



The Challenges of Change

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

by Hannah Matthews and
Deeana Jang

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PART II. The Participation of Young Children of Immigrants in Child Care and Early Education

High-quality child care and early education is critical to preparing children to succeed in kindergarten and beyond, and children of immigrants stand to benefit greatly from such experiences. Yet, children of immigrants are less likely to participate in preschool and in all other non-parental child care settings. Information on the child care arrangements that families use do not, however, provide information on the quality or educational content of the settings. There is also limited information on family preferences, which are constrained by cost, availability, language access, and other barriers. This section summarizes what is known about the participation of young children of immigrants in child care and early education programs, discusses some limitations of the data for understanding the child care and early education experiences of immigrant families, and addresses the benefits of high-quality child care and early education. It also examines the complicated interplay between family preferences and access barriers.

3. Examining Participation

The Child Care and Early Education Arrangements of Young Children of Immigrants

High-quality child care and early education has been shown to improve the well-being and healthy development of low-income children. Longitudinal studies of the low-income children who participated in the Perry Preschool Project; the Abecedarian project; the Chicago Child Parent Centers; and the Cost, Quality, and Outcomes study all found that children who participated in high-quality early education programs did better on a range of measures than their peers who did not participate.¹

While these studies did not focus on children of immigrants, emerging research finds that quality early education has the potential to provide comparable benefits for such children, along with additional benefits such as increased English language acquisition.² Research also tells us that it is the *quality* of a program, rather than the location or setting, that is most important to a young child's development. Yet, available data on the child care arrangements used by families do not include information on the quality of those environments, the educational content of services received, or family preferences. Families select child care based on multiple factors, including constraints such as affordability and proximity to home or work.

Available data show that young children of immigrants are less likely to participate in every type of nonparental care arrangement—including center-based, relative, and family child care—than children of U.S.-born citizens and are more likely to be in the care of a parent.³ Even when both parents work at least part-time, young children of immigrants remain more likely to be in

1 See Barnett, "Early Childhood Education"; Reynolds and Temple, "Extended Early Childhood Intervention and School Achievement"; Schweinhart, *The High/Scope Perry Preschool Study Through Age 40*; Gormley et al., *The Effects of Oklahoma's Universal Pre-K Program on School Readiness*; Masse and Barnett, *A Benefit Cost Analysis of the Abecedarian Early Childhood Intervention*.

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

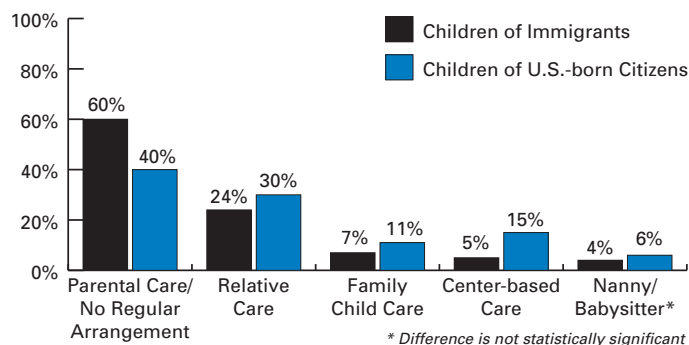
3 Data shown here are for first- and second-generation immigrant children (children who are either foreign-born or born in the United States to at least one foreign-born parent).

parental care or without a regular child care arrangement. In those immigrant families that do use regular nonparental care, infants and toddlers are more likely to be in relative care, and three- to five-year-olds are more likely to be in center-based care—the same trends that exist among children of U.S.-born citizens.⁴ (In this report, references are to a child’s primary care arrangement, except where otherwise noted.)

