



Kansas Parent Research Initiative 2009

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary..... 1

Agency Survey Summary..... 3

Focus Group Summary..... 4

Agency Survey Introduction..... 5

Agency Survey Results 8

Focus Group Introduction 26

Focus Group Demographics..... 27

Focus Group Responses 30

Focus Group Differences..... 36

Discussion 42

Key Findings 43

Next Steps 44

References 46

Appendix A: Name of Programs..... 47

Executive Summary

While early childhood and child welfare programs in Kansas have had some success in engaging parents at the State and program level, there remains a need for authentic parent involvement and leadership. Our systems must provide appropriate support and training to facilitate positive outcomes for children and families. Through the Kansas Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems Plan, a collaborative team identified parent involvement and leadership as a key focus area in 2009, and has partnered with Community-Based Child Abuse Prevention grantees and the Kansas Strengthening Families Plan to conduct the Kansas Parent Initiative.

The first step in the Initiative was two pronged: 1) an environmental scan of the current status of parent leadership and parent involvement in agencies across the State (data gathered through agency survey), and 2) focus groups to gather input and support from parents in defining future roles and structure of parent leadership and involvement.

The Kansas Parent Initiative used a developmental evaluation approach (Patton, 2002) that helped researchers:

- gain a deeper understanding of the ways parents define parent involvement and access supports to get the resources they need to nurture their children.
- gain a deeper understanding of how agencies utilize parent input and make programmatic changes in response.
- inform strategies in the Kansas Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems Plan and the Kansas Strengthening Families Plan to involve families at multiple levels.
- inform agency strategies to utilize parent input and deepen parent involvement.

Given the exploratory nature of the research and the complexity of the early childhood landscape, a developmental evaluation approach, which emphasizes ongoing learning and program development, was selected to guide the study. The goal of developmental evaluation is to understand the system dynamics so that programs can see the connections between elements and adapt accordingly. This study uses the Social Ecological Model as the organizing framework to understand how individuals interact with their environment, hence to better understand the context in which

parent involvement occurs (Belsky, 1980; National Research Council , 1993; Dahlberg & Krug, 2002).

Figure 1 shows the SEM and the interrelated individual, relationship, community, and societal levels.

Figure 1. Social ecological model.



Many interventions, however, only target one of these levels. To identify strategies that could maximize parent involvement, this study uses complexity theory for the systems analyses. Complexity theory views several levels of influence, including individual, family, community, and societal systems (Westley, Zimmerman, & Patton, 2006). According to the theory, individuals can be part of multiple systems, influence one another, and self-organize without a central authority (Plsek & Greenhalgh, 2001). Relationships are nonlinear and a small change can produce large effects or vice versa (Warren, Franklin, & Streeter, 1998; Manson, 2001). As a guiding framework, complexity theory enables the researcher to 1) identify continuously evolving networks of systems within the environments (Pinto, 2008; Agar, 1999), 2) document emergent behaviors (changes that were not predicted or anticipated), and 3) work within the dynamic social, economic, and political context to affect change. To capture the complex environment, this approach requires regular and frequent data collection from a variety of perspectives.

The developmental evaluation was implemented in phases to allow for learning and reflection. During Phase I of the focus groups, broad questions were posed to understand how parents conceptualize involvement. Questions were reviewed and expanded for Phase 2 of the focus groups.

The Kansas Parent Research Initiative provides a great opportunity for early childhood stakeholders to learn from and build on successes with parent involvement in other areas. Over 80 agencies completed the online survey, and over 100 parents participated in the focus groups.

Agency Survey Summary

The following provides a brief summary of the results of the Agency Survey. For detailed information on responses to specific questions, please refer to the Agency Survey Results, beginning on page 8 of this report.

- Early childhood programs in Kansas value parent involvement and make efforts to address parent involvement within their agencies in a variety of ways.
- Responses to the agency survey indicate that early childhood programs in Kansas largely define parent involvement as participation in agency services or events. Services or events commonly described include parent education classes, family nights, and participation in home visits or on-site service delivery.
- A majority of agencies indicated that they had a formal, written plan for parent involvement. Many stated that written plans were developed on an individual basis with families, and varied depending on the needs of each family. However, a quarter of the agencies reported that they had no written plan to guide parent involvement efforts.
- All agencies provided some form of incentive to encourage or facilitate parent involvement within their programs. Child care and food/meals were the most common incentives used by programs.
- Agencies indicated a wide variety of activities used to engage parents, including advisory councils, agency services, support groups, social events, and online support.
- Agencies use a variety of strategies to strengthen involvement. The most common strategies were personal invitations from staff, providing incentives (i.e. child care, food, transportation), and advertisement of services and events.
- In general, agencies indicated that they consider parents in their program as being highly involved by the agency's definition of involvement. Agencies were asked to estimate the percentage of parents that they consider to be involved in their programs. More than two-fifths of agencies indicated that over 75% of parents were involved. Another one-fifth said that half of the parents were involved.
- Many agencies lack an evaluation process to determine the effectiveness and/or outcomes of their parent involvement efforts. Most commonly used were outputs, such as a review of attendance records, and satisfaction surveys.

Focus Group Summary

The following provides a brief summary of the focus groups conducted as part of the Kansas Parent Research Initiative. For detailed descriptions of responses to specific questions and/or group summaries, please refer to the Focus Group Responses, beginning on page 30 of this report.

- Parents in general defined involvement as time spent with their children.
- In response to the agency definition of parent involvement as participation in services, parents indicated that the definition is good in theory and that they do want to have a say in agency planning. However, parents indicated that there are significant challenges to being involved in this way, including adequate time and resources. Parents suggested that if their child would also be included, they would be more likely to be involved.
- Parents shared that the top barriers to involvement are time, work requirements, financial concerns, language barriers (for those for whom English is a second language), and child care.
- Parents indicated that a strong social network (including both friends and family), community connections, statewide access to resources, financial support, and education for parents in the form of role models and resources were factors that could strengthen parent involvement. Parents wanted to know how their input/involvement would benefit their child and how it would benefit the agency.
- Parents expressed interest in having strong relationships and communication with social service agencies and child care providers working with their family. Specifically, parents indicated a desire to receive information about their child. Parents also indicated that communication from agencies should be short and to the point.
- Parents shared that their primary source of support in parenting was their extended family, including parents, grandparents, in-laws, siblings, and spouses. Social services were often referenced as a last resort for parenting information and support.
- Parents with older children (K-12) expressed different challenges to involvement than parents with younger children (birth-5). Specifically, parents with older children talked about barriers related to limited time and scheduling conflicts. Parents with younger children, on the other hand, talked about the physical and emotional strains of caring for a young child. For parents of young children, managing the daily tasks was a barrier for them being involved in other activities.
- Some parents expressed concern that if they were not involved, they would not get services.

Agency Survey Introduction

In March 2009, the Institute for Educational Research and Public Service at the University of Kansas (Institute) conducted a survey of over 80 early childhood programs in the State of Kansas as part of the Kansas Parent Initiative. While the survey is not comprehensive in terms of respondents and question content, it represents a snapshot of current perspectives from agencies concerning parent involvement across the State.

The survey questions were developed by the Institute with substantial input and approval from the Kansas Strengthening Families (KSF) Leadership Team, as well as the Early Learning Coordinating Council (ELCC), which serves as the oversight committee for the Kansas Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems Plan. Where possible, multiple choice answers were provided to survey questions to simplify survey completion and provide uniform reporting. Categories were established through input from the KSF Leadership Team and the ELCC. All multiple choice questions included an “other” category to allow agencies to provide additional information or clarification. A limited number of open-ended questions were included, and are presented in the results section. The survey was targeted at agencies that provide services to families with young children. SurveyMonkey, an online survey tool, was used as the means of data collection.

The survey was initially sent via email to the KSF Leadership Team and the ELCC members, which represents the following agencies and organizations:

- Child Advocacy and Parenting Services, Inc.
- Coalition for School Readiness
- Head Start State Collaboration Office
- Kansas Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies
- Kansas Children’s Advocacy Centers
- Kansas Children’s Cabinet and Trust Fund
- Kansas Children’s Service League
- Kansas Coordinating Council on Early Childhood Developmental Services
- Kansas Department of Health and Environment
- Kansas Head Start Association
- Kansas Parents As Teachers Association

- Kansas Department of Social and Rehabilitation Services
- Kansas State Department of Education
- Office of the Attorney General

Organizations were asked to forward the survey to individuals and agencies in their networks.

No eligibility requirements were established for survey completion. Respondents were asked to complete the survey by March 2009, reflecting on parent involvement activities over the past year. It is not known how many individuals or agencies received the survey as a result of these organizations forwarding it to their networks.

Agency Survey Analysis

The formal process of data analysis began with the online surveys. Demographic information was gathered through multiple choice (closed-response) questions and open-response questions. Closed-response questions were calculated numerically and the results were analyzed to look for patterns in the answers, including similarities and differences, as well as interesting or illuminating information between agencies. In addition, closed -response questions were reported as summary data for agencies in bar graphs to provide statistical information to draw inferences from the data. Open-ended responses were analyzed for patterns and themes. Once the patterns or themes were established, the themes were reduced to manageable proportions, which included some analysis, synthesis, and summarization. These patterns and themes were then organized and tabulated in order to depict and describe the responses.

Agency Survey Limitations

The Kansas Parent Initiative Agency Survey has several limitations that should be taken into consideration when reviewing results. The survey is a first step to capture the breadth of agency practices related to parent involvement in Kansas. The results constitute an environmental scan or snapshot of the current status of parent involvement with a focus on early childhood programs. Respondents were not required to answer all questions on the survey; thus, for most questions the

number of responses is smaller than the complete sample size. Not all respondents answered every question. Eighty-eight initiated the online survey; however 76 respondents completed the survey with an 86% completion rate. Respondents were allowed to discontinue and then return to the survey if they did not have the information necessary to answer the question available immediately.

The survey is not comprehensive in terms of respondents and question content. While every attempt was made to be inclusive, not every early childhood program in the State received or completed the survey. Similarly, the questions do not reflect all aspects of parent involvement. In addition, parent involvement is utilized through a variety of modes and formats. Finally, four of the respondents who are included in the survey results do not serve children birth through five, and two of the agencies do not directly impact parents, but serve as resource and referral agencies for other early childhood programs in the State.

The number of respondents (*n*) is reported for each question. Percentages were rounded for simplicity and thus totals may not equal 100%. For the majority of the report, “agency” and “respondents” are used to refer to both agency and individual respondents. This report includes detailed responses to each of the survey questions as well as discussion about the survey results.

Agency Survey Results

The following survey results provide detailed information about responses to each question of the agency survey. For background on the development of questions, including open and close-ended questions, please refer to the Agency Survey Introduction on pages 3-5 of this report.

Respondent Agency Demographics

Respondents were asked to select the answer that best described their agency. Of the 88 respondents, 83 (97.6%) reported belonging to one of the agencies listed in Table 1, which demonstrates the number and types of agencies represented. Those who reported “Other” were asked to provide a description, which were incorporated into the final results.

