

# Parental Perceptions of High-Quality Care and School Readiness: Findings from the Maryland Research Capacity Project

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*This project is funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation through a Child Care State Research Capacity Cooperative Agreement.*

## Project Purpose

The Maryland Research Capacity study, funded through the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, is a multi-method study designed to:

- 1) enhance administrative data in Maryland by merging child care subsidy, licensing, and credentialing data with children's kindergarten school readiness portfolio assessments;
- 2) conduct policy- and program- relevant research on the enhanced administrative data; and
- 3) build a sustainable consortia of researchers and early education professionals with the unified goal of improving the quality of care available and utilized by low-income working parents and at-risk families in Maryland in order to support parental outcomes and child well-being.

Qualitative and quantitative methods were used to examine research questions related to:

- parents', providers', and kindergarten teachers' definitions of high quality care and school readiness
- associations between child care subsidies, the use of high quality care, and children's school readiness upon kindergarten entry

## Methodology and Sample Description

As part of the Maryland Research Capacity study, four focus groups were conducted in the fall of 2010. These focus groups included a total of 41 low-income parents of children ages 2-5, half of whom were receiving a child care subsidy. Families who were not receiving a subsidy at the time of the focus group were financially eligible to do so and some parents had received a subsidy in the past.

As part of these focus groups, parents were asked about their definitions of high-quality care and school readiness, their priorities in selecting an early care and education arrangement, and their recommendations for improving the quality and availability of care to young children. In this presentation, key findings related to parents' definitions of high-quality care and school readiness will be discussed along with parents' recommendations to improve the child care subsidy system in order to facilitate the use of high-quality care.

### Sample Description

	Total Parents (N=41)	Unsubsidized Parents (N=19)	Subsidized Parents (N=22)
<b>Age</b>	32.15 years (range: 19-63 years)	34.89 years (range: 20-54 years)	29.77 years (range: 19-63)
<b>Race</b>	98% Black/African American 2% Other	100% Black/African American	95% Black/African American 5% Other
<b>Gender</b>	88% Female	84% Female	90% Female
<b>Education</b>	3% Less than high school 6% Some high school 25% High school or GED 33% Vocational school/ some College 13% AA 18% BA 2% Post-Bachelor's	5% Some high school 16% High school or GED 21% Vocational school/ some college 26% AA 26% BA 5% Post-Bachelor's	5% Less than high school 5% Some high school 33% High school or GED 48% Vocation school/some college 10% BA
<b>Marital Status (n=40)</b>	67.5% Single 32.5% Married or with a partner	56% Single 44% Married or with a partner	77% Single 23% Married or with a partner
<b>Employment (n=36)</b>	57.7% Employed 42.3% Unemployed	69% Employed 31% Unemployed	50% Employed 50% Unemployed
<b>Number of Children</b>	27% One child 37% Two children 20% Three children 9% Four children 7% Five children	26% One child 21% Two children 21% Three children 21% Four children 11% Five children	27% One child 50% Two children 18% Three children 5% Five children
<b>Type of Child Care</b>	70% of children in one type of care 30% of children in multiple types of care	74% of children in one type of care 26% of children in multiple types of care	57% of children in one type of care 43% of children in multiple types of care

## Findings

### Parental Definitions of High-Quality Care

In order to assess parents' definitions of "high-quality care," parents were asked to describe their ideal early care and education arrangements. As part of this discussion, parents spontaneously identified elements of an ideal early care and education setting related to schedule, environmental features of the care arrangement, activities offered, and characteristics of ideal providers. A brief overview of these elements is provided below.

#### Elements Identified by Parents as being Indicative of High-Quality Care

Element	Definition	Subsidized vs. Non-Subsidized
<b>Schedule</b>		
<b>Hours of Operation</b>	Flexible, extended hours available Hours that accommodate parents' work schedule	Discussed by both subsidized and non-subsidized parents.
<b>Environmental Features</b>		
<b>Safe and Secure Environment</b>	Electronic systems to ensure children are going home with an authorized person, security guards and surveillance cameras to protect access to children, webcams that can be used by parents to monitor their child's activities	Mentioned by more subsidized than non-subsidized parents.
<b>Inviting and Clean Physical Space</b>	Bright, pleasant atmosphere that is clean, open, and organized, with toys visible and labeled to facilitate children's learning, being smoke-free, dog-free, having a playground on-site, having a soft floor in the playroom, and having a designated area for sick children	Discussed by both subsidized and non-subsidized parents. The cleanliness of the facility was of high importance to subsidized parents in particular, who expressed concern about the children spreading germs to one another.
<b>Adequate Child: Provider Ratio</b>	Important to parents because it allows for individualized attention and proactive control of behavior issues	Discussed by both subsidized and non-subsidized parents.
<b>Characteristics of Ideal Providers</b>	Being educated/certified, enthusiastic, patient, nurturing, effective at disciplining, qualified to serve children with disabilities/special needs, and able to teach children respect; having a clean criminal record and not using drugs; enjoying his/her job; and conveying a professional demeanor	Both subsidized and non-subsidized parents also expressed a desire to interact with or establish a relationship with the provider so they could be kept up-to-date on their child's progress.
<b>Activities</b>		
<b>Structured Learning Opportunities</b>	Multiple age-appropriate activities, academically-based curriculum, book-reading and writing opportunities, exposure to computers, exposure to other languages, physical/hands-on activities, sports, and academically-oriented learning stations	Both subsidized and non-subsidized parents discussed the need for a structured environment in which children could be engaged and learn.

