

# Hearing from Parents About Their Child Care Needs



## Frontier Early Learning Hub

In January 2020, individual interviews were conducted with parents in Harney County, Oregon (Burns and Hines) to learn about their experiences with, and needs for, child care in their community. These interviews were part of a series of family listening sessions funded by the Preschool Development Grant as a part of a statewide early learning needs assessment. The goal of the listening sessions was to hear family voices that have not yet been reflected in ongoing work to better understand families' early learning needs and experiences. The interview sessions were co-designed, planned, and conducted by researchers at the OSLC Developments, Inc. and Portland State University, with support from the Frontier Early Learning Hub. Eight parents were interviewed by phone, all mothers of young children and all were English speaking.

## Parent's Needs and Challenges in Finding Child Care

Most parents talked about how difficult it is to find quality care for their children in this geographically isolated rural area. Parents mentioned safety (of the provider and the environment), reliability, and affordability as their top priorities. Parents described significant concerns in finding trusted care providers where children would be safe, as well as challenges finding care that was available during their work schedules. Parents told us that finding a provider they could trust to ensure their child's safety was paramount. Parents also said they needed to find a provider with flexible hours, as the parents' own work schedules were sometimes outside the typical 9-5 working day. One parent also mentioned that they were interested in the importance of socialization and in programs that could help support early literacy skills—such as letters and writing their names. One parent said they chose the preschool because “it was the only option.”

*“I think we need more people who actually are qualified to step up and do child care. ‘Cause there is a lack of child care in this county. I’ve lived in Sacramento, I’ve lived in Klamath Falls and this place...there’s not enough child care for poor people that are trying to go back to work. That’s the hardest part is trying to actually find people...”*

## What would you ideally want to know to make a good decision?

Parents described that the information they used to make decisions was mostly based on visiting child care providers themselves, or through word of mouth (their family and friends),



### **What does ideal child care look like?**

These parents' descriptions of ideal child care were influenced substantially by their expressed need for trusted child care in reasonable proximity to their home. For example, almost one half of the parents said they would prefer child care to be in their own home. One parent said she would prefer to not work and take care of her own children rather than trust anyone else to care for them. One parent was a stay-at-home mom, but was looking for preschool near her house. Those that preferred schooling or care outside the home would prefer the facility to be located close to their home. Transportation was a concern, with a few saying they could drive their child to the care facility. One parent mentioned "Dial-a-Ride" for parents who do not own vehicles. A few parents said transportation would be helpful if it could be provided by the child care provider.

or resources provided by staff at the Department of Human Services (DHS). To make good decisions, parents described the importance of getting to meet or know the provider and visit the site. Background checks and references were also mentioned by most parents as important. If care was going to be provided out of a home, parents were also concerned about knowing who else was living in the home, who would be coming in and out, and in some cases, background checks for these people were a concern as well. Cleanliness of the home or facility, provider drug tests, length of provider experience, how the provider interacted with children, and how they would handle certain situations were also mentioned as important.

### **What was most important to your final decision?**

Most parents said that what was most important to their final decision was being able to meet the providers and do a site visit, because this let them know whether they would feel comfortable with the site and staff and, most importantly, that their child would be safe. Trusting the care provider, seeing how they interacted with their child, and being flexible with hours/location were also mentioned. One parent said that no one passed the background check she ran, or the results came back inconclusive, so her husband quit his job to become a stay-at-home dad.

### **Compromising for Child Care**

About one half the parents said they did not make compromises in what they were looking for, while other parents mentioned compromising work schedules and not having other care or school options to choose from. One parent's compromise was not seeing her children for days because the parent worked odd hours, and the child care provider would not watch the children at their home so the parent did not get to see her children between school, sleeping, and her work hours for sometimes days at a time. Another family's compromise was for the husband to quit his job to care for their children because they did not trust anyone; their son had been injured while with their previous provider who had then not alerted the mom until she came to pick up her child.

