



Parent Engagement and Education Subcommittee

Parent Engagement Survey Results and
Recommendations



June 2013

Introduction

What is Parent Engagement?

Parent engagement is an overarching principle and approach for involving families in decisions about themselves, their children, services, and their communities. It is important to note that a “parent” can be anyone acting in a parenting role. The term parent does not necessarily mean the biological parent. It can often be a grandparent, foster parent, adoptive parent, or a non-relative in a caretaking role.

Collaborative leadership, parent leadership, and parent involvement are all terms that can be used interchangeably with parent engagement. It includes a wide array of activities, such as:

- Direct relationships with service providers
- Mutual support shared among parents
- Advocacy by parents on behalf of their families
- Decision-making and advisory roles in agencies
- Leadership in the community

For public, private, and grassroots organizations committed to community building efforts, engaged parents and families help ensure buy-in for shared goals and strategies. Community networks of support are strongest when built by and with engaged parents and other community members.

But what do we mean when we talk about engaged parents?

For the purpose of this document, engaged parents are people who:

- are committed to making positive changes in their family and community
- are representing a “parent voice” (as opposed to functioning in a staff role) which provides a different perspective

In addition, engaged parents might:

- advocate for their children
- serve as role models for other parents by helping them to see their strengths and encouraging them to make use of those skills

In February 2011, the Parent Engagement and Education Subcommittee of the Early Childhood Advisory Council decided to take a look at the parent engagement strategies currently used in the early care and education community. Rather than make uneducated guesses or wrong assumptions, the group desired to get a more accurate measure of current strategies. The committee reviewed several existing parent leadership assessments designed for agencies to use internally. The committee selected the most appropriate survey and adapted it for the committee’s use.¹

In order to determine a true picture of parent engagement in early childhood programs, the committee decided to administer the survey to two groups: parents with children enrolled in programs and practitioners (teachers, home visitors, workers, etc.). The committee kept the questions similar to ensure accurate comparison.

¹ The original survey adapted for use by this group can be found at <http://friendsnrc.org/cbcap-priority-areas/parent-leadership-and-involvement>

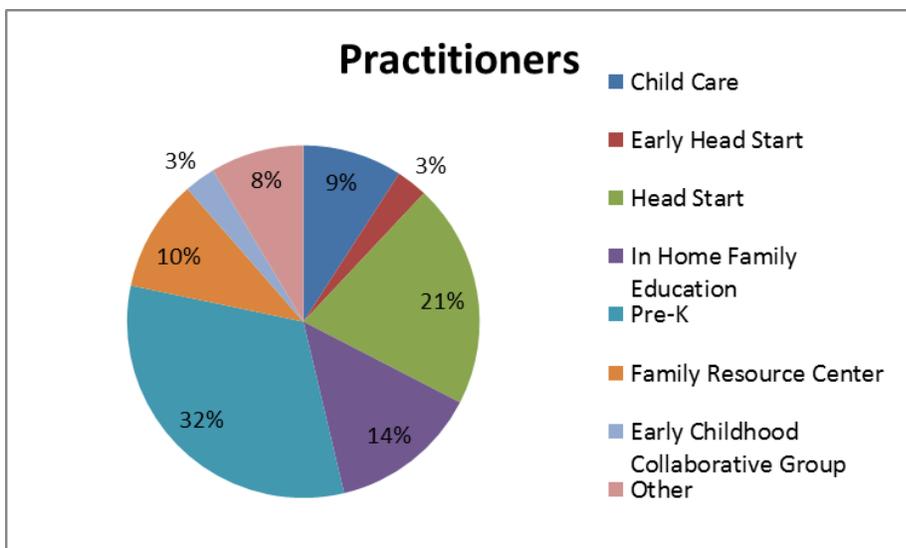
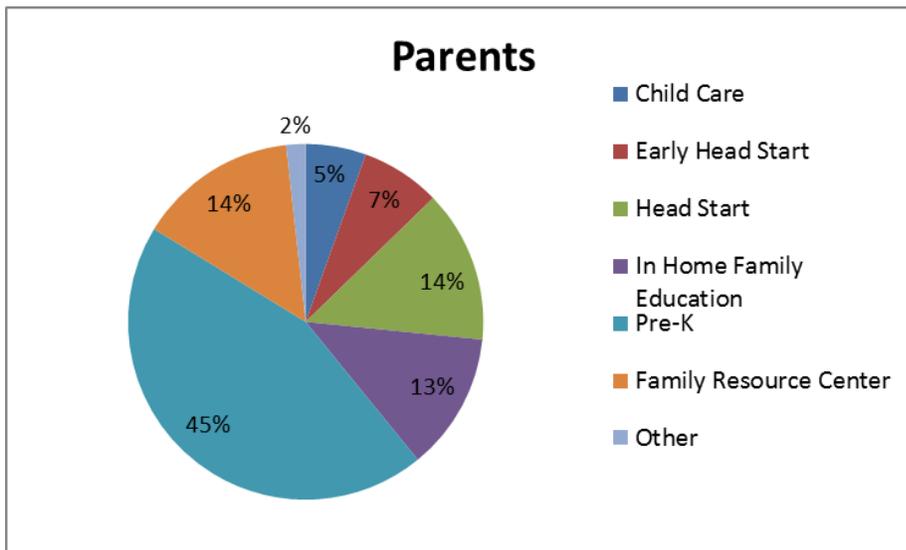
Survey Administration

The committee distributed both a web version and a paper version of the survey. The survey responses submitted on paper were entered into the web version for easier analysis. The West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources (WVDHHR) provided self-addressed stamped envelopes and copies of the surveys to programs who requested them. The majority of the parent surveys came back in paper form.

Distribution of the survey to practitioners was initially handled through several established list-serves including WVDHHR, Head Start and Early Head Start, the Department of Education, Bureau for Children and Families, and Family Resource Center.

Responses/Results

Of the surveys sent out statewide, **455 parents** and **175 early care and education practitioners** responded to the survey.



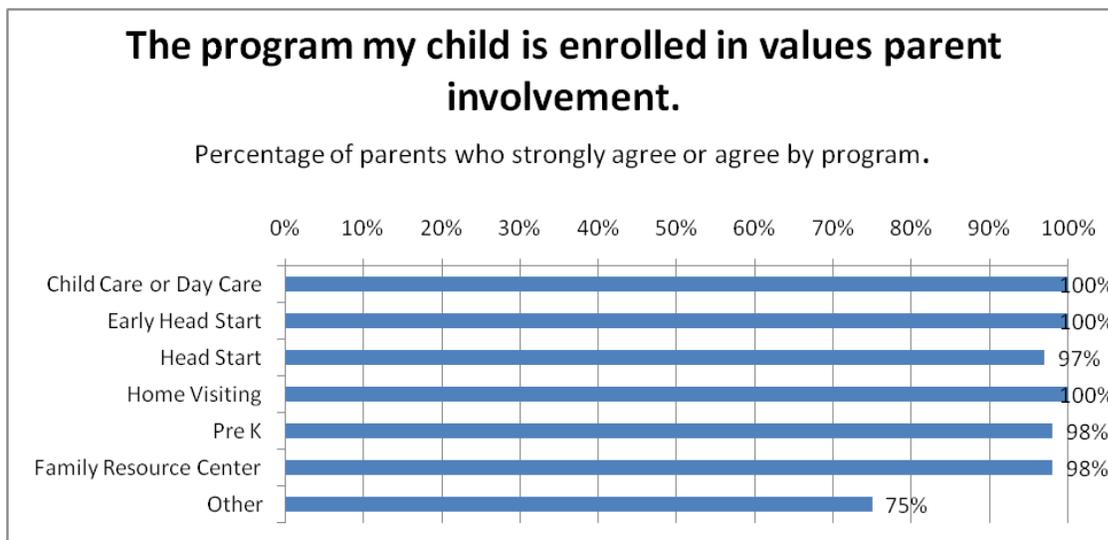
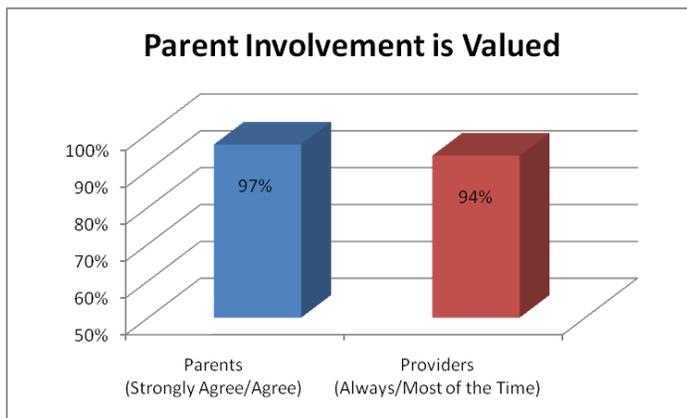
Perceptions

The first set of survey questions focused on how parents and practitioners perceive parent involvement.

