

CCPRC Poster Session: D2- Child Care Decision-Making Immigrant Families (Thurs., 11/17)

New Americans: The Child Care Choices of Parents of English Language Learners

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A collaboration between Oldham Innovative Research and the Cutler Institute for Health and Social Policy, Muskie School of Public Service, University of Southern Maine

New Americans: the Child Care Choices of Parents of English Language Learners is an exploratory, mixed method study examining the factors influencing the child care choices of immigrant and refugee parents of English Language Learners. The study population includes Mexican immigrant families in Denver, Colorado and Cambodian, Somali, and Sudanese families in Portland, Maine. Methods include parent focus groups, service provider interviews and surveys of child care providers and K-2 teachers. **This presentation focuses on Cambodian, Somali and Sudanese parents in Portland, Maine.**

The overarching research question for this study was: **What factors influence the child care choices of low income refugee families of English Language Learners?**

Relevant Methodological Context

- ❖ Portland, Maine is a refugee resettlement site and thus has refugees from all over the worlds (there are over 60 languages spoken in the local high school). The Somali, Sudanese and Cambodian are the largest and most long-standing in Portland. This made finding cultural liaisons and interpreters possible.
- ❖ Child care is a cultural construct. Conceptualization of child care and preschool are different within different populations. This affected the design, implementation and results.
- ❖ Time was built into the study to get to know the culture (through training and working with cultural liaisons) and build the trust necessary to conduct focus groups.

Methodology

- ❖ 6 focus groups in Portland, Maine
- ❖ Interviews with early care providers, K-2 teachers, and service providers that interact with refugee parents.
- ❖ Child care and K-2 teacher surveys

Research Findings

- Our results cannot be summarized into pithy statements. We relied upon the actual statements from the parents to present our findings in our report.
- However, some themes emerged:
 - **Many decisions reflected choices made by parents in general:** mismatch between work hours and child care hours, high costs and the availability of cheaper alternatives such as extended family, a desire for a less-structured, more family like

¹ Study conducted with Helen Ward (Co-Principal Investigator) and Julie Atkins (Project Manager)

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setting where they get more attention, health and safety concerns and a desire to insulate children from negative peer influences.

- Other choices seemed more tied to *cultural beliefs* including **concerns and misunderstandings about disciplinary practices** in child care settings especially in larger settings, **concerns about discrimination** and concerns over children **losing their language and culture** if they were enrolled in child care was a major concern across the cultural groups.

“I want my children to learn both languages but when the children start school and daycare they are going to lose it along the way. They can’t stop it. my children, one of them complains that Cambodian is too hard to speak. Even though you speak it every day at home they’re not going to remember what you tell them. They remember what they speak with their friends in English.” – Cambodian parent

“When my daughter gets home she tells me what is going on in daycare and she will say that the kids tell her, “you have brown skin” and “you look different.” She used to go to camp and they told her the same thin. This year she refused to go to camp. She said, “Oh, they will tell me I am different and I have brown skin.” – Sudanese parent

“When I see pork I say maybe my baby’s not safe... some babies at child care they use formula that comes from pork – that’s against our religion.” – Somali parent

- Benefits of enrolling children in care: **Child care provides more opportunities to learn**

“My son had home care and when he turned three we sent him to a daycare center. Now he learns a lot. Before he learned my language. He stayed home with a babysitter. Now he’s speaking English; he has a lot of activity.” Somali parent

- Benefits of enrolling children in care: **Child care allows children to socialize and learn about American culture and American schools.**

“Before he stayed in my home; he don’t go outside...he was sad. But now he goes everywhere they take the daycare. He talks; he knows things he didn’t know before; he’s a whole new boy now really; he’s very active. Before he was in babysitting with other two kids and now he’s in a whole group like 20 kids so it’s very good and I hope he’s doing that until Kindergarten and he’s starting kindergarten work and it’s good English, not ESL, that what I’m hoping.” Somali parent

- **The notion of “choice of child care” was bewildering to some parents**

Most parent received information through word of mouth. Having a “choice” of care was bewildering to some parents. In their native countries, when preschool is available, it was part of a single system of publicly funded programs. And when they were given information about child care, they were often just told about a single program (e.g. Head Start) so were unaware of many choices. There was a lack of information about what “child care” is. One Cambodian parent, at the end of the focus group asked, *“I want to know how they take care of all children in this country? What is this child care system?”*

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