

Child Care Program Management and Family Engagement Software

What Administrators, Owners and Teachers Have to Say

by Fran Simon and Steven J. Dick

Early childhood practitioners are among the most resourceful and creative professionals in the education industry. We must be scrappy because we face so many business and pedagogical challenges. For the most part, we see ourselves as educators first, not

entrepreneurs or business leaders. Over time, and now during the COVID-19 era, it has become obvious that we struggle with the same challenges that other industries face. We need the same types of specialized software solutions that other businesses use. In fact, we need them more than ever. The problem is that there are so many choices available, it can be overwhelming to know which will meet our specific needs.

consider as you shop for software, this article will also provide some thoughts about how to select the right product for your organization.

In our survey we set out to answer 38 questions about 23 products. The survey turned up some products we never considered, and responses about the use of assessment products and other statewide systems we did not intend to study. Because the survey was comprehensive and detailed, this article will focus on just a few of the questions and responses provided by administrators because they are more often the primary purchasers. For example:



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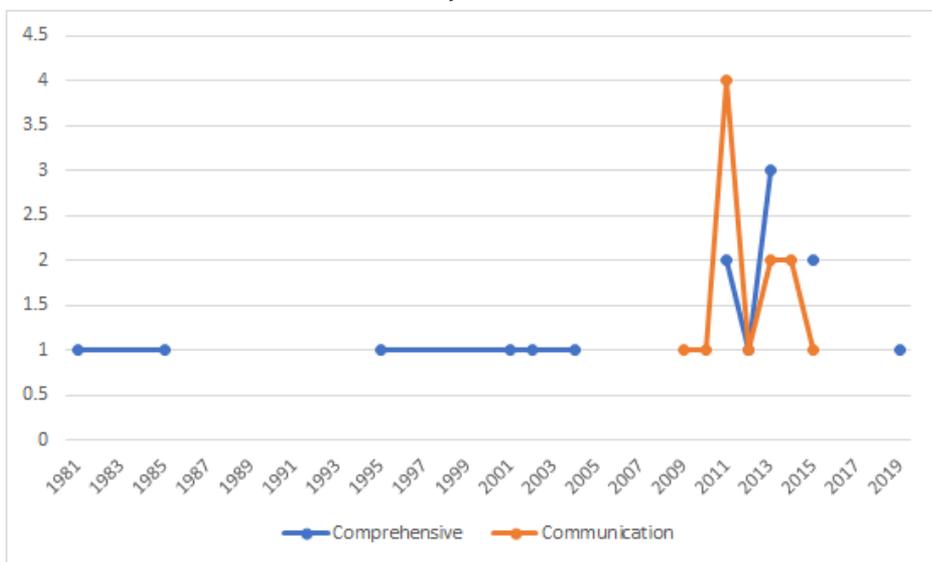
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The purpose of this article is to share insights about some of the available early childhood software products in the program management and family communication (commonly referred to as family engagement) category of products. Our findings are based on a few of the results of a survey we conducted in 2019 of 2,800 early care and education professionals. The survey was disseminated internationally through social media and Early Childhood Investigations Webinars' email list of more than 140,000 subscribers. Our goal was to find out what administrators and teachers have to say about the software products they used. These findings can help you make decisions as you search for software. Because user insight data is not the only factor you need to

- How many early educators considered and used institutional software products?
- How has the marketplace for program management and family communication systems evolved, and how does that impact options?
- Which products did programs consider as they shopped, and which did they ultimately use?
- How did they select products, and what influenced their decisions?

Figure 1
Number of Products Introduced by Year



How many early educators consider and use early childhood program management or family communication software products?

First, we looked at software consideration and usage. Among the survey respondents:

- 38 percent specifically considered buying software for their programs, whether or not they ultimately used them.
- 62 percent had never considered or shopped for software products for the programs where they work.
- More than half of the respondents who shopped for software (56 percent) eventually adopted a product to:
 - either meet their own needs (46 percent) or
 - fulfill teacher requests (32 percent).
- 44 percent of the administrators who reported they never used the products we reviewed were either unaware that they were available, did not see the need to use them, were inhibited by cost, or had technical issues. Still,

77 percent were interested if their objections or obstacles could be resolved.

Ultimately, it is clear that while some early education administrators either bought these software products themselves or are using products provided to them by their organizations, a far greater proportion of administrators still do not use these products. While our industry is opening up to adopt technology, there are still obstacles to adoption. We will discuss that later in the article.

