

Formative Assessment of ParentChild+ Model for Economic Stability

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Abstract

Background: Home visiting programs, including ParentChild+, have been shown to positively affect early learning, parenting support, child development, and health and maltreatment outcomes. Wilder Research implemented a formative evaluation to explore how the ParentChild+ home visiting program could either be adapted or supplemented to support families' economic mobility.

Methods: Wilder Research worked with ParentChild+ to identify partner sites to participate in the formative evaluation. Wilder asked coordinators at each site to identify early learning specialists (ELs) to: 1) participate in a phone interview with Wilder Research; and 2) interview approximately five of their families. Wilder conducted phone interviews with 11 ELs, who then interviewed a combined 36 families.

Results: Both ELs and caregivers observe positive changes in the children and parent-child interactions as a result of the program. Families' economic challenges vary, but child care, housing, and material goods are most common. Current economic supports provided by ParentChild+ largely consist of referrals to community partners. Additional supports would reduce caregiver stress, allow more engagement with their child, and (if child care were accessible) increase their child's social development. Reducing the economic burden families face has the potential to increase program retention by allowing families to prioritize activities beyond meeting basic needs.

Findings, strengths, limitations, and implications: Under the current program model, the ParentChild+ program is supporting families economically in the short-term primarily through referrals. Families have unique needs; however, child care, education, and training to qualify for available jobs were identified as the most valuable support for the largest number of families. Program adaptations or new program supplements, and additional training to ELs as navigators may increase program participation while increasing families' long-term economic stability. The study was small in scope and one site was overrepresented in interviews. Therefore, conversations with each site may be necessary before making any universal changes to the program model.

Contents

Background: Why a formative evaluation	1
Methods: Interviews with staff and families.....	2
Results.....	4
The Early Learning Specialist Perspective	4
The Family Perspective.....	9
Findings, strengths, limitations, and implications	13
Findings.....	13
Strengths of the study.....	14
Study limitations	15
Implications.....	15
Appendix: Internal reporting notes	17
Achievements and deliverables.....	17
Challenges or project deviations	17
Considerations for evaluation research to follow	18
Lessons learned.....	18

Background: Why a formative evaluation

ParentChild+ is a home visiting program for caregivers who have children ages 16-48 months. Early learning specialists (ELSS) visit families twice a week in their homes for two years (92 home visits). Each week, families receive one-on-one parenting support and information about child development and activities, as well as a physical item to keep (a book or toy). Research has shown that ParentChild+ is effective in helping children develop both academically and social-emotionally so they are prepared for school.

With financial support from CoLab, Wilder Research partnered with ParentChild+ to implement a formative evaluation of the ParentChild+ program at three sites in Minnesota, New York, and North Carolina.

CoLab was interested in exploring how the ParentChild+ home visiting program could be supplemented or adapted to better support families' economic mobility. Home visiting programs have been shown to positively affect early learning, parenting support, child development, and health and maltreatment outcomes. By adding economic supports, CoLab seeks to determine the effects of home visiting on children and families' economic mobility.

The formative evaluation has the potential to add value to the existing evidence-base by identifying more multi-pronged, culturally-responsive, and scalable programmatic or policy solutions for reducing intergenerational poverty. The goal of the research was to solicit family and staff input on adaptations and supplemental programming to the ParentChild+ main program model that could reduce family poverty and increase economic mobility. The following research questions guided this research:

1. (feedback on current model) To what extent does the current ParentChild+ program support families' short- and long-term economic mobility? How does the main program model currently support families' economic mobility?
2. (feedback on potential adaptation) What other types of support or resources do families most need or want? How might the ParentChild+ main program be improved, adapted, or supplemented to have a greater impact on long-term economic mobility? What economic supports, additional supplemental programming, or program adaptations would increase enrollment and retention?
3. (feedback to inform future impact evaluation) What outcomes do families most value as indications of short- and long-term success?

