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“Love for Children and Patience”: Voices of Nebraska’s Parents of Young Children 2024

RESEARCH BRIEF



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Early Childhood
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Introduction

Children’s education and developmental outcomes are enhanced when children participate in quality early care and education.¹ However, many children living in under-resourced families lack sufficient access to quality early care and education programs.^{2,3}

In 2019, we conducted a statewide, survey-based needs assessment to understand Nebraska families’ perceptions about early care and education, including their needs and barriers to accessing quality care. Many under-resourced populations were not adequately reached through that survey.

From 2020 to 2022, we recruited Nebraska families from under-resourced backgrounds who needed care for their young children to participate in focus groups. We facilitated conversations to understand a) what families want, need, and value in early care and education; b) what families believe their children need to grow and thrive; c) what barriers exist for families in accessing quality care and education; and d) what supports currently exist for families.

Method

We collaborated with community-based facilitators to reach communities we had not been successful in reaching previously. Specifically, we wanted to collect information from Black and African American families, Hispanic and Latino families, refugee and immigrant families, Native American and American Indian families, families of children with disabilities, families experiencing poverty or homelessness, and families providing foster care. Focus group facilitators were recruited from trusted professionals working with the families within their communities.

Community-based facilitators were trained to conduct focus groups and provided input to ensure that the data collection, consent, and protocol content and processes were culturally responsive. Community-based facilitators recruited 128 parents to participate in 20 focus groups. Parents were 19 or older and had at least one child age 5 or younger with a current need for child care. See Table 1 for descriptive information regarding parents.

Community-based facilitators conducted focus groups of five to six parents in each group. The parents chose whether they wanted virtual or in-person focus groups. The focus group discussions were recorded and lasted about an hour. Fourteen recordings were transcribed and cleaned by graduate research assistants, and six recordings were translated and transcribed by a third-party vendor because they were conducted in a language other than English (e.g., Spanish, Karen, and Somali).

We used thematic analysis with a culturally responsive lens.^{4,5} Data were managed and coded using NVivo 12 Pro software. Researchers met weekly for peer debriefing, and coding disagreements were settled through consensus.⁶ Identified themes were shared with the parents through a member-checking process; facilitators asked focus group parents to evaluate researchers’ interpretations and provide feedback.⁷ Direct quotes from parents are included with the themes beginning on page 5.

TABLE 1 | DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS

Variable Name	n	%
Race and Ethnicity (n=117)		
African American or Black	46	39.3
American Indian or Alaska Native	*	*
Asian or Asian American	11	9.4
Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish Origin	34	29.1
White	11	9.4
Karen	*	*
Somali	*	*
Language spoken in the home (n=116)		
Arabic	*	*
English	53	45.7
Karen	10	8.6
Somali	19	16.4
Spanish	26	22.4
English with an Additional Language	*	*
Education levels (n=98)		
Elementary/middle school	15	15.3
Some high school	12	12.2
High school diploma/GED	27	27.6
Postsecondary certificate or associate degree	13	13.3
Bachelor's degree	19	19.4
Graduate degree	12	12.2
Hours worked per week (n=107)		
Below 20	42	39.2
21–40	38	35.5
41 or more	27	25.2
Immigrant/refugee (n=61)		
Yes	21	34.4
No	40	65.6
Worried that food would run out before you get money to buy (n=80)		
Never true	39	48.8
Sometimes true	34	42.5
Often true	*	*
Child care arrangement used (n=116)		
Family member who does not live in your home	23	19.8
Friend or neighbor	12	10.3
Nanny or au pair	12	10.3
Child care center/day care provider	18	15.5
Preschool/PreKindergarten	20	17.2
Special education PreKindergarten	*	*
Other family member who lives in your home	19	16.4
Kindergarten	*	*

Note: * indicates categories with responses less than n=10 have been masked to respect the confidentiality of parents.

Findings

WHAT FAMILIES WANT, NEED, AND VALUE IN CARING FOR AND EDUCATING CHILDREN

Child Care Provider Communication

The parents reported that they prefer detailed communication about what the children do, eat, and how they behave throughout the day to shallow and routine reporting of children's day. They also indicated that they like receiving surprise progress updates via different media (e.g., WhatsApp, Facebook, verbal communication, written notes, texting, emailing, or applications such as ClassDojo) based on their preferences.

PARENT VOICE

"I like it when they call us on the phone or in person. I don't like letters. Sometimes they put letters in the children's school bags ... and you open them the next day, and 'there's a COVID infection.'"

Child Care Provider Patience

Patience was identified as a fundamental quality among the providers working with the children. Because children come from different cultures, patience would help the providers to accommodate all children and treat each child as an individual.

PARENT VOICE

"Here in this town, there is a lot of diversity of cultures and nationalities, and some kids start school who don't speak English. ... to work with children, the first thing you have to have is a love for children and patience."

Individualized Learning

Parents underscored the need for their children to be treated as individuals with unique needs and ways of learning and growing. They reported that they would like child care providers who recognize the particular strengths and weaknesses of their children and tailor strategies to provide unique opportunities for individualized learning and development.

