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by Amrin Ahmed and Mila Kingsbury

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Child care use, types and difficulties among vulnerable Canadian subpopulations

by Amrin Ahmed and Mila Kingsbury 

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Abstract

This study examined disparities in early learning and child care (ELCC) use, types of care and barriers to access among vulnerable Canadian families using data from the 2023 Canadian Survey on Early Learning and Child Care. The analysis focused on children aged 1 to 5 years living in the provinces and explored differences among low-income, single-parent, racialized, Indigenous, rural and same-gender-parent families. Descriptive analyses and logistic regression models were used to assess child care participation, experiences finding care and associated consequences, while adjusting for sociodemographic factors.

Overall, 64% of children were in regular non-parental child care, most commonly centre-based daycare or preschool programs. More than half of parents reported difficulty finding child care, with the most common barriers being a shortage of spaces and affordability. Significant disparities emerged across subpopulations. Children from low-income, racialized and Indigenous families were less likely to participate in regular child care, while children in same-gender-parent families and single-parent households had higher participation rates. Vulnerable groups were more likely to rely on care during evenings or weekends and to experience employment-related consequences of child care difficulties, including postponing a return to work, reducing work hours, or changing jobs or schedules. Indigenous and rural families more frequently reported limited availability of care in their communities, while low-income and racialized families more often identified affordability as the primary barrier. Findings highlight persistent gaps in access to affordable, flexible and culturally responsive ELCC in Canada and underscore the need for policies that improve access for underserved populations.

Authors

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Introduction

Access to high-quality early learning and child care (ELCC) is important for children's development and critical for supporting families' participation in the workforce.(Morrissey, 2017) ELCC services not only provide safe and stimulating environments for children, but also offer opportunities to foster cognitive, social and emotional growth that can have long-lasting effects on educational outcomes, health and social well-being.(UNESCO & UNICEF, 2024) In addition, access to ELCC supports parental employment, particularly among mothers, by allowing caregivers to balance work and family responsibilities more effectively.(Chanda, 2022) Despite these benefits, not all families have equal access to ELCC services. Several barriers, including affordability, availability, geographic access, cultural acceptability and systemic inequities, influence whether families can use ELCC options. Families experiencing sociodemographic disadvantages, such as low income, lower levels of education, precarious employment or systemic discrimination, often face the most significant challenges in securing reliable child care.(Ajayi et al., 2025; Cleveland & Forer, 2010; Findlay et al., 2021; Friendly et al., 2021) These sociodemographic factors create unequal opportunities for children to benefit from ELCC and may reinforce cycles of disadvantage, given evidence to suggest that participation in high-quality ELCC may yield greater developmental benefits for children from disadvantaged families.(Findlay et al., 2021; Schmutz, 2024)

The purpose of the present study is to explore child care use, types and challenges among the Canadian subpopulations most likely to experience barriers to child care, including low-income families, single-parent families, racialized families, Indigenous families, rural families and families with same-gender parents. Although children with chronic conditions and disabilities are an underserved subpopulation about whom further research is warranted, child care use among this population is best described using data sources other than those used in the present study.(Kerr et al., 2024) Using data from a nationally representative survey, this project examines child care challenges for such families. Results highlight areas for improvement in equitable access to child care. Understanding how certain Canadian subpopulations navigate the child care system and the unique challenges they face is critical for ensuring that policies and programs support equitable access for all.

Previous findings

Socioeconomic status and early learning and child care

Previous findings suggest that low-income households, households in which parents are unemployed, households with lower parental education levels and single-parent households face disparities in access to and choice of child care.(Bushnik, 2006; OECD, 2016)

A consistent finding in the literature is that affordability is a major barrier to ELCC use. Families with low income report higher levels of difficulty affording child care fees, compared with higher-income families.(Abrassart & Bonoli, 2015; Kingsbury et al.) Studies show that when child care fees consume a large portion of household income, families are more likely to reduce work hours, forgo employment opportunities or rely on informal care arrangements.(Roll & East, 2014) Conversely, parents in low-income families report that if they had access to child care with no barriers, they would likely start or increase work or school.(Kingsbury et al.) Despite targeted subsidies, many low-income families continue to report unmet needs for affordable care.(Huston, 2004; Kingsbury et al.) Results from the 2019 Survey on Early Learning and Child Care Arrangements showed non-parental child care participation rates to be 19% lower among low-income families than among families who were not considered to have low income.(Findlay et al., 2021) Relatedly, single-parent households, particularly those headed by single mothers, are more likely to experience lower income levels and higher rates of poverty.(Lu et al., 2020) Coupled with the inability to share child care with a partner, this leads single-parent families to experience both high demand for child care and a greater likelihood of difficulty securing affordable care.

Geographic access and availability

Geographic location also plays a role in ELCC access because remote areas frequently face shortages of licensed spaces, leaving families with limited or no options for formal child care. (*On the teeter-totter: the challenges and opportunities for licensed child care in rural, northern, and remote Ontario*, 2011) Families living in rural areas have been found to have lower participation rates in ELCC programs (Morrissey et al., 2022) and report more barriers related to child care access, (Kingsbury et al.) compared with families living in population centres.

Cultural and social barriers

Indigenous families in Canada face particular challenges with respect to child care. The intergenerational legacy of residential schools and assimilation has led to a lack of institutional trust among many Indigenous families, which can impact willingness to enrol their children in child care. (Findlay et al., 2023) An additional barrier for child care use among Indigenous children may relate to a lack of culturally relevant or language-based programs. (Findlay et al., 2023)

Families with racialized backgrounds also face significant barriers in accessing child care, limited availability of services in their communities and a lack of culturally sensitive care. (Copeland et al., 2024; Friendly et al., 2023) These factors can contribute to lower rates of participation in formal child care programs and may further reinforce social and economic inequities among racialized families. Families with 2SLGBTQI+parents (those who are Two-Spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or intersex or use another term related to gender and sexual diversity) may also encounter discrimination or a lack of inclusive programming that affirms their family structures. (Coulter-Thompson, 2023) Very limited research is available on ELCC access among families with 2SLGBTQI+parents.

Limitations of previous studies

Previous work has described patterns of ELCC participation among families with sociodemographic disadvantages; however, exploration among certain groups, such as gender-diverse families, remains limited. Much of the existing research has focused on socioeconomic status, with less attention paid to the experiences of families with gender-diverse and same-gender parents, Indigenous families, and other subpopulations. As a result, the unique challenges faced by these groups remain underexplored.

Research questions

This report aims to explore the following research questions:

1. How does the use of child care services differ among various subpopulations, including, but not limited to, low-income families, racialized families, Indigenous families and gender-diverse families?
2. What types of child care arrangements (centre-based care, home-based care, care by a relative or non-relative, before- or after-school program, etc.) are most frequently used by families within different groups?
3. What challenges do these groups face in accessing child care?
4. Do these associations persist after controlling for other factors?

Data source, variables of interest and definitions

The 2023 Canadian Survey on Early Learning and Child Care (CSELCC) is a national cross-sectional survey conducted by Statistics Canada in collaboration with Employment and Social Development Canada. The survey collected information from parents and guardians of children aged 0 to 5 years across Canada's 10 provinces from January to June 2023. It gathered detailed data on child care use, types of care, costs and difficulties finding care, as well as parental employment and family characteristics. The sample was drawn from the Canada Child Benefit database and was weighted to represent the national population (excluding the territories), accounting for the complex survey design and non-response. (Statistics Canada, 2024) For the present analyses, the sample was restricted to children aged 1 to 5 years because a much smaller percentage of children aged 0 to 1 (16%) were in regular child care.

