First 5 Contra Costa Report on Parent Involvement

Final Report

March 5, 2010

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents the results of the Parental Involvement in Pre-School Telephone Interview study completed by Mathematica Policy Research for the First 5 Contra Costa Children and Families Commission. Parent involvement in children's preschool programs and learning experiences is proven to be positively associated with cognitive, academic, social-emotional, and behavioral development. This report provides insight into parent opinions of and involvement with child care programs participating in Preschool Makes a Difference (PMD) and offers First 5 Contra Costa new accounts of how PMD programs help to support the diverse needs of Contra Costa parents.

The report is informed by 30 parent interviews conducted in December 2009 and January 2010. Interviewees were selected from a list of 100 parents who had children enrolled in programs participating in Contra Costa PMD and who had previously agreed to be contacted for a possible interview. The first section of the report summarizes the interview process and characteristics of parents who provided interviews. The second section offers an overview of parent responses organized around three core questions: (1) how did parents select afterschool programs, (2) how have programs helped parents become involved with learning at home, and (3) how did parents define quality. Following is a summary of the primary findings.

Program choice: Parents selected programs based on referrals, online research, and program visits. Often parents with older siblings who had attended a First 5 Contra Costa program opted to enroll younger children. Although parents listed many different factors influencing program choice, teacher attitude, personality, and teaching perspective were key considerations for the majority of parents.

How parents are learning to support their children's education: About two-thirds of parents reported learning valuable lessons from teachers, primarily in the areas of reinforcing what children were learning in the program, managing the child's behavior, and using effective disciplinary techniques. Most parents indicated the importance of effective parent-teacher communication and described teachers as welcoming and felt comfortable asking questions and offering opinions to teachers. Parents also reported that teachers offered advice on parenting, suggestions on learning, and recommendations for productive activities, both general and related directly to curricula, in addition to suggestions for community resources and activities.

Some parents said that because they had older children, they were already familiar with tools to help support learning at home. Eight parents said that they had not learned new approaches or techniques from teachers or program staff. Others explained that their children were advanced for their age and already familiar with the concepts taught at their programs. Even those parents who did not believe they had acquired new learning approaches, however, provided positive commentary on their programs in general. In addition several parents work or attended school on a full time basis and mentioned lack of time as a barrier to involvement.

Program quality: Parents offered positive reviews of their programs and appeared pleased with the quality of the learning support, as well as the combination of the curriculum and the structure of daily activities. Commonly cited quality factors related to academic learning and support, curricular and daily programmatic structure, and positive child learning outcomes.

The interviews offer a valuable snapshot of involvement among parents with children in the Preschool Makes a Difference program sponsored by First 5 Contra Costa. Detailed examples provided by parents paint an important picture of successful engagement activities and initiatives taking place at local child care programs.

INTRODUCTION

Proposition 10, passed by California voters in 1998, added taxes on tobacco products and earmarked revenues for programs supporting child and family development, health, education, and safety from pregnancy until children enter kindergarten. California Children and Families (First 5) County Commissions oversee the funds collected, which amount to about $600 million each year. Since its inception, First 5 Contra Costa has invested over $75 million in local programs for children and families. Although the county boasts a relatively high median income ($75,483 compared to the 2005-2007 state average of $58,361), the wealth is not evenly distributed. According to the First 5 Contra Costa Strategic Plan, "Pockets of deep and sustained poverty persist in large areas of the west, east and to a lesser extent, central portions of the county." Further, data from a recent First 5 Family Survey show that half the households served by First 5 Contra Costa reported earning less than $15,000 annually (First 5 Contra Costa Children and Families Commission, "2008-2009 Evaluation Report").

In 2009 the First 5 Contra Costa Children and Families Commission adopted a new five-year strategic plan to invest over $70 million in programs serving children aged 0-5 and their families. The strategic plan will fund initiatives in four core areas: (1) early childhood education, (2) family support, (3) early intervention services, and (4) community information and engagement. Parent and family involvement play a key role in all four core initiative areas, although the focus of the current study is on the first (early childhood education). In order to promote access to early learning programs for all preschool age children, Contra Costa County's Preschool Makes a Difference (PMD) offers several high-quality preschool programs with additional funding and support.

This study aims to understand parent choice and parent involvement in the Contra Costa Preschool Makes a Difference, both within and outside of the program.

Research indicates that parents' engagement in their children's preschool programs and learning experiences are positively associated with cognitive, academic, social-emotional, and behavioral improvements. Determining the ways in which parents are involved with their child's program and how parents view their role in these activities is an integral step in fostering parent involvement (Weiss et al 2006). Early childhood experts advocate the need for parents and providers to partner and recognize the need for putting systems in place at the program level to support engagement activities (Halgunseth 2009). An additional goal is to inform the development of questions for use in future studies of parental involvement in early education programs. In this report, we document the characteristics of the parents interviewed and summarize parent experiences and opinions about their teachers and programs.

