

# **"Come and Take a Walk": Listening to Early Head Start Parents on School-Readiness as a Matter of Child, Family, and Community Health**

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We explored the perspectives and experiences of low-income, predominantly African American families regarding children's school readiness. Our research, which involved qualitative interviews, ethnographic case studies, and "photovoice" methods, focused on families participating in the national evaluation of Early Head Start.

While valuing academic skills, study parents emphasized the importance of social and emotional health in regard to both children's and parents' readiness to begin school. These developments are especially critical given the challenges parents perceive in local school environments.

On the basis of a social ecology framework, we argue that psychological and environmental dimensions of school-readiness are public health matters and that understanding the perspectives of low-income and minority parents on such issues is a critical aspect of health communication dedicated to eliminating health disparities. (*Am J Public Health*. 2005;95:617-625. doi: 10.2105/AJPH.2004.041616)

*I wish that a lot of these folks that were making these laws would come and take a walk. Not just take a walk, but really get in and see it. The kind of situation they're creating.*

—Early Head Start parent

Listening to and learning from community members is a critical aspect of public health communication dedicated to eliminating health disparities. In a study involving families of children in Pittsburgh, Pa, who participated in the national evaluation of Early Head Start (EHS),<sup>1</sup> we explored the perspectives and experiences of low-income, predominantly African American parents in regard to child development and school-readiness. Our focus is on social and emotional health and the health-promoting functions of the community and social environment as key pathways to early childhood learning. Starting from the premise that conceptions of school-readiness are culturally diverse, we bring the voices and perspectives of local community members to the forefront of discussions of this policy issue.

Our research contributes insights about the synergistic interaction of social-emotional

and environmental factors in school-readiness and early childhood learning. We discuss 3 prominent themes that emerged in parent interviews: (1) parents' concerns regarding strengthening their children's social capacities and ensuring their emotional health in preparation for school entry, (2) parents' views of school environments as challenging and potentially threatening, and (3) the transition that parents themselves undergo in preparation for their children's school entry, including their own need for social and emotional support to allow them to adequately respond to their children's new challenges.

This interplay of psychological and environmental factors in terms of school-readiness can be effectively examined through social-ecological approaches developed and applied in the field of public health.<sup>2</sup> Building on this framework, we argue that school-readiness is a public health matter and that the perspectives of low-income and minority families are necessary to inform public health policy, practice, and research intended to eliminate health disparities related to early childhood development and learning.

## **APPROACHES TO "SCHOOL-READINESS"**

Since the creation of the National Education Goals Panel in 1990, elementary education policy has largely revolved around issues of "school-readiness," namely, what children bring with them from other life experiences to their early elementary years that either enhances or inhibits their capacity to learn.<sup>3</sup> Recent federal initiatives—for example, President Bush's "No Child Left Behind" and "Good Start, Grow Smart" proposals and the new Head Start National Reporting System<sup>4</sup>—rest on a narrow interpretation of these issues. This interpretation emphasizes literacy and preschool academic achievement while ignoring more comprehensive understandings of child health and development. One result has been a relative neglect of social and emotional factors in learning and of the influence of social and economic environments on a child's capacity to learn. For example, recent policy debates have devoted considerable attention to the lack of academic readiness on the part of minority children while focusing scant attention on environmentally based disparities that affect academic readiness and the social and emotional as well as physical health of children.

While one could argue that current policy initiatives are not soundly based on research on early learning and school-readiness,<sup>5-7</sup> the existing research itself has several limitations. One problem is that many studies of school-readiness have narrowed the scope of investigation to an almost exclusive focus on cognitive skills.<sup>8-10</sup> Studies that attempt to predict or explain school-readiness tend to concentrate on a narrow cluster of explanatory variables, such as single parenthood,<sup>11</sup> race/ethnicity,<sup>9,11</sup> parenting styles,<sup>10</sup> or peer interactions.<sup>12</sup> Even in those studies in which there

is recognition of the influence of parenting and home environments on school-readiness, these factors are treated as passive and static variables rather than complex and dynamic facilitators of child development.<sup>10, 12</sup>

