

Hearing from Parents About Their Child Care Needs



Humanitarian Assistance with Kindness and Interculturalism

In January 2020, a listening session with parents and caregivers was held at the Humanitarian Assistance with Kindness and Interculturalism (HAKI) community center in Lake Oswego, Oregon. This listening session was part of a series of family listening sessions funded by the Preschool Development Grant as a part of a statewide early learning needs assessment. The listening session was co-designed, organized, and hosted by HAKI and AB Cultural Drivers, OSLC Developments, Inc., and Portland State University. The goal of the listening sessions was to include the perspectives of African immigrant and refugee families, to understand their early learning needs and experiences, and to ultimately inform the development of the state's early learning plan. This listening session was held in Swahili with 13 parents and caregivers—10 mothers of young children, 2 fathers, and 1 grandmother. In addition, some of the parents participating also had experience in the early learning field as a teacher, home visitor, or parent educator.

Current Child Care Experiences and Building School Readiness

Who currently takes care of your children ages 0-5 years and what activities do they do?

Getting support from their own parents and/or other family members was common across these parents. Five parents had young children in Head Start or Early Head Start, and two of those parents had a teacher or home visitor who speaks Swahili and is from their community. When asked the types of activities that these individuals provide for their young children, parents talked about a variety of things that include screen time, pretend play, outside time, meals, bedtime, arts and crafts, reading, setting a routine, social emotional skills, counting, learning their colors, shapes, letters, and interacting with peers.

When asked what providers do to celebrate or practice their child's traditions, culture, and language, parents shared that their parents, family members, or community members speak Somali or Swahili to their children and tell stories and sing songs in Swahili to the children so they don't lose their home language. They practice Muslim traditions such as washing after children get home from school, reading the Quran, and teaching children how to pray and how to have good manners, behave and be a good positive person.

"[The] babysitter speaks Somali and Swahili; she talks to the little ones in Swahili. She tells stories about Africa in Swahili."

What kinds of parenting supports are most important?

Parents had many ideas about what support would be beneficial for them. Parents shared that they often feel isolated and may feel more comfortable learning in a culturally-specific and peer environment.

“Being a parent is not an easy job, it is overwhelming and exhausting. Having a support group that can give you an idea about how to talk to your child.”

In addition, having someone from their community who can teach parents about different developmental stages, setting routines for young children, and different activities they can do with their young children. Parents also talked about the benefits of having a teacher or parent educator come to their community and talk to parents about how they can prepare children for school, what the expectations are for children and for parents, and how to communicate with teachers.

“As a parent if you’re not educated then you don’t realize those small things add up. You have to be educated and realize that you learn at such a young age and that’s what impacts them as an adult. The little things you do at home, the little activities recognizing them and connecting them. He’s learning something or his development now is so different three months later.”

Benefits of Early Learning Programs

Parents with children in Head Start or Early Head Start talked about the benefits for their families, including seeing their child use words to describe emotions and getting a referral to a speech therapist. One parent noted that her child who was in both programs seemed to gain more skills than her child who only attended Head Start. Another parent spoke about the value of having a home visitor.

“A lot of people are not comfortable with someone coming into the home. They help us with early delays that the home visitor can refer to a specialist. [Home Visitors] help with activities and [we] had a positive experience. All the development stages about the hearing, speech, social-emotional, cognitive, physical. If I talk to my youngest, before I didn’t talk to my kid now I talk to him even if he doesn’t have words, he mimics.”

One parent, who is also an early learning provider, described that in their community most parents think that younger children are not learning when they go to preschool because of the emphasis on play. However, she shared the benefits of play and other learning that happens in preschool.

“There might be a lot of toys in a preschool classroom but what they’re learning most importantly is social-emotional skills...But also we’re teaching them to count, colors, shapes, letters, we prepare them to be ready for kindergarten. Parallel talk, interacting with peers, trust me they’re learning a lot. We use visuals, emotions, we give them words that they can’t process yet.”

What early learning supports would you like to prepare your child for kindergarten?

Many parents said that they would like a culturally specific classroom or early learning program in their own community, and talked about not having opportunities for children to socialize, like story time, where their culture, language, and values would be understood, honored, and reinforced. A couple parents suggested that HAKI could provide this type of support. One parent talked about the importance of dual-language programs so that children can build skills for transitioning from one language to another. Another parent said that they would like to see more understanding and adaptation of what is taught in early learning based on their religion since sometimes schools teach children things that go against their religion. All parents said that they would like a home visitor or provider who speaks their language and is familiar with their culture and works from a place of understanding why families would be reluctant to engage in White dominant early learning support. A few parents mentioned that lack of trust of providers and teachers outside of their community as a barrier to engagement in early learning opportunities.