RATIONALE AND APPROACH

The purpose of this study was to help the First 5 Contra Costa Children and Families Commission determine the ways in which parents choose and are involved with their child's program and how parents view their role in these activities. To do this, we conducted in-depth interviews with a sample of 30 parents whose children attend programs participating in Preschool Makes a Difference. Interviews were conversational in style to encourage open and honest expression of opinions, impressions, and experiences. While questions were largely open-ended, interviewers used prompts when necessary to obtain details about key issues across all interviews.

Interview Process and Parent Participants

We conducted in-depth interviews with a sample of 30 parents with children enrolled in either a family child care (FCC) or a center-based setting. Parents were racially and ethnically diverse and had a range of experience with First 5 Contra Costa child care programs. Interviewees had children enrolled at 14 of the 18 different family and center-based programs included in the sampling frame. Interviews with 3 of the 30 parents took place in Spanish. This number proportionately reflected the percentage of Spanish speakers (10 percent) in the sampling frame. All other parents stated that English was the primary language spoken in their homes. The majority of the parents interviewed were mothers. Most parents had attended at least some college. Table 1 displays demographic information collected from all parents.

Table 1. Respondent Demographics

Demographic	Number of Respondents
Relationship to Child	
Mother	26
Father	3
Grandparent	1
Ethnicity	
White/Caucasian	11
African American	5
Latino/Hispanic	7
Asian/Pacific Islander	3
Language Spoken at Home	
English	27
Spanish	3
Parent Age Range	25-51 years (one grandparent aged 71)
Highest Level of Parent Education	
Elementary School	1
High School	5
Some College	12
College Graduate	3
Graduate degree	2
Child Age Range	2-5 years

Note: May not sum to 30; not all parents provided responses to each question.

Most parents were over 30 years old. All interviewees had at least one child between two and a half and five years old currently enrolled in a First 5 Contra Costa program. All parents had children who had been enrolled in a First 5 Contra Costa program for a minimum of four months (since the start of the 2010-2011 school year). Several parents mentioned that they had enrolled more than one child in a First 5 Contra Costa program. Although we did not specifically ask parents to provide information on siblings, references to older and younger children arose throughout many interviews. Twenty-two parents discussed siblings in the context of program choice, comparisons between child care programs, time constraints related to child care, and home learning support. Specifically, older siblings were often described as helping younger children with reading and other learning activities.

Variation among respondents and confidentiality. We examined responses to questions about parent/teacher relationships, program choice factors, and perceptions of program quality in the context of parent characteristics including type of program, length of parental experience with

program, or whether parents had other children. Analysis revealed little association between these characteristics and responses to core interview questions. Further, analysis by demographic information (race, ethnicity, language, parent gender, and age) posed a risk to respondent confidentiality and has not been included in the narrative of this report (Table 2).

Table 2. Respondent Characteristics

Characteristics	Number of Times Cited
Type of program	
FCC	19
Center*	11
Length of time in program	
6 months or less	25
More than 6 months	2
Unknown	3
Other children in family	
Yes	22
No	7
Unknown	1
Education	
High school and less	6
More than high school	20
Unknown	4

*Only two center-based programs were represented in the sample

WHAT ARE PARENT REASONS FOR CHOOSING A PRESCHOOL PROGRAM?

Initial interview questions centered on how parents select child care programs. Follow-up (or probing) questions addressed what factors parents considered important and whether parents considered the program to be family- or center-based.

Program choice process. When parents were asked to describe their process in selecting a program, they most commonly cited referrals from family members, friends, coworkers, church members, and the Contra Costa Childcare Council. Some parents consulted online resources, including the CoCo (Contra Costa) Kids and Craigslist websites. Several described visiting at least two programs and meeting with teachers and staff before making their selection. Some parents brought their child when visiting programs so that they could gauge the child's reaction to the environment and the teachers. Some parents whose older children had attended a First 5 Contra Costa program opted to enroll younger siblings as well.

Program choice factors. We asked all parents to describe the top factors affecting their child care selection. Table 3 ranks the most commonly cited considerations by the number of respondents who reported them.

Table 3. Factors in Choosing a Child Care Program/Preschool

Choice Factor	Number of Times Cited
Teacher Attitude, Personality, Perspective	18
Curriculum, Classroom Activities, Academic Support	11
Cleanliness, Environmental Factors Such As Organization	10
Convenience (for Example, Location, Hours)	7
Child's Reaction to the Program	6
Opportunity For Parent Involvement and Volunteering	5
Program Type (Home Versus Center-Based Care)	5
Bi-Lingual Classroom	4
Older Sibling Enrolled In Program	4
Positive Referrals From Friends, Family Members	4
Individualized Attention	3
Small Class Size	2
Cost	2
Food and Snack Quality	2
Religious Perspective	1

Several parents offered more than one reason for selecting a program. One parent mentioned multiple commonly cited factors: *"I liked that it was a home facility, and I liked the size, and the location's right next to my work. And most of all I was really impressed by [the teacher], and she seemed to align with [my] values."* Another parent compared the environment of her current child care program to that of one her child had previously attended: *"There's a whole preschool room for my three-year-old. They have water that's accessible at a lower height for the kids. There were cups. There was just everything… [It] was perfect compared to the licensed child care that I had been at beforehand. The teachers showed me the whole house, and everything was completely set up for the kids. She had two computers in her living room, and then in her back yard there's a covered play area, and then there's a whole other side. Her whole yard is set up like the yellow brick road. There's basketball hoops, tetherball. It has everything."*

HOW DO PROGRAMS HELP PARENTS GET INVOLVED IN THEIR CHILD'S EARLY EDUCATION AT HOME?