Parent Involvement

Parent involvement is an integral part of any early care and education program. The benefits of parent involvement extend to the families, children, agency, and community. “When parents are fully engaged – from working with their children at home and being involved in the life of the school to becoming advocates for strong public education in their community – research tells us that everyone can reap substantial benefits.”²

- **Parent Question:** The program my child is enrolled in values parent involvement.
- **Practitioner Question:** We value parental involvement and provide opportunities for parents to engage in conversation with agency practitioners.



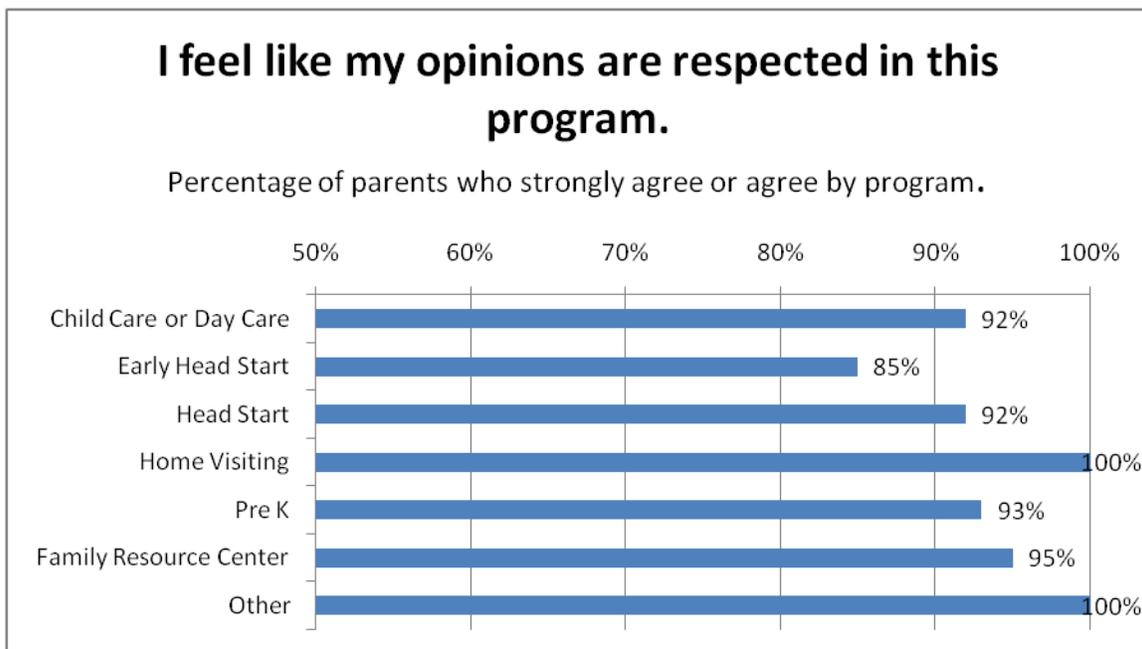
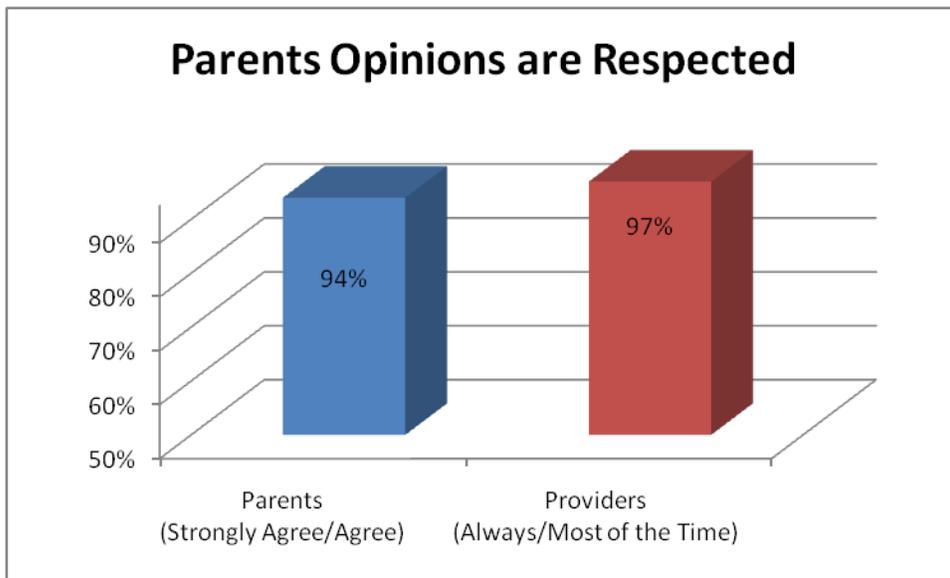
²Henderson, A. et al. (2004). *The Case for Parent Leadership*. Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence

Respectful Relationships

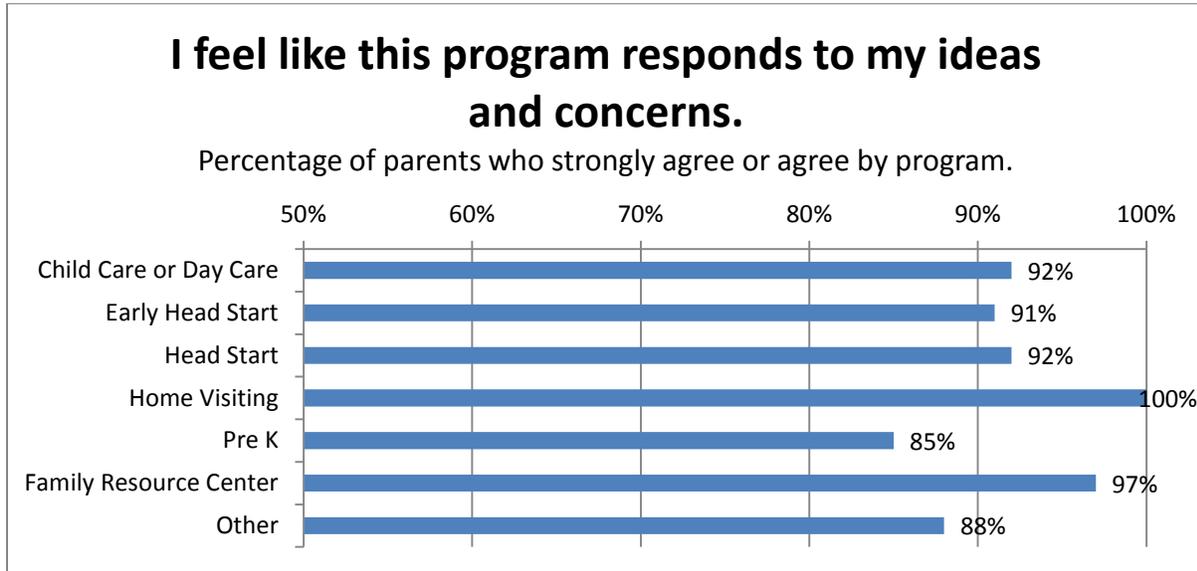
Parents are the experts on their own families. Sometimes, there are unintentional barriers that prevent parents from getting involved in decisions about their children and families. Parents may feel their input will not be valued by providers or that they don't have anything to offer.

