

Judy Centers: The Parent Perspective

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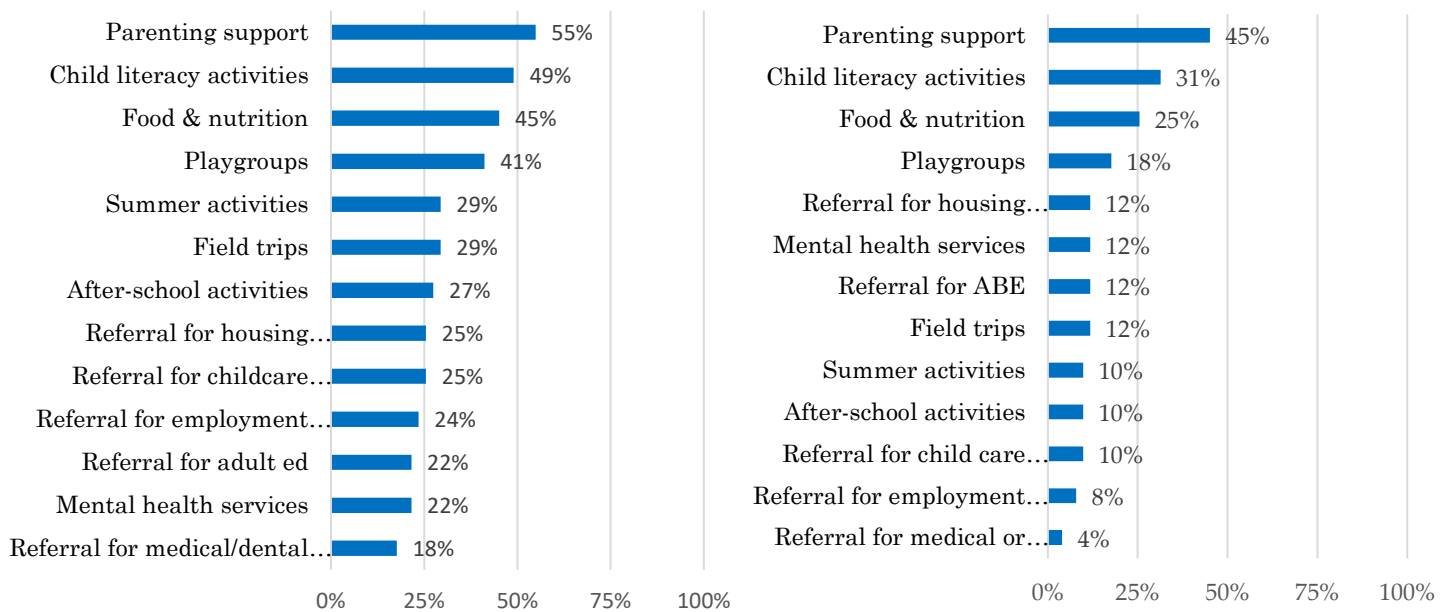
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Judy Centers are designed as wraparound service providers for *families*, so they provide parents/guardians services related to housing, employment, counseling, and utility grant referrals, etc., in addition to programming that supports children’s school readiness. To capture parent/guardian voice (hereafter “parents”, for simplicity), we collected survey data at five sites and conducted focus groups with parents at nine sites. This brief describes overall key findings, and Figure 1 provides a snapshot of parents’ reports of service use and perceived value.

Figure 1. Survey responses on Judy Center services.

What programs, services or activities have you, your family, or your child used at this Judy Center? (select all that apply)

Which three of the programs or activities you used at the Judy Center were the most valuable? (select up to 3)



Judy Center Families. Interview data suggested that Judy Center families take on a variety of structures and childcare arrangements. Some households are led by a single parent and others have two-parent households. Some families have relatives who provide childcare (e.g., grandmothers), and some have childcare shared by parents in separate households.

