

## Measuring Quality in Head Start through the Lens of Families who Have Children with Special Needs

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### Abstract

*Childcare quality is a major factor in the long-term development of children with and without disabilities. However, parents often choose childcare based on economic concerns rather than quality. This study seeks to examine the perceptions of parents who have children with disabilities on six different indicators. The results of this survey highlight the need to include parents in the childcare quality conversation and use their insights to make improvements in daily practice, thereby, increasing positive outcomes for their children.*

*Keywords: childcare, disabilities, quality*

### 1. Introduction

Choice of childcare is often defined by variables associated with personal family characteristics or childcare quality (Scopelliti & Musatti, 2012). However, among families in the low-income strata or families who have children with disabilities, cost is found to be the dominant factor in influencing the choice of child-care arrangement (Peyton et al., 2001). Parent's satisfaction may be heavily influenced by costs and a parent's concern with program quality may play a secondary role. As a result, when parents are asked about the effectiveness of their child's program, a valid reflection of their thoughts and feelings may not occur. A need exists to capture the thoughts and feelings of parents whose income is in the lower economic strata that is comprehensive, valid and reliable. This is especially true for families whose children have individualized needs that require an Individualized Service Program (IEP) or an Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP).

The Office of Head Start (OHS) has systematized different measures of accountability aimed at improving quality among Head Start grantees. Measures such as the CLASS Pre-K monitoring review (CLASS®) and the Head Start Family and Child Experiences Survey (FACES) have proven useful in understanding the quality of the Head Start learning environment from the viewpoint of teachers and administrators. However, to fully understand the quality within a Head Start program, assessment must go beyond the learning environment and include the voice of the parent of the child with a disability (Fantuzzo et al., 2006). A need exists for a comprehensive framework that examines the parent's evaluation of their child's experiences and the services provided at the child-care center (Scopelliti & Musatti, 2013), goes beyond the cost factor (Peyton, Jacobs, O'Brien and Roy, 2001) and helps the greater Head Start organization fully understand program qualities from the parent's point of view (Zigler & Balla, 1982).

Early childhood experiences in quality childcare centers can promote positive long term outcomes for children who are not typically developing. In addition, childcare also provides opportunities for families to have reliable and stable employment (Wiglarz-Ward et al., 2018). However, the rewards of childcare for children with disabilities and their families are only realized when the children receive quality care (Henly, & Adams, 2018). Childcare that is characterized by warm healthy relationships between the parent and the teacher or center have been found crucial in helping children develop self-regulation skills and later academic success (Cadima et al., 2016).

When quality in childcare is not examined in terms of parent perception, a gap may exist between what is thought be good by a teacher or administrator and what is perceived by the parent. Consequently, the lack of a reciprocal understandings may lead to break downs in relationships, thereby, causing suboptimal outcomes rather than optimal outcomes for the child.

The following report analyzes a survey that was developed by a local Head Start Advisory Board and distributed to parents of children with specialized needs in hopes of closing the perception gap between parents, teachers, and administrators. The survey was distributed in a large Head Start Program servicing over 4000 children. Among these 4000 children, over 1200 received specialized services for atypical development. The survey was created to gather parent perceptions concerning the quality of childcare their child with disabilities was receiving.

**2. Methodology**

**2.1 Setting**

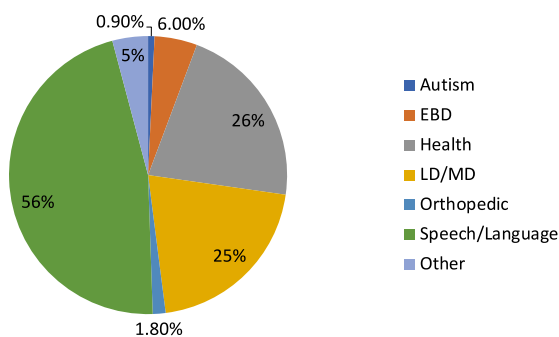
The Head Start program from where the survey was administered serves over four thousand children in an urban metropolitan area in the southwest. The agency’s

Head Start program seeks to address education, nutrition, health, and parental involvement. All children in the center qualify for services by meeting federal poverty guidelines. In each of the participating classrooms there were two adults, a lead teacher and an assistant.

