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Influential Factors Determine Parental Choice for Preschool Selection

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Parental Choice for Preschool Selection

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Abstract

Influential factors determine parental choice for preschool selection.

Abstract: This study investigated what key factors influence the decision of parents and guardians in preschool program selection. The participants were parents/guardians of a small NAEYC accredited child care center located in New England. If high-quality preschools do not meet the desires and needs of the families they are serving, then the parents/guardians will be less likely to enroll their children in the program. (Glenn-Applegate, Justice, & Kaderavek, 2016). The results indicated that quality is the most important factor in the participant's decision to enroll their child in the program. Other factors that influenced the decision were curriculum, and education of teachers. The results of this work will help aid preschool programs, policy makers, and researchers in creating programs to meet the needs of the community. The results will also raise awareness of the many perspectives that parents have when it comes to preschool quality.

Parental Choice for Preschool Selection

Introduction

High quality preschool provides tremendous benefits for children and families, as well as for society as a whole. Glenn-Applegate, Justice, & Kaderavek, (2016). state that research literature is abundant in what determines a high quality preschool, but little information is available about what influences parent selection of preschool programs. As educators, it is crucial to understand the importance of how families view quality childcare and how they can meet each need of the population they are serving. If high quality preschools do not meet the desires and needs of the families they are serving, then the parents or guardians will be less likely to enroll their children in that program

Why is quality a valued attraction to a preschool program? Studies have linked high quality preschool to numerous social benefits such as stronger literacy, language, and math skills, better attitudes towards school, increased high school and college graduation rates, greater rates of home ownership and a decrease in drug abuse. (Glenn-Applegate, Justice, & Kaderavek's (2016). These benefits are not new knowledge, but rather the result of years of on-going research in the early childhood education field. Glenn-Applegate, Justice, & Kaderavek's (2016) study demonstrated, in preschools and in homes, how formative the first years of children's lives are.

How programs are selected by parents and guardians reflects what is valued in a preschool program. Selections include factors of accessibility, which are important considerations when designing and marketing a preschool program. Every preschool is designed with different curriculum goals. Parents of preschool aged children have many factors to determine the best fit for their child and family. The factors in choosing quality programs are

based off of each individual family's idea of what a quality program consists of and how it meets the needs of their child as an individual. These factors may include cost, location, size, environment, and curriculum.

Preschool serves not only as a resource for working parents and other primary caregivers, but is a stepping stone in the development of children before they reach the public school system. The relationships built in the first few years of life for each child can create successful skills to building lasting relationships as well as a foundation for a knowledge base they have yet to receive. Therefore, simply educating families about what they should value in a preschool will not be enough if those suggested criteria do not include the caregiver's own needs. To best understand these needs, deep understanding and trust needs to be formed through parent-school relationships. Without hesitation, caregivers' needs and desires must be considered when designing, funding, and promoting preschool programs.

This study examines parental views on quality childcare and the importance of quality on parent decision making. The results of this work will help aide preschool programs, policy makers, and researchers in creating programs to meet the needs of the community they are serving and also become more aware of the many perspectives that parents have when it comes to preschool quality. Parents and families need to be able to freely voice the needs for not only their children, but for themselves.

Literature Review

The need for child care has been rising in the United States within the last two decades. This is due to the significant increase in women who work outside of the home. There are an estimated 14.5 million children under the age of 5 years who regularly attend child care (Jeon, L. & Buettner C.K. 2014). The difficulty now being faced is how to find programs that meet the

needs of each individual family. What type of programs do parents look for and what are their features? What is quality child care? Each factor that goes into a parent's decision to enroll their child into a specific child care program can be backed up by a substantial amount of research or accessibility to the program. The important piece is understanding the break down of each deciding factor.

What is childcare?

It is important to understand the definition of child care, because as we know there are many different types of child care programs across the United States. The National Institute of Child and Human Development (2006) defined childcare as any care provided on a regular basis by someone other than the child's mother. The NICHD included in the definition that any type of child care that is fewer than 10 hours per week was to be considered exclusive maternal care. The child care programs that children participate in are in-home child care (fathers, grandparents, or other adults come into the home to provide care), child care homes (adults provide care for children in their own homes) and child care centers (children who receive care from adults at a non-home location).

