

Childcare and Early Learning



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Overview

Accessible, affordable childcare and high-quality early learning opportunities are essential for working families in Bellevue. Yet many face long waitlists, high costs, or a lack of culturally responsive care options. Early childhood is a formative stage for development, and gaps in access can have long-term impacts on learning, equity, and parental workforce participation.

Service providers play a key role in supporting early learning through preschools, home-visiting programs, parenting workshops, and wraparound support for children with developmental needs. This category reflects the community's investment in the future and its effort to build strong, inclusive foundations for every child.

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Key Findings & General Trends

- **Severe shortage of childcare slots:** King County has ~69,700 licensed childcare slots for children under age 12, but demand exceeds 325,000—meeting only **21% of need** (King County estimate).
- **High costs exceed affordability benchmarks:** Full-time infant care in Bellevue averages **\$3,400/month** (~\$41,000/year), closely mirroring King County's "true cost of care" estimates (Care.com, 2025). This is well above the federal benchmark recommending families spend no more than 7% of income on childcare.
- **Affordability gap:** Only **46.7%** of respondents could find affordable childcare when needed; just **13.2%** reported affordable services were within reasonable travel time.
- **Waitlists and access delays:** Only **44.8%** accessed care without long waits; **50.7%** could reach services in a reasonable amount of time.
- **Cultural and language fit:** **60.0%** said services met cultural and language needs; **40%** either felt they did not or were unsure.
- **Quality satisfaction:** **62.1%** were satisfied with the quality of care; many remained neutral or dissatisfied.
- **Accessibility for children with disabilities:** **54.2%** of families needing disability accommodations received them.
- **Provider capacity barriers:** **14.5%** of providers want to expand childcare services but face staffing or resource limitations.
- **Workforce shortage:** The childcare workforce in King County remains **9.7% smaller** than pre-pandemic (DCHS, 2024); statewide turnover among early childhood educators is **~43%** (Seattle Chamber, 2023).





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- **State and local investments:** In 2024, the Washington State Department of Commerce awarded **\$30.4M** in capital grants, creating **2,400 new childcare slots** statewide. Enrollment in preschool programs such as ECEAP grew to **~16,000 children** in the 2022–2023 school year, with further funding for transitional kindergarten.
- **Persistent inequities:** About **63%** of Washington residents live in “childcare deserts” (MRSC, 2024). Bellevue families report long waitlists, rising tuition, and difficulty finding culturally aligned or flexible care options. Local programs like the Child Care Health Consultation initiative and expanded early learning subsidies are important steps, but affordability, home-based provider expansion, and culturally attuned care remain priorities.



Community Voice / Lived Experiences

Community members and subject matter experts consistently identified childcare and early learning as **among the most urgent yet inaccessible services** in Bellevue. For working parents—particularly those in low- and moderate-income households—the cost and scarcity of care create constant logistical and financial strain.

“Childcare is a huge barrier for families trying to work. They can’t afford it or find spots.” – SME

This tension between needing to work and being unable to secure safe, reliable care was a recurring theme. Families described making difficult choices—leaving jobs, taking overnight shifts, or relying on informal arrangements that lack developmental and safety supports—because licensed, affordable childcare is out of reach.

Early learning was described not as a luxury but a **foundational service** with lifelong impacts on academic readiness, social development, and opportunity. However, even families committed to early education struggle to find quality programs that provide language support or culturally responsive curricula, particularly immigrant families and families of color, who face compounded inequities from the earliest stages of a child’s life.

Parents in focus groups described impossible financial trade-offs:



“Our families often have to make hard choices—pay for rent or childcare?” – Focus Group Participant

Some praised early developmental support programs but noted a steep drop-off in services once children aged out or transitioned into public school, describing this shift as a step backward in quality or accessibility. Others reported that **inclusive childcare**, particularly for children with disabilities or those needing behavioral/therapeutic support, is extremely hard to find, with staff shortages further limiting options.

Access to information was also cited as a challenge. Many families learn about services only through schools, teachers, or word-of-mouth, leaving gaps for those with very young children or language barriers.

Participants called for **greater investment in childcare and early**

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learning infrastructure, expanded developmental assessments, inclusive programming, and parenting supports. They also stressed the importance of preserving long-standing services that provide trusted, accessible entry points for families.

Participants emphasized that accessible, affordable, and inclusive childcare is not a luxury, it's a foundation for family stability, economic opportunity, and community health.

City-Funded Initiatives & Impact

Access to affordable, high-quality early learning and childcare is essential for the healthy development of children and the economic stability of families. In Bellevue, the City supports a range of initiatives and partnerships that aim to increase school readiness, reduce childcare barriers, and provide targeted supports for low-income and underserved families.

Bellevue College's Early Learning Center supports early childhood development and school readiness. Bellevue College offers childcare for student parents, helping them stay enrolled while their children benefit from enriched learning environments. **Bellevue School District** provides culturally and linguistically responsive preschool instruction that supports academic and social-emotional growth, especially for dual-language learners.

Community-based programs also play a critical role. The **Boys & Girls**



Clubs of Bellevue provides affordable, structured childcare through its *Youth Program for Disadvantaged Youth* in the Lake Hills Corridor. The program offers a safe space during out-of-school hours, with culturally relevant activities that support youth development.

BrightSpark Early Learning Services connects families to trusted childcare providers, offers financial assistance, and provides targeted support for families experiencing housing instability. The agency also strengthens provider quality through training, consultation, and mental health services.

To further support the childcare workforce, the City partnered with the national network **Upwards** to launch the **BOOST Program** in April 2024. This initiative equips licensed providers with technology tools that automate administrative tasks like attendance tracking and marketing, saving providers up to 20 hours per week. BOOST also includes business coaching to improve operational efficiency, helping strengthen provider retention and expand available childcare slots across Bellevue.

Kinderling supports children with developmental delays and those experiencing homelessness through its *Families in Transition (FIT) program*. Services include trauma-informed care, caregiver education, and consultation for early learning providers.

Bellevue Funded Program Outcomes for 2024

- **13,524** days of Head Start early learning services delivered
- **7,295** months of childcare vouchers distributed to families





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- **1,681** individuals assisted with finding childcare
- **948** hours of childcare consulting and training provided to childcare providers
- **22** home-based childcare businesses were provided technical assistance to develop and grow businesses

Together, these initiatives reflect the City's commitment to ensuring children, regardless of income, background, or housing status, have equitable access to high-quality early learning opportunities and that families have the resources they need to thrive.