A fundamentally different approach was put forth in a recent report published by the Institute of Medicine, *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development*.<sup>13</sup> This report argued for a more comprehensive approach that explores the relationships among multiple influences on a child's development, which is understood as being "shaped by a dynamic and continuous interaction between biology and experience."<sup>13p 13</sup> Of particular importance is the attention given to social and emotional factors and to nurturing relationships as cornerstones for children's healthy development and capacity to learn (see also Raver<sup>14</sup> and Fantuzzo<sup>15</sup>). *From Neurons to Neighborhoods* emphasized the effects of environmental supports (e.g., quality child care and preschool programs) and stressors (e.g., poverty, racism, dislocation, and violence) on such relationships and thus on children's social and emotional health. In contrast to some of the other literature focused more narrowly on school-readiness, the Institute of Medicine report attempted to provide an integrated view of cognitive, social-emotional, and environmental dimensions of child health and development.

This perspective converges with an emerging consensus in the field of public health regarding the importance of ecological approaches.<sup>2, 16, 17</sup> Such approaches are critical for researchers and practitioners working with diverse communities to address public health problems that have multiple and complex dimensions. Within this framework, concerns about school-readiness and children's learning become public health issues. An ecological approach guides us to a focus on the role of social environments—including questions of economic sufficiency, social connectivity, physical safety, supportive public policies, and respect for cultural values—in promoting the social and emotional health of children.

While the analysis put forth in *From Neurons to Neighborhoods* provides a conceptual foundation and guide for our work, it too has

certain limitations. For example, while the report notes the important role of parents and other primary caregivers in the healthy social, emotional, and intellectual development of young children, there are no accounts of parental perspectives and experiences, especially from parents residing in low-income and minority communities. Related to this issue is an inadequate understanding of cultural differences concerning school-readiness and success, that is, what these constructs mean to different families and communities. Finally, while there is substantial evidence that social and economic environments affect families as they raise children and support their learning, our understanding of such environmental contexts, particularly as conceived by parents, remains fragmented and inadequate.

### **SCHOOL-READINESS IN THE EHS CONTEXT: METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

Working within the framework of community-based participatory research,<sup>18</sup> our study, in contrast, privileged the voices of low-income, predominantly minority parents, engaging them in a discussion of both the meaning and context of school-readiness. We grounded our research in a social ecology model of health. This model posits that health consists of many interacting dimensions (e.g., physical, emotional, social, economic, and spiritual) and is significantly influenced by the multilayered social environments in which people live. We added a critical-interpretive approach as articulated in the field of medical anthropology.<sup>19, 20</sup> This approach guided us in focusing our discovery process on parents' ideas, beliefs, and perspectives about school-readiness while also paying attention to social, economic, and political factors that shape their experiences of "readying" their children for school.

Participants in the present study consisted of families in the greater Pittsburgh metropolitan area who had taken part in an evaluation of EHS and had agreed to continue in a prekindergarten follow-up study. Representing an expansion of the long-standing Head Start program, EHS is designed to provide high-quality health and development services to

low-income pregnant women and families with children in the birth to 3-year age range.<sup>21</sup> The Head Start program, initially designed for 4-year-olds preparing for school entry, was created in response to growing disparities in health, development, and educational performance between low-income and middle-income children. As researchers and policymakers discovered that risks for such disparities often emerge much earlier in life, EHS was created to provide comprehensive, intensive, and preventive services to infants and toddlers and their families.

The Family Foundations EHS program in Pittsburgh, Pa. operates through a home-visiting model of service delivery in which program staff visit weekly with parents and children in their own homes. The purpose of home visits is to foster strong parent-child relationships, assess children's health and development, and provide play and other activities that support positive growth and address developmental delays. Home visitors and other program staff also offer parenting support and education and work with parents to identify and achieve family goals around matters such as employment, adult education, housing, and family relationships.

