



**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

**child care & early  
education in illinois:  
the choices parents make**

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# Child Care & Early Education in Illinois

Until now no one has known how many of Illinois' children use child care or pre-school and how many are cared for only by their parents. Nor has anyone published a reliable estimate of where young children receive care when they are not with a parent: whether they attend child care centers, child care homes, or formal early education programs.

For the first time, we can answer these questions. The report *Child Care & Early Education in Illinois* analyzes responses of 2,158 Illinois parents to the 2003–2004 National Survey of Children's Health (NSCH).

At any given time, two-thirds of families with children from birth through age 5 are using some type of non-parental care. By the time children reach age six, 77 percent of Illinois families will have placed them in non-parental care.

Table 1 shows where young children receive care. It breaks down the types of care into home-based child care and formal programs, which we define as center-based child care or early education programs. One weakness of the NSCH survey is that it did not define early education programs in a useful way, particularly Head Start. In our view, the numbers for the overall category "Formal Program" are more reliable than those for the early education sub-groups.

## CHILDREN FROM BIRTH THROUGH 2 YEARS OLD

The majority (55 percent) of children under age 3 receive parental care exclusively. If we break this age group down further we see that the youngest children are more likely to receive parental care exclusively while children approaching age 3 are less likely.

For the age group as a whole, one in six (16 percent) spend at least part of the

**Table 1: Child Care and Early Education Programs Used by Illinois Families with Children Ages 0-5**

	Number	Percentages of IL families using types of child care (by ages of children)		
		Age 0-5	Age 0-2	Age 3-5
<b>In Any Formal Program</b>	<b>470,630</b>	<b>44%</b>	<b>17%</b>	<b>68%</b>
Child Care Center	258,809	24%	16%	31%
Nursery School, Preschool or Kindergarten	357,730	33%	*	63%
Head Start or Early Start**	110,673	10%	2%	18%
<b>In Any Home-Based Program</b>	<b>407,076</b>	<b>38%</b>	<b>38%</b>	<b>38%</b>
Care in a Provider's Home	250,955	23%	21%	25%
Care in the Child's Home	219,414	20%	22%	19%
<b>In Any Non-Parental Child Care or Early Education</b>	<b>667,960</b>	<b>62%</b>	<b>45%</b>	<b>77%</b>
<b>In Parental Care Only</b>	<b>412,298</b>	<b>38%</b>	<b>55%</b>	<b>23%</b>

\* This question was only asked for children ages 3-5.

\*\* The actual number of children attending Head Start or Early Head Start in Illinois in 2004 was 39,177. The discrepancy between the number of families using the program and those who say they do seems to be due to NSCH's broader definition of Head Start and Early Start and is likely also due to confusion on the parents' end as to what the name means. In our view the numbers for the overall category "Formal Program" are more reliable than those for the early education sub-groups.

week in a child care center, about one-fifth (22 percent) have a babysitter or nanny providing care in the child's home, while another fifth (21 percent) go to a provider's home for care. Since some of these children receive both types of home care, overall about 38 percent receive some type of non-parental home-based child care.

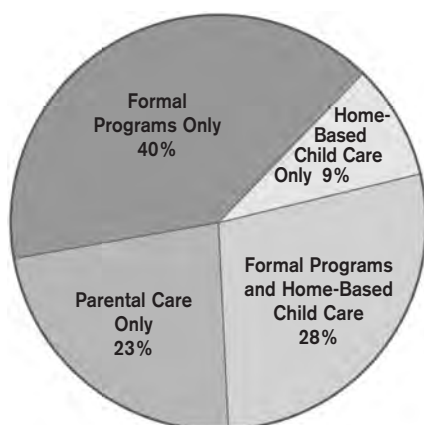
While home providers can be licensed or legally license-exempt, the survey did not ask respondents to specify which type of home-based care they use. From other sources, we find that the majority of home providers for children birth through 3 are legally without licenses. They care for relatively few children at a time, often all related to each other. Some providers are trusted relatives or neighbors of the child.

## CHILDREN AGES 3 THROUGH 5

Once children reach the age of 3, their child care settings begin to change dramatically. As Figure 1 shows, only 23 percent of 3- to 5-year-olds remain exclusively in the care of a parent or guardian. About two-thirds (68 percent) of children ages 3 through 5 attend a formal program such as a child care center, preschool, nursery school or Head Start, often in combination with home care.

The same percentage as the younger group—38 percent—is in home-based child care. Many attend a formal program as well. Only nine percent receive child care solely in a home, as shown in Figure 1.

**Figure 1: Child Care and Early Education Use by Children Ages 3 through 5**



Adding this 9 percent who are exclusively in home-based child care to those exclusively in parental/guardian care, we find that about one-third of children ages 3 through 5 receive care in the home only. This large a proportion will be of some concern to advocates of early childhood education if a significant number of these families are unlikely to enroll their children in free Preschool for All classrooms as they become available.

## OTHER FINDINGS

*Child Care & Early Education in Illinois* reports other findings, including the following patterns among Illinois families with children under age 6:

- One-third of Illinois families that use some non-parental child care and early education (and 22 percent of all Illinois families with young children) mix two or more types of child care and early education in provid-

ing care for one child. This fact calls for more research. It could have negative implications for children's development *if* it means that some children receive inconsistent care as they move from one provider to another each day or each week.

- Families with lower education levels are less likely to enroll their young children in formal programs. They are more likely to use home-based child care.
- As far as we have information, families with higher income use more child care and early education (both formal and home-based) and less parental care. (We do not have reliable numbers for families with incomes above four times the poverty level.)
- Comparing black, white and Hispanic families, black families are most likely to use formal programs and child care in another adult's home, while Hispanic families are least likely to use each of these. When it comes to using parent-only care, Hispanics are most likely, and blacks are least likely.
- Rural and metropolitan area families do not differ significantly in their use of child care and early education.
- Children whose families do not primarily speak English are 126 percent more likely to use home-based child care and 91 percent more likely to use parental care exclusively than families whose primary language is English.
- The more adults a household has, the less likely the family is to use a

formal program. (Though even with three adults, 35 percent of families still use formal care.)

- Very few single-adult families use parental care only. The more adults there are in a household, the more likely the family is to use parental care alone.
- 26 percent of Illinois families with children ages 3 through 5 read to their children fewer than four times per week.
- Parents of children ages 3 through 5 who use parental care exclusively read to their children less often than those who use non-parental care of any type.
- Other factors positively correlate with whether parents read to children ages 3 through 5 at least four times each week: Higher family income, a higher level of household education, speaking English as a primary language, enrolling 3-through-5-year olds in a formal early childhood program and the child being a girl rather than a boy.
- Each month more than 20 percent of families with children in some type of non-parental child care have to make two or more last-minute child care changes. Home-based child care is often criticized for being unstable—for example, leaving a child without care when a home provider gets sick. The study finds that families using child care homes are not significantly more likely to make last minute changes in child care than families that use formal care.

[www.actforchildren.org](http://www.actforchildren.org)

illinois action for children  
4753 north broadway  
chicago, illinois 60640  
312.823.1100