

Child Care in Canada: Little consensus over best approach to assist parents of little children

Majority support government investment in child care; divisions over how and where to allocate funding

March 3, 2021 – It is one of the most stressful and demanding aspects of what is already one of life's most challenging jobs: choosing the best way to care for little ones who aren't yet of school age.

A new study from the non-profit Angus Reid Institute, in partnership with Cardus, finds Canadian parents of kids under six are represented by a mix of circumstances. About half have at least one parent home with their child (47%) and half (53%) are taking their tots to centre or home-based day care.

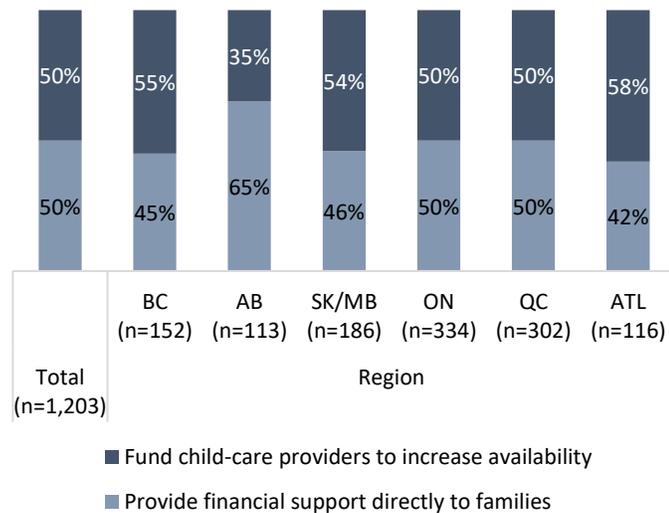
Feelings and motivations regarding these realities vary. While stay-at-home parents are most likely to point to preference, conscious choice or ideal for their current circumstances (54%) – others say they are at home because of the cost or availability of child-care spaces (39%).

And while many parents of kids in child care point to challenges with the costs, quality and availability of child care as common difficulties and stressors, a significant number also say they had more than one option to choose from (29%) and had little to no difficulty securing a child-care spot (69%).

As the lived experiences of parents highlight a major issue on the national policy radar, a majority of Canadians overall (70%) say this country should invest more in affordable options for child care.

That said, there is less consensus over how best to support parents whose children need care. Canadians are evenly divided between allocating funds directly to child-care providers or parents themselves.

There are two broad policy approaches to providing public funding support for child care. Which would you say is the overall best option?



METHODOLOGY:

The Angus Reid Institute conducted an online survey from February 4 – 9, 2021 among a representative randomized sample of 1,203 Canadian adults who are members of [Angus Reid Forum](#). For comparison purposes only, a probability sample of the general population (1,203 respondents) would carry a margin of error of +/- 3 percentage points, 19 times out of 20. From this sample, the Institute derived a sub-sample of 155 respondents who indicated having at least one child under the age of 6, which for the purposes of analysis was then boosted by an additional 508 cases to bring that group to a total of 663. A probability sample of those with children under 6 (663) would carry a margin of error of +/- 4 percentage points, 19 times out of 20. Discrepancies in or between totals are due to rounding. The survey was conducted in partnership with [Cardus](#) and paid for jointly by Cardus and ARI. Detailed tables are found at the end of this release.

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More Key Findings:

- Regionally, those in Alberta are most strident about direct-to-family funding, while British Columbians and Atlantic Canadians tilt toward more funding to expand centre-based care. The country's two most populous provinces – Ontario and Quebec – are each evenly split.
- Parents of children under six staying at home for child care are more likely to express support for policies that provide financial support to families rather than the child-care system itself, including a monthly subsidy for in-home care and paid family leave outside of EI, among others.

About ARI

*The **Angus Reid Institute (ARI)** was founded in October 2014 by pollster and sociologist, Dr. Angus Reid. ARI is a national, not-for-profit, non-partisan public opinion research foundation established to advance education by commissioning, conducting and disseminating to the public accessible and impartial statistical data, research and policy analysis on economics, political science, philanthropy, public administration, domestic and international affairs and other socio-economic issues of importance to Canada and its world.*

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Part One: Experience with child care among parents of children under six

Parents and the child-care universe

After the first year or so of a baby's life, the point at which federal EI benefits for working parents on leave come to an end, a key decision for families, indeed many would say *the* key decision, is who will care for their small one, and where.

CONTACT:

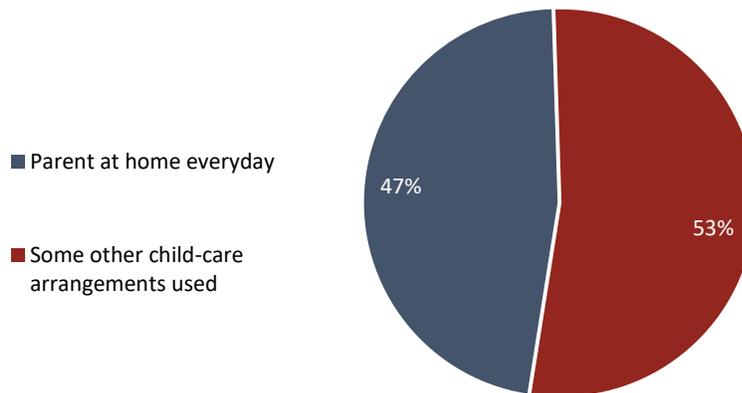
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The Angus Reid Institute, in partnership with [Cardus](#), surveyed 663 parents with at least one child under the age of six and asked them – among other things – about their young child’s current care arrangements.

Just under half say their child is mostly cared for by a parent at home. Just over half say they use another child-care arrangement, a proportion largely consistent with the most recent data from [Statistics Canada](#).