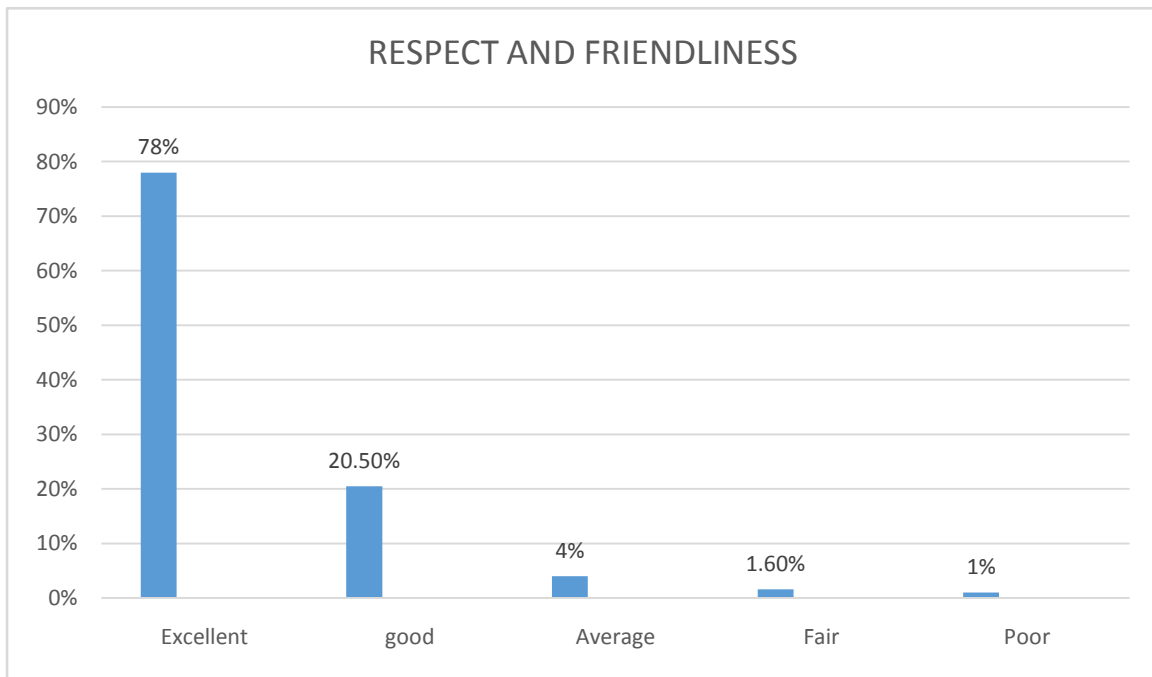
Twelve percent of this Head Start student population are identified as needed individualized help from and Individualized Education Program (IEP) or and Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP). These children are supported through a Special Services Department within the local Head Start that provides individualized services to all children with an IEP or an IFSP. Children receive three different types of services through the Special Services Department: (a)Identification and intervention, (b) preventive and remedial treatment, and (c) prevention of problems related to mental wellness. Targeted focus is put on identification, service delivery, intervention, and transition to public schools.

Table 1: Percentage of students who have disabilities in the local Head Start program.

**Disability Groups of Children**



- 1. How would you rate the respect given you and the friendliness of the Center professional support staff (Family Advocate, Special Services, Nutrition, Education, Health Staff)?  
 Excellent (78%),  
 Good(20.5%),  
 Average (4%),  
 Fair (1.6%),  
 Poor (.1%).



**2.3 Instrument**

Head Start of Greater Dallas created and implemented a forty-eight item parent satisfaction survey regarding various types of services to the parents of over 4000 children in the 46 center locations throughout Dallas County. Questions included Likert type response items and yes-no response items. The survey was validated by an initial review of parents and administrators connected with Head Start of Greater Dallas. A second review was conducted by an expert in question construction to ensure the questions were clear and not confusing. A pilot test was run with parents prior to the 2017 formal rollout of the survey. Internal consistency was checked and final revisions were made to the survey.

