

# Parent Perspectives on the First Five Years

Focus Group Report  
Bend, Medford & Portland

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*Parent attitudes about early childhood programs are an important part of the picture. While reading the focus group results, I realized how much providers of child care, parenting and other family services could learn from this report.*

April 2009

Mary Louise McClintock  
Early Childhood Program Director  
The Oregon Community Foundation

Dear friends and colleagues,

The Children's Institute is pleased to make available the enclosed focus group report — "Parent Perspectives on the First Five Years" — for your use. We believe that you and others who share our commitment to expanding access to high-quality early care and education will benefit from the candor, compassion and knowledge expressed by the parents in these focus groups.

To ensure the perspective of low-income parents is reflected in our public policy agenda, we commissioned Davis, Hibbitts & Midghall to conduct four focus groups. When I listen to these parents talk about the importance of the first five years of life, and the barriers they face in obtaining high-quality early care and education for their children, I am heartened by the progress we've made by expanding Oregon Head Start Pre-K. At the same time, I am also mindful of the thousands of young children we are still not reaching during this critical window of development.

As we move forward, bolstered by the voices of these and other parents, let us work together to ensure parents can give their children the strong start in life they deserve. Please join the Children's Institute in its efforts to make sure children arrive at kindergarten happy, healthy and ready for school. If you have questions about the focus groups or the work of the Children's Institute, please don't hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Swati Adarkar".

Swati Adarkar  
Executive Director



June 29, 2008

## I. Introduction and Research Design

Davis, Hibbitts & Midghall, Inc. (DHM) conducted two focus groups for the Children's Institute in Medford (June 14, 2008) and Bend (June 15, 2008). These two groups supplement and elaborate on the findings from two focus groups conducted in July 2007 in Portland.

The research has been designed to assess parents' understanding of and attitudes toward the first five years of their child's life, covering topics such as school readiness, child care, and preschool. Participants also discussed what barriers they face in getting what they need to make sure their children have a healthy start during their first five years of life.

Participants were recruited from the Portland, Medford and Bend areas, targeting low-income parents with young children and with some having experience with pre-K programs and services. Appendix A has participant demographic information. A total of 28 people participated. Participants responded both orally and in writing. Written responses are in Appendixes B-L.<sup>1</sup>

This report presents results from these two most recent groups as well as from the earlier Portland groups. It is organized around seven key concepts that were explored in the group discussions.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> There were some variations in the questions asked in the different groups, as indicated in the appendixes and the report. The results of some ratings and rankings are included in the appendixes. Although these are not a statistically valid measurement of views, they help illustrate the range and extent of consistency of views from group to group and within each group when read in combination with the written comments.

<sup>2</sup> Quotations presented at the beginning of each section and throughout the text were selected to represent the range of opinions regarding a topic, and not to represent quantitatively the expressed attitudes.

## II. Parents Know the Importance of the First Five Years of Life

*“Young children are sponges and the first five years are the foundation for the rest of their lives.” (Bend)*

*“This is when children discover who they are, discipline, values, learning letters, etc..” (Medford)*

*“You develop the core of who you are.” (Portland)*

*“What we do [in the first five years] prepares them for what to expect in school, socially and academically, and spiritually. Many aspects of behavior are set during these years.” (Medford)*

*“Formative, socially and intellectually.” (Portland)*

Very similar phrases and images were used unprompted by nearly all parents when they wrote and talked about the importance of the first five years of their child’s life (Appendix B). The following shows the tally for all groups in descending order from most-mentioned.

**Importance of First Five Years**

	<b>Total</b>
“Very”	11
“Extremely”	6
“Most”	5
“Vitality”	2
“Imperative”	1
“Crucial”	1
“So”	1
“Important”	1

Davis, Hibbitts & Midghall, Inc.; June 2008

Most said these years provided the “foundation,” “basics,” and “building blocks” for the rest of their lives. Many said this was when children learned who they are.

