I can show my child I can do it.” - Young Parent

“I would not be able to go to school. I would not be able to go to college. The job I have, it’s okay for now, but it’s not enough. Even just working, I wouldn’t be able to work, the childcare, the price without the discount would be too much.”

-Young Parent

- “I would still be struggling to go to school. Probably being expelled or kicked out because I can’t make the days. So it helps a lot.” -Young Parent
- One New Heights Coordinator was asked what students’ lives would be like without vouchers, and said: “They would be a mess. The cycle of poverty would never end. I think you would see an increase in abuse, domestic violence. If you are not given support to handle the things you need to take care of, you will get angry, stress will turn into depression.”

Finding 2: Some young parents don't know about the child care vouchers.

A number of young parents interviewed shared that they knew little about vouchers before engaging with support staff (such as New Heights) or going to apply for child care. Those who had heard about vouchers knew of them through word of mouth from family and friends or from their doctor or child's doctor (through programs such as Generations at Children's Hospital). The low awareness of financial support for child care could be a barrier to more young parents accessing the child care they need to finish school and find full employment.

- "I didn't even know anything about vouchers."
-Young Parent
- "[I called to ask] How much they charged. If they had any space. I had no idea about the vouchers."
-Young Parent
- "Maybe they should advertise [vouchers] on their page as well. More daycares should do that."
-Young Parent

"A lot of people don't know how to get a voucher or how to start looking for child care."

-Young Parent

- "I think they should tell parents more about [vouchers] so that they are aware." -Young Parent
- "It was a little stressful. I wish I would have found out about the [voucher] program sooner." -Young Parent
- "What do you mean by voucher?" -Young Parent
- "I heard people mention [vouchers] when I was pregnant, but I didn't understand it." -Young Parent
- "I didn't know how to get into daycare without getting a job. I didn't know about childcare vouchers." -Young Parent

Statements from providers also highlight the lack of knowledge about child care vouchers.

"[Young parents] are not really aware of the vouchers. It's subsidized for students, as long as they are going to school 20 hours a week. Some of them don't know that."

-New Heights Coordinator

- "I do not think it's advertised clearly. I don't know if my students would know how to navigate through the website to find daycare Vouchers could be advertised more." -New Heights Coordinator
- "I don't think everyone knows about subsidies."
-Child Care Provider
- "We have to tell them that we have vouchers available. We have to tell them about the daycares. They think they can just put the baby in the daycare. They find out later they have to apply for a voucher." -CFSA Social Worker

Initial Findings: Research & Selection Phases

Finding 3: Quality & affordability matter: Young parents are dedicated to finding quality, affordable child care.

Young parents often feel pressure to complete school and find employment, and are on tight timelines to put their children into child care programs. However, even with increased pressure and limited resources, the young parents interviewed were dedicated to researching and finding high-quality, affordable child care options for their children.

One upfront barrier identified during the research phase is a lack of trust in early learning providers. A number of young parents interviewed expressed concerns about the safety and wellbeing of their children based on stories they had heard from others and seen in the media. A number of interviewees specifically mentioned concerns about putting their children into care outside the home before they could speak and be able to communicate if something was wrong.

The young parents interviewed all took a similar series of steps to research, identify, and select high-quality, affordable child care options. Selection criteria most important to young parents included: proximity, affordability or availability of voucher slots, quality of staff and services, and neighborhood safety (specifically gun violence). Those interviewed underscored the difficulty finding sufficient voucher slots at desired providers in desired neighborhoods.

Once their children were enrolled, most reported positive experiences and were clear on what features they most valued including: receiving daily photos, their children showing affection for their teachers, feeling listened to and respected by staff, and additional support such as provision of food and diapers.

Young parents carefully researched child care providers.

“You don’t just want to put your child in any center, so you have to do your research.”

-Young Parent

- “I toured three day cares.” -Young Parent
- “I did research between the daycares. You can see the differences. There are a lot of daycares in South East are that way. They leave them in soggy diapers. I’ve seen a lot of cases of daycares of kids not being watched or stuff happening to them. You don’t see that in the high quality daycare.” -Young Parent

Many young parents lack trust in child care providers.

“You see a lot of stuff about daycare centers and your kids, so it makes you scared to send your child with someone else.”

-Young Parent

- “Lately in the news there’s been news of daycares abusing children.” -Young Parent
- “I would not want to have one of my kids in daycare ... I seen a post on social media about certain daycare, teachers abusing the kids, not feeding the kids, and not doing stuff they are supposed to do.” -Young Parent
- “I actually wasn’t really interested in daycare. [She] was my first child and I didn’t trust it.” -Young Parent

“I never really wanted to put her in until she was two to three. Just because she’s a little bit older. She’s able to tell me things, like if something happened. It was mainly my safety precautions.”

-Young Parent

- “I was nervous because I was about to be away from my daughter while I’m in school. And she can’t talk. I don’t know what’s going to happen to her. I don’t know if she is going to be comfortable, because all she knows is her family.” -Young Parent
- “I was iffy to put her into daycare. She couldn’t talk yet.” -Young Parent
- “I’m scared for my child to go around people. [New Heights] had to really convince me. It was hard for me to put my daughter in my daycare.” -Young Parent
- “[Day care] is close to school ... so I will know if my daughter is mistreated ... I can stop and check in on her.” -Young Parent
- “When I had my daughter, at first my mom was watching her for me, but she was working so it was hard for her to help me out as well. So she told me, ‘I don’t want to put her in daycare, you don’t want to put her in daycare, but we have to do something so that you can finish school.’ I reached out to other family members before I decided to go with that option, but no one could do it. Daycare was the only option so I could finish school.” -Young Parent

- One young dad said: "It's hard to explain. It's more like that instinct to not trust something. I guess you could say I didn't like the vibe." -Young Parent

One New Heights Coordinator explained the lack of trust of child care providers by highlighting the challenges young parents may have faced in their own upbringing: "If she has been abused by adults, the likelihood that she wants her child out of her sight is slim to none. When I find students who say 'I won't put my baby in child care because I don't trust it' ... that's a red flag, I know she's been abused. Then they learn to trust me."

The child care provider criteria most important to young parents interviewed includes:

Proximity: The first step in the process for most young parents was to google search for child care near their homes, schools, or work. Proximity was the most important selection criteria identified. Very few young parents used the government-provided website - <https://mychildcare.dc.gov/> - however, some of the providers supporting teens did use the site to find child care providers and note which ones accepted vouchers.

- "For me the distance mattered the most. Being in school, I wanted easy access to him. If anything happened to him, I would have to travel to get to him." -Young Parent
- "I went to Google the nearest daycare." -Young Parent
- "I just looked up the closed daycares to me, where I lived at the time. So it would be easier for me to get her to school, get myself to school ... I just went to google and did the search." -Young Parent

Affordability / Availability of Slots that Accept Vouchers: Interviewees then called to see which providers had openings, which ones accepted vouchers, and to ask basic questions about quality.

A common theme highlighted by the young parents interviewed was a lack of child care slots that accept vouchers and are considered high quality enough and located near their schools and homes.

"The child care that I wanted, I couldn't have. I really wanted them to go to the one that had more learning things and activities they can do, especially for the older one. It was just so expensive. I was just like ... hopefully by next year, they can accept vouchers. They put me on a waitlist. That would have been 1300 per month. I can't afford that and rent and a car."

-Young Parent

- "At first I thought you could use a voucher anywhere. I was looking at any daycare in the area ... Then I was told that I couldn't use it anywhere ... so I had to look at child care centers that would accept a voucher." -Young Parent
- "I was just calling around to the daycare centers. Asking them if they accept vouchers I'm not gonna say it was easy or hard. It was a process of people not answering or calling." -Young Parent
- "I had called quite a few daycares, and they did not accept in-house vouchers." -Young Parent
- "Childcare and all that, it's very difficult to speak with anyone. No one is taking phone calls. That's the hardest part, actually speaking to someone and getting someone to speak with you." -Young Parent

"Some did not accept vouchers, and were too pricey for me."

-Young Parent

- "I looked at the prices, and I was like 'I will not be able to afford this.' It was out of my budget." -Young Parent

- “I attempted to get the voucher from the government, but I was put on a wait list. I was waiting and waiting, and I didn’t want to keep waiting.” –Young Parent
- “Most of the daycares that I called had waitlists or were completely full.” –Young Parent
- “Some didn’t have space and some didn’t accept vouchers. Only CentroNia had space and accepted vouchers.” –Young Parent
- “I applied to a lot of them, but there were such long waitlists. The ones in my neighborhood, they don’t accept vouchers.” –Young Parent
- “I did not think it would take so long. The wait list is a long time. You can call them, and they can’t say how long. There have been times they closed the wait list because there are so many people on the waitlist.” –Young Parent

The providers interviewed also flagged the need for more voucher slots.