What are parents really looking for?

A study by Grace Hui-Chen Huang at Cleveland State University (2007) was conducted to understand what parents are really looking for when it comes to child care programs for their child. In this study 13 parents participated in 26 interviews to discuss their preferences in child care. Through the completion of this study, six themes emerged as a result of the qualitative research. The themes were continuity in the home environment, continuity in mothering, continuity in values, continuity in affection for and acceptance of the child, continuity in the

family system and continuity of expectations.

The results of Huang's (2007) study determine that there is a significant amount of emphasis placed on communication skills, professionalism, and reliability. Amongst the various themes that were supported through this research study, the reflection of what parents are looking for is explained as "In their reflection upon their journey, they discovered that they were searching for someone like themselves. Parents valued most a continuity of their own family life style while their children were in the providers' care." (Huang, G. H., 2007, p. 123). This shows that there is not a singular model of quality child care, but rather multiple variations that meet the needs of each individual's own personal experiences.

Quality Childcare Programs

High quality preschool benefits not only children and families, but for the community as well. Glenn-Applegate, Justice, and Kaderavek (2016) stated,

"High quality preschool has been linked to numerous other social benefits such as stronger literacy, language, and math skills, better attitudes towards school, increased high school and college graduation rates, greater home ownership, and decreased drug use. (p. 15)

What determines "quality" child care programs? For several decades, the quality of child care environments has been an issue of concern for policy makers, researchers, child care providers, and parents.

There are various perspectives on what quality programs are: that of the parent, that of the caregiver, and that of the child. Parents, may focus on the safety of the environment, trusting

relationships being built between the child care provider and themselves, and how the child care arrangement works with their employment needs, such as hours of operation and the cost of programs. For caregivers and teachers, a high quality environment may have more emphasis on the employment conditions. Teachers and caregivers may take into account the benefits, salary, vacation time, professional development opportunities and trainings, and child-staff ratios. For children, high quality child care environments are those that offer safety and security, while nurturing their development. Across the nation, there have been intervention systems to address quality child care programs and how they are rated. (Layzer, J. I., & Goodson, B. D. (2006).

Accreditation

Through goal setting, NAEYC Accreditation helps early childhood programs achieve and maintain high-quality early care and education. It outlines best practices for programs and encourages programs to be the best they can be. NAEYC Accreditation supports quality improvement and best teaching practices. NAEYC-accredited programs receive the most up-to-date information policies and procedures in the early childhood field. The NAEYC program standards outline specific descriptions of quality practices and explain the procedures that programs use to measure quality. (NAEYC. 2015)

Teacher-Child Relationships

Quality teacher–child interactions in early childhood classrooms connects with positive emotional, behavioral, and cognitive outcomes for children. Specifically, the more responsive and sensitive teachers are to children’s needs, the better children perform on measures of social skills. Additionally, the more teachers promote higher order thinking skills and scaffold children’s learning, the better they perform on measures of academic and language skills

(Mashburn et al. 2008). (Thomason, A. C., & La Paro, K. M. (2013).)

Teacher Education

In the early childhood education field, professionalism is important, which makes it necessary for research to assess how current professional characteristics of early childhood teachers relates to child development and quality interactions. The most commonly studied teacher characteristic is teacher education. In Amy Thomason and Karen La Paro's study of teacher characteristics, they explained "teacher education level has been consistently associated with higher quality in early childhood classrooms (e.g. Bowman et al. 2000; de Kruif et al. 2000) and the result in the field is often the common belief in a linear pathway between higher levels of teacher education and higher quality classrooms." (pg. 228). This statement stresses the importance of the education of teachers and the impact it has on an early childhood classroom.

Conclusion

There are an estimated 14.5 million children under the age of five years' old who are enrolled in a child care program across the United States (Jeon, L. & Buettner C.K. 2014). The number of children that need access to child care programs is enough for educators, policy makers, and government officials to understand the extensive research that goes into the creation of each childcare program. This research study examined what influential factors determine parents' child care selection.

Methods

This research study used a quantitative methodology that includes a parent/guardian survey at a childcare center in New England. Research is used to gain an understanding of

underlying reasons, opinions, and motivations. This study used a quantitative methodology in order to best understand each individual's beliefs. The survey measured the influential factors that determine parental choice for preschool selection.