- **Parent Question:** I feel like my opinions are respected in this program.
- **Practitioner Question:** Administration, program staff, and day-to-day practitioners respect the opinions of parents and work with them to respond to their ideas and concerns.

Parents know their children and their communities.



The committee also studied whether or not parents felt the program responded to their ideas and concerns.



Recommendations: While overall parents feel very engaged and valued, there are always strategies programs can utilize to ensure that these positive results continue. Here are some strategies that early care and education programs can use to engage parents.

- Train administration and staff on the importance of parents and their interactions with the parents of the children they are serving.
- Greet parents personally and engage their children. Parents appreciate the attention given to their child.
- Check in often with parents. Ask them how the program is meeting their needs, what is important to them, and what can be done to make them more comfortable. This builds rapport and can lead to parent ambassadors for your program.

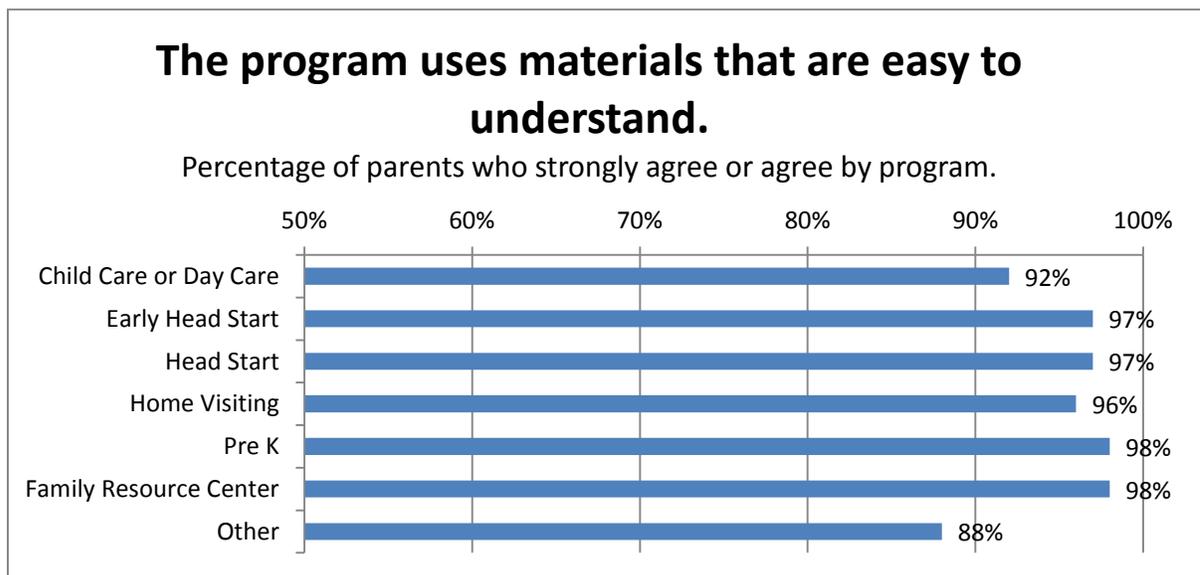
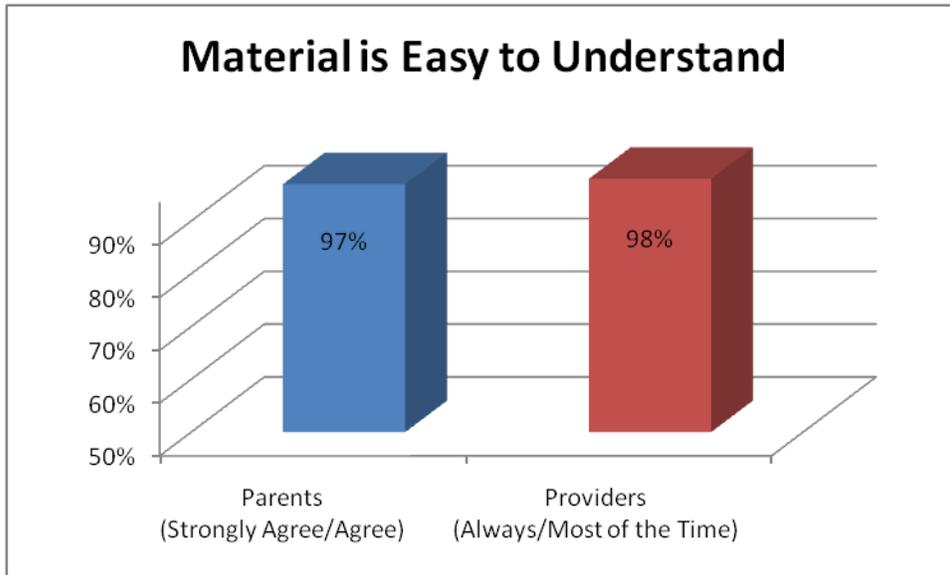
Practice

The next set of survey questions focused on current strategies used by early care and education programs to engage parents and build leadership skills.

Parent Friendly Materials

While it may sound simple and logical, often agencies forget to make sure that materials are parent friendly. If materials have a lot of agency jargon or are hard to read, this can create a feeling of distance or distrust from the parent toward the agency.

- **Parent Question:** The program uses materials that are easy to understand.
- **Practitioner Question:** We ensure that all of the information we share with parents is free of jargon and can be easily understood.



Parent Review of Materials

One of the ways to ensure that materials are parent friendly is to ask parents to review them. This reaffirms the agency's belief that parent input is valued and leads to a more trusting relationship between the parents and the agency.

- **Parent Question:** Parents are asked to review and suggest changes to agency materials that are sent out to us.

Parents responses reflected the following:

- **77%** of parents stated "Yes, we are asked to review and suggest changes to materials"
- **23%** of parents stated "No, we are not asked to review and suggest changes to materials"
- **Practitioner Question:** We have a process that enables parents to review and suggest changes to agency materials that are being sent to parents.



Are parents equal partners in developing our approach or do they simply endorse our organization's own ideas?