“A lot of parents are scared if there’s an American home visitor. Especially since they are scared of them calling DHS. A lot of people don’t want that and they lose a lot. It’s hard to trust somebody who’s outside of the community to come to your house or when you open your doors for people. The whole family or the kids may be taken away. Even if a child falls or gets hurt, they might blame the parents. The trust is an issue. This community has EHS but they do not participate because they do not trust those from outside the community.”

For the parents who were interested in support outside of the home, there were a variety of preferences, although the dates and times that were most needed included weekends and afternoons after 1pm, since most parents work swing and overnight shifts. Three parents said ideally early learning support would happen two days a week, another parent said once a week or twice a month when they are 3-5 years old. Another parent said morning classes are more beneficial since they will be expected to transition into a morning routine when they start kindergarten. One parent noted that **"We mostly keep our young kids at home since we don't trust. We would just rather have family members watch the little ones."**

Difference Between Home Culture and School Culture

Parents made it clear that their children are brought up in a different home culture and tradition than the White dominant culture at their school. Parents described the challenges for children and for themselves when crossing these cultural divides. One parent said:

"It is like day and night. That's why they're always having problems with their teachers. The teacher is expecting them to act differently." In families' countries of origin, children are expected and taught to respect their teachers differently. Children are taught to respect teachers just as much as they are taught to respect their parents."

"...the kids are scared of the teachers back home. The teachers here don't have the same discipline. Here the parents are responsible for that discipline."

"At school [the child] can tell the teacher like I'm not ready, I need quiet area because I'm not ready to listen to you. In our culture, at our home you have to listen to the old person."

"Our culture is kind of harsh so we have to understand our kids because the teacher over there using their words and talking. So we need as a parent [to understand that] we can also talk because our culture that does not teach that...So to learn how to talk to them and listen to them and discipline you can do it just using your words...So we need to educate our parents so we can be with the teachers and the teachers are on the same page."

A few parents expressed the fear that parents in this community have of teachers calling DHS, due to past experiences that reflect cultural misunderstandings. One parent said that at school children are taught that if they are experiencing abuse that they should call 911 or tell their teacher. Children are **"saying, 'Okay, if you say that to me the teacher said I can call 911 on you.' So for us, when we're talking to our kids sometimes we're like 'Hey, stop it!' So saying that they take it as abuse, so they're like okay, we can call 911 on you."**

This issue is further complicated by the fact that parents are fearful that teachers will take this information, call DHS, and the family will have a negative experience with the child welfare system. Parents felt that teachers need to communicate with families about their concerns prior to calling DHS.



Need for Teacher Diversity Training

One potential solution that families offered, which could help teachers understand differences between the home-school cultural divide for students is to provide diversity training for teachers. Teachers are expecting children from this community to act differently than the way they are expected to act at home.

"I think we should educate the teachers about our culture... They should have a day off to get trained on different cultures, Swahili culture, Somali culture, African culture. What we do at home and what we do at school and the teacher they should come and if they have any questions they should be trained to call the parents first before they call DHS."

Experiences of Discrimination and Stereotyping from Teachers and Schools

The experience of discrimination was widely shared among these families. One parent said, *"This is the biggest challenge, discrimination. It starts from early preschool and it can go all the way."* Parents have witnessed teachers treating their children differently academically compared to other children in the classroom; children have experienced school leaders saying negative things about them; and parents have experienced overt racism from other parents.

"There was a principal, he wasn't even a teacher, a principal who told my child that he's dumb. 'You're African, you Africans are dumb.' I was like, she said that, are you serious? I went to the principal and I talked to her and she said 'Oh I didn't mean it that way'. No, it doesn't matter which way you mean it, you told the child and the child feels that 'Oh the principal said that.' That's not right. You shouldn't say that, especially not the principal because they believe the principal knows more than the teachers. It was crazy. I didn't like it. My son who was like four years old, I took him out of school."

"So that's the most challenging, discrimination with teachers, with parents. I remember this instance when I was serving lunch there were 10 kids at my table. These parents walk in and come to a specific child sitting there and ask 'Is this child from Somalia, both mom and dad?' And I'm like yeah. 'Then how did he get this hair?' I was like, really? First of all there's a lot of Somalis that have different textured hair."