Participants

There were thirty-two parents/guardians that took part in this study. Participants were parents/guardians for children enrolled in a NAEYC Accredited child care center in New England. The participants were families enrolled in either full day, half day, or the after school preschool programs. In the full day program, there are 18 children; 11 boys and seven girls. In the part day program there are 16 children; 8 boys and 8 girls. In the after school program, there are 10 children; 9 boys and one girl. The age of parents/guardians that participated in this study are between 18 to 65 years old. Both male and females participated in this study.

Protection of Participants

This study was confidential. The participants in this study were not identifiable. Each participant was given a number on their survey that matched the number on their consent form. This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of Maine at Farmington before any data collection began. After the proposal of the study was approved, the director of the preschool program signed an administrator consent form that allowed research to be conducted in the facility.

Procedure and Data Collection

Participants included parents and guardians of children enrolled in either the full day, half day, or after school program. All participants signed the adult informed consent form prior to participating in the study. Participants were given a survey on the factors of quality, economics, availability, location, and overall well being of their child. (see appendix)

The survey was created on a Likert scale. Likert (1932) developed the principle of measuring attitudes by asking people to respond to a series of statements about a topic, in terms of the extent to which they agree with them, and so tapping into the cognitive and affective components of attitudes. The respondents of this study were offered a choice of five pre-coded responses consisting of strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, and strongly agree. The survey consisted of three parts.

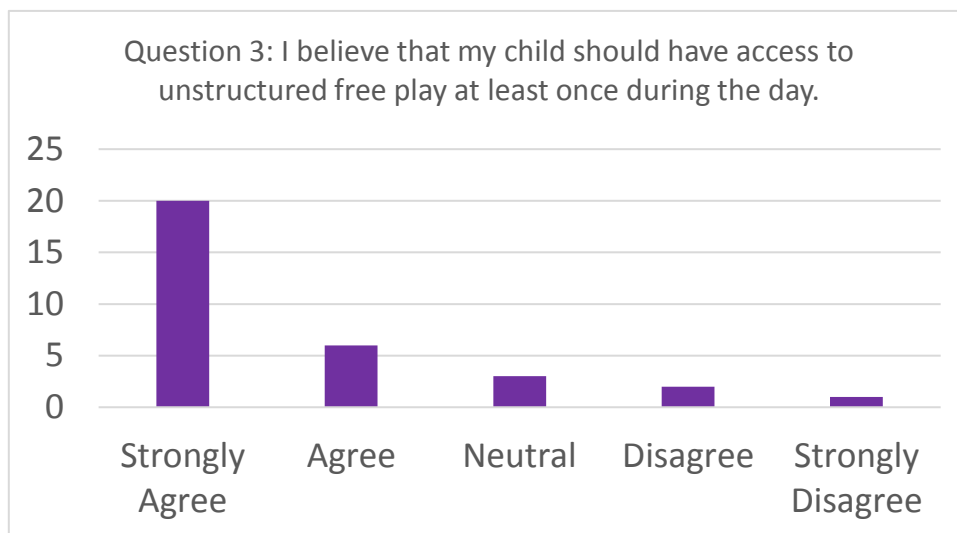
The first part of the survey used the Likert scale in the form of “I believe” statements. This allowed the participant to choose how each statement best fit their own beliefs toward the childcare program and how it meets the needs of their children. The second part of the survey directly related to communication. These questions were based on of how parents/guardians prefer to communicate with the director. The participant circled their preferred method of communication. The last piece of the survey included additional questions that allowed the participant to disclose any comments regarding preschool selection and what are important aspects in a quality program. These were opened ended questions to determine a more in-depth understanding of each individual families’ beliefs on the program. The time frame to fill out the survey was 3 weeks.