A national evaluation of EHS involving 17 research sites and 3001 children and families was conducted from 1996 to 2001.<sup>1</sup> The Family Foundations program served as one of the research sites. During the evaluation, Family Foundations provided services to families in 3 communities: a public housing development in the city of Pittsburgh, a working-class borough on the outskirts of Pittsburgh, and a former steel mill town located in a more rural setting. One hundred ninety-five families from these 3 communities, all of whom met Head Start eligibility criteria, were recruited into the evaluation sample at the Pittsburgh site. The national EHS evaluation involved a random-assignment research design, and thus half of the study families received program services and half were assigned to a control group that received only existing community services.

All families who participated in the original (birth to age 3 years) EHS evaluation were invited to participate in a follow-up prekindergarten study. One hundred fifty families at the Pittsburgh site completed data collection for

the prekindergarten follow-up and thus represented the participants in the present study. According to enrollment information obtained by the program at study intake, 91% of the 150 families had incomes below the federal poverty level. Of the parents we interviewed, 104 identified themselves as African American; 41, as White; and 5, as biracial. Of the White mothers, more than 40% indicated that their child was biracial. Our methods for the study reported here consisted of qualitative interviews conducted with 150 parents, ethnographic case studies involving 7 families, "photovoice" methodology involving 7 families, and a focus group with the program's parent policy council. These methods are described more fully in the paragraphs to follow.

To learn about perspectives of low-income and minority parents on school-readiness, we conducted qualitative interviews with the primary caregivers (predominantly mothers) of 150 children enrolled in the prekindergarten study. In these interviews, completed during the spring and summer preceding a child's entry to kindergarten, parents were asked to discuss how they think children learn, what school-readiness means to them, how they thought starting school would be for their child, their role as a parent in helping their child make this transition, and how community and policy contexts affected school-readiness. Open-ended questions were combined with structured assessments of the child's development and parent-child interactions and collection of demographic information and measures of parenting attitudes and practices.

To gain a more in-depth picture of parental perspectives on school-readiness, we also completed 7 ethnographic case studies with a subgroup of the 150 families. These were families who actively participated in program services in each of the EHS communities, and we had been working with 4 of the families since the child was an infant. Case studies involved several home visits over the period in which the child was 4 to 6 years of age until his or her completion of kindergarten. During home visits, we engaged parents in more narrative explorations of their views and experiences of child development and school-readiness. These visits also gave us the opportunity

to conduct informal participant observations of families' preparations for children's school entry.

Using a variation of the methodology known as "photovoice,"<sup>22,23</sup> we provided each case study family with a single-use camera and asked them to take photographs of "getting ready for school." Photos were taken by parents and occasionally other adult family members. Because the photovoice method is naturalistic, parents were given minimal instruction and training on the process. Instead, we intended the parents to use the cameras as part of their everyday lives to record activities and scenes that conveyed their own understandings of school-readiness. We collected the cameras, developed the film, and then returned to the family's home with the photographs, using them as a vehicle for further discussion of experiences and perspectives regarding school-readiness. Each family was given an album containing all of the photographs they had taken and asked to select one picture for an enlargement. A small sample of the photographs taken by parents accompanies this article.

Audiotaped interviews were transcribed and coded. After development of a basic set of codes, a qualitative analysis team led by the principal investigator reviewed coded transcripts, identifying major themes and issues. In a parallel process, the researcher who conducted the majority of the case studies and interviews reviewed parent narratives and field notes, employing a more ethnographic approach in discerning patterns and themes.<sup>24,25</sup> Important in the overall analytical process was the use of triangulation, whereby preliminary findings from these 2 analytic processes and from each strand of data collection (i.e., qualitative interviews, case study discussions, photographs taken by parents, and participant observations) were compared to enable a clearer and more robust interpretation of key issues and relationships.

We also employed a reflexive approach whereby we shared preliminary findings with the EHS policy council that represents the parent leadership of the program. This presentation was followed by a discussion eliciting parent leaders' own ideas in regard to school-readiness, thus adding a further layer of parental perspectives.

## RESULTS

In presenting our results we focus, as mentioned earlier, on 3 major themes: parents' concerns about their children's social and emotional development in preparation for school entry, parents' views of school environments as challenging and potentially threatening, and the transition that parents undergo to prepare for their children's entry into elementary school. We do not analyze here the effects of EHS or Head Start on school-readiness, nor do we recount what families told us about the role of EHS in helping them prepare their children for school. Instead, we focus on themes common to both program and control group families and thus on matters of general concern to low-income families and minority families in local EHS communities.