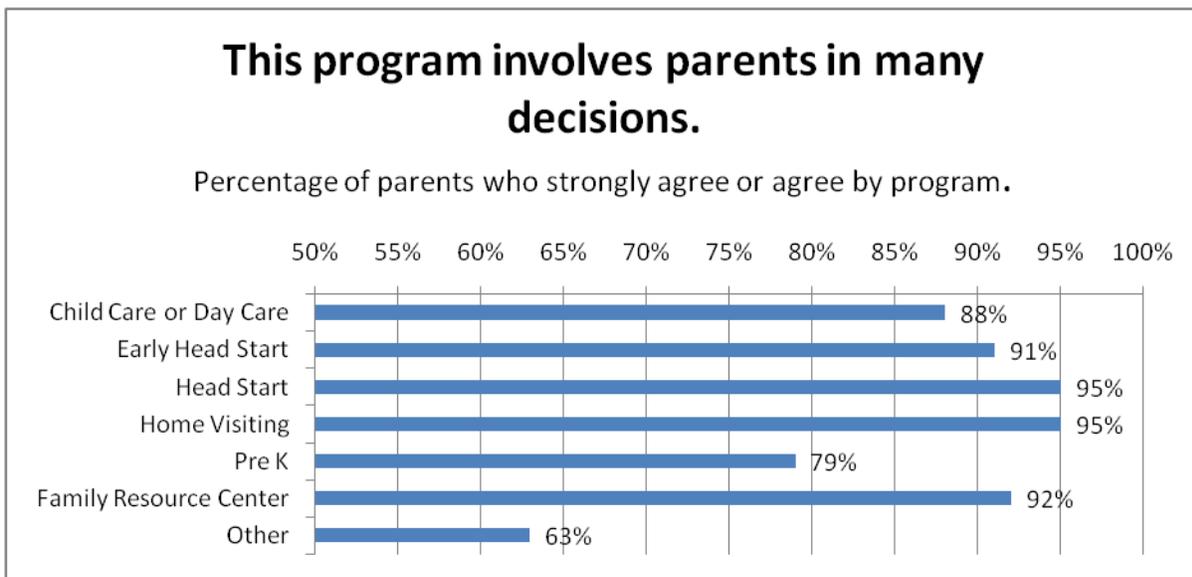
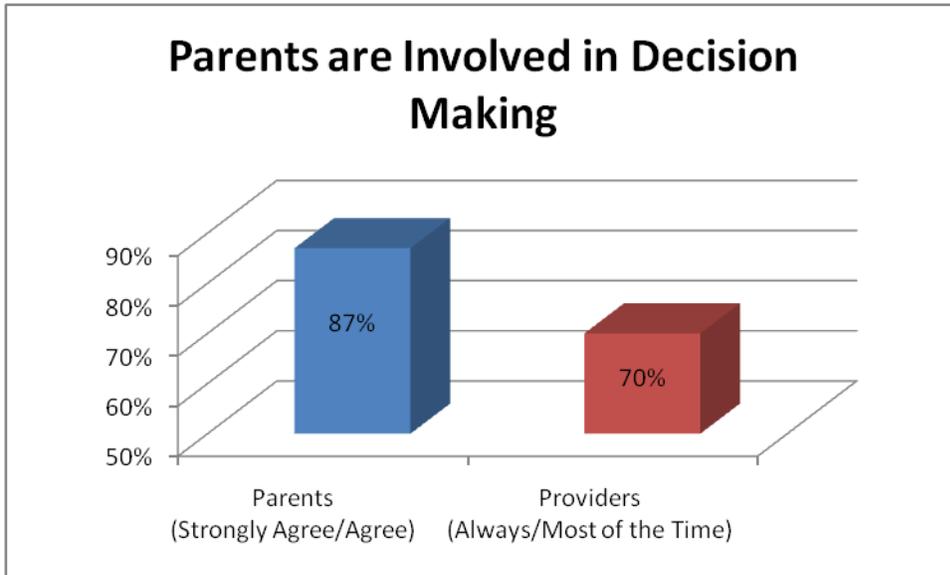
Practitioner responses reflected the following:

- **43%** of practitioners stated "Yes, we have a process and it is effective"
- **31%** of practitioners stated "Yes, we have a process and it could be better"
- **3%** of practitioners stated "Yes, we have a process and it is ineffective"
- **20%** of practitioners stated "No, we do not have a process"

Parent Involvement in Decision Making

Involvement in decision making is a key to parent engagement and leadership. When parents are involved in agency decisions, the agency is encouraging parent engagement. This engagement is demonstrated when the agency can see parents' ideas in action and celebrate those successes with them. On the parent side, engagement occurs when parents can see their input has changed processes and programs and they feel that their time and energy has created an impact on the agency and their community. While this might be uncomfortable for some agencies, this is an important step on the parent engagement and leadership continuum.

- **Parent Question:** This program involves parents in many decisions.
- **Practitioner Question:** Agency decisions are made with the involvement of parent leaders.



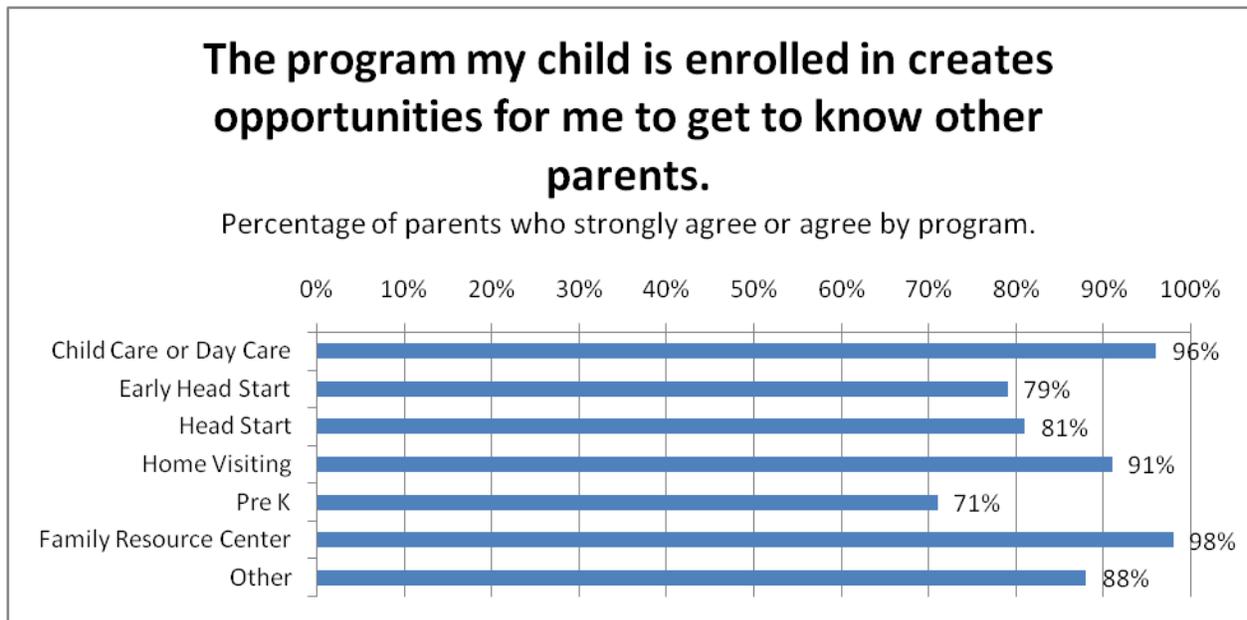
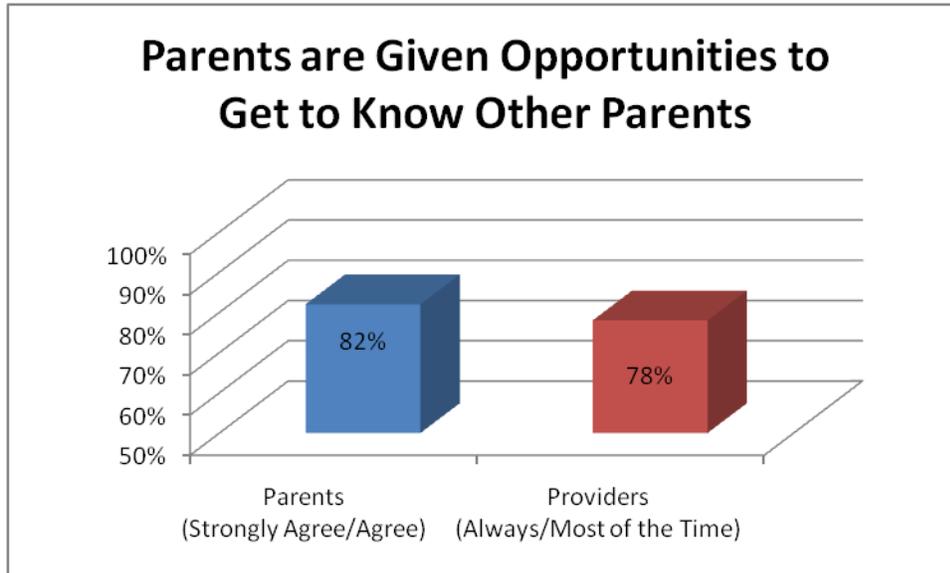
Social Connections

Social connections are one of the benefits a parent receives from being involved in their child’s program. In addition, it is also one of the critically important Protective Factors³ that can prevent child abuse and neglect. Parents who build social connections and informal networks of support often rely less on formal networks of support. Social connections are also critical to the open communication that will help parents develop more trusting attitudes toward the agency.

