SANTA ROSA COUNTY, FLORIDA

Community Needs Assessment

Background, Demographic Profile, Early Learning Services, and Community Resources

Prepared for: FL Department of Education, Division of Early Learning, and the Early Learning Coalition of Santa Rosa County Board of Directors
Prepared by: Early Learning Coalition / Community Needs Assessment
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1. INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE

A comprehensive Community Needs Assessment provides an opportunity to examine the characteristics, needs, strengths, and available resources of children and families residing in Santa Rosa County, Florida. For the Early Learning Coalition of Santa Rosa County, understanding the community is essential to ensuring eligible children and families have access to affordable, high-quality early childhood education and care. The assessment primarily focuses on children from birth through age 12 and their families, including

economically disadvantaged households, working parents, children with disabilities, children considered at risk, and families receiving public assistance.

The purpose of this report is to establish a resource profile of Santa Rosa County by identifying key population characteristics, economic indicators, early learning programs, developmental services, and community organizations that support children and families. Demographic and socioeconomic statistics provide a foundation for understanding the community's overall conditions and challenges, while Community Needs Assessment survey responses offer firsthand insight into residents' experiences, concerns, priorities, barriers to accessing services, and gaps in available resources. Together, these sources provide a comprehensive understanding of community needs and will help identify priorities, guide resource allocation, strengthen community partnerships, and inform the development of programs and services that best support Santa Rosa County residents.

1.1 The Early Learning Coalition of Santa Rosa County

The Early Learning Coalition of Santa Rosa County is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization established in statute and governed by a Board of Directors whose composition and responsibilities are established by state law. The Coalition is responsible for administering School Readiness child care financial assistance and Voluntary Prekindergarten (VPK) services through federal, state, and local funding. The Coalition operates under contract with the Florida Department of Education, Division of Early Learning, to deliver early learning services to children and families in Santa Rosa County, Florida.

In addition to administering these programs, the Coalition provides Child Care Resource and Referral services, child care provider training and support, child screening and assessment, and child development resources and support.

The Coalition is dedicated to promoting a system of high-quality, nurturing, and stimulating early learning programs that foster children's social, emotional, physical, and cognitive development, preparing them for success in school and throughout their lives.

2. SANTA ROSA COUNTY DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE

Understanding the demographic makeup of Santa Rosa County helps identify the populations most likely to need affordable child care, early education, family support, and other community services.

The following indicators provide an overview of the county's children and families.

2.1 Geographic Distribution

Santa Rosa County includes several communities and population centers including three incorporated municipalities: the City of Milton, the City of Gulf Breeze, and the Town of Jay, along with forty-eight unincorporated communities and rural areas throughout the county. Included in the unincorporated areas are Bagdad, Chumuckla, East Milton, Harold, Holley, Navarre, Woodlawn Beach, and Pace, to name a few.

The geographic diversity of Santa Rosa County presents unique considerations when assessing the availability and accessibility of child care and family support services. Families living in rural and more remote areas may experience additional transportation challenges or have fewer nearby options for quality, affordable child care. One example is the Town of Jay, where only two child care centers operate.

These geographic differences can create barriers for families even when child care programs are available elsewhere in the county. Transportation, commuting distances, provider availability, and child care capacity all influence whether families can access services that meet their needs. Consideration of these factors is essential when identifying service gaps and planning resources to ensure families throughout Santa Rosa County have reasonable access to early learning programs, affordable child care, and family support services.

Primary sources:

1. U.S. Census Bureau, ACS census tract and block group data
2. Florida Geographic Data Library
3. Santa Rosa County Planning and Zoning information

2.2 Age Distribution

Santa Rosa County has a growing population of families with children. Available demographic estimates indicate:

- Children under age 5 represent approximately 5.23% of the county population
- Children ages 5–17 represent approximately 16.56%
- The county's median age is approximately 40.1 years

For the Early Learning Coalition, the most important age groups are:

- Birth through age 4: Infants, toddlers, and preschool-age children
- Ages 5–12: School-age children who may need before-school, after-school, and summer child care

These populations represent potential demand for School Readiness, VPK, and other early childhood and school-age services.

Primary source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey (ACS), Tables B01001 and S0101.

2.3 Race and Ethnicity

Racial and Ethnic Demographics

- White alone: 83.4%
- White, non-Hispanic: 77.5%
- Black or African American: 6.5%
- Hispanic or Latino: 7.9%
- Asian: 2.4%
- American Indian and Alaska Native: 0.9%
- Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander: 0.2%
- Two or more races: 6.5%

Understanding the racial and ethnic makeup of the county is important when planning culturally responsive early learning programs, family outreach, and community engagement.

Primary source: U.S. Census Bureau, QuickFacts – Santa Rosa County, Florida.

2.4 Languages Spoken at Home

Approximately 6.5% of Santa Rosa County residents age 5 and older speak a language other than English at home.

This indicator is important when considering:

- Translated family materials
- Bilingual staff and family support
- Culturally appropriate outreach
- Communication with parents and caregivers
- Family participation in early learning programs

Primary source: U.S. Census Bureau, ACS Table S1601, Language Spoken at Home.

2.5 Household Composition

Santa Rosa County has approximately 72,605 households, with an average household size of 2.67 persons. Household composition is important because family structure and the

number and ages of children in a household can affect child care needs and eligibility for assistance.

Particularly important populations include:

- Single-parent households
- Two-parent households in which both parents work
- Households with multiple children
- Grandparents and other relatives raising children
- Families with children under age 5

Primary sources:

1. U.S. Census Bureau, ACS Table B11003
2. U.S. Census Bureau, ACS Table B09001
3. U.S. Census Bureau, Selected Social Characteristics, DP02

2.6 Household Income

The median household income in Santa Rosa County is approximately $91,922, based on the 2020–2024 ACS estimate.

Although the county's median household income is relatively high compared with many communities, this figure does not reflect the financial circumstances of every household.

Some working families may earn too much to qualify for certain assistance programs but still struggle to afford housing, transportation, food, utilities, and child care.

This is particularly relevant to the Early Learning Coalition because affordable child care is a key factor in maintaining employment and financial stability.

Primary sources:

1. U.S. Census Bureau, ACS Table B19013
2. U.S. Census Bureau, ACS Table S1901
3. U.S. Census Bureau, Economic Characteristics, DP03
4. Economic Conditions and Family Needs

3. Economic Conditions and Family Needs

Economic conditions play a vital role in a family's ability to access and maintain quality, affordable child care. Although Santa Rosa County has a relatively high median household income compared to many areas, countywide income figures do not reflect the financial circumstances of all households. Low-income families, single-parent households, and working

families living paycheck to paycheck may experience financial challenges that affect their ability to afford basic necessities, maintain financial stability, and access consistent, quality child care.

3.1 Poverty and Financial Hardship

Available estimates identify several important economic indicators for Santa Rosa County:

Santa Rosa Co. Poverty Statistics	Percentage	American Community Survey Period
Overall poverty rate	8.8%	2020–2024
Families below poverty	6.5%	2020–2024
Children under age 5 below poverty	13.4%	2020–2024

The 13.4% poverty rate among children ages 0–4 is particularly significant because this age group closely aligns with the population served by early childhood education and School Readiness programs. Children experiencing poverty may face additional challenges accessing quality child care, health care, adequate nutrition, stable housing, and developmental opportunities.

The United For ALICE (Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed) framework provides a broader understanding of financial hardship by identifying households that earn above the Federal Poverty Level but still do not earn enough to afford basic necessities. According to United For ALICE's 2022 household data for Santa Rosa County:

- 26% of households are classified as ALICE.
- 11% of households are living below the Federal Poverty Level.
- 37% of households fall below the ALICE Threshold when poverty-level and ALICE households are combined.
- Approximately 27,444 households fall below the ALICE Threshold.

These figures demonstrate that financial hardship extends beyond households traditionally classified as living in poverty. Even employed individuals and families may struggle to meet basic needs due to the costs of housing, child care, food, transportation, and health care.

3.2 Public Assistance and Family Support Needs

Participation in public assistance programs provides additional insight into the economic circumstances of families with children. Programs such as Medicaid, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and Temporary Cash Assistance help eligible individuals and families meet basic needs.

According to the Florida Agency for Health Care Administration, Santa Rosa County had 24,082 Medicaid and MediKids enrollees as of September 30, 2026. Of these, 13,253 were children ages 0–18, including:

- 4,345 children ages 0–5.
- 3,567 children ages 6–10.
- 5,341 children ages 11–18.

Additionally, approximately 7,583 Santa Rosa County households received cash assistance and/or SNAP benefits in 2024. This is a combined measure and does not represent SNAP participation alone. Additional estimates indicate that approximately 47.5% of households receiving SNAP benefits had children under age 18, representing an estimated 3,600 households with children.

Statewide, approximately 13.5% of Florida households received cash assistance or SNAP benefits in 2024, compared with 10.4% of Santa Rosa County households. Although the county's reported percentage was lower than the statewide average, these figures demonstrate that a substantial number of local households rely on public assistance to help meet basic needs.

According to research conducted by The Early Childhood Policy Research Group (ECPRG), a large majority of Florida's School Readiness households (72%) in FYs 2019-2021 did not report enrollment in SNAP, Temporary Cash Assistance, and/or Housing Choice Vouchers at the time of their SR application. Among the approximately 30% of households who reported enrollment in another public assistance program, 27% indicated participation in SNAP. Very few households who applied for SR services self-reported enrollment in more than one additional service. The most common combination, however, was the use of both SNAP and TCA (3%).

Participation in Medicaid or SNAP should not automatically be interpreted as eligibility for School Readiness services, as each program has different eligibility requirements. However, these indicators help identify populations that may benefit from additional community resources and support services.

3.3 Employment and the Needs of Working Families

Employment and workforce participation are key factors when assessing the need for affordable, dependable child care. Many parents and caregivers rely on consistent child care arrangements to maintain employment, pursue education, participate in job training, and seek opportunities for career advancement.

According to available Census Bureau and Florida economic data:

- Approximately 56.4% of Santa Rosa County residents ages 16 and older participate in the civilian labor force.
- Approximately 54.2% of females ages 16 and older participate in the civilian labor force.

- The county reported an unemployment rate of 3.4% in 2024.
- The preliminary unemployment rate for 2025 was 4.2%, based on 11 months of available data.

Although many parents are employed or seeking employment, finding affordable child care that accommodates work schedules can remain challenging. Single-parent households, families with multiple children, and households with limited financial resources may experience additional barriers when balancing employment responsibilities with child care expenses.

Parents working nontraditional hours, rotating shifts, weekends, or multiple jobs may have difficulty finding providers that offer appropriate operating hours. Families commuting longer distances, particularly those living in rural areas, may also experience additional transportation expenses and difficulty locating convenient child care.

Access to affordable, quality child care is essential to supporting working families. Reliable child care allows parents to maintain employment, pursue additional education and career opportunities, and work toward greater financial independence while ensuring their children have access to safe, nurturing, and developmentally appropriate early learning experiences.

3.4 Housing Affordability and Family Stability

Housing affordability and stability are key factors affecting families with young children. The cost of housing, including rent, mortgage payments, and utilities, can significantly reduce the amount of household income available for child care, food, transportation, and other essential expenses. Families experiencing housing instability may also face additional challenges maintaining consistent child care arrangements and accessing community services.

Although the current countywide count of children residing in HUD-assisted housing was not identified in published HUD demographic data, Santa Rosa County had approximately 436 federally subsidized housing units in 2025. Specific information regarding the number of children living in these households was not reported.

Housing assistance programs, including the HOME Investment Partnerships Program and the State Housing Initiatives Partnership (SHIP), provide resources for eligible households experiencing housing affordability challenges. These programs represent important community resources for families working toward greater housing stability and financial independence.

Implications for Early Learning and Family Support

The economic indicators presented in this section demonstrate that families in Santa Rosa County experience varying levels of financial need, including households living below the poverty level and working families who earn above the poverty threshold but continue to struggle with the cost of basic necessities.

Housing expenses, food insecurity, transportation costs, employment schedules, and the cost and availability of child care can all affect a family's ability to maintain financial stability and access consistent early learning opportunities.

These findings highlight the importance of maintaining and strengthening access to affordable, quality child care, including School Readiness assistance for eligible families. Community partnerships and coordination among early learning providers, employers, housing assistance programs, health care services, and other family support organizations can help address barriers that extend beyond child care alone.

Understanding the economic circumstances of Santa Rosa County families is essential to identifying unmet needs, recognizing barriers to early learning, and supporting strategies that help parents remain employed while ensuring children have access to quality early childhood education.

Primary Sources:

1. U.S. Census Bureau. American Community Survey, 2020–2024. QuickFacts and American Community Survey Tables S2301 and B23007.
2. United For ALICE. (2023). *ALICE in the Crosscurrents: Florida 2023 Update on Financial Hardship – Santa Rosa County Snapshot*.
3. Florida Agency for Health Care Administration. (2026). *Medicaid Eligibles by Age and County, September 30, 2026*.
4. Florida Department of Health. Florida Health CHARTS. Households Receiving Cash Assistance or Food Stamps/SNAP, 2024.
5. Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis. Household cash assistance and SNAP data.
6. U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service. SNAP Data Tables.
7. Florida Department of Children and Families. Public Assistance Programs.
8. Florida Legislature, Office of Economic and Demographic Research. (2026). *Santa Rosa County Area Profile*.
9. U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.
10. Santa Rosa County Housing Programs; USAFacts; University of Florida, Florida Housing Data Clearinghouse.
11. Childcare Access - The Sunshine Portal; Research Brief: Child Care Affordability for Florida SR Families
12. Childcare Access – The Sunshine Portal: Florida School Readiness Households Using Multiple Services

4. Children with Disabilities/Special Needs and/or Specialized Medical Care

Children with special and/or additional needs represent an important population to consider when evaluating the needs of Santa Rosa County. Children with developmental,

physical, intellectual, learning, behavioral, and emotional disabilities may require additional educational, medical, therapeutic, and family support services

Access to early intervention, specialized child care, appropriate educational resources, and health care services is essential to supporting these children and their families.

Santa Rosa County Statistics:

- Florida Department of Education identified 4,545 students receiving Exceptional Student Education (ESE) services in Santa Rosa County for the 2024–2025 school year. These services support students with disabilities who qualify for specialized instruction and educational assistance.
- Santa Rosa County identified 93 students in kindergarten through 12th grade with emotional or behavioral disabilities. This is a specific disability category and does not represent the total number of students with disabilities.
- During the 2023–2024 school year, 13.83% of Santa Rosa County preschool students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) received most of their special education services in a regular early childhood education setting. This measure provides insight into the inclusion of preschool children with disabilities in typical early childhood learning environments.

Florida Statewide Statistics:

The following statistics provide additional context regarding children with special health care needs throughout Florida. These figures are statewide estimates and should not be interpreted as Santa Rosa County-specific percentages.

- Approximately 25.5% of Florida children from birth through age 17 were identified as having special health care needs during 2023–2024. This includes children who may require additional health care services because of chronic medical conditions, developmental disabilities, or other ongoing health needs.
- Approximately 4.9% of Florida children were diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder.
- Approximately 13.5% of Florida children were diagnosed with Attention Deficit Disorder or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADD/ADHD).
- Approximately 54.5% of children with mental, emotional, developmental, or behavioral difficulties experienced challenges accessing mental health care, highlighting potential gaps in available services.

These statistics demonstrate the importance of ensuring that children with special/additional needs and their families have access to appropriate services and support. Areas of particular concern include access to specialized medical care, developmental evaluations, early intervention, speech and occupational therapy, behavioral health services, specialized child care, respite care, transportation, and educational resources.

Families caring for children with special needs may also experience additional financial, emotional, and caregiving responsibilities. These challenges can affect employment, household stability, and the family's ability to access necessary services.

Florida Early Steps provides early intervention services for infants and toddlers from birth through 36 months who have developmental delays or qualifying disabilities.

Services may include developmental evaluations, therapy coordination, family support, and Individualized Family Support Plans (IFSPs). Early intervention is important because identifying developmental concerns early can help children receive support during critical stages of development. The Western Panhandle Early Steps program serves Santa Rosa County in addition to Escambia, Okaloosa, and Walton counties.

The information below represents regional information, not Santa Rosa County-only results.

Indicator	Reported Regional Information
Children served monthly	Approximately 280–300
Children transitioning into ongoing intervention case plans	Approximately 34%–41%
Services initiated within 45 days of parental consent	100% compliance
Children receiving services in natural environments	74.8%
Families reporting positive developmental and learning outcomes	93%

Understanding the needs of these children and their caregivers is essential to identifying gaps in available services and determining where additional community resources, partnerships, and support programs may be needed throughout Santa Rosa County.

Primary sources:

1. Florida Department of Health. (2022). *Santa Rosa County Health Equity Plan, July 2022–June 2025*.
2. Florida Department of Education. (2025). *Santa Rosa County Annual Performance Report, Bureau of Exceptional Education and Student Services*. https://www.fldoe.org/core/fileparse.php/7672/urlt/SantaRosa2025.pdf
3. Florida Department of Health. (2024). *Children and Youth with Special Health Care*
4. Western Panhandle Early Steps program reports

5. EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CHILD CARE PROGRAMS

Santa Rosa County has a mixed delivery system of early childhood services. Publicly funded programs, private child care centers, family child care homes, faith-based programs, and private preschools all contribute to the availability of early learning opportunities.

