



First 5 Yolo

User Research Insights

Key synthesized insights informed by participant feedback on existing First 5 Yolo County programs

FEBRUARY - JUNE 2022

The Early Learning Lab (ELL)



Table of Contents

[Introduction](#)

[Participants](#)

[Guiding
Questions](#)

[Key Insights](#)

[Insights in
Depth](#)

[Conclusion](#)

[Contact Us](#)

Acknowledgements

This report was prepared thanks to the support of First 5 Yolo as well as Yolo County community members who generously provided time, stories, and expertise.

Introduction

Background

First 5 Yolo, building on its 23 years of leadership in ensuring that all children in the county are healthy, safe, and ready to learn, is currently looking at ways to strengthen care coordination and uptake of services across the early childhood system in the county, including home visiting and early learning, for families of children from prenatal to age five, with the goal of improving opportunities for self-navigation of services on the part of families. First 5 Yolo sees an opportunity to explore its own local community needs from various user perspectives to inform the plan to strengthen the local early childhood system and center family and community voice. The Early Learning Lab (ELL), a division of Start Early, partnered with First 5 Yolo to leverage a Human Centered Design + (HCD+) approach to meet with families, community members, and service providers in the county and ask how they might work with First 5 Yolo to innovate and improve service offerings to meet the evolving needs of children and families. HCD+ is an augmented form of traditional HCD research, including aspects of behavioral science, systems thinking and Start Early's knowledge of best practices in early childhood programs and services.

Research Methodology

Through this project, ELL worked with First 5 Yolo to define the overall project objectives and guiding questions (see p. 5 for the list of questions) for a set of interviews with service providers and families in the community to understand multiple perspectives on the landscape of services for families with young children in Yolo County. ELL and First 5 Yolo recruited 21 interviewees in all, a representative sample of parents/family members, direct service staff, and non-profit/community leaders, based on shared goals created with First 5 Yolo. We began with staff and local leaders who helped us to recruit families from their programs. To also include the perspectives of families who may be eligible but are not currently receiving services, we asked families for further recommendations and worked with First 5 and other staff to post recruitment fliers in local organizations and social media groups targeting community members who might be less able to access services due to language, cultural issues or geographic isolation. All community members who participated in the interviews received a gift card from Target valued at \$100 to compensate them for the hour-long interview. All interviews were conducted via the video communication platform Zoom. Please note, some of the interview quotations included in this report were mildly edited for clarity and to remove any identifiable information.

After the interviews were completed, ELL synthesized insights from the 21 interviews, referring back to the guiding questions and looking for themes and patterns in the user data. ELL facilitated a design session with First 5 staff to share the insights, receive feedback, and co-create a roadmap for improving services in the county. The ten insights and five solution themes are detailed below.

Participant Personas

The following are generalized participant “personas” or aggregated representations of the population groups we spoke with. These personas were created based on the attributes of the interview subjects that we talked to throughout our interviews to help create illustrative examples of the goals and experiences of residents in Yolo County.

Parents/Caregiver

“Leticia García”

Leticia is a mother of 2 children under the age of 5 living in Yolo County. One of her children has autism. She has accessed some Yolo County services, but she wasn't aware of several others that she likely qualifies for.



Direct Service Staff

“Jennifer Hale”

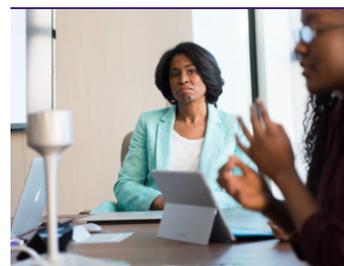
Jennifer is an intake staff member working directly with Community Members at a Yolo County-based non-profit. She earned a bachelor’s degree from a local college while working as a paraprofessional. She is also a parent in the community and has engaged with services in the past, even at her own organization.



Executive Director/Leadership

“Cynthia Jones”

Cynthia is an Executive Director of an organization in Yolo County. She holds a master’s degree from a four-year university. She had previously served as a direct service staff member before entering leadership. Cynthia deeply cares about the well-being of both staff and families.



