



Why do Families Disengage from Services?

A Study of Program Attrition
among First 5 Monterey County
Playgroup Participants

First 5 Monterey County: Program Attrition Report

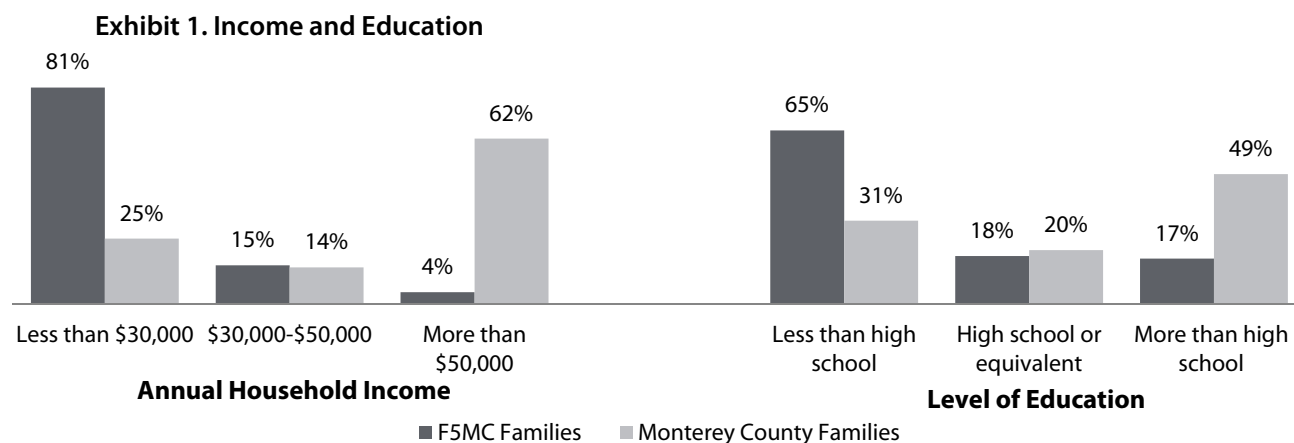
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Introduction

Prior evaluation findings, including the 2012 countywide Kindergarten Readiness Assessment (KRA) and a review of FY 2012-13 client-level data confirm that First 5 Monterey County (F5MC) continues to reach the children and families most in need. As demonstrated in Exhibit 1 below, F5MC participants have lower levels of income and educational attainment compared to Monterey County residents as a whole.



Source for F5MC Families: income from 2012 Countywide Kindergarten Readiness Assessment (n=248); education from FY2012-13 client level data (n=4,030)
Source for Monterey County Families: income from American Community Survey, (ACS) 2009; education for adults age 25+ from ACS 2011

In order to effectively serve the target population, F5MC supports programs and services that are culturally and linguistically appropriate, community-based, family-centered (including providing flexible hours), and coordinated across agencies. Still, funded partners continue to experience some level of service attrition, that is, families who enroll in and receive services and then disengage from funded partners. This evaluation came about as a result of F5MC's interest in exploring the internal and external barriers that prevent some families from receiving ongoing services.

The data presented here was collected through 50 phone interviews, conducted in the summer and fall of 2013, with parents who attended F5MC-funded playgroups. The 50 interviewees were divided evenly between

- *Disengaged parents*, those who attended at least one playgroup and a total of no more than two services from F5MC providers (n=25).
- *Engaged parents*, those who attended three or more playgroups, or received a substantial number of other services from F5MC providers (n=25).

Research¹ indicates that service engagement happens in three stages: (1) intent to enroll, (2) enrollment, and (3) retention. This report focuses on the latter stage by examining families who enrolled and received a service before disengaging. Specifically, it looks at the family, environmental, and program and provider factors that might contribute to program attrition. This methodology is discussed further in the Appendix.

The small sample size of this exploratory study means that results should be interpreted with caution; while this study is an important first step in understanding the characteristics and motivations of families who discontinue participation in F5MC services, these findings may not necessarily be generalizable to the broader population or to other F5MC programs. Please see the Appendix at the end of this report for a detailed explanation of the research approach.