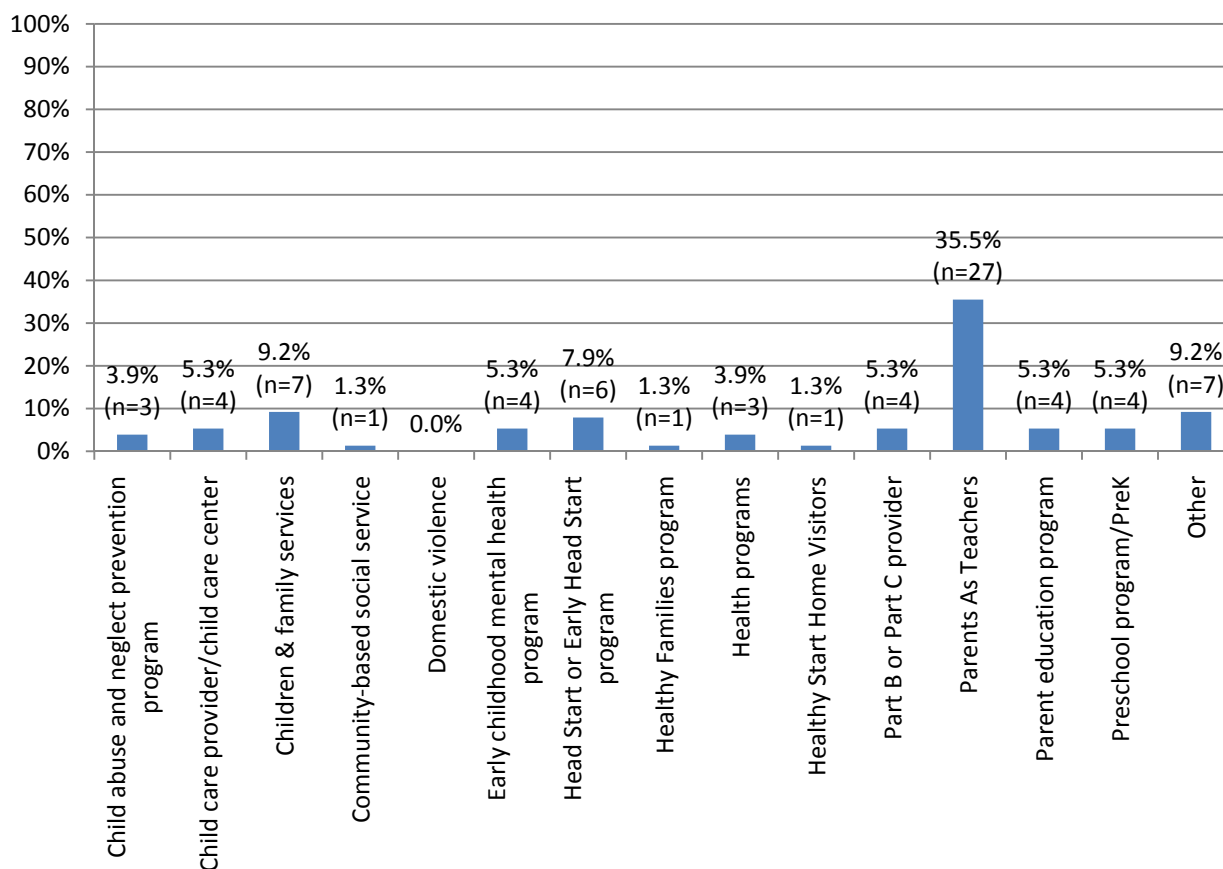
Table 1. Respondents by agency type.

Name of Agency	Number of Responses
Atchison County Dream Team	1
Child Start Inc.	1
Children’s Learning Center	1
Community Mental Health Center of Crawford	1
Douglas County CASA, Inc.	1
Family Resource Center	2
Four County Mental Health Center	2
Greater Wichita YMCA	1
Hays Head Start	1
Heartland Programs	2
Kansas Children’s Service League	3
Kansas Department of Health and Environment	5
Kansas Department of Social and Rehabilitation Services	2
Kansas Head Start Association	1
Kansas Parent Information Resource Center	1
Kansas School Districts	8
Kansas State Board of Education	1
Kansas State Department of Education	1
Mitchell County Partnership for Children	1
NEK-CAP, Inc. Head Start 0-5	1
Northeast Kansas Education Service Center	1
Oral Health Kansas	1
Parents as Teachers	21
Parsons State Hospital	1
SEK-CAP, Inc.	1
Smart Start	3
Southeast Kansas Birth to Three Program	1
Southeast Kansas Education Service Center	1
Success by 6 Coalition of Douglas County	2
The Family Conservancy	2

Type of Program

Respondents were asked to name the specific program or service with which their agency was affiliated. If the respondent worked with multiple programs, then they were invited to complete the survey again for each individual program in order to capture accurate information for each individual program. Eighty-eight agencies provided a program name (See Appendix A for the full list of programs). Agencies were then asked to select which one of the following categories best described their type of program. Results are found in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Type of program.

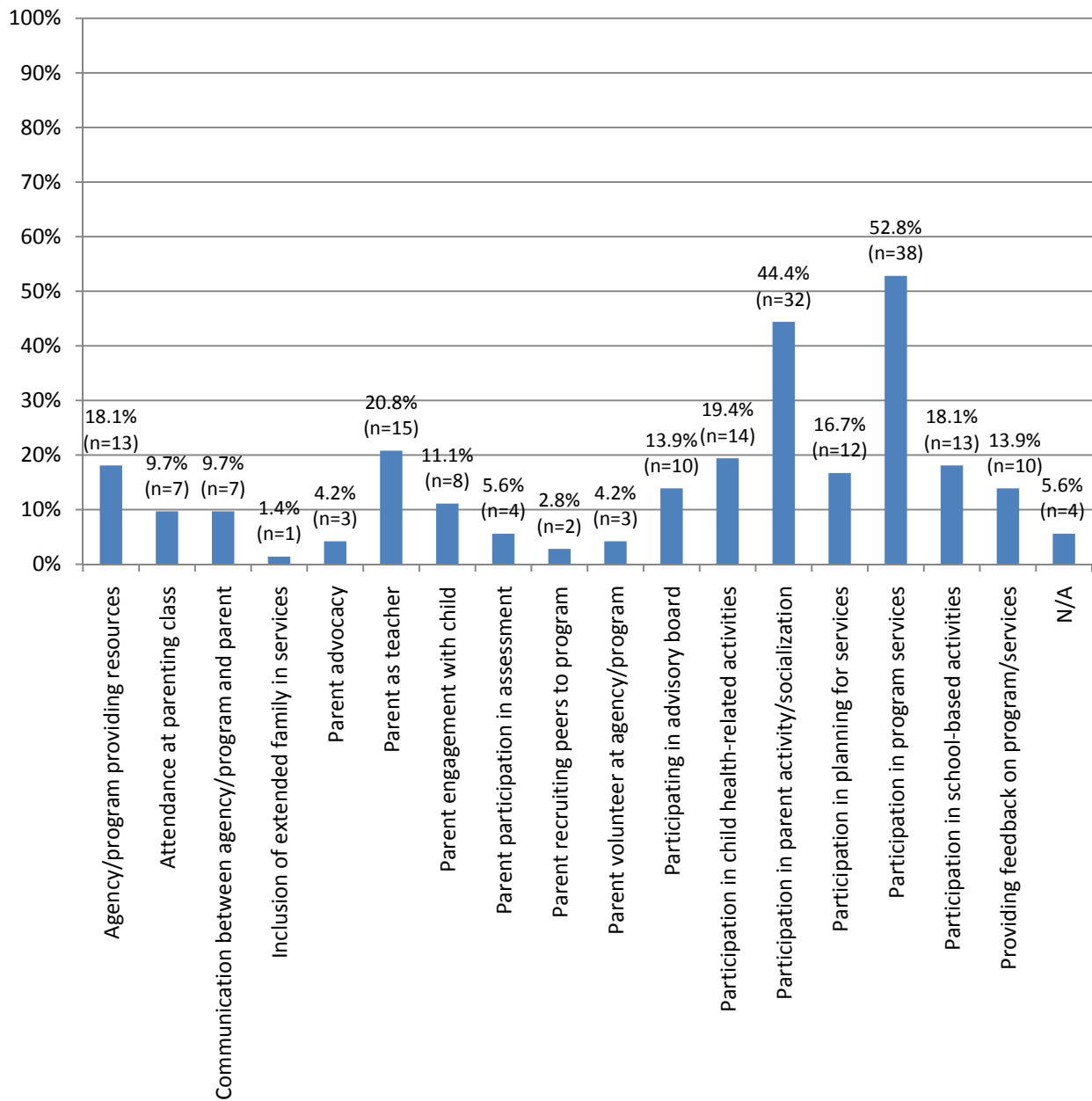


Eleven respondents that chose “Other,” provided a description of their program. Four of the “other” responses were incorporated into existing categories. Examples of the other seven responses included after school programs, professional membership organizations, and resource centers.

Program Definition of Parent Involvement

Respondents were asked to describe briefly how they define parent involvement within their agency/program. Seventy-two respondents answered this question. Answers were open-ended and were categorized according to similarities. Figure 4 shows the 18 categories that were established based on the agency/programs responses. Agencies were able to provide multiple responses.

Figure 4: Parent involvement.



Descriptions and illustrative quotes of the 18 categories are as follows:

Agency/program providing resources

(Resources included: parent handbooks, referrals to community-based resources, resource network, newsletters)

- “Our parent handbook informs parents of our open door policy and welcomes them to participate in their child’s daily activities.”
- “During the Family Nights we hand out materials from [name of program].”

Attendance at parenting class

(Parent education, parenting class, educational parent group meetings)

- “Parent involvement for the Parent Education program consists of participation in parenting classes, sharing of ideas with others...”

Communication between agency/program and parent

(Communication with the mentor, communication with parents regarding their child and the program, Communication with program volunteers)

- “Parents communicate with [name of program] volunteers regarding the needs of their children and their own needs.”
- “Communication occurs in both directions allowing for expertise and resources to be captured to address concerns.”

Inclusion of extended family in services

- “Parent involvement is a team approach, consisting of both parents, staff, and community to ensure positive development of all...children and families. Parents, grandparents, and significant others are encouraged to participate.”

Parent advocacy

- “Parents, as the key/critical person/s in the life of their child, are their most influential adult and therefore are the best advocate and primary instructor for their child/children.”

Parent as teacher

- “Sharing with parents that they are the most important teacher their child will ever have.”
- “The core values of the program are that Parents are their children’s first and most influential teachers.”
- “Being the child’s first and primary teacher on oral health knowledge, skills, and attitudes.”

Parent engagement with child

- “The ability of parents to actively engage with their children in every day moments, including play, that helps educate their child, both in education settings...and out of educational settings.”
- “Opportunities that support and strengthen a parent/guardian’s ability to be their child’s best teacher, nurturer, and advocate.”

Parent participation in assessment

- “Parent involvement for the Parent Education Program consists of...completion of a retrospective pre and post assessment.”
- “The [Name of Program] educates families, links families to services, and continually assesses needs of families by surveys and direct contact with families.”
- “Parent involvement is further reflected by their willingness to complete surveys...”

Parent recruiting peers to program

- “Parents are also the best at recruiting new families.”
- “They promote the program through word of mouth...”

Parent volunteer at agency/program

- “Individual classrooms engage parents as informational visitors (cultural, cooking projects, career, attend field trips).”
- “Parents are always more than welcome to volunteer...”
- “Providing opportunities for parents to volunteer at our centers, to enhance their parenting skills, to develop program curriculum, and possibly become staff.”

Participating in advisory board

- “Our Board of Directors includes five voting parent members.”
- “Inclusion of parents...on policy boards.”
- “Parent representatives are included on a Parent Council that meets quarterly – their input is sought on a variety of issues through this opportunity.”

Participation in child health-related activities

(Child screenings, medical health appointments, oral health)

- “Parents are involved in the development screening process (ASQ) by observations and answering questions about the skills of the child.”
- “Parent agrees to have children participate in a developmental screening annually.”

Participation in parent activity/socialization

(Parent fairs, parent activity nights, playgroups, support groups, parent meetings)

- “Center wide we have at least three functions per year, potluck/open house, carnival and book fair.”
- “Attendance and participation in an annual Parenting Fair is another way that parents are involved.”
- “Parents attend group meetings and parent/child activities.”

Participation in planning for services

(Parent involvement plan, family service plan)

- “Parent participates in the development and action steps of their Individualized Family Service Plan.”
- “Participation in the implementation of behavioral interventions and active participation in services planning for their children.”

Participation in program services

(Home visits, family therapy)

- “Engaging the parent in any services being provided to the child.”
- “We provide home visits to parents with children 0-3 yrs where pertinent child development information is shared along with ideas and suggestions to improve and strengthen development.”
- “Parents participate in court-ordered services needed to regain custody of their children.”

Participation in school-based activities

(Parent teacher conferences, school-sponsored events, observe class, read to class, attend field trips)

- “Attendance at parent/teacher conferences, meetings, open houses.”
- “Parents are always more than welcome to...observe their kids and our program.”
- “Parent participation in child’s educational experience and school sponsored events.”