**Current child-care arrangement for child under 6
(Parents of child under 6, n=663)**

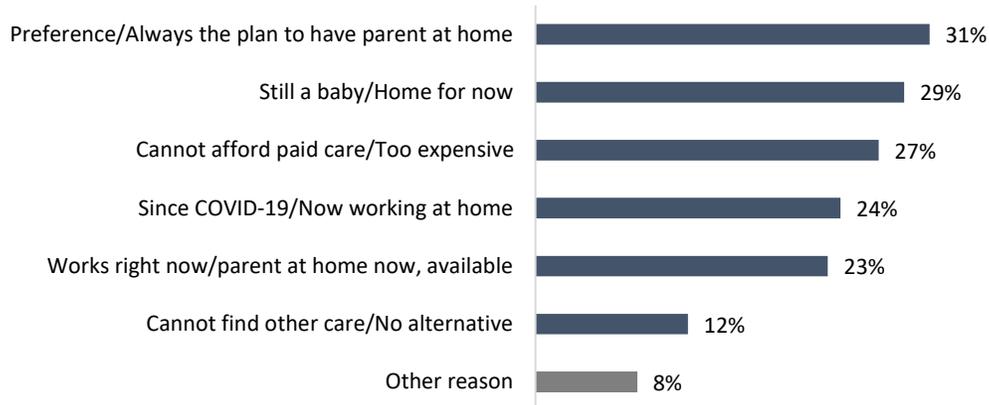


For many, stay-at-home parenting is the ideal

For households with at least one parent at home to care for their child, circumstances start with the obvious. Asked to select the main reasons for their situation, nearly thirty per cent are there because they’re actually on parental leave. About the same number, however, say they are where they are because it’s exactly where they want to be, while slightly fewer say the main rationale for being home with their child is because it’s an arrangement that works for them in this time, or because the COVID-19 pandemic has them at home anyway.

Not all parents are home by choice or because it’s an arrangement that suits them though. More than a quarter (27%) say the main reason they’re at home is because care outside the house is too expensive or because they have no other alternative (12%).

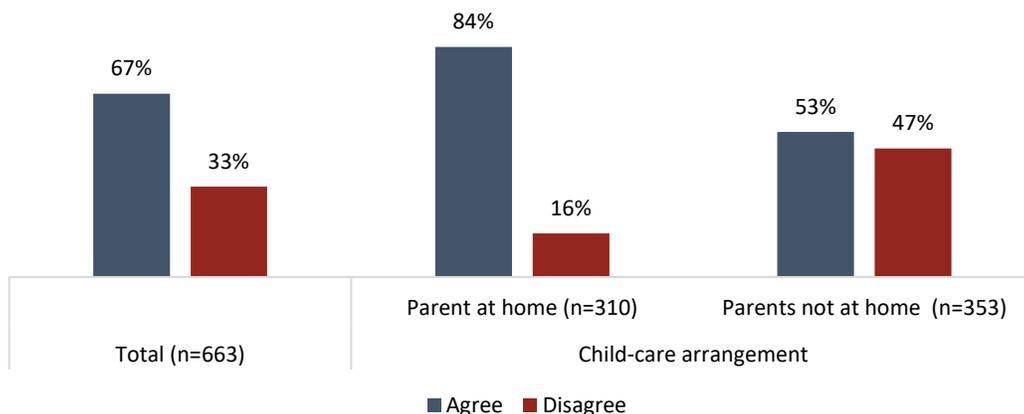
**You've indicated one or both parents are at home with this child.
What are the reasons for this being your main child-care arrangement? (Has a child under 6 cared for by a parent, n=310)**



It would seem parents at home are largely satisfied with their situations. Indeed, the majority of those already at home profess a desire to stay there until their child is school-aged, if their financial circumstances allowed it, as seen in the graph below.

Among parents of children using care however, it is a tale of two desires. For about half (53%) of parents who aren't at home, the guilt of not spending as much time with their child as they may like weighs heavy as they look longingly at friends and acquaintances who are able to be with their kids full-time. The other half prefer a different care arrangement and no amount of financial security would change that.

**Agree vs. disagree:
"If I could afford to, I'd rather stay home full-time until my kids go to grade school" (Parents of child under 6)**



The experience of parents using care

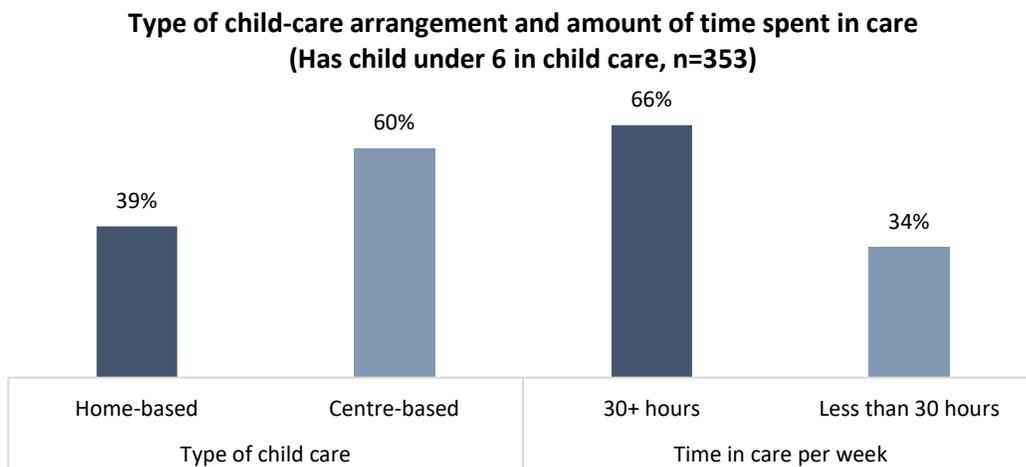
Either because of preference, financial considerations, or other factors, just over half of Canadian parents with kids under six rely on care for their little ones. The Angus Reid Institute grouped respondents according to the type of arrangement they use and on the amount of time their child spends in care on a weekly basis.

