



# PARENT AND PROVIDER PERSPECTIVES ON FAMILY ENGAGEMENT IN EARLY CHILDHOOD SETTINGS IN NORTH DAKOTA, 2024

November 2024

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## ***Parent and Provider Perspectives on Family Engagement in Early Childhood Settings in North Dakota, 2024***

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## PURPOSE

Collaboration among the North Dakota Department of Health and Human Services-Early Childhood section, NDSU Extension, North Dakota State University and other partners made this project possible. The goal of this project, which was undertaken to fulfill objectives associated with the Preschool Development Grant Birth to Five (PDG B-5) federal grant, was to conduct a Family Engagement Survey in North Dakota that would assist State and interested stakeholders in understanding how families of children birth to five would like to receive information, who they consider trusted messengers, and relevant topics for family engagement. In addition, it was meant to explore the perspectives of early childhood professionals relative to family engagement.

To develop the study through a collaborative process, the ND DHHS-EC section contracted with NDSU Extension in 2023-24. Project staff worked closely with the State to develop the 2024 Family Engagement Survey, seeking to develop questions that addressed multiple aspects of family engagement in early childhood settings and with families raising young children. The survey was developed and then distributed in North Dakota from May to September of 2024, targeting a cross section of families from across the state raising children ages birth to six and also including early childhood professionals. The data was collected using the Qualtrics survey platform and a total sample of 337 individuals responded to the survey. The data was analyzed and findings were summarized in this report during Fall 2024.

Family engagement efforts through early childhood education programs and resources potentially can provide enormous benefits to a young child's development during the rapid period of growth from birth to 5 years old. Family engagement opportunities in home settings, along with early childhood professionals or other community resources, are important because these activities enhance and promote building the collaborative mindset required for a child's optimal development.

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to thank the North Dakota Department of Health and Human Services-Early Childhood section for facilitating the opportunity to collaborate and conduct research on this important topic. Work on this project was conducted in association with ND DHHS Contract #300-13748, a subcontract extended to NDSU Extension as part of a competitive federal grant received by North Dakota in 2022 to focus on improvements to the state's existing early childhood infrastructure and resources.

Additionally, we extend our thanks to the early childhood professionals, parents and other partners who participated in this study project. Their insight and perspective on the topic of family engagement and related activities provided valuable contributions regarding the available opportunities, key priorities, barriers and preferences in North Dakota. With this study and report, we aspire to enhance the lives of families with young children in North Dakota and strengthen support for family engagement across the early childhood community.

A special thank you to the program coordinators of the North Dakota Parent Education Network who aided in recruitment of participants and organization of the focus group sites, as well as multiple other partners across the state who supported this project and facilitated recruitment of study participants.

# PARENT AND PROVIDER FEEDBACK SURVEY ON FAMILY ENGAGEMENT IN NORTH DAKOTA, 2024

## Introduction

In late 2022, North Dakota received a multi-year grant from the federal government known as the Preschool Development Grant Birth Through Five (PDG B-5). Such federal preschool development grants birth through five support states in their efforts to improve early childhood infrastructure and resources. These grant program funds were authorized by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which passed in late 2015, and are designed to foster connections across early learning programs, support and strengthen the early childhood care and education (ECCE) workforce, enhance quality, and expand access to early childhood services for children. The grant program is being administered through the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) under the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS). Grant funds are intended to facilitate assessment, collaboration, and improvement for existing early childhood programs and also a mixed delivery system for children and families.

The North Dakota Department of Health and Human Services Early Childhood section (HHS-EC) was provided with \$6.75 million in funding per year from 2022-24 under this grant. This funding builds upon and enhances work done previously under a PDG B-5 grant in North Dakota in 2018-19. Specifically, the renewal grant of the PDG B-5 focuses on continuing state-level needs assessments and strategic planning to optimize existing early childhood care and education (ECCE) resources. The North Dakota plan identifies five primary activities for the project, including statewide needs assessment, maximizing parent and family engagement in the B-5 system, supporting the B-5 workforce, and other efforts.

Representatives of the ND Department of Health and Human Services contacted staff within NDSU Extension, who have a history of working with early learning programs, to conduct work on some of the identified activities within the ND PDG B-5 renewal grant. NDSU Extension agreed to a contract arrangement and became responsible for leading and coordinating efforts to complete the work for specific activities under Activity 3 – Maximize Parent and Family Engagement in the B-5 System (Activity 3.1; Activity 3.2; Activity 3.3), which are identified in the overall ND PDG B-5 renewal grant. As part of Activity 3 – Maximize Parent and Family Engagement in the B-5 System, the following activities were listed:

- Update and re-design the assessment tool, previously designed for the 2019 Family Engagement Survey, to reflect how families prefer to receive information regarding family engagement.
- Facilitate the updated 2019 family engagement survey to a variety of targeted stakeholders; assess key questions of interest; collect data.

In relation to the two specific activities noted, NDSU Extension revised and implemented a parent and provider feedback survey on family engagement to gather more quantitative and qualitative information on this topic in North Dakota. This section of the report outlines the survey, its implementation and results associated with this parent and provider feedback survey on family engagement.

## Survey Background and Implementation

The purpose of this parent and provider feedback survey on family engagement was to fulfill specific objectives for Activity 3 of the grant project's focus on increased understanding about family engagement in early childhood settings in North Dakota. The North Dakota Department of Health and Human Services Early Childhood (HHS-EC) section sought to understand more fully the sources that parents, caregivers and early childhood professionals utilize and prefer as related to family engagement opportunities between the ages of birth and 6 years. An original and brief version of this survey was administered in 2019. First, a review of relevant information for the survey was conducted and then a revised, updated version of the survey was created for use in 2024. A brief summary of the revised survey's background and implementation are shared here.

## Study Design

The parent and provider feedback survey on family engagement was designed by the project team at NDSU Extension with some input from state HHS-EC staff members. Though the information collected was primarily quantitative, open-ended questions also allowed for respondents to furnish qualitative feedback as well for a multi-method design. To facilitate feedback from the intended population, a targeted convenience sample method was employed to gather feedback from parents, caregivers and community professionals in early childhood between May and September, 2024. When a final version of the survey was completed, it was placed online using Qualtrics survey software for ease of making the survey available and gathering participant feedback.

## Survey Measure

To gather participant feedback, the survey measure was constructed to provide in-depth information on participant characteristics, sources of information, family engagement options and preferences, barriers and goals related to family engagement in early childhood. Specifically, the following topics were included in the final survey:

- Family engagement information sources – 14 questions
- Topics of interest – 1 question
- Usage of information sources – 18 questions
- Preferred family engagement options – 7 questions
- Awareness of family engagement options – 20 questions



- Participation in family engagement options – 20 questions
- Opportunities for family engagement – 2 questions
- Barriers to family engagement – 13 questions
- Goals for family engagement – 2 questions
- Difficulty of early childhood transitions – 7 questions
- Other relevant questions – 11 questions

With 115 questions, the parent and provider feedback survey furnished a broad spectrum of inquiry about the topic of family engagement in early childhood settings. The specific questions related to each topic and the participant responses are outlined in the report that follows.

## Study Participants

Potential participants in North Dakota were recruited into the survey during a five-month period in May-September 2024. They were invited to participate in the family engagement survey via an email link that was shared. To participate, respondents had to complete a consent form and affirm their status as North Dakota residents. Each respondent was compensated for their participation with a \$20 electronic gift card.

Study participants were parents or caregivers of children between the ages of birth and 6 years of age in North Dakota, as well as early childhood professionals in the state. In North Dakota, a total of 337 participants completed the survey. Among respondents, 269 out of 337 respondents identified themselves as the parent or primary caregiver of child(ren) ages 0 to 6 (79.8% of participants). Also, 184 out of 337 respondents identified themselves as an early childhood professional with child(ren) ages 0 to 6 (54.6% of participants).

## Data Collection and Analysis

The parent and provider feedback survey on family engagement was distributed to parent resource center coordinators, Head Start, and other early childhood professionals or organizations throughout North Dakota. In turn, these professional contacts shared the survey link via email on client mailing lists.

Survey responses were gathered from 337 adult participants in North Dakota from May to October 2024. Data were collected using Qualtrics survey software. The survey responses were gathered using Qualtrics survey software. The data were then downloaded and analyzed using the statistical program SPSS.

## Survey Findings

The parent and provider feedback survey on family engagement was conducted in 2024 in North Dakota. A total of 337 participants completed the survey. Findings are shared below.





A table with the counties represented in the data set is listed below with the number of responses from each represented county and the percentage of responses from that county versus the county's percentage of the state population.

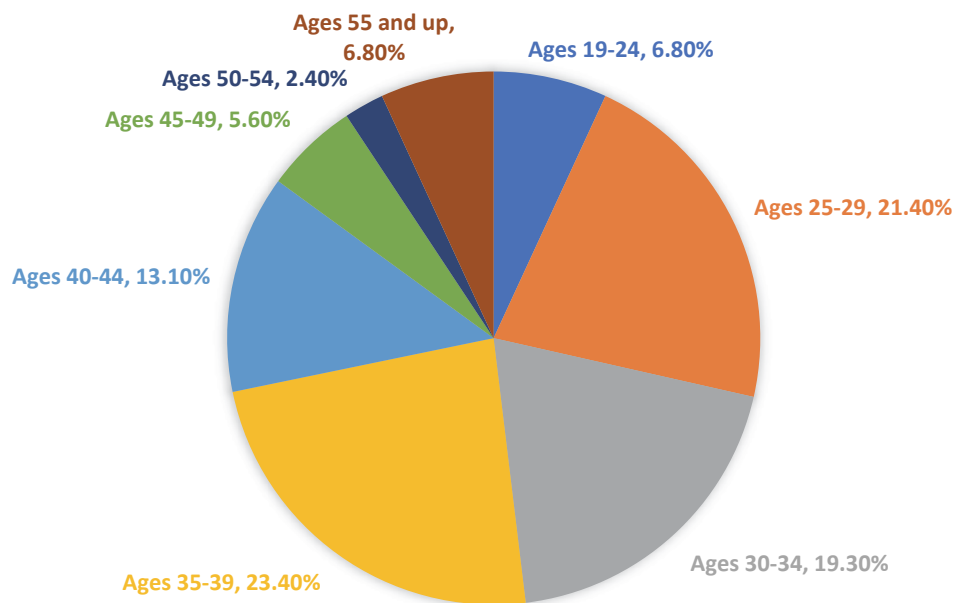
**Table 1. County-Level Responses to Family Engagement Survey in ND (2024)**

County (#)	% of Sample	% of State Population	County	% of Sample	% of State Population
Barnes (5)	1.5%	1.4%	Morton (14)	4.2%	4.3%
Benson (1)	0.3%	0.7%	Oliver (1)	0.3%	0.2%
Bottineau (1)	0.3%	0.8%	Pierce (4)	1.2%	0.5%
Bowman (3)	0.9%	0.4%	Ramsey (13)	3.9%	1.4%
Burke (1)	0.3%	0.3%	Ransom (7)	2.1%	0.7%
Burleigh (19)	5.6%	12.6%	Renville (2)	0.6%	0.3%
Cass (114)	33.8%	23.7%	Richland (17)	5%	2.1%
Cavalier (1)	0.3%	0.5%	Rolette (2)	0.6%	1.5%
Dickey (1)	0.3%	0.6%	Stark (5)	1.5%	4.2%
Foster (1)	0.3%	0.4%	Steele (1)	0.3%	0.2%
Grand Forks (43)	12.8%	9.4%	Stutsman (6)	1.8%	2.7%
Grant (1)	0.3%	0.3%	Traill (8)	2.4%	1%
Kidder (1)	0.3%	0.3%	Walsh (1)	0.3%	1.3%
McHenry (6)	1.8%	0.7%	Ward (38)	11.3%	8.7%
McIntosh (2)	0.6%	0.3%	Wells (3)	0.9%	0.5%
McKenzie (2)	0.6%	1.9%	Williams (9)	2.7%	5.1%
Mercer (3)	0.9%	1.1%			

## Age of Participants

The average age of respondents to the family engagement survey was 35.9 years ( $N = 333$ ), with a standard deviation of 9.6 years. Most participants were between the ages of 25 and 39 (64.1%), though ages ranged from 19 years of age to greater than 60. A percentage breakdown of the participants by age groups is highlighted in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Age of Participants in the ND Family Engagement Study (2024)

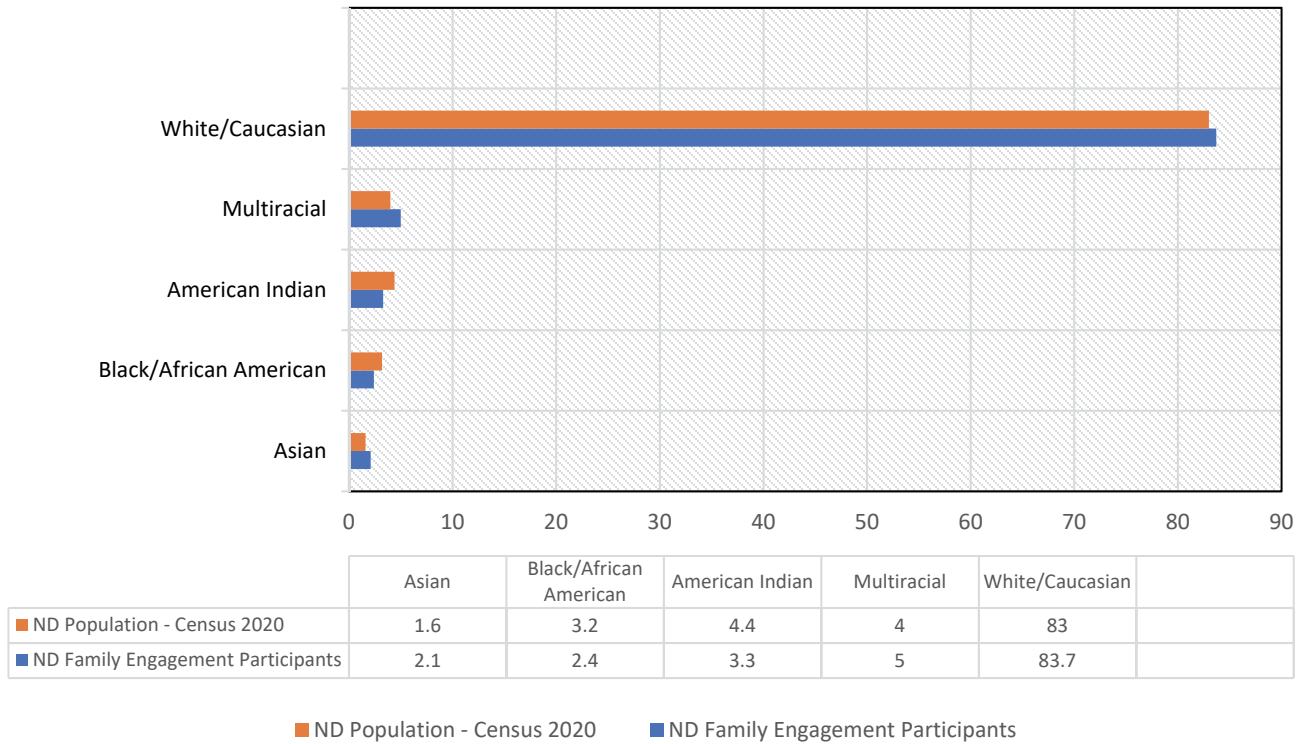


## Race, Ethnicity and Indigenous Affiliation of Participants

Individuals participating in the family engagement study came from a variety of ethnic and racial backgrounds. The population diversity of North Dakota continues to evolve and minority populations such as Black/African American, Hispanic, and other groups have increased during the first quarter century from 2000-2025. Individuals were asked to respond to a question allowing them to identify their ethnic or racial background and most did so ( $N = 336$ ).