Infants and Toddlers (Ages Birth to Two)

The majority of children of immigrants under age three (60 percent) are in parental care or do not have a regular care arrangement. The same is true of only 40 percent of children of U.S.-born citizens. Relative care is the most common child care arrangement for all children under age three, but it is less common for children of immigrants than for children of U.S.-born citizens (24 percent compared to 30 percent). Center-based care (including child care centers, Head Start, and preschool) is infrequent for children of immigrants under age three. Only 5 percent are in center-based care, while 35 percent are in other care arrangements (see Figure 4).⁵

FIGURE 4. CHILD CARE ARRANGEMENTS OF ALL CHILDREN UNDER AGE THREE



Source: Urban Institute, 2002 National Survey of America’s Families.

Parents who work outside the home are more likely to use a regular non-parental child care arrangement. However, differences in child care use between immigrant and U.S.-born families persist among working-parent families.⁶ The majority of children of working immigrant parents under age three (67 percent) are in some type of child care (compared to 74 percent of children of working U.S.-born citizen parents). Relative care is the most common child care arrangement for all children under age three with working parents, but it is more common for children of working immigrants than for children of working U.S.-born citizens (39 percent compared to 30 percent). Children under age three whose parents are working immigrants are

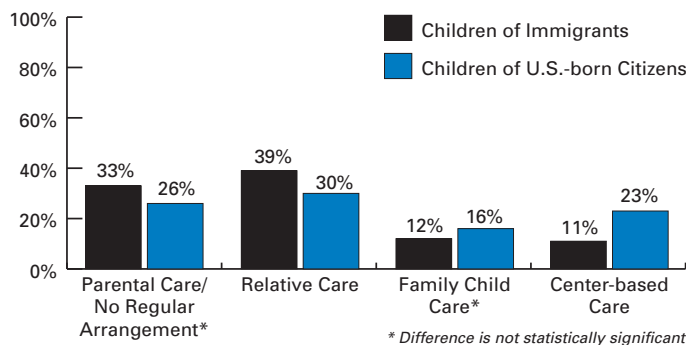
4 Urban Institute unpublished analysis of data from the 2002 National Survey of America’s Families.

5 *Ibid.*

6 This includes single mothers and two-parent families in which both parents work at least part-time.

half as likely to be in center-based care as children of working U.S.-born citizens (11 percent compared to 23 percent). (See Figure 5.)⁷

FIGURE 5. MOST COMMON CHILD CARE ARRANGEMENTS OF CHILDREN UNDER AGE THREE WITH WORKING PARENTS

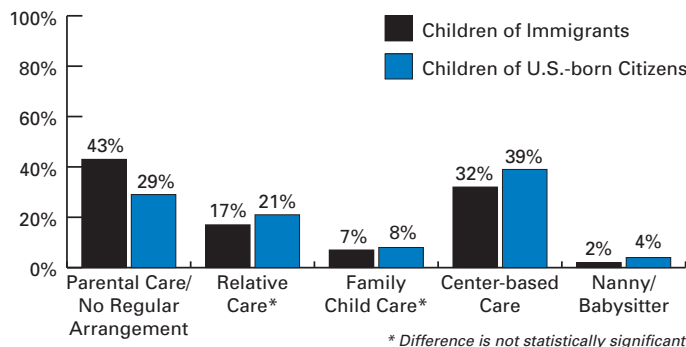


Source: Urban Institute, 2002 National Survey of America's Families.

Preschool-age Children (Ages Three to Five)

Forty-three percent of children of immigrants between the ages of three and five are in parental care or do not have a regular care arrangement. The same is true of only 29 percent of children of U.S.-born citizens. As with U.S.-born families, there are differences in the arrangements immigrant parents make as their children get older. Center-based care is the most common arrangement among all children ages three to five in non-parental care, but it is less common for children of immigrants than for children of U.S.-born citizens (32 percent compared to 39 percent). (See Figure 6.)⁸