### Parents' Priorities in Selecting Early Care and Education Arrangements

Following discussion of elements of an ideal early care and education arrangement, parents were asked what features they look for when selecting an arrangement for their preschool-aged child. Parents reiterated some of the previously identified elements of an ideal arrangement. However, their primary focus in discussing prioritized features of care focused more on practical issues, such as cost and location, than features related to the quality of the arrangement. The table below compares the most commonly identified elements of an ideal early care and education arrangement and features parents look for when selecting an arrangement for their child. Items in the table are listed in order of their popularity as measured by the number of parents who discussed each.

#### Comparison of "Ideal Elements" of Early Care and Education and Features Parents Prioritize in Selecting a Care Arrangement

Ideal Elements of Early Care and Education Arrangements	Priorities in Selecting an Early Care and Education Arrangement
Learning opportunities/age-appropriate curriculum (22 parents)	Cost (16 parents)
Physical space (21 parents)	Location (13 parents)
Provider characteristics (18 parents)	Hours (9 parents)
Safety (17 parents)	Class size/child: provider ratio (7 parents)
Hours (7 parents)	Convenience (5 parents)
Child: provider ratio (4 parents)	Learning opportunities/age-appropriate curriculum (4 parents)

Note: Items in the table are listed in order of their popularity as measured by the number of parents who discussed each.

Both subsidized and non-subsidized parents emphasized the importance of cost, location, and safety as features they look for when choosing an early child care arrangement. Non-subsidized parents were more likely to highlight having a clean, spacious physical space for their children as well as flexible hours of operation as priorities.

### Parental Definitions of School Readiness

The State of Maryland has incorporated seven domains of children's school readiness into the Maryland Model of School Readiness (MMSR). During focus groups, parents were asked what they perceive to be necessary skills for children to have mastered prior to entering school. Parents identified skills that were aligned with the domains of school readiness included in the MMSR, though all domains were not represented.

#### Alignment between MMSR Domains and Parents' Perceptions of Necessary Skills for a Successful Entry into Kindergarten

MMSR School Readiness Domain	What School Readiness Looks Like by Domain (MSDE Definitions)	Parents' Definitions of Necessary Skills for a Successful Entry into Kindergarten	Differences in Skills Discussed by Parent Subsidy Status
<b>Language And Literacy</b>	The child: talks and listens to others; speaks clearly; understands stories; loves books; identifies letters letter-sound connections; begins to write letters and words.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Knowledge of letters, letter sounds, animals, and body parts</li> <li>• Comprehension and recall of stories read to the child</li> <li>• Ability to write own names/start writing</li> </ul>	Knowledge related to letters and writing was discussed by subsidized and non-subsidized parents in all focus groups. Comprehension and recall of stories was discussed in one focus group of subsidized parents only.
<b>Mathematical Thinking</b>	The child: sorts things by color and shape; can count; recognizes simple patterns; can describe shapes.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Count to 20</li> <li>• Knows colors and shapes</li> </ul>	Mathematical thinking skills were mentioned in focus groups with both non-subsidized parents and subsidized parents. Colors and shapes were mentioned by more subsidized than non-subsidized parents during focus groups.
<b>Scientific Thinking</b>	The child: starts to understand rules and reasons for them; likes to explore natural and physical phenomena; talks about how things are alike or different; is able to observe and describe properties of objects (texture, weight, temperature etc.)	Not mentioned by parents	
<b>Social Studies</b>	The child: talks about him/her self, family, and/or the community; recognizes that people are similar or different; understands why there are rules.	Not mentioned by parents	
<b>Social And Personal Development</b>	The child: gets along with others; follows rules; starts, works on, and finishes an activity.	Abilities to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• separate from parents</li> <li>• transition from one activity to the next</li> <li>• share</li> <li>• follow directions</li> <li>• communicate and solve problems without hitting</li> </ul>	Skills related to transitions (from parents to teachers and between activities) were discussed in one focus group of subsidized parents and one focus group of non-subsidized parents. Social skills (not hitting, sharing, following directions) were discussed only by subsidized parents.
<b>Physical Development And Health</b>	The child: runs, jumps, and/or climbs; uses buttons and/or zippers; traces, draws, and uses scissors; uses good health and safety skills (i.e. washes hands, etc.).	Runs, jumps, able to throw trash away, hold a pencil, tie shoes, zipper coat, potty trained	With the exception of zipping a coat, which was discussed in focus groups with non-subsidized parents only, physical development and health were discussed in focus groups with subsidized parents only.
<b>The Arts</b>	The child: learns skills and appreciation for drawings and paintings, dance, and music; creates "make-believe" characters and scenes. Not part of state standards	Not mentioned by parents  Knows child's name, address, phone number, date of birth, teacher's name, parent's name, how to call 911	

### Suggestions for Helping Parents Access High-Quality Care

In closing the focus groups, parents were asked for advice on new programs or changes to existing programs that could be implemented to support parents in accessing high-quality care. The following suggestions were offered:

Both Subsidized and Non-Subsidized	Subsidized Parents	Non-Subsidized Parents
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Greater investments in or regulations of the quality of community-based child care.</li> <li>• Providing incentives to facilitate high-quality child care on-site at places of employment.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increasing accessibility of high-quality subsidized care by encouraging providers to extend their hours to accommodate parental work schedules.</li> <li>• Encouraging more licensed providers to accept subsidies.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Making the application process for child care subsidies easier.</li> <li>• Providing grants to community-based child care providers to subsidize learning activities such as field trips.</li> <li>• Allowing children to enter school prior to age 5 if they are ready.</li> </ul>