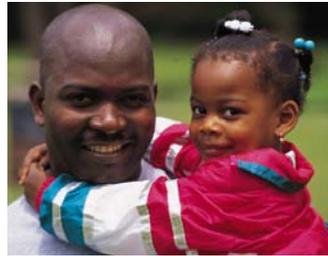




Washington State Department of  
**Early Learning**



June 27, 2008

## Parent Voices: A Closer Look

### Washington State Department of Early Learning Parent Needs Assessment: Focus Groups

SRI Project 18252

**Submitted to:**

Jone Bosworth, JD

Director

Washington State Department of Early Learning

649 Woodland Square Loop SE

Lacey, WA 98503

**Prepared by SRI International:**

Donna Spiker

Dana Petersen

Shari Golan





## Contents

Overview .....	1
Purpose of the Parent Needs Assessment.....	1
Focus Group Methodology .....	2
Organization of the Report .....	4
Early Learning Services and Resources.....	5
Early Learning Services and Resources That Are Important to Parents of Young Children ..	5
Accessibility and Availability of Early Learning Services and Resources .....	7
Parental Preferences About Types and Sources of Information.....	11
Topics for Which Parents Want More Information.....	11
Preferred Sources of Information .....	12
Parent Preferences About Child Care and Preschool Programs .....	16
Indicators of High-Quality Programs.....	16
Supports Parents Receive from Early Care Providers .....	19
Special or Unique Preferences for Services and Resources .....	20
Concluding Comments and Recommendations.....	25
Concluding Comments .....	25
Recommendations.....	26
Appendix A: Parent Focus Group Instrument .....	29



## OVERVIEW



### Purpose of the Parent Needs Assessment

The Washington State Department of Early Learning (DEL) is committed to supporting parents and others who care for and teach young children so that children are happy, healthy, and well-prepared to succeed in school and life. To inform its work, the Washington State Legislature funded a Parent Needs Assessment to gather information directly from parents and guardians (referred to as parents throughout the remainder of the report) about parent and family priorities, issues, strengths, and challenges. Through the Parent Needs Assessment, DEL wanted to learn about the types of services and information that parents use and desire as they nurture and educate their young children. The valuable findings of the Assessment will help DEL to set priorities and allocate resources in ways that are most likely to meet parents' needs and preferences. DEL hired SRI International (SRI) in November 2007 to conduct the Parent Needs Assessment.

To gather information from parents, the Parent Needs Assessment included a statewide phone survey and a series of focus groups in a variety of locations across Washington State. The phone survey gathered information from a random sample of parents to provide findings that are representative of the following:

- All young children in the state
- Children belonging to different subpopulations:
  - Infants, toddlers, and preschool-age children
  - English-speaking and Spanish-speaking families
  - Families living below, at, and above 100% and 185% of the federal poverty threshold (FPT)
  - Families living in urban and rural communities

Data from the phone survey provide information about the following:

- Types of early learning programs and services parents have used and their reasons for not having used or been able to use them
- Types of early learning information parents would like to receive more of and the sources from which they would like to receive that information
- Parents' experiences with, and use of, early care and education providers and programs, and their ideas about, and preferences for, quality of care and early learning goals
- Concerns parents have about their children's development and the extent to which they have been able to access appropriate services to address them
- Regular family literacy practices involving their children

Findings from the statewide phone survey are presented in a separate report, *Parent Voices: A Statewide Look. Washington State Department of Early Learning Parent Needs Assessment: Phone Survey.*

DEL also requested that focus groups be conducted to learn about differences in ideas and preferences among parents and guardians (referred to hereafter as parents) with children participating in different early childhood programs and among parents from different cultural and language backgrounds. Focus groups included parents who were most likely to use programs that DEL oversees (e.g., ECEAP—the Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program), as well as parent groups that may have been underrepresented in the phone survey, such as parents who spoke a language other than English or Spanish, or who did not have a home telephone.

Holding the focus groups signifies DEL’s ongoing commitment to enter into dialogue with parents from various ethnic, linguistic, and other diverse backgrounds across the state to learn about each group of parents’ unique preferences and needs, and to determine ways in which the Department can better support all parents in Washington State.

Data from the focus groups provide information about the following:

- Types of services and resources important to parents of young children, and the accessibility of those services and resources
- Topics for which parents want more information, and their preferences for the sources and format of information and services
- Parents’ perceptions of high quality in child care and early education programs and support received from programs
- Services and resources of interest to parent subpopulations and their unique preferences

This report presents findings from the focus group discussions.

### **Focus Group Methodology**

To complement the phone survey included in the Washington State Parent Needs Assessment, SRI conducted a series of focus groups across Washington State with parents of children ages 0 through 5.

The focus group instrument was developed in coordination with the phone survey and relied on many similar processes. The specific methods used to develop the focus group instrument, collect data, and analyze data are described below.

**Instrument development.** The focus group instrument, like the phone survey instrument, was developed using information from the initial planning for the Parent Needs Assessment that DEL conducted with its stakeholders, a review of recently conducted research that examined relevant issues, and internal reviews of draft items by DEL staff.

DEL and its parent advisory group and other stakeholders identified priorities for the types of information to capture in the Parent Needs Assessment, and those priorities were used to guide focus group instrument development.

In addition, recent research in Washington State on ways to better support parents and other child care providers to promote young children’s development was used to inform both the design of the focus group instrument and the Parent Needs Assessment phone survey. SRI solicited information from more than 50 organizations throughout the state about research they had conducted in the past 3 years to measure parental preferences, strengths, needs, and interests in supports. SRI reviewed the relevant information received and summarized the

findings for DEL in a separate report, *Summary of Relevant Reports about Parents' Perspectives on Early Learning in Washington*. SRI's summary of the relevant research was used to identify areas that had been well-documented and, therefore, did not necessarily need to be included in the Parent Needs Assessment, as well as areas in which additional information was needed.

SRI used the topics identified as priorities by DEL stakeholders and the findings from the review of relevant research to guide its preparation of the draft focus group instrument, which was submitted for review by DEL's central and regional staff. On the basis of DEL's comments, SRI finalized the instrument.

**Data collection.** SRI worked closely with agencies recommended by DEL to identify and recruit families and to coordinate focus group logistics. In some cases, the agencies recruited parents directly. In other cases, SRI recruited parents by calling those identified on lists the recommended agencies provided.

