2014 Early Childhood Parent Input Project

for the School Readiness Action Plan

March 2015

This was a collaborative project of the City of Austin Early Childhood Council, School Readiness Action Plan Leadership Team, and the City of Austin Communication and Public Information Office.

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We have attempted to recognize all individuals who contributed to this project; however, if we inadvertently omitted anyone, we sincerely apologize.

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Executive Summary

The parent engagement project was designed to learn about the needs and concerns of parents of young children in Austin in order to inform the School Readiness Action Plan for 2015-2018. During the summer and fall of 2014, 382 parents completed an online survey, and 115 parents participated in 16 focus groups designed to learn about their needs for parenting and financial services, early education and child care, and children's health.

Parents' hopes for their children included learning and education (for both short-term and long-term success), emotional well-being, health, safety, ability to communicate and interact with their peers and adults, independence, and a sense of self-worth. Their concepts of children's health included not only freedom from disease, but also nutrition, physical activity, and emotional and mental health.

Parents were asked what resources they used as well as what they would like to be able to use. Most of them used community reading resources, but many also used parent support, new baby support, food assistance, adult higher education, and assistance with housing. For many of these services, at least as many people would like to have used them but did not, suggesting a number of unmet needs in the community. The barriers to using services included times that programs were offered (e.g., during the work day), eligibility, cost, location, and transportation. Most parents reported using recreation facilities and attending festivals.

The majority of parents used child care, including licensed child care centers, care with a family member, relative, or friend, or care by a nanny or babysitter in the home. The majority of parents paid the full cost of care, and most thought that quality through accreditation was very important. The great majority of parents found their child care through informal sources—friends, relatives, or search on the Internet. Parents' criteria for selecting care included cleanliness and safety, positive interactions between caregivers and children, trust, qualified staff, and educational curriculum and activities. Some barriers to finding good care were cost, lack of availability (waitlists), distance, quality, and hours available. Parents also reported problems with applying for subsidies and the lack of information resources.

The great majority of parents reported having regular check-ups for their children, being current on immunizations, having a regular family doctor, and getting regular dental check-ups. Parents were concerned about affordability and availability of health services and services that promote good nutrition. The quality of interactions between medical professionals and both parents and children were important to them.

The common themes that emerged in parents' discussions of their needs were:

Parents want parenting information. Parents want more resources to provide parenting information, including parenting support, new baby support, and mental and behavioral health services.

Parents want comprehensive and easy to use information and referral resources. Whether discussing parenting, child care and early learning providers, or health-related services, parents said they need help accessing information and resources.

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Parents are financially strained: They need assistance with basic needs, including food and housing, as well as assistance with money management, job search, and higher education.

Parents want safe accessible outdoor spaces and activities. They acknowledged appreciation of the parks, green spaces and pools but were concerned about accessibility, safety and cost.

Parents want more high quality subsidized child care, with well-educated caretakers. They talked about high cost, long waitlists, low quality, and inconvenient hours and locations as barriers to obtaining quality child care. Early education was a priority in their goals for their children.

Parents are concerned about transportation (for drivers, bicyclists and pedestrians). Some neighborhoods do not have sidewalks and others are not safe to ride bicycles.

Introduction

In early 2011 the Austin community began work on a shared community plan to promote the health and development of young children. Convened by United Way Greater Austin, a cross-community team of stakeholders developed the first iteration of Austin Travis County School Readiness Action Plan (SRAP) 2012-2015.[1]

The vision for the SRAP was to create a shared, functional community plan, through which public and private sectors in Austin and Travis County could work together to ensure that school readiness would become and remain a top priority among local decision makers. The goals of the plan were to ensure that by the time children enter kindergarten, they would have the cognitive, physical, social, emotional, and language skills needed to thrive in the educational setting. It has succeeded in becoming an important set of guidelines for local policymakers and service agencies.

In early 2014 stakeholders and leaders began work on the second three-year SRAP for 2015-2018. The group decided to bring a stronger voice from Austin and Travis County families with young children into the SRAP process. To accomplish this goal, an online survey and focus groups with parents were conducted during 2014 to learn what services families use and what they need. This report presents the findings of that project.

Three entities combined efforts to form an ad hoc team for this project: the School Readiness Action Plan Leadership Team[2], the City of Austin Early Childhood Council[3], and the City of Austin Communication and Public Information Office[4] (CPIO). This team worked over the span of one year to gather and analyze parent input, and to develop this report to inform the SRAP 2015 -2018.

Methods

The purpose of the collaborative project was to collect input from parents and caregivers who have children younger than 6 years old on topics related to parenting, child care, health, and community services. Data collection took place between June 23, 2014 and October 2, 2014 using an online survey,

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[1] http://www.unitedwayaustin.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/UWATX_SchoolReadinessActionPlan_full_May2012.pdf

[2] The School Readiness Action Plan Leadership Team (SRAPLT) is a cross-agency team of individuals who represent organizations with significant early childhood funding, planning, or research roles in the Austin/Travis County Community. The objective of the SRAPLT is to align human and financial resources, whenever possible and appropriate, and to further the goals identified in the SRAP within and beyond our individual organizations. See Acknowledgements for full list of participants and agencies represented.

[3] The City of Austin Early Childhood Council (ECC) is part of the Austin's Board and Commission structure. The boards enable citizens to participate in Austin's government processes, make recommendations to council for the creation, development, and implementation of programs that promote optimal development for young children. Develop for recommendation to council, programs and activities that contribute to the continued development of a system of high-quality early care and education and after-school programs for Austin's children. Website: http://www.austintexas.gov/ecc

[4] The City of Austin Communications and Public Information Office[4] (CPIO) works to fosters positive relationships with local and national media, and provide timely, proactive and responsive information to media inquiries; create opportunities for the community to engage in the decision-making processes of the City of Austin; and actively promote City projects, programs and initiatives. Website: http://www.austintexas.gov/department/communications

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focus groups, and short in-person interviews, referred to as "Speak Week" events. The following briefly describes each of these data collection methods.

Online Survey

The online survey contained a series of questions about services parents used, what services they would like to use, and barriers to obtaining needed services. The early childhood ad hoc group and the CPIO developed the survey, which consisted of 17 multiple-choice questions and several demographic questions. The questions included services and information about parenting and mental health; financial and basic needs; community and infrastructure facilities; early education and child care; and health.

The CPIO hosted the survey on the SpeakUpAustin website, the City of Austin's online community engagement portal, with technical assistance from the vendor Granicus, Inc. The online survey was available in English and Spanish, although only 12 respondents completed the Spanish survey. It was open from June 23, 2014 to August 31, 2014, with a total of 382 respondents completing the entire survey. Half of respondents (50%) had household incomes over $75,000, 19% of respondents had household incomes between $50,001-$75,000, and 31% of respondents had household incomes less than $50,000. Almost three-quarters (71%) of respondents had a Bachelor's degree or higher, and 11% of respondents had a High School degree or less.

Parents and caregivers were recruited through various methods. The CPIO notified all SpeakUpAustin users about the online survey. The ad hoc group made announcements at Success by 6 stakeholder meetings and sent email notifications to stakeholders and related community groups. Manual copies of the survey were available to service providers who volunteered to distribute them to their clients. Completed manual forms were returned to Travis County staff for data entry.

Once the online survey was closed, the CPIO downloaded the data and compiled the survey results into a final report. For a copy of the report, see the Appendix A.

Focus Groups

Between July 16, 2014 and October 2, 2014, 16 focus groups were conducted with 115 participants. Eight of the focus groups were conducted in Spanish and 5 were conducted with teen parents. Optional demographic data was collected from parents for 15 of the 16 focus groups. Of the participants who completed the demographic forms, the majority of participants (78) identified themselves as Hispanic/Latino, followed by Caucasian (13), African American (4), and Asian American (1). Most participants had low to moderate household incomes, with 50 participants reporting a household income less than $25,000, 22 participants with household incomes between $25,001-50,000, six participants with household incomes between $50,001-75,000, and six participants with household incomes over $75,000.

The early childhood ad hoc group developed the focus group survey, tools, and demographic forms. The focus group survey included a set of 10 questions that included parents' hopes for their children, parenting; financial and basic needs; community resources (e.g., recreation, safety); early education and

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child care; and health. A shortened version was created as an alternative for groups that had less time. In all, 11 groups used the "long form" and five used the "short form." The demographic form was an optional and included information about zip code, number and ages of children under age 6, ethnic group, and family income. Most participants completed at least one question on the demographic form. For a copy of the facilitator's script and the demographic forms, see Appendix B and C.

Each focus group was led by a facilitator and recorder. Facilitators informed participants that identifying information would remain confidential, and guided the discussion using the Facilitator's script and set of questions. Recorders captured participants' comments by using a laptop, or by writing notes by hand on a printed version of the electronic form.

Focus group participants were recruited in multiple ways. Parents who completed the online survey were given the option to volunteer for a focus group. Online survey respondents who volunteered were contacted, and three groups were scheduled with those volunteers. Parents for the remaining 13 groups were recruited with help from local organizations and high schools. Light refreshments were offered and each participant was given a $10 HEB gift card.

Data collection forms and demographic forms were collected by Travis County staff and de-identified to ensure confidentiality. Once all the focus groups were conducted, three members of the ad hoc group reviewed the data and worked together to identify themes.

Speak Week

A total of five Speak Week events were held between July 1, 2014 – July 31, 2014, twice at Ditmar Recreation Center and three times at the Thinkery. Although several events and locations were considered, these two locations were selected because of limited resources. At each, volunteers approached parents and asked them to respond to a short survey. Parents were informed that the survey was optional and responses were confidential. Those who agreed were interviewed and the volunteer recorded the data by accessing a closed survey on the SpeakUpAustin website, using IPads. From these five events, a total of 42 parents agreed to participate and completed the survey.

The CPIO downloaded the data from the SpeakUpAustin tool and compiled the survey results. The Speak Week results are not presented in this report due to the limited number of responses.

Limitations

There are limitations of this project related to data gathering and analysis.

First, the respondents were not statistically representative of the whole community. In spite of efforts for broad outreach, it is likely that many parents and caregivers were unaware of the opportunities to provide input via the online survey or focus groups.

Putting the survey online in both English and Spanish helped to increase its accessibility, but limitations with the online platform altered the format from its original design and resulted layout complications. Furthermore, a technical malfunction discovered after the survey was closed compromised the data by

aggregating the responses from three separate, but repeated, questions. The malfunction prevented the separate questions from being analyzed independently, and the responses had to be reported together. Other technical limitations prevented the responses from the Spanish survey from being integrated with the overall report.

Due to limited resources and time constraints, the questions for the online survey and focus groups were not adequately tested to ensure they were easy to understand and useful. Allowing time and resources to beta test questions with a parent audience might have helped to identify issues with wording, formatting, and, ease of analysis.

Finally, volunteers for focus groups and SpeakWeek events came with a range of facilitation experience. A formal volunteer training might have helped ensure that groups were facilitated and documented with greater consistency. Training might have helped volunteers feel more comfortable approaching parents at events and might have led to an increased number of completed interviews.

Findings

The following section summarizes responses from parents and caregivers who completed the online survey or participated in a focus group. After data were collected, the ad hoc group reviewed responses to identify general findings and common themes. The information is organized in five broad topic areas: parenting; financial services and needs; community and infrastructure services; early education and child care; and health. Questions from the online survey and focus groups are *italicized*. Whenever possible, responses from the online survey and focus group questions are presented together.

Parent's Hopes and General Concerns

To provide a broad context for the information reported, the focus groups began with a general question: *What hopes do you have for your child?*

Parents described learning goals for short-term and long-term success, emotional well-being, health, safety, ability to communicate and interact with their peers and adults (including making friends and avoiding bullying), independence, and a sense of self-worth. It is noteworthy that they placed at least as much emphasis on social and emotional well-being as they did on formal academic skills.

At the end of the focus groups, parents were asked to add any thoughts. Two points emerged:

- *Parents want to be involved*: Parents need support and want to be connected to other parents and the larger community. They want more opportunities for parent involvement.
- *Parenting is hard, stressful and sometimes isolating*: Parents wanted us to remember that parenting isn't easy. Some parents said "no parent is perfect" and "every parent is different, and not everyone wants to raise their children the same way." "Sometimes I can't be at all the places with my child because I have to work to support my family, but it doesn't mean that I don't care."