During early childhood, two key aspects of parenting are (1) parent-child relationships and (2) participation in child-centered activities. The parent-child relationship provides a context for a child's positive social-emotional and cognitive development. Research on the influence of both aspects on children's development is extensive (Bradley et al. 2001; Amato and Fowler 2002; Weiss and Caspe 2006; Brooks-Gunn and Markman 2005). Fewer studies have explored the role of parenting specifically for children participating in preschool or child care, but findings are consistent (Connell and Prinz 2002; Lamb-Parker et al. 1999; Fantuzzo and McWayne 2002). Because research confirms that families are influential in supporting learning development, we dedicated considerable attention to asking how programs and teachers supported learning outside the program.

Types of home learning support fell into two broad categories: (1) general suggestions for supporting learning and development at home, and (2) suggestions focused on home reinforcement of what children are learning in programs. We also asked parents to describe materials provided by their programs, as well as whether programs offered information about community resources.

General home learning support. When asked open-ended questions about how their program supported learning *outside* the classroom, over half of parents responded that teachers encouraged parents to read with their child or that their program participated in the Raising-a-Reader program. Other answers centered on strategies that parents could use to support cognitive abilities and social-

emotional development. For example, some parents said teachers had suggested creating flash cards to help children with counting and learning the alphabet. One parent explained, *"She specifically listed the numbers that he was having difficulty with, or any shapes or colors that he was having difficulty with, and gave me ideas of ways that I could go about helping him get more familiar with them, such as while we're at the dinner table talking about colors, or if we're driving down the street to point out cars with different colors."* Parents also cited support for behavioral and developmental issues such as potty-training, manners, and discipline. One mother described her collaboration with a teacher, *"She said that my son gets frustrated when he's called by his last name, so she suggested that when we're at home that we call each other by first and last name so he realizes that it's not teasing or something and doesn't get upset about it."*

> "Over the two years my children were at preschool, they constantly talk about continuing reading at home. The teacher has just introduced library books at preschool, which wasn't available when my elder children were at school."
>
> -Mother with child at center

Curricular support. In terms of curricular support, teachers told parents what children were learning and offered both spoken and written suggestions for how parents could continue the learning process at home. One parent recalled, *"Just recently she has been sending us home with a calendar of activities that they are focusing on and their daily topics, and it kind of gives us an idea of what they are working on each day. And she encourages us to follow up with that at home, which we do."* Parents also appreciated receiving examples of activities completed in the program and homework assignments. One parent provided a recent example, *"As we went through the holidays, she'll send something back, like discuss with your child about the different holidays and observances from different cultures and things like that. So it gives us a chance to discuss at home and reinforce or augment what's been happening there."*

Only two parents were unsatisfied with the level of home learning support. One mother explained, *"I feel like there could be some tools that I could be given as far as helping her learn to read, and learn to write, and learn to do. Basically I feel like I need to be taught how to teach her, and I don't know what to do. Obviously I'm not a teacher."*

Home learning materials. Many parents appreciated the Raising-A-Reader program, which lends bags of books to families on a weekly basis. Additional resources provided by teachers and programs included activity sheets and calendars with lists of suggested learning exercises, musical CDs, coloring books, and learning games. This reading program was the most frequently mentioned example of home learning support.

Community resources. Teachers' suggestions for community resources and activities included library activities, fairs and events, church programs, and children's classes (such as dance lessons). Library information was the most commonly cited community resource. One parent recalled, *"She would also have librarians come in and give us information. As a result, I think lots of parents ended up getting library cards and visiting the library for various events they were having."* Examples of parent-specific resources included workshops, speaker series, and kindergarten-preparation events such as elementary school fairs. Teachers also referred parents to child development specialists including psychologists, speech therapists and physicians.

DO PARENTS LEARN METHODS, APPROACHES AND CONCEPTS THAT WILL HELP THEM SUPPORT CHILDREN'S EDUCATION IN THE FUTURE?

We asked a series of questions aimed at understanding how programs and teachers influenced the way parents support their child's learning and what tools had been taught to parents to help them support children's transition from the preschool or child care to the elementary school setting. Research indicates that parent home learning support associates with success in school. For example, in one study home literacy environment and cognitive stimulation in the home were shown to predict kindergartners' early literacy skills, and the relationship was especially strong among low-income African American and Hispanic families for whom educational resources in the home were circumscribed (Lin 2003). A multi-year study demonstrated that families in high-poverty neighborhoods in Chicago who provided early learning support continued to offer family support during school (as measured by parent participation in school and parents' interest in child's progress); family support, in turn, predicted subsequent educational attainment (Ou 2005).