Each focus group lasted 1.5 hours and included from 2 to 16 participants (a total of 85 parents across the eight groups). Two SRI researchers conducted the focus groups; one researcher moderated the group, and the other took detailed notes and audiotaped the discussions.<sup>1</sup> Exhibit 1 describes the focus groups conducted, including the types of parents included, the number of participants, the locations, and the host agency.<sup>2</sup> Parents recruited for the focus groups received a letter of invitation in their primary language that indicated the date, time, and location of group. Each focus group participant received a \$50 gift certificate for participating. Food was provided at each focus group, as well as childcare and transportation vouchers.

---

<sup>1</sup> Appendix A sets forth the focus group instrument.

<sup>2</sup> Originally, DEL recommended that 10 agencies serving 10 different parent and caregiver populations be included in the focus groups. Because of timing and other logistical issues concerning the host agencies, however, neither a Somali nor a Ukrainian-Russian focus group was conducted.

**Exhibit 1. Summary of the Parent Focus Group Sample**

<b>Demographic Information</b>	<b>Number of Participants</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Host Agency</b>
Teen parents	10	Kennewick	Kennewick Tri-Tech
Foster parents	9	Wenatchee	Department of Social and Health Services
Parents who live on military bases	8	Fort Lewis	Fort Lewis military base
Parents who are homeless	2	Spokane	Spokane Neighborhood Action Program
Parents who are migrant and seasonal agricultural workers	11	Wenatchee	Catholic Family and Child Services
Parents from an American Indian tribe	16	Wellpinit	Spokane Tribe of Indians Head Start
Parents from the Chinese community	13	Seattle	Chinese Information & Service Center
Parents from the Vietnamese community	16	Seattle	Refugee Women’s Alliance

**Data analysis.** Transcripts of the focus group recordings were coded independently by two research team members to identify similarities and differences within and across the focus groups and to develop themes. The two team members then compared and reconciled their findings to help ensure the validity of data interpretation.

It is important to note that the opinions of focus group participants and the issues described in this report do not constitute an exhaustive summary of all the specific preferences and needs of each unique population. Rather, the focus groups serve to highlight the perspectives of a few parents in each population. Two notable characteristics of the participants are that (1) they were recruited to participate via programs that they attend, and (2) they volunteered to attend focus groups and thus are self-selected participants.

**Organization of the Report**

The rest of the report presents findings from the focus groups. The findings are organized into four sections:

- Early learning services and resources
- Parent preferences about types and sources of information
- Parent preferences about child care and preschool programs
- Special or unique preferences for services and resources

Findings are summarized across the eight focus group populations. Although parents across the focus groups shared many similar opinions and preferences, unique preferences were articulated by some parents in specific populations; these preferences are also summarized.

## EARLY LEARNING SERVICES AND RESOURCES



Parents were asked about what kinds of early learning and parent support services, programs, and resources they want. Parents were also asked to share their experiences in accessing and using early learning services and resources.

### Early Learning Services and Resources That Are Important to Parents of Young Children

The early learning and family support services, programs, and resources that parents cited most frequently and indicated that they use, want, and value are described below.

**Early child care and preschool programs.** Parents value early child care and preschool programs, which they view as important for promoting their children's school readiness, including encouraging early learning and helping their children gain social skills.

#### *What parents say...*

- At my child's early care program, the children get early learning supports. The most important thing for me is that my child gets prepared for elementary school.
- Early learning services are very important. Having kids start school early is important so they can learn a lot.
- This program helps prepare my son for school and to feel more comfortable. It is great. They give me advice to help get my son ready for kindergarten.

**Developmental screening services.** Parents want early and periodic developmental screening, preferring that it take place in the early child care and preschool programs that their children attend. Parents believe that, because the children's teachers and caregivers know the child in their programs, program staff are well-suited for conducting such screenings. In addition, parents would like program staff to inform them not only of concerns they may have about their child's development or behavior, but also about their child's strengths and positive behavior.

#### *What parents say...*

- I know the program does developmental screenings, but they do them just with children birth through age 3. After they are age 3, children do not receive screenings. If your child has an issue, it would be nice if they could continue to receive screenings.
- It would be nice to have developmental milestone screenings available. Children could be screened and then referred to whatever and parents could know if there is an issue they need to work on.
- We want information about disabilities or learning issues that we should be aware of or watching out for.
- You can watch your kid grow and know how your kid's growing physically. But, it would be nice also to know how your kid is growing mentally and emotionally.

**Activities to do at home with children.** Many parents want early child care and education program staff to give them ideas about the activities that they can engage in at home to support their children's optimal development and early learning. Parents of children of all ages mentioned this issue.

***What parents say....***

- The child care program staff send parents every week information about what the children are learning (like songs, letters, numbers). This helps me stay on top of what my child is learning.
- I like that the teachers do home visits and bring additional resources with them for me and my child.
- I really want ideas about how to make an ideal learning activity happen in my home. Some simple how-to's on how to support early learning. Like a shopping list of things I could buy for under \$100 for my home.

**Story time programs.** Parents in several of the focus groups use and highly value story time programs provided in community centers and libraries. They noted that these types of programs are more likely to be available for older children and want more of such programs for children younger than 3.

***What parents say...***

- Library programs are great for me and my child. They provide an opportunity for being social and learning.
- My daughter loves the story time at the library.

**Services for children with special needs.** Several groups of parents, and particularly foster parents, want more services for children with special needs (e.g., physical, occupational, and speech therapy; behavioral consultation; early mental health services and evaluations).

***What parents say...***

- This program is important to me. They provide physical therapy, occupational therapy, and speech therapy.
- There should be more specialists in this area. I had to go all the way to Yakima, Spokane, or Seattle for the specialists we needed.

**Parenting education and family support services.** Parents want and value information about helping them to be better parents. Examples of education and support services desired include parenting classes, information from early child care and education program (ECE) providers (e.g., a general newsletter, telephone calls about specific issues, brochures), home visits (e.g., by ECE providers, nurses for postpartum visits), ongoing parent-child social/activity groups, a hotline telephone number (e.g., the 211 number), and food banks.

***What parents say...***

- I think it would be good for parents to be able to look at their own parenting issues as well as developmental milestones for their child.
- There are not enough parent education classes.
- I really enjoy the classes about parenting. That is why I put an effort into going to them.
- Parenting classes should be supported by the community because having smart and healthy kids is good for the future and the community. They should be available for everyone. It's not just teens or poor people that need parenting classes.
- I wish there was a place where you could go every week where families could experience new ways to enhance their babies' development. Sometimes it could be music and sometimes just a social gathering.