Methods: Interviews with staff and families

Given that the ParentChild+ program early learning specialists (ELS) serve as liaisons both to the families that they serve and the communities within which they work (and often live), Wilder worked with local organizations that implement the ParentChild+ program to gather feedback from ELSs and families.

As a first step, Wilder Research worked with ParentChild+ to identify partner sites to participate in the formative evaluation. Jewish Family and Children's Service (JFCS) is located in Minneapolis, Minnesota, as is CoLab, so they were selected as an initial partner. Wilder sought ParentChild+'s assistance in identifying two other sites whose demographic reach mirrors the national reach and that align with other research efforts in which ParentChild+ is embarking. ParentChild+ selected King Urban Life Center in Buffalo, New York, and CORE Programs in Charlotte, North Carolina. They were selected because they serve predominately African American families and families facing housing instability, respectively.

Wilder contacted sites and asked coordinators at each to identify approximately five ELSs to partner with for two components of this research process: 1) to participate in a phone interview with Wilder Research and 2) to interview approximately five of their families. Wilder relied on sites to determine the best ELSs to participate, though we recommended that sites select ELSs who continued to be connected with alumni families or were serving year 2 cohort families. In addition, we suggested that the ELSs selected mirror the demographics of the national ParentChild+ program demographics, such that the research findings would be more applicable to sites across the country.

Wilder developed an in-depth interview protocol for ELSs around the three research questions, and obtained initial feedback from CoLab, ParentChild+, and JFCS (the first site onboarded). Wilder also designed a brief interview/family feedback form for ELSs to implement with their families. The end of the ELS interview included some brief training and instructions on interviewing families, and asked each ELS to complete the form with up to five families. Both the ELS and family interview protocols were translated into Spanish.

The ParentChild+ site coordinators provided contact information for ELSs, who Wilder then contacted to schedule an interview. The first interview conducted was considered a pilot and the protocol was revised slightly. Wilder conducted phone interviews with the selected ELSs at each of the participating sites. ELSs received a \$20 gift card for the interview they participated in and for each subsequent interview they conducted with families. Families received a \$25 gift card for their participation.

1. Completed interviews

	# of ELS interviews	# of family caregiver interviews
Minnesota	7	27
Charlotte	3	6
Buffalo	1	3
Total	11	36

Wilder Research conducted a thematic analysis of the interview data using ATLAS.ti. We developed a draft codebook based on each interview question and refined the codes after analyzing the first 3-5 interviews. While there was some cross-over, we used different codes for the ELS and family interviews. The themes shared by the largest number of respondents were prioritized in reporting; however, sometimes ideas shared by a small number of respondents were included if relevant to the research questions. We also hosted a virtual 90-minute co-interpretation session with two staff from ParentChild+’s research department, two of the three site coordinators (one was unavailable), and CoLab in which we presented key findings related to research questions 1 and 2, followed by discussion of what was surprising, new, or missing from the findings. For the most part, site coordinators and ParentChild+ research staff said the interview findings confirmed what they had seen in other data or knew anecdotally.

Results

The early learning specialist perspective

ELs define success as changes observed both in the child and their caregiver

When asked what indicates to them that the ParentChild+ program has been successful, ELs talked about changes in the child and caregiver. Literacy development, while the top indicator of success, is not the only measure by which ELs determine success.

Child gains literacy skills → The largest number of ELs spoke about observing improvements in children's literacy skills (e.g., speaking and naming letters, numbers, and colors) and an increased interest in and enthusiasm for books and other learning activities. Sometimes parents will express gratitude and appreciation for the program and for the impact it has had on their child.

We're in a small town. The preschool is in the same building. I get to see the kiddos, the parents. They're right where they need to be for preschool with their classmates. – MN EL

Caregiver is more engaged in learning activities with their child → ELs noted that caregivers often gain a better understanding of how to engage their children in learning activities and build confidence to do so independently during their time with the ParentChild+ program.

