



Documentation in the Early Childhood Setting

Survey of Ontario Licensed Childcare Providers 2013

September 2013



Hi Mama Inc.

HiMama works with childcare providers to improve their operations through the use of enabling technology. We aim to improve documentation processes while also improving the quality of documentation and the communication of this information to parents.

When it comes to documentation in the early childhood setting we believe that children and parents must benefit first and foremost. This is why children and parents are the focus of our solutions that enable real time documentation and information sharing. Concurrently, we also strive to provide directors and supervisors with the information they need to stay on top of their operations.

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AT A GLANCE

Documentation and paperwork are top-of-mind issues for directors

Of all the issues that childcare centers are facing, documentation and paperwork were in the top three issues that were top-of-mind for childcare directors. This was not an overly surprising finding given the inefficiencies embedded in current processes. To put it in perspective, a center of 60 children will spend the equivalent of one full-time staff per year just on children's documentation.

There is a wide discrepancy in approaches to managing documentation

Some centers are spending less than 15 minutes a day on documentation while others are spending up to 90 minutes a day. Many centers are using ELECT and Nipissing as frameworks for documenting learning and development, but there are various other frameworks being used, including many proprietary frameworks. Distribution approaches also vary, however, the vast majority are using handwritten notes and providing parents with a hardcopy of these notes.

Caregivers are experimenting with technology, but lack direction

Childcare providers are increasingly using digital channels to communicate with parents. Almost all centers reported having a website and there has been a very marked increase in the use of email as a means of communication with parents. However, when it comes to the use of technology within centers, there was much less clarity on direction. Even though 25% of centers had a tablet, for example, most of these centers had no vision or plan on how they could maximize value through the use of the tablet.

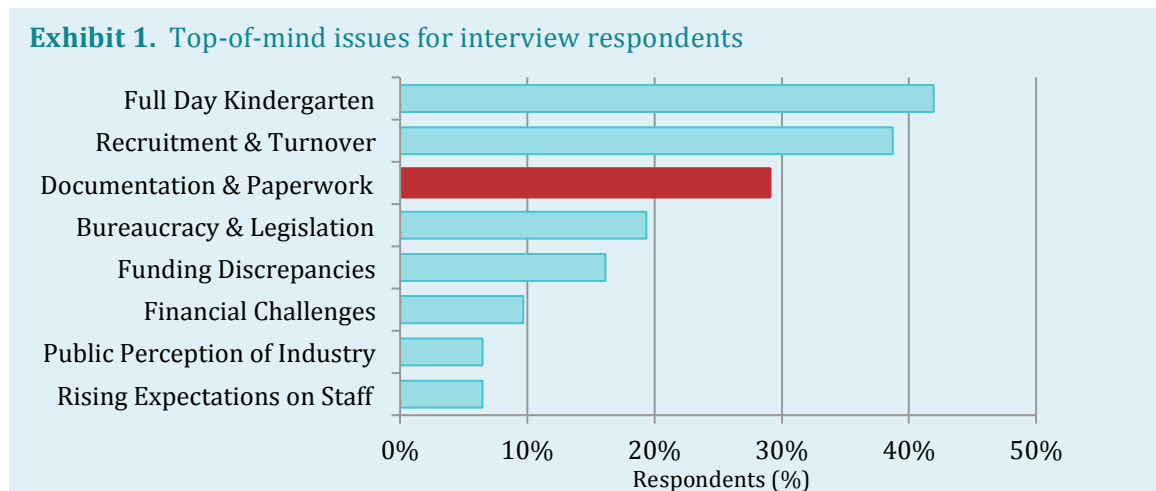
There are many challenges facing licensed childcare providers in Canada today. The cost of licensed childcare is increasingly unaffordable for many parents due to the high costs of operating a childcare facility, in particular those that serve our youngest children. At the same time, many licensed caregivers, particularly in Ontario, are struggling to maintain financially viable as they face decreasing enrollments as a result of the full day kindergarten implementation and increasing operational costs as a result of ever-increasing regulatory demands.

Despite the challenges, most in the industry remain optimistic. Many have been in this industry working with children for many years. For these devoted individuals, the focus is on ensuring that children have a safe and healthy environment to learn and grow. Yet, the challenges that the industry faces are what this nurturing group must think about in their time between caring for children, satisfying the needs of parents, and supporting the needs of their staff.

Of all the challenges that caregivers are facing, one thing that was clear from our interviews¹ was that documentation and paperwork were top-of-mind. However, while many felt that this was a significant challenge there was considerable discrepancy in how centers were approaching the problem. Some centers were leveraging technology to enable improved documentation and limit paper use, however, most of these centers were still very much in an experimentation stage while even more centers were sticking to pen and paper.