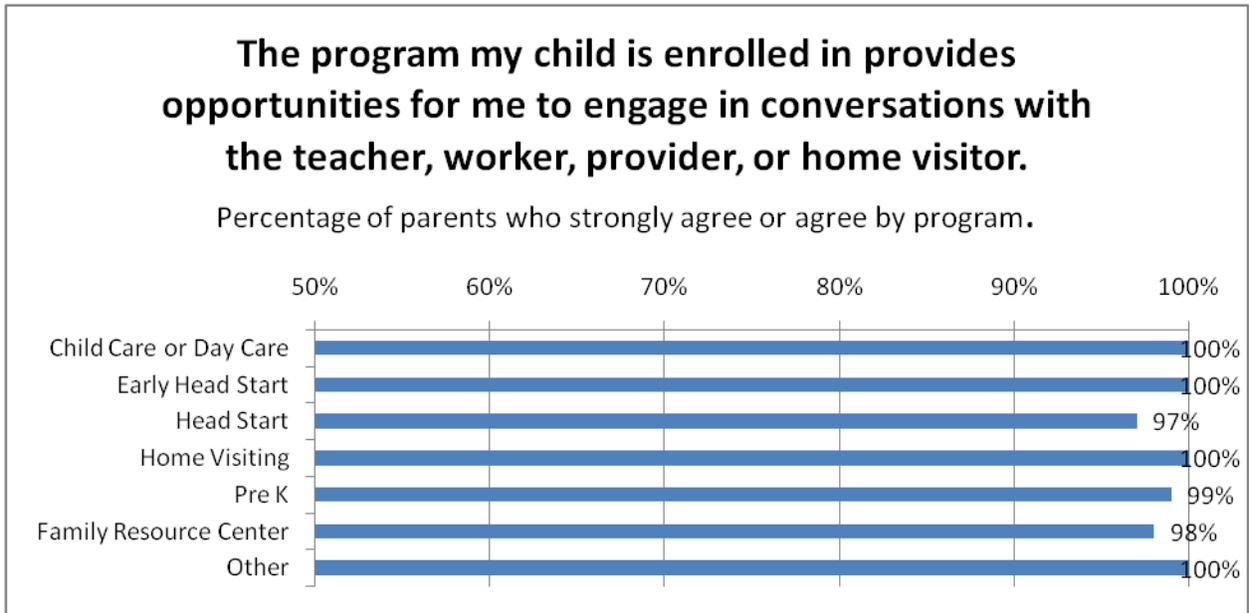
Building on personal relationships is an effective strategy for involving parents in programs and leadership opportunities.

³http://www.wvdhhr.org/bcf/children_adult/cAbusePrev/StrFam.asp and <http://www.cssp.org/reform/strengthening-families>

- **Parent Question:** The program my child is enrolled in creates opportunities for me to get to know other parents.
- **Practitioner Question:** We create opportunities for parents to engage in conversations with each other.



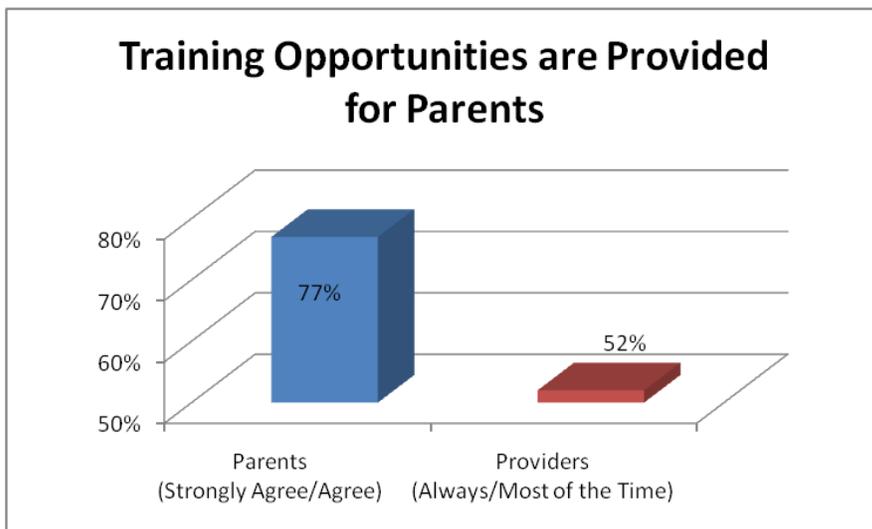
The committee also studied opportunities for parents to talk to the practitioners.

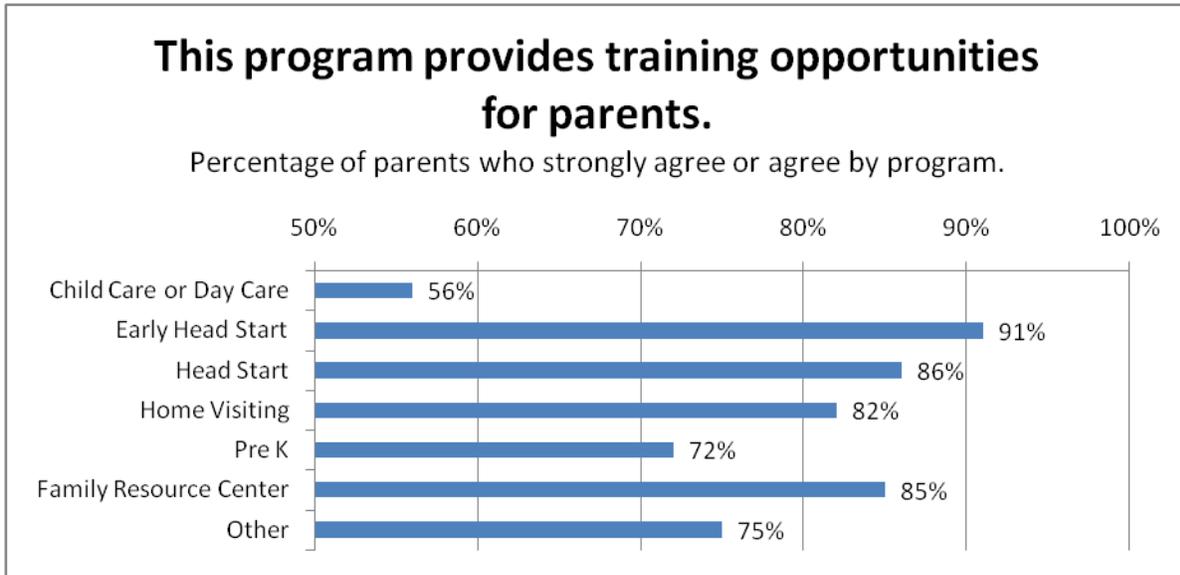


Training Opportunities

Consistent training and support are essential to nurturing parent leadership. While this can be a challenge for many agencies, it is essential that parent leaders are given opportunities to participate in formal and informal training sessions. Focused, intentional training of parents leads to informed and strong advocates for early care and education programs.

- **Parent Question:** This program provides training opportunities for parents.
- **Practitioner Question:** Parent leaders are given the opportunity to participate in staff enrichment workshops or training sessions.