5.1 School Readiness Program

The School Readiness Program provides financial assistance for child care to eligible families. Services are delivered through contracted child care centers and family child care homes.

The program serves eligible children from birth through age 12 under the following eligibility categories:

- Economically disadvantaged working families.
- Parents attending college or vocational school.
- Parents participating in qualifying job training programs
- Families receiving Temporary Cash Assistance (TCA) who meet applicable program requirements
- Children identified as at risk of abuse, neglect, abandonment, or exploitation
- Children in families experiencing homelessness
- Children in families affected by domestic violence
- Children with qualifying special needs or disabilities
- Children of low-income migrant families or farm workers
- Parents transitioning from the Work Program into employment
- Certain eligible siblings of children enrolled in priority eligibility categories

Florida's School Readiness Program supports children's early learning and development by providing access to quality child care and educational experiences during the critical early years. The program focuses on preparing children for kindergarten while supporting their cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development.

Educational benefits include:

- Kindergarten Readiness: Helps children develop the foundational skills needed for a successful transition into kindergarten
- Early Literacy and Language: Encourages vocabulary development, communication, listening, early reading, and language skills
- Cognitive Development: Supports early mathematics, problem-solving, critical thinking, and learning through exploration

- Social and Emotional Development: Helps children develop positive relationships, self-regulation, cooperation, and emotional awareness
- Physical Development: Encourages fine and gross motor skills, coordination, and healthy developmental habits
- Developmental Screening: Provides developmental screenings for participating children from birth through age five to help identify potential delays and determine whether additional evaluation or services may be beneficial
- Individualized Learning: Uses developmentally appropriate instruction and ongoing assessment to support children's individual strengths and learning needs
- Family Engagement: Provides parents with information about child development and encourages them to participate in their children's early learning

Importance to Santa Rosa County
School Readiness is a significant resource for families in Santa Rosa County because it helps reduce the financial burden of child care while providing children with opportunities to develop the skills necessary for future academic success. The program also supports working parents and those pursuing education or job training, helping families work toward greater financial stability.

Access to quality early learning experiences during the first five years of life can help establish a strong foundation for children's future educational, social, and developmental success.

Early Learning Coalition School Readiness Child-Specific Data, 11-2026

1. Number of children enrolled in School Readiness: 791
2. Number of children on the School Readiness waiting list, if applicable. 0
3. Number of eligible children not receiving services because of funding or capacity limitations. 290

Primary Sources:

1. Florida Statutes, Section 1002.82 (2026). School Readiness Program; Department of Education Powers and Duties. Establishes developmental standards and assessment requirements. Florida Statute 1002.82
2. Florida Statutes, Section 1002.84 (2026). Early Learning Coalitions; School Readiness Powers and Duties. Florida Statute 1002.84
3. Florida Department of Education, Division of Early Learning. What Is the School Readiness Program? School Readiness Program Overview
4. Florida Department of Education, Division of Early Learning. School Readiness Services – Developmental Screening and Child Assessment. School Readiness Services
5. Florida Department of Education. Florida Early Learning and Developmental Standards: Birth to Kindergarten
6. Early Learning Coalition of Santa Rosa County

5.2 Voluntary Prekindergarten (VPK)

Florida's Voluntary Prekindergarten (VPK) Education Program provides free prekindergarten education for eligible four-year-old children, regardless of family income. Established following a constitutional amendment approved by Florida voters in 2002, the program is designed to prepare children for kindergarten by supporting early learning and developmental growth.

Eligibility Requirements:

- Children must reside in Florida.
- Children must be four years old on or before September 1 of the school year in which they enroll.
- VPK is available regardless of family income.
- Parents must complete the application and provide documentation verifying the child's age and Florida residency.

Program Options:

- School-Year Program: Provides at least 540 instructional hours.
- Summer Program: Provides at least 300 instructional hours.
- Provider Options: Programs are offered through participating public schools, private child care centers, and other approved providers.
- Specialized Instructional Services: Eligible children with disabilities may receive specialized services as an alternative to traditional classroom-based VPK.

Educational Benefits:

- VPK supports kindergarten readiness through developmentally appropriate instruction in:
    - Early literacy and language development
    - Early mathematics and problem-solving
    - Social and emotional development
    - Communication and listening skills
    - Physical development and approaches to learning

VPK is an important part of the early childhood education system in Santa Rosa County, providing eligible four-year-old children access to early learning regardless of family income. The availability of public school and private child care providers gives families options when selecting an appropriate learning environment; however, access may be affected by provider availability, transportation, program schedules, and the need for additional child care before or after VPK hours. Families needing full-day care may

combine VPK with other child care arrangements or, if eligible, School Readiness assistance.

Understanding VPK enrollment and provider availability throughout Santa Rosa County helps identify access to early learning opportunities and potential gaps in services.

Early Learning Coalition Child Specific VPK Data, November 2026:
Number of participants: 1039

Primary Sources:

1. Florida Constitution, Article IX, Section 1(b) and (c).
2. Florida Statutes, Section 1002.53 (2026). VPK Eligibility and Enrollment. https://www.flsenate.gov/Laws/Statutes/2026/1002.53
3. Florida Statutes, Section 1002.55 (2026). School-Year VPK Program – Private Providers. https://www.flsenate.gov/Laws/Statutes/2026/1002.55
4. Florida Statutes, Section 1002.61 (2026). Summer VPK Program. https://www.flsenate.gov/Laws/Statutes/2026/1002.61
5. Florida Statutes, Section 1002.63 (2026). School-Year VPK Program – Public Schools. https://www.flsenate.gov/Laws/Statutes/2026/1002.63
6. Florida Department of Education, Division of Early Learning. Voluntary Prekindergarten Education Program. https://www.fldoe.org/schools/early-learning/parents/vpk-parents
7. Childcare Access - The Sunshine Portal; Child Care Provider Survival Analysis

5.3 Head Start and Early Head Start

Head Start and Early Head Start provide comprehensive early childhood services to eligible children and families. These programs focus on school readiness, child development, family engagement, health, nutrition, and other supportive services.

Santa Rosa County District Schools operates Head Start and Early Head Start services in Santa Rosa County. Available information identifies approximately 260 children ages 2–5 served through T.R. Jackson Pre-K Center.

Primary Source: Santa Rosa County District Schools, T.R. Jackson Pre-K Center.

5.4 Public School Prekindergarten and ESE Preschool

Santa Rosa County District School System provides preschool services for eligible children with disabilities through Exceptional Student Education programs. These services support children who require specialized educational assistance before entering kindergarten.

For School Year 25-26, there were 315 students enrolled in ESE Pre-K including VPK blended ESE students.

Primary Source: Santa Rosa County District Schools, Exceptional Student Education Department.

5.5 Child Care & Early Education Programs in Santa Rosa County, Florida

Child care and early education providers play an essential role in supporting working families and meeting the developmental and educational needs of children throughout Santa Rosa County. These providers serve children from infancy through school age.

Programs operate in a variety of settings, including licensed child care facilities, registered family child care homes, faith-based programs, and school district programs. Some providers serve families who pay privately, while others participate in publicly funded programs such as School Readiness and Voluntary Prekindergarten (VPK). Additionally, some providers serve both private-pay families and families receiving services through contracts with the Coalition.

Together, these diverse providers help ensure families have access to a range of child care and early learning options that meet their individual needs.

Program Type	Number of Programs
Child Care Facilities (Full Day, School District, Afterschool, and Morning Only)	**62**
Licensed Facilities	**46**
Registered Family Child Care Homes	**18**
Exempt Facilities (Faith-based/Afterschool/School District)	**27**
Gold Seal (Accredited Facilities)	**4**
Contracted School Readiness Providers in Santa Rosa County	**41**
Voluntary Pre-Kindergarten (VPK) Providers	**26**

Primary Sources:
Early Learning Coalition of Santa Rosa County
https://caressearch.myflfamilies.com/PublicSearch

THE SUNSHINE PORTAL | Florida's Early Childhood Integrated Data System

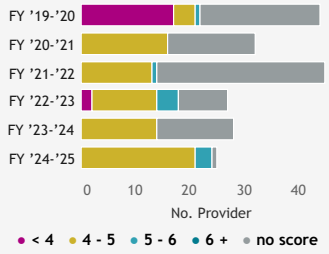
The Florida Index of Child Care Access: Florida School Readiness Program (SR) Birth-to-Five

Key Terms & Definitions

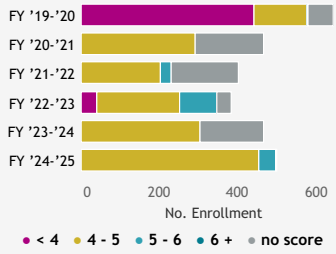
Select Fiscal Year and Coalition

FY '24-'25	Coalition
FY '24-'25	ELC of Santa Rosa

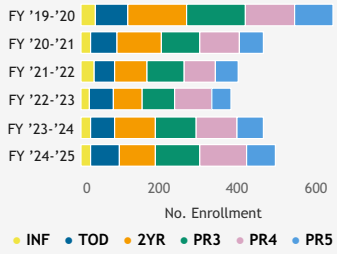
Providers by Quality Level



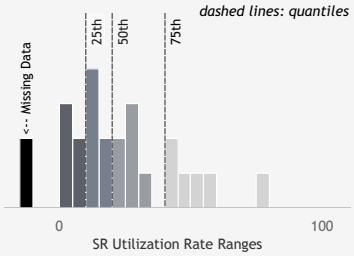
Enrollment by Quality Level



Enrollment by Care-Level



SR Utilization Rates FY '24-'25



High Quality Threshold (CLASS)
CLASS >= 4.0

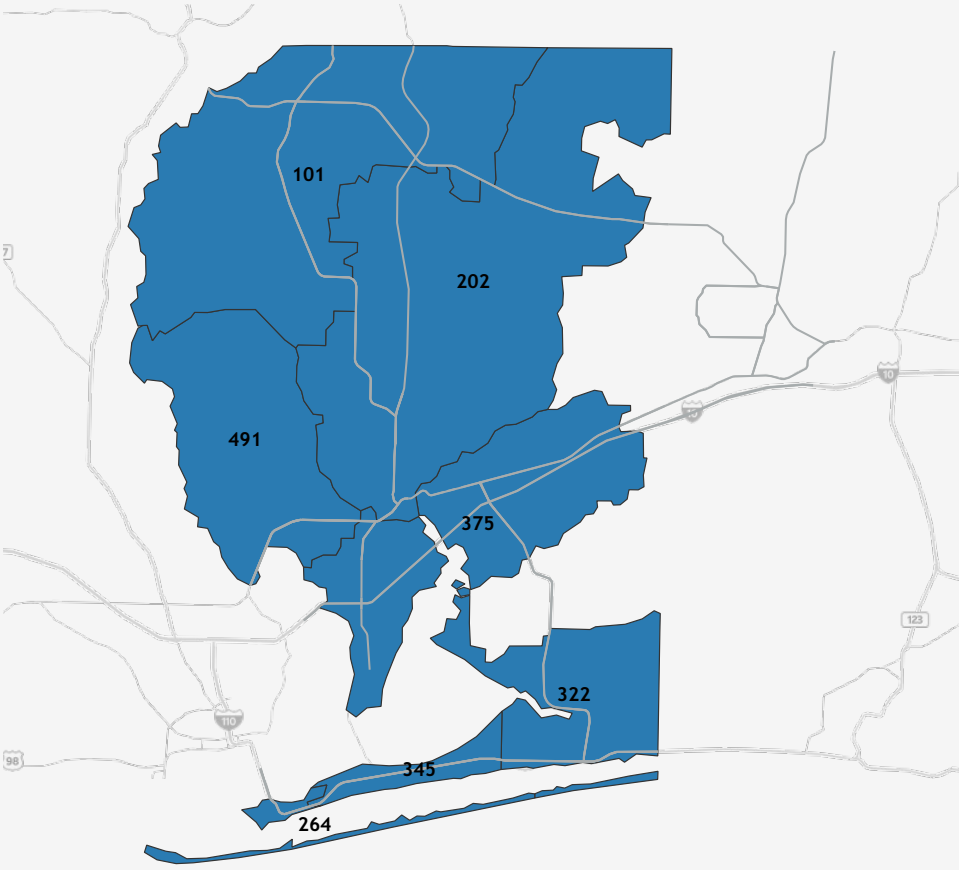
Percentage of HQSR Enrollment

- 0% - 20%
- >20% - 40%
- >40% - 60%
- >60% - 80%
- >80%
- SR Enrollment = 0

SR Contracted Providers

Non-Contracted Providers

The FLICCA analyses report on child care access for children (ages birth-to-five) and families participating in the Florida School Readiness Program. The results reflected in these maps should not be used to describe child care access for other populations seeking child care.



The Sunshine State Early Childhood Information Portal Project described was supported by the Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five Initiative (PDG B-5) Grant Number 90TP0068-03-02 from the Office of Child Care, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Its contents are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of the Office of Child Care, the Administration for Children and Families, or the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

6. COMMUNITY AGENCIES AND SUPPORT SERVICES

Children's development and school readiness are influenced by many factors beyond early education. Community organizations provide essential support involving health, nutrition, housing, family stability, child welfare, developmental services, and financial assistance.

The following organizations are important resources for Santa Rosa County families. The following list of community resources is intended to provide an overview of available services in Santa Rosa County. It is not meant to be a comprehensive listing of all organizations, programs, or services available within the community. For a more comprehensive resource directory, individuals are encouraged to consult United Way's Street Survival Guide, which provides additional information on community resources and support services.

Agency / Organization	**Services Provided**	**Population Served**
Florida Department of Children and Families (DCF)	SNAP, Temporary Cash Assistance, Medicaid eligibility assistance, and child welfare services	Low-income families and vulnerable children
Healthy Start Coalition of Santa Rosa County	Prenatal support, home visiting, parenting education, care coordination	Pregnant women, infants, and families
Tri-County Community Council	Poverty reduction, energy assistance, referrals, and family support, transportation	Low-income households
Santa Rosa Kids' House	Child advocacy, coordinated response to suspected abuse and neglect, counseling, and referrals	Children and families affected by abuse or trauma
Embrace Florida Kids	Family preservation, foster care support, prevention, and family stabilization	Children and families needing support
Florida Early Steps	Developmental evaluations, early intervention, therapy coordination	Children birth–36 months with qualifying developmental needs
FDLRS Emerald Coast Associate Center	Child Find, parent resources, disability information, and ESE support	Children with disabilities, parents, and educators
The Arc of the Emerald Coast	Support for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities	Children, adults, and families

Children's Home Society of Florida	Family support, counseling, prevention, and resource navigation	Children and families needing additional support
United Way of West Florida / 211	Referrals for food, housing, utilities, transportation, and employment assistance	Families needing community resources
Feeding the Gulf Coast	Food assistance coordination and hunger-relief resources	Families experiencing food insecurity
FL Dept. of Health in Santa Rosa County	Clinical and Preventive Health Services, Women/Infants/ Children's Services, Environmental Health and Safety, Community Health and Wellness, Specialty Health Care Access, Public Health Preparedness/Emergency Response, Vital Records	Residents of all ages throughout the County
Opening Doors	Helps individuals and families who are experiencing homelessness or are at risk of losing their housing obtain safe, stable housing, and achieve greater independence	Individuals/families experiencing homelessness, those at risk of becoming homeless, individuals living in unstable or unsafe housing situations
Favor House	Empowers domestic violence survivors and their families to create safe spaces and healthy relationships through intervention, empowerment, and prevention services	Individuals and families affected by domestic violence or intimate partner abuse, including adults, children, and teens
CareerSource EscaRosa	Connects job seekers with employment opportunities, career development, and workforce training	Job seekers and residents of Escambia and Santa Rosa counties at various stages of their careers
Milton Housing Authority	Assess and fulfill the need for decent, safe, and affordable housing	Residents of Santa Rosa County

Primary Sources:
Agency Websites

7. Child Protection Services

7.1 Florida Department of Children and Families (DCF)

The Florida Department of Children and Families (DCF) is the state agency responsible for protecting children and vulnerable families from abuse, neglect, and abandonment. DCF operates the Florida Abuse Hotline, receives and assesses reports of suspected child maltreatment, and conducts child protective investigations to determine child safety and the need for intervention or supportive services.

Primary Responsibilities:

- Receives reports of suspected child abuse, neglect, and abandonment
- Operates the Florida Abuse Hotline, available 24 hours a day, seven days a week
- Conducts child protective investigations and assesses child safety and well-being
- Determines whether protective action or supportive services are necessary
- Coordinates with law enforcement, courts, and community partners when appropriate
- Provides oversight of Florida's Community-Based Care system

Primary Sources:

- Florida DCF, Child, and Family Well-Being: https://www.myflfamilies.com/services/child-family/child-and-family-well-being/office-child-and-family-well-being
- Florida DCF, Child Protective Services: https://www.myflfamilies.com/services/abuse/child-protective-services

7.2 Northwest Florida Health Network (NWFHN)

Northwest Florida Health Network is the Community-Based Care lead agency contracted with DCF to oversee and coordinate community-based child protection and family support services in Northwest Florida. Its First Judicial Circuit service area includes Escambia, Santa Rosa, Okaloosa, and Walton counties.

NWFHN oversees a network of contracted providers responsible for delivering services to children and families involved in the child protection system.