Documentation and paperwork are top-of-mind issues for directors

In discussing issues that childcare providers in Ontario felt were top-of-mind for them, not surprisingly the top two issues were dealing with the repercussions of the full day kindergarten implementation and the persisting issue of recruiting and retaining qualified ECEs (Early Childhood Educators). The third most common response was effectively managing documentation and cutting back on the paper involved with this documentation. (See Exhibit 1)



¹ Interviews were conducted with childcare center owners, directors and supervisors in Ontario. For more details on the characteristics of centers interviewed, refer to 'Notes About this Report' on page 10.

As far as documentation was concerned, almost equally challenging and time-consuming among respondents were the documentation of daily logs² and the documentation of developmental observations. Other areas that were less of a challenge, but still a constant and important requirement were attendance, incident reports and communications to parents.

For developmental observations in particular, the feeling amongst many centers was that it was a real challenge to achieve the quality of documentation sought by regional or municipal quality programs while also being able to keep a watchful eye on children, which was of course always the number one priority. As a result, some ECEs were resorting to staying after hours or using their lunchtime to complete the requisite documentation. Other centers had to bring in part time or temporary support staff to get caught up on their documentation at peak periods of the year.

A general theme across many centers was that there was a lot of focus on the output of developmental observations without too much emphasis on the process. This was a surprising finding given that respondents indicated that on average the staff in their center spent approximately 45 minutes per day per person on children's documentation. To put this in perspective, for a center with 60 children ranging from infants to kindergarten, the effort required for documentation would equate to approximately \$30,000 per year³. Looked at another way, this is one full time staff per year working exclusively on documentation.

With this current state of affairs it is essential that centers take a closer look into the efficiency of their documentation processes. Based on our interview findings, even minor gains in efficiency would save the average center thousands of dollars a year on labor costs, not to mention going a long way in improving job satisfaction for staff. The reality is that parents do not give childcare providers credit for how long they spend on documentation, but instead on what they see and experience. Childcare center operators should always keep this in consideration.

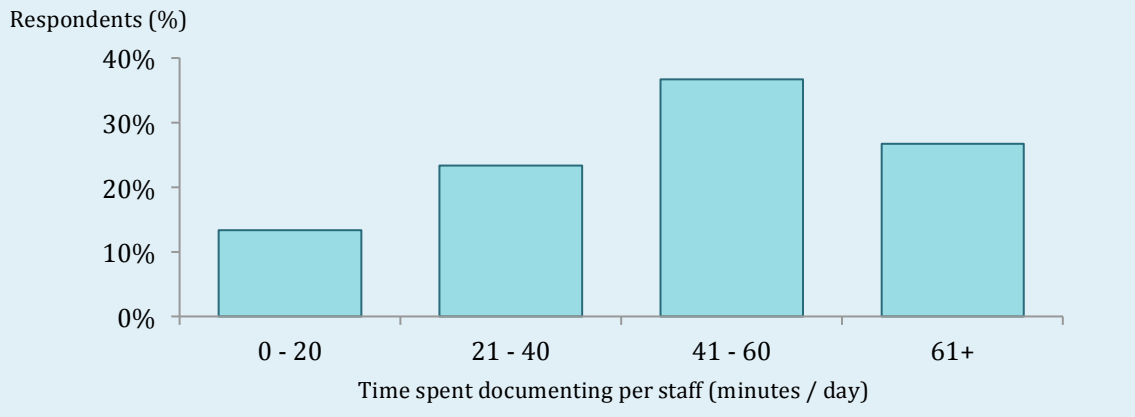
There is a wide discrepancy in approaches to managing documentation

While on average respondents indicated that staff in their centers spend approximately 45 minutes per day on children's documentation, there was a very wide distribution in responses with some centers spending less than 15 minutes a day on documentation and others spending up to 90 minutes a day. (See Exhibit 2) This broad distribution of responses is the result of the many different approaches that centers were taking to documentation.

² Daily logs for centers typically comprise of children's check-in and check-out time, food consumption, sleeping times, toileting events, general behavior or mood and a summary of activities for the day.

³ Assumes a distribution of 10 infants, 15 toddlers, 16 preschoolers, and 19 kindergarteners with staff to child ratios of 3:10, 1:5, 1:8 and 1:10, respectively as per the Day Nurseries Act of Ontario (R.R.O. 1990, Regulation 262). Also assumes that staff work 2,000 hours per year and earn \$15.00 per hour.