PARENT VOICE

"Just realize that every child learns differently—it's not a cookie cutter ... you have to just tap into each child's uniqueness."

Cultural and Racial Competence

Parents emphasized the need for child care providers to understand and appreciate that children come from diverse cultural backgrounds. According to parents, it is important to have racially diverse educators to curb racial discrimination between students in the classroom and to avoid implicit bias due to race.

PARENT VOICE

“For me race is important ... and I need to make sure that our instructor or whoever I’m leaving my child with understands... This is another human. They’re not going to be treated differently or looked at differently even implicitly, you know these unconscious biases, that if they’re having a bad day, maybe they’re just having a bad day. It’s not because they’re [a] bad kid ... Just treating them with that kind of respect and also understand that, because they will be a minority within their peers, that sometimes when fights happened on the playground extra questions may need to be asked, and so I need educators who are aware of those extra nuances that come with having students of color, especially when you only have one or two in a field of White flowers.”

Trusting Relationship

Parents regarded trust as a marker of quality. They indicated it is easier to send a child to a child care provider if they trust that the provider will meet both the parents’ and the children’s needs. Parents sent their children to child care providers whom they knew and were comfortable with.

PARENT VOICE

“I just wanted to send them somewhere where I know he will be safe and learning at the same time, and people I trust.”

Keen and Observant Child Care Provider

Parents identified sensitive and observant qualities among providers as important in caring for their children. Providers with these qualities can provide parents with information regarding their children’s growth toward key developmental milestones. These skills would help providers to identify unusual behaviors and work with parents to counter such behaviors in time.

PARENT VOICE

“They need to be attentive to the children ... we don’t notice things at home, but the teacher notices.”

WHAT FAMILIES THINK CHILDREN NEED TO GROW AND THRIVE

Safety

Parents underscored the importance of physical and emotional safety in early care and education. According to the parents, child care providers need to ensure that children are not only fed, provided with ample time to rest, and kept clean, but also protected from any form of injury. Providers need to support children with regular routines and warm care to ensure they have a sense of predictability and comfort.

PARENT VOICE

“We see in media when the people place their child at day care, they may not be able to take care of the child very well, not feeding them well. The child comes back home with injuries because they are not able to oversee every child, as there are many children. It will be better if we take care by ourselves.”

Diverse Experiences and People

Parents highlighted the need for children to have diverse experiences and opportunities in interactions with different people, indicating this will curb “culture shock” by the time children enter Kindergarten. Diverse experiences would help children learn to treat those they perceive to be different with respect and develop an appreciation for diversity. Diverse activities would also provide children with opportunities to learn and acquire different skill sets.

PARENT VOICE

“Give them a lot of experiences ... take them to museums ... to other places that you as a parent ... with all the hours we work, we don’t have the time to do it. I think it would be an important part of the kids’ education ... they go to a museum, and they see the presidents, and they like their story. ‘Oh, I want to be president.’”

Kindergarten Readiness

Parents expressed the need for providers to prepare children for Kindergarten, specifically for writing, reading, and acquiring academic skills. Parents also highlighted the need to foster social skills to prepare children to express themselves and to follow rules and directions.

PARENT VOICE

“They prepare the kids for the Kindergarten, like when [child’s name] started to school, he already knew all the rules like when they come to school, like washing their hands and these tips they follow and how to walk in the hallway, thinking about how they teach them how to be the line leader, and one of their rules is similar to elementary school, so they can be already ready when they start to school.”

Play Opportunities

Parents acknowledged play and exploration as important in enhancing children’s skill development and considered play opportunities necessary in children’s development of social, communication, and language skills. However, parents highlighted the need for some limits during play and exploration to protect children from unsafe experiences.

PARENT VOICE

“I think play is very important at that age because we can teach them many things through play. ... we can teach children boundaries but let them explore and like discover what they like, and give all of those options, but still have those boundaries.”

Regular Routines

Parents identified regular routines as an important factor in children’s development. They indicated that consistent routines would help children develop healthy habits and help direct children’s behavior by establishing clear expectations

PARENT VOICE

“I’m really big with routines ... I want my children to have routine before starting school, ... so children can have confidence where they are going or what they expect or with whom they are going to be.”

Consistent Caregiving

Parents underscored the need for having the same child care providers for longer periods of time to help foster relationships. Having consistent providers would ensure children have more time to interact and develop bonds with providers. Providers would have time to develop a greater depth of knowledge about the children (i.e., recognize their strengths and weaknesses), developing stronger relationships.

PARENT VOICE

“Having the same teachers in there so that they can have familiar faces and they are not making and breaking relationships consistently. ... [It’s important] that they build that same kind of bonds that they have with us with their school moms because they do spend a lot of time ... making that relationship and loving them and having the same thing ... the nurturing.”

Setting Goals

Parents acknowledged clearly set goals as imperative for young children’s development. Having meaningful goals improves children’s confidence as they receive reinforcement or encouragement while working toward accomplishing and meeting those goals.

PARENT VOICE

“To set goals for my child and then ...when you hit that mark if you have reached that goal ... celebrate it as good as possible and [encourage] them to constantly do more and explore. That is one of the biggest things that ... needs to be done.”