The predominant group among the study participants was White (Caucasian), with 83.7% ( $N = 282$ ) of respondents identifying with this category. The next most common response was Multiracial (5%;  $N = 17$ ), followed by American Indian/Alaska Native (3.3%;  $N = 11$ ), Black/African American (2.4%;  $N = 8$ ), Asian (2.1%;  $N = 7$ ), and Hispanic (1.5%;  $N = 5$ ). Other individuals also identified as Indian, Middle Eastern/North African, or from other groups. A percentage breakdown of each group compared to the population percentage in North Dakota in 2020 census data is included in Table 3.

**Table 3.** Race/Ethnic Background of Participants in the ND Family Engagement Study (2024)



Across most categories, the percentage breakdown by race/ethnic group in the family engagement study was similar to the breakdown in North Dakota according to the 2020 federal census.

Participants were also asked to indicate any affiliation with an Indigenous identity or community, which would include persons of multiracial heritage, and this resulted in 5.9% of respondents ( $N = 20$ ) who were Indigenous with links to a number of tribal communities (Lakota, Cherokee, etc.).

### Gender of Participants

Participants were able to identify their gender in demographic responses. The vast majority of participants in the study identified as Female (90.5%;  $N = 305$ ). Additionally, 7.7% of respondents were Male (7.7%;  $N = 26$ ). Other response options were listed but had no responses, while 1.8% of participants recorded no entry on this question.

### Household Composition

When asked about the average number of adults living in the household, the most common number listed was typically two individuals (62.3%;  $N = 210$ ). So, the mean score for adults living in the household was 1.97 ( $SD = 0.71$ ), although a significant number of households listed just one adult (15.1%). Five percent of households had three or more adults in the home.

## Place of Residence in North Dakota

North Dakota is a unique state geographically and it has a substantial rural and frontier population as well as a sizeable population in multiple small urban hubs in the state. Participants were asked about their place of residence in the state with options ranging on a spectrum from “rural area on a farm or ranch” to in a city of 25,000 or more.

Approximately half of the participants noted that they lived in an urban setting in cities with a population of 25,000 or greater. Of course, such settings are more likely to provide a range of child care or early childhood settings where information about the study could be communicated and shared. Additionally, between five and 10 percent of the sample fell into each of the six other residential settings listed in the question. Thus, a range of community types are well represented in the data for this study. The data on residential location for the study participants is outlined in Table 4.

**Table 4.** Participant Place of Residence in North Dakota (*N* = 336)

<b>Response Options</b>	<b>Percentage (%) (<i>N</i>)</b>
In a rural area on a farm or ranch	8.9% (30)
In a rural area, but not on a farm or ranch	5.9% (20)
In a small town – population less than 1,000	7.1% (24)
In a town – population 1,000 to 2,499	6.8% (23)
In a town – population 2,500 to 9,999	10.7% (36)
In a small city – population 10,000 to 24,999	9.8% (33)
In a city – population 25,000 or more	50.4% (170)

## Partnership Status of Participants

The family setting for individuals raising children can vary in multiple ways and caregivers are often partnered with others in their caregiving efforts. Individuals were able to select from a variety of partnership status options in answering this question that included single (never married), married, separated or divorced, remarried, widowed, or living with a partner.

The majority of participants in this family engagement study were currently living in a married partnership (70.3%; *N* = 237). The next most common partnership statuses were single (never married) at 17.2% (*N* = 58) and separated or divorced at 5.6% (*N* = 19). Living with a partner came next at five percent of participants (*N* = 17). The remaining options each had less than one percent of participants in the respective categories.

## Income, Education and Employment Among Participants

The socioeconomic conditions of individuals responding to the family engagement study were also inquired about with respect to levels of income, education and current employment. These items are briefly discussed in this section and the data profile on each of these topics is outlined in a combined table (see Table 5).

Regarding household annual income, the population of the sample was spread quite widely across the eight categories of household income with a greater proportion in the moderate and high-income categories. One in five participants fell on the lower end of the economic scale, with 21.6% ( $N = 73$ ) of them indicating that their annual household income was between \$0 and \$45,000 per year. Next, 44.6% ( $N = 150$ ) of respondents identified themselves in the moderate-income categories between \$45,000 and \$100,000 a year for their annual income. A final third of the participants (32.3%;  $N = 109$ ) currently lived in family settings with an annual income exceeding \$100,000 each year.

With regard to education, just over thirty percent (30.3%;  $N = 102$ ) of the participants had completed high school or some college education to this point. Then, just over half of the participants had completed training through a two-year college degree, technical degree or four-year college degree (51.6%;  $N = 174$ ), suggesting a fairly high level of education among the family engagement participants. Finally, nearly one in five participants (17.8%) had completed graduate training in a master's degree or other options. So, the overall educational level of the participants in the study ranged quite widely but trended toward a higher level of educational accomplishment.

Current employment circumstances for those responding to the survey trended strongly toward a substantial majority of individuals holding full-time employment (40+ hours a week). Seven out of 10 participants (68.8%) noted that they were currently employed on a full-time basis. Following this pattern, 8.9% were employed between 26 to 39 hours a week and an additional 9.2% were employed up to 26 hours per week on a more part-time basis. A few participants were currently looking for employment but another ten percent (9.5%) were currently not seeking employment due to being full-time students, homemakers raising children, or retired or disabled individuals. In the early childhood context, some shared comments that they were self-employed either part-time or full-time as child care providers in their communities or in other settings.

The findings related to income, education and employment circumstances for study participants are included below in Table 5.

**Table 5:** Income, Education and Employment Circumstances Among Participants (N = 337)

<b>Household Annual Income</b>	
Less than \$15,000	5.6% (N = 19)
\$15,000 to 30,000	7.4% (N = 25)
\$30,000 to 45,000	8.6% (N = 29)
\$45,000 to 60,000	11.6% (N = 39)
\$60,000 to 75,000	12.5% (N = 42)
\$75,000 to 100,000	20.5% (N = 69)
\$100,000 to 150,000	18.4% (N = 62)
Over \$150,000	13.9% (N = 47)
<b>Level of Education</b>	
Less than high school degree	1.8% (N = 6)
High school graduate/GED	9.2% (N = 31)
Some college (no degree)	19.3% (N = 65)
2-year college/technical degree	15.4% (N = 52)
4-year college degree	36.2% (N = 122)
Master-s degree or higher	17.5% (N = 59)
Other	0.3% (N = 1)
<b>Current Employment Status</b>	
Employed full-time (40+ hr/wk)	68.8% (N = 232)
Employed 26-39 hr/wk	8.9% (N = 30)
Employed less than 26 hr/wk	9.2% (N = 31)
Seeking employment	2.4% (N = 8)
Not seeking employment currently (e.g., homemaker, FT student, retired, etc.)	9.5% (N = 32)
Other	0.9% (N = 3)

## Defined Relationship to Children Ages 0 to 6

The relationship of participants in the study to children ages 0 to 6 was also explored in the demographic data. Most of them were in a parent or familial caregiver role but others were present in the study as early childhood professionals. The different familial relationships are outlined in Table 6 along with other caregiver or professional options related to young children.

The most common familial relationships to children ages 0-6 were biological mother (59.3%), biological father (7.4%), grandparent (2.7%), and other relative or caregiver (5.3%). The most common professional roles were child care provider (6.8%) and early childhood teacher (5.9%).



**Table 6.** Defined Relationship to 0-6 Years Children (*N* = 316)

<b>Response Options</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
Biological parent (mother)	59.3% ( <i>N</i> = 200)
Biological parent (father)	7.4% ( <i>N</i> = 25)
Step-parent (mother or caregiver)	0.6% ( <i>N</i> = 2)
Step-parent (father or caregiver)	0% ( <i>N</i> = 0)
Grandparent or step-grandparent	2.7% ( <i>N</i> = 9)
Adoptive mother	1.8% ( <i>N</i> = 6)
Other relative or caregiver	5.3% ( <i>N</i> = 18)
Child care director or coordinator	2.1% ( <i>N</i> = 7)
Early childhood teacher	5.9% ( <i>N</i> = 20)
Child care provider	6.8% ( <i>N</i> = 23)
Other early childhood professional	1.8% ( <i>N</i> = 6)

Additionally, participants in the study were asked if they were a parent or caregiver to an infant ages 0 to 12 months. A quarter of the study participants (24.9%; *N* = 84) affirmed that they were currently in the situation of being a caregiver for an infant child, which often might steer their family engagement needs or preferences in a particular direction. However, the majority of participants (73.6%) were not currently providing care to an infant child.

## Children and Special Needs Circumstances

Demographic data on children's presence in the household were collected to understand the context behind participant responses. The average number of children under age 6 living in the household was 1.25 children (*SD* = 1.65; *N* = 327), though there was a lot of variability with a very large standard deviation of 1.65 kids per household. Participants were also asked about the presence of children over the age of 6 in the household, and 44.5% of respondents (*N* = 150) noted that they had such older children in their households. Overall household composition is outlined below in Table 7.

**Table 7.** Household Composition with Children of Participants (*N* = 327)

<b>Response Options</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
No children	28.8% ( <i>N</i> = 97)
One child	37.7% ( <i>N</i> = 127)
Two children	21.7% ( <i>N</i> = 73)
Three children	6.5% ( <i>N</i> = 22)
Four or more children	2.4% ( <i>N</i> = 8)

A final set of demographic questions related to the presence of children between ages 0 to 6 with special needs in the household and the type of special needs if they existed. The circumstance of having a child with special needs present in the household was fairly uncommon, as only 15.1% (*N* = 51) of respondents indicated this was the situation in their household. It may be, also, that some people do not consider the language “special needs” as applying to their child, and yet they identify particular conditions that would fall under the definition of a child having such needs (such as visual impairment, etc.). If participant responses to the topic of special needs categories are added together, then in fact 28.8% of respondents (*N* = 97) indicated that there was the occurrence of some type of special need among 0-6 children in their household.

The different types of special needs circumstances that may occur with young children were listed and participants were allowed to select a category or add a textual response if the categories did not fit. The analysis resulted in the following categories and responses for children and families in the study that are highlighted in Table 8.

**Table 8.** Types of Special Needs Identified in Children Ages 0-6 (*N* = 97)

<b>Response Options</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
Physical special needs (such as asthma, MS, etc.)	2.7% ( <i>N</i> = 9)
Developmental/cognitive special needs (such as Downs Syndrome, autism, etc.)	5.6% ( <i>N</i> = 19)
Behavioral/emotional special needs (such as ADD, ODD, etc.)	8.3% ( <i>N</i> = 28)
Sensory impairments (such as visual impairment, deafness, etc.)	1.8% ( <i>N</i> = 6)
Verbal/language special needs	2.1% ( <i>N</i> = 7)
Multiple special needs – developmental, physical, etc.	2.7% ( <i>N</i> = 9)
Other	5.6% ( <i>N</i> = 19)

## Summary

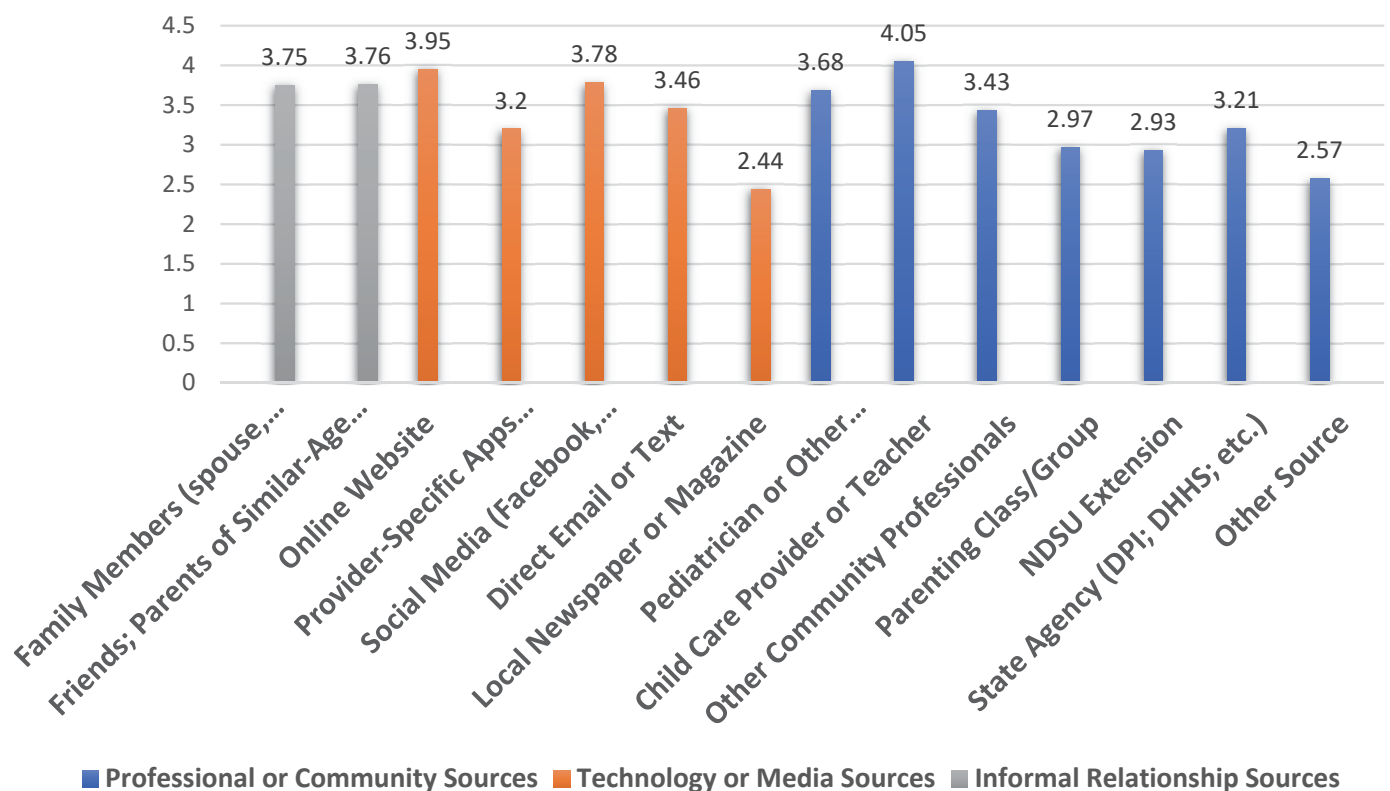
Demographic data collected for this study highlights the characteristics of parents raising children ages 0 to 6 and early childhood professionals who responded to the study opportunity. Individuals responded from over 60% of the counties in North Dakota and represented a substantial range of circumstances across factors such as age, residential location, ethnic/racial background, income, educational level, employment circumstances, partnership status and other selected variables. Study findings are shared in the sections that follow.