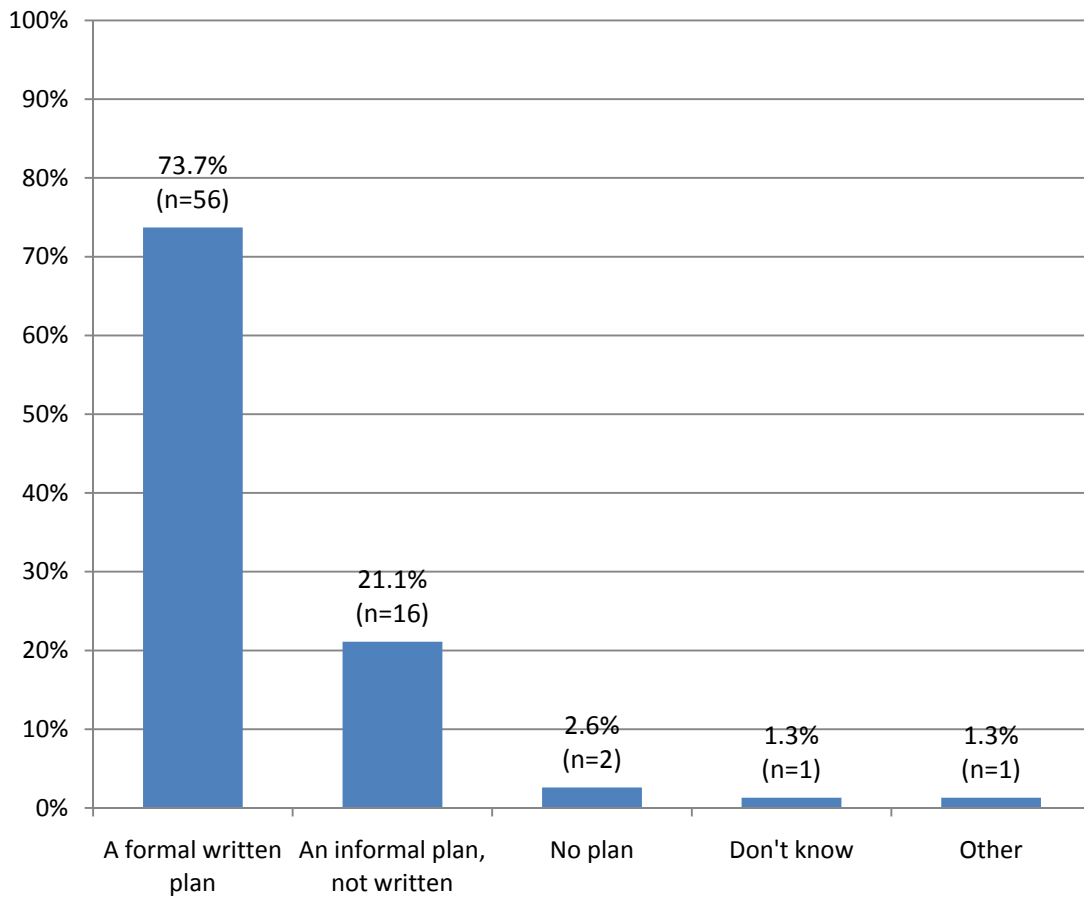
Providing feedback on program/services

- “Yearly parent evaluations of center.”
- “Parent involvement for the Parent Education Program consists of...providing feedback regarding ways to improve the program, and making suggestions about other parenting courses that would be beneficial.”
- “Parents make recommendations for program improvement both formally and informally.”

Program Plan for Parent Involvement

Agencies were asked to select which of the following categories describes their program’s plan or guidance for parent involvement. There were seventy-six respondents. A majority of the respondents indicated that they had a formal written plan for parent involvement. Figure 5 demonstrates the type of program plans for parent involvement.

Figure 5. Type of program plan for parent involvement.

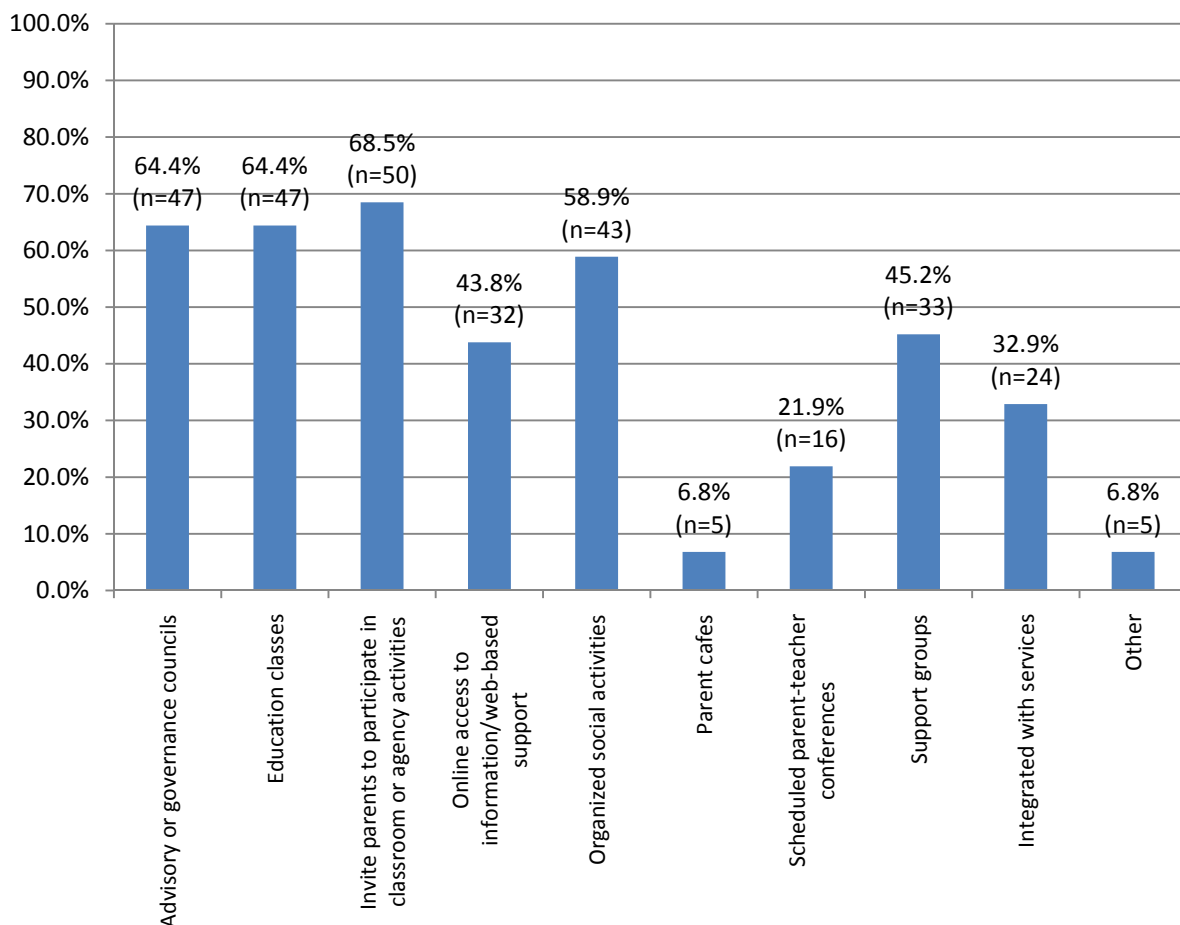


Those who reported “Other” were asked to provide a description. The “Other” category included 12 additional responses which were incorporated into existing categories. Four responses that were included into the category, “A formal written plan,” specified that their formal written plans were individualized for parents.

Activities for Parent Involvement

Respondents who had a plan for parent involvement were asked to select what types of activities their programs use to engage parents. Respondents were allowed to select all activities that applied or were used by their program. Seventy-three respondents answered this question. Results are found in Figure 6.

Figure 6: Types of activities programs use to engage parents.

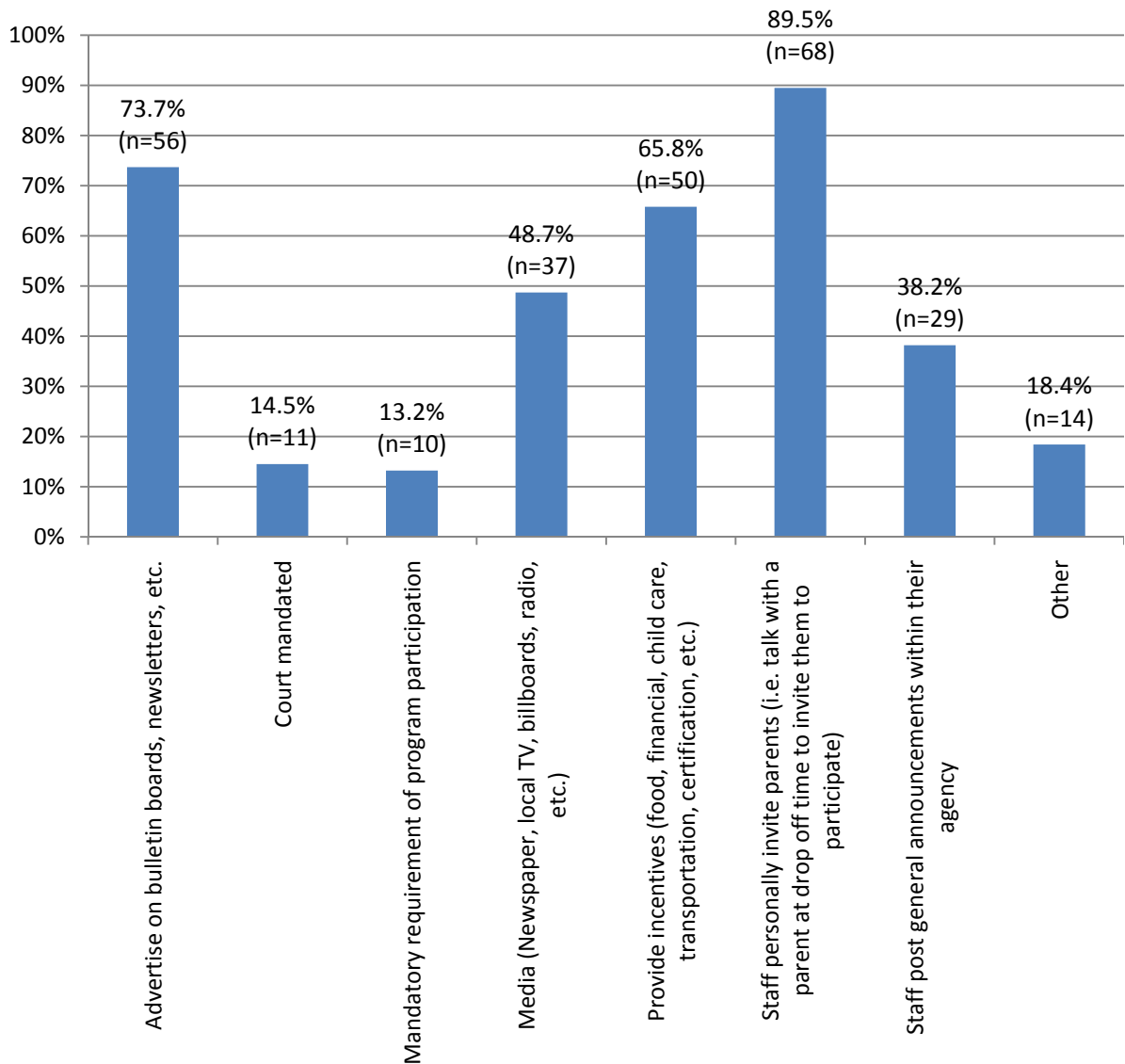


The “Other” category included forty additional responses, eleven of which were incorporated into the existing categories. Due to twenty-four responses addressing integrating services as a type of activity programs use to engage parents, a new category was created to include these responses titled, “Integrated with Services,” which was not in the original question choices. An example of the five remaining “other” responses included providing a resource library for parents.

Strategies for Parent Involvement

Respondents were asked to select strategies that were used to engage parents to strengthen involvement. Respondents were allowed to select all strategies that applied or were used by their program. Seventy-six respondents answered this question. Results are presented in Figure 7.

