

### EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT

Fundamental to the work of FTF is the research-based understanding that healthy early childhood development is a critical first step to educational success. The first years of life are a period of rapid brain development, as well as physical and social-emotional development that lays the foundation for a lifetime of learning. Many studies have shown that early experiences can influence brain architecture, with enriching experiences helping to promote a healthy architecture and neglect and trauma impairing brain structures.<sup>i iii</sup> These early experiences shape a child’s capacity to learn and achieve her developmental potential.<sup>iv</sup>

Research indicates that exposure to high-quality early experiences, including positive parent-child relationships and quality early learning and child care, promotes all children’s social-emotional and cognitive development. These high quality experiences are particularly important for children from families with lower socioeconomic

**“A STRONG FOUNDATION IN THE EARLY YEARS INCREASES THE PROBABILITY OF POSITIVE OUTCOMES AND A WEAK FOUNDATION INCREASES THE ODDS OF LATER DIFFICULTIES”**

- National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2007)  
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status (SES) who may lack opportunities at home for responsive, stimulating interactions,<sup>v vi vii</sup> and who have higher risk of exposure to stressors (such as substandard housing, separation from caregivers), that interfere with optimal child development.<sup>viii ix x</sup>

Recent policy efforts at the local, state and federal levels reflect the recognition that investing in early childhood by providing rich learning opportunities for children at home and in high quality community-based settings can reap substantial social and economic dividends.<sup>xi xii xiii xiv</sup> Longitudinal studies of high-quality preschool programs demonstrate important and far-reaching positive effects, contributing to better grades and test scores, lower rates of grade retention, higher high school completion rates, lower risks of teenage parenthood, less involvement in the criminal justice system, and better employment rates.<sup>xv xvi xvii</sup> Economic analyses suggest that early childhood education is one of the highest yielding public returns on investment. For example, Heckman’s<sup>xviii</sup> analysis of the economic impact of the Perry Preschool Project, a two-year intervention with low-income preschoolers in Chicago, reported return on investment rates of 15-17 percent per year. It also demonstrated cost-benefit ratios (comparing the input costs of the program to the aggregate program benefits, including reductions in remedial schooling and positive adult outcomes such as higher earnings, savings in welfare and less crime) of over 1:8.

## THE FIRST THINGS FIRST FAMILY AND COMMUNITY SURVEY

Many of brain building activities and experiences that provide for rich learning opportunities take place during everyday interactions between children and their families. Therefore, understanding parents and other key caregivers' knowledge and beliefs about child development and parenting practices provides important insight into how best to provide information, resources and support for this important role. This is the goal of the First Things First Family and Community Survey.

The FTF Family and Community Survey is a study of parents, other family caregivers, and the general community's knowledge about children's early development and their perceptions of the resources currently available for young children and their families in Arizona. The FTF survey is based on a national survey developed by Zero to Three, the National Center for Infants, Toddlers, and Families.

The FTF Family and Community Survey has six major areas of inquiry:

- Early childhood development
- Developmentally appropriate child behavior
- Child care and sources of parenting advice and support
- Family literacy activities
- Perceptions of early childhood services
- Perceptions of early childhood policies

The survey results provide insight about what early childhood issues are important to Arizona's parents and families, the areas where parents and families need additional support to get the services they need for their children, and what parents and families already know and what will be important to learn about the development of young children. This information can help shape family support efforts across the state by helping to ensure that programs and services offer families information and support in ways that are responsive and meaningful to them.

The Family and Community Survey also provides the data needed for one of the ten FTF School Readiness Indicators, the percentage of Arizona families that report they are competent and confident about their ability to support their child's safety, health and well-being. Overall, the FTF School Readiness Indicator initiative provides a comprehensive composite measure of progress in the early childhood system for young children.

## I. SURVEY METHODOLOGY

### The Sample

In 2012, a randomly selected, geographically balanced sample of 5,209 Arizona adults (ages 18 and older) was surveyed by telephone. Respondents were selected randomly from sample lists, with random predictive dialing used to supplement the lists. This strategy helps ensure that residents who are not yet listed in a directory (or who choose not to be listed) are still eligible for selection. To include cell-phone-only households, the contractor manually dialed randomly-generated cell phone numbers (based on known cell phone exchanges). About 5 percent (189) of the interviews were conducted in Spanish.

About 29 percent (1,499) of the persons reached by the telephone interviewers indicated there were no children ages 5 years or younger living in the home. An abbreviated version of the survey was administered with these persons, focusing on their opinions about a child's brain development, school readiness, and familiarity with First Things First and its mission. The responses to these questions

aligned with those of persons with a child or children ages 5 years or younger living in the home. With that, FTF decided to focus this report on the results generated from the substantially larger group of respondents with a child or children ages 5 years or younger living in the home who answered a comprehensive set of questions about early childhood.

The remaining 71% (3,708) of the persons reached by the telephone interviewers indicated that there was at least one child ages birth to 5 living in their household. If the person who answered the telephone was not a caregiver of the child, the interviewer asked to speak to another adult in the home who was a caregiver. The findings in this report are based on the survey data from these 3,708 respondents who are caregivers of at least one child ages birth to 5 living in their household.

