

Child Care is a Barrier for Parenting Students



Parenting students work hard every day to pursue their goals, often juggling work, classes, and caregiving responsibilities. Public systems and programs can provide critical support, but frequently create additional hurdles for parenting students and their families—especially those with low incomes. In 2022, the Center for the Study of Social Policy and Project SPARC conducted research to better understand the barriers experienced by parenting students participating in CalWORKs, California’s cash assistance program for families with children.

This brief highlights findings from the research on parenting students’ experiences with child care. For parenting students, the lack of accessible and affordable child care is a significant barrier because parents must first ensure that their children are taken care of before they can dedicate time and energy to class, study time, and work.

“ You can have a child care provider, but if your kid is sick, you can't send your child to school or to daycare. If you don't have a provider or a family member or a friend, you're it...students have to make a choice on what they do with their kid, how they maintain hours [for the CalWORKs work requirement], and how they get their schoolwork done...it makes it much harder because they have an added layer of responsibility in taking care of this small human who depends on them.”

— VALERIE, A CALWORKS ADVISOR AT A COMMUNITY COLLEGE IN THE BAY AREA

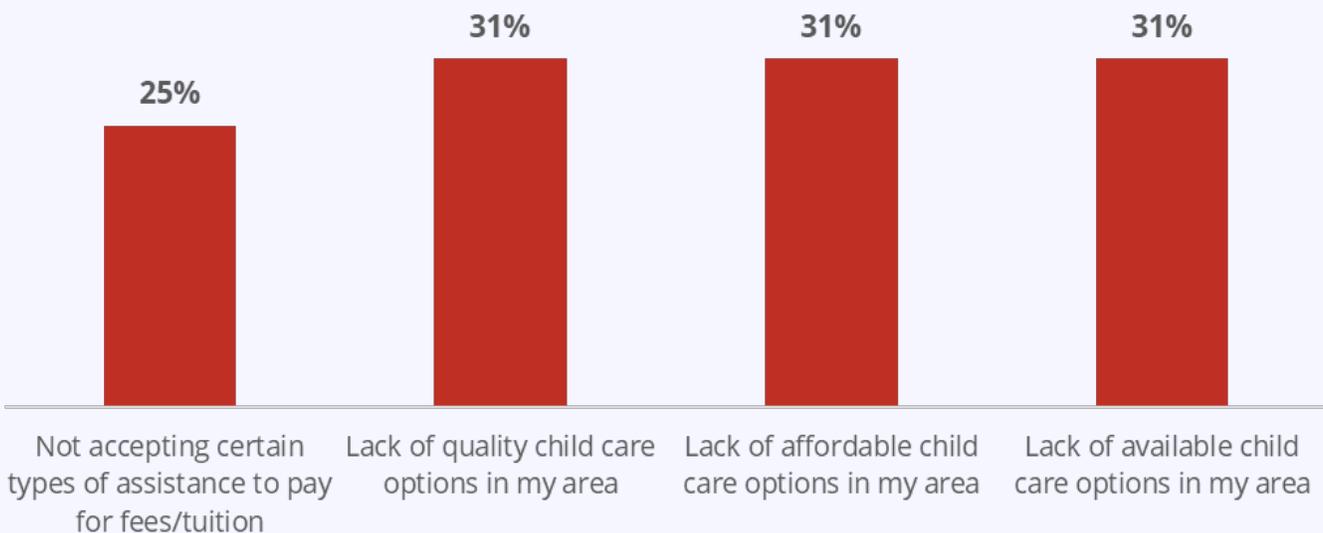
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It can be difficult for parenting students to find and afford child care that meets their needs and priorities.

Child care is indispensable for parents—particularly parents with young children—seeking to continue their education. But many have difficulty securing care. For some, the biggest hurdle is accessing child care subsidies. For others, subsidies do not cover the full costs of care, or they have difficulty finding a provider who accepts subsidies and has available openings. Still others are dissatisfied with the quality of care available, as they struggle to find care that meets their families’ needs and priorities—including provider language and experience, location, hours, and more.