Question	Poor	Fair	Average	Good	Excellent	Non Responsive
How would you rate the respect and friendliness to children and families?						
How would you rate the assistance you and your child receive for emotional well-being to reduce areas of concern related to behavior challenges and positive communication?						
How would you rate the assistance Special Services has provided to you on implementation of goals/objectives recommended for your child?						
How would you rate effectiveness of collaborative services provided to your child to address his/her individual special needs, such as speech, occupational therapy, etc.?						
How would you rate the guidance provided by Special Services staff to advocate for your child's individuals needs in/out of Head Start?						
	Yes	No				
Does the parent activities provided to you support the goals you have for your child's development and learning						

Figure 1: Questionnaire provided to families of children receiving Special Support services for IEP or IFSP.

## 2.4. Population

Survey respondents (n=1279) were disaggregated by gender, ethnicity and age. Seventy nine percent were female, 12.1% were male, and 8.8% did not report gender. Ages of the respondents were divided between parents in the 20-29 age group (40%) and those in the 30-39 (39%) age group. Twenty percent of the respondents were 40-60 years of age.

## 2.5. Data Collection

The survey was made available to parents in a paper pencil format at each center. Parents were given the opportunity to complete them at the individual Head Start centers.

## 2.6. Data Analysis

Data was analyzed by counting the number of responses for each category and then entering that data into an EXCEL spread sheet. Frequencies and percentages were calculated for each item. Results were displayed in individual graphs for each questions.

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The results of the survey revealed a high degree of satisfaction for the Special Services Program by the families of children with and IEP or an IFSP. Individual responses to questions are stated below.

Questions One of the survey asked, “How would you rate the respect given you and the friendliness of the Center professional support staff (Family Advocate, Special Services, Nutrition, Education, Health Staff)? Parents responded favorably question one. Excellent (78%), Good (20.5%), Average (4%), Fair (1.6%), Poor (.1%).

- 2. How would you rate the assistance Special Services has provided to you on implementation of goals/objectives recommended for your child?

