



2026 Report on Child Care in Cook County



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The **Sylvia Cotton Center for Research & Policy Innovation** leads the way in developing groundbreaking research on the most pressing issues facing families and the early childhood field.

The Center serves as Illinois Action for Children's in-house research, policy, and innovation hub, established in honor of our trailblazing founder, civil rights advocate Sylvia Cotton, through the generosity of her sons, Rick and Steve Cotton.

With rigorous data collection, policy analysis, and strategic insights, the Sylvia Cotton Center drives systemic change by informing our advocacy work and helping to advance policies that are responsive, sustainable, and just.

2026 Report on Child Care in Cook County

Fiscal Year 2025
(covering July 1, 2024 – June 30, 2025)

Prepared by: Research
Department Illinois
Action for Children

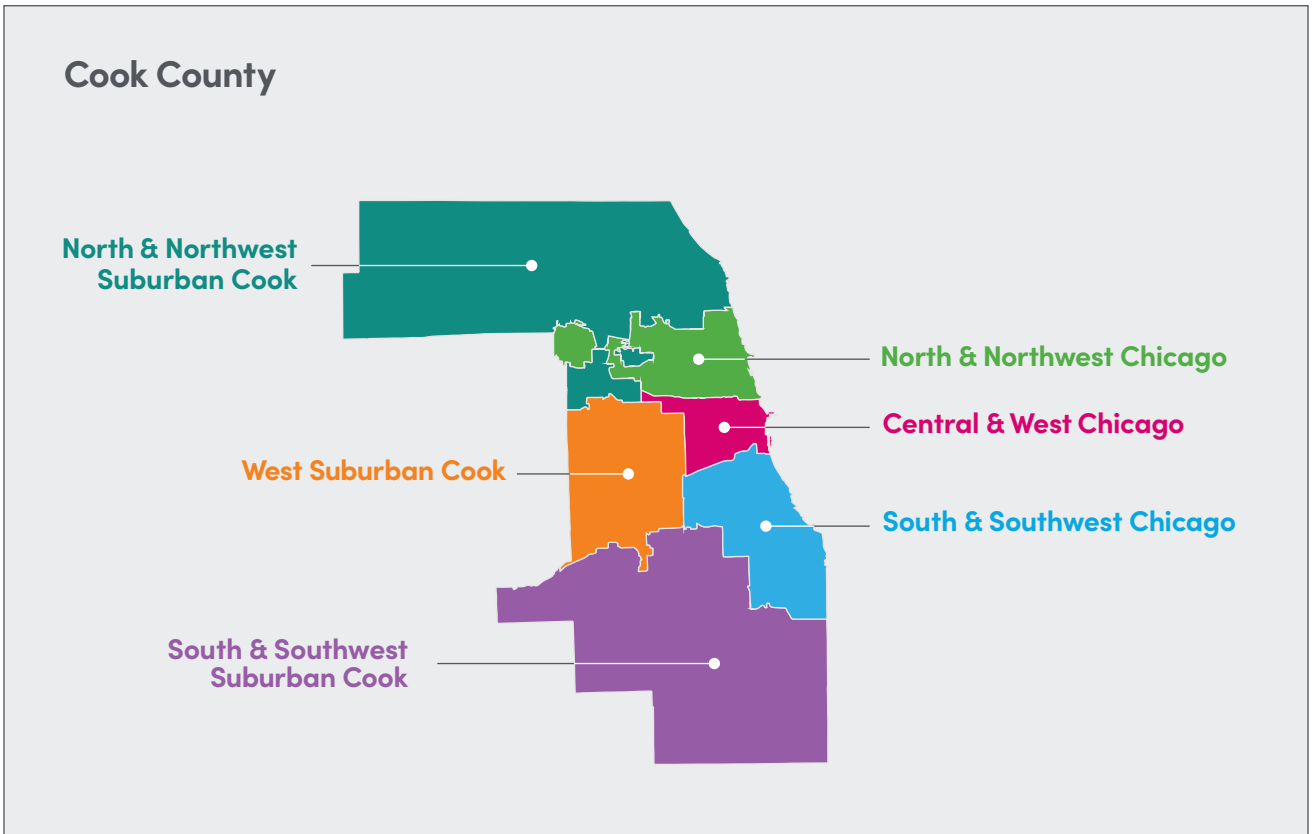
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Introduction: Families and Child Care in Cook County

Approximately 775,900 children under age 13 live in Cook County.¹ A large proportion of these children receive regular care from someone other than their parents or guardians: from a relative, a friend or neighbor, a family child care home, a child care center, or a park district or other after-school program.