Figure 7. Strategies used to strengthen parental involvement.

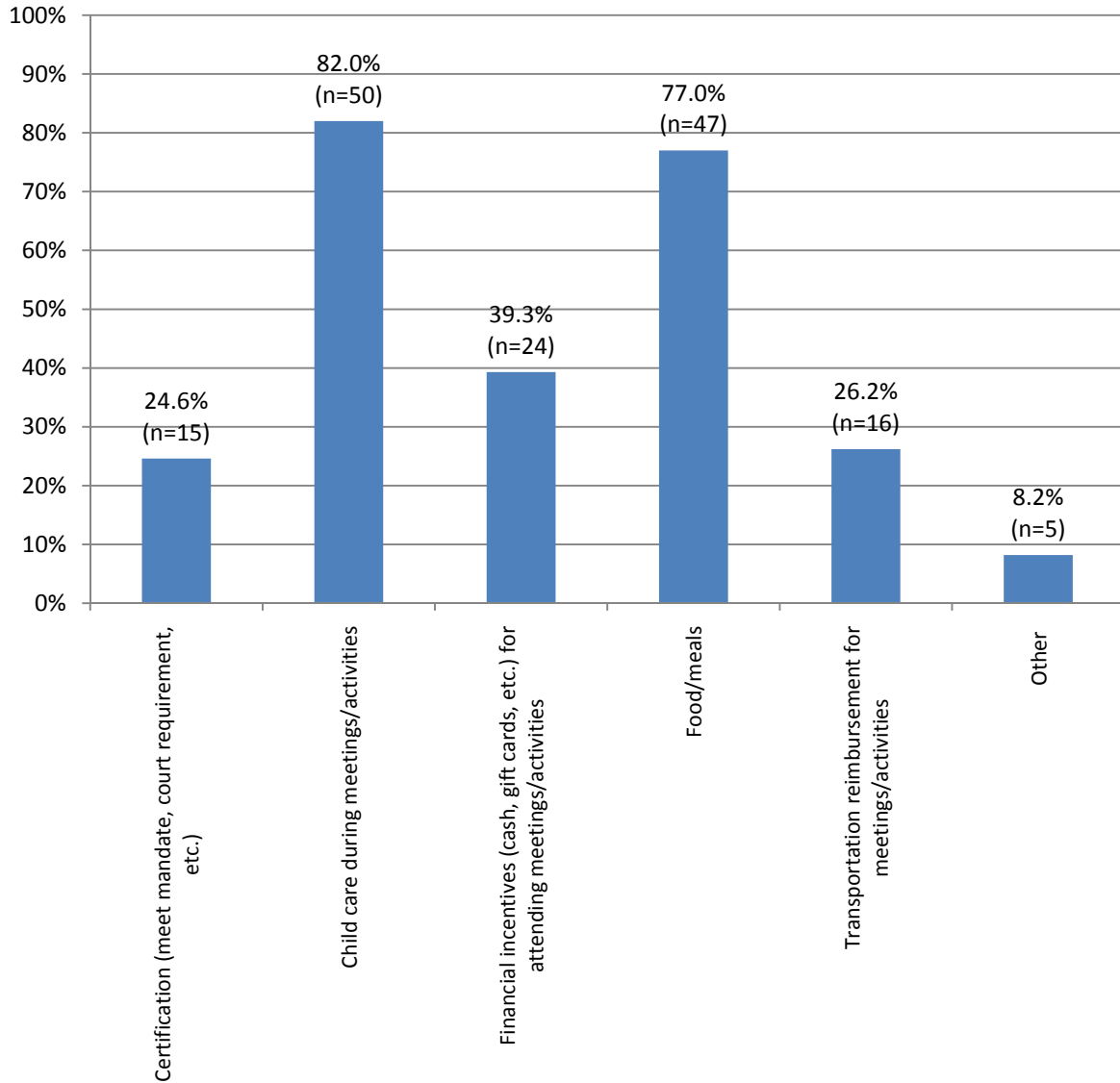


The “Other” category included twenty-six additional responses, twelve of which were incorporated into the existing categories, and fourteen remained in the “Other” category. Examples of “other” responses included intrinsic rewards and community partnerships.

Types of Agency Incentives for Parent Involvement

Respondents were asked to select what types of incentives their program uses to engage parents. Respondents were allowed to select all incentives that applied or were used by their program. Sixty-one respondents provided responses. Results are reported in Figure 8.

Figure 8. Types of agency incentives for parent involvement.

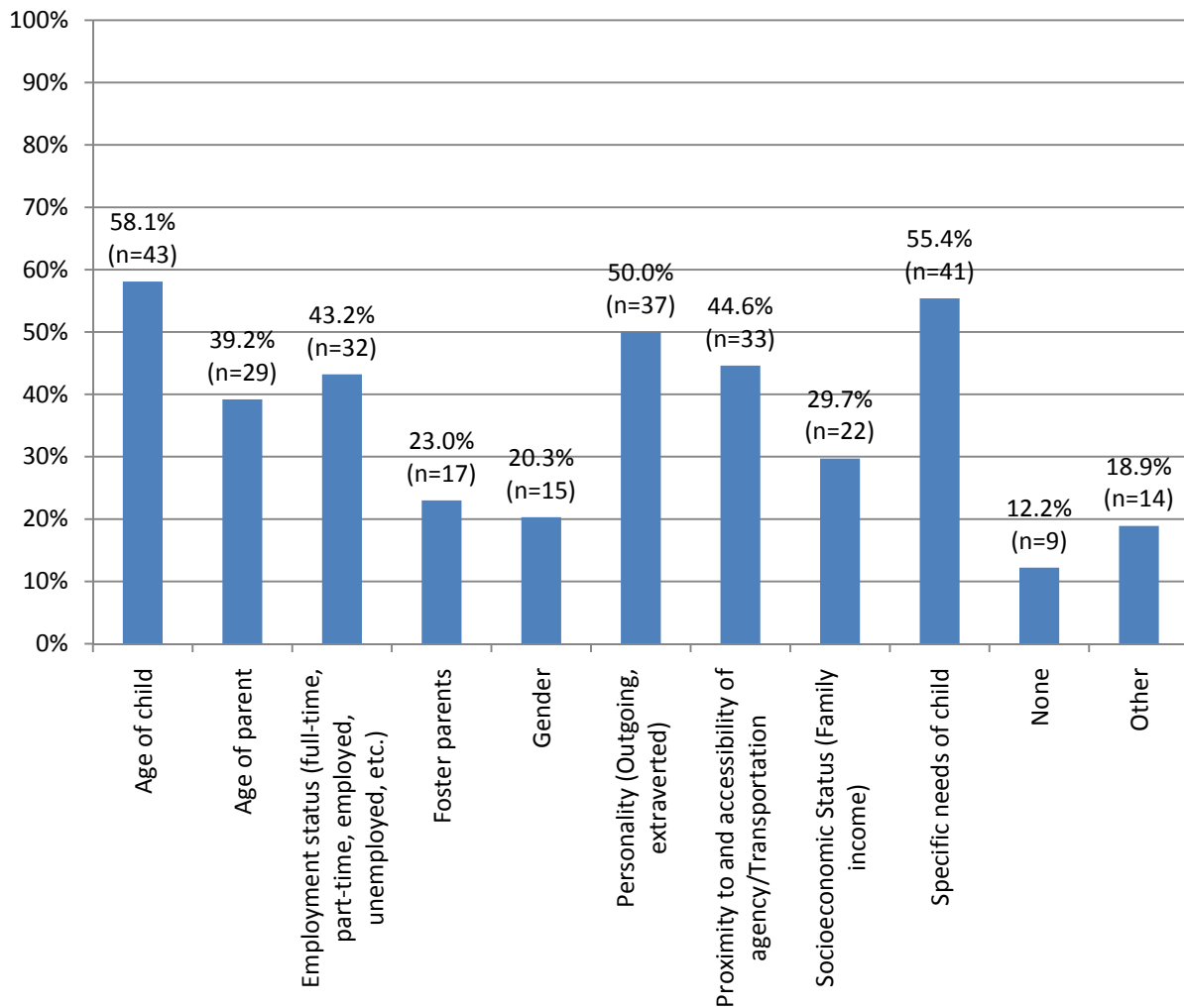


The “Other” category included twenty-two additional responses, fifteen of which were incorporated into the existing categories, and five remained in the “Other” category. An example of an “other” response included providing toys or books for children.

Characteristics that Strengthen Parent Involvement

Respondents were asked to select which of the characteristics strengthen parent involvement within their early childhood programs and were allowed to select multiple responses. Seventy-four respondents answered this question. Results are presented in Figure 9.

Figure 9. Type of characteristics that strengthen parent involvement.

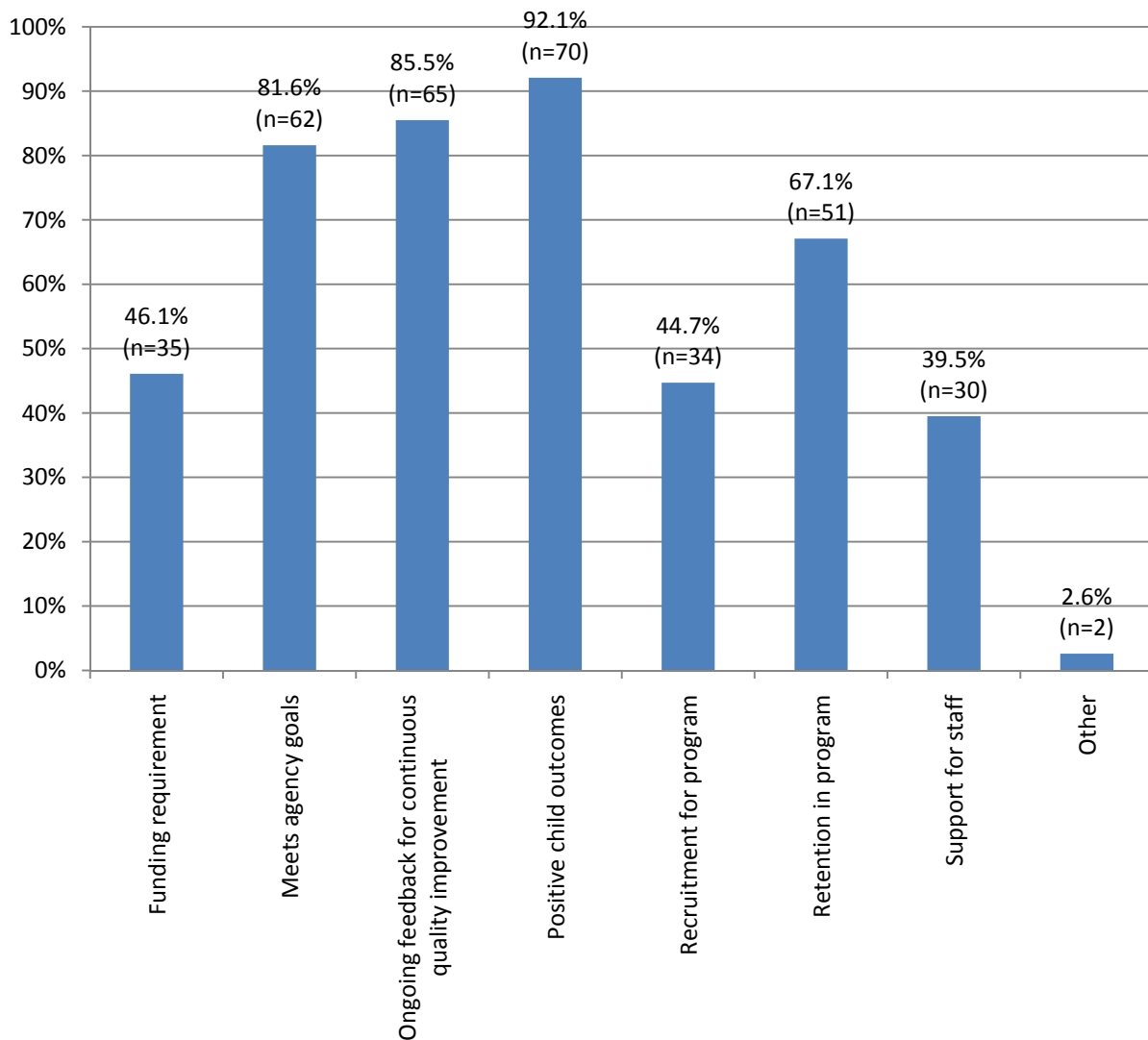


The “Other” category included seventeen additional responses, three of which were incorporated into the existing categories, and fourteen remained in the “Other” category. Examples of “other” responses included first time parents, parent interests/needs, peer involvement, and quality of relationship with agency/provider.

