

Parenting Knowledge among First-time Parents of Young Children

A Research-to-Practice Brief

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Introduction

Increasing parents' knowledge about their children's development and promoting healthy parenting are common goals of programs and services for families with young children. This is due, in part, to evidence of a strong link between what parents know and how they behave with their young children. Compared to parents with limited knowledge of child development, those with more knowledge engage in higher-quality parent-child interactions, use more effective parenting strategies, and participate in more developmentally supportive activities with their children.^{1,2} Knowledgeable parents also have more age-appropriate expectations of their children and use less harsh, more effective discipline strategies.¹⁻⁴ Research also suggests that first-time parents of young children can reap considerable benefits from programs and services,⁵ and that investments in the infant and toddler years can lead to better economic, social, and health outcomes for children and for society.⁶ The period surrounding the birth of a child may also provide a critical window for primary prevention of abuse and neglect, as parenting practices have not yet been firmly established.^{5,7}



Nevertheless, researchers have rarely examined what parents know, and want to know, about parenting and child development, how they prefer to receive such information, and how their knowledge and preferences may vary across different groups of parents. To address this gap, Child Trends conducted a study on parenting knowledge that included two components: (1) a comprehensive review of the literature on parenting knowledge; and (2) focus groups with parents from diverse racial, ethnic, and economic backgrounds. We focused especially on parents' perceptions of their knowledge of children's social-emotional and physical development, as early parent-child relationships form primarily through caregivers' intensive efforts to meet the social-emotional and physical needs of their infants and toddlers.⁸

This research-to-practice brief highlights findings from Child Trends' study of first-time parents of young children (under age 3) and their knowledge about parenting and child development.

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Findings from the literature on first-time parents' knowledge

Child Trends conducted a comprehensive review of the literature⁹ on parenting knowledge, defined as an understanding of “developmental norms and milestones, processes of child development, and familiarity with caregiving skills.”¹⁰ We reviewed 260 sources—primarily peer-reviewed articles, book chapters, and reports focused on first-time parents of children under age 3. Specific findings we identified from the review included:

- **Most parents lack the knowledge they need and want.** Research strongly suggests that first-time parents of infants and toddlers want to know more about parenting and child development yet have difficulty obtaining clear and trustworthy information.
- **The amount of information available to parents is overwhelming and its quality is inconsistent.** There are numerous sources of information on parenting and child development (e.g., internet, newsletters, service providers, friends and family, etc.). However, the amount of information can be daunting to parents, and the quality of the information is inconsistent.
- **Parents often use sources of information that do not reflect their preferences.** First-time parents often seek information on parenting and child development, but they do not receive sufficient information from preferred sources, including family and friends with parenting experience, individuals who are familiar with their child and family circumstances, and professionals they trust, such as pediatricians. Many parents opt to use the internet; while they appreciate its accessibility, they sometimes feel overwhelmed by the amount of information and variation in quality.
- **There is limited information about how parenting knowledge may vary across different demographic groups.** Studies suggest considerable variation in parenting knowledge within samples of white, middle-class mothers. However, little research has investigated variability among other groups of parents, including fathers, parents from various racial and ethnic backgrounds, families at different income levels, and rural and urban families.
- **Little research has been done on strategies that are most likely to improve parenting knowledge.** Parenting interventions have demonstrated effectiveness in increasing parenting knowledge, but it is unclear which strategies are most effective and why. This information is essential for informing programs and policies to promote parents' knowledge about their child's development.



Findings from focus groups with parents

To better understand what first-time parents of infants and toddlers know, and want to know, about parenting and early childhood development, where they get their information, and the sources they use and trust, Child Trends conducted a series of focus groups with parents of young children in three U.S. cities. The parents with whom we spoke were white, black, or Hispanic; represented the economic spectrum, although approximately two-thirds were low-income;^a and were mostly first-time parents.^b This study sought, through focus groups, to contribute to the field's understanding of parenting knowledge among first-time parents with

^a Defined as household income at or below 200 percent of the federal poverty level.

