

**CLASP**  
CENTER FOR LAW AND SOCIAL POLICY



# The Challenges of Change

Learning from the Child Care and Early Education  
Experiences of Immigrant Families

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# Executive Summary

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Children born to immigrant parents are a large and rapidly growing segment of the nation's child population. There are more than 5 million young children of immigrants in the United States, comprising approximately 22 percent of all children under the age of six. Nearly all of these children (93 percent) are U.S. citizens.<sup>1</sup> Children of immigrants are more likely than children of U.S.-born citizens to face economic hardships and significant barriers to healthy development, making them less ready to succeed in school and beyond. In recent years, a body of research has emerged showing that, overall, children of immigrants are less likely to participate in early education programs, such as pre-kindergarten, or formal child care arrangements, including center-based and family child care.<sup>2</sup>



Evaluations of a small number of high-quality early education programs that support the full range of children's development show long-term positive effects on child well-being and later school success.<sup>3</sup> High-quality programs have the potential to particularly benefit low-income children and those most at risk of school failure. For children of immigrants, early education has the potential to address issues of school readiness and English language acquisition, allowing them to enter elementary school with more advanced

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- 1 Capps et al., *The Health and Well-Being of Young Children of Immigrants*.
  - 2 For a summary of this research, see Matthews and Ewen, *Reaching All Children?*
  - 3 Takanishi and Bogard, "Effective Educational Programs for Young Children."

English skills and thus better prepared to learn and to succeed.<sup>4</sup> Early education may also ease the experience these children and their families have being integrated into American society and its education system. Programs that contain a high-quality comprehensive services component can connect families to much-needed health services and family supports; and they can provide recently arrived immigrants with an introduction to services and facilities available in their communities.

In its *Breaking Down Barriers* study, the Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP) explored three main questions:

1. What do we know about the participation of young children of immigrants in child care and early education settings (including Head Start, child care, preschool, and pre-kindergarten)?
2. What are some of the barriers and challenges immigrant families face in accessing child care and early education?
3. What can policymakers and advocates at the local, state, and federal levels do to improve access to high-quality child care and early education for young children in immigrant families?

CLASP conducted site visits in communities across the country to learn first hand about the challenges and barriers that immigrant families face in accessing child care and early education. We sought the perspectives of immigrant leaders and direct service providers, child care and early education providers (including schools, child care centers, and family child care homes), state and local policymakers, and immigrant parents. Communities were chosen based on a variety of criteria, including historical trends in immigration and the type of public pre-kindergarten program available in the state. CLASP visited traditional immigrant gateways, communities in states with well-established immigrant populations, and new or emerging destinations for immigrants, seeking to include communities with immigrant populations from diverse countries and ethnic backgrounds. The project included site visits to nine communities in eight states across the United States.

In our examination of the barriers to participation faced by immigrant families, we looked at a continuum of contact between families and child care and early education providers and programs. At each point of contact, immigrants face multiple layers of barriers. We identified and explored three areas that could be serving as barriers to participation:

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4 Rumberger and Tran, *Preschool Participation and the Cognitive and Social Development of Language Minority Students*; Gormley et al., *The Effects of Oklahoma's Universal Pre-K Program on Cognitive Development*; and Magnuson et al., "Preschool and School Readiness of Children of Immigrants."

1. **Awareness.** To what extent are immigrant families aware of the existence of high-quality child care and early education? To what extent are they aware of the eligibility rules for various programs? How do immigrant families obtain information about child care and early education?
2. **Accessibility.** For those immigrant families that are aware of child care and early education, what factors affect their ability to access it? How affordable and available are child care and early education opportunities in immigrant communities? How do programs' hours meet families' needs? How manageable are enrollment processes for immigrant families?
3. **Responsiveness.** Once immigrant families have enrolled in child care and early education, how responsive are programs to their diverse needs? Are providers equipped to provide children of immigrants with high-quality educational opportunities? Is there an adequate supply of qualified bilingual and culturally competent providers who work with young children? Do programs have culturally competent content and program standards? Are available programs facilitating access to high-quality comprehensive services and family supports?

