Early Childhood Education Journal
https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-024-01796-5

Russian Immigrant Families' Child Care Selection in the United States

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Accepted: 21 October 2024
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Abstract
Research on immigrant populations shows that child care choices are dependent on the population's region of origin. While the Russian immigrant population in the United States comprises the largest group of immigrants from Eastern Europe and is likely to increase in the future, there is virtually no research on Russian immigrant families' child care search and selection criteria. This qualitative study applies the theoretical model of Pungello and Kurtz-Costes (1999), which illustrates how factors such as parental demographic characteristics, environmental context, child characteristics, and parental beliefs play into families' child care selection. The study draws from semi-structured interviews with 11 Russian immigrant families residing in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States to examine their child care search processes and selection criteria. Results revealed that most parents found child care through friends' recommendations, Internet search, and online reviews. Nine themes describing child care criteria valued by Russian immigrant families emerged from the analysis. Specifically, parents mentioned culture and personal beliefs, child characteristics, convenience, cost and subsidy, education and learning, program features, facilities and environment, teacher characteristics, and rating and reputation as the major factors in selecting child care. Understanding Russian immigrant parents' child care information sources and selection criteria will allow for early care and education (ECE) providers to accommodate the needs of Russian immigrant population and for policymakers to facilitate access to ECE programs for these families.

Keywords Child care search · Child care selection · Russian immigrant families · Young children · Parents · Early care and education

Introduction

Child care search and selection are complex, multi-step processes influenced by various factors. A review of literature from 2012 to 2021 identified that parents typically use informal sources such as Internet and friends' recommendations to search for child care information (Sandstrom et al., 2024). The review showed that parents mostly value child care quality and safety but also consider the extent the program meets the family's needs.

Immigrant families' child care search and selection are defined by cultural and sociodemographic factors (Miller et al., 2013; van Leer & Coley, 2023; Vesely et al., 2021). For example, in addition to factors weighed by native-born families, immigrant parents consider provider's language when selecting child care (Johnson et al., 2017; Vesely, 2013). Immigrant parents' characteristics such as region of origin also play a role in immigrant parents' child care decisions (Johnson et al., 2017; van Leer & Coley, 2023).

Most research on immigrants and child care pertains to large immigrant groups such as Latine immigrant families, while less represented immigrant populations' approaches to child care search and selection are understudied. Specifically, research examining child care choices of Russian immigrant families is practically non-existent, despite cultural factors and faced political circumstances. Currently, over two million people in the United States are from Eastern Europe, with the largest group of individuals (18%)

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Published online: 16 November 2024

coming from Russia (Migration Policy Institute, n.d.). Russian population in the United States has been growing, prompted by political factors (The Economist, 2023). Among Russian immigrants residing in the United States are families with young children who must navigate child care. Russian immigrant parents also have unique values and expectations towards child care (Nesteruk & Marks, 2011; Protassova et al., 2021). This exploratory study examines Russian immigrant parents' (i) child care type selection, (ii) child care information seeking, and (iii) characteristics that are important for Russian immigrant families in child care. In this study, the term *parents* is used generally to designate child's primary caregivers; terms *parents* and *families* are used interchangeably.

Theoretical Framework

This study applies the Pungello and Kurtz-Costes's (1999) theoretical model of child care choices (Fig. 1). The model illustrates the interplay of factors—parental demographic characteristics, environmental context, child characteristics, and parental beliefs—and their links to parents' child care selection.

The first category, *parental demographic characteristics*, includes parent(s) age, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, occupation, and education level. For immigrant parents, this category will also encompass parents' immigration status and English language proficiency.

The second category, *child characteristics*, consists of child's age, temperament, special needs, and developmental outcomes. Child English language proficiency also applies to this category for immigrant families.

Third, the *environmental context* category involves factors that parent(s) can and cannot control. Examples of the former group are flexible work hours, while among the latter group are cost and availability of child care near residence, presence of relatives that could provide care for the child, and access to child care subsidy. For immigrant families, uncontrollable factors include being eligible for child care subsidy.

The *parental beliefs* category includes child care characteristics preferred by parents (teacher-child ratio, proximity to home), expected outcomes of child care (school readiness, peer interactions), attitudes to current work situation,