Key Findings

This evaluation provides F5MC and its funded partners with a better understanding of the individual and family characteristics, environmental and community factors, and the program and service features associated with program attrition. Key findings include the following:

- + While disengaged parents were demographically similar to those who remained engaged, they were more likely to be single parents, have lower-income, and have experienced major life changes over the past year.**

The majority of disengaged and engaged parents were Latino, spoke Spanish only, and had a high school diploma/GED or less. However, parents who disengaged from services had lower income levels and were more likely to be single parents than parents who remained engaged. Disengaged parents also experienced a greater number of major life changes – such as moving or changing jobs – over the last year, which may have contributed to their attrition.

- + Both types of parents reported low levels of social support; disengaged parents were less likely to have attended the playgroup with a friend or family member.**

All parents reported low levels of social support but disengaged parents were more likely to say they had no friends or relatives attending the playgroup. Only 28 percent of parents who stopped participating reported attending the playgroup with a friend or family member, compared to 52 percent of those who continue to attend. However, lack of approval or support from family members did not appear to influence retention.

- + Community factors appear to have played only a minor role in the disengagement of some parents.**

The vast majority of parents in both groups reported they were happy living in their neighborhood. Those who had disengaged were less likely to report a sense of belonging to their neighborhood and more likely to say they would like to leave their neighborhood given the chance, but also more likely to report that people in their neighborhood look out for each other. Other factors cited as reasons for disengagement include lack of transportation and enrolling in another program.

- + Compared to parents who remained engaged, those who stopped participating learned about playgroups in slightly different ways and had different reasons for becoming interested in the program.**

Parents most commonly reported hearing about playgroups from family and/or friends. Those who disengaged were slightly more likely to have learned about the program through advertisements, suggesting that they might have had a more limited understanding of the playgroup or lacked personal connections that might have encouraged persistence, or through providers of higher-need services, suggesting that those families may have needed higher-intensity types of services. More parents who

continued participating mentioned their interest in program quality, while more of those who stopped attending noted they hoped the playgroups would help them address behavioral issues with their child.

+ Hours of operation, parents' schedules, and restarting after the summer break make it difficult for some parents to attend regularly.

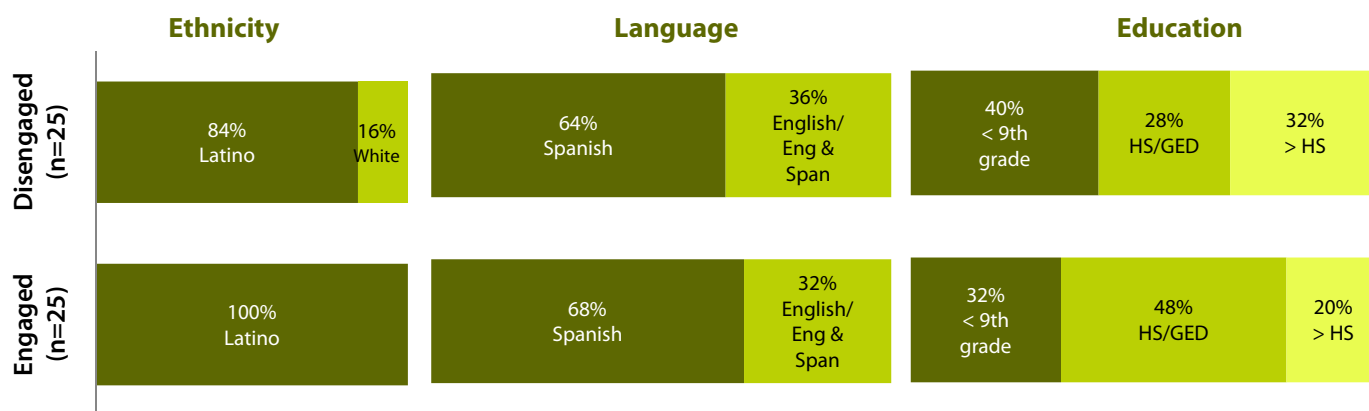
Overall, parents were extremely pleased with playgroup programs, although hours of operation are a significant barrier to attendance for many. Parents suggested offering playgroups during nontraditional hours (i.e., evening and weekends) and improving advertising to increase participation among parents like them. Additionally, some parents noted they were not contacted about playgroup programs having restarted after they closed for extended periods (i.e., summer breaks).

