Family experiences of engagement in inclusive childcare programs for toddlers

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Abstract: Previous research has explored family engagement experiences and practices in childcare programs. The purpose of this study was to explore family members' experiences related to their engagement in decision-making processes across various inclusive, toddler childcare programs. Five early educators and eight parents participated in the study. Four parents had a child with a diagnosed disability or developmental delays, were at-risk for developmental delays, and/or received speech, occupational, or physical therapy. Eligible early educators participating in the study taught toddlers (18 to 30 months) in a private, faith-based, or university childcare program. A semi-structured interview style was used to collect family participant responses. The early educators' inclusive practice indicator rubric scores previously collected from the larger grant funded project were used to triangulate data. Through a phenomenological qualitative design, this study gained a better understanding of families' decision-making experiences, facilitators and barriers that may impact family engagement, and opportunities early educators have provided or not provided to encourage family engagement in inclusive, toddler childcare programs.

Introduction

Today, there is an ever-growing number of children with and without disabilities playing and learning together in childcare programs across the nation (Division for Early Childhood/National Association for the Education of Young Children (DEC/NAEYC, 2009). In 2019, 59% of children from birth to age five participated in nonparental childcare (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2021). With this growing demand for childcare, centers must work to find ways to engage families in their children's early education. Family engagement is a high-quality indicator in childcare programs that underscores early childhood inclusive practices (Soukakou, 2016). Family engagement refers to a partnership between families and early educators where acceptance, communication, support, collaboration, and bidirectional feedback are common practices to support positive gains in child outcomes (Soodak et al., 2002; Soukakou, 2016). Xu and Filler (2008) noted family engagement within childcare programs is one of the strongest child development predictors. Furthermore, Comer and Ben-Avie (2010) emphasize that combining quality educational practices and family engagement practices effectively promote young children's learning and development. As families and educators engage with one another, mutual feelings of belonging and community develop that impact how children play, learn, and develop new skills as learners (Comer & Ben-Avie, 2010). When high-quality programs implement family engagement practices, both families and young children benefit (El Nokali et al., 2010; Powell et al., 2010).

Bronfenbrenner (1979) explained that the family is a highly effective system for encouraging and

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sustaining a child's development. Parent engagement in inclusive childcare programs has shown positive correlations with early development. Powell et al. (2010) found collaboration and communication quality between parents and educators affected development and increased school readiness during the preschool years. Furthermore, parent involvement studies have reported positive changes in students' social and emotional skills, decreased problem behavior, and improved mathematic skills (El Nokali et al., 2010; Powell et al., 2010). Parental engagement was linked to long-term effects such as increased high school graduation percentages and lower unemployment and crime rates (Yoshikawa et al., 2013).

Although research has shown that positive student and family outcomes result from parent engagement and strong teacher-parent relationships in childcare programs, programs still face challenges in supporting and promoting parent engagement (Classen & Westbrook, 2020; El Nokali et al., 2010; Powell et al., 2010; Soukakou et al., 2014). Using the Inclusive Classroom Profile (ICP), family and professional partnerships are one of twelve items measured on a 7-point scale (i.e., 1 = inadequate, 3 = minimal, 5 = good, and 7 = excellent). An international study using the ICP reported a 3.27 rating for family and professional partnerships (Soukakou et al., 2014) while a study conducted in a southern state that currently does not have a quality rating system reported a rating of 1.06 (Classen & Westbrook, 2020). Both studies show a need to implement more evidence-based family engagement practices within childcare programs (Classen & Westbrook, 2020; Soukakou et al., 2014). Furthermore, according to Mereoiu et al. (2015), parents have reported challenges in building and maintaining partnerships with early educators. Levickis et al. (2022) stated that parents reported limited engagement with early educators and other families when attendance resumed during the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic. Further exploring family engagement experiences can provide insight to assist in implementing and improving family practice quality (Mereoiu et al., 2015). Most research to date exploring family engagement was conducted with families who had preschool-aged children. This study sought to explore family engagement practices from the perspective of parents who had a toddler enrolled in inclusive childcare settings.

Literature Review

The literature on early childhood education provides professionals with a clear family engagement definition which includes inclusion components and guidance from professional organizations on best practices. Family engagement theories have provided insight and assistance in explaining what impacts child development. Research exploring family engagement experiences and practices in childcare programs is growing.

Family Engagement: A Critical Inclusion Component

Effective practices that support high-quality early childhood inclusion include children and families having full access and participation in quality environments with needed support and services (Barton & Smith, 2015). It is critical to define family engagement expectations and practices for childcare programs to fully support all families (DEC/NAEYC, 2009). As stated in the joint position statement from the DEC/NAEYC (2009) there are three defining early childhood inclusion features: access, participation, and support.

Access

According to Barton and Smith (2015), access refers to providing frequent and challenging learning opportunities across different settings for all children by identifying barriers including structural, relationship, and program content barriers. Providing physical access to the program and program content and social access to encourage relationships can promote a sense of belonging and community with families (Barton & Smith, 2015). To meet family needs, multiple communication styles are used in their home or preferred language (Halgunseth, 2009; Soukakou, 2016). Welcoming relationships can increase trust and understanding between parents and educators, thus encouraging family engagement (Soodak & Erwin, 2000).

Participation

As Barton and Smith (2015) explained, in quality childcare programs, all children and families have the right to fully participate in all opportunities. To provide the opportunity to fully participate, early childhood educators must provide many opportunities for learning and engagement through various instructional methods (Barton & Smtih, 2015). Family capacity building in programs encourages and promotes using at-home learning activities that may generalize skills and enhance early learning. These opportunities can increase early learning in the home and encourage families to meet the goals established (Halgunseth, 2009). Reciprocal communication between the early childhood educator and parents can assist in addressing their child's concerns, resources, priorities, or needs (Soukakou, 2016). Furthermore, early educators and families can collaborate during the decision-making process including creating goals for individualized plans and implementing practices that convey the family's primary concerns and addresses the child's developmental strengths and needs (DEC, 2014). Promoting participation also encourages relationships within the classroom between all peers as well as relationships between families and educators (Barton & Smith, 2015). Strong relationships built through family empowerment and participation within a program can positively impact each family (Comer & Ben-Avie, 2010). Strong programs focused on family engagement often solicit feedback from parents concerning the program's quality and seek improvement efforts (Soukakou, 2016).

Supports

Supports refer to broader system features including stakeholders such as educators, service providers, families, and community members (Barton & Smith, 2015). Furthermore, high-quality inclusion includes communication and collaboration between families and stakeholders (DEC/NAEYC, 2009). Supports are a critical component for family engagement and professional development for early childhood professionals (Soodak & Erwin, 2000). Soodak and Erwin (2000) state that collaboration with community stakeholders can provide access to further resources and support to encourage family engagement. High-quality inclusion in childcare programs requires ongoing professional development and coaching opportunities that encourage team collaboration critical to supporting all children and families (Barton & Smith, 2015). Turnbull and colleagues (2015) described family professional partnership elements that encourage family engagement to include building trusting relationships, maintaining competence, assisting families in accessing knowledge and resources, discovering and implementing solutions to problem solve, and increasing social communication skills.

Family Engagement Professional Organization Guidance

Professional organizations, including the DEC and the NAEYC, have provided recommended practices and standards to guide early educators and practitioners in improving child outcomes. All are evidence-based, created by professional experts in the early childhood field, and expected to be provided from high-quality childcare programs. When early educators implement and adhere to these practices and standards, positive outcomes are expected for both children and families (DEC, 2014; NAEYC, 2019).

Division for Early Childhood Recommended Practices

In 2014, the DEC established recommended practices as guidelines for practitioners and families on how to effectively enhance learning outcomes and encourage child development. Included in these recommended practices were family practices which focus on being family-centered, building family capacity, and facilitating family and professional collaboration. Family-centered practices value showing respect to all families, individualizing family needs, understanding family situations, giving family members unbiased information to make well-informed decisions, and including the family throughout all educational processes. The second theme includes opportunities for families to gain additional knowledge and skill in parenting practices that increase self-efficacy. The final theme includes family and professional collaboration which focuses on practices that strengthen relationships between families and educators who collaborate to accomplish mutually beneficial goals that build on family competencies and assist with the child's development (DEC, 2014).

