



What's At Stake?

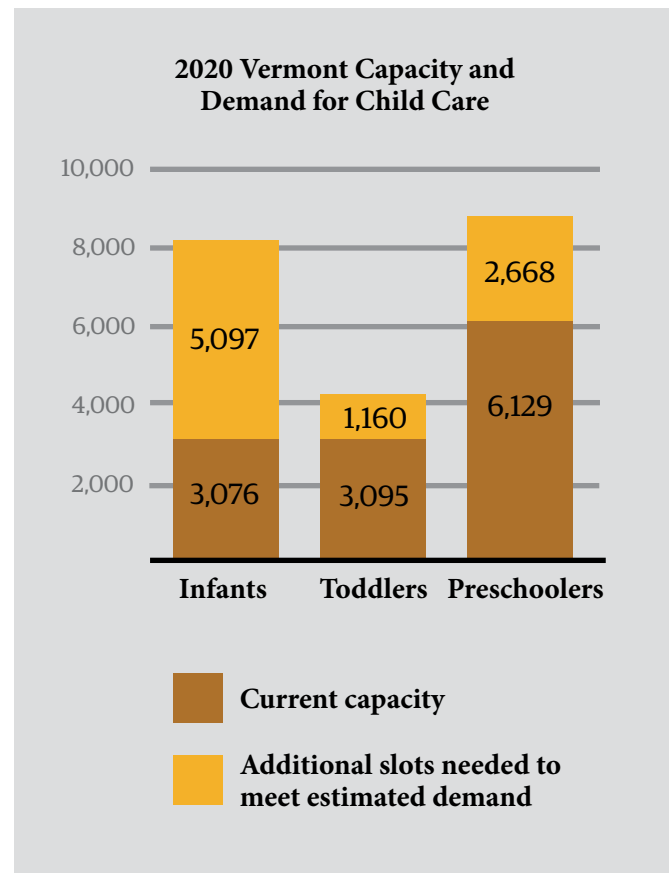
Child care is fundamental to household economics, and therefore farm economics. Farmers with children must continuously negotiate access to affordable child care as the needs of their children and families change.¹ Planning for these adjustments is part of whole-farm business planning, yet rarely taken into account in farm business support. Even with financial assistance, Vermont families may spend almost 30% of their annual income on child care. Vermont estimates the basic wage needed for two adults with two children (ages 4 and 6) to live alone and support their children is \$31.75 per hour (or \$66,036 annually), often far above a farmer's or farmworker's hourly wage.² Child care is also the best way to keep farm children safe.³ Addressing farm families' and farm workers' need for child care is necessary to support long-term, thriving, and equitable food systems in Vermont. There is further need to examine how national and state child care policies intersect with farm family well-being and farm economic development.⁴

Current Conditions

The time when farm families have young children is particularly vulnerable for a farm operation, and access to child care can help parents maintain the farm during this period.⁵ In Vermont, 71.5% of children ages five and under are in families where all available parents are in the labor force.⁶ Despite this, almost two thirds of infants and nearly one third of toddlers and preschoolers do not have access to licensed care programs.⁷

Child care choices for farm families are influenced by values, farm productivity, cost of care, and distance to care centers and relatives. Family care is the preferred child care arrangement for farm families due to affordability and flexibility around non-traditional schedules.⁸ Low and fluctuating profit margins make it difficult for farm families to afford off-farm care.⁹ Household stressors play a significant role in amplifying overall stress levels on farms. How child care is practiced affects relationships, inequitable division of labor, and day-to-day operations.¹⁰ First-generation and women farmers face the most significant challenges in accessing affordable child care.¹¹

There is tension between the belief that farming helps children gain life skills and a reluctance to use one's children as labor.¹² Farm parents' time is split between the farm and their children, and allocations towards one come at the expense of the other.^{13,14,15,16} Farm parents must regularly weigh the safety risks and benefits of keeping their children on the farm.^{17,18} In the U.S., approximately 33 children are seriously injured in agriculture-related incidents every day, and approximately every three days a child dies.^{19,20} About 60% of agriculture-related injuries are sustained by non-working children.²¹