Socialization

Parents highlighted the need for socialization to help children develop language and math skills in addition to learning and appreciating their feelings and those of others. Socialization was also identified as necessary and important in helping children learn acceptable ways of interacting with peers and adults.

PARENT VOICE

“Socialization is very important for my little [Name]. So, they could spend more time with kids of their age, to learn more about numbers, [and] colors. But more importantly, to make friends.”

THE EXISTING BARRIERS TO OBTAINING QUALITY CARE AND EDUCATION

Cost of Early Care and Education Services

The cost of child care was identified as a hindrance to accessing quality early care and education. Some families accessed early care and education via services offered through an individualized family service plan for children with disabilities. Those unable to afford child care took their children to family or members of their ethnic community to bypass cost.

PARENT VOICE

“Child care was so expensive that I was a stay-at-home mom with her until she got into preschool and Kindergarten. We just didn’t have the money and it was so expensive anyway that I just stayed home with her. Fortunately, you know, with Medicaid and everything we were able to get [my son] in here so I could, you know, not lose my mind.”

Cultural and Language Barriers

Some parents experienced language barriers that made it difficult to communicate with care providers. Somali parents also highlighted concerns that their religion was not observed in child care. Other parents perceived that their children were treated differently because of their culture.

PARENT VOICE

“I do not speak English. I cannot help with anything at school. When it comes to [providers], as Somalis we do not have [providers]. All day cares are owned by some people whom we don’t belong to the same religion. When children are young it is difficult to practice English, because we speak our mother tongue and previously, we had a problem of not understanding the teachers. That is our biggest problem, but we still take our children to [providers], but having Somali [providers] is something we need so much if we can have it. ... I don’t like my child to be discriminated and I will only take him/her to where I think he is happy with it.”

Lack of Knowledge and Flexible Child Care

Parents identified lack of child care with flexible hours as a barrier to accessing care as many parents reported working hours outside the typical 8 a.m.– 5 p.m. job. Other parents indicated that they did not know that some services were available (e.g., services for children with disabilities).

PARENT VOICE

“A lot of jobs are outside of the 7 a.m. to 6 o’clock time frame. Now who’s going to watch my child, and I’m sad to say it. There are only just a handful of 24-hour day cares that are really 24 hours, so for mothers this is the predicament, and we have to just go out, and by any means necessary get [a] job.”

THE EXISTING SUPPORTS FOR OBTAINING QUALITY CARE AND EDUCATION

Informal Social Networks

Parents identified trusted friends (largely from their ethnic community), close social networks, social media, and internet searches as what they relied on for help. Accessing early care and education was a sole responsibility of the family involved, so parents researched services and shared information among their ethnic community.

PARENT VOICE

“Some of my best decisions have been made because I know of another person who I really respect and value their opinion. ... I also use social media, just Googling stuff, because there’s so much out there to help people, but nobody tells you about it. You have to go and try to find it or it’s word of mouth ... whether it’s a disabled child or an elderly person or low-income family ... You’d think that there’d be advertisements for help everywhere and there’s just not.”

Formal Social Networks

Parents also reported accessing information and resources through their school directors, children’s pediatricians, child care staff, teachers, and family engagement specialists. Some parents leveraged the expertise of early care and education professionals to access opportunities and services.

PARENT VOICE

“My Family Engagement Specialist, whenever she didn’t have an answer, she would look into it, and that really meant a lot, and several times she looked into several concerns I had, not only things to do with my child, my kids, but also personal things that I wanted help with.”

Family, Trusted Friend, or Neighbor

Many parents provided their own care or used family members or members of their ethnic cultural community to break through barriers of culture, language, and trust. Some parents kept their children home due to language and cultural barriers and lack of trust. Some parents sent their children to family members (e.g., mothers, sisters, and older children) because they feared that their children would be treated differently at formal child care because of cultural differences. Others mentioned relying on family care due to high costs at licensed child care.

PARENT VOICE

“My first three children stayed at home with my mother. ... We have several family members who will make sure that he has any and everything that he needs in order to achieve greatness and or be healthy and happy, and it’s cheap and safe being a family member.”

Takeaways

Partnering with community-based facilitators supported recruitment from under-resourced communities, demonstrating the importance of community participatory methods in recruiting from and researching populations that may have reason to distrust the research process.

Effective communication and cultural diversity among child care providers were identified as both needed and valued in early care and education. Early childhood programs in the state need to recruit diverse workforce to facilitate enrollment of children from under-resourced populations. Training staff and hiring bilingual providers who can speak the under-resourced populations’ languages are also positive actions that could be taken by early childhood programs in the state.

Parents reported relying on formal and informal networks to access early care and education. Programs across the state can use the existing formal and informal networks to facilitate access to care among these populations. Programs also need to enhance social integration to support social networks and work with the participating families to reach other families.

The high cost of early care and education services and inflexible schedules were cited as barriers to accessing quality care, which resulted in families from under-resourced populations relying on family or neighbor care. Increased subsidization and standardizing of family child care could result in expanded access during non-traditional hours.

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