

July 2020

IMPACT Family Connections:

Family child care provider experiences implementing developmental screenings



Family child care (FCC) settings provide a unique type of early childhood education experience. Different from center- or school-based settings, FCCs are home-based settings for a small group of mixed-age students typically with one or few providers. While FCCs plays a significant role in early care and education (ECE), FCC providers can often feel detached from resources and other professionals in the ECE field and sometimes have limited training in how to support children's growth and development and implement quality standards.¹ The IMPACT Family Connections program attempts to bridge this gap, by connecting FCC providers to resources, training, and other professionals in the field.

IMPACT Family Connections was established in 2015 and is a partnership between First 5 San Diego and the YMCA Childcare Resource Service (CRS) that assists FCC providers with the implementation of developmental screenings. The program also assists FCC providers by developing and identifying appropriate referrals to services for children with developmental delays or concerns. Additionally, the partnership provides training and technical assistance to home visitors across San Diego County to enhance families' knowledge about quality early childhood education settings.

The Ages and Stages Questionnaire-3 (ASQ-3) and Ages and Stages Questionnaire-Social Emotional (ASQ-SE) are two developmental screening tools used across the early childhood sector to examine a child's development and identify potential delays or concerns before a child enters school. Screening children early on for developmental concerns is critical for identifying those at risk for delays and connecting them to services that can help. While developmental screening procedures and processes are not typical for FCC providers to implement, the IMPACT Family Connections program provides an opportunity for FCC providers to receive support on the administration and use of these tools in their practice to promote their student's development.



¹ <https://www.buildinitiative.org/Portals/0/Uploads/Documents/ORIS2019FamilyChildCareReportREV2.pdf>

Given the importance of developmental screenings for young children and the opportunity for FCC providers to adopt this practice, with the support of IMPACT Family Connections, First 5 San Diego and YMCA CRS partnered with Harder+Company Community Research to talk to FCC providers and understand:

- How the implementation of ASQ screenings in FCCs over the last four years has impacted FCC providers' caregiving practices;
- The process FCC providers use to refer children and families to support services when concerns are identified; and
- FCC providers' interest in strengthening their knowledge and capacity in other areas of early childhood education quality.

Additionally, at the time of data collection (March-May 2020), FCC providers were navigating the COVID-19 pandemic. As such, additional questions were added to help CRS and First 5 San Diego understand how FCC providers were impacted by the pandemic and how providers anticipate their needs might change post-COVID.

Methods

Between March and May of 2020, the evaluation team worked in partnership with CRS staff to conduct data collection outreach and recruitment to FCC providers who were participating in IMPACT. Providers were invited to participate in a focus group or over the phone interview and were offered a \$25 e-gift card as a small thank you for their time. Harder+Company conducted a virtual focus group and phone interviews with a total of 10 FCC providers. The provider focus group was conducted in Spanish and phone interviews were conducted in English. As data collection took place at the onset of a pandemic, it was difficult to recruit and obtain a large sample of participants due to the competing priorities FCC providers were experiencing as they responded to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Data collected from the interviews and focus group were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach. Thematic analysis is a systematic approach for organizing, analyzing, and interpreting narrative data. This approach allowed the evaluation team to identify common themes, topics, ideas, and insights shared across participants. Below we summarize the main findings from the focus group and interviews organized by topic area – ASQ Processes and Caregivers; ASQ Processes and Teaching Practices; Referrals; Looking Ahead; and COVID-19 Pandemic and Family Child Care.





ASQ Processes and Caregivers

Research shows that strong communication and trust between teachers and parents is beneficial for a child's academic success, emotional well-being, and social competencies.² Completing ASQ screenings in family child care settings is one way to bolster the parent-teacher relationship early on, as the screening process allows for an open dialogue between a provider (teacher) and parent about a child's development.

According to CRS leadership, prior to participating in IMPACT Family Connections, FCC providers were concerned about how the implementation of the ASQ tools may be perceived by parents and caregivers. Providers feared push back from caregivers, especially as it related to having conversations when a child had a 'concern' in an area of development. During data collection, one provider articulated how sensitive these conversations can be:

"Parents do not have an easy time accepting that there may be a developmental delay with their kid. It can be hard to have that conversation."

Once FCC providers had the opportunity to implement the ASQ screenings through the IMPACT Family Connections program, they reflected on the positive experiences they have had working with caregivers to implement the tools. Many providers explained that discussing the benefits of the ASQ screenings during their initial conversations with caregivers makes parents feel more at ease with the tool and helped open lines of communication. Providers reported that caregivers are generally receptive to the idea of screening their child and are often eager to know more about the benefits of having their child screened for developmental delays. For caregivers who are more reluctant, providers explained how ongoing conversations about the benefits of using the ASQ eventually results in the caregivers agreeing to the screenings.

