

# 2024



## Early Childhood Education Survey and Assessment, Northeast Reading

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# United Way of Berks County



## WHO WE ARE

United Way of Berks County is a nonprofit organization dedicated to improving lives and strengthening communities in Berks County. Founded in 1925, the organization has been a cornerstone of community support and innovation, impacting thousands of lives each year. By bringing together people, organizations, and resources to address the most pressing challenges facing the community, United Way works to ensure individuals and families thrive. Through United Way's four focus areas – education, financial stability, health, and safety net services – more than 190,000 Berks Countians receive help each year through its 80+ funded programs.

## WE BELIEVE...

...everyone can play a role in ensuring children grow up to be productive citizens and members of our community. This begins with a good education as the foundation for a child's success in work and life, along with providing supportive programming to help youth develop necessary skills for their futures. To meet this goal, key issues addressed by United Way and its supported programs in the education focus area include early childhood care, school readiness, school success, and positive youth development, with all these issues intertwined to help children achieve their potential.

## EARLY LEARNING: HOW WE MAKE A DIFFERENCE

### READY. SET. READ!

Third grade reading proficiency is a critical component of learning and an indicator of long-term educational and life outcomes. Yet 45% of third-graders throughout Berks County are reading below grade level. United Way's **Ready.Set.READ!** (RSR) initiative is a collaboration among United Way, the educational and business communities and community partners focusing on kindergarten readiness, early elementary grade-level reading proficiency and high quality child care in the City of Reading. The collective work focuses on four key strategies:

1. **Implement** school-readiness activities for pre-school children to support language and pre-literacy development in young children;
2. **Connect** tutors with early-grade students needing supplemental instruction;
3. **Engage** parents to promote literacy;
4. **Mobilize** the community around this work.



### GROWING READERS

This program focuses on kindergarten readiness by increasing the number of high quality, STAR 4, childcare centers in Reading. United Way provides coaching and modeling to childcare educators, as well as professional development, in partnership with Reading Area Community College. To date, 62 individuals have completed their classes and achieved their CDA Credential. United Way has helped 10 childcare centers achieve a STAR 4 rating since program inception in 2014.

# Focus: Early Childhood Education (ECE)

## WHY ECE?

Language develops in a baby's brain before they can talk – reading and speaking to a child early is important!

- 1 80% of a child's brain develops in the first 3 years.
- 2 The number of words a child learns during their first 3 years is key to preparing them for school and developing their language skills.
- 3 90% of a child's brain forms during the first 5 years – before they enter kindergarten!



## Harwood Institute for Public Innovation

As United Way has been working in the ECE field for over a decade, the organization became involved with a community wide initiative spearheaded by the Harwood Institute for Public Innovation. For over 35 years, The Harwood Institute for Public Innovation has addressed society's most pressing challenges and strengthened the civic culture of communities to catalyze lasting change. A group of 50 Berks County residents participated in the Harwood Public Innovators Lab in June 2022 to begin learning how to address challenges in Reading, PA, using the Harwood approach. Based on Harwood's research, three main focuses were identified to address Early Childhood Education (ECE), English as a Second Language (ESL) and After School Programs. Three teams were formed – one for each of these areas – and have been working in their respective areas. It was a natural fit for United Way of Berks County to lead the Harwood ECE team. United Way staff participate in Harwood Labs and webinars for ongoing training in the practice of "Turning Outward" – being more community-focused, understanding the community and putting community aspirations first.

**In early 2023, the team held 20+ Community Conversations with Reading residents about early childhood education. Residents shared hopes for a safe, clean community and concerns about isolation, mental health, lack of affordable family activities, and support for new parents. Suggestions included more neighborhood events like block parties and movie nights. The ECE team has shared these insights with community groups, sparking ripple effects that support ongoing efforts.**



# Northeast Reading Resident Survey

During the fall of 2024, United Way of Berks County conducted a door-to-door survey in Northeast Reading, PA. The goal of the survey was to gather input from residents about their aspirations for the community and the activities they want for their children. This feedback will help the Early Childhood Education (ECE) team tailor programs to better meet the needs of families and to ensure children have meaningful experiences during their critical developmental years. Recognizing the large population of Spanish-speaking families in Reading, United Way conducted the ECE survey in both English and Spanish. Outreach efforts were concentrated around the 11th & Pike Park and the Northeast Branch of the Reading Public Library.

