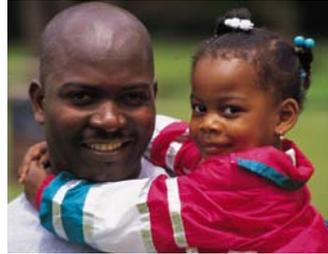




Washington State Department of
Early Learning



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Parent Voices: Executive Summary

Washington State Department of Early Learning Parent Needs Assessment

SRI Project 18252

Submitted to:

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OVERVIEW

Supporting parents as children's first and most important teachers is central to our mission.—Department of Early Learning



Purpose of the Parent Needs Assessment

The Washington State Department of Early Learning (DEL) is committed to supporting parents and others who care for and teach young children so that children are happy, healthy, and well prepared to succeed in school and life. To inform its work, the Washington State Legislature funded a Parent Needs Assessment to gather information directly from parents and guardians (referred to hereafter as “parents”) about parent and family priorities, issues, strengths, and challenges. DEL wanted to learn about the types of services and information that parents use and desire as they nurture and educate their young children. This valuable information will help DEL to set priorities and allocate resources in ways most likely to meet parents’ needs and preferences. DEL contracted with SRI International (SRI) in November 2007 to conduct the Parent Needs Assessment.

To gather information from parents, the Parent Needs Assessment included a statewide phone survey and a series of focus groups held across the state. The phone survey gathered information from a sample of parents randomly selected to provide findings representative of the following:

- All young children in the state
- Children belonging to the following *subpopulations*:
 - Infants, toddlers, and preschool-age children
 - English-speaking and Spanish-speaking families
 - Families living below, at, and above 100% and 185% of the federal poverty threshold (FPT)
 - Families living in urban and rural communities

SRI conducted focus groups across Washington State to enable better understanding of parents’ ideas about, and preferences for, their children’s participation in early childhood programs, including parents from different cultural, language, and other backgrounds. Focus groups included parents who were most likely to use programs that DEL oversees (e.g., ECEAP—the Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program), as well as parent groups that may have been underrepresented in the phone survey, such as parents who spoke a language other than English or Spanish or who did not have a home telephone.

DEL recognizes that Washington State’s families and communities are diverse, with different ethnic, linguistic, and other backgrounds, and have unique preferences and needs. Thus, DEL views the survey and focus group findings as part of an ongoing effort to learn from parents from diverse backgrounds about how DEL can better support all parents in Washington State.

The Parent Needs Assessment was designed to find out directly from parents what they want and need.

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Approach

Both the phone survey and focus group instruments were developed using information from (1) the initial planning for the Parent Needs Assessment that DEL conducted with its stakeholders, (2) a review of research recently conducted in Washington State, (3) internal reviews of draft items by DEL staff, and (4) pilot testing of phone survey questions with parents.

The data collection and analysis methods allow the survey's findings to generalize to all parents with a child age 0 through 5 in Washington State.

Phone survey. SRI's subcontractor, LHK Partners Incorporated, conducted family phone interviews in the language of the home (either English or Spanish) between February 15 and March 30, 2008, with 823 randomly selected parents. Each parent was interviewed about only one child. The resulting phone survey data were then statistically weighted so that they were representative of all children statewide younger than age 6 not yet in kindergarten and of children in each of the subpopulations studied (defined above). Thus, the data collection and analysis methods used allow DEL to generalize the survey's findings to all parents with a child age 0 through 5 in Washington State.

Focus groups. SRI worked closely with agencies recommended by DEL to identify and recruit families for focus groups. A total of 85 parents participated across the eight focus groups held. The groups included representation from the following:

- Parents who are teens
- Foster parents
- Parents who live on military bases
- Parents who are homeless
- Parents who are migrant and seasonal agricultural workers
- Parents from an American Indian tribe
- Parents from the Chinese community
- Parents from the Vietnamese community

Each focus group lasted 1.5 hours. Each focus group participant received a gift certificate for participating; food, child care, and transportation vouchers were provided to enable parents' participation. The focus groups were recorded, and the transcripts of those recordings were assessed and coded independently by two research team members to identify similarities and differences within and across the focus groups and to develop a set of emerging themes.

