

**Supporting Immigrant and
Refugee Families' Access to
Early Learning: Current
Challenges in Head Start/Early
Head Start Access and Policy
Recommendations**

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All children have the right to quality early learning environments to achieve their full potential.¹ Successful and quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) provide children with comprehensive and equitable education, health, and family support services.² Quality ECEC also has positive impacts on young children’s cognitive, social, emotional and language development.³ Moreover, providing high-quality early learning services demonstrates a commitment to equitable outcomes for all children.

ECEC also provides critical benefits to children of immigrants and refugees in particular. Early education develops immigrant and refugee children’s English language proficiency and their reading and math skills, such that they have improved academic performances when they enter kindergarten, compared to peers who do not receive early education.⁴ Additionally, comprehensive early education services can connect immigrant families to much-needed health and social services and support families’ long-term stability, self-sufficiency, and integration into society.⁵

Head Start programs are one of the primary providers of ECEC for low-income children and families in the United States.⁶ Early Head Start (EHS) serves children birth to age 3, while Head Start (HS) focuses on children ages 3-5. Both programs provide access to early and comprehensive services, including education, health, and nutrition (see footnote 6). During the 2020-2021 program year, Head Start programs served 756,000 children ages birth to 5 and pregnant women.⁷ Neither the Office of Head Start nor the Office of Refugee Resettlement collect data on refugee and immigrant enrollment in Head Start, so there is no precise count of the exact number of immigrant and refugee children in Head Start (see footnote

¹ National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). (2019). Head Start. <https://www.naeyc.org/our-work/public-policy-advocacy/head-start>

² Morland, L., Ives, N., McNeely, C., & Allen, C. (2016). Providing a head start: Improving access to early childhood education for refugees. *Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute.*

³ Gross, J., & Ntagengwa, C. (2016). Challenges in accessing early childhood education and care for children in refugee families in Massachusetts. *Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute.*

⁴ Rumberger, R. W., & Tran, L. (2006). Preschool participation and the cognitive and social development of language minority students

⁵ Matthews, H., & Ewen, D. (2006). Reaching all children? Understanding early care and education participation among immigrant families. *Center for Law and Social Policy, Inc.(CLASP).*

⁶ Office of Head Start. (n.d.) Head Start Services. <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/ohs/about/head-start>

⁷ HeadStart|Early Childhood Learning & Knowledge Center (ECKLC). (2021). Head Start Program Facts: Fiscal Year 2021. <https://ecklc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/about-us/article/head-start-program-facts-fiscal-year-2021>

2).

Many immigrants and refugee families are eligible for HS/EHS programs; however, children of immigrant and refugee parents often face barriers to participating in early education (see footnote 2). As a result, immigrant and refugee families with young children are less likely to participate in every type of nonparental care than are children if U.S. -born peers (see footnote 5), and they remain underrepresented in early education programs.⁸

This policy brief describes many of the most common systemic challenges that

immigrant and refugee families face in accessing HS/EHS, examines current policies and practices that support immigrant families' access to early learning at the federal and state level, reviews collaboration between Head Start and refugee resettlement agencies, and provides policy recommendations to help improve access to HS/EHS among immigrant families.

Who Are Immigrants and Refugees?
“**Refugees** are individuals who are outside their country of origin for reasons of feared persecution, conflict, and violence.

Immigrants are individuals who have left their country of origin. They may have various reasons for migration, including reunifying with family, seeking work, or fleeing violence. They may or may not be able to return to their home country (UNHCR, 2016).”

Challenges in Immigrant and Refugee Children’s Access to HS/EHS

Much of the literature shows that immigrant families with young children have less access to ECEC than their US-born peers (see footnote 2). Children of refugees and immigrants under age 6 are less likely to be in early childhood education services than children of US-born families.⁹ Immigrant and refugee parents face many barriers and challenges to their active participation in their children’s

⁸ Gelatt, J., Adams, G., & Huerta, S. (2014). Supporting Immigrant Families' Access to Prekindergarten. *Urban Institute*.

