

Raising Arizona's Children: Voices of Arizona Families and Service Providers

This research brief highlights emergent themes and critical issues relating to early childhood in Arizona as experienced by families and stakeholders participating in the Family and Community Case Study, the qualitative component of the mixed-method First Things First External Evaluation (FTFEE). Preliminary data highlight findings on issues of access, quality and affordability of early childhood services, and early reporting on the effectiveness of First Things First (FTF). Findings presented here have broad-reaching implications and can impact the ways in which Arizona addresses the needs of its families.

What issues do parents raising young children in different parts of Arizona face? Where do they turn for support in parenting — from childbirth and health care through child care, preschool, and the transition to kindergarten? How do preschool and kindergarten children view their lives, including their family, community, and school? How do local professionals and community leaders who support Arizona families view the "system" of early childhood and family support services and resources in their communities and statewide? What is the citizen initiative First Things First program doing to address the needs of families with young children in Arizona, statewide and

through its 31 Regional Partnership Councils? How could it improve its system and services?

These are some of the questions addressed in the **Family and Community Case Study** (FCCS) portion of the First Things First External Evaluation, a collaborative project led by faculty and research staff from several disciplines at the University of Arizona, Arizona State University, and Northern Arizona University. FCCS uses qualitative research methods of interviewing individuals and small focus group discussions to complement the Longitudinal Child Study of Arizona that is assessing young children and surveying their parents.

Based on interviews, family stories from a variety of diverse urban, border, rural, and Tribal communities in Arizona convey how families are raising their children and meeting their everyday needs. Researchers also interviewed children before and after they entered kindergarten. Children's perspectives will be shared in a future research brief. Finally, focus group discussions with service providers in health, early care and education, and related family support roles were conducted. This research brief shares some preliminary findings, through direct quotes from parents and service providers, focusing specifically on issues of access, affordability, and the quality of available programs for Arizona families in the current economic climate.

“Gap” Families: Caught in the Middle

Many of the 148 families interviewed discussed issues related to their inability to access quality services based on income. Specifically, these working families are ineligible for health care and child care services because their income is barely over the eligibility limit. These families, referred to in the literature as “working poor,” are defined here as “gap families.” A number of the parents we interviewed described how, after state programs were cut or they began making just a few dollars over the limit to qualify for minimal assistance, they struggled to meet basic health or special medical needs of their young children, as well as to find affordable care. In Arizona, the average cost of full time child care for infants is \$736 a month (4 weeks) and \$564 for children ages 3 – 5 years.

Matthew, a father of four, describes this struggle as he explains what happens if he and his fiancée make over the state maximum to qualify for services: *“But if we are making over \$2,200... that’s rent and that’s our bills. And, we have... very little to play with or to do anything with. How are we supposed to get food? How are we supposed to provide diapers? It’s frustrating because we can’t get the help we need when we want it and when we need it we can barely get it.”*

This lack of support as well as the lack of affordable child care affects many aspects of life in Matthew’s family. With his fiancée working full-time, Matthew struggles to find employment for himself. *“Because I’m not working, we can’t get child care and, how am I supposed to go out and*

look for a job? I have an infant.” They also struggle to meet their children’s medical needs who have asthma.

Susan, a stay-at-home mother during the week, describes her family as *“struggling lower middle class”* (150% of poverty income). She works a 12-hour shift on Sunday, while her husband, who works full-time Monday through Friday, takes care of the children. Susan also recently worked temporarily for the census in order to save up money in preparation for the arrival of a new baby. She describes her family as socially conservative and believes strongly that young children should be cared for by parents rather than put in full-time or even part-time care. Yet, this mother has often considered trying to find a full-time job in order to *“have a bit more money, enough to pay for health insurance, mortgage, food, and car. But this wouldn’t substantially raise our income, because most of my salary would then go to care of our three children under age 5.”*

As Susan talks about the difficulties her family faces reconciling their values with the economic costs of raising their children, she relates, *“It’s kind of like the big question. Like what do people like us who are kind of middle income, but lower middle income—I mean we don’t qualify for food stamps and AHCCCS, but we qualify for WIC—how do we negotiate getting what we need in a way that we can afford?”*

