



# Thrive byFive™ WASHINGTON

## REPORT ON OPINION RESEARCH

March 2008

### INTRODUCTION

Thrive by Five™ Washington\* is a nonprofit that partners with public and private organizations to champion positive early learning opportunities for every child in Washington. Thrive by Five sponsored a comprehensive opinion research program during summer and fall 2007 to gauge the perceptions of parents and child care providers across Washington state on child care, early learning and school readiness. In addition to providing a nuanced understanding of how parents and providers think and talk about these issues, the research also confirms much of what leaders in the early learning field knew or assumed to be true about these audiences' perceptions.

The project included a telephone survey of 600 parents and 18 focus groups with parents and providers, with a special focus on the needs and attitudes of lower-income parents. In this report, the term “providers” refers to licensed home-based child care providers as well as directors of licensed child care centers, early childhood education programs and preschools. “Parents” refers to those with children from birth to age 5.

### SUMMARY

**A majority of parents and providers recognize the importance of early learning—but there is work to do.**

#### **Summary of findings from parent research:**

Overall, parents are aware of the importance of children's early years to their later success. However, there are some indications that the critical birth to age 2 period is not as firmly established as having an important

effect on learning and school readiness as the period from ages 3 to 5. There are also misperceptions about the long-term consequences of starting school without the social and academic skills children need to be prepared for kindergarten. Parents believe that schools will help children catch up academically, although they say children lacking the requisite social and emotional skills will have a more difficult time.

Many parents say they could be doing more to promote development and learning with their children. They would like to receive more information about intellectual development, brain development, managing emotions and preparing children to do their best in school.

While parents are generally satisfied with their child care arrangements, nearly one-quarter (24 percent) say they would prefer a different child care situation if it were available and they could afford it. Many parents would like their children to be learning and developing more while in child care. Parents cite affordability—and in rural areas, availability—as their primary barrier to higher-quality child care.

For the most part, parents recognize that licensed providers are able to offer a higher-quality learning environment for children than family members, friends and neighbors who provide child care (FFN care). Many parents place a higher priority on having a provider they trust than having a provider who is better qualified to offer a high-quality learning experience.

Forty-four percent of parents say the state is not doing enough to ensure high-quality, affordable early learning opportunities. Most parents support the

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concept of a quality improvement system for child care, though many parents wonder how to make a rating system meaningful.

Parents value opportunities to share information with each other and would like to have forums for doing so regularly; they are comforted to know they are not alone with the challenges of parenting.

**Summary of findings from provider research:**

Child care providers are proud of their work and want to provide the best early learning experience possible. Home-based family providers struggle to find time for educational activities between custodial duties. Directors of child care centers and early education programs have a difficult time recruiting and retaining qualified staff due to limited budgets.

As with parents, some providers are not aware of the need for intellectual development for children from birth to age 2. Although, many understand the interrelated nature of physical, social, emotional and cognitive development.

There is less support among providers for the concept of a quality improvement system for child care. Many providers are concerned about the practical implications of a statewide system, particularly rigid education requirements. There is also broad skepticism of a state-run system among providers and parents alike.

Providers also like having a chance to share advice with each other and give feedback on issues that are important to them. Most providers say they wish they could continue these conversations on a more regular basis.

**KEY FINDINGS**

**There is awareness of the importance of the preschool years as a critical learning time but less understanding of the learning that occurs from birth to age 2.**

Parents and providers say the first five years of a child’s life have a significant impact on the child’s development and later success in life. Preparing for school may not be top-of-mind for parents of infants, but they do understand that children are shaped by their early experiences.

While a majority of parents and caregivers see every developmental age category as important for their children’s future success, they tend to focus on the period from ages 3 to 5 as especially critical; 93 percent of parents say this developmental stage is very important or essential in determining whether children will become good learners who will do their best in school. By comparison, the period from birth to age 2 is not quite as firmly established as having an important effect on learning and school-readiness; 79 percent of parents say the first two years are very important or essential.

