

Notes from Early Childhood Educator Listening Circles

Major Themes

1. We must meet the immediate safety needs of infants and children, and their parents, before we can turn focus to larger developmental support needs.

- The hierarchy of needs makes clear that children can not learn and grow while wrangling with instability, homelessness, hunger, and violence.
- We should not be rushing children or parents into growth areas until we have extended stability and started to heal trauma. Families need time to distance from the impacts of crises.

2. When infants and children need intervention services for developmental needs, the services move incredibly slowly. We need children connected swiftly to interventions for delays and needs so that they experience optimal outcomes and so that they do not lose their enrollments in childcare.

- Alta Regional, the main provider of intervention services for children with developmental concerns, takes months to connect children to services.
- We know these delays create lifelong impacts as we fail to reach children in critical windows of development.
- Alta has 15 days to respond to contacts and 30 days to interview and 4 months to connect.
- Children often lose spots in preschools or are labeled “problematic” in schools by the time interventions begin.
- Alta often contracts out with intervention specialists. Some are not as skilled in working with young parents or want to work through platforms such as Zoom that are not effective.
- SCOE’s Infant Development Program typically has room. It serves infants 0 to 3.
- Parents often do not know their children’s rights to services through local school districts.

3. The systems we ask parents to navigate are complex and often over-taxed. Young parents need navigators/case managers who stay with them through the first years of a child's life so that they have consistent support for parenting and accessing systems to meet needs.

- We need to connect young parents to a mentor who stays with that family through the years as they navigate housing, childcare, employment, wellness, educations, and complex systems.

4. Housing that offers longer stays and embeds on-site services ensures the stability children and young parents need to grow.

- Rather than ask parents to travel to services we need to bring services to families. Essential services include childcare shuttles, onsite wellness services, delivery of groceries and supplies, and case management.
- In Sacramento, we either need embedded services or we need to provide parents with vehicles. Public transport is terrible.
- Single parents have uniquely challenging circumstances in regard to accessing services and tackling daily tasks.
- Housing communities where parenting youth are congregated (co-housing, shared housing, shared complexes) allows a community of support between parents to blossom as well.
- These communities also allow for rich learning experiences (life skill workshops, parenting workshops, relationship classes...)
- The need for respite is real. We need to provide young parents with breaks from the relentlessness of parenting, especially since they are also developing as young adults.

- Vibrant, on-site wellness and development programs for children are critical.
- Culturally competent staff is critical. We need staff that reflect the cultures of the children and parents served.
- Queer parents are often viewed as an anomaly. Paperwork and program language and staff reinforce gender binaries and assume clients are straight.

5. Immediate housing for unhoused children and for children and parents escaping domestic violence is a top priority.

- We need a DV shelter that targets youth and young adults escaping violence.
- We need to make sure that when someone finds the courage to leave, we have a place for them to go.

6. Young parents need to be affirmed.

- Young parents are stigmatized.
- Young parents hear too much about how they are failing.
- Young parents are often held outside the community of parents.

7. The housing continuum for young parents has serious gaps.

- Only 8 shelter beds in entire county for young parents.
- Long wait lists for programs that house young parents (6 months +)
- Adult shelters will not allow fathers with children.
- No domestic violence (DV) shelter for youth- and adult DV shelters are extremely challenging to access.
- No options for parents under 18 experiencing homelessness.

8. We need a clear front door to services.

- Often times young parents are receiving support from preschool teachers or Head Start staff who are (understandably) not deeply informed on the processes for navigating homelessness.
- Young parents are turned away from Wind drop in center if they have children with them. This often leads to complete disengagement by young parents.
- We need a place for young parents and for ECE staff to reach out for support in navigating housing options and resources.
- We need this front door to assist with emergency housing as well as affordable housing and voucher connection.
- We need to educate parents, navigators, and providers on their rights. Often parents are operating under the idea that if they share they are homeless or trapped in a DV situation that CPS will take their children.
- We need to attach parents to a single point of contact/navigator as they stabilize housing. They get endless calls and don't know who is calling. They can't possibly navigate all the eligibility **rules and timelines.**

9. Once children connect to services, parents experiencing housing crises face unique challenges.

- Transport jeopardizes attendance.
- Slow moving subsidy programs lead to losing spots.

- Openings in Head Start may not be in local preschool.
- Children in congregate living experience a lot of sickness and miss a lot of school.
- Preschool children are developing immunity. Once parents enroll children, they start getting sick more and parents need to stay home to care for them. This leads to parents missing work and appointments and losing jobs and services.
- These experiences create resistance to engaging with services and stoke despair.
- Parents in DV shelters are mandated to not release addresses but schools will demand address for IEP processes.
- Parents may not have phones and/or may not answer calls from unknown numbers. Programs must innovate communication strategies (text). SHRA seriously must stop requiring faxes.

10. The funding structure of preschool programs serving youth experiencing homelessness presents challenges and the work is uniquely hard.

- Preschools are under pressure to stay fully enrolled while also wanting to give parents in crises the time they need to gather enrollment materials.
- Heavy paperwork load demanded by funding structures. Private preschools have FAR less documentation and enrollment demands.
- Preschools “punished” when children are absent, but children in crises are absent more frequently. Preschools have to make hard decisions about how long to hold spots.
- Head Starts 8 to 4 schedule is challenging for any parent working full time.
- Head Start has only one center doing children under 18 months and the vast majority are 3 years and up.
- Homelessness actually allows families to have increased prioritization in enrolling children in Head Start but often parents won’t share this detail for fear of being reported to CPS or being judged.
- Preschool teachers may not have the training in trauma responsive practice.
- Teachers need access to wellness services to process the challenges of the work.
- Massive issues with turnover in the ECE field impacts relationship building with children and parents.
- We need more high quality preschools that follow framework, use best practice, include families as partners, and offer children development in all critical areas.

11. Some services are uniquely challenging to work with and really demand reform. They are not client friendly and navigating the processes is complex at best and damaging at worse. The only clients who successfully navigate them are clients who are lucky (get a great worker), clients who are dogged in accessing services, or clients with mentors who support through the processes.

- SHRA (housing vouchers and affordable housing) is extremely challenging. Parents are thrilled to get vouchers and then lose apartments as applications are lost, inspections take weeks, and fax machines can’t be found. They hand out vouchers without matching to authentic support in attaching to actual housing.
- DHA shelters: Impossible to get anyone on the phone and never know if the resource will work.
- Child Action: “As good as the worker you get” Often parents lose jobs as they wait for Child Action to process. Workers can be AWOL.

- Alta Regional: Much to slow
- Navigating access to immediate shelter: Entirely lacking a clear front door and puts the work on parents. Youth Prevention and Intervention is a great improvement, but not at the scale needed to support demand.
- Accessing school district intervention support for children between 3 and 6 with learning disabilities or developmental delays.