- “They are calling to see who takes vouchers or who has an open slot. A lot of times we get stuck there because there aren’t a lot of affordable slots.” –CFSA Social Worker

“They don’t have enough slots. They don’t have enough qualified workers. Some people don’t take vouchers. Some say I had a problem with the vouchers and I didn’t get paid.”

–Social Worker

- “I don’t see them sending them far away. The youth is going to stay with a daycare near them. It’s not the distance. It’s the available slots, especially in our impoverished neighborhoods.” –CFSA Social Worker
- “We have been trying to get teachers. We’ve had marketing campaigns. Trying to help people get CDAs. Now it is a good paying job. Now the Mayor has a salary range that is comparable to teachers in DCPS. That has been very good.” –UPO Staff Member
- “We have a long waiting list, especially for children ages 0 – 3 There is a staff shortage right now.” –Child Care Provider

Quality of Staff and Services: Some interviewees read reviews on google, but most used word of mouth from friends and family, phone calls, and in-person visits to determine the quality of the provider. Finally, all parents visited the provider before sending their children and were looking for friendly, respectful staff and quality of services.

- “I listen to how my kids react. If my daughter is comfortable, she’s gonna show that she’s comfortable, when she’s not she’ll show that she’s not.” –Young Parent
- “One I walked through, I talked to the staff and I automatically felt welcome.” –Young Parent

“I looked at the reviews, but I went into a majority of the daycares. That’s a mom’s fear, their child being mistreated when they’re not around. It’s the people, you gotta really look at the people. If they are not being respectful to you, they are not going to be respectful to your kid.”

–Young Parent

- “I was looking at reviews on the internet about the daycare ... I wanted to see what other people were saying about the daycares.” –Young Parent
- “I wanted her to be in a daycare that spoke Spanish. At home, we speak Spanish, and I didn’t want her to forget.” –Young Parent
- “The surroundings felt warm and homey. The staff seemed like they wanted to be around the kids.” –Young Parent

Safety of Neighborhood, Specifically Gun

Violence: Safety of the community where the provider was located, and specifically gun violence, also came up as a primary concern and determining factor.

- “I used to live in South East (SE) on the Benning Road side, and I went to school in North East (NE). I knew for a fact I did not want her in a SE daycare.” –Young Parent
- “Because their daycare is on the SE side of town, there’s a lot of shootings. I was really skeptical about it.” –Young Parent

“I know regardless of where you are it can be dangerous. Nowhere is really safe. I know my area in South East ... there are a lot of shootings and stuff that goes on. I don’t want her in that area. Bullets don’t have a name, bullets go through walls, so I don’t want to risk that. So my main goal was to find a place in NE that would be more quiet.”

-Young Parent

- “Because their daycare is on the SE side of town, there’s a lot of shootings. I was really skeptical about it.” -Young Parent
- “Probably like two weeks into school there was a shooting by his school. It was terrifying.” -Young Parent
- “The south side area up here is so toxic. I’m not gonna lie, it’s scary to be out in public.” -Young Parent
- “The Anacostia area is worse than the Benning Road area.” -Young Parent
- “I’m trying to get a housing voucher, due to safety issues. I’m around South East; it’s not safe.” -Young Parent
- “I don’t know if you are familiar with Kennedy Street, but they used to have a lot of shootings. There was a daycare there that I wanted to put my kids in, but didn’t because of that.” -Young Parent
- A CFSA Social Worker also highlighted the safety concerns: “Youth say, ‘I’m not gonna pick my child up and have to dodge bullets.’ There are safety issues in the neighborhood.” -Young Parent

Once enrolled, most parents reported positive experiences and highlighted the following items as key to a good experience with their day care:

Receiving photos daily:

- “What I like the most is they would share pictures with me of what my kids were doing in class.” - Young Parent

- “I feel like every daycare should have an app with pictures.” -Young Parent
- “I had the cell number of the daycare worker and she would send me pictures and keep me updated to let me know how she was doing. The first week I was sticking my head in to see how it was going. The teacher kept me updated until I felt good.” -Young Parent

“I’m really happy with the service. I like that they send me pictures of my son during the day. They show me what he eats or when they take him out for walks.”

-Young Parent

- “I want to see all of his artwork, I want more pictures. I feel like they can do better on that part.” -Young Parent
- “They gave me Brightwheel, I like that so I can see pictures of her.” -Young Parent

Having their children look forward to school and show affection for their teachers:

- “Along with them treating him so respectfully, he loves it there.” -Young Parent

Feeling listened to and respected:

- “They have so much support and respect for the parents.” -Young Parent

Their children meeting milestones and developing:

“By her going to daycare and being around other children, it made her want to start playing with toys and eating more. She’s started using more motor skills.”

-Young Parent

- “I had a very good experience for my daughter. She learned to walk at the daycare. She took a liking to being in that environment and around other kids and babies her age.” -Young Parent

- “Before he went to daycare and in just a week he caught up. He learned to crawl and to talk, say yes and no. He’s catching up. He’s still a little bit behind.”
-Young Parent

Having everything provided for their children such as food and diapers:

- “They provide everything. That’s the difference between the daycare they are in compared to the daycare at my apartment. You had to provide their own drinks, food, pampers, wipes. I’m working, I’m already giving them at home. Now all I have to do is bring the twins in. The diapers are there, the wipes, are there. They eat breakfast and lunch.” -Young Parent
- “I like how they are generous there. They buy him clothes sometimes and socks. Extra clothes when he pees on himself.” -Young Parent
- “People need childcare and pampers and wipes, because some people can’t afford that.”
-Young Parent

Initial Findings: Delivery Phase

Finding 4: The voucher application process is not user-friendly: Every young parent interviewed needed assistance navigating the child care system and applying for vouchers.

The voucher process is confusing and overwhelming to most young parents.

“I know two people that dropped out of school when they first had their kids, because they could not find anybody to watch their kids and they couldn’t get childcare. They didn’t know what to do and they were embarrassed because they didn’t know what to do or what to say.”

-Young Parent

- “I searched it up, the voucher, I looked up the information, I didn’t understand it. I tried to call beforehand, I was given the runaround about it. I was lost.” -Young Parent

- “This is my first time, so I’m thinking, maybe they will help me find a center. Maybe they have certain centers they work with, but none of that was the case. They were like, ‘You have to apply for the voucher, find a daycare, let [the daycare] know you get a voucher, and then let DHS know you found somewhere so we can send them what we need to send them.’ -Young Parent
- “It was too much The process of getting a voucher during the time I was in school ... it’s not an easy process. Child care is expensive.” -Young Parent
- “A lot of people don’t know how to apply for a voucher, if they are young. People need more information.” -Young Parent
- “Everything puts a big headache on us I don’t know how the voucher process works.”
-Young Parent
- “I have friends who have had kids after me who still go through a struggle to try to get childcare for their kids. The process could be easier.” -Young Parent
- “So I wish the process would be a bit easier for teens. Because you know a lot of teens don’t finish school because they don’t have childcare. Making it easier on them to finish school, that would be a lot of help.”
-Young Parent
- “When I was looking at other daycares around, I was looking at the price. I know some daycares accept vouchers, but the voucher process can be tedious, so that was in the back of my head From people I knew who had kids, they applied for it, and they said it would take awhile. That worried me because I needed to get him into school quickly.”
-Young Parent

Young parents interviewed all received help from support programs or family to research and apply for child care.

- “I understand it’s not just teen moms and dads trying to get vouchers, but I think there could be a different process for teen parents. Because as teens, unless you have someone who can help you and tell you how it is, if this is your first child, you don’t know what to expect or what to do. -Young Parent
- “You’re trying to figure it out. Luckily I had my mom ... but I know people who don’t have that support to tell them what to expect.” -Young Parent

- “So my mom took me down to the DHS building and got the information for me. She helped me do the whole process.” –Young Parent
- “A social worker in school helped me put him in daycare at school.” –Young Parent
- “When I was first trying to get him into daycare I didn’t know what they were asking for.” –Young Parent
- My mom knew some of it, but not everything. It would have been helpful [to have help applying].” –Young Parent

“The application process was a lot. I had to wait for a long time. I wasn’t going to school. I had to have my mom watch my daughter I had to wait, keep calling, bringing up papers. She had to get lab work done. She got like five shots. [New Heights] assisted me with all that. She brought them in. I filled out the paperwork, it was a lot of paperwork. The process is hard. There are a lot of questions.”