Nearly all participants appeared to understand the significance of brain development during the first five years. However, the term itself was rarely used without prompting. Several called the first five years a time when children are “sponges.” Some had spoken and read to their child in the womb, believing the brain starts developing that early. Several made a direct connection between brain development and a certain maturity level needed for when school starts. Many commented on how parents don’t realize how much a child at a young age can comprehend.

A number of these parents talked about wanting their child to “...reach every milestone.” Others felt milestones got more attention than necessary, causing undue stress on both parents and children.

### III. Parents Want their Children Ready for School

*“I don’t want him to be behind, I don’t want him to not know something.” (Portland)*

*“Instill in a child the excitement for learning.” (Bend)*

*“Ability to cope with and deal with new things.” (Medford)*

*“Social interaction and being able to pay attention to what is going on in the classroom. The basics, like the ABCs and shapes and colors.” (Portland)*

*“I want her to [be able to] be actively engaged in asking questions and figuring things out in school.” (Medford)*

*“If they don’t get the basics like how to interact with other students they won’t be successful or productive at school.” (Portland)*

These parents clearly wanted their children ready to enter Kindergarten. Asked what “school readiness” meant, participants felt it encompassed educational, social, and emotional aspects (see Appendix D). Some also included physical health, and several said they wanted their child to enter school *“excited about learning.”*

- Educationally – child has basic knowledge of the ABCs, basic shapes and colors, and numbers (responses for how high a child should be able to count ranged from 10 to 1000)
- Socially - child is able to share and play well with others, follow directions, know the difference between right and wrong, and generally be comfortable with other children
- Emotionally – child feels secure, safe, loved, and confident and has a stable home life

Medford and Bend parents were asked which of six things were most, second, and third most important for a child to be ready for kindergarten (Appendix E). The following shows the combined weighted rankings in descending order from most important:<sup>3</sup>

**Combined Weighted Ranking of Most Important Programs for Kindergarten Readiness**

	<b>Combined Medford/Bend</b>
Child has good values and knows the difference between right and wrong.	22
Child can listen to and follow instructions from a teacher.	21
Child is healthy.	20
Child plays well with other children, can take turns, and share.	13
Child can sit still and pay attention.	11
Child knows the letters of the alphabet and count to ten.	3

Source: Davis, Hibbitts & Midghall, Inc.

The top priority demonstrates how important it was to these parents that their children enter Kindergarten with a strong sense of self and having a moral compass. This came up frequently in the discussions, with parents wanting their children to be able to handle the diversity of views they would find in school. It’s also interesting that even though they often included some basic knowledge in their concept of “school readiness,” knowing the alphabet and counting to ten came out least important to them in this ranking exercise.

<sup>3</sup> Relative rankings based on weighted rankings calculated by giving 3 points for #1, 2 for #2, and 3 points for #3.

We also asked Medford and Bend parents what a child needs to be ready for life (Appendix C). Much of what they identified are similar to what parents said all children need to be ready for school. Several summed up what most parents were saying: *“They need love, respect, guidance, learning as much as possible, fun, communication, empathy, and physical skills,”* and *“A child needs good boundaries, good discipline, love, affection, encouragement, hands-on experience, social interaction, and good diet.”*

#### **IV. Parent Education**

*“I need help with everything. It’s all new to me.” (Medford)*

*“If there were parenting classes I would have taken them.” (Portland)*

*“I took parent education through my church and it made a difference...I feel like we’ve had a lot of success and it helped us come together.” (Bend)*

*“I need help with the academic side of preparing him.” (Medford)*

Parents in all groups talked about the kind of help they needed or could have used in raising their child from 0-5. Many mentioned some type of parent education, whether they used the specific term or not. They especially talked about needing help with how to discipline and how to educationally prepare their child for school.