Importance of Parent Involvement to Program

Respondents were asked to select reasons why parent involvement is important in their early childhood programs. Respondents were allowed to select all categories that demonstrate importance in their program. Seventy-six respondents answered this question. Results are presented in Figure 10.

Figure 10. Importance of parent involvement to program.

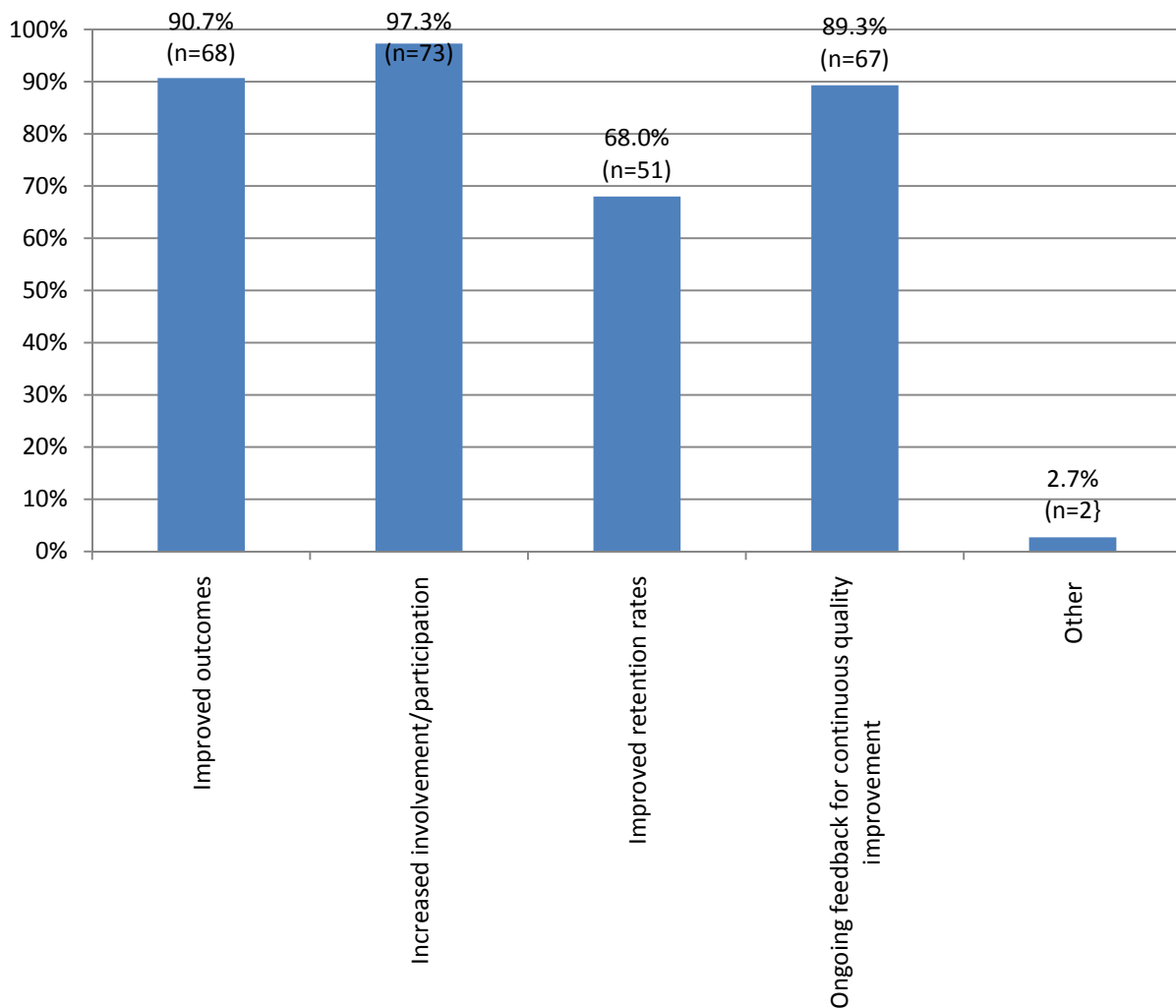


Those who reported “Other” were asked to provide a description. The “Other” category included nine additional responses, seven of which were incorporated into the existing categories, while two remained in the “Other” category. An example of an “other” response included meeting legal requirements.

Benefits of Parent Involvement

Respondents were asked to select what types of benefits the inclusion of parent involvement provides to their program and were allowed to select multiple responses. Seventy-five respondents answered this question. Results are presented in Figure 11.

Figure 11. Type of benefits of parent involvement.



Those who reported “Other” were asked to provide a description. The “Other” category included six additional responses, four of which were incorporated into the existing categories, while two remained in the “Other” category. An example of an “other” response included increased staff commitment and dedication.

Total Number of Families Served

Respondents were asked the total number of families served by their program in the past year.

Seventy-three programs responded. Results are provided in Table 2.

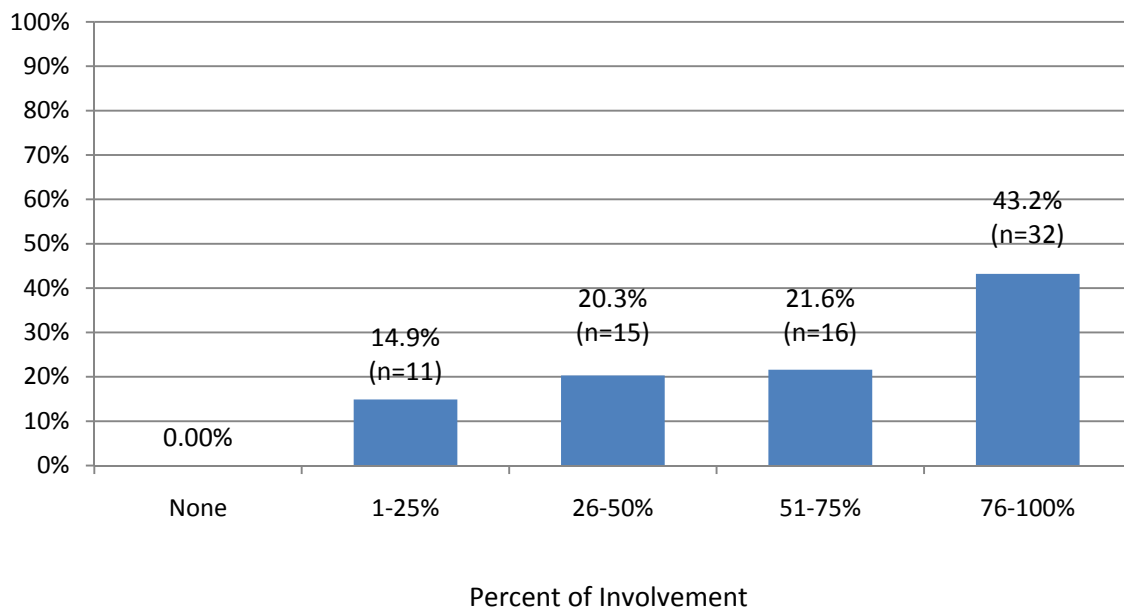
Table 2. Total number of families served.

Number of Programs	Response Ranges for Total Number of Families Served
54	0-500
4	501-1000
0	1001-2000
1	2001-3000
3	3001-4000
3	4001 or more
3	Statewide
4	Unknown
1	N/A

Percent of Parents Considered to be “Involved”

Respondents were asked to select what percentage of parents served by their program that they would consider to be “involved.” Seventy-four responded. Most of the programs (43.2%) stated that 76-100% of their parents are considered to be involved. Results are presented in Figure 12.

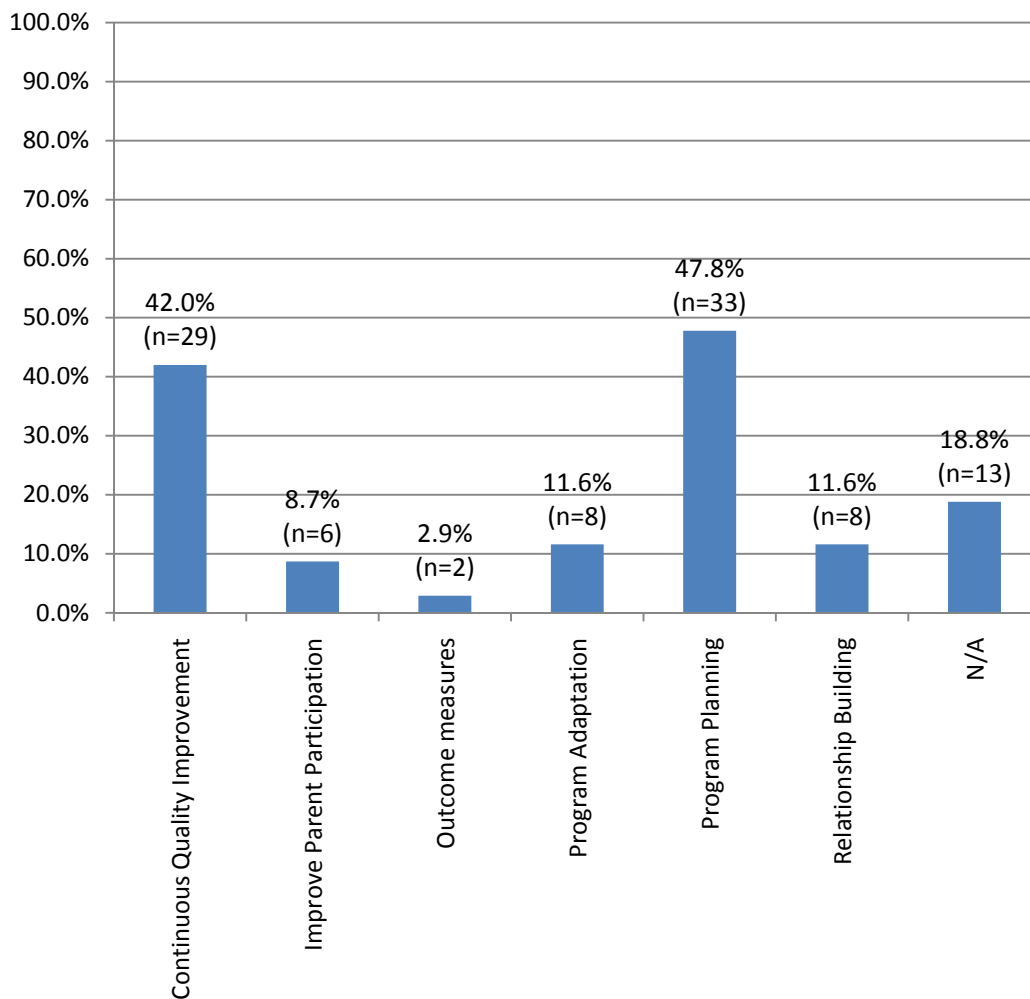
Figure 12: Percent of parents considered to be involved.



How Agencies Use Parent Feedback/Input

Respondents were asked to describe briefly how their agencies/programs use feedback/input that is obtained from parents within their agency/program. Sixty-nine respondents answered this question. Answers were open-ended and were categorized according to similarities. Figure 13 shows the seven categories that were established based on the agency/programs' responses.

Figure 13: How agencies use parent feedback/input.

