

## New Americans: Factors that Influence the Child Care Decision Making of Refugee Parents of English Language Learners

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### **Project Description.**

Despite the significant benefits quality ECE programs offer to immigrant and refugee children, their rates of enrollment are significantly lower than for comparable children of U.S.-born parents (Matthews & Ewen, 2006; Capps, et al, 2005; Brandon, 2002). The early care and education (ECE) system faces challenges in serving the youngest members of these new American families, particularly those who are English Language Learners (ELL). It is important for policymakers and child care providers to better understand the parents' work and child care needs, their cultural beliefs about child rearing and their perceptions about what their children need to get ready for school. ECE providers are keenly aware that the cultural sensitivity with which they care for the children who do enroll in their programs, as well as the degree to which they can successfully engage parents, has a bearing not only on the quality of care they provide but also on the likelihood that other immigrant parents will, through word of mouth, seek enrollment for their own children.

Aided by a diverse Advisory Committee, this in-depth, exploratory study was conducted in two cities which reflect the varied experience with immigration across the country: Denver, Colorado, where we focused on Mexican immigrants and Portland, Maine, where we focused on three of the many refugee populations which have settled there: Cambodian, Somali and Sudanese children and families. Findings include an emphasis on exploring the concerns parents have about formal child care, differences in child rearing beliefs that influence decision making and implications for providers when classrooms have multiple cultures and languages spoken among the children with no one culture or language predominating.

### **Research questions.**

The overarching research question for this study is:

- What factors influence the child care choices of low income immigrant and refugee families of English Language Learners?
- Other selected research questions include:
- How do immigrant and refugee parents' beliefs about child rearing, early education, and quality of care affect their decision to enroll their child and their choice among different care arrangements?
  - How do broader cultural views (of the immigrant and refugee populations studied and western views) affect parental choice of care and satisfaction with care?
  - To what extent do the practices of ECE providers and other service providers influence access to and choice of care?
  - What are the perspectives of child care and other service providers about immigrants' choice of, access to and satisfaction with child care?
  - What are the effects of state and local policies on parental choice of, access to and satisfaction with care?

### **Sample.**

The study population includes Mexican immigrant parents of children ages 0-6 in Denver, Colorado and Cambodian, Somali, and Sudanese parents of children ages 0-6 in Portland, Maine. In addition, key stakeholders and service providers in those counties and at the state level were interviewed. Kindergarten-2<sup>nd</sup> grade teachers and licensed child care providers located in the identified counties as well as Eagle, Garfield, Adams and Arapahoe counties in CO and Androscoggin County in ME were surveyed.

### **Methods.**

Methods include parent focus groups, service provider interviews and surveys of child care providers and K-2 teachers.

### **Progress Update.**

The project is in a carryover period; analysis is complete and the final report is drafted and ready for review by key stakeholders. Selected key findings:

- Refugee and immigrant parents admired some aspects of the child rearing practices of American mainstream culture but felt a sense of regret about the lack of extended family and what they saw as an over-structured life for children in this country.
- Concerns and misunderstandings about disciplinary practices in child care settings that made some refugee parents reluctant to consider formal care.
- Concerns over children losing their language and culture if they were enrolled in child care was a major concern across the cultural groups.
- A noticeable contrast reported by parents between the school readiness and English language acquisition of their children who attended preschool as compared with those who did not.
- A disconnect between child care providers' understanding of what factors influenced child care decisions of refugee parents, as compared with what parents said was important to them.

### **Implications for policy/practice**

Our final report will include strategies child care providers reported that they have used successfully to make child care more comfortable for these populations. We will include policy reforms suggested by interviewees to expand child care options for immigrant and refugee parents, with a particular emphasis on addressing legal status and documentation issues. Selected suggestions:

#### **Expanding access to quality child care:**

- Don't segregate refugee children in only a few programs – everyone should have access to child care so there is a mix of children.
- Provide opportunities for members of the refugee and immigrant communities to become licensed by removing licensing and documentation barriers and providing appropriate, culturally sensitive training in the first languages of participants.
- More quality child care programs that can accommodate non-traditional hours.
- More bilingual staff for R & Rs to conduct more outreach, assist in learning about quality child care, and how to apply for

child care assistance and pay for child care. Provide staff assistance because some parents are illiterate in native language.

#### **Making the transition to child care easier:**

- Have a community member present for the first few days when children are enrolled.
- Have providers learn a few key words in the child's native language
- Validate cultures - talk to parents and children about good you see in their cultures.
- Address the shortage of Spanish speaking providers with certification in early care and education with loan forgiveness programs and other measures.

#### **Implications for research**

- Child care is a cultural construct. Conceptualization of child care and preschool differ among populations.
- Studying multiple cultures within a single community presents specific issues
- Differing literacy levels in home languages

#### **For more information:**

<http://muskie.usm.maine.edu/newamericans/>

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### Key Topics

Please select all that apply and briefly describe/explain.

This information will be used internally in planning the CCPRC Annual Meeting.

#### *Parents & Families*

What do we know about parent decision-making and how it is influenced by issues such as culture, employment, subsidy policies? What other family-level constructs are relevant to child care policies/practices?

We have been invited to present on decision-making among immigrant and refugee parents on a panel at the conference; Erin Oldham, PhD will present.

#### *Other (please describe)*