⁹ Capps, R., Fix, M. Ost, J., Reardon-Anderson, J., & Passel, J. S. (2004). *The health and well-being of young children of immigrants*. Urban Institute.

educational experiences.¹⁰

Language access is a paramount concern in ensuring access to HS/EHS programs for immigrant and refugee families. A large population of immigrants arrives in the United States with limited English language or literacy skills, and although HS/EHS are required to provide meaningful access to services for all people with limited English proficiency, this does not happen in practice. Many programs do not have enough funding to hire bilingual staff to help orient new families to resources or interpret/translate information.^{11,12,13} There are also limited local resources and public funding to support immigrant caregivers in learning English¹⁴. ECEC programs providing insufficient language access for non-English-speaking families often prevents parents from connecting with early education programs and makes it difficult for parents to obtain information about HS/EHS programs. Even when immigrant and refugee families are able to access HS/EHS programs, language barriers can also affect their engagement in HS/EHS and knowledge of available HS/EHS services (see footnote 2).

Awareness and availability of HS/EHS programs are additional barriers to ECEC access for immigrant and refugee families. Newly arrived immigrant and refugee parents with limited English proficiency are often unaware of subsidized childcare options or may have difficulty understanding how the complex childcare subsidy and application processes operate (see footnote 2). Without support to understand and navigate these processes, application and enrollment in HS/EHS can be very difficult, and many programs do not have multilingual family liaisons or navigators who can assist immigrant families in this way (see footnote 3). In addition, HS/EHS program schedules can create challenges for refugee and immigrant parents who work long hours or have schedules that

¹⁰ Fazily, F. (2012). The perception of teachers and refugee parents regarding children's education: A parent involvement study. *Education Doctoral*, 22.

¹¹ Holder, E. (2011). Memorandum from the Attorney General to Heads of Federal Agencies, General Counsels, and Civil Rights Heads, "Federal Government's Renewed Commitment to Language Access Obligations under Executive Order 13166.

¹² McBrien, J. L. (2005). Educational needs and barriers for refugee students in the United States: A review of the literature. *Review of educational research*, 75(3), 329-364.

¹³ Morland, L., Ives, N., McNeely, C., & Allen, C. (2016). Providing a head start: Improving access to early childhood education for refugees. *Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute*.

¹⁴ Moinolmolki, N., Gaviria-Loaiza, J., & Han, M. (2016). Immigrant families and early childhood programs: Addressing the new challenges of the 21st century. In *Family Involvement in Early Education and Child Care* (Vol. 20, pp. 117-142). Emerald Group Publishing Limited.

conflict with program availability.¹⁵ These scheduling issues may force immigrant and refugee parents -who often face significant economic stressors- to choose between limiting their employment opportunities or forgoing enrollment in center-based early education (see footnote 15).

Distance from services and transportation is another important factor impeding families' participation in HS/EHS programs. Some parents rely on a single car, or they do not drive, or some prefer walking so they prioritize the geographic convenience of HS/EHS facilities (see footnote 8). Most HS/HS programs do not provide transportation services because of other more urgent needs such as staff compensation and the difficulty of maintaining buses and retaining bus drivers.¹⁶ Moreover, although some communities use neighborhood carpools, private bus services, and ride-sharing services for families, most cities have limited public bus and train services (see footnote 15).

Finally, cultural views about childcare may also affect participation in HS/EHS programs. Some immigrant populations perceive schools as a threat to the preservation of their native culture and language, so they are reluctant to participate in center-based early care and education settings.¹⁷ For example, refugee families may be uncomfortable with culturally different approaches to childcare, so they may prefer informal family-based providers or kith-and-kin care provided by relatives. Shared cultural values and a desire for home language support often play an important role in their choice of early education programs (see footnote 3). This may be why many refugees and immigrants tend to favor family and informal care arrangements over licensed, center-based programs.¹⁸

Federal and State Guidance on Early Learning Access for Immigrant and Refugee Families

Immigrants and refugee families arrive in the US with different cultures and experiences, as well as many family and parenting strengths. Most have also

¹⁵ Greenberg, E., Michie, M., & Adams, G. (2018). Expanding preschool access for children of immigrants. *Urban Institute*.