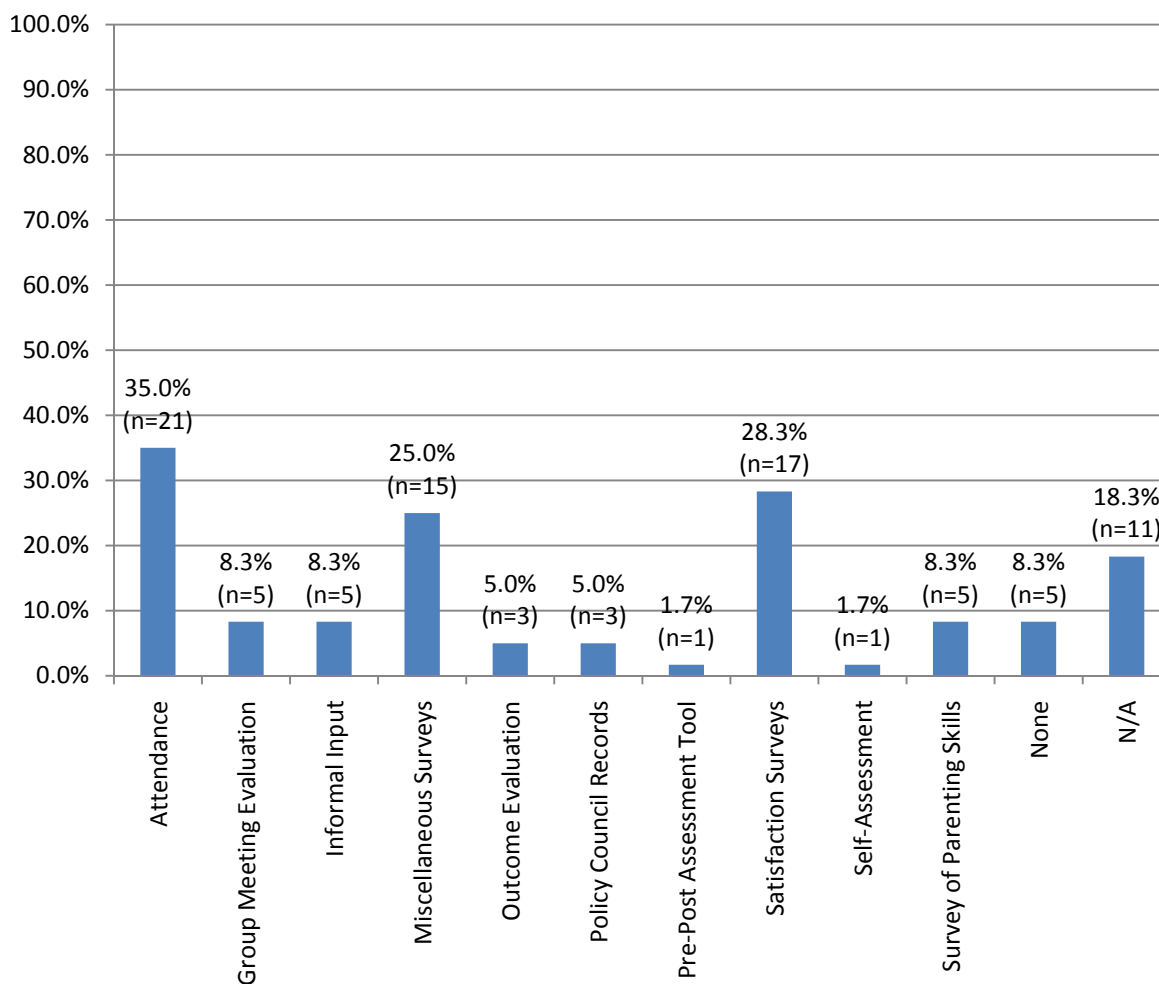


The N/A, "Not Applicable," category included thirteen responses that did not directly answer the question. An example of an N/A response included programs' recording parent attendance.

How Agency Programs Evaluate Parent Involvement and Leadership

Respondents were asked to briefly describe how their programs evaluate parent involvement and leadership. Sixty respondents answered this question. Answers were open-ended and were categorized according to similarities. Figure 14 shows the twelve categories that were established based on the programs' responses.

Figure 14. How agency programs evaluate parent involvement and leadership.



The N/A, "Not Applicable," category included eleven responses that did not directly answer the question. For example, several programs responded by writing that this question was not applicable to their agency or program.

Focus Group Introduction

A total of ten focus groups were conducted from October 2008 through August 2009 with 103 participants. The use of focus groups provided participants with the opportunity to elaborate on their perspectives on parent involvement. All focus groups were semi-structured and based on Patton's (2002) interview guide approach, in which the format, topics, and issues were covered in a specified outline. Members of the research team determined the wording of each question. The way in which questions were worded was a crucial consideration in extracting the type of information that was desired. Questions were written so that they would be understood in familiar language. "Using words that make sense to the interviewee, words that reflect the respondent's world view will improve the quality of data obtained during the interview. Without sensitivity to the impact of particular words...the answer may make no sense at all – or there may be no answer" (Patton, 2002, 312). Two sets of focus group questions were developed by members of the research team. During the first phase of the study, four focus groups were conducted. Questions were consistent across groups, and included:

- What constitutes a "good day" in terms of your parenting?
- What is parental involvement?
- Why is it important to be involved?
- What barriers exist to your being more involved?
- What are some examples of positive care experiences?
- To whom do you turn when you need assistance as a parent?
- What do you wish could be done to help families?

Six focus groups were conducted during the second phase. In addition to the questions asked in the first phase, clarifying questions were asked in the second phase to solicit feedback on agency definitions of parent involvement and ways that agencies might increase levels of parent involvement, including:

- What do you think about the agency perspective on parent involvement?
- If you needed help as a parent, who or what resource would you turn to for assistance?
- Do you have ideas or suggestions on what agencies or social services could do to make it easier for you to be more involved?

Each focus group session was recorded, transcribed, and reviewed for accuracy by the facilitator and note taker of each focus group. The transcribed interviews were analyzed and interpreted using the constant comparative approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Data analysis was inductive and identified common themes and emerging patterns using content analysis of the focus group data. The data were analyzed across the groups to determine common themes, with a focus on themes within the answers to each question. Obvious group differences within answers are highlighted in the results. Members of the research team involved in data collection and analysis engaged in frequent communication about emerging themes. An audit trail was maintained through rigorous adherence to record keeping at all stages of data collection. Quotations from participants are used to expand and illuminate the theme as well as to give voice to the participants.

Following is a discussion of the focus group findings, including demographics, focus group responses, and focus group differences.

Focus Group Demographics

Recruitment of participants was aimed at parents of children birth through five who participate in or utilize early childhood services across developmental domains. The focus groups consisted of 81.4% females and 18.6% males, with 89.3% identifying that English was their primary language. A majority of the parents had more than one child. Age ranges of children included 133 children prenatal to five years old, 50 children from 6-12, and 23 children from 13-19. Focus group ethnicity consisted of: 51.5% White; 13.6% Hispanic/Latino; 11.7% Black (African National); 8.7% Native American; 8.7% African American; 3.9% Multi-racial; and 1.9% Asian. A majority of parents were married (59.2%) or partnered (21.4%), while 9.7% were divorced. Only 2.9% of parents indicated that they were separated or single. Approximately 33% of the parents in the focus group had received their diploma/GED as their highest level of education. The second highest educational level was “some college” with 18.6%. Of the remaining respondents, 12.4% of parents had completed their Associate’s Degree; 12.4% their

Bachelor’s degree; and 7.2% their Master’s Degree. Other highest educational levels also included: 3.1% trade/vocational training; 10.3% some high school; and 2.1% elementary or junior high.

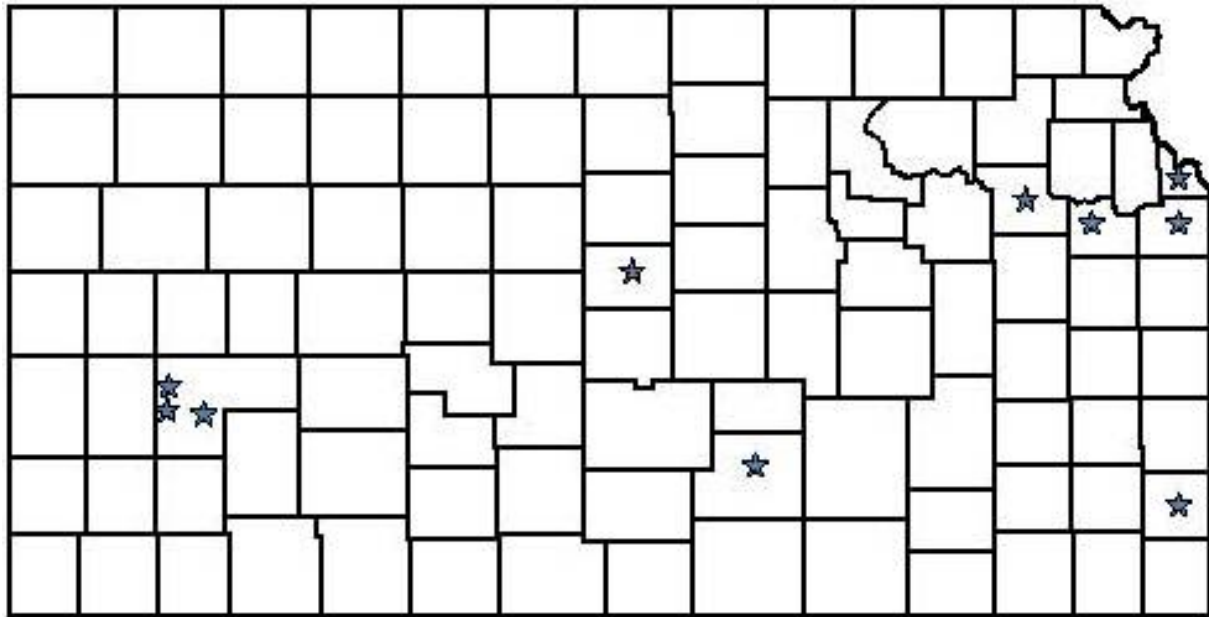
Parents were also asked to indicate their housing status, their income level, and their employment status. Housing status results indicated that 46.6% of parents rent their home; 45.6% own their own; 5.8% live in a shared home; and 2% live in temporary housing or are homeless. Parents also indicated their income level. The highest percentage of parents (30.4%) indicated that their income level was between 0-\$10,000, while the second highest percentage of parents (20.6%) indicating their income level was more than \$50,001. Employment status showed that the highest percentage of parents (33.0%) worked for someone else full-time. Of the rest of the parents, 14.6% of parents were full-time homemakers, while 13.6% of parents were students, disabled, or not employed. Approximately 11% of parents were temporarily unemployed or worked for someone else part time, while 9.7% were self-employed. The lowest percentage of parents (2.9%) was retired. Table 3 provides a description of each focus group including the type of parents who were involved in the focus group, the number of participants per group, the location and date of the groups, as well as the name of the facilitators.

Table 3. Focus group table.

Focus Groups	Who	Number of Participants	Location	Date	Facilitator(s)
1	Parents/Caregivers	13	Pittsburg, KS	10/14/08	Tammie Benham
2	Parent Leaders	16	Topeka, KS	10/24/08	Becky Eason
3	Student Parents	9	Lawrence, KS	12/5/08	Becky Eason
4	Business Employees at Call Center	13	Salina, KS	12/9/08	Lee Urban Carolee Jones
5	Preschool parents	4	Holcomb, KS	1/21/09	Jackie Counts
6	Preschool parents	7	Holcomb, KS	1/21/09	Rebecca Gillam
7	Head Start & PAT parents	6	Garden City, KS	1/21/09	Jackie Counts Rebecca Gillam
8	Fathers	4	Wichita, KS	5/18/09	Vanessa Lohf
9	Juniper Gardens (KCK Housing Authority)	17	Kansas City, KS	7/23/09	Becky Eason
10	Parents as Teachers	14	Olathe, KS	8/25/09	Becky Eason

Figure 15 highlights the location of the focus groups across the State. (The focus group in Topeka was conducted at the Kansas Parent Leadership Conference and included parents from across the State.)

Figure 15. Focus group locations.



Focus Group Responses

Focus group responses were analyzed by each interview question. The following provides a combined summary analysis of the focus group responses to each interview question.

What constitutes a “good day” in terms of your parenting?