Exhibit 2. Average time spent per staff per day on children’s documentation



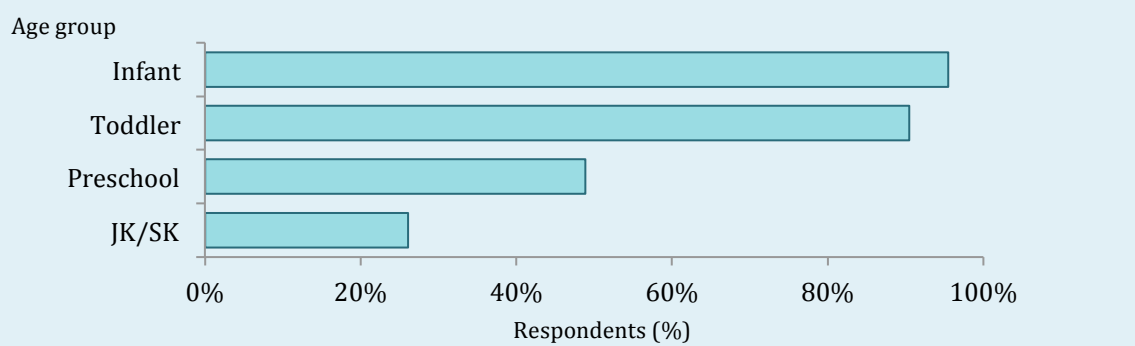
The explanations behind the different approaches to documentation were varied. For one thing, there is no provincial or national body that has the influence to drive a consistent approach across the industry. The result is that there are localized similarities stemming from influencing advisory and funding organizations, but more widespread consistency in approach remains elusive.

There are, however, other important factors at play including management’s views and opinions, the socio-economic condition of the community in which the center is located, the for-profit or not-for-profit status of the center, as well as available finances or funding opportunities that the center has access to.

All of the above factors make for a fragmented and complicated environment when it comes to documentation practices. However, the outlook of center owners and management tended to be the top influencer when it came to the direction that centers took with their documentation. While some centers looked to their local advisory organization for direction, other centers chose to follow their own approach that they felt worked most effectively for them, their staff and the parents they were serving.

One area in which this is evidenced was whether the center took the initiative to do documentation beyond recommended practices. For example, while over 90% of centers completed daily logs for infants and toddlers, only about 50% did so for preschoolers and about 25% for kindergarten students. (See Exhibit 3) This was largely attributable to the views and opinions of management.

Exhibit 3. Percentage of centers doing daily logs or reports by age group



Documentation approaches were also mixed in terms of when documentation occurred in the center. While many centers did not have a single approach, two thirds of respondents indicated that they did a significant portion of their documentation during children's sleep time. About a third of respondents indicated that they documented activities in real-time, however, in many of these instances efficiencies were not realized as the real-time documentation had to be revisited to improve legibility or expand on the notes taken.

The use of photo documentation also varied across centers. While almost all centers used some form of photo documentation, there were inconsistencies in photo usage. For example, less than 20% of respondents distributed photos electronically to parents, either through email or a newsletter. Most centers posted photos inside their center, but approaches with displays varied significantly. Multiple centers indicated that they took many photos, but did not have an effective system for distribution, often resulting in a large inventory of unused photos.

The use of photos was also an area where a lot of inefficiencies existed. The steps of loading pictures to a computer, sorting the pictures, printing the pictures in the center or at a local printing shop, and posting them up in the center is a very time intensive process. It is also expensive. Between daily logs and photos of children, respondents indicated that they spent, on average, upwards of \$2,000 per year on printing, including toner and paper.

Finally, when it came to developmental observations, 65% of centers indicated that they used the ELECT Framework⁴ in some capacity. Usage varied, however, with some centers following the domains and skills laid out in the framework very explicitly in their documentation, while other centers leveraged it more as a guideline. Over 50% of centers reported using Nipissing⁵ for tracking developmental progress. Many commented that this was the most effective framework for communicating children's progress with parents. Nearly 20% of centers reported that they had developed their own learning and development framework and used this as their primary reference.

Caregivers are experimenting with technology, but lack direction

Childcare providers were all using technology to some extent in support of their documentation practices. At a minimum, most centers had a digital camera with which to take photos in addition to an office computer. However, only half of centers had computers available in at least one classroom and less than half of centers reported having a computer dedicated for staff use. These limitations would make it difficult to enable ECEs to improve documentation processes in their centers with the use of supporting technology.

⁴ The ELECT Framework, released in January 2007, is a framework for Ontario early childhood settings called Early Learning for Every Child Today. It is a Best Start initiative from a panel of professionals from the early childhood education and the formal education sectors in Ontario.

⁵ The Nipissing District Developmental Screen (NDDS), developed by a multi-disciplinary group and inceptioned in 1993, is a developmental screening tool for infants and children up to 6 years of age that aims to identify developmental issues as a first step towards early intervention.