Results

The collection of data yielded results from 32 families from the full time, part time, and after school programs. All surveys that were received had questions 1-12 (Likert questions) completely filled out. Participants chose “strongly agree” most frequently for question 12. Twenty participants strongly agree that their child should have access to unstructured free play more than one time throughout the school day. There were 6 participants that agree that their child should have access to free play. The outlier of the group was the one parent or guardian

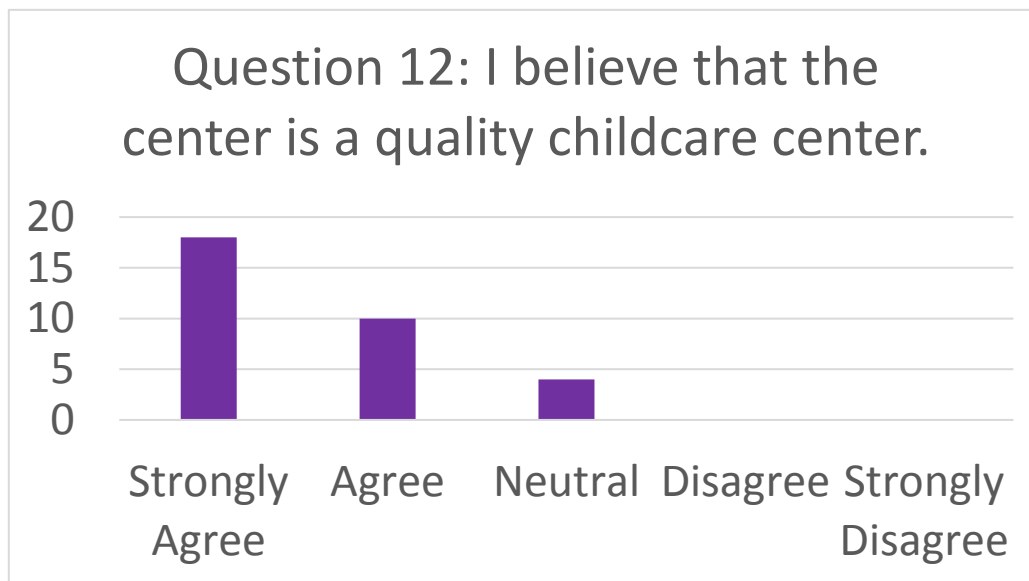
who chose that they strongly disagree that their child should have access to unstructured free play at least once during the school day. It was the only question on which participants chose strongly disagree as a response.

Figure 1: Responses to Question 3



The question that participants chose “strongly agree” most frequently was question 12. Twenty-seven participants strongly agree that the center is a quality child care center. Five participants agree that the center is a quality child care center. There were zero people who were neutral or disagreed that the center is a quality child care center.

Figure 2: Responses to Question 12



For question nine, eighteen participants chose strongly agree that they chose the center because of the curriculum. Eleven people agree that they chose the center because of its educational program model. There were three contributors to the study that were neutral. The last question that yielding interesting results was for question 2. Question 2 stated “I believe that preschool teachers should have at least an associates degree in early childhood or in a related field.” The results show that Eighteen participants strongly agree that the preschool teachers should have at least an associates degree in early childhood education or a related field. There were 10 participants agree that preschool teachers should have at least an associates degree in early childhood or a related field. There were only four contributors to the study that were neutral.

Figure 3: Question 2

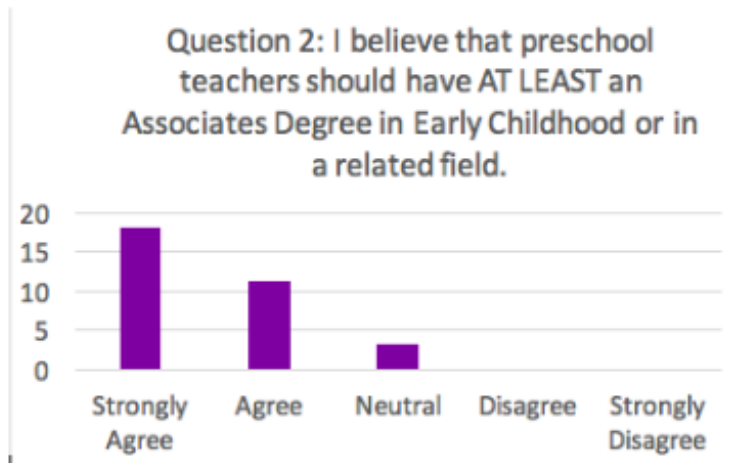
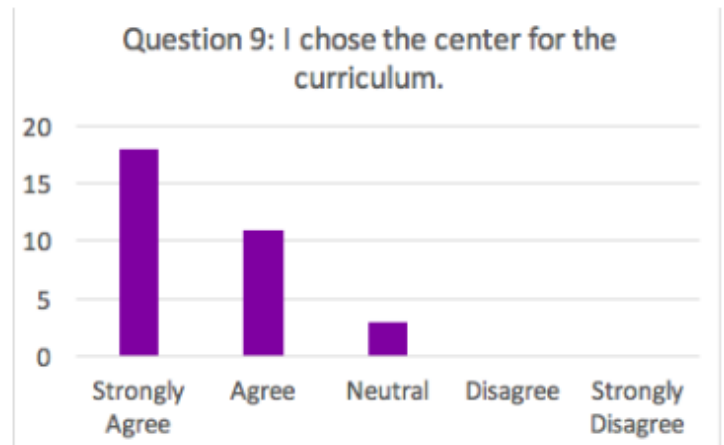