How has the marketplace for program management and family communication systems evolved, and how does that impact options?

The availability of software products for program management began in the late 1980s and early 1990s, well before the internet became ubiquitous. EZCare, ChildPlus, and Procure were the first to launch software to help program administrators manage data about children and, in the case of EZCare and Procure, manage tuition. (ChildPlus was initially developed to meet the heavy reporting requirements required of Head Start programs.)

These products were just in time to help programs when personal computers became available, but way ahead of the internet curve, and even more ahead of the early childhood profession. As our profession caught up with access to technology, availability heated up.

In the past ten years, technology companies have flocked to provide more internet-delivered (commonly referred to as “cloud” or “software as a service”) software designed specifically to address some of the biggest challenges facing early childhood program businesses. From program management and reporting systems, to family communication, to customer relationship management software and quite a few other products in between, we are experiencing a modern-day renaissance for child care software. Now there are more than 30 products in this category and it is growing every day. In Figure 1, you can see history of product launches for comprehensive program management and the rapid entry of family communication products entering the market that began in 2010.

While program management systems have been around for a while, it seems a lot of companies decided simultaneously that using the internet to communicate with families was a good idea. In the chart above, you can see that beginning in 2009 through 2015, ten new family communication systems were launched. The trend to offer family communication tools has evolved from the demands of the current generations of digital native parents who expect communication to be at their fingertips. This trend began in the broader educational technology industry, especially in K-12 schools. In fact, some of the family communication systems that survey respondents reported using were designed for K-12 use, not specifically for early childhood programs; however, our study zeroed in on those that were designed specifically for early childhood education programs.

It is important to point out that two of the products included in the family communication category are designed around the process of documentation that is often used in Reggio-influenced or emergent curriculum programs. Both products, Educa and Storypark, emerged from New Zealand, where including families in the documentation process is part of the nationally mandated framework for early education programs. They include the media-sharing capabilities of the other family engagement software products and robust functionality to make pedagogical documentation seamless for staff and families alike.

Also included in the family communications classification is a true family engagement product: ReadyRosie, which stands out as distinctly different than the others, which focus on communicating with families, not having them engage with their children. ReadyRosie focused on engagement by delivering video and text-based activities based on best practice that can be done at home. Another product in this engagement category that did not come up in our survey is Vroom, which is similar to ReadyRosie.

There is a trend to merge family communication and program management products.

One important takeaway is that there are plenty of options for early childhood software. However, be aware that the

The survey focused on family communications and program management products. We did not ask specifically about software designed to solve other very real problems child care administrators face. There are other product classifications. Here are a few other product classifications and products in that class.

Lead management and marketing	Childcare CRM
Document Management	Upbup
Compliance and process management	1Place
Assessment	COR Advantage, GOLD and Work Sampling

Most of these products can work with some of the program management systems. If you are interested in these products, but you use program management systems, it is a good idea to find out if they work together. Every year, more software categories and products are introduced, so it makes sense to scan the marketplace for new solutions regularly.

family communication systems and program management systems are becoming more alike than different. Some family communication tools expanded their features to include program management functionality, and some of the program management products have added family communication functionality. In other words, the categories of products are beginning to blur, and now there are more comprehensive or all-in-one products with similar functionality. For example, Brightwheel, HiMama, and a few other products originally began as family communication tools and have morphed to include program management as well, and products such as Smartcare, Procure, and EZcare have added family communication functionality. And, as of the past couple of years, some products have launched as all-in-one.

All of these changes and products are great for the early education market, but as you shop for products, you should scrutinize exactly what “all-in-one” means. Typically, the strongest functionality included in the all-in-one products is the functionality for which it was originally intended, and the expanded functionality may not be as full-bodied as other products. This is just one of the reasons you need to identify and prioritize the problems your program needs to solve before you go shopping for software, so you can match the relative strengths and weaknesses of the products to your needs.

Which products did programs consider and which did they use?

We discovered that most early education buyers considered more than one product before subscribing. Of the administrators that use software products, 54 percent actively shopped for the products, and considered 2.9 titles. Those that ended up not adopting software considered 2.5 software products.

Our survey explored not only which products were most often used, but also which were most considered before ultimately purchasing. Figure 2 compares the products most often considered and those selected for purchase. The color coding indicates which products are program management software, family communication software, or other types of systems. Please note that these categories are somewhat fluid, because of the aforementioned trend for the products to become more comprehensive. The key reflects the product class at the time of the survey.