FIGURE 6. CHILD CARE ARRANGEMENTS OF ALL CHILDREN AGES THREE TO FIVE



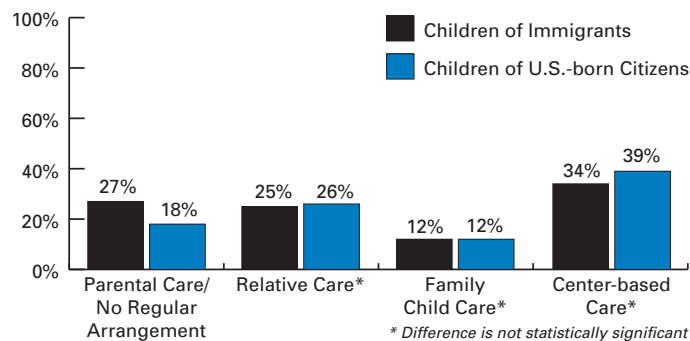
Source: Urban Institute, 2002 National Survey of America's Families.

7 Urban Institute unpublished analysis of data from the 2002 National Survey of America's Families.

8 Urban Institute unpublished analysis of data from the 2002 National Survey of America's Families. This sample excludes five-year-olds enrolled in kindergarten.

Most children ages three to five with working immigrant parents (73 percent) are in some type of child care (compared to 82 percent of children of working U.S.-born citizens). Center-based care is the most common arrangement among all working families; children of working immigrants are only slightly less likely to be in centers than children of working U.S.-born citizens. (The differences are not statistically significant.) Approximately one-fourth of all children ages three to five with working parents are in relative care; the difference between children of immigrants and children of U.S.-born citizens is not significant (see Figure 7).⁹

FIGURE 7. MOST COMMON CHILD CARE ARRANGEMENTS OF CHILDREN AGES THREE TO FIVE WITH WORKING PARENTS

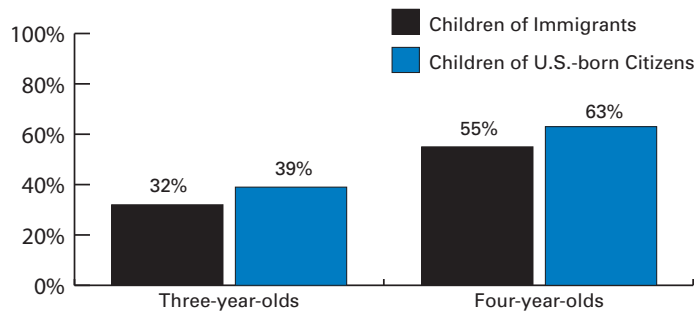


Source: Urban Institute, 2002 National Survey of America's Families.

Preschool and center-based care. Several studies show that children of immigrants are less likely than children of U.S.-born citizens to attend preschool (or center-based care).¹⁰ Children of immigrants comprise 22 percent of all children under the age of six and 21 percent of all children attending kindergarten. Yet, they comprise just 16 percent of all children attending preschool.¹¹ Differences in early education enrollment for children of immigrants and children of U.S.-born citizens persist at all ages and vary by state (see Figure 8 and Table 5).¹²

- 9 Urban Institute unpublished analysis of data from the 2002 National Survey of America's Families.
- 10 U.S. General Accounting Office, *Early Childhood Programs*; Hernandez, "Demographic Change and the Life Circumstances of Immigrant Families"; Capps et al., *The Health and Well-Being of Young Children of Immigrants*; Brandon, "The Child Care Arrangements of Preschool-Age Children in Immigrant Families in the United States"; Magnuson et al., "Preschool and School Readiness of Children of Immigrants"; Hernandez et al., "Early Childhood Education Programs."
- 11 Capps et al., *The New Demography of America's Schools*. The U.S. Census asks parents what grade of school their children age three and older attend. Parents select responses from categories, including "Nursery school, preschool." Parents may differ in how they answer this question with respect to their child's participation in center-based programs.
- 12 According to Census 2000, 4 percent of four-year-olds were enrolled in kindergarten as of April 1, 2000. Based on state rules for the age of school entry, children who began their kindergarten year at age four would have already turned five by the time of the Census. It is therefore likely that some of these children were actually enrolled in preschool programs and were erroneously reported as enrolled in kindergarten. For this reason, the data shown here aggregate preschool and kindergarten enrollment for four-year-olds.