# VALUE OF INFORMATION SOURCES ON FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

Individuals rely on and use a variety of information sources to learn about options, ideas or opportunities for involvement with young children (ages 0 to 6). Such information sources can range from casual friends to social media messages to specific organizations in the community. In this study, participants were asked to rate **how useful they find particular sources of information on ideas for involvement with young children.**

Fourteen potential sources of information that caregivers rely on or value for learning about options for involvement with young children were identified. Participants were then asked to indicate how useful they assessed each information source to be on a scale of 1 to 5, ranging from “not at all useful” (1) to “extremely useful” (5). Mean scores were computed for each information source. The average participant rating (mean score) for each information source is highlighted in Table 9 (N = 337), with higher scores indicating such sources were found to be more useful or valuable.

**Table 9.** Participant Ratings of Information Source Value on Family Engagement (N = 337)



The findings indicate that participants found many information sources useful but tend to value certain sources more highly than others. The fourteen information sources were organized according to three categories: **(1) Informal Relationship Sources** – family members; friends or parents of a similar-age child; **(2) Technology or Media Sources** – online website; provider-specific apps; social media; direct email or text; and local newspaper or magazine; and **(3) Professional or Community Sources** – pediatrician or other healthcare professional; child care provider or teacher; other community professionals; parenting class/group; NDSU Extension; state agency (DPI; DHHS, etc.); or other source. Any source with a score near to “3” or higher was considered to be at least “moderately useful” by respondents.

The top six most highly valued sources of information were all rated above 3.5 by participants. Four of the six top sources were linked to relationships, either informal or with a community professional, perhaps **indicating the importance of a relationship with a trusted source for family engagement information**. These trusted relationship sources were, in order of perceived usefulness, (1) child care provider or teacher ( $M = 4.05$ ), (2) friend or parent of similar-age child ( $M = 3.76$ ), (3) family member (spouse, parent, etc.) ( $M = 3.75$ ), and (4) pediatrician or other healthcare professional ( $M = 3.68$ ). Additionally, the top two other most valued sources were technology-linked sources, an online website ( $M = 3.95$ ) or social media (Facebook, etc.) ( $M = 3.78$ ), showing also the value that participants place on the convenience of information about this topic.

By category, both Informal Relationship Sources (family members and friends or parents of a similar-age child) were rated highly (above 3.5) and in the top six most useful sources by participants. This pattern underscores the importance that caregivers for young children place on their close personal relationships for information about involvement with young children.

Among technology or media-based sources, the three most highly valued sources were online websites ( $M = 3.95$ ), social media sources such as Facebook or Instagram groups ( $M = 3.78$ ), and direct emails or texts given to caregivers ( $M = 3.46$ ). The first two were ranked among the top six most useful sources of information, indicating that technology-based sources of information delivery and the convenience they offer are perceived as very useful sources by caregivers of young children.

The largest category was Professional or Community Sources, and six of these seven items were rated as “moderately useful” (near 3 or above) or higher by participants. The three most useful sources in this area were identified as: (1) child care provider or teacher ( $M = 4.05$ ; highest rated of all sources); (2) pediatrician or other healthcare professional ( $M = 3.68$ ); and (3) other community professionals (such as a counselor, childcare administrator, etc.) ( $M = 3.43$ ). The generally positive perception of usefulness of a diverse range of professional or community sources suggests the value of collaborative partnerships in early childhood care and education, furnishing caregivers with useful information from a variety of community sources that they might encounter or look to for guidance. All of the other sources listed under “Other” by respondents were community sources, including the WIC program, home visiting program, local library, Healthy Families program, and other options.

# USAGE OF INFORMATION SOURCES ON CHILD DEVELOPMENT OR FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

A second question regarding how caregivers interact with information sources on involvement with young children relates to their **usage** of varied information sources. What sources do they typically turn to or rely on when seeking information about a child's growth and development or how to become involved in their early care and education? For the study, participants were asked to identify which sources they would plan to use or have already used in seeking information on child development or involvement in a young child's care and education.

Sixteen potential information sources that caregivers might use to learn more about child development or family engagement were identified. Parents and caregivers were asked to indicate which information sources they would use or have already used in their efforts, simply indicating a "no" or "yes" response for each source. Frequency scores were created for each information source (how frequently the source was utilized by participants). The frequency of usage for each information source (percentage) is illustrated in Table 10, with a higher percentage score indicating greater usage (or likely usage) by caregivers of young children. Information sources with a percentage score from 0-25% might be considered as "limited" usage, those with scores from 26-50% might be considered as "moderate" usage, and those items with percentage scores of 51% or higher might be considered as "high" exposure and usage.

Again, in this case, the results show that caregivers use a variety of information sources but they tend to access or use particular sources more often others. Understanding this context can help decision makers prioritize who they collaborate with to deliver information to families and how they deliver such information so that it can reach caregivers of young children.

The sixteen information sources were again organized according to three categories: **(1) Informal Relationship Sources** – family members; friends or parents of a similar-age child; **(2) Technology or Media Sources** – Internet search; social media; books, magazines or newspapers; podcasts; specific online websites or organizations; and **(3) Professional or Community Sources** – pediatrician or other healthcare professional; child care provider or teacher; other community professionals; local school or school district; Parent and Family Resource Center or parenting class/group; NDSU Extension; state agency (DPI; DHHS, etc.); faith community; or other source. The top six information sources utilized by caregivers of young children in North Dakota are noted in the table with the numbers one through six listed next to those sources.

One item to consider is that it seems likely that parents of young children are using different sources for different kinds of relevant information. For example, it may be that a child's mother is most likely to turn to a pediatrician or nurse for some information on a toddler's development while making a

well-child visit. In contrast, the same parent may do an Internet search or talk to a friend of a similar-age child when seeking out information on local play group options for a child. It is typically not the case that caregivers limit themselves to just one primary source of information.

**Table 10:** Information Source Usage by Caregivers of 0-6 Years Children (N = 337)

Category and Response Options	Percentage (%)
<b>Informal Relationship Sources</b>	
Family members (spouse, parent, sibling, etc.) - <b>#5</b>	54.3% (N = 183)
Friends; parents of similar-age child - <b>#3</b>	57.6% (N = 194)
<b>Technology or Media Sources</b>	
Internet search (Google, ChatGPT, etc.) - <b>#4</b>	57.6% (N = 194)
Social media (pages, groups, etc.) - <b>#6</b>	45.4% (N = 153)
Books, magazines, newspapers	17.5% (N = 59)
Podcasts, etc.	14.8% (N = 50)
Specific online websites or organizations	12.5% (N = 42)
<b>Professional or Community Sources</b>	
Pediatrician or other healthcare professional (OB, nurse, etc.) - <b>#1</b>	70.3% (N = 237)
Child care provider or early childhood teacher (preschool, Head Start, etc.) - <b>#2</b>	65.9% (N = 222)
Other community professional (counselor, etc.)	35.3% (N = 119)
Local school or school district	26.1% (N = 88)
Parent and Family Resource Center in my area; Parenting class or group, etc.	23.7% (N = 80)
ND State Agency (DPI, Health and Human Services, etc.)	22.0% (N = 74)
NDSU Extension	19.9% (N = 67)
Faith community (parent support, etc.)	18.1% (N = 61)
Other source (please specify)	2.7% (N = 9)

The top six most frequently used sources of information were all utilized by 45% or more of the study participants. As with the value given to information sources on the previous question, four of the six top sources were linked to relationships, either informal or with a community professional, again **indicating the importance of a relationship with a trusted source for family**



**engagement information.** These relationship sources were, in order of frequent usage, (1) pediatrician or other healthcare professional (70.3%), (2) child care provider or early childhood teacher (65.9%), (3) friend or parent of similar-age child (57.6%), and (4) family member (spouse, parent, etc.) (54.3%). The other top two most commonly used sources were technology-linked sources, which were Internet search (57.6%) or social media exposure (Facebook group, etc.) (45.5%). Technology thus provides another effective mechanism for reaching parents and caregivers with information on child development or family engagement.

By category, both Informal Relationship Sources (family members and friends or parents of a similar-age child) were utilized with “High” frequency (above 51%) and in the top six most used sources by participants. As noted already, this pattern highlights the tendency for caregivers to seek and gain information on child development or family engagement from their network of close personal relationships.

With regard to technology or media-based sources, two of the most highly used sources were Internet search (such as using Google search, ChatGPT, etc.) (57.6%) and exposure via social media sources such as Facebook pages or Instagram groups (45.4%). Thus, one of these sources was used with “High” frequency and the second showed “Moderate” frequency of use. The other three items in this category each showed “Limited” usage, referring to sources such as podcasts (14.8%) or specific online organizations (12.5%). This pattern of usage demonstrates that caregivers most frequently are likely to do a direct Internet search or access information from social media groups, while their usage of other technology-based sources tends to be more occasional and limited. It should be noted that this question asked participants how they sought or used sources of information, and that it did not include possible information sources such as direct mailed information, direct emails or texts, or provider-used apps that facilitate information and involvement in early childhood contexts.

The largest category included nine possible Professional or Community Sources. Two of these nine items were used with “High” frequency (51% or higher), two of them were used with “Moderate” frequency, and the remaining five sources were used with “Limited” frequency (25% or lower). The two most commonly accessed sources in this category were identified as: (1) pediatrician or other healthcare professional (70.3%; most used of all sources); and (2) child care provider or early childhood teacher (65.9%; second most used of all sources). When considering who to partner with in reaching families of young children, these two sources clearly lead the way in showing high usage and potential reach for sharing information.

Among seven other community or professional sources, the next two most commonly used information sources at the “Moderate” usage level were other community professionals (counselor, etc.; 35.3%) and the local school or school district (26.1%). Again, these are both used with some frequency by a third to half of respondents. The remaining four sources of information that showed some frequency of usage (“Limited”) were all accessed by a fifth to a quarter of respondents (20-

25%), indicating these are also useful avenues of information for many caregivers of young children. These sources included regional Parent and Family Resource Centers in North Dakota (23.7%), state agencies such as ND DPI or ND DHHS (22%), NDSU Extension (19.9%), and faith communities (18.1%).

A small percentage (2.7%) indicated access of "Other" sources. Among "Other" sources listed for information (listed from one to three times), those identified were either other in-state programs for families (WIC program, Early Intervention, Healthy Families, etc.), early childhood-specific resources in North Dakota (Child Care Aware, Growing Futures, etc.), or other national-level resources (NAEYC, Zero to Three, WebMD, etc.).

## KEY TOPICS OF INTEREST – FAMILY ENGAGEMENT WITH CHILDREN 0-6 YEARS

There are a variety of topics that may be of interest to caregivers of young children ages 0 to 6, particularly in regard to learning or family engagement with children during these early childhood years. Participants in this project were asked an open-ended question that encouraged them to list topics of interest to them, as follows: “What topics are you interested in learning more about related to parent and family engagement with children ages 0 to 6?”

In response to this question, 426 “topical comments” were offered by the parents and caregivers involved in the project study. These comments were categorized and analyzed for selected key topics of interest that were identified by those who had responded to the question. The number of comments for each specific key topic of interest was added together and then divided by the total number of comments ( $N = 426$ ) to calculate the percentage of comments for each topical category. The key topics of interest related to family engagement with young children are identified below in Table 11 along with how common it was (percentage of comments) for that topic to be listed.

**Table 11: Key Topics of Interest – Family Engagement with 0-6 Years Children ( $N = 426$ )**

Topic Categories	Percentage (%)
Information on local events or activities for kids ages 0-6	17.8%
Play group options (indoor/outdoor; age appropriate; same age or issues; rural; seasonal; etc.)	14.5%
Early learning strategies and activities for young children	13.6%
Parent education classes, support, or connections	11%
Child development information (milestones, skills, special needs, etc.)	10.6%
Managing challenging child behaviors and emotions	5.6%
Child care program strategies and resources for providers	5.4%
Child development information – Other topics	4.7%
Parenting and caregiving topics – Other	4.5%
List of community resources for children, families	3.5%
Child – School-related resources and topics	3.3%
Child mental health, services and supports	2.3%
Other activity options for young children	2.1%

Among these key topics of interest related to family engagement, the top five themes that emerged make up two-thirds (67.5%) of the total comments that were contributed. Thus, these topical themes deserve particular attention. The top three categories ***all focused on caregiver interest in activity-based options and opportunities for engaging young children ages 0-6 in learning and interaction***. Specifically, these topical categories were as follows:

- 1) **Information on Local Events or Activities for Kids Ages 0-6** (17.8%) – Nearly one out of five comments focused on this topic. Participants expressed interest in finding a variety of inexpensive or free activity options in local communities for their young children, such as library story times, STEM learning opportunities, or local classes or camps for kids. In addition to low-cost options, participants also emphasized interest in child-friendly activity options for low-income and rural situations.
- 2) **Play Group Options** (14.5%) – Participants also registered substantial interest specifically in play group options for young children ages 0-6. This was the second most common category of interest, with caregivers noting an interest in play group options that met particular needs, such as indoor and outdoor play group options, seasonal options (such as winter), options for same-age or similar-issue (child with autism, etc.) groups, or rural options.
- 3) **Early Learning Strategies and Activities for Young Children** (13.6%) – Participants noted high interest in developing knowledge of interactive activities and learning strategies for engaging young children and helping them learn and grow. Specific options noted were promotion of play activities, reading, indoor and outdoor learning activities, arts activities, educational games, and interactions with other children.

Combined, these three topical categories made up nearly half (45.9%) of the comments contributed by participants when encouraged to share key topics of interest on family engagement.

The next three most common categories comprised another quarter (27.2%) of the comments shared by participants, and these three topical categories ***focused on understanding child development and learning effective caregiving strategies with young children as well as parental support***. Among these, the fourth most common theme was interest in parent education classes, support groups or connection (11%). For example, parents and caregivers particularly noted an interest in parent support or connection groups that allowed them to connect on shared issues of concern with children, such as a child with a particular special needs diagnosis, NICU experience, or other contexts. Participants were further interested in online parent education resources or classes, classes they could do together with young children, and fellowship with other parents (such as “Mommy and Me” groups). The fifth most common topic (10.6%) was interest in child development information, with the most noted issues being developmental skills, developmental stages and milestones, early cognitive and academic skills (early literacy, school readiness, etc.), social development and interactions, and special needs (autism; resources and support; etc.). Next,

the sixth most common topic of interest was managing challenging child behaviors and emotions, ranging from understanding discipline or behavior modification to ADHD and other concerns (5.6%).

