Virginia Family Voices
COMMUNITY REPORT

WHY FAMILY VOICES?

Virginia is in an important moment for early childhood education and development. Historic investments in early childhood education, totaling $85 million, were approved by the Governor and 2020 General Assembly. Virginia developed the Family Voices Project as a way to listen and learn from families’ experiences and preferences in child care and preschool. This way, Virginia could look to families to guide future decisions. The state wanted to learn what families look for in a child care program, how families make decisions about where to send their child, and how the current websites that communicate about quality and options support families searching for care.

The goal of this document is to share the findings with families and community stakeholders. We hope that families and communities can use this information as they participate in local and state-level discussions about increasing access for all families to high-quality early learning programs.

HOW DID WE LISTEN AND LEARN?

School Readiness Consulting was contracted to facilitate this project and partnered with twelve Smart Beginnings communities to identify diverse families across the state. It is important to note that voluntary participation by Smart Beginnings as well as by families was likely impacted by COVID-19. During the project (April–June, 2020), communities were dealing with closures of schools, child care, and the overall economy, as well as the threat of infection, particularly within communities of color, who are experiencing the overlay of racial inequities and higher infection rates. In each Smart Beginnings community, we identified families who might be interested in informing this effort. The project team reached out to each of the 121 families and invited them to participate in a listening session or telephone interview. In addition, all families who chose to participate were invited to take part in a follow-up interview and to submit additional information illustrating their own family’s story around child care.

In total, 50 families participated, 20 were interviewed, 30 were part of listening sessions, and 3 families decided to participate in family stories.

WHOM DID WE HEAR FROM, AND WHAT DID WE ASK?

The families we heard from were racially diverse, had varied educational backgrounds, and represented diversity in income.

During the interviews and listening sessions, families of young children were asked questions about their experiences searching for, selecting, and considering options for child care. During listening sessions, families were given the opportunity to review and provide feedback on online websites that assist with searching for child care.
WHAT DID WE HEAR?

Families have clear ideas about what they consider and prioritize when seeking quality early childhood programming. They need resources to gain equitable access to early childhood arrangements that are the best fit for their family.

Families have clear operating definitions of quality and understand that they must balance these important attributes with overall accessibility. Aspects of quality that were raised as priorities concerned the classroom and program environment. One important component was teacher and administrator relationships with children and families. Another was the overall balance of a “family feel” or orientation, with a structured and clear program focused on child development and learning. In addition, families care about the presence of a formal curriculum and the focus of that curriculum (social-emotional development). Families believe that teacher-child ratios are important. Finally, families care about elements that focus on the whole child’s needs, like mealtimes and menus. Important accessibility components that families were balancing with quality were the physical proximity of the program to their home, work, or school; the cost; and whether there were openings when families needed them.

*In the exit survey, we asked participants to select the race/ethnicity that best describes them from a list of options consistent with the Census. Additionally, to maintain consistency with the Census, we encouraged participants to choose all options that reflected their identity. This report showcases the racial/ethnic categories selected by participants involved in the project.*
“Some things that I look for as a parent is probably curriculum – if the facility is using any sort of curriculum for the kids in any way, whether that is academic or social-emotional, or if they’re using some sort of program to help guide the learning process.”

“So when I am looking for something, of course, I’m going to look for something close by. I work and I live, like my job and my home is like five minutes … And like with my youngest son, the private home day care he has, is like around the corner three minutes from my job. So also I want to make sure it is close, because if there are any emergencies or if anything happened, I want to be in reaching point where I can get to them close.”

“Something that's really important for me is if they're not only just child oriented but family oriented. So they're making sure that they include the family as much as possible and that just shows that they care not only for the care of your child, but they want to make sure that you're included in that you knew everything that's going on throughout the day with your child.”

“Knowing that your child is going to be well cared for. And so, that they’re just not going to be in this huge classroom of kids where there’s only one teacher. Knowing that there’s only 12 kids in this classroom and there’s two teachers in there made it a little bit easier to know the kids are going to be able to do one-on-one a little bit easier.”
When Sammara learned about Pre-K, she started the enrollment process for her daughter. Jada was placed on the waiting list. Sammara worried that her daughter would not be accepted. Eventually, Jada was placed at a program in her school zone, and she transitioned from a family child care facility to a school setting.