The Portland and Medford/Bend groups were asked to rank two lists of programs, both for themselves and for other parents/the community (Appendix K). Medford/Bend parents ranked parent education programs highest for themselves and among their top three for their community. While parent education was not on the Portland list, we found other similarities among items in common. For example, the Portland and Medford/Bend groups all ranked financial assistance for child care and pre-K second highest for themselves and their community (Medford/Bend) and other parents (Portland). Consequently, had parent education been included on the Portland list, we expect it would have scored highly as it did in Medford/Bend.

Several parents had personal experience with some type of home visit program after their child’s birth through programs like Healthy Start, with mixed reviews. A Portland parent who liked the program said, *“They used to come every other week, bring pictures, activities, at first I thought it was crazy but it made sense. I was learning a lot.”* Another commented, *“It was sometimes intrusive, sometimes helpful.”*

When Portland parents were asked what programs and services would help parents better prepare their children for Kindergarten, most mentioned either preschool or Head Start (Appendix J). During group discussion, the Head Start program was mentioned much less often in the Medford and Bend groups.



## V. Quality Child Care

*"I don't want to put my baby in daycare. I worry a lot about her safety." (Portland)*

*"[Child care] should be as good or better than if I were there." (Bend)*

*"If we all had a choice we would be with family, but we all need to work." (Portland)*

*"Child care is like babysitters. When I was a single parent, I didn't have much choice. I wasn't thrilled about it; but we had to eat." (Bend)*

*"I don't trust calling up a day care, nor can we afford it...It would be great to have relief." (Medford)*

*"I haven't used child care. If I need a babysitter I use my mom. Babysitting is child care. No way I'll call a company and say send me a babysitter. I only use family or closest friends." (Bend)*

*"No one else takes care of our kids – except teachers at school." (Medford)*

Parents had a variety of associations with the words "child care" (Appendix F). The most mentioned related to "safety," "education/teaching/learning," "fun/play/exercise," "day care/babysitting," and "cost/expensive/affordable." Negative associations mostly centered around feeling their child was unsafe in child care and missing their child. Trust was a major issue, and most favored having only family or very close friends take care of their children. Nearly all Medford and Bend parents limited their child's care to this group (Appendix G).

Most expressed a strong preference to stay home with younger children as their first option. A Portland parent said, *"We strived for one of us to be there with the children. Quite frankly, we just didn't trust anyone."* While preferring to stay at home, many said they or people they knew could not afford that luxury because both, or the single parent, had to work.

Several termed child care *"a necessary evil."* Others who would have like some "relief" from being an at-home parent couldn't afford child care (or daycare). Even some who didn't favor child care outside of the home identified benefits, including developing their child's social skills and some "relief" time for them.

While most used the terms child care and daycare interchangeably, several made a distinction between in-home care (more often called babysitting or child care) versus "dropping off" at a facility (more often called daycare). Concerns about a facility or another's home mostly centered around safety and quality, with several influenced by horror stories they had learned of through the media. As a Portland parent said, *"Child care is a no-no in my family. And it's costly. It just depends on your money, skin color. I hear bad things on the news like rape, cameras catching a person shaking and yelling at a kid. That makes your heart go...you know."*

Quality child care often focused on having structured activities (which many felt were more likely to happen in a daycare facility) that didn't involve a child sitting in front of a television (*"I'm not going to pay someone to do that"*). Many wanted some kind of educational component. As a Medford parent said, *"I want her brain to be active all day long."*

## VI. Quality Preschool

*“I have no need for daycare, but I may put my child in preschool to give him the best start to prepare for Kindergarten, to help his development.” (Bend)*

*“My daughter wasn’t learning very much [in preschool]...We thought instead of paying for preschool, we’re paying for daycare. I took her out and home schooled.” (Medford)*

*“[I]f you’re in a situation where your kid can’t play with other kids, it’s good to do a little bit, a couple hours a day, if you can afford it and have a good place to go.” (Portland)*

*“Preschool is really helpful for the child if they are learning.” (Medford)*

All parents were asked what “preschool or pre-K” meant to them (Appendix H). Most associations centered around both the educational and social aspects of learning. Many mentioned preschool as being an important step in being ready for school. As a Medford parent commented, *“[It] prepares them for K whether half or full day. They will be exposed to things you don’t want them to but that’s part of the learning process.”* Many had made financial sacrifices to send their child to preschool.