Guiding Questions

First 5 Yolo and the Early Learning Lab partnered to create four main guiding questions to serve as the foundation of our interviews. We used these questions as our “north star” as we conducted the user research.

1. What is the level of awareness and access to Early Childhood programs? How can we communicate better to increase awareness?
2. What are the categories of barriers and gaps to accessing services?
3. What are the needs that are not being served? Who is not eligible that should be?
4. What are the best mechanisms for incorporating family voice into the design of programs?

To answer the guiding questions, we explored the following key pieces of information from each of the interviews.

- **Entry points and exit points:** What are the entry points into the system? Where do people come into the system and why? Where do they drop out and why?
- **Level of awareness** of services, including Home Visiting.
- **Level of access and satisfaction:** Are people who are eligible and in need aware of and accessing services? If so, are they satisfied? If not, what are the barriers to access?
- **How people want to engage:** Do people feel that their voice is included in the way early childhood programs are offered? How and where would they like to be engaged? How does/do First 5 and their partners want people to engage? What are successful programs already doing? What does “shared decision making” actually look like?
- **Impact of COVID** - How has COVID-19 impacted the ways in which families engage and experience services from Yolo County?
- **Aspirations for their children:** What are families hopes and dreams for their children? How do these aspirations track with current services and how might we better communicate the value of services based on those hopes and dreams?

Key Insights Overview

Insight 1: Families and staff do not have a cohesive understanding of county services.

Insight 2: The best communication channels are where parents already are (i.e. flyers at common spaces and Facebook groups).

Insight 3: Programs have effectively provided culturally relevant/sensitive programming in multiple languages.

Insight 4: What seems like a warm hand-off from the program's perspective, might feel like being dismissed by the families. Some fall through the cracks or experience lack of follow-up.

Insight 5: Larger institutions (medical facilities, school districts, regional centers) are less approachable/more intimidating than smaller agencies.

Insight 6: Burden for family engagement is on the families. Programs have to be more intentional about providing space for family voice.

Insight 7: Different program eligibilities can lead to families being turned away and discouraged from looking for other services.

Insight 8: Accessing immediate essential needs (e.g., diapers and wipes) is an entry point to programs.

Insight 9: Backlogs/long wait time, especially for families with children with special needs, impact efficacy of early intervention.

Insight 10: First 5 Yolo is viewed as a leader and provider of key supports by programs in the early childhood system.

Insights in Depth

Insight #1:

There is not a cohesive understanding of county services from the perspective of families, nor staff. There is space for a tool/process that can connect across organizations and support parents in choosing services they want and need.

Many of the community members and staff we spoke to were aware of a few programs or services in the county, but they generally lacked a comprehensive view of the programs and services available to families and how the services could be stitched together to provide more comprehensive supports for children and families. Supplemental or related services that families may qualify for were not always linked to existing programs they received. This leads to the potential that families are not referred to programs that might be helpful and that they fall out of the system without taking advantage of services for which they may qualify and benefit from.

Opportunity Statement: How might we give families a comprehensive overview of services available to them?

"I feel like when people come to one of our programs... and they are getting one of their needs met, how do we help them tie that to the next set of needs? ...Wouldn't it be nice if there was an overall structure?"

– Program Leader

"Can you share resources on where I can find work and services?"

– Mother asking the interview team about identifying resources

Insight #2:

Many of the successful direct-to-participant outreach efforts were through flyers at frequently used services (laundromats, women's health clinics, drive-

up events, etc.) and on social media, (especially Facebook community groups).

Through our interviews, we found that Facebook and word-of-mouth were the two most common referral sources. Overall, identifying areas where families are already regularly going (social media, community festivals) and encouraging peer referrals are great opportunities to increase awareness of programs and services.

Opportunity Statement: How might we guide programs to build on successful referral methods, such as flyers, social media, word of mouth, and program-to-program handoffs?

Insight #3:

Community-based program leaders and staff have effectively provided culturally relevant/sensitive programming in multiple languages.

In general, many of the community-based organizations have brought on direct service staff that reflect the communities that they serve, providing a welcoming environment for families. However, while the culturally relevant/sensitive programming has been effective, several participants still noted the challenges of providing services to rural and geographically diverse communities due to the population distribution of Yolo County.