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Parenting, Financial, and Community Services

In both the focus groups and the online surveys, parents were asked about services for parenting, mental health, financial and basic needs, and community resources.
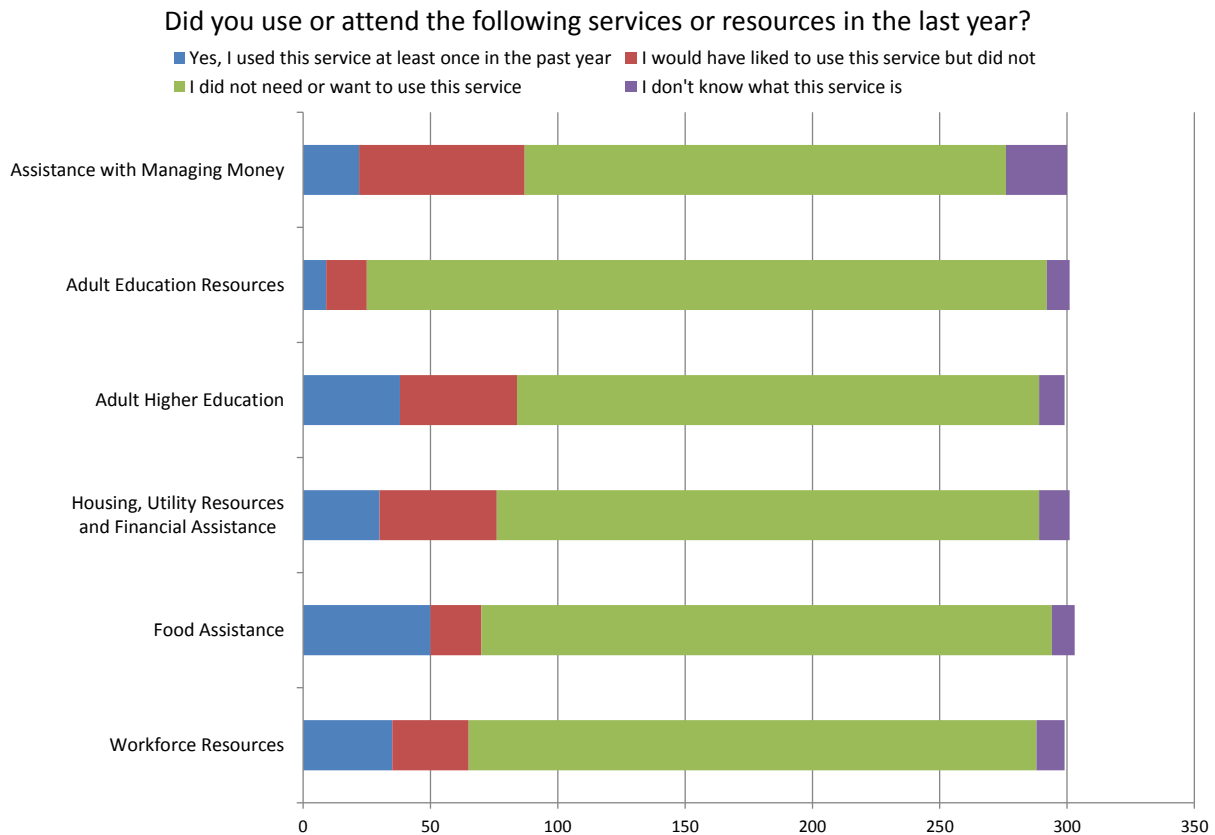
In the online survey, parents were asked: Did you use or attend the following services or resources in the last year? The questions included services for parenting and mental health; financial and basic needs; and community resources. Respondents were given a list of services and asked about how often they used or attended them. Responses are listed in the table below.

Parenting and mental health. As shown in the figure below, the most frequently-used parenting service was community reading resources, but close to 1/5 also used parent support and new baby support. It is noteworthy that the number of people who responded that they would like to use these services, but did not is almost as large as the number of users.

Did you use or attend the following services or resources in the last year?
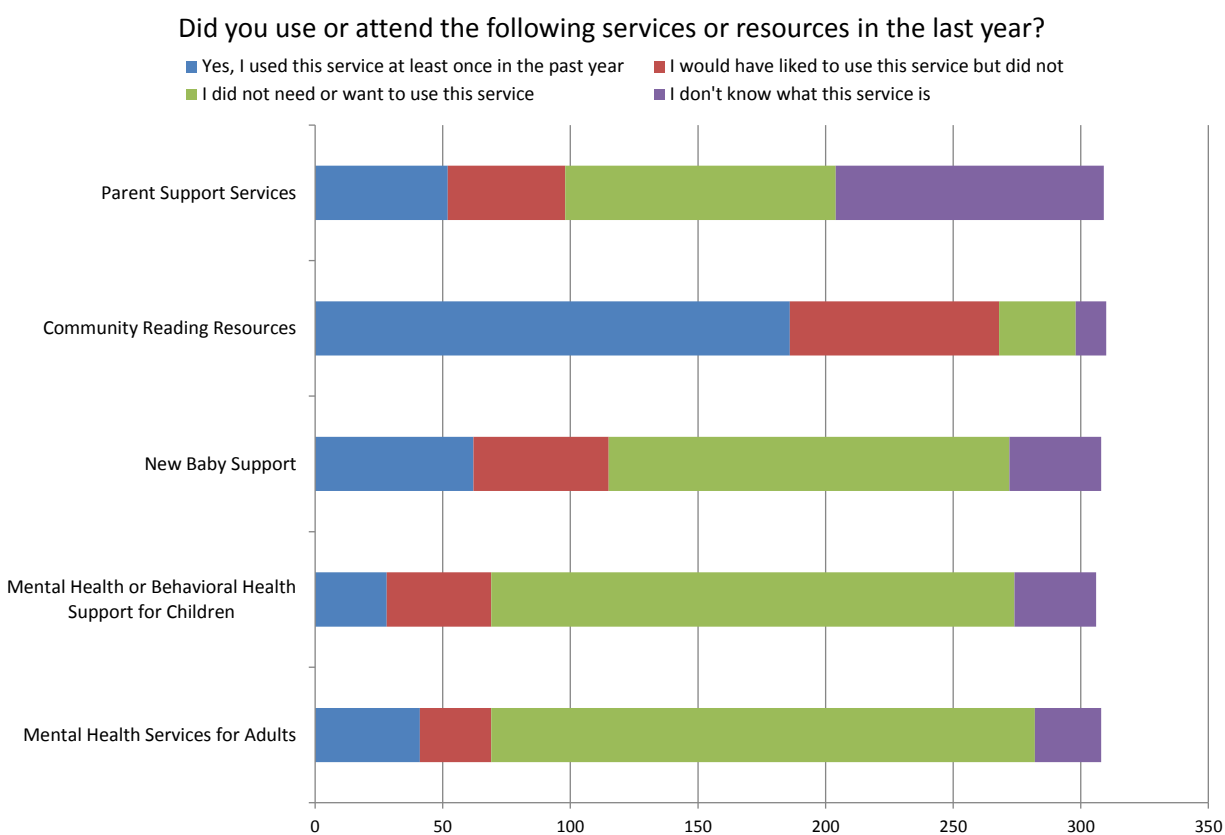
Adapted from the City of Austin CPIO, Early Childhood Development Report, see Appendix A.

Financial and basic needs. The most frequently used services were food assistance and adult higher education, and, not surprisingly, all of the services in this category were used more by low-income parents than by those with higher incomes, as seen below in Table 1. These responses also make clear that there is a considerable amount of unmet need for these services, particularly assistance with money management, higher education, and assistance with housing.

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Did you use or attend the following services or resources in the last year?

■ Yes, I used this service at least once in the past year ■ I would have liked to use this service but did not
■ I did not need or want to use this service ■ I don't know what this service is

Adapted from the City of Austin CPIO, Early Childhood Development Report, see Appendix A.

Community resources. A large majority of parents take advantage of recreation facilities and festivals, and most use banks or credit unions. About half use services in the faith community.

The following table shows the data from the survey in another format, and compares all the responses with a subset of respondents whose household incomes were less than $50,000. The first percentage represents all survey responses. The percentage in parentheses represents the responses from those with household incomes less than $50,000 a year.

Did you use or attend the following services or resources in the last year?

Table 1.	Yes, I used this service at least once in the past year	I would have liked to use this service, but did not	I did not need or want to use this service	I don't know what this service is
Parent support services	17% (29%)	15% (18%)	34% (27%)	34% (27%)
Community reading resources	60% (54%)	26% (28%)	10% (11%)	4% (7%)
New baby support	20% (20%)	17% (17%)	51% (54%)	12% (9%)
Mental health or behavioral health support for children	9% (14%)	13% (19%)	67% (57%)	10% (11%)
Mental health services for	13% (19%)	9% (10%)	69% (63%)	8% (9%)

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adults				
Assistance with managing money	7% (13%)	22% (32%)	63% (47%)	8% (8%)
Adult education resources	3% (8%)	5% (12%)	89% (75%)	3% (5%)
Adult higher education	13% (22%)	15% (29%)	69% (46%)	3% (3%)
Housing, utility resources, and financial assistance	10% (29%)	15% (32%)	71% (34%)	4% (4%)
Food assistance	17% (47%)	7% (14%)	74% (35%)	3% (4%)
Workforce resources	12% (29%)	10% (16%)	75% (49%)	4% (5%)
Recreation services	90% (76%)	5% (12%)	4% (9%)	1% (3%)
Festival, Museum, Art gallery, cultural center, zoo	86% (70%)	9% (19%)	4% (9%)	1% (2%)
Faith community	46% (49%)	8% (16%)	44% (30%)	2% (4%)
Bank or credit union	88% (72%)	4% (9%)	7% (17%)	1% (2%)

Barriers. To identify the barriers to the aforementioned services, online survey respondents were asked "What makes it difficult to use any of the services listed above?" Due to a technical malfunction, responses to questions about barriers were aggregated and could not be separated by groups of services, as originally designed. The aggregated results prevent a detailed analysis, but some results are consistent with the concerns expressed in the focus groups. The top five barriers to accessing all services listed above were, in ranked order:

- Programs were offered at inconvenient times,
- "I am not eligible,"
- Cost
- Location is not convenient or accessible
- Transportation.

The responses from those with household incomes less than $50,000 revealed similar barriers, but also included "There is a waitlist."

Where do you go to find answers to your parenting questions and concerns?

The majority of focus group participants said they used the following sources for parenting information: family members; child care providers and school staff; the Internet; community or social organizations; and parenting education programs. Parenting information resources that were mentioned less frequently included friends, the medical community, written resources and materials, and personal experience.

As a parent of a child under six, what other types of support would be helpful?

Focus group participants cited a range of different supports needed by parents who were raising young children. The three most frequently mentioned supports were *parenting information, child enrichment programs, and a comprehensive referral system*. Basic needs assistance was cited by participants in several focus groups and included the need for housing vouchers, transportation assistance, food banks,

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and help with diapers and wipes. Economic supports were also cited, including job search assistance and help with finances. A few focus groups cited the need for safe outdoor spaces and parks where their children can play.

Early Care and Education

Child care services are essential for parents and caregivers who are working or in school. The online survey and focus group questions were designed to collect information about what parents and caregivers are looking for, what families need, and what their experiences have been with arranging child care services.

In the past year, have your children used any of the following child care arrangements?[5]

Parents and caregivers used a variety of child care arrangements for their children, and many families used more than one option[6]. Survey respondents identified licensed child care center as the most frequently used child care arrangement (41%). The next most frequently selected option was arranged care with a family member, relative, or friend (23%); followed by using a nanny or babysitter in the home (16%). "I stay home with my child" accounted for 13% of the child care arrangements selected by survey respondents. The following comment, recorded in the "other" category hints at the many arrangements families make to care for their children: "My husband and I switch off during the day. He works graveyards and I work mornings."

If you used child care, how did you pay for it?

Most survey respondents (64%) reported that they paid the full cost of child care out of pocket. The other most frequently selected options indicated families paid for child care using a "WorkForce child care subsidy" (13%), followed by "we did not pay for child care" (7%).[7]

How important is it to you that your child care provider has a quality accreditation?

Child care quality accreditations ensure children are receiving a high level of care. Survey respondents were asked how important it was to them that their child care provider had a quality accreditation.[8] Of all respondents, 72% said quality accreditation was "very important," and 22% said it was "somewhat important".

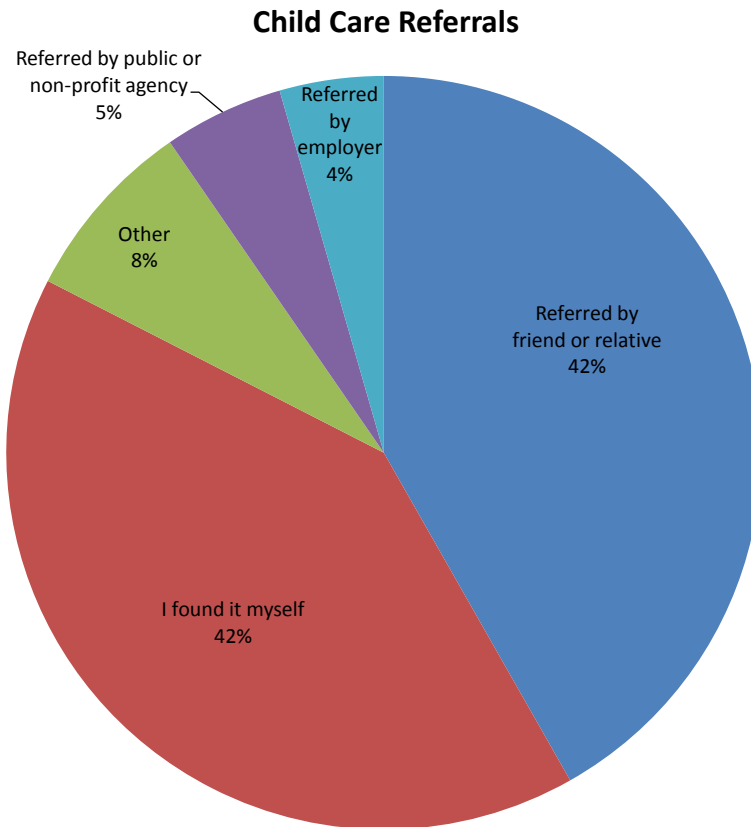*How did you find your current child care provider?*

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[5] Survey respondents were instructed to check all that apply from the following options: Licensed child care center/preschool; Licensed family based care; Head Start/Early Head Start; Public Pre-K; Family member, relative, or friend; Nanny or babysitter in home; I stay at home with my child; or Other.