¹⁶ National Head Start Association. (n.d.). Head Start United: Removing Barriers to Access for Children and Families.

¹⁷ Huntsinger, C. S., & Jose, P. E. (2009). Parental involvement in children's schooling: Different meanings in different cultures. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 24(4), 398-410. doi:10.1016/j.ecresq.2009.07.006

¹⁸ Fidazzo, G., Schmidt, L., & Bergsman, A. (2006). Enhancing child care for refugee self-sufficiency: A training resource and toolkit. Baltimore, MD and Washington, DC: Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service and US Conference of Catholic Bishops. www.brycs.org/documents/upload/EnhancingChildCare.pdf.

experienced trauma, including the loss of family members, community, and homeland and they must adapt to new cultures and social norms in the United States.¹⁹

Head Start and the Office of Refugee Resettlement, which fall under the Administration on Children and Families within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, partner to help serve refugee parents and families across the country (see footnote 3). Collaboration between the Head Start and resettlement agencies can help ease the transition of immigrant and refugee families into their new communities, provide centralized access to comprehensive services, and improves children’s school readiness (see footnote 2). However, the coordination between these agencies at the federal, state, and local levels is limited. The refugee resettlement system is not designed to help refugee and immigrant parents understand or access the best ECEC options for their children and focuses on childcare as a means of overcoming parents’ employment barriers, rather than as a tool for children’s long-term social-emotional and academic development (see footnote 3). For example, in Massachusetts, the refugee resettlement system mostly focuses on early employment, job training, and access to English language instruction for refugees. Moreover, the case management manual issued by the Massachusetts Office of Refugees and Immigrants does not reference helping families navigate the ECEC system or choose childcare options (see footnote 3).

Interagency Collaboration

There are a number of promising federal, state, and local initiatives that target the challenges in access to HS/EHS services for immigrant and refugee families. For example, “Bridging Refugee Youth and Children’s Services (BRYCS) has partnered with the Office of Head Start’s National Center on Cultural and Linguistic Responsiveness to improve access to Head Start services for refugee families” (see footnote 2). This collaboration aims to provide support and technical assistance to refugees, refugee service providers, and HS programs and increase coordination between local refugee resettlement agencies and HS programs.²⁰ A number of helpful resources and tools are available in their

¹⁹ Bridging Refugee Youth & Children’s Services. (n.d.). Raising Young Children in a New Country: Supporting Early Learning and Healthy Development

²⁰ Bridging Refugee Youth & Children’s Services (BRYCS). (n.d.) Refugee Resettlement-Head Start Collaboration toolkit.

[Refugee Resettlement-Head Start Collaboration Toolkit.](#)

Arizona Refugee Resettlement Program's Head Start Pilot project is one of the BRYCS/Head Start collaboration projects. It is a collaborative effort between local Head Start grantees and the state resettlement program.²¹ This pilot project identifies challenges and successes of collaboration between refugee resettlement services and Head Start (see footnote 2). The outcomes of this pilot project show that increasing collaboration between EHS/HS and refugee resettlement services supports the resources to ensure access to ECEC for refugee families (see footnote 2).

Another BRYCS/Head Start collaboration was the partnership between San Antonio Catholic Charities the Family Services Association (FSA) of San Antonio and the City of San Antonio as a Head Start grantee in 2009. This pilot program aimed to provide education and family and community support services to newly arrived refugee children and increase access to FSA-based Head Start services for young refugee children and their families. Through the program, refugee children and families received services including nutritional support, education, parenting orientation, health and mental health care. The program also helped to find employment for parents and then places their children in quality center-based programs that allow the parents to work.²² The program identified cultural and linguistic barriers to Head Start services for refugee families and increased school readiness for young refugee children and provided employment opportunities for their parents (see footnote 22).