Primary Responsibilities:

- Oversees the regional Community-Based Care system
- Coordinates and contracts with community-based service providers
- Oversees services related to family preservation, foster care, adoption, and reunification
- Supports child safety, permanency, and family well-being

- Develops partnerships with local community organizations to address family needs

Primary Sources:

- NWF Health Network, About Us: https://nwfhealth.org/About-Us/Who-We-Are/
- NWF Health Network, Child Protection: https://nwfhealth.org/child-protection/
- Florida DCF, Lead Agency Information: https://www.myflfamilies.com/services/child-family/child-and-family-well-being/community-based-care/lead-agency-information

7.3. Lutheran Services Florida (LSF)

Effective October 1, 2026, Lutheran Services Florida assumed child protection case management responsibilities for Santa Rosa, Okaloosa, and Walton counties. LSF works within the Northwest Florida Community-Based Care system to provide case management and coordinate services for children and families involved in the child protection system.

Primary Responsibilities:

- Child protection case management
- Family preservation and in-home family support
- Foster care and out-of-home placement coordination
- Family reunification services
- Coordination with caregivers, service providers, and community partners
- Supporting permanency and positive outcomes for children and families

Primary Sources:

1. Lutheran Services Florida, A New Chapter for Child Welfare in Northwest Florida: https://www.lsfnet.org/a-new-chapter-for-child-welfare-in-northwest-florida-a-qa-with-jamilyn-newton/
2. FamiliesFirst Network, October 1, 2026, Service Transition Announcement: https://familiesfirstnetwork.org/

7.4. First City Outreach

First City Outreach is a faith-based nonprofit organization partnering with Northwest Florida Health Network to provide child protection and family support services. Effective October 1, 2026, First City Outreach assumed child protection case management responsibilities for Escambia County. The organization provides family-centered services intended to strengthen families, address safety concerns, and help prevent children from entering or remaining in foster care when it is safe to do so.

Primary Responsibilities:

- Child protection case management
- Family preservation and family support services

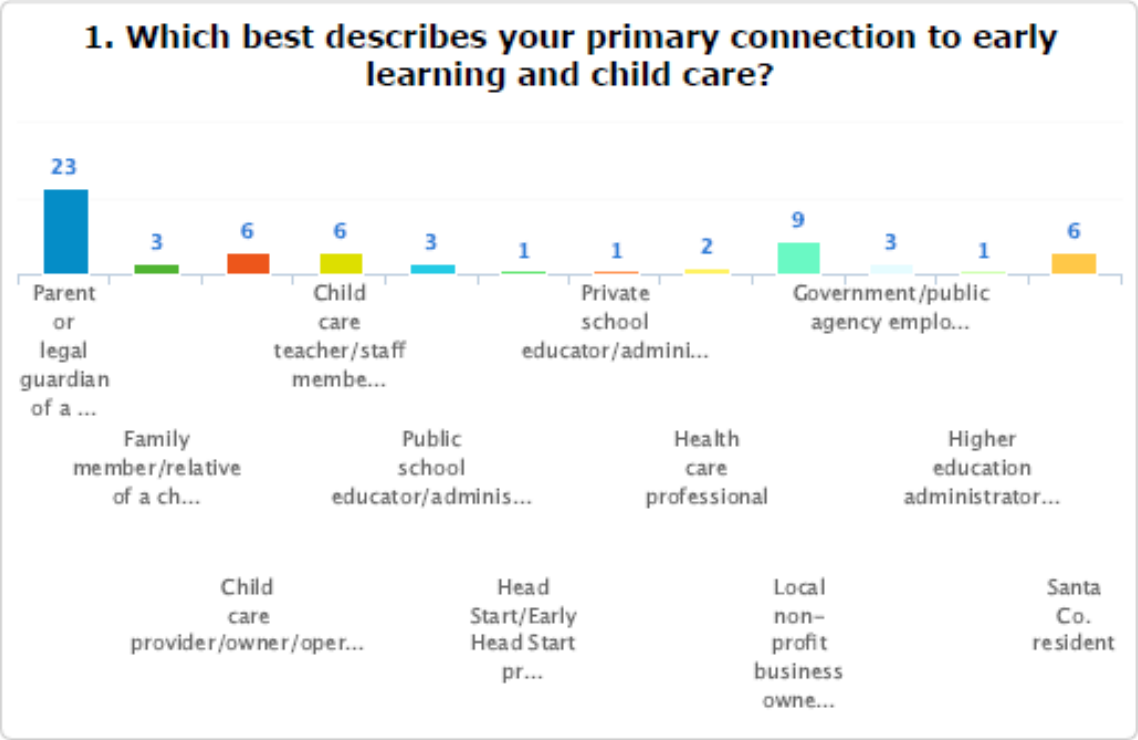
- Safety management services
- Crisis intervention and parenting education
- Connecting families with community resources and supportive services
- Supporting family stability and preventing unnecessary family separation

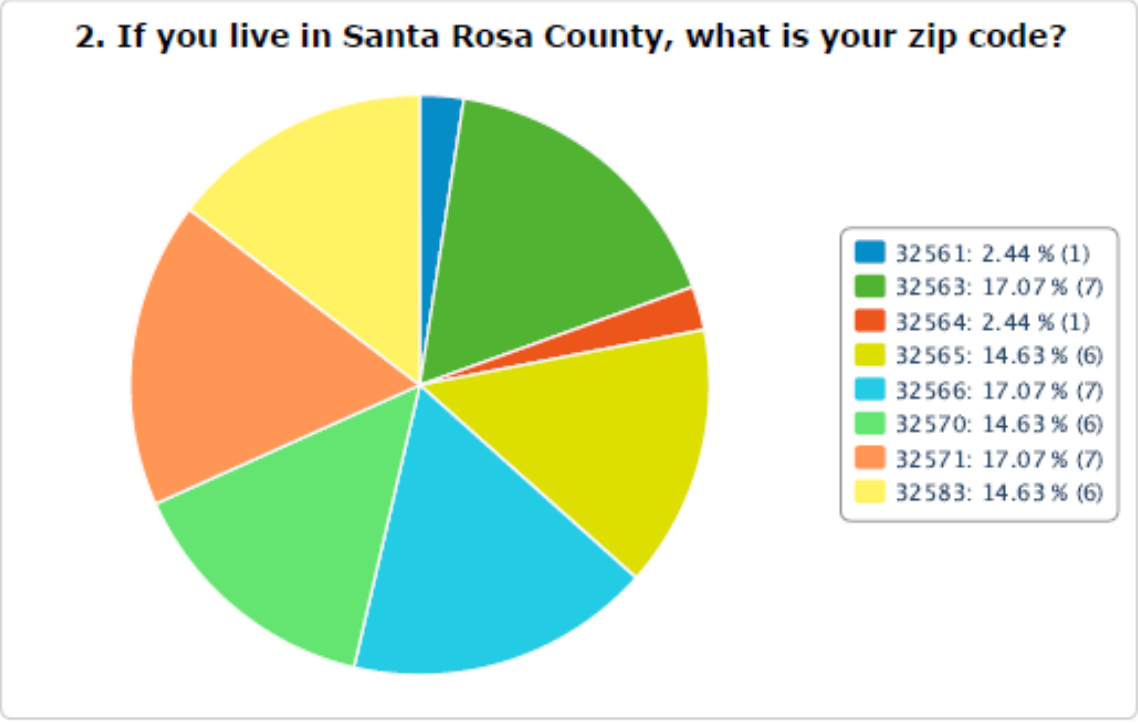
Primary Sources:

1. First City Outreach: https://firstcityoutreach.org/
2. FamiliesFirst Network, October 1, 2026, Service Transition Announcement: https://familiesfirstnetwork.org/

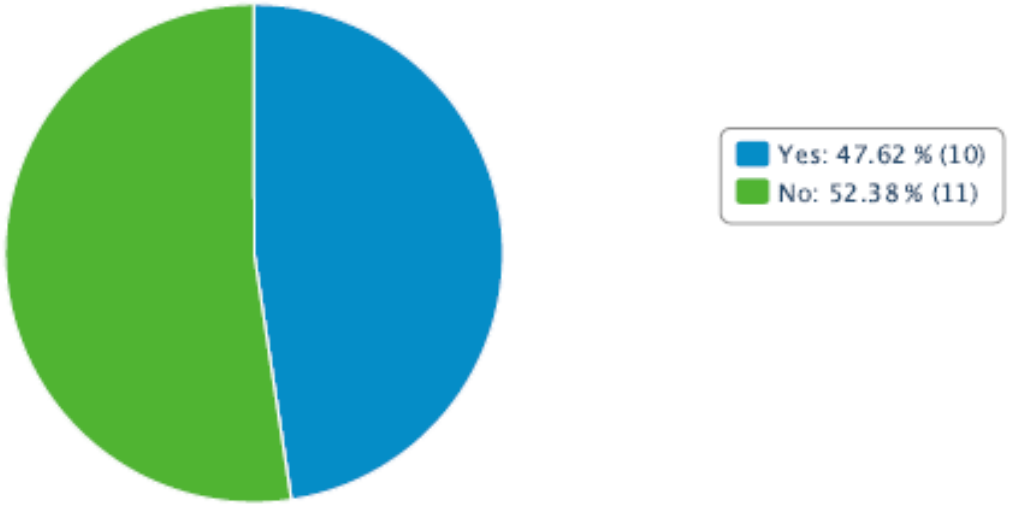
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8. COMMUNITY NEEDS ASSESSMENT RESPONSES

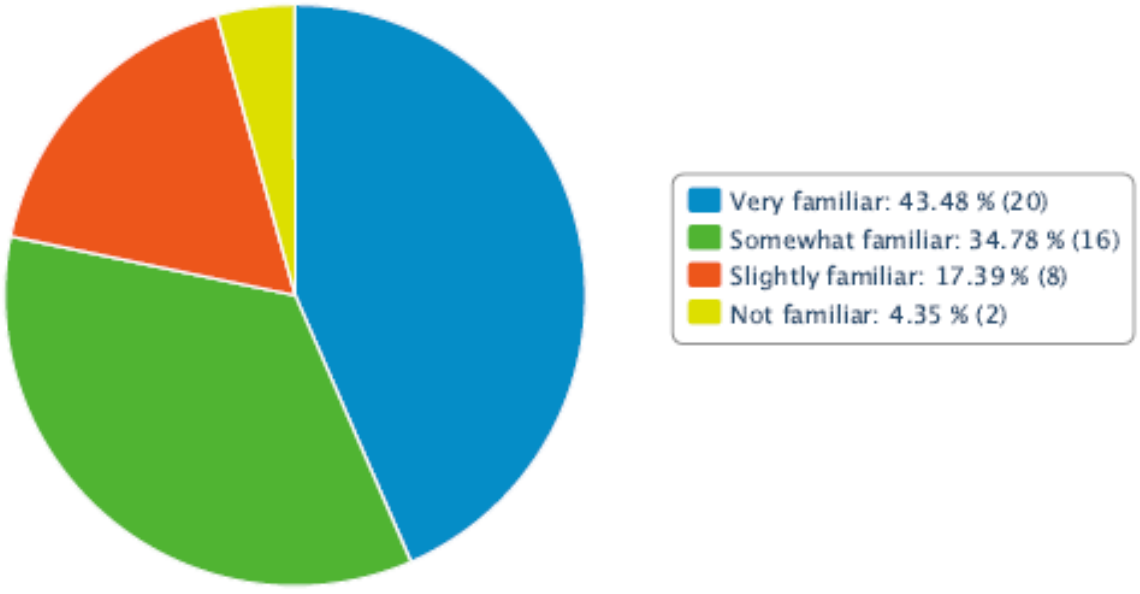




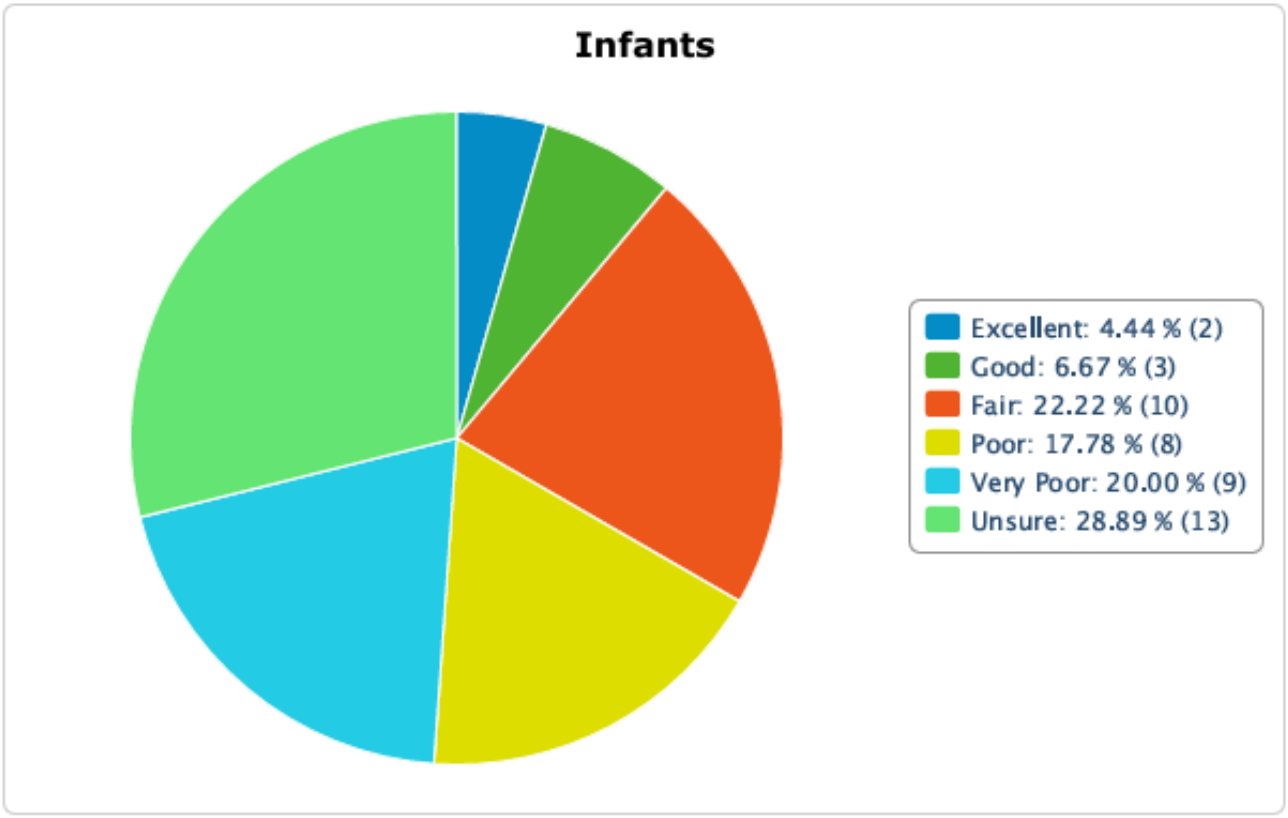
2 a. If you do not live in Santa Rosa County, do you have a child enrolled in school or child care in Santa Rosa County, or do you work for an employer located in Santa Rosa County?

