



EARLY CHILDHOOD Innovation Network

Needs and Wants of DC Parents and Caregivers of Young Children

SUMMARY OF DATA COLLECTED SUMMER 2023

Why we collected these data

The Early Childhood Innovation Network (ECIN) is a local collaborative of health and education providers, community-based organizations, researchers, and advocates in Washington, DC. Since 2016, this cross-sector partnership has used research and community insight to develop innovations aimed at improving equity in prenatal-to-3+ programs and services and to advocate for strong early childhood systems.

One of these innovations is the Prenatal to 5 Capacity Building Collaborative (P5CBC), formed in 2020 with funding from the Pritzker Children's Initiative and others. Over the last four years, the P5CBC has worked to increase investments in and access to programs and services that support the health and development of DC infants, toddlers, and their families, such as Parent Cafés, HealthySteps, and CenteringPregnancy. This work also included cross-sector community engagement through Family Leadership Academies that build advocacy skills, and community meetings that include in-depth discussions about issues impacting DC families. From 2021 through 2023, we served over 25,000 families and children through these early childhood initiatives.

As part of a process to best understand potential future directions, we sought to hear from community members about the most important needs and wants of families with young children in the areas of Washington, DC with the lowest rankings on the Child Opportunity Index.¹ We began by listening to parents of color who are economically disadvantaged (especially residents of Wards 4, 5, 7, and 8) by reviewing summary reports of directly accessible qualitative data collected from this population by our Early Childhood Innovation Network (ECIN) partners between 2020–2022. From these data sources, we learned that parents of young children want **better access to mental health care for themselves** (especially through the full perinatal stage) and **help promoting their children's healthy development through peer-to-peer programs** (e.g., Parent Cafés, information/training from experts such as home visiting, HealthySteps), and **high-quality early education**.

Our team acknowledged that certain caregivers had yet to be heard from - those who do not speak English as their primary language and/or are immigrants and those who are not yet engaged in ECIN-supported programs. Thus, we reached out to community partners to find out about convenings of

¹ See this [more detailed report](#) of our community identification and listening process.

parents/guardians from Wards 4, 5, 7, and 8 during June 2023, in which community members from these groups would be willing to share input with us. In addition to convenings of parents, we gathered input from service providers (e.g., teachers, community health workers) working with children and families in these wards.

How we collected the data

For expediency, we used the ThoughtExchange² platform to collect open-ended responses to a single question: **What do families – living in Wards 4, 5, 7, or 8 – with children under age three (including pregnant families) need and want?** Participants could submit a short “thought” response with a brief explanation.

This polling tool can be facilitated synchronously during virtual meetings, which our team did on seven occasions:

- Georgetown University Certificate in Infant & Early Childhood Mental Health Family Leadership students (20 attendees)
- DC Perinatal Mental Health Workgroup (16 attendees)
- Georgetown Head Start University Partners (10 attendees)
- P5CBC Steering Committee (11 attendees)
- SPACEs in Action Strengthening Medicaid Community Meeting (30 attendees)
- Children’s National HealthySteps Parent Advisory Council (8 attendees)
- SPACEs in Action Parent Cafe (23 attendees)

The polling tool can also be administered asynchronously via an email with a link, which we shared with:

- ECIN team members
- Healthy Futures child development programs
- Centering Pregnancy programs at Unity Healthcare
- Mary’s Center
- Community of Hope
- Under 3 DC Listserv
- DC Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA) Keeping Families Together Lived Experience Advisory Council, and
- CFSA Family Success Centers

In addition to answering the open-ended question, participants are asked to assign one to five stars to others’ responses to indicate how strongly they agree (all answers and rating are submitted anonymously). This rating system allowed us to measure consensus on the most important needs and wants of caregivers of young children residing in these wards.

In total, we collected 135 thoughts and 2,058 ratings from 113 participants. Of this group, 46 percent self-identified as family caregivers of young children in Wards 4, 5, 7 or 8 (and received a \$25 Target gift card when possible). The remaining 54 percent worked with young children in child care settings, health care settings or as community advocates (including researchers). Regarding breakdown of racial/ethnic groups, 63 percent of respondents self-identified as Black/African American and 22 percent as Hispanic or Latinx.

2 Georgetown University Center for Child and Human Development has a subscription to <https://thoughtexchange.com/>; if interested in using this tool please contact [Simeon Sanchez](#).