**Health services.** Parents value a variety of health services, and appreciate and need financial assistance with health insurance, immunizations, specialty care (e.g., orthodontist care; diabetes education and care), vision care (including insurance for glasses), CPR and first aid classes, and mental health services.

***What parents say...***

- Medical services are the most important to me.
- Health insurance is needed.
- I need better coverage. Getting a referral is hard. I went into urgent care and they made me wait 2 hours and then I had to call my doctor to get a referral before they would look at my son.

**Other programs and resources.** Parents in a few of the groups mentioned other types of programs and resources. Parents want more parks and playgrounds, particularly those that are safe and that have specific areas for infants. Parents also would like additional affordable arts, crafts, and music programs for young children, as well as additional recreation and sports activities.

### **Accessibility and Availability of Early Learning Services and Resources**

Across all groups, parents encounter barriers to finding and participating in early learning and family support services, programs, information, and resources they would otherwise like to access. The most commonly cited barriers are described below.

**Lack of knowledge about available services and programs.** Parents would like to use more services, programs, and supports, but indicate that learning about them is often so difficult that access to services is effectively rendered impossible. This was a significant theme across all the focus groups. Parents want much greater attention paid to disseminating information about available services and programs via multiple sources and avenues, and they want information to be clear and easy to understand (see the section on information preferences below for additional detail).

***What parents say...***

- If we don't have the information, we can't find the services.
- It's hard to navigate the system. It's not straightforward.
- You really have to know what's available and go looking for it. Services and activities are not advertised.
- Parents don't learn about programs unless they're already involved. For example, if you don't already go the library, you don't find out about story time programs.
- You need to ask where to find out about services for your family, and it's hard to know where to ask.

**More flexible service hours needed.** Parents in most groups need more flexible service hours, especially for child care, but also for other types of programs (e.g., parenting classes and services, story time and reading programs). Parents encounter difficulties with service hours, including the total number of hours for which services are available (many parents need more hours of child care than are offered), lack of service hours during summer and other vacations, and stringent drop-off and pick-up times that do not match parents' schedules. For some parents, getting same-day medical care appointments with their regular health care providers is difficult (and thus they often visit emergency rooms instead, which are slow).

***What parents say...***

- Longer child care hours, like more 24-hour day cares would be good.
- I'm not sure where to find child care that meets our family's schedule.
- For child care, how early they open and how late they close is very important to me.
- There are only a couple programs that stay open after 5:30. This is problematic because most people don't stop work by then.
- The libraries do story time only in the morning when most parents work. Doing story time at night would be better.

**Transportation issues.** Parents in most groups find that lack of transportation is a barrier in general and a challenge for accessing desired services (e.g., the cost of gas, the cost of public transportation, lack of public transportation, lack of a personal vehicle, safety issues on buses, the inefficiency associated with using public transportation, distance). Some parents have particular concerns about the safety of buses, which commonly lack seat belts, and they view public bus transportation as especially unsafe for young children. Parents also mentioned that because services are concentrated in downtown areas, access is difficult for some families.

**What parents say...**

- To get to appointments on time, I have to catch the bus an hour early.... Some of the buses don't drop you off near where you want to go, so you end up walking a few miles.
- Public transportation is unsafe because there are no seatbelts on the bus.
- Rather than taking the bus to the county office of social and health services every month to get a state provided bus pass in person, it would be easier if I could just call and say I need a bus pass and they could mail one to me.
- You really don't see much public transportation around. You see buses here and there but there are only certain areas that have transportation. It is hard if you live in the middle and need to get to the other side of the county.
- When specialty doctors are not available at the local clinics, we have to travel very far to get these services.

**Income restrictions.** Income eligibility qualifications make it difficult for many families to obtain and use some desired services and are often difficult for parents to understand. For example, medical coupons are difficult for teen parents to obtain because income requirements depend on their parents' incomes; they are also difficult for other groups of parents to obtain because of welfare/work requirements. In addition, income eligibility often depends on the number of children in the family. In other cases, services are too expensive for families, even with subsidies. For example, parents said that child care vouchers do not pay enough to access the child care that they might prefer and that it is often hard to find infant care that accepts state vouchers. Similarly, a few parents said that income limits set by preschool programs are too high. Other parents mentioned that many doctors do not accept medical coupons or Medicare, thus limiting their access to affordable medical and health care services.

**What parents say...**

- Pretty much your whole paycheck goes to child care.
- Child care is so expensive. If you're not getting it paid for by the state, you can't afford it.
- How is a \$16 an hour job supposed to support my family and pay for daycare?
- It's not hard to find, but we can't afford it. I have to pay a few hundred dollars a month for child care. I make only a few hundred a month, so I might as well stay home.
- Even if you are low-income and have a coupon, you still have to pay 25% of the cost for dental services. I have several kids, so paying 25% becomes a very high cost.

**Language barriers.** For the three groups of parents who spoke languages other than English (i.e., Spanish, Vietnamese, and Chinese), it is often hard to find services in their home language.

**What parents say...**

- Service agencies often do not have information in my language.
- I often have to call a translator or find the nearest Vietnamese language program to get information.
- I feel like all the resources, especially language-friendly services, are concentrated in downtown. So it is hard to move anywhere else.

**Lack of availability of specific service types.** Parents identified the following kinds of services as limited in their availability:

- Parks and recreation facilities for young children, including sites for year-around play activities (i.e., a need for more enclosed sites in winter)
- Early child care slots, especially for infants
- Services for children with special needs (e.g., physical therapy, occupational therapy, speech therapy, behavioral consultation, mental health/behavioral services, fetal alcohol system evaluations, mental health)
- Opportunities for non-English-speaking parents to learn English (i.e., in adult education, in classes combined with parenting skills, together with their children)
- Parenting education classes
- Health insurance
- Referrals to specialists
- Affordable housing options, including temporary housing
- Services for teen parents (i.e., a safe place for them to access resources, without negative judgments about their being young parents)

## PARENTAL PREFERENCES ABOUT TYPES AND SOURCES OF INFORMATION



Parents were asked about which early learning and child development, child health, and parenting and family support topics they want more information (regardless of the source of the information). They also were asked about how they currently get information and how they prefer to get information about early learning and parent support.