Some were reluctant to send their children to preschool because they “felt guilty” about dropping them off, while others felt they had no choice because they worked. Some had trust issues similar to, but not as strong as, their concerns about child care. In the end, however, many realized how much their child would benefit. As a Portland parent said, *“But for me because I work...I sent her to daycare and preschool in year three and four. Looking at it now, I’m so thankful I did it even though I had to pay extra.”*

Some parents felt preschool, while good, was not essential because parents could teach their child themselves. There were others, though, who felt they weren’t really qualified to do that. A Medford parent, commenting on another who home schooled, said *“I’m not that disciplined. If I could afford it, I would send my child where someone has the mental composition.”*

Several were either negative about preschool (*“I do not like the idea of preschool...It’s an excuse for a working Mom to be away”*), or expressed caveats about limiting their age (*“Going to preschool too early could affect their values and religious beliefs”*) or the amount of time spent in preschool (*“I totally disagree with all day”*). Several, especially in the Medford and Bend groups, felt children need *“more time to be a child.”*

Parents who had sent their child to preschool or knew someone who had described mixed experiences. For some, it was very positive. Others expressed concerns mostly about quality – they felt they were paying for something more akin to daycare and their children weren’t learning enough.

Some felt their child had been or could be “over prepared” for Kindergarten. As a Portland parent said, *“My daughter went to Montessori...at K she knew everything so she was pushed aside while other kids caught up.”*

We asked Medford and Bend parents if any of their children under age five were enrolled in any program or classes (Appendix G). All but two Medford parents said no; the other two had their child in preschool. In Bend, two were in preschool, while another was home schooled.

## VII. Parents Face Many Barriers Getting What They Need

*“Financial assistance is huge – good places are very expensive. We couldn’t do it [pre-K].” (Portland)*

*“Finding resources is a royal pain, and even worse when you come to a new town.” (Bend)*

*“We need a resource where parents can get this information as to what programs are available.” (Portland)*

*“Finding affordable daycare, trying to take care of all her needs. The biggest challenge has been financial.” (Portland)*

*“We’re at a point where we aren’t low income enough, but not high income enough to pay for it ourselves. Honestly, I think preschool is a good thing.” (Medford)*

*“The resources may be there, but they’re not easily accessible.” (Bend)*

*“Preschool is probably great for kids. I may have considered it if we could afford it...” (Medford)*

Parents face both internal and external barriers in raising their children age 0-5. Within the family, they mentioned inexperience, the need for self-education (reading books and online, learning from other parents, talking to experienced professionals), loss of personal freedom, challenges of sibling interactions, and financial issues. Obstacles outside of their home included difficulty in finding out and accessing programs and services, finding safe people to care for their children, and to a lesser extent mobility issues.

These parents emphasized the limits of both their finances and their parenting experience the most. Many would have welcomed financial support for child care, daycare, and preschool. When these parents ranked the most-needed programs for themselves and all parents (in Portland) or their community (Medford/Bend), financial assistance for child care and pre-K was second most important (Appendix K). For many, they could not send their child to preschool, even though they wanted to. Several expressed a great deal of frustration with not being poor enough to qualify for assistance, yet not being able to afford quality preschool and child care.

Several suggested some kind of central source of information about parent education opportunities and ways to access other programs and services. Many of these parents relied on their church or friends for help with child care, preschool, and parent education.