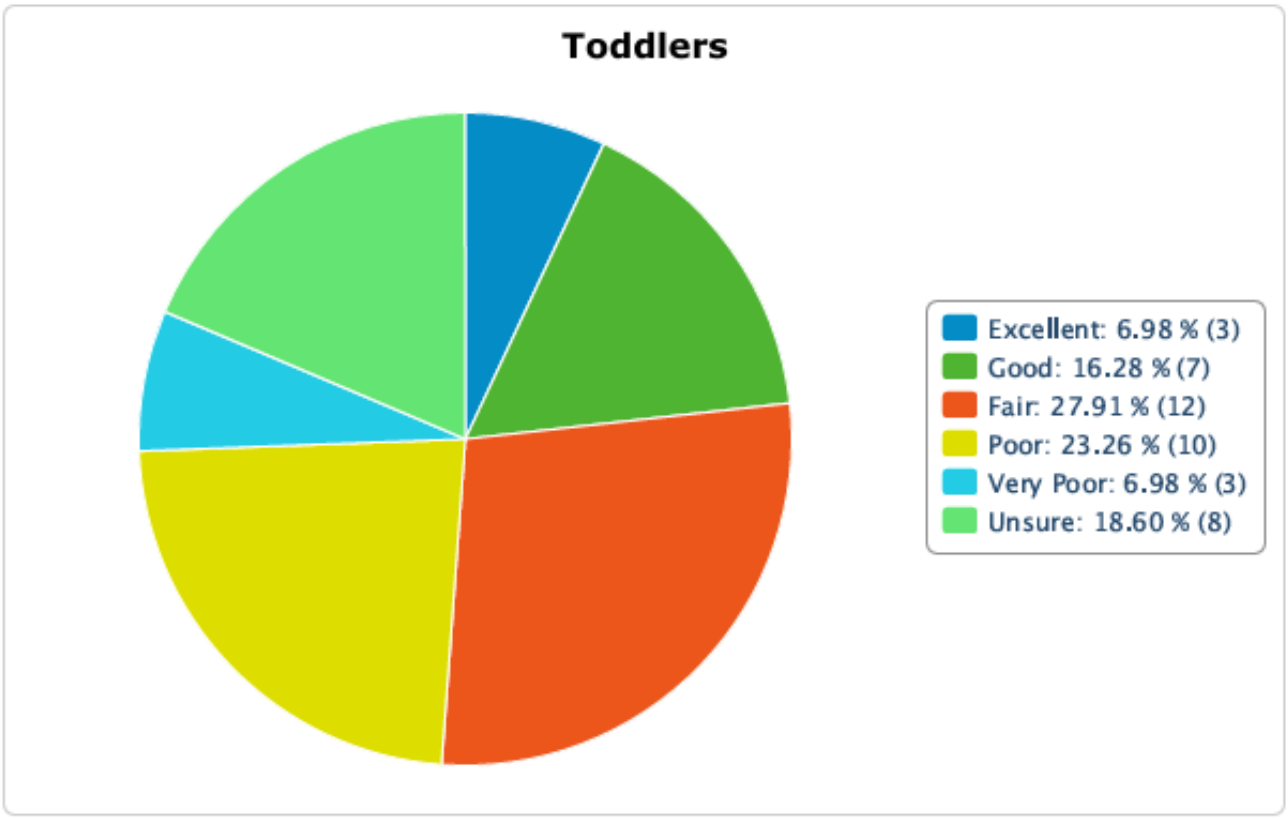


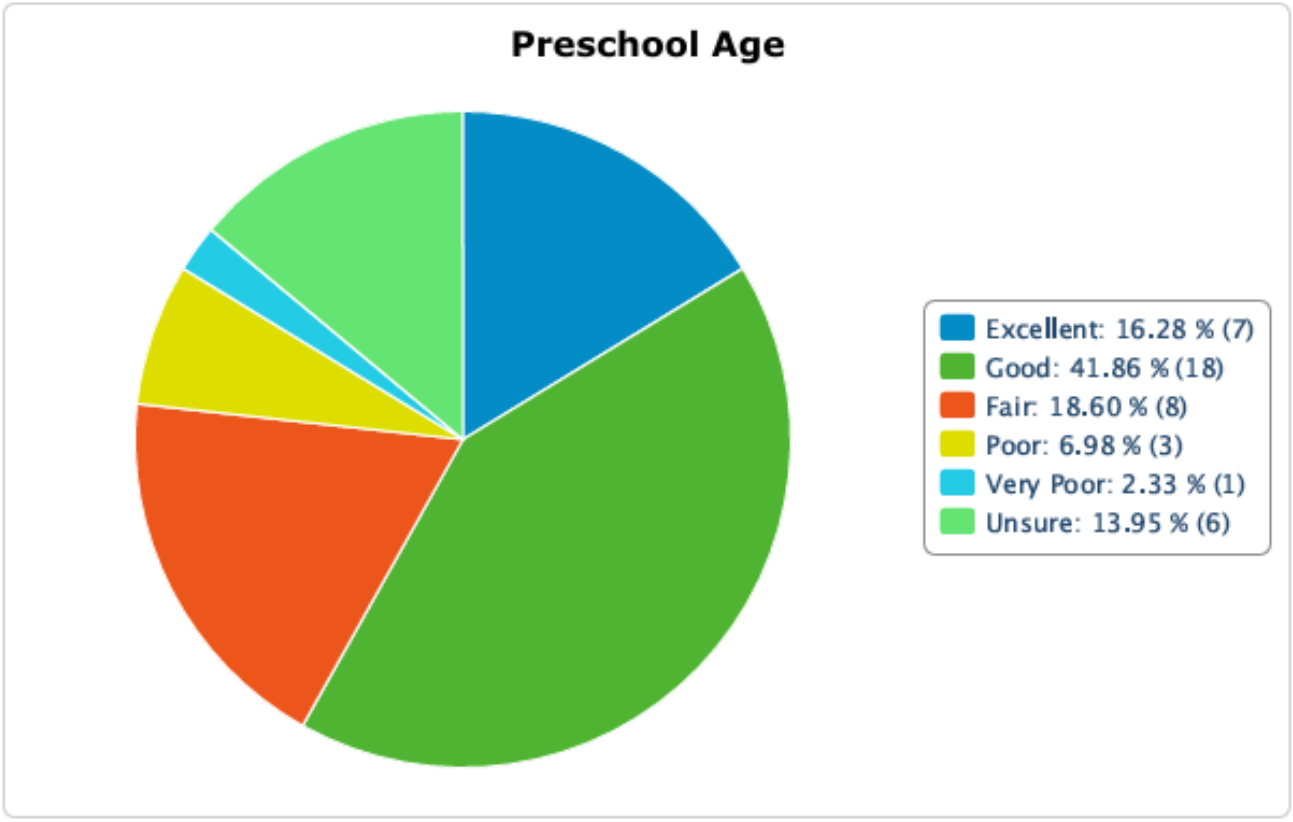
3. How familiar are you with early learning and child care services in Santa Rosa County?

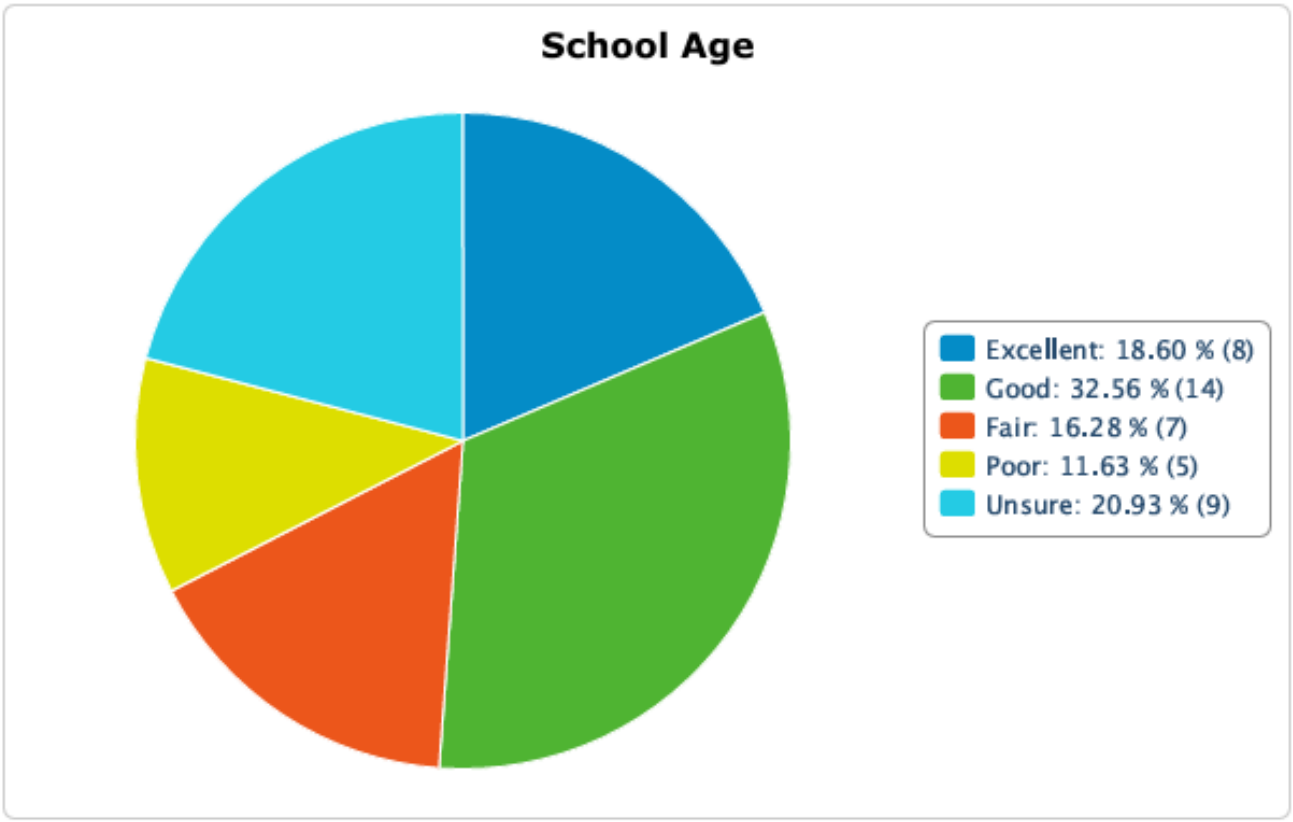


4. How would you rate the availability of child care for the following age groups?

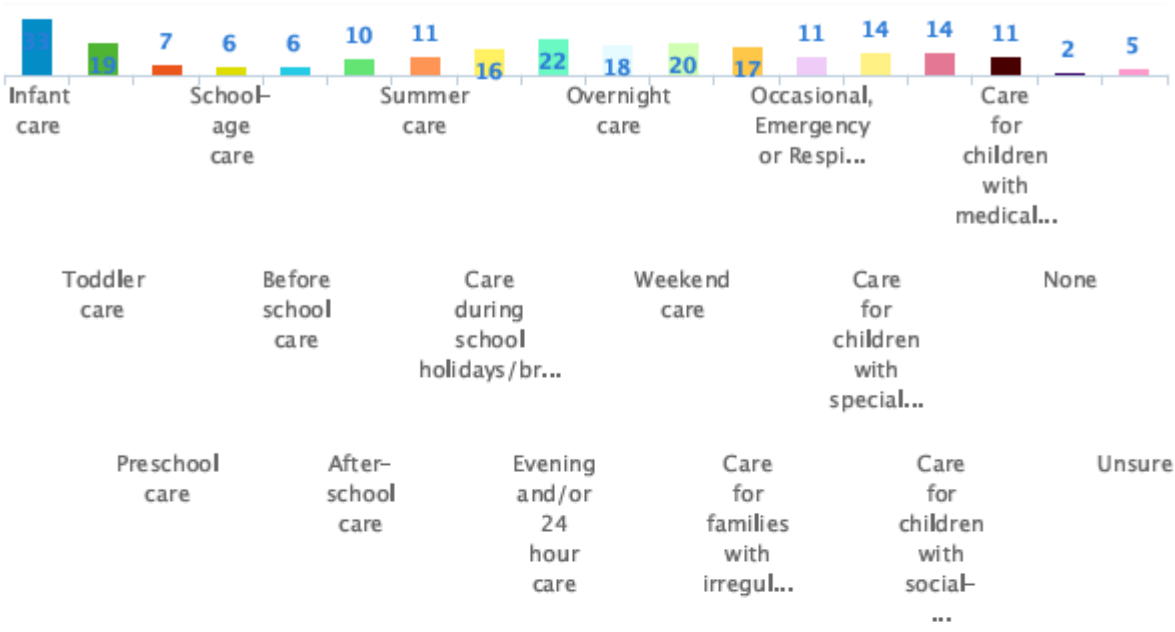




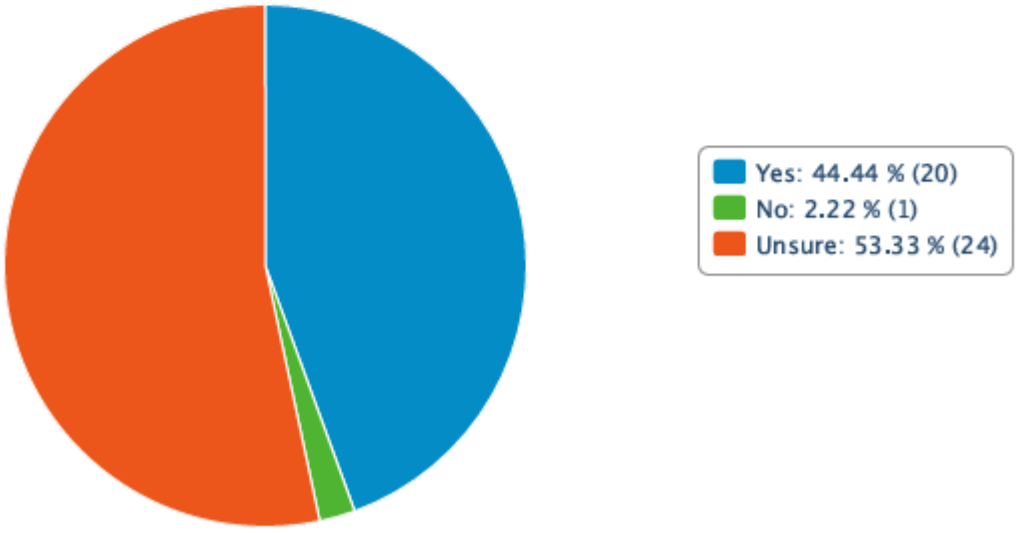

Preschool Age
Excellent: 16.28 % (7)
Good: 41.86 % (18)
Fair: 18.60 % (8)
Poor: 6.98 % (3)
Very Poor: 2.33 % (1)
Unsure: 13.95 % (6)


School Age
Excellent: 18.60 % (8)
Good: 32.56 % (14)
Fair: 16.28 % (7)
Poor: 11.63 % (5)
Unsure: 20.93 % (9)

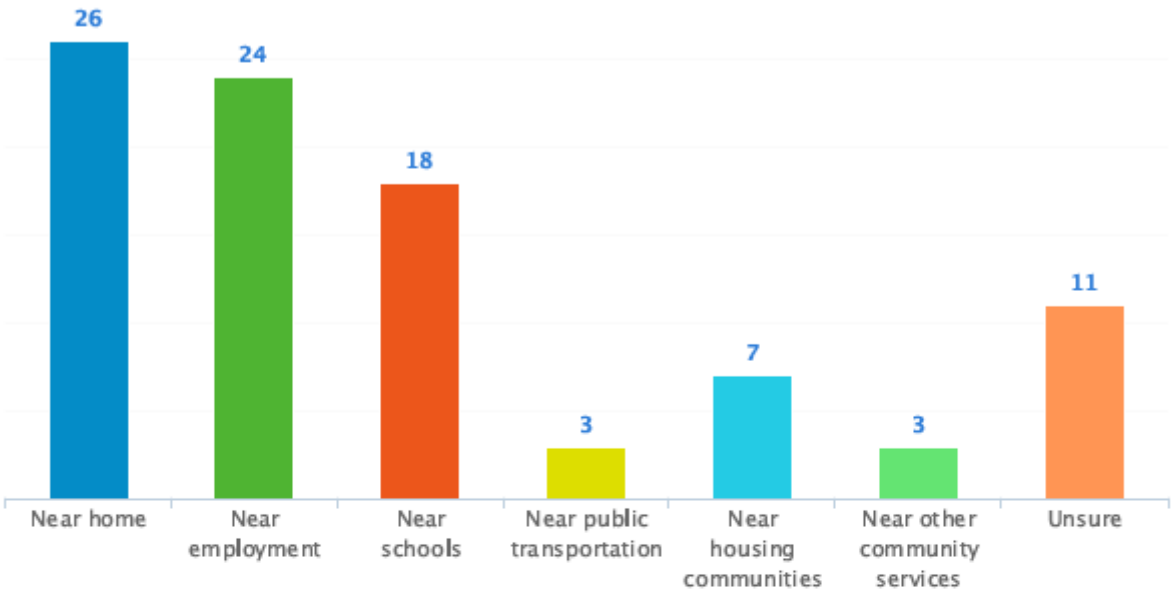
5. In Santa Rosa County, which types of child care are most difficult for families to find?



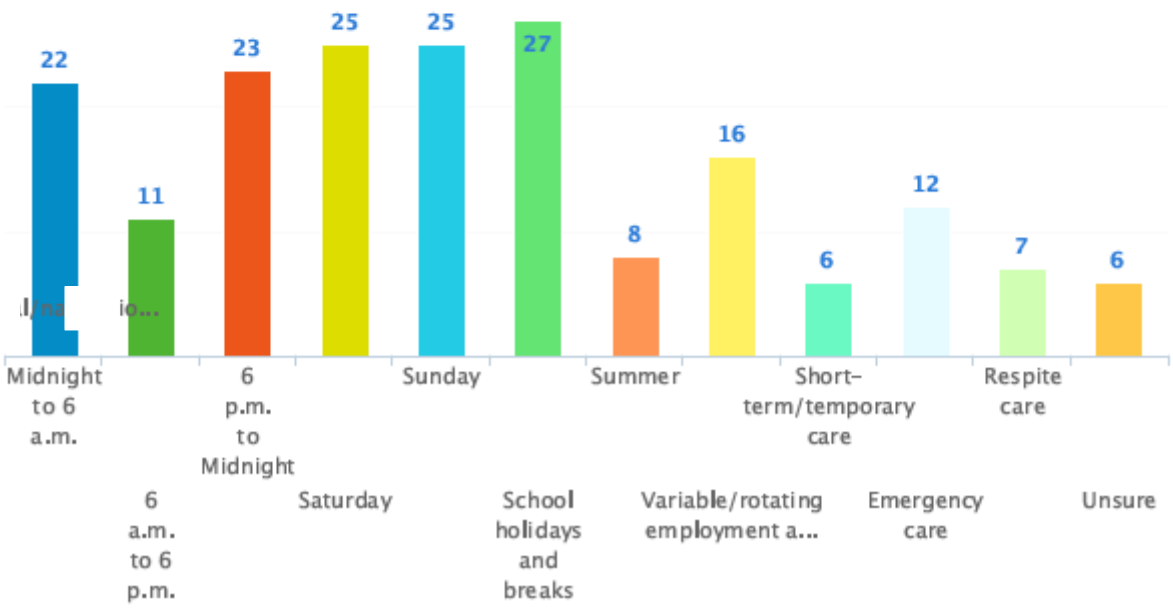
6. Are there geographical areas of Santa Rosa County where you believe families have greater difficulty accessing child care?



