

new Americans | Case Study in Maine



Somali, Sudanese and Cambodian Refugee Parents' Perspectives

The refugee population in Portland, Maine is diverse. The 1,800 students attending Portland Public Schools come from homes where over 60 different languages are spoken, from Acholi and Arabic to Khmer and Vietnamese (Portland Public Schools, 2010). This diversity provides unique challenges beyond the typical language barriers for both parents and child care providers; at any one time, a substantial number of providers are caring for children in their classrooms who speak a wide variety of languages. Almost one third (29%) of child care providers surveyed reported having 3-8 languages spoken by students in their classroom, and, by extension, the families they serve. Perspectives below were gathered at focus groups of Cambodian, Somali and Sudanese parents.

What do refugee parents believe about raising their children?

How do they compare themselves to native born American parents?

What cultural beliefs may influence parent's decisions about child care?

As noted above, with all findings from the study there was as much variation within each of the cultural groups as there was between different cultural groups. However, one commonality found during the focus groups was that parents across the cultural groups noted that many American parents lack the support of extended family living close by—a support they said is common among families in their own cultures. They also expressed regret that in the United States there seems to be less family time and that child rearing seems much more structured.

Back home when we have kids we have elders stay at home. They don't go to work. They take care of our kids for free. We have grandparents who are home. We have moms who are home. They just sit outside under a tree and take care the whole day, and the baby has privilege to run everywhere and play. Here you need to go and leave him—just like a prisoner. –Sudanese refugee parent

At the same time, Sudanese parents expressed admiration for what they saw as the ability of American parents to keep their children close by and well-behaved in public. They wanted help in learning how to handle their children in this culture. They explained that in the rural areas of their native country, children have more freedom to wander and they could depend on others to watch their children wherever they might roam; parents didn't worry about their safety. In contrast, parents felt

it was much harder to raise children here and they felt more alone in shouldering that responsibility. Some expressed fear for their children's safety in their new neighborhoods and several felt that their neighbors were too quick to report them to the police if they allowed their children to play outside alone.

At home [in their native country], the kids just play. They can play outside there. Everybody knows each other's children—"this is so-and-so's child"—so let them play. Nobody will bother your child. There will be no police. But here you are always being followed. If a child is out, why is this child outside here? Then the police will come to you or probably people from child protection will come. "Why did you leave your child out?" So there is no freedom. There, anyone else in the community will save your child. The kids will eat together and then they play until evening when the child will come home. Here you are like in prison because if anything happens wrong, it's hard. –Sudanese parent

These differences in child rearing practices between native born Americans and refugee parents seemed to have influenced some parents' decisions about child care. Although they might have preferred to have their children at home, this lack of freedom to explore led some parents to feel that their children "might as well be in a child care program." Otherwise, they would just "stay in the house and watch TV all day."

In our own country we live in a group of relatives so if she has a child who is, say, ten years old and I have a baby related to her, the ten-year-old would be responsible for this child. You have somebody to take care of your child. You are near; you are not going to be far away. She just holds the child when you're working...if something happens you are right there and you know somebody you can count on is there. Also your aunts are there, your mothers, your mothers-in-law. As soon as you have a baby, they are right there for you. You don't have to look for a daycare or look for someone to take care. –Sudanese parent

In contrast, refugee parents from Cambodia felt that American children were given too *much* freedom and were expected to be independent much too early. In their opinion, the bond between Cambodian parents and their children seemed stronger than that between American parents and their children.

Americans tend to let the children be free more than Cambodians. American parents give more freedom to children to select what kind of food to eat, where to go to play...Cambodian parents discipline them to stay home and eat whatever the family cooks. –Cambodian parent

I ...just feel bad for the kids—some parents they don't feel very deeply for the child, they just put them away when they are born until they 18, 19. We Cambodian people, Asian people very love their child. They just sleep in one bed altogether in the whole family and for us it seems like in America [there are] a lot of options to take care of your child. We want to deeply care until they are old enough that they can go by their own. We try to make scheduling between me and my wife to stay home. –Cambodian parent

Sudanese and Somali parents also noted significant differences between cultures in how children are disciplined. Accepted disciplinary practices in their native countries, such as spanking, are not considered appropriate in this country. As a result, parents worried that if they continued those practices, they would get in trouble with the police. Parents expressed a strong desire to receive training in disciplinary practices that are acceptable in this country.

What is important to parents in raising their children and what do they hope their children will learn before they enter kindergarten?

Parents consistently focused on socio-emotional skills and other critical components of school readiness. They had very specific ideas about what they want their children to learn prior to kindergarten, including:

- To show respect for adults and to learn how to say “thank you” when someone does something for you, to say “hello” and “good morning.”
- To learn good hygiene: how to use the bathroom, wash hands after using the bathroom and before eating.
- To learn good behaviors, their religion, their health, and to listen to their parents.
- To learn how to share, how to play with other kids.
- To learn how to hold a pen.
- How to write, how to color, how to do games, puzzles.

Before your child enters kindergarten you need to teach your child respect—we need to teach them before they get to school because we don't want to be shamed and get complaining your child did this ... the mother should try her best to teach her child the respect and behavior. –Sudanese parent

It makes me happy to see my kids do things he doesn't do at home to challenge himself. It makes me exciting and he tells me what that means and where he went and how many friends he has, so he's very active. When you see your child active it makes you happy. –Somali parent

He learn sharing; he learn different cultural; he learn English language...so definitely he is good now. He knows a lot of things... At the same time, my son he's losing a lot of culture or religion from my country. When he went for Head Start or kindergarten, he's losing some and he learns some. So is very, very tough challenge. –Somali parent

(It is important) that they learn the language and when they go to school, when they start kindergarten they already know what they can do and they can speak with other children there... that is the important thing. In daycare they teach them letters or alphabet and they know that and the rules too. They know how to speak if the other child speaking and they know what they do when they go (to school). It's better then. That's what I think. –Sudanese parent

I kept (my son) at home before he entered kindergarten and when he entered kindergarten, it was big problem for him. He fights and he bites other kids and that was so hard for him to adjust. Compared to my younger son right now because he is in daycare right now, now he plays very well with other kids. You know because he gets used to the kids and also to the discipline, also to the rules and now he is doing ok. And when he will enter kindergarten, he will be fine because he already knows what he can do. –Sudanese parent

Positive Aspects of Child Care

To learn more about refugee parents' views about child care, questions differed for those who had children in care and those who did not. Those parents in the "in-care" focus groups were asked to identify the most important reason they placed their child in care, what they look for in a child care program, and what makes them comfortable or uncomfortable about a child care setting. Parents in the "not in care" focus groups were asked what they thought about child care in this country, whether there were any circumstances under which they would place their child in a child care program, and what they would look for in a child care setting if they did decide to look for care.

