

Executive Summary

**Informing child care on the
San Mateo County Coastside**



A study of parents' child care and
development needs



The Institute for the Study of Knowledge Management In Education

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Executive Summary

There is limited knowledge regarding the child care needs of parents on the San Mateo County Coastsides. That which does exist suggests grave shortages of licensed child care spaces in San Mateo County's Mid and South Coastsides regions (Owen, Hoepke & Cho, 2000). In the Mid Coast, the population of children 0-13 years of age is estimated at 5,399, with 71 percent living within a family that consists of two working parents or a single working parent. Yet, the number of spaces in licensed family child care homes totaled 362, while the number of full-time spaces in licensed child care centers totaled 248, and the number of part-time spaces totaled 363 (Owen, Hoepke & Cho, 2000). For the South Coast, the population of children 0-13 years of age numbers 478, of whom approximately 69 percent live in a family with two working parents or a single working parent. The number of spaces in licensed child care homes totaled 38, while the number of full-time spaces in licensed child care centers totaled zero, and the number of part-time spaces totaled 103 (Owen, Hoepke & Cho, 2000).

In light of existing data indicating shortfalls in meeting child care and development needs for Coastsides families, the Institute for the Study of Knowledge Management in Education (ISKME) conducted a study to explore child care and development needs among Coastsides parents in greater depth. The specific aim of the study has been to determine whether and how parents are currently meeting their child care needs, as well as their perceived successes and challenges with their current care arrangements. Data were gathered for the study through a survey with Spanish and English speaking parents, specifically in the Mid and South Coastsides communities of Montara, Moss Beach, El Granada, Half Moon Bay, Pescadero, La Honda, and San Gregorio. Subsequently, four focus groups were conducted with a subset of the survey participants, in several of the Mid and South Coastsides communities. Working through multiple channels including local media, elementary schools, community centers, county organizations, online parent groups, and child care providers, this study seeks to contribute to the growth of public knowledge regarding Coastsides child care, and to improved child care services and resources for Coastsides families.

Findings

The findings that follow are from ISKME's analysis of survey data from 541 parents, representing 792 Coastsides children, ages 0-12. The findings also include analysis of data from four focus groups with a total of 23 parents, most of whom completed the survey.

Child Care Arrangements

- *Parents use a mix of types of care to meet their needs.* Overall, parents draw on a combination of types of care for each of their children, including both formal care options and informal care options. The most commonly reported type on the survey

was informal care, which includes care by parents themselves, by relatives, and by non relatives (72 percent), followed by formal, center-based care, which includes infant and toddler, preschool, and after elementary school care (52 percent), and licensed family child care homes (11 percent). Focus groups indicated that parents seek additional solutions usually because one type of care does not meet all child care needs.

- *Predominant type of care varies by parent/child populations.* The survey revealed that a higher percentage of Caucasian children (71 percent) were enrolled in infant and toddler and preschool care than Latino children (20 percent). A much higher percentage of Caucasian children (85 percent) were also in licensed family child care homes than Latino children (3 percent). The only type of care that Latino children were reported to be in more of was care by a non relative (53 percent for Latino children and 41 percent for Caucasian children). In terms of income level, a much lower percentage of middle-income children (11 percent) and low-income children (25 percent) were reported to be in infant and toddler care and preschool than high-income children (65 percent).
- *Cost, convenience, and perceptions about children's welfare and development influence child care choices.* Across all types of care, the most common factors reported on the survey (open-ended responses) were cost and convenience. For informal types of care, other factors cited include beliefs that children are better off when raised by family or other trustworthy individuals, followed by perceptions that informal care provides a more caring environment for children. Parents using infant and toddler care and preschool also frequently cited opportunities for child socialization and preparation for kindergarten as factors; homework assistance emerged as a key reason for choosing after-elementary school care. In the case of licensed family child care homes, a home-like environment and the quality of care were cited as additional factors.

Satisfaction with Current Child Care Arrangement

- *Overall, parents are satisfied with their current child care arrangement.* On average, across all types of care, parents indicated on the survey that they are satisfied with their current child care arrangement for the majority of children (87 percent). The percentage of those satisfied were highest for infant and toddler, preschool, and parental-based care, which were all at approximately 92 percent.
- *However, for some parent populations and for some types of care, satisfaction with current child care arrangements was less.* Low-income parents expressed the least overall satisfaction with their child care arrangements on the survey, when comparing level of satisfaction by income level. When comparing level of satisfaction by type of care used, parents using care by an older sibling and by a non relative were the least satisfied. Parents in the South Coastside region reported less overall satisfaction with current child care arrangements than parents in the Mid Coastside region.

- *Overall, a low percentage of parents want to change to another child care arrangement, excepting certain types of informal care.* For 64 percent of the children represented on the survey, parents did not want to change to another type of arrangement; an interest in changing to another arrangement was reported for only 19 percent, while uncertainty about whether they would like to make a change was reported for the remaining 17 percent. The percentage of those wanting to change increased when looking specifically at care by an older sibling (32 percent) or by a non relative (36 percent).
- *For those parents who do want to make a change to another arrangement, lower cost, closer location, and enhanced child development opportunities were prominent reasons.* For children in informal care, the primary reason for wanting to change cited on the survey (open-ended responses) and in focus groups was enhanced opportunities for their children’s development, either academically, socially, or culturally through arts enrichment activities at formal care providers. For children in formal care (both center-based and family child care homes), a convenient, closer location, and lower cost surfaced as prominent reasons for wanting to change to another arrangement.
- *Factors preventing parents from changing to another child care arrangement included cost, location, and availability of child care spaces.* For all types of child care, cost, location, and lack of available spaces in a preferred child care option were cited as common reasons for not making a change on the survey (open-ended responses).
- *Affordability and scheduling reported as the most common child care challenges.* The most common child care challenge reported on the survey and in the focus groups was the high cost of care, followed by difficulties in finding care to match work schedules. Regarding cost, the majority of parents reported that they pay full tuition (80 percent) for child care, while a lower percentage of parents receive government assistance (6 percent), a reduced rate from provider (4 percent), fee assistance from employer (2 percent), scholarship (2 percent), or “other” fee arrangements (8 percent).