National Association for the Education of Young Children Standards

The NAEYC and Pre-K Now joint report in 2009 provided guidance for programs wanting to improve family engagement. First, high-quality inclusive programs invite families to participate in decision-making and goal-setting for their child through participation in parent-teacher conferences (Halgunseth, 2009). Successful meetings include a collaborative exchange of vital information including progress-monitoring results and other child-related information between families, early childhood educators, interventionists, and service providers (Soukakou, 2016). For students with disabilities, the Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) and the Individualized Education Program (IEP) require collaborative decision-making processes that include families sharing resources and information while educators seek information about family priorities and strengths in regular bidirectional communication between the childcare center and families (Halgunseth, 2009; Soukakou, 2016). High quality inclusive programs provide support to early childhood educators to attend IEP meetings with providers, families, and local educational agencies (Soukakou, 2016). Finally, programs are encouraged to use home and community learning activities to broaden the child's learning environment and invite families to provide feedback and suggestions for program-level improvements (Halgunseth, 2009).

Family Engagement Theories

Family engagement theories have contributed to the literature on early childhood development and assist professionals when serving children and families. Family engagement theories can provide explanations when viewing a young child's social environment, cultural background, or family system and how both direct and indirect relationships impact a child's development. Furthermore, theories can provide insight into factors that impact or contribute to family experiences related to engagement in childcare programs.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model

In 1979, Urie Bronfenbrenner created an ecological model of systems to explain the direct and indirect influences on a child's development and how each system influences one another. The first layer, the microsystem, includes a child's immediate environment such as the family, school, peers, educators, childcare, health services, and religious organizations. Researchers in multiple studies highlight that safe and secure environments impact how trusting relationships between children and early educators are developed (Mereoiu et al., 2015; Purvis et al., 2007).

Furthermore, positive relationships built in early childhood can set the foundation for future relationships throughout the child's life (Levy & Orlans, 2014). The next layer, the mesosystem, connects the immediate settings in a child's life including the link between the home and the early education program. Negative experiences, especially during the diagnosis phase, can cause a lack of trust between parents and early educators, and parents are left feeling devalued during the decision-making process (Coussens et al., 2021; Stoner & Angell, 2006). Children are affected by the experiences in the home and at the childcare program but also by the indirect experiences linked between the home and early education program (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). "The developmental potential of a mesosystem is enhanced to the extent that there exist indirect linkages between settings that encourage the growth of mutual trust, positive orientation, goal consensus, and a balance of power responsive to action on behalf of the developing person" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 216). The exosystem, the next layer in the ecological model, includes social structures such as government agencies, school boards, extended family, the media, and family economic levels. The macrosystem encompasses the culture that the child is developing within. The final outside layer, the chronosystem, includes the environmental changes that occur within the child's life including historical events or major transitions (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Family Systems Theory

Turnbull et al. (1986) created the Family Systems Framework to describe family characteristics. The framework views all family components as interrelated and greater than individual members' characteristics. Family structure, family interaction, family functions, and the family life cycle make up the

four family system components. Family structure refers to the family size, relationships with each member, and their characteristics including disabilities, values, and beliefs. Family interactions include quality interactions among family members. Family functions define the responsibilities and the family's daily routines. A parent delineates and places value on certain responsibilities and functions whether it be financial, social, educational, or emotional. The last component, the family life cycle, refers to how the family evolves due to changes in development, relationships, roles, and functions over time (Pang, 2010; Turnbull et al., 1986). In conjunction with this research, Turnbull and colleagues (2015) also reported that utilizing a family-systems approach and promoting positive relationships between the educator, parent, and child result in positive child outcomes. Early educators can benefit from being able to identify the Family Systems Framework components for the families they serve. When considering a family's structure, characteristics, functions, and life cycle, much information can be obtained to understand different priorities, needs, values, beliefs, and other family dynamics. Furthermore, the family system can give insight into facilitators and barriers to family engagement in the decision-making process (McBride & Peterson, 1997; Turnbull et al., 1986).

Culturagram

In 1994, Culturagram was first developed to better understand families who come from non-dominate cultures within the community (Congress, 1994). The Culturagram can assist early educators in being more culturally sensitive when engaging families in their child's education. Congress (1994) discussed ten areas to consider when providing support. Early educators must consider causes for relocation, the family's legal status, a child's age at the time they relocate, languages spoken inside and outside the home, health care beliefs, special events and holidays celebrated, trauma's impact, value placed on education, and access to cultural resources in the community. Utilizing the culturagram, early educators can respect diversity and provide culturally responsive family partnerships and learning environments (Congress, 1994).

Skilled Dialogue Framework

The Skilled Dialogue Framework (Barrera & Corso, 2002) was created to increase two-way communication between professionals and families through respectful, reciprocal, and responsive interaction. Respect is honoring a person's individual identity as a valued community member. Reciprocity is believing that a person's voice is equally valued as one's own. Responsiveness requires the desire for connection including other's beliefs and perspectives. The Skilled Dialogue Framework discusses six strategies: Welcoming, sense-making, joining, allowing, appreciating, and harmonizing. *Welcoming* includes using words and behaviors that express our recognition of a person's value and dignity. When we *allow* diverse beliefs and perspectives to be present, we do so as to not change them. Attempting to understand a person's words or behaviors during face-to-face interactions describes the strategy of *sense-making*. *Appreciating* another's perspective can deepen relationships by acknowledging and explaining the significance it brings to the situation. After welcoming and seeking to understand (i.e., sense-making) shared information and/or behavior, educators must attempt to *join* or co-create a solution based on mutual understanding and shared responsibility. *Harmonizing* can help bring conflicting perspectives together and create a third choice in decision-making. Incorporating these six strategies during two-way communication between professionals and families can increase collaboration and joint decision-making (Barrera & Corso, 2002; Barrera et al., 2003; Barrera & Kramer, 2009, 2017).

Family Engagement Practice Studies

Along with family engagement theories, related research studies that contribute to the literature on family engagement are growing. Studies have focused on family engagement in preschool programs in regard to individualized education plans, learning activities, assessment, professional development, educator and parent experiences, and Covid-19 restrictions. Figure 1 shows a family engagement literature summary organized by topics including how many studies address each topic.
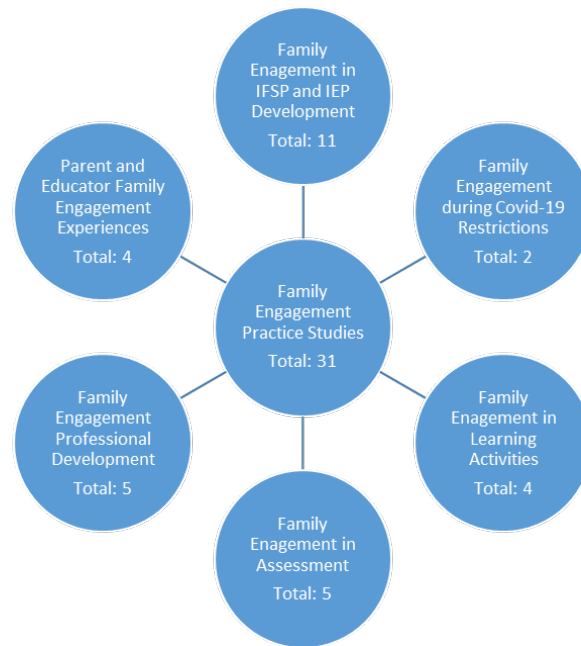
Figure 1. *Family Engagement Practice Studies*

Family Engagement in IFSP and IEP Development

IEP development has long been a discussion topic when it comes to involving and engaging families in the process. Under the Individuals with Disabilities Improvement Act (IDEIA) 2004, the law requires an IEP for all children aged three and above to be implemented if being provided special services for a categorized disability (IDEIA, 2004). Successful IFSP and IEP development requires a partnership between educators and parents (DeSpain & Hedin, 2022; Singh & Keese, 2020). IDEIA discusses parents being the most important team members involved in the IFSP and IEP development (IDEIA, 2004). For families with young infant or toddler children, early educators often provide the family with the first impressions of early intervention services (Kuhn & Higgins, 2020). Thus, it is important for early educators to build trust and provide support that is responsive to the families' needs and priorities during one of the most vulnerable times for families who have young children with delays/disabilities. Singh & Keese (2020) stated that IEPs should be developed by merging all team members' knowledge and creating a plan to encourage children's academic and functional success. This is an opportunity for all team members to come together to collaborate on what is in the child's best interest. Furthermore, the IEP development is designed to support and provide convenience for families such as providing yearly meeting notices with mutually convenient and beneficial meeting times for all parties (Singh & Keese, 2020).