The early learning and family support services, programs, and resources that parents cited most frequently and indicated that they use, want, and value are described below for the phone survey, followed by key findings from the focus groups.

PHONE SURVEY FINDINGS



Findings from the parent phone survey are organized below by the following topics: (1) characteristics of children, (2) parental preferences for early learning services, (3) parental preferences for early learning information, (4) parental preferences for early care and education, (5) children's development and parental concerns, and (6) family literacy practices.

Characteristics of Children

The demographic characteristics of children under age 6 who have not yet entered kindergarten in Washington State are as follows.

- Primary language spoken: 83% English, 7% Spanish, and 10% other language.
- Family income level: 18% at or below 100% of FPT; 21% above 100% and at or below 185% of FPT; and 61% above 185% of FPT.
- Type of community: 84% live in urban and 16% in rural communities.
- Maternal education: 11% of their mothers have less than a high school diploma/GED, 16% have a high school diploma/GED, 31% have some college, and 42% have a college degree.
- Paternal education: 12% of their fathers have less than a high school diploma/GED, 19% have a high school diploma/GED, 26% have some college, and 43% have a college degree.

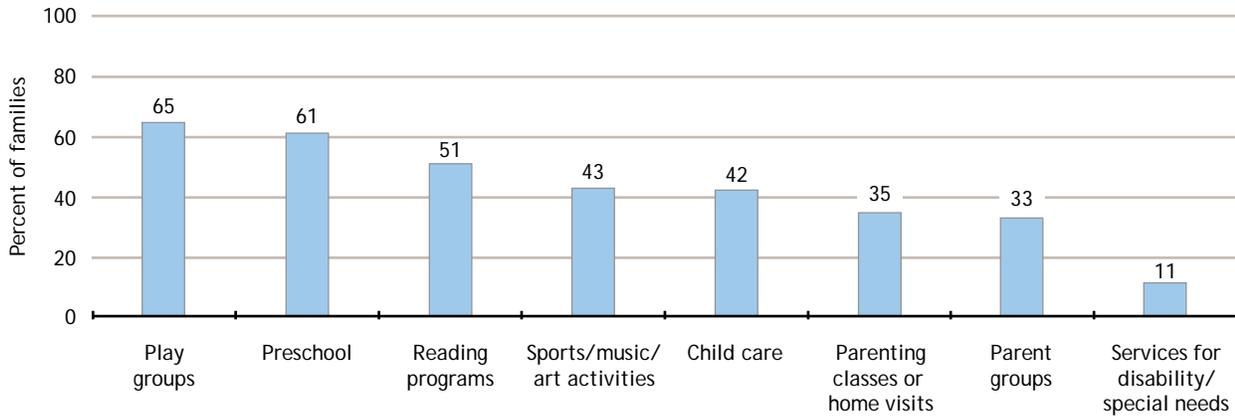
Parental Preferences for Early Learning Services

Participation in services. Parents were asked whether they or another family member have ever participated in a range of early learning services. More than half of families have used services that focus on children's learning and socialization such as play groups, preschool, and reading programs, and more than 40% have used child care or had their child participate in a recreational sports, music, or art activity (see Exhibit 1). A third of families have used services that promote parenting skills such as parenting classes/home visits and parent groups. The percentage of families who have participated in services for children with special needs (11%) corresponds closely to the 10% of children who have been identified with special needs.

More than half of families have used early learning services that focus on stimulating children's learning and socialization, and a third have used services that promote better parenting skills.

Participation in early learning services differs among the subpopulations. The percentage of families who have ever used services that focus on children's learning and socialization—play groups, reading programs, recreation activities, and services for children with disabilities and other special needs—increases with their child's age. Fewer Spanish-speaking families than English-speaking families have participated in play groups, parent groups, and services for children with special needs. Fewer families living in poverty than families with higher incomes have participated in play groups and recreation activities.

Exhibit 1. Early Learning Services That Families Have Used, Statewide



Note: All parents were asked about participation in every service except for preschool, which was asked only of parents with a child age 3-5.

Reasons for not participating. Some parents have not ever participated in one or more of the eight early learning services in Exhibit 1. For all but one of the services, parents have commonly not participated in the specific service because they are not interested in the service or do not need it. Lack of participation also occurs because parents are not aware of the service or the service is not available, their child is too young, the hours of the program are inconvenient for the family, or the program is too expensive. Fewer than 1% of the families mentioned transportation barriers, staff who do not speak the family’s language, full programs, lack of family eligibility, or dislike of the quality of the program as the reason for not having ever participated.