Satisfaction with and Importance of Specific Aspects of Formal Care

- *Overall, parents employing formal care indicated satisfaction with all aspects.* The survey revealed parental satisfaction with all aspects of formal child care. Parents were most highly satisfied with the location of the child care facility, languages spoken by staff, staff experience and staff-parent communication. The focus groups also revealed high satisfaction with how formal care providers treated children, specifically in terms of fostering a feeling that each child is an individual.
- *Overall, parents employing formal care indicated all aspects are important.* The most important factors of formal care as reported by parents on the survey include communication between staff and parents and activities promoting social skills.

- *Importance placed on specific aspects of formal care varied by parent populations.* Whereas student-teacher ratio was reported on the survey as a more important aspect of formal care by Caucasian parents, cost, full-time scheduling, a facility connected to schools, homework assistance, academic development and sports activities were reported as more important by Latino parents than by Caucasian parents.

Child Care Information and Resources

- *Friends and other parents are primary information sources for child care options.* Parents most commonly found out about their current child care provider through a friend (58 percent). Other sources of information included: a local parent group (12 percent), community center (11 percent) and the Internet (5 percent).
- *Online discussion groups, community bulletin boards and public parks facilitate parental connections around child care.* Focus groups revealed that parents with Internet access sought child care information through parent-initiated online discussion groups (such as Coastside Mothers' Club and GreenMoms), in addition to local meeting places, such as playgrounds. Community bulletin boards provided information for parents in rural areas, such as La Honda. Parents without access to the Internet indicated that they sought information about child care from fellow parents and from community centers (such as Puente Community Resource Center in Pescadero).
- *Parents want additional ways to find out about child care and to connect with other parents on child care issues.* Parents would like additional online and face-to-face sources of child care information and child care networking possibilities. Focus groups revealed that some parents have had difficulty accessing child care information, especially new arrivals to a community and parents whose immigration status prevents them from seeking formal resources.
- *Parents are proactively exploring ways to address child care needs.* Focus group participants pointed to current and future planned activities for addressing their own child care needs, as well as those of the wider Coastside community. For example, parents reported grassroots efforts to form babysitting and child care cooperatives to address the lack of available spaces and the high costs of care. A few parents expressed interest in supporting lower income parents who cannot afford child care, through offering time or money.

Opportunities and Conclusions

The findings suggest that Coastside parents are by and large, satisfied with their current care arrangements. However, this study also reveals that for some types of care, and for some parent populations, more supports are, in fact, needed. The section below addresses some of the Coastside child care and development opportunities stemming from the

findings, specifically for policy makers, support organizations, child care providers, schools, and parents.

- *For policy makers.* This study points to the need for further support for low-income and Latino families, and families from South Coastside communities, whose needs are not being met. This study also points to opportunities for policy makers to consider how policies might better facilitate new, innovative child care initiatives, including sliding-fee and pay-as-you-go models where feasible, for some parent populations. Finally, the study indicates a need for policy focused on flexible care models, and potentially even hybrid models that incorporate both formal and informal child care solutions and networks.
- *For support organizations.* Organizations supporting Coastside child care have the opportunity to facilitate or provide mechanisms for parents and other stakeholders to connect around child care to collaboratively solve problems. Additionally, supporting organizations can continue to serve as intermediaries between parent populations and policy makers, providing research, data and information gathered from parents about the Coastside's needs. Finally, supporting organizations have the opportunity to enhance their outreach to those who do not know how to find child care resources or are afraid to look.
- *For child care providers.* Overall, this study points to opportunities for providers in terms of reaching out to and servicing underserved or less satisfied parent populations. Additionally, providers might further explore opportunities to offer services that are somewhat overlooked on the Coastside, including flexible, drop in, or temporary care.
- *For schools and districts.* Schools and districts could serve as sources and channels for information sharing between parents about child care issues—either through facilitating meeting and discussion groups or advocating and spreading information about child care issues and needs. Furthermore, schools and districts could explore options for funding partnerships for child care services opportunities, as well as for combined advocacy efforts.
- *For parents.* This study has indicated that grassroots efforts and volunteer problem solving have the potential to help parents meet the full range of child care and development needs. For those parents who have not done so, it could be beneficial to access parent-initiated channels for networking around child care that have proven effective. Parents could also form new, community-based parent groups and explore ways to develop local cooperative child care solutions. Parents can proactively express their opinions to local child care support organizations and child care providers.

In conclusion, the study revealed opportunities for policy-makers, supporting organizations, child care providers, school districts and parents to improve support for Coastside child care, especially among underserved and dissatisfied populations. These

opportunities include the development of flexible care services (such as early morning care), improved channels for information sharing among parents, and school-community partnerships for funding and advocacy around Coastside child care.

References

Owen, S.M., Hoepke, K. and Cho, V. (2000). *San Mateo County Childcare Partnership Council Needs Assessment*. Child Care Coordinating Council of San Mateo. Retrieved June 9, 2009, from <http://plsinfo.org/healthysmc/pdf/childneeds.pdf>