

Maximizing Family Knowledge and Engagement in Child Development

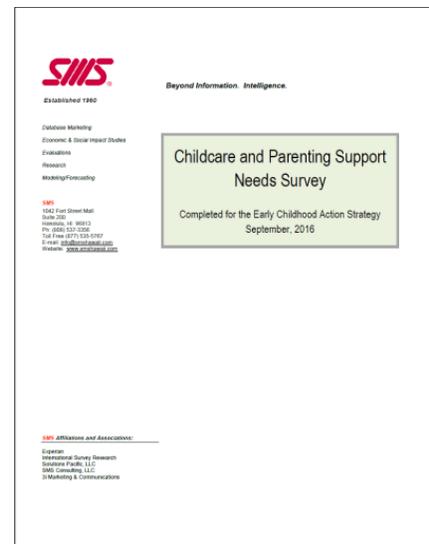
PDG B-5 Needs Assessment

State Advisory Council Workgroup – June 13, 2019

As a child’s first teachers, it is hard to overstate the importance of families in children’s development. What do families know about child development and to what extent are they engaged in providing the best possible guidance, care, health, and education for children? In Hawai‘i, comprehensive data are not readily available to answer these questions thoroughly. However, a few studies do shed some light on these issues.

How do Families Understand Quality Care?

When choosing an early care and education (ECE) provider, the majority of respondents to a 2016 survey cited *quality of care* as among the most important (Early Childhood Action Strategy 2016). Although the survey’s respondents (426 parents of children age 0-5) are not representative of the entire state, their answers can provide clues about what “quality care” means for some of Hawai‘i’s families. A very small proportion—those *dissatisfied* with their child’s caregiver—were asked to explain their opinion of their chosen provider, and the most common responses characterized providers being “unreliable” or “inconsistent.” Most did not elaborate, but a few mentioned providers arriving or beginning after the start time. In equal numbers, parents lamented a lack of structure or education (e.g., planned educational activities in addition to social skills). Less frequent answers included inadequate attention paid to their child, concerns about child discipline, incompatible hours of care, and difficulty accessing a provider (e.g., due to lack of open slots). Whether these answers reveal anything about parents’ knowledge of child development (i.e., developmentally appropriate practices, appropriate teacher qualifications and knowledge, and other widely recognized measures of quality in the ECE field) is debatable. Certainly characteristics like structured activities, reliability, consistency, and positive disciplinary practices are components of quality that few would disagree with, but these survey responses are at best vague indicators of parent knowledge.



What Parents Know and Want to Know

To empower parents to advocate for their children it helps to know what information parents have and what additional knowledge they would like, and the survey described above (Early Childhood Action Strategy 2016) includes several items to gauge parents' knowledge about the parenting supports available in their communities. To reiterate, these survey respondents do not represent all families of young children across the islands, so the findings presented here are best thought of as a limited range of perspectives.

Most respondents claim to know where to access information about parenting support services and programs in their communities, and most find that information useful. Slightly fewer report that the information is easy to access. A majority of respondents are aware of the Preschool Open Doors childcare subsidy for low-income families and about financial assistance options more generally, but slightly fewer know where to find information about child care subsidies. Even as majorities appear to know about and appreciate the available information, most also say they require more.

What additional knowledge do parents seek? One item that speaks to this question presents respondents with a list of eleven areas in which parents may receive support and asks them to choose the three they most desire. The most popular choices for these families are:

- Activities to do with children (55%);
- Determining if a child is developing on track (44%);
- Managing challenging behavior (40%);
- Having access to play groups (30%);
- Knowing what public services are available (30%).

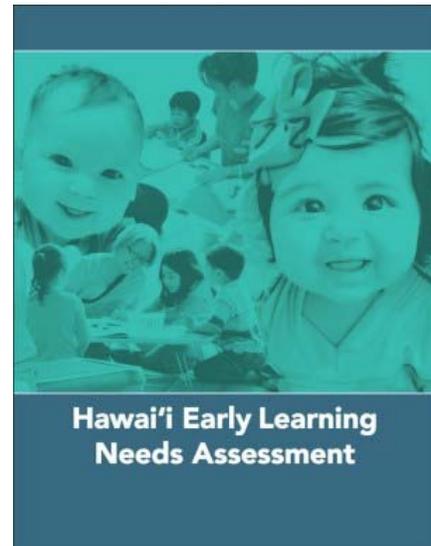
Not all refer to areas of knowledge *per se* that parents seek—for example, “activities to do with children” suggests parents would like access to more family-friendly places and events—but they all might be relevant to improving parents' engagement in promoting healthy development. Answers to this item differ in some instances by respondents' household income. Lower income families were more likely to want access to healthy food for their child (33% for incomes below \$40,000 and 24% for incomes over \$70,000), while higher income families were more likely to want support connecting with other families (17% for incomes below \$40,000 and 26% for incomes above \$70,000).

Another useful source of data about families' desires for information comes from Family Hui (2015). Between 2014 and 2015, Family Hui assembled families across the state for a total of 101 focus groups to address a range of early childhood topics affecting children age 0-8 (and an additional 159 focus groups with ECE providers). Like the ECAS survey, the results from this study are not generalizable beyond the pool of participants.

Focus group participants, many of whom claim to “know what to expect in terms of child development,” express a desire for more information than pediatricians typically provide. They wish for home visits for parents of newborns, and subsequent home visits to help assess whether their child is developing on track. Other topics of interest to families include breastfeeding, dealing with challenging behaviors, tools for fathers, transitioning into kindergarten, self-care (for parents), and special needs children.