Qualitative research has been conducted on parent and educator experiences related to these partnerships. When interviewing parents and educators, researchers have found various results. First, researchers have found that one party dominates the other during conversations when discussing opinions and concerns (Fish, 2008; Turnbull et al., 2015). Specifically, it has been found that parents feel that they don't have a voice during the process and aren't afforded the opportunity to discuss their parental observations, judgments, or knowledge (Fish, 2008; Turnbull et al., 2015). Frequently, decisions have already been made about placement and goals before the meeting takes place with the parent as a team member (Kurth et al., 2020; Ruppar & Gaffney, 2011). Specifically, parents feel powerless or express feeling like an invisible team member (Zeitlin & Curcic, 2014). Harry (2008) stated that to build trusting relationships and increase partnership, the families' priorities and goals must be valued and considered. Bruder and Dunst (2015) found that educators, specifically early childhood special educators, were more confident in a family-centered approach than they were competent. When educators dominate the meeting, parents begin to shut down from intimidation and take a back seat in the conversation (Carlson et al., 2020; Fish, 2008; Zeitlin & Curcic, 2014). Zeitlin & Curcic (2014) found that parents experience judgment and feel

they won't be able to meet expectations set by educators. Carlson et al. (2020) reported that parents wished educators would share more positive information, give them time to speak in meetings, and collaborate during the goal development.

Family Engagement in Learning Activities

Research on family engagement in learning activities has been explored. Several studies have concentrated on the impact home learning activities have on increasing positive child academic outcomes. Garbacz et al. (2019), Hindman and Morrison (2011), Lin et al. (2019), and Mendez (2010) explored parental experiences during family engagement opportunities including at home learning activities. Garbacz et al. (2019), Hindman and Morrison (2011), Mendez (2010) found that a positive parent-teacher relationship and program support encouraged parents to engage in the activities. Specifically, parents had positive experiences with shared reading in the home when provided additional support and relationships were positive between parents and educators. Lin et al. (2019) found that parents felt that open, consistent communication with educators about their child's development contributed to their engagement in at-home learning experiences.

Family Engagement in Assessment

Researchers have examined family engagement during the assessment process, specifically, during the initial phases. Developmental concerns for a child can arise in the early years from early educators or parents, and it is important to establish a parent-teacher partnership to collaborate through the assessment process. Parents may develop a concern for their child's development when comparing them to other same-aged peers and early educators are known to serve as an informant (Marshall et al., 2020). The DEC Recommended Practices state that early educators are responsible for including families in gathering assessment information and reporting results to families (DEC, 2014). If parents are invited to observe the child's development and offered an opportunity to share that information this could help them feel more prepared for meetings rather than feeling surprised. For example, Braiden et al. (2010) and Marshall et al. (2020) found that parents endured stress, anxiety, and uncomfortable feelings after early educators shared screening or monitoring results and concerns about their child's development. McConachie et al. (2018) stated that most parents expect to be included in the decision-making. Studies have shown that parents wanted to be given information that is relevant and applicable to their child to better understand their child's development (Auert et al., 2012; Braiden et al., 2010). Researchers found that if professionals had concerns for development, especially autism, parents preferred to understand the initial signs or red flags (Braiden et al., 2010). Furthermore, parents in this study reported a hesitancy from professionals when discussing a potential diagnosis but preferred to know cause for concern early (Braiden et al., 2010).

Family Engagement Professional Development

Several researchers have examined the family engagement professional development impact on educator change or implementation (Classen & Westbrook, 2020; Cummings et al., 2015; Herman & Reinke, 2017; Kuhn et al., 2017; Sheridan et al., 2010). Professional development training and coaching opportunities in the classroom are effective in providing early educators with practices that encourage and increase family engagement (Classen & Westbrook, 2020; Cummings et al., 2015; Herman & Reinke, 2017; Kuhn et al., 2017; Sheridan et al., 2010). Specific practices include establishing and maintaining parent-teacher partnerships, fostering parent-child relationships, collaborating to solve problems and address concerns, and implementing steps to assist with the decision-making process (Kuhn et al., 2017). Sheridan et al. (2010) found that when implementing both professional development and parent training on family engagement, child outcome measures were positive for both academic and social-emotional skill development. A professional development training program was implemented to examine its effects on parent-teacher and parent-child relationships and the correlation with positive student outcomes. The training program was found to increase positive relationships, thus increasing positive student outcomes (Sheridan et al., 2010).

Parent and Educator Family Engagement Experiences

Qualitative studies have researched family and educator experiences related to parent engagement in childcare programs. Rech et al. (2021) explored the use and perceptions of the NAEYC family engagement principles among early childhood educators in addition to barriers to implementation. Classen et al. (2019) identified barriers and facilitators between military families and early childhood educators when collaborating to meet the needs of young children with disabilities. Using interview questions aligned with the DEC Recommended Practices, the study found that families viewed educators who encouraged collaborative partnerships as showing empathy, communicating often, and exhibiting professionalism. Practices such as communication and parent-educator partnerships were important to parents and educators (Classen et al., 2019). Macy et al. (2019) stated that positive, trusting relationships can ensure effective two-way communication. Also, professional development was deemed important and requested from families and educators. When considering family engagement, families discussed how important it is for educators to understand family structure and functions to assist in overcoming barriers (Classen et al., 2019). Likewise, Douglass (2011) studied early educators' perspectives regarding their desire to collaborate and engage with families, support needed to assist collaboration, and facilitators and barriers impacting family engagement practices. The study found that family engagement is desired by families when childcare programs establish relationships involving caring educators and shared power. Modeling caring relationships and shared power within the program between educators was shown to facilitate family engagement. Power struggles and limited empathy between educators were reported as a barrier in building positive, collaborative relationships with families (Douglass, 2011).

Family Engagement during Covid-19 Restrictions

Covid-19 restrictions on family engagement have been explored in several research studies. For example, Levickis et al. (2022) found that major barriers to family engagement are the few opportunities for face-to-face interactions with educators and chances to observe their child within the childcare environment. Parents reported that, before Covid-19 restrictions were implemented, face-to-face interactions provided them with knowledge about their child's experiences in the classroom and made them feel like they belonged (Levickis et al., 2022). Levickis et al. (2022) found that parents continued to experience limited access and interactions with educators even when Covid-19 restrictions were reduced. Of more concern, Keengwe and Onchwari (2022) found the mutual shared relationships between the infant/toddler, parent, and educator were lower after restrictions began to be lifted than those reported during the pandemic. Specifically, parents who had infant and toddlers reported less opportunities for two-way communication than those parents who had older children (Keengwe & Onchwari, 2022). Parents reported limited access to walk inside the classroom and assist in settling their child before leaving resulting in parent and child distress. Also, Covid-19 restrictions resulted in programs providing various levels of support and resources depending on digital capabilities, funding, and program operations (Levickis et al., 2022).

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study was to explore family members' experiences related to their engagement in decision-making processes across various childcare programs.

1. What are families' decision-making experiences in inclusive childcare programs?

2. What facilitators and barriers exist that may impact family engagement in inclusive childcare programs?

3. What engagement opportunities have early educators provided or not provided to families?

Hypothesis

1. Families may describe a variety of comparable decision-making experiences in inclusive childcare programs.

2. Families will report various facilitators and barriers that may impact family engagement in inclusive childcare programs.

3. The amount and quality of engagement opportunities provided by early educators may differ among families.

Methodology

A phenomenological qualitative research design was implemented to gain a better understanding of family engagement experiences in inclusive, toddler childcare programs. This research design was chosen because the authors were interested in the "affective, emotional, and often intense human experiences" (Merriam, 2009, p. 26) that families with young children who have disabilities often experience. This section provides information regarding the methods used to collect data from participants to answer each research question.

Recruitment

Convenience sampling (Gravetter & Forzano, 2012) was utilized to recruit families from childcare programs in the mid and south regions of Mississippi. Specifically, researchers recruited family members from childcare centers where the educators were involved in an inclusive practice professional development as part of a larger grant-funded project (i.e., Mississippi Early Childhood Inclusion Center [MECIC]). The childcare center directors or the technical assistant specialist discussed the family recruitment with the early educators. Then, the early educators from three childcare programs sent an email or written letter providing information about the research study to families. The PI followed up with the educator participants to gather family consent forms and contacts. Before the interview began, the signed consent forms were gathered by the PI.

Participants

For this study, and to add to the research in the early childhood education field, it is important to explore relationships between variables among various participant and center demographics. Eight parents participated in the study with four of the eight parents having a child with a diagnosed disability or at-risk for a developmental delay. One parent aged 18 years and older from each family was asked to participate. Parents participating in the study had a child with or without disabilities enrolled in one of five classrooms across three programs. In Table 1, the reader will find the parent demographic information including educational background, age, race, and parental experience.

