

# We Can't Get There Without Them:

*Addressing the Barriers to Parent Participation  
in Building America's Child Care System*

## About the Research and State Child Care Administrators Residency Roundtable

In August 1999, seven participants representing parents, state administrative staff, and university-based researchers worked together in Skamakowa, Washington, on the topic of a parent perspective on quality child care. Participants included:

- Maya Carlson, Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts
- Felton Earls, Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts
- Arthur Emlen, Regional Research Institute for Human Services, Portland State University, Portland, Oregon
- Sherry Jackson, Mothers Group, Advisor to Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods, Chicago, Illinois
- Trish Phetteplace, Oregon Policy Council Co-Chair, Oregon Child Care Research Partnership, Eugene, Oregon
- Larry Shadbolt, Oregon Adult and Family Services, Salem, Oregon
- Roberta Weber, Oregon Child Care Research Partnership and Director, Family Resources and Education, Linn-Benton Community College, Albany, Oregon

Participants in the roundtable moved from a discussion of parent perspectives on quality to the parent role in improving the level of quality in child care. The group concluded that parent participation in decision-making at all levels is essential if we are to achieve the quality of care both parents and child care practitioners want. Concrete action is needed to meaningfully engage parents in policy decisions. Taking this action is key to building a quality child care system.

## About the Residency Roundtables

A Residency Roundtable is a strategy to support cross-state learning and research development. The roundtables are designed to

move forward understanding on a critical policy issue. Researchers, state staff, and parents from different states come together with Oregon partners for three days of shared learning and problem solving of issues on which Oregon partners and invitees bring expertise.

## About the Oregon Child Care Research Partnership

Members of the Oregon Child Care Research Partnership have more than 10 years' experience working together on policy-focused research. Researchers from two major state universities work with staff administering the state child care programs, a community college's family support program, the Oregon Progress Board, Head Start, Department of Education, Oregon Child Care Resource and Referral Network, the Career Development Center, the National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies, and the parent-driven Policy Council. Working with the Child Care Bureau, other federal offices who provide leadership on child care, Consortium partnerships, and other national organizations, the Oregon partnership facilitates sharing and dissemination of knowledge about key child care issues.

## About the Child Care Policy Research Consortium

The Child Care Policy Research Consortium is an initiative of the Child Care Bureau in the Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Administration for Children and Families, and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. In its unique approach to policy-relevant research, the Consortium brings together researchers, state child care administrative staff, and child care practitioners.

This paper is a product of the Oregon Child Care Research Partnership, which is supported in part by the Child Care Bureau in the Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Administration for Children and Families, and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

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## Introduction

After decades of little-to-no public investment in the care of young children, we have seen an increase in public expenditures over the past 10 years. We have an unprecedented opportunity to create a system that supports families and promotes the healthy development of our youngest citizens. Designing such a system will require creative approaches to the challenges of affordability, accessibility, and quality. Decision-making over the way policy is developed and programs are funded, governed, and regulated has devolved to the states – and in some states, to the county level. Development of an effective child care system requires the input and support of all stakeholders: parents, employers, child care administrators, providers, and other child care professionals. Unfortunately, parents and employers are often missing from the table. This paper seeks to draw attention to the critical importance of involving parents in child care decisions at the policy level, describes barriers to their participation, and lists resources for those individuals and organizations responsible for bringing people to “the table.”

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## Parents Are Invaluable Stakeholders

Parents have been the most underrepresented partners in policy deliberations of child care issues. Yet parents hold the most intimate knowledge of how the child care system works – or doesn’t. Accessing this knowledge and experience is essential if we are to shape policies and programs that are responsive, relevant, and realistic. We simply don’t know what parents know about



*California parents rally for child care.*

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*“Many voices speak for children and in behalf of parents, yet the vital interests of parents are underrepresented in child care policy.”*

—Arthur Emlen,  
Professor Emeritus,  
Portland State University

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systemic barriers, service gaps, and the nature of family needs. Additionally, parents offer insights and solutions needed to address long-standing turf issues, bureaucratic constraints, and assertions that “we have always done it that way.” Parents often have different assumptions about what is important. Parent concerns are broad in scope, addressing the pressures they face in managing the demands of work, family, and child care. They know what is involved with a depth of understanding. Parents’ views are critical. They need to speak for themselves and we need to listen.

An outgrowth of parent participation at the policy level is a group of parent leaders who can speak on behalf of families and demand the kinds of investments and policies that support raising healthy children. Without these voices, we will continue to languish without the policies and resources necessary for a well-functioning child care system. As a society, we have committed significant resources to educating our older children and adults. We must make a similar commitment to caring for and preparing our youngest citizens. This is unlikely without passionate parents willing to share their experiences and demand greater support for all families.