Reasons for families not having participated in various early learning services differ in regard to their child’s age, their primary language, and their income level. Parents of younger children (0 through 17 months) are more likely than parents of older children to indicate that their child is too young as the reason for not participating.

English-speaking families most often have not participated in services because they are not interested in or do not need the service or because their child is too young. Spanish-speaking families are more often not aware of an available service and have conflicts because of the hours or schedule of the service. Families living in poverty are more often not aware of available programs or cite the expense of services as a reason for not participating in services (i.e., recreation activities and services for children with special needs), compared with families with higher incomes.

Participation in medical, nutrition, and family support programs. Almost one-third of parents of children younger than 6 statewide have participated in the Medical Assistance program in the past 12 months, and a similar percentage report participating in the Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) nutrition program. About one-tenth of families participate in the Food Stamp and state welfare programs, including Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). More families with younger children (0 through 17 months) than families with older children use WIC and TANF services. About three-quarters of Spanish-speaking families have participated in Medical Assistance and WIC programs, compared with one-third of English-speaking families. More Spanish-speaking than English-speaking families

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Almost one-third of families with children younger than 6 statewide have participated in the Medical Assistance or WIC nutrition program in the past 12 months, and about three-quarters of Spanish-speaking families have done so.

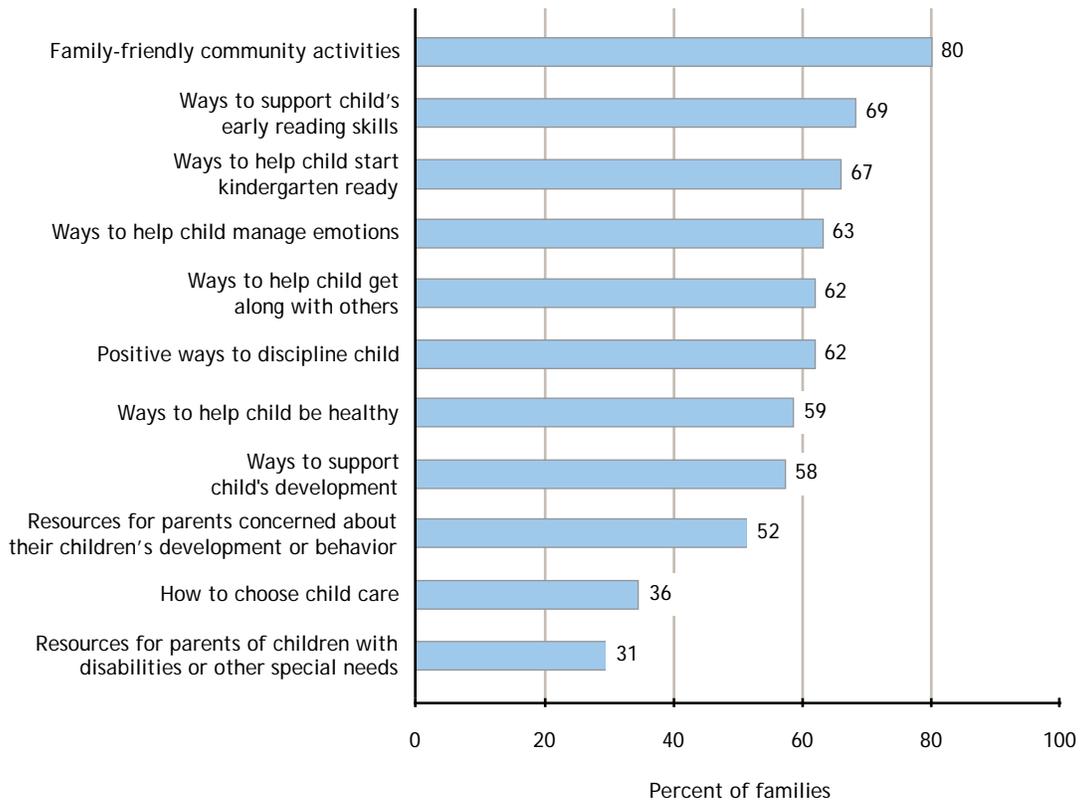
have participated in the Food Stamp program. Lower-income families participate more frequently than higher-income families in Medical Assistance, WIC, and Food Stamp programs; and more rural than urban families participate in WIC.