Table 1. Participant demographics

Parent	Parent's Age (Years)	Parent Race	Child Age (Months)	Education Level	Parenting Experience	Program	Disability or Child At-Risk
Parent 1	32	W	30	Associates	12 years	1	Yes
Parent 2	36	W	18	Bachelors	18 months	2	Yes
Parent 3	27	W	25	Masters	25 months	3	Yes
Parent 4	26	W	22	Highschool Diploma	5 years 6 months	1	Yes
Parent 5	32	W	24	Technical Degree	2 years	1	No
Parent 6	27	W	24	Associates	2 years	3	No
Parent 7	28	W	19	Bachelors	9 years	3	No
Parent 8	29	B	15	Bachelors	9 years	3	No

Data Collection Procedures

A semi-structured interview style was used to collect family participant responses. This style assisted the researcher in leading a natural conversation with families and providing further questions for clarification. The interview protocol was constructed using the Crosswalks of DEC Recommended

Practices with Early Intervention (EI)/ Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE) Standards, and Early Childhood Education (ECE) Standards (Early Childhood Personnel Center, 2020). The interview protocol can be viewed by the reader on request. The interview question protocol included questions about the participants' demographic information, family engagement opportunities provided by early educators, family engagement experiences and beliefs, and facilitators and barriers that may impact family engagement opportunities. The interview protocol was developed to stay within the one-hour interview parameters. As the interview protocol is followed, the PI audio recorded the interview conversations to assist in transcribing. After the interviews were completed and transcribed, member checking (Doyle, 2007) occurred by providing a transcript copy to the participants to review for accuracy. Using member checking added to the study's credibility and trustworthiness (Doyle, 2007). Along with a transcript, participants were given follow-up questions for clarification if needed. One parent reviewed the transcript without any necessary changes and provided answers to follow-up questions.

The researchers used the inclusive practice indicator rubric scores from early educators previously collected from the larger grant-funded project (i.e., Infant and Toddler Special Needs Inclusive Practice Credential: MECIC) to triangulate data. Specifically, the research looked at the family engagement portion of the rubric. The rubric, scored by a MECIC technical assistance specialist, was a 3-point Likert scale to assess classroom practices that support children with and without disabilities in inclusive programs. The scale ranged from 0 to 2 with 0 being not applicable, 1 needing improvement, and 2 implementing in an exemplary manner with 10 being the total possible score for family engagement. Early educators were observed to evaluate practices promoting family partnerships including creating opportunities for open, two-way communication with families, utilizing multiple communication forms, creating and maintaining positive, trusting partnerships, involving families in program activities, and empowering families as valued educational team members.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed through a thematic analysis approach (Glaser & Straus, 1967). A thematic analysis focuses on identifying and describing ideas or themes within the data collection. Through a thematic analysis, constructs and patterns were explored to provide insight into participants' family engagement experiences through the decision-making process (Namey et al., 2008). After the interview responses were transcribed verbatim, and data was analyzed by hand. Once all interviews were transcribed, the data were reviewed multiple times by the PI and an expert researcher. The PI proceeded with the initial coding to reduce and categorize responses into themes. After, the expert researcher reviewed all coding for validation, and then, any discrepancies were discussed between both researchers (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Then, the PI made comparisons between discovered themes and developed constructs to better understand family engagement opportunities provided by early educators, family engagement experiences and beliefs, and facilitators and barriers that may impact family engagement opportunities.

Results

In this section we will present the initial themes and subthemes that emerged during the data analysis. Themes and subthemes will be presented as they collectively answer the research questions about families' decision-making experiences, facilitators and barriers that may impact family engagement, and opportunities early educators have provided or not provided to encourage family engagement in inclusive, toddler childcare programs.

Families' Reported Decision-Making Experiences

This study aimed to understand families' decision-making experiences within inclusive, infant/toddler childcare programs and the unique perspectives shared by parents who have young children with and without disabilities. Table 2 provides the reader with the initial themes, subthemes, definitions, and example quotes used to answer research question one. After Table 2, detailed reports of decision-making experiences related to communication, collaboration, resources, parent rights, and active

involvement are shared.

Decisions were reportedly experienced through different *communication* methods including passive and active communication. Parents reported brief, passive communication through text, notes, apps, or in-person communication related to topics concerning daily routines, incidents, and activities. "Every morning when I drop him off, we talk about like what they're going to do, and in the afternoon, she'll tell me how his mood was, how long of a nap he took, what and how much he ate, and what kind of activities they did" and "They send out weekly newsletters or monthly newsletters letting us know what they're doing for the week."

Table 2. Coding related to decision-making

Initial	Sub	Definition	Example Quotes
Communication	• Passive • Active	Communication is defined as parents and professionals listening to one another, clearly describing their wants and desires, and being honest and open (Turnbull et al., 2015). Two-way communication involves both the family and professionals (Butera et al., 2016).	**Passive** "They had yet to communicate that he's trouble in the classroom. The only concern I had was them not communicating when my son was disrupting the class so that we could try to fix the problem." **Active** "K and I communicate back and forth. It's helpful the way she communicates with you."
Collaboration	• Program planning	Collaboration refers to the purposeful process in which families and professionals identify problems and create plans to solve them (Friend & Cook, 2021).	"I gave them the handouts [from speech therapy] because they were more likely to be able to do the handouts with her than I was."
Resources	• Screening • Evaluation • Public resources • Unsure/None	Practitioners work with the family to identify, access, and use formal and informal resources (DEC, 2014, F7).	"They offered us the contact information for Early Steps and a couple different resources for that area, and we talked with them."
Parent Rights	• Policy • Unsure	Practitioners help families know and understand their rights (DEC, 2014, F9).	"They did provide me with a handbook that goes over all of that stuff."
Activity Involvement	• Learning activities • Events	Practitioners engage the family in opportunities that support and strengthen parenting knowledge/skills and competence and in ways that are individualized (DEC, 2014, F6)	"They've brought me in here to do little lessons and read to him." "It's because of Covid we can't [be more involved in program activities]."

One parent explained using an app, "By app, they sent me pictures to let me know he had an allergic reaction to medication right when it began. I get to watch what he eats, diaper changes, every nap, and anything that's going on within the facility." Similarly, another parent preferred the app communication method over paper, "I didn't really like the piece of papers. I really like the app interaction. If there is anything initially wrong, I'll automatically get a notification right then, and then I, myself as a parent, get to make the decision if I need to go to him." Some parents reported difficulty during the decision-making process with early educators due to passive communication. One parent explained, "I do wish there was more over the phone interaction or either face-to-face interaction rather than just via text/the app" while another parent stated, "I have to ask questions to get feedback about development."

Several parents reported preferences for an active *communication* style by stating, "In person or through texts, [Teacher C] is very good at communicating things within the classroom or things that is he is learning." Additionally, parents reported positive experiences through active communication by one reporting, "If you have a problem, being able to verbalize [any concerns] and [resolve them] versus ignored is a positive thing" and another reporting, "[Teacher B] gives me her undivided attention to actually listen and have that opportunity to express my feelings. [What I'm saying is] not just going in one ear and out

the other. She's actually taking it into consideration."

Parents reported decision-making experiences through *collaborative* program planning. Parents reported that early educators involved parents through weekly or monthly *communication* regarding program plans. Many parents reported the desire to extend learning at home by practicing skills taught at the program. For example, a parent reported,

> "When [Teacher A] started doing colors [at the program] then I did colors at home. When [Teacher A] started counting numbers one to five, I started doing that at home. We were all on the same page. We communicate when [Teacher A] is going to potty train him here. I'm going to be able to start potty training him at home. I don't want to start at home if they're not going to do it here because [it will not be successful]. That helps everything work out together without going around in a circle."

Other parents had similar experiences stating, "I really like the newsletters that [Teacher C] sends out letting me know what they're learning that week so that I can follow up with teaching him the same thing at home" and "Each month [Teacher E] sends out like a letter or monthly calendar so that we can also practice at home with our child." Although parents reported educators communicating daily activity plans, only a therapist was reported providing at-home strategies for furthering development explaining, "They [the therapist] would show me exercises that I could do at home to work with him."

Parents reported a *resource* variety within the programs. Specifically, parents reported resources including screenings, evaluations, and public resources. Few were provided developmental screeners and/or evaluations. For example, "[The director] went out of her way to go and get two people that were going to do the screener because they knew I was struggling [with correspondence from an outside agency]." Another parent reported, "[The program] did some kind of evaluation on the children making sure that they were meeting their milestones appropriately and [they provided directions on] what we needed to do if our kid was behind." A parent also reported being informed about public resources stating, "I have spoken with people at the Public Assistance Office where they do WIC and stuff." A few parents were unsure or stated that no resources have been provided to them. One parent stated, "[The program has] not [provided any additional supports or resources] that I can think of. I remember doing [a checklist]," and another reported, "I'm not sure what resources are available."