Figure 4: Question 9



In the section of the survey that was marked additional information, participants were asked to provide a short answer response for 2 questions; other information the participant would like to explain regarding the center, and what are the most important aspects of a quality child care center. There were several reoccurring themes that emerged from the short answer responses. The first short answer question regarding any information participants would like to provide yielded thirteen different themes. The themes and their frequencies are displayed in Table 1.

Table 1:

Theme	Frequency
Involved/ Educated Teachers	9
Good Curriculum	5
Attention to Students	4
Structure	3
Hygiene/Safety	3

Communication	2
Play	2
Growth	1
Acceptance	1
Developmentally Appropriate Practice	1
Environment	1
Consistency	1
Diversity	1

Parents and guardians placed education, curriculum, and attention to students as the most important contributing factors to a quality child care center.

Reliability and Validity

Time was a threat to validity in this study. The amount of snow days in the college campus caused for a delay in the distribution of the surveys. This shortened the time frame for participants to complete the survey using in-depth responses.

Discussion

The overall goal of this study was to develop an understanding about the factors that determine a parent's preschool selection. Each question on the survey that was presented in the Likert scale was answered by 32 participants. One of the questions was directly related to outside play and if parents wanted their children to have access to more time outside, weather permitting. One participant chose disagree, but there was no specification as to why they disagree. A change that would benefit the overall comprehension of some of the responses would

be to provide a spot where participants could give a short answer explaining their choice. would have to spend more time on the survey explaining their answers.

Another response that was an outlier was on question 9 where participants had to agree or disagree if they thought their child should have access to more unstructured free play during the day. One participant chose strongly disagree. Rephrasing the question to be more clear to participants, such as giving parents a specific amount of time or a description of what free play entitled could provide a different outcome to the responses.

Traditional markers for child care quality and positive developmental outcomes include warm and responsive interactions between caregiver and child, space for children to explore, low teacher–child ratios, staff who are educated in child development, and developmentally appropriate toys and materials. Quality characteristics, such as teacher–child interactions, involvement with learning materials, and teacher–parent communication, are more influential to children’s development than structural aspects, such as physical space, equipment, and ratios. This research from Rose, Vittrup, & Leveridge, (2013) links with the results from the short answer responses. Parents emphasized the importance of quality, teacher education, low teacher-child ratios, and developmentally appropriate materials as factors for their choice in preschool selection. (Rose, K. K., Vittrup, B., & Leveridge, T. (2013).

Recommendations for Future Research

Early childhood educators may use this research to understand factors that contribute to a parent or guardian’s selection of preschool program. Research has shown that parents/guardians want their children to be a part of a quality childcare center. The opinions on what factors determine a quality childcare center can differ, but through this study educators, policy makers,

and researchers will be able to pinpoint what those factors are in regards to the community they are serving.

The results of this study, a recommendation for the early childhood field would be to focus on parental involvement in the center. By focusing on parental involvement, the relationship between parent/school will grow stronger and parents will be able to have their opinions influence decisions regarding the quality of the center, the programming, and the success of their children in the school. In a study conducted by Sonsinsky & Kim (2013), they stress this by saying,

“Understanding parental child care selection is necessary because, ultimately, parents select child care arrangements and their decisions affect children’s experiences...highlighting the importance of child care choices in the ecology of a child’s early years,” (Bronfenbrenner, 1986) (p.41).