At each point of contact, immigrant families face barriers related to demographic factors, language, culture, and immigration status, barriers that must be adequately addressed in order to ensure access to high-quality child care and early education. This report outlines our findings in each of these three key issue areas, and it provides some examples of strategies that can be employed to help families overcome these barriers and to structure programs to more appropriately serve diverse immigrant families.

**Awareness.** CLASP found that immigrant families are often unaware of child care and early education programs and services, including licensed child care, state pre-kindergarten and Head Start programs, and child care subsidies.

- Awareness differs within immigrant groups, based on factors such as the length of time in the U.S., the circumstances of immigrants' arrival, child care and early education experiences in their home countries, parental education levels, and English language ability.
- Some immigrant families are unfamiliar with the concept of "early education" and with the benefits of high-quality child care and early education.
- Many of those immigrant families that *are* aware of child care and early education are misinformed or confused about eligibility requirements.

- Immigrant-serving organizations, often immigrants' first point of contact in the United States, are also largely unaware of child care and early education opportunities.
- Information on the benefits of high-quality child care and early education is often not available to immigrant families in accessible formats in their primary languages.
- Outreach for child care and early education is frequently limited and is inadequately targeted to diverse immigrant communities.
- Successful outreach includes dissemination of translated materials and face-to-face communications with trusted messengers, including immigrant-serving organizations.



**Accessibility.** CLASP found that many child care and early education programs are unavailable to or inaccessible for immigrant families.

- High-quality child care and early education are insufficiently available in immigrant communities.
- There is a lack of affordable, high-quality child care and early education opportunities; and what programs do exist often have waiting lists or cannot serve all eligible children.
- Programs located outside immigrant neighborhoods are often unavailable, due to both transportation barriers and issues related to fear.
- Strict eligibility criteria, paperwork requirements, and complex enrollment processes serve as further barriers for immigrants attempting to access child care and early education programs.
- Immigrant families often have a difficult time navigating complex systems—particularly when language access is inadequately addressed—and therefore are less likely to secure enrollment in programs with limited slots.
- Many immigrant families avoid publicly funded programs for fear, grounded or otherwise, of immigration consequences. This is true of families of all immigration statuses.

**Responsiveness.** To ensure high quality, child care and early education must be responsive to the diverse needs of young children of immigrants and their families. However, CLASP found the following:

- There is a shortage of bilingual and bicultural providers, particularly to serve children of immigrants of backgrounds other than Latino and who speak languages other than Spanish.
- Providers are interested in training in cultural competency and second-language acquisition, but training is currently insufficiently available.
- There are multiple barriers to recruiting and retaining qualified teachers and providers from immigrant communities, including limited English proficiency, insufficient access to higher education, and limited technical assistance to assist providers with licensing.
- Few child care and early education programs have standards or curricula that explicitly address the needs of young children of immigrants or second-language learners.
- Parental involvement strategies must be targeted to diverse immigrant communities and must provide meaningful opportunities for limited English proficient (LEP) parents to be involved.
- Access to comprehensive health services and family supports is critical for immigrant families, yet not all programs provide these services or facilitate access to additional services. Also, comprehensive services are not always linguistically or culturally accessible.
- Home-visiting and family literacy programs, when they are done in culturally appropriate ways and trust is established between providers and families, offer promising opportunities to provide access to high-quality early education and family supports for young children of immigrants and their families.

## Recommendations

To improve immigrant families' access to high-quality child care and early education, CLASP makes the following recommendations for federal, state, and local policymakers, advocates, researchers, and private funders:

- 1. Promote coordination and collaboration between the child care and early education community and the immigrant- and refugee-serving community.**
  - States and localities should provide leadership and commitment to ensure access to programs, including high-quality child care and early education.

- States should establish early learning councils or other coordinating bodies to create a unified child care and early education system.
- States should support local coordination and collaboration.
- Localities should increase collaborations between the child care and early education community and immigrant-serving organizations, providers, administrators, and advocates.
- Localities should establish partnerships between child care and early education programs, early elementary schools, and immigrant parents.
- Private funders—including foundations, corporations, and others—should support collaboration and partnerships between immigrant-serving organizations and the child care and early education community.