Measures and definitions

- Use of child care: "In the past three months, did your child usually attend any child care arrangements?"
- Type of child care arrangements used: "In the past three months, which of the following child care arrangements did you usually use for your child?"
 - Daycare centre, preschool or centre de la petite enfance (CPE)
 - Care by a relative other than a parent or guardian
 - Care by non-relative in the child's home
 - Family child care home
 - Before- or after-school program
 - Other
- Main child care arrangement: "Currently, which child care arrangement do you consider to be the main one for your child?"
- Use of care during non-standard hours (in the evenings after 6 p.m. or on the weekends)
- Reasons for not using child care: "What are the reasons your family doesn't use child care arrangements for your child?"
 - Unemployed
 - Maternity, paternity or parental leave
 - Prefer to have a parent stay at home with the child
 - Prefer to adjust work or study schedules to accommodate child care needs
 - Prefer to care for the child while working
 - Shortage of places or waiting list
 - The cost of child care is too high
 - Services not adapted to the child's special needs due to disability or chronic illness
 - Available child care arrangements are not suitable
 - Child is in school

- Difficulty finding child care (yes or no): “Did you have difficulty finding a child care arrangement for your child?”
- Types of difficulties: “What did you have difficulty finding?”
 - Affordable child care
 - Licensed or accredited child care
 - Child care available in your community
 - Qualified child care provider
 - The quality of child care you require
 - Child care that meets your child’s special needs due to disability or chronic illness
 - Child care that fits your family’s work or study schedules
 - Child care that offers culturally relevant or minority language programming
 - Child care that could accommodate more than one child in the family
- Main difficulty: “Of the difficulties you indicated previously, which one represents the main difficulty you had finding child care for your child?”
- Consequences of difficulties: “Did the difficulties you had finding child care result in you and your family doing any of the following?”
 - Postponing your return to work
 - Deciding to work at home
 - Working fewer hours than you would have otherwise
 - Changing your work or study schedules
 - Changing jobs, quitting job or closing business
 - Deciding to have a parent stay home with the child
 - Postponing or discontinuing schooling or training
 - Using multiple child care arrangements or a temporary arrangement
 - Paying more for child care than you wanted to pay
 - Other impact
 - No specific impacts
- Vulnerability indicator variables
 - Residence in a rural area
 - Family low income (below Low-Income Measure threshold vs. at or above the threshold)
 - Child Indigenous identity (First Nations, Métis and Inuit were combined for analyses because of small cell sizes; children living on reserve are not included)
 - Family composition (single- vs. dual-parent family)
 - Same-gender parents

Analytic strategy

Descriptive analyses using cross tabulations were conducted to estimate proportions and 95% confidence intervals for child care use, types and difficulties, by vulnerable group. Chi-square tests of independence were used to assess whether proportions differed significantly for vulnerable groups, compared with the rest of the population. Finally, regression analyses were conducted to determine whether child care use differed for vulnerable groups after adjusting for other sociodemographic factors. Survey and bootstrap weights were applied to account for the complex survey design.

Results

Overall

In 2023, almost two-thirds (64%) of Canadian children aged 1 to 5 living in the provinces were in some form of regular non-parental child care (Table 1). The most common arrangement was a centre-based daycare or preschool, which was the main child care arrangement for over half of those in child care (61%), while 12% were mainly cared for by a relative. Of children in regular child care, about 11% were in child care during non-standard hours, such as evenings or weekends

Table 1
Use of child care by Canadian children aged 1 to 5 living in the provinces, 2023

	95% confidence interval		
	Percentage	Lower	Upper
Used regular child care	63.9	63.1	64.6
Among those in child care, main arrangement			
Daycare centre, preschool or centre de la petite enfance (CPE)	61.0	60.1	62.0
Care by a relative other than a parent or guardian	11.7	11.1	12.4
Care by a non-relative in the child's home	2.2	2.0	2.6
Home-based child care, licensed	8.7	8.2	9.3
Home-based child care, unlicensed	5.5	5.1	6.0
Before- or after-school program	8.5	8.0	9.1
Among those in child care, used care during non-standard hours	11.0	10.3	11.6
Among those not using care, main reason			
Unemployed	5.3	4.7	6.0
Maternity, paternity or parental leave	5.7	5.1	6.3
Prefer to have a parent stay home with the child	29.4	28.2	30.6
Prefer to adjust work or study schedules to accommodate child care needs	5.0	4.4	5.6
Prefer to care for the child while working	3.1	2.6	3.6
Shortage of places or waiting list	9.8	9.0	10.6
The cost of child care is too high	12.9	12.0	14.0
Services not adapted to the child's special needs due to disability or chronic illness	0.9	0.6	1.2
Available child care arrangements are not suitable	1.8	1.5	2.2
Child is in school	17.4	16.4	18.5
Other reason	7.0	6.3	7.8
No specific reason	1.6	1.3	2.1
Among those who looked for child care			
Difficulty finding child care	51.6	50.6	52.5
Main difficulty			
Finding child care available in the community	37.9	36.7	39.2
Finding affordable child care	15.8	14.9	16.8
Finding subsidized child care spaces or spaces eligible for child care fee subsidy	13.4	12.6	14.3
Finding child care that fits the family's work or study schedules	6.1	5.6	6.8
Finding licensed or accredited child care	4.5	4.0	5.0
Finding the quality of child care required	4.4	4.0	5.0
Finding child care that could accommodate more than one child in the family	2.8	2.4	3.2
Finding a qualified child care provider	1.7	1.4	2.0
Finding child care that meets the child's special needs due to disability or chronic illness	1.5	1.2	1.9
Finding child care that offers culturally relevant or minority language programming	0.4	0.3	0.6
Other difficulty	11.3	10.5	12.2
Among those with difficulty finding child care			
Consequences of difficulties			
Changing their work or study schedules	33.6	32.4	34.7
Postponing their return to work	33.3	32.1	34.6
Working fewer hours than they would have otherwise	32.5	31.3	33.7
Paying more for child care than they wanted to pay	26.7	25.6	27.9
Using multiple child care arrangements or a temporary arrangement	24.5	23.5	25.6
Deciding to have a parent stay home with the child	22.2	21.1	23.3
Deciding to work at home	16.4	15.5	17.3
Changing jobs, quitting job or closing business	15.8	14.9	16.8
Postponing or discontinuing schooling or training	8.7	8.0	9.5
Other impact	8.8	8.1	9.5
No specific impacts	12.3	11.5	13.1

Source: Statistics Canada, Canadian Survey on Early Learning and Child Care, 2023.

Among parents of children aged 1 to 5 not using regular child care, almost one-third (29%) preferred to have a parent stay home with the child, and 17% did not use child care because their child was in school. Other commonly cited reasons for not using child care were related to cost (13%) or a shortage of spaces (10%).

Difficulties finding child care

In 2023, parents of more than half of children aged 1 to 5 years reported difficulties in finding child care (Table 1). The most common main difficulty was a lack of available child care spaces in the community, which was reported for an estimated 38% of children. Affordability was also a prominent barrier, with 16% reporting that they were unable to find child care at a cost they could manage. The most common consequences of difficulties finding child care were a parent changing their work schedule (34%), postponing their return to work (33%) or working fewer hours to be able to care for their child (33%).

Subpopulations

Low-income families

Regular use of child care was substantially lower among low-income families (47%) than among higher-income families (71%; Table 2). Among those in care, children in low-income families less often used unlicensed home child care and before- or after-school programs as their main arrangement and more often used care during non-standard hours (Table 2). Among those not using child care, low-income families were more likely to report unemployment or a preference for a parent to stay home as reasons and were less likely to report preferring to adjust their work schedule or to care for their child while working.