### Topics for Which Parents Want More Information

Parents want more information in three general areas: early learning and child development, health, and parenting and family support. Across the three categories, parents most often want additional information on developmental stages, at-home parent-child activities to support children's development and learning, and general parenting support.

**Early learning and child development.** Parents want additional information in the following areas to help them support their child's optimal early learning and development:

- Developmental stages/milestones
- Activities that parents can do at home to promote child's learning
- Bonding, attachment, and emotional development issues
- Discipline and child behavior
- Brain development

**Health.** Parents want additional information on the following topics to help them better support their child's optimal health and well-being:

- Disabilities, including autism
- Nutrition
- Allergies
- Asthma
- Diabetes
- Hygiene (e.g., lice, ringworm)
- Safety (e.g., poisons)
- Substance abuse issues, particularly how they affect children

**Parenting and family support.** Parents want additional information on the following topics to help them support their children:

- Parenting support (e.g., managing parental stress, Is it normal to get so frustrated?)
- Online classes (i.e., parenting and other topics)
- Specific services for new parents (i.e., breastfeeding, prenatal, postpartum)
- Resources for help in obtaining medical and child care

- Family planning
- Continuing education/GED opportunities (for teens and pregnant women as well)
- Home economics (i.e., cooking, budgeting, finances when raising a family)
- Support and information for getting off of public assistance
- Assistance in obtaining a Social Security number to use in accessing services
- Community activities/resources

### Preferred Sources of Information

Across topics and interest categories, parents seek and obtain information both directly (i.e., from individuals with whom they come into personal contact) and indirectly (i.e., from mass media, print materials). Parents prefer no single source of information, but instead seek and obtain early learning and parent support information from a variety of sources. Parents in all focus groups agree, however, that information should come from trusted sources, regardless of whether the source is direct or indirect. Parents also prefer consolidated, integrated, and up-to-date sources of information and services.

**Direct sources of information.** Parents get information from a variety of direct contacts (across topics and interest areas). A main source of information, mentioned in all focus groups, is staff in programs in which their young children currently participate.<sup>3</sup> Other common information sources include service providers—doctors, home visitors, early care and education program providers, staff of the Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) nutrition program, social workers, and parenting class staff. Many parents indicate that the providers in the programs they use are trusted sources of information, informing them of links to other services and resources. Many parents also believe that these staff members should be knowledgeable about the information, services, and programs available for families with young children.

Parents also get information from their family, friends, and other parents, as well as through individuals they meet in community groups, community centers, libraries, and churches.

#### ***What parents say...***

- The people that we interact with should be resources for us, like the staff in this program, case workers, and pediatricians.
- I ask my pediatrician or my friends and family for information and support.
- You want to seek information from people you trust and respect.
- If this program doesn't have the information I need, then it's hard to find it.
- It's confusing when we get different answers from different service agencies. It's not consistent, and it's hard to know which answers are correct.
- Sometimes the workers at this program are not fully informed or helpful.
- You hear about services and programs through talking to other parents.
- If we have questions about our children, the program staff can answer them or find a way to answer them.

<sup>3</sup> It is important to note that the parents who attended the focus groups were recruited from existing programs and, therefore, may be more knowledgeable about other programs than parents who do not participate in early learning programs; thus, the focus group participants may not have been representative of all parents in these specific populations.

**Indirect sources of information.** Parents (across topics and interest areas) get information from a variety of indirect contacts as well. Indirect sources of information include the Internet and websites, fliers and brochures, community bulletin boards and other public postings, agency newsletters, newspapers and family/parenting magazines, television, radio, and telephone hotlines (e.g., the 211 number).

***What parents say...***

- It would be great if there was a hotline for parents to call and ask questions about different issues. If they could consolidate all the resources into a hotline, we could just call and ask.
- I think the library is an important factor in encouraging folks to seek out resources. When the library is well serviced and has information available, it aids in searching for information.
- The billboards visible along the road as you drive are good, but if you don't drive by or hear the public announcements on radio, you don't get the information.
- They need big old signs with important information right in front of my house or on my way to work.

**Consolidated and integrated sources of information.** Parents also want to receive information in a consolidated and integrated way (no matter what the format and no matter what the content). For instance, WIC was often mentioned as a service where parents get and want to get a variety of types of information (e.g., nutrition information, parenting information and services, child care referrals, financial assistance). Similarly, many parents appreciate that Head Start programs provide them with information and also provide needed services in a coordinated way (i.e., co-located services) or providers that come to their homes or local communities (i.e. mobile vans, home visitors). Parents also would like consolidated and up-to-date resource lists and hotlines.

***What parents say...***

- It would be really nice if there was a cumulative list of all the services that are available. So many people don't know about available services.
- A one-stop shop that let's you get information on many topics in different ways including fliers, the Internet, and the radio.
- A website that provides links to other quality websites, one-stop shopping with links.
- Besides helping me save money, the WIC program is in a building where you can get immunizations and flu shots, have your baby weighed, and talk to a nutritionist. It is great that all these services are in the same place.

**Mailed information.** Many parents like to get information by mail and in newsletters. Parents in several groups noted that they like the CHILD (Children's Health Immunizations Linkages and Development) Profiles they receive in the mail.

***What parents say...***

- In Washington State, they send you a letter every month that reminds you what shots your child should be getting soon and it gives me a lot of other information.
- It would be nice to get information in the mail, such as information about events that are coming up this month.
- They should sign you up while you are still in the hospital after giving birth to get parenting and development information in the mail.

**The Internet.** Use of the Internet as a source of information received mixed reviews from different groups of parents.

Some of the focus group participants are not Internet users. Generally, lower-income parents and those who do not speak English as their primary language are less likely to use the Internet than other parents.

- Most of the parents from the Vietnamese community cite the language barrier, although some ask their older children to look up information on the Internet for them.
- Most focus group parents from the Chinese community do not use the Internet because of the language barrier (as well as a preference for obtaining information from trusted service providers).
- Most participants in the migrant and seasonal agricultural worker focus group do not have computers at home and, although they sometimes use the Internet at the library, limitations on library use times and the long wait to get onto computers are barriers to their use.
- Parents who are homeless sometimes use the Internet at libraries, but such use is inconvenient and the Internet is not a preferred source of information for them.
- Across several groups, some parents prefer not to use the Internet because they find it hard to locate the information they need.