WHEN ASKED WHAT CHALLENGES THEY’VE EXPERIENCED FINDING CHILD CARE, PARENTING STUDENTS REPORT LACK OF AVAILABLE, AFFORDABLE, AND QUALITY CHILD CARE OPTIONS



n=591

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Despite a clear need, many parenting students report that they do not receive government assistance for child care—even though they are entitled to it through CalWORKs.

Parents' challenges affording child care are notable because as CalWORKs participants, they are guaranteed assistance with the costs of care for their children up to age 12. Some experience delays accessing assistance, while many never receive assistance at all.



26%

of parenting students report delays receiving a child care voucher/other support to cover the cost of child care.



43%

of parenting students with children under five years old report that they do not receive child care assistance from the government.



57%

of parenting students with children between the ages of six & 13 report that they do not receive child care assistance from the government.



“Child care for us is actually really not an option, because it's not in our budget. And we really have to be careful about going out of the budget because we have three kids... If I had child care, I would be much more readily available in school, and I would do well.”

— DEREK, A FATHER OF THREE AND A STUDENT IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

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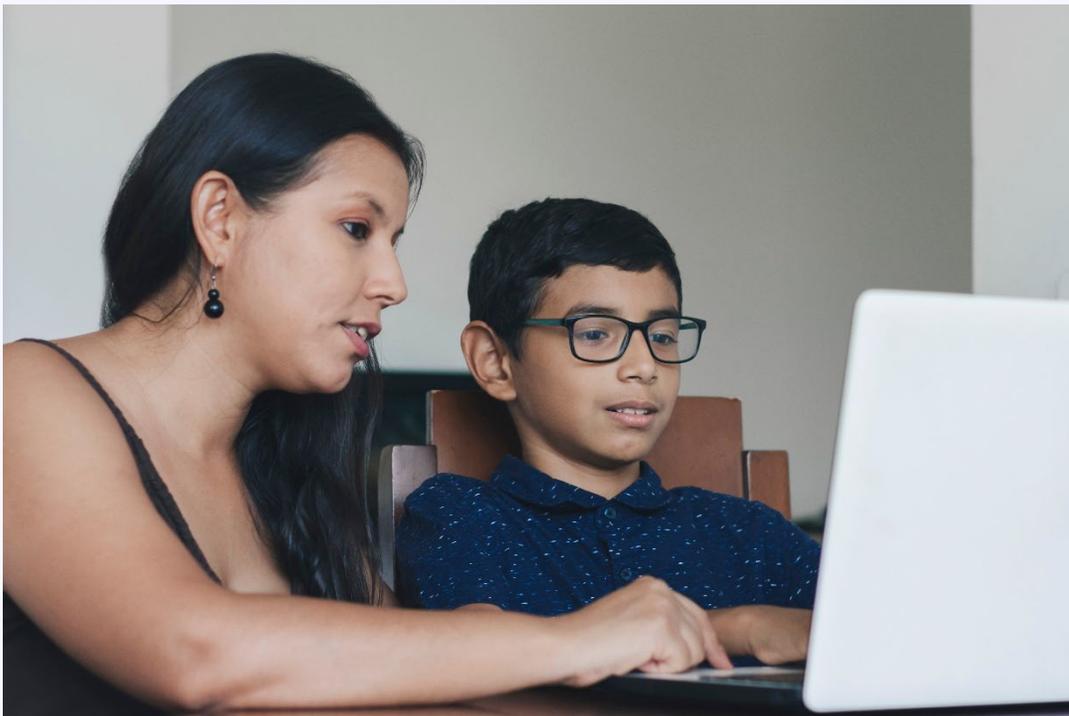


Parenting students in search of child care for children with developmental disabilities face even greater difficulties.

Both parenting students as well as support staff on community college campuses noted that finding child care for children with special needs or disabilities can be uniquely challenging.

“ I've had a fair number of students who would like to pursue their educational goals, however, they have to take less than full-time loads because they're caring for children with special needs... We've had to figure out creative ways to help our students in supporting their children or addressing their learning or social emotional challenges that the children are experiencing as well.”