Among refugee parents in Maine, the answers revealed an array of complex, sometimes contradictory attitudes toward child care, views about what enrollment in a care setting might do for their child along with fears and misunderstandings about child care.

The following benefits of enrollment in care were mentioned by parents:

- **Child care provides more opportunities to learn.** Parents noted that child care gives children the opportunity to learn academic skills (e.g. letters, sounds, holding a pen, etc.) and social skills (e.g. sharing, listening, not interrupting). Parents also noted that child care offers more activities, materials, toys, and books than the child would have at home.

My son had home care and when he turned three we sent him to daycare center. Now he learns a lot. Before he learned my language. He stayed home with a babysitter. Now he's speaking English; he has a lot of activity. –Somali parent

- **Child care allows children to socialize and learn about American culture and American schools.** Parents felt that child care provides a good opportunity for their children to socialize with other children. They wanted their child to learn about American culture (including learning English) and thought those settings were a place to break down racial barriers. They also noted that child care introduces children to rules and schedules similar to those encountered in elementary school.

Before he stayed in my home; he don't go outside...he was sad. But now he goes everywhere they take the daycare. He talks; he knows things he didn't know before; he's a whole new boy now really; he's very active. Before he was in babysitting with other two kids and now he's in a whole group like 20 kids so it's very good and I hope he's doing that until kindergarten and he's starting kindergarten work and it's good English not ESL, that's what I'm hoping. –Somali parent

- **Child care provides a safe, well-regulated setting.** Parents felt comfortable that their children who are enrolled in child care settings benefited from the governmental regulation of these programs and, according to these parents, the associated rules and oversight to ensure their child is safe. Parents also valued the training teachers receive. Specifically, they felt good knowing that if their child became ill, there was someone in the child care setting who would know what to do. Lastly, parents found it easier to know what was going on in a child care center than in an informal setting (family, friends or neighbors).

Many of the refugee parents' concerns about child care mirrored concerns raised by parents in general in making these choices for their children

- **Child care can connect parents to other services.** Parents noted that having their children in care meant that their children would be assessed and would receive any services they need. They also mentioned that being a part of a child care setting connected parents to additional services (especially when the child care provider is a multi-service agency).

Concerns about Child Care

Generally, those parents who were less educated, spoke limited or no English, and had recently arrived in the United States had more concerns and fears about child care than did those who had more education, spoke English, and had been here longer. Many of the refugee parents' concerns about child care mirrored concerns raised by parents in general in making these choices for their children (Weber, 2011).

These included:

- a mismatch between work hours and the hours of operation of child care;
- the high cost of care and the availability of cheaper alternatives such as extended family;
- a desire to have their child in a less-structured, more family-like setting where they can get more attention;
- a desire to keep young children with parents or extended family members;
- health and safety concerns with child care, including concerns about changing diapers often enough, inattentive caregivers, and increased exposure to illness; and
- a desire to insulate children from negative peer influence and learning bad behaviors.

In contrast, parents also shared many concerns about child care that seemed to be tied to their cultural beliefs and struggles with language barriers, many of which relate back to the findings about child rearing practices and the development of school readiness skills discussed earlier. These concerns about child care should be considered in the

Because the child spends most of the time at daycare I would like them to teach him religion and where he is from and introduce the culture because where he goes to school most of the students are Christian and he is Muslim. One day he came home and said, "I need to change my name and also need to change my religion." Because he doesn't have time to learn his religion and when he gets home I don't have the time to teach him. I would like the daycare to tell the children about religion, "you are Muslim." –Sudanese parent

context of a refugee population living in a state which is 95.3% Caucasian, non-Hispanic, and one in which very few child care programs are run by and/or staffed by individuals from refugee communities.

Fear of children losing their culture and language. Many parents, particularly in the Sudanese and Somali parent focus groups, were concerned that if their children enrolled in a child care program they would be less likely to hold on to their native language. They believed that their children would learn English no matter where they were cared for during their preschool years, but that they would be much more likely to become proficient in *both* languages if they stayed home, or were cared for by someone from their community, before entering kindergarten. It was particularly important to parents that their children be able to converse with relatives who didn't speak English, either here or when they visit their native countries.

I want my children to learn both languages but when the children start school and daycare they are going to lose it along the way. They can't stop it. My children, one of them complains that Cambodian is too hard to speak. Even though you speak it every day at home they're not going to remember what you tell them. They remember what they speak with their friends in English. –Cambodian parent

The kids are taken to Head Start. They pick up the English first and the mother who's at home does not speak English so there would be lack of communication. And the kids basically will pick up the language and they will make fun of mom who doesn't speak English. Basically, the antipathy starts right there. –Somali parent

Parents also worried that enrollment in child care would make it harder for their child to retain and learn about their own culture and adhere to religious practices. Specifically, Somali and Sudanese parents expressed great concern over violating religious dietary restrictions at child care programs. However, the child care providers interviewed in the programs which served these populations were attuned to these dietary restrictions and had put measures in place to address them.

When I see pork I say maybe my baby's not safe. ...some babies at child care they use formula that comes from pork- that's against our religion. –Somali parent

Discrimination. For some parents, concerns over whether their child might be discriminated against, particularly when they are too young to stand up for themselves, fueled fears about child care. Several parents reported incidents in which their children felt hurt by remarks made by other children about their race. Some Cambodian parents worried that at age three or four, their child might be unfairly accused of something and not be old enough to explain what happened. They also worried that because of their own language barriers, they wouldn't be able to intervene to defend their child. These parents felt more confident that by age six, their children could relate what happened and stand up for themselves against any accusations. This was one reason given for keeping children home until they reached school-age.