–Young Parent

- “When I first enrolled him in daycare, my New Heights program coordinator helped me get him enrolled She walked me through the process of getting into the daycare. She helped me print out the documents I needed to get him enrolled.” –Young Parent
- “I tried to look up daycares, at this time I was not in school and that was pretty stressful because I was like, ‘how can I get a voucher?’ I asked people around me and it was challenging. I asked my mom, and she only has information from when I was young, I don’t think it’s the same. It wasn’t easy. I didn’t have the same resources as when I was in school.” –Young Parent

The support staff and providers interviewed echoed the concerns of young parents that the process to find and access child care is confusing and creates barriers to access.

- “For youth not linked to a system, it’s confusing, or for those who don’t have a case manager.” –CFSA Social Worker

“At New Heights we let them know what documentation they need. The DHS website says it, but I’m trying to think through a kid’s lens: does it say this is exactly what you need? I don’t think it’s in plain children’s language. It needs to be more basic to say: ‘bring these with you to start the process.’”

–New Heights Coordinator

- “I’ve had youth who have turned 21 and had to get the voucher on their own and say, ‘I don’t understand this.’ They just felt like the process, the website, and what documents they were missing ... that process is challenging. They’ll say ‘I didn’t understand, they didn’t say what I needed.’” – CFSA Social Worker
- When asked what portion of parents are not using daycare because they can’t get their paperwork together, a senior staff member from UPO said, “It’s probably about 20% of our population, approximately 100 parents. They drop out or they are terminated, or they don’t finish the eligibility process.”

The young fathers interviewed felt particularly cut off from needed help.

“Teen dads actually matter. And we struggle. We actually try our best too. It can be hard raising baby.”

–Young Father

- When asked ‘what would have helped you find child care more easily?’ one young father said: “Something for the dads or the teenage fathers who are having trouble with childcare ... a lot of programs that are just for the females. A program for the young fathers Basically being more open to the fathers, showing them what’s supposed to be done. Showing them how to sign up for any assistance, like TANF, or a voucher for daycare. Programs for living arrangements. A lot of young children end up becoming parents very early. A lot of young males don’t have any guidance, a father figure, a mentor.” –Young Father

- “A New Heights Coordinator said of fathers: “I think the motherhood programs should be parenthood programs. She didn’t have that baby by herself. The dads aren’t being connected. We see motherhood as just us. The city and the country are uncomfortable engaging young black men ... If you dig deep you will find a scared little boy with a child who needs help too.”

Specific challenges to accessing child care vouchers highlighted by interviewees include:

The voucher process is too time-consuming.

Several young parents and support staff highlighted the challenges with needing to arrive at the Department of Human Services (DHS) building early in the morning and facing long wait times, resulting in sometimes missing school or work.

- “I would get up at 6 or 7 in the morning. Some people would be out there at 4 or 5 in the morning, so there would already be a line by the time you got out there.” -Young Parent

“If I was just going to turn something in, I would be there an hour or two. But if I had to go in and talk to somebody ... I was there all day and was going to miss school altogether. I would get out at 1 or 2, and I get out [of school] at 3 or 4.”

-Young Parent

- How was your visit to DHS: “Inconvenient. A headache. They have a cut off time. I went down there around 10 am. I was just waiting and waiting, there’s always long lines. It was a couple hours I was in that line waiting. They were having a cut off time for their lunch break. They wanted me to come back the next day at 7:30 am.” -Young Parent
- “That’s the hard part, you have to go to the food stamp building to get a voucher.” -Young Parent
- “It’s a long process.” -Young Parent
- “The only issue with DHS is how long the lines are and how slow they take.” -Young Parent

- “Students not being there by a certain time and having to come back the next day. We would compile all the documentation and send them there. The student would say: ‘The line was so long, I didn’t want to wait.’” -New Heights Coordinator

Several young parents also told us about needing to visit the DHS office multiple times in order to get all their paperwork correct.

One young mom visited the DSH three times, and on the third time she said, “Then they wanted more documents on [my daughter’s] dad about child support. I just basically gave up.”

- One young mom came back a second time, saying: “I came back two days later at 9 am. I was there an hour and a half. They told me I had to have proof of where I was staying. I was missing documents. So I had to come back again.”
- One young mom visited the DHS office three times before receiving her voucher. “It was a challenge because I was in school, so I would have to try to go to the building. You had to go to the building early to try to be seen, because if not, you’re going to be there all day. I would get there early to try and be seen early so I could try to make it to school, or I’m gonna miss school all together.”
- “They gave no checklist of needed documents. Just told you verbally.” -Young Parent
- “They didn’t have parking, so we had to drive around looking for parking.” -Young Parent
- One CFSA Social Worker suggested, “making it more clear up front what is needed and easier.” -Young Parent

Several interviewees reported the process to receive a voucher taking two weeks to several months. Challenges to the timeline sometimes included needing to be removed from their parent’s benefits such as TANF and SNAP and applying for their own benefits, before being eligible.

- “The turnaround time is 2 weeks to a month.” -CFSA Social Worker

“The whole process took several months.”

-Young Parent

- “It’s not a fast process. Between your school and DHS, it’s a whole process. Because everybody is on their own time. Nobody cares about your time or what you are trying to get done, so you are going to wait.” -Young Parent
- “They were trying to give us issues. They were saying ‘If she needs childcare, she needs her own benefits.’ So we had to go through a whole process of taking me off my mom’s stuff to get my own stuff, so I could even get the voucher It was a process. I can’t just come off my mom’s stuff. My mom had to write something to say I should be taken off her stuff.” -Young Parent
- “Someone in the building told me it might take up to a year. They told me they have in-house vouchers.” -Young Parent

“The turnaround time, the people reviewing the applications need to be faster. This is people’s lives. They need this. That teen mom is being affected by this or using some subpar person to watch their child. We don’t need to make it extremely hard.”

-Social Worker

The voucher process requires too much paperwork.

- “I submitted all my documents, everything was correct and up-to-date. I thought everything had gone through, but the day care notified me the voucher did not go through. They told me I need to reapply. I had to adjust my work schedule to avoid late fees. It took another two months to get everything approved.” -Young Parent
- “It was a lot of paperwork. I was only like 18 so I didn’t have anything under my name, so I had to bring my mom’s paperwork and her IDIt was just a lot of paperwork that I didn’t have It took at least six months.” -Young Parent

- “I know for a fact you have to show them a transcript and it has to be signed by the principal. So it was things like that, so I have to wait on the principal to do her part, so I can take this form down to the building.” -Young Parent
- “If you wanted to keep my voucher, you had to get a signature every week showing you had worked your 20 hours or gone to school for 20 hours.” -Young Parent

The support staff interviewed strongly supported the concerns around the paperwork being burdensome.

- “During the pandemic, it became challenging to get birth certificates. The cost can be a barrier. \$20 for birth certificate if you go in person. It’s \$55 if you get it mailed. I have called twice. They didn’t give me any information. We waited for an hour. They picked up and hung up on us.” -New Heights Coordinator
- “Now I think OSSE, I don’t know where the paperwork or hold up is. It’s almost as if they don’t want to give that voucher to that young person. Now that young person has to miss school or miss work and stay home.” -Social Worker
- “I have a youth that is waiting to put her daughter in daycare, because she needs a lead test. And in the meantime this delays the youth from going to school and working. I really feel like the paperwork is delaying.” -Social Worker
- “Sometimes when OSSE gets the daycare application, we find out later, something is wrong, the baby is missing a lead test, or the baby is missing a shot on the health care. So that delays our youth getting a voucher. In the meantime I have a youth who needs to go to work and needs to go to school.” -Social Worker

“It’s almost like they don’t want [the youth] to go back to school and get a job, because there is such a delay.”