Providers also discussed how the ASQ administration process supports relationship building and allows for a space that promotes a shared understanding of the child's development between providers and caregivers. One provider shared:

"The ASQ tools are great because the tool promotes learning. I sat down with a parent to complete it once, we talked through each question, and where we saw differences. It promoted shared understanding among the parents and myself. I was able to learn from them too."

The ASQ tools also allow FCC providers to offer support, activities, and recommendations on ways children can continue practicing developmentally appropriate activities at home. One provider described a time when she was able to use the results of the ASQ screening to offer an at-home developmentally appropriate activity for one of the children in her care, explaining that:

"We noticed a child scored as concern in the fine motor area. We gave materials and a simple activity to the family so they can practice at home. We even offered alternatives. The parents were responsive to this and it helped form a relationship with the parents to promote the student's development."

"Parents know their children are being monitored and receive the support they need in whatever aspect they need. We talk about the strengths of children a lot more than challenging areas."

– FCC Provider

"All of my parents are amazing. We talk in the morning about how the kids slept, their mood, and what happened at their house... I text and send pictures throughout the day. We have a lot of communication with parents."

– FCC Provider

² <http://earlylearningnetwork.unl.edu/2018/08/29/parent-teacher-relationships/>

Although FCC providers cited the many ways ASQ screenings benefit families, they also acknowledged the challenge of having the tough conversations with caregivers when a child's ASQ indicates a developmental concern. Providers noted that the coaching support provided through CRS has been incredibly helpful for learning new ways to have these tough conversations. One provider explained:

"[These conversations] are the hardest part, especially if the parent is not as invested or dismisses things like "oh, he's just like mom/dad" or "she's just a distracted kid". It has been important to have the right language to use and share with parents."



ASQ Processes and Teaching Practices

In addition to ASQ screenings helping to open the lines of communication between FCC providers and parents about a child's developmental or social emotional growth, the tools also help develop FCC providers' own skillsets around developmentally appropriate behaviors and activities for the children in their care. As part of the IMPACT Family Connections program, FCC providers received ASQ trainings and technical assistance from CRS staff through coaching. The coaching focused on training and supporting FCC providers to work with parents to understand screening results and identify activities parents could implement with their children.

The support provided by IMPACT Family Connections coaches, on the implementation and use of ASQ screenings, helped providers to be more attuned to children's behavior. Providers reported that the knowledge they acquired through coaching resulted in them not dismissing things they maybe would have before starting to use the ASQ tools. For instance, one provider shared that after her ASQ trainings she was able to recognize a speech delay in one of her students, whereas before she would have dismissed the child's lack of speech as shyness. The additional coaching support also increased providers' understanding of children's behaviors that are potential "developmental red flags."

One FCC provider shared an example of how she was able to adjust her teaching based on information she learned through ASQ trainings and screening results. She shared:

"I have a wide range of ages in my setting. Before I knew more about the ASQs I would just be reading books with the infants. Once I knew more about the tool, I had more activities to implement with the infants. For toddlers, I learned new physical activities to do with them that are focused on improving hand-eye coordination. I was able to implement a lot more activities for their age based on their results."

Lastly, after receiving coaching, FCC providers reported feeling more confident in how they interact with and educate their students. One provider shared:

"We feel more confident in the services we provide. We can meet the child at the level they are at. The parents feel more at ease and happy to have their children come to our facility because they see we get to know their children and their strengths."

"This has been one of the most gratifying parts of my entire career as an early childhood educator."

– FCC Provider



Referrals

Once a child has been screened and identified with a concern on the ASQ, FCC providers must have reliable places in the community to refer families to programs and services that address the child's needs. A key component of IMPACT Family Connections is educating FCC providers on appropriate referral pathways for developmental and behavioral services for young children and their families.

FCC providers who participated in a focus group or interview reported that since joining IMPACT Family Connections, few children in their care have been identified with a concern on the ASQ. Further, only three of the 10 FCC providers reported having formally referred a child in their care to an external service provider. These referral sources included psychiatric services (generally), the San Diego Regional Center, and South Bay Community Services, for concerns such as severe disruptive behavior and speech delays. Providers explained that their approach to making referrals was informed by multiple information sources and was not based on a single observation. All three providers described using multiple inputs to decide if and when to refer a child in their care. These inputs included their own observations, ASQ results, and conversations with caregivers. To follow up on the status of referrals, providers used ongoing and direct communication with caregivers through pick up/drop off conversations, calls home, emails, etc. In only one instance did the provider follow up directly with the service provider.