^b While most parents were first-time parents with infants and toddlers, some had slightly older pre-school-aged children (under age 5) and were asked to recall the first two years of their child's life.

young children, and how this knowledge may differ (if at all) across white, black, and Hispanic parents; between low-income and non-low-income groups; and between mothers and fathers. See Appendix A for further information on the focus group study design. Key findings are presented below.

What parents know and want to know about parenting and child development

- **Parents do not feel uninformed, but they do have many questions.** Parents' questions about parenting and child development varied, and their uncertainty often coincided with transitional periods such as the start of preschool, developmental milestones, and new behaviors—especially questions related to discipline and screen use.
- **Parents believe knowledge is necessary but not sufficient.** While parents valued general information about parenting and child development, they did not believe it was adequate to inform everyday interactions with their children. Parents wanted information accompanied by clear steps for putting knowledge into practice, and they preferred that it be provided in a judgement-free manner and in ways that are tailored to meet the specific needs of their child and family.
- **Parents had more knowledge about their child's physical development than social-emotional development.** Parents reported feeling knowledgeable and confident in their understanding of their child's physical development, which had observable markers and milestones, but less so about social-emotional development. Information about their child's physical development from well-child visits to the doctor and developmental screenings was particularly useful, and answered many of parents' most pressing questions (e.g., "Is my child meeting the appropriate developmental milestones? What is the next developmental milestone?").
- **Parents are eager for more information on children's social-emotional development.** Parents recognized the importance of social-emotional development for a child's overall well-being and were eager to support their child's progress in this domain. While they generally reported feeling knowledgeable about what social-emotional development means and which related skills to foster in their child (e.g., sharing, empathy, taking turns, regulating emotions, getting along with peers), they were frustrated by the lack of information about whether their child was developing "normally" in this domain. They wanted concrete recommendations for supporting their child's social-emotional development.
- **Being a parent means continually learning.** Parents were aware that children's development is not static and viewed knowledge acquisition about parenting and child development as a continual process.

“ I feel like the physical things are pretty obvious, but the social-emotional things are more difficult. ”

— Focus group parent

How parents get information on parenting and child development

- **Parents' knowledge-seeking occurs most often during transitions.** Parents reported being especially active knowledge seekers in the early months of their children's lives, when they were first adjusting to parenthood. Their information-seeking slowed soon after this phase, but increased again as children entered a new developmental stage or learned new behaviors, and when parents encountered challenging behaviors in their children.
- **Parents turn to the internet for information, support, and guidance.** They reported relying most on Google^c to search and find answers to their parenting questions, Facebook and online parenting groups for support, and YouTube or Pinterest for information on how to apply new knowledge to everyday interactions with their children. No other method compared to the ease of use and speed of information delivery offered by the internet and social media. Parents also found comfort in their feelings of anonymity and lack of judgment on the internet.
- **Pediatricians are a highly trusted source of information on children's physical development.** Parents trusted and relied on their pediatricians for information on milestones and child development, but felt most comfortable turning to them for answers to questions about their children's physical development. They did not view pediatricians as experts in young children's social-emotional development.
- **Parents value personal experiences as sources of information on their children's social-emotional development.** Parents placed a premium on childrearing experience and turned to their social networks—their parents, grandparents, friends, and other parents—for information. They also relied on their own instincts and experience, as well as their intimate knowledge of their children and their personal preferences and family values.
- **Parents use multiple sources of information to identify points of consensus.** When faced with inconsistencies or a lack of clear-cut answers to parenting dilemmas, parents often turned to more than one source. They used information gleaned across multiple sources to identify patterns or a consensus around issues of interest. Generally, they were willing to try different recommendations and identify approaches that worked best for their child and family.

Parents' knowledge-seeking occurs most often during transitions—when they first become parents and when their children enter new stages of development.