-Social Worker

- “There was a time when OSSE’s turnaround time was quicker. But now it takes 2 weeks or a month. There is something wrong with the paperwork, but it doesn’t make its way back to us.” -Social Worker

- “I submitted everything on the youth, and in the middle of it OSSE changed their forms. So they tell me they changed the form and now you have to do it all over again. How is that fair to the youth? You caught them when they were motivated. And the delays ruin their motivation. Now they feel like ‘nevermind.’ Do you want this youth to go to school? It feels like all the barriers. Where is the breakdown in the paperwork? I have screamed and yelled.”
-Social Worker

Young parents report a lack of empathy and customer service by some social service staff

“I feel like a lot of the workers, they aren’t very helpful or considerate. A lot of times when I call, I have to try to get in touch with somebody. They are really really rude. They talk to you like you don’t know anything. Like you are stupid. Speaking to anyone from DHS is always really difficult. If you don’t call by 8:30 or 9 am you will be on hold all day. You have to call as soon as they are open, it’s very inconvenient.”

-Young Parent

- “I think that they should be a little bit more considerate, I know it’s not their problem when people have kids, but when you are trying to get a voucher, it’s hard to get a job, not only for you to go to work, but also to learn. It’s hard because now my daughter can’t go to daycare. Now I’m trying to do school and take care of her and it’s hard.” -Young Parent
- “When you are young and you are applying for benefits, or just doing anything as a young person with a child ... my mom, she helped me go down to DHS ... when I would go by myself I would get stared at because I was young, or they would say stuff to me, and I would have to call my mom to ask if it was correct or accurate. They felt as though because I was young I didn’t know it ... Once my mom would tell me that’s not the way it’s supposed to go, that’s not true, then I would voice, ‘that’s not true.’” -Young Parent

- “I just basically felt like they weren’t trying to help me or do their job. I don’t know if it was because I was a young father and I didn’t know what to do.” - Young Parent
- “This year when I had to get my voucher renewed. There were papers they gave me. They have this box you can put it in in the building. But for some reason they lost the paper, and I had to do everything over. It was good until the renewal. It was like she was unavailable. I kept contacting her. I only had three days to get everything in. I kept calling her. They kept sending me everywhere, I had to fill the papers out again.”
-Young Parent
- “The issue was the communication of the people who work for the government.” -Young Parent

When asked what message young people would like to share with service providers, they said:

“Be understanding of the circumstances that may be stopping people from getting everything done. Be there for families and teen parents to make sure they can focus on themselves and make sure their child is in a safe environment.”

-Young Parent

- “I feel like they should be more easy on single moms. I feel like they could help us more and communicate like they really care. You never know what people go through at home. They made it seem like I didn’t have everything in, but they didn’t make it clear.”
- “Being a teen parent is hard. You are young and have a lot going on with school. We’re young but we’re not dumb. People think they can push you away and think “oh you’re young and don’t know anything about this.” People should take that in.”
- “In normal day life, they look down on you because you decided to have a kid so young. I don’t see why it’s so bad because the kids saved your life.”

- “I would just have the case workers be a little more available. I called for about two days and they did not answer. –Young Parent

Support staff interviewed agreed that treatment of young parents by service providers could be improved.

“The biggest crisis children are facing is untrained professionals We’ll look at a young girl who did not fill out her application. But if she’s at home and she’s taking care of her siblings, and her mother’s an addict, and her father’s an addict [They’re] calling her lazy and unmotivated. So now she won’t come in because [they’re] looking at her and calling her lazy. Number two is disrespectful, lack of training or understanding of staff.”

–New Heights Coordinator

- “There are some good qualities workers need to have to work with students. They need to want to be supportive. ‘I want this service for you because I want you to graduate.’ Being friendly. ‘I’m against you’ versus ‘I’m with you.’ I’m here to support you in this process that is difficult. [Teen parents] have so much trauma going on. They are a teenager, they had a baby, they have to go back to school Engage with them. We can’t expect them to do all the work.” –New Heights Coordinator
- “I think people feel like teen moms are lazy. They are not lazy Our teen moms, they want to go to school, they want to go to college. Just because they had a baby early in life, they don’t want to stop. They need the daycare so they can complete high school, or seek that job, or go to college. These vouchers are needed and necessary. We sometimes stereotype teen parents, and daycare is the number one thing that they need.” –CFSA Social Worker

One New Heights Coordinator highlighted the ageism faced by some young parents from child

care providers, and noted that poor treatment can lead to parents withdrawing from child care and then dropping out of school.

- “With outside daycare centers, they face ageism. If you are 15 or 16 dropping your child off, you are dealing with grown women who are a bit rude.”
- “I will go to the day care center to have a conversation about ageism. If the student has not told you she has faced discrimination, she will stop taking her baby there, and then she’ll stop coming to school. That’s prevalent.”
- “Every day someone had something to say about how [one of my young moms] doesn’t know what she’s doing because she’s a little girl. [The day care] told her that if she was late again, they would lock the doors on her. She called me crying. It was December and it was freezing and raining. She had her baby with her. I honestly didn’t believe they would have done that. I jumped in the car, and drove over there. I talked to the Director and she apologized. If she didn’t have New Heights or an advocate what would she have done?”

Young parents who applied for vouchers through Level II child care providers and with New Heights assistance, reported a better experience.

In the District of Columbia, Level II Child Development Center-Based Providers are certified to determine eligibility for child care voucher subsidies, as well as intake of infants and toddlers, on behalf of OSSE. This means, parents can go directly to a Level II provider to apply for entry into child care as well as voucher subsidies, rather than going to the DHS office.

There are a number of Level II providers across the District; however, the process to become certified in order to process applications for voucher subsidies can be long and complicated, and so can deter more providers from becoming able to process vouchers on site. One provider interviewed explained: “We’re working to become a certified Level II. It is a ridiculous amount of hoops and red tape. The process should be easier so more people can do it.”

Most child care providers operating at DC Public Schools (DCPS) are Level II providers, and so with the help of New Heights⁴⁴, a program funded by DCPS to

support expectant and parenting teens across DCPS, most teens in public high schools receive hands-on support from New Heights Coordinators to apply for child care, including voucher subsidies to ensure teens in high school can send their children to child care at no cost.

Across all interviewees, those who applied for voucher subsidies through Level II providers and with the help of New Heights reported having a better experience than those who attempted to navigate the system on their own or apply for a voucher at the DHS office.

New Heights was noted as key to helping parents in high school access child care.

“If it wasn’t for [New Heights] I would be lost. I wouldn’t know how to get around, how to get vouchers.”

-Young Parent

- “[My coordinator] with the New Heights program. She’s awesome, she always helps me she told me about the [day care] program and told me they give free diapers. She was trying to get me to get a voucher ... but you know something always happens. And I really needed the voucher. She told me about it. She’s been awesome. She’s been a great help. She gives my daughter clothes, little dresses and stuff. They need more people like that in schools and public places. She gave me a lot of resources, she told me she’s going to help me graduate.” -Young Parent
- “When I first put them in CentroNia, New Heights helped me enroll for a voucher and that’s how I got them into daycare.” -Young Parent
- “The New Heights program was probably the biggest support.” -Young Parent
- “[My coordinator with New Heights] did the actual voucher process for me. She just needed some documents ... I’m really grateful for the fact that her and the daycare worked together ... She had a copy of everything. [My New Heights Coordinator] told me everything I would need for the daycare.” -Young Parent

- “I will say, if you are in high school it is pretty easy, some high schools have child care centers or they can refer you. If you are not in high school, it is difficult because for different daycares you need a voucher.” -Young Parent

- “It would be hard, because I didn’t know anything about the vouchers before New Heights. They gave you baby clothes and diapers. And also, it’s a scholarship, by Generation Hope. I didn’t know about it until last year, but New Heights helped me apply for Generation Hope. Even that was 5 years after I graduated, the coordinator still helped me and gave me a letter of recommendation for the scholarship.” -Young Parent

New Heights Coordinators explained the special help students need to access child care.

- “If you have New Heights, it’s an easy process.” -New Heights Coordinator

“I do think that students need someone to support them in this process very closely. Yes, making the system easier ... but it’s the connection. They are not used to calling a random place. We help them make those phone calls. We do role playing to help them make the call, because of their age. And the parents aren’t always involved as much.”

-New Heights Coordinator

- “If she didn’t have me as an advocate she would not have gotten the slot.” -New Heights Coordinator
- “I fill [the application] out with them. Usually I do it for them.” -New Heights Coordinator
- “At four weeks we can get the baby’s birth certificate and vital records. We are texting and doing phone calls ... ‘Did you get the baby’s social security card? Did you schedule your appointment for the one-month check-up? This is what the form looks like.’” -New Heights Coordinator

Level II providers appear to provide a smoother voucher application process than DHS.