Detailed demographic information about the respondents is provided in Appendix A. In summary, the majority of the 3,708 respondents (83%) were the child's parent. The remaining respondents were grandparents (13%) or other relatives (4%). The majority had a paid job (55%), were married (76%), were female (69%), and had household incomes over \$30,000 (65%). Of the 3,708 respondents, 3,332 (90%) lived in one of the 21 county-based regions of First Things First and 386 (10%) lived in one of the 10 tribal regions. Of note, since the 2012 administration of the Family and Community Survey, FTF has conducted the survey with a focus on FTF tribal regions whereby interviewers administer the survey questions in person with respondents. This has increased the response rate to the survey in FTF tribal regions, because in-person administration of the survey is more culturally responsive than telephonic administration.

To reduce the number of questions that each survey respondent was asked, certain questions were asked of only half of the sample. We report the number of respondents for each of the survey questions discussed in this report. For all survey results presented here, we ignore the small number of respondents who did not answer a question, or who gave a response of "Not sure" or "I don't know."

## PRODUCING POPULATION ESTIMATES

To make the sample conform to what we know about the Arizona population, a statistical procedure was used to generate a weight for each participant. The weights were based on four characteristics: Family Income, Educational Attainment, Sex, and Race-Ethnicity. The weights were developed using the raking method, an iterative procedure that resulted in the sample characteristics matching the general population characteristics very closely. This report includes only weighted data, and except to describe demographic characteristics, non-weighted data are not included. Appendix A presents further information about the weighting process.

## SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS (SES)

Research indicates that parents' understanding of and beliefs about child growth and development, concepts of parenting and parenting behaviors differ by socioeconomic status.<sup>xxix</sup> It is important to understand that a number of these differences arise from variation in exposure to stressors such as poverty and community safety. Families that experience poverty are exposed to multiple stressors,<sup>xx xxi xxii</sup> which may undermine a parent or other family member's ability to provide sensitive and responsive caregiving that contributes to healthy child development.<sup>xxiii xxiv xxv</sup>

We created an SES variable (low SES and higher SES) to examine how SES may affect families' knowledge, beliefs, and behaviors about child growth and development. Findings based on this variable can provide insight into the needs of families and children and help identify target audiences for the dissemination of information and the improvement of services. The statistical process for creating this variable is explained in Appendix B.

The following describes the characteristics of the two groups.

- The Low SES group included 964 respondents; 78 percent had incomes less than \$30,000 per year, 79 percent had a high school education or less, 37 percent were Hispanic, and the average age was 37 years.
- The Higher SES group included 2,530 respondents; 87 percent had incomes greater than \$30,000, 91 percent had more than a high school education, 15 percent were Hispanic, and the average age was 38 years.

For the purposes of this report, we note differences in findings between SES groups that can reasonably be viewed as meaningful, which generally is when there is a 10-percentage point or larger difference between the findings for each SES group.

## II. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

In summary, the 2012 Family and Community Survey findings suggest that generally many parents and caregivers of children birth through age 5 in Arizona understand the importance of early opportunities for contributing to lifelong advantages in learning and development. For example, among the 3,708 parent and caregiver respondents:

- 81 percent acknowledged parents can significantly affect children's brain development at or before birth
- 86 percent recognized the importance of very early experiences and later school performance
- There was general recognition that play promotes children's development: On a ten-point scale (where "10" was labelled "crucial"), the average respondent rated the importance of play as 8.5 for a 10-month-old, 9.1 for a 3-year-old, and 9.4 for a 5-year-old
- At least half reported engaging regularly in family-based early literacy activities such as book reading and 53 percent reported reading to their child 6-7 days in the last week, on par with national reports
- However, many respondents did not recognize just how engaged infants are with their early environments and relationships. For example, among caregiver respondents, only about half recognized that:
  - Children react to the world around them in the first month of life (47%)
  - Children react to the mood of their caregiver in the first month of life (52%)
  - That language is better learned from 'live' face-to-face interactions rather than from watching television (46%)

The survey results also indicate that caregivers may need more information and education about young children's emotional development and ability to control their own behavior. For example, even though these behaviors are beyond the typical developmental capabilities of children at these ages, 47 percent of parent and caregiver respondents hold the expectation that 15-month-olds should share, and 26 percent indicated that 3-year-olds should be able to sit still for an hour.

In the area of sources for early childhood advice, 49 percent of respondents reported that a spouse or partner was the primary source for daily advice in raising children, and 31 percent of respondents reported parents or parents-in-law as the primary source. In contrast, less than 10 percent of respondents reported daily reliance on media sources and professionals such as pediatricians or child

care providers. More than half did report at least occasional reliance on books, magazines and websites for advice on raising a child.

Encouraging findings suggest that many parents are able to access regular health care for their children. Among the 3,708 respondents, 89 percent reported that their children under age 5 had regular visits to the same doctor's office, and 77 percent reported regular visits to the same dental provider.

Looking across survey responses, the findings suggest disproportionate risks faced by children and families from low socioeconomic status households. For example, low SES respondents were less likely to report reading most days of the week with their children. These findings are consistent with the research literature and national reports indicating that families experiencing economic disadvantage are exposed to multiple stressors and sources of disadvantage that may contribute to lack of access to information and resources needed to promote optimal early childhood development. Low SES families may also lack the same choices and opportunities afforded to families with higher SES.

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