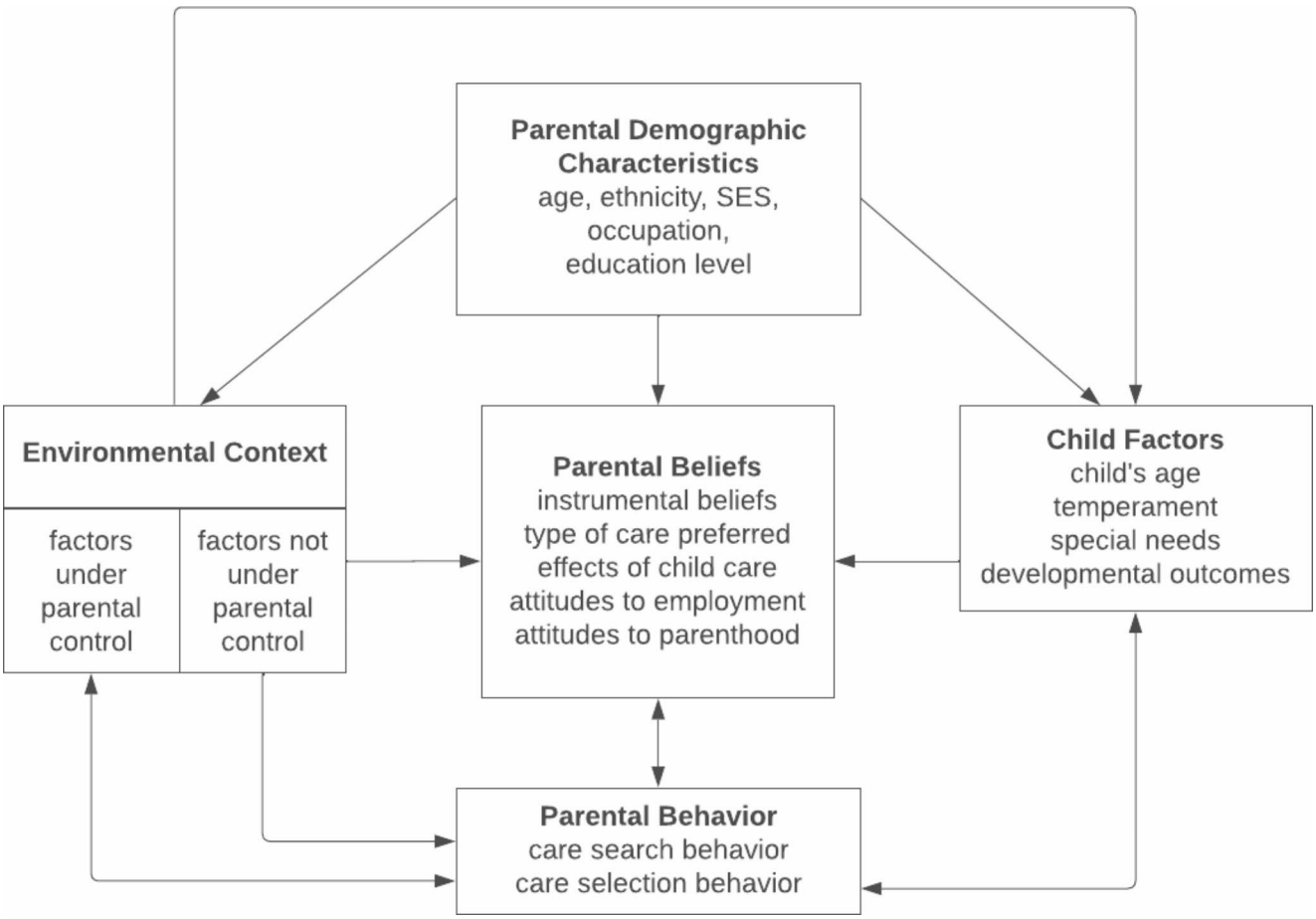

Fig. 1 Pungello and Kurtz-Costes (1999) theoretical model of child care selection

gender beliefs regarding employment and child care in the family, and attitudes to child upbringing. Immigrant parents can also hold beliefs about child care based on the cultural practices in their country of origin. Parents' attitudes to the society language (spoken by the majority of the destination country's residents) and the heritage language (spoken in the country of parents' origin) may matter in the child care selection process.

The child care search behaviors (e.g., use of certain information sources, time spent on the search) and selection strategies (e.g., familiarity with the child care provider) that parent(s) apply comprise the *parental behavior* category.

Pungello and Kurtz-Costes (1999) also propose the concept of *correlated constraints* that highlights the mutual influence of parental beliefs, environmental factors that are under parents' control, and child care search and selection behaviors. Child care selection is a continuous process as even after finding suitable child care, parents might keep examining available options and ultimately seek a different arrangement.

Immigrant Families' Child care Search and Selection

Immigrant parents use several child care information sources (Vesely, 2013). Studies of African and Latine immigrants in the United States indicate that families rely on (i) personal connections (relatives, friends, neighborhood), (ii) organizational connections (social service programs, pediatricians, child care providers), (iii) direct observation of child care options in their area of residence (signs, posters), and (iv) Internet and social media (Pacheco-Applegate et al., 2020; Vesely, 2013).

Multiple factors predict immigrant families' child care decision making. Quantitative research identifies parents' region of origin, citizenship status, child care preferences, socioeconomic status, English language proficiency, and access to child care providers that speak languages other than English as associated with the child care types immigrant parents select (Johnson et al., 2017; Miller et al., 2013). Findings from qualitative research elaborate on reasons behind choosing certain child care arrangements. In Vesely's (2013) study, interviews with 40 low-income African and Latina mothers demonstrated that mothers sought early care and education (ECE) programs where social practices would align with those provided in their country of origin. A study of immigrant families from Central America showed that despite multiple constraints such as low income and undocumented status, immigrant parents prioritized child care safety, learning opportunities, and alignment with child's needs (Vesely et al., 2021). In other studies, Latine immigrant parents praised ECE programs for academic and social-emotional learning (Rabin et al., 2024), sought programs with developmentally appropriate educational activities (Ansari et al., 2020), emphasized ECE teacher preparation and her role as a model for children, and desired ECE programs to provide heritage language maintenance for their children (van Leer & Coley, 2023). Additionally, Latine immigrant parents relied on ECE experiences in the country of origin when evaluating child care options (van Leer & Coley, 2023). Similarly, Latina mothers considered child care convenience, safety, quality, and children's needs in their search (Pacheco-Applegate et al., 2020).

Russian Immigrant Families' Child care Search and Selection

While extant research mainly focuses on larger immigrant populations in the United States such as Latine families, few studies have examined child care choices of Russian immigrant families. Findings that child care choices are dependent on the immigrant population's region of origin (Johnson et al., 2017; Miller et al., 2013) prompt an in-depth examination of specific immigrant populations in the United States.