## 2024 Survey Snapshot

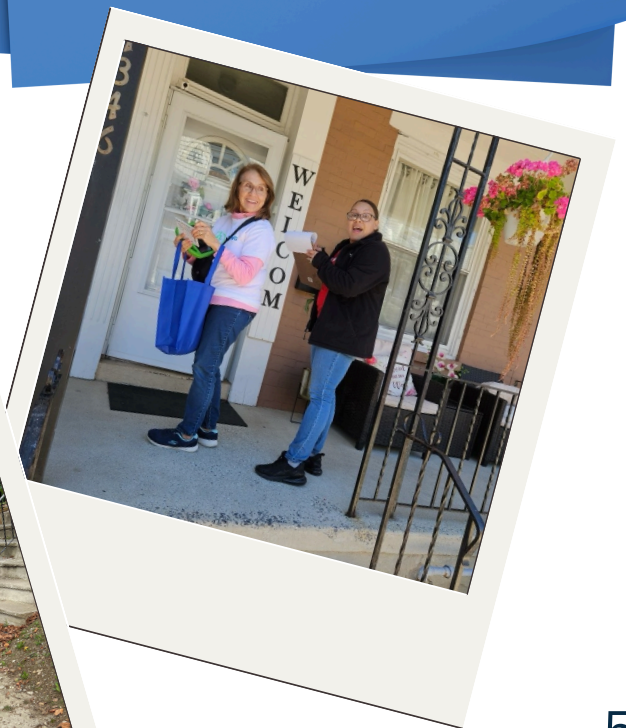
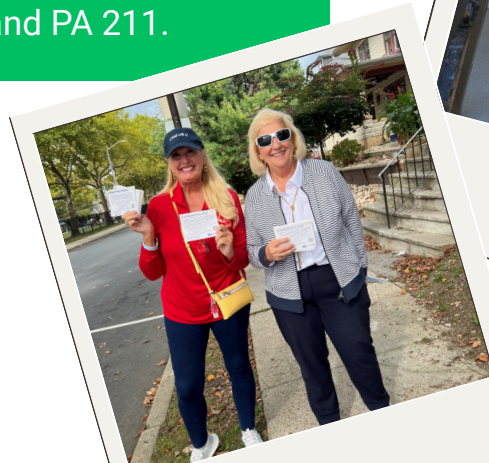
Nearly 30 community volunteers and United Way staff members conducted a door-to-door survey, in partnership with the Northeast Branch of the Reading Public Library.

The team piloted the survey at the 13<sup>th</sup> & Union Elementary School open house and canvassed nearly every home in the target area, reaching over 1,300 households. Cards with QR codes were also shared with individuals, allowing families to complete the survey online.

Households completing the survey received a \$10 Weis gift card, along with resources highlighting early childhood education facts, library activities, and PA 211.

## Notable Numbers

- 133 completed surveys
  - 83 in English
  - 50 in Spanish
- An additional 225+ households were reached but did not meet the eligibility criteria (no children aged 0-5).
- 358 total participants engaged

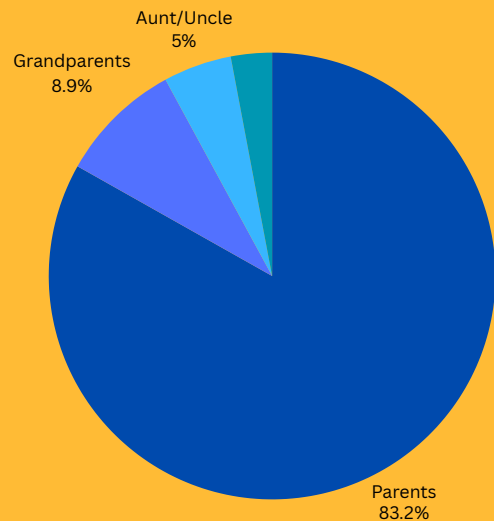


# Demographics

**KEY SURVEY DEMOGRAPHIC: Caregivers – parents, grandparents, aunts/uncles – of children aged 0-5.**

## Type of Caregiver

Out of 129 respondents who answered the question about their caregiver role, the majority identified as parents (approximately 84%). Grandparents made up about 9% of respondents, while other caregiver roles included aunts/uncles (5%) and siblings/other (3%).



4 out of 5 (80%) respondents were female caregivers.