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## Barriers to Parent Participation

Involving parents in decision-making about child care issues has been a challenge. Traditional strategies including involving parents as members of advisory committees or hearing their opinions through parent surveys and public meetings have been met with little enthusiasm. Token or superficial involvement is ineffective. A study of the North Carolina’s Smart Start program revealed that although the general public and board members felt that parent involvement was important, recruiting and retaining parents was difficult (Winton, Barrick, and Thegen, 2000). The same experience has been reported throughout the country. Rather than viewing this lack of parent involvement as an absence of parent interest, we must identify barriers, create new strategies for bringing parents into the decision-making process, and learn from the examples of parents who have been engaged in meaningful ways.

Simply asking parents to do more is not the answer. Efforts to improve the involvement of parents will have to address multiple barriers.

## Logistics

**Timing** – Most parents, particularly the working poor, are unable to attend meetings during business hours.

**Child care** – It is not surprising that parents of young children, our primary target, cite lack of child care for their inability to serve on advisory boards, task forces, and committees.

**Transportation** – Parents without reliable personal transportation or convenient mass transit are unlikely participants in meetings unless meetings are thoughtfully located. Transportation is also an issue when participation involves regional or state meetings.

**Costs** – Professionals who attend meetings are paid for their time and often reimbursed for their expenses (mileage, meals, etc.) by their employer. Rarely are parents reimbursed for their time or expenses when participating in these same meetings. When reimbursement is available, parents often must wait several weeks or months to recoup their expenses. For many families, this outlay of funds is prohibitive.

**Time and length of commitment** – It is common for professionals to meet together regularly for years to address common issues. The time pressure on families with young children leaves little time and energy for professional-style process and commitment.

## Climate

**Experts versus parents** – Parents are seen as lacking the knowledge of what is in the best interest of children. When professionals maintain the “expert” position, parents feel intimidated and question whether they have anything to offer.

**Number of parents** – A single parent in a group of professionals often questions his or her ability to provide meaningful input into the decision-making process.

**Professional jargon** – The use of acronyms and technical terms – a mainstay of professionals’ vocabulary – inhibits dialogue and understanding.

**Lack of experience** – Speaking in front of a group, brainstorming, and problem solving are common system-changing activities. These may be new experiences for many parents, particularly those traditionally underrepresented.

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*“I can’t count the number of meetings that I have been to that I was the only parent. I don’t want to be the only token parent at the table anymore. I need some support from other parents.”*

—Trish Phetteplace,  
parent, Eugene, Oregon

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*“I have a hard time telling people I don’t understand. Clarity, clarity, I don’t understand.”*

—Sherry Jackson,  
parent, Chicago, Illinois

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## Help Is Available

Involving parents is hard work, and each organization's solution will be unique to the task, resources, and community. As we rethink our methods of involving parents, we can benefit from looking at progress made in other systems. Early Intervention and Head Start have received mandates through legislation or policy that require parent involvement at both the individual and the system levels. In health care, working with families is called family-centered care. The resulting strategies represent a shift from a bureaucratic culture in which parents are seen as a recipient of knowledge from the professional to a partnership model where parents and professional work together as a team and each member is respected for his or her unique contributions to the group. A partnership of this kind takes time to develop.

Promising practices from Family-Centered Care, Early Intervention, and Head Start involve parents in many different ways, including:

- Hiring a parent consultant to share insights and to connect with hard-to-reach parents.
- Holding one-time focus groups on specific issues.
- Piloting materials in places where parents gather, including laundromats and bus stops.
- Including a parent panel during orientation of new staff.
- Providing “up front” payments to families for their expenses and expertise.
- Involving parents in the development of survey instruments.
- Having parents serve as co-trainers and co-chairs.
- Including a majority (at least 51 percent) of parents on policy committees and councils.

There are many examples of parents becoming successfully involved in child care issues. For example:

- Parent Voices, a group of California parents supported by local Child Care Resource and Referral agencies, have made their mark on child care legislation in California through grass roots organizing. Parents have organized, advocated, and taken their stories to Sacramento. They held rallies,

wrote letters, and testified at hearings. Their advocacy has contributed to legislated increases in funding of child care subsidies and increased public investment in child care.

- Parents can improve the quality of research efforts. The “Mothers Group” advises the Harvard Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods research teams. This group of mothers has met regularly with researchers Maya Carlson and Tony Earls throughout the design and implementation stages of their research project.