The remaining seven categories that emerged among topics of interest together totaled another quarter (25.8%) of all comments shared. While these topics were noted with much less frequency, they still furnish an important listing of topics that caregivers value and would like to learn about if possible. Each one is listed below by bullet point with more specific details of interest noted by participants:

- Child Care Program Strategies and Resources for Providers (5.4%) – Of particular interest to care providers, these participants encouraged information on parent involvement ideas and how to elevate parent attendance at activities. Related topics of interest were barriers to parent involvement in child care settings, field trip options and ideas, connections with other child care professionals, and professional development for care providers (having difficult conversations, engaging diverse families, etc.).
- Child Development Information – Other Topics (4.7%) – Other topics related to child development that participants identified as being of interest were eating habits and nutrition needs of children, technology/media and young children (screen time guidelines, selecting content, “tablet kids,” etc.), sleep and children, and health and safety information.
- Parenting and Caregiving Information – Other Topics (4.5%) – Participants also listed other parenting and caregiving topics of interest to them, including communication with young children, building secure attachment, parenting styles, coparenting strategies, work-life balance and other topics.
- List of Community Resources for Children/Families (3.5%) – Some participants expressed interest in having a listing of community resources available for families, to address topics such as child care options, inclusive playgrounds, housing, early intervention and other programs.
- Child – School-Related Topics (3.3%) – These topics related to children and school, such as building relationships between parents and educators, preschool options, child care availability, and homeschooling co-ops or groups.
- Child Mental Health – Services and Supports (2.3%) – Participant comments related to this theme noted the value of information on child mental health and related services or supports, such as therapy options or programs for kids with sensory needs.
- Other Activity Options for Young Children (2.1%) – Finally, a number of comments noted the value of information on other child activity options, such as gymnastics, swimming, dance or other options in the community.

## FAMILY ENGAGEMENT PREFERENCES

In this survey, parents and providers were asked to indicate what they perceived to be the best ways to engage and involve parents in a child’s development and learning in early care and education contexts. This question closely mirrored a similar question that was asked in the 2019 survey in North Dakota on family engagement in early childhood settings. So, in the results presented here we have compared both the 2019 and 2024 results for this question, as well as the responses from both parents and early childhood professionals.

Participants were asked to indicate their perceptions of optimal ways to engage parents relative to their child’s early care and education via a question with multiple response options. Participants selected each option they felt was useful. The frequency of responses related to each family engagement option is reported in the table below (*N* = Variable). The columns furnish a comparison of parents of 0-6 children and early childhood professionals, as well as data between 2019 and 2024.

**Table 12: Optimal Family Engagement Options for Parents of 0-6 Years Children (*N* = Variable)**

<b>Response Options</b>	<b>Parents of 0-6 Child (%)</b>	<b>ECE Providers (%)</b>	<b>2019 Data (%)</b>	<b>2024 Data (%)</b>
Family events (play groups, family nights, community events)	81.8% ( <i>N</i> = 220)	79.3% ( <i>N</i> = 146)	76%	81.9% ( <i>N</i> = 276)
Technology-based engagement options (texting, email, apps, podcasts, online support groups, etc.)	65.4% ( <i>N</i> = 176)	65.8% ( <i>N</i> = 121)	65.7%	65.6% ( <i>N</i> = 221)
Personal contact (home visits, parent conferences, etc.)	51.7% ( <i>N</i> = 139)	64.7% ( <i>N</i> = 119)	42.3%	54.3% ( <i>N</i> = 183)
Parent education classes	40.5% ( <i>N</i> = 109)	48.4% ( <i>N</i> = 89)	26.3%	43.9% ( <i>N</i> = 148)
Parent support group, monthly parent meeting, etc.	41.3% ( <i>N</i> = 111)	42.9% ( <i>N</i> = 79)	NA	42.1% ( <i>N</i> = 142)
Printed information (newsletters, mailouts, magazines, etc.)	35.3% ( <i>N</i> = 95)	37.5% ( <i>N</i> = 69)	48%	35.6% ( <i>N</i> = 120)
Other (please specify)	2.2% ( <i>N</i> = 6)	2.7% ( <i>N</i> = 5)	0.6%	2.1% ( <i>N</i> = 7)

These results indicate that among a variety of potential family engagement options, parents of children during the period of 0 to 6 years of age and early childhood providers show clear preferences for particular types of activity. The **most highly rated or optimal option was involvement in “family events,” which can range from play groups to family nights organized by a preschool or other early childhood program (81.9%).**

Typically, such events are preferred when they are offered at a convenient time, have a limited cost and furnish interaction opportunities with children. The overall preference for this option in engaging families increased from 76% in 2019 to 82% in 2024 (increase of 6%). Also, this was the option rated most highly by both parents of 0-6 children and ECE providers.

**The next most highly rated option consisted of technology-based options for contact or involvement, such as texting, email contact, provider apps or online support groups (65.6%).** This option rated almost exactly the same in 2024 as in 2019 (65.7% then), and both parents and ECE providers rated it very similarly.

**The third -rated option highlighted by just over half (54.3%) of participants was personal contact with parents through home visits, parent-teacher conferences or brief meetings at child drop-off or pick-up time.** Two patterns were noticeable here. First, the preference for this option increased substantially from 2019 (42.3%) to 2024 (54.3%), perhaps indicating increased awareness and desire for personal contact since this possibility was very diminished during the COVID-19 pandemic (2020-2022). Also, there was a fairly substantial difference between ECE professionals and parents on this item, with parents rating it somewhat lower (51.7%) than ECE professionals (64.7%) as a preferred engagement option.

Just over two-fifths of participants identified either parent education classes (43.9%) or parent support groups/meetings (42.1%) as optimal methods for engaging parents and caregivers of young children. The “parent education” option showed a significant increase from 2019 (26.3%) to 2024 (43.9%), and was especially preferred as an option by ECE professionals (48.4%). The “parent support group” option was a new category for this survey, and was rated similarly to parent education classes as an engagement option by both parents and ECE professionals.

Finally, just over a third of participants (35.6%) indicated that they appreciated receiving printed information such as newsletters or mailouts as a form of engagement. This option declined from 2019 (48%) to 2024 (35.6%), perhaps indicating that the use of technology for engagement has outpaced this traditional option for parent engagement. Again, both parents of 0-6 children and ECE professionals rated this option very similarly.



# AWARENESS AND INVOLVEMENT IN FAMILY ENGAGEMENT OPTIONS

The landscape of opportunities for family engagement is broad and varied as families are raising young children. While some early childhood programs are more well-known than others, for example, in the “mixed delivery system” that exists in early childhood there are many providers and pathways for families with young children to be engaged. It can be useful to survey the landscape of family engagement options and assess what options are more familiar to families and also what options tend to receive more involvement.

In this project, participants were asked about nineteen possible family engagement options and to indicate: 1) What options or opportunities for engaging with young children ages 0-6 they were aware of (have heard about); 2) What options or opportunities for engaging with young children ages 0-6 they have participated in with their child(ren). Participants simply furnished a “yes” or “no” answer in response to each family engagement option.

The frequency of responses related to each family engagement option is reported in Table 13 below (N = 337). The columns furnish a comparison of caregiver responses related to their *awareness of family engagement options* versus their *involvement in family engagement options*.

In the 2019 family engagement survey in North Dakota, “lack of awareness” regarding family engagement opportunities was cited as the most common barrier to family engagement by parents of young children (44%). In the current 2024 survey, the question related to awareness of family engagement options was designed to explore the varying levels of awareness related to family engagement opportunities across the landscape of early childhood. The findings are briefly discussed here (“Other” was not included in this analysis). For ease of discussion, we have designated categories of “Limited” awareness of options (0-30%), “Moderate” awareness of options (30-60%), and “High” awareness of options (60% or higher).

**Table 13: Awareness and Involvement in Family Engagement Options (N = 337)**

<b>Response Options</b>	<b>Awareness of Option Percentage (%)</b>	<b>Involvement in Option Percentage (%)</b>
Family-based or center-based child care/preschool	71.2%	49%
Early Head Start or Head Start	81.6%	27%
Preschool programs	77.2%	38.6%
Public or private schools (Elementary)	68.8%	32.6%
Counseling centers	39.2%	14.2%
Early intervention services	65.3%	30%
Special Education – support programs or services	50.1%	14.2%
Home visiting programs (Public Health, etc.)	48.7%	15.4%
Hospital or healthcare systems	41.2%	21.7%
Pregnancy and parenthood support services	47.8%	16%
Public library	70.3%	46%
Local art centers, museums, zoos	53.4%	44.2%
Fitness or recreation centers, programs	44.2%	26.4%
City park and recreation programs	59.6%	47.5%
Music education programs (Music Makers, etc.)	30.9%	9.8%
Children’s drama or theater groups	26.4%	5.9%
Faith-linked parent groups (church, Mothers of Preschoolers, etc.)	32.6%	18.1%
Homeschooling groups	26.1%	3.6%
Other (please specify)	0.6%	3%

Relative to awareness, just four of the 18 options available had “limited” awareness by participants based on the responses. Each of these items had been heard about by less than a third of survey respondents. Typically, these family engagement options were more specialized in nature (such as children’s drama or music programs) and therefore less likely to be noticed by a broader spectrum of the population raising young children. Also, these options have significant opportunity to increase awareness of their family engagement offerings to children and families. The limited awareness options were homeschooling groups (26.1%), children’s drama or theater groups (26.4%), music education programs (30.9%) and faith-linked parent groups such as Mothers of Preschoolers (32.6%).

There were seven family engagement options that fell into the category of “Moderate” awareness among participants. Again, these family engagement options generally had between 30-35% and 60% of respondents who were aware of the opportunity. Generally, between a third and two-thirds of participants were aware of these family engagement options. These options were either targeted toward the broader public but available to families with young children or were more specialized programs for families with young children that might have certain needs. The options in order of awareness (from lower to higher awareness) were counseling centers (39.2%), hospital or healthcare systems (41.2%), fitness or recreation centers and programs (44.2%), pregnancy and parenthood support services (47.8%), home visiting programs (48.7%), Special Education support programs or services (50.1%), and local community options (art centers, museums, zoos, etc.) (53.4%).

Seven family engagement options were identified as having a “High” level of awareness among caregivers for young children. Each of these options had been heard about by at least 60% or more of the caregivers. These options typically had one of two characteristics, which were that the option was a common community resource for all families or that the option was specifically focused on care and education for young children. Due to the high awareness of these options, perhaps they can serve well as starting points for engagement and also be consistent partners in community efforts to facilitate family engagement. This final set of options consisted of the following items: city parks and recreation programs (59.6%), Early Intervention services (65.3%), public or private elementary schools (68.8%), public library (70.35), family-based or center-based child care (71.2%), preschool programs (77.2%), and Head Start/Early Head Start (81.6%).

It should be noted that the gap between awareness and involvement for each of the varied family engagement options likely does not indicate any particular concern. For example, some of the options may be available only to families with children that meet certain criteria or have particular needs (e.g., Head Start, early intervention services). Others may provide a context for involvement that reaches families with more focused priorities in that area (e.g., homeschooling groups, music education). The available information simply provides a useful overview of how much caregivers know about family engagement options and current patterns of involvement with varied options for children.

Though involvement in family engagement options is influenced by multiple factors, including timing, availability, cost and distance, this menu of options highlights the varied settings in which families with young children in North Dakota are being engaged. To facilitate ease of exploration, the “Involvement” items have been categorized into “Limited” involvement with options (0-15%), “Moderate” involvement with options (15-30%), and “High” involvement with options (30% or higher).

In the “Limited” engagement category, there were six of the family engagement options that showed somewhat limited use by families. In these settings, again it was the case that the family

engagement options were more specialized in nature (e.g., drama or music programs, counseling centers) and therefore more likely to be of value to a smaller segment of the early childhood population in the state. The six options that had more limited involvement by families were “Other” (3%), homeschooling groups (3.6%), children’s drama or theater groups (5.9%), music education programs (9.8%), counseling centers and Special Education support programs (both at 14.2%).

There were six family engagement options that showed a “Moderate” level of involvement by caregivers with young children. These options, in order from lower to higher levels of involvement, were: home visiting programs (15.4%), pregnancy and parenthood support services (16%), faith-linked parent groups (18.1%), hospital or healthcare systems (21.7%), fitness or recreation centers and programs (26.4%), and Early Head Start/Head Start (27%). These options do not seem to share a particular characteristic beyond the recognition that each tends to serve families with young children at certain time points related to need (pregnancy support, etc.), over time based on need (Head Start), or by caregiver choice (fitness centers and programs). However, this pattern does reinforce the value of having a “mixed delivery system” of early childhood care and education to support the diverse and changing needs and preferences of families raising young children.

The most highly used family engagement options were each cited as a setting for involvement by between a third and half of the participants. So, it should be noted that no single option was used by greater than half of the participants, again emphasizing the importance of a broad and diverse set of family engagement options to meet family needs and preferences. However, these options do seem to furnish the most common and currently used settings for family engagement in reaching caregivers with young children. There were seven family engagement options that showed “High” usage (30% or more) and were as follows: Early Intervention services (30%); public or private elementary schools (32.6%); preschool programs (38.6%); local art centers, museums, zoos (community options; 44.2%); public library (46%); city park and recreation programs (47.5%); and family-based or center-based child care (49%).

Three of these options are key elements of a mixed delivery system and serve a broad range of families across many communities with a consistent focus on early childhood. These options include Early Intervention services, preschool programs and family-based or center-based child care programs. In a sense, these are key “anchor points” for reaching families with young children and engaging them in learning and activities. However, perhaps what should be highlighted further among these high-usage family engagement options are the four options that tend to serve the broader public but also may engage in particular outreach or programming efforts toward young children. Three of the four most highly used family engagement options fit this pattern, which include local community resources like art centers, museums and zoos, public libraries, and city park and recreation programs. All of these settings offer activity-based approaches to engaging with young children, which seems to be a major preference for those seeking family engagement opportunities. Exploration regarding how to partner with these options and leverage collaborative efforts to reach and engage families with young children seems important for improving family engagement.

# OPPORTUNITIES FOR FAMILY ENGAGEMENT WITH CHILDREN 0-6 YEARS

Opportunities for family engagement with young children ages 0-6 can occur in a variety of formats and approaches. Participants in the family engagement study were asked an open-ended question that allowed them to identify family engagement opportunities they have encountered in North Dakota. The question was as follows: “In your child’s early care and education settings (child care, preschool, etc.), what opportunities for family engagement have been provided?”

Responses to this question were shared by 269 participants in the study, which represents four out of five participants (79.8%). The comments shared were placed in thematic categories and analyzed to assess the primary opportunities for family engagement that were identified by the participants responding to the question. The number of comments for each identified engagement opportunity was added together and then divided by the total number of participant responses ( $N = 269$ ) to calculate the percentage of comments for each thematic category. The primary opportunities for family engagement offered in early childhood settings in the state are highlighted below as well as how common it was for each of the options (percentage of comments) to be listed by participants. The primary themes related to family engagement opportunities are outlined in Table 14.