Many of the stakeholders (who provide child care, health care, and other services) interviewed echo these very sentiments expressed by families. One stakeholder admits that *“a number of parents who were able to get help with*

insurance or child care are no longer eligible because they make just a few dollars over the limit to be eligible.” These same stakeholders are concerned that family needs far outweigh current services, especially with the deep cuts in state funded programs, including KidsCare, DES child care, AHCCCS, and other programs. As one provider put it, *“There’s more families that need services than services available.”*

Finding Affordable – and Quality – Child Care

Families across the state struggle to find affordable and quality child care. Many parents feel as though they have to settle for a certain level of care, either due to financial reasons or lack of available services. Debbie, a mother of two who is currently a graduate student working part-time, expresses concerns about her children’s child care: *“It was really, really challenging, and in some ways honestly quite appalling when we started looking at child care and preschool options and just in terms of the standards.”* She continues, *“I guess when you make the decision to have kids and still work, you need support . . . You want to feel comfortable when you go wherever you’re going every day when you leave your kids, and I haven’t always felt that way.”* Debbie expressed that the inability to find quality and trustworthy care places undue stress on families, *“I guess that just is really concerning and just thinking about the stress that puts on parents when they can’t find quality places.”*

Another mother, Alma, expressed similar concerns, indicating that she pulled her children out of several child care centers due to

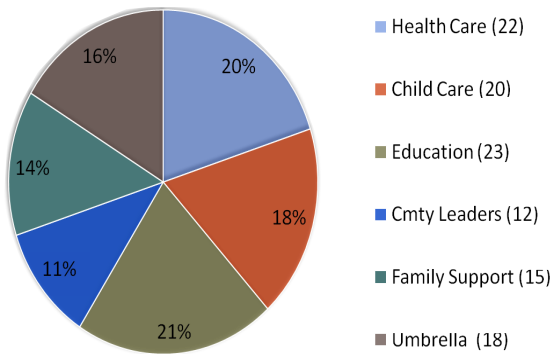
what she termed *“inappropriate care.”* She now relies on her aunt to care for her two children while she works. Though she has to drive out of her way to take her children to her aunt’s house, she is grateful that she has the family support available. Parents who do not have close family or friends to step in and provide child care do not have an alternative if they only have access to substandard care.

These concerns expressed by Alma and Debbie were echoed by other families participating in the study. Rhonda, for example, expressed dissatisfaction with the child care options available to her family, finding facilities to be outdated and unsafe. She also questions the cleanliness of the center her son attends after he contracted a serious infection at his child care facility. Rhonda also expressed dissatisfaction with the education provided by her son’s child care. *“I can’t teach my child all the values because I’m a working mother. I wish I could stay home but sometimes I don’t have the means to do it all. So I leave it up to the day care, but the day care personnel are not always qualified.”*

What Stakeholders are saying about First Things First

While First Things First is a new statewide initiative, some of its programs were well known to a sample of 110 stakeholders (providers of child care, health care, home visiting services, and other family supports) who were interviewed in several focus groups. (See Figure 1.) One stakeholder exclaimed, *“I think FTF has been just wonderful . . . I really like the way the [local] Regional Partnership*

Figure 1. Percent & Number of Stakeholders by Category



Councils work together” to enhance services to families. Another made the point that *“First Things First has gone a long way to promote communities and counties”* that may have been neglected or underfunded in the past. An early childhood educator stated, *“we have benefited in our [school] district alone with so many different aspects of First Things First.”*

Many stakeholders have long recognized the need for an initiative like First Things First

and expressed not only relief in its creation, but also satisfaction with the work FTF has been able to accomplish since its inception. *“There was a large handful of us here who waited for more than twenty years for someone to notice that there was a population of zero to five year olds that needed lots of attention and First Things First has brought us the ability to do what we need to do to start moving kids forward.”* Another stakeholder explains, *“The impact in just two years alone in our area has been huge. And the neat thing is just watching the level of growth in our staff because people are paying attention to them. All of a sudden early childhood is getting noticed and they feel better about themselves, they felt better about the profession. It is just remarkable. It would take us a hundred years to do all those things that have been done in two years.”*

In summary:

- Across the state, Arizona families are struggling to meet their needs as services are cut or eliminated and struggle to find affordable quality child care.
- The issue of quality and safe child care is a major concern of parents in the study.
- First Things First has brokered services that have addressed some of these needs, including child care scholarships, emergency food programs, and Quality First (and related programs) that address child care quality in Arizona.

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