### Social and Emotional Readiness

I also think that [school-readiness] means having self-confidence in themselves, and in what they can do, in meeting other people, in developing social skills. Which I think is why Head Start or preschool is wonderful for kindergarten, so they can develop those social skills. . . . It's not just academically, I think it's



"I'm confident and I'm ready."

Photo courtesy of Patrice Burgess.

socially, emotionally. I think that if you look at a holistic approach to a child as far as getting ready, there is so much that you can do to help encourage them and help them to become excited for school.—EHS parent

EHS parents agree with policymakers that cognitive and academic skills are important for success in school. However, diverging from the dominant policy discourse, they believe that social skills and emotional readiness are equally critical. Similar to the preceding quotation, one mother told us that, “for me, school-readiness for [my daughter] would be that she’s emotionally ready to go to school. Um, that there is not going to be a separation issue. That she is at the stage now where she can sit and pay attention and follow directions.” Another mother commented, “I think socially is a very important part, to be socially ready for school. Because a lot of children are not used to it, and it’s hard to get them away from their mothers. Where I don’t think that [my daughter] will have that problem because of Early Head Start and because of Head Start.”

EHS parents clearly linked their concerns about social and emotional development to their understanding that young children learn in social contexts and from social relationships. One mother said: “They just learn by playing. Learn by interaction with others. They learn by observation, they learn by watching other people. And they learn by showing me things also.” Another commented:

Learning . . . you know, they’ll teach each other things. Something one kid knows, she’ll tell her, and something she knows—it’s just like a big circle. You know, she’ll come home telling me things that someone else is doing or saying, and like, [the parent asks] “Well, where did you learn that from?” You know.

Many of the photographs taken by parents focused on practical aspects of getting ready for school, for example, preparing a new backpack and donning new shoes and school uniforms. But even these material symbols of school-readiness acquire meaning in the context of social relationships. Most commonly, children are portrayed as showing items, posing with them, or trying them on for others. Even parents who at first focused on practical and academic matters added the importance

of emotional and social skills. For example: “He’s got his clothes, his shoes, his little backpack. He knows his math, he knows his colors, he knows how to read. He does share. He knows how to share, he knows how to communicate with other people, he knows how to play with other people.”

Throughout their narratives, parents expressed a concern that children develop empathic skills and cooperative relationships. One mother, when asked how she assessed her daughter’s school-readiness, said: “I think her strengths are that she gets along with everyone. She’s a very, very sensitive little girl. She’s very sensitive, and she’s easy for adults and kids to like. . . . But she’s going to make it. I know she is. She’s really strong.” This statement indicates both a valuing of the child’s social and emotional responsiveness and a concern that she not be socially or emotionally exploited.

Some parents, in thinking about the new school environment their child would be entering, moved from talking about social cooperation to talking about social compliance. One mother, for example, saw her role as “helping them understand that they are going to have to play or interact with other children, and how important it is to share, be courteous, be polite, and always listen to your teacher.” While parents wanted to prepare

children to “get along” with others, including respecting teachers and other authority figures, they were also concerned that children have self-respect and know how to “stand up for themselves.” This tension reflected parents’ ambivalent attitudes toward the schools their children would soon attend.

### School Environments and Cultures

More than simply preparing children to be “good citizens,” many EHS parents suggested that strong social and emotional skills were necessary for their children to survive challenging, even threatening, school environments. One major contribution of our study is an enhanced understanding of how many low-income parents and minority parents experience school as a foreign and sometimes dangerous place.

The perceived “foreignness” of school environments might simply signal expectations for new forms of behavior and self-control. School-based learning, similar to learning at home and in the community, is social in nature. However, most parents noted that schools have definite rules structuring such social interactions and requiring a high degree of emotional regulation. For example, several parents expressed the same idea as this mother: “If they know how to sit there and listen, then they’re ready for school.”



“All ready.”

Photo courtesy of Amber Jackson.

