



The Silicon Valley Parent Story

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Project Sponsors

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Executive Summary

This report describes the results of the Silicon Valley Parent Story study, which was conducted from December 2012 to December 2013. The study was administered by the Silicon Valley Community Foundation (SVCF) and sponsored by a coalition of early childhood funders in Santa Clara and San Mateo Counties in California. The purpose of the study was to gather the perspectives of parents of children ages 0 through 8, who reside in these two counties, about parenting. The two research questions guiding the study are:

- 1) As viewed by parents, how effectively do the programs and institutions that work with children and their caregivers engage with families to support the needs of individual children?
- 2) How do families support the growth and development of their children?

The major topic areas addressed in this study are: (1) Systems of Support, (2) Schooling, (3) Child Care, and (4) Family Practices.

Research Methodology

The WestEd researchers employed both quantitative and qualitative data collection methods to gather information regarding parent engagement in the Silicon Valley. The primary data collection method was a representative survey of 1,000 parents of children age 0 to 8 residing in San Mateo and Santa Clara Counties. WestEd developed the survey in collaboration with the sponsors of the study, and IHR Research Group administered the survey via random digit dialing (RDD). The researchers also conducted focus group interviews, which we referred to as “community dialogues,” to gather the in-depth perspectives of parents of children age 0 to 8 residing in Silicon Valley. We completed a total of 14 focus groups, reaching 120 parents in San Mateo and Santa Clara Counties.

Findings

The goal of the Parent Story study was to conduct an investigation to help tell the story of being a parent of a young child—birth through age eight—in San Mateo and Santa Clara Counties. The sponsors were particularly interested in understanding the beliefs, practices, and challenges of Silicon Valley families. The primary purpose of this project was to develop recommendations for how to optimize child outcomes by supporting a positive family environment and community engagement.

This section highlights major implications as well as the most salient findings from each of the topic major areas, which are: (1) Systems of Support, (2) Preschool and School, (3) Child Care, and (4) Family Practices.

Systems of Support

Parents were presented with items examining their perceived levels of support, their level of family agreement, their ability to cope with everyday stressors, and the frequency of experiencing depressive symptoms. The majority of parents perceived having strong systems of support. Yet we found differences by income, marital status and Latino ethnicity.

- ***Fragmented Neighborhoods: One-Third of Parents do not Count on Neighbors for Support.*** The findings indicate that parents of young children in Silicon Valley do not feel that they can count on people in their neighborhood. This was the case for approximately a third of families who participated in the survey. Furthermore, low-income parents and immigrant parents reported lower levels of both personal and neighborhood support. Latino parents reported less personal support compared to non-Latinos. These findings were supported by focus group data, where parents discussed a sense of disconnection and not feeling a sense of community.
- ***Highest Disagreement among Families: Household Chores and Spending Money.*** Close to a third of Silicon Valley families disagree on sharing household chores and almost a quarter disagree on how to spend money. Single parents reported less agreement on spending money than parents in a domestic partnership. Additionally, single parents reported feeling less appreciated in their family than parents in a domestic partnership. Non-Latino parents reported less family agreement than Latino parents.
- ***Parental Depression: One-Third of Parents Experience Depression.*** The survey findings show that approximately a third of Silicon Valley parents experienced depressive symptoms. Low-income parents reported higher frequency of depressive symptoms compared to middle-to-high income parents. These findings have implications regarding the mental health needs of parents in the region.

Preschool and School

Parents were presented with items to understand preschool and school enrollment, satisfaction, interactions, and selection. Less than a quarter of 2-year-old toddlers were enrolled in preschool, while over two-thirds of preschool age children (3-6) were enrolled in preschool. Most parents paid for preschool. The school-age sample consisted of children enrolled in Transitional Kindergarten through fourth grade, and the majority of these children attended a school assigned by their district. Overall, parents reported high satisfaction and positive interactions with their child's preschool or school. Yet, we found differences for low-income and Latino families.