This *2026 Report on Child Care in Cook County* is a brief version of our annual report that examines the availability of child care to families in different parts of Cook County. This report spans fiscal year 2025, the year beginning July 1, 2024 and ending on June 30, 2025. We present the various settings in which child care takes place, the number of children that can be served in each type of care, and the fees that parents pay to different types of providers. For a deeper analysis see our 2025 Report.²

We divide Cook County into six regions to show how geographic differences can affect parents' success in finding child care. See our 2025 Report for detailed definitions of these regions.



¹ 2024 American Community Survey, five-year estimates.

² [2025 Report On Child Care Cook County](#)

Types of Child Care Available in Cook County

A family's ability to find quality child care is based on many factors, including the types of care available where they live, the child's age and specific needs, the hours of care needed, the amount the family can afford to pay, and the parent's particular preferences. Below we outline the types of formal and informal child care options that are available to Cook County families.

Center Care

Most child care centers are licensed through the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS), though a number connected to schools or religious institutions are exempt from licensing. Centers provide care for dozens or even hundreds of children and must employ staff and establish formal operating rules. In June 2025, 1,266 full-time centers operated in Cook County.

Licensed Home Care

This is care offered in a person's home and regulated by DCFS. Licensed home providers may care for eight to twelve children. Providers with full-time adult assistants licensed as group homes can care for as many as 16 children. In June 2025, there were 2,381 licensed home providers in Cook County.

Family, Friend, and Neighbor (FFN) Care

This is care provided by friends, neighbors, and relatives in either the home of the child or the caregiver. FFN providers are permitted to care for up to three unrelated children at a time without a license. There is no registry of informal care providers and therefore the total number in Cook County is unknown. FFN providers are thought to be the most flexible about hours of care and payments. They are sometimes referred to as license-exempt home providers.

School-Age Care

In addition to school-age care offered through child care centers and homes, before- and/or after-school care is offered by some schools, park districts, and programs such as the Boys and Girls Clubs. Most of these programs are exempt from licensing, making it difficult to get a complete count of them. In June 2025, 136 programs in Cook County were listed with Illinois Action for Children (IACF).

Child Care Slots in Cook County Regions

The formal child care sector in Cook County, comprised of full-day child care centers, school-age programs and licensed child care homes, has the capacity to care for approximately 139,100 children. Not all programs operate at capacity, however, for various reasons including staff shortages. As there are about 554,400 children birth-through-12 in Cook County with all parents working, we estimate that 25 percent of children potentially in need of child care can be served in formal settings. The remaining 75 percent of children in this category may be cared for by:

- Family, friend, or neighbor providers
- Older siblings
- License-exempt programs not listed with IAFC
- Babysitters or nannies
- Public or private preschool programs
- Parents or guardians who work part-time or stagger their work schedules, or
- Self-care

Table 1 shows the number of formal child care slots and number of children potentially in need of child care by region in Cook County as of June 2025.