Looking Ahead

It has been widely demonstrated that involvement in high quality preschool programs is directly related to improved academic and behavioral outcomes for children at kindergarten entry, and can improve children's likelihood of attending college, entering the workforce, and avoiding criminal activity in the long-term.^{3 4} Currently, many quality early education efforts are focused on center- or school-based settings. As family child care settings become more prominent in the early

³ Takanashi, R. (2004). *Reconsidering when education begins. What happens before kindergarten matters*. New York: Foundation for Child Development. Retrieved at: <http://fcd-us.org/sites/default/files/ReconsideringWhenEducationBegins.pdf>

⁴ Campbell, F., Ramey, C. T., Pungello, E., Miller-Johnson, S., & Sparling, J. J. (2002). Early childhood education: Young adult outcomes from the Abecedarian Project. *Applied developmental Science*, 6(1), 42-57. DOI: 10.1207/S1532480XADS0601_05

care and education field, there is an opportunity to integrate FCC providers into quality preschool initiatives.

When asked about their interest in continuing to pursue quality ECE elements for their FCC, all providers who participated in the focus group and interviews expressed interest in continuing to build their knowledge and capacity in other areas of quality, including implementing a single quality component at a time (i.e., DRDP or CLASS) or joining a quality initiative like First 5 San Diego's Quality Preschool Initiative.⁵ One provider shared:

"[The ASQ screenings] make the work so much more gratifying. I've seen my children blossom and parents feeling at ease because they know their children are receiving the instruction they need to reach their potential."

Overall, providers have had a very positive experience implementing the ASQ tools as part of the IMPACT Family Connections program. The program has strengthened providers' abilities to deliver developmentally appropriate services and has strengthened the way providers and caregivers interact to support a child's development.



COVID-19 Pandemic and Family Child Care

At the time of data collection, early childhood education providers and families were enduring challenges associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. For some ECE providers in San Diego, the pandemic meant closing their child care for an extended period of time, but for others it meant closing indefinitely. To understand IMPACT Family Connections FCC providers' experiences during the pandemic, we asked how their child care had been impacted by COVID, what practices they've had to change, and how they anticipate their needs would be different post-COVID. The following section outlines the main themes that came from these discussions.

The family child care providers interviewed had varying experiences in their setting during the pandemic. Some closed their child care for a few weeks while others reduced the number of children they care for in their setting per day. All providers explained that the incorporation of new cleaning and sanitation procedures at their child care setting was relatively seamless.

Additionally, FCC providers recognized the hardships many of their parents are encountering as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Providers explained that some of their parents are essential workers, some had been laid off, and some were able to continue their work from home. Regardless of whether children were still coming to child care every day, providers made a conscious effort during the pandemic to continue communication with parents and connect them with needed resources (i.e., links to unemployment benefits, SNAP, etc.). One provider shared:

"There has been a financial and emotional impact on our families. We have been validating parent and child emotions and experiences and doing all we can to connect them to needed resources."

Providers have also used the COVID-19 pandemic as an opportunity to educate their students on the importance of hygiene and health. Explaining the pandemic to preschool aged children can be challenging, but providers shared how they have

Recommendation

As counties introduce early care and education providers to classroom quality initiatives, consider having providers (especially FCC providers) implement a single quality element at a time. YMCA CRS and First 5 San Diego have found much success in doing so as it eases providers into quality practices as opposed to overwhelming them with multiple elements associated with formal QRIS processes simultaneously.

⁵ As of July 1, 2020 the First 5 San Diego Quality Preschool Initiative has ended and is replaced by the First 5 San Diego Learn Well Initiative.

had important conversations with children in ways they can understand. For instance, one provider explained:

“We say [COVID] is like a flu and that’s why it’s important for kiddos to be more mindful of their hygiene so they don’t get sick.”

Providers also explained the new hygiene practices implemented in their classrooms to ensure their staff, children, and families remain safe and healthy during the pandemic. One provider stated:

“Our cleaning procedures have changed drastically. When the child comes in, we go straight to the sink to wash their hands. Parents no longer come into the facility and we have sign-in sheets and hand sanitizer outside for their use. We also have an agreement with all parents that if anyone in their home isn’t feeling well, they’ve agreed to have the child stay home. We want to ensure the safety and health of us, our children, and our families.”

Looking ahead, providers are optimistic they will continue supporting the children in their childcare setting. As they reflect on the pandemic, providers do not currently anticipate that their needs will change post-COVID. Instead, providers anticipate needing to support their families and be empathetic as everyone transitions to their “new normal” – expecting that normal will look different for each family. 🏠