Grandma and Auntie were getting involved [with the child]. Just seeing that I don't have to interact; that they can take it on and make it their own. – MN EL

The parents learn how to take time to spend with their children and stimulate their brains. They read and play with them. – MN EL

Caregiver seeks services and resources for their child → For several families, ELs supported and advocated for them when a child has needed additional services or supports (e.g., for a learning disability, autism). ELs noted that when caregivers are willingly seeking services and resources to help their child with learning or when they start to ask the EL for more materials, they know the program has been successful. One EL used the Ages & Stages Questionnaire (ASQ) to help a family understand their child's developmental needs and get them into an appropriate program. In addition to services for their child, parents are also utilizing resources they have become aware of and are asking for more materials or expressing that they want more time with the EL.

Caregiver has increased confidence → ELSs shared that they observe increased confidence among caregivers in their ability to engage with their child in learning activities and caregivers more confident in their child's abilities and readiness for school.

[The doctor] thought maybe her daughter was on the spectrum because she wasn't talking yet. I would give her a book and she would read it and it was very bland [the way she read]. There was no interaction between the two of them. I asked when she is cooking, does she talk to her? And she didn't. That's the way she grew up. I told her to narrate what she was doing to her child. By the end of the year, she was reading with such excitement and the little girl was so excited to sit and listen to the book. It was remarkable to see that happen. ... Mom is happier and feels like she's doing her job as a mom. – MN ELS

Common economic challenges vary by family and location, but child care, housing, and material goods rise to the top

When asked about families' economic challenges, the greatest proportion of ELSs noted the following:

- **Affordable and available child care** – Not having child care that is affordable or available at the times needed makes it difficult for caregivers to work or get the education necessary to increase their skills.
- **Affordable and safe housing** – Many families are living in spaces that are too small for the number of people in their household and are unable to afford a larger or safer home for their family.
- **Cost of household items (e.g., food, diapers, furniture)** – Some families experience food insecurity or are challenged to pay for regular household items, especially given recent inflation.
- **Transportation** – Many families either cannot afford a vehicle, do not have a driver's license, or do not have the funds to repair their vehicle. This is a key logistical barrier to employment, particularly for those in rural areas or small towns.
- **Job skills to obtain employment** – Many caregivers lack the job skills to obtain employment. Some caregivers have never had a job before and may lack the confidence or knowledge about how to get a job. Others have barriers to employment due to their immigration status.

In the co-interpretation session, site coordinators concurred that housing and child care were top challenges. They also acknowledged these have been the hardest needs for their organizations to help families meet.

Current economic supports provided by ParentChild+ largely consist of referrals to community partners

ELSS inform families about local resources available in the community that provide financial support. Several said they referred families to short-term resources, such as a local food shelf or other services for accessing material goods (e.g., diaper drive, holiday gift donation).

At some sites, ParentChild+ is under the umbrella of an organization that provides additional wraparound supports. For example, in Charlotte, North Carolina, ParentChild+ is a program out of the Housing Authority (Inlivian), so participants are already receiving housing subsidies when they enroll in ParentChild+. Participants also have access to a life coach that can assist them with employment (e.g., resume development, job search).

Resources that we have are various food banks that we have in the area. We have one called “Beds for Kids” if the family needs furniture. That’s a really good one that we have. We can assist with utilities in the area. Because of the organization that we work within, they have other job resources that they can put in place for them. – NC ELS

We are a partner collaborating to provide support. Every family has a different need, but it really is doing that warm hand off. There is programming for driver’s licenses. We’re able to bring up these needs with stakeholders/organizations and they come up with these programs for the long term. Education as well. A lot of families want some education, like language learning or training, like welding, to get a better job. – MN ELS

The most valuable supports to add to the ParentChild+ model are those that address the most critical challenges families face, which vary by region and individual family

The type of supports most valuable to families will depend on a number of factors. For example, for a family living in a small town or rural area, transportation may be the most critical issue to address for economic stability. For a family new to this country, assistance with legal documentation or English language skills may be more valuable than building employment skills or resume development. Despite these contextual variations, the greatest proportion of ELSS mentioned the following supports as the most helpful:

- **Child care or removing other barriers to work** – Child care would be particularly helpful to families in two ways. First, when families have safe places for their children to be, they are able to work, thus helping them financially. Additionally, quality child care serves an important role in helping children develop to their full potential and prepare for school. Helping families access child care would be particularly helpful for single-parent households.