“[The best environment for my child to learn] would have to be a kid-friendly learning environment. Somewhere where I know that she’s safe while I’m working. [It has] teachers who enjoy kids and have their best interests, make me feel comfortable. Patience is the main thing when you’re dealing with toddlers. The teachers made me feel comfortable because they were experienced and patient with my child.”

At first, Sammara was nervous about how her daughter would do in a school setting, but she was reassured when she learned Jada’s teachers had taught other children in her family. Her confidence also increased after attending an orientation offered by the program.
Navigating the child care landscape is difficult for families, even for those with significant time and monetary resources, social networks, and other supports. For families facing institutional barriers such as racism, poverty, limited time off from work, and so on, the process is truly daunting. Families must figure out when to begin looking for care so that they stand a chance of securing a spot. They must determine their list of top priorities as it relates to quality programs. Families must determine what options are within their reach (financially, geographically, and from a capacity standpoint). They want to visit and interview programs to ensure they could be a potential fit. Finally, families must balance all of these elements and time everything just right, and then hope all the “stars align” for them to secure a slot in the program of their choosing.

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“Unfortunately, you know child care is a struggle so a lot of times you are on a wait list and it was finding whatever was available when he was born. So I was just thankful that there was some ... there was child care available.”

“When I was looking for child care programs the first time around I tried to figure out price, the cost of it, the tuition was really helpful and not having that listed anywhere all in one place or even on individual child care provider websites was really difficult because I had a long list and I could make the calls or send the emails with varying degrees of success, sometimes they would call me back right away or sometimes I had to schedule an in-person visit just to find out more, which was frustrating.”
Jasmine was stationed in Hawaii for the Marine Corps when her oldest two children were younger. They did not qualify for an early childhood program. Jasmine’s mother, Ida, homeschooled them by using things in the home and finding resources online. Jasmine also arranged for the children to spend time at educational programs offered by the local YMCA.

Unlike their older siblings, Malachi and Mariah attended Head Start at age 3. When Malachi turned 4, Jasmine enrolled him in a public Pre-K program. Jasmine intends to follow the same process now that Mariah is 4.

“I look for staff friendliness. I look at reviews, [a program’s] accreditation. Then I make my phone calls to see which ones that we can go to because everything is by zone. I was looking for the best school and a lot of the best schools were where I didn’t live at.”

When she first moved to Virginia, Jasmine began her child care search by going to the local social services department and asking for a list of local day care providers. Next, she conducted Google searches. One thing Jasmine kept in mind during her search was whether a program was accessible by bus, since she did not have a car. During this process, Jasmine learned that her children would have to go to a program based on where she lived.

“I want to see, is it more of a day care or are you really trying to make sure the kids are well prepared to go to the next step?”

It is important to Jasmine that her youngest two children have a quality early learning experience. When exploring whether a program is high quality, she inquires about what her children should know before they enroll and what goals her children will have accomplished when they leave.
Families use information found on websites as a “starting point” in the search for child care. However, the information found was cited as not being a determining factor when choosing a program for their child. The experiences of other families and members of the community, however, is a major factor for families when choosing programs. Families use the recommendations and experiences of other trusted sources (i.e., friends, families, community) when looking for and choosing programs. And nothing else takes the place of a program visit, a tour, and the “feeling” that families get when they explore program options on their own.

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“That website had a lot of really great information, but it was too much. As a parent, I mean we get caught in the tyranny of the moment. If we got a crying baby, and we are trying to figure out work and we are trying to figure out lunch, trying to change the fourth poopy diaper of the day. Like we do not have the time for all of that.”

“For me, I would use it to be able to narrow down the list of places. I don’t think I would use it as a final decision on anything but it could help me know like what’s available, how far away is it from me, how late is it open, does it work with my schedule, do they ... are they working to meet the levels, stuff like that, so that I can narrow it down to a few and then be able to visit those and focus my energy there and not be going to like so many places and wasting time.”

“I understand technology is important. So even if I can do it online, me personally, I would still like to come in and do some aspects face-to-face so that I can get a better feel for those that I’ll be working with on the education of my child. It’s a different way of making connection. So just making sure that you are flexible. And allowing my child to be in the space before her first day is extremely important.”

