



Vermont's Early Childhood
Data & Policy Center

Executive Summary: Plain Language Summary



**2022 Vermont Early Childhood
Family Needs Assessment**



Executive Summary

Overview:

The Early Childhood Family Needs Assessment was a survey led by Building Bright Futures' Families and Communities Committee. It was supported by the Building Bright Futures State Advisory Council Network and the Vermont Integration Prenatal to 3 (VIP-3) grant. More than 600 people took the survey from mid-August to mid-October 2022.

The survey focused on better understanding the experiences that families have with Vermont's early childhood system. Specifically, the survey asked about services and supports for families with children prenatal to age 8. This report provides a close look at how well these services are working for families, the challenges and barriers families face, and what Vermont is doing well for young families.

Survey and Distribution:

Vermont families with children under age 9 shared their experiences of accessing early childhood services and supports.

- The survey asked about families' experiences with accessing a variety of services. These services included child care, early intervention services, healthy food, pediatric care, and transitions between settings and services.
- The survey asked participants to rate their overall experiences with seven different services and supports in Vermont's early childhood system. Then the survey asked people to provide more in-depth feedback on up to three services.

Findings:

- Overall, respondents said they had positive experiences with the services and supports they were asked about. 71% of respondents agreed that their experiences with child care and early learning settings were positive overall. 93% agreed that their experiences were positive in medical care settings.
- Survey respondents suggested that a number of factors made it either easier or harder to access services and supports for their families.

Findings (continued):

- Helpful factors included relationships with staff and providers, communication, services being available in a timely way, and services being located nearby.
- Frequently mentioned barriers included difficulty accessing a service or support due to availability or cost, and difficulty navigating the complex early childhood system.

Limitations:

There are a few limitations to the Early Childhood Family Needs Assessment and our analysis. These include:

- A self-selection bias, meaning that the people who chose to take the survey might be different in some ways from the people who chose not to take it
- Accessibility limitations to the survey itself (including its availability in only English)
- A limited ability to fully analyze a large amount of data
- Continued limitations related to the COVID-19 pandemic that may affect how well the survey results represent the experiences of the whole group

Policy Considerations:

Four policy considerations have resulted from the report's findings, Families and Communities Committee discussions, and discussions with content experts. These policy considerations can be read in full in the report.

1. Evaluate and align Vermont's strategies to inform and connect families to resources

Vermont currently has many ways for families to find early childhood resources and get referrals to services. But families said they had trouble knowing where to look for information and how to navigate systems. An evaluation of existing systems and financing streams will help identify areas for improvement.

2. Review national best practices to reduce paperwork and help all families obtain basic needs (diapers, food, formula, etc.)

Data has shown that white, non-white, and multiracial Vermonters do not all have equal access to nutritious food and other necessities. To best serve and support all young children and their families, it is very important that those running programs or making policies review national best practices to end these disparities.

3. Support the implementation of clear guidance on kindergarten transitions

Positive kindergarten transition experiences are connected to improved academic achievement and positive family engagement. Data from the survey show that families have varied experiences with their children's transitions to kindergarten and that schools handle this transition differently. Guidance and support from the Agency of Education could ease transitions for young children and their families across Vermont. This process should also include stakeholder engagement.

4. Work to integrate mental health services throughout Vermont's early childhood system to make it easier for families with young children to access these services

The findings of the Family Needs Assessment reinforce the recommendations of the Mental Health Integration Council, which include a focus on increasing the size of the mental health workforce and increasing mental health services. Families also receive or get connected to mental health services through Children's Integrated Services, Parent Child Centers, Head Start, and other programs that should also be used to help make sure families can get the help they need.