

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

What Parents of Young Kids Want: Insights from the 2026 National Parent Survey



In our 2026 [National Parent Survey](#), the New Practice Lab (NPL) at New America fielded the largest-of-its-kind representative survey of U.S. parents with children under the age of six.¹ The years spent raising young children are among the most demanding on parents' time and energy, yet this is often a period when families can least afford to work less. These competing pressures make this population particularly vulnerable. The earliest years shape people's lives and economic well-being, and families with young children are more likely to experience poverty.

At the New Practice Lab, we believe families know a great deal about what they need. Yet despite high rates of material hardship and stress among parents, governments rarely ask families what they actually want. Our institutions need fresh ideas and better ways of working to help families have agency and thrive. **How might our public policies shift if they were more informed by what families say?**

Reflecting the voices of nearly 5,500 parents from every state, including nearly 3,000 parents in lower-income households (defined as having income below 200 percent of the federal poverty level), the 2026 National Parent Survey presents a snapshot of what it is like to raise young children in the United States today.

5,472

respondents

2,915

**parents below 200% FPL
oversample**

100%

of states + DC reached

Inspired in part by what NPL has heard directly from parents through our [Thriving Families project](#), a series of multi-state, in-person workshops and diary study, the survey heard from parents of young children of all backgrounds and from across the country. They shared not only their core challenges in the early years of parenthood, but also forward-looking insights on how they want their lives and their children's lives to look. Here is what they said.

1. Throughout this report the term "parents" is used for readability when describing survey results, but in all cases it refers only to parents with children under six and is not generalizable to all parents.

Parents with young children agree on a lot.

Parents want more time with their children.

72 percent of parents report wanting more quality time with their children, and this desire is universal, holding true across income groups, geography, race and ethnicity, and gender. With that time, what parents want to do most is play, be outside, and travel with their children.

Most parents took minimal parental leave—and want more.

Among parents who were employed when their youngest child was born, 15 percent took no leave at all. While most parents (59 percent) took six weeks or less of leave, the average is pulled down by dads, who took far less leave than moms (a median of two weeks versus a median of 10 weeks). A majority of both moms and dads—55 percent of parents overall—say they had less parental leave than they wanted.

Money gets in the way of parents' time.

Needing more income is the top barrier standing between parents and how they want to spend their time—cited by more than half of all parents (52 percent). Top obstacles are not being able to afford the activities they would like to do with their time (37 percent) and having to work more hours to support their household financially (27 percent). Higher wages are parents' single most-requested change to working life, cited by two out of three (66 percent) parents.





Parents want different types of work, care, and leave arrangements.

Preferred approaches to work, child care, and leave vary.

No single work schedule is chosen by more than 46 percent of parents. No single child care arrangement tops more than 31 percent. People's desired length of leave after their child's birth, and their interest in working during that first year of life, also varies.

Most parents want to work—but not the same amount.

A majority of moms and dads want to work, but 76 percent of parents with one or more jobs today say their work arrangements do not fully match what they want.² And gender disparities in preferred work schedules are significant—64 percent of dads would prefer a full-time schedule compared to 30 percent of moms with children under six.

Who parents want to care for their kids shifts as children grow.

While the top child care choice for parents with children under six is parental care, it is highest during a child's first year of life; 35 percent of parents with infants under one prefer to care for their child themselves, compared to 27 percent of parents with three-year-olds. Conversely, the share of parents seeking formal child care settings such as child care centers, family day care programs, or school-based programs increases by nine percentage points between infancy and when children are three.

2. We use the term “work” throughout to refer to paid employment. This is not intended to diminish the significance of unpaid labor, including child care and other caregiving responsibilities, which represent substantial contributions of time and effort by parents and caregivers.

Families are diverse, and important stories get lost in “averages.”

Many parents carry dual caregiving roles.

28 percent of all parents with young children are also caring for an older adult. But this responsibility falls disproportionately on lower-income, Black, and Hispanic parents.

Lower-income families have even less control over their time.

Transportation prevents 23 percent of the lowest-income parents from spending their time as they want, versus 2 percent of the highest-income parents.³ Health or mobility issues get in the way for 15 percent of the lowest-income parents but only 4 percent of the highest-income parents.

Moms face steeper financial hardships.

43 percent of moms with young children report having struggled to meet basic needs sometimes or often in the last year, compared to 34 percent of dads. Moms are also more likely to say they cannot afford to spend their time the way they want (42 percent versus 30 percent).



3. “Highest-income parents” refers to those whose income is at 400 percent of the federal poverty line or above, and “lowest-income parents” refers to those whose income is below 100 percent of the federal poverty line.

Parents are holding on and hope for better.

Views on parenting show nuance.

45 percent of parents say parenting is somewhat challenging, while 27 percent say it is very challenging and 11 percent extremely challenging. The top challenge noted by the highest-income parents was parenting's impact on time, whereas the lowest-income parents were more likely to cite cost and financial difficulties.

Parents imagine better for the future.

Asked what they hope to be most true about their lives and their children's lives, parents on average cite connection and strong relationships for themselves and happiness for their children. Parents with lower incomes, however, prioritize financial security and housing for their own futures, and for their children, a better life.



Read the full report

newamerica.org/insights/2026-national-parent-survey/

ABOUT THE NEW PRACTICE LAB

The New Practice Lab works alongside government partners across the country to build and improve policies, public service delivery systems, and technologies to better support families with young children. Trained as designers, researchers, policy experts, data scientists, and technologists, their work to build a tighter link between policymakers and the families they serve has strengthened public benefits programs to deliver cash, child care, and time with loved ones to more than 2.8 million Americans since 2024.