Parent lessons. Parents described many ways in which they had learned new techniques to support children's learning and development outside the program. Table 4 summarizes the range of parent lessons learned.

Table 4. Parent Lessons Learned

Parent Lessons	Number of Times Cited
General learning support (for example, playing learning games, reading at home, understanding and supporting what is being learned through the curriculum)	15
Behavior management (for example, assistance with potty training, patience, and listening techniques)	8
Discipline (for example, use of time-outs, encouragement rather than scolding)	6
Increased level of parent involvement at home, spending designated one-on-one time with children	3
Raising expectations for children, setting learning goals	2

One parent described learning new approaches by both observing the teacher's attitude and engaging in conversations about learning support techniques, *"She has an incredible amount of patience. It's hard as working parents, then you come home patience is a big factor. That is something that she encourages and just going over things with him. Following up with stuff he's learned throughout the day, talking about it, reading about it."* Another parent also mentioned importance of patience, and continued to explain that she learned to dedicate specific one-on-one time to home learning activities, *"That's one thing that she says, try to interact and try to be very patient. The one-on-one the child really needs. She did say, even if you're really busy, try to spend that maybe 20 minutes of reading time, writing, or whatever you can. And I've always enforced that in myself. And now my oldest daughter will, if I'm busy or whatever she'll spend that 20 minutes with my son or daughter to read to them, or wring letters and numbers. But that definitely helped me out, continuing that reinforcement that she taught me."*

> "Basically the tools and the little games that she has shown me encouraged me because it has made me want to find different ways of creating the same things, the things that she needs to learn in a different fashion."
>   -Mother with child at family child care program

Eight parents said that they had not learned new approaches or techniques, six of which were enrolled in FCCs and all of which had other children. There did not appear to be any relationship with the reported education of the parent in answering this question. One parent voiced her belief that *"I know I can teach them better than any preschool. When my daughter started kindergarten she could already count to 145 and could read. So I don't need preschool to teach my children."* When asked if she had learned new skills from her child's teachers another mother provided the following comprehensive response, *"Not really... It's up to a parent to start a child at an early age, whether it's one, two years old, the earlier, the better... I think it's up to parents to do the minimum of teaching their children the ABCs, doing shapes and colors, even doing their numbers. There are a lot of basic learning materials out there that you can use to teach your children before they go to kindergarten."* Even those parents who did not believe they had new learning approaches, however, provided positive commentary on their programs in general. For example, one parent offered, *"I wouldn't say it changed my perspective, it more validated. It was more reassuring."*

Preparation for the future, transition to kindergarten. Parents with older (aged 3.5 and above) children and siblings offered the most informative responses about kindergarten transition supports. Several parents attributed their children's high level of preparedness to participation in their preschool program. Learning the alphabet and counting to at least 10 were most commonly cited as proof of a program's teaching success. One mother compared the academic support between current and former programs, *"I can honestly say that my daughter wasn't prepared at the previous daycare she was at. She didn't know how to spell her name. She knew the alphabet only from me teaching her here at home. So she definitely prepared her. She knows how to spell her name now, and it's kind of a long name for a kindergartener to know. She knows her first and her last name and how to spell it correctly. She knows lower- and upper-case letters. She knows her numbers all the way up to a hundred."*

Other parents said their program offered assistance in registering for kindergarten, scheduling kindergarten visits, and offering advice about academic expectations. One parent described a high level of personal help: *"My provider actually gave me teachers she recommended for kindergarten that she had worked with in the past, and knows that I'm kind of strict, so to speak, so she gave me a teacher that she thinks will work best with me and my child."*

HOW DO PARENT-TEACHER RELATIONSHIPS GUIDE PARENT INVOLVEMENT?

A majority of parents described teacher attitudes as welcoming and felt comfortable asking questions of and offering opinions to teachers, in turn facilitating parent involvement in the learning process. One mother summarized a common sentiment among interviewees: *"You can talk to them about anything. If you have concerns or they have concerns, yeah, they're very open and easy to talk to."* Teacher attitudes appeared related to the quality of communication. Another mother commented, "It's just something that you're always aware of. When you go in just to go see the school, the instructor is like anytime you want to be there for whatever reason, whether it's on your schedule to be there or not, everybody's welcome." Only one parent cited a "lack of communication" with program staff. Over 20 parents praised the communication abilities of teachers at their program, in terms of providing regular progress updates, offering advice, and being receptive to questions.