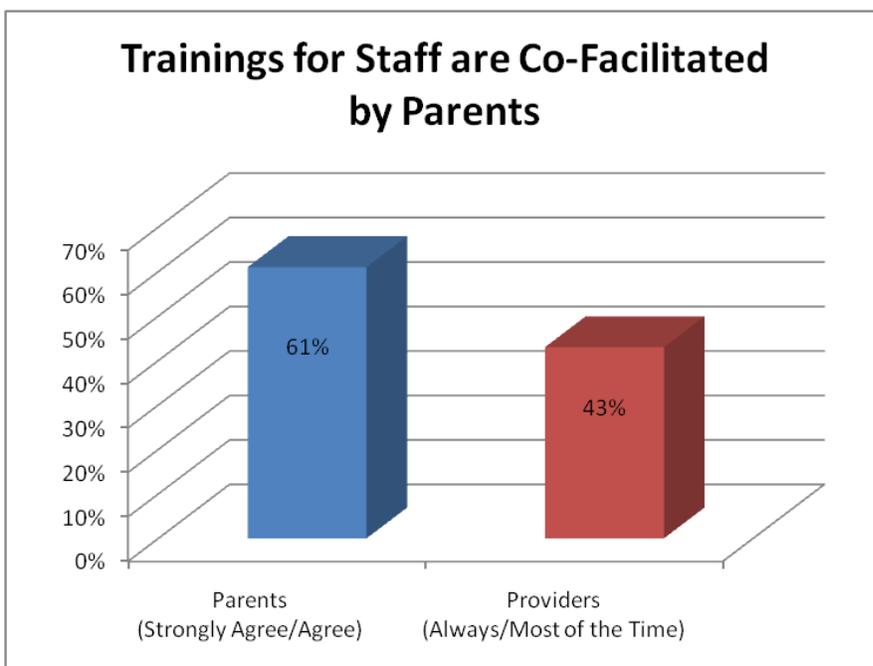


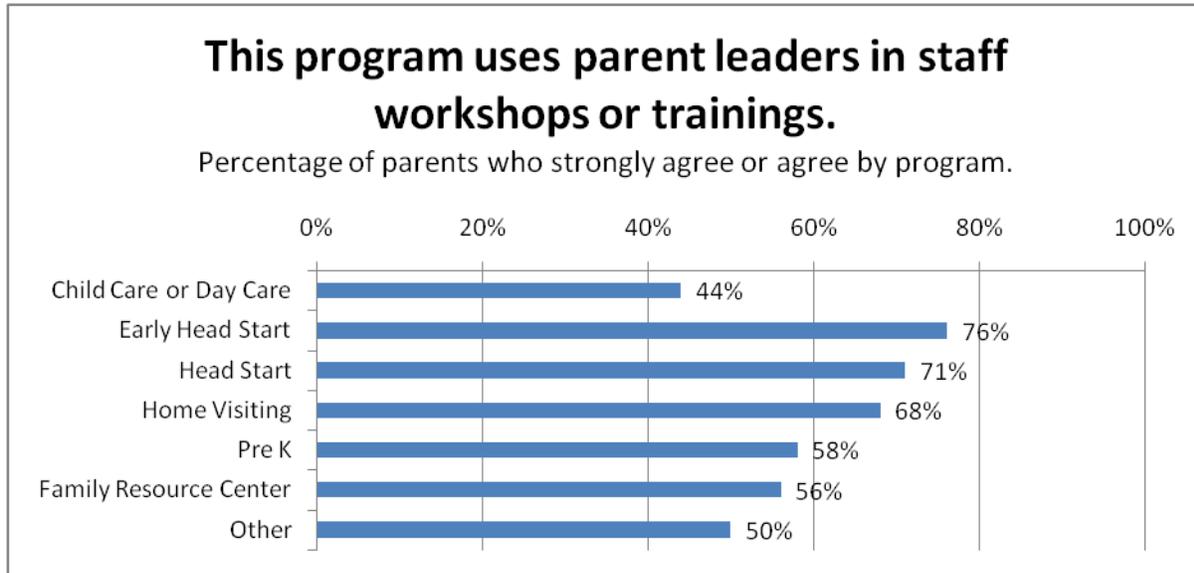


Involving Parents in Staff Training

When ensuring a culture of parent partnership, engagement, and leadership, it is important for the agency to have parents visible in all aspects of program planning, delivery, and evaluation. Including parents in staff training builds relationships between the staff and parents, creates empowerment for the parent, and reminds staff that the parent is the ultimate expert on the child and that services cannot be delivered to the child without keeping the family system in mind.

- **Parent Question:** This program uses parent leaders in staff workshops or trainings.
- **Practitioner Question:** Our information sessions and training opportunities for agency staff are co-facilitated by both parents and practitioners.





Convenient Training Times

Providing trainings at convenient times for parents and families is critical to ensuring parent participation and leadership. There is no “one size fits all” approach.

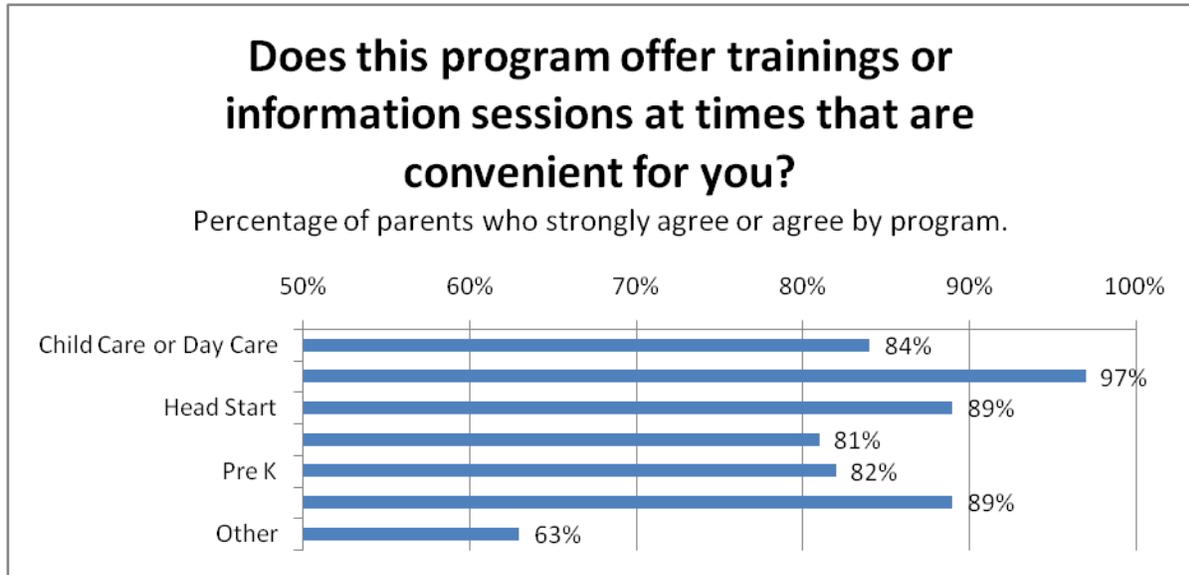
- **Parent Question:** Does this program offer trainings or information sessions at times that are convenient for you?

Parent responses reflected the following:

- **42%** of parents stated “Yes, opportunities are at different times for stay-at-home and working parents”
- **43%** of parents stated “Yes, sometimes they offer opportunities at times I can attend”
- **7%** of parents stated “No, opportunities for parents are always during the day”
- **0%** of parents stated “No, opportunities for parents are always during the evenings”
- **3%** of parents stated “No, there are no opportunities offered to parents”
- **Practitioner Question:** Opportunities for parental involvement, input, and leadership are offered at times and locations that are convenient for parents.

Practitioner responses reflected the following:

- **43%** of practitioners stated “Always”
- **41%** of practitioners stated “Most of the time”
- **10%** of practitioners stated “Sometimes”
- **2%** of practitioners stated “Rarely”
- **2%** of practitioners stated “Never”
- **5%** of practitioners stated “Other”



Support for Parents

Parent engagement requires staff time and financial support for important activities and services including: on-site child care or reimbursement, meals, transportation, skill development opportunities, and provisions for reimbursement of out-of-pocket expenses for parents. This is often an area that agencies tend to overlook.

- **Parent Question:** This program offers the following types of assistance for parent leaders.

Parent responses reflected the following:

- **17%** of parents were offered transportation assistance
 - **17%** of parents were offered child care
 - **7%** of parents were offered stipends
 - **5%** of parents were offered nothing
 - **51%** of parents didn't know if they were offered anything
- **Practitioner Question:** We have mechanisms to provide for the special needs of parent leaders such as stipends, assistance with transportation, and child care.

