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Please cite as:

Bassok, D., Magourik, P., Markowitz, A. J. & Player, D. (2018). Are there differences in parents' preferences and search processes across preschool types? Evidence from Louisiana. *JEarly Childhood Research Quarterly*, 44(3), 43-54. doi: 10.1016/j.ecresq.2018.01.006

Are There Differences in Parents' Preferences and Search Processes Across Preschool Types? Evidence from Louisiana

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A rising proportion of four-year-olds now attend formal, or center-based, early childhood education (ECE) programs. Formal settings, such as Head Start, public preschool, and subsidized child care centers vary significantly in regulation, funding, and service provision. As these differences may have substantial implications for child development and family well-being, understanding how parents search for and select formal programs is critical. Using data from a sample of low-income families with four-year-olds enrolled in publicly-funded programs, we examine whether parents' preferences for ECE and their search processes vary across formal ECE program types. We find little evidence of differences in preferences across preschool types but do find significant differences in parents' search processes. Parents with children in subsidized child care consider more options, consider their search more difficult, and are less likely to call their child's program their "first choice." Implications for policy and future research are discussed.

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Updated April 2018

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Do not cite or quote without author permission. Working paper retrieved from:
http://curry.virginia.edu/uploads/epw/54_Can_Parents_Assess_Preschool_Quality.pdf

EdPolicyWorks Working Paper Series No. 54, January 2017.

Available at <http://curry.virginia.edu/edpolicyworks/wp>

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