One parent's child received a pair of shoes from their Head Start teacher and thought that the teacher was operating on unspoken assumptions and had a stereotype of her and her son as lacking resources. The added fact that this was done without talking to the parent first is in line with another challenge we heard from many parents—teachers are not getting to know families, nor making an effort to strengthen parent-teacher communication.

"To not have that respect of a parent and teacher relationship to say 'hey can I give your son these shoes?' And giving me the opportunity to be like, no he can't have those shoes or I don't want them. You know what I mean? To assume that he needs it because he's African or in a Head Start program, automatically jumping to conclusion."

Poor Teacher-Parent Communication Is Harming Families

Multiple parents shared experiences of extremely challenging communication issues with their child's White teachers, and noted that they often do not get the same levels of information as other (non-African) parents. Two parents experienced instances where their child was injured and they felt the teacher did respond appropriately or adequately.

"I took [my child] to the hospital, they told me it was broken. I assumed he didn't tell anybody because I didn't get a call, I didn't get an email, I didn't get anything. He was like, 'Yeah, I told the teacher that my arm was hurting and she told me to go and sit down at my desk.'...What really made me furious and angry was, my child has a good friend who goes to school together...they are Caucasian and I kind of talked to her [the mom] about it. And she was like, 'She [the teacher] emails me every time my little girl gets a paper cut.'...That was kind of like, okay, now I felt that discrimination."

Another parent noticed that a Head Start teacher was relying completely on written communication to parents, even though most of the parents in the classroom could not read English. However, because of cultural norms and expectations of families in the US, immigrant and refugee parents might not raise the issue immediately to staff in white dominant organizations or institutions, especially if they haven't made attempts to build a relationship with the families and understand their perspectives.

"I was just an assistant, most teachers that come from our culture they don't like complaining a lot. We have a lot of patience, we take a lot. Maybe when we are about to explode that's just when we complain. A lot of things we observe and just stay quiet about it. That's what I notice."

One parent described the harm being done by teachers with negative perceptions of families:

"Teachers have more time with our children than we do, but still the teachers try to blame the parents, instead of parents blaming the teachers...But we still want to work together with the teachers so we expect the teachers to work with us to include the kids. So there's that stereotyping that is going on in our schools that if it can be handled from the top it would be much better."

Parents Want More Teachers Who Reflect and Understand Their Community

In addition to more teacher/provider training and education that builds specific cross-cultural understanding, other ways to bridge these divides are clearly needed, such as having more culturally specific providers. One parent has a preschooler who is in a classroom with a teacher from their community and an older child who is in a classroom with a White American teacher, and noted the extreme differences for their children:

“Like right now, my [youngest child] and has someone from our community as the teacher. If he does something bad that teacher is going to come and tell me hey, this is what’s going on. He cannot misbehave in school because he knows at the end of the day we will talk. She will care because she knows him personally...She’s not going to say your child is bad, she’s going to say how can we work together to settle this...We work together, we understand where we come from...how can the teacher and parent communicate with each other, work with each other to help our children? Not blame them...But my [older child] does something bad, I get a nasty email your son did this and this and this. She’s not going to sit there and be like hey, I’m going to talk to you, this is not right.”

Ideally, children would have more teachers that reflect their community, culture, and language—however, there are challenges.

“If there’s a school around our area we need to have our own teachers. I understand there’s the issue of pay that’s why they are going for better jobs.”

Key Takeaways

- ▶ Parents would like to see parent support groups, parent education, child socialization opportunities, and home visiting services that are provided by their community organizations and individuals from their community, with knowledge of their culture and language.
- ▶ Having a teacher from their community in the classroom with their children provides a more supportive environment for the child and better parent-teacher communication, however, teacher pay needs to be better in order to attract individuals from their community into the teaching profession.
- ▶ The issue of teacher and school discrimination and stereotyping needs to be addressed from the top.
- ▶ Teachers and school staff need to be trained in the cultural norms of the children in their classroom. Teachers need meaningful training in antiracism, especially when it comes to understanding and communicating with parents from backgrounds different from their own.
- ▶ Communication and relationship building with parents that is culturally-specific and builds trust is a key factor in engaging and supporting these families. Building this trust is likely to have to start with persons from within their community.
- ▶ Parents want their children to grow up seeing and experiencing their culture and language valued and reinforced in early learning and education settings.

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