Table 2

Use of child care and difficulties finding child care by parents of Canadian children aged 1 to 5, by family low-income status, 2023

	Low-income families			Families not in low income			Chi ²	p-value
	95% confidence interval			95% confidence interval				
	Percentage	Lower	Upper	Percentage	Lower	Upper		
Used regular child care	46.8*	45.2	48.4	70.6	69.8	71.4	637.67	< 0.001
Among those in child care, main arrangement	...	...	...	...	...	...	11.94	< 0.001
Daycare centre, preschool or centre de la petite enfance (CPE)	61.9	59.5	64.2	60.8	59.8	61.9	...	...
Care by a relative other than a parent or guardian	13.8*	12.2	15.4	11.2	10.6	11.9	...	...
Care by a non-relative in the child's home	2.4	1.7	3.3	2.2	1.9	2.6	...	...
Home-based child care, licensed	8.0	6.8	9.4	8.9	8.4	9.5	...	...
Home-based child care, unlicensed	3.0*	2.3	4.0	6.2	5.7	6.7	...	...
Before- or after-school program	6.6*	5.5	8.1	9.0	8.4	9.7	...	...
Among those in child care, used care during non-standard hours	15.3*	13.5	17.2	9.9	9.2	10.6	30.18	< 0.001
Among those not using care, main reason	...	...	...	...	...	...	18.18	< 0.001
Unemployed	8.5*	7.3	10.0	3.1	2.6	3.7	...	...
Maternity, paternity or parental leave	3.4*	2.7	4.3	7.3	6.4	8.2	...	...
Prefer to have a parent stay home with the child	33.0*	30.9	35.1	26.9	25.4	28.4	...	...
Prefer to adjust work or study schedules to accommodate child care needs	2.9*	2.3	3.6	6.5	5.7	7.4	...	...
Prefer to care for the child while working	2.2*	1.7	2.9	3.7	3.1	4.4	...	...
Shortage of places or waiting list	8.8	7.6	10.2	10.5	9.5	11.6	...	...
The cost of child care is too high	14.4	12.9	16.1	11.9	10.8	13.1	...	...
Services not adapted to the child's special needs due to disability or chronic illness	1.3	0.9	2.1	0.5	0.3	0.9	...	...
Available child care arrangements are not suitable	2.1	1.5	2.9	1.6	1.2	2.1	...	...
Child is in school	13.1*	11.6	14.9	20.5	19.1	21.9	...	...
Other reason	7.7	6.5	9.1	6.5	5.7	7.3	...	...
No specific reason	2.4*	1.8	3.2	1.1	0.8	1.5	...	...
Among those who looked for child care								
Difficulty finding child care	51.9	50.9	52.9	50.5	48.5	52.5	1.43	0.231
Main difficulty	...	...	...	...	...	...	11.81	< 0.001
Finding affordable child care	22.3*	20	24.9	13.8	12.9	14.8	...	...
Finding subsidized child care spaces or spaces eligible for child care fee subsidy	18.1*	15.9	20.5	12.0	11.1	12.9	...	...
Finding licensed or accredited child care	2.9*	2.1	4.1	5.0	4.4	5.6	...	...
Finding child care available in the community	29.4*	26.8	32.3	40.6	39.2	41.9	...	...
Finding a qualified child care provider	2.1	1.4	3.1	1.5	1.2	1.9	...	...
Finding the quality of child care required	3.1*	2.3	4.2	4.9	4.3	5.5	...	...
Finding child care that meets the child's special needs due to disability or chronic illness	3.1*	2.2	4.3	1.0	0.8	1.4	...	...
Finding child care that fits the family's work or study schedules	5.5	4.4	6.8	6.4	5.7	7.1	...	...
Finding child care that offers culturally relevant or minority language programming	F	F	F	F	F	F	...	...
Finding child care that could accommodate more than one child in the family	2.5	1.7	3.6	2.9	2.4	3.4	...	...
Other difficulty	10.5	8.9	12.3	11.6	10.7	12.5	...	...
Among those with difficulty finding child care								
Consequences of difficulties								
Postponing their return to work	38.4*	35.6	41.2	31.7	30.4	33.1	17.66	< 0.001
Deciding to work at home	15.0	13.0	17.2	16.8	15.8	17.8	2.32	0.128
Working fewer hours than they would have otherwise	34.7	32.0	37.5	31.8	30.5	33.2	3.58	0.059
Changing their work or study schedules	34.1	31.5	36.9	33.4	32.1	34.7	0.23	0.631
Changing jobs, quitting job or closing business	22.1*	19.8	24.6	13.9	12.9	14.9	38.14	< 0.001
Deciding to have a parent stay home with the child	33.7*	30.9	36.5	18.6	17.5	19.8	94.93	< 0.001
Postponing or discontinuing schooling or training	15.8*	13.8	18.0	6.5	5.9	7.3	64.37	< 0.001
Using multiple child care arrangements or a temporary arrangement	19.4*	17.2	21.7	26.1	24.9	27.4	26.63	< 0.001
Paying more for child care than they wanted to pay	19.9*	17.7	22.3	28.9	27.6	30.2	44.62	< 0.001
Other impact	7.8	6.4	9.4	9.1	8.3	9.9	2.2	0.138
No specific impacts	9.1*	7.5	10.9	13.3	12.4	14.2	17.81	< 0.001

... not applicable

F too unreliable to be published

* estimate for group is significantly different from reference group

Source: Statistics Canada, Canadian Survey on Early Learning and Child Care, 2023.

Though having difficulty finding child care was equally common for low-income and higher-income families (Table 2), the types of difficulties parents experienced differed based on income. Affordability emerged as a critical issue for low-income parents, with more than one in five low-income families (22%) reporting cost as the main difficulty encountered, and an additional 18% reporting difficulty finding a space in subsidized child care. These barriers had clear consequences: parents in low-income households more often postponed returning to work or school, changed or quit their job, or had a parent stay home with the child because they had difficulties finding child care.

Single-parent families

Single-parent families had higher overall use of child care (67%), compared with two-parent families (63%; Table 3). Children in single-parent households were less likely to use unlicensed home-based child care as their main arrangement and were more likely to use child care during non-standard hours. Among those not using care, single parents were more likely to report unemployment and the cost of child care as reasons and less likely to report preferring not using child care or not using it because of parental leave (Table 3). Although difficulty finding child care did not differ significantly between single- and two-parent families, single parents more often reported that the main difficulty they experienced was finding affordable care (19% vs. 15% of respondents in dual-parent households). Single parents also more often reported postponing their return to work or school, or quitting or changing their job because of these difficulties finding child care.

Table 3

Use of child care and difficulties finding child care by parents of Canadian children aged 1 to 5, by family composition, 2023

