Evidence from 126 Families:
Understanding Parent-Led Early Intervention

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Research period: July 2023 - August 2025
Analysis date: September 2025

Introduction to Happy Ladders & Study Context

Early intervention professionals understand the challenges facing families who need developmental support: geographic barriers, capacity constraints, scheduling conflicts, and economic limitations that can delay or prevent access to traditional services. These barriers are particularly pronounced for families in outlying areas, working parents unavailable during business hours, and families navigating complex socioeconomic circumstances.

The scale of this challenge is significant: 1 in 4 children in the United States are now diagnosed with a developmental need (CDC, 2023).

Happy Ladders emerged from recognizing these access challenges within California's Early Start system. We developed a platform that provides play and routine-based activities designed to be accessible to any parent, regardless of educational or socioeconomic background.

What Happy Ladders Provides

Core Service: Play and routine-based activities targeting specific developmentally appropriate skills

Support System: Live Zoom office hours for direct professional guidance

Optional Resources: Learning materials for families who want additional information

Language Access: Available in English, Spanish, and Russian

Platform Access: Mobile-based (phone or tablet), allowing families to go at their own pace, wherever and whenever convenient

Design Philosophy: Simple by design - as one parent told us about their experience with traditional parent training, "I felt like I was drowning and they threw me a book on how to swim." We provide simple, parent-friendly activities, not clinical details.

How It Works

1. **Complete Assessment**: Short developmental skill assessment in each category
2. **Personalized Therapy Plan Creation**: Customized therapy plan with play and routine-based activities targeting appropriate skills
3. **Implement Simple Activities**: 10-20 minutes, 3-5 times weekly during play and daily routines
4. **Track Progress**: Track child development through consistent, small efforts

Population Served

Our platform currently serves children with developmental needs from Early Start units across 5 California Regional Centers:

- **Age range**: 0-5 years (targeted for 0-3 developmental)
- **Demographics**: Wide socioeconomic and educational backgrounds with predominance of Medi-Cal clients
- **Diagnoses**: Range of developmental needs, with majority at risk of or recently diagnosed with autism
- **Geographic distribution**: Majority living in outlying or underserved areas
- **Family circumstances**: Many parents working and unavailable during traditional business hours, possibly wait listed for ABA services

Study Documentation Period

From July 2023 through August 2025, families logged skill mastery, and activity session data (including qualitative data) using our platform. This wasn't designed as formal research. The patterns that emerged, however, provide valuable insights about the efficacy of parent-led therapy.

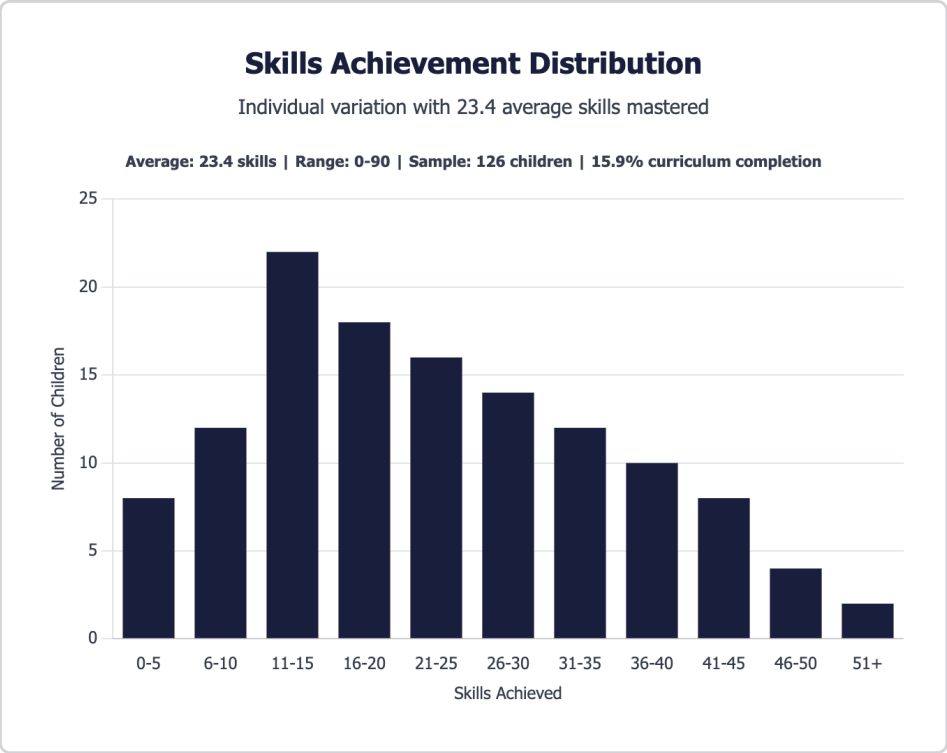
Evidence from 126 Families

The 126 children in our analysis represent real families facing real barriers to traditional early intervention services. They are Early Start families who chose our platform when traditional services weren't accessible or sufficient for their needs.