Child Care in Russia

To understand the motivations behind Russian immigrant families' child care choices, it is important to review child care practices in Russia. Over the years, child care in Russia has undergone numerous changes. The centralized ECE system, whose formation started at the inception of the Soviet Union, aimed to fulfill two purposes: supporting mothers' labor participation and instilling ideological values in the young, also known as moral education (Kosyakova & Yastrebov, 2017). The attempts at experiential learning in ECE shifted towards didactic teaching, culminating with the 1962 Standard Preschool Educational Program, a national curriculum that detailed both content and organization for ECE programs across the Soviet Union (Bodrova & Yudina, 2018). It also defined knowledge and skills that children had to acquire by a certain age as well as emphasized cognitive development and physical health (Komarova & Pashchenko, 2023). The Soviet ECE system ensured continuity of education by preparing children to enter elementary school; moral education was fulfilled by promoting collectivist behaviors (e.g., by encouraging children to share toys with peers and play in groups) and instilling positive attitude to labor (e.g., by assigning children with socially useful tasks; Tudge, 1991). The 1980s Perestroika and the subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 led to modifications in ECE

in Russia. The 1962 Program was revoked, with ECE programs now being able to select their own curricula (Ispa, 2002). While many aspects of Soviet ECE system remained untouched, prior uniformity in ECE was replaced by humanistic pedagogy and emphasis on child's personality (Taratukhina et al., 2007). ECE teachers' goals still included promoting kindness, good manners, aesthetic appreciation, and physical well-being (Ispa, 2002). But over the decade from 1991 to 2001, there was a noted increase in respect for individual differences and independence (e.g., flexibility in arrival times, access to toys, choices in free and group play, creativity in arts), with the extent dependent on the teacher (Ispa, 2002). Additionally, apart from diversification in the type of ECE programs (full-day, part-day, specialized centers such as Waldorf and Montessori), there has been a move toward inclusivity as regular ECE programs started accepting children with special needs—who would attend specialized schools during the Soviet Union time (Kozlova & Ryabichenko, 2024).

Currently, children in Russia have a right to formal care—center or family child care (FCC)—starting from age two months up to the beginning of elementary school (between 6.5 and eight years old; Volkova et al., 2024). Parents are also entitled to a three-year leave and can receive a one-time benefit when the child is born as well as a monthly benefit until the child turns 1.5 years old. Russian mothers in two-parent families are often the ones taking maternity leave. The scarcity of ECE spots for infants and toddlers coupled with the maternity leave specifics result in most children in Russia beginning the attendance of formal child care at around 1.5 years old (Volkova et al., 2024).

ECE programs in Russia are mostly publicly funded and come in the form of centers and FCC programs. Centers offer part-time, full-time, and, in some cases, extended-day groups that include overnight and weekend care. Parents pay a small monthly fee for care. Center teachers are usually highly qualified and hold a vocational school or college degree. FCC is a much less common child care type. FCC is organized by a parent that either only cares for three or more of her own preschool-aged children or assumes care for other children in addition to her own. FCC programs are affiliated with centers. The parent is registered as a center employee and receives salary, support, and materials from the centers. Parents in Russia can also enroll their child in a private ECE program, although it is less popular than publicly funded settings. ECE enrollment in Russia is highest during the preschool years—27% of children aged 0–3 years and 88% of children aged 3–6 years attended ECE in 2021 (Volkova et al., 2024). Among informal care options—care provided by other family members, friends, or a nanny—grandparents often provide help with child care in Russia.

A traditional ECE center in Russia is a standalone building separated into groups by children's ages. Group size is determined by the group playroom space (square meters per child) rather than a teacher-child ratio. Two teachers per group alternate half-day shifts. One full-day teacher aide per group assists with feeding, cleaning, toileting, and dressing children. Specialized teachers that conduct music, sports, arts, and foreign language activities—usually in specially designated rooms in the center—alternate between groups. The classroom presents an open space organized as centers, with separate rooms for changing, nap time, a kitchen, and a bathroom. A typical Russian ECE center schedule includes four meal times with food prepared on-site, two outdoor time periods, teacher-organized activities, and free play.

The goal of ECE programs in Russia is to provide parents with an opportunity for employment and other activities while ensuring comprehensive child development (Bertram & Pascal, 2016). Education of children plays a major role in Russian ECE programs. The state requires all ECE programs to have a curriculum, providing federal guidelines for its development and sample curricula that ECE programs can adapt. The education process centers around the child, following the principles of Vygotsky's cultural-historical theory (Bertram & Pascal, 2016). Parents are encouraged to engage in children's development and learning by participating in parent-teacher conferences and attending children's performances organized by ECE teachers for major holidays and end-of-year celebrations.

Research on parents' child care choices in Russia illustrates what ECE program characteristics are important for parents. Interviews with center directors showed that parents are seen as increasingly aware of pedagogy (Vlasov & Hujala, 2016). Parents view ECE centers as a setting designated for education and value structured, guided learning over free play (Vlasov & Hujala, 2016). Among other parents' concerns are ECE program safety and a desire for a higher number of teachers per classroom. Nisskaya (2018) conducted a survey of parents with 6-7-year-old children (preparatory class in Russian ECE programs) on reasons for choosing their current program and perceived goals of ECE in Russia. The results showed that parents mostly appreciated the center's proximity to home and high teacher qualifications. Some parents also mentioned high quality of child care and level of individual attention as well as the program's reputation and prestige. Interestingly, few parents indicated curriculum, the teaching methods, and extracurricular activities as important in choosing the ECE program. Among ECE goals, parents chose learning personal care routines, cognitive development, and socialization. Similarly, Savinskaya (2017) conducted interviews with parents of 3-6-year-old children attending public ECE programs in Moscow on their perceptions of ECE goals. Parents

prioritized socialization with other children and learning life skills. They also discussed teacher professionalism as reflected in her ability to create a supportive environment conducive to child's individual expression, manage conflicts and soothe the child, and organize effective parent-teacher communication. While parents discussed the program learning materials and children's participation in crafts and performances, they did not mention preparation for school as a goal for ECE programs. Among important program characteristics also were group size, nutrition, and safety.