Family Engagement

While there is little doubt that families desire additional supports and knowledge, we have not yet considered whether ECE providers are offering families opportunities to be engaged. A wide-ranging needs assessment conducted by the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa Center on the Family in partnership with Hawai'i Children's Action Network (DeBaryshe, Bird, Stern, and Zysman 2017) provides some answers. For this study, the authors distributed surveys among directors and proprietors of three types of ECE programs: childcare centers, family childcare (home-based), and family-child interaction learning (FCIL) programs. All such programs in the state were invited to participate and response rates were very high. However, the authors note that the findings, due to self-selection bias, may skew slightly in favor of childcare centers that are NAEYC accredited and charge more, and toward family childcare providers that charge more (DeBaryshe 2017)



Family engagement practices differ across program types in number and kind. Among childcare centers, which account for 85% of licensed capacity across the state, a large majority typify what the authors call a “traditional perspective on family engagement.” They incorporate such family engagement practices as parent-teacher conferences, communicating with families via newsletter, email, or daily journals of school activities, providing information (e.g., on child development, parenting) to families, social events, referrals to community services and programs, and invitations to families to volunteer. Approximately half of centers report the use of practices that support “families as teachers” (e.g., lending libraries, jointly setting learning goals with families, parent workshops and support), and fewer than one-third include families in program governance decisions or offer direct supports to families (e.g., counseling, adult education, home visits).

Family childcare providers, representing 9% of licensed capacity in the state (and 46% of licensed providers), also tend toward a traditional perspective on family engagement. Some also integrate parents as teachers, although in slightly lower numbers in comparison with centers. Program governance decisions and direct support services were excluded as options from the FCC survey.

With parents and families integrated into the core philosophy of the FCIL model, it is hardly surprising that these programs shine brightest in the area of family engagement. Because they are not licensed, FCILs are not counted in the total licensed capacity, but according to this report FCIL programs serve 33% more children (3,062) than do family childcare providers (2,300). They types of engagement practices used by FCILs span the spectrum of traditional, parents-as-teachers, and shared governance. In addition to communicating regularly with families and offering lending libraries, half report including family representatives on governing boards and all incorporate family input on program reviews, evaluations, or other forms of continuous quality improvement. Consistent with their principles, all FCILs adapt curricula to the cultures and languages of participating families (compared with 59% of centers) and nearly all offer direct services, which may include home visits, counseling, and job training, to support families.

Even if engagement opportunities are available, families may or may not access them. Focus group participants in the Family Hui (2015) study differed in their willingness to attend free parenting workshops. Some said they would attend and others said they would require incentives to attend. When asked what it would take for them to attend parenting classes, families mentioned:

- Free or inexpensive fee
- Transportation options
- Repeated offerings of the same topic (in case one has scheduling conflicts)
- Free and engaging child care
- Meals
- Other incentives (e.g., credit, work hours, prizes, gas card)

Do families want to be engaged? If their thoughts about transitioning into kindergarten are indicative of their broader view point, focus group participants believe that engagement is important for improving outcomes for children and they want to be more involved. When presented with an opportunity (in this case, to meet their child’s teacher and visit the classrooms in advance), parents were appreciative. Some parents spoke favorably about specific activities that encourage parent involvement (anti-bullying, “make a friend, be a friend”). There were also concerns among families that might discourage engagement. Some parents said they did not always feel welcomed by school staff. Others pointed to persistent barriers to participation, from language difficulties (e.g., poor translations) to inflexible event schedules that have not worked with their schedules.

To date, Hawai‘i has a limited understanding of families’ knowledge and levels of engagement and these come from studies designed for other purposes. The findings have yet to be analyzed in light of what professionals and leaders in the ECE system would like parents to know, but all signs suggest that parents would welcome additional support and information to help them support their children’s development. They need no convincing of the value of family engagement and, when aware of the opportunities available, appear eager to participate. ECE providers, to varying degrees, present opportunities for engagement (especially FCILs), although the quality of those opportunities also varies greatly. No study has yet sought to assess what supports are available for providers to improve family engagement. Nor have existing studies identified the range of parent supports available to families or which families are and are not accessing them. These issues, among others, await further research.

Some Questions to Consider

1. What initiatives are currently have in place to inform parents about what constitutes high-quality child care and education and how different providers match up in terms of quality? Is this information delivered in a culturally and linguistically sensitive manner? How effective are the initiatives and information? What could be improved in this area?
2. What initiatives are in place to promote and increase involvement by and engagement of parents and family members in the development and education of their children? What works well about these initiatives? What could be better?

3. Are families in vulnerable and underserved populations aware of programs and services available to them? How have they learned about them?
4. What are the most important gaps in data or research related to maximizing parental choice? What initiatives are currently underway to address these gaps?
5. How are parents currently provided with information about child development and how best to support school readiness? Is the information provided in a culturally and linguistically sensitive manner? What is effective about the information provided? What could be improved?

References

- DeBaryshe, B. D., Bird, O., Stern, I., & Zysman, D. 2017. *Hawai'i Early Learning Needs Assessment*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Center on the Family. Available at http://uhfamily.hawaii.edu/publications/brochures/e8998_HawaiiEarlyLearningAssessment-Web.pdf.
- DeBaryshe, B. D. 2017. *Hawai'i Early Learning Needs Assessment: Technical Supplement*. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Center on the Family. Available at http://uhfamily.hawaii.edu/publications/brochures/32d2f_ELTechnicalSupplement-Web.pdf
- Early Childhood Action Strategy. 2016. *Childcare and Parenting Support Needs Survey*. Honolulu, HI: SMS. Available at <https://hawaiiactionstrategy.org/s/Child-Care-Early-Childhood-Action-Strategy-Summary-Report-vFinal-Watermarked-100716-3.pdf>.
- Family Hui. 2015. *Final Report: Statewide Coordination and Facilitation of an Integrated Early Childhood Development and Learning System*. Unpublished.