	Single-parent families			Two-parent families			Chi ²	p-value
	95% confidence interval			95% confidence interval				
	Percentage	Lower	Upper	Percentage	Lower	Upper		
Used regular child care	66.5*	64.2	68.6	63.4	62.6	64.2	6.38	0.012
Among those in child care, main arrangement	...	...	...	...	...	...	4.72	<0.001
Daycare centre, preschool or centre de la petite enfance (CPE)	60.9	58.1	63.7	61.1	60.0	62.0	...	...
Care by a relative other than a parent or guardian	13.1	11.3	15.1	11.5	10.8	12.2	...	...
Care by a non-relative in the child's home	2.8	2.0	3.9	2.2	1.9	2.5	...	...
Home-based child care, licensed	7.7	6.4	9.3	8.9	8.4	9.5	...	...
Home-based child care, unlicensed	3.4*	2.5	4.5	5.9	5.4	6.4	...	...
Before- or after-school program	9.4	7.9	11.3	8.4	7.8	9.0	...	...
Among those in child care, used care during non-standard hours	16.5*	14.4	18.9	10.0	9.4	10.7	30.79	<0.001
Among those not using care, main reason	...	...	...	...	...	...	10.06	<0.001
Unemployed	12.4*	9.8	15.6	4.3	3.7	4.9	...	...
Maternity, paternity or parental leave	4.2	2.9	6.0	5.9	5.3	6.6	...	...
Prefer to have a parent stay home with the child	18.7*	15.7	22.1	31.0	29.8	32.4	...	...
Prefer to adjust work or study schedules to accommodate child care needs	2.7*	1.7	4.2	5.4	4.8	6.0	...	...
Prefer to care for the child while working	3.2	2.0	5.0	3.1	2.6	3.6	...	...
Shortage of places or waiting list	9.9	7.9	12.5	9.8	8.9	10.7	...	...
The cost of child care is too high	15.1	12.3	18.4	12.6	11.6	13.7	...	...
Services not adapted to the child's special needs due to disability or chronic illness	2.3*	1.3	4.0	0.7	0.4	1.0	...	...
Available child care arrangements are not suitable	3.3	2.0	5.2	1.6	1.3	2.0	...	...
Child is in school	12.9*	10.3	16.0	18.2	17.1	19.3	...	...
Other reason	12.3*	9.6	15.6	6.2	5.5	6.9	...	...
No specific reason	3.0*	2.0	4.6	1.4	1.1	1.9	...	...
Among those who looked for child care								
Difficulty finding child care	50.7	48.2	53.2	51.7	50.7	52.7	0.54	0.461
Main difficulty	...	...	...	...	...	...	5.03	<0.001
Finding affordable child care	18.9	16.2	22.0	15.3	14.3	16.3	...	...
Finding subsidized child care spaces or spaces eligible for child care fee subsidy	16.3	13.7	19.4	12.9	12.0	13.8	...	...
Finding licensed or accredited child care	3.0	2.1	4.4	4.7	4.2	5.4	...	...
Finding child care available in the community	32.3*	28.9	35.9	38.9	37.7	40.3	...	...
Finding a qualified child care provider	2.1	1.2	3.4	1.6	1.3	2.0	...	...
Finding the quality of child care required	2.5	1.7	3.9	4.8	4.3	5.4	...	...
Finding child care that meets the child's special needs due to disability or chronic illness	2.6	1.6	4.0	1.3	1.0	1.7	...	...
Finding child care that fits the family's work or study schedules	7.8	6.1	10.0	5.9	5.3	6.5	...	...
Finding child care that offers culturally relevant or minority language programming	X	X	X	X	X	X	...	...
Finding child care that could accommodate more than one child in the family	1.7	1.0	3.0	3.0	2.5	3.5	...	...
Other difficulty	12.4	10.3	14.9	11.1	10.3	12.0	...	...
Among those with difficulty finding child care								
Consequences of difficulties								
Postponing their return to work	37.1*	33.7	40.8	32.6	31.3	33.9	5.6	0.019
Deciding to work at home	13.9*	11.7	16.6	16.8	15.8	17.8	4.6	0.033
Working fewer hours than they would have otherwise	35.2	31.8	38.6	32.0	30.8	33.3	2.9	0.09
Changing their work or study schedules	36.4	33.1	39.8	33.1	31.9	34.3	3.4	0.067
Changing jobs, quitting job or closing business	21.5*	18.5	24.7	14.8	13.9	15.8	16.1	<0.001
Deciding to have a parent stay home with the child	21.1	18.2	24.3	22.4	21.2	23.6	0.6	0.425
Postponing or discontinuing schooling or training	12.2*	10.0	14.8	8.1	7.4	8.9	9.9	0.002
Using multiple child care arrangements or a temporary arrangement	26.9	23.8	30.2	24.1	23.0	25.3	2.7	0.101
Paying more for child care than they wanted to pay	24.2	21.2	27.3	27.2	26.0	28.4	3.3	0.07
Other impact	9.8	7.9	12.1	8.6	7.9	9.4	1.1	0.306
No specific impacts	12.8	10.6	15.4	12.2	11.4	13.1	0.2	0.644

... not applicable

X suppressed to meet the confidentiality requirements of the *Statistics Act*

* estimate for group is significantly different from reference group

Source: Statistics Canada, Canadian Survey on Early Learning and Child Care, 2023.

Racialized children

Use of child care also varied by population group. Just over half (56%) of racialized children were in regular care, compared with over two-thirds (70%) of non-racialized, non-Indigenous children. Among those who did use care, racialized children were more often in a daycare centre, preschool or CPE as their main arrangement, and less often in licensed or unlicensed home-based care as their main arrangement (Table 4). Additionally, racialized children more often used child care during non-standard hours.

Table 4

Use of child care and difficulties finding child care by parents of Canadian children aged 1 to 5, by child racialized background, 2023

	Racialized children			Non-racialized, non-Indigenous			Chi ²	p-value
	95% confidence interval			95% confidence interval				
	Percentage	Lower	Upper	Percentage	Lower	Upper		
Used regular child care	55.5	54.1	56.8	69.9	68.9	70.8	266.36	<0.001
Among those in child care, main arrangement	...	...	...	...	...	...	47.53	<0.001
Daycare centre, preschool or centre de la petite enfance (CPE)	67.7*	65.9	69.4	57.7	56.5	58.9	...	...
Care by a relative other than a parent or guardian	12.0	10.9	13.3	11.1	10.3	11.9	...	...
Care by a non-relative in the child's home	1.8	1.3	2.4	2.5	2.2	2.9	...	...
Home-based child care, licensed	6.3*	5.5	7.2	10.0	9.3	10.7	...	...
Home-based child care, unlicensed	1.8*	1.3	2.3	7.5	6.9	8.1	...	...
Before- or after-school program	7.7	6.7	8.8	9.4	8.7	10.1	...	...
Among those in child care, used care during non-standard hours	12.9*	11.6	14.2	10.7	10.0	11.3	18.08	<0.001
Among those not using care, main reason	...	...	...	...	...	...	12.28	<0.001
Unemployed	7.2*	6.1	8.4	3.4	2.7	4.2	...	...
Maternity, paternity or parental leave	4.7*	3.9	5.6	6.5	5.6	7.5	...	...
Prefer to have a parent stay home with the child	23.8*	22.0	25.7	34.6	32.8	36.4	...	...
Prefer to adjust work or study schedules to accommodate child care needs	5.6	4.8	6.6	4.8	4.0	5.7	...	...
Prefer to care for the child while working	2.7	2.1	3.4	3.6	3.0	4.5	...	...
Shortage of places or waiting list	10.3	9.1	11.7	9.3	8.3	10.5	...	...
The cost of child care is too high	16.7*	15.1	18.5	9.3	8.1	10.6	...	...
Services not adapted to the child's special needs due to disability or chronic illness	0.9	0.5	1.5	0.6	0.3	1.0	...	...
Available child care arrangements are not suitable	1.9	1.4	2.7	1.6	1.2	2.2	...	...
Child is in school	17.2	15.6	18.9	18.5	17.1	20.0	...	...
Other reason	7.1	6.1	8.3	6.7	5.7	7.8	...	...
No specific reason	2.0	1.4	2.8	1.0	0.7	1.5	...	...
Among those who looked for child care								
Difficulty finding child care	50.7	49.1	52.4	51.5	50.4	52.7	0.58	0.447
Main difficulty	...	...	...	...	...	...	17.19	<0.001
Finding affordable child care	22.5*	20.6	24.5	12.0	11.0	13.2	...	...
Finding subsidized child care spaces or spaces eligible for child care fee subsidy	15.8*	14.2	17.7	12.1	11.1	13.2	...	...
Finding licensed or accredited child care	4.4	3.6	5.4	4.6	4.0	5.3	...	...
Finding child care available in the community	29.8*	27.8	31.8	42.7	41.1	44.3	...	...
Finding a qualified child care provider	1.9	1.4	2.7	1.6	1.2	2.0	...	...
Finding the quality of child care required	5.1	4.2	6.1	4.0	3.5	4.7	...	...
Finding child care that meets the child's special needs due to disability or chronic illness	1.6	1.1	2.4	1.2	0.9	1.6	...	...
Finding child care that fits the family's work or study schedules	6.0	5.0	7.1	6.3	5.5	7.1	...	...
Finding child care that offers culturally relevant or minority language programming	0.3	0.2	0.7	0.4	0.2	0.6	...	...
Finding child care that could accommodate more than one child in the family	1.8*	1.3	2.5	3.4	2.9	4.1	...	...
Other difficulty	10.8	9.4	12.3	11.7	10.7	12.7	...	...
Among those with difficulty finding child care								
Consequences of difficulties								
Postponing their return to work	33.0	30.9	35.3	33.5	32.0	35.0	0.12	0.728
Deciding to work at home	20.6*	18.8	22.5	14.2	13.1	15.3	34.33	<0.001
Working fewer hours than they would have otherwise	31.7	29.6	33.8	32.5	31.0	34.1	0.41	0.524
Changing their work or study schedules	37.6*	35.4	39.9	31.2	29.8	32.7	21.21	<0.001
Changing jobs, quitting job or closing business	17.5*	15.9	19.3	14.7	13.6	15.9	7.27	0.007
Deciding to have a parent stay home with the child	26.9*	25.0	29.0	19.3	17.9	20.7	38.61	<0.001
Postponing or discontinuing schooling or training	12.4*	11.0	14.1	6.4	5.7	7.3	44.06	<0.001
Using multiple child care arrangements or a temporary arrangement	18.3*	16.5	20.2	28.0	26.7	29.4	66.66	<0.001
Paying more for child care than they wanted to pay	24.5*	22.6	26.5	28.2	26.8	29.6	9.54	0.002
Other impact	7.4*	6.3	8.7	9.3	8.4	10.2	5.97	0.015
No specific impacts	9.9*	8.6	11.4	13.9	12.9	15.0	19.68	<0.001