When my daughter gets home she tells me what is going on in daycare and she will say that the kids tell her, "You have brown skin" and "You look different." She used to go to camp and they told her the same thing. This year she refused to go to camp. She said, "Oh, they will tell me I am different and I have brown skin." –Sudanese parent

Concerns about disciplinary practices. Concerns and misconceptions about disciplinary practices seemed to emerge in part from misunderstandings due to language barriers, including a lack of materials translated into parents' languages explaining these policies. For example, a number of parents were unsure what a "time out" meant. Some parents said it meant that their child would have to stand up for a long time. One parent believed that children were locked up during a "time out." Another parent said she would not place her child in a child care program because she was afraid that if her child misbehaved, "his food rations would be cut back." Parents want to have information about disciplinary practices in child care centers more clearly explained and translated into their native languages. For example, they would like a definition of the term "time out" and an adequate explanation of the policies related to this practice.

As discussed previously, Sudanese and Somali parents expressed concern that disciplinary practices that are acceptable in their own culture, such as spanking, are not considered appropriate in the United States. They worried that if they enrolled their children in child care and the children told their teachers that they were being spanked at home, the providers would report the parents to the police. Parents wished that providers would teach them alternative disciplinary methods, rather than

too quickly judging a method that parents experienced in their own upbringing and do not see as wrong. These feelings also reflect a deep distrust of the police by some parents, in part based on negative experiences with law enforcement and the government in their native countries.

Several Somali and Sudanese parents worried that if they enrolled their children in child care, their children would learn that the disciplinary practices used at home were not acceptable in the United States, and would use that knowledge to question their parents' authority. Some based that fear on previous experiences with their teenage children; when parents asked their teenagers to do something that they did not want to do, their children would tell them, "In this country we have rights. All I have to do is call the police."

...something that I notice at daycare center is the provider tries to find out if the child goes to child care in dirty clothes or, you know, with a scratch or anything they will think maybe parents are not treating the child good. And it could be the parent—some of us come from rural areas—they don't know how to dress up the kids and the provider will take it in a different way. They will say, "Oh the parents are abusing the child," instead of giving information to the parents and teaching the parent. –Somali parent

What access do parents have to information about child care where they live?

Do parents know about the availability of assistance with child care costs?

Do these factors affect or constrain their child care choices?

Parents and service providers were asked about the information sources refugee parents use to learn about child care programs as well as their experiences applying for child care assistance.

Limited access to information about child care programs. While parents from any culture can lack access to information about child care, parents from refugee communities face additional challenges in making informed child care decisions because of language barriers and social isolation. This is particularly true for families who were using informal care, some of whom seemed genuinely bewildered by the whole notion of child care "options" or "choices." In their native countries, when preschool programs are available, they tend to be a part of a single system of publicly funded programs and parents don't view it as a question of "choosing" between available programs. Parents also seemed to lack information about affordability of care such as the fact that for eligible families, Head Start is free.

While many parents expressed concern that enrolling children in a program would risk loss of their language and culture, this father wanted his children to be in a preschool with a wider range of children, including children from American culture, and believed that such integration would help his children assimilate, benefit race relations and promote tolerance.

One Cambodian refugee parent, when asked if she had anything else to add at the end of the focus group session, asked, “I want to know how they take care of all children in this country? What is this child care system?”

Those parents who had looked for child care were asked how they heard about available programs. Most parents received their information through word of mouth in their community or through a refugee services agency. Once they enrolled one child, they typically continued to use that program when their other children became old enough to attend. These findings were corroborated by the child care providers, representatives of refugee services agencies, and the local child care resource and referral representative.

Typically, families who depend on community interpreters for child care information are told about only one or two programs, partly because of issues of affordability which limit their choice of care. Indeed, one Sudanese father expressed regret that children from his culture tended to be concentrated in a very small number of public preschools in Portland. While many parents expressed concern that enrolling children in a program would risk loss of their language and culture, this father wanted his children to be in a preschool with a wider range of children, including children from American culture, and believed that such integration would help his children assimilate, benefit race relations and promote tolerance.

The child care resource and referral agency did not seem to be a major source of information for the parents in our focus groups. The local R&R agency reported that they lack adequate funding to cover the cost of bilingual staff. Moreover, because the refugee population in Portland is so linguistically diverse, it is much more difficult to employ staff who speak all of the necessary languages. The agency also reported that they lack funding to support the use of a language service to communicate with parents.

Other sources for information about child care mentioned by parents and service providers were the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) and Additional Support for People in Retraining and Employment (ASPIRE) office and the Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program. The TANF/ASPIRE program does not have written information about child care available in multiple languages. Instead, interpreters are used to inform parents. The limited number of TANF/ASPIRE staff interviewed did not express concern about the lack of information about child care options for this population saying that in their experience parents already knew about the “one or two programs” the population typically uses. This reinforced the assertion that refugee children

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were clustered in only a limited number of programs. The TANF/ASPIRE staff also said that most families are able to rely on friends and family to care for their children.

Experience Applying for Child Care Assistance. In Maine, service providers reported that refugee parents' choices in child care settings were limited by cost and waiting lists for the child care subsidy program. The application *process* for child care assistance, however, did not seem to be an issue for parents; TANF offices and refugee services organizations have interpreters available to help parents fill out the application forms, which are only in English. TANF/ASPIRE has a contract with Catholic Charities of Maine to provide two ASPIRE workers to serve English language limited parents. In addition, a Somali interpreter comes in one day a week. Otherwise, the agency uses a language line, a service where interpreters in a variety of languages are available over the phone.

Some service providers felt the eligibility rules for child care assistance were too rigid. In particular, they cited rules about household income; when many extended family members live in the same household, it becomes difficult to determine household income. Some parents were

aware that child care subsidies could be used within their own community to pay for child care. However, according to those we interviewed in our field study, refugee parents have encountered significant barriers to becoming licensed providers, including strict housing code requirements and fire regulations.