Excellent - 45.4%

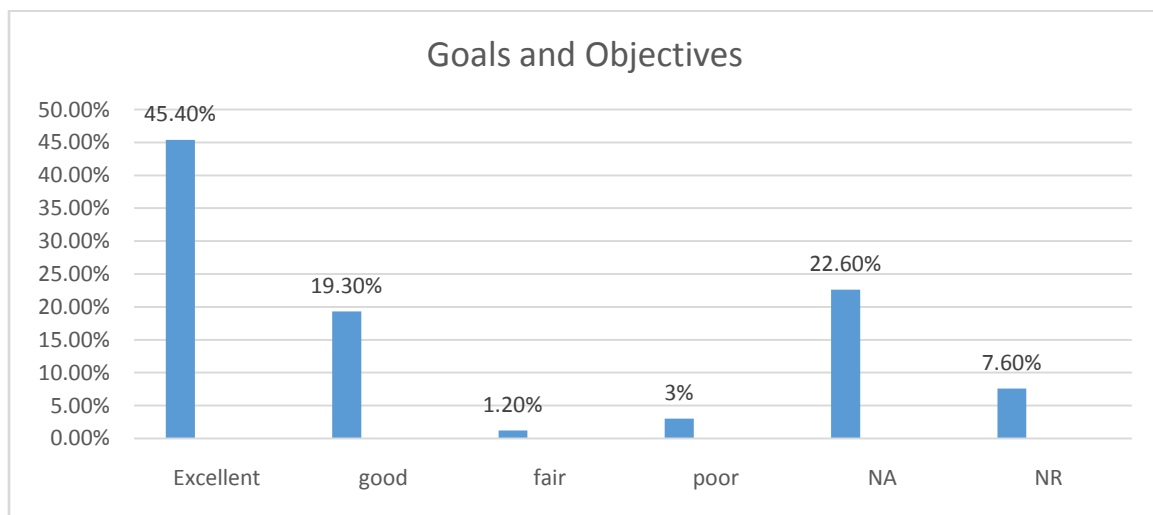
Good - 19.3%

Fair - 1.2%

Poor -3%

NA -22.6%,

NR -7.6%

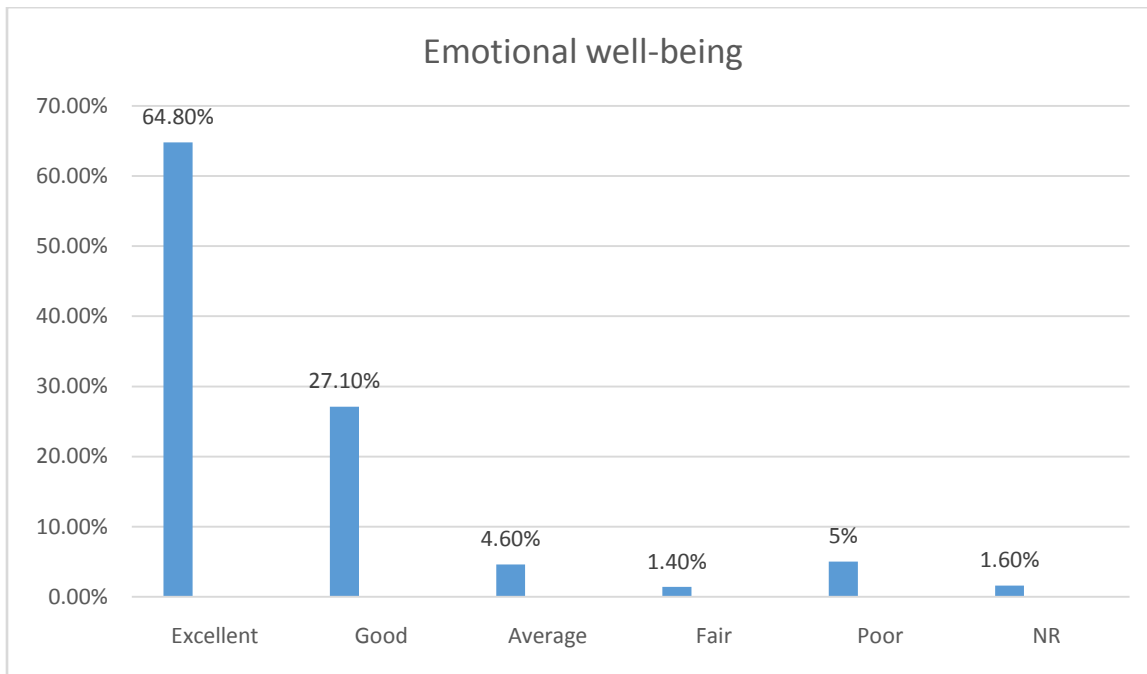


Question Two of the survey asked families to rate the assistance that the Special Services Department provided in helping implement the goals and objectives of their children. The results revealed that 45.4% rated the results excellent, 19.3% good, 1.2% fair, .2% poor. Twenty two percent of the responders stated that this question did not apply to their family and 7.6% did not respond to the question.

TABLE 3. Emotional well-being

3. How would you rate the assistance you and your child received for emotional well-being to reduce areas of concern related to behavior challenges and positive communication?