Variation in knowledge of parenting and child development

- **There were more similarities than differences across groups of parents.** Regardless of their economic background, gender, or race or ethnicity, parents appeared to possess similar knowledge, asked the same types of questions about parenting and early child development, sought information from comparable sources, and used similar strategies to make sense of the information they obtained.
- **The most observable differences were between mothers and fathers.** Both mothers and fathers struggled with societal expectations focused on gendered ideas of parenting. Mothers felt pressure to be a “super mom”—always present and nurturing, well-organized, equipped to

^c We refer to the specific type of search engine or social media platforms that parents reported using; Child Trends does not necessarily endorse these companies or their products.

handle any challenge, with a highly functioning and well-mannered child that plays well with peers. Fathers resented the low expectations for paternal involvement they viewed as pervasive in U.S. society. Fathers also appeared to focus more on their child's future, while mothers paid close attention to their child's immediate well-being.

- **There were many similarities across racial and ethnic groups.** The one area in which parents may have differed by race, ethnicity, and culture was in how they approached discipline. Even in this respect, the similarities were more notable than differences. Parents across all race and ethnic groups in the study voiced a common desire to improve their skills as disciplinarians. Overall, they wanted to be more consistent and less harsh, and to discipline their children in developmentally appropriate ways.
- **Parents at all income levels worried about finances.** Parents thought of themselves as providers and, independent of income, worried about how they would provide for their children. They began thinking about the financial aspects of parenting long before their child was born, from buying diapers to paying for child care. They were also aware of resource disparities and viewed wealthier neighborhoods as having greater access to child resources and services.



Recommendations

Below we provide recommendations derived from our literature review and focus groups findings, with direct implications for programs, policy, and practice. The literature review identified major gaps in the field's understanding of parenting knowledge, which we subsequently explored through focus groups. Taken together, our findings from the literature and focus groups were consistent with one another:

- **Optimize the likelihood that parents use information on parenting and child development** by (1) delivering it with clear and concise recommendations; (2) accompanying it with guidance to help parents apply this information to everyday interactions with their infants and toddlers; (3) offering it in strengths-based, judgment-free ways that acknowledge the centrality of fathers and the cultural beliefs and practices of families; and (4) providing options and alternatives that account for each family's needs and preferences.
- **Build on the strengths of the internet.** Parents value the accessibility of internet-based resources, opportunities to view parenting behaviors being modeled, and the internet's sense of community. Several parents in the focus groups noted parenting and home-visiting programs have used these strategies effectively and in ways they have enjoyed. Not only can programs and services use such strategies, but they can also incorporate internet and technology-based resources into their service delivery models.
- **Highlight the range of normal physical and social-emotional development.** The pediatric community, early care and education professionals, home visitors, and other service providers can alleviate many parental concerns by emphasizing the fact that typical development includes a range of behaviors and growth patterns.
- **Use developmental milestones as windows of opportunity.** Parents actively seek and are receptive to information when their children approach developmental milestones. These transitions also may be stressful for parents and their young children. Service providers can help parents predict these challenges and provide anticipatory guidance on how to navigate them effectively.

- **Expand the capacity of pediatric care to address young children’s social-emotional development.** Parents highly value advice from pediatricians, in part because they see them as experts. However, our focus group discussions suggested that parents often view pediatricians as experts on children’s physical development, but not on early social-emotional development. With adequate training, staff, and time to address parents’ need for information and support in this domain, pediatric primary care settings can better meet the needs of infants, toddlers, and their families in the context of well-child visits.
- **Engage fathers.** Many parenting resources, programs, and services specifically target mothers and/or have been unsuccessful in efforts to engage fathers. Fathers in our focus groups expressed a strong desire to be included in childrearing activities, programs, and services. Additional efforts are needed by practitioners and policymakers to shift traditional, gender-based expectations of both fathers and mothers, and to more successfully engage fathers during their child’s infant and toddler years, setting the stage for active paternal involvement throughout childhood.
- **Address common parental concerns.** Regardless of the specific topic discussed, our literature review and focus group findings suggest many parents want additional information and support to parent more consistently and effectively, and in developmentally appropriate ways.

