

Best Starts for Kids' Child Care Subsidy Program Family Survey

Report of Findings from King County Households

Photos: Best Starts for Kids



Project Partners



Best Starts for Kids is King County's community-driven initiative to support every baby born and child raised in King County to be happy, healthy, safe, and thriving. Best Starts is committed to racial equity and justice and strives to ensure that neither ZIP Code nor family income constrain people from pursuing lives of promise and possibility, while advancing equity in systems and policies that affect families across King County.



BrightSpark Early Learning Services (BrightSpark) works with families, child care providers, community organizations, and advocacy groups in order to increase access and improve the quality of early learning in King and Pierce Counties. BrightSpark's mission is to nurture and sustain child-centered, anti-racist early communities so that every child can have a great start in school and in life.



Cardea is a national, women of color-led organization with more than 50 years of experience in social impact evaluation, policy advancement, capacity development, and professional learning. Cardea envisions a world in which optimal health and well-being, equity, and justice are realities for all communities.

Acknowledgments

We appreciate everyone whose wisdom and perspectives informed this report.



King County
Households



Family Access
and Support
Team Members

Table of Contents

01 Introduction & Methods

02 Survey Participants

03 Key Findings

04 Conclusions,
Considerations, &
Recommendations

05 Glossary of Terms

Introduction & Methods



01 Introduction & Methods

Photo: Best Starts for Kids

Best Starts' Child Care Subsidy Program supports expanded eligibility for households to receive child care financial support

In 2022, [Best Starts launched the new Child Care Subsidy Program](#), dedicating more than \$160 million over six years to ease the cost of care for households ineligible for existing subsidy programs.

The subsidy program has served over 2,000 children since 2022 with program navigation support provided by Family Access and Support (FAS) team in partnership with program administrator BrightSpark.



Households participating in the Best Starts for Kids Child Care Subsidy in 2024 received an invitation to take an end of year survey

In December 2024, Cardea partnered with the FAS team to distribute an online survey to households that participated in the child care subsidy program in 2024. The survey questions covered the impact of the subsidy and asked about program experience including feedback. A mix of Likert scales, open-ended responses, and participant characteristic questions measured self-reported changes. An example of a retrospective pre-post question measuring self-reported change experienced by recipients before and after participating in the subsidy program is shown on the right. All questions were optional to allow survey participants the choice to skip questions.

8. Thinking about your life both **NOW** and **BEFORE** receiving the child care subsidy, select your level of agreement or disagreement with the following statements:

My family has enough money for...

	NOW	BEFORE THE SUBSIDY
Food when we needed it	-- Please Select --	-- Please Select --
Transportation (i.e., car payments, gas, bus fees, parking, etc.) when we needed it	-- Please Select --	-- Please Select --
Child care when we needed it	-- Please Select --	-- Please Select --
Healthcare (hospital stays, doctors visits, medication) when we needed it	-- Please Select --	-- Please Select --
Diapers and/or formula when we needed it	-- Please Select --	-- Please Select --
Adequate and livable housing	-- Please Select --	-- Please Select --

The survey supported learning about experiences households have with the Best Starts Child Care Subsidy Program

BrightSpark with the support of the FAS team electronically distributed the survey to households using email with weekly reminders and follow-up text or phone support. The survey remained open for three weeks, and respondents had the option of completing the survey in English, Somali, or Spanish.

To encourage households to share candid responses, the survey remained anonymous. As an appreciation for taking the time to respond to the survey, households received a \$25 electronic flexible gift card.

Cardea received some responses in Spanish and no responses in Somali. Cardea hired professional translators to translate responses to open-ended questions from Spanish to English. Cardea completed quantitative analyses in R and used Excel for thematic content analysis of qualitative data.

The sections that follow present findings from the households that completed the survey. Conclusions and recommendations follow these brief findings.



Photo: Best Starts for Kids

Survey Participants



02 Survey Participants

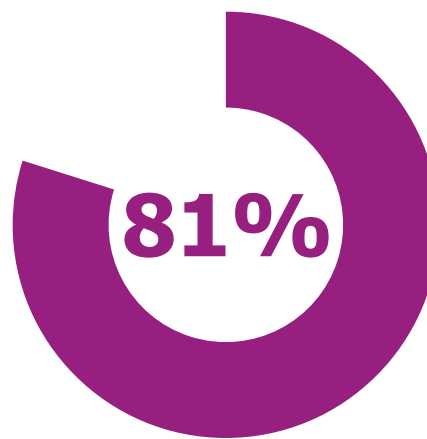
Photo: Best Starts for Kids

Most respondents identified as female and head of household

Across the two surveys, 575 households who participated in the Best Starts Child Care Subsidy Program in 2024 received the survey and 124 households responded, resulting in a **22%** response rate.