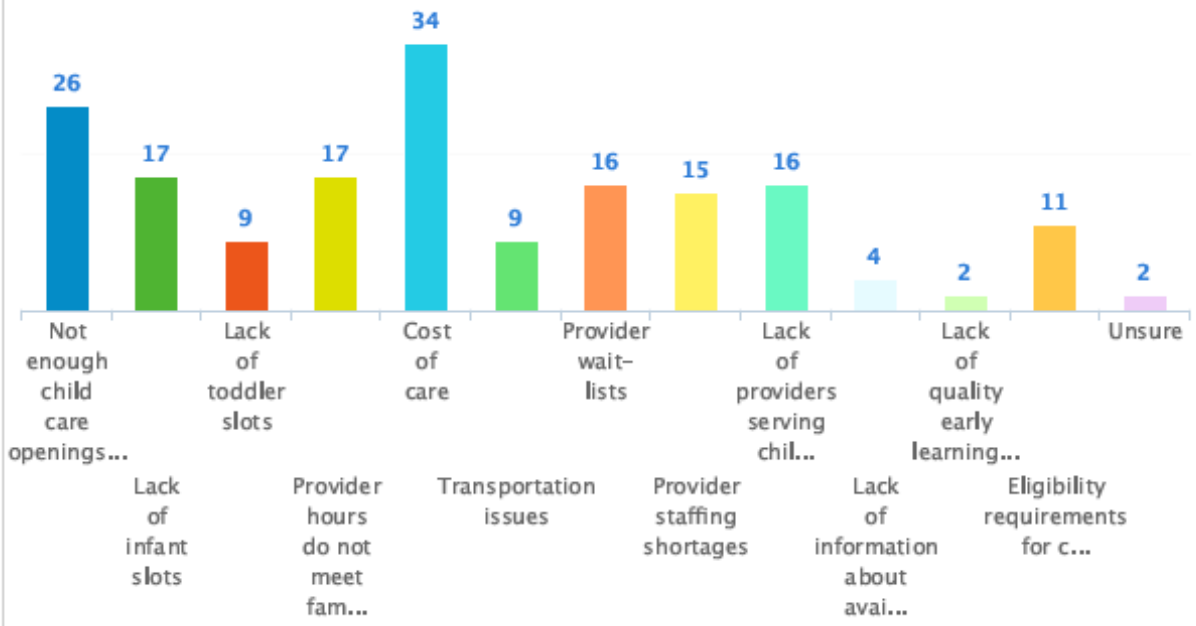
7. What locations would make child care more accessible to families?



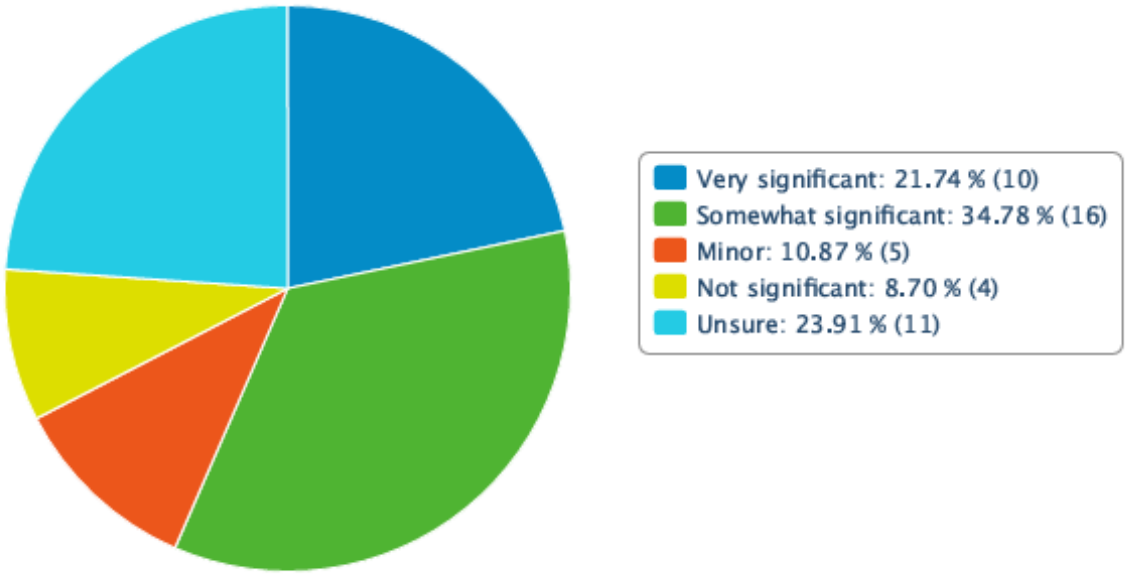
8. Which child care schedules do you believe are most difficult for families to obtain?



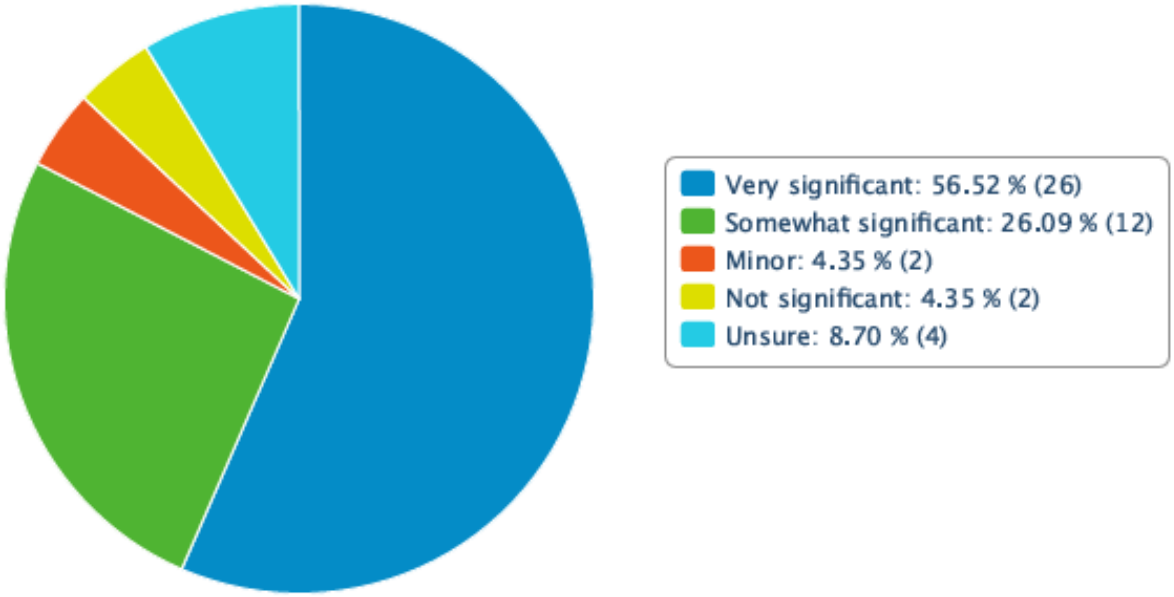
9. What do you believe are the primary reasons families have difficulty finding the types of child care they need?



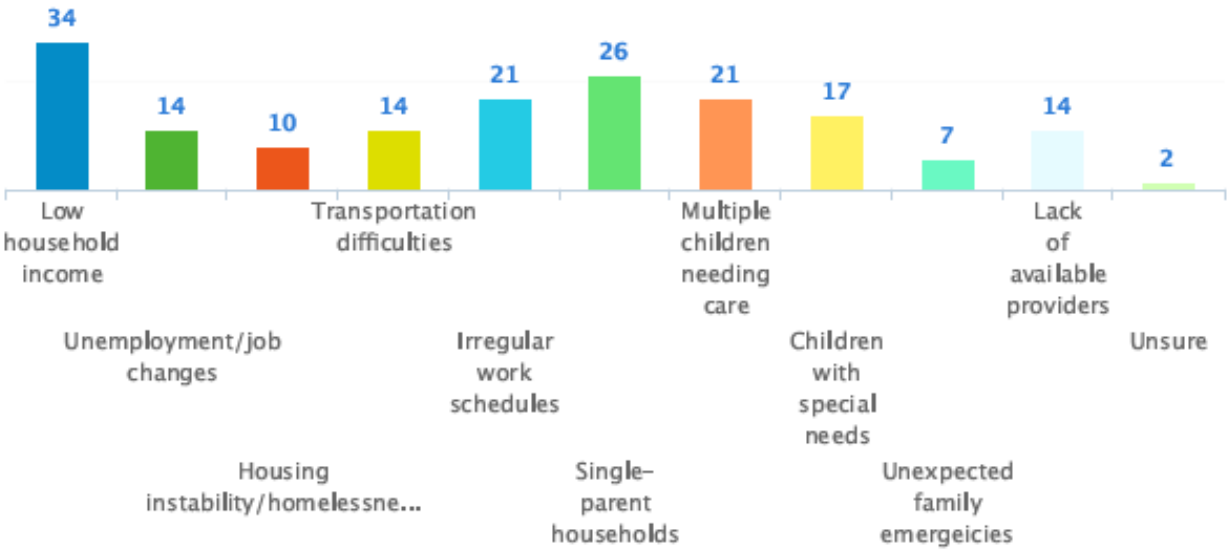
10. How significant is transportation as a barrier to accessing child care in Santa Rosa County?



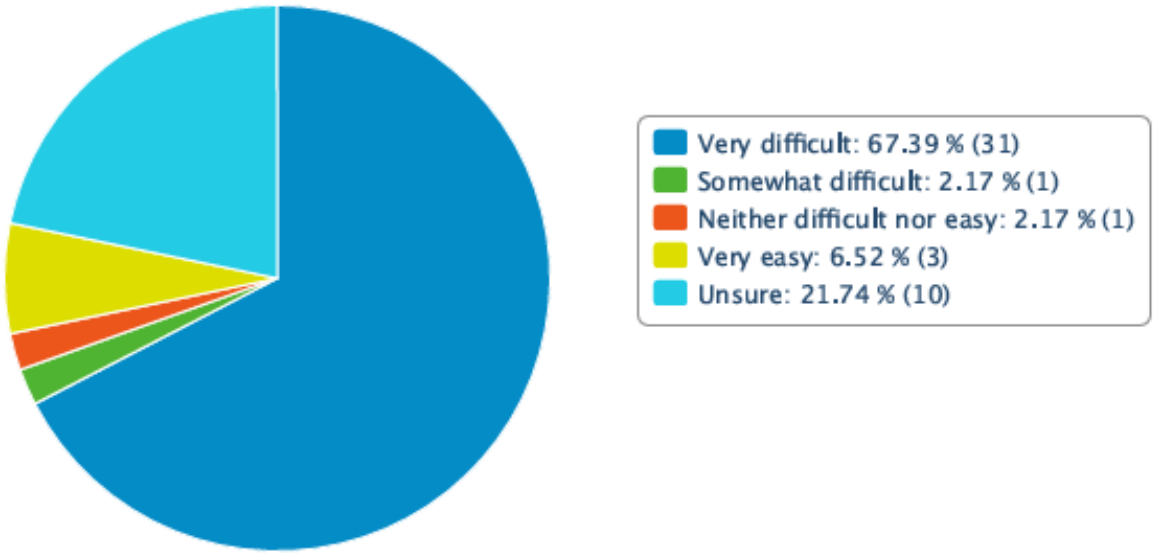
11. How significant is the cost of child care as a barrier for families in Santa Rosa County?



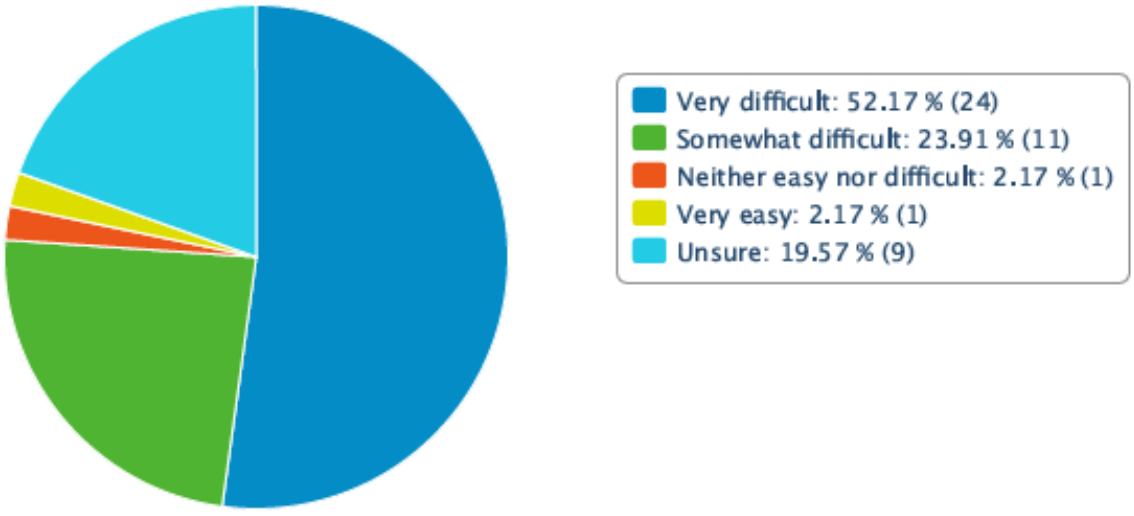
12. Which circumstances do you believe make it particularly difficult for families to obtain or maintain child care?



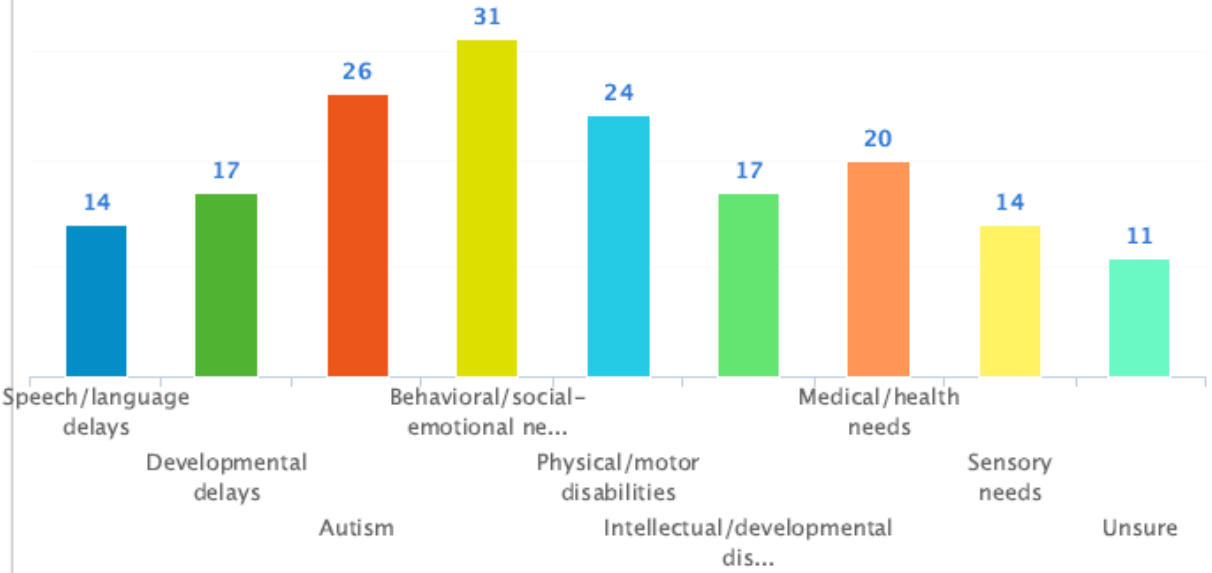
13. How difficult do you believe it is for families who are unhoused or experiencing housing instability to obtain and maintain appropriate child care?



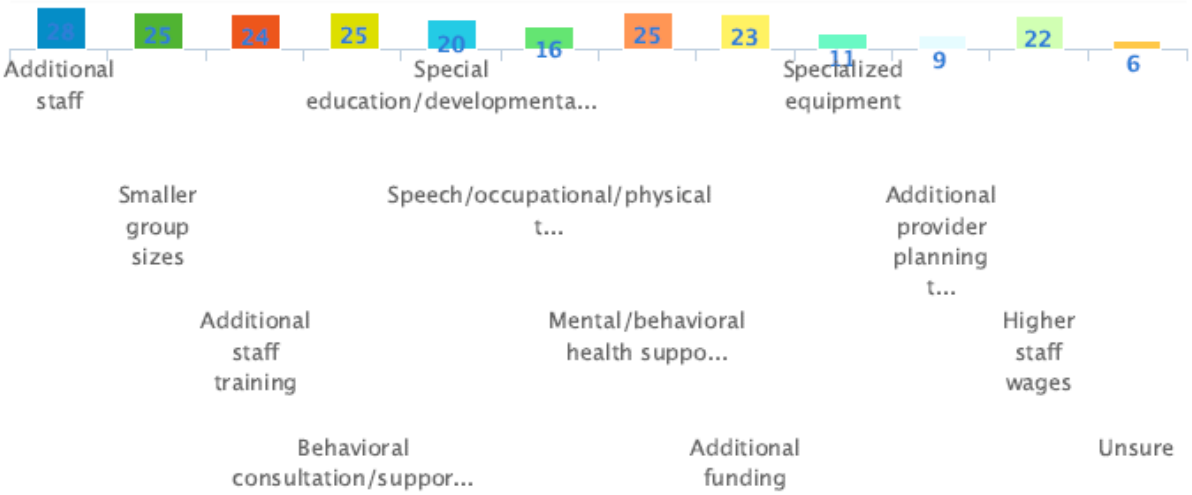
14. How difficult is it for families to find child care that can appropriately serve children who have additional developmental, behavioral, medical or disability-related needs?