**Parents Understand Importance of Early Years, Especially Preschool Years**

**Importance of each stage of development in affecting whether children become good learners who will do their best in school.**

	ESSENTIAL	+	VERY IMPORTANT	=	TOTAL
Birth–Age 2	35%		44%		79%
Ages 3–5	40%		53%		93%
Ages 6–10	34%		52%		86%
Ages 11–13	29%		51%		80%
Ages 14–18	28%		46%		74%

*“Intellectual development, social development—it all starts to kind of come together at 3, from the views and the studies that I have seen.”*

—MOSES LAKE PARENT

**Strategic Implication:** A greater understanding of the fundamentals of early learning—when it happens, how it happens and how it prepares children for success in school and in life—is critical to improving early learning opportunities in the home and with providers.

**Most parents and providers do not begin to think about preparing children for school until they are at least 2 years old.**

Parents emphasize the importance of physical and social-emotional development when thinking about infants and toddlers, yet they emphasize intellectual and social-emotional development when thinking about preschool-aged children. Many providers echo this distinction.

Generally, parents say the right time to introduce learning activities that will prepare children for success in school is between the ages of 2 and 4. Parents are less likely to engage in early learning and school readiness activities if they equate them with academics, which some feel are introduced to children at too young an age.

Like parents, providers are less certain of the activities they should be doing with infants and younger children to prepare them for school. While providers consider themselves teachers as well as caregivers, many say they are hesitant to “push” academics on younger children.

*“In the toddler room, I feel more like a caregiver who educates; it is more of an emotional bond on a more basic level to provide food and clean diaper and rest and reassurance to a toddler. In the preschool and school age, I feel more like an educator who is also giving care and love.”*

—WESTERN WASHINGTON CHILD CARE DIRECTOR

**Strategic Implication:** There should be a clear and widely supported definition of early learning. A special effort should be made to help parents and providers understand how early learning opportunities benefit infants and toddlers.

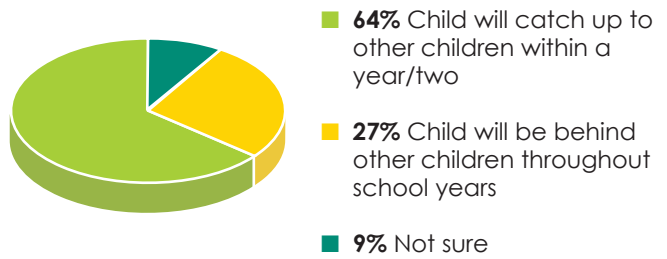
**A majority of parents believe that children who start school behind will be able to catch up within a year or two.**

Although research proves otherwise, parents are generally optimistic that children who start school behind will catch up to their better-prepared peers. Approximately two-thirds of parents (64 percent) say that a child who starts school with few of the necessary skills will be able to catch up to other children within a couple of years.

Parents and providers talk about the interrelated nature of the developmental domains in the years prior to kindergarten, but they say success in the first few years of school depends mostly on children’s social-emotional development. Parents say children who lag behind from a social-emotional perspective will have a harder time catching up than children who lack only the necessary academic skills.

### Parents Overlook Consequences of Children Not Being “School Ready”

How would beginning kindergarten knowing very few basic skills affect a child’s success in school?



*“I think the children who have the social skills can catch up easily. The actual act of learning to read or do math is easier if you are able to sit still and able to learn.”*

—TUKWILA PARENT

**Strategic Implication:** It is important to connect all aspects of early learning in a way that encourages parents and providers to assess the whole child when thinking about school readiness.

**Many parents and some providers say they could be doing more to prepare children to succeed in school and life.**

Despite the high level of commitment to children’s early learning, many parents and some caregivers say they could be doing more to help prepare the children in their care for success in school. Parents identify learning issues as among their most important concerns and would like more information about helping the intellectual and brain development of children and helping children manage their emotions.

### Parents Want More Information on Brain Development and Learning

About which one or two of these areas would you most like to have more information to help you make sure your child gets off to a good start?

Intellectual/brain development	32%
Managing emotions	27%
Preparing children to do their best in school	24%
Children’s health needs	16%
Disciplining children	13%
<b>All of these</b>	<b>16%</b>

More than half of parents (53 percent) say they could be doing more to teach their children something new every day. Nearly half say the same about spending time playing with their children and limiting the time their children spend watching television and videos (47 percent).