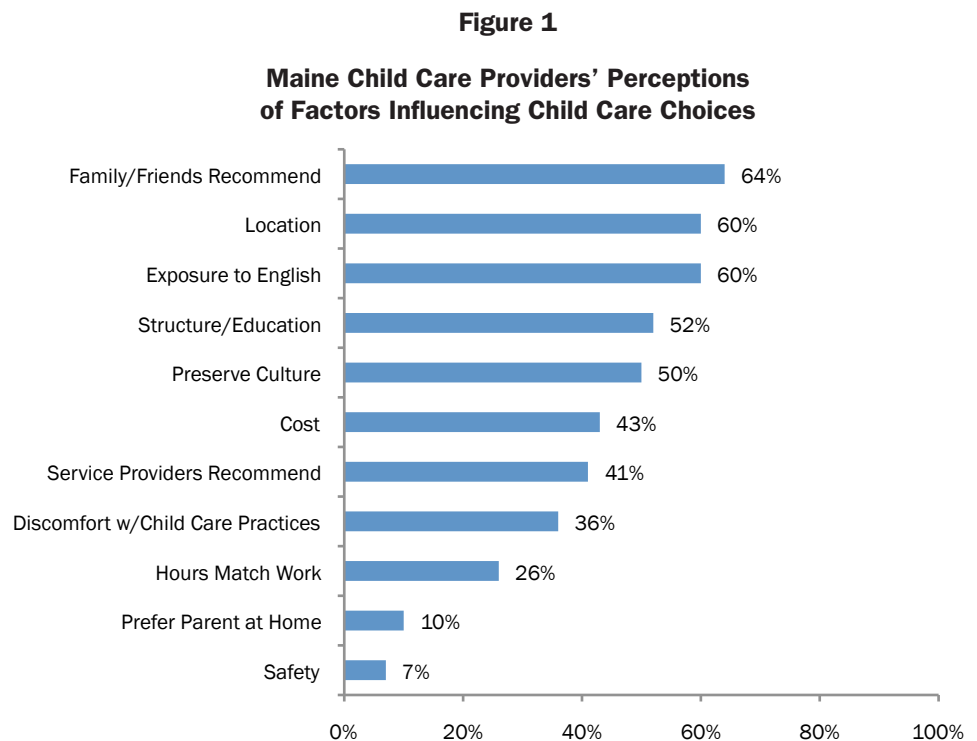
Child Care Providers' and Teachers' Perspectives

In addition to hearing from refugee parents, the views of child care providers and K-2 teachers provided insight into their perceptions of how these parents make child care decisions and the implications of those decisions as well as the providers' perceptions of the challenges, real and anticipated, of serving this population of families. It should be noted here that for the most part, providers who participated in the study were not members of the study populations.

Are child care providers aware of the factors identified by parents as influencing their child care choices?

Figure 1 represents providers' responses to the survey question:

Do parents ever express the following preferences or concerns regarding what they think about when they choose care for their children? (Providers could check all that applied.)



Refugee & Immigrant Services (through Catholic Charities in Maine) resettled 860 refugee families in 2009. Portland Public Schools have over 1,800 students from homes where over 60 different languages are spoken, representing about 25% of Portland Public Schools' total enrollment

Source: Portland Public School
Multicultural and Multilingual
Center

The highest proportion of providers (64%) cited recommendations from family or friends as an important factor expressed by parents as influencing their decisions about child care. A smaller number of providers also responded that location, exposure to English, structure, educational opportunities and programs that allowed them to preserve their culture were common desires expressed by refugee parents. In interviews, child care and other service providers offered a number of additional observations about the factors they felt influenced parents' decisions about child care:

- There is a strong preference for infants and toddlers to be cared for by family.
- The more school aged children a family has, the more likely they will enroll younger children in child care because they see how important it is for children to learn English before they enter kindergarten.
- Cost is the major factor; parents cannot afford child care and choose instead to arrange for relatives to care for their children.
- Sometimes parents who receive child care subsidies prefer to use friends to care for their child because they prefer to keep the child care payments in their communities.
- Many parents work in jobs that have non-traditional hours and child care isn't available to cover those hours.
- The more education parents have, the better they speak English, and the longer they have been in this country, the more likely they are to enroll their child in a child care program.
- Parents prefer to enroll their children in a public center over a family child care home run by an American provider because they feel they are better able to learn about what goes on during the day in a public center.

These observations and survey findings suggest a disconnect between what child care providers and service providers believed were the most important factors in the child care decision making of refugee parents, and what refugee parents reported as the most important factors. While most child care providers and service providers were aware of the practical factors, such as cost, transportation and hours, only half were aware of concerns such as the desire to preserve one's culture and less than half were aware of a discomfort with certain practices used in child care.

This disconnect may be due in part to language barriers: it may be easier for parents to ask providers about issues like cost of care, but harder to communicate about these other, more nuanced, factors. When asked what factors refugee parents look for in child care programs, one child care director responded, "They ask very few questions. It's more that they need the spot." Interviewees also noted, as will be discussed later,

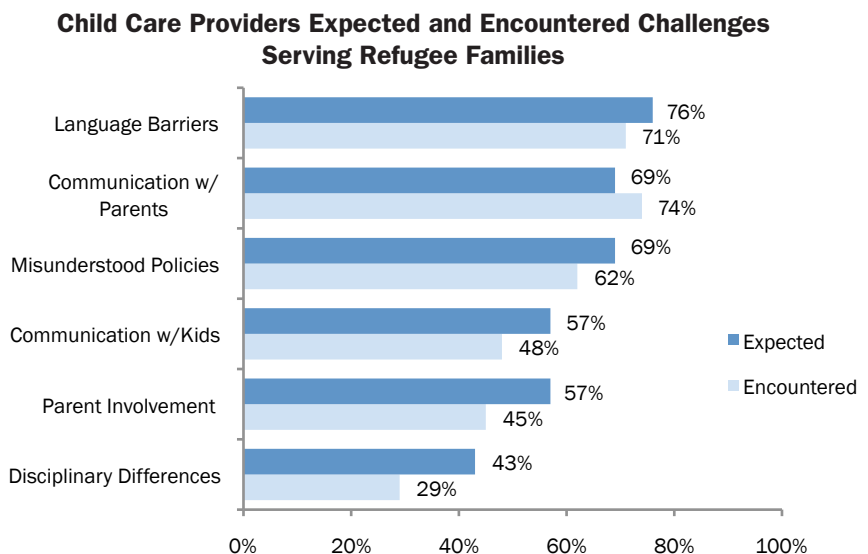
that in the cultures studied, child care providers are viewed as “the teacher,” an authority figure who should not be questioned. It is possible that in addition to language barriers, parents may feel uncomfortable raising concerns or asking questions about such factors as disciplinary practices because they happen in the classroom under the supervision of “the teacher.”