Such comments frequently contrasted with the more active modes of learning parents had described when initially asked "How do children learn?" Some parents elaborated on this idea of self-control. For example:

Knowing that you use your inside voice, and that you can't just get up when you're ready to go. And we work all the time on the fact that you have to wait your turn before you speak. That you can't blurt out, and that you have to respect other people's property. . . . So I'm just more worried about the socialization transition from preschool to day care, and day care now into a formal school setting.

According to another parent, "I would say that I have concerns about his 'hyperness.' Not being able to sit for a long period of time, or being interested in more than one thing. Like if the teacher is talking or reading or something like that, he may not be interested for very long." Still other parents spoke more generally about the mismatch between school cultures or policies and young children's needs. For instance:

It's like people are rushing, expecting younger kids to hurry and grow up. [Instead] expect them to be younger kids, and then we wouldn't have any of those problems. But now it's the state that's rushing the younger kids to hurry up and grow up, so that they can be able to get them in there and get them out quick.

They're supposed to let them learn at their own pace, not just force them to learn quick. I don't know. She's gonna get frustrated if I push all of that onto her right away.

Perceived dangers included racism, class prejudice, and disrespect for individual children and families. For example, one parent commented, "Some people is racist around here, and I don't like that. I look at everybody as one color: green. Light green and dark green . . . but we have some people who are very racist, who don't let their kids go to school with Black children." Other parents talked more about physical risks from bullying and other forms of violent behavior. For instance: "I want to help her to be able to recognize, you know, what's right from wrong. It's like, I don't want her to be like bullied or something at school and not know what to do about it, and not say anything because you're

like scared, or whatever." One parent, reflecting on both national and local concerns, said:

Violence . . . just it seem like all the kids they go to school and they shoot each other. You see that all over the news. It's making me feel like I don't want to send my kids to school. If I could stay home and teach them I would. What if I get a call that someone shot my kids? Or a kid bring a gun to school? I'm always afraid of that. I'm so scared.

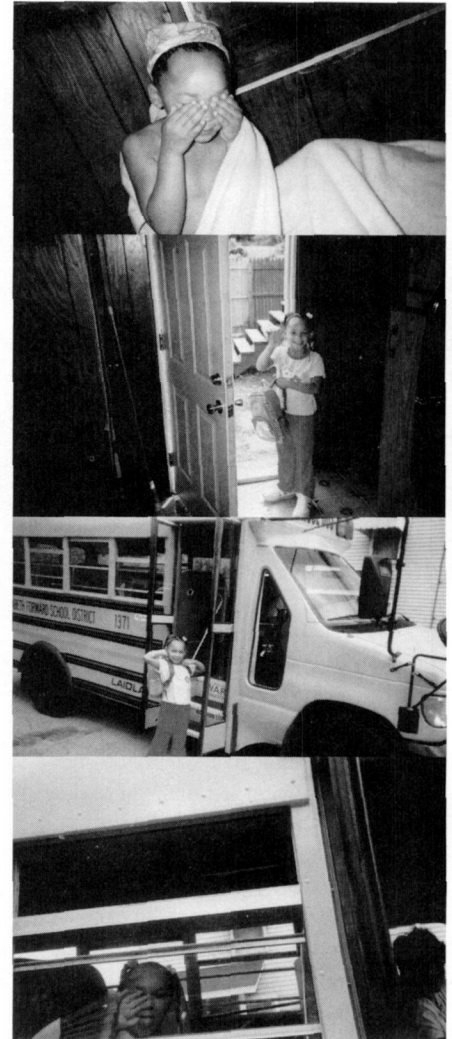
Many families were concerned with fortifying their children socially and emotionally so that they could successfully face and transcend such challenges. One mother, who took a sequence of photographs demonstrating her child's transition from home to school, commented:

I want things [at school] to be the way it should be. So I will do my best to make sure it is like that. No drama. No name-calling. I don't want them to have to experience no racial prejudice, or anything like that. You can face prejudice from your own race, so I just hope that everything goes right. But I know the way [this town] is, and she's going to be tested. Sooner or later. And I hope that when it comes to be that time, that everything I taught her, and everything she learned from everyone else comes into play.