Parental Preferences for Early Learning Information

Topics about which parents want more information. Parents want more information about numerous topics related to their child’s early learning. Parents most often want more information about family-friendly activities, events, and places in the community (see Exhibit 2). More than two-thirds of parents want more information about how to support their child’s early reading and school readiness skills. More than half of all parents desire more information about how to help their child’s social-emotional development, use positive discipline, keep their child healthy, and support their child’s overall development. Slightly more than one-third of parents desire more information about how to choose child care. Nearly one-third of parents want more information about resources for parents of children with disabilities and other special needs, even though only one-tenth of the parents have been told that their child has a disability or a developmental delay. Reasons for not wanting more information about any topic may also include not being interested in or not needing the information and feeling that enough information is already available.

Parents most often want more information about family-friendly activities, events, and places in the community.

Exhibit 2. Early Learning Topics About Which Families Would Like More Information, Statewide



Analysis of data for subpopulations indicates that Spanish-speaking families are more often interested than English-speaking families in receiving all the types of information. Families living in poverty are significantly more interested in ways to support a child's early reading skills, ways to support a child's development, resources to address parental concerns about children's development or behavior, and how to choose child care than are families with higher incomes. The types of information parents desire do not differ in regard to their children's age. For example, parents of younger children are as interested as parents of older children in ways to support children's early reading skills and school readiness.

Statewide, parents trust health care providers the most as a source of early learning information. Child care providers are another highly trusted source.

Preferred sources of information. To help determine the most effective ways to reach parents with information, parents were asked how much they both trust and want to receive early learning information from 11 different sources. Statewide survey results indicate that there is no one source for information on early learning that all parents trust and want to use. Some parents trust some sources "a lot," but many other parents do "not at all" trust the same sources. Statewide, parents most often trust and want early learning information from health care providers (71%). Other trusted and desired sources of information include child care providers (53%) and friends and family members (43%). Forty percent of parents trust and want information from their faith or religious community "a lot," but close to a quarter of parents (23%) do "not at all" trust and want information from this source. Parents also differ from each other in the extent to which they trust and want information from parenting classes.

Their child's age and the family's language and economic status also influence parents' degree of trust in information sources. More parents of older children than parents of younger children trust and want information from their child care provider. More Spanish-speaking families than English-speaking families trust and want information from their faith/religious community, parenting classes, home visits, materials that come in the mail, radio/television, and a toll-free advice line. Fewer Spanish-speaking families than English-speaking families trust and want information from health care providers "a lot" (48% versus 78%). Families living in poverty trust and want information from home visits and radio/television more and the Internet less, compared with families with higher incomes.

Parental Preferences for Early Care and Education

Typical child care arrangements. Parents were asked whether anyone other than a parent or guardian cares for their child on a regular basis (i.e., at least 2 days a week), and if so, who. Half of all children younger than 6 across the state do not participate in child care outside of their immediate family; they receive care only from a parent or guardian. Of the remaining children, 30% are in a center-based child care or preschool program, 15% are in informal care (i.e., have a relative, friend, or nanny care for them either in the parent's home or in the home of the caregiver), and 5% are in a family-based child care program (i.e., a child care program run in a family's home with 12 or fewer children). The type of usual care differs with the children's age: younger children more often are in parental or informal care, and older children are more often in center-based care.

Half of all children younger than 6 across the state are cared for only by their parent or guardian.

Accessibility of child care that meets the family’s needs. Approximately 75% of families are able to find care for their child that meets their needs most of the time. Approximately 1 out of 6 families find it somewhat difficult to find child care for their child that meets their needs most of the time; and about 1 out of 20 parents have not been able to find care for their child that meets their needs most of the time. Therefore, almost 1 in 4 families have experienced difficulty in finding the child care they need. Subpopulation analyses related to the child’s age, family’s primary language, family’s economic status, and type of community in which the family lives found no significant differences in a family’s ability to find child care that meets their needs.

