



Appropriate funds to the Commission on Children and Youth to conduct a Misalignment Index study of Tennessee's child care system, examining the gap between the care families need and want and what is currently available.

Quick Facts

Children with all Parents in the Labor Force

In 2024, approximately

65.0%

of Tennessee children under 6 had all available parents in the workforce. By county this measure ranges from^{*1,2}

40-85%.

Child Care Capacity

In July 2026 there were approximately

328,700

child care slots for children under 6.³

The largest gap between child care capacity under 6 and children under 6 with all available parents was in Davidson County with a gap of ⁴

3,540.

Misalignment Index

Nationally,

64%

of families using child care reported moderate to high misalignment between their current child care arrangement and their family's needs and preferences.⁵

The Misalignment Index evaluates four priorities families weigh: reasonable effort, affordability, meets parents' needs and supports children's development.⁶

* County data based on 5-year estimates (2020-24)

The Problem

The decision to place a child into an early education setting can be complex and difficult for parents. Many families have the care they desire and hope for their child, whether that be a certain size, facility type, quality and learning curriculum, location, price or a combination of all of the above. Oftentimes, due to limitations on available child care, there is a gap between the care parents ultimately desire and would choose and the care that is accessible, available and affordable to them. This discrepancy has been studied on a national level and in a handful of states, and labeled the Misalignment Index.⁵

Why this Matters

A truly successful system meets the needs of its consumers. Understanding the care and needs of parents is pivotal to ensuring we are investing in supporting and creating the right type of care, in the right locations. In Tennessee, counties with more regulated child care spots than children with all available adults in the workforce, or where utilization rates of providers are low despite available capacity. Yet, many times when you talk with parents they mention significant waitlist and challenges finding care. The idea that the state has too much child care simply does not ring true for them. This disconnect is not serving Tennesseans seeking care or the providers. Slot counts don't provide a complete picture of the challenges families face in accessing care, nor do they tell policymakers the extent to which existing care actually aligns with what families need.⁶ When the state is able to understand the needs and choices of parents and tailor our child care supply to support those choices, the whole system is uplifted.

How we can fix it

Understanding the gap between the kind of care parents want and need versus what is currently available to them is the first step in creating a child care system that meets the demands of a growing Tennessee. The Misalignment Index can be used to provide an overall picture of alignment between child care supply and family need within a state or community, and, perhaps more powerfully, to show where, and for whom, access gaps are greatest by breaking the data down by geography, income, or other family characteristics. This disaggregation is what gives the tool its policy value: it lets leaders move beyond a single access score to identify which specific dimensions are driving misalignment, for which families, and to track whether policy or funding changes are narrowing or widening those gaps over time.⁵ Tennessee Commission on Children and Youth is a nimble, trusted state agency with the ability to quickly turn around reports and a reputation of providing reliable information for policy makers.

References

Appropriate funds to the Commission on Children and Youth to conduct a Misalignment Index study of Tennessee's child care system, examining the gap between the care families need and want and what is currently available.

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2. U.S. Census Bureau, U.S. Department of Commerce. (2024). Age of Own Children in Families and Subfamilies by Living Arrangements by Employment Status of Parents. American Community Survey, ACS 5-Year 2020-2024 Estimates Detailed Tables, Table B2300
3. Tennessee Department of Human Services. (2026). Child Care Web Provider List – July 15, 2026.
4. U.S. Census Bureau, U.S. Department of Commerce. (2024). Age of Own Children in Families and Subfamilies by Living Arrangements by Employment Status of Parents. American Community Survey, ACS 1-Year 2024 & 5-Year 2020-2024 Estimates Detailed Tables, Table B2300. Note: 2024 1-Year Estimates were used for Anderson, Blount, Bradley, Cumberland, Davidson, Greene, Hamilton Knox, Montgomery, Rutherford, Sevier, Shelby, Sullivan, Sumner, Washington, & Williamson Counties. & Tennessee Department of Human Services. (July 2026). Child Care Web Provider List July 15, 2026. Note: This list of regulated child care providers include those licensed by the Department of Human Services (TDHS) or approved by the Department of Education, as well as license-exempt Boys and Girls Clubs. Providers that listed a minimum age above 6 years were excluded. Those that provided no minimum age were included.
5. Daily, S., Hirilall, A., Gerson, C., & Richards, K. (2026). Understanding child care access challenges require family-centered solutions. Child Trends. DOI: 10.56417/2895y1066c
6. Child Trends, Early Childhood Education Access Center. Tennessee Statewide Family Child Care Access and Misalignment Study Draft Scope of Work.