Practitioner responses reflected the following:

- **38%** of practitioners stated "We have them and they are effective"
- **31%** of practitioners stated "We have them and they could be better"
- **2%** of practitioners stated "We have them and they are ineffective"
- **22%** of practitioners stated "We do not have them"

Parents as Leaders

Meaningful parent leadership is fostered when parents are given the opportunity for personal growth, to gain the knowledge and skills to function in leadership roles, and to represent a “parent voice” to help shape the direction of their families, programs, and communities. Parent leadership is successfully achieved when parents and practitioners build effective partnerships based upon mutual respect and shared responsibility, expertise, and leadership in the decisions being made that affect their own families, other families, and their communities.

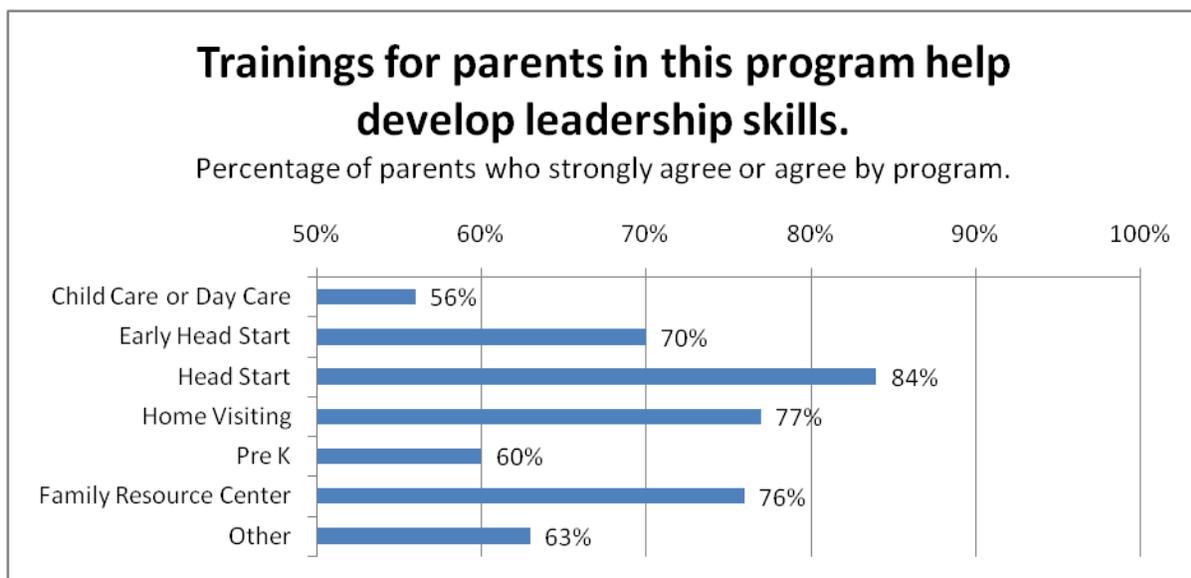
- **Parent Question:** Trainings for parents in this program help develop leadership skills.

Parent responses reflected the following:

- **31%** of parents responded “Very likely”
 - **38%** of parents responded “Likely”
 - **26%** of parents responded “Neutral”
 - **0%** of parents responded “Unlikely”
 - **0%** of parents responded “Very unlikely”
 - **5%** of parents responded “Our program doesn’t offer trainings for parents”
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- **Practitioner Question:** We provide opportunities for parents to develop leadership skills by giving them support to participate in workshops, meetings, or other events where such skill development is offered.

Practitioner responses reflected the following:

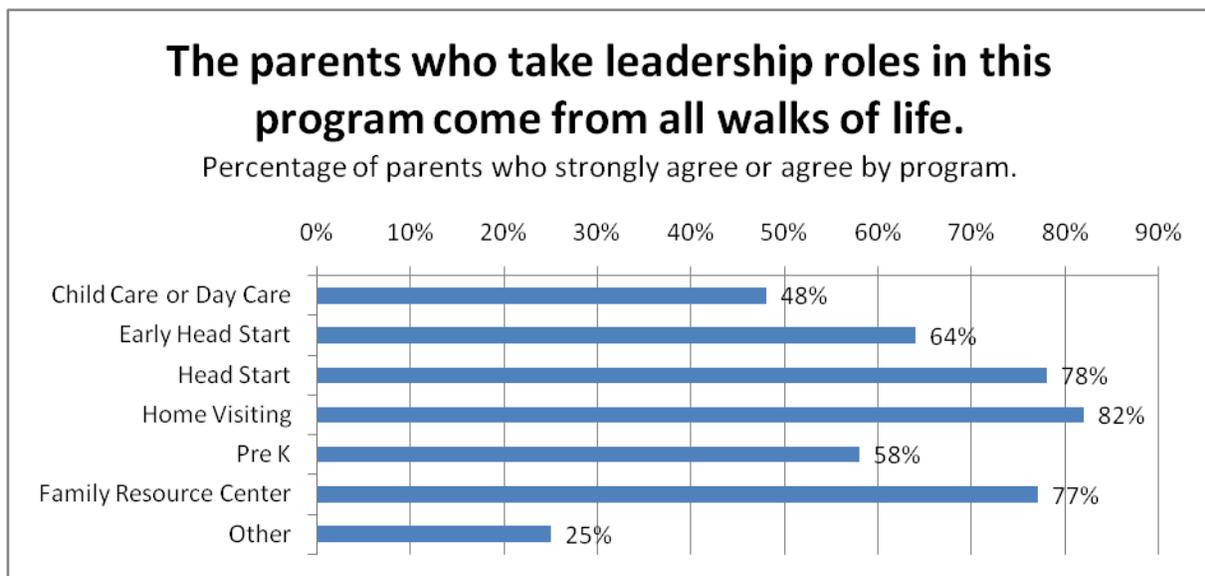
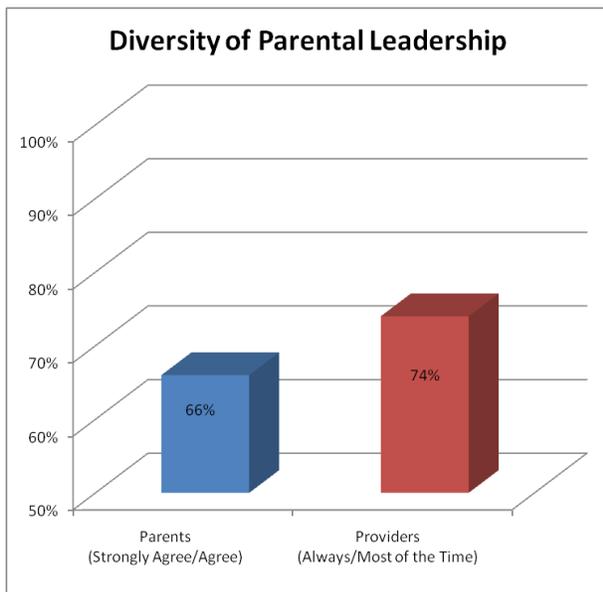
- **39%** of practitioners stated “Yes, we have them and they are effective”
- **42%** of practitioners stated “Yes, we have them and they could be better”
- **4%** of practitioners stated “Yes, we have them and they are ineffective”
- **11%** of practitioners stated “No, we do not have them”



Diversity in Leadership

Diversity of leadership is important when engaging parents in programs. Programs that only select certain groups of parents will be seen as less credible than programs that make a concerted effort to include parents from all walks of life. This can be a challenge for agencies, as agencies often choose their more prominent, educated, or well-spoken parents for important roles.