**Table 14: Common Family Engagement Opportunities Offered to Caregivers ( $N = 269$ )**

<b>Family Engagement Opportunity – Categories</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
Family events, celebrations or workshops (once a month, etc.)	53.5% ( $N = 144$ )
Parent-child interaction activities (in-class, field trips, etc.)	18.6% ( $N = 50$ )
Parent-teacher conferences or other in-person contacts	16.4% ( $N = 44$ )
Usage of electronic platforms or apps for engagement	13% ( $N = 35$ )
Usage of printed communication tools, updates (provision of newsletter, calendar, etc.)	10.4% ( $N = 28$ )
No engagement opportunities offered	9.7% ( $N = 26$ )
Children not involved or focused on at-home situation for engagement	7.8% ( $N = 21$ )
Child care or preschool program activities	6.7% ( $N = 18$ )

**Table 14 continued**

<b>Family Engagement Opportunity – Categories</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
Monthly parent support or networking meetings (MOPS, etc.)	5.9% (N = 16)
Classroom or school volunteer opportunities	5.6% (N = 15)
Early childhood program-linked homework or at-home activities	5.6% (N = 15)
Engagement in community settings (library, music education, etc.)	4.8% (N = 13)
Parent orientation or advisory meeting (policy council, etc.)	4.4% (N = 12)
Play groups	3% (N = 8)
Engagement in community or learning services (speech therapy, OT, etc.)	2.6% (N = 7)

Among different family engagement opportunities that might be offered, **by far the most heavily noted opportunity by participants was the provision of special family events, celebrations or workshops in early childhood settings.** This option type was highlighted by more respondents (53.5%) than the next three options combined and was the only opportunity that was noted by over half of the caregivers. Such special events might take the form of monthly parent or family nights, cultural or holiday celebrations, parent-child school activities, or workshops for parents and caregivers. Analyzing the 144 responses to this question, the most common engagement patterns in this thematic category were:

- **Family Day or Family Night Event** (45.8% of comments in this category) – Holding regular, focused “special events” for families was perhaps the most-used family engagement option in this category. Such events were typically held at a regular time (Thursday or Friday night, etc.), focused on a specific activity, and included interactive elements (games, etc.) and sometimes a snack or meal. Specific examples mentioned were monthly parent-child engagement nights (cooking together, etc.); family game nights or family fun nights; public health or safety fairs; and family movie or bingo nights. Sample comments include:
  - “Family afternoons or nights with activities and snacks.”
  - “Family Fun Night – dinner followed by an activity.”
  - “Vaccination clinic and public health fair.”

- **Sharing Snack or Meal Time** (43.1% of comments in this category) – Food and snacks often provide a simple, engaging way to connect with parents or caregivers and bring children, parents and partners together. Specific strategies and activities that were most mentioned were parent-focused snack times (Muffins for Moms; Donuts with Dads; Pancakes for Papas; Men and Muffins; etc.); birthday or holiday snack times with caregivers (Pumpkin Pie Social; Valentine’s Day snacks; etc.); family picnics; and parent or caregiver breakfast or lunch sessions (Breakfast Buddies; etc.). Other examples included ice cream socials or having a food truck come to a child care program. Sample comments include:

  - “Our child care does family nights quarterly throughout the year, such as a summer grill and potluck night.”
  - “Our preschool will do special breakfasts with parents throughout the year; they have also hosted luaus and fun things on Friday night for the whole family to attend.”
- **Holiday Happenings** (21.5% of comments in this category) – Another major pattern in this category included engagement centered around holiday or cultural/community celebrations. In this pattern, programs engaged families through activities linked to common holidays, such as: parades on American Independence Day or with a community celebration; trick or treat or pumpkin patch outings at Halloween; Mother’s or Father’s Day cards and/or activities; holiday celebrations with a program and/or meal (Thanksgiving; etc.); or other cultural celebrations (Kwanzaa, Cinco de Mayo, etc.).
- **Beginning or End-of-Year Orientation, Celebrations** (16% of comments in this category) – Many early childhood settings recognize that natural engagement opportunities with families occur at the beginning or end of a school year experience. Even though young children are in an early childhood context, which varies significantly from an elementary school experience, children and families can benefit from both “beginning” and “ending” transition experiences in a program. Thus, multiple examples were noted of “beginning” events such as a program open house, back-to-school orientation day or developmental screenings to start a program experience. Also, additional “ending” transition experiences that engaged families were preschool or end-of-year “graduation” or celebration events that might include a concert, art fair, or other program.
- **Parent Training Opportunities** (13.9% of comments in this category) – The next major pattern in this category centered on providing parent/caregiver learning opportunities, specifically parenting classes or workshops. Different settings in early childhood provided such learning opportunities, ranging from regional Parent and Family Resource Centers to local hospitals. Sample comments include:

  - “Free classes such as Love and Logic, CPR, First Aid, Nurtured Heart Approach, Baby Signs, etc.” (example of Parent and Family Resource Center classes).



– “Hospital had a car seat class, labor and delivery instruction, and an infant massage class.”

- **Other Family Engagement Events** – Other examples shared in this category that did not easily fit into one of the identified major themes included activities such as “spirit week” (child dress-up activities), fundraising events, before or after-school events, field trips or library visits, and other engagement activities. Respondents mentioned the value in having consistent opportunities such as a monthly event or a regular after-program option for engagement.

These varied options highlight the different engagement strategies that are most commonly used when connecting with families through family-focused events or activities.

The next major engagement pattern that was described by participants ***focused on invitations or opportunities for caregiver involvement through parent-child interaction activities in a program-linked setting*** (18.6%). In this context, early childhood settings or programs extended the invitation for caregivers to connect and be involved with their child(ren) and/or the program by participating in existing or planned activities at the program site or with program support. Such options varied but the consistent characteristics included: a direct invitation to parents/caregivers; a planned, interactive activity with children; and involvement in the program setting. Activities described in this context included a monthly parent-child classroom activity, a shared parent/child meal (lunch, etc.), field trips, classroom tours, class observations, playground time, and “project time” with caregivers and kids (coloring time, etc.). Sample comments include:

- “We do monthly “show and share” opportunities – parents bring in a new sibling, pet, etc.”
- “Being able to come to your child’s class and spend the morning with them and observing the class!”
- “We are able to go to my child’s class and eat lunch with them or read stories to them.”

Where such engagement is possible, caregivers can perhaps take time during a day to both connect with a child and engage more intentionally with the early childhood setting that supports their child.

The third most common family engagement opportunity mentioned by participants ***focused on engagement through regular in-person contacts via parent-teacher conferences or other strategies*** (16.4%). The unique dimensions of this family engagement strategy were that the opportunity was planned, occurred on a regular basis and featured in-person communication between providers and parents or caregivers. Parent-teacher conferences were the most-mentioned engagement approach within this theme and typically consisted of regularly scheduled meetings (3-6 times a year) where early childhood providers communicated with caregivers and discussed a child’s progress, strengths and opportunities for growth. Other mechanisms following this pattern also included regular home visits or a regular check-in system at child drop-off or pick-up time within a program. Such in-person contacts allowed for a routine check-in, enhanced communication and customization of care and support for a child.

The fourth most-cited engagement strategy noted by participants ***focused on usage of electronic platforms or specific apps for family engagement*** (13%). Digital apps that can be downloaded on a cell phone or other electronic device were frequently used to provide regular updates on children’s activities, pictures, and information or reminders about upcoming events or available resources. There are multiple mobile apps developed specifically for use to facilitate engagement with caregivers in early childhood settings, as well as other technology-based approaches. The most common forms of digital engagement included usage of the BrightWheel / ProCare app (40% of comments); usage of Facebook groups or other social media (23% of comments); and text messaging (17% of comments). Other apps mentioned were ReadyRosie, Tadpoles app, DoJo, Remind, or other options.

Among engagement approaches, the fifth most-mentioned option by caregivers ***focused on usage of printed or other communication tools such as newsletters or monthly calendars to share information with families*** (10.4%). Parents and providers noted the value of regular communication mechanisms for keeping families informed about classroom activities, upcoming events, and/or child progress. Sometimes such communication mechanisms occur as daily reports via email while other tools include usage of newsletters, monthly calendars, flyers, or resource lists to inform and engage parents. One provider noted, “As a teacher, I send out a monthly calendar with activities that parents can do with their children.”

Among fifteen family engagement opportunity types that emerged from analyzing this topic, the aforementioned themes represent the top five approaches emphasized by participants in their comments. The remaining themes might be classified as “minor” and will be discussed more briefly.

Two related themes that were mentioned by a small minority of respondents perhaps fit here prior to exploration of other minor themes. One theme mentioned with some frequency (9.7% of participant comments) simply noted that no engagement opportunities had been pursued specifically for parents’ interaction or involvement. Investigating this theme more closely, a variety of reasons for the “no engagement” theme were offered, including that parents were too busy, children were too young right now, families were new to an area, or an early childhood program was just starting up or simply didn’t really offer options. Additionally, 7.8% of participants indicated that children in the family were either not involved due to preferences for at-home engagement (home schooling, no preschool, etc.), or children were in home-based child care or child care with relatives (grandparent, etc.) which offered “not many opportunities for family engagement.” Caregivers referencing this context made comments such as “I don’t expect the provider to offer family engagement activities” or “we utilize a home-based day care in a rural community, so very little engagement.” While these two themes may represent a smaller portion of families with young children, they highlight the variability in local contexts for families and the resulting need to recognize a spectrum of options and preferences related to family engagement.

There were eight additional themes regarding family engagement opportunities that emerged from the analysis of participant comments on this topic. Each theme is briefly discussed here as additional examples of family engagement provided in early childhood contexts:

- Child Care or Preschool Program Activities (6.7%) – This theme referenced caregiver engagement in planned activities in a child care or preschool setting, such as Head Start. For example, one parent noted: “Being invited to be involved during activities or lunch by Head Start. Head Start is amazing in this area. They provide tons of information on events and opportunities for engagement.”
- Monthly Parent Support or Networking Meetings (MOPS, etc.) (5.9%) – Some families benefit through engagement with regular parent support groups or networking efforts, often held monthly. For example, the Mothers of Preschoolers program engages parents through a monthly faith-linked group in communities. One caregiver stated: “The daycare regularly organizes events where parents can join in, share their experiences, and discuss common challenges in parenting. It’s a great way for us to stay involved in her early development.”
- Classroom or School Volunteer Opportunities (5.6%) – Some early childhood settings extend regular opportunities for caregivers to assist in the classroom or school. Such options might include helping with activities, reading to children, supporting special events, or being a classroom helper or lunch room assistant.
- Early Childhood Program-linked Homework or At-home Activities (5.6%) – Some early childhood programs facilitate engagement by providing “homework” or at-home activities that connect children and parents back to the program or classroom. Similarly, others facilitate at-home activities designed to foster learning and development. For example, multiple participants mentioned Waterford UpStart, an in-home, early education option for 4-year olds, with one person recounting: “The state-funded Waterford early education system allowed for joint effort of caregivers and parents to get children ready for kindergarten.”
- Engagement in Community Settings (library, music education, etc.) (4.8%) – Some families expressed their involvement in a range of community-based options for families with children. Examples cited of engagement in community settings included music education (“concerts for kids”), library story hour, sports lessons or clubs, nonprofit organizations (Jaycees), 4-H programs, and faith settings (Sunday School, etc.).
- Parent Orientation or Advisory Meeting (policy council, etc.) (4.4%) – Some early childhood settings offer more formalized opportunities for parent engagement that were mentioned, such as having an annual Parents Meeting (orientation to program, etc.) or involvement in a regular Parent Advisory Meeting or council.

- Play Groups (3%) – Some participants highlighted their engagement through play groups or “discovery groups,” such as through Anne Carlsen early intervention supports. One provider explained: “I have provided play dates, meeting areas where we can sit and engage while watching the kids play.” Families note the value of play group opportunities where children can engage with children of similar ages or abilities.
- Engagement in Community or Learning Services (speech therapy, OT, etc.) (2.6%) – A final type of opportunity for family engagement mentioned was engagement in community-based (counseling, etc.) or early learning services (speech therapy, early intervention, etc.). Such formalized services and supports play an important role in engagement for families with children who have specific or specialized needs.

# IMPROVING OR ENHANCING OPPORTUNITIES FOR FAMILY ENGAGEMENT WITH CHILDREN 0-6 YEARS

Caregivers and care providers for young children further shared their perspectives on how family engagement opportunities might be improved in early childhood settings. Since existing family engagement opportunities were emphasized in the prior section, it is not surprising that many suggestions given by participants overlapped considerably with family engagement themes already noted. Study participants were asked another open-ended question that furnished the chance to suggest ways to improve family engagement opportunities in North Dakota. The question was asked as follows: “In what areas (if any) do you think opportunities or strategies for family engagement could be improved in your child’s early care and education setting?”

Responses to this question were shared by 194 participants in the study, which represents three out of five study participants (57.6%). Comments and suggestions offered by participants were put into thematic categories and then further analyzed to assess the key suggestions for improving family engagement given in responding to the question. The number of comments for each particular engagement suggestion was added together and then divided by the total number of participant responses ( $N = 194$ ) to calculate the percentage of comments for each thematic category. The main suggestions for improved efforts in family engagement offered in early childhood settings are featured below, in addition to how common each suggestion was among ideas offered by participants (percentage of responses). The main themes related to improving family engagement opportunities are outlined in Table 15.

Analysis of participant suggestions related to improving family engagement resulted in identification of 14 different strategies for improvement. Since about three-fifths of the total sample (57.6%) offered comments and no single category was listed by more than 20% of those who commented, suggestions for improvement should be recognized as being given by a minority of participants. However, the improvement ideas still offer a wide range of possible strategies that might reasonably be pursued for enhancing family engagement in early childhood contexts.

**Table 15: Suggested Improvements for Family Engagement Opportunities (N = 194)**

<b>Family Engagement Opportunity – Categories</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
Provision of parent/family events for engagement	18% (N = 35)
Expanded parent education programs and events	13.9% (N = 27)
Provision of parent-child interaction activities	10.8% (N = 21)
None – Family engagement already done well	10.3% (N = 20)
Usage of communication tools to share information, updates and resources	8.7% (N = 17)
Enhanced parent-educator collaboration	8.2% (N = 16)
Usage of electronic platforms or apps for enhanced engagement	7.7% (N = 15)
Individualized assistance according to child or family needs and circumstances	7.7% (N = 15)
Flexible and convenient scheduling of events or meetings for engagement	7.2% (N = 14)
Innovative approaches to support and improve attendance in family engagement opportunities	5.2% (N = 10)
Increased support for staff training and funding to enhance family engagement	4.1% (N = 8)
Greater variety of activity and engagement options for young children	3.6% (N = 7)
Increased homework or at-home activity options to support learning and development	3.1% (N = 6)
Other useful strategies to support and enhance family engagement (miscellaneous and varied suggestions)	12.4% (N = 24)

Consistent with the theme in the prior section that the most common family engagement option was the provision of family events, ***the most highly suggested improvement for family engagement was greater provision of parent/family events for involvement*** (18% of participants who commented). Parents and providers noted the value of providing events where families can get together multiple times a year to connect with children’s friends and their parents, participate in group activities, or otherwise be engaged. Sample comments from participants include:

- “Family events to bring the parents in and be part of a project, and it also lets the parents get to know each other and the other kids that your child is interacting with in the program. Opens the door for communication between families, and future support group or play dates.”
- “It would be nice to have the preschool help facilitate get-togethers and help families get to know each other and make friends with the kids in their child’s class.”

Such events expand opportunities to connect and engage with other families raising young children, but must be offered often enough that families can still connect if they miss particular events offered.

As noted, the additional strategies put forward for improving family engagement had substantial overlap with previously highlighted mechanisms for family engagement. The remaining 13 categories are briefly mentioned and explained with some sample comments included from participants.