Portland parents were asked their preference between a mixed delivery program funded through a voucher/subsidy or a state paid program like Head Start (Appendix L). They clearly favored having the voucher option, with none selecting a central state-funded location and three selecting both options. Most wanted the advantages of having choice. A few had problems with a government-run program. As one Portland parent wrote, *“I don’t agree with the state on how to raise children.”*

## VIII. What Do You Mean? Competing Languages About Early Childhood

*“Daycare and child care for me imply a break from your kids, a place to put them so we can work typically a 9-5 job. For me preschool is more of an educational resource.” (Medford)*

*“Pre-K and preschool are the same thing, but daycare is different. There are a lot of daycare that are preschools and a lot of preschools that are daycare.” (Bend)*

*“Early learning and school readiness are the same.” (Portland)*

*“Early learning and school readiness are different. Early learning is talking to babies, flash cards. School readiness is preschool, ABCs, recognize letters.” (Portland)*

The terminology used for child development from age 0-5 may mean different things to different people. For example, some equated child care, daycare and babysitting, while others saw a distinction among the three. While these parents generally used the terms child care and daycare interchangeably, some thought of child care as more in-home and daycare as in a separate facility. School readiness for nearly all parents included knowing the “basics,” while others included being socially ready.

We asked Portland parents what “early learning” meant to them (Appendix I). Many felt early learning started even before birth, with an emphasis on the earlier years and being a continuous process. Others were more inclined to associate the term with learning the basics and school readiness and one thought it related to making kids grow up too fast. While somewhat comfortable with this term once prompted, parents hardly ever used it when talking about their child’s first five years.

Bend parents, asked for their preference between the terms “preschool” or “pre-K” (Appendix H), mostly said it didn’t matter, although one said *“I just don’t like daycare...”* Another preferred preschool because they saw it as *“...an introduction to school and not just Kindergarten.”* Generally speaking, parents in all groups had far more negative associations with “child care” than with “early learning” or “preschool.”

## IX. Observations

The following summarizes what these parents told us:

1. The first five years of a child’s life are very/extremely/most/vitally important
  - Parents have an important role in their children’s development during these years
  - They form the foundation for their children’s lives, helping them learn who they are
  - This is a crucial time when children’s brains are developing, akin to being “sponges”
2. Children need to be ready for school
  - Educationally ready, so they aren’t left behind
  - Socially ready, knowing right from wrong, able to interact with others and follow directions
  - Emotionally ready, so they feel safe, loved, secure, and confident

3. Parents need education
  - Provides support for inexperienced parents
  - Helps with specific concerns, like discipline and how to prepare their child for school
  - Can be provided in many ways, including structured community or church classes, talking with more experienced parents and professionals, and in-home visits
4. Child care gets mixed reviews
  - Most would prefer to stay at home with younger children if at all possible; if they can't they turn first to trusted family and friends
  - For many a "necessary evil" for those who cannot stay at home
  - Concern about safety and cost are barriers to parents feeling positive about child care
  - Those with less than positive experiences focused on quality issues like lack of structure or educational benefit and overuse of television
5. Preschool can be important to a child's development and school readiness
  - Most parents associate preschool with both educational and social learning
  - Some felt they couldn't adequately give their child the benefits preschool offered; others felt they could and thus did not see it as essential
  - Quality was critical in how parents viewed preschool; they want their children to learn and aren't paying for only daycare
  - Some had trust issues similar to, but not as strong as, those for child care
6. Parents face both internal and external barriers to getting what they need
  - Internal barriers mentioned the most were limits of their finances and parenting experience
  - External barriers mentioned the most were difficulty finding and accessing programs and services and finding safe people to care for their children
  - Many would have welcomed financial assistance for child care, daycare, and preschool
7. Early childhood terminology does not always have a shared meaning
  - Many terms mean different things to different people
  - Different terms have varying degrees of positive and negative associations; for example, child care has far more negative associations than early learning or preschool
  - Some terms like "brain development" are rarely used unprompted by parents