

Parents' Perspectives on Child Care Quality and Quality Ratings in Maryland

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This infographic highlights themes from interviews and focus groups with 37 parents from various regions of Maryland from November 2021 to May 2022 conducted as part of Child Trends' Maryland Child Care Policy Research Partnership project. All parents were receiving child care scholarships (i.e., subsidies) at the time of the interviews/focus groups. We asked parents how they defined high-quality child care and the extent to which they considered provider quality ratings designated through [Maryland EXCELS](#) when searching for and choosing a child care provider. Six key characteristics of high-quality child care emerged across the groups, as shown below. We then reviewed Maryland's [public consumer education website](#) to see what aspects of high-quality child care mentioned by parents were apparent from the QRIS rating information provided online and compared this to the aspects parents identified.

Characteristics of high-quality child care according to parents interviewed in 2021 & 2022



Program Cleanliness (n=9)

"I think definitely cleanliness was super important to me, especially with COVID-19."



Health & Safety (n=9)

"Safety measures. Most child cares have a playground...making sure there's a fence that toddlers, or even older children, can't open."



Nurturing Caregivers (n=7)

"Quality child care for my child was that my child was going to get the love and support regarding her development and her growth that she would get at home."



Learning & School Readiness (n=8)

"Making sure they know how to say their numbers and colors and the months of the year and all that. So that like when they get there, they'll be, you know, ready."



Staff-Parent Communication (n=7)

"Staff that is amenable to working with parents and understanding their needs and the needs of their children and trying to work around that."



Individualized Attention (n=6)

"[I thought it was a quality program because] she went out of her way to make sure that, you know, each child was getting their own personal, individualized"

Characteristics of child care quality highlighted on Maryland’s public QRIS website

The Maryland EXCELS QRIS system (quality rating and improvement system) aims to assess and improve the overall quality of early care and education (ECE) programs across the state. Currently, the Maryland EXCELS website has a “[Find a Program](#)” page, which allows parents to look up child care programs and view their Maryland EXCELS ratings. Participating child care programs are evaluated numerically on a scale from 1–5 across five categories (see below). Only three of the six dimensions of quality mentioned by parents in focus groups are reflected in Maryland EXCELS category titles.¹ Although almost all the characteristics parents mentioned are reflected in detailed descriptions of the EXCELS categories, parents may not readily see the characteristics that they think are important reflected in the broad EXCELS category titles displayed on the “Find a Program” page.

Maryland EXCELS Rating Category and Description ²	Dimensions of Quality Mentioned by Parents
<p>Licensing and Compliance (LIC)</p> <p>To participate in Maryland EXCELS, all child care providers must be licensed by the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) to ensure they provide care to infants, toddlers, and children with consideration for their health and safety. Maryland has rigorous standards and regulations that are required for licensure.</p>	<div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around; align-items: center;"> <div style="text-align: center;">  <p>Program Cleanliness</p> </div> <div style="text-align: center;">  <p>Health & Safety</p> </div> </div>
<p>Staff Qualifications and Professional Development (STF)</p> <p>Programs participating in Maryland EXCELS are encouraged to seek ongoing training and professional development for their staff to build knowledge and skills in areas such as child development, inclusive practices, learning environments, curriculum, health and safety, assessment practices, program administration, and current business practices.</p>	<p>None</p>
<p>Accreditation and Rating Scales (ACR)</p> <p>To achieve the highest Maryland EXCELS quality rating, programs must demonstrate a commitment to pursuing and attaining accreditation by an organization recognized by MSDE. Being accredited validates the quality of a program’s practices, including having positive teacher-child interactions and nurturing learning environments.</p>	<p>None</p>

¹ We analyzed dimensions of quality that were apparent in section titles, not in the descriptions of each Maryland EXCELS rating category. Category descriptions are not currently presented to parents on the Maryland EXCELS “Find a Program” page of the consumer website.

² Descriptions were collected from <https://marylandexcels.org/commitment-to-quality/maryland-excels-standards/> and were not listed on the “Find a Program” page.

Maryland EXCELS Rating Category and Description ²	Dimensions of Quality Mentioned by Parents
<p>Developmentally Appropriate Learning and Practice (DAP)</p> <p>Maryland EXCELS recognizes quality programs that are inclusive and implement practices and policies that optimize learning experiences for all children in the program. Quality child care programs create learning experiences to support each child’s growth and development.</p>	 <p>Learning & School Readiness</p>
<p>Administrative Policies and Practices (ADM)</p> <p>Quality child care programs clearly communicate their administrative policies and practices to families and staff. Highly rated programs embrace practices that broaden children’s and families’ access to a variety of resources, including within the local community, and ensure that families and staff understand the program’s current policies and practices.</p>	<p>None</p>

Parents’ awareness of Maryland EXCELS

- Most parents who participated in our focus groups were unfamiliar with Maryland EXCELS ratings.
- Parents described using other information sources to assess program quality, including online parent reviews and advice from other parents in the community.

Implications & recommendations

- Results regarding parents’ lack of awareness of Maryland EXCELS mirror those from other investigations in Maryland.
 - For example, in the Mid-Atlantic Equity Consortium’s [analysis of Surveys, Town Halls and Focus Groups](#), child care program administrators and providers noted that parents were largely unaware of Maryland EXCELS ratings. They reported that parents who were aware of the program did not appear to use Maryland EXCELS ratings to select child care programs unless they received a child care scholarship (which required them to enroll children in participating programs).
- To increase awareness and use of Maryland EXCELS, MSDE can consider the following:
 - Consider providing additional details about how EXCELS ratings relate to specific elements of quality mentioned by parents. For example, each dimension of the Maryland EXCELS QRIS system could be described using the same terminology that parents used in our focus groups and interviews.
 - Consider incorporating parent voices in the upcoming Maryland EXCELS revision process by seeking parent input on educational materials and advertisements, including information about

which dimensions of quality to feature on the consumer website. MSDE could build upon their current work with John's Hopkins on [Voices from the Field](#).

- Reorganize the Maryland EXCELS consumer education website to display information about specific child care programs' ratings organized around the dimensions of quality mentioned by parents (cleanliness, safety, learning and school readiness, staff-parent communication, nurturing caregivers, and individualized attention).
- Create additional consumer guides and resources to help parents understand and use Maryland EXCELS ratings when selecting child care programs.

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