> "[The teacher] tells us how to help him with some difficulty that he may be having. And they are in good communication; If there is something I'm having difficulty with at home, like he's not obeying, I will ask them about it and they will help me communicate with my son, which I have appreciated very much. They are always talking to us about new things."
>   -Mother with son at center

In the context of discussing classroom and home learning support, we learned a great deal about communication techniques. Most parents talk to teachers when dropping off and picking up children. Parents described brief conversations during which teachers provided updates of daily activities and learning progress, interactions between children, and notice of upcoming events. According to one mother, *"I talk with her a lot at pickup and drop-off times. For those of us who are too busy to read the newsletter, or if we maybe forgot, she'll remind us of any activities going on for the day. You know, if there were any issues, like if there was an issue with the child and the potty, of if there was an issue where the child had trouble learning something, because she works with them on all their sounds, phonics, all of that."*

In addition to brief on-site conversations, parents talk on the phone and exchange emails with teachers about topics ranging from scheduling to their children's progress. Formal parent-teacher meetings were mentioned less often. Only six parents cited annual, semester, and monthly meetings where they discussed expectations and progress for their children.

WHAT ARE PRIMARY BARRIERS TO PARENT INVOLVEMENT?

When discussing involvement, parents offered insight into personal factors that limited their involvement in the program, but few parents cited time as a barrier to supporting their child's learning at home. For most, the difficulty appeared to be in finding free time to visit the classroom, so we will limit discussion of these barriers but point out the value in programs offering evening and weekend classroom events that includes childcare to encourage participation from working parents. The most common hindrances were work and education schedules, and lack of child care for other siblings. Fourteen parents said that they worked one or more jobs and therefore had little time to spend at the classroom. Five parents said that they were full-time students and did not have extra time for classroom involvement. Four parents said that because they were busy caring for siblings, they could not spend time at the program. One mother recognized the importance of parent involvement but simply had limited time to spend with her daughter, *"I know that one of my major barriers is I feel like if she's not getting the proper education at school or in her program, it's going to be harder on me to try to focus... to really, really work with her to get her to where she wants to be because I'm a single parent, I work full time, I travel two hours a day going back and forth to work, and I have two older kids. So it's really hard to focus on one, when you have three."* One mother summarized similar sentiments, *"I'm sure more parents would like to be involved, but in this day and age there's so many commitments that they have with work, and so many moms and dads working, that it's just a shame that parents just don't have the time to put into the school."*

HOW DO PARENTS DESCRIBE THE ELEMENTS OF QUALITY PRESCHOOLS?

Before ending each interview, we asked parents to tell us their definition of quality and to rate the quality of their program on a scale of 1 (lowest) to 5 (highest). After parents had assigned a rating, we asked them to describe the best and worst elements of their programs.

Defining quality. Table 5 lists the most commonly cited factors in discussions of program quality. We gathered this information by asking parents the general question of how they defined quality and more narrow questions about how their own programs measured up against their standards. Parents often mentioned multiple factors in their definition of quality.

Table 5. Quality Program Factors

Quality Factors	Number of Times Cited
Academic and learning support, curricular and daily programmatic structure, positive child learning outcomes	18
Small class size, teacher attentiveness	13
Child satisfaction and comfort	12
Teacher attitude (positive descriptors included welcoming, caring, informative)	10
Safety, trust in teachers	8
Socialization, opportunities for group play	6
Teacher expertise (factors including high level of education and knowledge)	4
Opportunity for parent involvement, good communication	4
Flexibility around family schedules	4
Program cleanliness	4

Quality ratings. Parents assigned overwhelmingly positive ratings to their programs. Table 6 lists program ratings provided by 29 parents.

Table 6. Quality Ratings

Quality Rating (1= lowest quality, 5=highest quality)	Number of Times Cited
Over 5 (some parents assigned ratings of 5+, 7 and 10)	4
5	18
4.5/5	1
4.5	1
4	3
3.5/4	1
2	1

Note: One parent did not offer a rating.

Quality highlights. We asked parents who gave positive ratings to describe the program attributes that informed their ratings (that is, that led to the positive ratings). Parents' responses generally corresponded with factors they identified as defining quality in Table 6. One comment illustrated parents' frequent focus on support for learning and individualized child attention, *"The environment, the school setting, the teacher's attention, one-on-one attention that they give my child, their curriculum. When my oldest son went to kindergarten he was very prepared for kindergarten. Just the overall experience he had in the school, I felt like it was a quality preschool as far as they teach them all kinds of different things, from manners to interacting to schooling, just everything that a full-time parent is not able to do or needs assistance with. So I was really happy with the experience with my oldest son, and it continues with my four-year-old. She's got the same curriculum, same setting, same rules. She's able to have enough one-on-one time with the kids. That to me is very important."*

> "Activity and education. You could really put them anywhere as long as they're safe. Obviously that's number one, but if there's quality education and good activity, then I think that that's what really would set it apart from anything else. I don't care really where it's at as long as it's safe, as long as what they're doing when they're there, the time is quality and being spent well—that's important to me."
>
> -Mother with child at family child care program

Quality concerns. The few parents that did not choose top ratings offered suggestions for improvement. Two parents thought the curriculum could be improved. Two parents wanted their programs to provide daily updates of classroom activities and additional suggestions for home activities. One parent explained that toddlers and prekindergarten children were in the same classroom and would prefer that separation existed between age groups. Another parent thought the space was too small and "wished" the property included a back yard. Finally, one parent offered a minor complaint: she wished hot water was available for hand washing.

