

2024 Community Engagement Findings From Providers and Parents/Caregivers

In 2024, the Wisconsin Department of Children and Families (DCF) set out to listen to and learn from a broad range of stakeholders about child care quality. Our goal was to identify opportunities to [improve the YoungStar Child Care Quality Rating and Improvement System](#). This document summarizes what we heard from these engagements, including major themes and the most frequent answers to the specific questions we asked.

Major Themes

Child care quality is a priority for parents/caregivers and child care providers. Both groups face significant barriers to quality. Many parents/caregivers lack affordable and accessible child care options. At the same time, many providers are struggling to stay open and to recruit and retain staff.

There is no single definition of child care quality, but many **parents/caregivers and providers** had similar values (see next section).

Parents/caregivers and providers want **better alignment between the programs that govern child care providers**, including YoungStar and child care regulation (i.e. licensing and certification).

Providers are eager for **support to improve quality**, including investment, coaching, and training.

What is quality child care?

Most participants defined quality child care as **safe**. They agreed that safety is an essential foundation for other aspects of quality care, such as

- Programs guiding developmentally appropriate learning, development, and social/emotional growth with positive behavioral guidance
- Educators possessing positive character traits and strong skills for building relationships with children, as well as relevant experience, education, and training
- Healthy, clean, and stimulating learning environments with nutritious food and good staff-to-child ratios
- Respecting and supporting families while engaging them in meaningful partnerships with the program
- Cultural and linguistic responsiveness and the ability to serve children with developmental delays/disabilities

Participation

DCF partnered with many communities and organizations across Wisconsin to collect feedback. They included

- Child care provider networks and advocacy groups
- Family resource and support agencies
- [The Parent/Caregiver Equity Advisory Cabinet](#)
- Local and tribal communities

DCF and its partners collected feedback through a survey, in-person and virtual listening sessions, and partner meetings. In total, we heard from

- 805+ child care providers and community members
- 680+ parents/caregivers
- 15 legislators/staff

Surveys and sessions were offered in both English and Spanish.



Have you ever participated in YoungStar? Why or why not?

Many providers reported that they chose to participate in YoungStar because it

- Allowed them to accept Wisconsin Shares subsidy payments from families (many providers participated only for this reason)
- Helped to improve their program and provided opportunities for staff professional development
- Included valuable resources like checklists and self assessments, along with coaching support
- Enhanced their reputation and fostered pride and unity among staff

Some providers chose accreditation as a preferred pathway to higher YoungStar quality ratings. Others felt that this option was inequitable due to the cost and differences in requirements and oversight.

Many providers who do **NOT** participate in YoungStar

- Felt that the costs (e.g., financial and time/effort involved) outweighed the benefits
- Didn't agree with YoungStar's rating processes or expectations
- Had other priorities such as hiring and retaining staff or supporting families

Some child care providers were not aware of YoungStar.

As of September 2024, 3,885 Wisconsin child care providers participate in YoungStar (86% of all regulated providers).

2,994 of them currently accept Wisconsin Shares subsidy payments, serving a total of 37,369 eligible children statewide.



What aspects of YoungStar are challenging for providers?

Paperwork was the most common challenge mentioned by providers.

Many providers indicated that one short site visit is not enough to know the program and assign a fair and accurate star rating. They described these visits as stressful, too short, and not frequent enough. They wanted DCF to know that what happens during formal rating visits is not always a good representation of what happens in their programs every day. Some other issues they raised were:

- Poor communication and support from YoungStar technical consultants
- Barriers to increasing their quality, such as the high financial cost and the challenges of hiring and retaining highly qualified staff
- The complexity of DCF's YoungStar and regulation systems, which sometimes felt overwhelming or confusing to providers



Have you ever used YoungStar when making child care decisions?

Most parents/caregivers did not use YoungStar to make child care decisions. In fact, over 40% of them were not aware of the YoungStar program.

Some parents and caregivers appreciated the information presented in the online [Child Care Finder](#), such as programs' quality ratings and past safety violations.

What information about child care quality should be made available to families?

Parents/caregivers would like having DCF and/or providers share more detail about programs, such as their

- Program strengths/weaknesses or ratings in several categories—rather than just a single star rating
- Philosophy and program design, curriculum, and instructional activities
- Social-emotional learning and behavioral guidance practices
- Staff longevity/experience and other qualifications, such as training to serve children with disabilities
- Rates, hours, schedules, policies, and openings/wait lists
- Languages spoken



PCEAC Recommendations for YoungStar and DCF

We are grateful to the [Parent/Caregiver Equity Advisory Cabinet](#) for leading its own survey and engagement events and for offering the following recommendations for improving YoungStar:

- **Safety:** DCF should explain its role in ensuring safety when communicating with parents and families.



- **Family Engagement:** To deliver quality, programs should strengthen communication and resources for the whole family, not just the child in their care.
- **Cultural understanding and alignment:** Including language, food, beliefs, traditions, etc. is a critical aspect of child care quality.
- **Marketing:** Get information about YoungStar and child care quality out to families throughout the state.



2024 Community Engagement Findings: Suggestions from Providers, Parents, and Caregivers

How could YoungStar be improved?

- **Expand how YoungStar measures staff qualifications.** Many providers feel they should receive credit in YoungStar for experience, demonstrated expertise, and non-credit continuing education. While valuing knowledge and training, many providers expressed how the current workforce shortage makes it difficult to meet the YoungStar education requirements for quality.
- **Consider changing the accreditation pathways** to ensure that accreditation is a signal of quality and that access to accreditation is fair.
- **Make YoungStar and regulation work together.** Align licensing rules and YoungStar standards, use consistent wording across the programs, and cross-train DCF staff to be aware of both systems. Having no violations or having serious violations should both impact programs' YoungStar quality ratings.
- **Prioritize funding and incentives** for YoungStar participation. Consider offering more resources to lower-rated programs to help them reach for higher quality.
- **Improve YoungStar services to child care providers by:**
 - Increasing the experience, training, and racial and linguistic diversity of YoungStar staff
 - Improving YoungStar/provider communications and relationships
 - Increasing the amount of time spent in programs
 - Finding ways to reduce the stress of rating visits
- **Remove linguistic and cultural barriers to participating in YoungStar.** For example, increase the translated resources available for providers and families.
- **Ensure that YoungStar policies and resources work for all program types,** including camps, family programs, and out-of-school-time programs.

DCF is grateful for all the input provided in this process. We are committed to finding ways to respond to what we learned and to improving the YoungStar system.



**Wisconsin Department of
Children and Families**

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