There was, however, a very evident increase in the use of email reported by centers. Nearly 60% of respondents indicated that they used email frequently for communicating with parents both on a day-to-day basis, as well as for wider announcements. In contrast, only 6% of centers indicated that they did not have email addresses of parents and were not using email to interact with parents. The remaining centers used email to some degree, but not frequently.

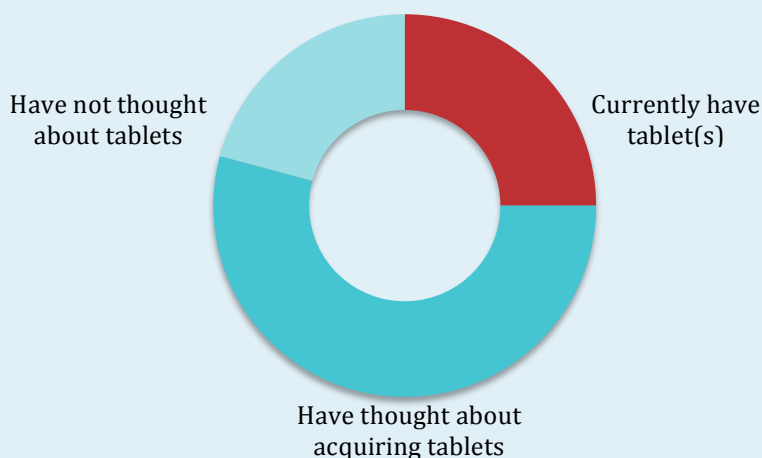
Nearly all centers interviewed were distributing newsletters to their parent community. Approximately half of these centers were providing parents with only a hardcopy of the newsletter and the other half were providing parents with an electronic copy, at least as an option. A lot of centers did, however, report that newsletter communications had limited effectiveness, with parents asking questions about children’s activities that had been shared with them previously through a distributed newsletter.

Every center interviewed had a website which they utilized in varying capacities. A further 26% of centers indicated that they also participated in some form of social media with most of these using Facebook. However, many centers indicated that they have had limited success in communicating with parents through these channels due to the limitations of what could be shared because of privacy or security concerns.

One of the more recent trends amongst centers was the use of tablets to support documentation. In fact, 25% of respondents indicated that they had at least one tablet in their center that they were using for documentation purposes. Some of these centers were also providing the tablets to children for curriculum related games or information. A further 54% of respondents indicated that they had thought about or discussed acquiring tablets for their center, but had not yet made a decision, were waiting for funding, or had decided that they would not make the investment at this stage. (See Exhibit 4)

While the number of centers with tablets was higher than we expected, we did also find that many of these centers did not have a clear vision of how the tablets could most effectively be used, either for educational purposes or to improve the efficiency or effectiveness of documentation in the center.

Exhibit 4. Status of interview respondents on the use of tablets in their centers





A common remark from those interviewed was, “We spend all this time on documentation, and we’re still not able to get through to parents effectively”. Seeing first hand the effort that many centers were putting into their documentation it was easy to understand their frustration – detailed notes, beautiful murals on center walls, binders with photos and artwork. But the reality is that parents need to be engaged in a way that works for them.

Some centers are starting to understand this shift and are responding accordingly, for example, with increased usage of email, SMS texting and other digital communication. Nevertheless, many are not yet ready to move in this direction. We believe that the use of technology should be seen as a way to engage parents more effectively. Those centers that are adopting technology are experiencing this improved engagement. Emails from parents, for example, thanking supervisors for an emailed picture that made their day while they were at work.

Fundamentally, childcare providers should avoid documenting for the sake of documenting. They must instead focus on the benefits that their documentation is creating. Benefits should be delivered to all parties – children and parents first and foremost, but also to center directors, supervisors and staff. These benefits should be assessed regularly and if current processes or outputs aren’t working for any of the parties involved, they should be revisited. While there is a lot of external advice out there on documentation approaches, childcare providers should focus on what works for them while best serving the needs of children and parents.

Acknowledgments

This report would not have been possible without the participation of the owners, directors, supervisors and staff of those childcare centers that we interviewed in Ontario from May to August 2013. We thank all those who took the time to participate in an interview and who provided us with candid information about their center's operations and documentation practices.

Notes About This Report

The interviews that informed this report were conducted in Southern Ontario. Childcare centers from the following urban centers and municipalities participated: City of London, County of Brant, Municipality of Hamilton-Wentworth, Halton Region, Region of Waterloo, City of Guelph and Wellington County, City of Toronto, and Niagara Region. Of all centers participating, approximately 23% were for-profit enterprises with the remaining 77% being not-for profit organizations.

Further Contact

To discuss this report, take part in our 2014 survey, or for further information on emerging documentation practices in the early childhood setting please contact research@himama.com.

