

Supporting Children with Special Needs in Nebraska Through Child Care Access, Financial Stability and Family Well-Being

Kidsights Data is a groundbreaking initiative designed to generate population-level insights into how children develop from birth to age five using the Kidsights Measurement Tool, the first population-based tool in the nation to measure a core set of early child development skills throughout the early childhood years. Nebraska is home to Kidsights Data, located at the University of Nebraska Medical Center, and has served as the pilot site for three statewide rounds of parent surveys, creating a unique and powerful dataset.

Through direct input from families with young children, Nebraska now holds one of the most innovative sources of early childhood data in the country, offering new opportunities to uncover what supports children's development and to share meaningful learnings with parents, early childhood educators, funders, and policymakers. Beyond developing the tool and leading data collection and analysis, Kidsights Data is committed to making these insights accessible to the public, and this brief is one way those learnings are being shared.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Children with special needs often require a level of resources and a higher level of care that makes it even harder to support their child's development. Fifteen percent of parents completing the Kidsights Data survey indicated their child required special therapy (physical, occupational, or speech) while 8% indicated that their child exhibited emotional, behavioral, or behavioral problems requiring treatment or counseling.

This brief shares insights on additional obstacles and stressors faced by the parents in Nebraska in handling the care and early education of a child requiring additional resources and therapies.

Parents of children with special needs experience more challenges in accessing child care, education, and financial stability than parents of children without special needs.

Parental well-being and access to reliable support are critical factors for supporting the development of children with special needs.

The findings highlight that parental well-being and access to reliable support are critical factors for supporting the development of children with special needs. The data indicate that families of children with special needs face interconnected challenges across child care access, financial stability, and well-being. These challenges were seen across income levels. These families experience higher stress, instability, and unmet needs, despite strong social support.

Strengthening systems of care for all families—including flexible child care, financial support, and mental health resources—could improve outcomes for both parents and children. This is especially important for children with special needs and their families.

FOR DECISION-MAKERS

State and local policymakers, and community partners

Why It Matters:

- All children need access to quality child care, emotionally healthy parents, and financial stability. Children with special needs often require a level of resources and care that makes it even harder for families to support their child's development.

How It Works:

- Families of children with special needs who feel supported and have easy access to additional resources to assist in caregiving and education will be able to provide a stable environment for their child(ren).

Call to Action:

- Expand access to early screening for parents of young children. Tie those results to easily identifiable and accessible interventions and resources for those who need them.
- Strengthen community-based social support networks for ALL parents of a child with special needs, regardless of income level.
- Integrate parent well-being supports into early childhood systems, pediatric care, and community programs.
- Consider a new funding formula for financial support that takes more than gross income levels into account.

SUMMARY OF THE CONTEXT, FINDINGS, AND IMPLICATIONS**Study Overview & Population Context**

These findings reflect the voices of over 2,500 Nebraska parents of young children, birth to 5 years, who participated in Kidsights Data. Families represent urban and rural communities across income levels.

Data are drawn from Kidsights Data and parent interviews, reflecting population-level patterns in early childhood development.

Why Population-Level Data Matters

Population-level child development data helps communities and decision makers see patterns that individual stories alone cannot, guiding policy decisions that strengthen systems for all families. These data help ensure that all children and families have access to what they need regardless of location and family circumstances.

Key Findings: Child Care Access, Financial Stability, and Family Well-Being

In the survey, parents were asked about their perceived physical and mental well-being as well as about the prevalence of depression and anxiety symptoms. Social support refers to whether parents report having someone they can turn to for day-to-day emotional support with parenting or raising children. Measures of child and parent flourishing were created from a set of questions that assess the positive development and well-being of children and parents. Child development was measured using a psychosocial score, which is a validated measure of children's behavioral problems and dysregulation, with a higher score representing adverse outcomes.

Through follow-up with Nebraska parents who participated in the survey, Kidsights Data gathered additional insights that bring the data to life, illustrating how families experience mental health, support, and parenting in their daily lives.

What the data shows:



Families of a child with special needs face more challenges than other families in accessing child care.

Families of children with special needs face greater instability and barriers in accessing child care.

- Parents of a child with special needs experienced more changes (**18% had 3+ changes in 12 months**) in their child care arrangements compared to other parents (**less than 5%**).
- They are also more likely to need care outside traditional hours (**28% vs. 14%**), contributing to greater difficulty securing care (**43% vs. 27%**).
- More children with special needs were enrolled in Early Head Start or Head Start programs (**31%**) than children without special needs (**11%**), indicating the need for continued support and funding for the program.