FIGURE 8. EARLY EDUCATION ENROLLMENT OF THREE- AND FOUR-YEAR-OLDS, 2000



Source: Hernandez et al., *Children in Immigrant Families*.

Early education participation at ages three and four differs among immigrant groups by country of origin:

- Children of immigrants with origins in Australia, Canada, China, Haiti, India, New Zealand, Europe, Africa, Southwest Asia and the Middle East, and the English-speaking Caribbean have the highest rates of early education enrollment, above the average rate for children of U.S.-born citizens.
- Children of immigrants with origins in Mexico, Central America, the Dominican Republic, and Indochina have the lowest rates of early education enrollment—and account for most of the enrollment gap between children of immigrants and children of U.S.-born citizen families.¹³

TABLE 5. EARLY EDUCATION ENROLLMENT FOR SELECTED STATES, 2000

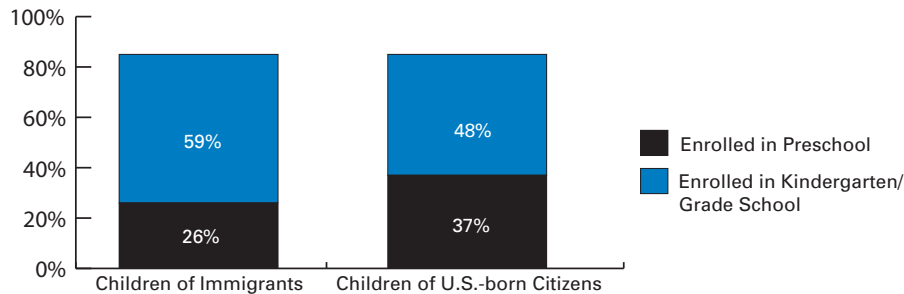
	Percent of Three-year-olds		Percent of Four-year-olds	
	Children of Immigrants	Children of U.S.-born Citizens	Children of Immigrants	Children of U.S.-born Citizens
United States	32	39	55	63
Arkansas	33	37	29	56
California	29	42	52	63
Colorado	29	40	55	65
Florida	43	48	59	65
Georgia	37	45	57	70
Maryland	40	44	71	71
New York	43	45	69	73
Oklahoma	29	33	54	58

Source: Hernandez et al., *Children in Immigrant Families*.

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

Kindergarten. At age five, enrollment in preschool declines for all children, as many five-year-olds attend kindergarten. Yet, children of U.S.-born citizens still attend preschool at a higher rate (37 percent) than children of immigrants (26 percent). However, a larger share of children of immigrants are enrolled in kindergarten or grade school (59 percent) than children of U.S.-born citizens (48 percent). (See Figure 9.)¹⁴

FIGURE 9. EARLY EDUCATION ENROLLMENT OF FIVE-YEAR-OLDS, 2000



Source: Hernandez et al., "Early Childhood Education Programs."

At age five, children of immigrants and children of U.S.-born citizens are equally likely to participate in *some* early education program—85 percent are enrolled either in preschool or in kindergarten or grade school. In most communities, public education is free and universally available beginning in kindergarten. Thus, the fact that children of immigrants are likely to begin kindergarten at an earlier age than children of U.S.-born citizens may suggest that there are continuing barriers to participation in preschool programs.¹⁵ This also suggests that a greater share of children of U.S.-born citizens are spending an additional year prior to kindergarten in early education settings and may, therefore, enter kindergarten with more of the skills they need to be ready to learn.

Children in Mexican immigrant families. At ages three to five, children of Mexican immigrants have among the lowest rates of preschool enrollment of any immigrant group (18 percent at three years, 43 percent at four years, and 23 percent at five years).¹⁶ They also have below average rates of kindergarten enrollment at age five. Because Mexico is the country of origin for nearly 40 percent of immigrant families with young children, the experiences of children of

14 Hernandez et al., "Early Childhood Education Programs." Three percent of children of U.S.-born citizens and 4.7 percent of children of immigrants are reported to be enrolled in "grade 1" at age five.