- Excellent 64.8%, Good 27.1%, Average 4.6%, Fair 1.4%, Poor 5% NR 1.6%

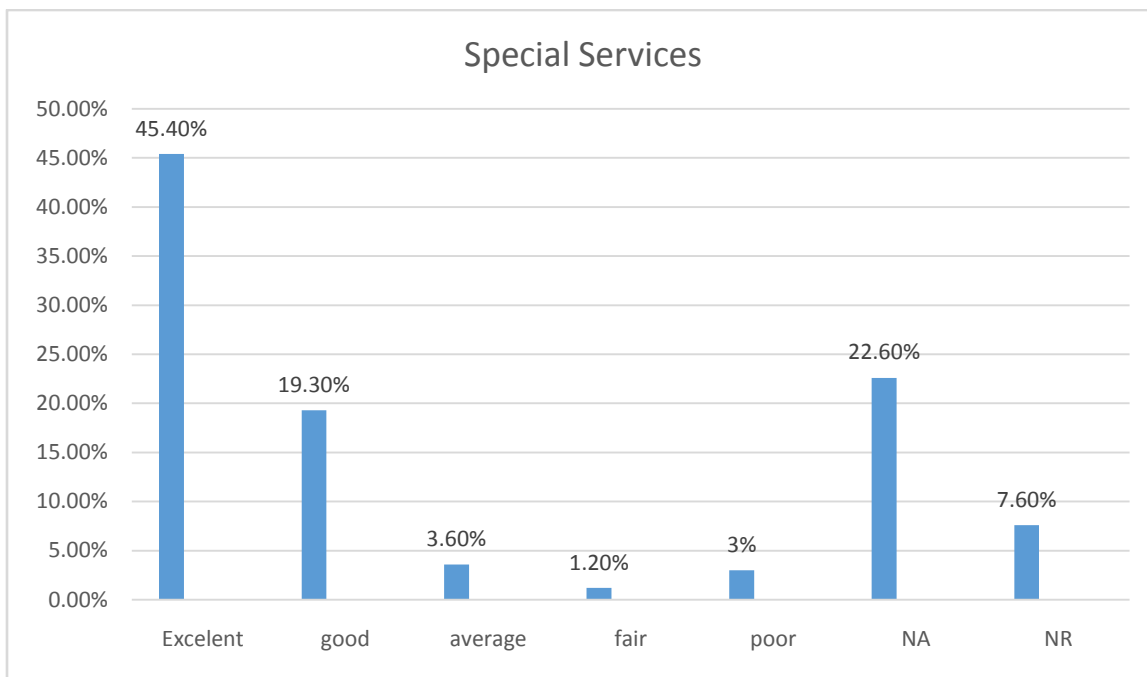


Question Three asked respondents to rate the assistance that received for increasing emotional well being to reduce behavior challenges and increase positive communication. The results revealed a positive trend (Excellent= 64.8%, Good = 27.1%, Average= 4.6%, Fair= 1.4%, Poor =.5% NR =1.6%).

TABLE 4. Special Services

• 4. How would you rate the assistance Special Services has provided to you on implementation of goals/objectives recommended for your child?

- Excellent 45.4%, Good 19.3%, Average 3.6%, Fair 1.2%, Poor 3% NA 22.6% NR 7.6 %

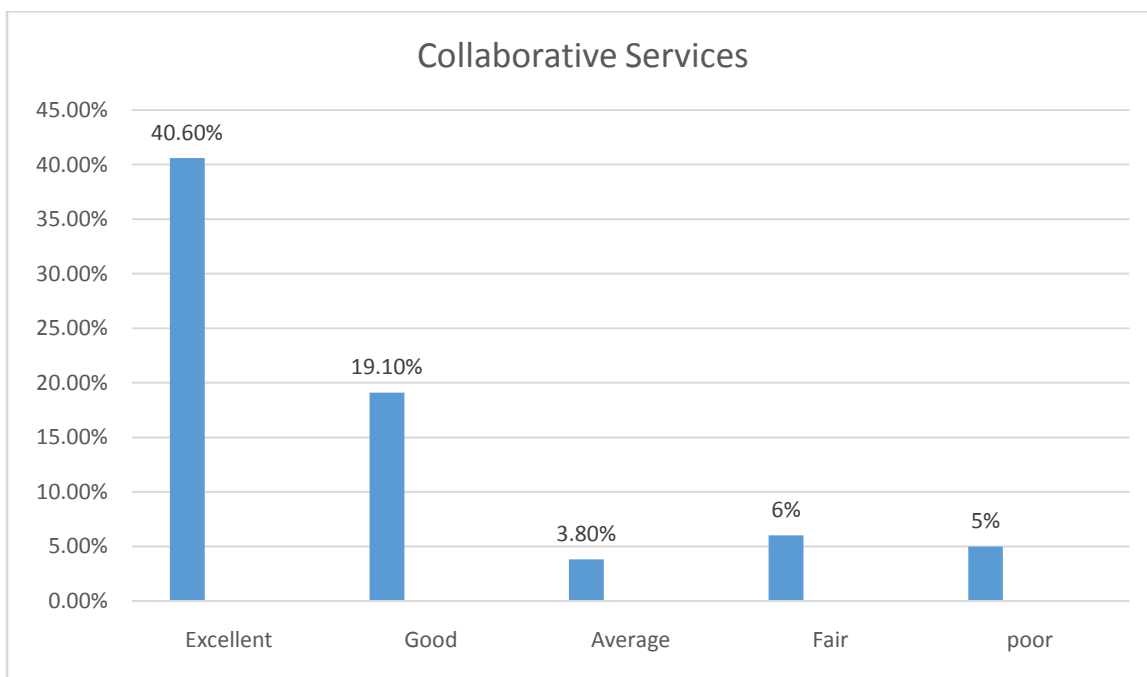


Question Four asked families to rate the effectiveness of collaborative services provided to your child to address his/her individual special needs, such as speech, occupational therapy, etc.? Forty percent rated collaborative services as excellent, 19.1% rated the services as good, 3.8% rated the services as average, .6% as fair and .5% as poor.