More specifically:

- Type of care – parents whose primary child-care arrangement is either:
 - **Home-based** (care by a relative or friend, care by non-relative in their home, or home-based child care); or
 - **Centre-based** (child-care centre or daycare centre, a nursery school, or preschool setting)

- Amount of time child spends in child care per week, defined as either:
 - **Full-time** (30 hours or more); or
 - **Part-time** (fewer than 30 hours)

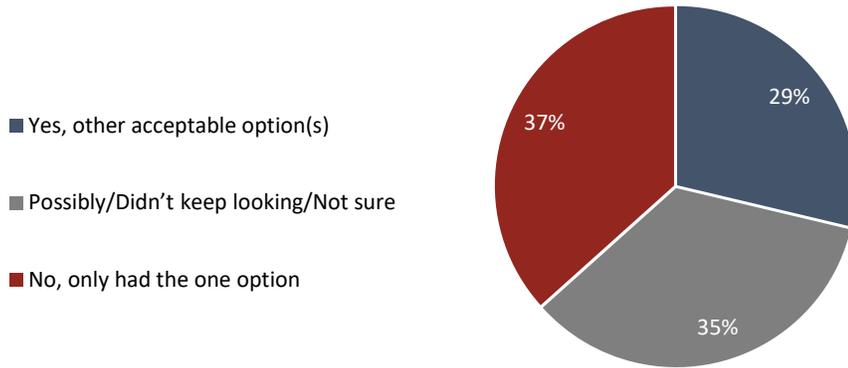
Among parents that use child-care services, most (60%) have their children in a centre-based arrangement while the rest are home-based (39%). Asked about the amount of time their child spends in care, two-thirds of parents report 30 hours or more per week (i.e. full-time), compared to the one-third that report fewer than 30 hours per week (i.e., part-time):



In choosing care, how many options do parents have?

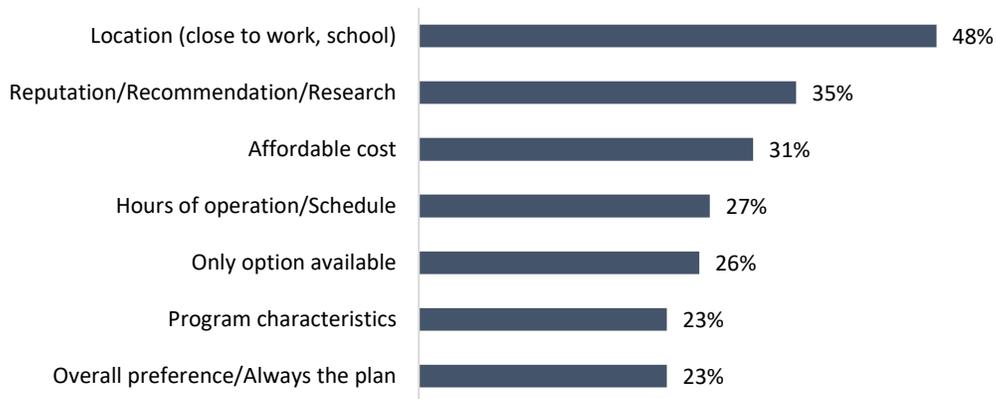
The out-of-home care journey begins with finding a space for their child. Nearly two-in-five (37%) say they only had one option available to them, while just under 30 per cent were able to pick from at least one other alternative. Just over one-third (35%) were either not aware of other options, or gave up looking:

**Did you have other acceptable options available for you to choose from – whether a different facility or a relative available or any other alternative?
(Has child under 6 in child care, n=353)**



As many parents using care juggle pick-ups and drop-offs in addition to the usual parental responsibilities, convenience becomes a sought-after luxury. Indeed, asked what their main reasons are for using their current child-care arrangement, location is a top consideration for nearly half of parents. Reputation (35%) and affordable cost (31%) follow:

**What are the main reasons for using your current child-care arrangement? (Up to three selected, items 20% or greater shown)
(Has child under 6 in child care, n=353)**



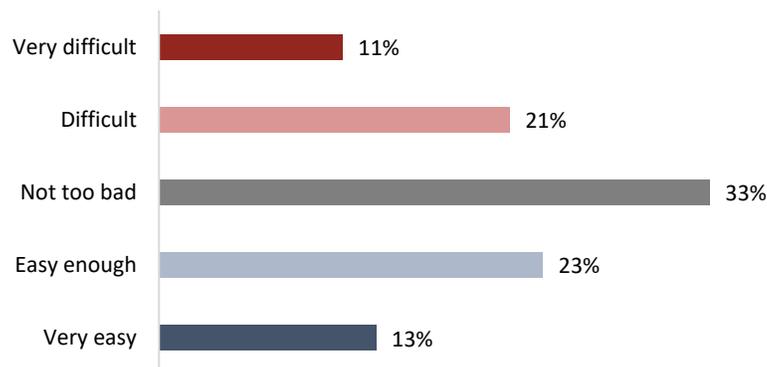
Parents using centre-based arrangements appear to place considerable value in the quality of options, as reputation and program characteristics take a back seat. By contrast, parents using home-based arrangements are more focused on basic aspects such as cost and hours of operation. Notably, a significant portion of parents using home-based (29%) or part-time care (33%) are in their current arrangement due a lack of other options:

Top reasons for using current child-care arrangement by type and duration of care (Up to three selected) (Has child under 6 in child care)					
Total (n=353)	Type of child-care			Time in care per week	
	Home-based (n=139)		Centre-based (n=211)	30+ hours (n=232)	Less than 30 hours (n=120)
Location 48%	Affordable cost 48%		Location 55%	Location 57%	Only option 33%
Reputation 35%	Location 37%		Reputation 39%	Reputation 43%	Location 31%
Affordable cost 31%	Only option 29%	Hours 29%	Program characteristics 34%	Affordable cost 31%	Affordable cost 30%

Availability top reason for difficulty finding arrangement

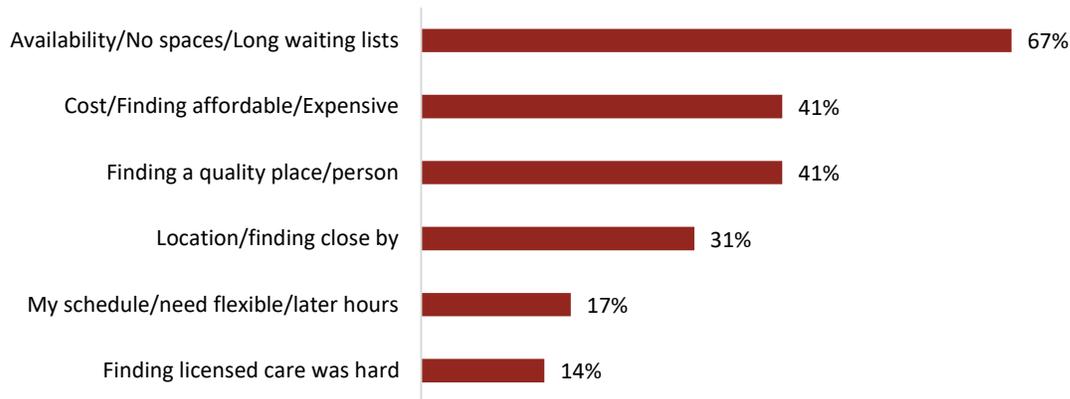
Asked to assess the overall difficulty of finding and securing their current arrangement, parents are evenly split into three groups with one-third each saying it was “difficult”, “not too bad” or “easy”.