[Child care] is a huge one because it is very expensive and we have heard that most of them are not good. Also, there is too much “red tape” when you have a child in these programs, like they won’t let you take your child if they are sick and many parents have to go to work and don’t have anyone that can care for them during the time they are sick. – MN ELS (Spanish)

- **Rent subsidies or subsidized housing** – Paying for housing is a common challenge for families and can lead to frequent moving and stress for families. Assistance with housing could help families stay in one place and reduce the stress associated with not being able to afford rent or a mortgage.

Single mothers have a huge issue with [housing] because they cannot work close to their due date when they are pregnant and cannot afford to pay their rent so they are usually evicted or forced to go live elsewhere and that becomes a financial hardship for that family and it takes a long time to recover from this. – MN ELS (Spanish)

Rent and housing availability in this area is difficult. It gets snatched up so fast. For it to be affordable, they have to move. Some families do move because there isn't affordability or availability here. – MN ELS (small town)

- **Education or training so they are better qualified for available jobs** – Many families could use additional training to gain the skills needed to qualify for available jobs. However, this type of support may not help families economically if they lack child care. Some ELSs noted the need for online education opportunities that make training accessible to families with children and/or without transportation.
- **Support accessing public benefits or other services** – For some ELSs who are under the umbrella of a larger social service organization, their families are already receiving some of this assistance. For those who are not, families would benefit from support with help navigating systems to access benefits for which they may be eligible.

Other supports that may be valuable, depending on the population, are supports for new Americans, transportation, and mental health resources.

My families are new recent immigrants and don't know the city or state, so they have many barriers and issues looking for a job. They are left in the dark because they do not have the legal paperwork to work in the U.S., so they have to depend on friends and relatives to help them find work here and there. – MN ELS (Spanish)

Adding economic supports will likely contribute to household stability, increase the amount of attention and engagement from the caregiver, and improve program enrollment and retention

When asked about whether the addition of economic supports would improve program enrollment and retention, ELSs largely talked about how this might have a positive impact on families that end up canceling or rescheduling ParentChild+ sessions due to competing priorities (e.g., caregiver needs to interview for a job or a last-minute work shift). However, working parents may be less able maintain a regular schedule of home visits; thus, supports that increase parents' work hours may negatively impact retention.

One of my families, I lost them because she's a single mom and working all the time. – MN ELS

Additional supports may increase overall stability in the household, contributing to a better learning environment for children. It may also reduce caregiver stress and allow them more time and energy to focus on their child's learning and ParentChild+ activities. Though the program has already shown to positively impact child development, additional economic supports may allow caregivers to get even more out of the program in regards to their child's development.

It would help the care provider to not be so stressed and worried about having enough money for food and rent. If they're not worried or stressed, they can be more present for their child and sit with them to read or do homework. – MN ELS

When the parents are relaxed and happy, you can spend more time with your child and be in the moment and observe milestones, and facilitate their learning at home. – NY ELS

Families have unique needs and it takes a trusting relationship for families to communicate their needs and access resources

When asked about considerations to be aware of when providing additional supports aimed at financial stability, ELSs shared many different considerations.

Program adaptations or new supplemental programming should not assume a one-size-fits-all approach. What is appropriate for one family, might not be appropriate for another. For example, some families might welcome direct payments, while others might be suspicious of or offended by such an offering. It may be valuable to allow families autonomy to identify and select what is most important and helpful to them.