The limited *parental rights* knowledge played an important role in family decision-making experiences. Parents reported not knowing their rights or recalling program policies being provided. One parent stated, "Nothing [was shared with me regarding parent rights] that I can think of off the top of my head" while another shared, "They gave us a handbook the first day and I'm pretty sure there's a section of your rights and stuff." Only one program discussed parent rights regarding special services at a local school district stating, "[The program] said that if I go to the public school that they have to [conduct an evaluation] if I request it."

When exploring *activity involvement*, parents reported the desire to be involved in the decision-making processes, planning, and learning activities. A parent shared her willingness to assist by stating, "If they need volunteers or assistance with anything, just let me know." Other parents provided suggestions on how to increase activity involvement in the programs. For example, parents stated, "[I suggest] maybe [planning] a parent-kid day where the parents, kids, and the teacher all get to go and just have a little party interacting with other parents and children as a whole. "Another parent reported the program's desire to provide opportunities by stating, "I guess it would really require them having more activities that I can help with or help do with her [to become more involved]."

This study's findings presented differences and similarities in family engagement experiences during decision-making among parents who have children with and without disabilities or are at-risk for developmental delays. Parents reported differences in communication preferences modes and whether resources were provided by programs. The study found similarities when programs offered useful information regarding program planning and parents desired more active involvement within the program. Parents who had children with and without disabilities reported different communication preferences. For example, parents who had children with disabilities reported a preference for

communication apps but desired a face-to-face conversation or a phone call as needed for a follow-up. Parent 3 stated, "It starts over our app where we get daily updates. I ask them to call me up if I just need to further explain because I hate texting." Similarly, parent 4 preferred the communication app with immediate notifications so she could engage in decision-making. Parent responses were similar regarding decision-making experiences. Parents who had children with and without disabilities enjoyed receiving monthly or weekly newsletters containing useful program planning information to extend learning at home. Importantly, all parents seemed to be equally interested in decision-making in regard to planning learning activities or events within programs. In addition, public resources were equally shared with parents who had children with and without disabilities.

Reported Facilitators and Barriers to Family Engagement

This study's secondary goal was to gain insight into family perspectives regarding facilitators and barriers to their engagement in early education decisions. Specifically, this study explored the unique perspectives of families who had young children with and without disabilities ages 18 to 30 months. Table 2 and Table 3 provide the reader with the initial themes, subthemes, definitions, and example quotes used to answer research question two. Below you will find the family perspectives regarding family engagement facilitators by creating trusting relationships, providing active communication, supporting families' priorities, being culturally responsive to the family's values and beliefs, and parent knowledge and/or skills. Family engagement barriers were described as passive communication, limited support for family priorities, few training opportunities for parents, and limited parental rights knowledge.

Facilitators

Most parents reported positive *trusting relationships* between the parent and educator, the parent and child, and/or the child and educator. Safety and security seemed to play an important and common role in facilitating trusting relationships. Participants explained relationships between the parent and educator by stating comments such as, "[Teacher A] made me feel at ease [when scheduling conflicts occurred]" or "[I felt] very comfortable in the beginning that [Teacher A] was very open and honest about all the [policies and procedures]." One parent felt comfortable leaving the child for the first time at the program explaining, "Me leaving him was a big, big worry for me, and they made it very easy to feel comfortable leaving him. I never had any worry [about whether] they [were] educated enough to take care of his needs and provide for his needs."

Table 3. Coding related to facilitators and barriers.

Initial	Sub	Definition	Example Quotes
Trusting Relationships	• Safety/Security	Trusting relationships refer to the connection between families and professionals based on mutual confidence in each other (Turnbull et al., 2015).	"He's attached to my hip, but since starting the program, he will now sit down and play with his toys by himself."
Family Priorities	• Family time • Religion • Health • Education • Marriage • Career development	Family priorities are defined as differing values such as work, or education based on the family's culture (Congress, 2004)	"Our priorities are eating together as a family, family time, making sure every need is met, being there for everything that we can, going to the doctor if they're starting to get sick, and reading books."
Culturally Responsive	• Religion • Diversity	Culturally responsive is defined as having mutual respect and understanding for families' cultures, values, and languages (DEC, 2010).	"They do different little activities. They include different cultures, and she has [pictures of] different races in her class. I think I've seen some different cultural musical instruments."

		Practitioners support family functioning, promote family confidence and competence by acting in ways that build on family strengths (DEC, 2014, F5).	"I don't think any [parent trainings have been offered]. If they would, I would participate."
Parent Knowledge/Skills	• Parent Training • Intervention for behavior and communication challenges		

It was reported that parents also felt a stronger bond with their children knowing they were safe and secure while being cared for at the childcare center. One parent described a positive parent-child relationship, "[The program played a part in our relationship by] possibly making [our relationships] better when I'm away because when I pick him up, he's super happy." Another parent stated "He's (her child) so excited to see us after being separated during the day. It's helpful when any of us drop him off, [that] he's not crying". Similarly, parents reported a key element to *trusting relationships* included the child and educator. "[Teacher A] built a connection with [my son]" and another stating "[My child] was very clingy [with me]. I feel like [teacher A] has kind of brought him out of his shell. He's not scared or anxious about going to her or being in the classroom".

Participants provided active *communication* examples that facilitated positive relationships such as, "[Teacher D] personally calls and tells me when there's an issue with [my daughter]". Some parents reported active communication strategies used such as partnering to problem solve and asking for feedback. For example, one parent stated, "I've had to really advocate for her to be in the older classroom to make sure that she's challenged. They started transitioning her to the two-year-old room, so they know it's important to me and they keep pushing for it" and another stated "They do surveys and ask for feedback about your priorities and concerns". Also, a parent experienced active listening when she reported that Teacher B took her feelings and concerns into consideration.

Parents had similar responses when reporting *family priorities*. Priorities among families included family time, religion, health, education, marriage, and career development. Several parents explained development as being a top priority with one stating, "Everybody being able to communicate with him and him being able to communicate with us are important to me". Another explained concerns about development and how the early educator provided reassurance such as "I noticed he didn't [know skills or met certain developmental milestones] like I've noticed some of the other kids really know. She lets me know there is nothing to worry about." One parent reported faith as being the family's main priority and how the childcare center was supportive in following similar religious beliefs. A parent stated, "Our faith is our main priority. Reading the bible at night with her and making sure she's involved in church at a young age. The curriculum at her school is Christian-based and taught by Christians".

Parents discussed how educators were *culturally responsive* to religion and diversity. One parent said that "Our cultural background is probably very similar to the program's cultural background which was the deciding factor [for choosing the program]. I feel like I'm supported in that because I know that most of the workers there are members of the church". Another parent stated, "You see all children and even [early educators] of all shapes and sizes and colors. I think it's really good for all kids to see that."

Parents reported the desire to attend training to increase *parent knowledge and skills*. Most parents expressed a willingness to engage in center-hosted family training opportunities to learn more about communication challenges and interventions for behavior challenges. One parent explained, "I would like to learn more about understanding and communicating [with my son]" while another stated, "I would want to learn more about the terrible twos, [following directions such as] getting dressed in the morning, and meltdowns". One parent wanted to understand more about development stating, "[I want to know more about] what to expect next in the [developmental] stages."

Barriers

A barrier that parents experienced included engaging in passive *communication*. As example quotes were previously presented, parents reported passive communication as a barrier to family engagement by explaining a dislike for written communication and the need to ask questions to gain feedback.

Furthermore, passive communication was reported as a barrier to building a positive *trusting relationship* between the parent and educator and/or the educator and child. For example, one parent explained,

> "We had an incident where he kept getting bit. I was asking, what is he doing for this kid to keep biting him. They just kept telling me nothing. Then, she proceeded to tell me how he troubles in the classroom every day. They had yet to communicate that he troubles in the classroom. The only concern I had was them not communicating when my son was disrupting the class so that we could try to fix the problem. They said that they would watch out more (for biting) and keep a better eye on it and address the child that was biting."

Similarly, parents described Covid safety procedures as a barrier. As one parent stated, "Because we can't go in there because of Covid, we've only met the teacher one time" to explain a barrier to building a *trusting relationship* with the educator. The parent further explained, "We don't even know a lot as far as how the program works and what goes on [due to lack of access inside the center and interactions with the teacher]."

Family priorities were reported as a barrier to family engagement through trusting-relationships. Specifically, a parent reported feeling like the educator had limited developmental knowledge. This was a concern for the parents since development was a major family priority. The parent explained,

> "I think [developmental knowledge] could be improved. [Teacher E] didn't point out [my daughter] was at-risk for a speech delay. I had to point it out [to the educator]. I wasn't satisfied with that screening [that the program provided] so I did a second screening on my own."