... not applicable

* estimate for group is significantly different from reference group

Source: Statistics Canada, Canadian Survey on Early Learning and Child Care, 2023.

Among children not in care, parents of racialized children more often reported that this was because they were unemployed or because the cost was too high and less often reported that they were on parental leave or preferred to have a parent stay home. Although difficulty finding child care did not differ significantly between families of racialized and non-racialized children, parents of racialized children more often reported that the main difficulty experienced was finding affordable care (23% vs. 12%) or subsidized spaces (16% vs. 12%). Parents of racialized children also more often reported multiple labour market consequences of difficulties finding child care, including quitting or changing their job or schedule, working from home, having a parent stay home with the child, and postponing schooling. By contrast, parents of racialized children were less likely to have used multiple or temporary child care arrangements, or paid more than they wanted for child care.

Indigenous children

A majority (59%) of Indigenous children living off reserve in the provinces used regular child care, significantly lower than the proportion of non-Indigenous children in child care (64%; Table 5). Among those using child care, Indigenous children more often used care by a relative as their main arrangement (21% vs. 11% among non-Indigenous children), while use of before- or after-school programs as the main arrangement was lower (4% vs. 9%). Parents of Indigenous children more often opted not to use child care because available services were not adapted to their child's special needs (3% vs. 0.8%).

Table 5

Use of child care and difficulties finding child care by parents of Canadian children aged 1 to 5, by child Indigenous identity, 2023

	Indigenous children			Non-Indigenous children			Chi ²	p-value
	95% confidence interval			95% confidence interval				
	Percentage	Lower	Upper	Percentage	Lower	Upper		
Used regular child care	58.5*	54.8	62.1	64.1	63.4	64.9	8.79	0.003
Among those in child care, main arrangement	...	...	...	...	...	...	6.19	<0.001
Daycare centre, preschool or centre de la petite enfance (CPE)	57.8	52.9	62.6	61.2	60.2	62.1	...	...
Care by a relative other than a parent or guardian	21.2*	17.3	25.8	11.3	10.7	12.0	...	...
Care by a non-relative in the child's home	2.4	1.3	4.5	2.2	2.0	2.6	...	...
Home-based child care, licensed	7.1	5.1	9.7	8.8	8.3	9.4	...	...
Home-based child care, unlicensed	5.0	3.4	7.2	5.5	5.1	6.0	...	...
Before- or after-school program	3.5*	1.9	6.1	8.7	8.2	9.3	...	...
Among those in child care, used care during non-standard hours	18.0*	14.1	22.6	10.7	10.0	11.3	10.44	0.001
Among those not using care, main reason	...	...	...	...	...	...	4.95	<0.001
Unemployed	7.1	4.8	10.3	5.3	4.6	6.0	...	...
Maternity, paternity or parental leave	6.9	4.7	10.1	5.6	5.0	6.3	...	...
Prefer to have a parent stay home with the child	32.0	26.8	37.6	29.2	28.0	30.5	...	...
Prefer to adjust work or study schedules to accommodate child care needs	1.5*	0.7	3.4	5.2	4.6	5.8	...	...
Prefer to care for the child while working	1.6	0.8	3.3	3.2	2.7	3.7	...	...
Shortage of places or waiting list	11.6	8.4	15.9	9.7	8.9	10.6	...	...
The cost of child care is too high	14.5	10.7	19.3	12.9	11.9	13.9	...	...
Services not adapted to the child's special needs due to disability or chronic illness	2.9*	1.3	6.0	0.8	0.5	1.1	...	...
Available child care arrangements are not suitable	1.9	1.0	3.7	1.8	1.5	2.3	...	...
Child is in school	9.1*	6.0	13.6	17.9	16.9	19.0	...	...
Other reason	7.5	5.1	10.8	7.0	6.2	7.8	...	...
No specific reason	3.5	1.8	6.5	1.5	1.2	2.0	...	...
Among those who looked for child care								
Difficulty finding child care	56.9*	52.5	61.2	51.3	50.4	52.3	5.83	0.016
Main difficulty	...	...	...	...	...	...	1.80	0.057
Finding affordable child care	16.0	12.1	20.7	15.8	14.8	16.8	...	...
Finding subsidized child care spaces or spaces eligible for child care fee subsidy	8.2	5.4	12.2	13.7	12.8	14.6	...	...
Finding licensed or accredited child care	3.9	2.4	6.4	4.5	4.0	5.1	...	...
Finding child care available in the community	39.8	34.3	45.6	37.9	36.6	39.2	...	...
Finding a qualified child care provider	0.9	0.4	2.0	1.7	1.4	2.1	...	...
Finding the quality of child care required	4.8	2.8	8.1	4.4	4.0	5.0	...	...
Finding child care that meets the child's special needs due to disability or chronic illness	4.6	2.5	8.5	1.4	1.1	1.7	...	...
Finding child care that fits the family's work or study schedules	7.5	5.1	10.9	6.1	5.5	6.8	...	...
Finding child care that offers culturally relevant or minority language programming	X	X	X	X	X	X	...	...
Finding child care that could accommodate more than one child in the family	1.9	0.7	4.8	2.8	2.4	3.3	...	...
Other difficulty	11.6	8.4	15.8	11.3	10.5	12.2	...	...
Among those with difficulty finding child care								
Consequences of difficulties								
Postponing their return to work	35.8	30.4	41.7	33.2	31.9	34.5	0.80	0.370
Deciding to work at home	15.2	11.3	20.1	16.4	15.5	17.4	0.30	0.583
Working fewer hours than they would have otherwise	39.5*	33.8	45.4	32.2	30.9	33.4	5.79	0.016
Changing their work or study schedules	36.2	30.7	42.1	33.4	32.2	34.6	0.88	0.348
Changing jobs, quitting job or closing business	19.2	14.9	24.5	15.7	14.7	16.7	2.00	0.158
Deciding to have a parent stay home with the child	22.9	18.3	28.3	22.1	21.0	23.3	0.09	0.768
Postponing or discontinuing schooling or training	11.1	7.8	15.4	8.6	7.9	9.4	1.61	0.204
Using multiple child care arrangements or a temporary arrangement	26.1	21.3	31.5	24.4	23.3	25.6	0.37	0.542
Paying more for child care than they wanted to pay	23.4	18.7	28.8	26.9	25.8	28.0	1.73	0.188
Other impact	12.3	8.7	17.0	8.6	7.9	9.3	2.94	0.087
No specific impacts	10.2	7.3	13.9	12.4	11.6	13.2	1.66	0.198

... not applicable

X suppressed to meet the confidentiality requirements of the Statistics Act

* estimate for group is significantly different from reference group

Source: Statistics Canada, Canadian Survey on Early Learning and Child Care, 2023.