Family Characteristics

Parents who disengaged from playgroups were demographically similar to those who remained engaged with F5MC services.

Parents in both groups were predominantly Latino (84 percent of those who disengaged and 100 percent of parents who remained engaged); largely spoke only Spanish (64 percent compared to 68 percent); and most commonly had a high school diploma/GED or less (68 percent compared to 80 percent). These characteristics mirror those of the larger F5MC client population¹ and suggest demographic characteristics are likely not a major contributor to families' decisions to discontinue participating these services.

Exhibit 2. Demographic Characteristics



Parents who disengaged had lower income levels and were more likely to be single parents.

In terms of family circumstances that suggest higher family need or greater instability, these two groups looked less similar. Disengaged families reported significantly lower income levels than those who remained engaged: 81 percent of these families reported incomes under \$20,000 compared to 32 percent of more engaged families (see Exhibit 3)². Disengaged parents also reported higher rates of single parenthood (25 percent compared to four percent of engaged parents). It is not surprising, therefore, that families with greater financial instability and less assistance running a household and raising a child found it more difficult to attend F5MC playgroups. Playgroups held during typical workdays might be especially difficult for working parents to attend. In addition, playgroup services may not provide higher-need families with the most appropriate supports and services. Ensuring that families are connected to services and programs that address their immediate needs may help improve outcomes and ensure families remain engaged in F5MC services.

¹ 2012-13 Client Level Data Report, November 2013

² The 2012 KRA found that 61 percent of F5MC families had an annual income of less than \$20,000.

Exhibit 3. Income and Adults in Household



Disengaged parents experienced more major life changes over the last year, including moving or changing jobs.

Disengaged respondents also reported a greater number of life changes over the prior year than other parents (see Exhibit 4). Most common among these were moving (a statistically significant finding), or a family member changing jobs or starting school.

Exhibit 4: Family Changes

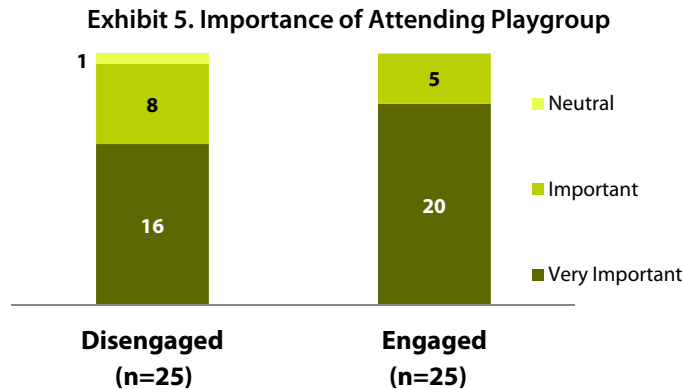
Family Changes in the Past Year	Disengaged (n=25)	Engaged (n=25)
Changed jobs/started working	12	12
Moved*	11	4
Returned to school	9	9
Lost a job	8	4
Became pregnant/gave birth	6	2
Illness /death in the family	5	5

*statistically significant (p<0.05)

Parents who attended fewer than three playgroups lived in their homes for less time than engaged parents: only 36 percent of disengaged parents had lived in their home for more than 3 years compared to 64 percent of more engaged parents. Families in transition may have different service needs than parents who are more established in their homes and careers. In addition, 12 percent of disengaged parents reported that they stopped attending the program due to their own health or the health of a family member. Some of these families may have too many competing demands to prioritize playgroup attendance. Moreover, it is possible that other types of services (for example, home visits or high-intensity consultations) may be more closely aligned with their needs.

Attending playgroups was slightly less important to disengaged parents, but lack of support from family members did not appear to influence retention.

Parents who attended only one or two playgroups were less likely to report that attending the playgroup was *very important* to them than more engaged parents (64 percent compared to 80 percent of engaged parents).