## Race of Caregivers

78% of survey respondents identified as Hispanic/Latino. Furthermore, language preferences reveal that Spanish-speaking respondents are predominantly monolingual, with 98% reporting Spanish as their home language, while the English-speaking group shows more linguistic diversity, with 75% preferring English and 28% selecting Spanish. Of the respondents, 5% speak multiple languages in the home.



## Caregiver Ages

The demographic distribution of caregivers revealed notable differences across age groups.

The largest group of respondents were aged 25–34, primarily identifying as parents or aunts. The 35–44 age group was the second most represented. Fewer respondents were in the 18–24 range, while older adults aged 55–64 also made up a smaller portion of the sample. Only two respondents were aged 65 or older, both identifying as grandmothers.

Age	%
18 to 24	10
25 to 34	52
35 to 44	22
45 to 54	3
55 to 64	9
65 and older	2
N/A	2

# Social Needs

## Healthy Food and Nutrition

### Interest in Learning More About Healthy Food in Childcare

A strong majority of caregivers expressed a high level of interest in learning more about healthy food in childcare, with about two-thirds strongly agreeing.

However, a smaller proportion—around 15%—expressed disagreement with the idea of stricter guidelines around healthy food in childcare, suggesting some variation in views on regulation.

### Key Survey Takeaways:

While all caregivers were interested in learning about healthy food guidelines in early childcare programs, there is a need for targeted nutrition education and outreach specifically in Spanish-speaking communities to address concerns and reinforce the importance of childhood nutrition.

Support for implementing healthy food guidelines in early childcare programs was also stronger among English-speaking caregivers. A similar trend emerged in caregivers' interest in learning more about healthy food in early childcare settings. These findings suggest that some Spanish-speaking families may have concerns about the feasibility or necessity of these guidelines, potentially due to cultural preferences, cost concerns, or lack of trust in institutional policies.

### Differences in Perception of Food Access

There were notable differences in perceptions of whether children are getting enough healthy food and drinks.

About 13% of caregivers strongly disagreed with this statement, indicating concern about food access, though this concern was more pronounced among some respondents than others.

### Importance of Healthy Food Access

Most caregivers agreed that it is important for children to have access to healthy food, with nearly 9 in 10 strongly agreeing.

However, a small but meaningful group (around 11%) strongly disagreed, reflecting differing views or potentially differing experiences related to food access.

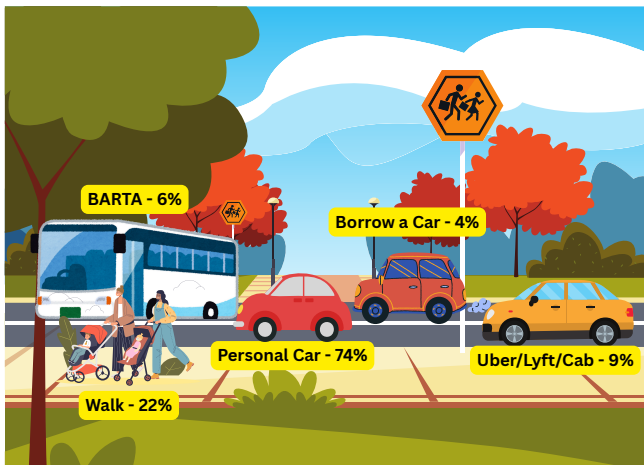


# Social Needs

## Transportation

Transportation access among respondents varied widely. The majority reported relying on their own car (approximately 74%).

Alternative transportation methods were also utilized: 22% reported walking as their primary mode of transportation, 9% used rideshare services such as Uber or Lyft and 6% of respondents used BARTA (bus). Borrowing or renting a car was relatively uncommon (around 4%), and no respondents reported biking as their main form of transportation. These findings suggest that while personal vehicle use is the most common, a significant portion of respondents, particularly those less likely to own a car—rely on public and shared transportation options.



**1 out of 5 (22%) survey respondents prefer to walk as their primary mode of transportation.**



## Activities & Participation

**Most commonly attended activities:**



**Sports, afterschool programs, and library programs**  
**18–22%**



**Preschool and Early Childhood programs**  
**14–20%**



**Music, Theater, and Summer Camps**  
**8–14%**

## Key Findings

- 30–34% of children did not participate in any activities.
- Sports were especially popular among Spanish-speaking families.
- Library programs and preschool were more commonly attended by English-speaking families.