- Expanded Parent Education Programs and Events (13.9%) - Expanding the scope of parent education programs and providing workshops aimed at enhancing skills could prove advantageous for families. The learning and development of a child can be more effectively supported by parents if they are knowledgeable about topics like early literacy strategies, positive discipline tactics, and building strong parent-child relationships. Participants offered a variety of relevant ideas in this category, including the value of parent-centered events or training experiences on child development and parenting techniques, discussion groups, and online options offered at flexible times. Regional Parent and Family Resource Centers and NDSU Extension were mentioned as helpful providers in this category. Further, the value of parent support networks or groups was highlighted as well. Sample comments include:
  - “Regularly scheduled meetings where parents can share their ideas, experiences, and challenges related to parenting. These groups provide a supportive environment where parents can learn from each other and find solutions to common issues faced during the early years.”
  - “Organizing workshops or events on parenting strategies or child development could be beneficial.”
  - “Creating networks where parents can connect with each other for advice, play dates, and mutual support. These networks are invaluable for building a community of shared experiences and solutions.”

- Provision of Parent-Child Interaction Activities (10.8%) – Participants suggested the value of providing brief, focused and interactive parent-child activities in early childhood settings that allow for family engagement. Strategies suggested were inviting caregivers into the classroom, on field trips, or doing family projects. Participants shared these comments:
  - “Short and sweet parent-child interaction opportunities during the day have been very successful. Parents can take a break from work and the children love to see their parents and do an activity together.”
  - “More frequent involvement in the classroom setting with family members, or class field trips to meet family members at a local park or event center for organized activities, etc.”
- None – Family Engagement Already Done Well (10.3%) – While no suggestion is offered here, it is noteworthy that a substantial number of comments simply indicated that no improvements were needed since family engagement efforts were already being done well.
- Usage of Communication Tools to Share Information, Updates and Resources (8.7%) – Re-emphasizing the value of common communication tools for engagement, multiple participants remarked on the helpful contribution of using such tools to share information about local organizations, family events or reliable resources. Such tools can take the form of a monthly newsletter, a flyer or community resource listing, and can be valuable and informative for parents or providers. Sample comments include:
  - “It is always nice to have more community connections. I would love to have one resource that shared all of the opportunities that are available. ”
  - “Community resource list that reaches all providers to help disseminate the information.”
- Enhanced Parent-Educator Collaboration (8.2%) – In this category, respondents suggested enhancing family engagement could be achieved by fortifying the bonds that exist between educators and parents, through cooperative goal-setting and decision-making procedures. A sense of ownership and partnership in their child’s education can be fostered by including parents in curriculum planning, goal-setting meetings, or parent advisory committees. Mechanisms for accomplishing this could involve regular parent-teacher meetings or collaborative planning efforts. Sample comments from participants noted:
  - “A more coordinated and collaborative approach . . . would be nice.”
  - “Finding ways to make parents feel as if they are more a part of their child’s development and education, either through being present more often or having more meaningful learning moments and collaboration with providers.”
- Usage of Electronic Platforms or Apps for Enhanced Engagement (7.7%) – Again, emphasizing a common existing strategy, participants suggested implementing or improving the use of apps and digital platforms for more frequent, real-time communication between



teachers and parents. Multiple comments highlighted the desire for frequent, interactive communication on a child's development and experiences. Comments shared by participants included:

- “While these platforms are helpful for sharing updates, having more interactive channels of communication could improve family engagement. Parents and educators may be able to engage more meaningfully if two-way communication is encouraged via forums, discussion boards, or live chat.”
- “I think there needs to be more communication on a regular basis between preschool teachers and parents.”
- Individualized Assistance According to Child or Family Needs and Circumstances (7.7%)
  - Offering assistance that is specific to each family's needs and/or preferences may boost involvement. Participants commented that assisting parents in promoting their child's growth and building stronger connections could be achieved by providing tailored advice, materials, or workshops according to the needs, interests, cultural backgrounds, or parenting philosophies of their families. Specific examples of individualizing support include assistance for parents and children who face language barriers or offering programs that optimize accessibility and inclusivity. Participant comments included:
    - “Helping parents outside of the facility to have a well-prepared, individualized plan.”
    - “Significantly more involvement with parents in learning more about the center and how my child is doing regularly at child care, socially and behaviorally, what friends they have, and their ability to actively participate in events.”
- Flexible and Convenient Scheduling of Events or Meetings for Engagement (7.2%) – Participant comments acknowledged that a useful strategy for improving family engagement is scheduling events and meetings at various times (including evenings and weekends) to accommodate working parents or challenging schedules. Two sample suggestions were:
  - “Creating more flexible opportunities for working parents to participate in activities would enhance overall family involvement.”
  - “Having events at times after working hours to accommodate all families.”
- Innovative Approaches to Support and Improve Attendance in Family Engagement Opportunities (5.2%) – For this suggested improvement, it was primarily early childhood providers who voiced the view that they needed more innovative ideas and approaches to improve attendance for family engagement opportunities. These comments acknowledged that “family engagement is challenging because everyone has such a busy schedule.” Families may also struggle with motivation to be involved at a higher level. Provider comments included:

- “Learn other ways to get families to want to be involved. We have a lot of families who don’t give their time to be involved or don’t care to be involved.”
- “I am not sure. I have tried a get together with families, spent money on food and prizes, and no one showed up.”
- Increased Support for Staff Training and Funding to Enhance Family Engagement (4.1%) – An additional recommendation for improvement centered in further comments by early childhood providers, who expressed a need for more staff training, support and funding to enhance family engagement efforts. Some indicated a need for more money to spend on events or more staff time to engage children and families. One comment stated: “We need better ways to communicate within staff of all opportunities, finding out what works (best practice) with parents in order to get them involved.”
- Greater Variety of Activity and Engagement Options for Young Children (3.6%) – A few comments were shared highlighting the need for an increased range of activity options for some young children, such as those uninterested in sports or living in smaller communities. One comment on this theme shared:
  - “It would be nice to have more activities for younger children in our community, but it’s difficult since it’s so small.”
- Increased Homework or At-home Activity Options to Support Learning and Development (3.1%) – A final theme for improvement focused on increasing the use of handouts, early learning curricula or other tools for caregivers and children to engage in skills learning through at-home activities. This suggestion recognizes that activities in the home can be an extension of the early childhood setting and facilitate engagement.

A final theme was summarized as “Other Useful or Miscellaneous Strategies” related to improving family engagement that didn’t align with a particular category or theme (12.4%). And, of course, this pattern recognizes that there is not a “one-size-fits-all” approach in family engagement that can meet the needs or preferences of all families with young children. Suggested improvements among a variety of ideas given were offering virtual participation options, child engagement options for those with special needs, more classroom volunteer options, and opportunities specifically for fathers. Other suggestions included a greater variety of play group options or creating a sensory gym in a community.

Whatever the strategy, this set of varied strategies and suggestions for improvement offered up by parents and providers in North Dakota furnishes a rich set of possibilities for continuing to strengthen and enhance family engagement in the state.

## BARRIERS TO FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

Participants also were asked to identify barriers that had affected them with regard to engaging in opportunities related to their child's early care and education.

As with other topics, this question closely mirrored a similar question that was asked in the 2019 survey in North Dakota on family engagement in early childhood settings. In the 2019 survey there were nine response options related to this topic, and in 2024 this was expanded to 12 response options based on previous data and additional obstacles that participants identified in their feedback. So, in the results presented here we have compared both the 2019 and 2024 results for this question based on the available data with some new options as well.

Participants selected all options that they felt limited them from being engaged or actively involved in a child's early care and education. The frequency of responses related to each barrier option is reported in the table below ( $N = 337$ ). The columns furnish a comparison of parents and caregivers of children ages 0-6 between 2019 and 2024.

Responses from participants demonstrated that quite a wide variety of barriers may occur that limit family engagement for families with children from 0 to 6 years of age. In all, there were 12 obstacles listed among potential barriers that can limit or affect family engagement in a child's early years. Three additional response options were listed to those used in the 2019 survey and some items were re-worded or clarified based on survey review and previous feedback. Participant responses for each item are highlighted and reflect the percentage of individuals who acknowledged "yes" that an item had been a barrier to their involvement with a child's early care and education.

**Table 16: Barriers to Family Engagement for Parents of 0-6 Years Children (N = 337)**

<b>Response Options</b>	<b>2019 Data (%)</b>	<b>2024 Data (%)</b>
Conflict with work obligations or schedule; limited time due to work	NA	58.8% (N = 198)
Lack of awareness about opportunities or information to be involved	44%	46.6% (N = 157)
Lack of available opportunities for parent and family involvement	16%	41.5% (N = 140)
Lack of or limited child care availability when needed	25.1%	36.2% (N = 122)
Too much cost, not affordable	NA	30.9% (N = 104)
Lack of communication between parents and providers	16%	27.9% (N = 94)
Difficulties due to distance to travel (rural area; time between home and program; etc.)	NA	20.2% (N = 68)
Opportunities not available in my location or setting	6.9%	18.4% (N = 62)
Difficulties due to lack of transportation, travel options limited	4.6%	11.9% (N = 40)
Language barriers to involvement (English not first language, etc.)	0.6%	5.3% (N = 18)
Too many opportunities to be involved	2.9%	5% (N = 17)
Other (please specify)	22.3%	3.3% (N = 11)

The most highly noted barrier in the 2024 survey findings was conflict with work obligations or schedules and/or limited time to pursue engagement due to work, which was cited by 58.8% of participants. This was one of the three new barrier items added to this section of the survey in 2024. With three-fifths of participants indicating this item was a barrier, consideration of family work obligations or schedules should likely be a top priority when planning family engagement opportunities. The next most common barrier was simply lack of awareness of existing engagement opportunities (46.6%), which was just slightly higher in 2024 than the same item in 2019. This pattern suggests that lack of awareness continues to be a consistent obstacle related to family engagement.

The next four obstacles that were most cited were experienced by between a quarter and half of caregivers raising young children. Among these items, the next common barrier to family engagement in 2024 was lack of available opportunities for parent and family involvement (41.5%), which was nearly three times higher than this item was rated in 2019 (16%). It seems likely that the COVID-19 pandemic shut down nearly all family engagement for an extended period and it has taken substantial time for communities and programs to return to a higher level of family engagement efforts, which may be a reason for an increase in the perceived lack of available opportunities for family engagement. Also, this item was re-worded and perhaps added clarity gave participants more recognition that this was a common obstacle.

Next, just over a third (36.2%) of participants noted that lack of or limited child care availability served as a common barrier to family engagement, which was a noticeable increase on this item since 2019 (25.1%). Two further items that ranked closely to each other as barriers to engagement were financial costs being too high or unaffordable (30.9%; a new item) and lack of communication between parents and providers (27.9%). The concern about lack of communication was noted by just 16% of participants in 2019.

Beyond these items, the six other barriers of concern included difficulties due to travel distance (20.2%; a new item), opportunities not being available in a specific location (18.4%; 6.9% in 2019), difficulties due to lack of transportation (11.9%; 4.6% in 2019), language barriers (5.3%), too many opportunities (5%), and "Other" considerations (3.3%). Some other themes noted were cost of child care or simply a preference to focus on engagement in the home setting.

# GOALS FOR FAMILY ENGAGEMENT AMONG FAMILIES WITH CHILDREN 0-6 YEARS

Parents and caregivers for young children ages 0-6 have a variety of reasons for participating in family engagement opportunities. Some of them are seeking to connect with other parents while others desire to learn and practice in-home interactive learning efforts with a young child. Understanding the goals of parents and caregivers raising young children related to family engagement can provide useful guidance in designing and implementing engagement efforts that meet diverse family interests and goals.

Participants in the family engagement study were given an open-ended question that explored the topic of their goals as a caregiver for participating in such opportunities. The question asked them: "If you are a parent, what are your goals for participating in family engagement activities or programs? That is, what do you want to get from such activities and programs?"

Individual answers to this question were given by 206 participants in the study, which represents three out of five study participants (61.1%). To analyze participant feedback, the comments were organized by themes and then reviewed to determine the particular goals that caregivers identified in relation to family engagement. The number of comments for each thematic category was added together and then divided by the total number of participant responses ( $N = 206$ ) in order to highlight the percentage of comments related to each goal. The most frequently noted goals in relation to family engagement for parents and caregivers of young children are outlined below in Table 17.

The study analysis explored caregiver goals for family engagement and resulted in identification of 12 diverse themes that parents and caregivers articulated as primary goals for their involvement. These thematic categories are both identified in Table 17 and discussed here in greater detail. For ease of discussion, goals were framed as being "Limited Priority" goals (0 to 7% of participants), "Moderate Priority" goals (7% to 15% of participants), or "High Priority" goals (15% or more of participants). Of course, participants can have multiple goals for their engagement, reflected in one participant's response quoted here: "My goals for participating in family engagement activities and programs are to understand my child's development, strengthen our relationship, learn effective parenting strategies, support academic success, foster a sense of belonging, promote holistic development, and advocate for my child's needs."

**Table 17: Most Common Goals for Family Engagement Cited by Caregivers (N = 206)**

Caregiver Goal for Family Engagement – Categories	Percentage (%)
Connect with other parents and professionals, learn about ECE	23.3% (N = 48)
Foster my child’s sense of belonging and social well-being	22.3% (N = 46)
Engage in activities that teach my child values and skills and promote development	21.4% (N = 44)
Engage in fun, enjoyable interactions with my child through time, activities and learning together	21.4% (N = 44)
Gain understanding of child’s developmental progress	15% (N = 31)
Learn effective parenting strategies	14.6% (N = 30)
Enhance learning and development activities at home	12.1% (N = 25)
Build a connected, caring relationship with my child	9.2% (N = 19)
Discover resources to support development of my child	8.7% (N = 18)
Support child’s academic and overall success	6.8% (N = 14)
Advocate for my child’s needs and partner with ECE providers	4.8% (N = 10)
Participate in social/cultural events and build community	4.8% (N = 10)

The four goals identified that fell into the High Priority category all received support from more than 20% of respondents who answered the question. Each of these high-priority objectives for parents and caregivers of young children related to family engagement is briefly discussed here.

- **Connect with Other Parents and Professionals, Learn about ECE (23.3%)** – The highest priority for parents and caregivers featured their goal to form connections with both other parents and early childhood professionals working with their children. Nearly a quarter (23.3%) of participants cited this as a key goal for participating in family engagement. Since connection and support with other parents is often found as a top priority in parent education

assessments, this finding is consistent with what parents and caregivers often prioritize in such settings.

- **Foster My Child’s Sense of Belonging and Social Well-Being, Relationships** (22.3%) – The second most-cited goal for family engagement among parents was the intention to foster their child’s sense of social belonging and well-being. Social and emotional development and skills have emerged as key items of concern for parents and caregivers of young children. For example, parents hope children will learn to get along and play well with peers or avoid the anxiety of feeling rejected or being bullied. Thus, they expressed hopes that family engagement would introduce their child to peers and friends, provide social opportunities, and facilitate further development of social skills and connections.
- **Engage in Activities that Teach My Child Values and Skills and Promote Development** (21.4%) – A fifth of responses mentioned engaging in activities to promote a child’s chance to learn values and skills linked to their overall development. This theme became the third-highest priority expressed by caregivers, indicating the value of engagement approaches that are activity-based and learning-focused for caregivers and their children.
- **Engage in Fun, Enjoyable Interactions with My Child Through Time, Activities and Learning Together** (21.4%) – Tied for the third-highest priority, this theme similarly highlighted parental intentions to engage in fun, enjoyable interactions with their child when involved in family engagement opportunities via shared time, interactions and learning together. Making engagement opportunities fun and interactive for both children and their parents thus seems to be an important element of planning and designing such efforts. Parents noted that sometimes it was “not easy to do at home” and that “intentional time” makes a difference for them in reaching this goal.