- “[The CentroNia] application was more convenient than other places that make you go in. You just had to apply online and then bring in the supporting documents. The actual application, I did that in a day. To gather all the documents, yeah it did take me about a month They did everything with the voucher, but a lot of daycares aren’t like that.”
-Young Parent
- One interviewee applying to CentroNia said: “I was pretty surprised about that, but they were able to do the voucher right there. The application process wasn’t too bad.”

Several interviewees referred to applying for vouchers through Level II providers as receiving “in-house vouchers” and noted the process was easier than going to DHS:

- “I had to do an in-house voucher. Their process is a little bit quicker.” -Young Parent

- When asked what she would change about the voucher application process, one young mom who had attempted to secure a voucher through DHS but gave up and eventually secured one through a Level II provider said: “I would never have gone down to the building, I would have gone straight to an in-house voucher.”
-Young Parent
- “The lady I spoke with told me to call back and speak with the head of in-house vouchers at the daycare. She told me she would see if she could start the next day. She said ‘I have everything, it’s just going to take 2-3 more days,’ I started the process Monday afternoon and she started on Thursday.” -Young Parent
- “I went there to inquire about the services to see if they had any slots. There was one packet ... It was easy. It was paper. I filled it out by myself. It was maybe 8 or 9 pages long. I filled it out there and gave it back to them. It took me maybe an hour The application process took like two weeks.”
-Young Parents

Educare DC: A Model for Improved Application Process

Multiple young parents interviewed noted the ease of applying for financial support and child care through Educare, a nationwide chain of high-quality early childhood development centers, available at no-cost to low-income families. One young parent interviewed said: “[Applying to Educare] was easier than applying at Anacostia. It was that I didn’t have to do all this crazy paper work ... The application was really easy. You just have to prove you are eligible for the free aid. You just list your emergency contact. The application was online, took 5 minutes to fill out.” Another parent said, “It wasn’t hard at all. It was pretty simple and straight to the point. All of the questions were easy.”

This ease of application is not by accident. Interviews with Educare staff reveal an intentional effort, over a number of years, to ensure the application process for financial assistance and entry is simple and clear. To begin with, Educare staff acknowledge the process to access resources is confusing and offer hands-on

support for parents: “It’s really hard for teens and low-income families to get these resources. A lot of families don’t know how to access these resources. They need help. They need to learn advocacy skills or have someone advocate for them. They are going through a huge transitional period, and then they are trying to navigate with a small child. They don’t know where to start.”

Second, Educare makes it easy to apply online and allows parents to text or email screenshots of certain support documents needed: “Most commonly they apply online. You can apply and download all the documents that are needed. If there are parents who are struggling to use technology they can drop them off. They can text or email our enrollment team. For example, if we’re still missing your health certificate, they can take a screenshot and share it via text and email.”

The customer journey for those applying to Educare is straightforward, and the staff are always working to streamline it.

- Most applications are done online through the Educare website.
- The first step is for parents to take a three-question eligibility quiz to see if they are even eligible. This is a time-saver to ensure they aren't being asked to fill out a lot of paperwork, only to find out they aren't eligible for aid or a slot.
- Second, parents complete the application online, which is relatively short. Staff shared: "We used to ask for a lot more upfront, but that created barriers. So now we only ask for the four essential items. We ask for the others later because we don't want to overwhelm them."

- Third, after parents complete the application, a link is sent to their email which takes them to a portal where they can upload all the needed documents.
- Fourth, the enrollment team at Educare reaches out to new applicants within 48 hours to ensure they have submitted all needed documents through the portal.
- Educare estimates the total application takes 15 to 30 minutes to complete, a number they monitor closely and work to reduce.
- This simplified, online application process, with human support as needed throughout, could be a model for other child care providers, including those accepting vouchers.

Although the application process was easier with New Heights and Level II providers, a number of challenges were still highlighted including too many supporting documents and long applications.

- "They have to have 13 documents ... once it passes 30 days, they have to start over. That happens often. From August to September we had 25 parents apply for subsidies, and 5 or 6 (20 - 25%) could not collect all the documents." -Child Care Provider

Medical records were particularly challenging to obtain.

- "The hardest part was getting the medical records. I had to physically go to Children's to get his medical records. I called and then I went into Children's. They wouldn't be able to give me a birth certificate. I needed the universal health certificate, with his height, his weight, a summary about him ... They told me I already received it and they weren't going print it out again. At that point I contacted Generations. The hardest part was trying to get the documents the daycare needed for him to attend." -Young Parent
- "I had to keep going to the daycare to bring them paperwork. They would need this documentation It just was too much. I had to take her to pediatric care. I had to wait 10 days for her health certificate." -Young Parent

- "The biggest hang up: the health certificate." -CFSA Social Worker
- "Right now it's very difficult for teen parents to go to the doctor to get all the documents and vaccine records they need. They don't even know what to ask for ... We've had several trainings to bring doctors in and explain to them what is needed." -UPO Staff Member
- "They need to make sure the child is fully vaccinated and should have a well-baby check. We are struggling in this area ... we have to explain it to the parents, but many parents do not understand." -Child Care Provider
- "Sometimes when they go to the doctor they will ask for the vaccine records. But the DC health cert is two pages (e.g. health, weight, lead, the second page is the immunization certificate). So the doctor's office will only print the immunization certificate. Sometimes it's hard to explain to the parent." -Child Care Provider
- "A lot of times we have trouble getting health information. But the schools have that information, so we wouldn't have to ask the student for it, we could ask the school. Because we are all asking for the same information. They have to provide this information over and over. They shouldn't have to, especially with technology today. Same thing happens at Kaiser, if I move to a new doctor, they all have my up-to-date information." -UPO Staff Member

- “I want [OSSE and DHS] to know about the struggle of the parents going back and forth from medical providers to us. If OSSE or DHS could create an online portal where everyone can share medical providers, childcare providers, the MCOs, housing, in one place, so we don’t have to call them and wait for so long to get information ... a better process to acquire data.”
-Child Care Provider
- “The other delay is them making sure the baby is on the insurance.” -New Heights Coordinator

Records from the school were also sometimes challenging to collect.

- “It was easy except for getting paperwork from the school. I had to wait until school started to go to my office to ask them for a paper to show my hours for school. It was a little hard got the papers for them, but it took a week before I could take him to daycare.” -Young Parent

The full application process for some providers was highlighted as too long and complicated.

Several teen parents sending their children to child care centers at public schools were asked what could be improved about the process. They highlighted too much documentation:

- “I would say as far as the communication, if the communication would have been better I would have understood why the process took so long. The long time to process the documents. The coordinator for the daycare would always have to go to her boss to ask if something was okay. You have to make the timeframe shorter.” -Young Parent
- “Just the extra paperwork, they would ask questions about if the baby was meeting milestones. Also paperwork ... it just seemed to take a long time.”
-Young Parent

New Heights Coordinators similarly flagged the length and complexity of the application.

- “The application process is pretty thick. [Teen parents] may be uncomfortable saying my literacy level is low, or I don’t have anyone at home to help me fill this out. If they need help I will help them fill it out or the daycare will help them fill it out.” -New Heights Coordinator

“The application is something from the 90s. Ninety percent of it is irrelevant. Most of what they are asking for is something that should be done after your kid is accepted ... I see maybe three good pages ... and the rest ... that’s unnecessary.”

-New Heights Coordinator

- “It’s a huge, 20-page packet. But I help with the process.” -New Heights Coordinator

UPO explained why the application form is so long and repetitive.

- “It has to be two different forms because it’s two different funders. I would love for it to be one form. Because you have the DC government paying for vouchers and you have the federal government paying for early head start, so you have two different forms.” -UPO Staff Member

Finding 5: The hours provided by child care providers often do not align with work schedules of young workers. Several young parents were forced to quit or fired.

Several interviewees reported being fired or having to quit their jobs because child care was not offered during the hours they worked, such as nights and weekends, or because child care did not cover enough time to allow them to get to and from work. The District does offer subsidy vouchers to cover “nontraditional services,” available evenings, nights, and weekends, but the awareness and supply of these services does not appear sufficient.

“At night there’s really no one to watch them. For my Nando’s job, I had to work from 5 pm to 10 or 11 pm at night. Daycares don’t run that late ... I got a job at night, but I ended up getting fired because I would always call out because I didn’t have anybody to watch my kids. So that got hard.”