*“You always worry if you’re doing a good enough job. I mean, I do. I always think, ‘Am I doing enough?’”*

—BURIEN PARENT

Providers make a genuine effort to prepare children for school through reading, formal instruction and purposeful play, particularly with children in the preschool stage.

Many providers would like expectations of school preparedness clarified by kindergarten teachers. Providers are willing to support the work of teachers and view them as a trusted source of information. Providers are eager to be considered partners in the process of preparing children for and transitioning them into kindergarten.

*“If the school would just tell us what they want—then we could build them a preschooler that could match. But we have to sort it all out.”*

—ENGLISH-SPEAKING TRI-CITIES PROVIDER

**Strategic Implication:** The environment is ripe for a better understanding of early learning and how to facilitate it appropriately. There must be a strong push to help parents and providers with the identification of learning opportunities and the implementation of appropriate activities. Facilitating partnerships between parents, providers and teachers will likely increase the opportunities for quality early learning and school readiness.

**Parents have difficulty finding affordable, high-quality child care.**

Nearly one-quarter (24 percent) of parents who have children in care outside the home would prefer a different child care situation if it were available and they could afford it. Parents’ satisfaction with the quality of care their children are receiving is more closely linked to their income than to their children’s type of care arrangement.

Parents identify cost and availability as the primary obstacles to obtaining higher-quality child care; 48 percent say it is very or fairly difficult to find an affordable program, and 47 percent say the same about finding programs with available space.

More than one-quarter of parents who use child care say it is very or fairly difficult to find a program with trained or qualified teachers (28 percent). Approximately one-third of parents (32 percent) say it is very or fairly difficult to judge and evaluate programs; 35 percent say the same about knowing where to look for information about programs.

**The Difficulties of Finding High Quality Care**

**How difficult was it to find a program that met your family’s needs in this area?**

	RANKED BY % VERY/FAIRLY DIFFICULT
Finding an affordable program	48%
Finding enough programs that have space available	47%
Knowing where to look for information about programs	35%
Finding a program that is close to home or your workplace	32%
Knowing how to judge and evaluate the programs	32%
Finding a program with trained and qualified teachers	28%
Finding a program that offers the hours you need	26%
Finding a program that engages children in learning and social activities	26%
Finding a program that appreciates and respects your family’s traditions	12%

*“It’s just one barrier after another. And, like, you are asking, ‘How interested am I in them learning?’ Well, I’m just interested in finding a day care provider. I would be so happy. And then I would start getting picky.”*

—MOSES LAKE MOTHER

**Strategic Implication:** To be successful in improving quality early learning opportunities, programs and information must be highly accessible to all parents and providers.

**In many cases, parents value trusted individuals more than trained educators.**

Parents generally recognize that qualified providers are able to offer a better learning experience for children than family members, friends and neighbors who provide child care (FFN care). They say providers should have specialized training in the field of early childhood education to complement their love of working with children. Parents who use FFN care generally say they wish more teaching and learning were taking place.

Despite this, it is difficult for many parents to trust an unfamiliar person with caring for their children, even if the person is a licensed provider. Sixty percent of parents agree with the statement: “It is almost always better to have someone you know—such as a family member, friend or neighbor—care for a child than to have a child in an outside child care arrangement, even if the outside program has teachers who are trained to care for young children.”

*“I’d rather he be with my parents. Because I’ve heard bad things about day care, and I think he’s more safe with my parents. And they’re there all the time. I trust them more.”*

—BURIEN PARENT

**Strategic Implication:** To give parents the confidence to trust their children to outside providers, they need to hear more about the benefits of high-quality care offered by dedicated and trained professionals. Parents must have the information to evaluate whether professionals or family members will be the best choice for realizing these benefits for their particular situation.

**Most providers must overcome obstacles to offer high-quality child care.**

With few exceptions, providers are dedicated to their profession and the children in their care. They also face a unique set of obstacles, from meeting children’s basic needs to recruiting and retaining qualified teachers. Home-based providers and program directors say it can be difficult balancing children’s intellectual and basic custodial needs, especially for children who have negligent parents. Most providers take pride in their role as educators and dedicate time to formal instruction—some providers refer to this as “doing preschool.”