Child Care in the Country of Destination

While there is a dearth of research on Russian immigrant families, studies show that the families do use formal child care (Protassova et al., 2021). Research on Russian immigrants demonstrates that the parents place high value on education (Nesteruk & Marks, 2011). Parents expect structure in the form of a curriculum in their children's ECE classes. A relevant point is the role of Russian immigrant parents' attitude to language used by their children. In prior studies, some Russian immigrants in the United States indicated that they wanted their children to both preserve heritage language and acquire the society language, while others did not find it necessary to teach heritage language to the children (Nesteruk & Marks, 2009). Enrolling children in a Russian-speaking ECE program appears to be another way of maintaining heritage language (Protassova et al., 2021).

Parents' views on raising children might also play a role in choosing child care. In Nesteruk and Marks's (2011) study of Eastern European immigrants' child-rearing practices, parents strove to maintain balance in raising their children in the United States, taking advantage of practices from their own countries of origin and the American society. Therefore, Russian immigrant parents might find an acculturated provider who shares the same cultural background the best fit for their child care needs. Similar to practices in the country of origin, Russian immigrant families also enlist grandparents' help with child care by inviting them to the United States (Nesteruk & Marks, 2009), which became less accessible due to current political conflicts.

Overall, evidence from the available limited research precludes one from confidently speculating on Russian immigrant families' child care search and selection criteria. While norms practiced in the country of origin can predefine parents' child care decisions (van Leer & Coley, 2023), the demands of settlement in immigration and available resources can also be salient factors in making the choice.

This study explores the following questions:

1. What types of child care do Russian immigrant families choose?
2. How do Russian immigrant families search for child care?
3. What characteristics do Russian immigrant families value in child care?

Methods

Sampling and Participants

Participants residing in the Mid-Atlantic area of the United States were recruited via posts in social media groups. Eligible participants were at least 18 years old, born in or citizens of Russia, immigrated to the United States at least six months before the interview date, and were primary caregiver of a child under five years old while in the United States. The total sample size was 11 participants.

Data Collection

Data were collected during Spring 2023. Semi-structured online interviews inquired about experiences with child care search and selection of Russian immigrant parents. The one-hour interviews were conducted in Russian and were recorded for subsequent transcription. The interview audio recordings were transcribed and translated from Russian into English by the first author who is a native Russian speaker. Participants filled out an online survey that asked for demographic and child care information.

Data Analysis

Grounded theory was used to identify themes across the parent interviews (Charmaz, 2014; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Data analysis using Nvivo software was performed in several steps. First, line-by-line coding was conducted to gain a closer understanding of participants' views and experiences and to generate initial codes (Glaser, 1978). Initial coding allows researchers to uncover significant processes within the data (Charmaz, 2014). Next, focused coding was done to identify the most important emerged codes and organize them into larger categories. Third, theoretical coding was used to identify relationships between codes from focused coding (Glaser, 1978). The authors developed a codebook and adjusted it throughout the coding process. Analytic memos were made for codes while going through the data.

A second coder trained on the codebook coded a random 20% of the transcripts to establish inter-coder reliability. A 92% agreement in coding emerged. The differences in coding were discussed until a 100% agreement was achieved (Miles et al., 2014).

Results

Participant characteristics are presented in Table 1. Pseudonyms are used for participant names. Most participating families (73%) were two-parent, with an average of two children. In four out of 11 families, both (or the only) parent(s) worked full-time, and the household income ranged from less than $10,000 to more than $250,000. On average, participants lived in the United States for eight years, and most families (91%) spoke Russian at home. All participants indicated that they had used or were planning to use formal care, with almost half of the sample (45%) reporting that they received child care subsidy. Types of center-based care also included Head Start and a school district early development program, and several families selected Russian-speaking centers. One family used a Russian-speaking FCC as a temporary arrangement. Some parents also used informal care such as friend/family/neighbor care, Russian-speaking friends and grandparents, or a nanny. Additionally, one child attended an online preschool based in Russia.

Table 1 Family and child care characteristics ($N = 11$)

Demographic characteristics	*N*/M	%/SD
Interviewed parent		
Mother	9	81.82%
Father	1	9.09%
Mother and father	1	9.09%
Years in the United States	8.18	7.04
Two-parent household	8	72.73%
Annual household income		
<$10,000	2	18.18%
$10,001–$20,000	1	9.09%
$30,001–$40,000	1	9.09%
$50,001–$60,000	1	9.09%
$75,001–$100,000	2	18.18%
$100,001–$150,000	1	9.09%
$150,001–$200,000	1	9.09%
$250,001+	2	18.18%
Received child care subsidy	5	45.45%
Family has used formal ECE	9	81.82%
Family is planning to use formal ECE	2	18.18%
Type of child care ever used		
Friend/Family/Neighbor care	5	45.45%
Center-based, English-speaking	5	45.45%
Center-based, Russian-speaking	4	36.36%
Nanny	4	36.36%
Family child care, Russian-speaking	1	9.09%
Online preschool, Russian-speaking	1	9.09%
Number of children in the household	1.81	0.60
Parent(s) work(s) full-time	4	36.36%
Home language is Russian	10	90.91%

Child Care Search and Exploration

The Online Supplement provides detailed information on participants' responses. On average, Russian immigrant parents used three information sources. Nine parents used friends' recommendations; seven conducted Internet searches and studied online reviews. Three parents also mentioned specifically using child care search websites, and three parents used social media groups. Two parents learned about child care options from other parents who used a particular child care; and two saw informational posters. Individual participants mentioned being referred to a specific child care by an organization such as an intervention program and a subsidy agency.