-Young Parent

- “I know I was fired because I could not come into work. She said that since it was my last strike. Not having anybody to keep him for me. I can’t just leave my child with anybody. I’m not the type of person. It was a matter of his safety or my job, and I felt my job was not as important.” –Young Parent
- “My schedule for dominos, it was mostly afternoons, 12 to 7 pm or sometimes 3 to 10 pm. His [dad’s] hours were mostly mornings. So when he was at work I was at home. When I was at work, sometimes he would still be at work. Just that little gap of time was enough to not have someone to take care of him and make me late to work.” –Young Parent
- “I have the voucher now, it’s still a challenge. Even though I have a voucher now, a lot of the jobs that were hiring are like 6 am to 2 pm. My job now is 12 pm to 9:30 pm, which is okay because they are in school during the day, but then my mom has to pick them up. I have to get them and bring them back home. As far as spending money because I’m using public transport and Lyft and Uber. It’s still difficult. I’m hoping I’ll be able to shift my schedule to the time when they are in school.” –Young Parent
- “I was working at Starbucks, I had to close, so the timing didn’t work out.” –Young Parent
- “In order to work 40 hours, I have to be at work by 8 and be off by 5 – 5:30, I would only be able to work part time [without before and after care].” –Young Parent
- “I used to work during the week and I would get off at 9 pm. If I didn’t have anyone to watch him after work, I would not be able to work. If I was to work during the week, I wouldn’t be able to go to work, because ... if [day care] ends at 6:30, my schedule is usually until close, so I get off at 8 or 9 pm.” –Young Parent

Several support staff also highlighted the lack of nontraditional services for young parents.

- “Happy Faces is the only one that has sliding hours. We don’t have a lot of daycare that works on different hours. If I’m working retail, or you have to work on the weekend, but they don’t have that. I’ve only seen two daycares in DC with extended hours. Therefore that limits the youth when they have to work on the weekends.” –Support Staff Member

- “Some daycares have recently cut their hours because of the pandemic. They don’t have enough staff to the daycare from 6 am to 6 pm. So now they have to bring their kids at 7:30 am, but they have to be at school.” –Support Staff Member

Finding 6: The criteria around work and school requirements are confusing and burdensome.

A number of the young parents and support staff interviewed highlighted the challenges of meeting the requirement to work, attend job training, attend a college program 20 hours per week and/or attend high school (or a G.E.D. program) full-time in order to qualify for the voucher. Specifically, several interviewees underscored the catch-22 of needing a job in order to be eligible for child care, but needing child care in order to look for and secure a job. Technically, parents can receive subsidy vouchers if they are job searching 20 hours per week; however, this has to be certified by the Department of Employment Services, and this may be too high a bureaucratic hurdle for young parents to meet.

The requirement to work or attend college 20 hours per week is burdensome and confusing.

“After I gave birth to my second They told me that I didn’t qualify [for a child care voucher]. I needed a job, but I couldn’t get a job because I didn’t have day care ... You have 30 days from when you get the voucher to get a job.”

–Young Parent

- “I couldn’t get a job at first because I didn’t have childcare. My parents, they work, so I wouldn’t have anyone to watch him. Before I even got a job, I needed to be sure he would be in daycare.” –Young Parent
- “OSSE used to be able to take a verification letter. Now they are saying, ‘we need her first paycheck.’ How is she supposed to get a paycheck when she has a new job?” –Social Worker

- “The other breakdown is they changed the voucher system. Now that youth has to be doing 20 hours per week. If they are going to school, that’s one thing. That employer has to make sure they meet that 20 hours. Maybe they are working part time and they only got 16 hours.” –Social Worker
- “I could only go to [college] in the hours he was in school. I had to make it fit because I had an hour commute to and from school They give you timesheets and you have put the hours you work or in school and the name of the person’s class you were in ... you can include homework time. You have to make sure you get a signature, phone number and email of the person.” –Young Parent
- “[Getting the signature] was kind of difficult. If I had classes on a Friday and I wasn’t going to make it in time. I would have to find a FedEx and sometimes the machines weren’t working so it was so hard. Sometimes it wouldn’t work. Then I would email it, and they wouldn’t like it emailed, but that would sometimes be my only way.” –Young Parent

Interviewees suggested high school attendance should not be a requirement to receive subsidized child care.

Subsidized child care is provided to students currently enrolled with a verification letter, school schedule, and attendance history. If a student has 10 unexcused absences in a month, the child care center may not be reimbursed for the month. Because of this, most school-based centers monitor absences and

communicate with the parent, and in some cases New Heights, to reduce absences and encourage the parent to return to school.

This policy is designed to encourage student parents to attend school; however, several interviewees flagged that attendance can be a challenge for some young parents, and that the infants and toddlers of teen parents should be allowed to attend day care, regardless of their parent’s attendance, as quality early learning care is very valuable for infants and toddlers.

- “I’ve also had students who have a history of bad attendance. In those cases, I would write a letter on the student’s behalf. And often times it would be because they didn’t have childcare. If they have three absences unexcused they can terminate services.” –New Heights Coordinator

“Maybe the youth had some problems. We are talking about traumatized youth. They only maybe went to school 20 days last month. Then I get a letter they are going to lose their daycare. I don’t think that’s fair. You have to take into account that they are traumatized. I had a pregnant 13-year-old. Right now I have a 15-year-old. They have been through a lot, you are not always going to have a teen who can do 20 hours per week.”

–CFSA Social Worker



Recommendations for Consideration

1. Fully fund Birth-to-Three for All DC Act.

As this report highlights and the data show, there are a lack of high-quality child care slots that accept vouchers in the District. Parents and support staff report calling around to many providers before being able to find a spot that is close enough, considered high-quality by the parent, and accepts vouchers. These findings also underscore the need for high-quality child care that young parents can trust and feel respected by.

The Birth-to-Three for All DC Act would go a long way toward ensuring quality and increasing availability of affordable child care in the District by increasing compensation for early educators to be on par with their peers in the public school system, increasing subsidies to providers to cover the full cost of care, and ensuring no family in DC spends more than 10% of their income on child care (and less for low-income families).

DC has already taken significant steps to fund this critical bill, passing a modest tax increase, providing an important initial investment in teacher salaries of \$75 million, and investing \$10 million in the Access to Quality Child Care Grant program to increase the supply of slots. However, the bill is not yet fully funded, and additional investments to increase access to affordable child care, including expanding eligibility for subsidy vouchers, is critical.

2. Increase awareness of child care vouchers through targeted advertising campaign including social media channels.

As these interviews showed, a number of young parents are not aware of the vouchers or don't know how to access them.

DC policy makers should fund, and key government agencies should roll out, an advertising campaign to ensure all eligible families, including young families, are aware that subsidy vouchers can help them cover the cost of child care and where to begin the application process.

The process to access subsidies is currently serving as a barrier that is reducing utilization of child care and harming young parents' ability to graduate from high school, enroll in college and job training, and earn family sustaining wages.

The advertising campaign should highlight the trustworthiness and quality of child care providers in DC. Testimonials from young parents in DC sending their children to child care can be used to help convince others of the benefits and trustworthiness. The campaign should be bilingual and shared through key websites and social media channels used by young people.

Several interviewees also suggested advertising vouchers through hospitals, birthing centers, clinics, and physician offices to ensure that young parents are aware of and connected to child care support even before their children are born.

3. Ensure Capital Quality aligns with family definitions of quality.

As this report underscores, many young parents across the District are leery about sending their children to child care providers. Young parents are also dedicated to researching child care providers and enrolling their children in providers whom they deem to be providing high-quality services.

The Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) has taken important steps to improve the quality and oversight of child care providers in the District by launching a new Quality Rating and Improvement System called Capital Quality.

OSSE should ensure that the voices and perspectives of parents, particularly young parents, are included in their definition of high-quality.

Specifically, OSSE could factor into their definition of quality the items identified in this report as being important to young parents such as receiving daily photos, feeling listened to and respected, seeing their children reach developmental milestones, and having items such as food and diapers provided.

OSSE could also partner with DC NEXT!, including the Context Team of young parents, to establish a roundtable and conduct a survey to collect feedback on quality and ensure the voices of young parents are represented in the new Capital Quality system.

4. Fund and launch a dedicated human-centered design process to reform the child care voucher and application process that directly engages with consumers.

These interviews reveal widespread frustration with the process required to apply for and access child care

vouchers as well as simply enroll children in care. From long lines at the DHS offices, to burdensome in-person requirements, to dozens of pages of paperwork, to unempathetic treatment by staff, young parents and those helping them report numerous areas for improvement in the process to access subsidized child care.