Although several parents were willing to attend trainings to increase *parent knowledge and skills*, all parents reported few training opportunities offered in the programs." One parent explained, "I haven't had any [parent training] opportunities offered". Parents were hesitant when trying to recall if any opportunities had been communicated or offered in the past explaining, "[They have not provided] any [training opportunities] I can think of" or "I don't know that they've offered any [parent trainings] yet".

Parents reported being unsure whether programs provided information about *parent rights*. Many parents were unsure if their rights were discussed or what parent rights were within the program or other early intervention agencies. As previous example quotes stated, information was not provided regarding parents' rights. One parent explained, "I know that they did send out a handbook". One parent reported some knowledge of parent rights provided from an outside agency including the school district from explaining, "He's going to when he goes because he'll be three. I know all about IEPs [and] 504 [plans] because of my older son."

This study's findings presented similarities and differences in facilitators and barriers that may affect family engagement among parents who have children with and without disabilities or at-risk for developmental delays. Parents reported differences in family priorities, however, some parents shared similar priorities. Parents who had children with disabilities or at-risk for delays discussed development as a potential facilitator and/or barrier to family engagement. Parents 1, 2, and 3 reported child development as a major family priority, whereas some parents who had children without disabilities discussed other priorities such as health or careers. For example, parent 5 reported, "Right now, I'm in school so it's like two full time job," and parent 6 reported, "Health is a priority to us." Also, parent 1 had some parental rights knowledge due to material provided by a school district while all other parents associated parent rights with school policies. Parents who had children with and without disabilities discussed family time as a priority. The majority discussed passive communication through newsletters or communication apps. In addition, all parents reported limited opportunities within the programs to increase parent knowledge.

Families' Reported Engagement Opportunities

This study's third goal explored engagement opportunities provided or not provided to families within inclusive, toddler childcare programs. Insight into engagement opportunities was gained from families who had children, ages 18 to 30 months, with and without disabilities. As previously defined, family engagement refers to a partnership between families and early educators through acceptance, communication, support, collaboration, and soliciting and providing feedback to increase positive child

outcomes (Soodak et al., 2000; Soukakou, 2016). Table 1 and 2 shown above provide the reader with the initial themes, subthemes, definitions, and example quotes used to answer research question one. Below you will find engagement opportunities provided to parents by building open, trusting relationships with early educators, engaging in communication, being culturally responsive, and collaborating. A lack of opportunities provided to families to engage with educators and other families due to limited parent training, resources, and activity involvement.

Engagement Opportunities Provided

Trusting relationships were shown to increase opportunities for engagement. One parent explained, "I'll come [to the program] early at like 2:00 and then, I'll just sit outside at the park with all the kids and the teachers and play." Similarly, a parent stated, "We're allowed to pop in whenever we choose." A parent described the program as accepting and welcoming stating, "I feel like they have accepted [my child] with open arms. They are open and accepting of everyone."

Engagement opportunities were reported by *communication* exchanges between early educators and parents to increase positive outcomes. As the example previously stated, a program communicated with a parent regarding the mother's concerns about the child's placement and development. In addition, a parent reported the opportunity to engage in the decision-making process with the early educator. When expressing feelings, a parent described Teacher B as attentive and proactive. Engagement opportunities were provided by a program requesting feedback from parents as stated, "They asked about our Christianity [religious] beliefs in a questionnaire." One parent shared, "We did a little questionnaire before we went into the program. They would ask a bunch of different questions."

Most parents discussed programs' efforts to engage families in *collaboration* on program planning. For example, a parent reported, "Each month they send out a letter or monthly calendar so that we can also practice [skills] at home with our child." Similarly, a parent discussed asking for and receiving support as explained, "I gave them the handouts [from speech therapy] because they were more likely to be able to do the handouts with [my child] than I was." Another opportunity reported by parents was at-home activities provided to families. A parent shared, "[The early educator] is good about sending stuff home for us to do with him that will go back to class with him. We'll all sit down together and work on it together so we can send it back". Potty training was a collaboration example with a parent stating, "We communicate on when she's going to potty train him here. I'm going to be able to start potty training him at home. I don't want to start at home if they're not going to do it here. That helps everything work out together without going around in a circle."

It was reported that early educators provided engagement opportunities by supporting families in finding additional *resources*. Screening and evaluations were resource examples provided to families. One parent reported, "They're going to have somebody come to the campus and evaluate the kids and discuss [developmental progress]." Other parents reported, "They did some kind of evaluation on the children making sure that they were meeting their milestones appropriately and what we needed to do if our kid was behind" or "It was a checklist asking if your child had met these goals. Somebody came, like a therapist, and evaluated him. It was comforting just to have an outside source to tell me that he didn't need any therapy." Other engagement opportunity examples included public resources. Parents shared, "[The program] offered us the contact information for [the state early intervention program] and a couple different resources for that area, and we talked with them" and "[The program] did send a message out to remind families there was a family night at the church."

Parents discussed *activity involvement* as an opportunity to engage in programs. Described in a previous quote, a parent shared an experience inside the classroom involving learning activities. Similarly, a parent stated, "We had a Dr. Suess parade and parents actually got to help design costumes and [the children were able to] parade them around the school." One parent reported activity involvement through invitations to events hosted by the programs. For example, two parents shared, "They do let us know when they're having school parties so if we want to be involved, we can" and "They have done a few events where we can come outside."

Limited Engagement Opportunities Provided

Limited *parent training* to improve parent knowledge and skills was reported as well as parents' desire to participate in training to learn more. In an example quote previously provided, a parent explained her desire to learn about behavior management. Similarly, a parent stated, "The [parent training] thing, I've never actually done that. [I] would like to learn more about understanding and communicating [with my son]. I can't do anything about it because I can't help him."

Along with parent training, parents reported limited *resources* offered by programs. For example, "[They have] not [provided any additional supports or resources] that I can think of. I remember doing [a checklist]". Additionally, a parent described knowledge about available resources, however, no resources had ever been offered by the program. The parent stated, "I haven't had to ask for [any resources], but I know that resources are available."

Additionally, parents shared that Covid safety procedures prevented *activity involvement* within programs. A parent explained, "It's because of Covid we can't [be more involved in program activities]. Having more opportunities for more events to get to know the [program staff] a little bit more." Similarly, a parent shared "We started [the program] towards the end of Covid so we haven't gotten to do as many things as parents usually do, but they try to give us as many opportunities to come see the kids as possible." Although a parent reported the teacher communicating daily activities by sending her child's artwork or pictures in the classroom, the parent shared the inability to be engaged in activities inside the classroom stating, "They do send like artwork and pictures. So, the pictures help with seeing her [and] seeing she's actually doing stuff while we can't actually be in the room with her [because of Covid]."

This study's findings presented similarities and differences in family engagement opportunities among parents who have children with and without disabilities or are at-risk for developmental delays. Parents who had children with disabilities reported an opportunity regarding program planning. The study found similarities when parents experiences engagement opportunities through trusting relationships and when resources were provided. Only parents who had children with developmental delays reported engagement opportunities that included program planning and collaboration regarding individual goals. As a previous quote stated, Parent 1 expressed satisfaction in knowing when the early educator started potty training so it could be continued at home. Also, handouts from speech therapy were provided to the early educators because Parent 2 felt they would be more successful in implementation. Parents who had children with and without disabilities or at-risk for delays reported opportunities for engagement through welcoming, trusting relationships and developmental resources including screenings and evaluations. As example quotes previously explained, parent 1 stated that the program director provided a developmental screening as a resource and parent 6 described evaluations provided to the children from an outside agency. Also, many parents reported a desire to engage in parent training opportunities.

Inclusive Practice Indicator Rubric: Family Engagement

In Table 4, the reader will find an inclusive classroom rubric score summary used to triangulate the family reports about teacher practices and parent engagement practices. This study found connections between rubric scores and families' experiences of opportunities provided for engagement and preferred communication modes. Parent 1 stated, "[Teacher A] and I communicated back and forth. It's helpful the way she communicates with you" and "She personally calls and tells me when there's an issue with [my daughter]". When measuring two-way communication and various communication forms based on family preferences, teacher A scored a 1. Parent 4 reported, "[Teacher B] gives me her undivided attention to actually listen and have that opportunity to express my feelings. [What I'm saying is] not just going in one ear and out the other. She's actually taking it into consideration." Teacher B scored a 2, the highest score, on providing two-way communication and a 1 on using various communication modes based on families' preferences.

Limited two-way communication was reported when parent 3 stated, "I have to ask questions to get

feedback about development" while parent 6 stated, "I do wish there was more over the phone interaction or either face-to-face interaction rather than just via text/the app." Both parent 3 and 6 had a child in teacher E's classroom, and teacher E's scored a 1 on using two-way communication and using various communication forms based on families' preferences. When discussing teacher C parent 2 stated, "I really like the newsletters that they send out letting me know like what they're learning that week so that I can follow up with teaching him the same thing at home." Teacher C scored a 2, the highest score, in including and engaging families in activities and engaging families in meetings and program planning.