It is important to recognize the factors that parents use to determine their preschool selection because most of the research that is present is based off of a researcher’s perspective. Location, size, socio-economic status, and availability all play a role in a parent’s perspective of preschool selection. Through this study, the importance of understanding the demographics of the community you are serving in addition to the perspective of parents and guardians will play an influential role in the overall quality of the childcare center.

Limitations

This study was limited to a small center in New England. To yield more in-depth results, the survey needs to emphasize demographics such as specific age of the child, gender of the child, amount of children in the family, ethnicity, and occupation of the family members. With

this information, the results can be narrowed down to provide a clearer understanding of the community that the childcare center is serving.

Conclusion

In summary, participants in this study expressed what factors influence their choice in preschool selection. Quality, being an influential factor was described by the center having an emphasis on curriculum, parent involvement, educated teachers, as well as availability, location, cost, and teacher-child ratio. The participants of this study valued the center as a whole, touching upon many characteristics that play a significant role on enrollment in the childcare center. What better way to understand why parents choose the center that their child is enrolled in then directly asking the source? For these parents, their perspectives could provide tremendous insight on the program as a whole.

Appendix

ADULT INFORMED CONSENT FORM

You are invited to participate in a research project being conducted by Emily Dustin, a student at the University of Maine at Farmington. The purpose of the research is to gain insight on how parents choose the preschool program that meets the needs and desires of their children. What are the deciding factors?

What Will You Be Asked to Do?

If you decide to participate, you will be asked to complete a survey of 15 or more questions in regards to how you have chosen Sweatt Winter and the factors that went into your decision. The survey should take about 45 minutes to complete. After the survey is completed, follow up interviews **may** be conducted to gain more information on the questions in the survey.

Risks

- The risk is minimal due to the possibility that you **may** be uncomfortable disclosing any personal information, feelings, and beliefs. The questions in the survey will reflect your own personal opinion and the direct needs of your child/family.
- The time and inconvenience of the follow up interview **may** be risks of participating in the study.

Benefits

There are no direct benefits to you from participating in the study. However, as a participant you may enjoy learning about how parents and families choose the preschool program that meets their own needs and how they view a quality program. Aside from this benefit to the participant, this research will help Early Childhood Educators learn more about how parents are choosing the programs they involve their children in. Also, this information will directly benefit Julie Farmer on how the parents/families choose Sweatt Winter and the factors that influence their decision in enrolling their child in the program.

Confidentiality

Subjects will not be identifiable. The surveys each will be numbered so only the researcher will know who completed their survey. The documents and files from this study will all be kept with Emily Dustin. They will be scanned and secured in a document on her laptop. All of the data will be password protected on Emily Dustin's personal laptop. Some data may be shared with The University of Maine at Farmington. All data from the study, including the participant key, will be kept for maximum of 7 years and then destroyed.

Voluntary

Participation is voluntary. If you choose to take part in this study, you may stop at any time. You may skip any questions you do not wish to answer. IF a **PARENT** or **EMPLOYEE** indicate there are no repercussions for joining/not joining:

I, _____, fully understand the purpose of this research and the procedures to be followed. I understand that my records will be kept

confidential, my participation is voluntary, and that I may withdraw at any time without penalty. I also recognize that I may skip any questions I don't wish to respond to. Results of this research will be shared in the form of one or more publications and verbal presentations. If you have any questions about this study, please contact me, Emily Dustin, at emily.dustin@maine.edu or 207-491-6868. You may also reach the faculty advisor, Donna Karno, on this study at donna.karno@maine.edu or 207-778-7067. You may also contact the Chair of the IRB, Karol Maybury at karol.maybury@maine.edu or 207.778.7067 By signing below, I assert that I fully understand the above and give my consent to serve as a subject in this research. (If you would like a summary of the results, please make the request of the researcher at the contact given above).

(Date)

(Signature)

DIRECTOR CONSENT FORM

Dear Julie Farmer,

My name is Emily Dustin and I am a student at the University of Maine Farmington. I am interested in conducting a research study that goes from January to May of 2017. I am interested in gaining insight on how parents choose the preschool program that meets the needs and desires of their children. What are the deciding factors? Parents will be asked to complete a survey of 15 or more questions in regards to how they chose Sweatt Winter as the preschool program for their child and the factors that went into the decision. After the survey is completed, follow up interviews **may** be conducted to gain more information on the questions in the survey. The participants that **could** be selected for follow-up may include participants with unanswered questions, unclear answers, or for more detail in their responses. Having a face to face interview following the survey may provide clarity in the survey answers for the researcher.