Not every family is the same. Some families are already stable and some are fresh and first time mothers, so we work with them to prioritize and meet them where they are at. – MN ELS

Additional supports may result in increased job satisfaction for early learning specialists. A couple of ELSs noted it can be difficult to enter a home and not be able to provide families with the supports they need. Providing ELSs with more tools to help families in their journey toward financial stability and economic mobility could reduce the stress and secondary trauma they experience in their role.

It may be important to ensure families are not motivated to enroll in the program for the financial supports alone. If families are not driven to participate for the developmental benefits for their child, issues with retention may increase and/or families may not be engaged to the level desired or expected.

The family perspective

Caregivers appreciate their relationship with their ELS, the materials provided, and the newfound engagement with their child

When asked to share a positive experience with ParentChild+, many caregivers spoke about their relationship with the ELS. They valued not only the social interaction for their child, but for them as well.

A positive experience for me are all of our visits together. I'm a stay-at-home mom, our visits together give me other interactions other than with my children. – MN caregiver

My son loves his teacher very much. He really enjoys when she comes to visit us and I also enjoy her company and support. – MN caregiver

Caregivers also reported that the books and toys provided through the program have been extremely helpful. Several caregivers also mentioned specific activities they engaged in with the ELS as a positive experience.

My child was having a hard time learning the ABCs and the numbers. We had a harder time teaching her than with her older brother. With the program she was so excited to learn. The books and the toys that you brought are fun and helped build her foundation. She looked forward to the visits and the learning and used the books and toys all the time. – MN caregiver

Caregivers observed the development of academic and social skills in their child, experienced increased confidence and knowledge about how to engage their child in learning, and are generally more engaged with their child

When asked about what had changed or what they believe will change as a result of the program, caregivers echo what was identified by the ELSs as key changes.

Development of child's academic and social skills → Similar to the ELS observations, the largest proportion of caregivers talked about witnessing their child's skill development throughout the program. Caregivers noted improvements in language and speech, readiness for school, openness to learning, ability to focus, social skills, and enthusiasm for reading/storytime.

She has grown in her speech and communication, is more open, and has learned so much. My favorite experiences with her are when she looks forward to our visits and wants to "read" a book to us. – MN caregiver

He has a longer attention span because of the program visits and seems to have more patience, which will help him in preschool. – MN caregiver

Knowledge gain and confidence of caregiver to engage child in learning →

Caregivers shared that they felt more comfortable and confident knowing how best to interact with their child to facilitate learning, a success also noted by ELSs. They benefited from information and coaching from the ELS that helped them instill new routines with their child (e.g., storytime, library visits).

[My child] and I have learned a lot throughout these two years, including my interaction with her. She was my first born child and I have learned how to play and teach her by having fun with the toys and books that have been provided. The dedication, routine, and time spent each week with an ELS [has helped]. – MN caregiver

I have changed the most. It opened me up to different ideas and to use my imagination when coming up with creative activities to do with my kids. – MN caregiver

Caregivers are more engaged with their children → In addition to the knowledge and confidence gained, caregivers feel they are spending more time interacting with their child. They are communicating more, more hands-on, and more connected. They reported that they read together and have developed routines as a result of the program. Some caregivers mentioned additional benefits for their other children who are not enrolled in ParentChild+.

Every night he has a routine now to read a book with me and if I don't read, he says, "I can't sleep. You did not read a book to me." – MN caregiver

Our storytime happened more. I read to my boys, but it wasn't every single night. So I believe that's what changed for my family and is better now. – NC caregiver

Financial stability would mean having better housing, having more time with their children, and being able to afford basic needs and have a savings

When asked about what it would look like to be in a better financial situation, the largest proportion of caregivers talked about having better housing, including housing that is better quality, affordable, or that they owned.

If I had a better job, making more money, it would... help in getting a better, more comfortable place to stay. – NC caregiver

Families stated that financial stability would mean they are be able to afford basic needs and have savings--not live paycheck to paycheck.

