



Key Learnings from First 5 Contra Costa Listening Tour | Brief

Continuous Improvement Rapid Cycle Learning &
Evaluation (CIRCLE) Team, Stanford Center on
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Families with young children in Contra Costa County speak about their experiences engaging with family support services in the county.

Key points

- Contra Costa County is home to thousands of families with children under age 6.
- Parents of young children shared what's helpful for their families and where more support is needed around programs, resources, and services.
- Their experiences and suggestions can guide First 5 Contra Costa and other early childhood providers, agencies, and advocates to find impactful ways to support more families with young children.

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I feel that First 5 has helped me a lot as a woman, as a mother, as a friend, and I am very grateful to First 5 for all that I have learned, for the way I have improved. I don't know what I would do if First 5 wasn't here in Concord, and um... I am very grateful to all the teachers, to all the staff. Everything they have done for me and the programs they have offered us have been very helpful, but I feel that there should be more.

- Parent in Contra Costa County

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Families in the county report both positive experiences with services and unmet needs related to raising young children, highlighting the importance of better understanding their experiences, elevating parent voices, and offering supports that ensure every child thrives from the start.

Lifting up parent voices

The Stanford Center on Early Childhood (SCEC) partnered with First 5 Contra Costa to understand the experiences of Contra Costa families with children under age 6. We focus on these early years because they are a critical time in children's and families' lives that builds the lifelong foundation for physical health, emotional well-being, and positive development.

In this brief, we lay out what we've learned from Contra Costa parents about their experiences accessing family support services in the county, including what's working well and where more support is needed. We gathered these insights from discussion groups and interviews, conducted in both English and Spanish, with more than 50 families between March and July 2025.

Parents know best what their children and families need. We are grateful to the families who shared their time and stories with us to shape programs and family support services for young children in the Contra Costa community.



Understanding families' experiences

We gathered input from First 5 staff and their parent advisory group about what questions we should ask families to better understand their experiences and needs as they relate to family support services in Contra Costa County. For the listing tour, we recruited families that engage with First 5 Contra Costa-funded services and families that do not.

Many families expressed difficulties paying for basic needs.

We asked families about the kinds of help available in the county for basic early childhood necessities like food, car seats, and diapers. Parents reported difficulty accessing food and household goods, including diapers. Access to basic needs was related to eligibility for programs and services designed to support families with low incomes, with one parent left asking, "How do I qualify for low-income housing, but not food stamps, cause... right now, everything's really expensive." Availability of basic necessities differed by region too; for example, some parents mentioned particular struggles with food access in West Contra Costa. Parents also discussed the lack of affordable, accessible child care that meets their family's unique needs, despite child care access not being a focus of this family support listening tour.

While many families engaged with different supports, others didn't know they existed.

Overall, parents across Contra Costa reported a high demand for supports, naming over 45 programs and services they have used to support their families. Many reported engaging in enjoyable activities at one of the five First 5 Centers in the county, such as parenting classes and parent-child activities. However, some only learned about what was available through the SCEC's discussion groups or by first being connected to other services. We learned that this initial connection point is crucial as it often leads to connections to other services and family supports.

Even when they knew about the programs, not all families could access them.

Knowing about county services and other family support options isn't enough; many families couldn't access what they needed because of conflicting schedules, unclear eligibility, complicated enrollment, limited availability, and fear of stigma. Program staff across agencies helped families to navigate some of these barriers, but more outreach and support is needed to meet families where they are and improve access.

Families shared where there were gaps, beyond access to child care and covering basic needs.

As discussed, many families expressed affordable child care and paying for basic needs as unmet needs. Parents in all regions of the county reported the perception that their neighborhood or city was particularly underserved, though that sentiment was more strongly and consistently reported by parents living in West Contra Costa. Across the county, parents said that offerings for fathers and the Latinx population were hard to find.

Families learned about supports through a variety of sources.

Parents found out about family support services through informal connections, like family and friends, and more formal connections, like their pediatrician and the library. More can be done to ensure that information is shared through the channels that parents tell us they already rely on, such as word-of-mouth referrals and pediatricians. Sharing information through trusted sources and service providers can help make sure that more families know their options.

Parents would like programs to be offered at times that would better suit their schedules, a wider ranges of topics covered and language options.

We asked parents for specific ideas and suggestions about improving their access to and engagement with supports for families with young children. Here are some of the most common suggestions we heard:

Parents would like information to be in one place and for systems to be better connected.

They asked for a clear, county-wide resource guide to be shared widely (many did not know about an existing, county-wide resource guide, 211, which is funded by various county agencies and organizations, including First 5). In particular, stay-at-home parents, immigrants, and those with infants may need targeted outreach. Participants also shared a need for systems to be better connected to make it easier to find and access support. For example, parents specifically called out the need for more attention and support for referral pathways for children with developmental concerns (e.g., the Regional Center).

"I think that if there was a way to connect folks more quickly to the Regional Center that would be helpful because, you know, the earlier the intervention, the better." - Parent in East Contra Costa County

For county programs and services with strict eligibility rules around income, parents shared a need for simpler, consistent systems to access programs.

They need less paperwork, clearer eligibility rules, and one-on-one guidance to reduce stress and make it easier to get the help their families require.

"You may qualify for one thing with one agency and then not for another agency, so just navigating that can be a little bit hard and understanding what you qualify for." - Parent in West Contra Costa County

For agencies offering classes specifically, parents would like more classes with flexible schedules, a wider range of topics, and language options.

They also need child care to attend classes and engage in career support and community events.

"I wish there was more that [would] provide us skills of how to find a job, where we can become successful at the same time as being moms." - Parent in West Contra Costa County

Parents expressed a need for child care support.

They asked for child care during parent classes, job interviews, and for siblings of children when classes are not appropriate for all ages.

"If they could provide childcare like on site for the littles... because that can be a barrier. I know it's been a barrier for me several times like trying to bring my now 2-year-old, and my 6-year-old, and she obviously is not appropriate for those programs... it can be kind of distracting to the little kids." - Parent in East Contra Costa County

Conclusion

While families with young children in Contra Costa are benefiting from available services, they also seek better access to information, programs, and basic supports.

While many are interested in accessing family support services, barriers like low awareness, weak referral pathways, and burdensome paperwork can get in the way of uptake. Trusted relationships often help families navigate these challenges. These insights can guide First 5 Contra Costa and local system leaders to improve outreach, tailor support, and strengthen programs to lay a strong foundation for healthy children, families, and communities.



To download the full report, scan the QR code or visit: bit.ly/listening-tour-2025

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We extend our appreciation to the Stanford Center for Early Childhood, the authors of this report, and the participants of the listening sessions for their invaluable contributions. We would also like to thank our community partners and organizations for their continued commitment to supporting families with young children.