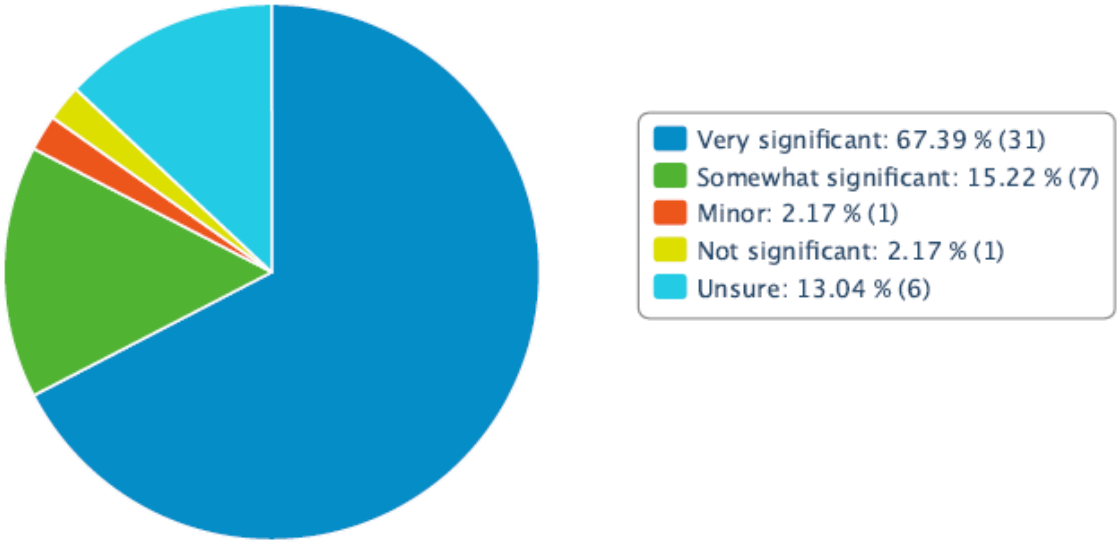
15. Which types of needs do you believe create the greatest challenges in finding appropriate child care?



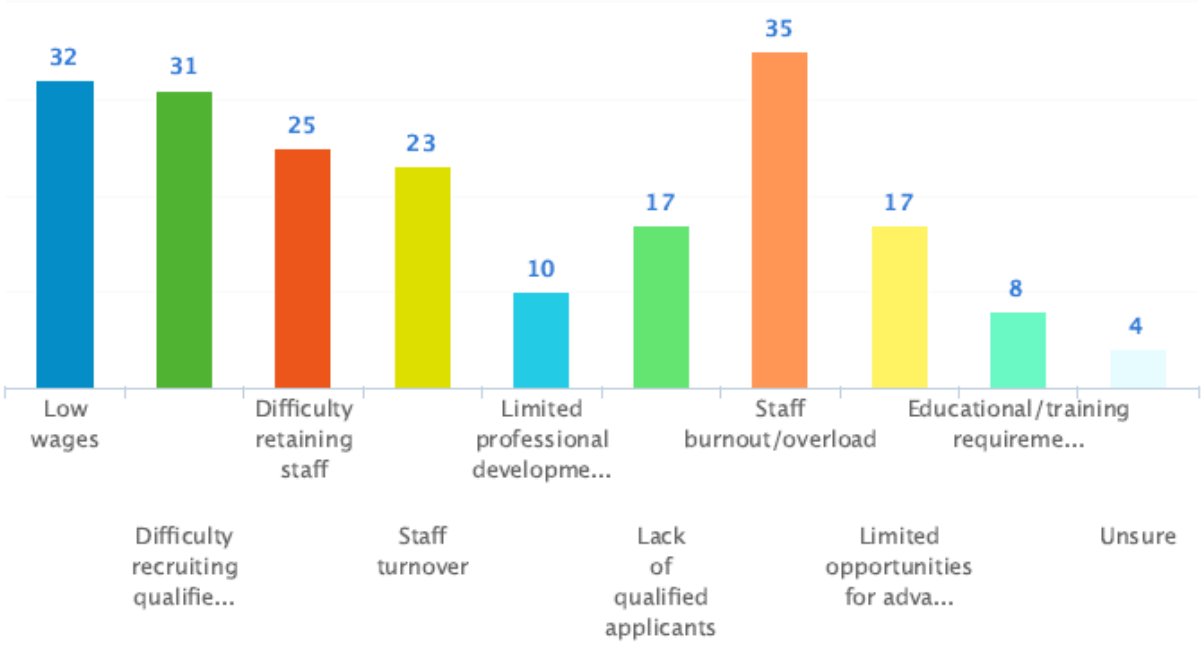
16. What do you believe would most improve the ability of child care programs to serve children with developmental delays, autism, physical disabilities, or other specialized support needs?



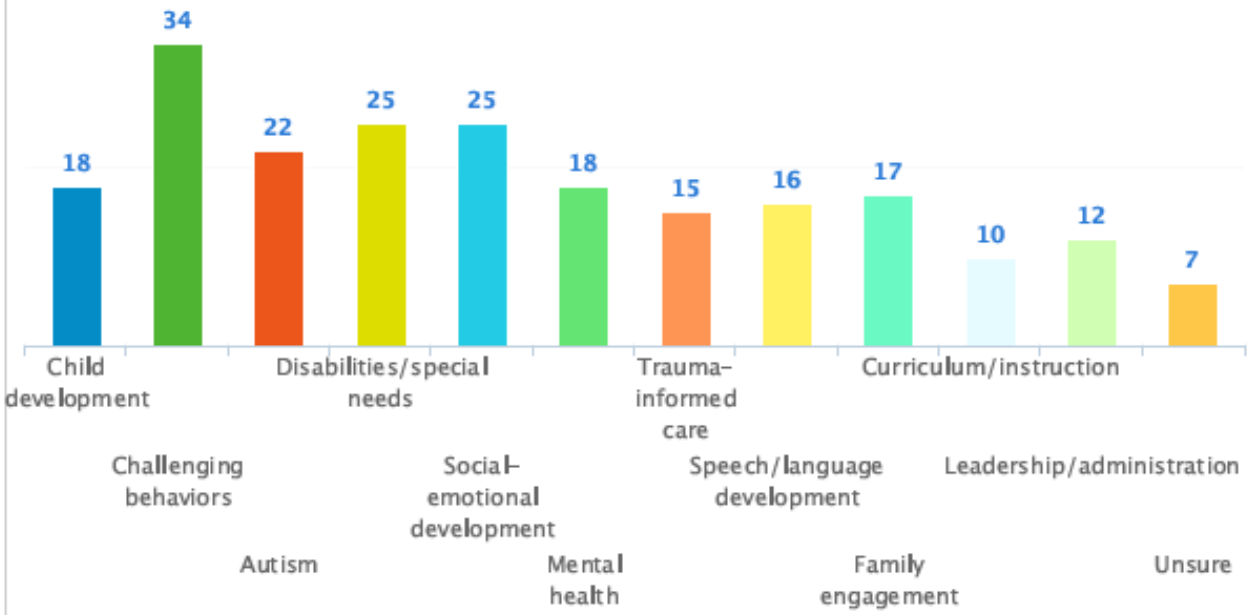
17. How significant are staffing and workforce shortages as a barrier to the availability or quality of child care in Santa Rosa County



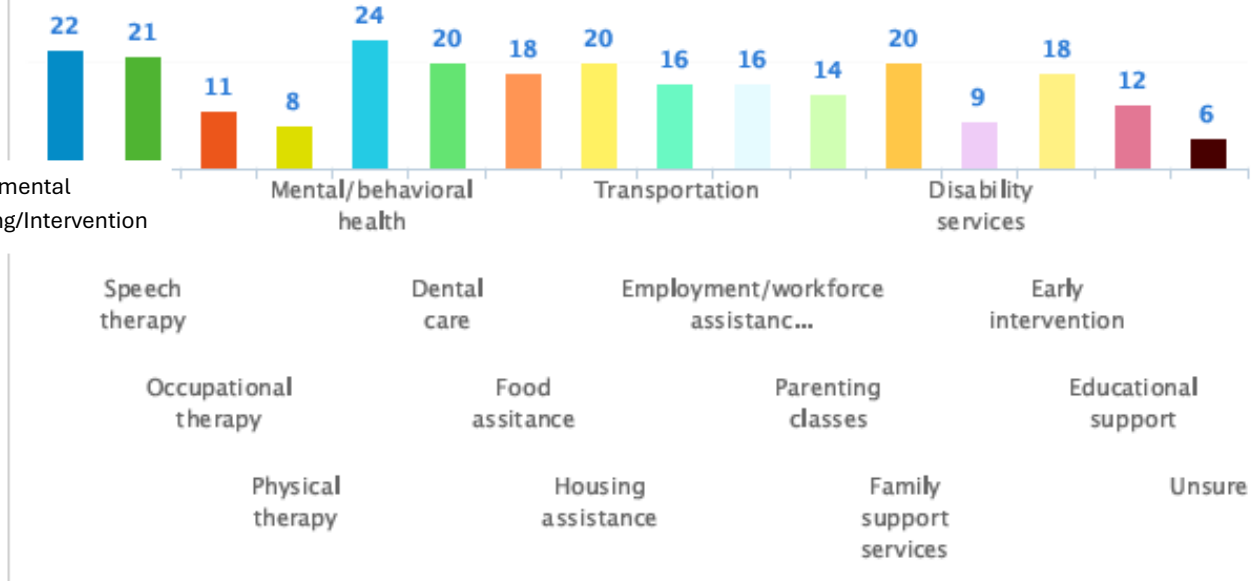
18. What workforce issues do you believe have the greatest impact on child care availability or quality?



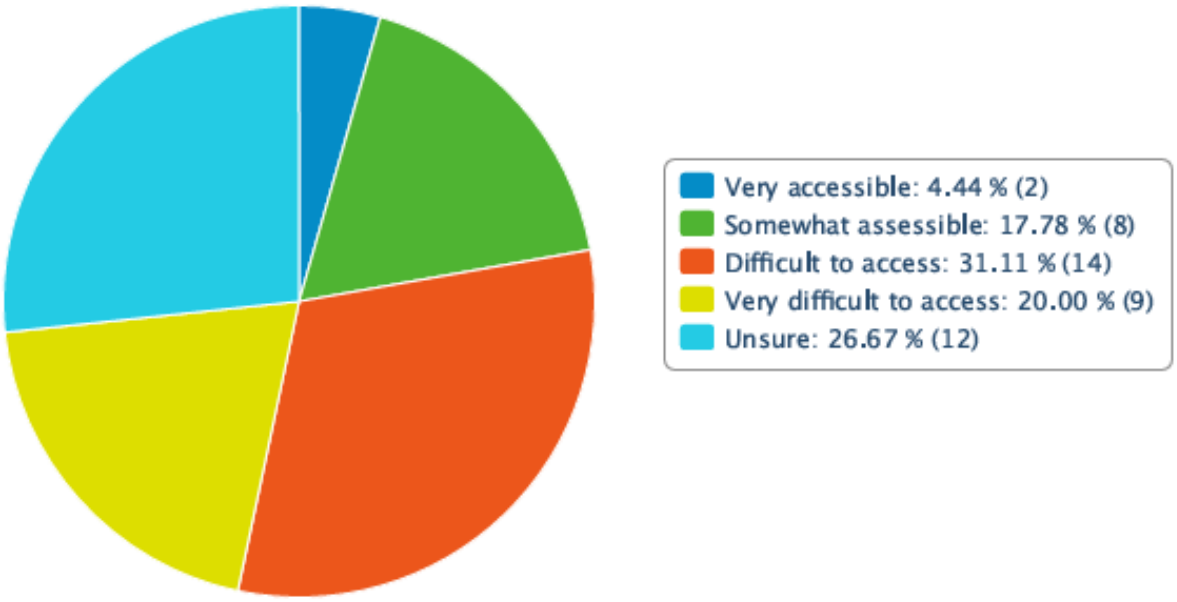
19. What types of training or professional support would most benefit early learning professionals



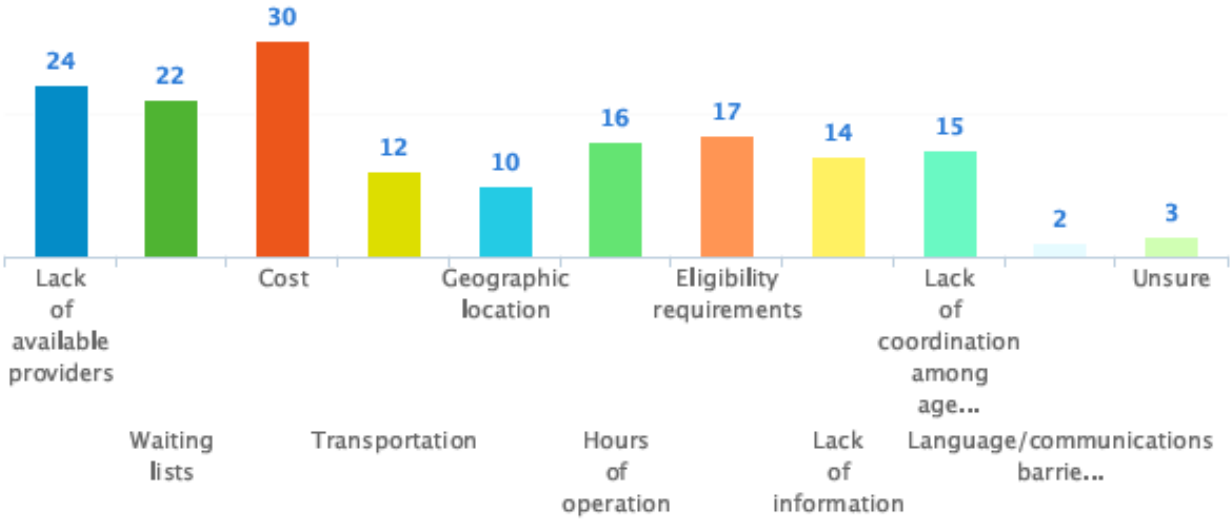
20. Which services or resources do you believe children and families in Santa Rosa County most commonly need in addition to child care?



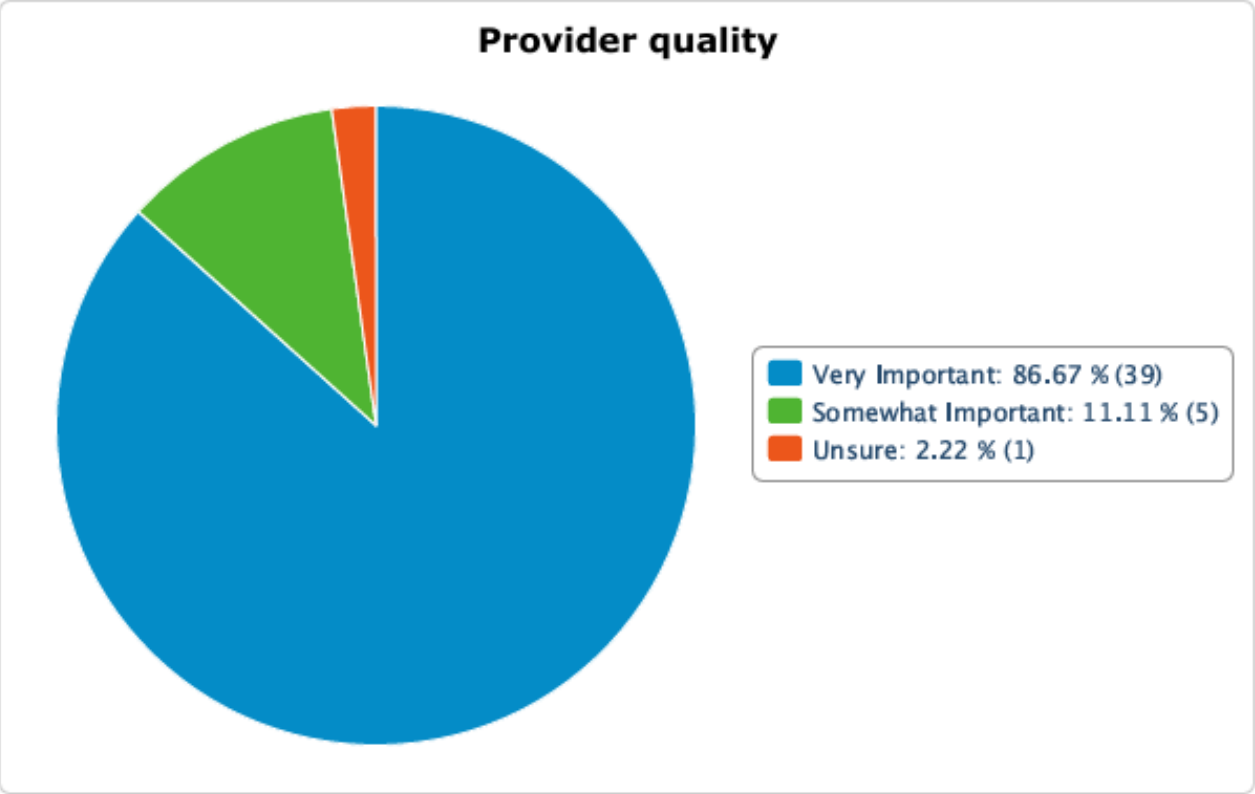
21. How accessible are the services that you selected in Question 20 to families who need them?