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

16 Only children of Dominican immigrants have lower preschool enrollment rates at age five (20 percent).

Mexican immigrants play a large role in driving national trends among all young children of immigrants, including low rates of participation in preschool.¹⁷ Children of Mexican immigrants also have parents with among the lowest levels of formal education, putting these children at a disadvantage upon school entry.¹⁸

Head Start. Information on children of immigrants' enrollment in Head Start is not available, as Head Start does not collect information on the immigration status or country of origin of children or parents participating in the program. Head Start *does* collect information on the ethnicity of children served and the primary languages spoken in a child's home. In 2006, 71 percent of children and pregnant women served by Head Start and Early Head Start were from homes where English was the primary language, and 24 percent were from homes speaking primarily Spanish. Middle Eastern and South Asian languages, East Asian languages, and European and Slavic languages each accounted for 1 percent of home languages.¹⁹ The U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) found, based on 1998 data, that children of limited English proficient (LEP) parents were less likely to participate in Head Start in the year prior to kindergarten, with differences in participation between Hispanic and Asian families.²⁰ A 1996 study found that children of immigrants were less likely than children of U.S.-born citizens to be enrolled in Head Start (25 percent compared to 46 percent), but more recent studies have not been conducted.²¹



Limitations of the Data

Data currently available on the participation of children of immigrants in child care and early education is limited in several respects. Surveys such as the U.S. Census and the National

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

18 Crosnoe, "Early Child Care and the School Readiness of Children from Mexican Immigrant Families."

19 Head Start PIR 2006. Native Central American, South American, and Mexican languages; Native North American or Alaska Native languages; Caribbean languages; Pacific Island languages; and African languages each accounted for less than 1 percent of children enrolled in Head Start in 2006. The primary language was "unspecified" for 1 percent of participants.

20 U.S. Government Accountability Office, *Report to Congressional Requestors, Child Care and Early Childhood Education*.

21 Nord and Griffin, "Educational Profile of 3- to 8-Year-Old Children of Immigrants."

Survey of America's Families are based on parental report of children's child care arrangements or preschool enrollment. Because there is not a single child care and early education system, nor are child care and early education settings of uniform quality or educational content, parents differ in how they report their children's participation in various programs and settings. For example, on the Census, parents may indicate whether their children (over age three) are enrolled in public or private nursery school or preschool. Parents whose children attend center-based programs, including state pre-kindergarten and Head Start, may answer this question in different ways. As previously mentioned, the data presented in this report do not offer any indication of the quality of settings used. Finally, given the proliferation of state-funded pre-kindergarten initiatives in the last several years, the age of the data raises questions about how accurately it reflects current participation rates. In states that have had large expansions in state pre-kindergarten in recent years, including Florida and Oklahoma, Census data from 2000 may not reflect current pre-kindergarten enrollment rates.

Program data on the immigration status or country of origin of children or parents is limited. There is no data on immigrant participation in Head Start, state pre-kindergarten, or child care subsidies. While states are required to collect information on the ethnicity of children who participate in the Child Care and Development Block Grant, information on the language spoken or country of origin of children or families served is not available.²² The data collected by pre-kindergarten programs varies by state and is not available in a single, uniform data source. While studies of immigrant participation in child care and preschool are emerging, to date there have not been large-scale studies of immigrant access to particular child care and early education programs.²³

Children of Immigrants Would Benefit From Early Education

Children of immigrants would likely benefit greatly from high-quality early education experiences, receiving both the developmental benefits shown to exist for other at-risk groups and additional benefits. For children of immigrants, early education has the potential to address issues of school readiness and English language acquisition, enabling them to enter elementary school with more advanced English skills and thus making them better prepared to learn and to succeed.²⁴ It may also ease integration for them and their families into American society and its education system.