### **Important Early Learning Supports for School Readiness**

All the parents reported that they would ideally want their child to be learning while in care. In particular, a number of parents described having a provider who interacts with children rather than sitting them in front of a TV. When it came to specifics about what they would like their children to learn, one parent mentioned a particular curriculum she had experience with—Timberdoodle—while the other parents mentioned social skills, sharing, being respectful, and general growth and connection with the provider. Parents also mentioned arts and crafts, coloring, and writing their name. A few parents also mentioned wanting their child to receive help with their school work and tutoring as they grow older.



## Experiences of Bias

All families interviewed reported that they only spoke English in their homes. One family felt they had been disrespected because she was a recovering drug addict. In response to the question about whether they felt their provider created opportunities to highlight their family background and traditions, parents either said it was not something that was ever done or thought of, that they did not feel it was relevant to their family, or that their provider recognized their child's birthday, Christmas, or Thanksgiving holidays as examples of family culture.

## Costs of Care: Impacts on Work

Significantly, all families but one reported that they have chosen not to work because child care was too expensive, either in the past or currently. The one mother who did not say yes to the question added that if she did not have such a good job, or once she has an additional child, she might be in the position of having to choose between work and paying for child care. Most parents said that once they added up how much they were making through their work, and compared this to how much child care would cost, it either was not worth it for them to work—or in many cases, that they actually would have owed money on top of what their paycheck would afford. One family had experienced going into debt in the past for this same reason. Other families mentioned that receiving help from DHS for a copay plan was the only way they could afford child care. Having multiple children that needed care was also a factor in choosing not to work and to provide the child care themselves instead.

## Early Learning Supports for Kindergarten Readiness

Every parent reported that it was extremely important to them that their child care provider help their child be ready to start kindergarten and felt that at least some of their providers did this. For example, parents reported that most of their providers did social-skills activities, like having children work in groups, eat together, play outside, and go to the library. Parents also mentioned more general activities that they or their providers did, such as reading to the children, helping kids with the general routine of school, and getting kids used to separating from parents now so it will not be so difficult when they start school.

Only a few parents told us that their early learning provider gave them information about to help them support their child's learning at home. Providers more typically provided updates about what their child was doing in care and occasionally made suggestions about what children might need to work on to be ready for school, such as helping their child recognize the first letter of their name, practicing tracing and writing their name and handwriting skills, and counting skills.

## What gets in the way of being able to be the best parent you can be?

The most frequent barrier that parents talked about when asked this question was time was that they felt that they simply do not have enough time for their children. Most of the parents we spoke with were single parents, parents with multiple children, and working parents, and they talked about these factors as making it difficult to spend time and pay attention to their child. Most parents responded that having more time with their child would help them feel they were doing the best they could as a parent, through more support at home, being able to adjust work schedules, and just generally being able to do more with their kids. One parent said that she would feel like she was doing a good job as a parent if she was, "doing all I can to provide what they need. Making sure I give each child individual one on one time."

Another parent said that how her child responds and behaves with her, when her child “lights up” is all the validation she needs.

One parent reported that her family was involved with DHS/child welfare, and that the agency was what “got in the way.” This parent expanded on this point by saying that getting more flexibility and understanding from DHS, and feeling that they understood that “people need chances,” would help her to feel she was doing the best she could; consequently, she would not be constantly scared of losing her kids again.

One parent said that the biggest barrier for her was dealing with the child’s behavior, stating that she often needed to “leave the room and take a break and come back to it.” This suggests that these parents might see value in having additional parenting support, education, and encouragement to spend time with their children.

## Key Takeaways

- ▶ Lack of available child care providers, generally, is a central concern for these parents.
- ▶ Aspects of care that are most important for these parents are cost/affordability, feeling that they can trust the provider, as well as geographic proximity.
- ▶ There is significant mistrust of the providers who are available and a need for better ways for parents to get information about where quality, affordable care might be located.
- ▶ These parents clearly see that quality early learning experiences can help children be ready for school; generally, however, they did not feel that either themselves or their children were getting the kinds of supports they needed in this area.
- ▶ Virtually all of these parents reported not working at some point because of the cost of child care.
- ▶ Parents expressed a strong desire to be able to spend more time actively engaged in parenting their children, but faced challenges related to work, single parenting, and other factors in doing so.

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