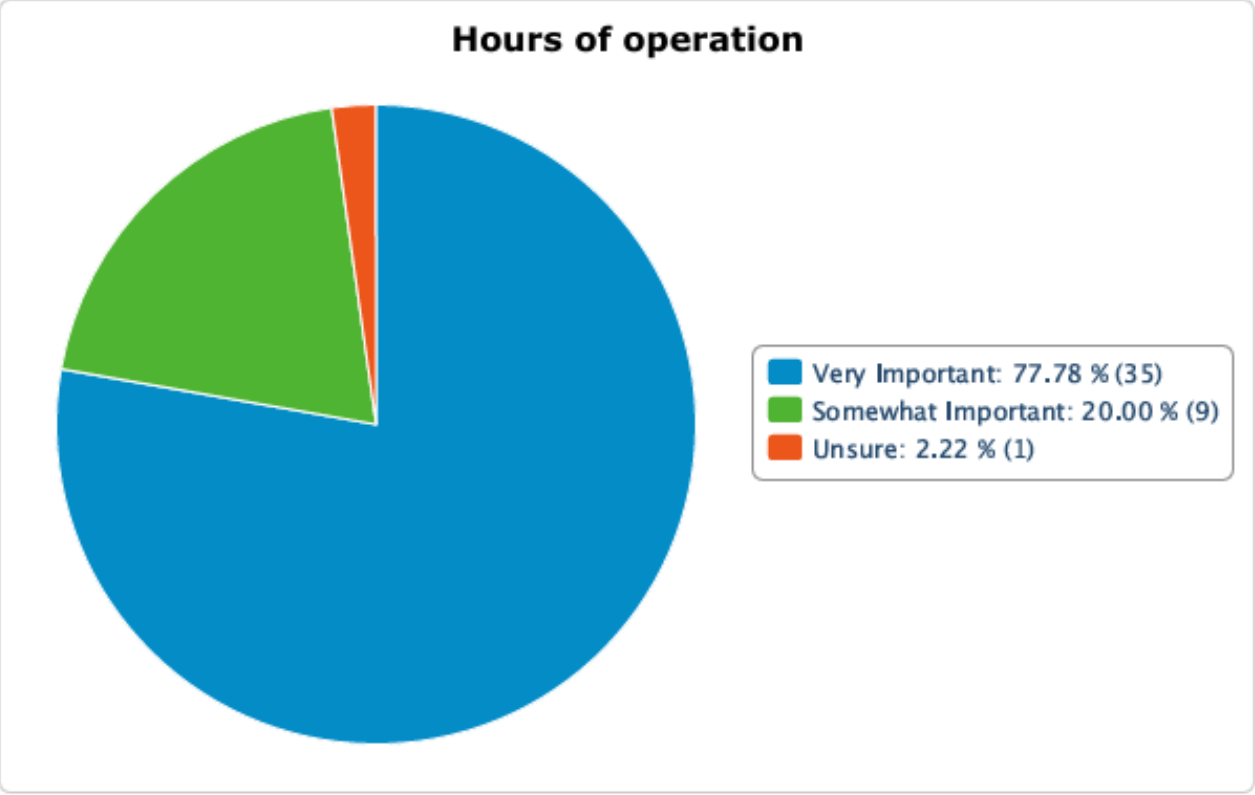


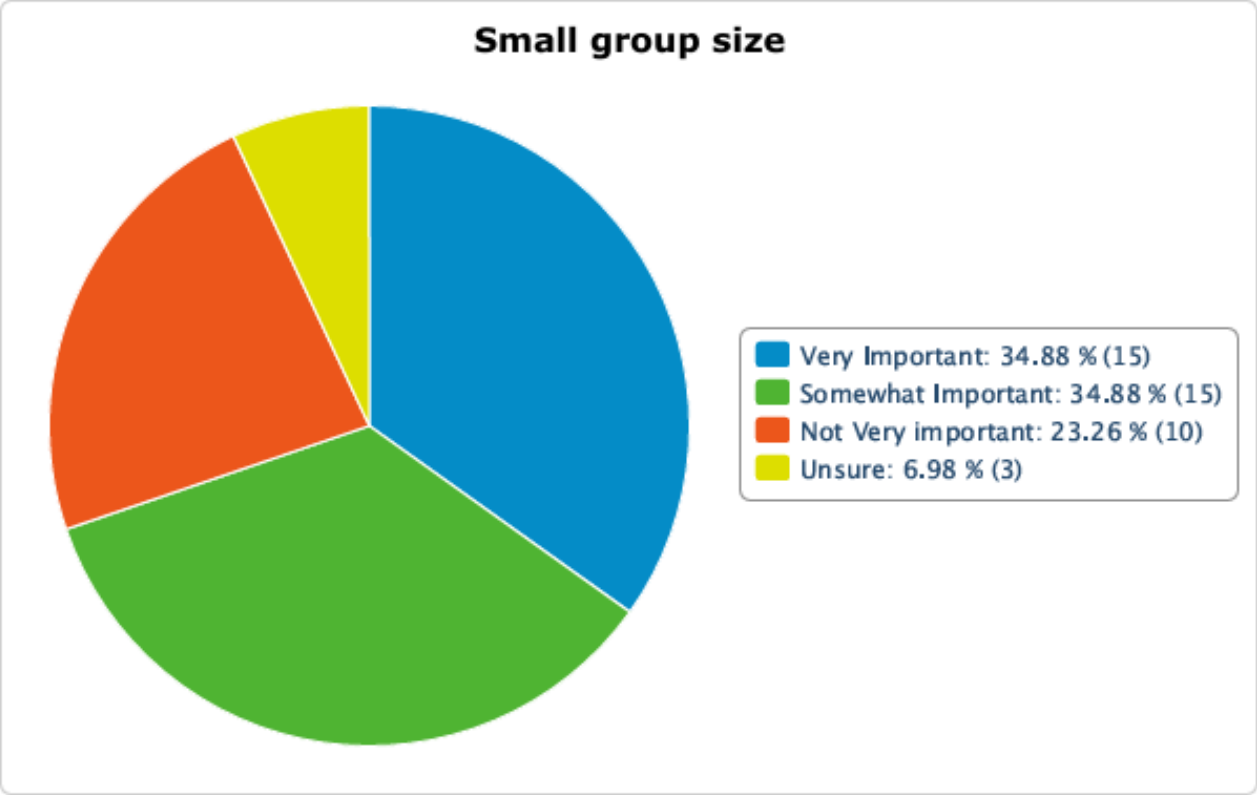
22. What are the greatest barriers families experience when trying to access the services you selected in Question 20?

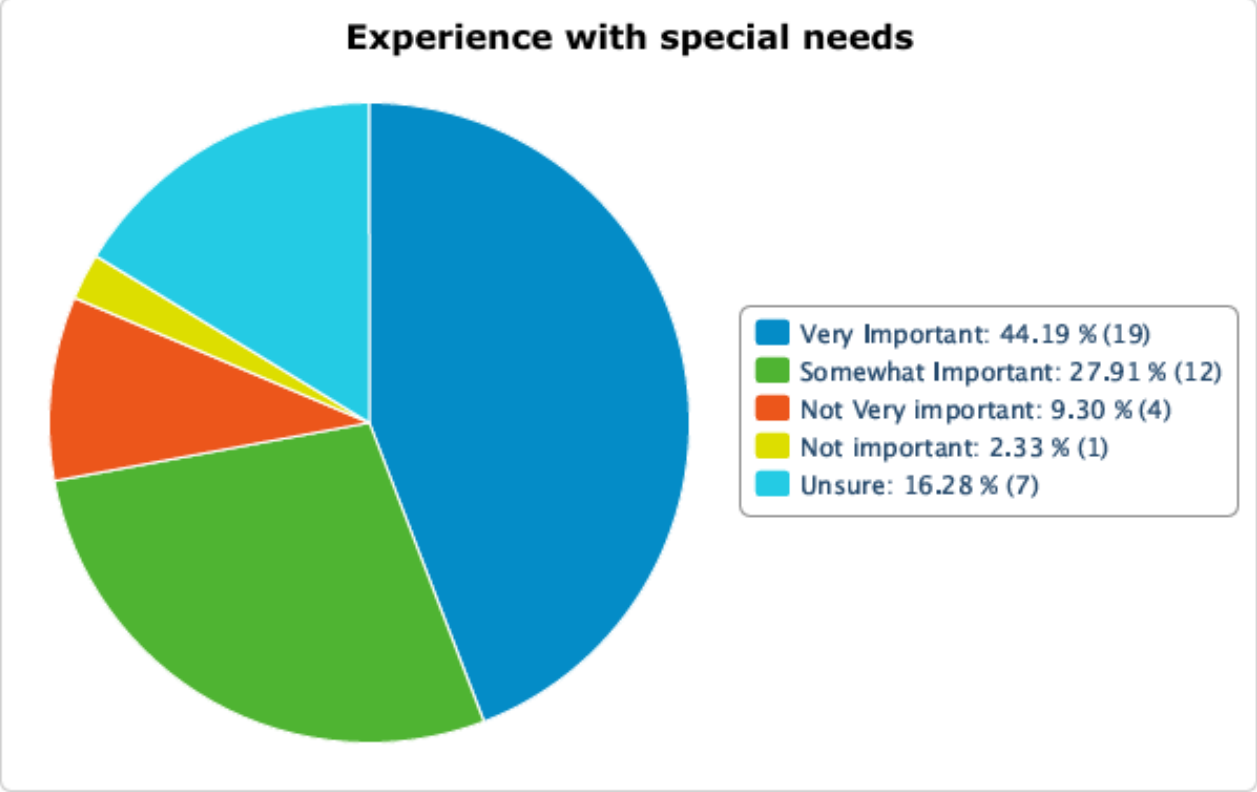


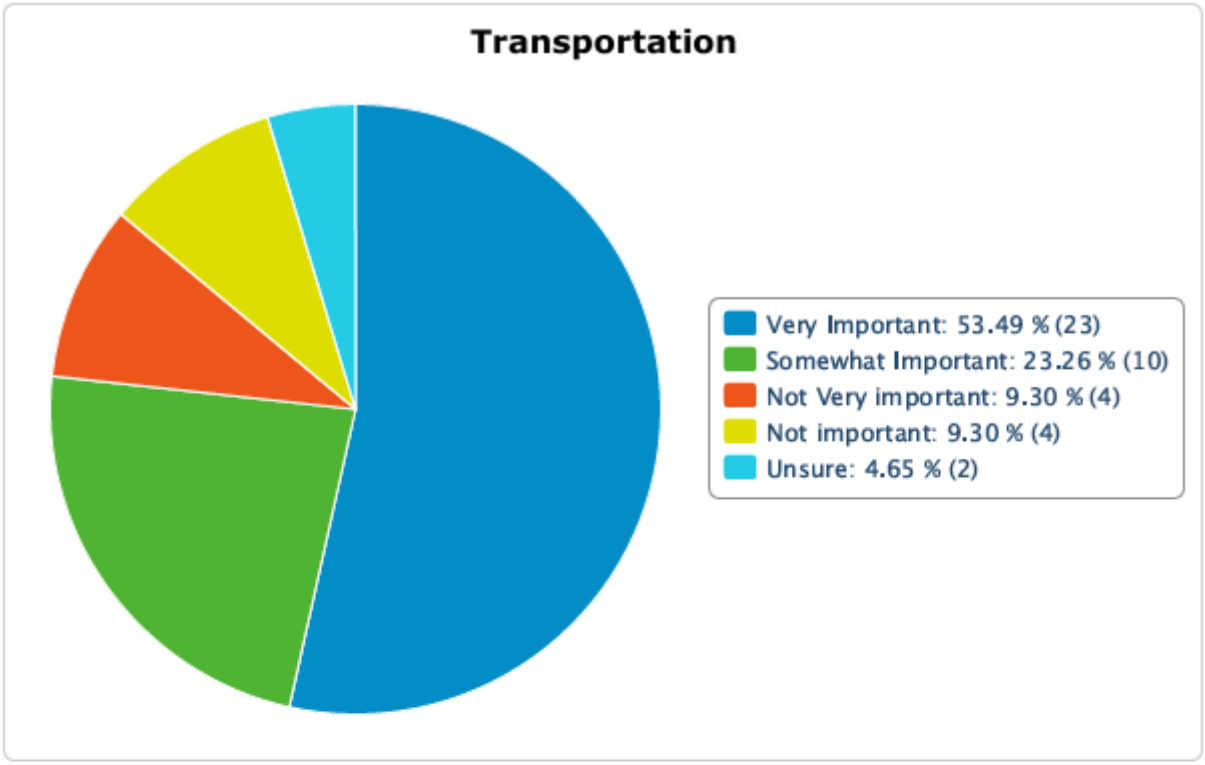
23. When families select child care, how important are the following factors?