I would like to create a survey for parents/families with 15 or more questions that focus on the different variables that go into their decision for choosing Sweatt-Winter as their preschool program. What are the different factors, why? How do they choose and define a high quality preschool program? This is a qualitative study, which means that parents/families will be providing information based on their own personal opinion. There is no right or wrong answer to the survey questions. After the survey's have been completed and collected, follow up interviews may be conducted to gain further information from the parents/families. I will be getting written consent from each parent/family member before they complete the survey/interview. Participation is voluntary and participants can leave the study at any time

I will not share identifiable data about specific students, parents or others involved in the study. If I have any questions about the research, you may contact the principal investigator, if you have any questions about this study, please contact me, Emily Dustin at emily.dustin@gmail.maine.edu or 207-491-6868. You may also reach the faculty advisor, Donna Karno at donna.karno@maine.edu or 207.778.7067. You may also contact the Chair of the IRB, Karol Maybury at karol.maybury@maine.edu_or 207.778.7067

Thank you for considering my request to conduct research,
Emily Dustin

I have reviewed Emily Dustin's research plan for "NAME OF STUDY". I give my consent to conduct this research. I am aware that I may also ask to view the report at the end of the study.

Date

Name

Position in District/Site

Parent/Guardian Survey

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

1. I believe that class sizes for preschool should be small. (example: 1 teacher for every 8 children)
 - 1: Strongly Agree
 2. Agree
 3. Neutral
 4. Disagree
 5. Strongly Disagree

2. I believe that preschool teachers should have AT LEAST an Associates Degree in Early Childhood or in a related field.
 - 1: Strongly Agree
 2. Agree
 3. Neutral
 4. Disagree
 5. Strongly Disagree

3. I believe that my child should have access to unstructured (free play) more then one time throughout the school day.
 - 1: Strongly Agree
 2. Agree
 3. Neutral
 4. Disagree
 5. Strongly Disagree

4. I believe my child should have access to outdoors more than once a day/ (Weather permitting)
 - 1: Strongly Agree
 2. Agree
 3. Neutral
 4. Disagree
 5. Strongly Disagree

5. I believe that curriculum should be available for parents to have copy of. (Parents should have access to the weekly themes/activities)
 - 1: Strongly Agree
 2. Agree
 3. Neutral

4. Disagree
 5. Strongly Disagree
6. I believe I should have access to the director during the work week.
- 1: Strongly Agree
 2. Agree
 3. Neutral
 4. Disagree
 5. Strongly Disagree
7. I believe that I should have access to a classroom website, Facebook page, or other social media site for updates.
- 1: Strongly Agree
 2. Agree
 3. Neutral
 4. Disagree
 5. Strongly Disagree
8. I chose Sweatt-Winter because of its location.
- 1: Strongly Agree
 2. Agree
 3. Neutral
 4. Disagree
 5. Strongly Disagree
9. I chose Sweatt-Winter because of its curriculum.
- 1: Strongly Agree
 2. Agree
 3. Neutral
 4. Disagree
 5. Strongly Disagree
10. I chose Sweatt-Winter because of the hours of operation.
- 1: Strongly Agree
 2. Agree
 3. Neutral
 4. Disagree
 5. Strongly Disagree
11. I chose Sweatt-Winter because of the tuition cost.

- 1: Strongly Agree
2. Agree
3. Neutral
4. Disagree
5. Strongly Disagree

12. I believe that Sweatt-Winter is a quality childcare program

- 1: Strongly Agree
2. Agree
3. Neutral
4. Disagree
5. Strongly Disagree

Additional Questions

1. How do you prefer to communicate with the director? (Circle Top 2)
 - a. Email
 - b. Phone
 - c. Face to face
 - d. Texting
 - e. Written notes/communication journal
 - f. Classroom Social Media communication (i.e. Facebook)
2. Do you have other comments to provide regarding preschool selection?
3. What are the most important things you recognize in a quality program?

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