Opportunity Statement: How might we support more programs to provide culturally relevant programming in multiple languages? How might we increase services for rural communities?

"The staff is very reflective of the community... We try to be very representative because representation matters. If I go somewhere where I see someone that looks like me and can relate to me culturally, as well as provide language access, I am more than likely going to come to you."

– Program Leader sharing about the importance of providing culturally relevant services

"I would love to hit the rural areas of Yolo County. I want a mobile-client navigator out there in the rural areas. I'm partnering with [another community organization] and getting out there... I would really like to be out there more in the rural areas."

– Program leader on how they can expand their reach in Yolo County

Insight #4:

What seems like a warm hand-off from the program's perspective, might feel like being dismissed by the families.

Program staff and family members can have different perspectives on services that are provided. While cross-organizational handoffs are often done, there aren't formal protocols or data sharing systems that confirm that the families have received the services at the new organization. Because of the lack of intentional follow-up, families can feel like what was originally a warm handoff from provider to provider led to them falling through the cracks. This is especially the case when service providers refer families to larger institutional services, such as a school district, the health care system, or Regional Center, as we will discuss in Insight #5.

Opportunity Statement: How might we strengthen follow up after referrals and handoffs?

"When my daughter turned three, they kind of forgot about her. I tried to get ahold of [the organization] because she needed a new caseworker, and nobody ever really called me back."

- Mother sharing about her daughter being transitioned from one medical professional to another

"If we make a referral, then they get all these services and all these providers they can have access to, but unless they have a referral or a CPS case, it is so difficult to get a family something like, for example, a childcare subsidy. We have families sitting on waiting lists, and they never hear back."

- Program Leader on the challenges of getting follow through on some referrals

Insight #5:

Larger institutions (medical facilities, school districts, regional centers) are less approachable/more intimidating to families than smaller agencies.

Most family members we spoke to describe a common experience when families interacted with the medical field, where they struggled to navigate the system and often ran into professionals who were perceived as dispassionate or dismissive about their challenges as a caregiver. Oftentimes, this led to parents/caregivers not receiving vital services. We also heard similar stories about school districts and regional centers, where long backlogs to receive services compounded the frustrations that families felt.

Opportunity Statement: help guide larger institutions (health care, school districts, regional centers) to be more welcoming and supportive?

"When my daughter feels inadequate, she shuts down...that's really important with any services that she comes into contact with. If they make her feel inadequate, she won't deal with them."

- A grandmother sharing her adult daughter's experiences with medical professionals when looking for care for the granddaughter

"A parent mentioned to me, when going to the doctor, the doctor said, 'only mention two things you want to talk about, and you get 5 minutes to talk about them.' Sometimes, when you have a sickness and go to the doctor and need to tell them everything you're experiencing, they never give you a chance."

- A direct service provider describing a caregiver and her separate experiences in the same health system

Insight #6:

Programs should be more intentional about providing space for family voice, otherwise it falls upon the families' shoulders to speak up.

Throughout our interviews, we asked families and program staff about family voice is integrated into programming, if at all. Not many had opportunities beyond surveys or more traditional avenues for parents to share their opinions, (e.g., PTA meetings, parent conferences, etc.). Parents sometimes indicated that even if they gave feedback, they felt as though it reached a "dead end" and was generally not built into Early Childhood programs/services. Additionally, there was little evidence that programs actively co-design their services with families.

Opportunity Statement: How might we guide programs to be more intentional in soliciting family voice for program development and improvement?

Insight #7:

Different program eligibilities can lead to families being turned away and discouraged from looking for other services

Some families noted that they attempted to enroll in programs they believed they would be eligible for, but once they were turned away, they did not explore (or get referred to) similar services for which they may be eligible.

Both program staff and families noted some of the challenges navigating eligibility. In some cases, the income requirements to qualify for programs were low compared to the level of need in the community, noting that high housing, gas, and food prices were pushing the cost of living up so that need was significant for families that may not qualify for services due to incomes over the limit. Further, some program leaders noted eligibility that required admission of addiction or other personal information dissuaded families from receiving assistance.