What challenges in serving these families did providers anticipate and what challenges were actually encountered by providers?

...communication with parents was the only expected challenge (69%) that was actually encountered with greater frequency (74%); all others were less than providers expected.

In our child care provider survey, we listed a series of potential challenges, drawn from our findings in the qualitative phase of our research, and asked respondents to tell us which challenges they anticipated before serving this population and which ones they actually experienced. This examination was relevant to our study of child care decision making because the degree to which providers experience these challenges is related to the comfort level parents feel with a child care setting. As seen in Figure 2, communication with parents was the only expected challenge (69%) that was actually encountered with greater frequency (74%); all others were less of a problem than providers expected. Language barriers were anticipated as a challenge by more than three quarters of respondents (76%) and were encountered by a vast majority of providers (71%). Communication with children was actually encountered as an issue by less than half of providers (48%).

Figure 2



What experiences have providers had with encouraging parent involvement in their child care programs?

... providers also noted that parent involvement is higher when they offer some other service in addition to taking care of the children such as classes on parenting skills, English or nutrition.

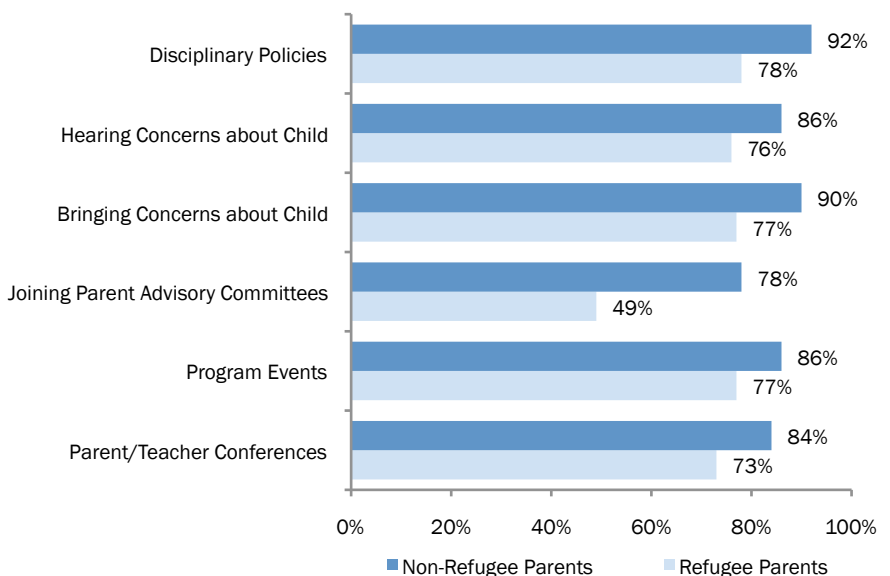
The issues providers face specifically in encouraging parental involvement were a focus of our study because they are so closely related to the level of comfort parents feel with a child care setting and, in turn, whether the program is one they would recommend to their friends.

Several child care providers reported that in their experience, refugee parents are excited to have their children learn new things and are very interested in academics. They also observed that it is much easier to attract parents to events and have them comfortably participate if there are a number of children enrolled in the program from the same cultural group. Child care providers also noted that parent involvement is higher when they offer some other service in addition to taking care of the children such as classes on parenting skills, English or nutrition.

Because of the variety of ways a parent can become involved with their child's program or school, we asked child care providers and K-2 teachers how they would rate the comfort level of both non-refugee and refugee parents participating in the specific activities included in Figures 3 and 4 below. Respondents selected from a five-point scale; results below include the percentage of those selecting "comfortable," "mostly comfortable" and "very comfortable." Both groups report a consistently high comfort level among non-refugee parents and a lower comfort level among refugee parents. Both child care providers and K-2 teachers

Figure 3

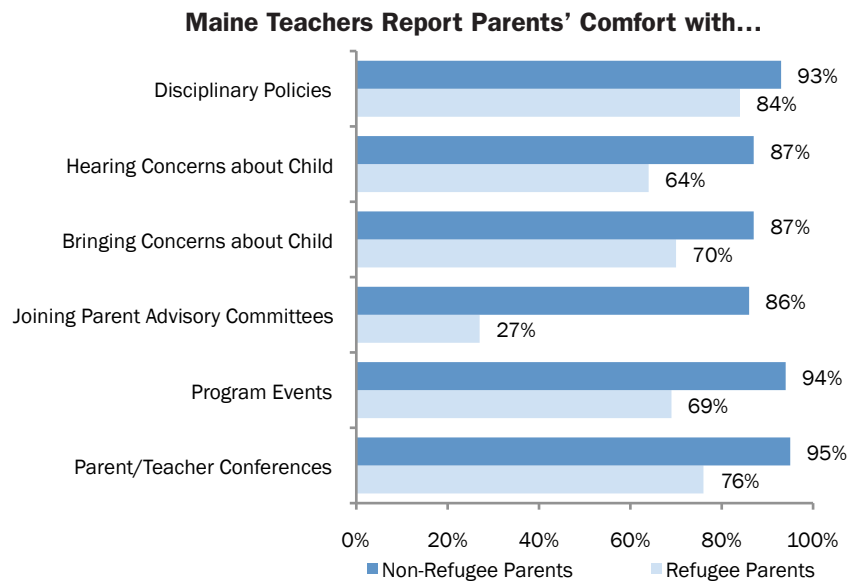
Maine Child Care Providers Report Parents' Comfort with...



Both child care providers and K-2 teachers observe that refugee parents are least comfortable with joining parent advisory committees.

observe that refugee parents are least comfortable with joining parent advisory committees. Child care administrators who operate multiple programs report more success involving refugee parents at local sites than at the program level on larger advisory boards; joining these larger bodies may be more intimidating.