[6] Survey respondents were instructed to indicate all forms of child care they used in the past year, so while there were 304 respondents who answered this question, there were 601 responses to this question.

[7] Respondents were instructed to check all answered that applied, so while there were 293 respondents who answered this question, there were 332 responses to this question.

[8] Although "quality accreditation" was not defined, examples were provided (National Association of the Education of Young Children, National Accreditation Commission, and Texas Rising Star).

The majority of survey respondents found their current child care provider informally. The following chart shows the responses to the online survey question "How did you find your current child care provider? Of all respondents, 83% found their child care provider through friends and relatives, or by themselves. The respondents who selected "Other" included various responses, such as well-known online classified advertisements and customer review websites, and neighborhood list serves.

Child Care Referrals

Note: A total of 292 parents answered the question "How did you find your current child care provider?"
Adapted from the City of Austin CPIO, Early Childhood Development Survey Report, see Appendix A.

Where do you go for information about child care and about educational opportunities for your children?

Focus group participants echoed survey respondents, saying that they found child care informally. In slightly over one-half of the focus groups, participants cited receiving information about child care and educational opportunities from family members and friends. Slightly less than one-half of the focus group participants described using the internet to locate child care providers. On the other hand, the focus group participants were much more likely than the survey respondents to report getting information from social service agencies and community resources, including the library and 2-1-1, than the online survey respondents. This difference may be due to the fact that many of the focus group participants were recruited through a social service agency.
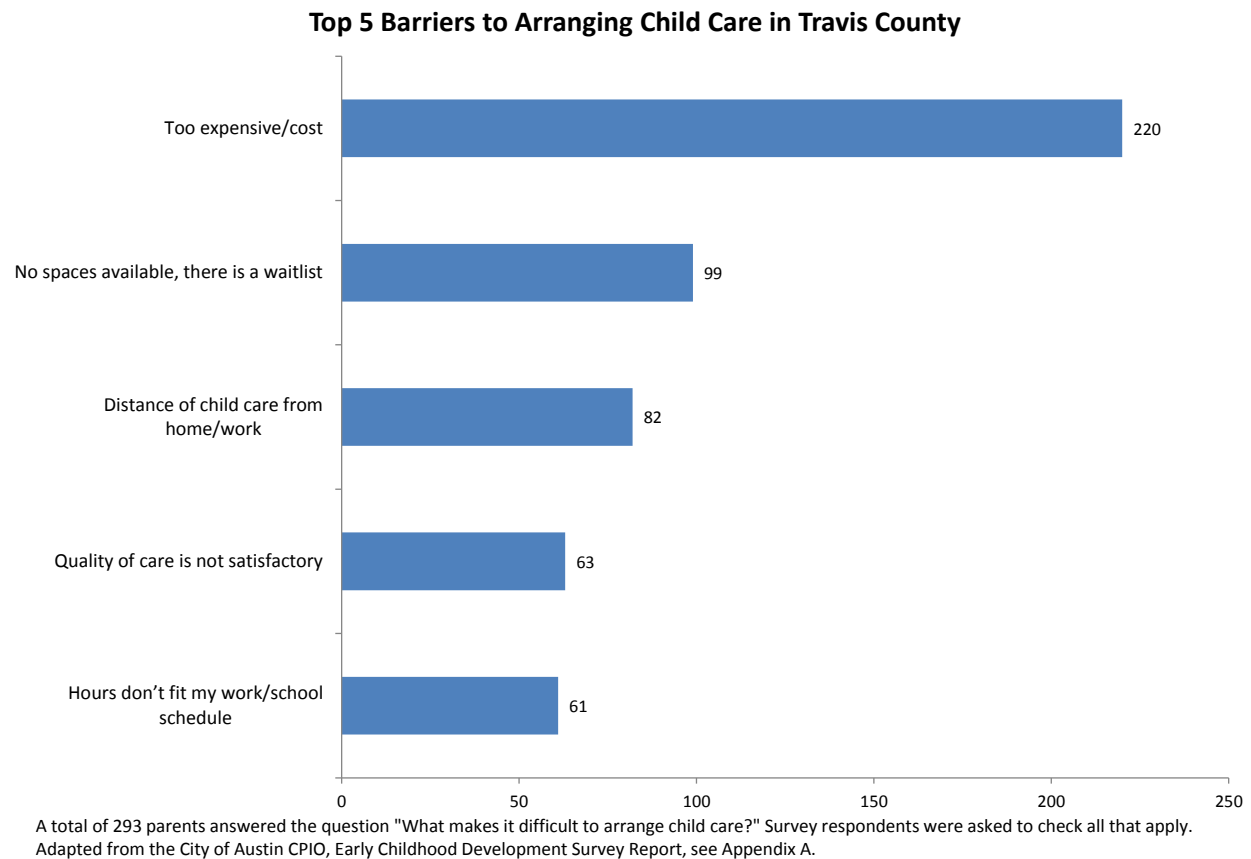
What do you look for when choosing someone to care for your child?

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In all focus groups, participants named cleanliness and safety as a priority. The five most common themes were:

- Cleanliness and safety,
- Positive interactions between caregivers and children,
- Trust and feeling comfortable of the child care provider,
- Qualified child care staff, and
- Educational curriculum and activities.

What makes it difficult to arrange child care?

Not surprisingly, the cost of child care was the most common barrier reported by in both the online survey and the focus groups. The following chart shows the barriers identified by respondents from the online survey, with cost of care clearly emerging as the top barrier.

Top 5 Barriers to Arranging Child Care in Travis County

A total of 293 parents answered the question "What makes it difficult to arrange child care?" Survey respondents were asked to check all that apply. Adapted from the City of Austin CPIO, Early Childhood Development Survey Report, see Appendix A.

The top five barriers for respondents with household incomes less than $50,000 were the same but in slightly different rank order, with the provider's hours and the distance to child care providers ranking higher than the quality of services.

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While focus group participants cited barriers that were similar to those mentioned by the survey respondents, the feedback from the focus groups adds context to the findings. The five most common themes are listed below with a brief summary of the comments:

- *Location*: [Child care providers] are "too far." "There should be more places that are closer to us since there seems to be a lot of people living in this part." "It's hard to do things if there is no day care in the area."
- *Waitlist & Availability*: Providers "are booked," there are "not enough spaces available," and there are "waitlists for the best quality." Waitlists are really long – this is hard when a job is lined up but there is no one to look after the child.
- *Provider's Hours*: The "hours are hard for standard 9am-5pm jobs…employers are not always flexible." The "schedules are on the ISD calendar. It's hard to find back-up care when the centers are closed." "There aren't options for parents who work outside of regular business hours."
- *Resources & Information*: "It takes a lot of time to do research and find a provider." "There isn't a central place to go to find out the general information and options for child care". "I don't know where to go for any of this information in my own neighborhood." They asked for accessible and easy to understand information, with details about cost and resources for assistance. Parents also asked for accessible information about Pre-Kindergarten and Kindergarten. "We don't understand all the lotteries, when the deadlines are to register, how long the waitlists are, who qualifies for Pre-Kindergarten, or how to apply."
- *Applying for Subsidies*: The "paperwork for subsidies is difficult". The process to maintain assistance is "hard". One participant said she "started the process" but gave up because she knew she wouldn't qualify.

Two focus groups cited *language* as a barrier, reporting that Spanish speakers have difficulty accessing English-speaking child care programs. In addition, participants in one focus group cited *racism* as a barrier to finding child care. While these responses weren't identified as "common" themes, it is important to recognize that it can take courage for participants to express personal opinions and experiences in a focus group with strangers. It is possible that other focus group participants faced these issues as well.

Health

To explore families' health practices and parent perspectives related to health, different set of questions were included in the online survey and in the focus group questions. The online survey asked respondents solely about physical health care and practices, related to screenings and exams. Focus group questions were broader and asked questions to understand how parents and caregivers think about health, the types of support they look for, and what other services they need to support their children's health.

The great majority of parents and caregivers who completed the online survey indicated their children had regular access to health services. Almost all respondents (99%) reported that their child received a well-check appointment with a doctor between birth and 1 year old. Most respondents reported their

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children were current on immunizations and received yearly physical exams from a doctor, 94% and 97%, respectively. Most respondents (96%) also reported having a regular family doctor whom they could talk to about their child's health. The most noticeable difference between respondents in different income groups was the number of parents who reported that their child received a yearly dental check-up from a dentist, which was higher (84%) for families with household incomes less than $50,000 than for all respondents (77%).

Different people have different ideas about what makes a child healthy. What does it mean to you for your child to be healthy?

Focus group participants described what it means to them for their child to be healthy. Having good physical health (free from illness, developing well, and maintaining a healthy weight) was the most common theme, cited by all focus groups, but several other themes emerged in the majority of the groups, including nutrition, physical activity, and emotional and mental health. Participants described children's health in terms of eating nutritious food, being physically active, and having energy to play. Children's emotional and mental well-being was also included. Descriptions included children who are happy, socialize with other children, are able to talk about their feelings, and who are learning to understand and deal with their own emotions.

What is important to you about the people and places that help you keep your child health?

The most common themes were the importance of the interactions between parents and health-related professionals, followed by the safety and cleanliness of facilities, and the interactions between health-related professions and children. The following summary briefly describes the comments participants shared when describing what they are looking for when interacting with health-related professionals:

- *Interactions with Parents/Caregivers*: One participant said "speak to me like I am a person and a responsible parent." Focus group participants said they want timely call-backs, staff to take the time to explain things to them, and help navigating care or completing paperwork.
- *Interactions with Children*: focus group participants said they look for professionals who care about children, are friendly and patient with their children, and for those who notice individual differences among children.

Focus group participants also noted affordability of services (including sliding scales and services that accept their insurance), services that promote good nutrition, and the availability of services (hours clinics are open, timely responses from health-related professionals, and waitlists for specialists.) as important factors.

Common Themes

In both the online survey and the focus groups, the following common themes emerged as important concerns for parents of young children.

- *Parents want parenting information.* Parents want more resources to provide parenting information, including parenting support, new baby support, and mental and behavioral health services. Participants suggested parenting classes, such as child psychology, child development, and how to care for newborns. Other identified themes included nutritional information and classes.

- *Parents and caregivers want comprehensive and easy to use information and referral resources.* Whether discussing parenting, child care and early learning providers, or health-related services, parents and caregivers said they need help accessing information and resources. Parents don't always have the time to do extensive research to find the services and information that they need. General internet searches they conduct can result in an overwhelming amount of information, or conversely not enough information, and it takes time to sift through information. In addition, some parents may not be internet "savvy." They also said they need information that is easy to understand and find, and "comprehensive," including information about eligibility, deadlines, and costs. In a few focus groups, parents mentioned the loss of Family Connections as an information hub. One participant asked "Who in our community has filled the void for Family Connections?"

- *Parents are financially strained*: Parents are concerned about the cost of living and property taxes. "Parents are getting priced out of Austin." Respondents to the online survey and participants in several focus groups talked about basic needs assistance including the need for housing vouchers, transportation assistance, food banks, and help with diapers and wipes as well as assistance with money management, job search, and higher education.

- *Parents want safe accessible outdoor spaces and activities.* Parents need free activities for their children. The need for safe and accessible outdoor spaces was mentioned throughout the focus group recordings. Parents want safe parks and outdoor spaces for their children to play in. Parents shared hopes about their children being part of a stable community with limited crime and violence, and in which police officers are responsive to the needs in their neighborhoods. They acknowledged appreciation of the parks, green spaces and pools but they were concerned about accessibility, safety and cost. There are "logistical nightmares" for community events, and parking costs are too high. When considering the health of their children, they want safe and clean public spaces, parks, and pools where their children can play, exercise and be physically active.

- *Parents want more high quality subsidized child care, with well-educated caretakers*: "We need more options for all people (low-income and high-income). We need all types of care for all people."

- *Parents are concerned about transportation (for drivers, bicyclists and pedestrians).* Parents are concerned about transportation throughout Austin, and they are also concerned about pedestrian and bicycle fatalities. They said that some neighborhoods don't have sidewalks and others aren't safe to ride bicycles.

Next Steps

At the end of the project, the ad hoc team members participated in a debriefing exercise, where they talked over the lessons learned and brainstormed suggestions for the future. The following two recommendations capture some of the higher-level ideas that were suggested:

- *Create a strategic plan for the next parent input process, including timelines.* It takes a tremendous amount of time and effort to conduct a community-wide parent input process. Future projects will benefit from a plan for data collection, analysis, and reporting which includes timeframes and benchmarks. The timeframe should take into account the time of year when data collection is conducted, avoiding the summer months.
- *Build community partnerships to engage parents who are not connected to "traditional" programs and services*. Most parents who completed the survey and attended a focus group where already connected to services or resources in some way. While the input was valuable, the collaborative group wants to be intentional about hearing from many parents and caregivers with different experiences, including those whose voices may not otherwise be heard.