Barriers to participation included:

- Inconvenient timing of programs.
- Lack of information about available activities, especially for very young children.
- Families are new to the area.

Parent suggestions for future programming:

- More opportunities for children ages 0–5, including:
  - Sports
  - Music classes for babies
  - Arts and crafts
  - Financial literacy programs for children



# COMMUNITY ATTRIBUTES

## SURVEY TAKEAWAY:

While safety is the leading priority, parents also value vibrant, well-equipped communities that support recreation, connection, and child development.

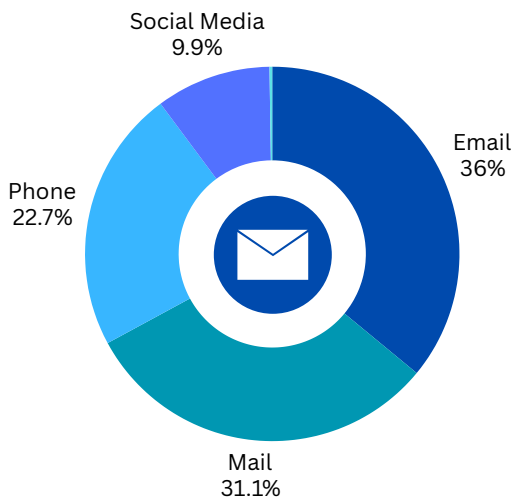
### When choosing a community for their children, parents consistently prioritize:

- Safety as the top concern, with over 90% of respondents identifying it as a key factor.
- Community activities (50% overall).
- Access to nearby parks (around 44%) as an important feature.

### Additional desired attributes include:

- Neighborhood watch programs
- Swimming pools
- Proximity to family
- More park activities
- Affordable extracurriculars like swimming, gymnastics, and dance

To share information about programs/activities, email, mail, and phone should be the primary outreach channels; social media plays a secondary role.



## Activity Timing

Most respondents indicated they were available for activities in the late afternoon and early evening. The highest availability was between 2 PM and 6 PM (38–45%).

Morning hours (8 AM–12 PM) had the lowest availability, selected by only 12–19% of respondents.



# Barriers to Accessing Childcare

## Top Barriers Noted

- 1 Cost
- 2 Childcare hours
- 3 Lack of trustworthy childcare options
- 4 Transportation

## Childcare Needs

65% of families care for their children themselves without external support.

- Barriers to external childcare:
  - Cost: 39%
  - Reliability: 16%

Findings from the survey highlight the need for more robust outreach, more diverse and flexible program offerings, and increased accessibility through improved scheduling and transportation options to encourage greater participation.

Interest in learning about ECE resources and engaging in community discussions was high across survey respondents.





# Observations & Recommendations

The findings from United Way of Berks County ECE survey highlight key opportunities to improve early childhood education access, caregiver support, and community resources in Northeast Reading, PA.

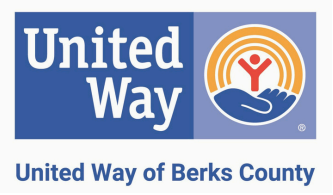
Families consistently emphasized the importance of enriching environments, including accessible recreational spaces, structured activities for young children, and opportunities for community engagement.

One of the most significant challenges identified was a general lack of awareness about existing programs and resources available in the area. Additionally, some caregivers reported specific barriers, such as limited transportation options, increased reliance on self-care for children, and difficulties accessing programs in their preferred language. Expanding outreach efforts and investing in culturally and linguistically responsive programming that reflects the diversity of the Reading community can better support all families. Addressing these needs will help ensure that every child, regardless of background, has access to meaningful early childhood education experiences that support long-term well-being and success.



*Please Note: Since the Northeast resident survey was completed in the fall of 2024, United Way and community partners have been working to implement positive change in Northeast Reading. The Northeast Branch of the Reading Public Library has expanded its activities for families including those available for families with toddlers. They have also added bilingual story times. The ECE team has worked to share this information with families in Northeast Reading. United Way and community partners including the Berks County Intermediate Unit (BCIU), Easterseals of Eastern PA, and Start Strong PA are engaging with families at the library and sharing early learning resources. Efforts will continue, taking into account what was learned from residents via the survey.*





**Thank you to our community partners and volunteers for being a part of the Northeast Reading resident survey and ongoing community outreach. Without their assistance, this work would not be possible.**