Conclusions

While parenting is an ordinary phenomenon—approximately 4 million babies are born each year in the United States alone¹¹—the responsibilities of parenthood are extraordinary. The infant and toddler years can be especially demanding. At almost no other time in life must adults devote themselves more fully to the needs of another human being. Parents who have a solid understanding of healthy parenting and child development are better equipped to support their young children as they grow.^{3,10,12}

The parents in our focus groups believed this to be true. They were both eager to receive information and savvy consumers of it. However, they desired more clarity on translating their knowledge into effective parenting practices. Importantly, our work suggests more commonalities than differences among parents across race, ethnicity, and income, and between mothers and fathers—all of whom ultimately had the same desire to nurture their infants’ and toddlers’ health and well-being.

While our work highlights key aspects of parenting knowledge, there is more to learn. Perhaps the most significant gap is a lack of evidence on optimal approaches for helping parents *both* acquire *and* apply knowledge to their everyday behaviors and interactions with their infants and toddlers. Given parents’ interest in receiving information through the internet, efforts to help them use this information in everyday interactions with children should include testing the efficacy of strategies for translating knowledge into healthy parenting practices. In turn, practitioners, program leaders, and local, state, and federal policymakers will be better positioned to promote use of the most effective strategies for supporting parents’ in obtaining and using this knowledge.



About this Brief

This brief summarizes findings from two related reports aimed at understanding first-time parents' knowledge on parenting and child development.

[First-Time Parents' Knowledge of Infant and Toddler Development: A Review of the Literature:](#)

This report presents results from a comprehensive literature review on parenting knowledge, with particular attention to groups that are underrepresented in the research to date (e.g., fathers, parents with different racial and ethnic backgrounds, families living in rural areas).

[First-Time Parents' Knowledge of Early Child Development: Focus Group Report:](#) This report documents findings from focus groups with parents of young children that sought to better understand what parents of infants and toddlers know and want to know about parenting and early childhood development, where they get their information, and how they make sense of it.

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Appendix A

Focus group study method

The Child Trends study team conducted 13 focus groups with parents of young children. Our discussions with parents focused on their knowledge of parenting and early development. We facilitated groups in three cities across the United States (Washington, DC, Chicago, IL, and the metropolitan area of Durham/Raleigh, NC) between July and December 2017. The sites were selected due to their racial/ethnic diversity and sizeable child population, and were intended to provide geographic diversity. The sections below describe the study's eligibility criteria, recruitment strategy, and participant characteristics.

Inclusion criteria: To be eligible for our study, participants had to self-identify as white, black, or Hispanic; be at least 18 years old; and live with their biological or adoptive children for more than half the year. Because the study aimed to understand what parents know and want to know about their young children's development when they first enter parenthood, we targeted first-time parents of infants and toddlers (children ages 0 to 2). However, it was necessary to modify the inclusion criteria due to challenges with enrollment. Consequently, we extended eligibility to parents whose children were all ages 0 to 5, but asked them to reflect on the first two years of their child's life. Study staff screened all potential participants in their preferred language (English or Spanish) to confirm eligibility.