Almost 75% of families are able to find child care that meets their needs.

Interactions between child care providers and parents. Parents with children in child care were asked about the kinds of parent-provider communication and support they experienced. More than 90% indicate that their provider makes them feel comfortable when they are visiting. More than three-quarters of the parents have talked with their child’s care provider or preschool teacher about how to help their child learn and grow. However, fewer parents (31%) report that their child’s care provider or preschool teacher informs them about services available in the community.

More than three-quarters of parents have talked with their child’s care provider or preschool teacher about how to help their child learn and grow, but fewer than a third have received information from their child’s care provider or teacher about services available in the community.

Parents’ responses differ according to their child’s age and the family’s primary language and income level. Parents of older children more often indicate that their child’s care provider or preschool teacher lets them know about services in the community that might interest or help their family, compared with parents of younger children. Many more Spanish-speaking families than English-speaking families report that their child care provider lets them know about community services. More families living in poverty than families with higher incomes indicate that their child’s care provider or preschool teacher lets them know about relevant services in the community.

Characteristics of child care important to parents. Parents were asked about the degree of importance of 15 factors in their selecting and keeping their current child care arrangement or preschool program. For almost all parents, a clean and safe environment and the ways in which providers talk and play with children are “very important” reasons in selecting child care and preschool programs. Almost three-quarters of parents rate 11 of the 15 characteristics, all related to program quality, as “very important.” For half or more of the parents, program accessibility characteristics, such as hours, location, language spoken, and affordability, are “very important.”

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More Spanish-speaking families than English-speaking families rate four program accessibility characteristics as “very important”: convenient location (92% versus 55%), convenient and flexible hours (90% versus 55%), affordable cost (82% versus 45%), and the language spoken by the provider (78% versus 51%). Spanish-speaking parents are also more likely than English-speaking parents to consider the way children play and get along together (99% versus 83%) and the program’s respect for culture and values (93% versus 74%) as “very important.”

Skills related to emotional well-being and social competence are the goals parents cite most often as very important for their children to learn in preschool.

Preschool learning goals. Parents of children ages 3 through 5 who are in a preschool or center-based child care program were asked to rate the importance of 10 potential learning goals for children in a preschool setting. The majority of parents rate most of the preschool learning goals as “very important.” However, parents differ about the importance of some goals. Skills related to emotional well-being and social competence are the goals parents cite most often (97%) as “very important” for their children to learn in preschool. Other “very important” goals for 88% to 91% of parents relate to approaches to learning (persisting at tasks), cognition and general knowledge (being interested in books; learning the alphabet, colors, and numbers), and communication skills (being able to follow directions).

Spanish-speaking families almost unanimously consider every skill as being “very important” for their children to learn in preschool, whereas English-speaking families vary more in regard to the importance they assign to learning various skills. In addition, Spanish-speaking families more often rate learning how to ask questions and tell stories (i.e., communication skills) as being “very important” than do English-speaking families (98% versus 80%).

Children’s Development and Parental Concerns

Parents were asked whether they have any developmental, behavioral, or health concerns about their child, and whether they have shared those concerns with a professional. Statewide, 29% of families report at least one serious developmental, behavioral, or health concern. Of those families with at least one serious concern, 78% have shared their concern with their child’s doctor, child care provider, or another professional. However, more than 1 in 5 parents have not shared their serious concern with a professional. Ten percent of all families indicate that a professional has identified their child as having a disability or developmental delay.

Developmental issues differ by subpopulations. More parents report serious developmental and behavioral concerns as their children get older; and more older children than younger children have been identified as having a disability or developmental delay (3% of 0 through 17 months, 11% of 18 through 35 months, and 13% of 3 through 5 years old). Also, more English-speaking children (11%) than Spanish-speaking children (3%) have been identified with disabilities or delays.

Family Literacy Practices

National research has found that reading or showing books with children at least three times a week is associated with higher levels of school readiness when children enter school. Most parents (93%) in Washington State read or show picture books at least three times a week with their child, and almost three-quarters do so every day.

Differences in family literacy practices related to primary language and income levels are significant. More English-speaking families than Spanish-speaking families read or show picture books with their child three or more times a week (95% versus 75%). More families living above 185% of FPT than families with lower incomes read or show picture books with their child three or more times a week (98% versus 86%).