“I would say if your kid is neurodivergent, it’s hard to find care outside of their therapy and, any kind of special education, preschool, or schooling.”

–Urban Graphic Designer

“We were trying to work a deal with the daycare he was at to teach them tube feeds, but we were going to have to pay staff wages after hours and train them ourselves because they had to do it outside of business hours.”

–Urban Pharmacy Tech

“I wish there were more affordable local programs that provide early childhood education, parenting classes, and mental health support for parents. Access to flexible child care and resources for learning activities at home would also make balancing work and parenting much easier.”

–Urban Nurse



Families with children with special needs experience more financial instability even with the same income.

Even with similar income levels, families of children with special needs experience significantly greater financial stress, likely due to increased costs for caregiving and lost income due to job changes and changes in child care. About half report annual incomes of at least \$100,000—comparable to other families—yet 34% struggle to cover basic needs, compared to 19% of other parents.

Additional financial pressures are reflected in:

- Nearly **1/3 of parents** needed to quit their job within the last year due to caregiving responsibilities.
- **75%** reported having reliable transportation compared to **92%** of other parents.
- Food insecurity was more pronounced for families of a child with special needs with **45%** worried about not having enough food to eat and **28%** reported running out of food within the last 12 months.

“Quite frankly, the issue literally for most families is MONEY. And you can have all the resources in the world, but when every agency is short staffed, and everyone is burnt out, no one can take the time to truly care and do real good.”

–Urban Stay-at-Home Parent

“We’ve been told so many different ways through different programs that ‘do this [and] you’ll qualify’, but ... then we do that and then we’re denied.”

–Urban Pharmacy Tech

“When you think about having a disabled kid, everyone’s like, ‘Oh, that’s expensive.’ But nobody takes into consideration...the amount of work missed, lost income, the cost of daycare, out-of-respite care rather than a daycare, things like that. Nobody takes that into a factor or considers it for like income-based programs. They look at your hourly wage and they’re like, ‘Yeah, you should be able to afford that,’ – except they don’t look at the fact that I’ve only worked 42% of my hours this year”

–Urban Pharmacy Tech



Family well-being faces increased challenges with mental health, trauma, and with the demands of caregiving.

- Caregiving demands significantly affect family well-being. Although **80%** of families report having a social support system and **91%** feel they are managing caregiving at least somewhat well, their caregiving burden remains substantial. Around **13.5%** of parents report fair or poor mental health, and roughly one in five experience frequent symptoms of depression or anxiety.
- **40%** say their child is much harder to care for than peers (**vs. 10% of other parents**).
- Higher exposure to adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) among both parents and children was found for families of a child with special needs. Examples of ACEs include death of a parent, exposure to violence, divorce of parents, or abuse.
- Families of children with special needs report higher exposure to adversity:
 - **36%** of parents report 4 or more ACEs (vs. 21%)
 - **24%** of children experience 2–3 ACEs (vs. 5.6%)

“It’s hard and at times I feel as if I’m failing as a parent because I get depressed.”

–Urban Customer Service Representative

“[I’m] proud of raising children who are inclusive and always wanting to make friends. [It’s] hard fighting for acceptance of my children at school and daycare about their differences.”

–Rural Medical Records Professional

“My sleep quality is very poor. Our family abandoned us since our ‘burden’ isn’t temporary.”

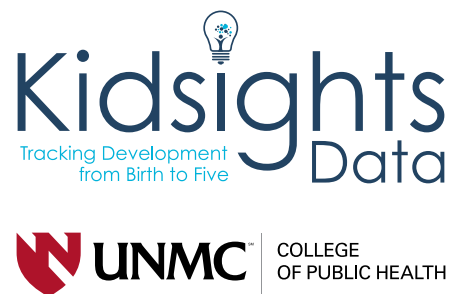
–Urban Stay-at-Home Parent

This suggests compounding challenges that may impact both parental capacity and child development outcomes.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY

Continue to advocate and support funding for Early Head Start and Head Start programs as they support many families with children with special needs.

Take into consideration additional context beyond gross income levels for families to qualify for additional financial support.



About Kidsights Data

Kidsights Data is an initiative to build demand for and generate population-level data that tracks the development of children from birth to five in the United States using the Kidsights Measurement Tool. This tool is the first population-based measurement tool of a core set of child development skills for children from birth to age five in the United States. For more information about Kidsights Data, located in the College of Public Health at the University of Nebraska Medical Center, visit www.kidsightsdata.org.