Many home-based providers wish they could afford to hire an assistant or outside specialists to give them the time or ideas they need to do a better job of helping children learn. Center-based program directors say it is difficult to recruit and retain qualified teachers with the salaries they are able to pay. In their experience, many providers who pursue higher education opportunities end up leaving the child care field for a job that pays better. Burn-out among staff is another common challenge.

*“It is very difficult [to provide schooling] because you have to change diapers, you have to cook, clean, start dinner, and all of that.”*

—SPANISH-SPEAKING TRI-CITIES PROVIDER

**Strategic Implication:** Providers need support in delivering quality early learning opportunities, including incentives for keeping staff motivated and engaged. They could also use help integrating more quality early learning experiences into their curricula.

**Providers make an effort to engage parents in their children’s development, although some providers need additional support in this area.**

For some providers, it is frustrating to see the gains they make with children go unrecognized or be undone during the time a child is at home. Their goal is to work as partners with parents, although some providers say parents expect them to shoulder the burden of their children’s development.

Many providers currently engage parents in some fashion; some directors use documentation to help parents understand how their child is learning, while others provide verbal updates to parents. Still others require parent involvement.

Home-based providers would appreciate learning new tactics for engaging difficult parents, while some program directors would be interested in receiving materials and support to host parental education programs onsite.

*“We feel that the parents are going through learning and growth with their children; it is not just the child learning and growing and being challenged.”*

—SPOKANE PROVIDER

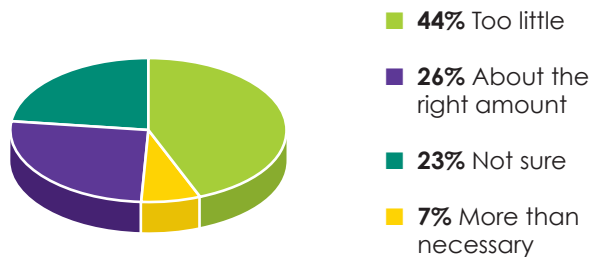
**Strategic Implication:** Support for providers in developing mutual partnerships with parents is important to maintaining the consistency of quality early learning among home and out-of-home care and education environments.

### There is cautious support for a quality improvement system in early learning.

A 44 percent plurality of all parents say the state government is doing too little to ensure that affordable, high-quality care programs are available for parents who need them. However, parents are not in complete agreement about what should be done.

### Climate Is Favorable for Supporting Additional State Resources for Early Learning

Overall, how much is the Washington state government doing to ensure that there are affordable, high-quality child care programs for parents who need and want them?



Most parents and some providers support the concept of a quality improvement system for child care—80 percent of parents describe a statewide rating system for child care programs as a good idea—though many parents express concern about whether a rating system would be meaningful, given the skepticism many express about government regulation.

Many parents would like to see standardized ratings supplemented with reviews written by other parents, and many would prefer that one or more independent organizations create the guidelines for a rating system.

These preferences stem, at least in part, from the fact that parents value qualities that are difficult to measure objectively, such as a provider’s warmth and ability to build rapport with their children.

There is more skepticism among providers regarding the concept of a statewide quality improvement system. Some providers prefer a system that offers guidelines

and benchmarks to measure progress with ideas—but not specific requirements or a rigid schedule—about how each goal should be pursued.

Providers express particular concern that a rating system might impose stringent educational requirements that would be difficult to meet and might be irrelevant to the skills needed day-to-day.

*“I heard [the ratings system is] based on how much education you have ... I’ll tell you what: It doesn’t take a whole lot of education. I think it takes more caring and patience and taking time out to play with the kids.”*

—ENGLISH-SPEAKING TRI-CITIES PROVIDER

**Strategic Implication:** To promote trust and earn credibility with parents, there is a need to emphasize the public-private partnership in creating a ratings system that will improve quality early learning opportunities. Providers should be authentically engaged in the development of this system.