— SERENA, A CALWORKS ADVISOR AT A COMMUNITY COLLEGE IN SOUTHERN SAN JOAQUIN VALLEY



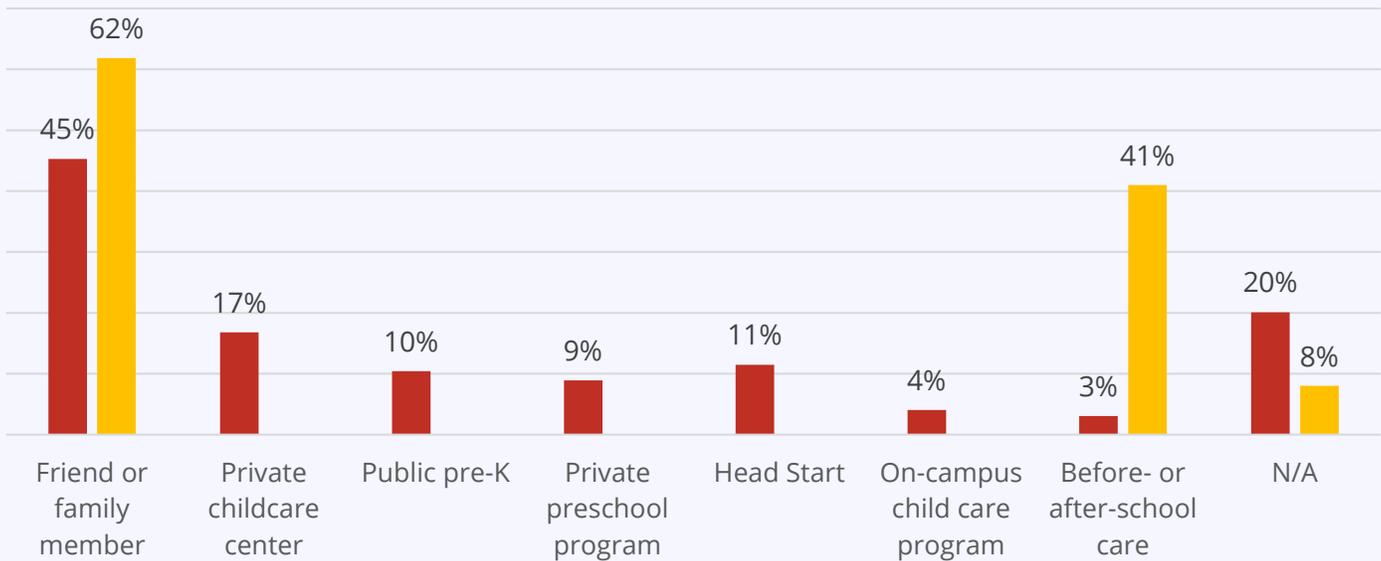
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Parenting students often rely on informal networks to provide care. Some families rely on informal caregivers out of necessity, because formal child care is difficult to find, while others prefer their children to be cared for by friends and relatives.

PARENTING STUDENTS REPORT USING A VARIETY OF CHILD CARE ARRANGEMENTS, WITH FRIENDS AND FAMILY BEING MOST COMMON

■ Parenting students with children ages 0-5 ■ Parenting students with children ages 6-13



Shown above are two questions: "If you have a child under the age of 5 who is regularly cared for by someone other than a parent, which child care arrangement do you use? (Check all that apply)" & "If you have a school-age child age 6-13, do you use any of the following child care arrangements? (Check all that apply)"

n=393
n=346

Parents are grateful for help from family, as it lifts some of the financial burden.

“ Child care was \$1,000 a month and my rent was \$1,500 a month...I just couldn't afford it. So thank God my parents were on my side and they still support me with school and helping me with the kids.”

— BIANCA, A MOM OF TWO AND A STUDENT IN NORTHERN SAN JOAQUIN VALLEY

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Parents often feel more comfortable turning to friends and family for care.

For some families, it is important to have children cared for by family or friends because of cultural traditions, especially given the lack of culturally and linguistically appropriate licensed child care. Other families, especially survivors of domestic violence and trauma, feel safer placing their children with family or friends.