Difficulties finding child care were also more common for Indigenous children (57%) than non-Indigenous children (51%). Parents of many Indigenous children worked fewer hours (40%), changed their work schedule (36%) or altogether postponed their return to work (36%) because of child care challenges.

Same-gender-parent families

Children aged 1 to 5 with same-gender parents were more likely to use regular child care, compared with the rest of the population (73% vs. 63%; Table 6). Similar to other families, daycare centres, preschools or CPEs were the most common main arrangement (63%).

Table 6

Use of child care and difficulties finding child care by parents of Canadian children aged 1 to 5, by same-gender parent status, 2023

	Same-gender parents			Rest of population			Chi ²	p-value
	95% confidence interval			95% confidence interval				
	Percentage	Lower	Upper	Percentage	Lower	Upper		
Used regular child care	73.3*	66.6	79.2	63.4	62.6	64.2	8.77	0.003
Among those in child care, main arrangement	...	...	...	...	...	...	1.69	0.119
Daycare centre, preschool or centre de la petite enfance (CPE)	62.6	53.8	70.6	61.1	60.0	62.1	...	...
Care by a relative other than a parent or guardian	7.6	4.2	13.4	11.5	10.8	12.2	...	...
Care by a non-relative in the child's home	1.5	0.4	5.4	2.2	1.9	2.5	...	...
Home-based child care, licensed	13.0	8.5	19.5	8.9	8.3	9.5	...	...
Home-based child care, unlicensed	2.6	0.9	7.4	6.0	5.5	6.5	...	...
Before- or after-school program	11.3	6.7	18.5	8.3	7.8	8.9	...	...
Among those in child care, used care during non-standard hours	8.7	4.8	15.0	10.0	9.4	10.7	0.28	0.597
Among those not using care, main reason	...	...	...	...	...	...	2.10	0.018
Unemployed	6.5	1.7	21.7	4.1	3.6	4.8	...	...
Maternity, paternity or parental leave	10.1	4.0	23.2	5.9	5.3	6.6	...	...
Prefer to have a parent stay home with the child	32.3	20.9	46.3	31.1	29.8	32.4	...	...
Prefer to adjust work or study schedules to accommodate child care needs	X	X	X	5.3	4.7	6.0	...	...
Prefer to care for the child while working	6.5	2.4	16.4	3.1	2.6	3.6	...	...
Shortage of places or waiting list	5.8	2.4	13.1	9.9	9.0	10.8	...	...
The cost of child care is too high	6.3	2.1	17.2	12.6	11.6	13.7	...	...
Services not adapted to the child's special needs due to disability or chronic illness	X	X	X	0.7	0.4	1.0	...	...
Available child care arrangements are not suitable	X	X	X	1.6	1.3	2.0	...	...
Child is in school	7.9	3.3	17.9	18.4	17.3	19.5	...	...
Other reason	14.4	5.9	31.0	6.0	5.3	6.7	...	...
No specific reason	X	X	X	1.4	1.0	1.8	...	...
Among those who looked for child care								
Difficulty finding child care	50.3	42.6	58	51.7	50.7	52.7	0.12	0.728
Main difficulty	...	...	...	...	...	...	0.70	0.723
Finding affordable child care	16.6	9.6	27.4	15.2	14.2	16.2	...	...
Finding subsidized child care spaces or spaces eligible for child care fee subsidy	15.2	8.7	25.5	12.9	12.0	13.8	...	...
Finding licensed or accredited child care	4.3	1.7	10.7	4.8	4.2	5.4	...	...
Finding child care available in the community	35.5	25.6	46.9	39.1	37.8	40.4	...	...
Finding a qualified child care provider	X	X	X	1.6	1.3	2.0	...	...
Finding the quality of child care required	X	X	X	4.8	4.3	5.4	...	...
Finding child care that meets the child's special needs due to disability or chronic illness	X	X	X	1.3	1.0	1.7	...	...
Finding child care that fits the family's work or study schedules	8.7	3.9	18.2	5.8	5.2	6.5	...	...
Finding child care that offers culturally relevant or minority language programming	X	X	X	0.4	0.3	0.7	...	...
Finding child care that could accommodate more than one child in the family	X	X	X	3.0	2.5	3.5	...	...
Other difficulty	8.6	4.1	17.1	11.1	10.2	12.0	...	...
Among those with difficulty finding child care								
Consequences of difficulties								
Postponing their return to work	36.2	26.5	47.1	32.6	31.3	33.9	0.45	0.501
Deciding to work at home	21.4	13.3	32.6	16.7	15.7	17.8	0.91	0.341
Working fewer hours than they would have otherwise	23.4	15.6	33.4	32.1	30.8	33.4	3.45	0.063
Changing their work or study schedules	35.4	25.4	47.0	33.0	31.8	34.3	0.19	0.666
Changing jobs, quitting job or closing business	12.7	6.9	22.0	14.9	13.9	15.9	0.35	0.556
Deciding to have a parent stay home with the child	18.3	11.3	28.3	22.5	21.3	23.7	0.92	0.337
Postponing or discontinuing schooling or training	10.8	5.4	20.6	8.1	7.3	8.9	0.56	0.456
Using multiple child care arrangements or a temporary arrangement	17.3	10.8	26.5	24.2	23.1	25.4	2.79	0.095
Paying more for child care than they wanted to pay	26.3	17.9	36.9	27.2	26.0	28.4	0.03	0.854
Other impact	8.5	4.1	17.0	8.6	7.9	9.4	0.00	0.983
No specific impacts	11.0	6.0	19.5	12.2	11.3	13.1	0.12	0.728

... not applicable

X suppressed to meet the confidentiality requirements of the Statistics Act

* estimate for group is significantly different from reference group

Source: Statistics Canada, Canadian Survey on Early Learning and Child Care, 2023.

Difficulty finding child care was reported for about half of children with same-gender parents (50%), comparable to the rest of the population (52%). The most frequently reported difficulties were finding care in the community (36%) and finding affordable care (17%), followed by challenges securing subsidized spaces (15%) or finding care that fit work or study schedules (9%), similar to other families. In response to these challenges, parents of 36% of children postponed returning to work and those of 35% of children changed their schedules, similar to trends observed in the rest of the population.

Rural families

Families in rural areas used child care overall at rates similar to those of families in non-rural areas (64% of children; Table 7). Rural families were less likely to use daycare centres as their main arrangement and more likely to rely on relatives and home-based child care (both licensed and unlicensed), compared with families living in non-rural areas. Families living in rural areas more often experienced difficulty finding child care (54%), compared with families in non-rural areas (51%). Among those who experienced difficulty, almost half (49%) of parents of children living in rural areas reported that the most common barrier was the lack of available services in the community, reflecting geographic constraints on access. By contrast, non-rural families were more likely to emphasize difficulty finding affordable or subsidized care. Compared with non-rural families, rural families were more likely to use multiple or temporary arrangements or to work fewer hours as a consequence of difficulties finding child care.

