

Childcare: What Utahns Need to Know

RESEARCH SUMMARY

UTAH WOMEN & LEADERSHIP Project

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Research shows Utah families struggle to find childcare that is accessible, affordable, and high-quality. Costs are high, yet childcare workers earn far below sustainable wages, creating an imbalance that makes it difficult for providers to stay open and for families to find care. As a result, many parents reduce work hours or leave the workforce, even though most households rely on two incomes. Limited childcare and preschool access also means many children miss critical learning opportunities for kindergarten readiness. Childcare is a critical issue Utahns must address to support family stability, strengthen the workforce, and promote positive outcomes for children and communities.

GROWING NEED

Childcare is essential for most Utah families. With 64.1% of families and 54% of children under age six living in households where all available parents work, the need for care is built into Utah's economy. Additionally, 74% of two-parent households rely on two incomes to cover basic expenses, leaving few families able to depend on a stay-at-home caregiver. This sustained demand highlights that childcare is not a luxury but a foundational support that enables families to participate in the workforce and maintain financial stability.

LIMITED ACCESS

Even when families can afford care, they often cannot find it. Approximately 77% of Utahns live in a childcare desert, where the number of children far exceeds available licensed slots. An estimated 154,000 children may need care, but only about 54,000 licensed childcare slots exist statewide. Although capacity has increased in recent years, it has not kept pace with demand, leaving families in both urban and rural areas and with few or no childcare options.

WHY THIS MATTERS

“High-quality child care and early learning programs are proven to dramatically improve a child's opportunities for a better future while offering parents improved stability and overall economic security.”

First Five Years Fund

FINANCIAL BURDEN

Despite its importance, childcare is unaffordable for most Utah families. Only about 12% of families can afford infant care, and those with two children spend nearly a quarter (24.7%) of their household income on childcare. On average, families pay around \$17,600 annually for care for two children, and total costs can reach \$50,000-\$70,000 before a child enters kindergarten. These costs far exceed federal affordability recommendations and force families to make difficult trade-offs between employment, savings, and basic needs. For many, childcare becomes one of the largest (and least flexible) household expenses.

CHILDCARE IN UTAH IS:

- often unavailable when needed.
- financially burdensome.
- essential for working families.
- critical to the state's economic stability.

SYSTEM STRAIN

The childcare system is strained by an underpaid and unstable workforce. Despite high costs for families, 89% of childcare workers earn less than the statewide median wage, and nearly one-third work multiple jobs to make ends meet. More than half (53%) rely on public assistance, and their families are more than twice as likely to live in poverty compared to other workers. This imbalance of high costs and low wages reflects a broken system where providers cannot raise wages without making care less affordable. As a result, programs struggle with staffing shortages, turnover, and financial instability.

These challenges directly limit workforce participation, especially for women. Nearly half report they would work more if they had access to affordable, high-quality childcare, and about 11,540 additional Utah parents could join the workforce if barriers were reduced. When care is unavailable, parents often reduce hours, miss work, or leave jobs altogether. This affects family income, career growth, and overall economic productivity.



EARLY LEARNING GAPS

Limited childcare access can also mean fewer opportunities for early childhood education, which is critical for long-term development. Utah ranks behind most states in providing preschool access, even though 94% of residents agree that childcare and pre-k programs are essential for early development. High-quality early learning supports children's cognitive, social, and emotional growth and improves kindergarten readiness. When access is limited, many children begin school without these foundational skills, creating disparities that can persist throughout their education.

BROADER IMPACT

The effects of childcare challenges extend beyond individual families to the entire state economy. Utah loses an estimated \$1.4 billion each year due to childcare-related disruptions such as employee absenteeism, turnover, and reduced labor force participation. These impacts show that childcare is not just a family issue. It is a critical part of the state's economic infrastructure and long-term well-being.

TURNING UNDERSTANDING INTO SOLUTIONS

Strengthening childcare systems is essential. Utah's childcare challenges reflect a system imbalance where costs are high for families and wages are low for providers. Addressing this requires coordinated investments to expand capacity, stabilize funding, and support providers. Policy solutions such as subsidies, tax credits, and reducing barriers to opening or expanding programs can help ensure more families have access to affordable, high-quality care.

Expanding access and affordability supports families and the workforce. When childcare becomes more accessible and affordable, parents can remain in or return to the workforce, increase hours, and pursue career growth. Employers can play a key role by offering flexible schedules, childcare benefits, or on-site care. Expanding options strengthens both family stability and workforce participation.

Investing in early childhood strengthens long-term outcomes. High-quality childcare and early learning programs support children's development and improve school readiness. These investments also drive long-term benefits through stronger educational outcomes and economic returns. Addressing childcare requires shared responsibility through policies, partnerships, and sustained commitment to raising awareness, supporting evidence-based solutions, and prioritizing childcare as essential infrastructure.

HELP IMPROVE UTAH'S CHILDCARE LANDSCAPE

You can help address childcare challenges in Utah by increasing awareness, supporting solutions, and advocating for accessible, affordable, and high-quality care. See below for calls to action and resources that can help strengthen Utah's families, workforce, and communities.

Data Sources: [UWLP Snapshot No. 51 \(2023\)](#), [UWLP White Paper No. 20 \(2026\)](#)

WHAT YOU CAN DO

- **Learn More:** Explore resources in the UWLP Childcare & Pre-K Programs [Resource Kit](#).
- **Review:** Goals, perceptions, and community partners on the Childcare & Pre-K Programs [Spoke Webpage](#).
- **Get Involved:** Connect to grassroots movement happening within [A Bolder Way Forward](#).
- **Take Action:** Help move the needle and discover additional [Calls to Action](#) for groups, organizations and communities.



Share resources about childcare solutions with Utah employers and employees. See [Childcare Solutions for Employers \[Spanish\]](#) and [Working Parent Childcare Resources \[Spanish\]](#).



Learn about the importance of early childhood learning and development. Share information and [resources](#) with others.



Talk to your legislators about supporting research-based public policy related to expanding childcare and early childhood education programs.

Learn more at www.utwomen.org

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