Study recruitment: We recruited participants using several strategies that evolved throughout the data collection period to accommodate study needs. We initially relied on recruitment methods that had been successful in previous studies with similar populations, including posting flyers in community boards, advertising on Craigslist, partnering with community organizations, parent referrals, and commercial phone lists of individuals likely to be in our target groups. Where possible, our study team conducted on-the-ground recruitment at strategic locations (e.g., day care centers, baby stores, public transit stops, churches, pediatricians' offices) to recruit hard-to-reach populations (e.g., immigrants, Spanish speakers, fathers, etc.). Collectively, these strategies were only modestly successful and none yielded a large enough sample of Hispanic parents. As a result, we explored additional recruitment strategies that we expected would resonate with parents of young children—namely, paid advertisements on Facebook, Instagram, and parenting websites. Facebook and Instagram proved to be effective platforms for advertising the study and attracting (mostly) white and black parents of young children. Additionally, we asked partner programs and organizations serving young parents—especially those working with Hispanic parents—to advertise the study on their Facebook pages. While much of our Facebook effort targeted Hispanic parents, the number of Hispanic parents recruited remained low and insufficient to support separate groups. We invited eligible Hispanic participants to join the groups held with black parents (see participant characteristics below), resulting in focus groups with combined Hispanic and black mothers. We suspect that the difficulties we encountered recruiting Hispanic participants reflected, in part, the current political climate that many perceive as hostile to the Latino immigrant community. Conversations with staff at programs serving Hispanic families support this hypothesis, as programs were also experiencing difficulties enrolling Latino families.

Participant characteristics: A total of 90 parents participated in the 13 focus groups. Groups ranged in size from four to 11 participants. We stratified groups by gender, language, and (where possible) race and ethnicity. As noted above, it was necessary at times to group together

participants who identified as Hispanic or black due to the small number of enrolled parents who identified as Hispanic. Of the 13 groups, eight included both black and/or Hispanic parents (one group of Hispanic parents was conducted in Spanish), four had only white parents, and one included white, black, and Hispanic fathers (it was not possible to assemble a group of fathers that was racially homogenous). Across the 13 groups, two were held with fathers and one (with mothers) was held in a rural location. Most participants (62 percent) were low-income (defined as household income less than 200 percent of the federal poverty level), and most were mothers (n=80). Just over half of the parents were black (52 percent, n=47), 12 percent (n=11) were Hispanic, and 36 percent (n=32) were white. There were low-income and non-low-income participants in each racial and ethnic subgroup. Sixty-eight percent of black parents were low-income, as were 73 percent of Hispanic parents and 50 percent of white parents.

Data collection procedure

The Child Trends research team developed the focus group protocol, which was directly informed by findings from the literature review noted above.⁹ The protocol included questions about parents' knowledge on parenting and early child development, and focused on the first two years of children's lives, the sources and uses of information, and barriers and facilitators to information use. Because some parents had children older than age 2, or had more than one child, we asked parents to think back to the time when their first child (if they had more than one) was 0 to 2 years old. To help parents situate themselves in that period, we started focus discussions with an icebreaker that asked parents to recall when they were expecting their first child, and to share either the best piece of advice they had received or the one thing they wanted to know more about at the time. Experienced qualitative researchers (usually two per focus group) who matched the gender of participants facilitated focus group discussions. Facilitators were Hispanic or white and all were fluent in both English and Spanish. Focus group discussions lasted approximately 1 hour and 45 minutes. Participants received food during the discussions and \$50 in cash at the end. Focus groups were conducted at local libraries or community centers that were accessible for parents and, when possible, where child care was provided. We also provided participants a guide with information about local resources for parents and young children. Participants signed consent forms and agreed to have the discussions audio recorded. Child Trends' Institutional Review Board (FWA 00005835) reviewed and approved all study procedures.

Data analysis

The study team drafted a summary of participant characteristics and key themes after each focus group. Focus group facilitators held debriefing sessions throughout the data collection period to identify preliminary themes and modify the protocol as needed. We transcribed audio recordings and translated the Spanish recording into English prior to data analysis. Two experienced qualitative researchers reviewed all transcripts and identified themes using an inductive approach, allowing new and unexpected themes to emerge from the data. The two researchers coded participants' responses, discussed commonalities across groups, and identified connections among themes to create a narrative.^{13,14} This brief presents themes that were most common and salient across groups. We note when themes were not universal, and where we identified differences between groups (e.g., mothers versus fathers). The demographic composition of our sample and study design preclude us from making direct comparisons by income level or specific races and ethnicities: Not all groups were stratified by income, and two groups combined participants who identified as black or Hispanic. Another group (with fathers) included participants of all three racial and ethnic groups.

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