I would have money to pay bills and take a trip. – NY caregiver

Financial stability would look like me maintaining my bills, not sharing a car, and saving money for a rainy day. – NC caregiver

Caregivers also shared that an increase in financial stability would give them more time to spend with their children.

I'd be spending more time with my kids instead of working so much. I'd be taking trips with my children and would focus on spending quality time with them. – MN caregiver

Caregivers receive access to material goods and increase awareness of community resources

When asked about how ParentChild+ had helped them financially, caregivers noted receiving material goods and connecting to community resources through referrals or information shared by the ELS. Among the most frequently mentioned items were diapers, educational toys and books, food services (e.g., food shelf or food bank information), and assistance with gifts or food during the holidays (i.e., Thanksgiving and Christmas). Many caregivers talked about connecting to local resources or assistance programs they had not known about or been utilizing prior to their enrollment in ParentChild+. [Note: It is unclear the extent to which ELSs are providing these resources on behalf of ParentChild+ or as part of an umbrella organization under which ParentChild+ is housed.]

The ELS has helped me by referring me to local resources and new programs that come along the way throughout the years. Each week, if I needed help with a resource or was in need of food or diapers, or not able to pay a bill or read a letter. The ELS helps with transportation and [to] interpret letters or picking up and dropping off important forms. – MN caregiver

Child care and education or training are the most needed supports

From the following list of potential supports, the largest number of caregivers identified child care or removing other barriers to work and education or training as what would be the most helpful for their family. ELSs noted similar supports as top needs. The supports are listed by most to least frequently selected as most helpful.

1. Child care or removing other barriers to work (N=23)
2. Education or training so they are better qualified for available jobs (N=14)
3. Career coaching and help finding jobs (N=11)
4. Rent subsidies or subsidized housing (N=10)
5. Support accessing public benefits or other services (N=10)
6. Direct payments or income (N=10)
7. Another type of resource or support (N=7)

Many caregivers expressed that with the high cost of child care, it does not make financial sense to work. Affordable child care or child care assistance would allow caregivers to work more hours or would simply increase the amount of their income that could be used toward other things.

However, during the co-interpretation session, attendees acknowledged there may be other cultural nuances in that some families may simply prefer to have a family member care for their child, rather than sending their child to a formal child care provider or center. In addition, attendees noted that direct payments may serve the purpose of addressing an immediate financial need, yet without additional supports to sustain the income, they may not contribute to long-term financial stability as once the income is taken away, the family is again struggling to pay bills.

Food assistance and transportation are other desired supports

When asked about what other types of supports would be helpful to their family, caregivers mentioned help with accessing food, such as through grocery vouchers, and assistance with obtaining reliable transportation, including funding for vehicle repairs. Transportation was a particular challenge mentioned by families in rural areas.

Other suggestions varied widely across respondents. Examples include language services, social service navigation, and lengthening the program.

Additional supports would reduce caregiver stress, allow more engagement with their child, and (if child care were accessible) increase their child's social development

According to caregivers, additional supports aimed at economic and financial stability would contribute to their child's development in a number of ways. The most common themes included reduced stress for the caregiver; more time, energy, and focus to engage with their child; and improved social skills (if their child were able to attend child care).

I would be less stressed and be able to focus on other things instead of worrying. I can focus on my children. – MN caregiver

If my husband is financially calm/good, the harmony in the home is better, and I can dedicate myself to my children more calmly without the extra economic stress. – MN caregiver

Child care would have given him social opportunities he didn't have at home. – MN caregiver

Findings, strengths, limitations, and implications

Findings

This section is structured to answer the initial research questions.

The current model

To what extent does the current ParentChild+ program support families' short- and long-term economic mobility? How does the main program model currently support families' economic mobility?

Currently, early learning specialists support families economically in the short-term by providing them with or connecting them to resources where they can get household items that they need, such as food, diapers, furniture, or gifts for the holidays. Families are also connected to community resources that ELSs make them aware of by providing information or referrals. While many of these resources provide families with support in the short-term (e.g., utilities assistance), others may have long-term impacts on economic mobility (e.g., language learning programs, enrollment in Head Start).