Statewide, 29% of families report at least one serious developmental, behavioral, or health concern.

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Differences in family literacy practices related to primary language and income levels are significant.

FOCUS GROUP FINDINGS



Findings from the focus groups are organized below by the following five topics: (1) services and resources important to parents of young children, (2) access to and availability of services and information, (3) parental preferences for delivery of services and information, (4) perceived quality of early care and education programs, and (5) preferences and needs unique to specific ethnic, linguistic, and social groups of parents.

Services and Resources Important to Parents of Young Children

The comments of many focus group parents about the importance of the first 5 years of a child's life for later success in school and life demonstrate that they understand that young children are active learners. Parents in many groups also understand that how they interact with their young children makes a difference in the children's learning and development, including building their early academic skills, social skills, and emotional well-being.

Across all the focus groups, parents use, want, and value early learning and parent support services and programs.

Across all the focus groups, parents use, want, and value early learning and parent support services and programs. The services and programs most commonly mentioned as important to parents of young children are (1) early care and preschool programs, (2) developmental screening services, (3) activities to do at home with children, (4) story time programs, (5) services for children with special needs, and (6) parenting education classes.

What parents say ...

- Early learning services are very important. Having kids start school early is important so they can learn a lot.
- It would be nice to have developmental milestone screenings available. Children could be screened and then referred to whatever and parents could know if there is an issue they need to work on.
- We want information about disabilities or learning issues that we should be aware of or watching out for.
- The child care program staff send parents every week information about what the children are learning (like songs, letters, numbers). This helps me stay on top of what my child is learning.
- Library programs are great for me and my child. They provide an opportunity for being social and learning.
- I wish there was a place where you could go every week where families could experience new ways to enhance their babies' development. Sometimes it could be music and sometimes just a social gathering.

Access to and Availability of Services and Information

Parents want more information about early learning services and programs to support them and their young children. Parents in all focus groups lack knowledge about the availability of various services, programs, and resources. This is a major finding of the focus groups: parents often do not access services because they are unaware of their existence. In addition, most parents cite other barriers to finding and using services, including (1) lack of schedule flexibility to accommodate their work schedules, (2) transportation issues, (3) high cost and eligibility requirements, (4) language barriers, and (5) insufficient supply of particular services (e.g., infant child care slots, recreation facilities for young children, services for children with special needs).

Parents in all focus groups lack knowledge about the availability of various services, programs, and resources.

What parents say ...

- If we don't have the information, we can't find the services.
- You need to ask where to find out about services for your family, and it's hard to know where to ask.
- Longer child care hours, like more 24-hour day cares would be good.
- To get to appointments on time, I have to catch the bus an hour early.... Some of the buses don't drop you off near where you want to go, so you end up walking a few miles.
- Child care is so expensive. If you're not getting it paid for by the state, you can't afford it.
- I feel like all the resources, especially language-friendly services, are concentrated in downtown. So it is hard to move anywhere else.
- When specialty doctors are not available at the local clinics, we have to travel very far to get these services.

Parental Preferences for Delivery of Services and Information

Parents across the focus groups want more information and resources to help support their children's early learning and development (e.g., developmental milestones and social-emotional development). Parents also want additional information to help them support their children's optimal health and well-being (e.g., in regard to disabilities, nutrition, allergies, asthma) and to support them in being successful parents (e.g., managing parental stress, positive discipline, and continuing education).

Parents in all focus groups agree that information should come from trusted sources. Some sources involve direct contacts (e.g., service providers, family, and friends). Other sources involve indirect contacts (e.g., newsletters, billboards, the Internet, radio). No one source of information is preferred by all groups.

Parents want to get information in a variety of formats, and different groups of parents want to receive information in different ways. In general, parents prefer consolidated and integrated information, such as from co-located services and comprehensive home visits. They want the providers who serve them to be well informed about a variety of services available to families in the community and to share that information with them. Some parents prefer to receive information in the

Parents prefer consolidated and integrated information. They want the providers who serve them to be well informed about a variety of services and to share that information with them.

mail, and many parents referred positively to the CHILD Profile Health Promotion mailings that are sent to Washington State parents of children up to age 6.