Early Childhood Development Survey

The Early Childhood Development Survey was prepared for the City of Austin Early Childhood Council. The purpose of this study was to help the City of Austin and Travis County create and improve services for families to ensure that their children grow up happy, healthy, and smart. This was a voluntary survey and all responses were confidential.

703 participants answered at least one question in this survey with 382 completing the entire survey. All responses are included in this report. Each question includes the number of responses.

This survey was hosted on www.speakupaustin.org and was available from the beginning of June to the end of August.

Q1. Are you the parent or guardian of a child under 6 years old (birth to 5 years old)?
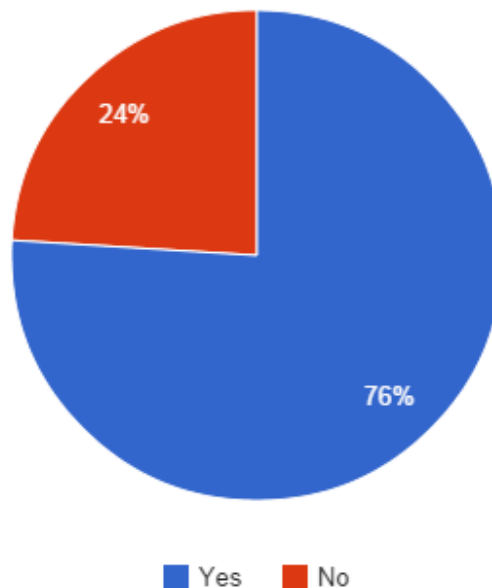
Total Respondents: 687

Yes	522
No	165

Q2. How many children under age 6 do you have?
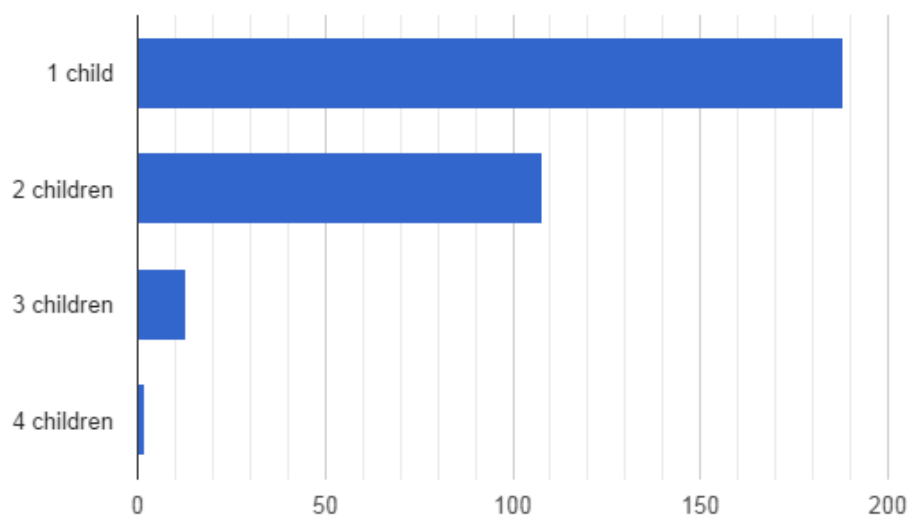
Total Respondents: 331

1 child	188
2 children	108
3 children	13
4 children	2

Q3. How old are your children?
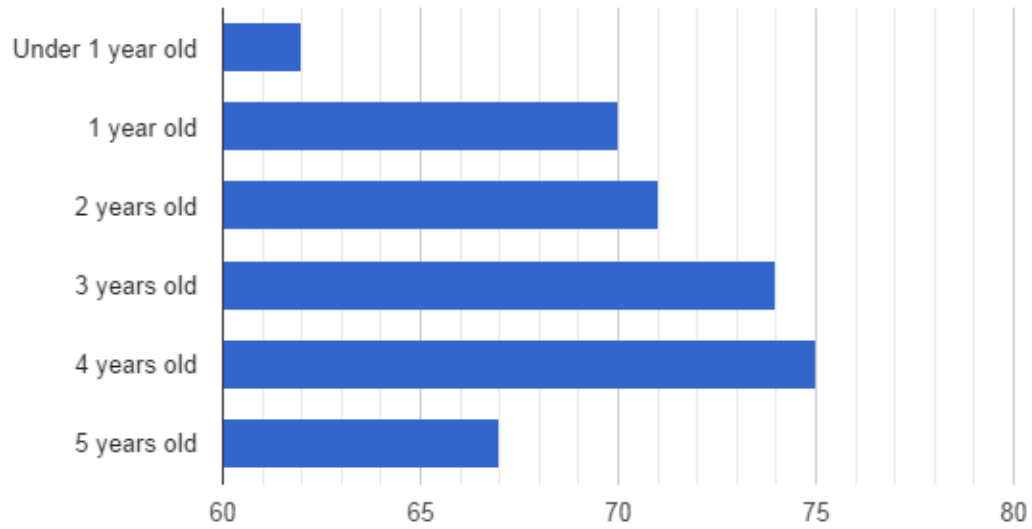
Total Respondents: 298

Under 1 year old	62
1 year old	70
2 years old	71
3 years old	74
4 years old	75
5 years old	67

Services

Q4. Did you use or attend this service or resource in the last year? (Part 1)
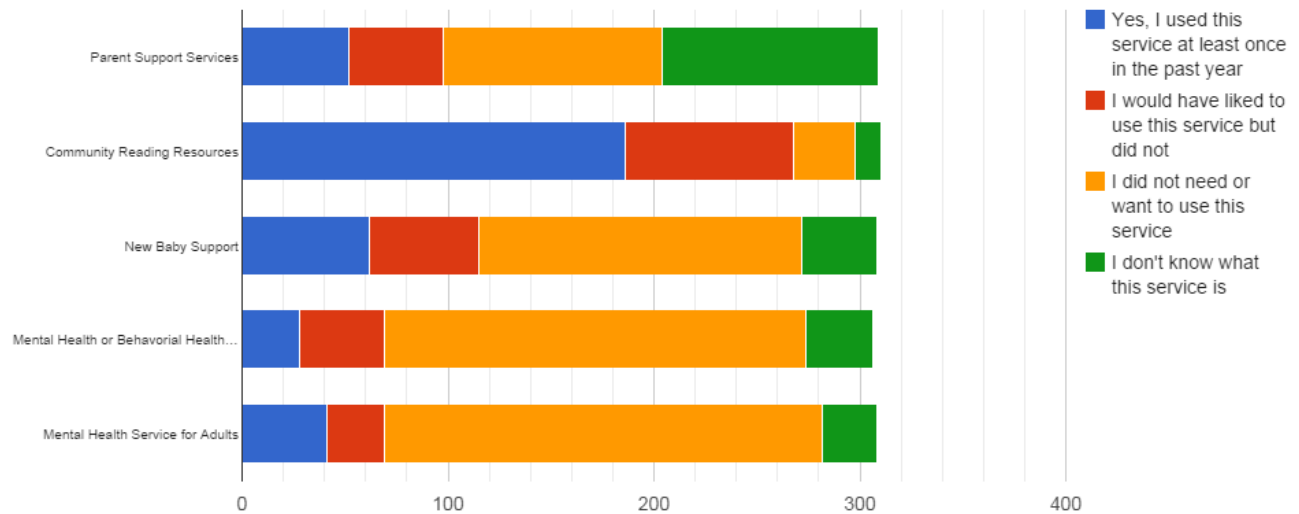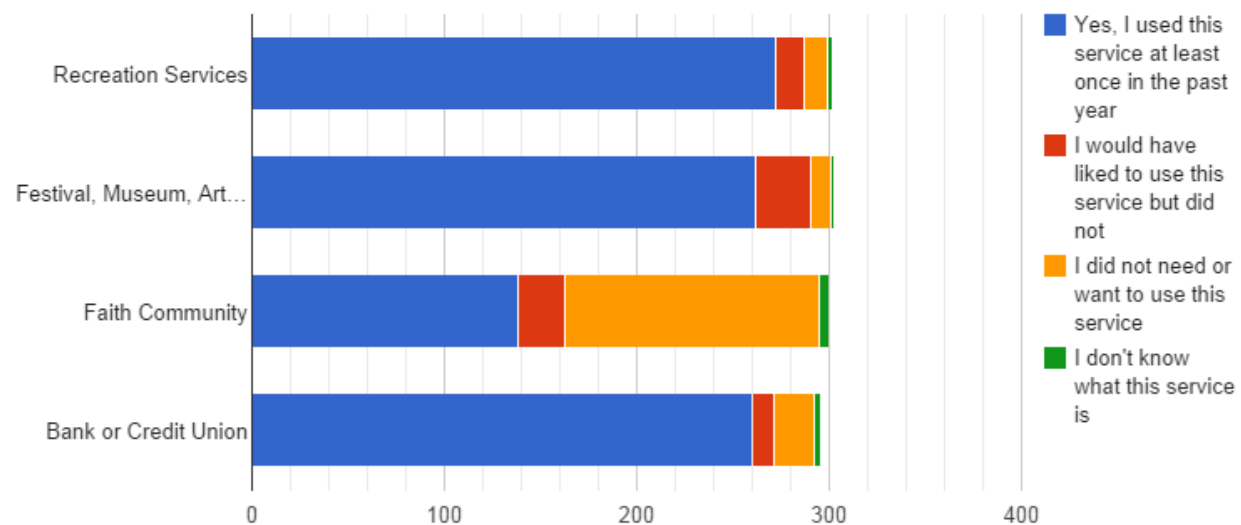

Total Respondents: 310

	Yes, I used this service at least once in the past year	I would have liked to use this service but did not	I did not need or want to use this service	I don't know what this service is
Parent Support Services	52	46	106	105
Community Reading Resources	186	82	30	12
New Baby Support	62	53	157	36
Mental Health or Behavioral Health Support for Children	28	41	205	32
Mental Health Service for Adults	41	28	213	26

Parent Support Services Examples: home visiting programs; parenting education programs; parenting support groups; Play to Learn; promotoras
Community Reading Resources Examples: public libraries, reading programs or story times, school library
New Baby Support Examples: prenatal services; breastfeeding support; postpartum support groups

| Mental Health or Behavioral Health Services for Children Examples: counseling, play therapy |
| Mental Health Services for Adults Examples: substance abuse services, counseling |

## Q5. Did you use or attend this service in the past year? (Part 2)
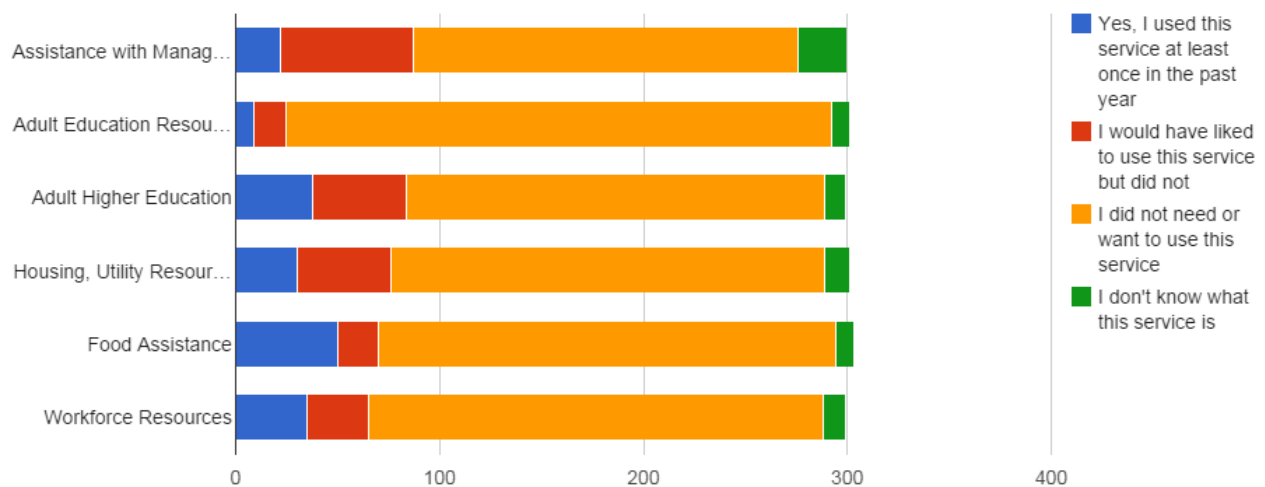
Total Respondents: 303

	Yes, I used this service at least once in the past year	I would have liked to use this service but did not	I did not need or want to use this service	I don't know what this service is
Assistance with Managing Money	22	65	189	24
Adult Education Resources	9	16	267	9
Adult Higher Education	38	46	205	10
Housing, Utility Resources and Financial Assistance	30	46	213	12
Food Assistance	50	20	224	9
Workforce Resources	35	30	223	11

| Assistance with Managing Money Examples: Financial literacy classes, credit counseling; money management classes; tax preparation assistance |
| Adult Education Resources Examples: Adult education programs(high school/GED); English as a |

Second Language Programs
Adult Higher Education Examples: college, trade school
Food Assistance Examples: food pantry; Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program or housing subsidy; temporary housing/shelter; utility assistance
Workforce Resources: job search services; job training services; job placement