CONCLUSION AND CONSIDERATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Results of the Pre-School Telephone Interview study provide insight into child care parent and family involvement in preschool and child care programs participating in Preschool Makes a Difference. These parent interviews offer First 5 Contra Costa new accounts of how programs are helping to facilitate home learning and support for the diverse needs of Contra Costa parents. While this report captures the opinions and experiences of 30 parents, study participants should not be considered representative of the First 5 Contra Costa parent population, as certain groups were not well-represented in the sample. Fathers, teen-age and younger parents, and immigrants stand out as three groups that were notably disproportionate in number.

A suggested next step to help First 5 Contra Costa plan its parent supports and activities agenda is the design and distribution of a questionnaire on parent and family involvement to a large sample of parents representative of those participating in First 5 Contra Costa programs. This would help First 5 Contra Costa learn more about the opinions, attitudes, and behaviors of diverse parent groups. Asking specific questions about teacher characteristics would facilitate complex analysis. Equipped with more comprehensive data, First 5 Contra Costa could direct special attention to high-need groups such as single working parents. The questions and listening points developed and themes uncovered throughout the interview process and summarized in this report, offer a starting point for designing a questionnaire that would allow First 5 Contra Costa to measure and understand parent involvement trends and experiences at a county level.

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APPENDIX A: METHODOLOGY

Study Design and Interview Procedures

In the initial phase, First 5 Contra Costa provided Mathematica with a spreadsheet listing the names of 100 parents who had agreed to be contacted for a possible interview. The spreadsheet contained identification and background data for each parent including: contact information, alternate phone numbers, child care/preschool site, and scholarship receipt. While the sample cannot be considered random, we did randomly select from available names by using a *seed* (a starting sample number used to generate the pseudo-random number sequence of generated sample). Thereafter, we used nth-name selection which resulted in 35 completed parent interviews, including two pilot interviews. Because the note-taking strategy was revised, three interviews were not audio-recorded; corresponding respondents' answers were not used in the final analysis.

In November 2009, Mathematica and First 5 Contra Costa staff met to discuss the aims of the project and decide which questions to include in an interview protocol. The protocol included core questions followed by scripted probes intended to obtain insights into each respondent's experiences and opinions. After speaking with First 5 Contra Costa, we revised the protocol, which was then reviewed, refined, and approved before conducting two pilot interviews. Following these pilot interviews, Mathematica and First 5 Contra Costa staff discussed final changes to be made before the next round of interviewing. Existing questions were revised and reordered to improve the level of clarity, and a few new items were developed to capture additional information (refer to the final protocol in Appendix A).

In December 2009 and January 2010, we conducted 33 interviews, each of which lasted 30 to 40 minutes, including time required to call and schedule appointments with parents. Mathematica made five attempts to reach parents at different times of the day and week; 151 calls were made over daytime, evening, and weekend hours to obtain the interviews. Table A1 summarizes key statistics regarding response rates.

Table A1. Sample Summary Statistics

Number in Sample	50
Number Completed	33
Number Refused	2
Number Eligible	44
Cooperation Rate**	75%
Refusal Rate	5%

**number completed/number eligible to complete.

After listening to audio recordings of the pilot interviews First 5 Contra Costa requested full transcriptions of all interviews. Interviews were transcribed and put in an electronic format for use with the Atlas.ti qualitative software program.

APPENDIX B: FINAL PARENT INVOLVEMENT INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

PART I: INTRODUCTION (Approx 2-3 Minutes)

(NOTE: This section may be completed during actual interview or pre-interview scheduling call)

Introduce Self
- State name, job position, Mathematica Policy Research:
  - Independent research organization

Explain the interview purpose
- Mathematica is working with First 5 Contra Costa to help them learn about parent opinions of their preschool programs.

BACKGROUND – USE IF PARENT HAS QUESTIONS
- We hope to talk about the different ways you like to get involved in your child's program, and the things that you like to do at home to facilitate what your child is doing in the program.
- First Five Contra Costa has given special funding and training to several select high-quality programs and schools to help the teachers learn how to best help parents help their child learn.
- Your experiences with this program can really help us do this.

Explain the incentive - $25 Target gift card mailed to parent's home-
- Ask for parent's address- e.g. where to mail the card

Mechanisms of Discussion
- I will be recording the interview.
- Confidentiality
- Encourage interviewees to offer opinion, no right or wrong answers.
- Able to refuse to answer any questions

We were hoping to get an idea of how parents' backgrounds
- Please tell me your:
  - age
  - race or ethnicity
  - what languages are spoken in your home
  - mother's highest level of education

We were hoping to get an idea of how parents choose their child's program

- How long have you have been involved with this program or school?
  → Screen for >4 months

- Number and ages of children/siblings enrolled in this program or school?
  → Screen for age between 2.6 and 4.6

- Please tell me why did you choose this program or school for your child?
- Do you think of your program as a family childcare center or classroom?