Figure 4



Barriers to Meaningful Parent Involvement

Interviews with child care providers revealed a number of challenges to parent involvement for parents of young English Language Learners. Some child care providers believed that attendance at parent/teacher conferences and other events was not that different for refugee parents than for typical American parents—some are too busy and are less involved; others attend every session. However, other child care providers reported that many refugee families view their child's caregiver as “the teacher” or authority figure and less as a partner in their child's education. As a result, parents may be hesitant to raise concerns or question practices in the classroom, such as at parent/teacher conferences. One child care provider reported giving parents a questionnaire at the beginning of the year to ask parents about their children—their likes and dislikes, food preferences, etc. This practice not only provides them with useful information but sends a message that the child care provider values the parents' perspective on the child. This could be a challenge, however, for those parents with low literacy levels and would need to be completed with the help of a translator.

Parent involvement is a huge, tough problem. I would love to figure it out.
-Child Care Administrator

Making visits to each child's home has made a big difference.

–Maine Elementary School

Teacher

Several child care providers reported holding open houses for parents but have found that attendance by refugee parents has not been as high as they would like. They cited the cost of multiple interpreters for a variety of languages as a major barrier to increasing attendance. One provider suggested that a closer relationship to the communities these parents are from would be beneficial so that someone could attend open houses to interpret for parents. Time was also an issue mentioned by a number of child care providers. In some of the cultures studied, time is viewed as more fluid and less precise so late arrivals have meant that events do not get started as scheduled.

What are the perceptions of those who interact with refugee families and children about the implications of child care decision-making on the school readiness of refugee children when they enter kindergarten?

According to the K-2 teachers, refugee families have experiences and a history that play a role in their learning. As one teacher noted, “These kids come to us from war-torn countries and some of them are suffering emotionally because they are separated from their families.” Another said, “Many ELL children who we meet need to feel safe, and have their basic needs for food, shelter and clothing met before [they] are able to access learning and that can take a long time to develop.”

K-2 teachers also noted that opportunities to develop basic school readiness skills are limited for these populations of children. However, while focused on immigrant as opposed to refugee children, recent research suggests that although children of first and second generation immigrants lag behind their peers in cognitive and language skills, they excel in socio-emotional skills and behavior. In addition, first generation immigrant children showed more advanced socio-emotional and cognitive skill development than did second generation immigrant children (DeFyeter & Winsler 2009). The authors emphasize the importance of understanding and building upon these strengths in refugee and immigrant families in order to promote school readiness.

K-2 teachers participating in our study noted,

Their vocabulary is low—their exposure to different things outside the home is lacking. They don't have people to practice their English with. The classroom is where they practice their English—and it is hard to get them to stop talking during class time!

Language barriers, access to books and toys are challenges for children. Kids do a lot of authentic speaking while playing. Spatial relations can be practiced with Legos but not if it's the first time a kid has seen a Lego. Some kids have never even seen a baby doll. Ordinary things like, "sit next to ____" are an issue.

There is a lack of scissors, pencils, and crayons in some homes. The children haven't had exposure and a chance to play with these things. Their parents don't understand the need to have these things. So I have to do "hand-over-hand" practice with the child. It would be great if they got this exposure in preschool.

What is the impact of quality early care and education programs on the school readiness of refugee children?

More than three quarters (78%) of K-2 teachers reported increased school readiness for ELL students who have attended a preschool or pre-kindergarten program

We were interested in the perceptions of K-2 teachers about whether they saw differences in the school readiness of refugee children who had attended an early care and education program and those who did not. According to K-2 teachers surveyed in Maine, enrollment in a preschool does seem to make a difference in preparing children for later school success.

- **More than three quarters (78%) of K-2 teachers reported increased school readiness for ELL students who have attended a preschool or pre-kindergarten program** (such as Head Start, child care, a family child care home, or preschool).
- 73% of K-2 teachers reported their belief that participation in a preschool is a major factor in the speed of learning English among English Language Learners
- Specific skills noted by K-2 teachers as a result of attending a program included (1) familiarity with the classroom setting and routine, (2) the ability to speak some English and have better conversational skills; (3) greater exposure to interacting and socializing with other children; and (4) enhanced ability to participate in classroom activities.
- Equally importantly, the **majority of teachers surveyed (61%) believe that the benefits of attending preschool, such as those listed above, last beyond kindergarten.**

In contrast, teachers commented that refugee children who enter kindergarten after being cared for in their homes tend to be unfamiliar with environments outside the home; they are "shy," "overwhelmed" or "lost"; starting behind others, both socially and academically; less verbal and with fewer English skills; less exposed to print or books; and in need of more support in all areas of learning.

K-2 teachers participating in our study noted,

From their social skills—it is obvious if they have been home for five years. They don't know how to wait turns, raise hands, share. Also, the conflict resolution skills are not there. Because in the home, there are not as many demands on the adult and they can attend to the child more.

The reading readiness is very different (in children that haven't attended preschool). They have very little exposure to books and they take longer to understand all concepts including 'word to letter' and 'left to right'. Sometimes they don't understand that certain things are not a choice. I will ask them to sit down and write a story and they say 'no'—as if it were a choice. They are not used to the school format.

Children who have been in preschool have more background knowledge and more vocabulary. They have more familiarity with school utensils.

Formal childcare does make a difference in kids. There is huge diversity of English levels. Child care program kids are better socially (sharing, sitting) and know more letters. Kids without (child care) have to start from scratch.

Equally importantly, the majority of teachers surveyed (61%) believe that the benefits of attending preschool, such as those listed above, last beyond kindergarten.



Study Participants

Maine Focus Group Participants

The New Americans focus groups held in Portland, Maine were attended by 29 parents of 55 children ranging in age from less than one year to 27 years old. The child(ren) they were asked to report on and discuss in the group were those from 0-6 years old who live in their home for whom they make child care decisions. In a few cases, both the mother and father of a child attended the group but their child information is only reported once.

Seven Somali parents, 10 Sudanese parents and 12 Cambodian parents attended the focus groups.

Of the 27 parents reporting their child care status², 59% (16) have a child who is cared for outside of the home. 41% or 11 parents were not using any child care. Parents were recruited based on whether or not they use child care. The distribution of settings is below. Note that some parents use multiple settings.