Seven parents indicated that they first looked into nearby ECE programs. Most parents (82%) also went on program tours to meet the teachers and check the program environment.

> We [G]oogled what [day cares] were in our area. Then we looked at the information that was provided about them, including reviews… Then we visited, watched, and created an impression. (Elena – two-parent household; long-time immigrant; higher income)

Many parents (64%) explored Russian-speaking programs. However, since such programs were often located in other states, the remoteness deterred parents from choosing them. Parents with several children (45%) stated that the experience with the older child helped their search for child care for the younger child.

Additionally, two families whose child care search coincided with COVID-19 recounted that the reduced waitlist allowed them to get in the desired ECE programs:

> Covid helped us get a spot, oddly enough. Everyone stopped going during Covid, but we were only for [that]. We immediately took these spots. Immediately, the first day, as the day care opened after this terrible quarantine… Because I knew the spot would take a very long time to wait for. (Taisia – two-parent household; recent immigrant; higher income)

Child care criteria/characteristics

Nine themes pertaining to child care selection emerged from the interview analysis (also see Online Supplement).

Child Characteristics

Five parents mentioned that the child needs to like the child care, which pertained both to formal ECE programs and informal care. The child's attitude towards care was an important factor in deciding whether to pursue or maintain an arrangement. One parent noted: "If the child doesn't like it, I basically… if possible, I won't insist." (Yana – one-parent household; long-time immigrant; lower income).

A major point in four parents' decisions was the child's adaptation to the child care arrangement. One family introduced child care gradually because of this reason. They speculated that the poor adaptation could have been due to lack of English language understanding but also because of child's personality. In another family, it was important that the parent could go inside the program building with the child, which was difficult during COVID-19 when parents passed children to the teacher outside. Accompanying the child to the program was possible in an FCC. The parents and teachers were also able to present the care as "coming over" to someone's home, which helped ease the transition.

Meeting child's needs appeared in three parents' responses. One parent reported that since the child had a speech problem, she enrolled her child in a Russian-speaking program for consistency of language exposure. Child's special needs such as a speech delay and autism motivated parents to seek early intervention programs.

> They [specialists] diagnosed that this is just a delay in development precisely because of the presence of two languages, bilingualism. That's why I sent him to this school, which deals with… it is, in fact, a kind of a specialized one. Children with special needs go there. (Yulia – two-parent household; recent immigrant; higher income)

Among other child characteristics was the child's developmental stage. One parent felt that the child needed to become independent in performing routine activities (e.g., walking, feeding oneself) to start formal ECE. Another parent noted that the child was too young to attend an online preschool and therefore unable to sit through classes during the COVID-19 lockdown, choosing parental care instead. Two parents mentioned that the child was developmentally ahead for the educational activities in the toured English-speaking centers, although acknowledged that the child did not speak English and the familiar activities could facilitate language learning. Child characteristics such as not sleeping during nap time and being a picky eater also made three parents consider program schedule and bringing their own food for lunch.

Culture and Personal Beliefs

Parents' views on language largely determined the selected ECE program's language of instruction. Two parents saw ECE programs as a way to heritage language preservation. For others (45%), wanting the child to learn English prompted choosing an English-speaking program: "I was staying at home at the time, and the goal was for her to communicate in English, prepare for pre-K." (Olga – two-parent household; long-time immigrant; lower income)

Four parents relied on their intuition and own childhood experiences when visiting ECE programs. One parent described her impression when she toured a Russian-speaking program: "And I went there, this day care itself, from all the others that I saw, it was the one I liked the most, because it reminded me of my day care in Russia." (Svetlana – one-parent household; recent immigrant; lower income)

Comparison of child care in Russia and in the United States was common across eight parents' accounts. For many (55%), resemblance to ECE programs in Russia was seen as a standard of quality. One parent avoided selecting FCC because it did not match common ECE programs in Russia in terms of size. The attitude to mixed-age groups in ECE programs differed, with some parents (27%) seeing it as a negative aspect and others (9%) mentioning that children benefitted from interactions with different-age peers.

Three parents discussed a disconnect between child care routines and the role of teachers in Russia and in the United States. The parents felt that the children need more care and attention drawing on practices in Russian ECE programs.

> Here they [children] come from the street, their parents brought them a change of shoes. They took off their outer clothing, no one will be there to change your clothes, as we do, for example—[teachers] would change them, put on pajamas for nap, braid them after nap, change them again, feed them. (Anastasia – two-parent household; recent immigrant; lower income)

Differences in practices between Russia and the United States were a major point of contention for Russian immigrant parents. Four parents mentioned their surprise with using cots instead of beds for nap, children having to wear shoes all day, and serving meals that, in the opinion of parents, resembled fast food.

> Pizza on Wednesdays every week. And, in general, again, returning to the nutrition, sandwiches every day, something like that…Yes, it was just very strange. But again, if we talk about how the children were put to bed in addition to food, it was also strange for us that they were somehow lying on the floor on their

> mattresses, covered. (Elena – two-parent household; long-time immigrant; higher income)

While for many parents getting used to local practices was challenging, two parents mentioned that the initial shock with unfamiliar ways was replaced with realization that things such as having a foldable cot instead of a bed could be more practical and did not affect child's attitude toward the program.