TABLE 5. Collaborative Services

5. How would you rate the effectiveness of collaborative services provided to your child to address his/her individual special needs, such as speech, occupational therapy, etc.?

- Excellent 40.6%, Good 19.1%, Average 3.8%, Fair .6%, Poor 5%

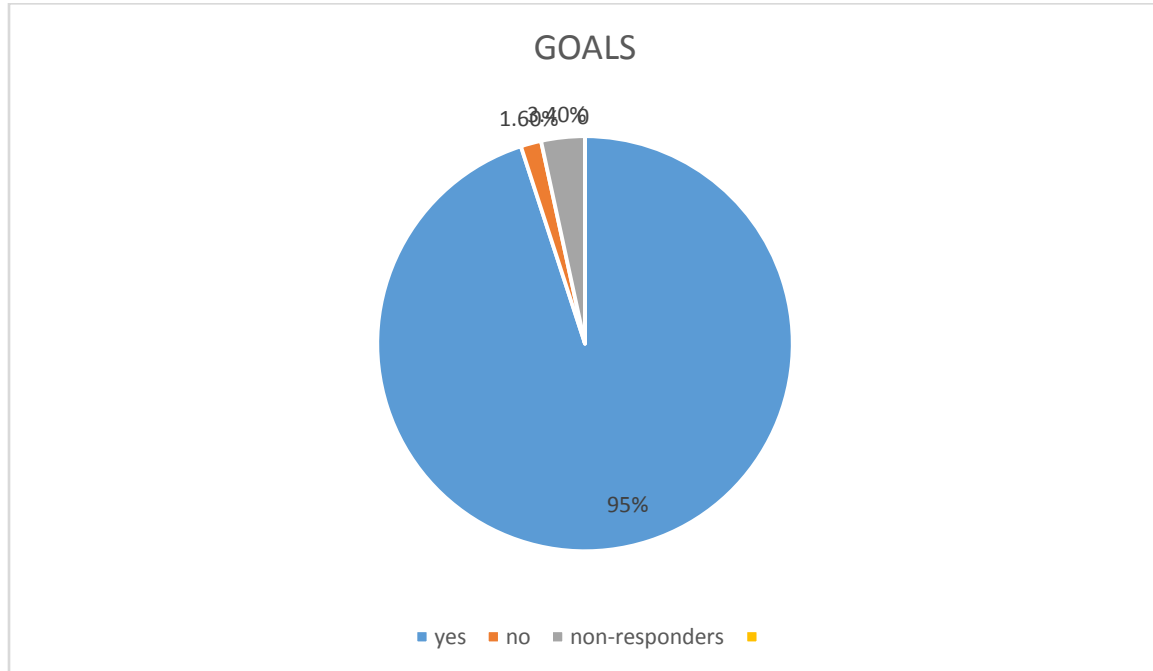


Question Five stated, “How would you rate the guidance provided by Special Services staff to advocate for your child’s individual needs in/out of Head Start? Families responded with 39.5% in the excellent category, 17.7% in the good category, 3.1% in the average category, .9% in the fair category and .2% poor.

TABLE 6. GOALS

6. Do the parent activities provided to you support the goals you have for your child's development and learning?

• Yes 95%, No 1.6% Non-responder 3.4%



A final question asked parents to rate the support they felt they received for their child's development and learning. 95% responded with a yes that they felt positive about the support they received for their child's development and learning while 1.6% responded no. 3.4 percent of the families respondents did not answer this question.

### 3. Results

Results of the parent satisfaction survey indicated a high degree of satisfaction with the Head Start Services. Most questions were rated in the excellent range (>40%). However, percentage differences existed among the excellence ratings. For example, the difference between question one concerning friendliness of staff (70%) and question five concerning individual differences (40%) was sufficiently great enough for further examination.

### 4. Summary

Parent perceptions concerning the relationship they have with a childcare center are an integral component in defining quality and ensuring long term success for children with special education needs. The findings of this study demonstrated that a simple survey is one way to analyze parent perceptions, note areas of celebration, and identify areas of concern. Further work can be done through individual interviews with parents to better understand how the childcare center can improve this important reciprocal relationship between parents, teachers, and administrators.

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