- Family, friend or neighbor care 41% (12)
- Child Care Center 21% (6)
- Preschool 13% (4)
- Head Start 10% (3)
- Kindergarten 7% (2)
- Family Child Care Home 7% (2)
- Afterschool Care 3% (1)

Language Acquisition

We asked parents about the language most often spoken in their home. Only one parent reported English as the language most often spoken in their home, otherwise their primary language was spoken most often in their home (e.g. Acholi, Arabi, Cambodian, Khmer, Nuer, Somali or Dinka). In a separate question, parents were asked what language they speak most often to their child. Seven reported English alone or along with their native language, while the remainder reported just their primary language. When asked to rate their child's fluency in English, 55% selected "good," 38% "fair" and 0% "poor."

² Missing information was either left blank on their registration form or was from sets of parents who both attended the group.

Parent Demographics

Parents ranged in age from 24 to 55 years old and 69% (20) were female. A vast majority (96%) of attendees were parents and one attendee was a grandparent (4%).

40% of focus group participants had not completed high school. 60% of the focus group participants had completed at least some high school. 15% had attended Adult Education classes and 15% had attended college classes.

- 7% (2) had no education
- 4% (1) attended kindergarten – 6th grade
- 22% (6) attended 7th – 8th grade
- 7% (2) attended 9th – 11th grade
- 30% (8) completed high school
- 15% (4) attended Adult Education
- 15% (4) attended college

More than half (64%) were married, 12% divorced and 24% single. The parent's duration in the US ranged from one to 26 years, with an average of 10.4 years.

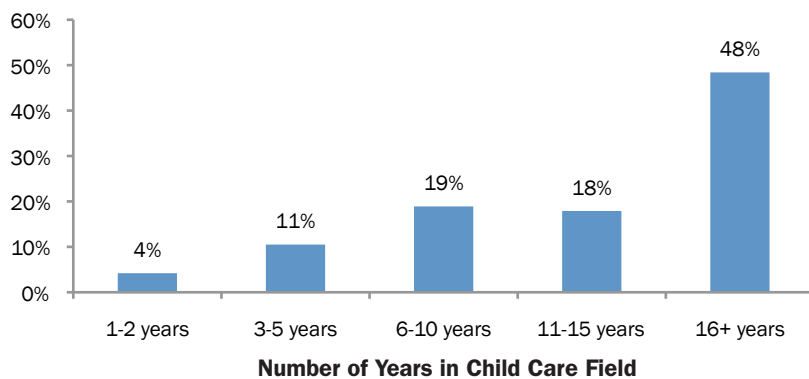
When asked about employment:

- 28% (8) not employed outside the home
- Of those working:
- 41% (12) employed full-time
- 31% (9) employed part-time
- 21% (6) have a partner/spouse who is not working

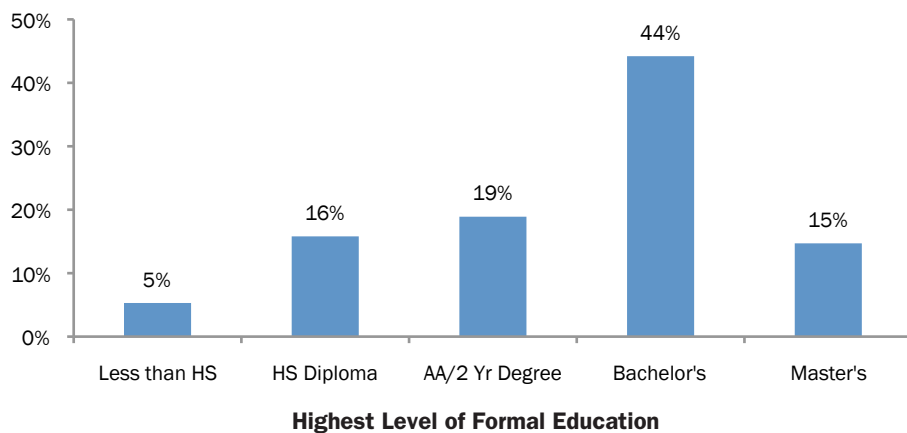
Twenty-four percent (7) receive child care subsidies, 38% (11) receive TANF and 72% (21) receive food stamp assistance. Two-thirds (66%) receive Maine Care.

Maine Child Care Provider Demographics

Surveys were completed by 95 licensed Maine child care providers. There were 91 female and 3 male respondents. Two thirds (66%) of the providers have been in the field for more than ten years.

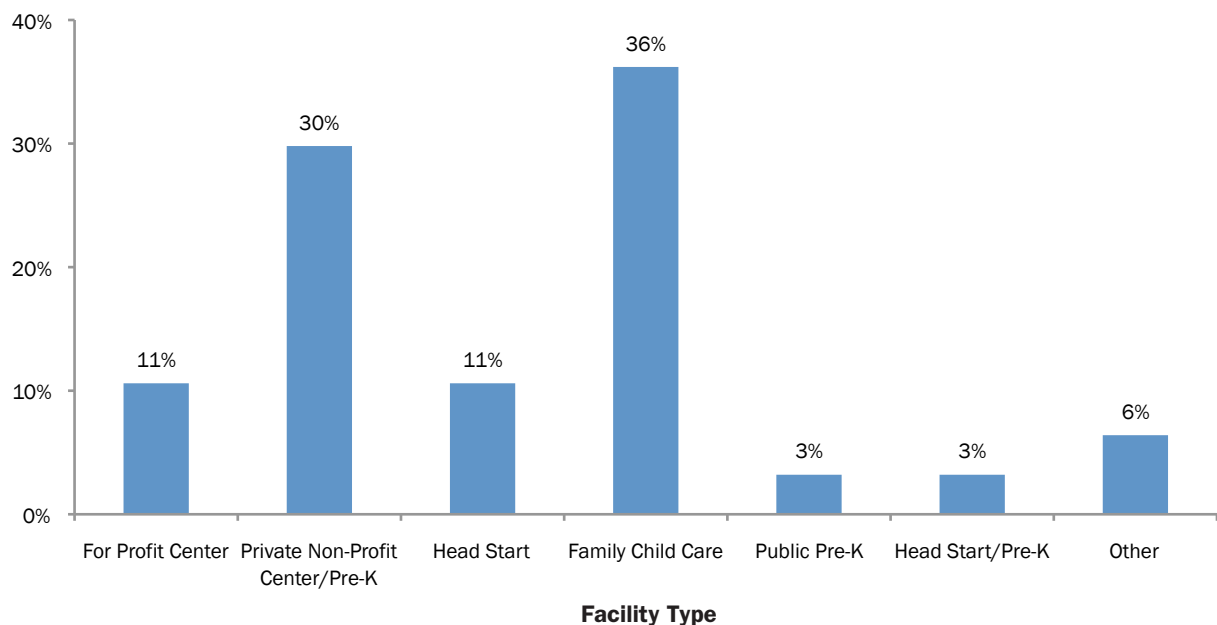


Almost 60% of providers have a Bachelor's or Master's Degree.