In addition, the majority of respondents in both groups told us that their partners or other family members knew of and supported their playgroup attendance (92 percent of disengaged parents and 76 percent of engaged parents). As one more engaged parent told us, “my husband wanted to go [to the playgroup] but he couldn’t because he works nights. He is happy because I have my daughter in school and I have her more active and ready for kindergarten.” These findings suggest that while parents who disengaged may not have prioritized playgroups to the same extent as more engaged parents, this was not attributable to their attitudes or a lack of support from family members but likely due to other factors like higher needs and conflicting demands.

Environmental Factors

All parents reported low levels of social support and those who disengaged were less likely to have friends or relatives attending the playgroup.

Overall, parents who stopped attending playgroups reported similar low levels of social support and neighborhood connectedness to parents who received many F5MC services. Parents were asked how frequently they had someone who *understands my problems, I can confide in, I can turn to for suggestions, will listen to me, whose advice I want, I share my worries with, or gives me information*. Only about half of all parents reported that they *often* or *always* had someone who provided these types of social support.

This lack of support was also reflected in the low percentage of parents who had a friend or family member attending playgroups. Even among more engaged parents, only 52 percent reported attending the playgroup with a friend or family member. Among disengaged parents, the percent was even lower; only 28 percent reported that this was the case. This may suggest that while lack of social support is an issue for all playgroup participants, the absence of a familiar face in the playgroup might be an additional contributor to disengagement.

Community factors appear to have played only a minor role in some parents' disengagement.

The vast majority of parents in both groups reported they were happy living in their neighborhood, though they also reported that fear of crime has limited the places they will go alone or with their children. Parents who had disengaged from playgroups and other F 5MC services were less likely to report a sense of belonging to their neighborhood, more likely to say they would like to leave their neighborhood given the chance, but also more likely to report that people in their neighborhood look out for each other (see Exhibit 6).

Exhibit 6: Neighborhood Connectedness

	"Agree" or "strongly agree"	
	Disengaged (n=25)	Engaged (n=25)
I am happy in my neighborhood	18	18
I am similar to my neighbors	16	14
neighbors look out for each other	15	9
I feel that I belong	14	19
I don't want to leave	10	9
I am not limited by neighborhood crime	9	5

Other community factors were cited more commonly than social support or community connectedness as reasons contributing to disengagement (Exhibit 7). Three of the parents who disengaged mentioned a lack of transportation and two named enrolling in another program³ as having contributed to their disengagement from F5MC playgroups. *Not knowing someone in the program* and *no longer living in the area* were each cited once as explanations for disengagement.

Exhibit 7. Reasons for Disengagement

Reason for Leaving	Count (n=25)
I did not have enough flexibility in my schedule to attend	11
Program didn't follow up with or contact me about participation	9
Program's location made it difficult for me to participate	3
Needed transportation	3
I or a family member had a health problem that made it difficult	3
Program's hours of operation made it difficult for me to participate	2
I enrolled in another program	2
<p>Each of the following was given as a reason for leaving by one respondent:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ I no longer needed services ✓ We moved from the area ✓ Staff did not communicate in a language I felt comfortable in ✓ Needed child care ✓ I didn't know anyone else in the program ✓ Personal reasons ✓ No longer living in shelter ✓ Child didn't behave well 	<p>None of the respondents said the following was a reason for leaving:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ I had bad experiences with similar programs in the past ✓ I worried for my safety while getting to the program ✓ I didn't like the program's goals or methods ✓ I wasn't treated well or respectfully ✓ I felt uncomfortable receiving services from this program