Table 7

Use of child care and difficulties finding child care by parents of Canadian children aged 1 to 5, by rural residence, 2023

	Rural families			Rest of population			Chi ²	p-value
	95% confidence interval			95% confidence interval				
	Percentage	Lower	Upper	Percentage	Lower	Upper		
Used regular child care	63.5	61.6	65.3	64.1	63.3	65.0	0.41	0.524
Among those in child care, main arrangement	...	...	...	...	...	...	12.85	<0.001
Daycare centre, preschool or centre de la petite enfance (CPE)	52.8*	50.4	55.1	62.3	61.3	63.4	...	...
Care by a relative other than a parent or guardian	15.2*	13.5	17.0	11.2	10.5	11.9	...	...
Care by a non-relative in the child's home	2.1	1.6	2.9	2.3	2.0	2.6	...	...
Home-based child care, licensed	11.2*	9.7	12.8	8.4	7.8	9.0	...	...
Home-based child care, unlicensed	8.9*	7.6	10.4	4.9	4.5	5.4	...	...
Before- or after-school program	7.5	6.3	9.0	8.8	8.2	9.4	...	...
Among those in child care, used care during non-standard hours	10.3	9.0	11.8	11.1	10.4	11.9	0.88	0.349
Among those not using care, main reason	...	...	...	...	...	...	11.27	<0.001
Unemployed	2.4*	1.7	3.3	6.0	5.2	6.8	...	...
Maternity, paternity or parental leave	7.3	5.8	9.2	5.4	4.8	6.1	...	...
Prefer to have a parent stay home with the child	39.5*	36.5	42.6	27.0	25.7	28.4	...	...
Prefer to adjust work or study schedules to accommodate child care needs	3.8	2.8	5.2	5.3	4.6	6.0	...	...
Prefer to care for the child while working	3.5	2.5	4.9	3.0	2.5	3.7	...	...
Shortage of places or waiting list	9.4	7.9	11.3	9.9	9.0	10.9	...	...
The cost of child care is too high	6.7*	5.3	8.4	14.2	13.1	15.4	...	...
Services not adapted to the child's special needs due to disability or chronic illness	0.4	0.2	0.9	1.0	0.7	1.4	...	...
Available child care arrangements are not suitable	1.5	1.0	2.2	1.8	1.4	2.2	...	...
Child is in school	15.6	13.3	18.2	18.2	17.0	19.4	...	...
Other reason	8.3	6.6	10.4	6.6	5.9	7.5	...	...
No specific reason	1.5	0.9	2.5	1.6	1.3	2.1	...	...
Among those who looked for child care								
Difficulty finding child care	53.7*	51.6	55.8	51.2	50.2	52.2	4.24	0.040
Main difficulty	...	...	...	...	...	...	12.29	<0.001
Finding affordable child care	10.6*	8.9	12.6	16.9	15.8	18.0	...	...
Finding subsidized child care spaces or spaces eligible for child care fee subsidy	8.8*	7.3	10.6	14.4	13.5	15.4	...	...
Finding licensed or accredited child care	3.5	2.5	4.9	4.7	4.2	5.3	...	...
Finding child care available in the community	49.2*	46.3	52.2	35.8	34.4	37.1	...	...
Finding a qualified child care provider	1.5	1.0	2.5	1.7	1.4	2.2	...	...
Finding the quality of child care required	3.1	2.2	4.2	4.7	4.1	5.3	...	...
Finding child care that meets the child's special needs due to disability or chronic illness	0.6*	0.3	1.1	1.6	1.3	2.1	...	...
Finding child care that fits the family's work or study schedules	6.1	4.8	7.6	6.2	5.5	7.0	...	...
Finding child care that offers culturally relevant or minority language programming	0.7	0.4	1.5	0.4	0.2	0.6	...	...
Finding child care that could accommodate more than one child in the family	3.5	2.5	4.8	2.7	2.2	3.2	...	...
Other difficulty	12.3	10.5	14.3	10.9	10.0	11.8	...	...
Among those with difficulty finding child care								
Consequences of difficulties								
Postponing their return to work	34.8	32.0	37.7	32.9	31.6	34.3	1.37	0.242
Deciding to work at home	16.0	13.9	18.3	16.4	15.4	17.5	0.10	0.751
Working fewer hours than they would have otherwise	37.6*	34.8	40.5	31.2	29.8	32.5	16.21	<0.001
Changing their work or study schedules	34.4	31.7	37.2	33.2	31.9	34.5	0.57	0.45
Changing jobs, quitting job or closing business	17.0	15.0	19.3	15.7	14.7	16.8	1.23	0.267
Deciding to have a parent stay home with the child	22.6	20.0	25.4	22.0	20.8	23.2	0.19	0.661
Postponing or discontinuing schooling or training	6.9*	5.6	8.6	9.1	8.3	9.9	6.26	0.012
Using multiple child care arrangements or a temporary arrangement	28.8*	26.2	31.6	23.7	22.5	24.9	11.97	0.001
Paying more for child care than they wanted to pay	24.4*	21.9	27.0	27.4	26.2	28.7	4.31	0.038
Other impact	8.8	7.3	10.6	8.8	8.0	9.6	0.00	0.985
No specific impacts	12.2	10.5	14.2	12.2	11.3	13.2	0.00	0.995

... not applicable

* estimate for group is significantly different from reference group

Source: Statistics Canada, Canadian Survey on Early Learning and Child Care, 2023.

Adjusted models

A series of logistic regression models was used to estimate odds of each child care outcome, adjusting for all sociodemographic predictors simultaneously. Same-gender-parent family status was excluded from the models because it was not possible to include this variable alongside single-parent family status (families with same-gender parents are necessarily two-parent families). Models were also adjusted for child age because age may be associated with both child care participation and other sociodemographic variables (e.g., parental separation or single-parent family status).

Results suggested that after adjustment, child care use was more likely among children in single-parent families and children aged 3 years, compared with other ages. By contrast, children in low-income families and children living in rural areas were less likely to participate in regular child care (Table 8). Racialized and Indigenous children were also less likely to use regular child care, compared with non-racialized, non-Indigenous children.

Table 8
Results of logistic regression modelling predicting use of child care by
Canadian children aged 1 to 5 living in the provinces from
sociodemographic predictors, 2023

	Odds ratio	95% confidence interval	
		Lower	Upper
Household low income	0.31*	0.28	0.34
Single-parent family	2.09*	1.84	2.39
Rural residence	0.77*	0.70	0.84
Child racialized background ¹	0.58*	0.53	0.63
Child Indigenous identity ¹	0.69*	0.58	0.82
Child age (years)			
1	0.55*	0.49	0.62
2	0.77*	0.68	0.86
3 (reference)	...	...	...
4	0.69*	0.62	0.78
5	0.40*	0.36	0.45

... not applicable

* estimate is statistically significant ($p < 0.05$)

1. Reference group: non-racialized, non-Indigenous children.

Source: Statistics Canada, Canadian Survey on Early Learning and Child Care, 2023.

After adjustment, Indigenous children, racialized children, and children living in low-income and single-parent households were more likely to use child care during non-standard hours (Table 9), as were children aged 1, 4 or 5 years (compared with those aged 3). Parents of Indigenous children and children younger than 3 were more likely to have had difficulty finding child care, while parents of children aged 4 or 5 were less likely to have had difficulty (Table 10).

Table 9
Results of logistic regression modelling predicting use of child care
during non-standard hours by Canadian children aged 1 to 5 living in
the provinces who participated in regular child care, 2023

	Odds ratio	95% confidence interval	
		Lower	Upper
Household low income	1.33*	1.10	1.61
Single-parent family	1.44*	1.17	1.77
Rural residence	1.02	0.85	1.21
Child racialized background ¹	1.34*	1.14	1.56
Child Indigenous identity ¹	1.74*	1.27	2.39
Child age (years)			
1	1.40*	1.11	1.75
2	1.14	0.91	1.43
3 (reference)	...	...	...
4	1.60*	1.28	1.99
5	1.90*	1.53	2.36

... not applicable

* estimate is statistically significant ($p < 0.05$)

1. Reference group: non-racialized, non-Indigenous children.

Source: Statistics Canada, Canadian Survey on Early Learning and Child Care, 2023.