While we need to ensure full funding for child care providers and subsidies for families to afford services, the process to access subsidies, particularly for young parents who are facing numerous challenges, is currently serving as a barrier that is reducing utilization of child care and harming young parents' ability to graduate from high school, enroll in college and job training, and earn family sustaining wages.

DC policymakers, together with community leaders, providers, and parents should fund and launch a human-centered design process to reform the child care voucher and application process. This process could be housed at The Lab @DC⁴⁵, in partnership with DC NEXT!

DC NEXT! has built a network of every organization working with teen parents and a strong team of teen parents with lived experience, all of whom stand ready to partner with OSSE and others to stand up a process to reform the child care application process.

A number of initial ideas to reform the process were suggested by interviewees and can create the base for the next phase of this work. Appendix A includes a more detailed outline of findings and recommendations, but a high-level overview of initial ideas for process improvement include:

- Expedite certification of more Level II child care providers who can process applications for vouchers, so young parents don't have to go to the DHS office.
- Eliminate the need to physically go to an office to apply for a child care voucher.
- Make the voucher application available online, mobile-friendly, and including smart logic and auto-fill.
- Implement a customer satisfaction survey that all young parents can complete when interacting with child care or voucher providers to provide immediate feedback on the quality of the service.

- Require ongoing anti-bias, youth-centered trainings for all government and child care providers.
- Reduce the amount of paperwork required, simplify forms.
- Increase data-sharing between high schools, medical providers, and child care providers.
- Increase resources for New Heights and others supporting young parents.

5. Increase availability of child care offered at alternative hours for shift workers.

A number of interviewees reported either needing to quit their jobs or being fired from their jobs because they could not access child care during the hours they were required to work, such as evenings and weekends.

DC does offer vouchers for “nontraditional services”, which are available evenings, nights, and weekends at selected sites; however, it appears there are either not a sufficient number of providers offering these alternative hours, or young parents and support staff are not aware of them.

OSSE should increase the availability of child care available at alternative hours for shift workers and ensure young parents, and those most likely to work in jobs that require alternative hours, are aware of and able to easily access these services.

Young parents in particular are early in their lives and more likely to work in minimum wage jobs that require evenings and weekends. In order to ensure they can keep their jobs and earn an income, expanding alternative hour access to child care is critical.

6. Eliminate or at least modify the requirement that parents work or attend school in order to receive a child care subsidy voucher.

This report has repeatedly highlighted the need to provide child care in order to allow young parents to

complete school and secure employment. Additionally, early education for those aged 0 - 3 is a stand-alone public good that is essential for early learning and laying the groundwork for future health, well-being, and success for our youngest residents.

There are no school or work requirements for parents to send their children to public school or universal pre-kindergarten available to three- and four-year-olds in the District. Early learning and care programs are an extension of our public school system, simply reaching children early in their learning journey and arguably at a time in their lives that is most critical.

Just as there is no work or school requirement for public school, there should be no work or school requirement for early education and care programs because they are simply the right thing to do for our infants and toddlers.

We recognize these are federal requirements in the Child Care and Development Block Grant, but we recommend the District think about ways to provide resources to all parents in need, regardless of work or school status.

As the report highlighted, the requirement to attend school or work 20 hours per week can sometimes be difficult, particularly for shift workers and for teens who may be facing significant challenges at home. Child care should not be used as a lever to require school and work.

If work and school requirements cannot be dropped all together, OSSE should consider ways to increase access to child care voucher subsidies for young parents looking for employment. One approach could be to loosen the proof required to show a parent is job-searching (e.g. proof from DOES or other agency of approved job search), as this may be too high a bureaucratic hurdle, and ensure all young parents are able to receive voucher subsidies for at least three to six months while they search for employment.

Conclusion



Conclusion

One in four children live in poverty in the District and research shows intergenerational upward mobility, the ability to earn more than your parents, and climb out of poverty is actually decreasing in America.

There is one group of residents who are primed to help end these cycles of poverty and are deeply motivated to move to prosperity: young parents. While young parents have long been viewed as a challenge, emerging research shows they are deeply motivated by their children to improve their lives, and if given the proper support, can change the trajectory not only of their lives but of the next generation.

Still, these young parents need comprehensive wrap-around support, including high-quality child care, to ensure they can graduate from high school and go on to earn family-sustaining wages. The District is doing an outstanding job of investing in child care for low-income families; however, data from 2019 (before the pandemic) indicate that more than half those who are eligible child care subsidy vouchers are not using them. Additionally, DC NEXT!, a network of organizations working with teen parents, has heard access to child care vouchers is often a challenge.

DC NEXT! decided to use our network of frontline providers and teen parents with lived experience, to apply human-centered design approaches, to dig into why more young parents aren't utilizing child care subsidy vouchers, given how critical they are to the future success of young parents and their children.

Through conducting in-depth interviews with over 30 young parents and providers supporting them, DC NEXT! uncovered six initial findings and six recommendations for consideration.

We found that young parents are deeply motivated to finish school and find employment and see child care as a key tool to achieve their goals. However, a number of young parents report not knowing about vouchers or how to apply. Young parents also take the quality and affordability of child care very seriously and research their care providers carefully, in part because many report not trusting child care providers. Young parents and support staff also reported a lack of high-quality providers who accept vouchers in locations convenient for parents.

Young parents need comprehensive wrap-around support, including high-quality child care, to ensure they can graduate from high school and go on to earn family-sustaining wages.

Those interviewed also reported a lack of child care offered at alternative hours to accommodate their work schedules on evenings and weekends. The young parents and support workers interviewed also highlighted the confusion and burden around the requirements to work or attend school 20 hours per week, underscoring the difficulty of receiving a voucher while job searching, but needing child care in order to secure a job.

However, one of the biggest takeaways from this research is the confusion, difficulty, and poor customer service reported by those attempting to apply for child care support.

Interviewees reported long lines, cumbersome paperwork requirements, long processing times, and a lack of empathy from workers processing applications.

While these customer-service and ease-of-access elements may seem minor compared to ensuring sufficient funding for high-quality child care slots, they are not. We want to ensure that as the District expands the number of quality child care providers, the process to access these providers is not so difficult that it accidentally creates a secondary barrier. We want to ensure the process to access child care is easy and smooth for all

parents, but particularly for young parents, for whom these support can be life-changing.

The report concludes with six recommendations that range from full funding to ensure the supply of child care slots is sufficient, to increasing awareness of vouchers through an ad campaign, to increasing alternative hours of care for shift workers, to eliminating or modifying the requirement to work or attend school in order to receive child care support.

Still, arguably one of the most important recommendation in this report is for policy makers and OSSE to partner with DC NEXT! to stand up a human-centered design process to reform the child care voucher and application process to ensure it is quick, available online, and delivered with compassion.

DC NEXT!, our network of providers, and our team of young parents, stands ready to work with any policy makers or leaders in DC who want to ensure access to child care is easy, quick, and friendly, and never stands in the way of a young person achieving their dreams and climbing from poverty to prosperity.





APPENDIX A: Detailed Recommendations to Jump Start Human-Centered Design Process to Reform Child Care Voucher and Application Process

Expedite certification of more Level II child care providers who can process applications for vouchers, so young parents don't have to go to the DHS office.

- Numerous young parents and support staff interviewed highlighted the challenges of physically going to the DHS office to apply for child care vouchers, highlighting the need to arrive early, long wait times, poor customer service. However, the process of applying for voucher support through Level II providers was reported as a better and easier experience.
- One provider noted the difficulties and “red tape” required to become a Level II provider, so one idea to improve the process of applying for childcare is to expedite the certification of more Level II providers so parents can access vouchers and enroll their children in the same location and with the same staff person, rather than needing to go to two different places and work with multiple staff.

Eliminate the need to physically go to an office to apply for a child care voucher.

- Outlined below is a recommendation to make the entire voucher application process available online, but one interim step would be to ensure the “intake interview” required by OSSE’s Eligibility Determinations for Subsidized Child Care Policy Manual can be done virtually.
- Another option would be to make this intake interview optional.
- All of the items included in this intake interview could be done via virtual meeting or simply submitted online.
- Removing the requirement that parents come in person to the DHS office would save them time and the frustrations highlighted by many about their experiences at the office.

“The application process could be improved. This is 2022, everything young people do is online. I don’t understand why the application process can’t be online and simple. Then you are dealing with comprehension level. I don’t think the process has caught up with the times.”