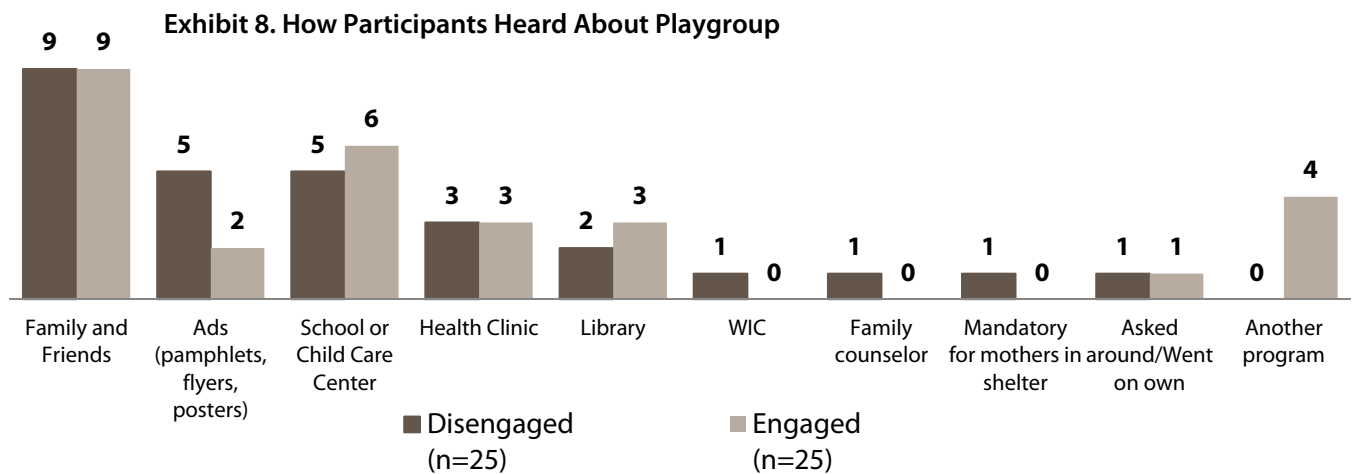
These findings paint a somewhat complex picture of respondents' attitudes toward their community and the extent to which neighborhood factors might influence playgroup attendance. Overall, these neighborhood and community factors appear to have played less of a role than family and program or provider factors (discussed in the preceding and following sections, respectively) in contributing to a parent's decision to stop attending playgroups.

³ Respondents did not specify which program(s) they enrolled in

Program and Provider Factors

Disengaged parents tended to learn about playgroup programs from different sources than engaged parents.

The most common way that all parents reported learning of playgroups was through a friend or family member (Exhibit 8). For many parents in both groups, their introduction to the playgroup came from a public agency like a school or child care center, health clinic, library, or other program, though this was more true for engaged families. A total of sixteen parents who continued participating reported that they had learned of the playgroups from one of these programs compared to just ten of the disengaged parents. The majority of parents in both groups, therefore, learned of the playgroups from either a public agency or program or from friends and family.



Five of the disengaged parents learned about the playgroups through posted advertisements like flyers and pamphlets, and two heard about them through providers of higher need services like family counselors and shelters. The impact of these discrepancies is unclear though it is possible that disengaged parents do not receive as thorough an introduction to the goals and expectations of playgroups—an information gap that might eventually contribute to disengagement. In addition, it is possible that these parents need extra support to establish relationships that will improve retention. Parents who are referred to playgroups by programs providing more urgent services may also simply need additional supports that playgroups are not designed to address.

Both disengaged and engaged parents had slightly different reasons for their initial interest in attending playgroups.

All parents told us that the opportunity to socialize their child was the primary reason they were interested in attending playgroups. The response of one disengaged parent echoed a common theme: “[I wanted] my daughter to learn how to share and interact with other kids.” Engaged parents were more