Since these four goals represent the highest priorities articulated by parents of young children as they seek and participate in family engagement options, they should likely be the top considerations for how such opportunities are planned and implemented in early childhood settings.

The next set of goals shared by participants fit into the Moderate Priority category and were supported by between 7% and 15% of those who commented. There were five moderate priority goals articulated by parents and caregivers. These moderate priority themes for family engagement are briefly explored.

- **Gain Understanding of a Child’s Developmental Progress** (15%) – Gaining a clear understanding of a child’s academic, social and emotional development and skills was regarded as a significant priority by many participants. For example, one parent noted, “As a first-time parent, I had no idea about milestones of growth and development.” Caregivers cited the value of family engagement experiences for assessing a child’s progress and getting



feedback from providers about the child's areas for growth. Also, they mentioned simply wanting to understand more about child development overall and how their child might be progressing in relation to particular markers of development.

- Learn Effective Parenting Strategies (14.6%) – Many caregivers expressed the goal of participating in family engagement so that they could address common parenting concerns and learn effective strategies for raising their child(ren). Family engagement options can provide a chance for parents to exchange ideas with other parents or community professionals (parent educators, etc.) who offer further insight into helpful approaches in parenting.
- Enhance Learning and Development Activities at Home (12.1%) – Many caregivers prioritized the goal of seeking out ideas, strategies and activities that they could use in the home environment to support their child's learning and development. Slightly more than one out of ten parents who shared comments highlighted this goal, suggesting the value of helping parents extend what is experienced in family engagement settings into their family setting.
- Build a Connected, Caring Relationship with My Child (9.2%) – About one in ten parents listed the goal of developing a more connected, caring relationship with their child through family engagement experiences.
- Discover Resources to Support Development of My Child (8.7%) – A similar number of parents provided the moderate goal of discovering helpful resources for their use in supporting development of a young child. For some families this may mean a full program like Head Start, while for others it may mean a referral to a speech therapist who can assess a child's language or else getting access to some learning videos on brain development. Highlighting and encouraging access to available resources can be a strategy when designing any family engagement effort.

As with the high-priority goals, these moderate goals shared by caregivers of young children can serve as a useful guide when considering the strategic efforts in family engagement that a program or organization seeks to provide.

There were also three Limited Priority goals that participants noted in their responses as well. The first was that a small portion of parents (6.8%) had the goal of supporting their child's academic and overall success through family engagement. These respondents mentioned items such as working toward improvements in early literacy skills or growing a child's school readiness. Another goal mentioned by some caregivers (4.8%) for family engagement was to advocate for their child's needs and partner with early childhood providers. A final goal mentioned was the intention to participate in supporting events that build community such as social or cultural events (4.8%), which can assist in building a positive culture and celebrate diversity.

# GOALS FOR FAMILY ENGAGEMENT AMONG EARLY CHILDHOOD PROFESSIONALS

Just as caregivers for young children ages 0-6 list multiple reasons for being involved in family engagement opportunities, similarly there are a range of goals that early childhood professionals pursue when facilitating family engagement efforts. Goals may be practical such as increasing family attendance at events or more focused on enhancing learning and developmental skills of children. The goals articulated by early childhood professionals for their family engagement efforts typically address the ideal of meeting family needs and enhancing child growth and potential.

Early childhood professionals who were involved in the family engagement study responded to another open-ended question that focused on goals for family engagement. The question stated: "If you are an early childhood professional, what is your goal in designing or hosting family engagement activities or programs?"

Responses to this question were furnished by 149 study participants, which represents close to half of those involved in the study (44.2%). Analysis of the comments shared by early childhood professionals occurred through organizing them into categories and then assessing the goals they articulated for family engagement. The number of comments for each category was added together and then divided by the total number of participant responses ( $N = 149$ ) to obtain the percentage of comments focused around each particular theme. The most frequently cited goals regarding family engagement efforts by early childhood professionals are highlighted in Table 18.

As the participant responses regarding the goals of early childhood professionals in family engagement efforts were analyzed, 13 distinctive but overlapping themes emerged from the answers that had been shared. These themes reflected the most common goals articulated by early childhood professionals related to family engagement efforts. These findings are explored here in greater detail. Again, for ease of discussion, expressed goals were noted as being "Limited Priority" goals (0 to 7% of participants), "Moderate Priority" goals (7% to 15% of participants), or "High Priority" goals (15% or more of participants). The goals are discussed in order of most common to least common.

**Table 18: Most Common Goals for Family Engagement Cited by Early Childhood Professionals (N = 149)**

<b>Caregiver Goal for Family Engagement – Categories</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
Establish and maintain communication and partnering with parents, strengthen home-school connections	21.5% (N = 32)
Increase attendance of children and families at family engagement events	20.8% (N = 31)
Provide a fun, engaged activity for parent-child involvement, learning and fun	18.1% (N = 27)
Provide families with tools, resources and strategies to support child learning and development at home	17.4% (N = 26)
Establish positive connections between parents, family and community	16.1% (N = 24)
Furnish information and education on child developmental progress, parenting, other topics	14.8% (N = 22)
Enhance parental involvement in a child’s learning and education	13.4% (N = 20)
Organize and support activities of interest to most families	10.1% (N = 15)
Support positive interactions between the child and parent	6% (N = 9)
Enhance learning and developmental skills of the child	3.3% (N = 5)
No goal to do more engagement due to existing busy commitments	3.3% (N = 5)
Assist parents and families to address challenges or concerns	2% (N = 3)
Work in partnerships with other agencies and providers	2% (N = 3)

Five goals emerged from the analysis that fit into the High Priority category, with all of them being supported by more than 15% of the early childhood professionals who answered the question. These high-priority items thus highlight the top priorities for early childhood professionals who are designing and hosting family engagement experiences for families and children.

- **Establish and Maintain Communication and Partnering with Parents, Strengthen Home-School Connections (21.5%)** – The top priority among early childhood professionals focused on engaging in and maintaining regular communication with

parents so they could know families better and partner with them in serving children. Early childhood professionals noted using a range of strategies in pursuit of this goal, including personal visits, so that they could strengthen connections and “provide more customized care and support” to children and their families. One provider noted the goal to “make parents a part of the planning and opportunities” through communication and sharing of ideas and efforts.

- **Increase Attendance of Children and Families at Family Engagement Events** (20.8%) – The second major goal identified among early childhood professionals focused on increasing attendance of children and families at family engagement events. This goal featured a very straightforward and practical objective. Early childhood professionals who do the work to sponsor family engagement experiences hope that families will turn out and take advantage of the opportunity. The responses by professionals recognized some obstacles to attendance for families, and emphasized consideration of parent work schedules, sufficient communication, and transportation or child care options as means to help families if needed. Also, over half the responses on this theme noted the importance of making experiences accessible and helping all children and families feel welcomed and included in family engagement experiences.
- **Provide a Fun, Engaged Activity for Parent-Child Involvement, Learning and Fun** (18.1%) – The third primary goal for family engagement mentioned by early childhood providers was the intent to simply provide fun, engaging activities to facilitate parent-child involvement, learning and fun. Such activities tend to be the most common setting for family engagement. Early childhood professionals clearly recognize this fact and strive for the goal of creating family engagement experiences that foster this type of environment and experience for children and families.
- **Provide Families with Tools, Resources and Strategies to Support Child Learning and Development at Home** (17.4%) – Many early childhood professionals expressed the goal of being a provider of helpful learning tools and resources to families. This goal reflected provider intent to meet the varied needs of children and families in a way that is tailored to each family’s unique needs or concerns. Existing strategies pursued by providers in relation to this goal were sharing online resources, connecting families with local resources, delivering parenting information, and adapting resources shared to particular family needs (kids with sensory impairments, etc.).
- **Establish Positive Connections Between Parents, Family and Community** (16.1%) – The final goal that fell among the top priorities of early childhood professionals for family engagement was establishing positive connections between parents or families and community providers. In a sense, this goal recognizes that children are surrounded by a network of multiple influences, and that the “it takes a village” approach to raising children

requires fostering supportive connections across these systems of support. Collaborative linkages among providers and families can help build trust and communication about meeting the needs of children.

These five goals shared by early childhood professionals highlight the foremost priorities outlined by them as they design and host family engagement activities or programs. Community professionals who work with young children and provide such experiences should keep these ideals in mind and also assess whether their efforts align with the goals that parents and other caregivers have noted as key priorities for their involvement in such opportunities.

There were three additional goals for family engagement noted by early childhood professionals that were placed in the Moderate Priority category. These goals were supported by between 7% and 15% of those who commented. These moderate priority themes for family engagement are discussed briefly.

- **Furnish Information and Education on Child Developmental Progress, Parenting & Other Topics (14.8%)** – Early childhood professionals recognize their role as information providers to families, and so articulated the priority of extending information and education to families on key topics. Such topics as developmentally appropriate activities, child developmental progress, and healthy approaches in parenting were suggested. Typically, early childhood professionals accomplish providing such information through both traditional and technology-based approaches for communication, parent-teacher conferences or other meetings, and workshops or parent-child interaction activities.
- **Enhance Parental Involvement in a Child’s Learning and Education (13.4%)** – The second moderate-priority goal of early childhood professionals was using family engagement to enhance parental involvement in a child’s learning and education. In essence, these professionals desire for parents to move “off the sidelines” and “into the game” of guiding and supporting a young child’s learning. When engagement activities are planned, they often have a higher purpose of building on-ramps to such involvement in a child’s education by caregivers. As one professional noted, “I hope they can engage through more than just dinner and bedtime during the week.”
- **Organize and Support Activities of Interest to Most Families (10.1%)** – This final moderate-priority goal was highlighted by multiple professionals and focused on the simple objective of hosting or providing experiences that were well-organized and of interest to most families. These providers noted the intent to facilitate family engagement consistently as part of their services and do so in an organized, engaged and professional manner. Some professionals wanted to “host more as a provider” while others expressed the intent to simply “continue doing what I already am doing or planning.”

Similar to the high-priority goals identified by early childhood professionals, these moderate goals can define and direct providers in their efforts to craft family engagement options that meet a variety of needs and align well with what families are seeking for their children.

Additionally, there were also five Limited Priority goals that early childhood professionals mentioned in their answers about family engagement. A number of providers (6%) identified the goal of supporting positive interactions and building relationships between children and parents in doing family engagement. The remaining goals were each mentioned by three to five respondents but highlighted important issues as well. One limited priority goal supported by early childhood professionals was to enhance learning and developmental skills of children involved (3.3%). Another goal articulated by some professionals was to directly assist parents and families with addressing particular issues or concerns (2%). Also, some providers held the goal of working in partnership with other agencies and providers in a meaningful way (2%). One other item that emerged was the simple communication from a few providers that they did not have a goal to do more family engagement due to existing busy commitments in either their own schedules or the busyness of families they served (3.3%). These varied goals sum up the variety of priorities that early childhood professionals cite as they plan, design and offer family engagement opportunities to families with young children.

# THE VALUE OF FAMILY ENGAGEMENT PROGRAMS AND STATE RESOURCES

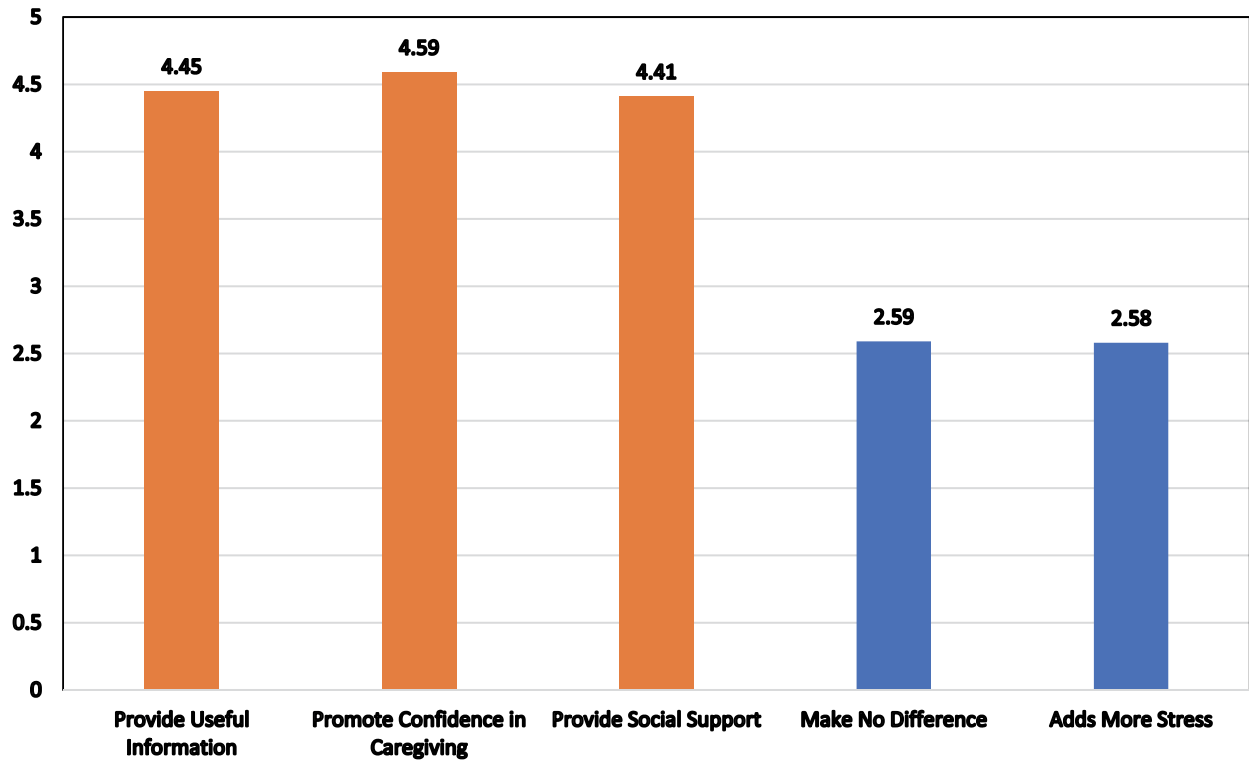
Developing a greater awareness of how caregivers of young children value family engagement efforts can provide needed insight into how such programs are encouraged and made available to families in North Dakota. Additionally, it is useful to understand how much caregivers are aware of and make use of some of the available resources on family engagement through state-supported websites or programs. Such resources include state agency websites (ND Department of Public Instruction; ND Department of Health and Human Services; etc.) and the Parents LEAD program in North Dakota.

Caregivers in the study were asked to assess how they value family engagement programs in relation to their effects on awareness, confidence, social support, and other items. They rated the potential effects of family engagement programs, that is, to what degree they provide useful information that they need in childcare, make them feel more confident as caregivers, and provide them with the social support that they need (1 = strongly disagree to 6 = strongly agree).