In describing what made for a “good day” as a parent, respondents often described it as being a day in which “bad things” did not occur. For example, a good day is one where the children do not fight; they are not late for school; or the parent does not get stressed out. From a content perspective, there were four themes noted in responses to this question. Specifically, a good day is when the children are well behaved; when the children are healthy; when parents have time to spend with their children; and when everyone in the household gets enough sleep. Sleep issues (waking up on time, going to bed on time, getting enough sleep, etc.) were raised by many of the respondents as a particularly salient marker of a good day. Some sample comments from parents include the following:

“A good day would be if he didn’t get up in a bad mood.”

“A good day would be would be if she actually slept in her own bed.”

“It’s a really good day when there is no bickering or fighting.”

What is your definition of parent involvement?

The answer to this question constitutes the main focus of the study. There were six sub-themes identified in the responses to this question. They include: providing for your children; teaching your children; spending time with your children; communicating with your children; loving your children; and, advocating for your children. Comments in the first five of these themes overlapped somewhat, but some of the comments showed nuanced differences. Some typical comments included:

“Involvement is being in the game and knowing what your kids are working on.”

“Being there for them. Listening to them. “

“Actually being part of your kids’ life on a daily basis.”

“Involving them in what you are doing.”

“Making sure you are with them instead of just cooking dinner and setting them in front of the television.”

“Asking your children, ‘How was your day, what did you learn?’”

“You’ve got to get down on their level and bond with them.”

The idea of involvement being related to being an advocate for your child with outside agencies (including child care and schools) is particularly important in this analysis. Parents were clear that when they relied on others to assist them with child care, education or other social services that it was important for them to be a strong advocate for the needs of their child. Among other means of being an advocate, the parents thought it was very important that teachers, principals and child care providers know the parent well. As one parent explained “I make sure the school knows me. They know my face. They know who my daughter is. They know who I am.” Another parent elaborated “If you are not involved things slip through the cracks. The school system tries hard but as a parent if you don’t stay involved then your kids are going to miss out on something they need.” In a different focus group a parent explained, “I have always been very active in the school – I have the teacher’s cell phone on speed dial.” For the parents with children with special needs, involvement also meant working with schools and agencies to make sure that they were meeting the special needs of their children, which included “being vocal, getting help, following your instincts and getting the school to understand his disabilities.” Aside from establishing personal relationships with care providers, parents did not discuss involvement as being synonymous with attending meetings, sitting on boards, or engaging with service providers in a way that extended beyond their own children.

How do parents respond to agencies’ definitions of involvement?

Parents in the second phase of focus groups were asked to comment on agency definitions of involvement. Specifically, they were asked about the extent to which they ought to be asked for input

by agencies and schools, the extent to which they should be informed by these agencies, the extent to which they should serve on advisory boards, and the extent to which they should participate in activities and services by these agencies. Most of the responses on involvement centered on experiences with child care providers and public schools. (For most of the parents in this study, schools and child care providers served as the primary point of contact.) Secondly, parents referred to other agencies or programs (like Parents as Teachers or Head Start) but these references were made less frequently.

Parents responded that the agency definition of parent involvement is good in theory in that parents do want to have a say in how things happen in schools and in social service agencies. Parents liked the idea of being asked to participate and being able to provide input. They also saw serving on agency boards as a good way to help their own children as well as to help others. As one participant stated, "Being involved.... You have a voice in how things get run for the better of your children." Another parent added, "It might be reasonable to expect parents to participate in meetings but that sort of involvement takes time. I'd do it if I think it would benefit me or my child to be involved in that way." While everyone agreed with the above statements, parents were also quick to point out the difficulty of being involved in these organizations because doing so required time and resources. Parents were more willing to be involved if they could do it with their children. Attending meetings in the evenings, they noted, took time away from their family (which they already felt was limited) and many felt less inclined to participate in these ways. One parent explained, "I don't go to PTO meetings because I feel like by the time I'm done at school and I pick up my kids I am tired and we need to go home and do family time and to turn around and come back again... you know it's hard to do this." For some parents, there was a belief that if they could not be more involved they risked not getting services. There seemed to be a preference stated for parents to be informed about what was happening in various agencies and to be asked for input but not to have to invest too much time and energy in such endeavors.

What are the barriers to involvement?

When asked what impedes parents from being as involved as they would like to be in their children's lives the answers were fairly uniform across the focus groups. The most common barrier identified was time, or lack thereof. Parents are busy and they did not often have the time that they need to be involved with their children at the level that they may prefer. Time was described as a finite commodity by parents in all of the focus groups and most felt like they did not have enough time in their lives simply to spend quality time with their children, let alone participate in events that fit the agencies' definition of involvement. This issue of time was different depending on the age of the children. For parents of older children the time concern was focused on organizing a coherent family schedule and making it to all the events and activities in which their children were involved (this problem increased as the number of children in the family increased). A parent summed up this concern stating, "Having more than one kid you feel pulled by each of them.... My 17 year old may have a choir concert and my 16 year old may have a wrestling tournament, my four year old may have a parent meeting at school and my seven month old may not want to go anywhere.... And, they may all be at 6:30 in the evening and I am a single parent. So, how do you make it to all those things?" Parents thought it was important to have their children participate in activities and sporting events, but worried about not having time to fully participate in all of them. As one mother explained, "It's just not possible to make it to everything." For younger children, the time concerns were more focused on having the time and energy to be there as their children developed at a time when the children's needs were acute. The lack of time was compounded by work requirements (for the parents in dual career families). Working clearly created barriers to involvement for parents. Other barriers mentioned by some parents included financial concerns, language barriers (for those for whom English was a second language), and available child care.

What might help parents be more involved?

Parents suggested a number of possible ways to help them be more involved with their children in direct response to the barriers mentioned above. Suggestions included having a strong and supportive family, having supportive friends, having community connections and state-wide access to resources, financial support, education for parents (in the form of role models and resources); and a variety of less tangible ideas (an on-off button for children, more time, love, patience, and more hands).

Specifically related to agency involvement, parents suggested having information sent to them via e-mail, notes sent home, or via regular mail. They wanted to hear from schools and agencies about how their child is doing, about special events and lesson plans, and perhaps about larger issues, but they did not always have the time to attend scheduled meetings. Parents most want information about how their child is doing. They also want to know how and if their child will benefit directly from their being involved. Parents also reiterated that communication with agencies should be short and to the point. When parental feedback was sought, parents did want to know how the information was going to be used. One group of parents did note that they wanted to make sure that e-mails they received were not SPAM. As one parent stated, "If you want me to fill something out, it needs to come through a personal connection." Parents noted that they also appreciated when social agencies had good websites because it allows one to be as involved as one likes. "You can go to the website if you want, but you can go further to get more support if you need it."

Who do you go to for advice?

Parents mentioned a range of individuals to whom they turn when they need help with family issues. The most popular group was family (including parents, grandparents, in-laws, siblings and spouses). One parent commented that her in-laws are wonderful. "They live in town and they tend not to tell us what to do. They just give us a helping hand." However, many parents commented that they do not have family nearby so they do need to rely on others for help. Friends (especially people from

work, others with children, and people from their social networks) were seen as a good support group, especially for people who did not have family nearby. Friends from church groups were also often cited as being supportive. School personnel were the next most commonly mentioned group of individuals. Parents mentioned teachers, counselors, and principals as those they could turn to for help. Some parents suggested that medical personnel have been helpful to them in providing advice and parenting support. One parent explained, “Our pediatrician gave us advice. He told us what books to read.” The last groups mentioned that parents relied on for help or support were public or social services. The use of public or social services seemed to be a source of last resort for many participants, although parents of children with special health care needs were more likely to identify social services as a resource and support. While not every parent turned to social service agencies for assistance, those that did lauded their ability to provide assistance when other sources of support were unavailable.

When turning to others for support, what constitutes a good experience?

Parents who relied on others to help them meet their child care needs (including those who used child care and/or had children in school) felt that it was essential to get to know their children’s teachers. They indicated it was important to bridge the gap between home and school and create a two-way communication link between the service provider and the parent. This, most believed, was accomplished through establishing positive relationships and open communication with service providers. As one parent explained, “It is important to have strong communication with the people who take care of your kids.” Another parent added, “It helps to compare notes with the provider and make sure that she has a genuine interest in my kids.” The other tack taken to answering this question included mentioning those service providers that parents had used that were particularly helpful to them. This list was extensive and included direct references to the following service agencies: Parents as Teachers, Rainbow, Head Start, Arrowhead, Kiddy College, etc.).

Focus Group Differences

While most of the parent groups had a lot in common in terms of their responses to questions, there were also some unique differences among the groups that are worth noting. Group differences are described in the order that the focus groups were conducted.

Pittsburg Group

Participants in the Pittsburg focus group were not as talkative and responses were not as detailed as in other groups. Although questions remained the same, phrasing of questions and prompting was not as in depth as in the other groups. Many of the participants were grandparents who provided part-time child care for their grandchildren. They were not actively engaged in the parental role and seemed to have a more difficult time focusing on the needs of parents. The parents who participated in this group shared about bad child care experiences and expressed a high level of distrust in the “system.”

Topeka Group

Participants in the focus group held in Topeka were from across the State who were attending the Kansas Parent Leadership Conference. Parents in this group had experienced many more medical and high needs concerns with their own children, and generally had children who were somewhat older than those in other focus groups. The group included parents who experienced a lot of hardship and difficulties as parents. They made greater use of social service agencies and public services than other groups. Participants expressed the need for parents to advocate for their children and to pursue their gut instincts in terms of finding solutions to problems they faced and finding resources to assist them. A significant amount of time in this focus group was spent on parents sharing resources and offering advice to each other.

Lawrence (Haskell) Group

The focus group in Lawrence was comprised of Native American parents who were also students at Haskell Indian Nations University. Participants in this group emphasized the difficulties of balancing being a student and a parent at the same time. They also talked about the benefits to their own children of being a student-parent in terms of demonstrating a value of education and serving as a role model for their children. Participants also emphasized the role of tradition and culture in their lives. They noted the importance of breaking away from their families or at the minimum creating some distance between themselves and their families. They noted that their own families had views about education and medical care, for example, which in some cases were in conflict with what teachers or health care providers suggested.

Salina Group

Participants in the Salina focus group had very young children, not yet in school. Parents who participated in this group were employed by a call center, and the group was conducted over their lunch break. They seemed to be very involved in their children's lives and also had at least one member of their family who served the role of a stay-at-home-parent. Extended family was of key importance to this group. Many of them lived near their extended family and relied very heavily upon their support. Parents in this group made little use of social services and, in fact, were somewhat distrustful of these services. They also described themselves as existing in a middle class gap in that they made too much money to qualify for assistance from outside agencies but made too little money to be able to provide for their families in the way they would like. It should be noted that it is unclear if this group would turn to service providers outside the family even if services were available.

Garden City Group

This focus group included many parents for whom English was a second language. Due to the language diversity in this group, a Spanish language translator from a local social service agency was

provided for the group. In addition, there was one Vietnamese parent who spoke limited English. A Vietnamese translator was not available for the group. The use of the Spanish translator affected the flow of the focus group conversation. There were numerous young children in attendance with their parents, which served as a distraction to the group discussion. From a content perspective, this group defined involvement in similar ways as the other groups. Participants discussed some language barriers to participation in social service agencies. They also described feeling pressured to participate in ways that did not work in their schedules but feared that not participating would put them in jeopardy of not receiving services. As one parent explained, “They want you to be in a certain place at a certain time. They want you to participate in a certain program or they won’t help you.... The ideal situation is that we would all have time to participate in all the things they want us to so we could get the help we needed...but we don’t all have cars so that we can go there.”

Holcomb Group (a)

Participants in Holcomb group (a) included many single parent mothers, as well as mothers in families in which the father worked the late night shift. The children were mostly school aged. Many of the mothers worked in child care centers or in schools, and they indicated that co-workers were a source of support for them as parents. The mothers expressed an interest in being more involved with agencies and schools, but felt like they did not have enough time available to get more involved. Parents in this group expressed frustration that particular services were not available in their community, and talked about having difficulties accessing pediatric care for their children because of availability of providers who accept Medicaid.