While the chart shows results in order of number of responses (from highest to lowest), consider that the most popular products are not necessarily better than others. In fact, in our review, some of the less frequently considered or used products actually scored well on satisfaction factors. There are many variables that propelled some products to the top, including the number of years they have been available, the size of the organizations that use the products (big chain organizations buy on behalf of their many programs so they have more users) how much the product has been marketed, and the amount of buzz that has been generated about the product.

In Figure 3, you can see that three products dominate the top spots. Procure, one of the products available the longest, was used by 27 percent of the administrators. The top three programs—Procure, HiMama and Brightwheel—accounted for 45 percent of the respondents. This means that most of the systems have significantly fewer customers than Procure. It is of note that HiMama is very well marketed and Brightwheel has generated more buzz because it was on Shark Tank (Feloni, 2016). All three compa-

Figure 2
Products Most Considered and Most Used by Program Administrators

Key

Program Management/ "All-in-One"	Family Communication/ Documentation
Other	CACFP

Products Considered	Products Used
HiMama	Procure
BrightWheel	Other
Procure	HiMama
Tadpoles	BrightWheel
EZCare	Tadpoles
Storypark	EZCare
Kaymbu	KidKare
Sandbox	Seesaw
Seesaw	Ready Rosie
Smartcare	Kaymbu
KidReports	Bloomz
Lifecubby	KidReports
KidKare	Storypark
Ready Rosie	Daycare Works
Daycare Works	Kinderlime
Kinderlime	Lifecubby
Educa	Sandbox
Kangaroo Time	Educa
Bloomz	Parent Square
Parent Square	Smartcare
Jackrabbit	Kangaroo Time
	Jackrabbit

nies are funded by venture capital, which makes it easier for them to grow and compete. (Some of the other products we reviewed also receive private equity funding.)

What influenced early childhood software buyers' decisions?

As we set out to survey early childhood software users, we wondered what exactly drove them to begin looking.

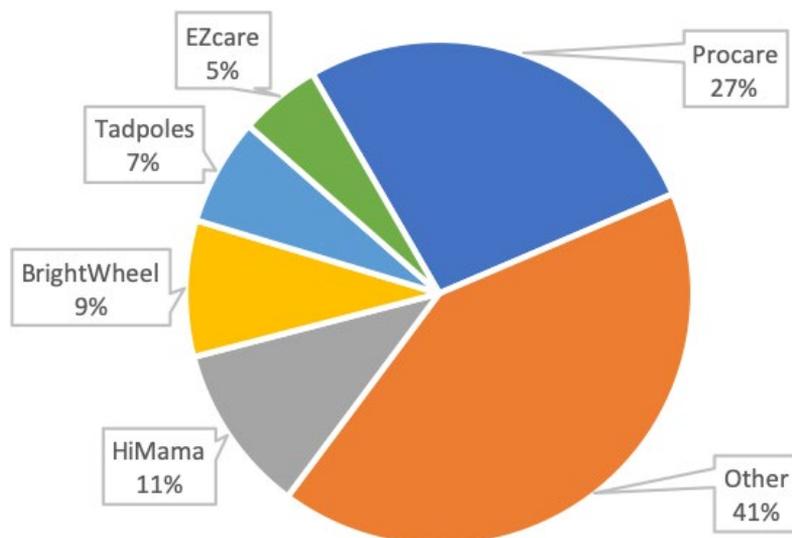
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Figure 4 draws an interesting picture of influences. It was no surprise that administrators were prompted to begin shopping based on problems they needed to solve because they needed the results (36 percent). The second most cited reason for beginning the search was prompted by staff members' requests (24 percent). Requests from families (22 percent) and previous experience with a product (12 percent) followed closely behind. Colleagues' experiences (7 percent) and board member requests (6 percent) were the least influential reasons for beginning the search, but on another question, colleagues' referrals were highly rated as a factor in the selection of specific products.

Of those who purchased software, did marketing strategies influence buyer's decisions?

