**MATHEMATICA**
Policy Research

# IssueBRIEF

By Jaime Thomas, Cleo Jacobs Johnson, Madeline Young, Kimberly Boller, Mindy Hu, and Daisy Gonzalez

## Moving Forward Together:
# How Programs Can Support Informal Caregivers and Parents

## The strategy

The David and Lucile Packard Foundation's Children, Families, and Communities (CFC) program strives to ensure that all children have the opportunity to reach their full potential. The goal of CFC's Early Learning Strategy is to make sure infants, toddlers, and preschoolers are on track for success in school and in life by being ready for school by age five, regardless of their family's background. The Early Learning Strategy supports adults who provide nurturing environments where children can enjoy learning, exploring, and making friends, and adults have pride and confidence in the education and care they provide. CFC is focusing part of this 10-year strategy on identifying caregivers who provide informal child care in California, learning about their needs for support, and funding and evaluating promising approaches to enhance the quality of children's experiences in these settings.

This issue brief is the last in a series of three presenting the findings from the Informal Caregivers Research Project, funded by the David and Lucile Packard Foundation's Children, Families, and Communities (CFC) program and conducted by Mathematica Policy Research. The first brief in this series provided an overview of informal child care in California based on a review of recent literature and from the perspectives of state- and county-level organization staff. The second brief presented findings from ecomaps: graphical representations of the child care arrangements and sources of support for a small sample of informal caregivers and parents in the Bay Area.

### A working definition of informal child care

This research project defines *informal child care* as care provided on a regular basis to children from birth through age 5 by unlicensed, noncustodial caregivers. Other terms for informal child care are family, friend, and neighbor care; home-based care; kith and kin care; relative care; and license-exempt care.[1]

This brief discusses the varied roles of parents and informal caregivers, their strengths in caring for children, their needs for information and support, and barriers they face in accessing caregiving resources. It also provides recommendations for outreach methods, programs, and policies to address their needs. The main data source is a set of interviews with parents and informal caregiv-ers conducted during site visits to community organizations in Alameda and Santa Clara counties.[2] We visited two public library branches, two family resource centers, and two other community organizations, and talked with adults who were there with children to attend story hours and arts, educational, and other activities.

**Public Libraries**

Temescal Branch, Oakland Public Library (Alameda County)

César E. Chávez Branch, Oakland Public Library (Alameda County)

**Family Resource Centers**

Lotus Bloom Child and Family Resource Center (Alameda County)

Santee Family Resource Center (Santa Clara County)

**Other Community Organizations**

East Valley Family YMCA (Santa Clara County)
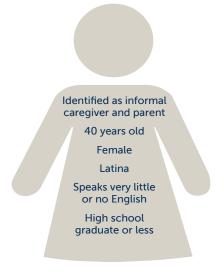
Sacred Heart Community Service (Santa Clara County)

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## PARENTING, INFORMAL CAREGIVING, AND FORMAL CAREGIVING ROLES OVERLAP

When recruiting study participants at library story hours, the Mathematica team found that for many individuals, the roles of parent, informal caregiver, and formal child care provider overlap.[3] Participants may have attended the story hours in the role of parent, nanny, or licensed family child care provider, but in addition to caring for children in those contexts, also provided informal care.

Across all sites, we interviewed 22 individuals who self-identified as informal caregivers (38 percent), 25 as both informal caregivers and parents who used informal care (43 percent), and 11 as parents who used informal care only (19 percent). The figure below illustrates the typical study participant.



Identified as informal caregiver and parent

40 years old

Female

Latina

Speaks very little or no English

High school graduate or less

## PARENTS AND INFORMAL CAREGIVERS ARE HIGHLY INVESTED IN CHILDREN

**Parents and caregivers provide enriching activities and positive experiences for children.** Parents and informal caregivers in this study demonstrated many strengths in caring for children. They reported engaging with the children in their care in stimulating activities such as reading and singing; spending time outside; teaching values, rules, and manners; and fostering basic living skills. They actively sought programs that promote child

> Loving and teaching... Teaching right from wrong, teaching safe play, colors... Don't play with the knives. Don't go in the street... Sharing. Can't bite.
>
> Informal caregiver on how she spends time with children

development, school readiness, and family functioning, and found safe and enriching environments for the children in their care. The parents and caregivers we met were attending programs whose staff provided school readiness activities and other resources and modeled positive behaviors and strategies for parents and caregivers to use with children.

- At two branches of the Oakland Public Library, we observed story hours. During these events, staff engaged dozens of children, parents, and caregivers with songs, reading, and movement activities.

- At Lotus Bloom, informal caregivers and parents participated in a caregiver-child program involving free play, art, snack, puzzles, and circle time.

- At the Santee Family Resource Center, operated by Catholic Charities, individuals participated in an arts enrichment program.

- At East Valley YMCA, we visited Nana y Yo, an early learning readiness program involving circle time activities and multiple play stations at which caregivers and children interacted while staff facilitated these interactions.