Potential adaptations or supplemental programming

What other types of support or resources do families most need or want? How might the ParentChild+ main program be improved, adapted, or supplemented to have a greater impact on long-term economic mobility? What economic supports, additional supplemental programming, or program adaptations would increase enrollment and retention?

Families have unique needs or desires, particularly given several contextual factors such as location, immigration status, and household type. Despite these contextual factors, which may be worth exploring more in future research, child care and education and training to qualify for available jobs were identified as the most valuable support for the largest number of families. However, every type of potential support listed was identified by at least one-third of families as “most helpful” to their financial stability (note: families could select more than one option).

Families often cancel or need to reschedule appointments with their ELS, or drop out of the program because of efforts to meet basic needs for their family. Two examples include families dropping out of the program because they moved to a different community seeking employment or better/more affordable housing, and families canceling ParentChild+ appointments because they need to pick up a last minute job or participate in an interview.

Supporting families to meet their financial needs may improve family engagement and retention in the program. Program coordinators noted in the co-interpretation session that retention could be negatively impacted, as families that are supported in obtaining full-time jobs (a key contribution to economic stability) may be less able to engage with a home visiting program on a regular basis. We do not have sufficient data to understand whether ELSs believe these supports will increase program enrollment.

Measures of success

What outcomes do families most value as indications of short- and long-term success?

Families most value the academic and literacy development and social development that they observe in their child as a result of the ParentChild+ program. They also value their own development as caregivers such as increased knowledge, confidence, and self-efficacy to engage their child in activities and routines that support their learning.

In addition, ELSs and families noted the following potential benefits of increased financial stability. Though they did not specifically identify them as indicators of success, they are benefits staff and families consider important.

2. Benefits of increased financial stability, by role

Perspective	Benefits of increased financial stability
ELS	Contribute to household stability – better learning environment Improve enrollment and retention in program
Family	Increase child's social development (if child care is accessible)
Both	Reduce caregiver stress Allow for more attention and engagement from caregiver

Strengths of the study

While this is not a true participatory action research study, it was designed to gather feedback directly from parents with young children who may have lived experiences with low household income, speaking languages other than English, or migrating to the United States. Caregivers were likely more responsive to completing interviews with ELSs than they may have been with unknown researchers. Including ELSs in the research was also important, as many of them are previous participants and they can speak to both their experiences as well as observations from working with many families.

In addition, the co-interpretation session provided an opportunity for those working closely with ParentChild+ programs to review and provide feedback and interpretation of the results.

Study limitations

While there is some risk that families felt inclined to give the perceived “right” answer due to social desirability, we believe that ELSs likely have sufficient relationships with families that most gave their honest opinions and reactions. We also ensured the questions were not focused on critiques of current services in order to avoid any potential power dynamics or concerns about maintaining the relationship.

The formative evaluation was relatively small in scope compared to the vast reach of ParentChild+ nationally. Additionally, Minnesota is overrepresented in the interviews. Thus, the findings may not be applicable to all ParentChild+ sites, particularly those that are in a very different context than those that participated in this formative evaluation. Despite that, there is diversity among the ELSs and families that participated in terms of their location (rural and urban), home language (English and Spanish), and context in which the ParentChild+ program is offered.

Implications

Based on key themes from interviews with families and current program design, ParentChild+ could improve its impact on the economic mobility of enrolled families by:

- Providing child care subsidies and engaging in advocacy to increase the availability, affordability, and quality of child care. Lack of child care capacity is a national problem and it is challenging for sites to provide referrals for child care providers that actually have space.
- Providing training to ELSs to formalize the process of understanding families’ financial challenges and connect them to and help them navigate resources. ParentChild+ staff also acknowledged that ELSs are increasingly playing a navigator role and additional training, or even additional home visits, to support this role may be warranted. Given that ELSs already have quite heavy workloads and to protect the important literacy and childhood development work they are doing with the children and families, adding a family stabilization specialist role who works with a team of ELSs and their families and who specializes in connecting families with appropriate benefits and services may be more appropriate.