Opportunity Statement: How might we help families navigate and more easily identify which programs they are eligible for?

"We tried to qualify for Head Start, and we didn't qualify because supposedly we made over the income."

– Mother in Yolo who attempted to get childcare through Head Start

"[For families to qualify for a program] they had to admit they use drugs currently or that they've used drugs in utero. Well, you're not going to get a lot of people admitting that and to get them services, they had to admit that"

– Program Leader describing challenges with eligibility

Insight #8:

Basic essential events and programs (e.g. diaper and gift card events) were lauded universally and led to an entry point for enrolling in those and related programs.

From a caregiver perspective, Immediate, short-term needs often take priority over long-term, child development programming. These short-term needs became even more essential during the height of the COVID pandemic when families struggled to find and purchase key essentials like wipes, diapers, and food. Families also noted the value in flexible funding (like gift cards) that they could put towards their families' unique needs. Some noted that while they were appreciated, food drives were less effective than gift cards because the food provided in the drives was not always culturally relevant to the families receiving the goods.

Opportunity Statement: How might we continue to provide basic needs for families to meet their needs while also building awareness of other services?

"Everything is so expensive right now. COVID is the reason I potty trained my son sooner because when I went to the store, the diapers were \$10 more expensive than normal, so I potty trained him sooner."

– Mother in Yolo

"What we realized during this pandemic is that if you can provide someone with \$100 Walmart gift card, if you can provide someone with an emergency food voucher, it does go a long way. Although we have a food distribution, not many families actually eat the typical American diet. So, if you give someone a food voucher, they can pick that food voucher and go to a grocery outlet and try to find something that aligns closely with their culture."

– A program director on what they learned during the pandemic

Insight #9:

Backlogs/long wait times, especially for families with children with special needs, impact efficacy of early intervention

Head Start and Yolo County services, including services for children experiencing developmental delays like autism and families experiencing homelessness, are struggling with staffing shortages and/or high demand beyond their resources. This has been exacerbated by COVID, needing more staff to adequately support families who are also struggling even more from the pandemic.

Opportunity Statements: How might we increase early intervention services for children with special needs? How might we entice more high-quality staff to enter the early childhood workforce through unique methods? (e.g., Head Start-funded paid internships.)

"I could see that two [students] were probably autistic based on behaviors... but I couldn't achieve getting either one of them into any kind of services at all, more so than pre pandemic. And this I think was because of the backlog, but also people were not following through...And then from what I can tell, nobody ever followed up with them. And I was really frustrated because it had taken me two-and-a-half years to refer the children in the first place. He was three when he got [the diagnosis], and now he is nearly four. That's a long time not to catch the ball."

– Center Director and Mother

"[One early childhood program is] complicated because there's only six slots and then you have to sign up online when they open it up It goes really quick. Sometimes I feel guilty that I'm retired, and I can usually get a slot. I have really mixed feelings about that whole scene. I do feel a little guilty of taking slots... I wish they had more, I wish it wasn't. So, and I actually kind of get a little anxious, wondering - is the online registration portal open yet? Is it open yet?"

– A grandmother describes her experience signing up her granddaughter for classes

Insight #10:

First 5 Yolo is viewed as a leader and provider of key supports by programs in the early childhood system.

Many of the program leaders we interviewed spoke highly of role First 5 Yolo plays within the early childhood system in the county. In particular, interview participants discussed First 5's advocacy work as important for being able to highlight and gain additional resources to address issues that are affecting families in the county. They also expressed appreciation for First 5's work to foster cross-organizational collaborations and partnerships which help increase the impact of services provided.

Opportunity Statement: How might we further leverage First 5's leadership and advocacy to strengthen the Yolo early childhood system? Opportunities for First 5 include providing guidance and support for:

- building more/stronger connections between family-serving organizations
- developing protocols and shared practices to ensure warm and effective referrals between programs
- elevating family voice at the program level
- strategically advocating for more resources for the system

"First 5 is really great with advocacy and elevating particular topics within the county...So I would want them to, you know, start elevating some of these topics like with housing in particular, the housing system works in Yolo county because we not only have government, but we have the local COC working with governments and cities...I'm not sure if this is a policy initiative for First Five California where there's a lack of affordable housing for families. So that's where I would want this to be a policy initiative because housing is affecting 0-Fivers when it comes to equity, racism, discrimination. I think it's more of a community building and whole relation-building as a local COC."