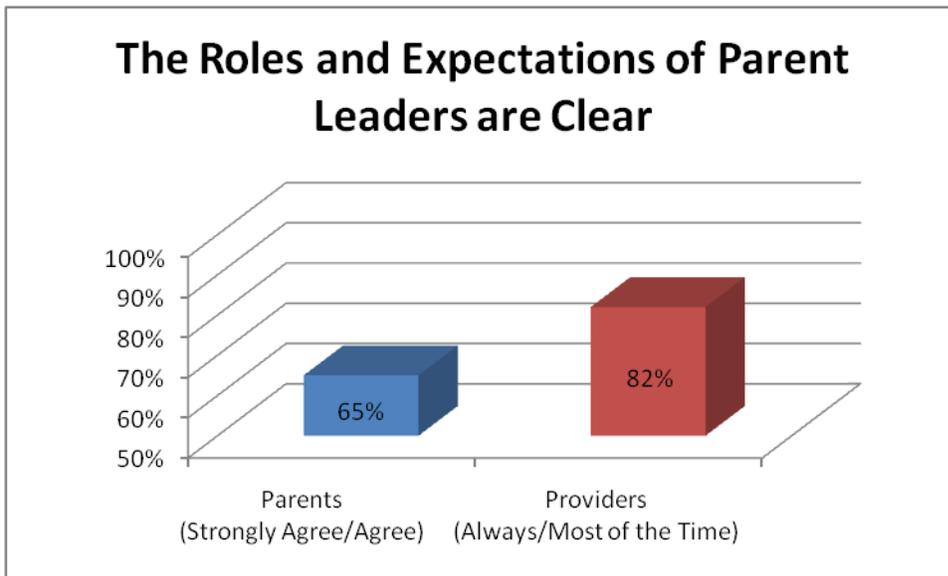
- **Parent Question:** The parents who take leadership roles in this program come from all walks of life.
- **Practitioner Question:** The parents who take leadership roles in our organization are representative of the larger community in terms of race, culture, language, income, and education.



Clear Roles

Clearly articulated roles for involved parents are beneficial to both the parent and the agency. Just as practitioners expect clear direction in their jobs, parents should be provided with clear roles, responsibilities, and directions for their involvement and leadership efforts.

- **Parent Question:** Parents who are asked to play leadership roles in this program have clear roles and expectations.
- **Practitioner Question:** Parents who are asked to play a leadership role have clear roles and expectations.



Agency Support of Parent Leadership

Agencies must have clear strategies and policies for supporting parent leadership. Truly fostering meaningful parental leadership takes a concerted effort from the agency through the agency's staff.

- **Practitioner Question:** Our agency or organization devotes resources such as money and staff time to promote parent leadership.

Practitioner responses reflected the following:

- **42%** of practitioners responded "Always"
- **27%** of practitioners responded "Most of the time"
- **18%** of practitioners responded "Sometimes"
- **7%** of practitioner responded "Rarely"
- **4%** of practitioners responded "Never"

- **Practitioner Question:** We provide internal and external resources to help parents develop and maintain their skills.

Practitioner responses reflected the following:

- **37%** of practitioners responded "We have them and they are effective"
- **44%** of practitioners responded "We have them and they could be better"
- **3%** of practitioners responded "We have them and they are ineffective"
- **13%** of practitioners responded "We do not have them"

Agency Policies

Agencies must have formal procedures and policies for parent involvement and leadership. These policies and procedures should be clearly articulated for both staff and parent knowledge.

- **Practitioner Question:** Our policy manuals include clear expectations that parents will have input and involvement in how we do our work.

Practitioner responses reflected the following:

- **51%** of practitioners responded "Yes, and it is effective"
- **29%** of practitioners responded "Yes, and it could be better"
- **3%** of practitioners responded "Yes, and it is ineffective"
- **14%** of practitioners responded "No"

How to nurture leadership in a parent:

- Accept them as they are
- Listen when they express anger at the system or tell it like it really is
- Give them the opportunity to talk
- Build a relationship with them based on mutual respect

Agency Monitoring of Parent Involvement

Agencies should have a consistent and meaningful review of parent involvement on a regular basis. The agency should make the effort to constantly improve on their levels of parent involvement.

- **Practitioner Question:** Our evaluation and monitoring efforts include measures of the quality of parent involvement (intensity and meaningfulness).

Commitment forms the backbone of effective parent engagement initiatives. It is what gives a program its strength.

Practitioner responses reflected the following:

- **53%** of practitioners responded “We have them and they are effective”
- **30%** of practitioners responded “We have them and they could be better”
- **6%** of practitioners responded “We have them and they are ineffective”
- **10%** of practitioners responded “We do not have them”

Recommendations: The practice section of this report was the largest and covered the majority of the questions administered. Again, results were positive overall; however, there are several areas that programs will want to continue to monitor or determine where they may be able to strengthen or improve practices. A primary recommendation is that agencies adopt formal policies from the top down and ensure that parent involvement is a priority by developing a plan of action that includes allocation of resources such as staff time and funding.⁴ The committee also offers these ideas and suggestions for consideration:

- Utilize culturally sensitive materials. Have parents review the materials. Ensure that materials are in the language needed, are written on a 4th to 6th grade level, and represent the diversity of the children and families your program serves.
- Be creative in how you engage parents. Not every parent will sit on an advisory council. Encourage parent leaders to collect input from other parents.
- Make parent involvement meaningful and not just a token representative. Ask yourself, “Are we asking them enough?”
- Value staff that are in a parent role. Studies have shown that employees who work in family friendly workplaces have increased employee productivity. This also reinforces the value of all parents.
- Empower parents by asking them to fill a need for the program.
- Create opportunities for parents to connect with one another on a deeper level through parent led mutual support groups such as Circle of Parents. They can also extend to other projects such as community gardens and family style events that can help families meet concrete needs.

⁴http://www.wvdhhr.org/bcf/children_adult/cAbusePrev/documents/pl_guidebook.pdf or <http://www.cssp.org/publications/growingandsustainingparentengagementtoolkit.pdf> could be starting points for agencies that may lack parent engagement resources

- Use parents' skills to provide trainings and help reduce burden on the program. Incorporate trainings with opportunities for parents to make social connections and receive concrete supports.
- Develop training for staff and orientations for parents about locally based resources and supports. Ensure that referrals are appropriate with follow-up and not just a list that might overwhelm a parent.
- Develop leadership opportunities for all parents by instituting parent policy councils, advisory councils, or other opportunities. Instill the value in staff that everyone has something to offer; don't forget about fathers.
- Make parent leadership a priority in your program. Develop job descriptions for parent leaders and volunteers. Develop policies and procedures and a culture of leadership that includes continuous quality improvement where the program measures itself.

Conclusion

Promoting parent engagement and leadership can be a difficult and time consuming task, yet no one is more important in the life of a child than their parent. As demonstrated through the survey results, West Virginia's early care and education programs are doing a positive job overall; however, programs must ensure that parent leadership remains a priority. Programs must continue to utilize a continuous quality improvement process that begins with these results and grows into their own processes for measuring how well they are engaging parents. Through consistent internal monitoring, parent leadership will continue to be a priority and grow.

Commitment grows within people over time,
as they gain experience:

- Working together
- Feeling successful at what they do
- Making decisions together
- Working through conflicts
- Supporting each other's leadership
- Having fun together
- Overcoming obstacles
- Appreciating and respecting each other
- Challenging each other
- Building relationships
- Having an impact on something they care about
- Learning from mistakes and setbacks
- Having solid, committed leadership

Additional Resources

Annie E. Casey Foundation, <http://www.aecf.org>

Child Care Aware, <http://childcareaware.org/>

Child Welfare League of America, <http://www.cwla.org>

Circle of Friends, <http://www.circleofriends.org/>

Circle of Parents, <http://www.circleofparents.org/>

Connecticut Commission on Children, <http://www.cga.ct.gov/COC>

ECLKC—National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement, <http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/family/center>

Family Friendly Schools, <http://www.familyfriendlyschools.com/>

FRIENDS National Resource Center, <http://www.friendsnrc.org>

Meaningful Parent Leadership: A Guide to Success,
www.wvdhhr.org/bcf/children_adult/cAbusePrev/documents/pl_guidebook.pdf

National Center on Shared Leadership, www.sharedleadershipnetwork.org

National Coalition for Parent Involvement in Education, <http://ncpie.org/AboutNCPIE/>

Parents Anonymous, <http://www.parentsanonymous.org>

Strengthening Families Through Early Care and Education, <http://www.cssp.org/reform/strengthening-families>

WV Resource and Referral Agencies, <http://www.wvdhhr.org/bcf/ece/earlycare/rr.asp>

Parent Engagement and Education Subcommittee

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