- Assessing the extent to which ParentChild+ programs are housed within umbrella organizations that provide wraparound supports for families, and move those that are standalone programs to become part of a broader social service organization.
- Incorporating an education and training component of ParentChild+ that focuses on helping caregivers obtain job skills and credentials to enter the workforce or advance in an in-demand industry. Education may include English language learning depending on the population.

Finally, although only a subset of participants explicitly stated a desire for direct financial assistance, families described a range of material needs to help them stabilize and thrive (child care assistance, housing assistance, food, transportation, resources for pursuing education, etc.). One of the most efficient ways to address diverse and dynamic needs could be to offer fungible support, such as direct cash transfers, alongside of home visiting and family counseling.

Appendix: Internal reporting notes

This appendix provides additional internal notes for CoLab and may be removed for broader dissemination.

Achievements and deliverables

Over the course of this Innovation Grant, Wilder Research achieved the following:

- Collaborated with CoLab and ParentChild+ to design the formative evaluation, including defining the research questions and data collection approaches.
- Partnered with, and received prompt responses from, three ParentChild+ sites who helped facilitate the research, particularly JFCS of Minneapolis who has been a partner to CoLab and Wilder since this project was first broached in 2023.
- Successfully completed 36 interviews in partnership with ELSs at three sites.
- Developed two interview tools that can be adapted or reused in the future.
- Planned and co-facilitated a co-interpretation session with CoLab, ParentChild+, and the participating sites.
- Wrote a final report with recommendations for ParentChild+ programs moving forward.

Challenges or project deviations

While Jewish Family and Children's Service of Minneapolis was identified as a partner early on, ParentChild+ was delayed in identifying the two additional sites, as they were also conducting site visits and seeking to align this project with other research. This delay resulted in fewer interviews, at the Buffalo, NY, site in particular, as their ELSs do not work in the summer.

Since the sites were onboarded at different times, it did not make sense to do one interviewing training with all ELSs to instruct them on how to conduct interviews with their families. Instead, Wilder provided training and guidance at the end of each interview with the ELSs so they could each start interviewing families immediately following their interview with Wilder.

Considerations for evaluation research to follow

The underlying purpose of this formative evaluation was to shape a future longitudinal evaluation of the effects of additional economic supports as part of the ParentChild+ model, either directly through the home visits or indirectly through referrals or other supports. To that end, we asked families how they define success to inform measures in a future study. Families noted that financial stability would reduce stress and give them more time to spend with their child. In addition, they would have stable, consistent, and high-quality child care and housing. Thus, measures related to access to high quality child care, stable housing, stress, and family time may be worth exploring as part of a future longitudinal study.

In addition, coordinators and ParentChild+ research staff noted in the co-interpretation session that increases in economic support, specifically job placement, could inversely affect retention. That is, when parents are able to obtain paying jobs outside the home, they may no longer be available during the day to meet with their ELS and, thus, may have to drop out of the program. This relationship would also warrant further research.

Finally, as noted above, further research may be needed to explore the disparate needs of families based on their location (urban, suburban, or rural, as well as specific locations), immigration status, and household type.

Lessons learned

Overall, the formative evaluation was successful at recognizing ways ParentChild+ is currently supporting families, both within the current scope of child development, and in broader family supports. The study also was able to point to additional supports both families and ELSs identified to support economic mobility; these supports were validated by ParentChild+ staff at the co-interpretation session.

One site was overrepresented and there was insufficient data to analyze differences by other factors, such as family's home language or site. Future studies may benefit from identifying local sites earlier on in the process and securing their partnership. The timing of this study, in late spring, likely contributed to some challenges with participation, as some ParentChild+ sites run their programs on a school year calendar and were unable to complete interviews in the timeframe needed.

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