**Overall, how easy or difficult was it for you to find and secure this child-care arrangement?
(Has child under 6 in child care, n=353)**



Looking specifically at those who report having difficulty, availability tops the list of issues encountered. Availability has been a well-chronicled issue, even dating back to the creation of the modern concept of daycare during the Second World War.

**What specific difficulties did you have getting this child-care arrangement?
(Up to three selected, items with 10% or greater shown)
(Among those that had difficulty, n=228)**



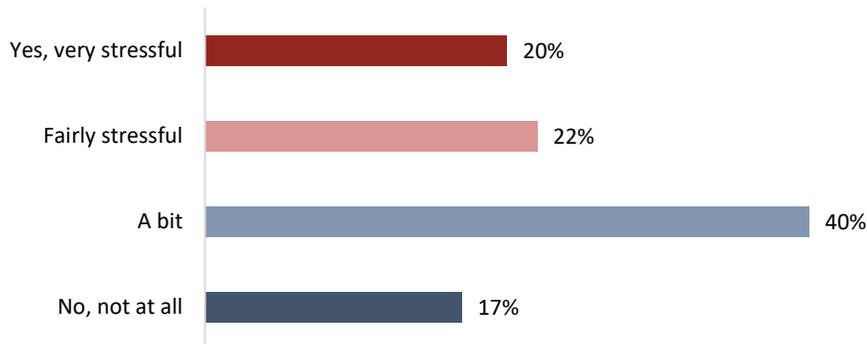
Parents using centre-based care arrangements are even more likely to point to availability of spaces for their child – or lack thereof – as a particular stressor. Four-in-five of those who had difficulty express this, which represents about a quarter of all parents of small children. For parents using home-based arrangements, however, finding a *quality* facility is most difficult.

What specific difficulties did you have getting this child-care arrangement? (Up to three selected, items with 10% or greater shown) (Among those that had difficulty)			
	Total (n=228)	Type of child care	
		Home-based (n=94*)	Centre-based (n=133)
Availability/No spaces/ Long waiting lists	67%	48%	81%
Finding a quality place/person	41%	59%	29%
Cost/Finding affordable/Expensive	41%	43%	39%
Location/finding close by	31%	21%	39%
My schedule/need flexible/later hours	17%	31%	8%
Finding licensed care was hard	14%	9%	17%

**Small sample size, interpret with caution*

Given the difficulties parents grapple with in searching for a child-care arrangement that suits their – and their child’s – needs, little wonder it’s a process that stresses so many out. The vast majority experience some degree of strain during the process.

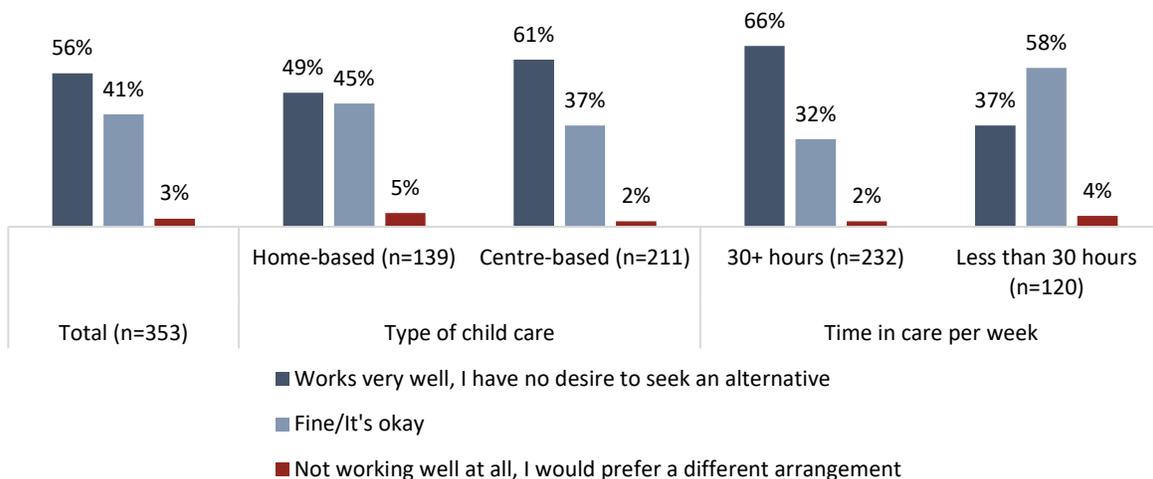
**And was it stressful finding and securing this child-care arrangement?
(Has child under 6 in child care, n=353)**



Levels of satisfaction with child care vary by arrangement

Parents using care are vastly more satisfied than dissatisfied with their current arrangements, by a margin of almost 19-to-1. That said, a significant proportion of parents have somewhat lukewarm evaluations. Looking at responses by type and weekly duration of arrangements illustrates slight differences in opinion on this question. Parents using centre-based or full-time care are more likely to say they are completely satisfied with their arrangements. By contrast, those with part-time arrangements are most likely to give a milder assessment:

All things considered, how is this current child-care arrangement working for you? (Has child under 6 in child care)