22 The GAO found that 13 states collect some language data from parents whose children receive subsidies, but language information is not available nationally.

23 In August 2006, the GAO released a report on the experiences of LEP families in accessing federal child care subsidies and Head Start. The GAO identified many of the same barriers to access that are identified in this report. U.S. Government Accountability Office, *Report to Congressional Requestors, Child Care and Early Childhood Education*.

24 Rumberger and Tran, *Preschool Participation and the Cognitive and Social Development of Language Minority Students*; Gormley et al., *The Effects of Oklahoma's Universal Pre-K Program on Cognitive Development*; and Magnuson et al., "Preschool and School Readiness of Children of Immigrants."

Programs that contain a high-quality comprehensive services component can connect families to much-needed health and other social services and provide recently arrived immigrants with an introduction to services and facilities available in their communities. Recent arrivals may be less familiar with available resources and may be less connected to networks that could ease their integration and help them access available services. Children with special needs in immigrant families can benefit—as can all children—from early intervention and programs that connect their families to additional support services. Family literacy programs and other parental involvement components can help immigrant parents learn English, which in turn helps them gain employment skills and actively participate in their children’s formal education from the beginning. From the time a family arrives, early education can set the course and serve as a method of integration into the larger community.

Immigrant families with young children are more likely to be recent immigrants (having arrived in the country within the last five years).²⁵ It is critical to the well-being of families to reach parents with young children—especially infants and toddlers—and to get the entire family the supports it needs.

Access Barriers and Family Preferences Are Intertwined

A discussion of the barriers that immigrants face in accessing early childhood programs must begin by assessing the families’ desire and need to participate in such programs. Current data suggest that immigrants are underenrolled in center-based child care and preschool programs but do not necessarily indicate a lack of interest in participating if such programs were more accessible. The idea has been put forward that some immigrants—in particular, Latino families—are reluctant to use center-based child care due to a preference for relative caregivers.²⁶ However, while ethnicity affects child care decisions, child care use also varies within ethnic groups by income, location, and spoken language.²⁷

Child care and early education participation is not consistent within immigrant and ethnic groups; it varies by income, location, and spoken language.

A multilingual poll of Asian, Latino, and African-American parents in California found that parents support sending their children under age five to educational programs to prepare them for kindergarten.²⁸ Similarly, a national poll found high support for pre-kindergarten among Latino parents with young children—parents understood that pre-kindergarten was beneficial

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

26 Fuller et al., “Rich Culture, Poor Markets”; Liang et al., “Ethnic Differences in Child Care Selection.”

27 Huston et al., *Family and Individual Predictors of Child Care use by Low-Income Families in Different Policy Contexts*; Hirshberg et al., “Which Low-income Parents Select Child Care?”; Liang et al., “Ethnic Differences in Child Care Selection.”

28 New America Media, *Great Expectations*.

to their children and could give them an educational advantage. Enrolling in programs, however, was revealed as problematic.²⁹

Focus groups of Latino families also show that families are interested in sending their children to child care centers but find them to be unaffordable and unavailable in their communities.³⁰ Parent interviews and focus groups with diverse sets of immigrant groups (conducted for the Breaking Down Barriers study) found similar barriers to access and found that immigrant families support a wide range of early education experiences for their young children.³¹ While some immigrant families may prefer relative care, just as some U.S.-born citizen families may prefer it, it is likely that others are not participating in formal programs for other reasons. Recent analysis of Census data attributes most or all of the gap between immigrant families and U.S.-born citizen families in child care and preschool enrollment to socioeconomic barriers—including poverty, maternal education, and parental employment indicators—rather than to cultural influences.³²

Our research confirms that there is a great need in many immigrant communities for affordable and accessible quality child care and early education. In many cases, families patch together child care by utilizing shift work, with parents working alternating hours. Family, friend, and neighbor caregivers frequently are used as primary caregivers or to fill in child care gaps. For example, Asian immigrant families in New York report using relatives to care for children while parents are working, working alternate shifts in order to care for children, and bringing children to work—such as in factories and retail stores—for lack of child care alternatives.³³ While some immigrants are not familiar with the concept of “early education,” others are seeking information about education for their young children or are interested in accessing services once introduced to the idea.