Bottlenecks & Gaps

- Farmers struggle with lack of child care providers, distance from providers, cost, and scheduling constraints.^{22,23} For seasonal, migrant, and undocumented workers, language, transportation, and safety issues may compound these challenges.²⁴
- Care of young children largely falls on women. Gendered roles can exacerbate family tensions and intersect with isolation and lack of extended family, contributing negatively to mental and physical health.²⁵
- Different abilities amongst children limit options for appropriate child care. Children requiring extra care directly affect relationships in the family, farm structure and management, and overall quality of life.²⁶
- There is no comprehensive accounting of how cost, availability, and access to child care affect farm structure and management. Agricultural service providers lack training and expertise in providing support to farmers around child care, and family scheduling is often not factored into their services.²⁸
- Vermont needs approximately 2,090 additional early childhood educators to meet current needs for young children.²⁹

Opportunities

- Farmers with access to child care have an increased chance of improving farm viability and personal and family health, while reducing their stress.³⁰
- There is demand for cooperatives and on-site, affordable child care, particularly in rural areas and the farming community.^{31,32,33}
- Access to child care could increase Vermont's attraction for many rural families, including farmers and farm workers. Along with cost of land, soil quality, and familiarity with an area, some farmers also consider access to child care when deciding where to establish their operation.³⁴
- European public social support systems provide a model for comprehensive child care and family policies with generous parental leave and subsidized care available to all parents.³⁵
- Child care subsidies are currently underused by rural families, despite higher poverty and unemployment rates.³⁶ Farmers who are able to access subsidies describe them as a boon to their farms.³⁷

Recommendations

- Develop and enact policies which create just and equitable systems for fairly compensating farmers and farmworkers. Systemically work across sectors to bring voice to, and address the gendered nature of, child care and household work and its consequences for society, particularly farms.
- Ensure universal, high-quality child care for all families living in Vermont. Invest in the necessary facility infrastructure changes, and increase support for and expansion of current programs, particularly in rural, underserved areas. Provide living wages, scholarship supports, and ongoing professional development and training to early childhood educators to enable them to both enter and remain in the field.
- Conduct research into how child care cost, availability, acceptability, and access affects farm structure and management, and how these factors may evolve as children age. Conduct a comparative analysis between U.S. farmers and farmers in western European countries where child care and social support systems are more robust.^{38,39}
- Integrate care work as a critical component of farm planning and child safety.^{40,41} Direct agricultural service providers to work with the Vermont Department of Children and Families (DCF) and to include household economics as a part of farm economics. Train service providers to share information about tax benefits and child care assistance programs with farmers.
- Work with Vermont DCF to simplify and expand the criteria for child care subsidies to make them more accessible to farmers, including pursuing an IT system that enables these changes.

Farm to Plate is Vermont's food system plan being implemented statewide to increase economic development and jobs in the farm and food sector and improve access to healthy local food for all Vermonters.

The Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food & Markets (VAAFMM) facilitates, supports, and encourages the growth and viability of agriculture in Vermont while protecting the working landscape, human health, animal health, plant health, consumers, and the environment.

This brief was prepared by:

Lead Authors: Graham Unangst-Rufenacht and Mollie Wills, *Rural Vermont*
Contributing Authors: Drake Turner and Ansley Bloomer, *Let's Grow Kids* | Matt Levin and Charlie Gliserman, *Vermont Early Childhood Advocacy Alliance* | Shoshanah Inwood and Andrea Rissing, *Ohio State University* | Florence Becot, *National Farm Medicine Center*, *National Children's Center for Rural and Agricultural Health and Safety*

For end notes and data sources, and to read other food system briefs, visit vtfarmtoplate.com/plan