Cost a problem for one-third

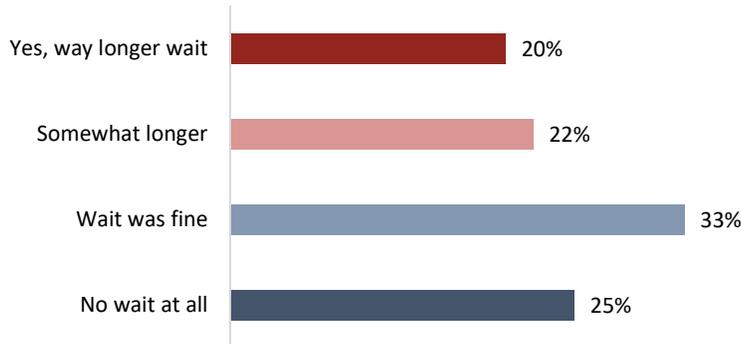
There is one shortcoming of child-care services that emerges on top for parents using care: cost. One-third (33%) say the cost of their care is a problem. As parents prioritize certain aspects of child-care services, they inevitably make concessions. While parents using centre-based services choose arrangements primarily based on location and the program itself, they are more likely to experience unaffordable costs. The opposite trade-offs exist for parents using home-based care, who are more likely to say their arrangement lacks an educational aspect:

Are there any problems or shortcomings you would highlight with this child-care arrangement? (Select all that apply) (Has child under 6 in child care)					
	Total (n=353)	Type of child care		Time in care per week	
		Home-based (n=139)	Centre-based (n=211)	30+ hours (n=232)	Less than 30 hours (n=120)
Expensive/Cost	33%	16%	45%	38%	24%
Lacks educational aspect	11%	23%	4%	11%	13%
Quality of staff could be better	9%	8%	10%	7%	14%
Difficult to accommodate schedule	8%	10%	7%	7%	10%
No “extra’s” (outings or meals, etc.)	8%	7%	9%	9%	5%
Not licensed	7%	13%	3%	6%	8%
Far away/Not convenient	6%	5%	7%	7%	5%
Child does not like it	2%	4%	1%	1%	5%
Other	8%	8%	7%	8%	7%
No problems	40%	49%	35%	38%	44%

Plurality had to wait longer than anticipated

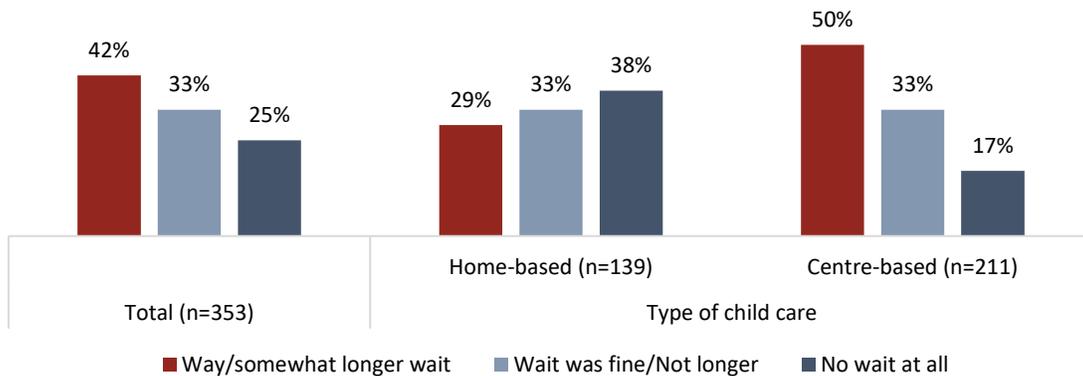
Given the aforementioned shortages in child-care spaces, it is likely that parents expect to face a certain amount of delay when securing a particular arrangement. Indeed, most parents either say the amount of time they waited for their arrangement was “fine”, or they did not have to wait at all. For a plurality (42%), however, this wait was longer than anticipated:

**To confirm, did you have to wait longer than you wanted to get this child-care arrangement?
(Has child under 6 in child care, n=353)**



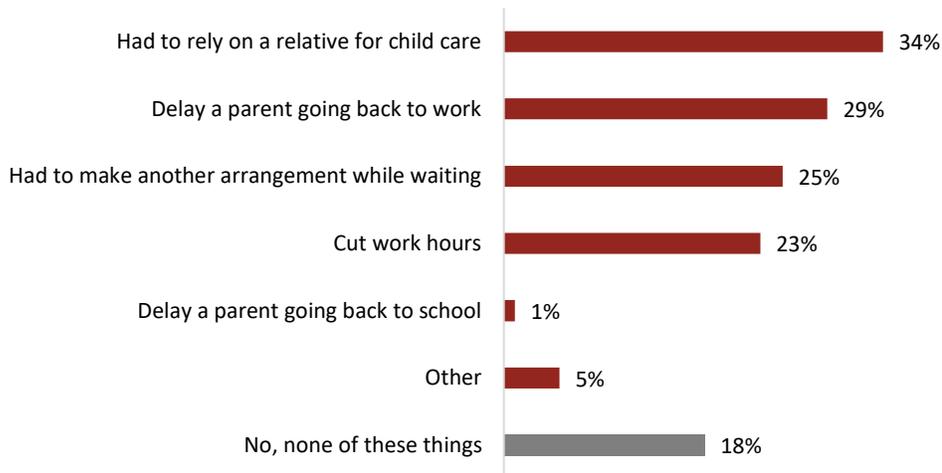
Wait times appear to be a more frequent issue for parents using centre-based child care, with half (50%) saying they experienced a “way” or “somewhat longer” wait than they had wanted. This, compared to 29 per cent of parents using a home-based arrangement that say the same:

**To confirm, did you have to wait longer than you wanted to get this child-care arrangement?
(Has child under 6 in child care)**



Parents that experience wait times longer than anticipated can face myriad consequences, from finding a temporary child-care arrangement to postponing their return to work or school. Indeed, a significant portion of this group say either they themselves or the child’s other parent had to delay going back to work or had to cut their work hours.