*San Francisco Supervisor visits with Parent Voices member's children.*

- In Oregon, the Policy Council advised Arthur Emlen throughout his research on Quality of Child Care from a Parent's Point of View. Parents reviewed and critiqued survey instruments and helped interpret survey findings. The council evolved into Parent Voices, a group committed to increasing parent involvement in groups that set child care policy. Parent Voices produced a video of parents telling their child care stories, and they distributed the video to state legislators and other policy makers. Parent Voices is now integrating a group of parents into the state's child care planning organization.
- Smart Start, North Carolina's statewide early childhood initiative, has included parents from its inception by mandating parent board representation at the state and local levels. Participation in governance and decision-making is in accord with the Principles of Family Support Practice (Family Support America). Parents are serving on local Smart Start subcommittees, helping to shape services in the Smart Start core areas of early care and education, health, and family support. Parents are also serving on the North Carolina Partnership for Children's Program Services advisory committees, and they receive a meeting stipend for their time and expertise.
- Smart Start's "Tuesday for Tots" initiative brought county-based groups consisting of parents, children, clergy, child care providers, business representatives, and professionals to the 2001 legislative session. Discussion centered on the needs of children in their communities and the successes



Smart Start's "Tuesday for Tots" brought parents and children to the 2001 legislative session.

and challenges they've experienced in finding affordable child care. Often the groups presented items made by children to the legislators. During the session 1,800 people participated from more than 64 counties in North Carolina. According to legislators, these groups' efforts resulted in reduced cuts to Smart Start and other early childhood programs. These efforts are being supported by continued advocacy at home. "Tuesday at Home" promotes continued efforts by community members to meet and lobby with their legislative representatives between legislative sessions.

■ The focus of Boston's Parents United for Child Care (PUCC) is twofold: 1) to provide a parent voice on public policy issues related to child care, and 2) to increase the supply of quality, affordable child care. PUCC's activities are governed by a grassroots, neighborhood-based membership of low- and moderate-income families. Local chapters of parents and community members work with staff to develop strategies for meeting the unique child care needs of its neighborhoods. Neighborhood-based organizing and leadership development have been used successfully to achieve changes and improvements at the local, program, and systems levels.

ership development have been used successfully to achieve changes and improvements at the local, program, and systems levels.

Publications that provide in-depth discussions of parent involvement include:

- *A Guide to Engaging Parents in Public-Private Child Care Partnerships*. 2000, 59 pp. Published by: Child Care Partnership Project.

Provides rationale, strategies, tools, and resources for engaging parents in child care partnerships.

Available in PDF from National Child Care Information Center, phone: 800.616.2242; Web: <http://nccic.org/ccpartnerships/parents.pdf>



- *Essential Allies: Families as Advisors*. By Elizabeth Jeppson and Josie Thomas. 1995, 76 pp. Published by: Institute for Family-Centered Care.

An in-depth discussion of the benefits, barriers, and strategies of seeking family input in program and policy decisions.

Available from: Institute for Family-Centered Care, phone: 301.652.0281; Web: [www.familycenteredcare.org](http://www.familycenteredcare.org)

- *Toolkit: Family Support and Involvement*. 2000, 24 pp. Published by North Carolina Partnership for Children.

Describes the Smart Start Initiative's approach to family involvement, lists challenges experienced in the process of involving families, and presents strategies to address the challenges at three stages—recruitment, preparation, and sustainability.

Available from the National Smart Start Technical Assistance Center, phone: 919.821.9540; Web: <http://ncsmartstart.org/information/publications/htm>

Both professionals and parents benefit from trainings that address attitudinal barriers and teach listening and decision-making skills. Elizabeth Jeppson and Josie Thomas have developed two training manuals focused on developing partnership skills:

- *Families as Advisors: A Training Guide for Collaboration*. By Elizabeth Jeppson and Josie Thomas. 1997, 64 pp.

A step-by-step guide to training that promotes the development of the skills and attitudes required in creating collaborative partnerships. Includes masters for handouts and overhead transparencies.

Available from: Institute for Family-Centered Care, phone: 301.652.0281; Web: [www.familycenteredcare.org](http://www.familycenteredcare.org)

- *Making Room at the Table: Fostering Family Involvement in the Planning and Governance of Formal Support Systems*. By Elizabeth Jeppson and Josie Thomas. 1997, 75 pp.

Utilizing a variety of learning strategies including brainstorming, group discussion, and individual reflection, parents and professionals in this three-hour workshop develop relationships and skills needed to work together. The easy-to-use guide provides the agenda, materials needed, facilitator notes and handouts.

Available from: Family Support America, phone: 312.338.1522; Web: [www.familysupportamerica.org](http://www.familysupportamerica.org)



Parents and professionals working together at Oregon's Childhood Care and Education Coordinating Council.

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## Call to Action

Development of a quality child care system requires that all individuals and organizations charged with developing child care policy embrace the belief that the parent voice is essential. Once committed to the concept, policy makers must address the barriers to parent participation and explore creative approaches to their involvement. Our success in

building quality child care options for all families depends on our ability to engage parents in meaningful ways at all levels of policy discussion about design, implementation, and evaluation of the child care system.

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## References

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