Whether immigrants seek child care and early education may depend on multiple factors, including knowledge of what programs are available and whether child care is needed to allow parents to work. While nearly 80 percent of young children of immigrants live in a two-parent household, only 43 percent have two working parents.³⁴ (Children of U.S.-born citizens are less likely to live in a two-parent family and more likely to have two working parents.) Children of

29 Pérez and Zarate, *Latino Public Opinion Survey of Pre-kindergarten Programs*.

30 Illinois Facilities Fund, *We Need More Day Care Centers*.

31 Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families, *Final Report to the Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP) Breaking Down Barriers Mini-grant*; Florida Immigrant Advocacy Center, *Final Report for Breaking Down Barriers Project for the Center for Law and Social Policy*; Refugee Family Services, *Immigrant and Refugee Family Voices*; Coalition for Asian American Children and Families, *Breaking Down Barriers*; and Long, *Immigrant Families and Early Education in Oklahoma*.

32 Hernandez et al., “Early Childhood Education Programs.”

33 Coalition for Asian American Children and Families, *Half Full or Half-Empty?*

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

employed mothers are more likely to attend child care and center-based preschool programs.³⁵ While some immigrant mothers may choose to stay at home with their young children, others may want to work or to take English as a Second Language, job training, or other classes but may be unable to because they lack child care or work authorization or they face other barriers. More research is needed to fully understand the differences in parental employment among immigrant families.

In some cultures, paying for child care is not the norm. It may be customary for grandparents and other family members to play a primary role in caring for young children.³⁶ Immigrant parents from countries such as Vietnam and China may bring grandparents to the U.S. to care for young children while they work.³⁷ Children of immigrants also may be sent back to their home countries (or that of their parents) during their preschool years, to be cared for by grandparents or other relatives. This phenomenon is particularly prevalent among Chinese families. When children return to the United States, both parents and children may have a difficult time adjusting to living together in this country.³⁸

Some immigrant groups may be less likely than others to utilize non-parental care. For example, many refugees have experienced significant trauma or long periods of separation from family members. Service providers report that refugee parents are often reluctant to leave their children with strangers or to drop them off at child care centers. Migrant and farmworker families face unique difficulties in accessing child care, difficulties related to seasonal fluctuations in employment and income and recurrent relocation.³⁹

We found evidence that some immigrant families may prefer to keep infants and toddlers at home with either a parent or relatives and thus are less likely to be looking for formal child care arrangements. Early education providers serving children of immigrants commented that infants and toddlers were less likely than three- and four-year-olds to be in formal arrangements.

35 U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *National Household Education Survey*, 2001.

36 Minnesota Department of Human Services, *Family, Friend and Neighbor Child Care Providers in Recent Immigrant and Refugee Communities*.

37 Interviews with Tae In Lee, Korean Community Service Center of Greater Washington, Gaithersburg, Maryland, September 8, 2005, and Carol Chen, Chinese Culture and Community Service Center, Gaithersburg, Maryland, September 20, 2005.

38 White et al., *Hardship in Many Languages*; Coalition for Asian American Children and Families, *Half Full or Half-Empty?*; interview with Lois Lee, Queens School Age Day Care Center, Chinese-American Planning Council, New York City, October 19, 2005.

39 Kloosterman et al., *Migrant and Seasonal Head Start and Child Care Partnerships*.

It is likely that multiple factors contribute to immigrant families' lower participation rates in child care and early education programs. These include demographic and socioeconomic factors, language, culture, and immigration status and citizenship. In the next section, we unpack the layers of barriers that immigrant families face in accessing high-quality child care and early education and provide some examples of strategies that can be employed to help families overcome those barriers and to structure programs to more appropriately serve diverse immigrant families.