**Did waiting for a child-care space result in any of the following:
(Waited 'way' or 'somewhat longer', n=146)**

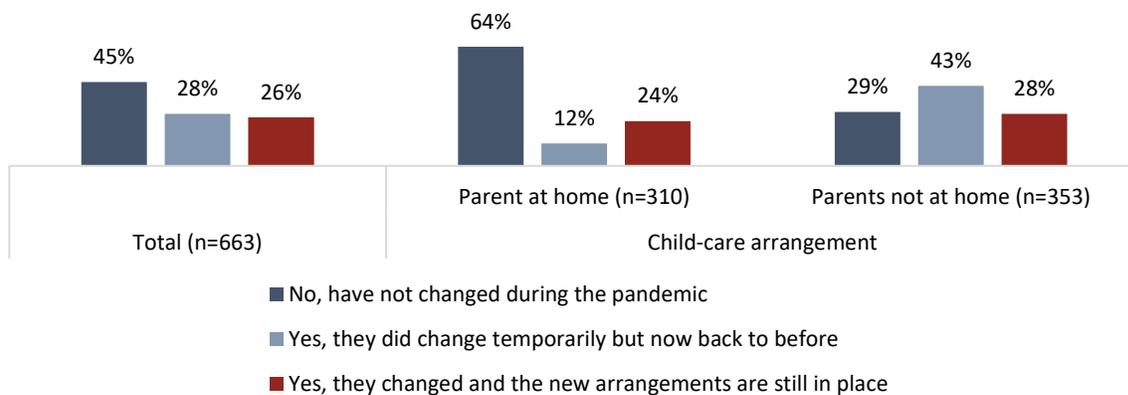


Impacts of COVID-19 on child care

Overall, half (54%) of parents with at least one child under six say their child-care arrangement was disrupted during the pandemic, increasing to 71 per cent among parents who use child-care services rather than staying at home. Within this group, 43 per cent were able to return to their pre-COVID option.

By contrast, 28 per cent are still using their new arrangement, perhaps revealing a longer-term impact of the pandemic on child-care availability. Given the effects of COVID-19 restrictions mentioned throughout this report, it is likely unsurprising that centre closures were the top reason for these changes ([see detailed tables](#)).

**Have your child-care arrangements changed since COVID-19 pandemic-related restrictions began in early 2020?
(Parents of child under 6)**



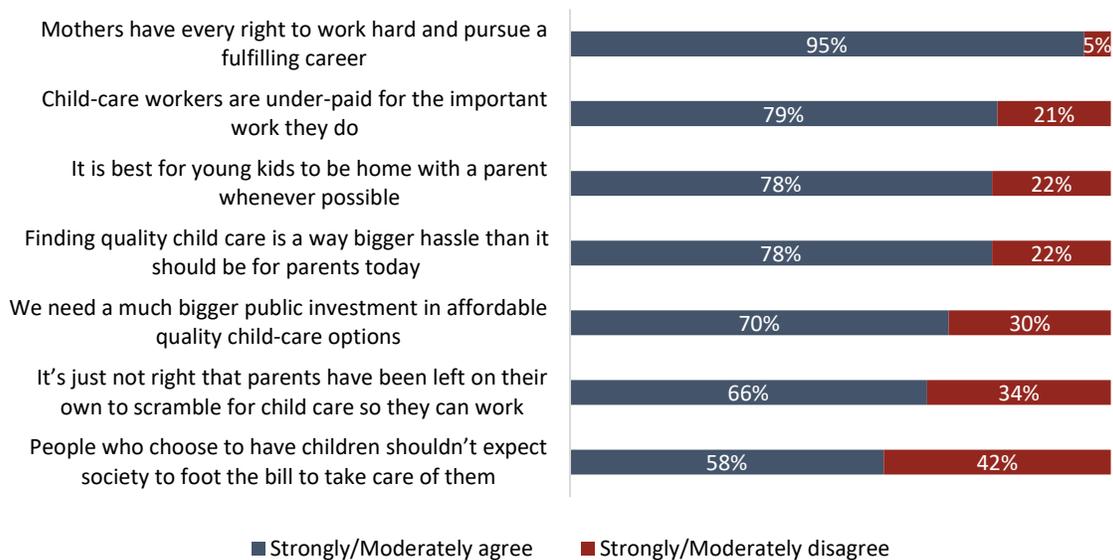
Part Two: Government investment in child care: Quo Vadis?

Attitudes about child care

So as Canadian parents weigh in on the realities and experiences of full-time care for their small children, what does the rest of the country think? This study also canvassed Canadians who are not currently raising little ones, about their general attitudes towards parenting and child-care policy.

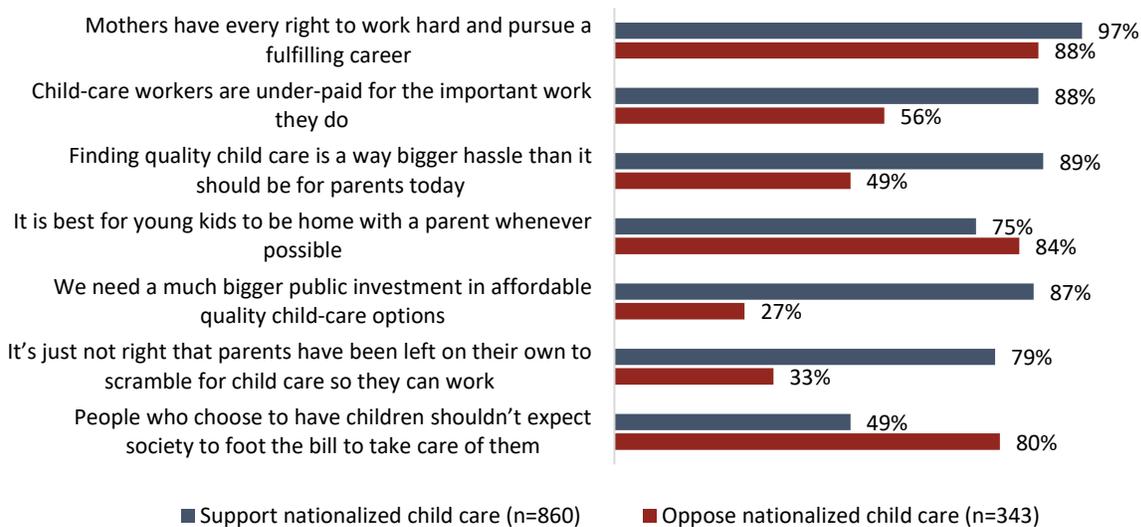
While responses reveal Canadians are largely sympathetic to the challenges faced by working parents and child-care workers, questions about whether these challenges warrant increased public funding are somewhat more divisive:

**Agree vs. Disagree with the following:
(Nat. rep. sample, n=1,203)**



Further analysis also illustrates how ideas related to these attitudinal statements may be influencing opinions on government investment in child care. For instance, four-in-five of those that oppose a national child-care system agree that parents should not expect to receive public funding for child care, compared to half of those that support it:

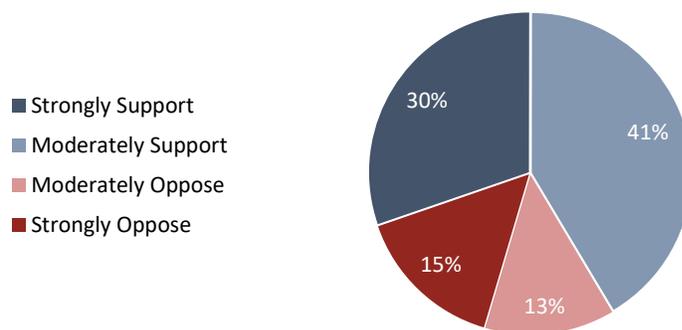
Percentage that agree with each of the following statements by support for nationalized child care (Nat. rep. sample)



Majority of Canadians support national system

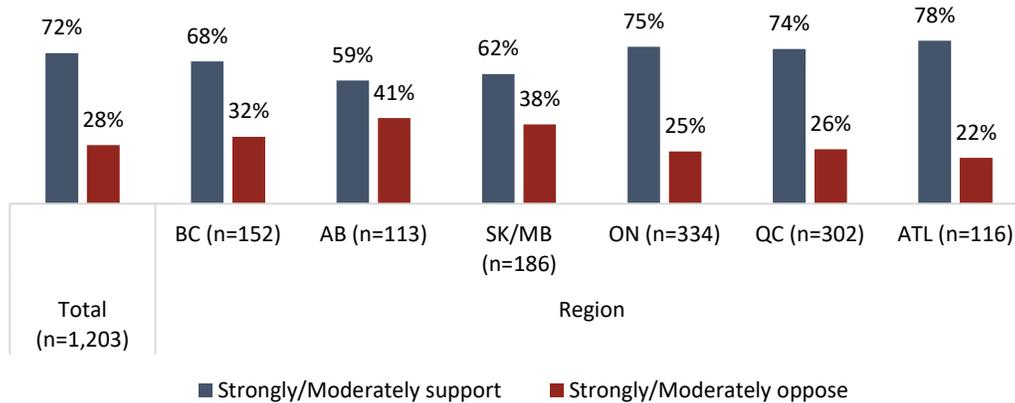
The Trudeau government has signalled child care is an area in which it wants to invest. Last fall, it announced plans – and an initial \$20 million in funding – to create a new secretariat on early learning and child care that will oversee the development of a new national system. Asked whether or not they support the idea of moving towards a national child-care system, seven-in-ten Canadians are in favour:

Overall, do you support or oppose the idea of moving towards a national child-care system in Canada? (Nat. rep. sample, n=1,203)



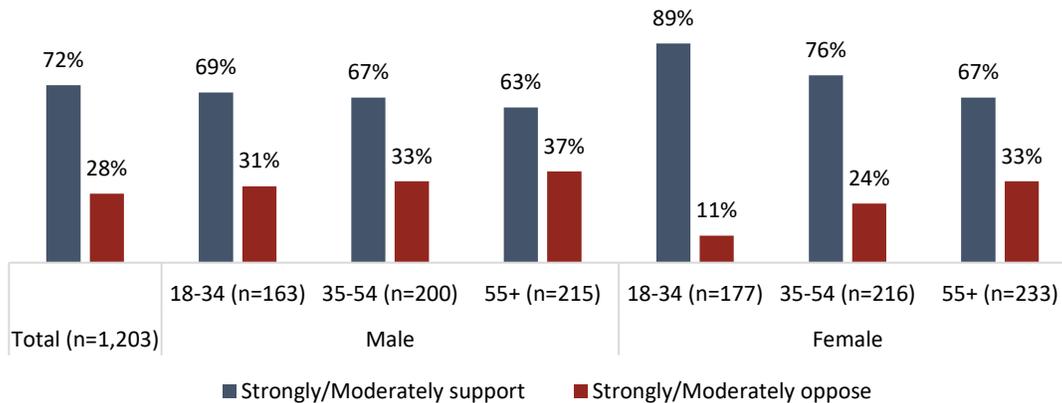
Regionally, support for national child care is strongest in Ontario, Quebec, and Atlantic Canada. By contrast, Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba report the highest rates of opposition, though still at below-majority levels:

**Overall, do you support or oppose the idea of moving towards a national child-care system in Canada?
(Nat. rep. sample)**



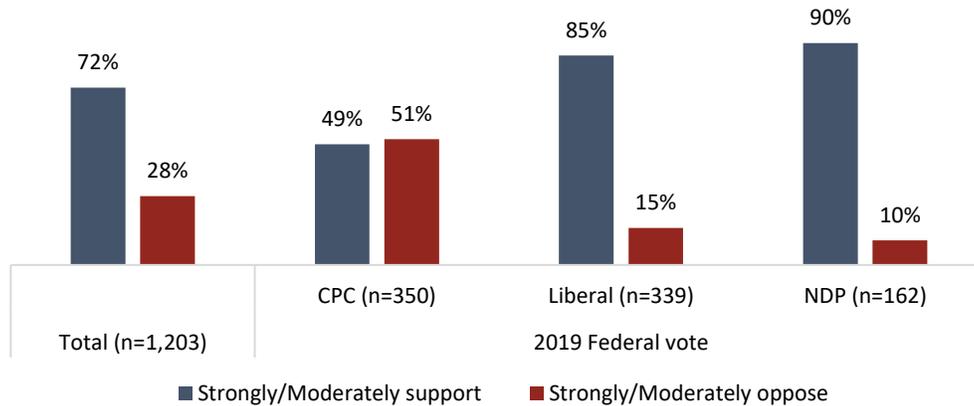
Women of all ages are more likely than men to support nationalizing child care, with women under the age of 35 most likely to say so. [Studies](#) have repeatedly shown that women are more likely to perform most parental tasks than men:

**Overall, do you support or oppose the idea of moving towards a national child-care system in Canada?
(Nat. rep. sample)**



As with most policy issues, political preferences drive the debate. A national child-care system garners support from the vast majority of past Liberal (85%) and NDP supporters (90%). Those who voted for the Conservative Party in the last federal election, however, are divided on the idea. During the CPC leadership election, [Erin O'Toole](#) had promised to increase the amount families could claim under the Child Care Expense deduction, and also temporarily convert it into a refundable tax credit, but has yet to provide a policy update since becoming leader:

Overall, do you support or oppose the idea of moving towards a national child-care system in Canada? (Nat. rep. sample)

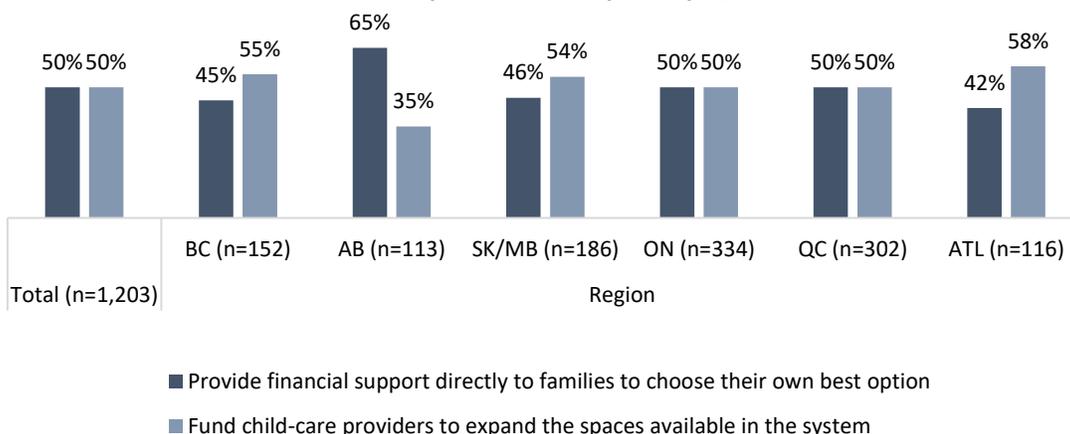


Less consensus over what that system should be

There are a wide variety of measures that have been proposed to bolster availability and affordability of child care in Canada. The Angus Reid Institute asked respondents to choose between two broad policy approaches: whether to allocate funding directly to families to choose their own best option, or to child-care providers in order to expand the spaces available in the system.

Overall, Canadians are split between the two approaches. Regionally, however, the difference in opinion is largest in Alberta, where 65 per cent would prefer to provide financial support directly to families:

Generally speaking, there are two broad policy approaches to providing public funding support for child care. Which would you say is the overall best option? (Nat. rep. sample)



Although specific details of the federal government’s plan to create a national child-care system will be outlined in the next federal budget, the system is expected to be modelled on one already in place in

Quebec. Under the so-called “Quebec model”, the provincial government subsidizes child-care services for children under five years old so that parents pay a flat fee.

To what extent do Canadians believe it’s the best approach? Beyond the question of support or opposition to a move towards a national child-care system, Canadians opinions were also sought on a number of other policy options. While a majority (68%) do support funding subsidized, \$10-a-day child-care facilities, people in this country express the most support for policies that would create direct tax benefits or direct income supports, particularly those that would prefer to provide financial support to families rather than the child-care system itself, as seen in the table below:

Support for each of the following programs by opinion on how best to allocate child-care funding (Has child under 6 in child care)			
	Total (n=663)	Best option	
		Provide support directly to families (n=350)	Fund child-care providers (n=313)
Expand Child Disability Benefit up to an additional \$125	84%	86%	82%
Tax credit so lower income families can claim up to 75% of child-care expenses	78%	82%	74%
Paid family leave outside EI	73%	73%	72%
Subsidized child-care facilities where parents pay \$10/day	68%	65%	72%
Increase the CCB benefit by \$125	61%	67%	56%
More funding for child care in Indigenous communities	59%	57%	61%
\$300 a month subsidy for in-home care	54%	61%	47%

Each of these child-care policies receive higher support among parents of young children. Parents using a stay-at-home care arrangement, however, are more likely than those using child-care arrangements to support policies aimed at providing direct support to families, including a monthly subsidy for in-home care and paid family leave outside of EI:

Support for each of the following by opinion on how best to allocate child-care funding (Among parents of children under 6)			
	Total (n=663)	Child-care arrangement	
		Parent at home (n=310)	Parent using care (n=353)
Expand Child Disability Benefit up to an additional \$125	88%	91%	85%
Tax credit so lower income families can claim up to 75% of child-care expenses	85%	86%	85%
Subsidized child-care facilities where parents pay \$10/day	85%	83%	86%
Paid family leave outside EI	84%	86%	82%
Increase the CCB benefit by \$125	84%	83%	85%
\$300 a month subsidy for in-home care	64%	69%	60%
More funding for child care in Indigenous communities	62%	63%	61%

Notes on Methodology

Sample augment

In order to enhance our view of Canadian parents with pre-kindergarten/elementary-school-aged children (typically five years old or younger), the Angus Reid Institute augmented this key portion of the survey sample up to the total of 663.

The general population sample size for the study was 1,203 and yielded a sub-sample of 155 respondents (13%) reporting they have at least one child under the age of six. To provide a more robust sub-sample for analytical purposes, the overall group was “boosted” with an oversampling of 508 additional respondents.

Those in this “booster” sample had been previously profiled on the Angus Reid Forum and re-qualified on the initial parental screening question used in this special survey. The sample augment was statistically weighted to reflect the demographic makeup of the original general population group with children under the age of six.

For detailed results of the national sample of 1,203 Canadian adults by age, gender, region, education, and other demographics, [click here.](#)

For detailed results of the national sample of 1,203 Canadian adults by support for national child care, [click here.](#)

For detailed results of the 663 parents of children under six by child-care arrangement, [click here.](#)

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