Child Care Convenience

Almost all parents (91%) cited ECE program's distance from home as an important factor. However, parents had varying opinions on the importance of the child care proximity to the home. Two parents mentioned that they were willing to drive a short distance. Although parents preferred a child care run like programs in Russia, the large distance deterred them from selecting it. However, one parent that did not have a car selected an inconvenient location that she felt was suitable for her child. For another parent, the program being nearby mattered more than the fact that it did not meet her other criteria such as being full-day. Two parents who had multiple children of similar age cited convenience in taking them to the same location. One parent shared her experience with selecting a Russian-speaking center that was located far from her:

> I found a day care half an hour away from me. I drove my child there. The day care was not bad but, to be honest, this half-hour drive back and forth, it was quite an exhausting process. Therefore, later, when I already had a second [child] in plans, I transferred the older child to an American day care. (Oksana – one-parent household; recent immigrant; higher income)

Among other criteria pertaining to convenience was flexibility of hours. Specifically, mentioned were full-day programs that allowed parents to pick their child(ren) up earlier when necessary (18%). One parent also noted that unlike informal child care like a nanny, a child care center would not have unpredictable closures due to providers getting sick, thus limiting the need for parents to quickly search for back-up care.

Presence of kindergarten or elementary school within the ECE program also mattered for two parents. The parents appreciated the convivence of not having to search for another school, which allowed them to plan ahead.

Education and Learning

Parents saw learning as a crucial component of ECE. Five parents emphasized the importance of curriculum and educational activities pertinent to ECE programs in Russia but seen as lacking in the U.S. programs. The parents based their selection on the presence of curriculum, expressing the desire for structure, planning, and continuity in children's education. One parent described the American ECE program that matched her standards of care:

> It was the PreK format that suited me, because it seems to me that I needed a better pastime, not play. I can play with her myself, go for a walk, give her toys. That is, I didn't need her to just spend time somewhere without me, but I already wanted there to rather be some kind of structure in it. (Vera – two-parent household; recent immigrant; higher income)

A variety of extracurricular activities, events, and celebrations was a desirable characteristic during the search for child care for five parents. An emphasis in parent interviews (36%) was placed on the opportunity to learn English that children received while attending ECE programs.

In contrast, two parents highlighted the opportunity for the child to socialize with peers and develop strong immunity as the factors that came before education.

> As for the younger child, I can't say that it's [education] important to us. Because for him, just the same, it's just more of a pastime, communication, attempts to communicate with other children. (Nikolai – two-parent household; recent immigrant; higher income)

For one parent, while acknowledging that education is perceived by post-Soviet immigrants as an important aspect of ECE programs, the social-emotional learning of U.S. programs was seen as a positive element missing in ECE programs in Russia. Additionally, for individual parents (18%), factors such as presence of religious education or special education mattered.

Teacher Characteristics

Parents placed a strong emphasis on teacher's personality. Six parents cited patience, attentiveness, and kindness as desired teacher qualities. Parents expected teachers to offer additional clothing layers to child during cold temperatures, attend to child's struggles with routines, and soothe the upset child. Two parents also praised teachers that disciplined children within reason rather than being lenient.

Some parents (18%) discussed looking at teacher qualifications to understand whether teachers would be able to provide necessary care and education to their children. Four parents relied on how children behaved around teachers.

Teachers' attentiveness to parents' requests mattered. Two parents provided accounts of situations when teachers did not follow through with requests about clothing, taking the child to the bathroom, or heating food. At the same time, other two parents praised teachers listening to parents' concerns.

> We had this problem at the beginning of the year, suddenly it arose that children were asked to go to the bathroom once in a while. Apparently, some still had some accidents. And mine was terribly annoyed. If she doesn't want to go to the bathroom, she says, 'I don't want to', they say, 'You have to, go'. And it bothered her very much. I talked [to the teachers] – that was it. One conversation, the question was closed. (Vera – two-parent household; recent immigrant; higher income)

Formal (teacher-parent conferences) and informal communication (phone calls, chats during pick-up and drop-off) as well as ample feedback on child's activities in the program were appreciated by parents (55%). Three parents also mentioned instances when teachers recognized child's needs and talents and offered online English language or drawing classes as well as showed sympathy and understanding when parents were in a difficult situation.

Facilities and Environment

Parents paid attention to the infrastructure of ECE centers. Having a playground on the ECE program's premises played a role for four parents since they saw outdoor time as a major part of child's schedule. Importance of safety as search criteria was reflected in parents mentioning fenced perimeters, distance from roads, and a safe neighborhood (27%).

The ECE program building was also cited as important. Parents indicated that they desired the program to be in a separate building (18%), with separate classrooms for routines and activities (27%).

> As a result, we chose this day care…from those that were equivalent, because it was large. As it is customary here, especially in [city], in this small house as a townhouse, and there is a day care in there. For us, it was absolutely wild…So in the end, we chose a day care that was located in a school building… It is big, a little bit like regular day cares in Russia. (Marina – two-parent household; recent immigrant; lower income)

Program Features

Eight parents preferred the program to have meals prepared on-site. For some (9%), it was a matter of convenience as they did not want children to bring lunch, including concerns about food storage. Other parents mentioned that they paid attention to the quality of meals, preferring food prepared from scratch (45%). As one parent put it: "So that there is food that is according to our standards, so that it is not chips, not cereal, but porridge, mashed potatoes, soup, normal food." (Marina – two-parent household; recent immigrant; lower income)

Four parents paid attention to frequency of accidents in the program and appreciated communication about accidents. The overall cleanliness of the premises was also mentioned by two parents.