### Providers will give more credibility to a rating system developed by their peers.

Like parents, providers are wary of a quality improvement system designed by the state. All providers and directors would like to see the system designed and evaluations conducted by people who have worked as providers. They do not expect state employees to understand the nuanced challenges of their profession. Some providers and directors say an independent organization should also have a say in designing the system; they would like to see input from a variety of sources.

*“Ideally all these things [in the model] are important. However, all these things cost money. Some centers would love to lower ratios but cannot afford to. Some centers in rural areas do not have access to staff that meet educational requirements. So only centers with a great financial backing may be able to meet some of these standards.”*

—WESTERN WASHINGTON DIRECTOR

**Strategic Implication:** Instead of rigid rules and policies, providers need guidelines and benchmarks built from credible and trusted professionals in their industry in order to buy in and support large-scale improvement initiatives. Further, such a system must be able to be implemented on the ground and integrated into their existing systems.

## Parents and providers value opportunities to share information with their peers and would like to have forums for doing so regularly.

One of the most interesting observations from the focus groups is that parents and providers enjoy talking about these issues in the company of their peers. Both groups are comforted to know they are not alone in the challenges of giving children the best possible care. They also like having an opportunity to share advice with each other and give feedback on issues that are important to them. For parents and providers in rural areas, in-person sessions are also one of their preferred ways to receive information. Most parents and providers say they wish they could continue these conversations on a more regular basis.

*“I’ve also gained a lot of insight from the knowledge that people have shared in responding to these questions ... being able to share what expertise each of us has is a great support.”*

—WESTERN WASHINGTON DIRECTOR

**Strategic Implication:** Ongoing input and discussion among parents and providers is important in the improvement and maintenance of quality early learning.

## METHODOLOGY

Thrive by Five commissioned this opinion research to build comprehensive, research-based information about the perceptions, needs and concerns of parents and providers. The findings provide a nuanced understanding of how parents and providers think and talk about these topics. The research also confirms much of what leaders in the early learning field knew or assumed to be true about these audiences’ perceptions.

### Quantitative Research

The first step in the process was a statewide telephone survey among a representative sample of parents of children ages 5 and younger throughout the state, conducted by Peter D. Hart Research Associates Inc.

The survey sample included 500 interviews with parents and an over-sample of 100 lower-income parents with annual household incomes of \$35,000

or less. All respondents were given a choice to participate in the survey in either English or Spanish. The margin of error for the full sample of 600 is plus or minus 4.0 percentage points and is larger for subgroups. Any statistics cited in this report are based on the survey, not the focus groups.

### Qualitative Research

To supplement the statewide survey, Thrive by Five commissioned 18 focus groups with parents and providers. Focus groups are structured but open-ended discussions that permit a deeper exploration of issues than is possible with a survey. Focus group findings cannot be generalized to the larger population, but they provide insight into why parents and providers think the way they do about issues related to child development, early learning and child care. All focus groups were conducted in person and in English unless otherwise noted.

### Peter D. Hart Research Associates Inc., out of Washington D.C., conducted six focus groups with parents and providers:

- Center-based child care program directors in Washington state (telephone)
- Home-based providers in Washington state (telephone)
- Middle-income parents in Burien
- Middle-income parents in Pasco
- Lower-income parents in Yakima
- Lower-income Latino parents in Yakima (in Spanish)

### Pyramid Communications, in Seattle Washington, conducted an additional 12 focus groups with parents and providers:

- Middle- and upper-income mothers in Kirkland
- Middle- and upper-income fathers in Kirkland
- Middle-income mothers in Tukwila
- Middle-income fathers in Tukwila
- Lower-income mothers in Moses Lake
- Lower-income Latina mothers in Othello (in Spanish)
- Home-based providers in Tacoma
- Center-based child care program directors in Spokane
- Home-based providers in Tri-Cities
- Home-based Latina providers in Tri-Cities (in Spanish)
- Center-based child care program directors in Western Washington (online)



## ABOUT THRIVE BY FIVE

Thrive by Five is a champion for early learning improvement whose goal is for every child, from birth to 5, to experience positive, early learning environments. Thrive by Five partners with parents, communities, philanthropic organizations, business and government to develop a sustainable system for statewide, early learning improvement—strengthening families and ensuring that children in Washington are ready to succeed in school and thrive in life.

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