“I would say honestly I believe most of it is word of mouth. You have a friend that her child was in this day care, or her child goes to pre-K, then someone tells you about it. You can look up on a website for the school system here, but to me it’s not very informative. I’m one of those people that I’ll just find the number and call and start asking questions, but a lot of people don’t. So, to me, honestly, word of mouth, people telling other people.”
Renita wakes up at the crack of dawn on most mornings. She is usually accompanied by her toddler and a cup of coffee, before she wakes her older children up.

Since the children eat breakfast at school or child care, they enjoy a light snack before heading out the door. On a typical day, Renita takes her older children to her mom’s place; she makes sure they catch the bus to school. Afterwards, Renita takes Narlea across town to the home of Narlea’s great aunt, who takes care of Narlea during the day.

“In order for my morning routine to run fairly smooth, we all take showers the night before and lay out our clothes for the next morning and pre-pack our lunches before lying down at night. My son usually helps me with my toddler while I’m gathering items packed from the night before. I have to be on time and at work at least by 6:30 a.m., with a forty-five minute commute. Adequate time is needed to tend to children’s needs and whatever curveball life may throw to me, a single mother of three.”

Renita’s days are long. She is either working a 12-hour shift or her day is split between work and attending classes for school. While her toddler, Narlea, spends the full day with her great aunt, Anthoney and Deshiya transition to the local YMCA after school. They are usually picked up by their other grandmother around 6pm each day.

Renita’s oldest children attended Head Start when they were younger. She recalls that an important priority for her when she searching for the best place to send her children was learning how her children would spend their time. Renita noted that checking out online reviews, going directly to program websites, and meeting staff in person were steps in her decision-making process.

“A high-quality program is organized, they have contact with the parents, like conferences, as well as activities for the children and parents to attend. Also, I think communication with the parents is very important. Parents should know what is going on with their child in that facility.”
Families do not have consistent access to resources or language about how early childhood program policies and practices can and should be culturally responsive.

Families did not consistently define the ways in which culturally responsive care showed up in the options available to them, or the indicators families might look for to determine a program’s approach to equity or cultural responsiveness. Websites that families visited, as well as those reviewed for this project, lacked information on equity-focused or culturally responsive approaches. Families desire a program that meets their child’s and family’s unique needs but did not express ways in which program policies and practices were specifically acknowledging or responding to families’ social and cultural identities.

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“It should be welcoming. I wouldn’t want [discrimination] to happen to my son, since it’s going to be his first experience. And he’s going to be alone, without mom and dad. I’d like the teacher to be welcoming, to have that empathy with children.”

WHAT MIGHT BE NEXT?
The project team recommended some areas for consideration based on what we heard and learned.

Families need support for navigation of program review, selection, and enrollment.

Families have a clear sense of what they look for in an early learning program and how they define quality. Families identified a desire for support in navigating the complex and often unclear process of selecting and enrolling in early learning programs. This support should be localized, culturally responsive, and build on the success of trusted organizations within the community, such as Smart Beginnings. In addition, Smart Beginnings could work as a community liaison to integrate support for this type of navigation in other community-based services and programs that families interact with (WIC, Home Visiting programs, etc.) as a way to reach families who are least connected. In some instances, innovative cash supports might be explored to support families with limited resources as they research, make contact, conduct program visits and tours, and engage in enrollment processes.
Make platforms customizable so that they efficiently connect families to the information they are looking for.

The information and content of websites focused on early childhood or child care should ultimately be guided by the users, Virginia’s families. Websites should utilize a human-centered design that allows families to dictate what information is front and center. These websites, or any future website content developed for families, should use the language of families and include the voices and experiences of families and members of the community. Families want to search for factors that are relevant to their early care needs, such as costs, location, classroom sizes, curriculum, quality ratings, wait list information, and reviews. This could be achieved with one centralized “hub” of information with features that allow families to filter and search based on their own priorities. Families also want to be easily directed to websites of specific programs and facilities that match the family’s criteria and meet their needs. Also, a better understanding of family “starting points” (Google, Facebook, etc.) can be used to optimize the experience families have as they search for early childhood program options.

Focus on advancing equity in definitions of quality and in program delivery.

It is important to ensure that state definitions of quality and sponsored communications to families about child care opportunities include a focus on advancing equity.¹ In early childhood settings, this focus may include preparing programs and leaders with increased knowledge, understanding, and competency about culturally responsive, anti-bias, and equitable classrooms and programs, such as support for home language development; incorporating children’s home culture in daily activities; and hiring and retaining staff who reflect the children and community served.²

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