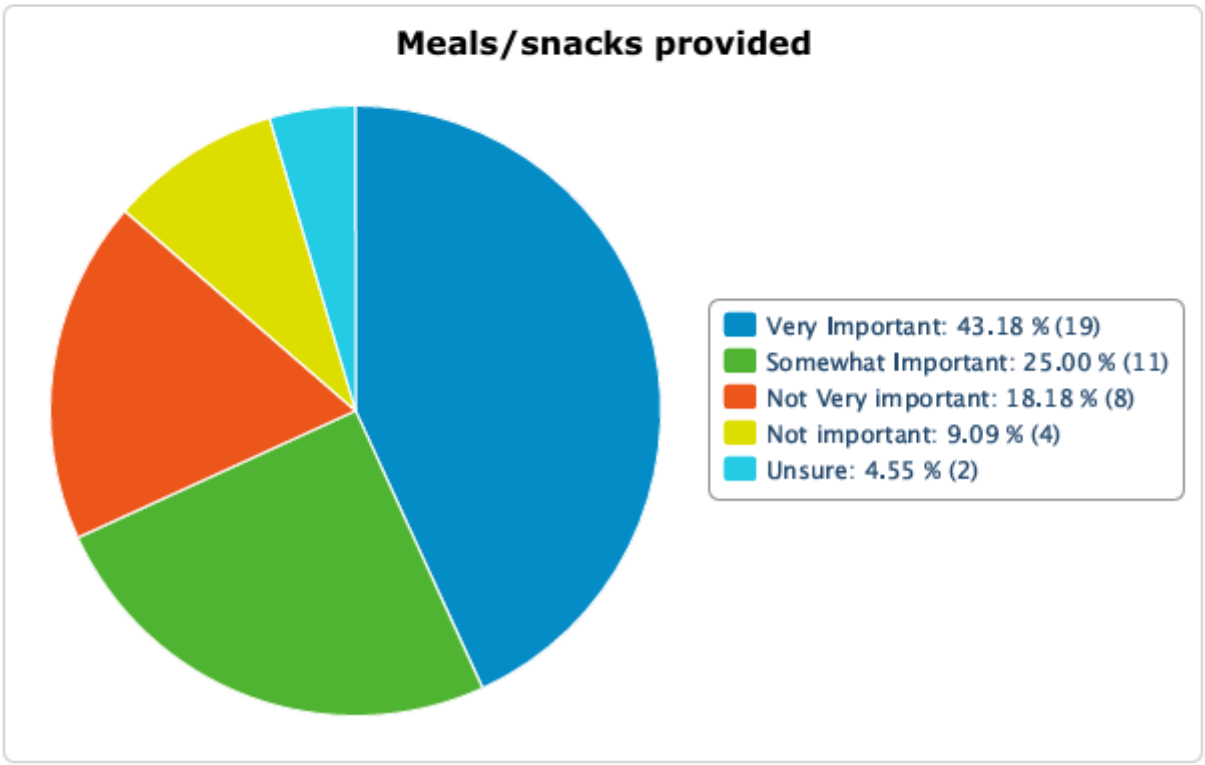


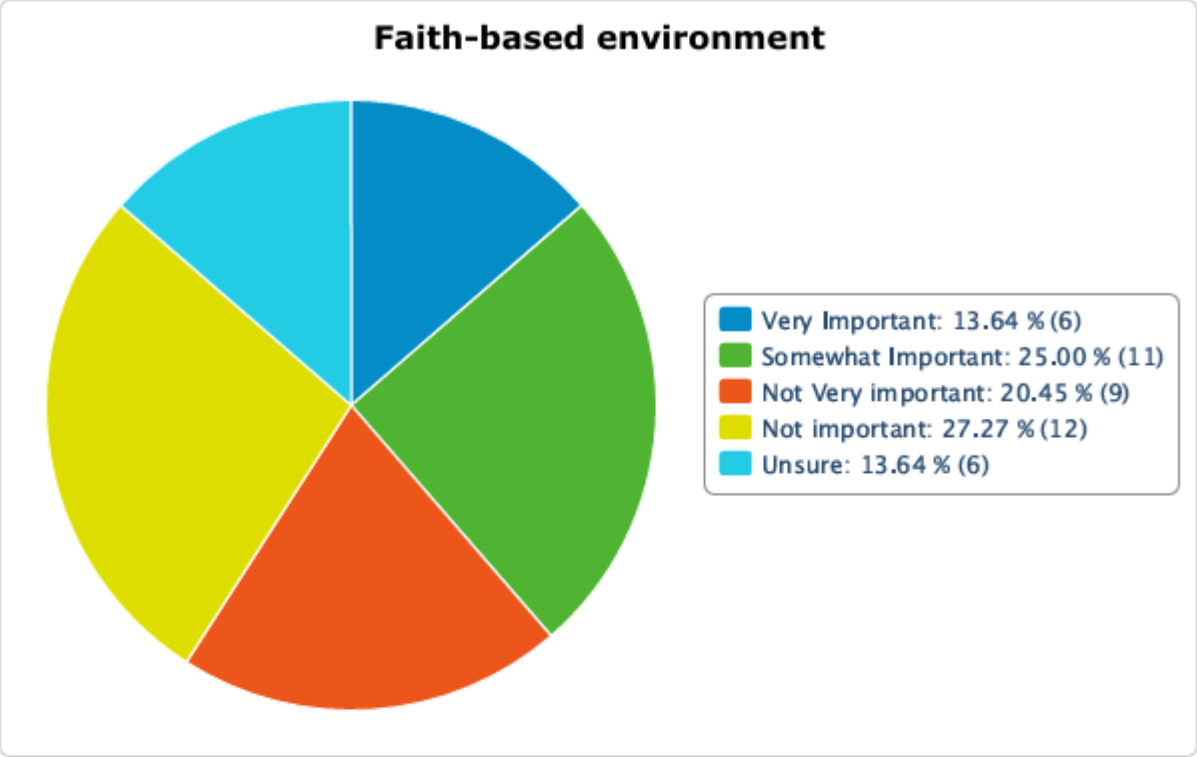


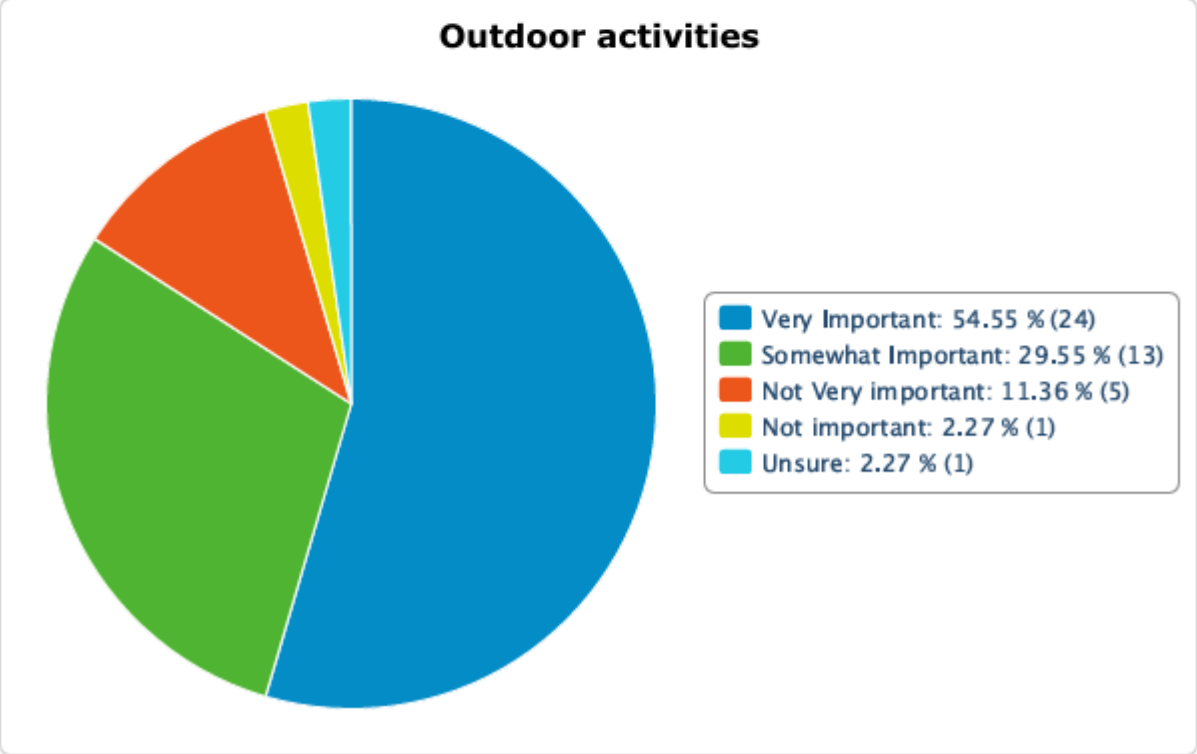

Small group size
Very Important: 34.88 % (15)
Somewhat Important: 34.88 % (15)
Not Very important: 23.26 % (10)
Unsure: 6.98 % (3)

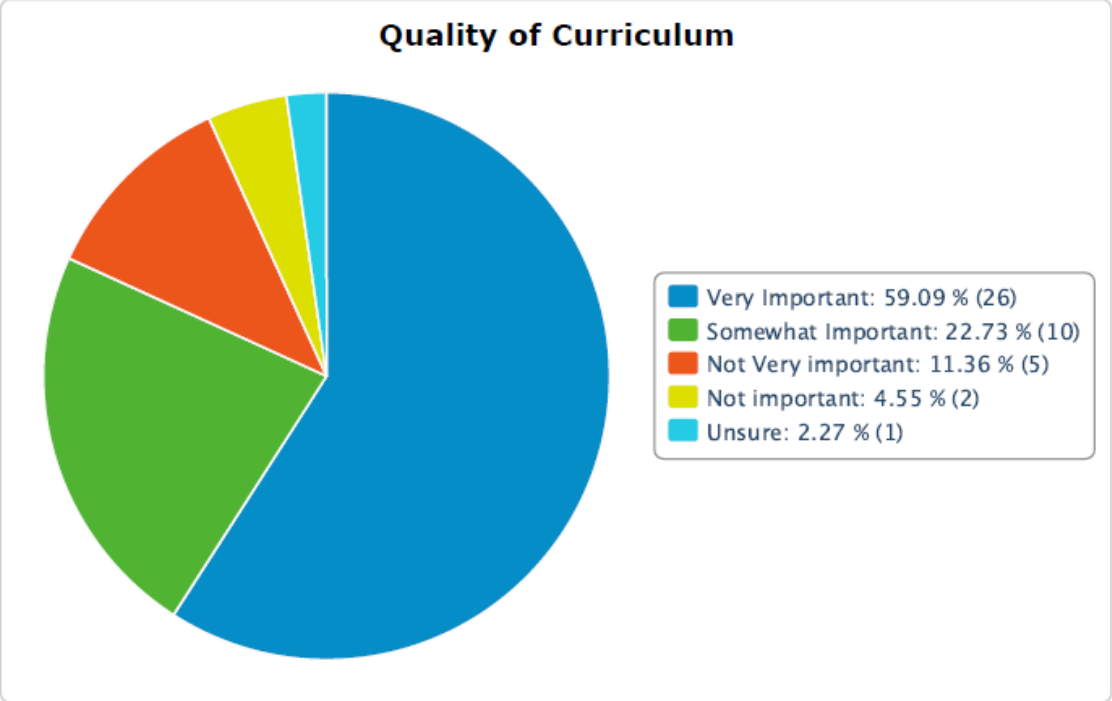

Experience with special needs
Very Important: 44.19 % (19)
Somewhat Important: 27.91 % (12)
Not Very important: 9.30 % (4)
Not important: 2.33 % (1)
Unsure: 16.28 % (7)


Transportation
Very Important: 53.49 % (23)
Somewhat Important: 23.26 % (10)
Not Very important: 9.30 % (4)
Not important: 9.30 % (4)
Unsure: 4.65 % (2)

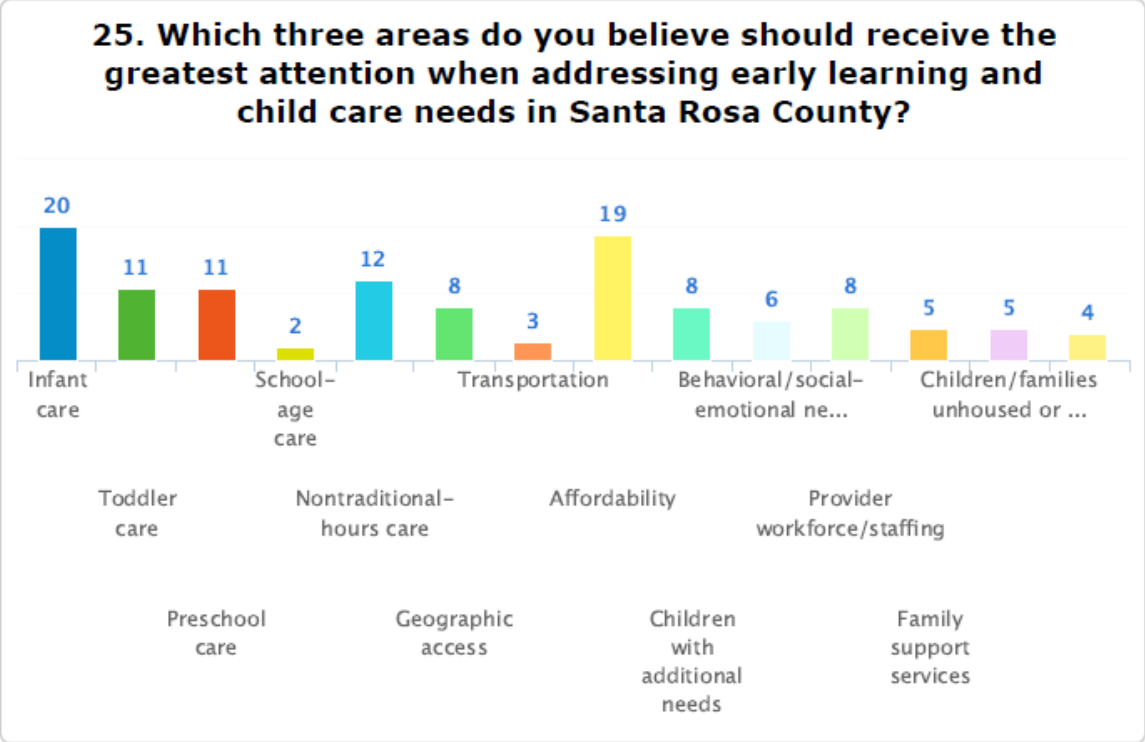

Meals/snacks provided
Very Important: 43.18 % (19)
Somewhat Important: 25.00 % (11)
Not Very important: 18.18 % (8)
Not important: 9.09 % (4)
Unsure: 4.55 % (2)


Faith-based environment
Very Important: 13.64 % (6)
Somewhat Important: 25.00 % (11)
Not Very important: 20.45 % (9)
Not important: 27.27 % (12)
Unsure: 13.64 % (6)


Outdoor activities
Very Important: 54.55 % (24)
Somewhat Important: 29.55 % (13)
Not Very important: 11.36 % (5)
Not important: 2.27 % (1)
Unsure: 2.27 % (1)



Question 24 of the survey was:
"Based on your experience or knowledge, what is the most significant unmet need related to early learning and child care in Santa Rosa County?" We did not receive any responses to this question.



9. EARLY LEARNING COALITION OF SANTA ROSA COUNTY COMMUNITY NEEDS ASSESSMENT CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The demographic and community resource information presented in this report establishes a foundation for evaluating the needs of Santa Rosa County children and families. The survey included 46 submissions from individuals with varying connections to early learning and child care. Responses represent community perspectives and perceptions, not a comprehensive count of child care slots, unmet enrollment demand, or service availability. Some questions also included an "unsure" response, indicating opportunities for additional information gathering. The findings should be considered alongside provider data, available child care capacity information, and other community resources when establishing priorities.

The ultimate goal is to support informed planning and decision-making that strengthen access to affordable, high-quality early childhood education and related family services throughout Santa Rosa County.

9.1 Key Conclusions

Santa Rosa County has an established network of early learning providers, public agencies, nonprofit organizations, and community partners that serve children and families. Publicly funded programs such as School Readiness, VPK, Head Start, and ESE preschool provide important educational opportunities. Private child care centers, family child care homes, faith-based programs, and private preschools further expand the county's early learning delivery system. Community organizations provide additional services involving economic assistance, child welfare, health, developmental intervention, food assistance, housing, and family stabilization. Despite the availability of these resources, additional information is needed to determine whether current services adequately meet the needs of eligible families.

The Community Needs Assessment identifies several significant challenges affecting access to affordable, accessible, and appropriate early learning and child care in Santa Rosa County. The findings suggest that local needs extend beyond the availability of child care spaces. Families are also experiencing challenges related to affordability, provider staffing, nontraditional work schedules, transportation, and access to specialized services.

The following conclusions are drawn from the survey responses:

- Affordability is a major barrier for families.
  Cost was identified as an incredibly significant barrier by 56.52% of respondents, with another 26.09% identifying it as somewhat significant. Additionally, 88.89% indicated that cost is particularly important when families select child care. These findings suggest that the ability to afford care is a central concern and that the availability of child care alone does not ensure families can access it.
- Infant and toddler care warrant particular attention.
  Respondents identified infant care and toddler care among the most difficult types of care for families to find. Ratings of the availability of infant care were especially concerning: 37.78% rated availability as poor or very poor, while 28.89% were unsure. Toddler care ratings were also mixed, with 30.24% rating availability poor or very poor. In contrast, preschool availability received more favorable ratings. This suggests that the Coalition should continue examining the supply and accessibility of care for the youngest children.
- Provider workforce shortages affect both availability and quality.
  A substantial 67.39% of respondents identified staffing and workforce shortages as an incredibly significant barrier, with another 15.22% identifying them as somewhat significant. Low wages, difficulty recruiting qualified staff, and difficulty retaining staff were among the most frequently identified workforce concerns. These findings point to workforce stability as a vital component of the county's child care capacity and quality.
- Families of children with additional needs may have difficulty finding appropriate care.
  More than half of respondents (52.17%) indicated that finding care for children with developmental, behavioral, medical, or disability-related needs is exceedingly difficult. Another 23.91% said it is somewhat difficult. Respondents identified autism, behavioral and social-emotional needs, speech/language delays, and medical needs as important challenges. The findings suggest opportunities to strengthen provider training, access to specialized consultation, and coordination with community services.
- Transportation, location, and scheduling affect access.
  Transportation was identified as a significant barrier by 56.52% of respondents. Respondents also identified care during evenings, overnight hours, weekends, summer, and school breaks as difficult to obtain. These concerns are particularly relevant to families with irregular or nontraditional work schedules.
- Families need more than child care alone.
  Respondents identified needs for developmental screening and intervention, transportation, mental and behavioral health services, disability services, speech therapy, housing assistance, and other family supports. Importantly, 51.11% indicated that these services are difficult or difficult for families to access. This

suggests that coordination among early learning providers and community service organizations is an important local consideration.

9.2. Recommendations for Board Consideration

Based on these findings, the following areas are recommended for Board discussion and consideration:

- Continue prioritizing affordability and access to child care.
  Explore opportunities to strengthen awareness and understanding of available financial assistance, including School Readiness. Consider whether additional outreach, enrollment assistance, or partnerships could help eligible families access affordable care.

- Examine the availability of infant and toddler care.
  Consider further assessment of infant and toddler capacity, including geographic distribution, provider interest in expanding services, staffing requirements, and barriers to offering care for younger children. Explore opportunities to support providers interested in expanding or maintaining infant and toddler classrooms.

- Support provider recruitment, retention, and workforce development. Continue identifying opportunities to support the early learning workforce through professional development, training, and partnerships. Consider strategies that address recruitment, staff retention, compensation challenges, and opportunities for career advancement. Workforce stability is essential to maintaining available child care slots and providing consistent, quality early learning experiences.

- Strengthen support for providers serving children with additional needs. Explore opportunities to expand training and technical assistance related to autism, developmental delays, challenging behaviors, speech and language development, and other specialized needs. Consider partnerships with early intervention providers, therapists, mental health professionals, and other community organizations to help providers better support children and families.

- Explore solutions for transportation and nontraditional child care schedules. Consider collaborating with local employers, transportation providers, community organizations, and child care providers to identify potential solutions to transportation barriers. Further explore the need for evening, overnight, weekend, summer, and school-break care, particularly for families whose employment schedules do not align with traditional child care hours.

- Strengthen community partnerships and connections to family support services.

Explore opportunities to improve coordination between early learning providers and organizations offering developmental screening, behavioral health, disability services, housing assistance, transportation, and other family supports. Consider ways to help families identify and navigate available resources.

9.3 Overall Recommendations and Board Direction

The assessment indicates that Santa Rosa County faces several interconnected early learning and child care challenges. Affordability, infant and toddler care availability, workforce shortages, specialized care needs, transportation, and access to related family services emerge as key areas requiring continued attention.

It is recommended that the Board use these findings to guide the Coalition's ongoing planning, community partnerships, resource development, and program priorities. Rather than attempting to address every identified need independently, the Coalition may wish to focus on areas where it can have the greatest impact through its existing responsibilities, partnerships, and available resources.

The Board may also wish to consider the following priorities:

- Affordability and access: Help families understand and access available child care assistance and resources.
- Child care capacity: Explore opportunities to address shortages in infant and toddler care.
- Workforce stability: Support initiatives that strengthen recruitment, retention, and professional development.
- Inclusion and specialized care: Improve provider capacity to serve children with additional developmental, behavioral, medical, or disability-related needs.
- Community collaboration: Strengthen partnerships to address transportation, nontraditional schedules, and access to wraparound family services.