Q6. Did you use or attend this service in the past year? (Part 3)

Total Respondents: 304

	Yes, I used this service at least once in the past year	I would have liked to use this service but did not	I did not need or want to use this service	I don't know what this service is
Recreation Services	272	15	12	3
Festival, Museum, Art Gallery, Cultural Center, Zoo	262	28	11	2
Faith Community	138	25	132	5
Bank or Credit Union	260	11	21	4

Recreation Services Examples: park or playground, rec center or YMCA, public swimming pool
Faith Community Examples: church, synagogue, mosque, temple

Q7. What makes it difficult to use any of the services listed above?
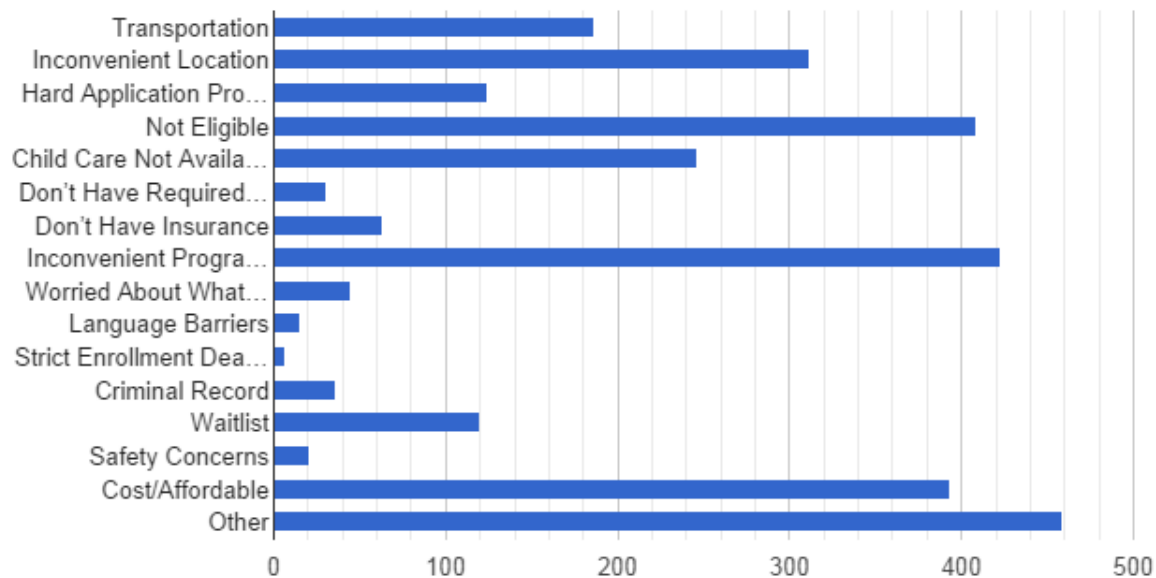
Transportation	186
Location is not convenient or accessible	312
The application process is hard	124
I am not eligible	408
Child care is not available	126
I don't have the required documentation	30
I don't have the insurance	63
Programs are offered at inconvenient times	423
Worried about what others will think	45
Services/programs are not offered in my language	15
Strict deadlines for enrollment	6
Criminal record	36
There is a waitlist	120
Safety concerns	21
Cost/Affordable	393
Other	459

Child Care

Q8. In the past year, have your children used any of the following child care arrangements? (check all that apply).
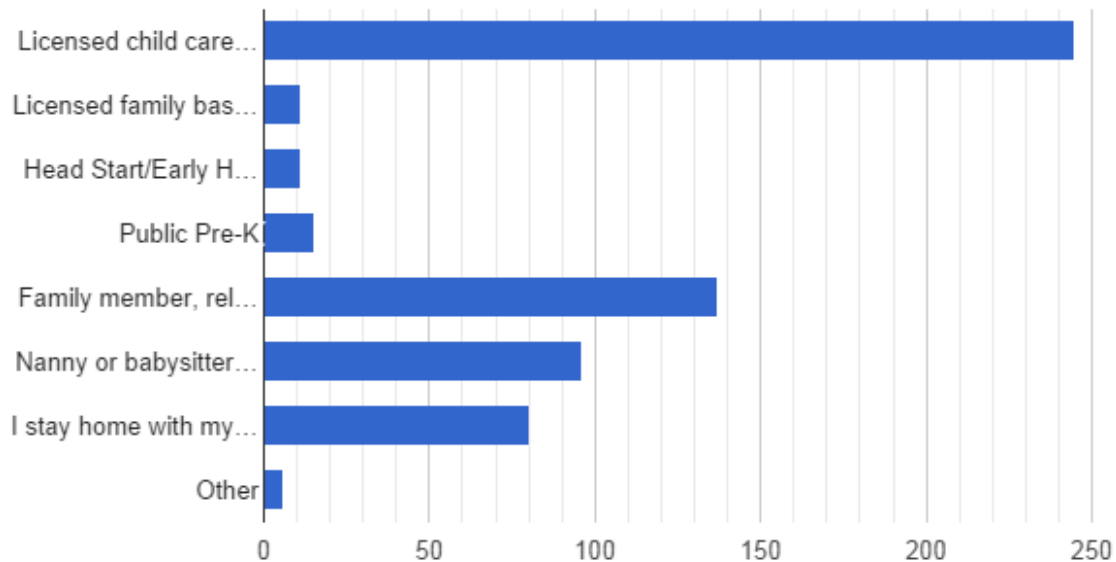
Total Respondents: 304

Licensed child care center/preschool	245
Licensed family based care	11
Head Start/Early Head Start	11
Public Pre-K	15
Family member, relative, or friend	137
Nanny or babysitter in home	96
I stay home with my child	80
Other	6

Other Responses

After school program
Boycare
Maternity leave
My husband and I switch off during the day. He works graveyards and I work mornings.
Private catholic school for pre k
Summer programs

Q8. If you used child care, how did you pay for it?
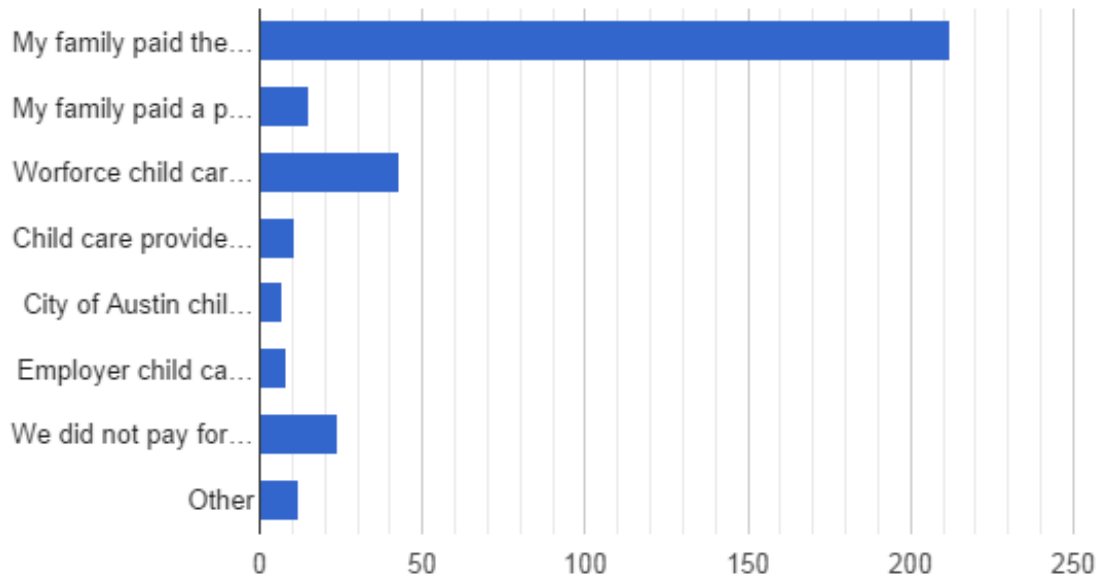
Total Respondents: 293

My family paid the complete cost of childcare	212
My family paid a portion of the cost	15
Worforce child care subsidy	43
Child care provider discount scholarship	11
City of Austin child care program	7
Employer child care program discount	8
We did not pay for child care	24
Other	12

Other Responses:

Austin Recovery
Austin Recovery
CPS
Dependent Care FSA
FSA
I pay out of pocket if I need a sitter. I also have a copay for CCMS daycare. 110$ a month, so I can't often afford a sitter.
If need to pay I would
Out of pocket
Own money

Salvation Army Shelter
We paid for it

Q9. How important is it to you that your child care provider has a quality accreditation? (For example: Texas Rising Star (TRS), National Accreditation Commission (NAC), or National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC))
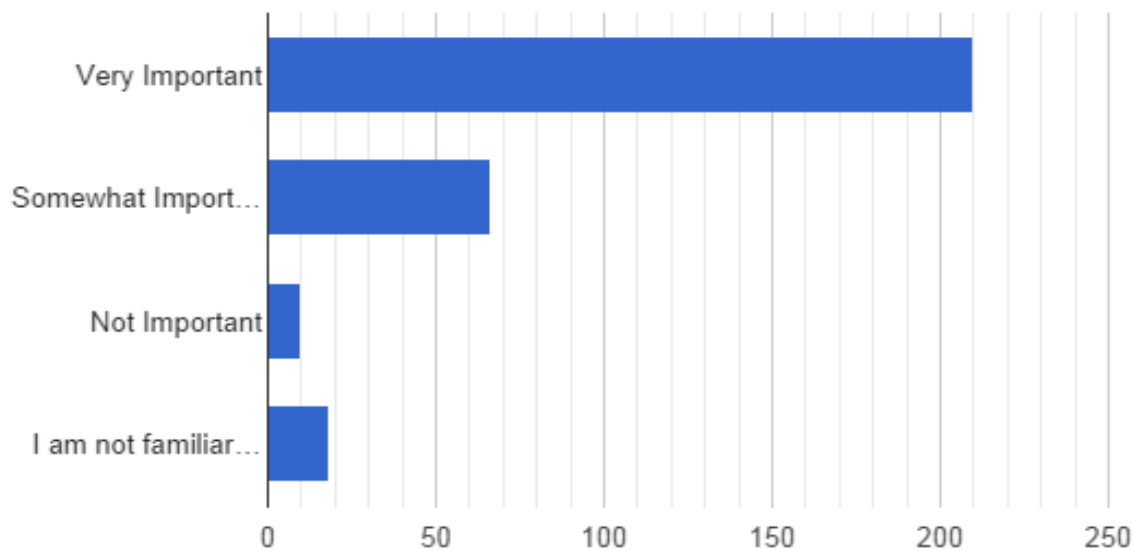
Total Respondents: 304

Very Important	210
Somewhat Important	66
Not Important	10
I am not familiar with quality accreditations	18

Q10. What makes it difficult to arrange child care
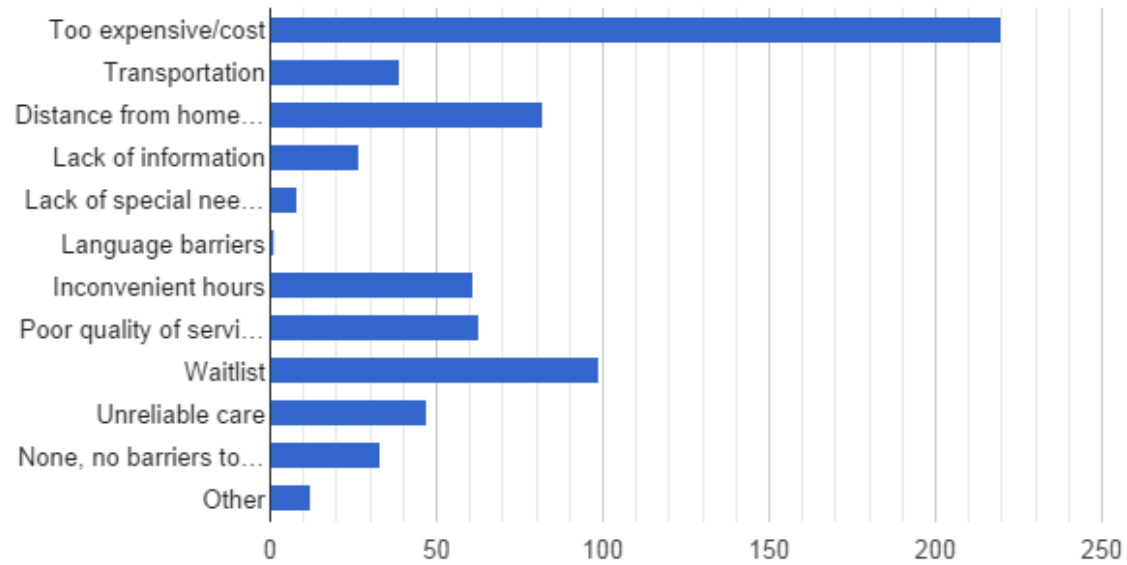
Total Respondents: 293

Too expensive/cost	220
Transportation	39
Distance of child care from home/work	82
Lack of information about child care	27
Lack of special needs services	8
Providers don't speak my home language	1
Hours don't fit my work/school schedule	61
Quality of services/care is not satisfactory	63
No spaces available, there is a waitlist	99
Care is not always reliable	47
None, no barriers to finding child care	33
Other	12