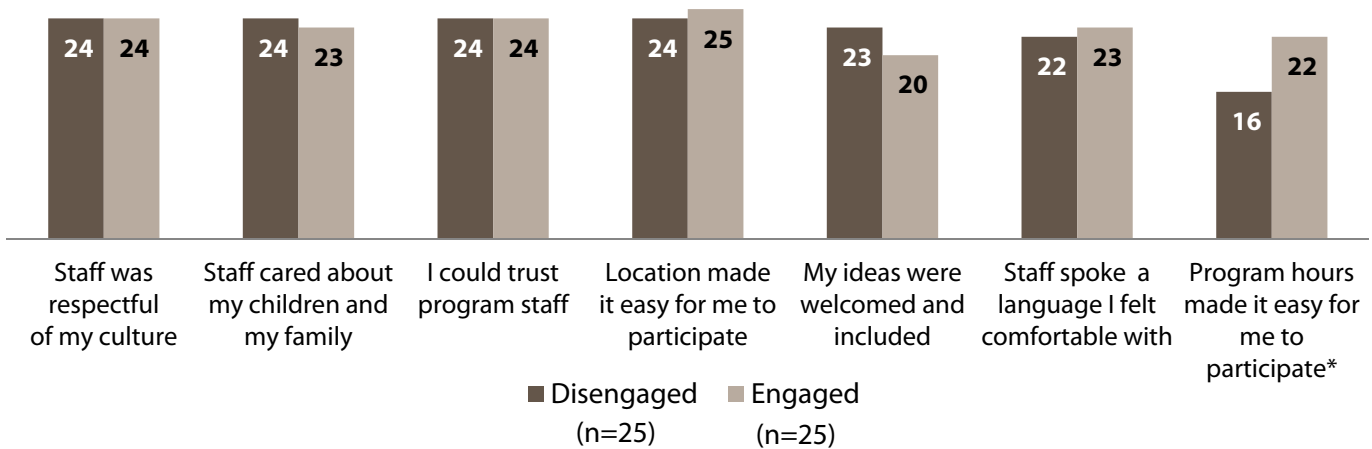
likely to tell us that what they heard about the quality of the program piqued their interest while disengaged parents were more likely to say that they were looking for help addressing their child’s behavior. As one parent put it, “we were having a lot of issues with our son; he may have autism.” Disengaged parents were also more likely to have been interested in learning about developmental milestones. One such parent was interested in the program because of “the evaluations and screenings and [the opportunity] for my son to play with others and learn new words.” Overall, though there were some differences in the reasons disengaged and engaged parents were initially drawn to the playgroups, it does not seem like these were a major contributor to disengagement.

Although parents were extremely pleased with playgroups, hours of operation were a barrier for some participants who disengaged.

Parents’ rankings of playgroups on a number of programmatic elements were overwhelmingly positive. The vast majority of parents reported that the playgroup they attended *always* offered culturally respectful and linguistically appropriate services; had staff who cared about clients, could be trusted, and valued parent ideas; and had a location that made it easy to participate in services. Disengaged parents, however, were significantly less likely to agree that programs’ hours of operation made it easy to participate (16 of the disengaged parents compared to 22 of the engaged parents).

In fact, when disengaged parents were asked explicitly about the primary factors contributing to their disengagement, the most common response was that the parent did not have enough flexibility in his or her schedule to attend (see Exhibit 7). Two people also reported that the playgroup’s hours of operation made it difficult to participate. Likewise, inflexible work schedules was the most common reason parents in both groups cited as to why more families like theirs do not attend playgroups. *Not having time* and *hours of operation* were also common responses. Clearly, parents who work during traditional business hours, when playgroups are held, often struggle to find the time to attend. This is likely to be particularly true in single-parent households and households where parents have unpredictable or extended work schedules.

Exhibit 9. Program Characteristics



Disengaged parents did not always know when programs were offering playgroups.

After issues relating to hours of operation and work schedules, parents named a lack of follow-up from programs as the second most common reason they did not continue attending (see Exhibit 7). Several parents mentioned that the playgroup had ended for the summer and that they had not been notified in the fall when the program began again. Rather than an isolated occurrence, this phenomenon was reported from clients who attended playgroups at a variety of locations. Five of the 25 parents also surmised that more families did not attend playgroups because they simply did not know they existed. Both of these findings suggest programs would benefit from taking a closer look at their communication to new and previously enrolled clients in order to reach more families and improve retention or reconsider substantial breaks.

Parents suggested offering different playgroup hours and improving outreach.

When parents were asked what changes playgroups could make to better meet the needs of families like theirs, the most common responses reflected the two issues described above: (1) playgroup schedules and (2) advertisement of services. Parents wanted to see playgroups offered at a wider variety of times including earlier in the morning, after school, and in the evening after work. Simply offering more playgroups, several parents suggested, might allow for parents with changing schedules to attend more frequently. Parents also thought that playgroups should do a better job of advertising their services; one parent suggested that enrollment suffered because the programs weren't sufficiently advertised. This sentiment aligns with findings from prior F5MC evaluation studies⁴ in which parents also stressed the important role of advertising, in particular word-of-mouth promotion from service providers and program participants, plays in their decisions to enroll and continue engaging in F5MC programs.