TABLE 1. FORMAL CHILD CARE SLOTS IN COOK COUNTY REGIONS

JUNE 2025

| | Formal Child Care Slots ³ | | | | | | Children Potentially in Need of Child Care ⁴ | | Slots as a percent of children with all parents working |
|---------------------------------|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------|---------------------|--|----------------|---|---|---|
| | Full-day licensed center slots | Full-day license-exempt center slots | School-age only program slots | Licensed home slots | Licensed home extended care school-age slots | Total slots | Total children birth through 12 | Children birth to 12 with all parents working | |
| Cook County | 98,302 | 6,598 | 9,850 | 19,879 | 4,489 | 139,118 | 775,901 | 554,416 | 25% |
| North & Northwest Chicago | 19,092 | 973 | 1,371 | 2,688 | 730 | 24,854 | 142,126 | 102,860 | 24% |
| Central & West Chicago | 15,572 | 615 | 1,077 | 2,647 | 485 | 20,396 | 74,676 | 52,322 | 39% |
| South & Southwest Chicago | 20,163 | 2,015 | 1,244 | 7,737 | 1,812 | 32,971 | 157,166 | 111,164 | 30% |
| Chicago Total | 54,827 | 3,603 | 3,692 | 13,072 | 3,027 | 78,221 | 373,968 | 266,346 | 29% |
| North & Northwest Suburban Cook | 20,977 | 1,385 | 4,495 | 1,116 | 161 | 28,134 | 199,066 | 142,462 | 20% |
| West Suburban Cook | 7,847 | 771 | 1,157 | 1,875 | 417 | 12,067 | 79,291 | 56,932 | 21% |
| South & Southwest Suburban Cook | 14,651 | 839 | 506 | 3,816 | 884 | 20,696 | 123,576 | 88,675 | 23% |
| Suburban Total | 43,475 | 2,995 | 6,158 | 6,807 | 1,462 | 60,897 | 401,933 | 288,070 | 21% |

³ Slots represent daytime capacity. Licensed homes have the capacity to serve 14,876 children during evening hours if they choose to operate during these hours, while child care centers can provide an additional 5,326 evening slots. Additional license-exempt centers and slots may exist that are not reported to Illinois Action for Children, particularly those serving school-age children.

⁴ From the 2024 American Community Survey, five-year estimates.

Not all child care centers report their slots by age to IAFC. Table 2 reflects the capacity of the 74 percent of centers that do and categorizes the center slots by age in the regions of Cook County as of June 2025.

TABLE 2. CENTER SLOTS BY AGE IN COOK COUNTY REGIONS⁵
JUNE 2025

| | Infants (6 Weeks to 14 Months) | Toddler (15 to 23 Months) | 2-Year-Old | 3- to 4- Year-Old | 5-Year-Old to Kinder- garten | Before and After School (Full and Part Time) | School Age, Summer |
|---------------------------------|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------|----------------------|------------------------------------|---|-----------------------|
| Cook County | 6,707 | 9,142 | 11,894 | 21,129 | 15,656 | 20,083 | 20,936 |
| North & Northwest Chicago | 1,163 | 1,736 | 2,206 | 3,695 | 2,665 | 3,163 | 4,348 |
| Central & West Chicago | 932 | 1,259 | 1,828 | 3,049 | 2,358 | 2,553 | 2,307 |
| South & Southwest Chicago | 1,525 | 2,046 | 2,532 | 4,636 | 3,694 | 4,088 | 6,441 |
| Chicago Total | 3,620 | 5,041 | 6,566 | 11,380 | 8,717 | 9,804 | 13,096 |
| North & Northwest Suburban Cook | 1,295 | 1,662 | 2,364 | 4,504 | 2,949 | 5,748 | 4,106 |
| West Suburban Cook | 532 | 707 | 948 | 1,785 | 1,429 | 2,001 | 1,282 |
| South & Southwest Suburban Cook | 1,260 | 1,732 | 2,016 | 3,460 | 2,561 | 2,530 | 2,452 |
| Suburban Total | 3,087 | 4,101 | 5,328 | 9,749 | 6,939 | 10,279 | 7,840 |

Comparable data for licensed homes are not reported because home providers have more flexibility in the ages of children they can enroll and the ages they serve change frequently.

Price of Care in Cook County Regions

Each year, IAFC’s Child Care Resource and Referral program asks providers what rates they charge parents. The tables below present the average rates for both licensed centers and licensed homes for the regions of Cook County based on child age as of June 2025.⁶ The bottom row of each table shows the maximum weekly reimbursement rate the state will pay on behalf of families eligible to receive assistance through the Illinois Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP).⁷

For both center-based care and licensed home care, child care rates typically decrease as children age because it generally costs less for providers to care for older children. In centers, the child-teacher ratio often increases as children get older. In licensed homes, providers are permitted to care for additional school-age children beyond the usual maximum capacity if they have a part-time assistant.

The cost of care also differs by geographic area. Following the patterns of supply and demand, care is least expensive in the least economically resourced parts of the county. This is true of center-based and licensed home care in the south and southwest regions of both Chicago and suburban Cook County, as well as for licensed home care in the central and west region of Chicago. Child care is most expensive in the relatively affluent north and northwest regions of both Chicago and suburban Cook County.