Other Responses:

Austin needs more daycares!!!
Day care closing often (ice days)
Don't qualify
Don't want to leave my child with someone else
My child has separation anxiety
N/A
N/A
No background checks and not approved by foster agency/CPS
Not difficult

Not flexible times
Some schools have holidays and it is close to impossible to find back up center care for an infant.
The child care workers at my son's school are not paid enough to afford cars, so they are not available to babysit (transportation to my home) even though they are the best qualified

Q11. How did you find your current child care provider?
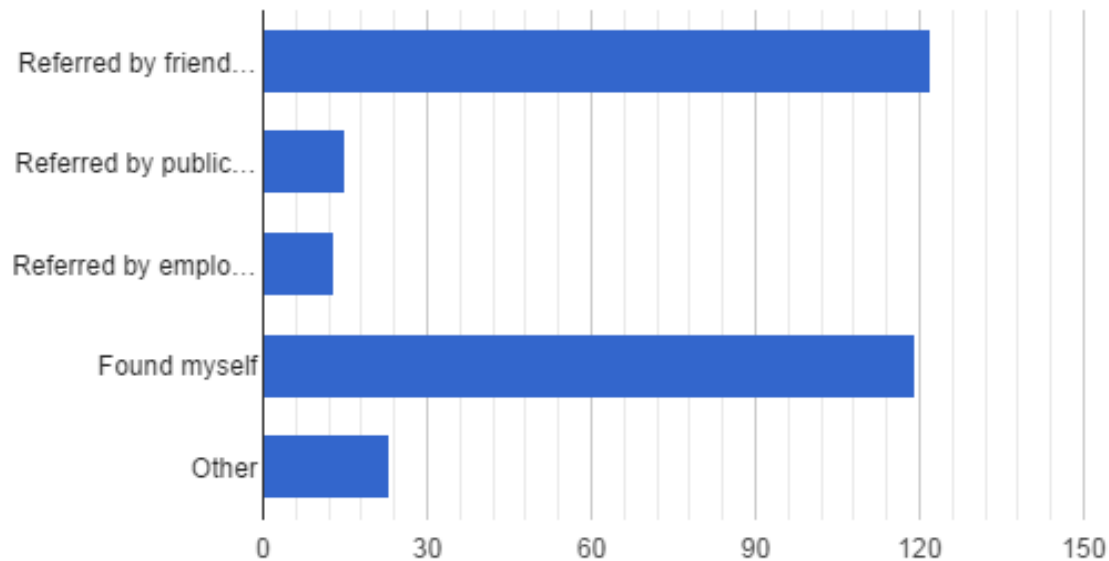
Total Respondents: 292

Referred by friend or relative	122
Referred by public/Non-profit agency	15
Referred by employer	13
Found myself	119
Other	23

Other Responses:

Austin Recovery and they arranged it
Based at my workplace
Care.com
Church
CPS and AR
CPS/Austin Recovery
Craigslist
Employee to center
Family member

If I need or needed a child care provider I would found myself
Mother
My church home school and we love it
Neighborhood known
Neighborhood list serve
None
Referred by another child care center that couldn't accommodate children with special needs
Referred by other child care provider
Workplace has one
Yelp

Q12. If you have a three year old child, would you enroll them in a half-day, public pre-kindergarten program?
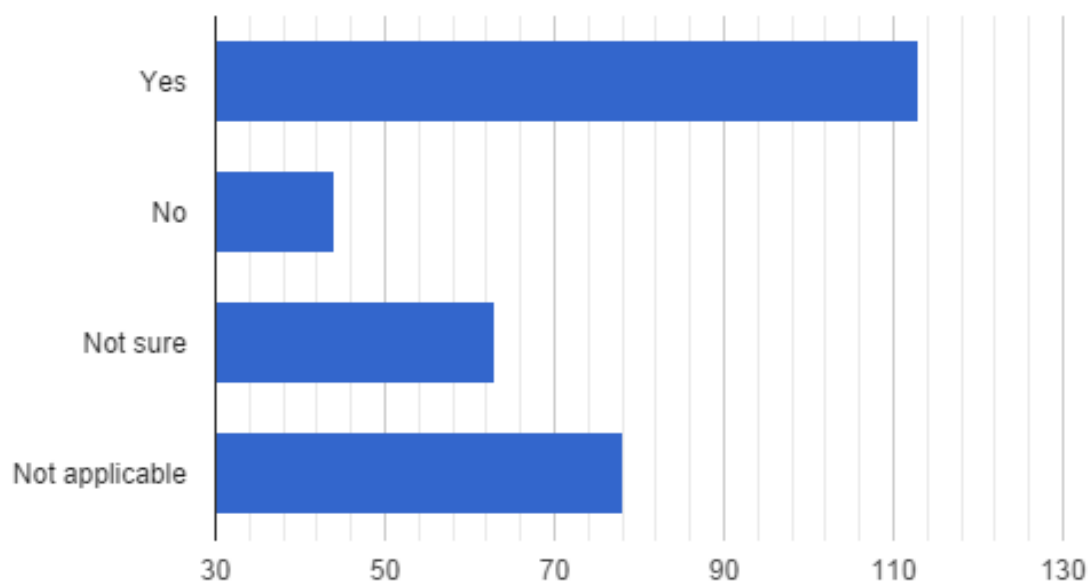
Total Respondents: 298

Yes	113
No	44
Not sure	63
Not applicable	78

Health Services

Q13. Did your children under 6 years old receive a well-check appointment with a doctor between birth and 1 years old?
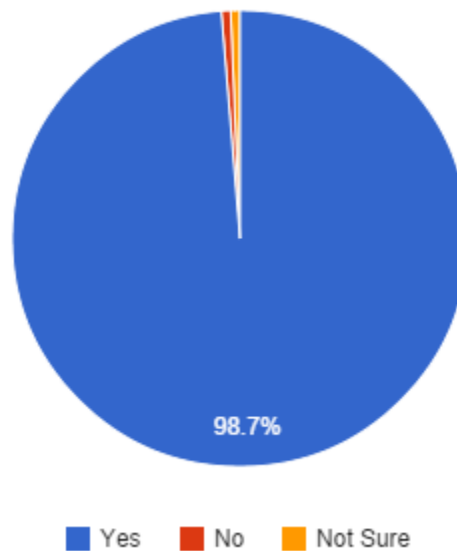
Total Respondents: 305

Yes	301
No	2
Not Sure	2

Q14. Are your children under 6 years old current on their immunizations?
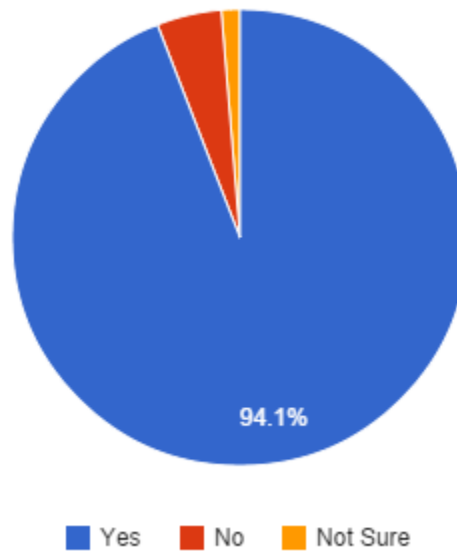
Total Respondents: 305

Yes	287
No	14
Not Sure	4

Q15. Do your children under 6 years old get a yearly physical exam from a doctor?
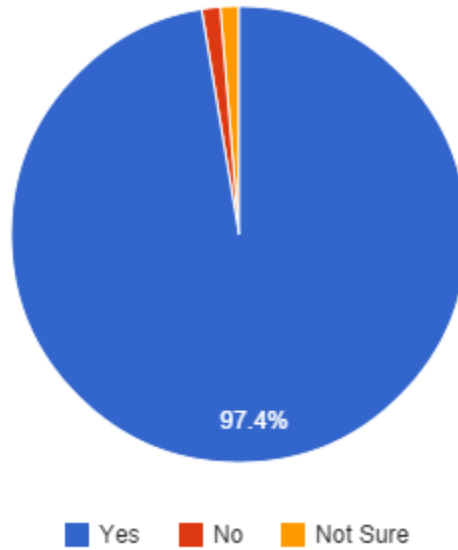
Total Respondents: 304

Yes	296
No	4
Not Sure	4

Q16. Does your family have a regular family doctor who you can talk to about your child's health?

95.7%

■ Yes   ■ No   ■ Not Sure
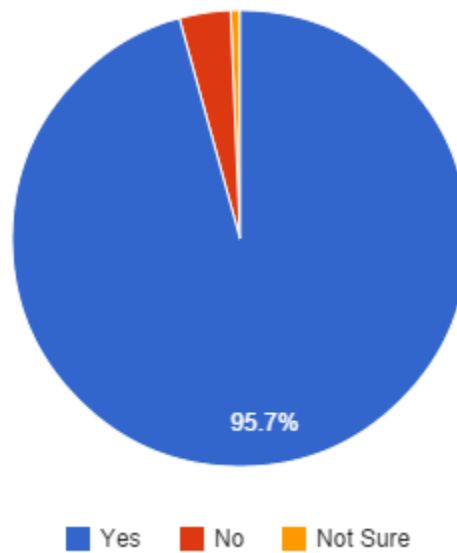
Total Respondents: 303

Yes	290
No	11
Not Sure	2

Q17. Do your children under 6 years old get a yearly dental check-up from a dentist?
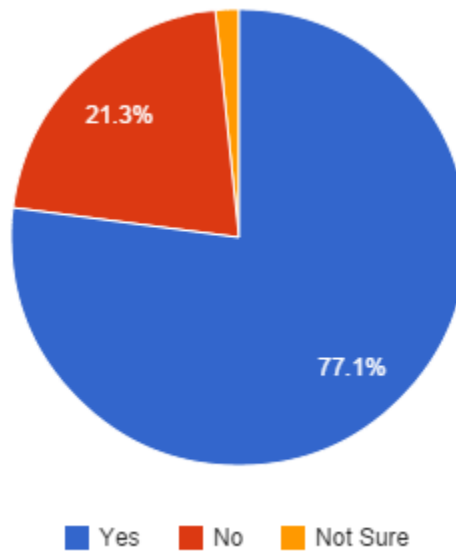
Total Respondents: 301

Yes	232
No	64
Not Sure	5

Demographics
Q18. What is your location?
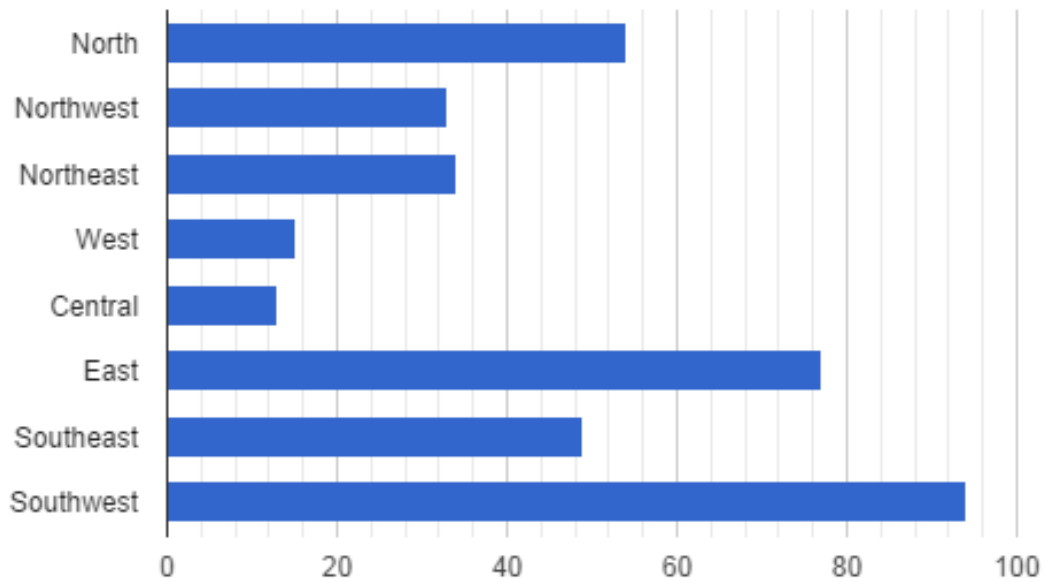
Total Respondents: 382

North	54
Northwest	33
Northeast	34
West	15
Central	13
East	77
Southeast	49
Southwest	94