Table 10
Results of logistic regression modelling predicting difficulty finding child
care, Canadian children aged 1 to 5 living in the provinces whose parents
looked for child care, 2023

	Odds ratio	95% confidence interval	
		Lower	Upper
Household low income	0.97	0.87	1.07
Single-parent family	1.02	0.90	1.15
Rural residence	1.09	0.98	1.20
Child racialized background ¹	1.01	0.92	1.10
Child Indigenous identity ¹	1.27*	1.05	1.55
Child age (years)			
1	1.43*	1.26	1.62
2	1.23*	1.10	1.39
3 (reference)	...	...	...
4	0.81*	0.73	0.91
5	0.62*	0.55	0.69

... not applicable

* estimate is statistically significant ($p < 0.05$)

1. Reference group: non-racialized, non-Indigenous children.

Source: Statistics Canada, Canadian Survey on Early Learning and Child Care, 2023.

Discussion

This study highlights significant disparities in the use of ELCC services among vulnerable families in Canada. Consistent with previous research, the use of regular child care was generally lower among families experiencing socioeconomic or social disadvantage, including those with racialized children and

lower household income. These findings reflect enduring inequities in both the affordability and the accessibility of ELCC, suggesting that, despite policy efforts to expand access, financial and structural barriers continue to limit participation among families who may benefit most from early learning opportunities.(Findlay et al., 2021; Schmutz, 2024)

Differences in child care patterns were also noted based on rurality and Indigenous identity. Rural and Indigenous families living off reserve were more likely to rely on care provided by relatives and less likely to use centre-based child care programs. These groups were also both more likely to report difficulties finding child care—the most often-cited challenge among both groups was finding care within their community. This pattern likely reflects the limited availability of centre-based child care in rural and remote regions, where service provision is often constrained by low population density, staffing challenges and fees that outstrip many rural families' incomes.(Prentice, 2017) In addition, for many Indigenous families, the intergenerational legacy of residential schools has led to a lack of trust in more “institutional” forms of child care.(Hare & Anderson, 2010) A lack of culturally relevant and language-based programs may further deter Indigenous parents from using formal care options.(Findlay et al., 2023) The importance of culturally grounded programming has been emphasized by Indigenous organizations and researchers who note that successful ELCC initiatives integrate community leadership and traditional knowledge.(*Understanding child care in First Nations communities*, 2018; Findlay et al., 2023)

Among children in regular child care, those in low-income, single-parent, racialized and Indigenous families were more likely to use child care arrangements during evenings, nights or weekends. This is perhaps unsurprising because low-income, racialized and Indigenous adults are disproportionately represented in occupations that involve shift or irregular work schedules.(Lamb & Verma, 2021; Lieberman et al., 2020) In addition, single parents do not have the option of relying on a partner for child care, and this may explain their reliance on non-parental child care during non-standard hours. However, care during non-standard hours is often scarce, costly and of variable quality,(Lero et al., 2021) leaving parents with limited options. Previous studies have shown that a lack of flexible ELCC contributes to employment instability, particularly for mothers and single parents, and can exacerbate economic hardship.(Kingsbury et al.; Morrissey, 2017; Roll & East, 2014) The greater reliance on care during non-standard hours among these groups highlights the need for flexible and affordable ELCC arrangements that accommodate diverse work schedules.

Across groups, affordability and availability of care in the community were the most frequently reported difficulties finding child care. The most commonly reported consequences of difficulty finding child care were also similar across groups and included delaying a return to work, working fewer hours, changing schedules or having a parent stay home to provide care. However, low-income parents and parents of racialized children more often stayed home with the child or delayed their return to work or school because of difficulties finding child care. These disruptions can have lasting financial consequences, potentially reinforcing cycles of economic insecurity and employment instability.(Huston, 2004; Lu et al., 2020; Roll & East, 2014) In this way, inadequate access to child care may not only impact children's developmental opportunities(UNESCO & UNICEF, 2024) but also perpetuate socioeconomic inequality through its influence on parental employment. Conversely, previous research, including studies of Quebec's child care reform, demonstrates that more affordable child care substantially increases maternal labour-force participation and overall employment rates.(Chanda, 2022; Lefebvre & Merrigan, 2008; Morrissey, 2017)

Although about one-quarter of parents who were not using child care indicated that they preferred to have a parent stay home, the results of this study regarding the consequences of difficulties finding child care suggest that many of these “preferences” may in fact reflect constrained choices. Explicit examination of parents' child care preferences (uncoupled from structural constraints), in addition to their use of services, is important when assessing unmet needs for child care because low use may mask latent demand among those who face barriers to child care.(Kingsbury et al.)

Although large-scale quantitative examinations of child care use by 2SLGBTQI+ families remain extremely limited, qualitative research emphasizes a need for inclusive, affirming child care environments.(Coulter-Thompson, 2023) Recent reviews emphasize that supportive and non-discriminatory ELCC settings are crucial for ensuring equitable access for 2SLGBTQI+ parents and children.(Coulter-Thompson, 2023) In the present study, children with same-gender parents used child care at higher rates than the general population, though respondents reported similar experiences of barriers and consequences. Of note, the CSELCC did not include measures of gender diversity among parents, limiting the analysis of 2SLGBTQI+ families to those with same-gender parents. Additionally, sample sizes were relatively small for this group, and this may have limited the detection of statistically significant group differences. Future research employing larger samples of 2SLGBTQI+ parents may help shed light on child care use and experiences among this understudied population.

Taken together, these results highlight persistent inequities in access to affordable, accessible and flexible child care among certain subpopulations in Canada. The disparities observed may reflect broader structural and socioeconomic inequalities within the ELCC system, including uneven service provision and access, affordability challenges, and limited flexibility to accommodate varied work schedules. Expanding affordable child care options in underserved areas, supporting culturally grounded programming and increasing the availability of care during non-standard hours may help increase child care equity.

Limitations and future directions

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting these findings. First, the data are cross-sectional, meaning that associations between vulnerability characteristics and child care use or difficulties cannot be interpreted as causal. The survey captures a single point in time and does not account for changes in family circumstances, employment or child care availability that may occur over years. Second, all information was reported by parents and may be subject to bias. Parents may have under- or overreported their use of child care, the type of care arrangement or the difficulties they experienced. Some parents may also interpret “difficulty finding care” differently, and this could affect comparability across groups. Third, although the analyses used survey weights and bootstrap methods to account for the complex design, smaller sample sizes in certain groups—such as children with same-gender parents—limited the precision of estimates. Some differences may, therefore, reflect sampling variability rather than true population differences. Fourth, because the CSELCC did not cover the territories or children living on reserve, the sample is not representative of Indigenous children. The sample size limited the ability to disaggregate distinct Indigenous Peoples (i.e., First Nations, Métis and Inuit), an approach that is preferable given the distinct cultures, histories, and economic and social realities of these groups. Fifth, though several groups were examined, including low-income, rural, racialized and Indigenous families, other Canadian subpopulations may face challenges related to disproportionate access to child care. For example, previous studies have indicated that parents of children with disabilities experience particular difficulties finding child care that meets their needs.(Kerr et al., 2024) This subpopulation was not examined in the current study because it was described in detail in a separate study using a targeted survey of children with disabilities.(Kerr et al., 2024) Future iterations of the CSELCC will include indicators of child disability, enabling comparisons of child care use with the rest of the population. Families belonging to the official language minority in their province may also face unique challenges in accessing child care,(Cleveland & Forer, 2010) though this population remains understudied. Finally, the survey did not include all possible dimensions of child care access, such as the quality of care, the match between care hours and work schedules, or the inclusivity of services. Families who found child care but were dissatisfied with its quality or cultural responsiveness may not have been captured as experiencing difficulty.

Despite these limitations, the study provides a comprehensive picture of child care use and access among Canadian subpopulations, offering important evidence to inform future policy and program

planning. Future research should build on these findings by examining changes in child care use longitudinally within families, as well as cross-sectionally over time, to better understand how family circumstances and availability of care evolve over time. Qualitative data would allow for an in-depth examination of the barriers to child care faced by subpopulations of Canadian parents, as well as the consequences of these barriers for parents' education and career progression.

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