⁵ Includes full-time slots in licensed and exempt child care centers and full- and part-time before- and after-school slots.

⁶ The cost of family, friend and neighbor care is not reported because very little data are available on the rates they charge.

⁷ CCAP reimbursement rates in effect as of July 2024. The weekly rate paid to family, friend and neighbor providers was \$121.50 regardless of the child’s age, or \$24.30 per day.

TABLE 3. AVERAGE WEEKLY RATES: FULL-TIME CHILD CARE IN A LICENSED CENTER

| | Infant (6 Weeks to 14 Months) | Toddler (15 to 23 Months) | 2-Year- Old | 3- to 4- Year-Old | 5-Year-Old to Kindergarten | Before and After School | School Age, Summer |
|---|--|---------------------------------|----------------|----------------------|-------------------------------|--|-----------------------|
| Cook County | \$378 | \$362 | \$313 | \$277 | \$272 | \$240 | \$255 |
| North & Northwest Chicago | \$428 | \$399 | \$344 | \$306 | \$293 | \$244 | \$249 |
| Central & West Chicago | \$407 | \$383 | \$326 | \$287 | \$283 | \$231 | \$263 |
| South & Southwest Chicago | \$330 | \$321 | \$269 | \$236 | \$234 | \$223 | \$236 |
| Chicago | \$374 | \$357 | \$305 | \$268 | \$262 | \$229 | \$245 |
| North & Northwest Suburban Cook | \$437 | \$412 | \$372 | \$334 | \$335 | \$305 | \$312 |
| West Suburban Cook | \$378 | \$364 | \$311 | \$277 | \$271 | \$237 | \$243 |
| South & Southwest Suburban Cook | \$335 | \$332 | \$281 | \$248 | \$245 | \$225 | \$246 |
| Suburban Cook | \$382 | \$367 | \$323 | \$288 | \$285 | \$254 | \$265 |
| Maximum amount reimbursed by CCAP for full-time care | \$335 | | \$270 | | \$230 | \$115 (<5 hrs/day) \$230 (5+ hrs/day) | \$230 |

TABLE 4. AVERAGE WEEKLY RATES: FULL-TIME CHILD CARE IN A LICENSED HOME

| | Infant (6 Weeks to 14 Months) | Toddler (15 to 23 Months) | 2-Year- Old | 3- to 4- Year-Old | 5-Year- Old to Kindergarten | Before and After School | School Age, Summer |
|---|--|---------------------------------|----------------|----------------------|-----------------------------------|--|-----------------------|
| Cook County | \$266 | \$265 | \$249 | \$230 | \$230 | \$228 | \$230 |
| North & Northwest Chicago | \$281 | \$277 | \$264 | \$246 | \$249 | \$240 | \$244 |
| Central & West Chicago | \$262 | \$262 | \$245 | \$224 | \$225 | \$224 | \$225 |
| South & Southwest Chicago | \$261 | \$260 | \$243 | \$223 | \$223 | \$221 | \$224 |
| Chicago | \$265 | \$264 | \$248 | \$228 | \$229 | \$226 | \$229 |
| North & Northwest Suburban Cook | \$304 | \$302 | \$295 | \$288 | \$288 | \$283 | \$284 |
| West Suburban Cook | \$269 | \$268 | \$254 | \$236 | \$236 | \$235 | \$234 |
| South & Southwest Suburban Cook | \$257 | \$255 | \$239 | \$219 | \$218 | \$216 | \$221 |
| Suburban Cook | \$267 | \$266 | \$252 | \$234 | \$234 | \$231 | \$233 |
| Maximum amount reimbursed by CCAP for full-time care | \$264 | | \$246 | | \$224 | \$112 (<5 hrs/day) \$224 (5+ hrs/day) | \$224 |