Q19. Which race or ethnicity do you identify with? (For parent or guardian)
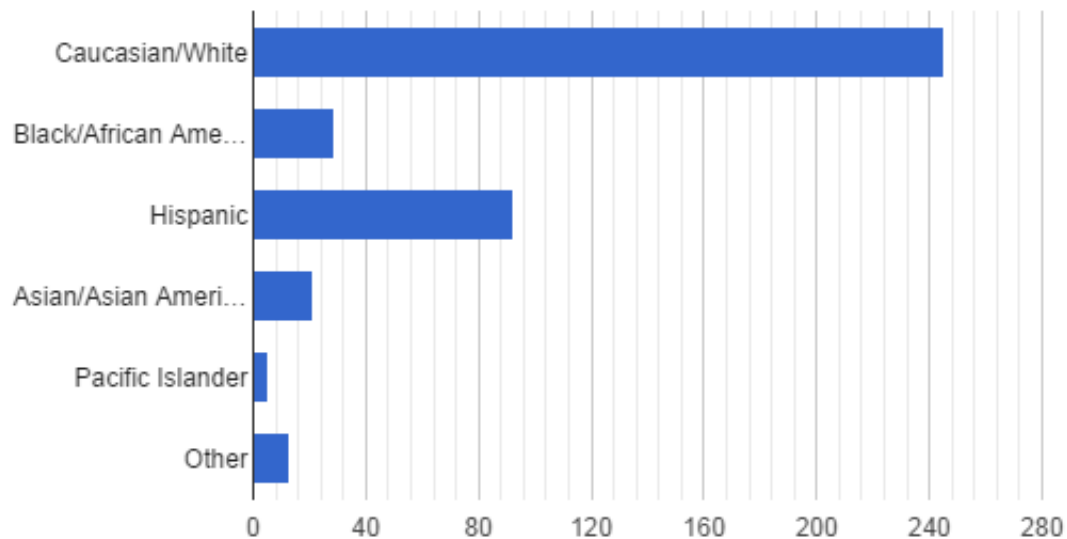
Total Respondents: 371

Caucasian/White	245 (66%)
Black/African American	29 (7.8%)
Hispanic	92 (24.8%)
Asian/Asian American	21 (5.7%)
Pacific Islander	5 (1.3%)
Other	13 (3.5%)

Other Responses:

Hispanic/asian
Human
Italian/Puerto Rican
Mexican
Mexican American
Mix
Mongrel
Native American

Q20. What is your household income?
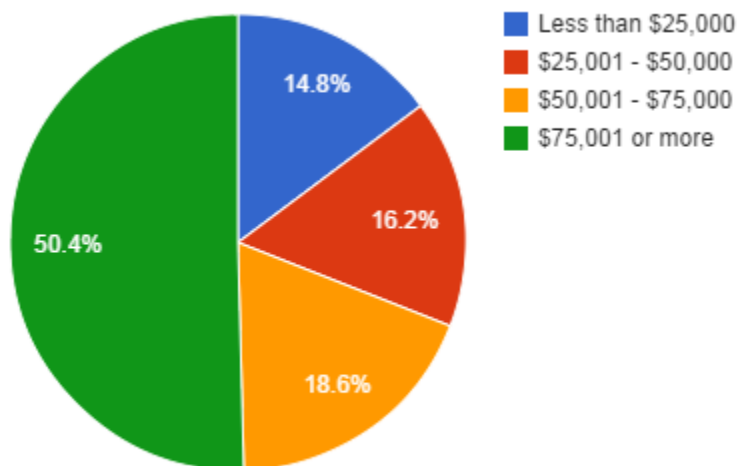
Total Respondents: 365

Less than $25,000	54
$25,001 - $50,000	59
$50,001 - $75,000	68
$75,001 or more	184

Q21. What is your highest education level?
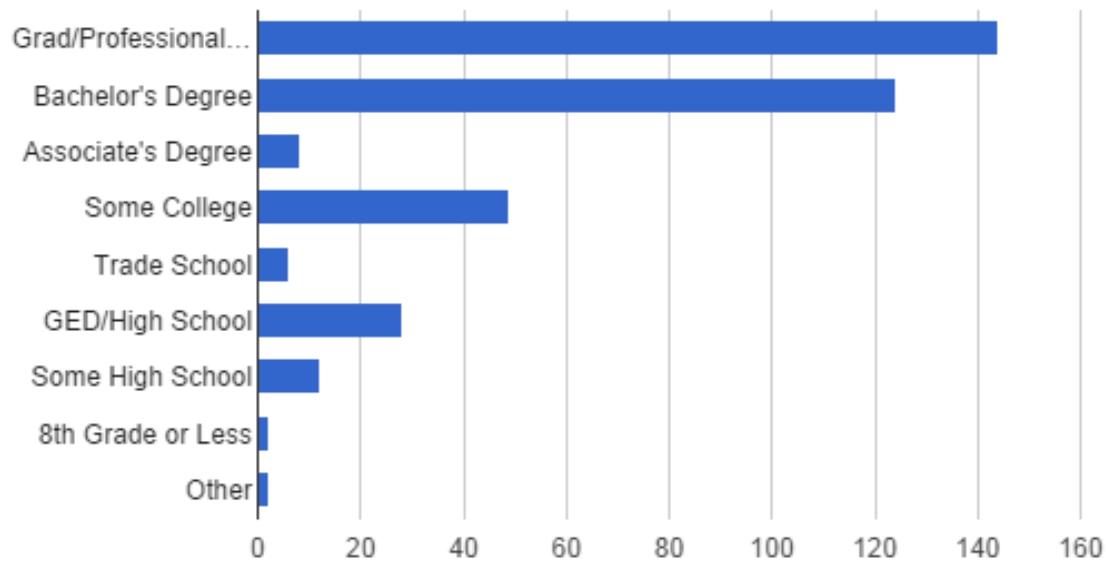
Total Respondents: 375

Grad/Professional Degree	144 (38.4%)
Bachelor's Degree	124 (33.1%)
Associate's Degree	8 (2.1%)
Some College	49 (13.1%)
Trade School	6 (1.6%)
GED/High School	28 (7.5%)
Some High School	12 (3.2%)
8th Grade or Less	2 (0.5%)
Other	2 (0.5%)

Q21. Since your youngest child was born, how often have you moved to a different home?
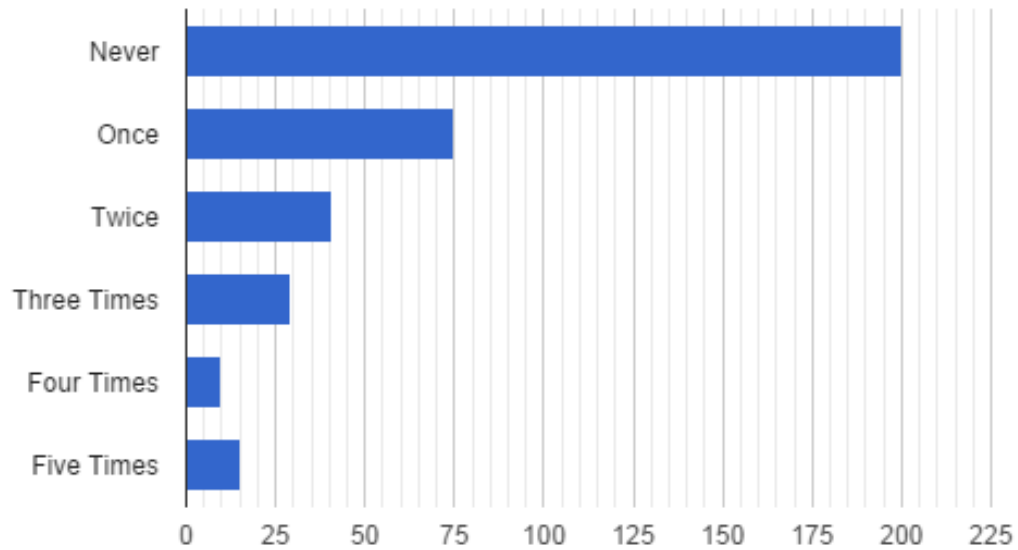
Total Respondents: 370

Never	200 (54.1%)
Once	75 (20.3%)
Twice	41 (11.1%)
Three Times	29 (7.8%)
Four Times	10 (2.7%)
Five Times	15 (4.1%)

Q22. What is your marital status?
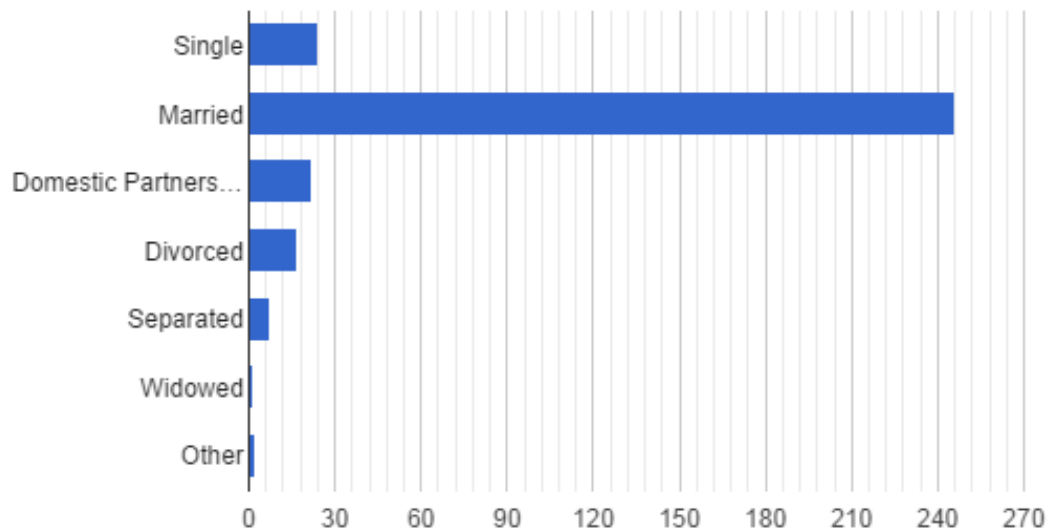
Total Respondents: 319

Single	24 (7.5%)
Married	246 (77.1%)
Domestic Partnership	22 (6.9%)
Divorced	17 (5.3%)
Separated	7 (2.2%)
Widowed	1 (0.3%)
Other	2 (0.6%)

Q22. Including you, how many adults (18 years old and older) live in your household?
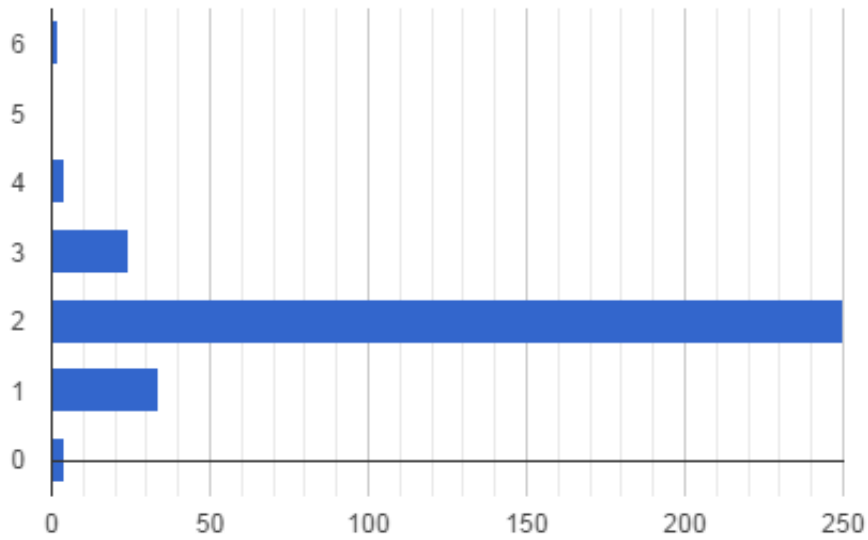
Total Respondents: 316

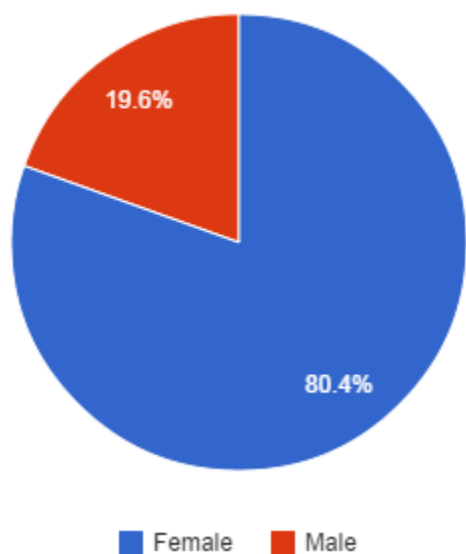|	
0	4
1	34
2	250
3	24
4	4
5	0
6	2

Q23. How many children (17 years old and under) live in your household?
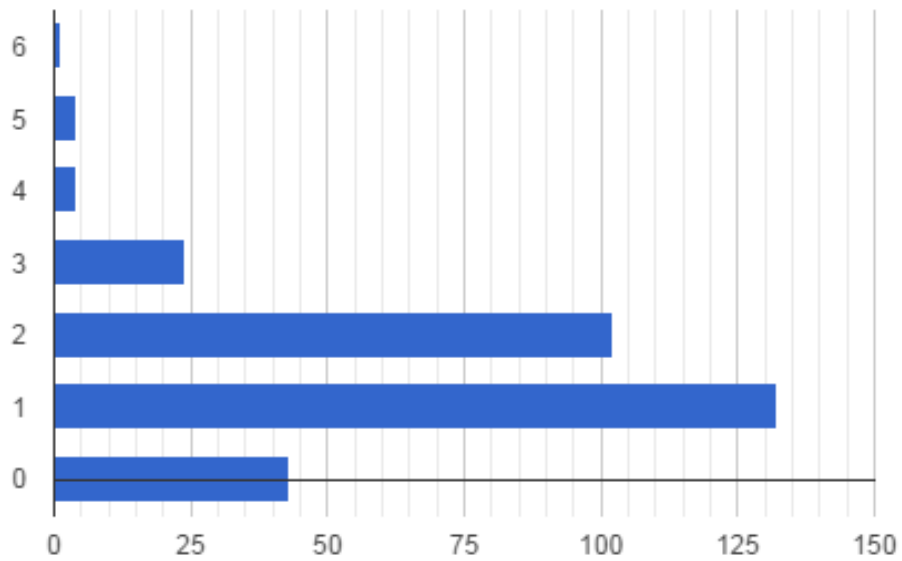
Total Respondents: 316

0	43
1	132
2	102
3	24
4	4
5	4
6	1

Q24. What is your gender?