Key Findings

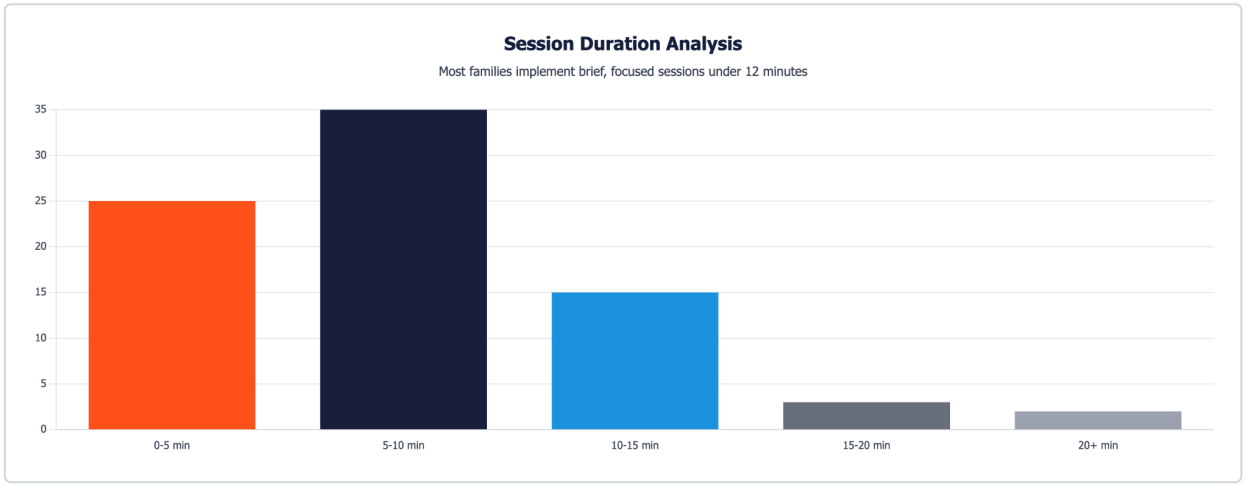
Developmental Outcomes:

- **23.4 skills average** achieved per child across four developmental domains
- **Range**: 0-90 skills, demonstrating wide variation in family implementation and child responsiveness
- **Curriculum context**: 147 total skills available across Communication, Play, Self-Help, and Community & Coping domains



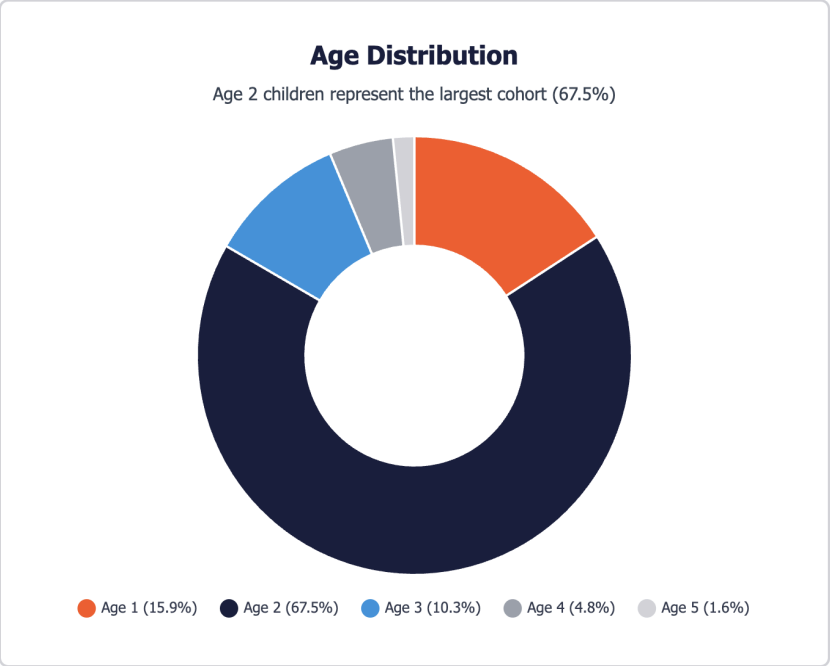
Family Engagement Patterns:

- **92.0 activity sessions** average per child over the study period
- **11.2 minutes** average session duration
- **8.8 minutes** median duration (most sessions were brief and focused)



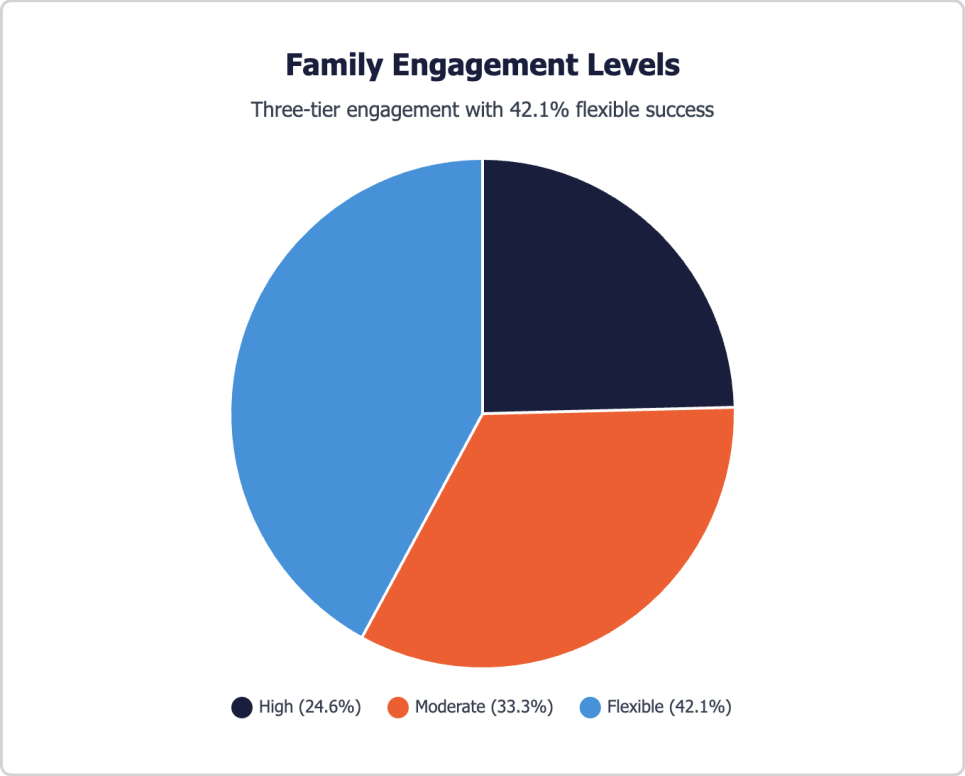
Age-Specific Insights:

- **Age 2 dominance**: 67.5% of children were age 2, suggesting families naturally seek intervention during this critical period
- **Optimal timing**: Age 1-2 children showed consistent developmental progress
- **Broad applicability**: Platform served children across the full 0-5 age range effectively



Engagement Distribution:

- **High engagement** (≥100 sessions): 24.6% of families
- **Moderate engagement** (30-99 sessions): 33.3% of families
- **Flexible engagement** (<30 sessions): 42.1% of families
- **Key finding**: All engagement levels achieved meaningful developmental progress



Success Across Diverse Circumstances

The evidence demonstrates that parent-led therapy can produce meaningful developmental outcomes across the full spectrum of family circumstances that characterize underserved Early Start populations:

- **Working parents** achieved progress through brief 11-minute sessions that fit into family routines
- **Rural families** accessed quality intervention without traveling to clinical settings
- **Multilingual families** engaged through Spanish and Russian language support
- **Autism families** (majority population) showed sustained engagement and skill development

Real-world examples from families:

"She would always fuss when putting her shoes on. But this week, she went to find her shoes alone and put them on by herself! It's big progress because she wouldn't even keep them on before, let alone put them on." - Enrica H.

"At 18 months, my daughter was undiagnosed and non-verbal. After a few months of engaging in communication activities with her, she began speaking. She is doing so well that I was able to enroll her in a Montessori School. I'm so grateful to have something while we wait for services." - Maria S.

