

Families Define Quality Pre-Kindergarten Programs More Broadly than Educators, Researchers and Policy Makers

E DUCATION POLICY MAKERS IDENTIFY ACCESS TO QUALITY PRE-KINDERGARTEN programs as a critical step in early childhood development. While most agree on access, definitions of quality vary widely. A new study by the National Center for Early Development & Learning (NCEDL) finds that families define quality in broader terms than educators, researchers and policymakers.

The NCEDL study examined how parents of children in publicly funded pre-Kindergarten defined quality and selected programs. In addition to placing a high value on education, families identified three factors not usually included in educational research or professional discussions of program quality— comprehensive service provisions (e.g., meals), convenient location, and homeschool collaboration.

Most families surveyed had only one pre-K program to select from. Those with more options were typically forced to base their decision on life circumstances rather than on perceived quality of care.



Study Background

Participants were randomly selected from fully or partially funded pre-K programs in Georgia, Illinois, Kentucky, Ohio, and regions of California (Los Angeles and Central Valley), and New York (New York City to Albany).

This study includes data collected from 937 parents soon after their children entered pre-K in the fall of 2001. Home interviews were conducted in five states. Parents in Kentucky completed a mailed questionnaire. The findings are based on a content analysis and descriptive statistical analyses of parental responses. Almost all of those surveyed were female—either biological mothers (92 percent) or maternal surrogates (4 percent).

Parents' responses were assigned to the following categories:

- Positive structural attributes,
- Safe clean attractive environment,
- Adequate instructional resources,
- Effective instructional methods,
- Socially and academically competent teachers,
- Discipline,
- Positive classroom emotional climate,
- Comprehensive service provision,
- Convenient location, and
- Home school partnership.

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How do Parents Define Quality?

Parents' responses demonstrated their view that pre-K programs should provide both early education and child care. Accordingly, their descriptions about what constitutes quality care reflected these dual functions.

Overall, parents characterized quality care as providing an emotionally safe and responsive environment while academically preparing children for kindergarten. The most common criteria cited by families related to the teacher and the curriculum. Specifically, parents pointed to teacher competence, experience and attentiveness to the child and a curriculum that teaches skills needed for kindergarten.

The hallmark of quality pre-K, as defined by parents surveyed, was the opportunity through play and structured learning activities to acquire a range of skills from the socio-emotional to the cognitive. Parents said that academically preparing children for kindergarten went beyond letters, numbers and reading. In their opinion, school readiness included the development of social skills, ability to pay attention, and control of behavior and emotions.

Many families also identified comprehensive service provisions, convenient location, and home school collaboration as playing an important role in determining quality. Educators, researchers, and policy makers typically do not consider such criteria in their discussions.

How do Parents Choose a Pre-K Program?

When deciding whether or not to enroll their child in a program, the majority of parents considered the factors described above. However, significant ethnic differences also emerged. White families were more likely to base their decision on a positive emotional climate. Among families living in poverty, Latinos were more likely to factor in responsive service provisions, and African Americans looked to a home school partnership.

Many poor families typically have little choice at all and must set aside issues of perceived quality to meet basic needs such as programs that provide access to health care services and nutritional food for their children. As a result poor families often send a child to a program that is not optimal from their vantage point.



Conclusion

Families' definitions of quality were broader than those often used in research and professional literature and included practical concerns linked to their personal experiences. For many families, for example, having a location that was convenient to home or work was critical. Also important was the availability of meals for children in poor families and extended flexible hours for single and/or working parents.

Comparisons of the indicators families used to evaluate quality and those that guided their enrollment decisions underscored the difficult choices some families faced. Life circumstances may force a trade-off between enrolling a child in a high quality program and choosing an arrangement that is feasible and fits the needs of the family. ■

To Learn More

"Quality of Pre-K: What families are looking for in public sponsored programs" appears in the December 2006 issue of *Early Education and Development*. Authors are Oscar A. Barbarin, Terry McCandies, Diane Early, Richard M. Clifford, Donna Bryant and Margaret Burchinal from The University of North Carolina; Carolee Howes from the University of California at Los Angeles; and Robert Pianta from the University of Virginia.