– Executive Director of a local program

"First 5 encouraged us to apply for an outreach grant and funded us to provide workshops about our literacy program to other service providing organization. Through this collaboration, it got us all thinking about big ideas about collaboration"

– Director of a local program

Conclusion

The summarized key insights from this report above are intended to be a compass as First 5 Yolo moves forward and continues to provide services to families in the community. They are based on the guiding questions we identified at the beginning of our journey.

We hope these insights can be integrated into the First 5 Yolo programmatic offerings and can serve as guidance in both the short- and long-term for families and staff in Yolo County.

Contact Us

Thank you for partnering with us on this important work.

Please feel free to reach out with any follow-up questions, comments, or concerns:

General: The Early Learning Lab

earlylearninglab@startearly.org

Sheetal Singh

Executive Director, Early Learning Lab

ssingh@startearly.org

Mark Koski

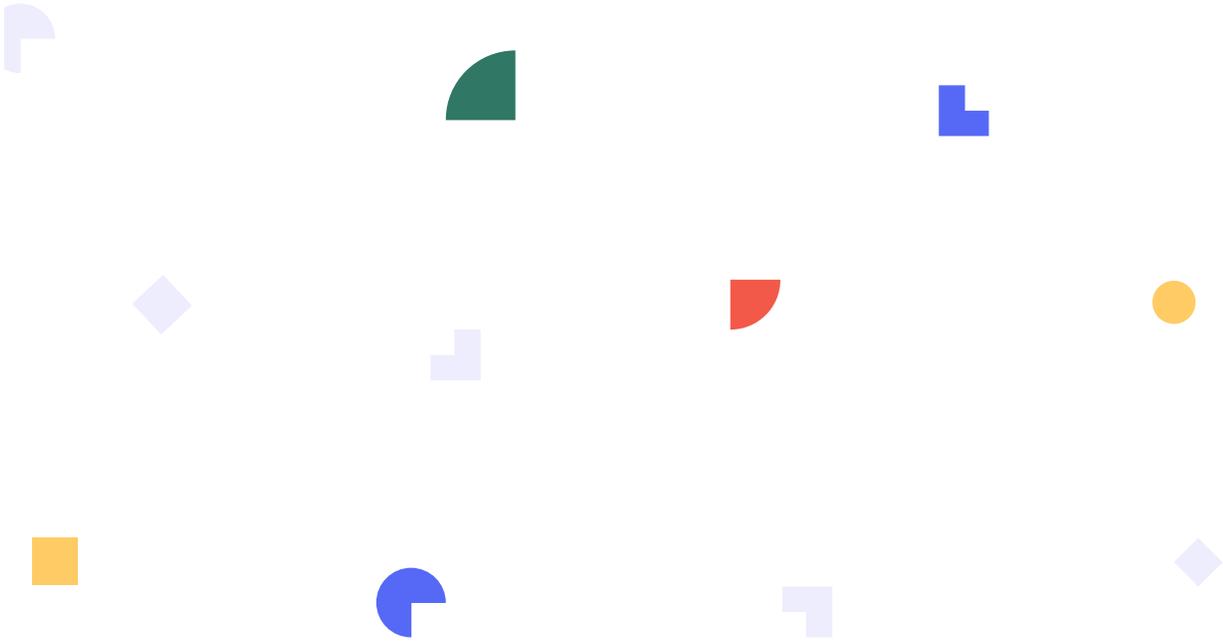
Senior Program Manager, Early Learning Lab

mkoski@startearly.org

Natalie Breuner

User Experience Researcher, Early Learning Lab

Nbreuner@startearly.org



[f /startearlyorg](https://www.facebook.com/startearlyorg)

[t @startearlyorg](https://twitter.com/startearlyorg)

[in /startearlyorg](https://www.linkedin.com/company/startearlyorg)

[i /startearlyorg](https://www.instagram.com/startearlyorg)