We wondered if marketing and sales strategies influenced decision-making about software purchases. As you

**Figure 3
Products most Used by Administrators**



can see in Figure 5, buyers were most influenced by product demonstrations presented by company representatives, with 81 percent of buyers reporting that the demonstration was most important. Trials followed closely with 78

percent. From our experience working in the early education technology sector, we were surprised to find trials to be so important, because typically ECE customers sign up for trials but end up not using them. While that finding is

Figure 4
People That Influence Administrator’s Decision to Shop for Software

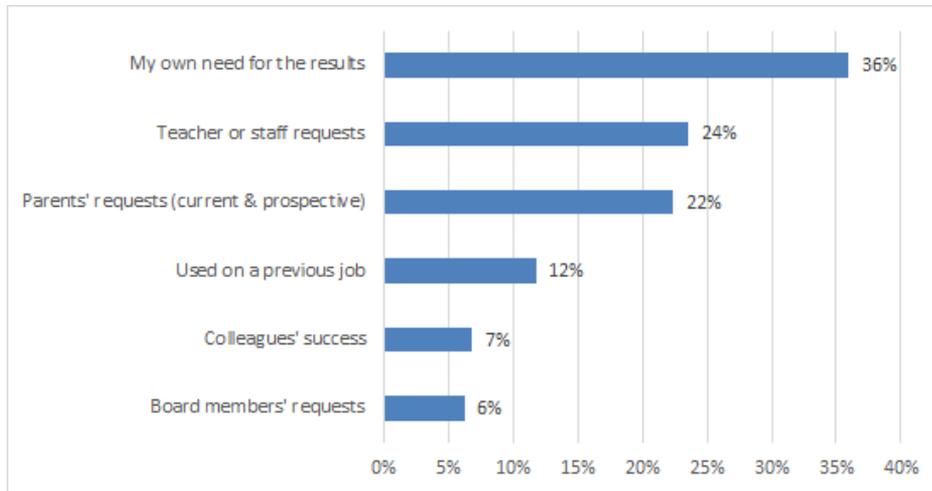
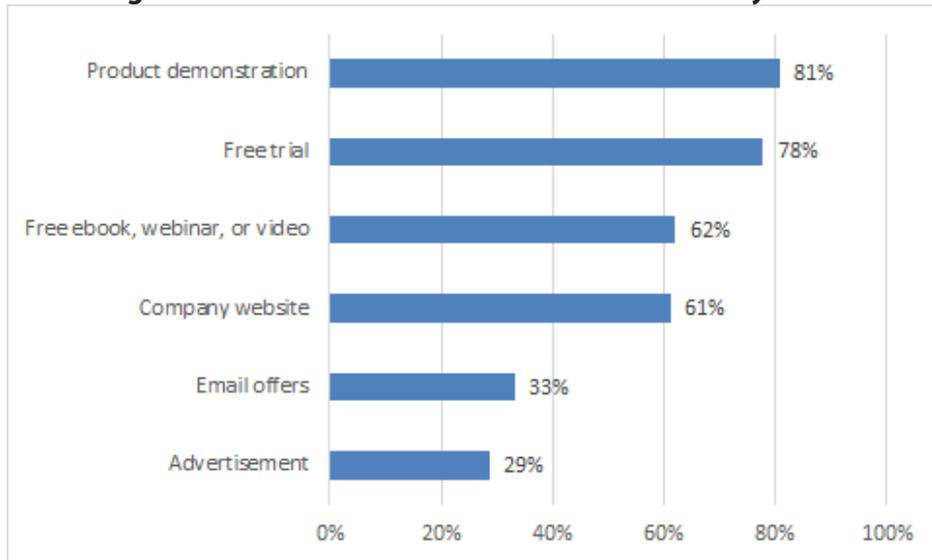


Figure 5
Marketing That Influences Administrator’s Decision to Buy Software



baffling, we do strongly recommend participating in—not just signing up for—trials of software after attending a demonstration and before buying.

What the study reveals will help you with your software needs.

The most important takeaway is to do your homework before you shop. Know your objectives and what your program needs before you set out on your shopping journey. Prioritize your program’s needs. We recommend getting referrals, but do not rely on

them as the single most important factor. It stands to reason that you will hear from more people who use the most popular products, but we urge you to resist the impulse to be influenced to not consider the newer or less well-known products. As suggested above, popularity does not necessarily reflect quality or lack thereof. We recommend you do your best to survey all of the available products you can find. We have compiled a list of products we know about and have made the list available on our site, but there are

software rating sites that are far more comprehensive and up to date, such as Capterra, which we strongly recommend.

It is exciting to know that our profession is now better prepared than ever to manage our businesses, using the same types of tools that other industries use to manage theirs. In general, now, more than ever, it is time to invest in software products that will make your program more efficient and make it easier for you to communicate with families. Having great software at your fingertips will help professionalize your program so you can meet the needs of children and their families for generations to come.

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