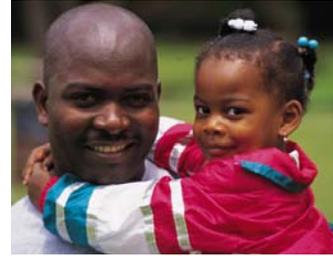
Parents who use the Internet to get information have a number of preferences about the information it should provide, as well as specific suggestions for DEL if DEL develops a website:

- Make Internet information available in the families' home languages (suggested by parents who speak Mandarin, Cantonese, Vietnamese, and Spanish).
- Make sites easy to navigate to obtain the desired information.
- Have the information geo-coded so that it is easy to see what is available in a local area, or organize a website by regions of the state. Across groups, parents want regionalized information whether it is on the Web or in a newsletter.
- Make sure that any website has only accurate and trustworthy information.
- Consider having websites with chat functions so that parents can communicate with each other, support each other, and share information.
- Consider having websites where parents can ask questions and get information from specialists.

***What parents say ...***

- Make a website that is not overwhelming. Make it visually friendly. Some websites are too difficult and confusing which leads parents to give up.
- A website needs to be trustworthy.
- The thing is that a website needs to be real, and not so politically correct.
- A “My Space” area for parents to link up with each other that has an online chat room or bulletin board would be great.
- We would like an organized space and information online, as well as an online specialist that we could e-mail with questions.

## PARENT PREFERENCES ABOUT CHILD CARE AND PRESCHOOL PROGRAMS



Parents were asked to identify the factors and characteristics of child care and preschool programs that they use in choosing programs and those that they consider to be important as indicators of high quality.

### Indicators of High-Quality Programs

A number of key types of information are important to parents and felt to be indicators of program quality when they choose a child care or preschool program for their child. Factors parents use in making decisions pertaining to their child's care commonly mentioned groups fall into five general categories—recommendations received, structural characteristics of the program, provider interactions with children, provider interactions with parents, and curriculum and activities. Examples of indicators in each of the five categories are given below. Other specific factors that parents mentioned in one or two focus groups are also described in the fifth category.

**Recommendations received.** Across most of the focus groups, parents use and value recommendations from others (i.e., parents currently participating in programs their children attend, other services providers). Several groups also mentioned that they look at the state's list of providers in their area and then call to check out each program. For example, Catholic and Family Services and other providers often give parents lists of licensed providers in the families' geographic area for parents to call and follow up with.

#### *What parents say...*

- I get information from Catholic and Families Services about licensed child care providers.
- I ask for recommendations from my friends with children.
- I get information from the county office of social and health services. They send you a list, but they do not recommend specific places. It would be really helpful if they did give you more information.
- The main thing that we do to decide if a program is good is to ask parents already in the program for their opinions.
- Knowing if child care is high-quality is mostly through word of mouth and checking it out on your own.

**Structural characteristics of the program.** Parents in most groups want the number of hours and the schedules for child care to be flexible enough to meet their needs. For example, parents prefer child care that can provide enough care hours to cover the whole day, including before and after parents' school or work. Parents also look for care that provides flexible hours that accommodate their needs/schedules, including weekend and holiday coverage. It is important to note that although parents may prefer longer and flexible hours, they often cannot make decisions based on this preference because of the lack of available options.

Parents in more than half of the focus groups want programs with safe, secure, and clean environments (e.g., programs that have passed inspections, have fire drills, and have appropriate safety procedures in place).

Parents in some of the groups prefer programs that are conveniently located close to their homes or workplaces. Similarly, parents in three focus groups like programs that provide help with transportation.

The provision of high-quality and nutritious meals and snacks are important for several groups of parents.

Low child-to-staff ratios is also important to parents when choosing among child care options.

***What parents say...***

- One problem with child care is that your child has to go full-time even if you only want them to go part-time. There are only a few part-time spots, and it's competitive, so programs fill up the spots with full-time students.
- Security of the building is important to me. The facility has a big fence around it.
- There is a feeling of security; the kids are well taken care of.
- I like that they have a menu of good, nutritious morning meals.
- The biggest thing that helped me choose my child's' child care provider was that there was a slot available.

**Provider interactions with children and children's comfort level.** Parents in most groups want to see how providers interact with the children before they decide to enroll their child in a particular program. Parents often like to visit programs to see if providers pay attention to children, interact with them, and play with them. For many parents, their observations of the interactions of providers and children and their sense of the comfort level of children in the child care or preschool environment are important in choosing care. Some also use online tours of programs to observe their operations.

***What parents say...***

- One way we judge the quality of a program is to see how the provider interacts with the kids. We take our kids with us on interviews, and then we see how the provider interacts with them.
- The teachers treat my kids as if they are their very own, and the quality of the care my kids receive from them is just phenomenal.
- I look to see if my child feels comfortable. Every day when I pick my child up, she is so happy, and you can tell she had a good day. You can tell she's having fun there.
- To me, quality care is when a child is so happy there that when you pick him up, he doesn't want to go home.
- It is important to know how comfortable the child is in the environment.
- I like that my kids love coming to school.

**Provider interactions with parents.** Parents want providers in the programs they chose for their child to communicate about their child's progress and development, including informal communications, parent-child conferences, and materials and activities sent home with the child. Parents want providers to communicate both about concerns and about positive aspects that make them feel proud of their child. Parents in three groups also said that it was important to know, like, and/or trust the providers of their child's care.

***What parents say...***

- I think all day care programs should chart and track every child's progress. They should give parents updates and tell us if there are any problems with our children.
- I like that they give me ideas for things to do at home with my child.
- My old child care provider used to give me a list of everything my child did each day. I really liked that.

**Curriculum and activities.** Parents in most groups want the child care and preschool programs to work with their children on early learning and education activities, or to use a curriculum or lesson plans. Many parents specifically mentioned the importance of the program activities for school readiness, including reading to children and teaching children letters and numbers. In addition to building their child's early school readiness skills, parents also want programs that enhance their child's socialization, life, and leadership skills (e.g., good habits, individuality, self-esteem). Families who do not speak English as the primarily language in the home like knowing that their children are learning English in their child care programs.

***What parents say...***

- It would be nice if the day care program would teach using a curriculum. I do not think the day care program I'm at right now uses any kind of curriculum.
- Social structure is important for me and my wife regarding our son. It is important that our son is learning to get along and share with the other students.
- I want to know that the teacher has a lesson plan for how she is going to teach the children.