However, when discussing program 3, parent 6 stated, "[I would like the program to] allow us to be able to participate when they have parties and [events] so that we can get to know the parents, the other children, and the teachers and be able to assess the way our children interact with other kids and their teacher." As previously shared in a quote, parent 3, whose child also attends program 3, stated that Covid-19 was the reason for the lack of involvement in program activities. Parent 3 went on to explain that having more activities would provide the families with an opportunity to get to know the staff more. To confirm these reports, both teachers from program 3 scored a 0 on including and engaging families in activities.

Table 4. Childcare program rating

Family Partnership Scoring Items	Program 1		Program 2	Program 3		Average Per Item
	Teacher A	Teacher B	Teacher C	Teacher D	Teacher E	
Teachers promote family partnership by…						
Item 1: using two-way communication.	1	2	2	0	1	**60%**
Item 2: using various communication forms based on families' preferences.	1	1	2	0	1	**50%**
Item 3: maintaining responsive practices that promote trust.	1	2	2	0	1	**60%**
Item 4: including and engaging families in activities at the center.	0	0	2	0	0	**20%**
Item 5: engaging families in meetings and program planning by listening to opinions, suggestions, and guidance.	0	0	2	0	0	**20%**
Teacher Average	**30%**	**50%**	**100%**	**0%**	**30%**	**42%**
Program Average	**40%**		**100%**	**15%**		

Discussion

This study's overarching goal was to understand perspectives of families who had children with and without disabilities who were 18-30 months old regarding their decision-making experiences, and facilitators and barriers to family engagement. Below you will find a discussion including how the findings contribute and compare to existing literature.

Family Systems Framework

The Family Systems Framework describes families based on their characteristics, family structure, and family interactions (Turnbull et al., 1986). From participant reported decision-making experiences, trusting relationships facilitated family engagement. This study's findings showed three different relationship types (i.e., parent-teacher, child-parent, and child-teacher) parents reported as key to promoting positive decision-making experiences. These findings expand work by Turnbull et al. (2015) as parents expressed all key relationships in the decision-making process were important.

Positive parent-teacher relationships have been reported in other studies focused on preschool-aged children. For example, prior studies by Douglas (2011) and Mendez (2010) found that parents (with the majority of children in preschool) desired more positive parent-teacher relationships, and this encouraged more family engagement in programs. This study's findings are similar, in that our families desired and appreciated positive parent-teacher relationships. Furthermore, our study expands previous research findings (Soodak & Erwin, 2000), where parents who had preschool aged children with disabilities reported that a welcoming environment and increased trust between parents and teachers promoted positive relationships. Research studies focused on early intervention (birth to age 3 years) are limited; therefore, this study's findings are important in the early childhood field.

This study's unique parent perspectives regarding their experiences in the early intervention age range added to the research by showing the importance of not only parent-teacher relationships but also parent-child relationships and teacher-child relationships in relation to facilitating family engagements. Parents who had access to the educator attributed their strong relationship with their child to both their relationship and trust with the educator coupled with positive, responsive relations between the educator and their child. This further supports research found by Levickis et al. (2022) when parents reported child and parent distress when unfamiliar adults accompanied children inside the program or when parents were denied access to the classroom to settle their toddler during drop off times due to Covid-19 restrictions. Healthy, positive relationships between children and caregivers begin through a safe and secure environment (Purvis et al., 2007). Furthermore, positive, trusting relationships set the foundation for future relationships throughout adolescence and adulthood (Levy & Orlans, 2014).

Like Mereoiu et al. (2015), parents included in this study shared difficulties forming positive relationships with early educators when a lack of safety and security and limited access to the classroom environment existed. The present study found that trust between a parent and the early educator suffered due to initial diagnosis experiences just like previous research reports (Stoner & Angell, 2006). In addition, one parent in this study reported a strained relationship and felt devalued as a team member during the decision-making process equivalent to findings by Coussens et al. (2021). Figure 2 makes a connection between this study's findings regarding positive parent-teacher, parent-child, and teacher-child relationships and Family Systems Theory concepts.
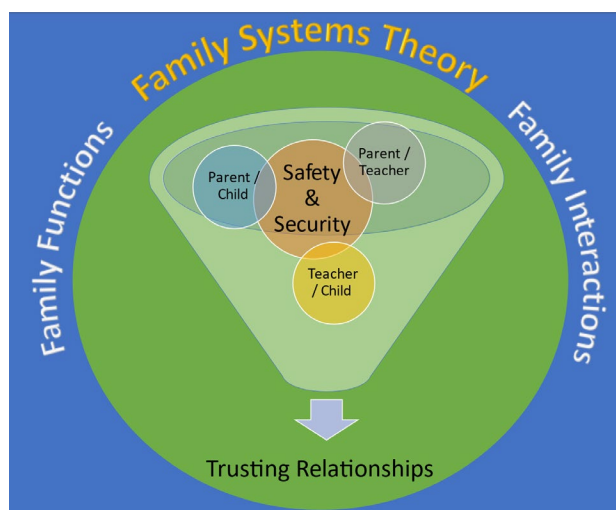

Figure 2: Trusting relationships

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model

The findings from the present study illustrate Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) by showing that development is directly and indirectly influenced by a child's social environment. According to parent reports in this study, Covid-19 created barriers to family engagement and restricted engagement opportunities within early education programs. The chronosystem includes environmental changes throughout the child's life such as the Covid-19 pandemic that can have an impact on their

development. Following the outermost layer, as shown in Figure 3, the exosystem represents influences such as government agencies, school boards, social services, and health care (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

During the Covid-19 pandemic, health and safety procedures and policies were suggested by government health agencies, social services, and surrounding school boards. Influenced by the government health agencies and surrounding school district policies, the childcare programs created program-wide policies and procedures affecting parents' opportunities for engagement. For example, parents reported difficulty building trusting relationships due to restricted physical access to early educators. This included limited opportunities to be engaged, allowed, or invited into the programs for activity involvement. Levickis et al. (2022) found that due to Covid-19 restrictions eliminating full access to the classroom, parents were not given opportunities for active communication, were unaware of their child's experiences in the classroom, didn't feel they belonged, and were not provided with community resources. Research found that during the Covid-19 pandemic, parents who had infant and toddlers reported less opportunities for two-way communication than parents who had older children (Keengwe & Onchwari, 2022). This study's findings were comparable to previous studies reporting little active communication between toddler parents and educators due to limited physical access to the early learning environment (Keengwe & Onchwari, 2022; Levickis et al., 2022). In return, fewer interactions during the pandemic with the educators and access to the program could have prevented shared resources, collaboration during decision-making, and limited consideration of family priorities.

As Bronfenbrenner (1979) suggested from the exosystem and the microsystem, resources can have a direct and indirect impact on families and a child's development. Resources discussed in this study included screenings and/or evaluations from early educators and state agencies and other public resources.
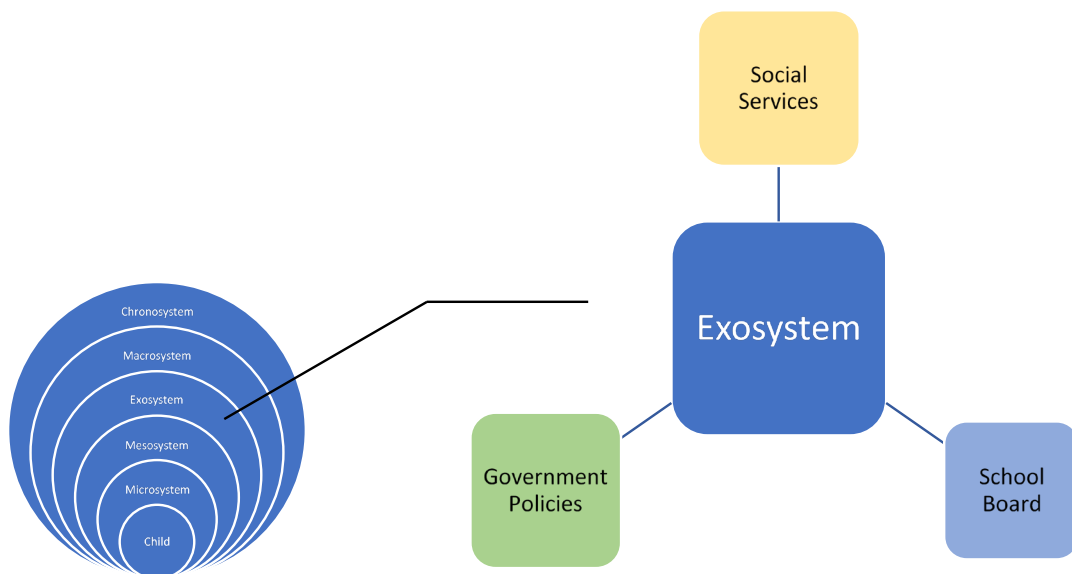