-New Heights Coordinator

Make the voucher application available online, mobile-friendly, and including smart logic and auto-fill.

- Making the voucher application available online, and specifically accessible via smart phone, in a responsive format was the most commonly suggested improvement to the process.
- Support staff and providers highlighted the need for a simplified, online form specifically for teens:
 - “The application process could be improved. This is 2022, everything young people do is online. I don’t understand why the application process can’t be online and simple. Then you are dealing with comprehension level. I don’t think the process has caught up with the times.”
-New Heights Coordinator
 - “Kids are wired to do things on their phones.”
-New Heights Coordinator
 - “I think that teens are well versed in technology apps and such. I think the childcare voucher system is not teen technology friendly. If there were an application where they created an account and submitted documentation (photo or screen shots), they could do well. Just a new idea! If this voucher process had reminders, timelines, etc. on a virtual platform, I think this could be very helpful for them as well.” -New Heights Coordinator
 - “I think electronic submission would be helpful. Some people will say I got down there late and they weren’t taking more people or you’ve waited and you didn’t have that document. Doing it online would be more convenient.” -Social Worker
 - “I would love for OSSE to do subsidies like that [online], because right now, it’s in paper form.”
-Social Worker

Implement a customer satisfaction survey that all young parents can complete when interacting with child care or voucher providers to provide immediate feedback on the quality of the service.

- When asked how the voucher and child care application process could be improved, the most common answer was for the staff to be more empathetic, helpful, and understanding.

- Research shows that young parents often face stigma due to their age, and that recurring poor treatment can increase stress, which leads to a whole host of poor mental and physical health outcomes.
- OSSE and DHS could work with DC NEXT! and other community leaders to design and implement a simple, electronic customer satisfaction survey that would be required to be suggested to all young parents interacting with government service providers or child care providers receiving subsidies. An incentive could be offered for completing the survey, such as being entered to win a \$100 gift card, and there could be 3 - 5 questions such - would you recommend this service provider to a friend, and how could this experience have been improved. The findings would go back to that service provider on an agreed-upon basis, to enable them to understand the experience of the parents they are serving and make needed adjustments.

Require ongoing anti-bias, youth-centered trainings for all government and child care providers.

- In addition to creating a feedback loop for service providers supporting young parents, OSSE and DHS could require ongoing anti-bias, youth-centered trainings for all government and child care providers serving young parents to ensure they have the tools and skills they need to provide quality, empathetic care.

Reduce the amount of paperwork required; simplify forms.

- One New Heights Coordinator shared an application for both a voucher and child care that was more than 20 pages long. Because the packet included the voucher application form from OSSE, the federal Early Head Start application, and the application for the child care provider, there were a number of duplicative questions. Additionally, because the form must be printed to be filled out and is not responsive or inclusive of autofill, basic demographic information was requested five times throughout the whole packet.
- Finally, several support staff and providers noted the burden of asking young parents for all information upfront that will eventually be needed (e.g. food preferences, allergies, etc.), rather than holding those additional questions until the child has been accepted.

- Several support staff shared that the paperwork can feel so daunting, young parents sometimes give up.
- In addition to making all applications available online, via smart phone, and in responsive format so key information is autofilled and questions that are not applicable (e.g. information about additional children) are hidden, a review of all questions and the language used should be conducted to reduce unnecessary and duplicative questions and ensure all language is able to be understood by young parents.

Increase data-sharing between high schools, medical providers, and child care providers.

- One of the biggest barriers to young parents quickly accessing child care when needed is the amount of supporting paperwork needed. Several providers interviewed suggested increasing data-sharing between high schools and medical providers with child care providers. Specific ideas include:
- Create a shared database where key documents can be stored, updated in real-time, and accessed by school officials and child care providers. UPO noted that a lot of the information they need “is already at the school,” and suggested creating a platform that would require a username and password, where school staff and students could upload key documents. “All their information can be uploaded in one area so they don’t have to go home and keep those documents, and they can share those uploaded documents ... More shared database platforms would definitely alleviate challenges for teen moms ... DCPS is under OSSE, child care is under OSSE, this should be possible,” said a UPO staff member.

- Support the DC Health Management Network to encourage DC Health to create an online platform where medical providers, schools, and child care centers can access all health records in order to streamline the application process. Currently, schools and child care centers only have access to immunization records through a website, but expanding access to well-baby forms and DC Universal Health Certificates would save time and resources. One child care provider suggested, “If we had a site where we could access records for some people. No personal health information, not breaking FERPA or HIPPA, it would help the family because they are the ones hurt by this.”

Increase resources for New Heights.

- Making the process to research and apply for child care should be a top priority; however, it should be noted that particularly for young parents still in high school, additional support will still be needed.
- New Heights staff were highlighted repeatedly by interviewees as being critical supports for them as they navigated being both pregnant and parenting while still in high school.
- The New Heights program used to serve all public high schools and public charter schools; however, their funding was cut and staff reduced, significantly limiting their reach.
- Increasing resources for New Heights to reach all teen parents, including at all public and charter schools, at a critical juncture in their lives will help ensure young parents receive all the supports they need, including child care, to thrive and pull themselves and their child out of a cycle of poverty.



APPENDIX B: Housing Insecurity Highlighted as Additional Challenge

Housing insecurity was noted as an additional challenge for many young parents.

All interviewees were asked what they saw as the greatest challenges facing young parents, and housing insecurity came in numerous interviews. Interviewees highlighted the challenges of not having a secure place to live while trying to raise their child(ren). Specifically they talked about needing to remain in suboptimal living situations with family due to an inability to afford their own housing; the challenges of accessing quality, affordable child care close to home when you are forced to move frequently; and the challenges of transportation when being required to live in certain locations that may not be near child care, school, or medical care. Support staff echoed these concerns and raised housing as a leading challenge for young parents.

- “We’re sharing a house now. It’s me, my mom, and a few other siblings. It is a challenge. I spend \$60 on Ubers to get him to school when he has to stay with me. It’s very overwhelming. Especially not having a job right now.” –Young Parent
- “The most challenging part about housing is from the teen who lives with her mother. DC has had such a huge homelessness crisis. It’s an epidemic that’s not being addressed. I just had a student, her whole pregnancy she spent in the shelter. She wanted to get her own place. If she gets her own place, [her mom] can’t use her name to get the voucher. The mom needs her on her lease to keep her voucher. She wants to look out for her mother and her siblings.” –New Heights Coordinator
- “[I was living with] my great grandma, my mom, and her pedophilic boyfriend. My grandma didn’t feel like taking me places. My mom was more obsessed with having a man in her life. They tried to separate me and [my child’s dad]. They didn’t keep their word until it came to ultrasounds and checkups; that’s the only time they would give me a ride.” –Young Parent

“Right now I’m on my mom’s housing voucher. At first we got evicted. I was living with his dad. It was draining. I ended up living with my dad. Honestly, it’s always been shaky. It’s always been 50/50 if I can stay with my mom. She doesn’t want me here, but she doesn’t want me on the streets with my son.”

–Young Parent

- When asked what the biggest issues facing teen parents are, one CFSA Social Worker said: "One is child care, lack of. The second is housing."
- "We don't have a lot of housing out there. You can go through Virginia Williams and they'll put you up in a hotel. But the housing market is under attack. Housing vouchers, there are none. You have to meet a certain amount of income right now. I can't get affordable housing if I'm making McDonald's salary. Then you have teen moms living with another relative. The housing system sucks." -Social Worker
- "If home isn't peaceful and comfortable you are going to have a hard time doing anything in your life." -New Heights Coordinator
- When asked what the most challenging part of the voucher application is, one New Heights Coordinator said, "When addresses are mixed up. They don't know they need everything to have the same address. They move a lot. I have students who have lived in three different places in one year. It takes time to update their information. There are cases where they are doubled up. They just rent a room in someone's apartment. So they don't have any official proof."
- "OSSE has a policy you can only change your daycare twice. OSSE does not let you switch. Sometimes it becomes a problem " -CFSA Social Worker
- "Sometimes it's hard for teens to have proof of residency. Maybe their parents kicked them out and they are moving from house to house. So trying to have that proof of residency can be very challenging for that teen." -UPO Staff Member

Housing insecurity can lead to moving a lot, which is also disruptive to infants and toddlers who then must move child care providers and whose parents must then reapply.

- One young parent said, "the house we lived in, we had lived in a while, it was just time to move ..." She added that they then had to move child care as well, which was challenging.



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