What we learned from these data

After considering the top five AI-generated themes from ThoughtExchange, our evaluation team created a similar but more specific set of nine themes. The two researchers each coded half of the thought responses, assigning a primary theme to each; then they reviewed and confirmed each other's coding. These are the most frequently mentioned themes with example thought responses ³:

- **Housing in safe neighborhoods:**

To reduce stress, families need/want stable housing that they can afford in neighborhoods that are safe. (27 thought responses)

- ☐ **Safe neighborhoods.** "It's important for families to be able to live in and move thru their neighborhoods w/o threat of violence." (4.4 ★)
- ☐ **Healthy housing.** "Stable health housing is important for healthy and decreases stress on the family." (4.4 ★)

- **Quality [early] education and child care:**

Single parents especially need/want affordable, high-quality childcare so they can work or go to school. (26 thought responses)

- ☐ **They need daycare.** "They need someone to watch their children so that they can go to work to provide for their families." (4.4 ★)
- ☐ **Child care.** "Some families, poverty-stricken, need or seeking training or employment. Childcare supports the ability to obtain advancements for family stability." (4.3 ★)

- **Accessible healthcare:**

Parents need/want several types of health care (medical, behavioral) to be more affordable (covered by insurance), accessible (location, hours, volume of providers), and culturally sensitive. (23 thought responses)

- ☐ **Culturally sensitive mental health care for parents without waitlists.** "Parents need to be able to see a therapist they trust during these early stages of parenting especially when you have postpartum depression." (4.3 ★)
- ☐ **Easy access to affordable high quality health care.** "Families need caring doctors that take medicaid and are located in their neighborhoods." (4.3 ★)

- **Employment/income:**

Parents need/want financial resources – through employment opportunities, financial education, or direct monetary benefits – to provide for their children's basic needs. (18 thought responses)

- ☐ **Financial support via employment opportunities.** "Part-time or per diem opportunities that do not have hiring restrictions." (4.4 ★)
- ☐ **Financial literacy.** "To learn how to properly budget and get on the other side of a bad financial situation, start to build a solid foundation for their children." (4.4 ★)
- ☐ **Enough income.** "So parents can provide for their children." (4.3 ★)

3 A full list of thought responses and assigned themes is available [for download](#). For any questions about the data, please contact [Stephanie Mitchell](#).

Additional themes associated with fewer (but greater than two) responses were:

- **Social support for parents:** Parents, particularly single parents and fathers, need supportive relationships with others in their community. (12 thought responses)
- **Food:** Parents need/want to be able to afford and conveniently shop for healthy food to fuel their children's health development. (12 thought responses)
- **Resource navigation:** Parents need/want information about and help accessing the community support services available to their families. (9 thought responses)
- **Fairness and respect:** Parents want to be treated with dignity and respect and to have their voices listened to regardless of their skin color, income, or other circumstances. (5 thought responses)

What should be done with what we learned

We are grateful to the caregivers of young children who shared their thoughts with us. We encourage the following constituencies, and others, to consider utilizing these ThoughtExchange results, which form a rich DC community needs assessment for prenatal, infant, and early childhood:

- community organizations
- advocates
- policymakers
- researchers
- philanthropy
- service providers

The P5CBC team is eager to partner with others in taking next steps to improve family well-being for children prenatal to five years old. We strongly encourage family leaders to continue the conversation about how to affect real change in your communities by visiting <https://www.spacesinaction.org/> or stay connected by using this [link](#).

Acknowledgements

This work was supported by a grant from the Pritzker Children's Initiative. We are grateful for the family and professional caregivers who shared their thoughts and whose knowledge instigated this report. They are creators and authors of this work. The report was written by the P5CBC evaluation team from Georgetown University (Stephanie J. Mitchell, PhD and Jordyn Rand).

The ECIN Prenatal to Five Capacity Building Collaborative (P5CBC) extends its gratitude to the Pritzker Children's Initiative for its support.

We would also like to thank: Simeon Sanchez for providing thought-partnership and technical skill on using the ThoughtExchange platform; the members of the PN-3 Hub of the BUILD Initiative who contributed their time and expertise in the editing and design of this report; Ngozi Lawal of Early Actions, LLC for her thought-partnership and review; and our [ECIN](#) colleagues and partner organizations (listed in detail on page 2) for their help in recruiting ThoughtExchange participants and for their ongoing collaboration.