Responses were excluded when: no survey questions were answered, the unique identifier fields were invalid, or there was a duplicated unique identifier. This survey summary includes **108** responses from:

- **75** households that reapplied and were reauthorized to continue the subsidy in 2025
- **33** households that chose not to reapply to continue the subsidy in 2025



Of survey respondents identify as female



Of survey respondents identify as the head of household

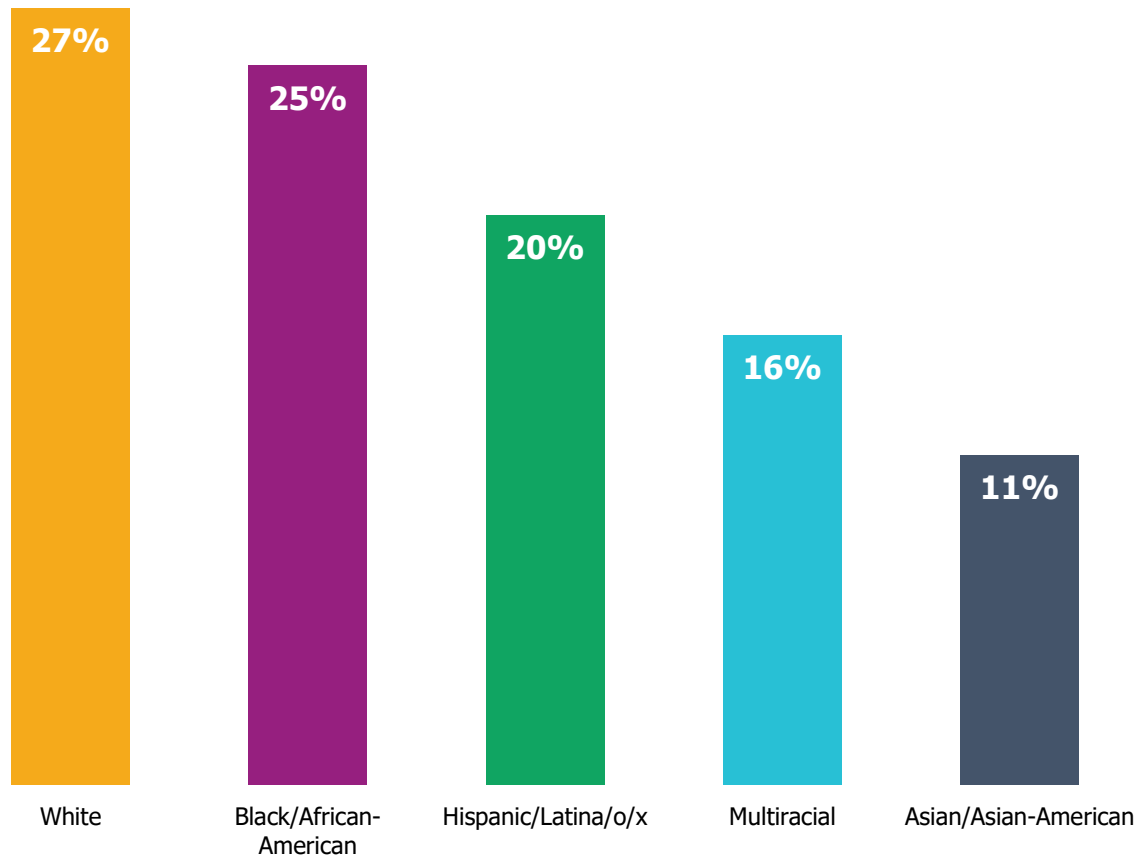
n = 97

Many survey participants identified as Black, Indigenous, or a Person of Color

Almost three quarters (72%) of survey participants identified as Black, Indigenous, or a Person of Color. Over one-quarter (27%) of respondents identified as white. One quarter (25%) of respondents identified as Black/African-American/African, and one-fifth (20%) identified as Hispanic/Latina/o/x.

Of the overall subsidy recipients, 22% identified as white, 30% identified as Black/African-American/African, and 22% identified as Hispanic/Latina/o/x.

Respondents also identified as: Afghan, African, Bi-racial, Indigenous, Jewish, Jordanian, and Multiracial.



Nearly 1 out of 5 survey respondents primarily spoke Spanish at home

Respondents most commonly (58%) spoke English as their primary language at home, followed by Spanish (19%).

Other languages spoken at home included Amharic, Arabic, Dari, French, Kinyarwanda, Mandarin, Pashto, Oromo, Swahili, Uzbeki, and Vietnamese.



n = 99

Respondents most commonly had 2 children and 1 adult per household

Respondents most commonly reported having 2 children in their household. The number of children per household ranged from 1 to 5.

Respondents most commonly reported 1 adult per household. The number of adults per household ranged from 1 to 5.

While the Best Starts Subsidy program calculates household income from a max of 2 adults in the household, survey respondents may have more than 2 adults in their household.



