



The Challenges of Change

Learning from the Child Care and Early Education
Experiences of Immigrant Families

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Introduction

Evaluations of a small number of high-quality early education programs that support the full range of children’s development show long-term positive effects on child well-being and later school success.¹ High-quality programs have the potential to particularly benefit low-income children and those most at risk of school failure. Informed by this research, policymakers at the state and local levels have been implementing—or exploring the implementation of—a variety of early learning programs, in order to improve young children’s school readiness. To be most effective, early learning programs and policies must be designed with the needs of all children who will be served in mind.



Children born to immigrant parents are a large and rapidly growing segment of the nation’s child population. Roughly one in five children under the age of six is the child of an immigrant parent.² Children of immigrants are more likely than children of U.S.-born citizens to face economic hardships and significant barriers to healthy development, making them less ready to succeed in school and beyond. These children are more likely to be living in low-income or poor households. Over half of young children of immigrants (56 percent) are low income—living in households with incomes below 200 percent of the federal poverty threshold.³ Across the country, the demographics of communities are changing quickly; and policymakers are struggling with how to include immigrant families most effectively in their early care and learning programs, in order to mitigate the risks that these families often face. To date, children of immigrants—and,

1 Takanishi and Bogard, “Effective Educational Programs for Young Children.”

2 Capps et al., *The Health and Well-Being of Young Children of Immigrants*.

3 *Ibid.*

in particular, children who speak a primary language other than English—have not been the focus of a longitudinal study of the benefits of early education. Yet, emerging research finds that quality early education has the potential to provide comparable benefits to children of immigrants as to other at-risk groups.⁴

A body of research has recently emerged showing that, overall, children of immigrants are less likely to participate in early education programs, such as pre-kindergarten, or to have a regular child care arrangement, including center-based and family child care.⁵ A substantial portion of the difference in preschool participation is explained by the socioeconomic characteristics of immigrant families.⁶ Children of immigrants are more likely to live in households characterized by poverty, low parental educational attainment, limited English language proficiency, and low maternal employment, all of which correlate with lower participation in early education programs. While research on preschool participation provides important guidance to communities, demographic characteristics alone fail to answer many important questions about how best to facilitate participation and to structure services for immigrant families. There is little formal research to explain how language, culture, and immigrant status contribute to lower rates of participation. This report explores the multiple reasons for immigrant families' underparticipation in child care and early education. It also identifies strategies for increasing participation and making programs more accessible, more responsive, and ultimately of higher quality for immigrant families. It concludes with policy recommendations for federal policymakers, state and local administrators of child care and early education programs, and providers. This publication is intended as a resource for both the child care and early education field and the immigrant service field, in the hope that it is a step toward bringing individuals in these fields together to meet the challenge of improving access to high-quality child care and early education for immigrant families with young children.

4 Magnuson et al., "Preschool and School Readiness of Children of Immigrants."

5 For a summary of this research, see Matthews and Ewen, *Reaching All Children?*

6 Hernandez et al., "Early Childhood Education Programs."

Definition of Terms

In this report, “children of immigrants” refers to children who are either foreign-born or born in the United States to at least one foreign-born parent. “Young children of immigrants” refers to children of immigrants under the age of six. The term “immigrant” refers to foreign-born persons living in the United States, regardless of legal status (i.e., this includes legal residents, naturalized citizens, refugees and asylees, temporary legal migrants, and undocumented persons). “Mixed status” refers to families in which at least one sibling or parent is a U.S. citizen and at least one is not. “English Language Learners” (ELL) are individuals who are learning English as their second language. The term “English Language Learner” is often used interchangeably with the term “limited English proficient” (LEP).

We use the term “pre-kindergarten” to refer to state programs that provide early education for three- and/or four-year-old children. However, since from birth children are constantly learning from their surroundings and caregivers, “child care and early education” refers to any non-parental setting, including child care centers, family child care, Head Start, preschool, or pre-kindergarten, as well as children in the care of family, friend, and neighbor caregivers. The term “community based” is meant to describe child care and early education programs provided in non-school settings.

Research demonstrates that the overall quality of child care and early education that is available to families is mediocre at best. CLASP believes that all children should have access to a high-quality experience in the setting that best meets their family’s needs, and that all teachers and caregivers should have access to appropriate training, information, supports, and technical assistance to enhance the quality of their care. CLASP believes that the components of high-quality child care and early education include the following:

- Sufficient funding to attract and retain well-trained and qualified teachers in formal settings
- Training and information for all providers, whether informal or formal, to address the developmental needs of all children, particularly those who may be more likely to experience the risk factors associated with poverty
- Availability of and access to comprehensive services for families needing them, including developmental screenings and follow-up treatment; child health, mental health and nutrition services; and access to continuous and ongoing medical care, family support, parental involvement, and home visiting
- Infrastructure supports to ensure ongoing monitoring and quality improvement, technical assistance in all aspects of the program, and program assessment in formal settings
- Strategies to help children manage transitions to other classrooms or programs
- Inclusion of children with special needs in settings with normally developing children, along with supports to teachers and parents to help all children reach their full potential
- Appropriately serving culturally and linguistically diverse children with bilingual and bicultural teachers and caregivers, and increasing training opportunities for all caregivers, including cultural competency and strategies for teaching English Language Learners
- Responsiveness to the needs of working parents, ensuring that full-workday options are available to families needing them—through planning, coordination, and collaboration with other community, state, and federal programs
- Accessing resources to help children develop the range of skills they will need to enter school