**Continue if parents meet both screening requirements-
otherwise, discontinue interview**

PART II: DISCUSSION OF PARENT INVOLVEMENT (Approx 13-18 Minutes)

TYPES OF INVOLVEMENT

IN-PROGRAM ACTIVITIES, HOW DOES THE TEACHER INVOLVE YOU IN THE PROGRAM?

> *Q: How does your program **encourage** you to support what your child is **learning in the classroom** or to get involved in the classroom or program?*

Listening Points/ Probes
- Provision of information:
  - Informs parents of events (FFCC)
  - Lists information on a preschool website
  - Distributes information in multiple languages
  - Offers different methods of providing updates and information, ensures that all parents receive feedback
  - Offers feedback in the form of progress reports

- Specific invitations to parents/respond to parent interests and needs
  - Asks parents to help in the classroom (FFCC)
  - Encourages parents to come on class trips
  - Encourages parents to give class presentations
  - Schedules events at different times that work with different schedules, provides advance notice and reminders for events
  - Offers participation/volunteer options to meet different family needs and interests

- Create open, two-way communication and welcoming climate
  - Equal two-way communication (FFCC)
  - Listens to parents about concerns (FFCC)
  - Asks parent opinion about children (FFCC)
  - Set goals together during parent-teacher conferences
  - Encourages parents to participate in decisions that affect their child/children (FFCC)
  - Makes parents feel welcome
  - Issue surveys to get parent feedback

> *Q: What are some of the **opportunities** for involvement your child's program offers?*

Listening Points/ Probes
- Volunteer in child's classroom
- Attend family events or parent workshops
- Ask teacher about how child is doing
- Do you communicate with other parents about the program and/or your children's experiences outside? Can you describe these conversations?
- How does the teacher help you be involved (skills/attitudes)?

> *Q: What kinds of ways you have chosen to get involved with activities at **your program or school**.*

HOME LEARNING SUPPORT, HOW DOES THE TEACHER HELP YOU HELP YOUR CHILD LEARN AT HOME?

*Q: What kinds of things does the **teacher encourage** you to do **at home** with your children?*

Listening Points/ Probes
- Do activities similar to those done at preschool (FFCC)
- Takes child on outings for educational enrichment (FFCC)
- Model learning behaviors (reading, talking, hard work) (FFCC)
- Have high expectations for child (FFCC)
- Learned about child development (FFCC)
- Give child realistic responsibilities(FFCC)
- Implement routines for bedtime and meals, attendance, nutrition (FFCC)
- Build a learning environment (place to study?) (FFCC)
- Show interest in what children are learning
- Assist with activities program encourages your child/family to do at home
- Use educational television or computer programs

Q: How have your teacher's suggestions for home learning activities changed your view of parent support for early learning?

Q: What have what you have learned from your teacher that will help you support your child's learning in the future?

*Q: What kinds of ways you have chosen to get involved with learning support activities **at home**?*

OVERALL EXPERIENCES

Q: Is there anything else you would like to be doing?

NOTE: Skip this question if FCC and only one classroom/ head teacher

*Q: How does the **program or school** work to accommodate your families specific needs in terms of time, schedule, financial and other constraints?*

Q: Do you have an opportunity to express to the program/teachers how you'd like to get involved? If yes, how?

RESOURCES AND SUPPORT FOR PARENT INVOLVEMENT

Q: In what ways does your program foster involvement in your child's learning outside of school?

Listening Points/ Probes
- Workshops on how to support learning based on parent interests (FFCC)
- Handouts on strategies that can be used at home (FFCC)
- Connects parents with resources outside the program (FFCC)
- Helps parents understand why it is important to be involved with my child's education (FFCC)
- Teaches parents skills on how to build early literacy (FFCC)
- Gives advice with parenting skills (FFCC)
- Family book-lending program
- Presents ideas for community activities for educational enrichment
- Encourages parents to advocate for my child and gives me / connects me to resources and support to do so (FFCC)
- Sponsors parent groups, buddy-system with other parents
- If child is around 4 years old ask about Transition to Kindergarten:
  - Teaches parents about school transitions, Kindergarten expectations (FFCC)
  - Helps parents understand elementary schools and how to "navigate" the system (FFCC)
  - Offers information and meetings about transition to Kindergarten, understanding how to navigate the public school system

BARRIERS TO PARENT INVOLVEMENT

Q: What kinds of things might discourage you from participating?

Listening Points/ Probes
- Unhappy with how information is communicated
- Not comfortable at the program
- Worried about "getting in the way" in the classroom
- Thinks teacher(s) do not want parents in the classroom

Q: If you haven't been able to get involved, what are some of the reasons why?