**Other factors.** For one or two groups of parents, other specific factors are important in determining whether or not programs are high-quality. These include program documents, available slots, group size, provision of wrap-around/co-located services, incorporation of a second language into the program, good staff role models for children, field trips to museums or parks, exercise activities, teacher characteristics (i.e., diversity, qualifications), opportunities for parent involvement, the provision of screening and other tests, and the ability to observe kids in action at a center through glass.

### **Supports Parents Receive from Early Care Providers**

Parents identified several types of parent and family support that they receive from their child care or preschool providers that they value. Valuable support includes the following:

- Information about the child's progress and development, and daily activities, including information about any concerns the provider has about the child (which can be informally or formally conveyed through parent-teacher conferences)
- Ideas for encouraging interaction with the child
- Home visits
- Insurance enrollment support
- Information about resources and help in filling out state forms
- Follow-through on parents' suggestions for the child during care

## SPECIAL OR UNIQUE PREFERENCES FOR SERVICES AND RESOURCES



For most of the topics and issues discussed in the focus groups, parents' comments, preferences, and concerns were quite similar across the different populations. However, some issues were raised by some groups and not by others; and some preferences or barriers to accessing and using information, services, programs, and resources were specific or unique to different populations. It is important to note that the issues described below do not represent an exhaustive summary of all the specific preferences and needs of each focus group population. Rather, they represent a few parents' perspectives from within those populations.

**Parents who are teens.** Parents who are teens and who participated in the focus group want to be respected as adults and parents, including being given equal access to services and financial support. Teen parents want to be treated respectfully and as financially independent, regardless of their age. Some teen parents have difficulty in accessing some services because of their age and requirements to involve their parents and sometimes feel discriminated against. Parents who are teens also want more support to complete their education.

### *What teen parents say...*

- People need to understand that being a teen parent doesn't mean I have my parents' support.
- We need more recognition that we're the ones financially and socially responsible for our children. Treat us like the parents we are and respect that we are making an effort.
- Every time I go to the doctor or another service, my parents are required to be with me, but they don't live here. Providers should treat teen moms like adults. Our parents are not here and we have kids.
- My father has guardianship of my son, because I'm under age. I don't think that's fair. It makes me agitated that the state would treat me that way. I should be his guardian and be responsible for him.
- Treat us like we're not just teenagers. We already know we were young to have kids, but that's what we chose. Now, we are being responsible and doing what we have to do for our kids. People should recognize that.
- I have a big issue with people looking at me and telling me that I'm too young to be a parent because I am doing everything myself.
- They should make it easier to get your GED.
- Between going to school and working, I can't find child care that covers the whole span of time that I need covered.

**Foster care parents.** Because many of the children they care for have special needs, foster parents want additional information, support, and resources to address the children's special needs. For example, foster parents want more information about attachment issues, fetal alcohol syndrome, and the special histories of children in their homes so that they can provide better care. They also want more information about the child care system and the services they and the children they care for are eligible to receive. Foster parents also have concerns about the children's transitions to and from their care, and feel that they need more support around this issue both to help the child cope and to cope themselves with feelings of loss. Foster parents also strongly indicated a need for specialized/credentialed child care providers for their foster children. They are frustrated that child care is not provided during required education trainings for foster care parents, noting that this is a significant problem because of the special eligibility qualifications that providers who care for foster children must meet (and the difficulty and cost foster parents incur in finding such care). Finally, a number of foster parents in the group would like to be connected to other foster parents so that they can share experiences and receive support from each other.

***What foster parents say...***

- We need additional information on how the foster system really works and what the rules are.
- We need to know, clearly and definitively, what is wrong with the kids when they come into our care.
- We need to be able to access respite care. Having a pool of qualified care providers would be very helpful.
- I can't find a day care program for my foster child that is open on the weekends.
- As foster parents, we are required to get in so many hours of training each year, and it is ridiculous that child care is not provided at the trainings.
- I've gone to the Web to learn about Attachment Disorder because I have not heard much about it from other people.
- It would be really nice to get together socially with other foster parents and their foster kids.
- It is hard when one of my foster children leaves and I don't know where they end up going. I could use some ongoing counseling and extra counseling when the children cycle out of my care.

**Parents living on military bases.** Parents living on military bases note the special mental health needs of their children. Children in military families often face unique circumstances, including parents being deployed, frequent moves, military life, and lack of stability. Parents in this population tend to use the Internet more than some of the other groups to obtain information (specifically mentioning use of a site provided by the military base), but want more help in determining how to access information that is accurate, trustworthy, and available in one place.

***What parents on military bases say...***

- I think resources related to deployment would be helpful because deployment impacts the kids so much.
- Kids here are facing serious issues in military life. Alternative mental health support for children should be pursued.
- A lot of the children that we deal with here are facing some pretty significant, heavy-duty issues that kids shouldn't have to go through in their lives. But, that's the reality of how we live on the base.
- Promote information about resources because there are many programs that families don't know about. On the post, when new families come, they usually do not know anyone and they do not know where to go for services or support.
- I'd like to see the base website promote early learning supports by providing links to quality websites. The Internet service at the base could really be improved.

**Parents who are homeless.** Parents in this group encounter many difficulties in accessing services and programs because they do not have a permanent address. For example, parents need child care that is flexible because their schedules change daily. They also need housing support and other economic assistance for families with young children.

***What parents who are homeless say...***

- You usually have to wait 3 to 4 months to get into any program. If you are homeless and sitting in your car with no place to go, you don't have 3 to 4 months to wait.
- Day care with longer hours would be nice because I have to figure out how to drop the younger children off at child care, drop my other child off at preschool, and still work a full day.

**Parents who are migrant and seasonal agricultural workers.** Parents in this group want high-quality child care, but cite difficulties in accessing the care they need. They have several issues, including difficulties in finding programs that are open for long enough hours to accommodate their work schedules, lack of available child care in the summer, lack of affordable child care options, and a lack of programs that accept child care subsidies. Parents in this group also strongly value early education programs for their children and want these programs to teach their children English.

***What migrant and seasonal agricultural worker parents say...***

- My four-year-old needs help with her language skills. The state-funded preschool program has services that are able to help my daughter.
- They put my child in a Spanish only class, so all the homework that he's bringing home is Spanish only. I asked my child 'Why are they giving you Spanish homework and not English?' I went to the teacher and said, 'I can teach him Spanish, I would like for you to teach him English.'
- I like WIC because it teaches me how to eat healthy, provides milk for the children, and makes sure that the children are healthy by checking their iron and more.
- There really aren't enough slots for child care, especially in the summer. Many families have to take their kids to work. It is dangerous, especially when picking cherries.