First, the caregivers provided a response to potential positive effects of family engagement programs. The average participant rating (mean score) for each information source is highlighted in Table 19 ( $N = 305$ ), with higher scores indicating family engagement programs were found to be more useful or valuable in that aspect. Results indicated that participants tend to mildly agree or somewhat agree with the positive effects of family engagement programs. The mean scores for each of the three items were: (1) provide useful information ( $M = 4.45$ ); (2) promote confidence in caregiving efforts ( $M = 4.59$ ); and (3) provide needed social support ( $M = 4.41$ ).

Meanwhile, participants also rated the potential negative aspects of such programs, including whether they believed that family engagement programs do not make any difference in their lives or that they even add more stress to the caregivers. Again, the six-point scale ranged from “strongly disagree” (1) to “strongly agree” (6), but this time lower scores illustrated a more positive response from caregivers and their disagreement that such programs have negative effects. Results indicated that participants generally mildly disagreed or somewhat disagreed that the family engagement programs were not useful for them ( $M = 2.59$ ) or were stressful to them ( $M = 2.58$ ).

**Table 19: Value of Family Engagement Programs - Agreement (N = 305)**



To further explore responses to the value of family engagement programs, we investigated the survey data when compared between two sub-groups: caregiver participants and early child professionals. We found that participants who are professionals in early childhood education and care tend to think the family engagement programs are more valuable across the three categories than participants who are not professionals. Though the scores were not dramatically different on the 6-point scale of agreement, the contrast does show that providers tend to place higher value on family engagement programs. The comparative scores for each item were:

- Provide useful information that I need in childcare
  - Early childhood professionals – 4.75 (mean score)
  - Parents and caregivers – 4.31 (mean score)
- Increase confidence as a caregiver
  - Early childhood professionals – 4.72 (mean score)
  - Parents and caregivers – 4.46 (mean score)
- Provide needed social support
  - Early childhood professionals – 4.59 (mean score)
  - Parents and caregivers – 4.21 (mean score)



Again, both groups tend to place a moderately positive value on these effects experienced through involvement in family engagement programs.

In addition, we asked participants whether they had used state agency websites as a tool to learn about resources available to families with young children, such as websites for the North Dakota Department of Public Instruction or else the North Dakota Department of Health and Human Services. The participants could rate their usage of such websites on a 1-4 scale rated from “Not at all” (1) to “Have used a lot” (4). Nearly two out of five participants (38%;  $N = 310$ ) indicated that they have not used such a resource at all. This finding alerts us that some parents or providers may need some scaffolding or support to develop awareness of the useful information on these state agency websites.

Similarly, two out of five participants (41.6%) also noted that they had used state agency websites to a small degree (“a little bit”) as a learning tool for information about families with young children. The remaining respondents shared that they had used such websites either “a fair amount” (14.2%) or “a lot” (6.1%) in their efforts to learn of resources or information for families with young children. These findings suggest there is considerable opportunity for growth in how such state agency resources are communicated about or utilized for the benefit of families with young children and early childhood professionals.

An additional state resource is the Parents Lead website, which is supported by the state’s Behavioral Health Division (ND Department of Health and Human Services), and which focuses on furnishing a range of information, tools and resources for individuals and families involved in raising children. Parents Lead is an evidence-based prevention effort intended to give parents and caregivers supportive tools for creating a safe environment for children that promotes their health and well-being. Participants in the family engagement study were asked two questions about Parents Lead, which were if they had heard of the Parents Lead website in North Dakota and (if yes) whether they found the website to be useful or not.

Though the Parents Lead website and initiative has been available for some time, only about a third (31.2%) of the study participants in North Dakota had heard of the website previously. Among those who indicated “yes” to their awareness of the Parents Lead website, the mean rating of its usefulness was 2.19 (out of 3), showing that those who knew about it agreed that it was “somewhat” to “very” useful for them. In total, 21.4% of the study participants responded that they had accessed the Parents Lead website and found it to be “somewhat” useful while an additional 7.1% found it to be “very useful.”

In sum, the participants generally evaluate family engagement programs positively, but future exploration might investigate how to improve awareness and usage of state agency websites in order to make them more beneficial for caregivers in terms of providing useful information, improving confidence, and providing social support.

# KNOWLEDGE OF LANGUAGE AND LITERACY DEVELOPMENT

One topic that becomes critical for the development of young children is their growth in language skills and literacy abilities. Parents and care providers can do more for children if they themselves grow in understanding of the importance of language development and how to assist children in developing their early literacy skills. Varied stakeholders in North Dakota expressed interest in assessing this topic more closely through the family engagement study, so three questions were included that allowed participants to articulate their awareness of language and literacy development resources for children.

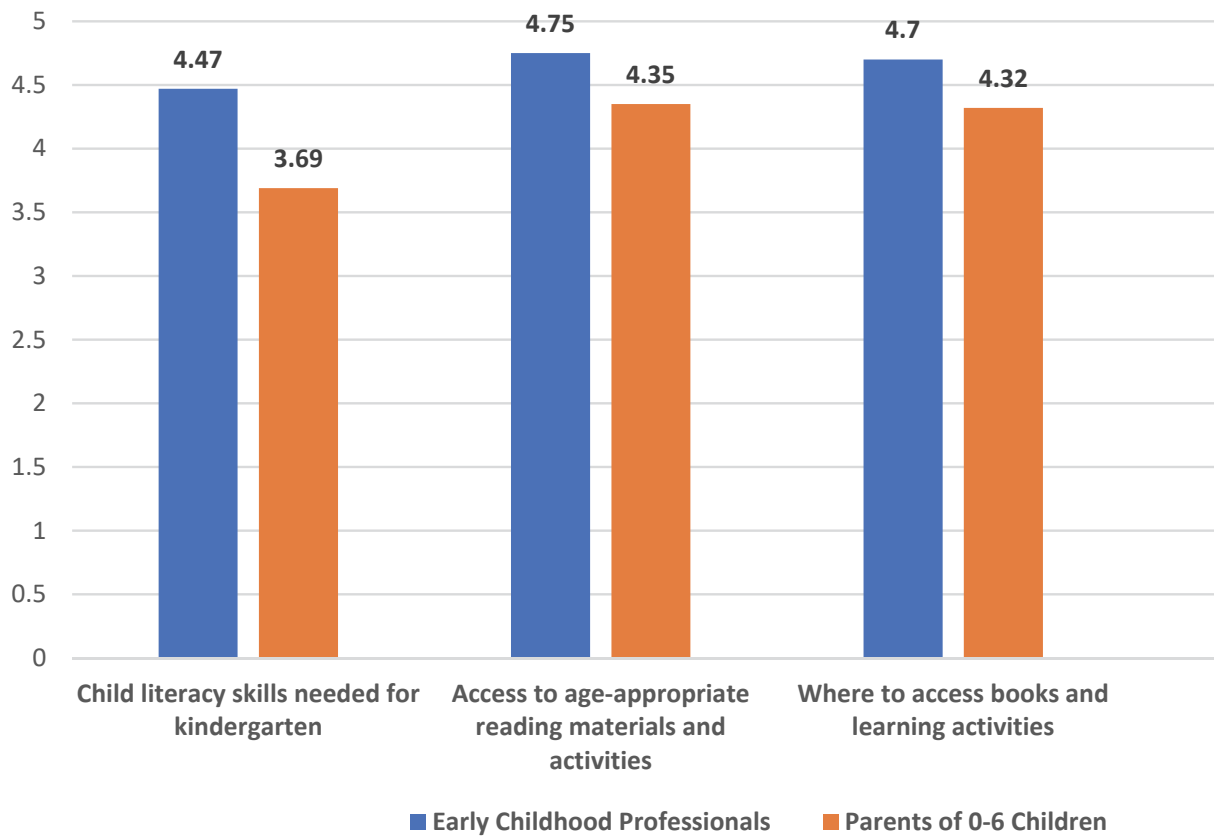
Participants provided ratings on three items that indicated their knowledge of language and literacy, including whether they know what reading and language skills are necessary for a child to be successful when they enter kindergarten, whether their children have access to age-appropriate reading materials and activities, and where to access books and learning activities for children. The responses were given on a 5-point scale ranging from “Not at all aware” (1) to “Very much aware” (5).

Results from the overall sample show that participants expressed having a good knowledge of language and literacy for children from ages 0 to 6. The average rating shared by participants on each item is highlighted here. Higher scores represent greater awareness or availability of literacy-supportive resources. The average mean score regarding awareness of the language and literacy skills needed for a child’s success in the transition to kindergarten was 4.1 out of 5, showing that most participants were “moderately” to “very much” aware of what was needed. Additionally, the average scores for the other two items were even higher, with children having “access to age-appropriate reading materials and activities” at 4.56 and awareness of “where to access books and learning activities for children” at 4.52.

How do caregivers of young children compare to early childhood professionals on these items related to language and literacy? The findings are noted in Table 20 ( $N = 306$ ). Further analysis showed that, compared to non-professionals, early childhood professionals have much better knowledge of language and literacy development. This reality was especially true regarding awareness of what reading and language skills are necessary for a child to be successful when they enter kindergarten. On this item, the average mean score for early childhood professionals was 4.47 whereas it was 3.69 for non-professionals, which showed a significant statistical difference. Further, the mean scores were also higher for early childhood professionals on the other two items.

The results of this analysis suggest that there could be substantial value in offering more training and resources to parents of young children in the area of language and literacy development. Still, the scores were relatively high for both groups.

**Table 20:** Knowledge of Resources for Language and Literacy (N = 306)



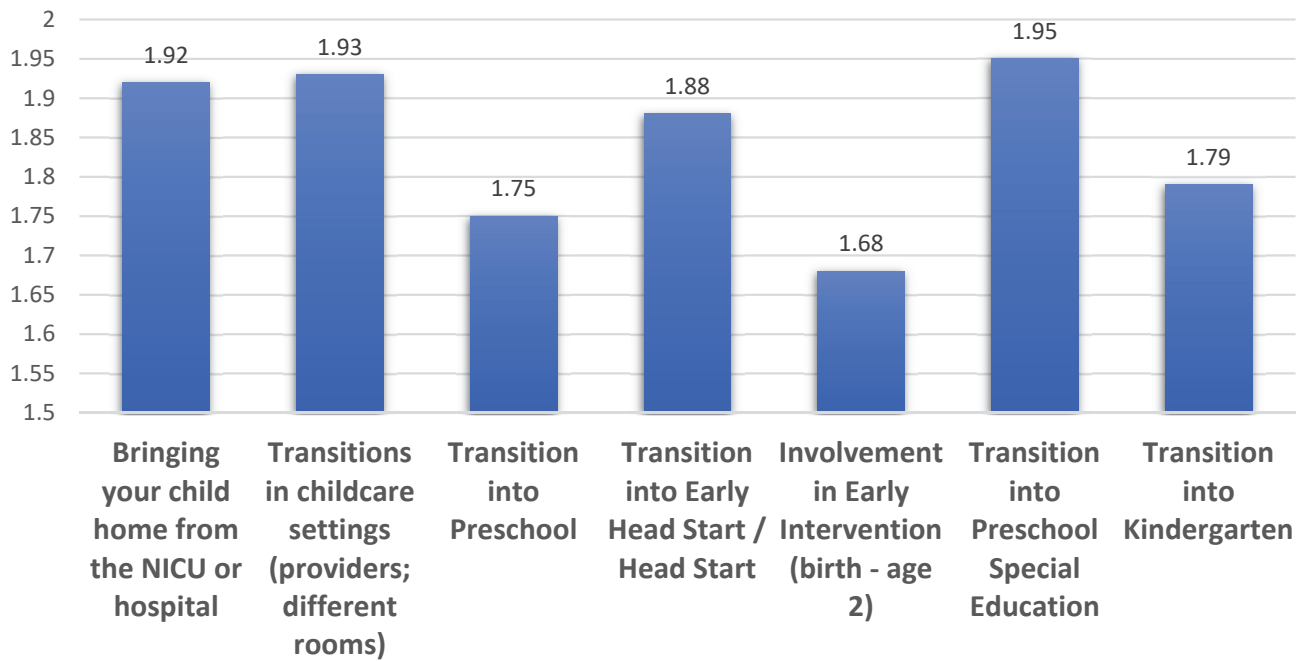
# DIFFICULTIES IN TRANSITION EXPERIENCES FOR YOUNG CHILDREN

A final topic of interest related to family engagement concerns the variety of transitions that young children experience in their early years. Stability in environments and caregivers is a cornerstone of healthy development for young children. Too many transitions or complicated transitions can diminish child well-being and increase developmental difficulties for young children. To gain greater insight into how caregivers and professionals perceive a range of transition experiences for young children, the study included a participant assessment of multiple transition experiences with young children ages 0 to 6.

Participants were asked to rate only those transitions that they had experienced with a child, so the number of responses on each item varied considerably. The seven transition experiences they rated were: (1) bringing a child home from the NICU or hospital; (2) transitions in childcare settings (different rooms, providers, etc.); (3) transition into preschool; (4) transition into Early Head Start/Head Start; (5) involvement in early intervention; (6) transition into preschool special education; and (7) transition into kindergarten. Though these transition experiences are not exhaustive, they do outline many of the common transition types that occur for young children. The most common transition experience was “transitions in childcare settings” ( $N = 232$ ) while the least common experience was “transition into preschool special education” ( $N = 95$ ).

The study participants rated the difficulty level of these seven important early childhood transitions on a scale ranging from “Not difficult” (1) to “Very difficult” (3). The mean scores of the seven transition experiences ranged from 1.68 to 1.95. Please see Table 21 for details. The three transition experiences identified as most challenging were: (1) Bringing a child home from the NICU or hospital ( $M = 1.92$ ;  $N = 176$ ); (2) Transitions in childcare settings (change in providers; different rooms; etc.) ( $M = 1.93$ ;  $N = 232$ ); and (3) Transitioning to preschool special education ( $M = 1.95$ ;  $N = 95$ ). Involvement in early intervention and the transition to preschool were considered relatively less challenging by caregivers.

**Table 21: Difficulty Ratings of Early Childhood Transition Experiences**



Looking more closely at the ratings given, we can also assess how many participants rated a particular transition experience as “very difficult” versus the other two options (“not” difficult or “somewhat” difficult). Specifically, there were 27% of participants who rated as “very difficult” the transition from NICU to home, and 24% of participants who felt the experience was “very difficult” on the transition to Preschool Special Education. The “very difficult” numbers for other experiences were 20% for the transition to (Early) Head Start, 17% for the transition to kindergarten, 14% for the transition to preschool, and 13% for involvement in Early Intervention.

## SUMMARY

Responses to the parent and provider feedback survey of family engagement (2024) implemented in North Dakota resulted in data being gathered from 337 parents, adult caregivers and early childhood professionals. While the survey used a convenience sampling approach, responses to the survey came from throughout North Dakota and included caregivers for children across the ages from 0 to 6 years.

Multiple questions were asked on a variety of family engagement topics in early childhood to generate a substantial dataset that could be explored to further understand family engagement in North Dakota. The results obtained from the survey furnish some useful information for consideration in exploring issues and needs related to the topic of family engagement in North Dakota.







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