Some parents used this discussion as an opportunity to reiterate the importance of social skills in the school environment. For example:

For me it means how you act socially, as well as academically. Most important to me is how he'll do—not so much academically—because I don't worry so much about that, because I'm sure he'll do fine, but more the social part. I want him to be able to be responsible, because he's very irresponsible. I know he's only five, but when you're in school, no one is going to tell you to get your book bag if you leave it . . . but, socially, 'cause I know how kids can be mean in terms of fighting. I'm kind of worried about that, but I also know that there will be changes and that there are things that he'll have to go through. So socially is a very important thing.

Turning the notion of "school-readiness" on its head, numerous parents also questioned whether, and to what extent, the schools were ready for their children, their specific cultural backgrounds, and their individual needs. Several pointedly asked our interviewers "Are schools ready for our children?" Some talked about a child's specific developmental needs and expressed concern that these needs



"From home to school."

Photos courtesy of Audelia Amoah.

would not be addressed by local schools. For instance:

[School will be] traumatizing. Because [he] lacks social skills. He don't talk. I mean, he don't talk to the kids. He plays by himself. He very rarely speaks to his teachers. . . . I'm afraid [he] might stand in the corner and peen on himself, and nobody's going to know. And some kid might hit him, and he's going to stand in the corner and cry.

Parent leaders on the EHS policy council expressed concerns that teachers would not recognize and celebrate the strengths of "our children." These leaders also felt that teachers, like parents, need to learn to "follow the child"; in other words, teachers should learn how to individualize and adapt to specific children. Such an adaptation was believed to



**"Are schools ready for us?"**

be more appropriate than children being "ready for" (i.e., adapting to) the individual teacher.

In regard to the photovoice exercise, parents took very few photographs in the school environment. Instead, most of the photos were taken in home environments and show relaxed poses and engaged interactions as the primary context for "getting ready" for school. Except for the leaders of the EHS policy council, parents rarely expressed the expectation that they would be actively involved in the school itself, which raises the question of whether parents themselves find the environments of local schools intimidating. This does not, however, mean that parents are uninvolved in their children's education. Rather, the parents in our study viewed their role at home and in the community as primary in readying and supporting their children's transition into school.

### Roles and Needs of Parents

The preceding leads directly to the role of parents themselves in school-readiness. Many parents suggested that it is equally important that they be "ready for school." A child's entry into school can be emotionally stressful for parents in that they have to adjust to a new social situation, routine, and changing re-

lationship with their child. Of most importance, they have to be ready and able to help their child cope with the challenges that emerge in the school environment.

Aware of the increasing emphasis on academic preparation and self-control, many parents wanted to teach their children specific skills and behaviors that they hoped would ease the process of school entry. They also wanted to provide more general social and emotional support. The central role of parents in preparing and supporting children's transitions into school is evident in many of the statements offered earlier. Other parents commented more directly on this aspect of their own "readiness." As one mother said: "[My role is] to push her, to tell her it's going to be okay, to give her support. To let her know that I'm by her side regardless of the situation." Another parent commented: "Steer him the right way. Let him know if there's something he needs to talk about, that I'm here no matter if it's good or bad. Pretty much be his angel. His guardian angel, and accept everything he do. Little things, big things, I accept it." A mother who had not been able to complete her own public schooling told us:

I guess I just hope that he go and he pay attention, and he learn and just do the best he can. And if he can't I'm still gonna be his mom and

I'm still gonna love him. But I'm going to push him to do the best that he can and I just hope that he do something that I didn't do, which is graduate.

Several parents emphasized the importance of talking with their children about school. One mother described how she was preparing her son for entering an unfamiliar and potentially difficult environment:

Take him to the bus stop. Like just tell him that he's going to a new school, a bigger school [relative to preschool or Head Start]. That there's going to be more kids and different kids. Kids you are not familiar with, kids that you're not used to playing with. Kids you ain't never seen before. Just like tell him all the positive stuff about going to school. Nothing negative. You wouldn't tell a child nothing negative. Just like, keep him on a positive track. Like just be up-front. Tell him what you think it will be like, or how you think it's going to be. How you think the kids is going to be.