**2. Design child care and early education programs and policies that intentionally address the needs of immigrant families with young children.**

- The federal government—including the U.S. Department of Education and the Child Care Bureau in the Office of Family Assistance, the Office of Head Start, and the Office of Civil Rights in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services—should provide guidance, technical assistance, oversight, and information on best practices.
- Federal agencies should improve data collection and reporting on young children in immigrant families.
- The federal and state governments, as well as other funders, should support research to create developmentally, culturally, and linguistically appropriate curricula and assessment tools.
- The federal government and private funders should support research to better understand the child care and early education experiences of young children of immigrants.
- Federal and state governments should provide resources for targeted child care and early education outreach to immigrant families.
- Federal, state, and local governments should expand access to programs that support children and families, including Head Start, Early Head Start, Even Start, Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters, and Parents as Teachers.
- State licensing agencies should evaluate materials, regulations, and policies and ensure that immigrant providers have meaningful access to the licensing process.

- State administrators of child care and early education programs should incorporate cultural and linguistic competency in existing program and content standards.
- Local government agencies, including local planning councils and economic development agencies, should conduct assessments of the demographics and child care and early education needs of immigrant families with young children.

**3. Strengthen child care and early education systems to improve and expand access to high-quality services for young children in immigrant families.**

- Federal, state, and local governments—and other funders—should increase resources for high-quality child care and early education.
- States should establish a centralized and coordinated system to help all families access the array of child care and early education programs in their communities.
- State and local child care and early education agencies should build the supply of high-quality child care and early education in immigrant communities.
- States and other funders should provide sustainable resources to increase the capacity of immigrant-serving organizations to participate in and support child care and early education.
- State and local child care and early education agencies should fund cultural mediators, as should local planning councils, other community agencies, and private funders.



**4. Build the linguistic and cultural competency of state and local child care and early education agencies and programs.**

- Federal, state, and local governments and other actors can work together to build a high-quality, multilingual, culturally competent child care and early education workforce.
  - State and local child care and early education agencies and programs should have language assistance plans to ensure effective communication with LEP persons, along with plans to ensure the cultural competency and diversity of the workforce.

- Federal and state agencies should recruit, hire, and retain bilingual, culturally competent staff.
  - Federal and state agencies administering child care and early education programs should support the increased linguistic and cultural competency of the workforce.
  - Local programs can implement policies to recruit, hire, and retain bilingual, culturally competent providers.
  - Local child care resource and referral agencies can help to identify and coordinate the professional development needs of immigrant providers.
  - Institutions of higher education can play a role in helping the early childhood workforce move toward greater cultural competency and diversity.
- State child care and early education agencies, state early learning councils, and child care resource and referral agencies should support family, friend, and neighbor caregivers in immigrant communities.
  - State child care administrators and private funders can promote community-based networks of immigrant child care and early education providers to assist with accessing professional development.

## Conclusion

Children from immigrant families are the fastest growing group of children in the United States, and nearly all young children of immigrants living in the United States are U.S. citizens. High-quality child care and early education opportunities will be critical to these children's success in school and in life. Yet, the early experiences of children in immigrant families are as diverse and varied as immigrant families themselves. While many immigrant families face numerous barriers to accessing high-quality child care and early education for their young children, these barriers are not insurmountable. Unique solutions to improving access for immigrant families are already emerging in local communities and in state policies.

Reaching all children of immigrants, and successfully including them in child care and early education initiatives, will require specific strategies and collaborations among providers, policymakers, and immigrant-serving organizations. Above all, it will require understanding and respecting the needs and preferences of diverse families. Meeting the needs of the growing population of young children of immigrants presents a challenge for the early childhood field. It is a challenge, however, that is essential to meet. If children of immigrant families are given opportunities to participate, and if programs reflect their experiences, the linguistic and cultural diversity that these children offer will ultimately enrich the early childhood experiences of *all* children.