“ Not every Hispanic family — or anybody who's not from the US — feels comfortable with leaving their child with somebody they don't know, especially anybody who's been through abuse. It's a difficult thing to want to let somebody else watch your kid after what you've been through...and the language barrier [is hard]. If the children speak another language, but the daycare providers are mainly English speaking, it's hard for the children to understand.”

— MIRANDA, A MOM OF TWO AND A STUDENT IN CENTRAL COAST



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CalWORKs provides subsidies to compensate friends or family who provide child care for parenting students' children, but more is needed.

Families are grateful that subsidies are available to provide compensation to friends and relative caregivers, but report they are not adequate and can be “insulting,” given the significant emotional and physical labor that caregiving involves.



“ My mom helps me watch the babies, which I get child care through government assistance but man, that's not enough for everything she does for me and how much she watches them... And the rate that she gets paid for watching them, it's low... I feel embarrassed that I need a lot of her help and I don't have extra money to compensate her.”

— SOFIA, A MOM OF THREE AND A STUDENT IN INLAND EMPIRE

Many parents have neither formal nor informal child care arrangements, and instead are providing care themselves, even when in class or working.



55%

of parenting students with children under five years old report that their children are not cared for on a regular basis by someone other than a parent.



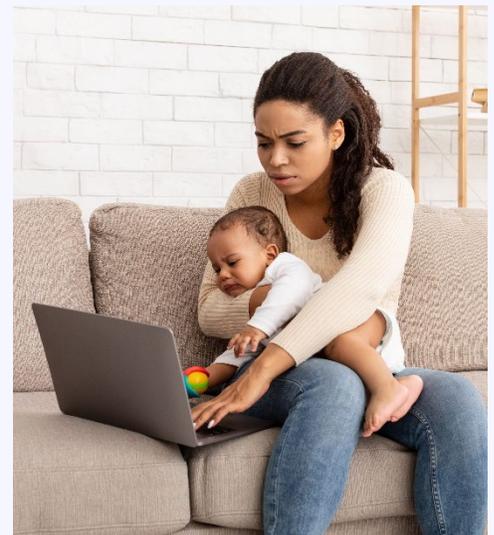
56%

of parenting students with children between ages six & thirteen report that their children are not cared for on a regular basis by someone other than a parent.



1 in 2

That means one in two parenting students are either sole caregivers or rely on their child's other parent to provide all the care for their children.



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Because child care is inaccessible and unresponsive to many families' needs and priorities, parenting students struggle to ensure that their children are taken care of during work, class, and study time.

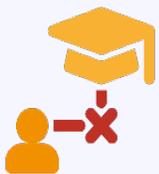
Parenting students report that due to child care challenges in the last year, their ability to focus on school and work has been impacted:



46%
reduced work hours.



49%
received a lower grade in
a class.



45%
dropped a class.



All because of child care
challenges.

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WHAT'S NEEDED NEXT

Parenting students need expanded assistance to access affordable, high-quality child care that meets their needs and priorities, nurtures their children in culturally and linguistically appropriate ways, and enables them to pursue their education and career goals.

“ I used to have my daughter here at home with me while I was doing classes and it was super stressful. I was like, oh, maybe I just need to stop doing college... I never felt like I had enough time [and] was overwhelmed. So when I finally got daycare, it just gave me a break to do homework.”

— JESSICA, A MOM OF A YOUNG DAUGHTER AND A STUDENT IN CENTRAL COAST

About the Research

In 2022, the CalWORKs Association’s Project SPARC—a cohort of parenting CalWORKs students from California community colleges—partnered with the Center for the Study of Social Policy to co-design research to better understand the barriers experienced by parenting students participating in CalWORKs. In the spring and summer of 2022, SPARC and CSSP conducted in-depth interviews with 40 parenting CalWORKs students and 20 community college CalWORKs staff, as well as fielded a survey of 688 parenting CalWORKs students from across California. Data in this series of briefs are products of the research. The research found that while parenting CalWORKs students are highly motivated, they too often struggle to achieve their goals because public systems are not designed to meet families’ needs and create barriers to their success.

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