Use of the Internet as a source of information receives mixed reviews. Some parents use and trust the Internet; others do not. Parents who use the Internet would make use of an early-learning website if it had accurate and trustworthy information, was well organized and easy to navigate, allowed searching of information by region or community, and was presented in their home language.

What parents say ...

- You want to seek information from people you trust and respect.
- I ask my pediatrician or my friends and family for information and support.
- It would be great if there was a hotline for parents to call and ask questions about different issues. If they could consolidate all the resources into a hotline, we could just call and ask.
- The people that we interact with should be resources for us, like the workers in this program, case workers, and pediatricians.
- It would be really nice if there was a cumulative list of all the services that are available. So many people don't know about available services.
- It would be nice to get information in the mail, such as information about events that are coming up this month.
- A website that provides links to other quality websites, one-stop shopping with links.

Perceived Quality of Early Care and Education Programs

Parents assess a number of program quality and accessibility factors in choosing child care and preschool programs. These include recommendations by others, structural program characteristics (e.g., hours, safety, location, nutrition, cost), provider interactions with the child and with parents, and activities offered and curriculum used. Some parents receive support from child care providers, including information about their child's progress and daily activities, home visits, and assistance with enrollment in additional programs and services.

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What parents say ...

- The main thing that we do to decide if a program is good is to ask parents already in the program for their opinions.
- One way we judge the quality of a program is to see how the provider interacts with the kids. We take our kids with us on interviews, and then we see how the provider interacts with them.
- There is a feeling of security; the kids are well taken care of.
- I look to see if my child feels comfortable. Every day when I pick my child up, she is so happy, and you can tell she had a good day. You can tell she's having fun there.
- I think all day care programs should chart and track every child's progress. They should give parents updates and tell us if there are any problems with our children.
- I want to know that the teacher has a lesson plan for how she is going to teach the children.
- Social structure is important for me and my wife regarding our son. It is important that our son is learning to get along and share with the other students.

Preferences and Needs Unique to Specific Groups of Parents

Parents expressed similar needs, preferences, and concerns about many of the topics discussed across the eight focus groups. However, some unique preferences and barriers to using information and services were raised by each group as well. Unique needs and preferences reported by individual groups include:

Some unique preferences and barriers to using information and services were raised by each group.

- Teen parents report difficulty in accessing some services because of their age and requirements to involve their parents. Teens also want more support to continue their education.
- Foster parents strongly desire credentialed child care providers for their foster children, more information about the special histories of their foster children (e.g., attachment issues, history of abuse, fetal alcohol syndrome, prenatal drug exposure), and social and emotional support to help them cope with feelings of loss as children transition in and out of their homes.
- Parents in the military need services to address the special mental health needs of their children, such as parents' being deployed and frequent moves.
- Parents who are homeless have a strong need for child care that is flexible because their schedules change daily, and they experience barriers when enrolling in services because they have no permanent address.
- Parents who are migrant and seasonal agricultural workers need child care that meets their schedules, especially during the summer months. Many parents are forced to bring their children to work, which can be dangerous.
- Parents from an American Indian tribe lack access to services because many services are not available on the reservation and transportation is a barrier when they try to use services off the reservation.
- Parents whose primary language is other than English strongly desire high-quality early education programs for their children; they also want these programs to teach their children English.
- Parents from the Vietnamese community want to get information, in their home language, from local trusted providers, newspapers, and the radio.
- Parents who identified themselves as stay-at-home parents feel isolated and therefore need sources of emotional and social support.

DEL will use the expressed interests and needs of parents as highlighted by the Parent Needs Assessment to guide the development of new programs, services, and resources for parents and to strengthen existing efforts to support parents.

Conclusion

After surveying and listening to parents from different types of families and communities across Washington State, it is clear that all parents deeply care for their children and want to support their health and development. DEL will use the expressed interests and needs of parents as highlighted by the Parent Needs Assessment to guide the development of new programs, services, and resources for parents and to strengthen existing efforts to support parents.

For a copy of the full phone survey and focus group reports, visit <http://del.wa.gov>.

- *Parent Voices: A Statewide Look. Washington State Department of Early Learning Parent Needs Assessment: Phone Survey*
- *Parent Voices: A Closer Look. Washington State Department of Early Learning Parent Needs Assessment: Focus Groups*