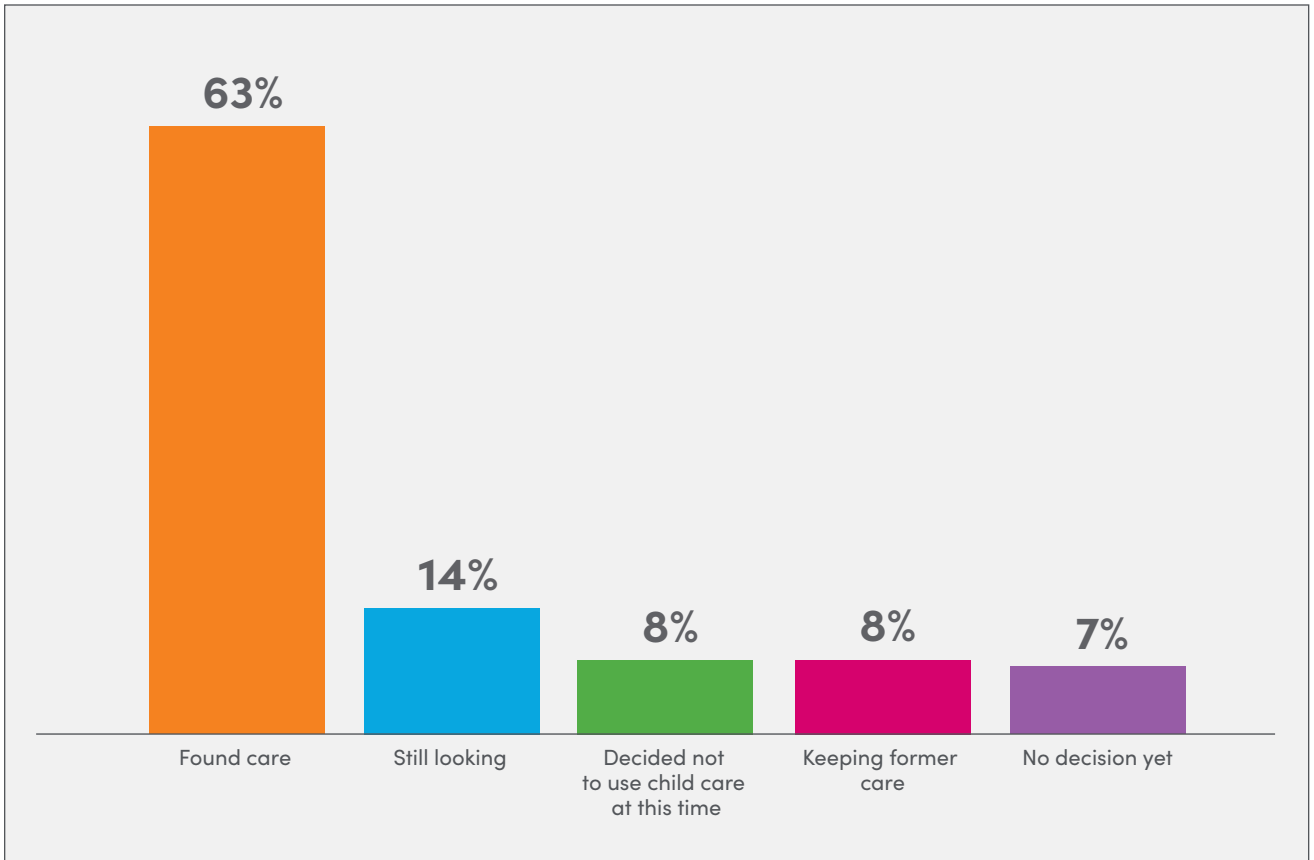
Experience Finding Care for Some Cook County Families

In FY2025, IAFC helped 2,812 Cook County families with their search for child care and preschool programs through our referral hotline. After providing referrals, families were surveyed about their search experience and about one fifth responded to the survey. Families using IAFC’s referral service do not represent the child care demand across the county and across socio-economic groups (the majority earned below 200 percent of the poverty level), but their experiences can provide insight into some of the needs and challenges of families seeking child care.