Parents indicated their own need for social and emotional support to fulfill these new roles and described the informal family and community support systems on which they relied. There was frequent mention of the support offered by godparents, partners, and grandparents. The relevance of these relationships for parents' conceptions of school-readiness became apparent as parents talked about the central role they expected relatives and friends to play in caring for their children outside of school hours when parents were working, helping the children with homework and other school-related activities, and providing emotional support for parents often overstretched by other burdens. This point was reinforced by the photos that parents took, which featured partners, extended family members, and godparents in close interactions with study children. One parent described how her neighborhood as a whole had helped in preparing her daughter for school:

She made friends very quickly. There's a lot of nice children of all races in the neighborhood, and I think that was a good thing for her too. Because when she goes to school she's going to come across that. So she's able to socialize with children of all ages, all races, backgrounds. She was able to pick up a lot of stuff that she wasn't aware of. Because when they're that little they probably think that every family is maybe like ours. But now she knows that



“Parents have to get ready too.”

there are families of different sizes, and we all eat different and talk different.

However, many parents indicated that additional pressures are placed on families because of community and policy contexts. Issues included housing problems and relocations, violence in local communities, and lack of adequate public transportation. Of particular concern were regulations related to welfare reform (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families) and the ways in which these regulations intersected with the local child care system. While parents had widely differing opinions about welfare policies, there was consensus that work requirements to receive public assistance (single parents must work at least 20 hours per week and also accept the first job they are offered) made it more difficult to support children in this important transition into school. The low wages earned by most EHS parents, combined with limitations in the local child care system, create considerable stress for parents and children alike. Some parents told us about their own personal situation. As an example:

In the process that they're trying to better, at the same time it's worsening, because the people who are really trying to do something can't. . . . The child care situation, it's a mess. It's a mess. To get these monies, it's beaucoup

time you wait on the list. Meanwhile, they're saying, well, you gotta do something. Meanwhile, where's my kids going to go? Then if you don't work, they don't give you a check. And on top of that I got to be sure and work good, because since the welfare reform, jobs are like crowns.

Other parents commented more generally on problems generated by the new policies. For example, according to one parent:

Some of the legislation they think is helping is not. [Parents] can't really afford the child care, so a lot of kids are running the streets or are being left with folks who really don't have any idea where these kids are or what these kids are doing. . . . I wish that a lot of these folks that were making these laws would come and take a walk. Not just take a walk, but really get in and see it. The kind of situation they're creating. There's a lot more child abuse going on too. A lot more kids are being crippled, maimed, or killed. And I think it's the result of the kind of pressure parents are being put under.

## DISCUSSION

The results of our study underscore the importance of listening to parents with young children to understand their own perspectives on school-readiness. This is especially critical for minority families and low-income families of all ethnicities. These are the families whose voices are often marginalized even though

their lives are at the center of current policy debates. Our review of the literature indicates a failure of most research on school-readiness to include parent voices and perspectives. The few but important exceptions are studies completed before recent policy shifts on early childhood education<sup>26,27</sup> and studies based on small numbers of primarily White parents of variable socioeconomic status.<sup>28</sup>

Public health communication commonly involves *conveying* information to local communities. We suggest that it should also include *learning from* culturally diverse and economically stressed community members, such as those who participated in our study. Ethnographic approaches, qualitative methods, and innovative modes of inquiry such as photovoice can contribute to the ability of public health researchers and practitioners to effectively “listen” to parents and other community members in order to develop a better understanding of their perspectives on issues such as school-readiness.

Parents' conception of school-readiness in the present study supported new research and policy directions that place as much emphasis on social and emotional development as on academic skills in regard to school entry and success. From the perspective of parents, it is a comprehensive developmental process, as also articulated in reports such as *From Neurons to Neighborhoods*, that leads to school-readiness. Parents in our study contributed the insight that social and emotional readiness is especially important for children facing challenging school environments.

School environments and cultures must also be considered factors in school-readiness and must be critically examined as part of the social ecology that shapes child health. A major contribution of our study is the finding that many low-income parents, especially minority parents, perceive school environments as fraught with dangers such as racism, class prejudice, violence, and disrespect for their own cultural values, as well as behavioral expectations inappropriate for young children.