- ***Top 3 Preschool Selection Characteristics.*** Parents rated: 1) safety, 2) support for child’s development, and 3) quality of the teacher-child interactions as the most important characteristics when selecting a preschool. Low-income parents identified ‘cost or subsidies’ and ‘lack of a waitlist’ as important criteria when selecting a preschool more so than middle-to-high income parents. Latino parents rated ‘convenient hours’, ‘no waitlist,’ and ‘language, culture, or religion’ as more important in selecting a preschool compared to non-Latino parents.
- ***Top 3 Concerns about Enrolling in Preschool.*** The majority of parents of children eligible for preschool but who were not enrolled in preschool indicated that this was the case because their child was too young for preschool. Other reasons for not enrolling were the cost of preschool was too high and concerns about the quality of the preschool.
- ***Low Preschool Enrollment: Lower Preschool Enrollment among Low-Income and Latino Children.*** The survey findings show that a smaller percentage of low-income preschool-age children enrolled in preschool compared to middle-to-high income children. The same is true for Latino children when compared to non-Latino children.
- ***Elementary Schools Do Not Meet Expectations.*** Parents of school-age children expressed less satisfaction with school than parents of preschoolers. Parents whose children attended a school assigned by the district were less satisfied with school, specifically with regards to safety. Elementary school parents were significantly less likely to express confidence that their child was safe at school compared to preschool parents. Additionally, parents whose children attended a school assigned by the district wished their child could attend a different school more so than parents whose child attended a school of choice. Furthermore, low-income parents were less satisfied with their child’s school compared with middle-to-high income parents. Latino parents were less satisfied with their child’s school compared with non-Latino parents.
- ***Top 3 Elementary School Selection Characteristics.*** Parents who chose a school not assigned by their district cited 1) quality of the teaching, 2) support for child’s academic development, and 3) safety as the top three selection criteria (in this order). Low-income parents were more likely to cite waitlist and the physical facility of the school as important selection criteria compared to middle-to-high income parents.
- ***Children Missing Out on Enrichment: Low-Income Children and Latino Children Have Lower Participation in Enrichment Activities.*** The survey findings indicate that low-income children of all ages in Silicon Valley, as well as Latino children, are less likely to participate in enrichment activities outside of school. This finding is critical, considering that many schools serving low-income children may not have the funds to offer enrichment activities on site.

Child Care

Parents were presented with items to assess their experiences with child care, including types of child care arrangements and setting, satisfaction with formal child care, selection criteria and difficulty finding care. The majority of children ages 0 to 8 in Silicon Valley are cared for by a parent. The majority of parents whose children receive care in a center or afterschool care report high satisfaction with the provider. Yet, we also identified concerns and barriers, particularly for low-income and Latino families.

- ***Child Care Challenges: Families Concerned with Affordability and Quality.*** Parents who reported problems finding child care most frequently indicated concerns with cost and quality of the care. Low-income parents were more likely to encounter problems finding child care and were more likely to be the primary caregiver compared to middle-to-high income parents. Furthermore, low-income parents were more concerned about cost and the convenience of the location when selecting child care. Latino parents viewed inconvenient hours as a barrier more so than non-Latino parents.
- ***Top 3 Child Care Selection Characteristics.*** All parents—across all age groups—rated safety as the most important characteristic in selecting a child care center or afterschool care. The next most important characteristic was ‘quality of provider-child interactions’—parents of infants/toddlers and preschool-age children rated this criterion as second most important whereas parents of school-age children rated it as the third most important. Parents of infants/toddlers also cited ‘support for child’s social and emotional development’ as the third of the top three, whereas parents of preschool-age children cited ‘provider qualifications’ as third. Parents of school-age children cited ‘convenient hours’ as second most important.

Family Practices

Parents were asked a variety of items to understand how they engage in activities that promote their child’s development. Parents of children of all ages reported high levels of engagement in promoting the healthy development of their child. Yet we found differences in family practices based on age of the child, income, and Latino ethnicity.