Holcomb Group (b)

Participants in Holcomb group (b) included both fathers and mothers. English was a second language for many of the participants in this group, and a Spanish translator was used. The discussion in this group deviated from the original questions, and there were many distractions and unfinished

thoughts reflected in the transcription. Participants had a hard time focusing on the key issues of involvement. Definitions of involvement focused on parent-child interactions. As one member of the group explained, “It’s important to be involved in their daily lives, asking questions, going through their homework, asking them what they learned, trying to be a support.” The lack of English proficiency of the parents also served as a barrier to greater participation in the schools. “If we go over there [school], there is no one who can translate so we don’t go to school.” There was a generally positive belief that parent participation in schools is a good idea, but time, money, work and language all served as barriers.

Wichita Group

Participants in the Wichita focus group included fathers of younger children. They spent most of the time discussing gender expectations of what it means to be a father in today’s society. Fathers in this group expressed strong religious views and relied heavily on their respective churches to help support them socially. The fathers prided themselves on being involved with their children, more so than their own fathers were involved in their lives, but also in a manner that was different than their wives’ involvement. Participants indicated that time and societal expectations were barriers to involvement. As one father said, “It’s just a matter of time and finding that time even at the end of the day... by the time you get home, get dinner on the table, then an hour and a half later it’s time for them to get ready for bed. So, you spend two hours a day sometimes with your kids.” Participating in daily activities and not just being the “fun guy or make all the decisions” were among the concerns raised by these fathers. Among other concerns that the group of fathers raised was the fact that many schools and child care centers focus their communication and involvement efforts on mothers and only require a signature from one parent (typically the mother). This made the fathers feel somewhat left out of the conversation and decision-making process.

Kansas City Group

Parents participating in the Kansas City focus group were from an existing parent education class. The participants were African-American, and had children ranging in age from 14 days to 23 years old. They seemed to believe that involvement with their children is important because it will help their children avoid making the same mistakes that they made. Participants seemed to feel threatened by social service agencies asking for their involvement, and expressed worries that if they did not participate enough they might not get the services they need. They expressed the belief that social service agencies are not really helpful to them. When asked about support for their parenting, they uniformly described support as money. They talked extensively about financial needs that included being unable to afford school clothes and additional school expenses such as field trips. Their needs were much more tangible than in other groups, including needing a job, a car, etc.

Olathe Group

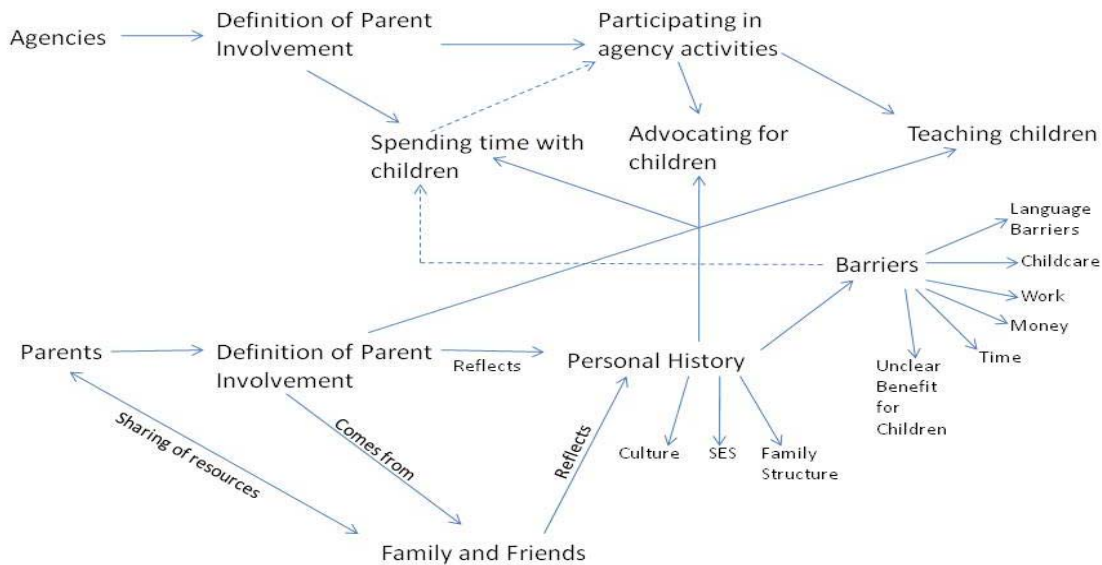
Parents participating in the Olathe focus group had young children, not yet in school. Most of them either worked part-time, worked from home, or stayed at home with their children. They recognized the need to have their children socialize with other children in organized activities, but were conscious of trying not to over-schedule their children. For those who used some form of child care, the emphasis was on trusting the child care providers and facilitating communication about their child with the teacher on a daily basis. Despite most families having a stay-at-home parent, these parents described time and money as both being barriers to their involvement with their children. Participants expressed a desire for child care settings and schools to inform them of how their children are doing. In regard to use of the Internet as a tool for sending or receiving information about their children, they had concerns about privacy and misuse of information. Parents indicated that they do not rely on social service agencies, with the exception of the Parents as Teacher program (which recruited focus group

participants). From the discussion, a potential reason for limited participation in social service agencies and activities was that participation took away from family time and raised privacy issues in general.

Discussion

The results of the Kansas Parent Research Initiative highlight the complex nature of parenting and parent involvement in early childhood programs in Kansas. Both agencies and parents provided information about the context within which services are provided and received. Specifically, understanding external factors that impact parent involvement from both perspectives could be critical to increasing parent involvement. From the agency perspective, this may include funding requirements, philosophy of parent involvement (formal plan, informal plan, etc), or program goals. From the parent perspective, external factors such as work requirements, extended family, culture, and demands of multiple children need to be addressed to support and encourage parent involvement. Figure 16 provides a visual diagram of parent involvement from agency and parent perspectives, taking into account the contextual factors that were identified in the Research Initiative.

Figure 16. Kansas parent involvement model.

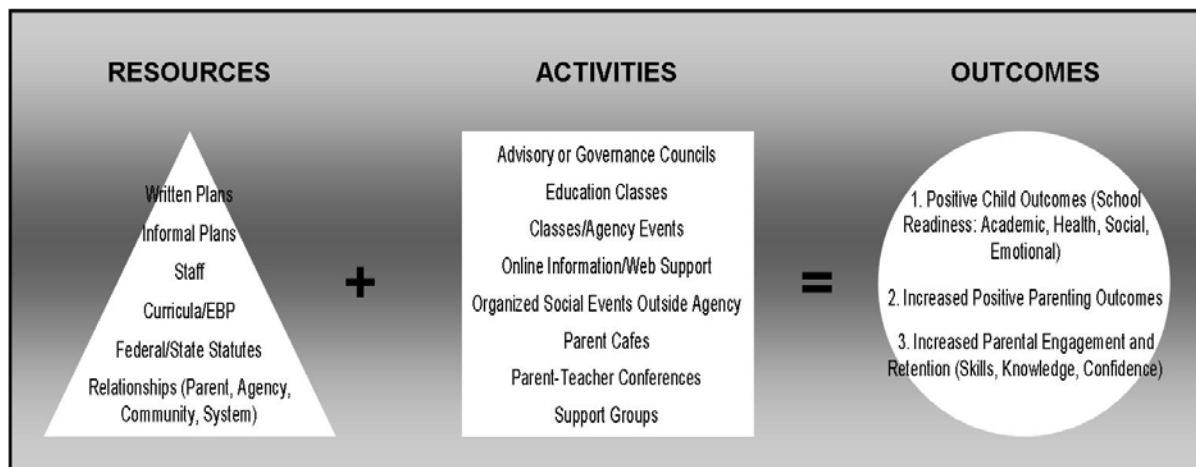


Key Findings

The following provides information about the key findings from the Kansas Parent Research Initiative.

- Parents understand involvement in very different ways from agencies. Parents define involvement as, “spending time with your children,” “sitting on the floor playing with my child,” and “always being there for my child.” Providing input through advisory boards or participating in agency activities was not mentioned as a form of involvement. Parents create their own support networks of family and friends. These systems of supports are dynamic and operate outside of the formalized agency support structure.
- Results show that agencies should explore family and friends as supports that could foster parent involvement in home environments and in agency activities. Additionally, agencies were seldom mentioned as primary contacts in times of need, creating boundaries that prevent parents from accessing available resources. Thus, sources of formal and informal social support such as neighborhood, community, churches, etc. may be missed or underutilized by agencies.
- Agencies tended to understand involvement as participation in agency activities. Based on the agency responses to the online survey, a logic model of the way agencies identified resources devoted to foster involvement, activities and the anticipated outcomes was constructed and is included in Figure 17. Agencies defined involvement as parent engagement in activities/events that were offered by the agency. “Involvement” happened within the boundaries defined by the agency through the activities they offered.

Figure 17. Parent involvement logic model.



Next Steps

The results of the Kansas Parent Research Initiative will be used to develop a list of recommendations for agencies to strengthen parent involvement and utilize informal supports available to parents. In addition, information will be shared with parents to help strengthen their understanding of parent involvement in early childhood programs and services. The recommendations will build on efforts and resources already developed by Kansas agencies and organizations. The recommendations will be generated through several mechanisms:

- Results of the focus groups were shared with parents at the Kansas Parent Leadership Conference. Over one hundred parents attended the presentation and participated in a parent café where they were asked to provide feedback on a variety of questions related to strategies that agencies might use to help support parent involvement. Feedback and suggestions from the Parent café will be incorporated into recommendations and training provided to both agencies and parents.
- Multiple webinars will be conducted in early January 2010 to share results with the Kansas Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems (KECCS) Plan and Kansas Strengthening Families Plan (KSFP) stakeholders, as well as national partners, parents, and other interested parties. Following the webinars, participants will be given the opportunity to provide feedback on the results and suggest recommendations.
- This report will be announced in the KECCS and KSFP newsletters and posted on the respective websites. Readers will be encouraged to provide feedback and recommendations.

The multiple avenues for input, including a significant reliance on parent input, will generate recommendations based on results of the agency survey, focus groups, as well as the experiences of agencies and parents. Using a similarly broad approach to disseminate the recommendations, summaries, tips, and tools will be posted on the KECCS and KSFP websites. Recommendations will be distributed to agencies statewide through a variety of mechanisms, including stakeholder meetings and online trainings.

The Kansas Parent Research Initiative provides relevant and tangible information for early childhood programs to examine, enhance, or change their parent involvement practices. The Initiative and the results maximize the successes of agencies in Kansas early childhood programs while providing a

variety of suggested strategies that can lead to increased and strengthened parent involvement at various levels statewide, based on feedback and input from Kansas parents.

The research and follow up recommendations will be combined in a final report and will be distributed to the ELCC and KSF Leadership Teams for implementation in 2010. The efforts will contribute to authentic parent involvement in the State of Kansas and will help to build meaningful mechanisms for feedback from parents on an ongoing basis at all levels – agency, community, and state. Most importantly, the statewide focus on parent involvement will support positive outcomes for children and families.

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Appendix A: Name of Programs

- 0-5 Early Childhood Program
- Atchison City Infant-Toddler Program
- CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocates)
- Child Care and Camp Branch
- Child Care Resource and Referral
- Children & Family Services
- Colts Round-Up After School Program
- Dual Diagnosis Treatment and Training Services Outreach Program
- Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation
- Early Childhood Special Education Program
- Family Resource Team
- Family Support Services
- Gardner Edgerton
- Geary County Pre-Kindergarten Pilot
- Head Start/Early Head Start (including NKESC Head Start and Early Head Start, SEK-CAP Head Start 0-5)
- Healthy Families
- Healthy Start Home Visitor Services
- Kansas Enrichment Network
- KPIRC
- KSFP
- Labette County USD 506
- Mitchell County Early Learning Center
- Optimum Oral Health for Children and Youth with Special Health Care Needs
- Parent Education Program
- Parents As Teachers (including USD 218, 227, 308, 309, 313, 334,335, 378, 379, 384, 394, 400, 418,419, 423, 435, 448, 457, 469, 495, 509, 602)
- Parents Helping Parents
- Pilot Pre-K
- Project Before and Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation
- School Health
- Services for Children with Special Health Care Needs
- Smart Start Kansas
- Southeast Kansas Birth to Three Program
- Teen Pregnancy Case Management
- Youth for Christ - Teen Parents Program