Total Respondents: 317

Female	255
Male	62

Q25. What is your age?
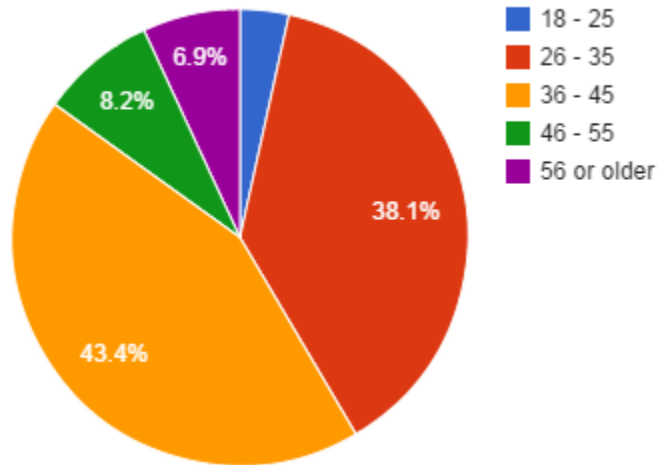
Total Respondents: 318

18 - 25	11
26 - 35	121
36 - 45	138
46 - 55	26
56 or older	22

Q26. What is your employment status?
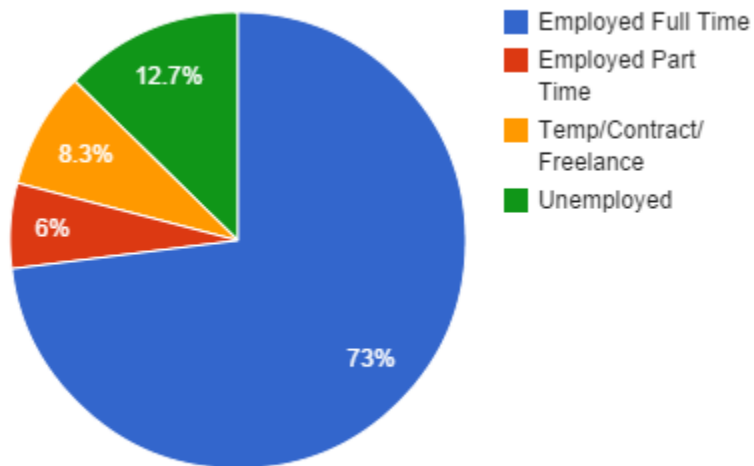
Total Respondents: 315

Employed Full Time	230
Employed Part Time	19
Temp/Contract/Freelance	26
Unemployed	40

Q27. I would like to...
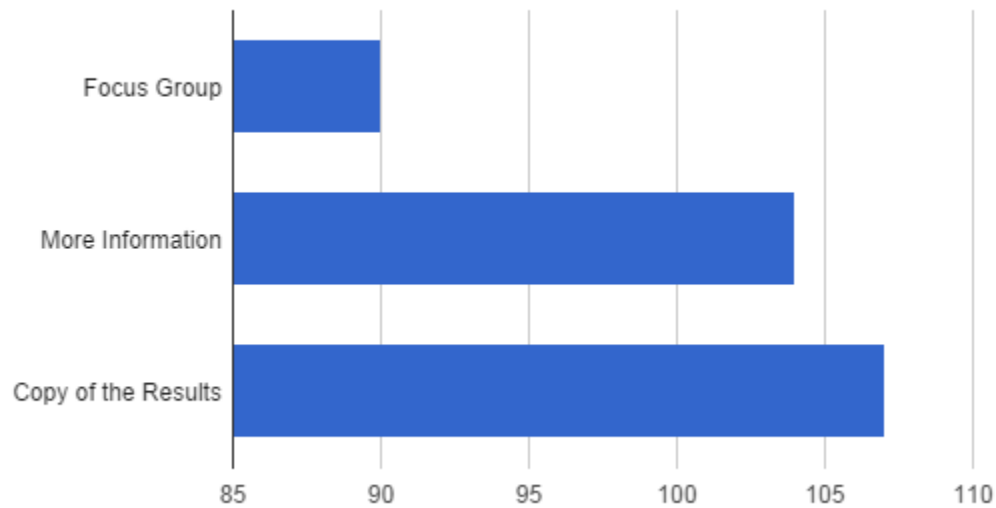
Total Respondents: 161

I want to participate in a focus group	90
I would like more information about this project	104
I would like a copy of the results of this project	107

Appendix B:

Facilitator's Script & Focus Group Questions

Note: The opening greeting can be put into your own words, to make it more natural for you. However, make sure to fully explain the purpose and general guidelines mentioned in the following narrative.

Welcome/Background Information

Welcome to our Early Childhood Parent Engagement Focus Group. Thank your for taking the time to talk about your experiences as parents with young children in Austin/Travis County.

 My name is _____ and I'll be facilitating the discussion. This is _____, and he/she will be using the laptop to take notes.

The **purpose** of our Community Conversation is to find out what public and private services parents and families need to help them raise their children. For the last 3 years, Austin/Travis County has had a community-wide School Readiness Action Plan to guide decisions about services that will help all children enter kindergarten happy, healthy, smart, and ready for school. We've met some of the goals in the plan, but not all. It is time for us to develop a plan for the next three years and we want to hear from parents with children under 6 years old to make sure the plan addresses the most important concerns and needs of families and caregivers in our community.

We have a few **general guidelines** for our Community Conversation today:

- All ideas, experiences, and opinions are valuable.
- There are not right or wrong answers to any of the questions.
- Please be respectful of other members, and only one person talking at a time.
- We will be typing/recording what you share with us today. <u>Personal information is confidential; no one will be identified by name in our report. Your comments will remain anonymous</u>.

Introductions: (Note: this is primarily for groups that aren't already familiar with each other.)

To get started, let's go around the room and share your first name, the age of your child or children under 6 years old, and how long you've lived in Austin/Travis County.

Focus Group Questions:

Let's begin our discussion with a general question.

1. What are the top hopes you have for your child (while they are between the ages of birth and 5 years old)?

Now let's talk about information for parenting children under 6 years old.

2. Babies and young children do not come with instruction manuals. Where do you go to find answers to your parenting questions and concerns?
3. As a parent of a child under six, what other types of support would be helpful?

Now let's talk about child care and early education for your young children.

4. Where do you go for information about childcare and about educational opportunities for young children?
5. What do you look for when choosing someone to care for your child? What is important to you about the people and places where your child is cared for?
6. What is difficult or hard about finding what you want?

Next, we'd like to talk about children's health.

7. Different people have different ideas about what makes a child healthy. What does it mean to you for your child to be healthy?
8. What is important to you about the people and places that help you keep your child healthy?
9. What other support or services would be helpful?

We have one last question.

10. Is there anything else you think we should know about being a parent in our community?

Closing Comments & Other Information:

- Thank everyone for coming and sharing their input!!
- Pass out a $10 HEB gift card to each participant
    - We need each participant to sign in (just name and signature) for documentation purposes. Send the sign-in sheet to Tara to submit to WFS.
- Demographics Form – Pass out demographics form and pencils/pens.
    - Ask participants to complete the demographics form. (It's OK to do this before or after the focus group, whatever works best for the specific group.)
    - Inform participants that the questions are optional, but will help us with our study.
    - Ask participants to put the completed forms in an envelope. Identify a specific location in the room or pass the envelope around the circle.
- If anyone wants additional information about the results of our study, refer them to the City of Austin, Public Information office at 512-974-2324.

Tell us about you

The City of Austin values input from all of its residents. To make sure everyone's voice is being heard, we ask for you to provide the following demographic information.

Thank You.

Your ZIP code:

_____

How many children under 6 years old do you have?

_____

How old are your children? (Under 6 years old)

_____

What race or ethnicity do you identify with?

- ☐ Caucasian/White
- ☐ Black/African-American
- ☐ Hispanic/Latino
- ☐ Asian/Asian-American
- ☐ Pacific Islander
- ☐ Other

What is your household income?

- ☐ Less than $25,000
- ☐ $25,001 - $50,000
- ☐ $50,001 - $75,000
- ☐ $75,001 – or more

Appendix C:

Early Childhood Parent Input Project: Focus Group Themes

The following tables list themes that emerged from focus groups. The number of focus groups that answered each question (noted by the number in parentheses) varies, because some focus groups did not answer every question. The count, noted in the right hand column, refers to the number of focus groups that mentioned each theme.

Question 1: What are the top hopes you have for your child? (16 focus groups)

Theme	Count
Ready for school and learning: short term (during the early years)	11
Social skills with peers	8
Ready for school and learning: long term (for college and future success as an adult)	7
Emotionally healthy and happy	7
Health: good health and healthy practices	6
Safety	5
Connection to supportive parents and adults	5
Free from bullying	4
Independent, sense of self	4
Involved in enrichment activities	2
Health: access to services	2
Connection to a larger community	2

Question 2: Where do you go to find answers to your parenting questions and concerns? (11 focus groups)

Theme	Count
Family members	7
Child care providers and schools	7
Internet	7
Community and social organizations (including churches)	6
Parent education programs	6
Friends and other parents	5
Medical community (including doctors, clinics, and WIC)	4
Written resources	3
Personal experience	2

Question 3: As a parent of a child under six, what other types of support would be helpful? (11 focus groups)

Theme	Count
Parenting information	6
Enrichment programs	4
Comprehensive referral systems (including information, and navigation)	3
Supportive, quality child care programs	3
Low-cost programs	2

Safe places for physical activity	2
Economic support (financial and employment assistance)	2
Social service programs or counseling	2
Basic needs assistance (housing and transportation)	1
Programs outside of normal business hours	1

Question 3b[1]: As a parent of a child under six, what types of information or resources do families with young children need? (5 focus groups)

Theme	Count
Nutritional information	3
Quality medical care and resources	3
Parenting information	3
Basic needs assistance (including food, housing, diapers, etc.)	2
Child care	1

Question 4: Where do you go for information about child care and about educational opportunities for young children? (11 focus groups)

Theme	Count
Social service agencies and community resources	7
Word of mouth (family & friends)	6
Internet	5
Personal visits and tours of the facility	4
TX DSHS licensing website	3
Employers	1
NAEYC	1

Question 5: What do you look for when choosing someone to care for your child? (16 focus groups)

Theme	Count
Health & Safety (includes cleanliness)	16
Caregiver and child interaction	10
Trust and comfort level	9
Staff qualifications	8
Curriculum and activities	7
Affordable/Cost	6
Licensing	6
Location	5
Food & nutrition	5
Ratio	5
Care by relatives and friends	3
Diversity & Language	3
Referrals from other parents or friends	2
Accreditation	2
Transportation	2

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[1] Question 3b was only included in the short version of the focus group questions.

Provider's hours	1

Question 6: What is difficult or hard about finding what you want? (14 focus groups)

Theme	Count
Cost	11
Location	9
Waitlists and availability (includes availability of infant care)	7
Provider's hours	6
Resource and information	6
Applying for subsidy (includes customer service)	4
Finding a "quality" program	4
Trusting the provider	3
Language	2

Question 7: Different people have different ideas about what makes a child healthy. What does it mean to you for your child to be healthy? (13 focus groups)

Theme	Count
Physically healthy (include healthy development and being free from illness)	13
Proper nutrition	10
Emotional & mentally health	9
Active (including access to safe outdoor areas)	9
Access to medical and dental care	5

Question 8: What is important to you about the people and places that help you keep your child healthy? (15 focus groups)

Theme	Count
Interactions with parents, customer service	10
Cleanliness & Safety	8
Interactions with children, providers care about children	8
Affordable or accepts insurance	5
Good nutrition	5
Availability	3
Enrichment activities	3

Question 9: What other support or services would be helpful? (10 focus groups)

Theme	Count
"Other" classes for parents	5
Child development and parenting classes	4
Resources & Referrals	4
Child care	3
Classes for children (including summer programs)	3
Nutritional information and classes	3
Safe recreational areas/programs	2
Public health and safety	1

Question 10: Is there anything else you think we should know about being a parent in our community? (14 focus groups)

Theme	Count
Parents want to be involved: parenting support, involvement, groups, and inclusivity	7
Parenting is stressful	7
Parents want safe, accessible outdoor parks and activities	4
Parents want accessible and transparent information about early education and care resources	3
Parents want affordable & accessible quality child care	3
Parents are concerned about the cost of living	3
Transportation & mobility (including sidewalks, bike lanes, etc.) is a concern	2
Safety is important	1