In response to such concerns, parents emphasize the importance of socially and emotionally preparing both themselves and their children for school entry. Our study uncovered a process of “parental readiness.” That is, parents themselves need to “get ready” for

children's entry into school, including preparing themselves for their new role of protecting children in many school environments. Viewed as an aspect of maternal or paternal health, this process of parental development warrants additional attention by both researchers and policymakers.

Parents relied on extended family and informal community networks (as well as programs such as EHS and Head Start) as support systems in this process. At the same time, they identified other community and policy factors, such as welfare reform and lack of high-quality, accessible child care, as undermining their efforts to ready their children for school. Promoting school-readiness thus requires attention to broader community and policy issues, in particular those concerning public assistance, child care, and employment, that affect parenting and, in turn, child health and development.

These findings, considered holistically, contribute to our understanding of the synergistic relationship between psychological and environmental factors in terms of school-readiness. While social and emotional health is important for all children, environmental stressors heighten the importance of these developmental pathways for minority children and children in low-income families and communities. From the perspective of study parents, social skills and emotional health serve as important protective factors for children facing challenging school environments. At the same time, environmental disparities create additional challenges for parents attempting to help children develop the social and emotional strength necessary for successful transition into school.

Viewed through an ecological lens, the study children and their parents traversed a set of interpenetrating environments: home, school, community, and broader structural or policy contexts. Each of these environments influences the meanings of school-readiness that parents and others construct, and each contributes to the realization or undermining of children's successful school entry. What we learned from the perspectives and experiences of the study parents is that these environments are not comfortably nested but rather exhibit serious disjunctures. These points of disconnection may provide the most

important focus for program and policy interventions as well as for future research.

We believe that our study's findings are of broad significance and make valuable contributions to discussion of school-readiness among practitioners, researchers, policymakers, and community members. Our study participants, consisting of families who were enrolled in EHS and those from the same communities who were not, are typical of many low-income communities that now offer EHS or other early childhood programs. However, our study involved primarily African American and White families in urban neighborhoods and industrial small towns. We therefore can construct a more comprehensive picture of the meanings and experiences of school-readiness for these families than for other populations. Also, the majority of our interviews were with mothers. We do not know whether our study would yield additional interpretations had we included families from rural communities and from other ethnic backgrounds (e.g., Hispanic or Asian) and had we interviewed fathers as well as mothers. In spite of these limitations, our findings, in the tradition of grounded theory,<sup>29</sup> identify new issues and analytical constructs that speak to the general problem of school-readiness and suggest lines of inquiry for future research.

Our study and what we learned from EHS parents lead us to the conclusion that school-readiness is a public health matter. The participants in the study represented families and communities whose limited economic means and racial minority status are of particular concern in current debates about school-readiness. And, yet, the perspectives and actual lived experiences of these families and communities are largely missing from both policy discussions and research on these issues. As public health researchers and practitioners, we must become engaged in debates about school-readiness, contributing the insights of community members with whom we partner as well as our own analytical skills. Our social ecology approach to health can help inform and broaden the terms of the debate, directing attention to the integrated dimensions of child health as well as the contextual factors that support or undermine the healthy development of all children and thus

their capacity for learning. This work is vitally related to our mission of eliminating health disparities. ■

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#### Contributors

C.L. McAllister and B.L. Green conceived and designed the study. C.L. McAllister supervised its implementation, analyzed qualitative data, and took the lead in writing the article. P.C. Wilson conducted interviews and case studies, analyzed qualitative data, and reviewed existing studies. J.L. Baldwin contributed to the literature review and helped prepare the article. All of the authors helped to conceptualize ideas, interpret findings, and review drafts of the article.

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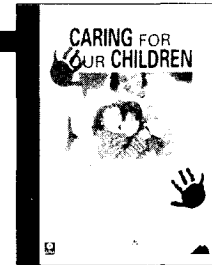


and sharing with us their own ideas and experiences of child health, development, and school-readiness.

**Note.** The content of this article does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the US Department of Health and Human Services.

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