⁴ 2008-2010 and 2010-2012 Parent Interview studies; 2010 Participatory Evaluation; 2007-2008 Playgroup Evaluation Case Study

Recommendations

F5MC has taken an important first step in improving retention among clients by undergoing this study of playgroup program attrition. Harder+Company encourages F5MC to use the findings highlighted here to facilitate discussions with funded partners about the factors that influence service disengagement and the barriers that prevent programs from doing more to ensure clients are connected, and stay connected, to the services they need. In particular, we suggest F5MC engage agency staff in intentional conversations around the following issues:

- **Hours of operation:** parents identified the scheduling of playgroups as a primary barrier to repeated program attendance. What obstacles currently stand in the way of programs offering more flexible program schedules? What additional resources or supports would programs need in order to offer services to parents with non-traditional or irregular work schedules, particularly in the evenings and on weekends?
- **Breaks in service:** parents were often unaware that programs had resumed after breaks in service. How do programs currently communicate to clients that programs are on hold and how do they ensure parents continue to receive the services they need during those breaks? What systems are in place to reach out to clients once services have resumed and how can these be improved?
- **Fostering community and setting expectations:** disengaged parents had different program expectations and were less likely to know someone attending programs than parents who remained engaged. What steps do programs currently use to orient new clients, increase their understanding of program goals and methods, and connect them with other parents?
- **Identifying, tracking, and referring disengaged clients:** mechanisms currently in place to track clients are insufficient to accurately identify and follow up with those who disengage from services. What additional steps do programs take to follow up with parents they noticed have disengaged? What systems might help service providers recognize parents who are disengaging from services? What resources are needed to thoroughly follow up with parents who have disengaged and help connect those parents to other services they may need?
- **Advertising and outreach:** parents reported that many of their peers were simply unaware of the playgroup services offered in their neighborhood. How can F5MC help programs reexamine their outreach strategies to improve community awareness? How can programs enlist parents as community ambassadors and connect parents to improve a sense of community among clients?

Appendix: Approach & Methods

Research⁵ suggests that parental service engagement happens in three stages: (1) intent to enroll in a service, (2) enrollment, and (3) retention. While it is nearly impossible to capture clients who disengage during the first two stages, that is families who never intend to enroll and families who intend to enroll but who do not end up receiving services, it is likely that we can learn something about F5MC families who enrolled and received a service but who then discontinued participation. This study is therefore limited to disengagement in service at the third stage, retention.

This evaluation used a mixed-methods approach that incorporated quantitative data captured in the Persimmony database and qualitative data collected through interviews with F5MC participants. The Persimmony database was used to identify participants from each of the groups and to collect additional information about participant characteristics and service receipt.

The data presented here was collected through 50 phone interviews with parents who attended at least one playgroup at a F5MC-funded program: 25 parents who attended three or more playgroups, or received a substantial number of other services from F5MC providers 25 parents who attended at least one playgroup and a total of no more than two services from F5MC providers. The 20-30 minute interviews, conducted in summer and fall 2013, asked parents about a variety of factors that might influence their decision or ability to continue or terminate playgroup services. The following research questions informed the interview protocol:

1. **Family Characteristics.** Family circumstances, conflicting demands, and beliefs may affect program participation. How do these families differ from those who continue participating in services? What are the demographic, socio-economic, and geographic characteristics of families who discontinue services? How do parent attitudes, past-experiences, understanding and trust of providers contribute to attrition?
2. **Environmental Factors.** A family's decision to discontinue services may have to do with issues that may be out of their control and may be influenced by community factors or barriers in the service delivery system. Sample questions include the following: To what extent is attrition influenced by availability of other resources in the community? To what extent are families' decisions to continue service receipt influenced by the participation of their neighbors and friends? Do factors like violence, perceived safety, and having a sense of community contribute to program participation or attrition?
3. **Program and Provider Factors.** Parent participation may be influenced by characteristics of the program or service they receive. How do programmatic characteristics like geographic location and accessibility, hours of operation, or other program or provider characteristics influence participation?

⁵ Karen McCurdy and Deborah Daro, "Parent Involvement in Family Support Programs: An Integrated Theory." *Family Relations*. Vol. 50, No.2 (Apr. 2011).

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