High teacher turnover was a disadvantage for some parents (18%), citing that not only did teachers change every new year of the program, but the change also happened during the year.

> But in addition to the fact that there is a turnover, teachers can also change. That is, one year to one and a half years, [there is] one class and one teacher, and from one and a half years to two, [there is] another teacher. And I understand that it is very stressful for a child to change teachers, change caregivers. (Elena – two-parent household; long-time immigrant; higher income)

Six parents also looked at teacher-child ratio and number of children per classroom. Two parents elected to send children—both typically developing and special-needs—to a mixed-needs group because there would be more individual attention to the child.

> Most children are normotypical, but children with some special needs are included there. As a result, thanks to this, they have several paraeducators who are with them all the time, and if in an ordinary elementary school there are two of them, a teacher and an assistant, adults per class, we have five adults per class. (Vera – two-parent household; recent immigrant; higher income)

For several parents (18%), it was important for the program to serve a diverse population. This included racial, socioeconomic, and ability diversity. Three parents also

noted security features such as being asked for documents at entry, presence of an administrator at the entrance, and video surveillance.

As shown in Table 1, only one family used FCC as a short-term solution during COVID, motivated by child characteristics and home-like environment. While parents were not explicitly asked about their preference of ECE program type—center-based versus FCC—five participants' elaborations demonstrated some reasons behind selecting center-based care. Perceptions of FCC lacking a curriculum and preschool-like structure were deterring for three parents. Two parents also preferred groups separated by age, and one parent noted that she had more trust in centers compared to FCC.

Cost and Subsidy

Generally, parents from different socioeconomic backgrounds emphasized quality of child care over its cost (45%). For one parent, being able to continue in kindergarten in the same school outweighed the cost of care. Two parents mentioned that, although some programs cost less than others or were even free, parents still chose the program that aligned with their perceptions of a good ECE program.

> I didn't like that they didn't go outside, that there were no windows, and that they didn't cook for them, all the children came with their own food…Although, of course, they were probably cheaper, these programs, than this [the current] one. (Svetlana – one-parent household; recent immigrant; lower income)

Yet for others, the financial aspect was crucial. Two parents were unable to enroll their child in an ECE program earlier due to high cost; subsidized care allowed the child to start program attendance. Additionally, the availability of a subsidy motivated one parent to send her child to an ECE program for the first time.

Rating and Reputation

Many parents (45%) placed high importance on program reputation during child care search. A good reputation in the community motivated parents to not look beyond the considered program, while negative reviews deterred parents from visiting the program.

> We asked for recommendations from other parents. We asked where they went. For example, we asked about [program name], and several people told us that they didn't like it, and we didn't even go there. (Olga – two-parent household; long-time immigrant; lower income)

Parents who used a nanny (36%) mentioned that they considered recommendations of parents who previously hired the person, with two parents selecting a nanny only from acquaintances.

Two parents stated that they also followed their own intuition. Additionally, one parent talked about the mismatch between their expectations and local attitudes. The parent noted the vast differences between the Americans' preferences and Russian immigrants' attitudes, which precluded her from solely relying on their reviews:

> Basically, the higher the rating, the better the reviews. But this is not the main thing, again. Because it may be something that people like, but it may be that local people like it, and we, with our mentality, arrived in horror, for example, from how children are fed or how they are kept there, how they nap. (Elena – two-parent household; long-time immigrant; higher income)

Similarly, five parents considered ratings during their search. One parent recounted that low program rating prevented her from sending her child there despite the program being free. However, it was unclear whether parents meant formal program rating (such as Quality Rating and Improvement System [QRIS]) or ratings found on review websites.

Discussion

This qualitative study explored the types of child care Russian immigrant families use in the United States. Additionally, the study examined Russian immigrant families' experiences with searching and selecting child care. The study findings are discussed below.

Child Care Types

The results of the study demonstrate that Russian immigrant families are using—and are planning to use—formal child care, which aligns with existing literature on Russian immigrant families in the United States (Protassova et al., 2021) and practices in Russia (Volkova et al., 2024). The families in our study could be selecting child care types guided by the cultural norms of care in the country of origin as shown in studies of other immigrant populations (van Leer & Coley, 2023).

Child Care Search and Exploration

Our findings suggest Russian immigrant families' reliance on friends' recommendations and online search resembles practices of Latine and African immigrants shown in the literature (Pacheco-Applegate et al., 2020; Vesely, 2013). The fact that some families were provided with information about ECE programs by an organization such as a subsidy agency speaks for the potential of such organizations in helping connect immigrant families with ECE programs. Indeed, studies show that agencies in charge of social supports serve as a referral mechanism to child care for immigrant families (Greenberg et al., 2019).

Child Care Factors

In our findings, parents attended to the child's attitude and adaptation to the ECE arrangement. Parents' consideration of the child's needs, including special needs, developmental stage, and food preferences are reflected in other research on immigrant families' child care search and selection (Pacheco-Applegate et al., 2020; Vesely et al., 2021).

As expected, parents' views on language informed their child care selection. Prior research has also demonstrated differences among parents in their perception of preserving heritage language (Nesteruk & Marks, 2009). Although most families in our study spoke Russian at home, some used Russian-speaking ECE programs to reinforce heritage language maintenance, whereas other families selected English-speaking programs to initiate child's learning of English.