Listening Points/ Probes
- Too busy or too tired
- Transportation issues: too difficult to find a way to get to the program, parking, no convenient public transportation
- Feel uncomfortable about getting involved
- Language barriers (FFCC)
- Sense of ability / knowledge (FFCC)
- Sense of rights to be involved (FFCC)
- Home environment (FFCC)
- Fear of voicing opinion
- Concern about breaking rules, view that teachers have authority
- Lack of a structured volunteer program
- Lack of access to the internet

- Literacy (concern about reading and writing abilities)
- Think learning is a teacher's, not a family's responsibility

VALUES AND CULTURES

> *Q: Do you feel that the teachers/staff at your child's program understand your values or your culture when it comes to your children?*

Listening Points/ Probes
- Expectations for child development
- How communication should occur between teachers and families
- What parent responsibilities should be when it comes to child's education
- Language background
- Religious background
- Teachers demonstrate respect for family backgrounds
- *Does the teacher take into account your family's particular situation? If yes, how?*

PROGRAM QUALITY

> *[Core question]*
>
> *What does quality mean? Or what makes for high quality?*

Listening Points/ Probes
- Examples: success in learning development/ progress, safety, teacher attention, convenient location, warm environment, etc.

> *Q: How would you rate the quality of this program on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being the lowest quality and 5 being the highest?*

APPENDIX C: CODING GUIDE FOR FIRST 5 CONTRA COSTA PARENT INVOLVEMENT REPORT

Atlas Code	Description
Family Background	
Spanish/English	Record if interview took place in Spanish or English
Single Mother	Single mother information
Single Father	Single father information
Ethnicity: White/Caucasian African American Latino/Hispanic Asian/ Pacific Islander	Race/ethnicity information
Language: English Spanish Tagalong	Information on languages spoken in the home
Parent Age:	Parent age information
Education: High School Some College College Graduate Graduate Degree	Highest level of parent education
Child Age	Child age information
Sibling Information	Information about siblings
Program Choice	
Program Participation Length	Length of time child has been enrolled in program
Program Choice Factors	Information about what informed parent decision to enroll child in program
Program Choice Process	Information about program choice process (e.g. staff meetings, site visits, conversations with friends)
Program Type	Information related to FCC versus child care center

Atlas Code	Description
In-Program Activities	
Informal Classroom Participation	Description of daily/ informal parent involvement in program (e.g. volunteering, spending time at pick-up or drop-off, during the school day)
Field Trips	Description of parent participation in field trips
Program Events	Description of parent participation in special events (e.g. potlucks, program plays, holiday parties)
Parent Presentations	Description of special parent presentations
Parent Donations	Food, supplies, materials parents, etc that parents were encouraged to donate to the program
Communication	
Informal Verbal Communication	Description of informal communication between parents and teachers, including topics discussed, frequency, how parents use information
Formal Verbal Communication	Description of types of formal communication between parents and teachers (e.g. parent-teacher conferences, scheduled meetings), topics discussed, frequency, how parents use information
Written Communication	Description of types of written communication between parents and teachers (e.g. email, letters home, flyers, bulletin board postings), topics, time and frequency, how parents use information
Communication Quality, Teacher Attitudes	Description of teacher tone, availability, degree of teacher listening, amount of parent feedback solicitation
Parent Comfort	Level of parent comfort with expressing their needs and ideas to teachers
Home Learning Activities	
Home Curriculum Support	Description of home activities that align with preschool curriculum (e.g. teacher recommended readings, homework) level of teacher direction
General Home Learning Support	Description of general learning activities (e.g. reading, singing songs), level of teacher direction
Home Learning Behavior Modeling	Description of behavior modeling activities (e.g. manners and communication), level of teacher direction

Atlas Code	Description
Home Learning Materials	Description of books, CDs, DVDs, online websites, activity sheets provided by the program for home use
Parent Assessments	Parent strategies to assess home learning, teacher-parent conversations about home learning
Learning Support Lessons	
Parent Lessons	Skills, techniques and tools parents learned from their program and teachers
Preparation for the Future	Impact of childcare experience, teacher interactions on how parents will support children as they grow older
Learning Support Suggestions	Ways the program, teachers might do a better job providing learning support, opportunities for involvement
Community Resources	
Community Resources	Description of community opportunity information made available (e.g. library and town events geared toward children), frequency and methods teachers used to communicate information
Between Parent Interaction	Opportunities for parents to meet each other, discuss common issues, experiences
Transition to Kindergarten	Description of transition information made available related to local elementary schools, school district, kindergarten expectations; frequency and methods teachers used to talk about kindergarten preparation
Barriers To Involvement	
Involvement Barriers	Reasons parents cited for lack of involvement (e.g. time, transportation, work schedule, lack of information about events or opportunities)
Parent Involvement Suggestions	Ideas parents offered to encourage or increase likelihood of their involvement
Family Cultures, Perspectives, Needs	
Family Cultures	Description of program support for family cultures (e.g. languages, religions, cultural experiences)
Family Perspectives	Description of program support for family perspectives and opinions (e.g. discipline routines, educational/ early child learning beliefs)
Family Needs	Description of program support for family schedules, financial situations, etc.

Atlas Code	Description
Program Quality	
Defining Quality	Different parent interpretations of quality
Rating Quality	Numerical rating for programs (one is lowest, five is highest)
Quality Highlights	Reasons cited for high ratings
Quality Detriments	Reasons cited for low ratings
General Suggestions	General suggestions on how programs could improve quality

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