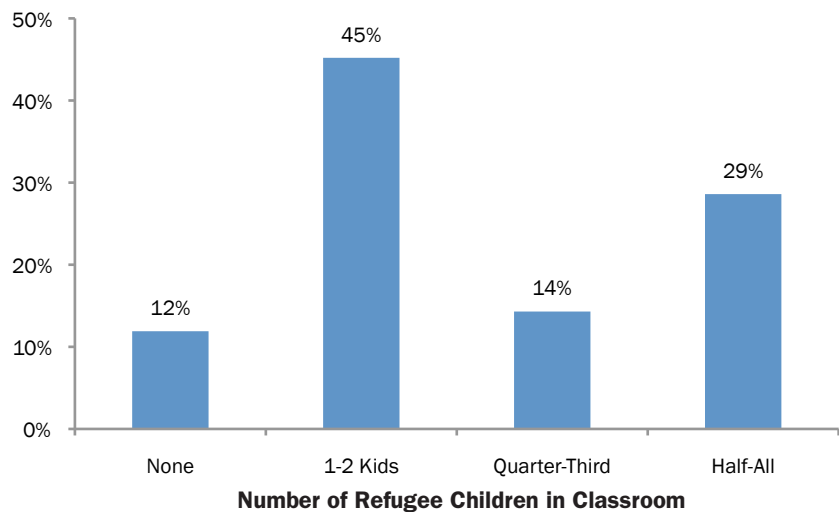


Almost 90% of the responding providers are white, with most of the remaining percentage identifying as Somali.

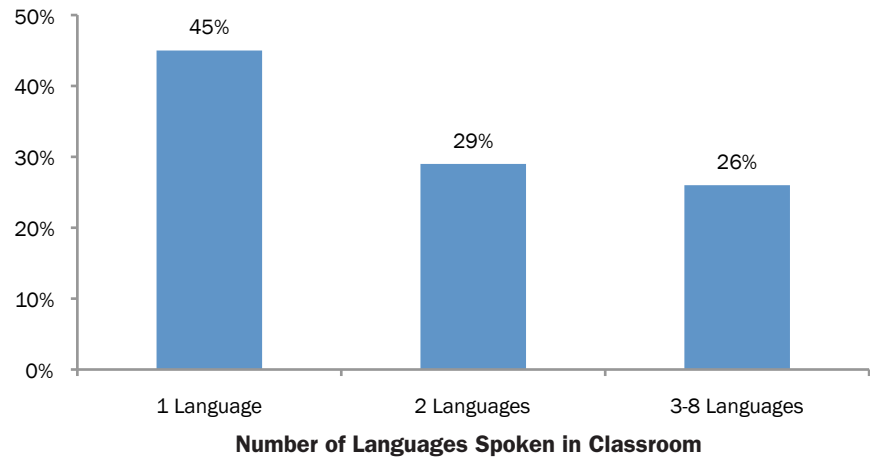
Responding providers represented a number of facility types. “Other” facilities included legal, unlicensed and special purpose non-profit preschool programs.



We also asked providers for some information on the population of children and families they serve. Almost half of respondents (44.2%) report serving children from refugee families now or in the past three years. The number of refugee children in their classroom varied, with 1-2 children common.

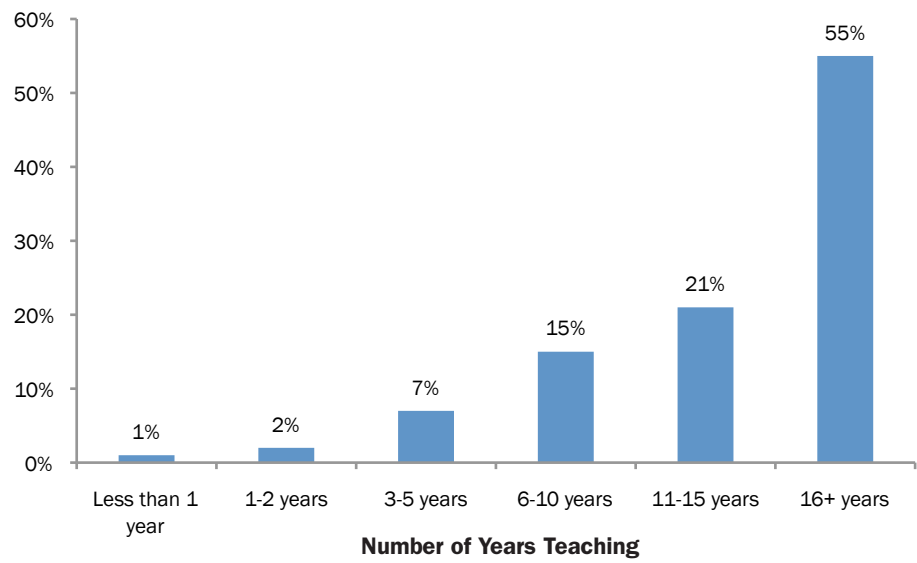


When we asked about the average number of languages commonly spoken in their classrooms, 45% of teachers reported that a single language, 29% reported that two languages and 26% reported that 3 or more languages were spoken in their classrooms.



Maine Teacher Demographics

123 surveys were completed by Maine kindergarten through 2nd grade teachers: 117 female respondents and 6 male respondents. More than 70% of the teachers have taught for more than 10 years. 98% of teachers have taught for more than 5 years.



96% of teachers responding to the survey have at least a Bachelor's degree.

98% of teachers were white or Caucasian, reflecting the population in Maine.

When asked what percentage of children in their classroom are from lower income families (less than about \$36,000 a year), teachers responded in this way:

