

Preschool Development Grant-Renewal

Child Care Decision Making for Children with Special Needs

INTRODUCTION

The Preschool Development Grant – Renewal (PDG-R) supports efforts for states to analyze and streamline early learning and care (ELC) mixed delivery systems resulting in improved quality of care. Child Care Resource Center (CCRC) leads California’s efforts to engage families in feedback sessions that help inform policy-makers on ways to improve the ELC system. In September 2021, CCRC facilitated a conversation with nine parent caregivers of children with special needs. The discussion focused on three key topics: child care decision-making and the impact of COVID-19 on access to ELC programs and services; the need for additional training and resources for ELC providers and families; and the isolating nature of early learning, identification and intervention systems. The group was racially and geographically diverse with representation from five counties across the state.



“Finding care and services during the pandemic has just been a mess. We have been trying for months to get occupational therapy evaluations and services, but schools and centers are overwhelmed.”

“During COVID, my son was home and did everything online. He has services, but they were no help when we have to do it online- it was too difficult... he regressed in socialization due to the isolation.”



CAREGIVER DIVERSITY

Figure 1. RACE

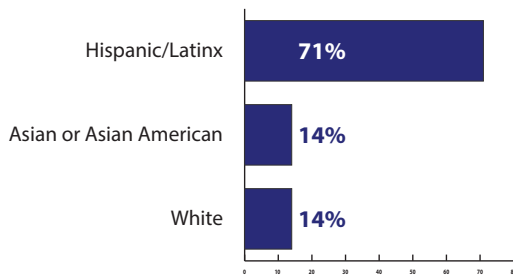


Figure 2. GEOGRAPHY



GENERAL CHILD CARE NEEDS AND THE IMPACT OF COVID-19

Overall, the past 18 months were especially difficult for these families, making an already complex and siloed system more difficult to navigate.

Parent caregivers of children with special needs face similar child care dilemmas as those of typically developing children.

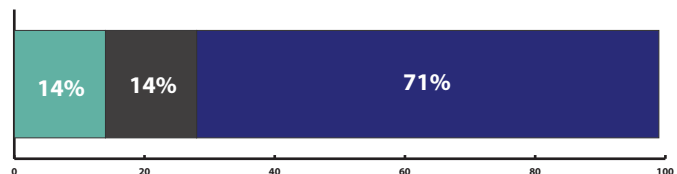
- Families consider the same aspects of care: location, hours, cost, health & safety, ratios, supervision, and how staff treat children.
- Due to COVID-19, program closures, restricted hours, and staffing prevented them from seeking/keeping full-time employment.
- Remote learning is challenging for all young children.

These families experience additional burdens.

- While travelling to therapeutic sessions for a child with special needs (in some rural communities this can be to another county), child care is needed for the other children.
- Remote learning for children with special needs presents an often insurmountable challenge, in addition to other learning, cognitive or physical needs.
- COVID-19 has resulted in further delays in identification, screening, assessment and referrals to services.

Most caregivers found it **difficult** to find child care for their child with special needs

Easy Neither Easy nor Difficult Difficult



THE NEED FOR ADDITIONAL TRAINING AND RESOURCES

Finding and paying for quality ELC programs is difficult for all families but securing care for a child with special needs presents additional barriers. Feedback session caregivers described years-long waiting lists, travelling long distances for services, and facing higher costs for knowledgeable and well-trained staff. A number of families, including one in Head Start, were asked to leave programs that were ill-equipped to care for their children. They suggested that parent caregivers and providers receive appropriate special needs training and resources.

"I begged his first provider to please give my child access to care. He loves to be social and interact with other kids. But the provider said that she didn't have the training. So I had to move my son to a special needs preschool. How do you feel when you face that rejection with your son?"

- Caregiver, Sonoma County

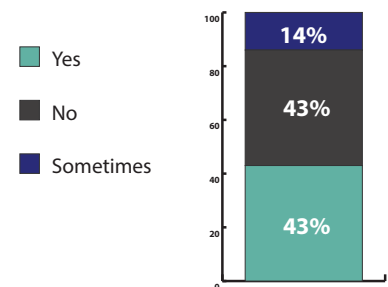


PARENTS ADVOCATE AND NAVIGATE THE SYSTEM ON THEIR OWN

A distinct pattern emerged with these families during the session – on top of navigating a complex early learning system, they must teach themselves to advocate for their children to be identified, assessed, and connected to services.

- Families bring child development concerns to the attention of important figures in their child's life, e.g., pediatricians, providers, etc. Their concerns are brushed off with statements such as "he's just active", "don't worry", or "they'll grow out of it".
- Some persist and continue to advocate despite the barriers – this is one of the many points where children can be missed in the early identification pipeline if parents don't have the awareness, knowledge or language skills to persist.
- Even when parent caregivers succeed in their advocacy efforts, there is often an added delay in accessing screenings, assessments or services because of the time involved.
- Families discussed the challenge of spending time researching how to identify special needs, assessments, services, etc. in their community.

Caregivers were **divided** when asked if they felt supported in accessing assessments and services



RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Ensure equitable access to early learning, identification and intervention services for children with special needs:
 - a. Increase the number of funded spaces for children with special needs in underserved communities.
 - b. Create a multilingual, community specific, and easily searchable database to provide equitable access to services, resources and supports.
 - c. Collect and report data across racial, income, disability and language backgrounds, and analyze disparities across the system.
 - d. Increase the availability of supportive services and therapies to children across all types of early learning settings by co-locating within ELC settings or through the availability of itinerant professionals.
2. Build capacity for identification:
 - a. Provide multilingual resources, training and coaching for families, ELC and medical providers on each step in the EI pathway.
 - b. Expand marketing of Help Me Grow where it exists.

For questions about this study, please contact:

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