- At Sacred Heart, parents and informal caregivers attended English classes during the visit. Other community members took part in computer courses and accessed resources such as a food pantry.

**Parents and caregivers look for information from various sources.** In addition to attending programs, many of the parents and caregivers we interviewed reported seeking out information about child care from informal, personal networks. For example, one parent reported looking mainly to friends for information about caring for children, and one individual who was both an informal caregiver and a parent mentioned a social worker, a doctor, and a friend as people who provided information about health and safety for young children. Several informal caregivers reported discussing child care strategies with the parents of the children in their care.

Parents and caregivers also reported searching for information on their own. Several reported using the Internet to search for resources such as ideas about trips and activities and how to entertain children at home.

In addition, the ecomaps which we described in the second brief in this series, "A Closer Look: Informal Child Care Arrangements and Support in California," contained many examples of parents who saw their informal caregivers (often their own parents) as strong sources of support and advice related to child care.

**Parents and caregivers care about building strong communities and caregiving networks.** Many of the informal caregivers and parents we interviewed wanted to be part of a network and participate in programs but were unaware of any such networks or programs in their communities. Others were well connected and participated in caregiving networks; in particular, they reported attending or participating in community-based programs related to child care and meeting informally with other parents and caregivers in their community. They mentioned several key programs and locations.

### Key programs and locations
- Head Start/Early Head Start programs
- Schools
- Libraries
- Parks
- Child development centers
- County First 5 organizations
- Child care resource and referral agencies
- Community organizations
- Church

## INFORMAL CAREGIVERS AND PARENTS WANT MORE PROGRAMS AND OUTREACH

Many of the informal caregivers we interviewed could not identify any networks or programs available to them. In addition, others cited only the program at which the interview took place. Interactions with other parents and caregivers tended to be unplanned, occurring, for example,

when a grandmother caring for her grandchild would run into her neighbor, a new mother, while on a walk. A parent pointed out the need for more outreach, noting that even when programs and support are available, people cannot use these resources if they do not know about them.

Informal caregivers cited specific needs for information, activities, and materials related to child safety and development.

### Information on child safety
- Health and safety training
- How to handle suspected child abuse
- Websites providing information on how to care for children

### Activities and materials to promote child development
- Safe places where children have room to play
- Information on enriching activities for children
- Affordable programs to attend with children
- School readiness materials

Parents agreed that they would like the informal providers caring for their children to have access to health and safety training and information on developmentally appropriate activities.

## PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS FACE LOGISTICAL, LANGUAGE, TECHNOLOGICAL, AND FINANCIAL BARRIERS IN ACCESSING RESOURCES

The informal caregivers and parents in this study found programs that met some of their caregiving needs. Despite being able to attend the programs at which we met them, they listed many barriers to participating in other programs or accessing additional resources. We grouped these barriers into four categories: (1) logistical, (2) language, (3) technological, and (4) financial.

### Logistical barriers
Lack of transportation
Unsafe neighborhoods
Undocumented migrant status

### Language barriers
Limited English proficiency
Illiteracy

### Technological barriers
Lack of Internet access

### Financial barriers
Costs associated with children's programs and trainings such as CPR, first aid, and child development

## PARTICIPATION IN THE FORMAL CHILD CARE SYSTEM IS LOW

The existing formal system—which we define as including California's voucher-based child care subsidy program and the licensed child care system—is a potential source of support for informal caregivers. Parents can use subsidies to pay for informal care, which could benefit both parents and caregivers. Informal caregivers can seek licensing to open a regulated family child care home. An advantage of operating a licensed family child care home is that reimbursement rates for subsidy payments are higher for licensed operators than for license-exempt care. Despite these potential benefits, participation in the formal system was low among the parents and caregivers in our study.

**Informal caregivers are largely unaware of child care subsidies.** Although more than half of the caregivers we interviewed received some sort of payment, only about 15 percent were aware of California's voucher-based child care subsidy program. Over half of parents we interviewed were aware of the program.

**Few informal caregivers desired to become licensed.** Few informal caregivers wished to make child care a career or pursue licensing. Among those who expressed a desire to become licensed, however, contact with licensed early childhood professionals appeared to influence this desire. Though many informal caregivers reported that money was part of their motivation for providing care, many also reported that they were motivated by a wish to help the families for whom they provided care or to build a strong relationship with the children in their care.

**Informal caregivers lack knowledge of licensing requirements and fear violating them.** One informal caregiver was reluctant to reveal the number of children for whom she provided care, because she feared she was caring for too many children to qualify as license-exempt. In California, family day care providers are exempt from licensing requirements if they provide care for the children of only one family in addition to the caregiver's own children.

Although legal residency is not required to obtain a license, undocumented immigrants may believe that they are unable to obtain a license due to their legal status.[6] In at least one case, this belief led an informal caregiver to decline the opportunity to care for a child—the mother was seeking a licensed care provider, and the caregiver told her that due to her legal status she would be unable to take care of the child.

## RECOMMENDED OUTREACH METHODS TENDED TO BE LOW-TECH AND PERSONAL

We asked informal caregivers and parents two related questions: (1) What methods do you use to access information about caring for children? (2) What methods do you recommend programs use to reach caregivers and parents? Although

### Reported methods of obtaining caregiving information
Text messages
Telephone
Internet
Social media
YouTube
Email

### Recommended methods for outreach
Text messages
Television advertisements
Mailings
Bulletin boards at community buildings
Materials distributed through schools

there was some overlap, recommended methods tended to be more "low-tech" than reported methods. An advantage of low-tech methods—in particular, those that do not rely on Internet access—is that they are more inclusive and can reach older, less educated, and less connected individuals. In some cases, individuals disagreed on preferred outreach methods. For example, although some recommended mailings, others questioned their effectiveness.

In addition to these broad methods targeting caregivers directly, individuals mentioned ways to reach caregivers via personal connections. One small group of caregivers in Alameda County suggested that targeting parents would be a good way to reach informal caregivers. As another conduit of information and support, several parents and informal caregivers suggested that home visits by experienced child care providers would be helpful.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PROMISING APPROACHES DRAW FROM INFORMAL CAREGIVERS RESEARCH PROJECT FINDINGS

> Part of it is just thinking of strategies that are outside of the box and ... meeting people where they are and not expecting them to come to where we want them to be.
>
> Former county First 5 staff member

The Informal Caregivers Research Project targeted a range of stakeholders, including policymakers, researchers, funders, program staff, parents, and caregivers, and aimed to provide a deeper understanding of the characteristics of informal caregivers and parents in California, their existing networks, and their needs for support. Based on the findings from this project, we recommend several promising approaches for programming and outreach.

**Programs should target a spectrum of caregivers.** We found that caregivers have a spectrum of identities and can fill many roles—parent, grandparent, full-time care provider, and/or ad hoc babysitter. Parents, family members, and other people in children's lives may not consider themselves child care providers. Programs seeking to improve the quality of care in informal settings should target their services broadly, including in their outreach parents and other family members, friends and neighbors, and more formal providers such as nannies and family child care operators.

**Programs should build on parent and caregiver strengths.** Parents and caregivers reported providing children with enriching activities and positive experiences and sought to do more. Programs should honor these strengths—one way is by emphasizing that parents and caregivers are already promoting school readiness through simple, everyday activities such as talking, singing, and reading with children.[7]

**Programs should leverage informal networks for outreach.** Existing networks tend to be informal and happenstance, involving unplanned interactions. Programs can leverage these informal networks by reaching out to parents and caregivers in the locations where they already spend time—parks, libraries, schools, post offices, laundromats, and other settings.

**Programs should provide connections to the formal system when appropriate.** Parents and caregivers want information on child safety and development. Organizations tied into the formal system, such as child care resource and referral agencies, are natural places to provide these resources. In addition, subsidies can provide informal caregivers with much-needed income at little cost to eligible parents. However, parents and caregivers can be reluctant to interact with the formal system, wanting to maintain a low profile so as not to reveal their legal status or the number of children in their care. Programs need to be sensitive to these concerns but not let them stand in the way of reaching out to parents and caregivers who could benefit from their resources.

**Programs should make messaging accessible to people facing language and technological barriers.** Some of the caregivers in our study were illiterate; many more lacked Internet access. Although some reported using the Internet, social media, and YouTube to access information, programs should keep in mind that Internet access is not ubiquitous

among informal caregivers and the parents who rely on this type of care. In addition, programs should explore methods such as radio or local television announcements to reach individuals with low levels of literacy.

We hope the insights from this project and our recommendations will help target outreach and develop programs to more effectively serve the informal caregivers and families who make up this important sector of the caregiving community.

## ENDNOTES

[1] Susman-Stillman, A., and P. Banghart. "Quality in Family, Friend, and Neighbor Child Care Settings." Child Care & Early Education Research Connections, National Center for Children in Poverty, 2011.

[2] The second brief in this series, "A Closer Look: Informal Child Care Arrangements and Support in California," contains a more detailed description of these organizations.

[3] At the other organizations, program staff found participants for us.

[4] Public Policy Institute of California. "How Do Subsidies Affect California's Child Care Market?" Research brief (Issue 79). San Francisco: Public Policy Institute of California, 2003.

[5] California Child Care Resource & Referral Network. "State Subsidized Child Care Payment Rates." California Child Care Resource & Referral Network, 2013.

[6] California Legislative Law, California Health and Safety Code, Division 2, Chapter 3.35, Sections 1596.60 – 1596.601.

[7] This concept is a central tenet of Talk Read Sing, a campaign of Too Small to Fail in partnership with various organizations (http://www.talkreadsing.org/).

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