**Parents from an American Indian tribe.** Parents in this group lack access to many services for families with young children because many services are not available on reservations. They experience significant access and transportation difficulties when they try to use programs and services that are not on reservations. Parents in this group who participated in a Head Start program shared many positive comments about the program.

***What parents from an American Indian tribe say...***

- Transportation is a problem.
- If you're nonnative, the clinic on the reservation will not serve you, and transportation is an issue.
- There are not enough early learning activities for children who are 3- to 4-year-olds. Usually the community activities are for older kids.
- Most of the information I get comes from Head Start.
- I like the education letters that the Head Start program sends home. It takes me 10 to 15 minutes to read, and I learn a lot every time.
- It's a problem that there is no dental service on the reservation.

**Parents from the Chinese community.** Parents from the Chinese community want to have child care and preschool programs for their children focus on school readiness and their child's educational learning and progress, as well as on teaching their child English. Parents in this group want more and earlier learning services for children of all ages, including preschool options for children younger than 3 and public school enrollment at younger ages than is currently the case. Parents also want more information on how to best raise their children, including general information and formal parent education classes. Finally, participants discuss cost as an issue that challenges their ability to use many types of services.

***What parents from the Chinese community say...***

- If kids could start school early, the adjustment would be easier. Because when children are young it is the best time for learning and absorbing information.
- My kid has a difficult time learning English, so I'm wondering if there can be extra help for him to learn English.
- There are not enough parent education classes in Chinese.
- It is not hard to find child care, but we cannot afford what we find.
- It would be better if the income requirement for going into preschool could be raised. The requirement is that the yearly income for a three-person family has to be less than \$16,600 a year. For full day preschool, the income requirement is even lower. That's impossible for a three-person family. If the income limit can be raised a little, my daughter can go to half-day preschool.

**Parents from the Vietnamese community.** Parents from the Vietnamese community strongly value early education programs for their children and want these programs to help their children learn skills to prepare them for school and teach them English. Parents in this group also view family service providers as a trusted source of information. They do not use the Internet to get information, mainly because of the language barrier, preferring to obtain information from local community centers and trusted providers as well as newspapers and radio programs in their home language.

***What parents from the Vietnamese community say...***

- Language is a huge barrier. I don't use the computer because it is not in Vietnamese.
- Both the parent and the teacher should be involved to help children become successful.

**Parents who identify themselves as stay-at-home parents.** Parents in this group often feel isolated and stuck at home and therefore need sources of emotional and social support. Some mentioned that being isolated with your child can result in depression. Parents who cared for their children at home need support to help them get out of the house, including part-time services where they can drop off children so they can run errands. Other stay-at-home parents need more support while they are at home, including home visiting services, education about how to support infant and child learning and development, and how to handle medical and safety emergencies.

***What stay-at-home parents say...***

- It would have been good to have a delivery service that could help if I ran out of diapers or formula when my child was younger. I didn't have a car, so I was stuck. If you are a stay-at-home parent, you can't leave.
- If you are a stay-at-home caregiver, then you have to go out and find the services on your own.
- When I took care of my three kids at home, I was pretty isolated. I wasn't depressed, but knowing there was a free counseling hotline might have been good.

## CONCLUDING COMMENTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS



After listening to parents from different types of families and communities across Washington State, it is clear that all parents deeply care for their children and want to support them in the best possible way. For most topics and issues discussed, parents' preferences and ideas are similar across the different focus group populations, although some issues are unique to specific groups. In this section, we provide concluding comments and recommendations to DEL for next steps in its continuing dialogue with parents of all types in Washington State.

### Concluding Comments

Many parents of young children are aware of the importance of the first 5 years of a child's life for his or her later school and life success and understand that young children are active learners during those years. Parents across the groups know that their interactions with their young children can positively affect the children's learning and development, including building their early preacademic skills, social skills, and emotional well-being.

Across the focus groups, parents use, want, and value early learning and parent support services and programs. Parents' preferences and opinions in the different focus groups were more similar than dissimilar. The services and programs most commonly mentioned as important to parents of young children include (1) early care and preschool programs, (2) developmental screening services, (3) activities to engage in at home with children, (4) story time programs, (5) services for children with special needs and (6) parenting education classes.

Although parents want information about early learning and services and programs to support them and their young children, parents in all focus groups lack knowledge about sources of information and about the availability of various services, programs, and resources. Parents in all focus groups would like to use more services, programs, and supports, but indicate that finding out about them is so difficult that access to them is effectively rendered impossible. This is a major finding of the focus groups—parents often do not access services because they have been unable to find out about them.

In addition to difficulties in locating information, services, programs, and supports, other common barriers to parents' use of services and programs include (1) lack of schedule flexibility for services and programs to accommodate their work schedules, (2) transportation issues, (3) high cost and eligibility requirements of services and programs, (4) language barriers, and (5) insufficient supply of particular services (e.g., infant child care slots, recreation facilities for young children, services for children with special needs).

Parents across the groups want more information and resources to help support their children's early learning and development (e.g., developmental milestones, social-emotional development, discipline and behavior). This finding is not limited to parents of children of preschool age (3 through 5 years of age), but also includes parents of children 0 to 3 years of age. Parents also want additional information to help them support their children's optimal health and well-

being (e.g., about disabilities, nutrition, allergies, asthma) and to support them in being successful parents (e.g., managing parental stress, having access to online and other parenting classes, continuing their education).

Parents in all focus groups agree that information should come from trusted sources. Parents seek information from a variety of trusted sources. No one source of information is preferred by all groups. Some sources involve direct contacts (e.g., service providers, family, friends), and others involve indirect contacts (e.g. newsletters, bulletin boards, the Internet, radio).

Parents want to receive information in a variety of formats, and different groups of parents are interested in receiving information in different ways. In general, parents prefer consolidated and integrated information, including co-located services and wrap-around home visits. They want the providers who serve them to be well informed about a variety of services and resources and to share that information with them. Some parents prefer to receive information in the mail, and many parents referred positively to CHLD Profile (Children's Health Immunizations Linkages and Development Profile) mailings.

Use of the Internet as a source of information receives mixed reviews. Some parents use and trust the Internet; others do not. Parents who use the Internet suggest that DEL consider features that make a website useful, including posting accurate and trustworthy information on an organized and easy-to-navigate page, and presenting information organized by state, region, and communities and in the parents' home language.