Figure 3. Ecological model of exosystem

Culturagram

As the Culturagram (Congress, 1994) describes, the participants in this study shared experiences related to family culture. The Culturagram defines family values, health beliefs, and cultural institutions to better understand families' cultural backgrounds and how they impact the family (Congress, 1994). Building trusting relationships and collaborating with families requires early educators to consider families' priorities and goals (Harry, 2008). As presented in Figure 4, this study's findings presented various family priorities including family time, religion, health, education, and career. Some parents experienced support from programs regarding religion. Parents shared that when choosing a program for their child mutual religious beliefs were a high priority. Programs chosen were reported to support and teach similar religious beliefs to children and families they serve. Additionally, as the Culturagram

(Congress, 1994) suggests, family experiences can be influenced by values on family, education, and work. Like previous research, this study found that parents share a high value in their child's development and education as well as how skills can be furthered (Mereoiu et al., 2015; Stoner & Angell, 2006). Furthermore, like those previous studies, little educator knowledge about toddler development and monitoring for red flags was important to families. Interestingly, most participants had mutual perspectives regarding prioritizing the allocation of quality family time and programs sharing and supporting health as a high priority.
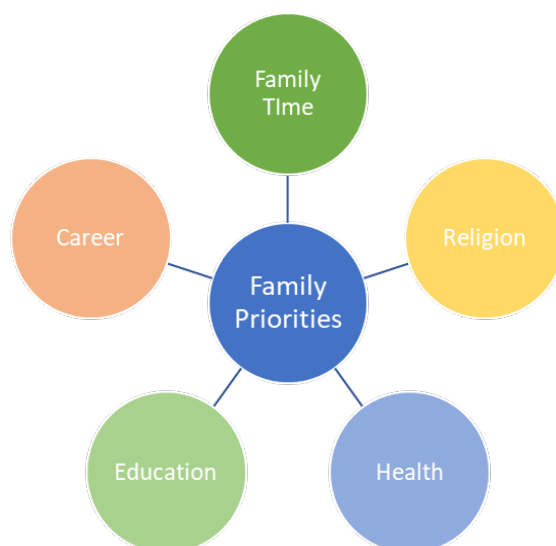
Figure 4. Family priorities

Skilled Dialogue Framework

As Macy et al. (2019) states, active, effective communication occurs when positive, trusting relationships are present. Much the same as previous research (Classen et al., 2019), this study presented parents desiring more active communication to create partnerships as a major theme. Passive communication with the early educator during decision-making and limited communication from the educator about concerns occurring in the classroom was exemplified in parental reports. Ultimately, only the educator's opinion and solutions were reportedly shared. As found in the study by Fish (2008), one side often dominates the other when sharing opinions and concerns. Open communication requires the educator to be respectful and responsive regarding families' concerns (DEC, 2014). Furthermore, to effectively collaborate both the parent and the educator must maintain shared responsibility during decision-making to optimize everyone's expertise (Butera et al., 2016).

The Skilled Dialogue Framework (Barrera & Corso, 2002; Barrera et al., 2003; Barrera & Kramer, 2009, 2017) can be an essential tool to use during two-way communication between parents and educators. To assist in bilateral decision-making and to encourage more parent engagement, parents and educators should engage in skilled dialogues (Barrera & Corso, 2002; Barrera et al., 2003; Barrera & Kramer, 2009, 2017). Examples of this framework occurred in the present study during active communication between parents and educators. From one program, feedback about priorities and concerns was reportedly requested from parents. In addition, parents reported a welcoming environment, willingness to listen to concerns and suggestions, and support received in beliefs and values from educators. Turnbull et al. (2015) stress the importance of encouraging a friendly environment, listening to each expert in the child's life, clearly describing desires and concerns, and being open to sharing information. It is important for educators to engage in two-way communication and active listening to learn from parents' unique perspectives and to exchange ideas, suggestions, and concerns (Butera et al., 2016).

Limitations

Although this study presents a few limitations to consider, the findings extend previous research and offer new findings relevant to parent perspectives and preferences regarding family engagement in inclusive childcare programs. First, defining "culture" during the parent interview may have provided needed context to families so they may have been able to elaborate and depict culturally responsive experiences within programs. Participants may not have been aware of all family culture aspects when asked about program support. Secondly, additional participants from various racial backgrounds may have provided a more in-depth family engagement understanding. Third, participants were recruited from a grant-funded project resulting in a limited population. Results must be considered carefully with the understanding that the small sample size may not represent everyone's perspectives within our larger diverse population. Similarly, this study's parent participants only represented faith-based and university centers. Faith-based programs represent the majority. Having various program types could have provided other unique insights into parent engagement. It is important to consider that this study's participants may be a more engaged sampling due to their agreement to participate in the study. Having a more diverse parent participant sampling with more variance in family engagement may have yielded different perspectives.

Implications for Further Research

This study added to the existing research regarding parent engagement experiences within inclusive childcare programs. However, further research is needed to further understand family engagement experiences within infant and toddler programs which include children with and without disabilities. First, when designing future research careful revision should be given to the question protocol to include context for families and appropriate follow-up questions. Specifically, when asked the question "With the country moving towards embracing various cultures, races, religions, beliefs, and values, describe how your program has supported your cultural background?" most participants in this study focused their responses on religion. Revising this question to be multiple questions may provide participants with an opportunity to respond more holistically to how their programs exhibit culturally responsive practices. Second, future researchers should seek to include Early Head-Start centers, private centers, faith-based, and university centers in urban and rural settings to capture a more diverse population that is representative of the United States. In addition, the Covid-19 pandemic is a relatively new and current influence on parent engagement in childcare programs. Parent reports and the inclusive classroom rubric scores showed Covid-19 effects on parent engagement experiences regarding activity involvement and including families in meetings and program planning. Four out of five classrooms scored a 0 on the classroom observation tool. Parents in these two centers reported limited access to the program due to Covid-19 restrictions. More research concerning the pandemic is needed to contribute to existing research. As program restrictions were enforced by state and local agencies when the Covid-19 pandemic emerged, future research is needed to examine quality family engagement practices as early education programs and families return to life activities post-pandemic.

Implications for Practice

This study indicates facilitators for encouraging family engagement in inclusive, toddler childcare programs. However, several barriers were reported that could hinder families from participating in engagement opportunities or the decision-making process. In addition to parent reports, the inclusive classroom rubric scores provided insight into changes that are warranted to increase parent engagement. The scores show that early educators must encourage parent engagement beyond foundational components including providing various communication modes that support positive relationships. Classen and Westbrook (2020) reported similar scores within the state when measuring parent-professional partnerships. Higher education professionals or professional development coaches may use this study's findings to develop training material. Disseminating quality professional development opportunities could provide early education professionals with the necessary strategies to encourage higher-quality family engagement practices. Classen and Westbrook (2020) found that when early educators were provided

professional development training and in-class coaching, parent-professional partnerships increased. Through professional development, early educators could gain knowledge on topics such as building trusting relationships, ensuring two-way communication, considering family priorities during program planning, and collaborating with parents during decision-making. In addition, these findings could be used to create training material for parents with infants and toddlers. Researchers (Sheridan et al., 2010) found that when implementing both family and parent training opportunities, positive child outcomes increased. Furthermore, positive parent-teacher and child-teacher relationships can increase by participating in family engagement training programs thus increasing positive child outcomes (Sheridan et al., 2010).

Conclusion

The family is a highly effective system that directly affects a child's early development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). With 59% of children from birth to age five participating in nonparental childcare, it is important to encourage effective family engagement practices (NCES, 2021; Soukakou, 2016). This study fills a needed research gap in the literature related to family engagement experiences within childcare programs serving toddlers with and without disabilities or at-risk for developmental delays. Unlike key research studies reviewed (Classen et al., 2019; Classen & Westbrook, 2020; Mereoiu et al., 2015; Sheridan et al., 2010), this study included parents who had toddlers with and without disabilities who participate in inclusive childcare programs. Specifically, this study found that positive, trusting relationships between parents and their children increased when positive relationships between parents and educators as well as between educators and the children were present. In addition, this study provides insights, like Levickis et al. (2022), into the Covid-19 impact on family engagement experiences. By better understanding family engagement experiences during decision-making processes, facilitators and barriers that may impact family engagement, and engagement opportunities provided or not provided, effective strategies can be developed to increase family engagement in programs.

Declarations

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