- ***Parent Engagement Tapers as Child Grows.*** Parents of school-age children showed less frequent engagement with their children on a number of parenting practices compared to parents of preschool-age children. For instance, parents of preschool-age children told stories or sang together with their child more often than parents of school-age children. We found the same pattern for playing rhyming or wordplay games. We also found that parents of preschool-age children engaged in more math activities compared to their school-age counterparts. Furthermore, low-income families, particularly those of infants/toddlers and

preschool-age children, reported lower levels of language development activities with their child compared to middle-to-high income parents.

- ***Lower Language and Literacy Practices in Low-Income and Latino Families.*** Low-income parents engaged in language development activities less frequently with their infant/toddler than middle-to-high income parents. Low income-parents read with their preschool-age child less frequently than middle-to-high income parents. Latino parents read to their child less frequently than non-Latino parents. Also, Latino parents told stories, sang together, and had conversations with their child less frequently.
- ***Low Rates of Mathematical Skill-Building.*** Parents of all age groups reported lower levels of engaging in mathematical skill building activities with their children compared to other parenting activities. Mathematics skills are linked to success in school and are critical from an early age.
- ***Families Lean on Professionals and Community Leaders for Advice.*** Low-income families were more likely to rely on professionals and other community leaders for advice regarding child-rearing. For example, low-income parents of preschool-age children viewed child care resource and referral programs, as well as religious leaders, as helpful sources of child rearing advice. Low-income parents of school-age children also viewed religious leaders as helpful, as well as doctors and nurses, child care providers or teachers, community based organizations, and social workers.
- ***Low-income Parents Express Greater Concerns about Childrearing.*** The findings show that low-income parents expressed greater concerns about child and childrearing than middle-to-high income parents. More specifically, low-income parents reported that their infant/toddler was harder to care for than most children compared to middle-to-high income parents of infants/toddlers. Furthermore, low-income parents of preschool and school-age children reported that they felt they were giving up too much of their life to meet their child's needs than middle-to-high income parents. And low-income parents of school-age children also reported showed lower instances of trying to teach their child how to manage his/her emotions than middle-to-high income parents.
- ***Breastfeeding Longer for Middle-to-High Income Parents.*** Most parents of infants/toddlers indicated that their child was fed breast milk only and that they breastfed until their child was nearly six months. Low-income parents breastfed for a shorter period of time compared to middle-to-high income parents.
- ***Low-Income Parents and Latino Parents Exhibit Strengths in Parenting Practices.*** We also want to highlight findings that show strengths among low-income and Latino parents. Low-income parents were more likely to help their children with homework and have family meals together than middle-to-high income parents. Latino families also

reported having family meals together more often compared to non-Latino families. Also, Latino parents expressed fewer concerns about their child and childrearing than non-Latino parents. Latino parents also reported a greater ability to deal with stress compared to non-Latino parents. These findings provide an opportunity for service providers to consider the strengths and assets of the families they serve; and to incorporate these findings in to the literature and resources available to their colleagues and to families in the region.

Conclusions

The findings tell a story of high parent engagement through strong systems of support, satisfaction with schools and child care providers, as well as positive parenting practices. The majority of the parents who shared their stories in this study reported high support in times of need, high agreement within their families, and the ability to cope with daily stress, as well as low instances of depressive symptoms. Parents also reported high satisfaction with their children’s preschools and schools, as well as with child care centers. Furthermore, parents reported engaging in a variety of activities that promote healthy child development, counting on personal sources of support, feeling confident about their ability to guide their child’s development, and few concerns regarding their child.

Yet, our analysis also revealed that a disparity when considering low-income and Latino parents. Low-income families report less support in times of need, lower enrollment in preschool, less satisfaction with elementary schools, lower participation in enrichment activities, and less enrollment in formalized child care. Furthermore, low-income families showed lower instances of engaging in language development activities and reading with their infant/toddler and preschool age-children. Low-income parents breastfed their infant/toddler for a significantly shorter period of time than their middle-to-high income counterparts. And finally, low-income families reported higher reliance on community organizations for advice on raising their child. Latino families showed similar trends as low-income families. It is important to note that we did not find significant differences when we compared Latino families to non-Latino families in regards to breastfeeding and helpful sources of support. Furthermore, Latino parents reported fewer concerns about childrearing when compared to non-Latino parents.