Families’ Search Experiences

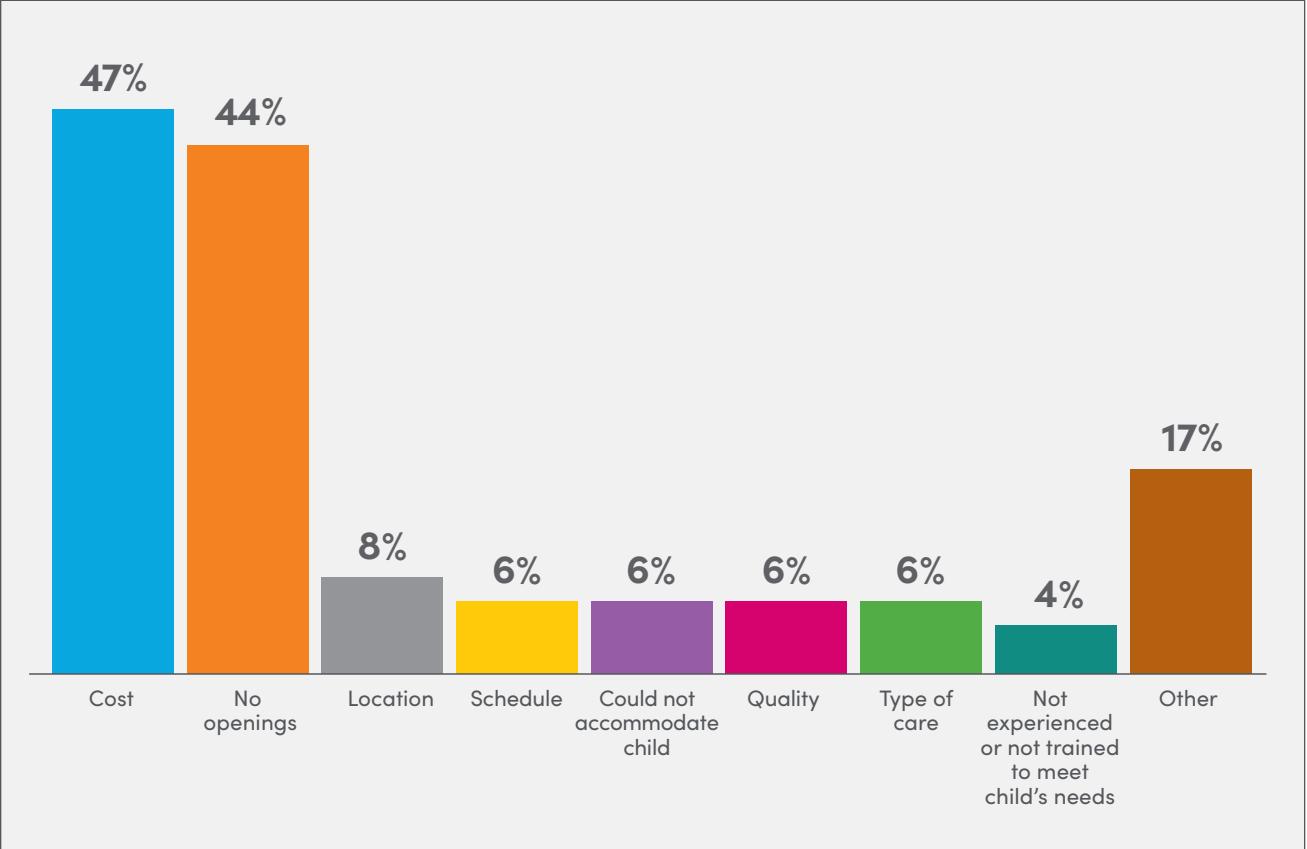
Among the families responding to the referral follow-up survey, 63 percent said that at the time of the survey they had found child care. Another 14 percent were still looking for care. Other parents decided to keep their former care or decided not to use child care. Among families who reported finding care, 74 percent selected some form of center-based care such as a child care center or preschool. Twenty-six percent of families selected home care by a non-relative and 10 percent selected home care by a relative (note, some families used multiple care types).

CHILD CARE SEARCH RESULTS – ALL SURVEY RESPONDENTS (N=530 PARENTS)



Families were asked what problems they encountered while searching for care. About 40 percent of families said they did not experience any problems with finding care. Among those who did have difficulties, the top challenges were the cost of care and lack of openings at a program, reported by 47 percent and 44 percent of families respectively. Location was the next most common problem. Common responses in the “other” category included lack of transportation, the parent was no longer working, and the parent could not get CCAP.

**MOST COMMON SEARCH ISSUES AMONG PARENTS WHO REPORTED PROBLEMS WHILE SEARCHING FOR CARE:
COOK COUNTY PARENTS USING THE REFERRAL SERVICE IN FY2025 (N=254 PARENTS)**





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