

# What Do Missouri's Youngest Children Need to Succeed?

## 2019 Preschool Development Grant Listening Sessions Summary

Missouri's youngest children need us to work together to support a safe and healthy early childhood. But what do families need? And how can early childhood professionals respond best to families? To answer these questions, the University of Missouri-St. Louis' Community Innovation and Action Center talked to Missouri families and early childhood professionals about their experiences. These listening sessions were part of the Missouri Preschool Development Grant Needs Assessment, led by Missouri's Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.

In the summer of 2019, 289 individuals from urban and rural communities came to 22 listening sessions about early childhood education. The sessions ranged in discussions about salaries and education levels. Over 40% of participants identified themselves as a racial minority. In two of the sessions, everyone spoke Spanish. Most participants were women. After carefully listening to all the participants, the following themes emerged.

### Listening Session Themes

#### Early Childhood Workforce

Listening session participants expressed a need for livable wages and health benefits for early childhood professionals. This would help with consistent staff at centers. Parents shared stories of how their children made connections, with a professional, who eventually chose to leave for a job with better pay or benefits. These transitions can be hard on children and many parents would like to prevent them. Many early childhood professionals and parent participants suggested that early childhood education is not valued enough in Missouri communities and they thought public awareness could help address this issue.

Both early childhood professionals and parents want more training and certification opportunities for early childhood professionals. For example, they identified trainings in cultural responsiveness, first-aid training and developmental delays. Early childhood professionals, in rural areas, shared that they need to travel long distances to attend trainings, which is difficult for them.

## Listening Session Locations



### Support for Families

Most early childhood professionals and parents were concerned about the high cost of child care. Missouri currently offers a financial assistance program for families who don't make enough at work to pay for early child care themselves, called the Child Care Subsidy Program. While families were grateful for this, professionals shared that the amount was only about half of what it costs to keep quality centers open. The wages offered haven't increased to keep up with operating costs over time, so professionals have to make hard choices, like laying off teachers or turning families away. This often means families don't get what they need.

Early childhood professionals said that an increase in subsidy dollars would make child care more affordable. Most professionals and parents also thought that raising the income cut-off to be eligible would help more families. For example, one parent mentioned that their income was four dollars over the subsidy cut-off, so they had to find other options. Several parents suggested that working at their jobs does not cover the full cost of child care; therefore, many parents leave the workforce to care for their children.

### Early Care

In rural listening sessions, both professionals and parents talked about the lack of child care centers and medical providers in the area. Parents also were concerned about the lack of internet access and quality food. Many felt that children were not getting needed services, because some services don't exist in their communities. Similarly, parents from urban areas shared concerns about the need for culturally relevant programming. Both rural and urban families also emphasized transportation issues and long travel distances.

### Support for Early Childhood Services

Early childhood professionals and families generally appreciated the high standards of certification, licensing and accreditation. However, professionals felt that the costs were too high. There was also frustration with unclear safety requirements and confusing licensing rules, specifically fingerprinting. Professionals in rural areas noted that some licensing requirements are difficult to achieve in their area. They said that this resulted in a higher number of unlicensed in-home centers in rural areas.

Parents noted physical safety and psychological safety were key factors overall. For example, many parents in rural areas were concerned about the number of staff in unlicensed centers. Parents in urban areas shared stories of driving all the way

across town so their children could attend a reputable center. They believed the options in their neighborhood were not safe. Several parents looked to their children's reactions to determine if a center was safe: Did the child feel comfortable around the teachers? Did the child look forward to going to the center? Without an easy way to understand if a program is good for their children, parents use word of mouth recommendations, gut checks and trial and error.

## Centralized Resources and Communication

Many early childhood professionals and parents talked about the importance of communication and information sharing between professionals and parents. They would like this connection to improve. One parent talked about how the variety of programs felt like "managed chaos." Many parents and professionals shared stories of confusion, missed service opportunities, long wait times and unclear answers. Better coordination across the state would help families connect with needed services and find resources to support their children.

### **"I think there's a lack [of child care providers], and I think it's pretty common across rural area**

- Parent, Listening Session Participant

## Transitions

Parents and professionals across the state noted that home visiting programs are a great support. Parents stated that they would like professionals to offer support for the whole family; this would help lay a strong foundation for children at home. Transitioning children from early childhood services to kindergarten was also important to parents. Early childhood professionals and parents who coordinated with Pre-K and Kindergarten professionals found the transition to be more comfortable and successful for their children. It was very important to parents that staff members foster stable relationships over time with their children. Mutual respect between parents and professionals was mentioned as an important factor.

## Early Identification

In general, special education information and services to help diagnosis delays were two common concerns from parents in both rural and urban areas. Many parents and early childhood professionals raised concerns regarding special education programs, indicating that there are not enough qualified professionals who are able to diagnose and care for students with developmental, behavioral or physical delays. This means that some children are not getting services as early as they could, which creates more drastic needs during the school-aged years. Early childhood professionals also talked about wanting more trainings so they can better care for children with disabilities.

Parents also noted that there are fewer professionals available to do special education assessments in rural areas, and that they have to drive to the nearest city in order to have their child considered for special education. In order to make this trip, parents have to arrange to take time off work which can cause delays in getting the assessment.

### **"We were absolutely lucky. Our son was very delayed, and we were just really lucky that one of the people at our church happened to know about the First Steps program and told us about that."**

- Parent, Listening Session Participant

## Help with Special Education Resources

Early childhood professionals would like for parents to better understand special education resources and services. They also expressed a desire to change the cut-offs to make special education services available to more children. While many parents received services for children age 0-3 years, they find a lack of services for children ages 3-5 years. As children transition to elementary school, parents do not feel well-informed about the special education process.



## Care Should Reflect the Child

Parents said that they would like early childhood education that reflects the identity, culture and language of every child. Six percent of Missouri's children speak a language other than English at home, and Missouri is growing in racial diversity. Culturally competent child care was important to many professionals and parents.

## Trauma Informed Care

Parents and early childhood professionals in all areas wanted to see more trauma-informed care. They would like professionals who are trained in managing their own trauma to help children dealing with difficult situations, such as family stress, violence, drug use and poverty.

**“We now understand that what happens in the first five years determines the rest of a child’s life, especially with trauma. ... We know that trauma matters.”**

- Early Childhood Professional, Listening Session Participant

## Practical Hopes for the System

The study asked: "If you had \$1 billion to do anything for early childhood education in Missouri, what would you do?" Answers included practical things: extending child care hours for parents who work long or odd hours, safe and creative outdoor play spaces, help with transportation, more information about disabilities, and access to healthy food. They all agreed: By strengthening Missouri's early childhood services, Missouri leaders can make a difference in the lives of its youngest children and their families.~

The Missouri Preschool Development Grant Listening Sessions helped us understand the challenges and opportunities affecting early childhood services in Missouri and how to lift up the voices of those directly impacted by these issues: families and early childhood professionals. We thank them for their time and their contributions.

The goal of the Preschool Development Grant is to strengthen early childhood services for children birth to age five.



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