Judy Centers are deliberately located in schools serving low-income neighborhoods. From our focus groups, we learned that Judy Center parents highly value education and see it as a path for upward mobility. They also reported struggles that research has found common in low-income families: few options for affordable childcare (Chaudry, Morrissey, Weiland, & Yoshikawa, 2017), limited access to jobs (Torpey, 2018), and distrust of institutions (Lareau, 2011).

Program Satisfaction. Survey data showed high levels of satisfaction with Judy Centers; nearly all respondents (97%) reported that they were “very likely” to recommend Judy Centers to a friend (3% were “likely”). Most respondents (76%) strongly agreed that activities and programs at Judy Centers were a good match for their needs, someone there could speak their native language (68%), staff understand where they are coming from (84%), staff cared about them (81%), and programs had helped their child be ready for kindergarten (69%).

Most-used Programming. More than half of respondents (55%) reported using parenting support resources (e.g., classes or counseling), 49% said they used child literacy activities, and 45% used food and nutrition assistance. When parents/guardians were asked which three programs or activities had been most valuable, 45% selected parenting support. (See Figure 1 for full results.)

Social Networks. Respondents indicated that Judy Centers functioned as a hub for families and children to connect socially. Parents described making friends through Judy Center workshops and later helping each other with baby-sitting or advice. One mother said that giving back was a crucial part of the Judy Center experience; she felt it connected families more deeply to the center. These findings offer preliminary evidence that Judy Centers facilitated development of social ties. Judy Center coordinator interview data suggested that social ties—a phenomenon that is a component of social capital—are often missing in the communities that Judy Centers serve.

Mediating Transition Stress. Focus group participants indicated that Judy Center participation helped mediate the stress accompanying the transition to school. Parents contrasted first-day school entry for siblings who had not participated in Judy Centers with siblings who had. Descriptions for older siblings conveyed considerable stress and resistance—for both children and parents. However, descriptions for participating children indicated that school entry was tolerable or even positive. Initial reports suggest that this buffer may extend to other settings, as well. One respondent said:

“We would go to church and she always went to my Sunday School class with me instead of going to hers in the other building. And just out of the clear blue sky one day, because [Judy Center staff] have been working with her, ... she told me one day, ‘Mommy, I’m going to my class now, bye.’ I go, ‘Okay, bye!’ And she walked all up the steps and went to her building to her own Sunday School class, and this summer I’m going to send her to the summer camp at my church. Because I think she’s progressed far enough now.”

Parent Definition of *Kindergarten Readiness*. When parents were asked about what kindergarten readiness meant to them, some mentioned academic benchmarks such as knowing letters, numbers, and one’s name and address. But parents often mentioned independence-related social skills, such as the willingness to enter a classroom alone, as exemplified on first-day school entry. Moreover, parents articulated a clear connection between Judy Center services and the perceived independence of their children. Their comments revealed the critical role of socialization and emotional preparation—for both children and adults—that Judy Centers provided.

Next steps. Judy Centers provide families with needed services, and preliminary data indicate that parents are pleased with centers. An area for improvement could be to develop or increase outreach to fathers, who were underrepresented. Additionally, parents consistently reported a need for safe, affordable childcare. Childcare is front-of-mind for parents and could be a service coordinated by Judy Centers.

Interview data also indicated that independence may be a critical component of parents’ conception of school readiness, a finding that could inform school readiness programming and transition support for children and families. In addition, studies collecting data on perceptions and outcomes for specific programs can inform which are best-received and most effective, for more formally sharing best practices among centers.

Chaudry, A., Morrissey, T., Weiland, C., & Yoshikawa, H. (2017). *Cradle to kindergarten: A new plan to combat inequality*. New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation.

Lareau, A. (2011). *Unequal childhoods: Class, race, and family life* (2nd ed.). Oakland, CA: University of California Press.

Torpey, E. (2018). Measuring the value of education : Career Outlook: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Retrieved October 26, 2018, from <https://www.bls.gov/careeroutlook/2018/data-on-display/education-pays.htm>