"Thank you, Amy, for the support over the past year. My son has made so much progress. Our authorization is coming to an end. But I'd highly recommend that parents have access to all these resources." - Cheryl H. (Mom of HL Graduate)

What This Evidence Demonstrates

About Serving Underserved Populations

Traditional early intervention services face well-documented challenges in reaching certain family populations. Our evidence suggests that parent-led therapy delivered through accessible platforms can effectively serve families who face barriers to conventional services:

Geographic accessibility: Families in outlying areas achieved the same 23.4 skills average as families with better service access

Schedule flexibility: Working parents succeeded through activities integrated into natural family routines

Economic accessibility: Medi-Cal families participated without transportation costs or work schedule disruption

Cultural responsiveness: Multilingual support enabled participation across diverse communities

Technology accessibility: Mobile platform (phone or tablet) enables families to access intervention anywhere, anytime

About Capacity Solutions

The capacity mathematics facing early intervention are well-known: unlimited family need meeting finite professional resources. Our experience suggests that parent-led therapy offers a solution:

Unlimited geographic reach: Platform served families regardless of provider location or availability

Schedule independence: Families implemented activities when convenient, not when appointments were available

Resource efficiency: One platform supported 126 families without proportional increases in professional staff

Quality maintenance: Consistent developmental outcomes (23.4 skills average) achieved across all circumstances

About Intervention Accessibility

The evidence indicates that quality developmental support can occur outside traditional clinical models when families receive appropriate guidance:

Natural environment effectiveness: Children achieved developmental progress through activities embedded in daily family life

Brief session success: 11.2-minute average sessions produced meaningful outcomes

Sustainable engagement: Families maintained participation over extended periods (92.0 sessions average)

Professional partnership: Live office hours provided expert guidance without creating service dependency

About Simplicity and Effectiveness

Perhaps most significantly, the evidence suggests that meaningful developmental outcomes don't require complex training protocols or intensive professional oversight:

Simple design works: Activities accessible to any parent regardless of educational background achieved consistent results

Training isn't necessary: Families succeeded through clear activity guidance rather than extensive parent education

Natural adaptation: Families found their own sustainable implementation patterns

Professional support: Expert guidance available when needed without overwhelming families with requirements

External Research Validation

Our findings align with broader research trends demonstrating parent-led intervention effectiveness. Recent research from the Catalight Foundation found that parent-led intervention significantly increased parental self-efficacy while practitioner-led intervention showed no improvement in parental self-efficacy (Sneed & Samelson, 2022; https://scholarworks.waldenu.edu/jsbhs/vol16/iss1/12/).

BYU research has shown that children can make the same or more progress through parent-led approaches as conventional therapy (Brigham Young University, 2022; https://news.byu.edu/intellect/children-with-autism-benefit-when-parents-are-trained-to-provide-at-home-interventions).

Additionally, research indicates that children who receive parent-led therapy have less severe overall symptoms later in childhood, with improved social communication and reduced repetitive behaviors (Preschool Autism Communication Trial (PACT), 2016; https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC5121131/).

Study Limitations & Context

Research Design Considerations

This analysis represents observational documentation of real-world outcomes rather than controlled research. Caregivers self-reported all data – we didn't design this as formal research with control groups or independent assessment.

What this evidence shows:

- Parent-led therapy can produce measurable developmental progress when properly structured
- Families from underserved Early Start populations can implement intervention effectively
- Brief, frequent sessions may be more sustainable than intensive blocks
- Age 2 appears to be optimal timing for parent-led intervention approaches

What it doesn't establish:

- Comparative effectiveness versus traditional early intervention approaches
- Causality between platform use and developmental progress
- Generalizability beyond families who chose our platform
- Long-term maintenance of skills or generalization across settings

Research Value for the Field

While these limitations prevent definitive conclusions about intervention effectiveness, the data provides valuable insights into parent implementation patterns and outcomes in a population that traditional services often struggle to reach consistently.

The large sample size (N=126) and extended documentation period (July 2023 - August 2025) offer substantial descriptive data about how families engage with play and routine-based activities when provided with professional support and structured frameworks. These findings complement existing research from Catalight Foundation and BYU demonstrating parent-led intervention effectiveness.

About Happy Ladders

Happy Ladders provides play and routine-based activities that make early intervention accessible to families facing traditional service barriers. Founded by Amy Jacobs-Schroeder and Sean Schroeder, the platform serves Early Start families across 5 California Regional Centers through simple, multilingual support that honors diverse family circumstances.

Our approach combines evidence-based developmental activities with flexible implementation, professional guidance with family autonomy, and measurable outcomes with cultural responsiveness. The platform's design reflects nearly two decades of experience in parent-led therapy development, focused on accessibility and effectiveness rather than complexity.

Platform Features: Mobile-accessible (phone or tablet), available in English, Spanish, and Russian, with live professional support through Zoom office hours.

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This analysis represents our contribution to professional dialogue about expanding early intervention access while maintaining quality outcomes. We welcome collaboration and further research to validate and expand these preliminary findings.