Like immigrant families in other studies (van Leer & Coley, 2023; Vesely, 2013), Russian immigrant parents compared child care practices in the country of origin and in the United States. Parents named several practices present in ECE programs in Russia but lacking in U.S. programs. The points of contention included parents' perceived lack of care and attention towards their children. Considering that most families in the sample selected center-based care, it could be that they are less informed about the features of settings such as FCC. As mentioned earlier, FCC is not a common ECE program type in Russia, and parents' assumptions that FCCs lack curriculum and structure as well as apprehensions regarding mixed-age groups are therefore not surprising. At the same time, there are some distinct characteristics of FCC that could appeal to parents such as the home-like atmosphere, small groups, and low teacher-child ratio (Harmeyer et al., 2024). It is possible that, if given more information about this child care type, parents would find FCC meeting their needs.

ECE program's distance from home was cited as a major factor for child care choice, which resonates with parents' preferences in Russia (Nisskaya, 2018) and Latine immigrant parents in the United States (Pacheco-Applegate et al., 2020). For several parents, a matter of convenience was continuity of education—i.e., from ECE to kindergarten and beyond. This could be one way families try to reach stability in the often challenging process of school search.

Similar to research on Russian immigrant families (Nesteruk & Marks, 2011; Protassova et al., 2021), education in our study played a major role in child care selection. In their child care search, parents valued academic and social-emotional learning offered by ECE programs, similar to other immigrant populations (Ansari et al., 2020; Rabin et al., 2024; Vesely et al., 2021). Russian immigrant parents appear to hold developmental activities to the standards set in Russia (Bertram & Pascal, 2016; Vlasov & Hujala, 2016). Similarly, like in the country of origin, parents in our study valued extracurricular activities, crafts, and performances in ECE programs in the United States (Savinskaya, 2017). At the same time, socialization with peers mattered in some parents' decisions on formal care, as reflected in studies of parents in Russia (Nisskaya, 2018; Savinskaya, 2017).

In contrast to research on child care selection in Russia (Nisskaya, 2018; Vlasov & Hujala, 2016), Russian immigrant parents rarely mentioned teacher qualifications. Rather, they relied on observing teachers' behavior with children as well as their attitude and attentiveness to children in their care, a criterion mentioned by parents in Russia (Savinskaya, 2017) and Latine immigrant parents in the United States (van Leer & Coley, 2023). Parents also appreciated teacher communications, in line with research (Savinskaya, 2017). ECE providers serving Russian immigrant parents are recommended to be aware of parents' expectations about teachers' practices (e.g., changing child's clothes, helping open food containers) and the amount of teacher-parent communication to establish and maintain positive program-family relationships and facilitate family integration.

For several parents, the program having a playground for outdoor time was important, which aligns with equipment of ECE programs in Russia. Another desired characteristic was a separate ECE program building rather than a family home, similar to Russian ECE centers (Volkova et al., 2024). As in other studies of immigrant families (Ansari et al., 2020; Pacheco-Applegate et al., 2020; Vesely et al., 2021) and parents in Russia (Savinskaya, 2017; Vlasov & Hujala, 2016), program safety was cited as crucial.

Most parents desired ECE programs to have healthy nutritious meals prepared on-site (Savinskaya, 2017), common in Russia. Characteristics such as teacher-child ratio were also mentioned in studies of parents in Russia (Savinskaya, 2017; Vlasov & Hujala, 2016), whereas communication about accidents, day care cleanliness, teacher turnover, and diversity were unique to this study. The finding that

mixed-needs groups were preferred by several parents of both children with special needs and typically developing children indicates that efforts to distribute information about the availability and features of the mixed-needs programs are necessary.

While several parents selected child care quality over cost, the high cost of child care influenced others' decision-making (Rabin et al., 2024). Parents could benefit from being offered information and assistance with applying for subsidy and locating subsidized ECE programs.

Similar to parents in Russia (Nisskaya, 2018), ECE program reputation in the community mattered in our findings. However, there is no equivalent to ECE program rating in Russia, therefore, consumer education is recommended to be provided to Russian immigrant parents on steps to locate and interpret program QRIS rating.

Despite the rich qualitative data collected for this study, there are several limitations. First, the qualitative nature of the study hinders its external validity. Second, this study could benefit from a larger sample size. Additionally, this study collected data only from parents in the Mid-Atlantic area of the United States; perceptions and practices of Russian immigrant families in other areas could differ.

Future Directions

Overall, examining Russian immigrant parents' processes for selecting child care arrangements can support policy-makers' decision-making to expand access to child care programs for these families. For example, efforts to improve child care search tools and provide targeted supports could be made.

Our findings aid in understanding the supports that can facilitate Russian immigrant families' child care search and selection. Child care programs could develop strategies for reaching out to this population such as providing information through social networks. Child care search and application procedures could be made more accessible—agencies could provide information materials or hold sessions on the organization of the ECE system in the United States, its goals and outcomes. Based on parents' concerns, we recommend that ECE providers acknowledge cultural practices in the parents' country of origin and foster program-family collaboration. Additionally, it could be useful to offer more information on child care settings such as FCC and mixed-needs groups to Russian immigrant families since this type of care is not typical in their country of origin.

Future research efforts are proposed to focus on the role of parents' immigration status in their child care search and selection processes. The scarce research on this population could also benefit from quantitative studies that would examine how characteristics such as years in the United States, household income, and English language proficiency play into Russian immigrant families' child care type selection. Additionally, comparative studies of Russian immigrant families with immigrants from other Eastern European countries on child care decisions could be conducted. Finally, given this study's findings, it is important to understand the characteristics of ECE programs run by immigrants from the former Soviet bloc countries.

Supplementary Information The online version contains supplementary material available at https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-024-01796-5.

Acknowledgements We thank the families that participated in this study.

Funding This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Declarations

Conflict of Interest The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose. This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Informed Consent Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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