Parents cite a number of program quality factors and accessibility issues they take into consideration in choosing child care and preschool programs. These include recommendations by others, structural program characteristics (e.g., hours, safety, location, nutrition, cost), provider interactions with children and parents, and activities and curriculum. Supports parents say that they receive from their child care provider include information about their child's progress and daily activities, home visits, and assistance with paperwork and enrollment into additional programs and services.

Although the parents who participated in the focus groups share more similar opinions than dissimilar ones, some parents in different groups raise special or unique preferences for information, services, and programs. Not all parents of young children in Washington State share the same experiences, wants, and needs.

## **Recommendations**

Parents understand the importance of their role in their young children's early learning and development and want to support them the best they can. DEL should continue to provide parents with easy-to-access to information and services in the topic and service areas outlined in this report.

Given that the most commonly cited reason parents provide for not using services is the difficulty in finding information about how to locate them, DEL should consider mapping existing resources for families with young children and working with resource providers to increase outreach efforts. Given that parents trust the providers whom they already have established relationships, DEL should consider working to increase awareness about available information and resources among all the providers who have contact with young children and their families (e.g., ECE providers, WIC offices, medical facilities, and doctors). Doing so may enable more

families to benefit from the information, services, programs, and supports already available in Washington State.

DEL should explore ways to help programs and providers in Washington State provide more accessible and available services that meet the diverse preferences and needs of the state's different families and communities.

The parents participating in the focus groups are already connected to at least one program, and they generally see the program in which they participate as a preferred and trusted source of information. This finding suggests that DEL should disseminate information and resources about early learning and development via existing programs and services that already serve young children and their families.

Because parents seek information from multiple sources and because they prefer no one format for information, DEL should consider using multiple outlets (e.g., mailings, radio and TV spots, brochures, posters, a website). DEL should note which information sources different groups of parents prefer and seek to ensure that information is distributed in accessible languages.

For some topics and issues discussed, parents' preferences and ideas differ by group. The information from specific focus groups can thus be used to identify specific issues that DEL should investigate more fully for specific populations. Because different groups of parents have varying needs and perspectives, DEL should continue to gather input from different populations of parents to (1) better understand their preferences and needs, (2) learn how their needs are being met, (3) tailor future activities to increase access to, and the quality of, DEL's information, services, and programs.

DEL should repeat parent needs assessment using focus groups on a regular basis to monitor how its work is addressing parents' needs and preferences.



## APPENDIX A: PARENT FOCUS GROUP INSTRUMENT

### Introduction to the Participants

The focus group leader addressed the following remarks to participants:

- Thank you for participating in this group discussion. To show our appreciation for each of you taking time to talk with us today, we will be giving each of you a \$50 gift certificate at the end of the session.
- We are holding discussions like this one across the state with several groups of parents and caregivers. SRI International is based in California and is working with the Washington Department of Early Learning (DEL) to organize these parent focus groups.
- The groups are to help DEL identify ways in which they can better support families with young children under age 6.
- DEL is committed to providing parents with the early learning information, services, and support they want and need.
- DEL really wants to learn from parents. Your ideas can help it make sure that its programs and services for families are really what parents want.

### Consent Process

The focus group leader described the following points about informed consent to participants:

- We will summarize the ideas discussed here to share with DEL, but we will never include names or any identifying information about you or your families in those summaries.
- We would like to record the discussion so we do not miss any important points you make.
- Your participation in this discussion is voluntary.
- Please let me know now whether or not you are comfortable participating in this discussion and whether or not you are okay with our recording the discussion.

### Additional Facilitation Notes Provided to the Focus Group Leader

- Be sensitive to the culture of each group (homeless, military, Vietnamese, etc.). If possible, find out ahead of time anything special we need to take into consideration.
- Explain the role of observers and recording equipment (they may be a source of anxiety) and reassure participants of confidentiality.
- Explain the structure of the focus group (topic, estimated time, etc.).
- Emphasize that there are no wrong answers. We want to learn about your opinions and your experiences.
- People should talk about their own experiences and not talk about the experiences of others in the group (e.g., do not say that another person is wrong).
- Make the group comfortable by having participants introduce themselves.
- When asking questions, allow time for participants to respond; silence may just mean they are thinking.

## Focus Group Questions

1. What services and resources are important to you as a parent to help your young children ages 5 or younger to learn and develop well?

Probes:

- Early Learning services (such as child care, preschool, story times and reading programs, recreation classes, play groups)
  - Health services (such as health insurance enrollment, immunizations, well-child care, dental services, child development screenings and services)
  - Family support services (such as parent education classes or home visits; assistance enrolling in programs that assist with food, housing, or basic needs; mental health services and counseling, adult English as a Second Language or GED classes)
  - Other community resources (such as safe and appropriate parks and playgrounds; better transportation)
2. How easy was it to find and use these services and resources? What makes it easy or hard to find or use them?
  3. Now let's talk about how you get information about early learning and parenting.
    - When you want information about children's learning and development, where do you go or whom do you ask?
    - When you want information about children's health, where do you go or whom do you ask?
    - When you want information about parenting strategies, where do you go or whom do you ask?
    - When you want information about resources, activities, and events available in the community to families, where do you go or whom do you ask?
  4. Where and whom do you turn to if you are worried or have questions about how your child is developing [or have a problem with your child]?

Probe: Why do you turn to (the source named by parent)?

5. How many of you have enrolled your child in child care or a preschool program?

If you have ever enrolled your child in child care or a preschool program:

- What information was important to you when choosing child care that meets your child's needs? Where did you get this information? What information was difficult to get and why?
- What do or did you like most about your child care? What did you not like about it?
- In what ways does your child care provider support you as a parent?

6. How many of you stay home to care for your child?
  - If you stay home to care for your child, what information, resources, and services have been the most helpful to have in helping you support the learning and development of your child?
  - What additional information, resources, and services would you like?
7. We have discussed a lot of topics today. Have you ever used the Internet when you wanted to find out more about a topic?
  - What types of information would you want on a website that has information on a wide range of topics about children's early learning and development?
8. Are there any other things we haven't discussed today, as a parent/caregiver, you would like the State's Department of Early Learning to know about?

**General Probes**

- Tell me more about that.
- Can you give me an example of that?
- Why is that important to you?
- What could be done to make it easier?