Respondents had
2 to 3
children per
household



Respondents most
commonly had
1
adult per household

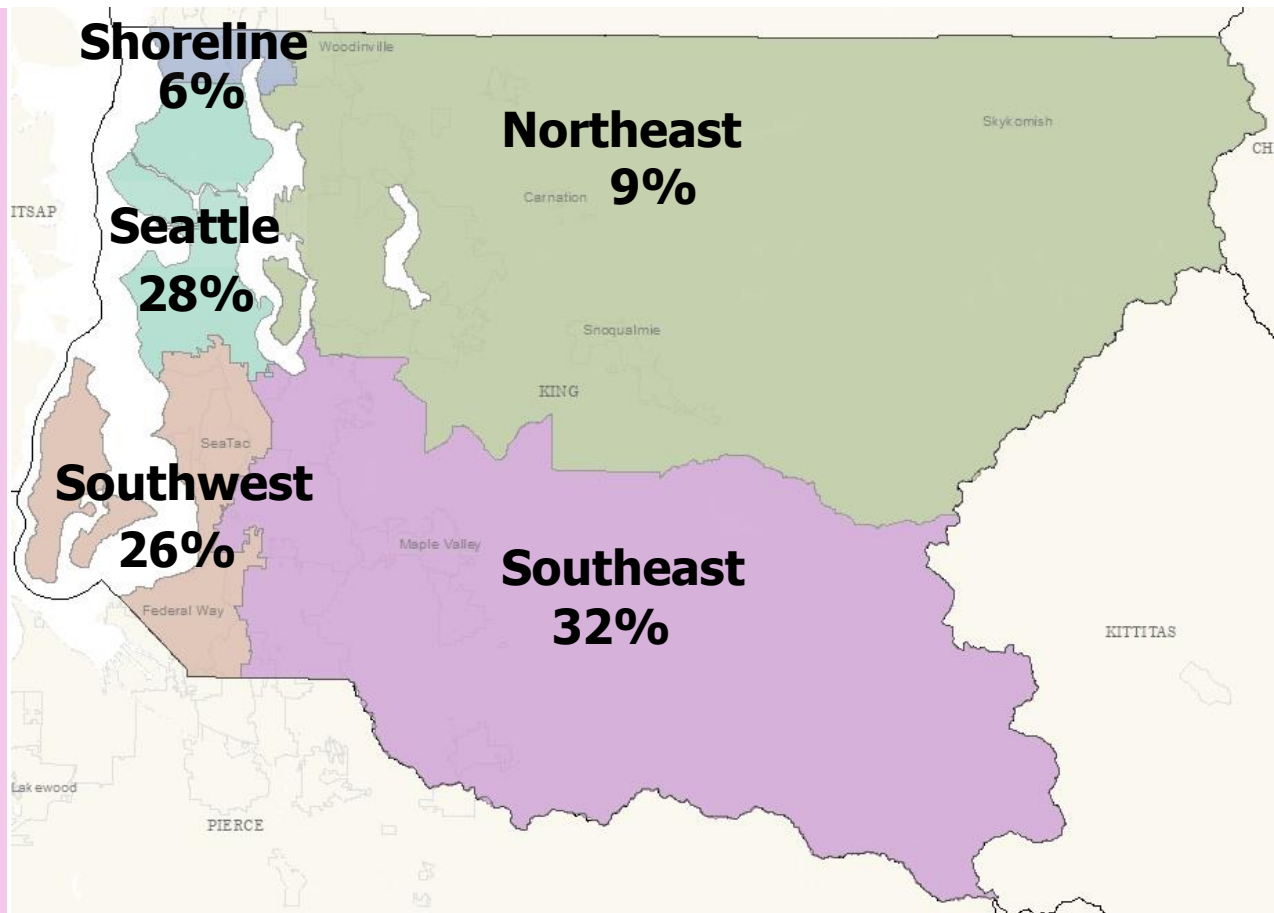
n = 99

Survey participants primarily lived in Seattle or the Southwest and Southeast regions of King County

Respondents most commonly (32%) lived in the Southeast region of King County.

One third (33%) of the respondents from the Southeast region identified as Black/African American, and an additional 33% identified as white. In contrast, 35% of respondents in Seattle identified as white, while only 12% of respondents in Seattle identified as Black/African American.

Nearly one third (32%) of respondents in the Southwest region identified as Hispanic/Latino.



n = 74

Key Findings



03 Key Findings

Photo: Best Starts for Kids

Respondents commonly expressed appreciation for their experience and its financial impact

“

*First off, I want to say **thank you [Best Starts for Kids]** for everything you have done for me and my family. Due to our limited income, **you have made it easier for my husband and I to work** but also **afford childcare** now, as well as **pay our bills**. You have **made it possible for my child to receive great, safe, and quality care**. From the moment we received the approval email, **you have improved my family stability**, giving us an opportunity to try to manage our finances and try to balance work-life responsibilities. Thank you for the communication and quick responses you provide anytime I reach out. Most of all, **I want to thank you for making me feel human**. Anytime I reach out, I'm not rushed, I don't feel ashamed. Just the opposite, **I feel heard, and seen**. I feel like they understand what it feels like to not be able to afford life and the struggle it is to provide for a family. **The communication, kindness, and caring staff who respond is what I applaud** best because that is rare to find these days.*

”

Survey Respondent

Respondents' experiences interacting with the FAS team are primarily positive

Almost all (**94%**) respondents reported that they were satisfied or very satisfied with their interaction with the FAS team. When asked to describe their experience with the FAS team, survey respondents had overwhelmingly positive comments to share. Respondents consistently described feeling supported and appreciated. They also described how FAS team members actively listened to concerns and responded promptly to requests for support or information. A handful of respondents experienced longer wait times to get a response from the FAS team and expressed hopes for faster communication.

“

*The [FAS] team **responds quickly, and you have the feeling they are available...to help you.** [Their] communication [is] very professional...[and] they are knowledgeable.*

”

Survey Respondent

Respondents shared appreciation for the Family Access and Support (FAS) team

“

*I am incredibly grateful for the Family Access and Support (FAS) team. They **consistently go above and beyond** to assist me whenever I have questions or concerns, providing clear guidance and unwavering support. **Their dedication** to addressing critical needs and advocating for resources **has been invaluable in helping me navigate challenging situations**. The FAS team **fosters a sense of resilience and empowerment**, ensuring that I feel heard and supported every step of the way. They also maintain open communication, which makes it easy to collaborate and find solutions together. **Their commitment to building strong, connected communities has had a meaningful impact on my life**, and I deeply **appreciate their professionalism, compassion, and dedication to making a difference.***

”

Survey Respondent

On average, respondents doubled their weekly use of child care for children under 6 years old

Participants doubled their use of child care hours after joining the subsidy program for children ages 6 and under.

Survey participants who chose not to reapply to continue in the subsidy program in 2025 used less child care than those who reapplied and were reauthorized to continue the subsidy program in 2025.

Of the respondents who reapplied and were reauthorized, children below school age used 33 hours a week of child care after the subsidy, compared to only 14 hours a week before the subsidy.

Before the subsidy,
participants used on average

15

hours per week of child
care for children under 6

After the subsidy,
participants used on average

30

hours per week of child
care for children under 6

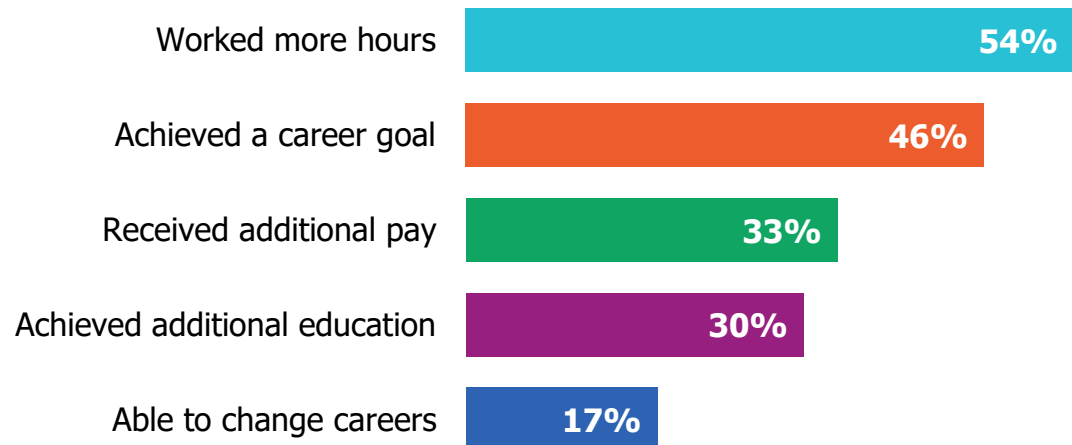


n = 108

After participating in the subsidy program, respondents reported positive changes in their career and education

After the subsidy, more than half (54%) of respondents said they were able to work more hours, nearly half (46%) of respondents said they were able to achieve a career goal, almost one-third (30%) said they were able to achieve additional education, one-third (33%) said they received additional pay, and nearly one-fifth (17%) said they were able to change careers.

Some respondents experienced a positive change in their career and while less frequent, others were able to participate in additional education opportunities



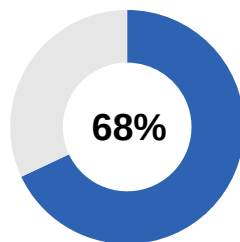
n = 45

Overall, respondents experienced fewer disruptions to their ability to work due to childcare while participating in the subsidy

Respondents were asked if child care disrupted their ability to work prior to and after participating in the child care subsidy program. A disruption was considered either working fewer hours than wanted or not being able to work at all.

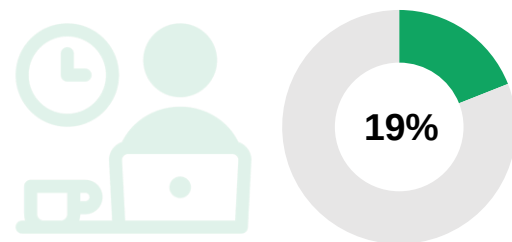
68% of all survey respondents felt that childcare impacted their ability to work before receiving the subsidy, while after receiving the subsidy 19% of all respondents felt that childcare impacted their ability to work.

Before the subsidy



of respondents felt that childcare impacted their ability to work

After the subsidy



of respondents felt that childcare impacted their ability to work

Among respondents who experienced a disruption before the subsidy experienced fewer disruptions to their ability to work due to childcare while participating in the subsidy

Within those who did experience a disruption before receiving the subsidy, over two-thirds (69%) no longer experienced a disruption to work after receiving the subsidy.

Among respondents who shared that prior to joining the child care subsidy program, child care impacted their ability to work, all (100%) reported cost as at least one of the reasons. After joining the subsidy program, about 2 out of 3 (67%) respondents continue to report that the cost of child care is at least one reason their ability to work is impacted.

After participating in the subsidy program

69%

of respondents **no longer experienced a disruption to work**

In contrast, after participating in the subsidy program

31%

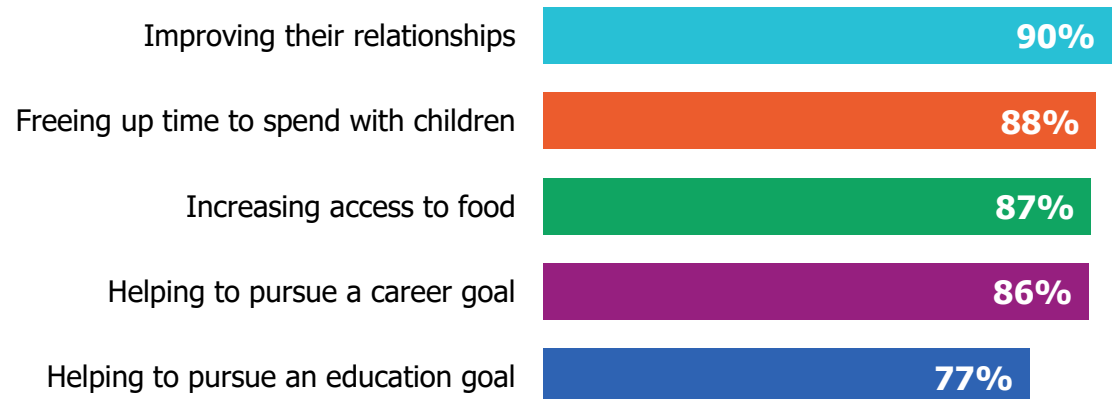
of respondents **continued to experience a disruption to work**

n = 63

Participants experienced improvement in relationships, freed up time, increased access to food, and support to achieve career and education goals

Most participants (90%) said that the subsidy helped to improved their relationships with spouses, partners, friends, or community and similarly (88%) freed up time to spend with their children. Most participants (87%) also reported that the subsidy increased their access to food. Many participants reported that the subsidy program helped with pursuing career (86%) and education (77%) goals.

Respondents felt the subsidy changed their daily lives by...



n = 91

Respondents experienced less financial stress after participating in the subsidy program

Across racial and ethnic identities, respondents generally reported decreased financial stress. A little over two fifths (42%) of respondents who identified as Hispanic/Latino felt less financial stress after the subsidy program. About two thirds (67%) of respondents who identified as multiracial felt less financial stress after the subsidy program.

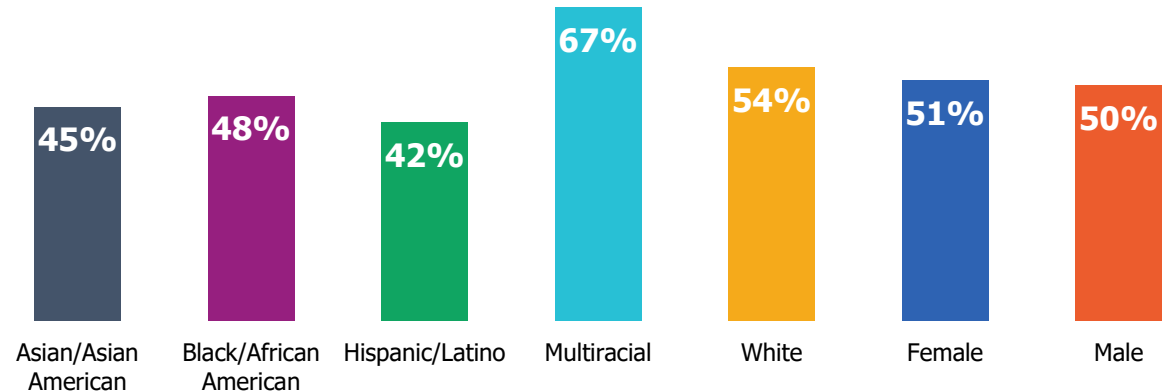
There was little variation in responses by gender identity with just over half (51%) who identify as female and half (50%) who identify as male reporting less financial stress.

After participating in the subsidy program

53%

of respondents indicated **less financial stress**

Respondents generally experienced less financial stress after participating in the subsidy program



n = 96

Respondents commonly described enhanced protective factors as elements of success with the subsidy program

When asked to share "*What is going well with the Best Starts for Kids Child Care Subsidy Program?*," respondents commonly listed protective factors (e.g., social connections, concrete supports, etc.).

Many respondents described feeling supported by the FAS team, experiencing less financial stress, having the ability to both focus more on their career/education, and being better able to meet the basic needs of their family.

“

*The Best Starts for Kids Child Care Subsidy program is **making a positive difference by helping families like mine afford quality child care.** It's been particularly helpful in supporting access to before- and after-school programs for my kids, which **allows me to focus on work and have time for self-care.***

”

Survey Respondent

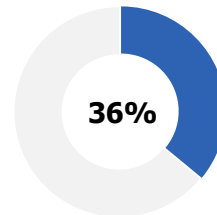
Respondents felt the subsidy improved their emotional health, stress, and physical wellbeing

Nearly nine out of ten (86%) respondents felt their emotional management was in a good place after the subsidy, compared to less than four out ten (36%) respondents before the subsidy.

Over three quarters (78%) of respondents felt like their stress management was in a good place after the subsidy, compared to just one-third (36%) before the subsidy.

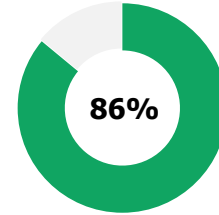
Almost three quarters (74%) of respondents felt like their physical wellbeing was in a good place after the subsidy, compared to less than one-third (27%) before the subsidy.

Before the subsidy

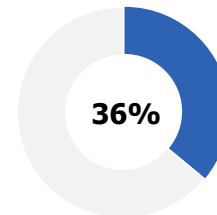


of respondents felt their **emotional management** was good/excellent

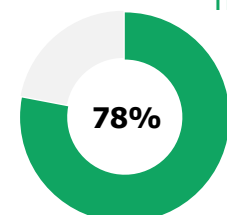
After the subsidy



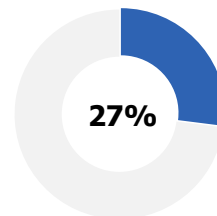
of respondents felt their **emotional management** was good/excellent
n = 104



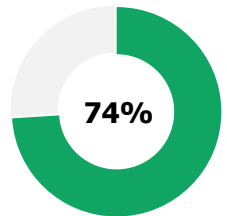
of respondents felt their **stress management** was good/excellent



of respondents felt their **stress management** was good/excellent
n = 103



of respondents felt their **physical wellbeing** was good/excellent



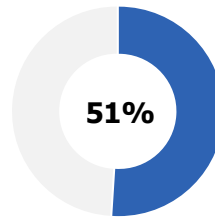
of respondents felt their **physical wellbeing** was excellent or good
n = 104

Respondents felt the subsidy improved their children's emotional and physical wellbeing

Almost all (93%) respondents felt their child(ren)'s emotional wellbeing was in a good place after the subsidy, compared to only half (51%) before the subsidy program.

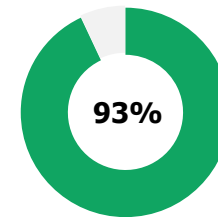
Similarly, most (90%) respondents felt their child(ren)'s physical wellbeing was in a good place after the subsidy, compared to less than half (46%) before the subsidy program.

Before the subsidy,



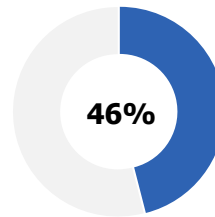
Of respondents felt their children's emotional wellbeing was good/excellent

After the subsidy,

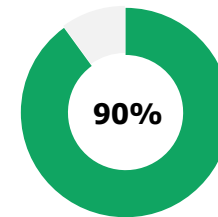


Of respondents felt their children's emotional wellbeing was good/excellent

n = 72



Of respondents felt their children's physical wellbeing was good/excellent



Of respondents felt their children's physical wellbeing was good/excellent

n = 73

Overall, the subsidy program improved participants' abilities to afford basic needs

Overall, many respondents (87%) felt they were better able to afford their basic needs since joining the subsidy program.

Positive perception of ability to afford basic needs was consistently reported across the diversity of survey respondents. There was little variation across race and ethnic identities as well as gender identities.

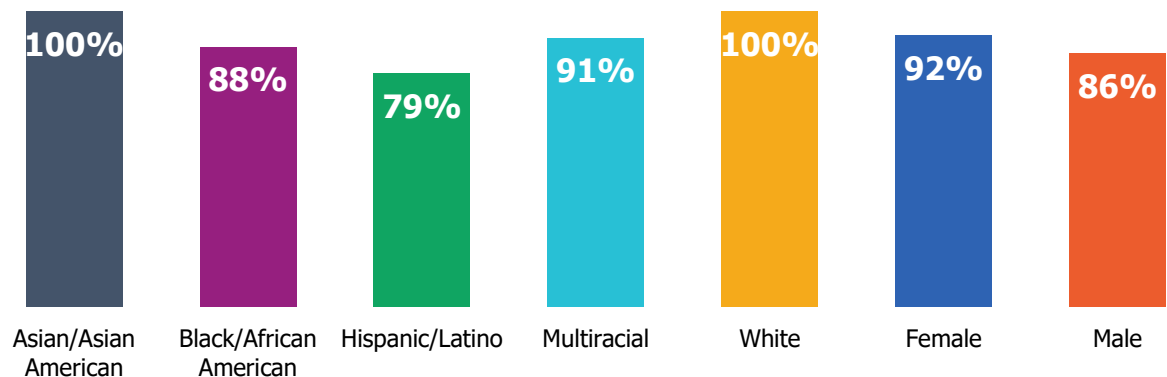
The next few pages provide specific categories of basic needs where respondents reported improved affordability after joining the subsidy program.

After participating in the subsidy program

87%

of respondents report feeling an **improved ability to afford four or more areas of basic needs**

Most or all respondents felt an improved ability to afford their basic needs after participating in the subsidy program



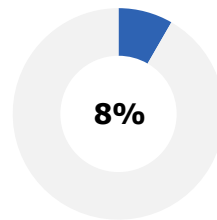
n = 84

Respondents agreed that the cost of child care and diapers & formula felt more accessible after the subsidy

Nearly three quarters (72%) of respondents agreed that the cost of child care was accessible after the subsidy, compared to less than one out of ten (8%) respondents before the subsidy.

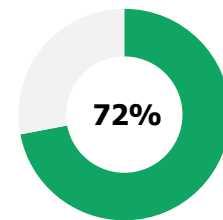
Nearly nine out of ten (89%) respondents agreed the cost of diapers and formula was accessible after the subsidy compared to just half (49%) before the subsidy.

Before the subsidy



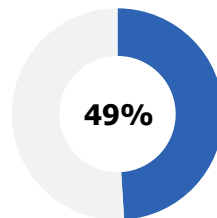
of respondents agreed
child care was accessible

After the subsidy

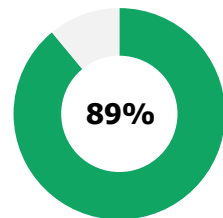


of respondents agreed
child care was accessible

n = 75



of respondents agreed
diapers & formula were
accessible



of respondents agreed
diapers & formula were
accessible

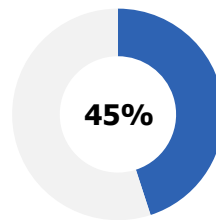
n = 66

Respondents agreed that the cost of food and healthcare felt more accessible after the subsidy

More than nine out of ten (93%) respondents agreed that the cost of food was accessible after the subsidy program compared to less than half (45%) of respondents who felt the cost of food was accessible before the subsidy program.

Almost three quarters (74%) of respondents agreed that the cost of healthcare was more accessible after the subsidy program compared to about one-third (37%) who felt the cost of healthcare was accessible before the subsidy program.

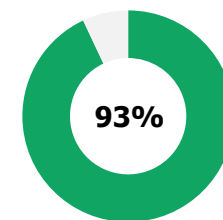
Before the subsidy



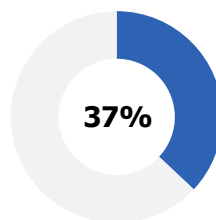
of respondents agreed
food was accessible



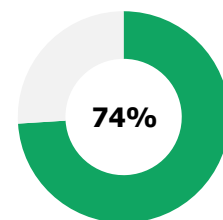
After the subsidy



of respondents agreed
food was accessible
n = 73



of respondents agreed
healthcare was accessible



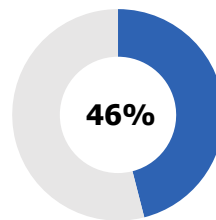
of respondents agreed
healthcare was accessible
n = 73

Respondents agreed that the cost of housing and transportation felt more accessible after the subsidy

More than four out of five (85%) respondents agreed the cost of housing was accessible after the subsidy program compared to less than half (46%) of respondents who felt it was accessible before the subsidy program.

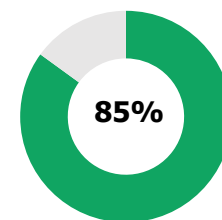
Similarly, nearly nine out of ten (89%) respondents agreed the cost of transportation was accessible after the subsidy compared to four out of ten (40%) respondents who felt it was accessible before the subsidy program.

Before the subsidy



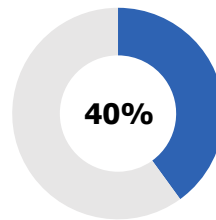
of respondents agreed **housing** was accessible

After the subsidy

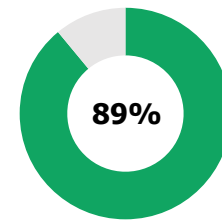


of respondents agreed **housing** was accessible

n = 72



of respondents agreed **transportation** was accessible



of respondents agreed **transportation** was accessible

n = 73

Some respondents shared feedback to improve the subsidy program's communication, resource navigation, feedback loops, and child care coverage flexibility

When asked to think about what could be improved with the Best Starts' Child Care Subsidy program, respondents identified communication, navigation, feedback or transparency, and coverage flexibility. Respondents hope FAS can communicate more across the team to reduce duplication of support. In addition, respondents wanted easier access to information about the subsidy and support with navigating the application portal/website. Some respondents asked for more timely feedback about subsidy program funding decisions. A few respondents suggested the subsidy should have more frequent periods for accepting applications, higher income limits, and greater flexibility to pay for different forms of child care (i.e., non-licensed care like family, friend, and neighbor [FFN] care).

“

*The **communication between staff** and sharing of documents/recorded information from clients **could be better**. I've **almost had to repeat processes** because people were filling in for my navigator and weren't properly relaying my completed documents and information. The **issue was eventually resolved**.*

”

Survey Respondent

Respondents suggested technical enhancements to the subsidy program portal to improve their experience

“

*The Caseworthy **portal seems incomplete**. Many of the things the home page says we should be able to access are unavailable. It would also be **nice to have a PDF of the award letter** to distribute to potential providers. Currently we can only forward the award email. These are fairly minor complaints, though. **I'm so grateful to receive this subsidy.***

”

Survey Respondent

Conclusions, Considerations, & Recommendations



04 Conclusions, Considerations, & Recommendations

Photo: Best Starts for Kids

Overall, the subsidy has a positive impact on households in King County

Responses from current and past subsidy recipients indicate the subsidy program has a positive impact on the whole household by making child care more accessible, increasing the use of child care services, and supporting children's social-emotional development. In addition, many adults report the financial support through the subsidy program enables them to focus on their own well-being, education or career goals, and meeting the basic needs of their family. Many adults indicate that experiencing less financial stress enables them to spend more quality time with their children when they were together at home. The structure of having frequent contact with the FAS team also built a sense of social support for households.

“

*The ability to be able to have **assistance with childcare** has helped tremendously with stress and my child is able to socialize in a childcare setting which helps with the foundation of their development.*

”

Survey Respondent

There may be additional perspectives among participating households not shared through the survey

Findings may not reflect the full range of perspectives among households participating in the subsidy program in 2024. The survey, offered in English, Somali, and Spanish, was **primarily taken in English**, with some responses in Spanish and no responses in Somali.

The survey was **open for three weeks** directly following the reauthorization period, which may have introduced a positive response bias among reauthorized respondents and a negative response bias or non-response among other respondents. The survey did not reach households who reapplied for the subsidy and were not reauthorized to continue in 2025.

While the survey captured some open-ended responses, surveys often **miss the depth and breadth of the subsidy's impact** that can be gained from in-depth conversations with participating households.



Photo: Best Starts for Kids

Findings suggest the subsidy program should continue with some changes to improve households' experiences

Findings indicate that Best Starts should sustain the positive impact by continuing to offer the child care subsidy program to King County households. To amplify the subsidy's impact, Best Starts could explore ways to expand the flexibility of the subsidy by offering multiple enrollment periods and allowing households to spend funds on non-licensed care such as FFN care. Additional recommendations include focused attention on making the application system easier to navigate, building stronger feedback loops to households around subsidy changes, and generating more community awareness of the subsidy program as an available resource.



Photo: Best Starts for Kids

Future evaluation efforts could focus on integrating mixed methods to deepen understanding of the subsidy

Future evaluation efforts could increase survey access by offering the survey in additional languages and providing alternative options for those less comfortable with technology or written communication.

Distributing the survey before reauthorization or re-application cycle could support expanding survey reach to all households to reflect on their experience and the impact of the child care subsidy program independently from their eligibility to continue in the program for the next year.

Finally, integrating qualitative methods, such as interviews or focus groups, will deepen the understanding of the child care subsidy's impact by offering specificity to the ways in which households would describe the impacts reported through the survey. Conversations should be offered in multiple languages to increase culture and language accessibility.

*En lo personal ami **me ha ayudado mucho** porque aveces no tenia adonde dejar ami hija y poder ir a trabajar pero muchas gracias a ustedes por ayudarme **ahora estoy más segura en donde dejar ami hija y yo poder trabajar.** Muchas gracias. (Personally, **it has helped me so much.** There were times when I didn't have anywhere to leave my daughter so I could go to work, but thanks to you, **I now feel much more secure about where she stays, and I can work.** Thank you so much.)*

Survey Respondent

The Best Starts' Child Care Subsidy Program is a vital source of child care support for King County Households

Overwhelmingly, households experienced positive outcomes from participating in the subsidy program and expressed a global appreciation for the Best Starts' Child Care Subsidy Program demonstrating how important the current program is to households in King County.



Photo: Best Starts for Kids

I make **too much to qualify for state subsidies, but not enough to even remotely comfortably raise children in King County.** Without [the subsidy], childcare would have been (all) of my take home pay... **This subsidy has taken away so much stress ...[and] allowed me to feed my children healthy, whole foods...**without worrying about money, and pay my mortgage and utilities without draining my savings. **It has been life changing.**

Survey Respondent

Glossary of Terms



05 Glossary of Terms

Photo: Best Starts for Kids

Glossary of Terms

Best Starts for Kids Child Care Subsidy Program

– Often called the Best Starts Child Care Subsidy, this refers to infrastructure and services offered to households to increase accessibility to child care in King County.

Family Access and Support (FAS) Team – A group of customer support service providers focused on delivering culturally-matched supports to households engaged in the Best Starts Child Care Subsidy Program. The FAS team help households navigate subsidy application and connection with eligible child care providers.

Family Friend and Neighbor Care (FFN) – Child care provided by someone who is a family member such as a grandparent, neighbor, and/or exempt from child care licensing.

Reauthorization – A process where households reapply to confirm eligibility to continue subsidized child care through the Best Starts' Child Care Subsidy Program.



Photo: Best Starts for Kids

Thank you to the households who took the time to share their wisdom and stories through this survey.