Policy Recommendations

Federal

- The Office of Head Start should develop policy and practice guidance specifically focused on young immigrant and refugee children, particularly helping Head Start grantees identify, recruit, and enroll these communities and facilitate connections to community-based social service providers.

<https://brycs.org/toolkit/refugee-resettlement-head-start-collaboration-toolkit/>

²¹ Bridging Refugee Youth & Children's Services (BRYCS). (2015a). Arizona Head Start Project.

<https://brycs.org/promising/0113/>

²² Bridging Refugee Youth & Children's Services (BRYCS). (2015b). San Antonio's Head Start for Refugee Children. <https://brycs.org/promising/0107/>

- There is a major gap in the data on immigrants and refugees in Head Start. The Office of Head Start Program Information Report (PIR) should collect and track data on the country of origin of enrolled families, parent's year of arrival, parent's education level, and the English proficiency level of both child and parent. The routine collection of relevant data in a consistent way across the national system should be emphasized to assess immigrants' and refugees' access to childcare, the quality of the care they use, and how effectively refugee resettlement providers help them access care (see footnote 2).
- The Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) should increase coordination/partnership with the Office of Head Start (OHS) to ensure that referrals/connections to Head Start. Partnerships between ORR and OHS help ensure that refugee families with young children are aware of Head Start programs available to them and help promote equitable access.²³

States

- At the state level, the ECEC leadership and the Office of Refugee Resettlement should develop strategies, share information, and sponsor cross-training opportunities. They could collaboratively implement staff training on refugee resettlement at all levels, as well as develop multidisciplinary resources for providers and families (e.g., user-friendly tools for immigrants and refugees, infographics, flow charts) (see footnote 3).
- The lack of statewide data collection and information on refugee ECEC access and refugee voucher referrals and child-care use creates challenges so there is a need to improve statewide data collection and information tracking.

Local Head Start/Service Provider Agencies

- Local organizations that work with immigrant and refugee children should strengthen the collaboration among state and local networks of resettlement and HS/EHS services and work cooperatively to better meet the ECEC needs of immigrant and refugee families.
- HS/EHS programs should recruit more bilingual staff who speak the home languages of the local immigrant and refugee populations and provide additional training for staff working with young children of immigrants and refugees,

²³ Hoaglan, I. (2022). Early Childhood Education for Refugees in the United States. <https://blogs.gwu.edu/gsehd-real/2022/11/14/early-childhood-education-for-refugees-in-the-united-states/>

particularly focused on culturally and linguistically responsive teaching (see footnote 5).

- HS/EHS services should use multiple languages and approaches to reach families who may be limited English proficiency or low literacy in their home language.
- Half-day classes may not correspond to parents who work full-time or their work schedules may prevent them from picking up their children in the middle of the day (see footnote 2). In addition, schedules at EHS/HS programs and issuing of financial penalties for late pick-ups can be difficult for refugee parents who attend pre-employment training programs. Therefore, HS/EHS providers could extend program hours to accommodate parents' work schedules.²⁴
- Partnership with parents and other family members are very important to the success of ECEC services, so HS/EHS services should promote parent involvement. According to Ansari and Gershoff, "parent involvement in Head Start is associated with improvements in parenting over time, and these improvements are, in turn, associated with children's behavior and academic achievement".²⁵ Therefore, Head Start programs should do more to facilitate parent involvement and devote more time and resources for teacher and staff training to increase parent involvement (see footnote 25).

²⁴ Greenberg, E., Michie, M., & Adams, G. (2018). Expanding preschool access for children of immigrants. Urban Institute.

²⁵ Ansari, A., & Gershoff, E. (2016). Parent involvement in head start and children's development: Indirect effects through parenting. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 78(2), 562-579.