



# The Early Learning Study at Harvard: Findings from the Household Survey

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## I. The household survey

As described in our first brief, *The Early Learning Study at Harvard: New Science to Advance Early Education*, the Saul Zaentz Early Education Initiative recently launched the Early Learning Study at Harvard (ELS@H, pronounced “Elsa”). Led by Professors Stephanie Jones and Nonie Lesaux, ELS@H is a large-scale, longitudinal study of young children’s learning and development that explores and documents the features of the settings in which young children receive their early education and care. Drawing on approaches in public health research, ELS@H is designed to reflect the population of 3- and 4-year-olds living in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts as well as the major types of early education and care that families use. The representative sample includes approximately 3,200 children who are in both formal (e.g., licensed community-based center) and informal (e.g., neighbor or relative care, group childcare in home) early education and care settings.

Because young children in informal care settings can be difficult to locate, they aren’t often included in research focused on early education and care. This fact has rendered the research base both incomplete and largely only relevant to informing improvement efforts in formal, licensed center-based programs. Yet it is well-known that a large number of children—in some states the majority of young children—are not in formal, licensed centers.

To overcome this gap in existing research, and to design a study that would inform a scaling and improvement strategy for the entire (mixed-delivery) system of early education and care, ELS@H began with a household survey to identify 3 and 4 year-olds and to document the landscape of the landscape of settings in which they receive their early education and care. To recruit the sample, the study’s field workers visited approximately 90,544 households between September and December 2017 to conduct the survey with those parents or guardians who identified as having a 3- or 4-year-old child<sup>1</sup>. This effort resulted in the recruitment of 841 three- and four-year-olds and their families from across the state. Of participating households that indicated they had an age-eligible child, 85% responded to the household survey and 75% agreed to participate in the study.

While the study includes other types of information about children (e.g., descriptions of their language development and social-emotional competencies) and their families (e.g., descriptions of their daily lives and parenting practices), as well as the features of their early education and care settings (e.g., reports about the physical environment and adult-child interactions), this brief focuses on the technicalities and findings of the household survey. For more information about the overall study design, please see Brief 1.

<sup>1</sup> During a pilot phase of the household survey, the in-person visit proved far more effective than phone calls.

## II. Survey questions and data weighting

To document the landscape of early education and care across the state, we used the household survey to ask parents or guardian(s) about the primary early education and care settings they use (e.g., Head Start, public pre-K, care by a non-parent relative, etc.) and the number of hours per week their children spent in each type of care setting. We also asked for the name and contact information of providers to allow us to verify the care setting type and to invite those providers to take part in the study. Finally, we asked parents and guardians to report their biggest worry about their child’s future as well as their level of confidence in their care arrangements.

## III. Findings

We present several key findings<sup>2</sup> in four areas: the overall patterns of early education and care in the state, differences in patterns of education and care use across the state, parents’ confidence in their child’s early education and care, and parents’ concerns for their child’s future.

### A. Overall patterns of education and care for 3- and 4-year-olds in Massachusetts

A key purpose of the household survey was to describe the landscape of early education and care for young children throughout the state. Specifically, the household survey shed light on the percentage of 3- and 4-year-olds in each of the following setting types:

- Public prekindergarten
- Head Start
- Licensed center-based care
- Licensed family child care
- Non-relative care
- Non-parental relative care
- Parent/guardian care

To be counted in one of these types, children had to be in the given setting for a minimum of 8 hours per week. The one exception to this rule was parent/guardian care; since a pilot of the household survey confirmed that all children spent at least 8 waking hours in parent/guardian care, we only counted children in this category if they were exclusively in parent/guardian care or spent less than 8 hours per week in any other type of care.

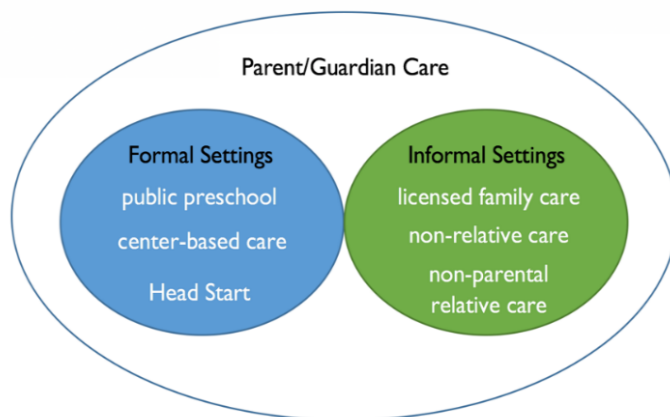


Figure 1: Taxonomy of education and care types

We grouped the six non-parental education and care types into two larger categories: formal education and care settings (centers with classrooms, including Head Start, public pre-K, community preschool, and parochial preschool) and informal settings (family or group childcare in a home, care by a non-relative, and care by a non-parent relative). Figure 1 (above) presents the taxonomy of education and care types represented in this study.

<sup>2</sup> All of the results described here are based on analyses that incorporate preliminary weights to account for households’ probability of inclusion in the sample and survey non-response. The analyses presented in this brief are generated using these preliminary weights. When the final weights are applied we expect to see minimal, if any, change in the results. These weighted results can be considered representative of the Commonwealth as a whole.

### Overall patterns of education and care for 3- and 4-year-olds in Massachusetts, cont'd

As shown in Figure 2 (below), of these education and care types, licensed center-based care was by far the most common (32% of children). The next most common types were parent/guardian care and unlicensed relative care (17% each). The two least common types were Head Start (5%) and licensed family childcare (2%). Another noteworthy pattern is that 16% of three- and four-year-olds in the Commonwealth spend at least 8 hours a week in two or more non-parental care settings.

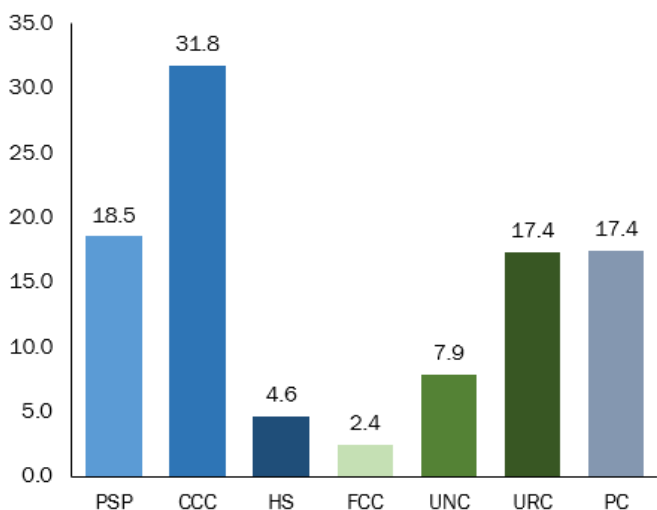


Figure 2: Percent of children in the Commonwealth enrolled in different types of education and care

### B. Differences in patterns of early education and care use across the state

In addition to examining overall trends across the seven different categories of early education and care, we also examined the characteristics of children and families who use different types of education and care with a special focus on the distinction between formal and informal settings. As described above, children could be in a formal setting only, in an informal setting only, or in both formal and informal settings. Parent care was also treated as a separate and exclusive category.

Results indicate that the patterns of early education and care for 4-year-olds in the state are distinct from those for 3-year-olds. As shown in Figure 3, four-year-olds are more likely than 3-year-olds to be in formal care (60% vs. 50%) or in a combination of formal and informal care (18% vs. 10%), and less likely to rely on parent care only (14% vs. 20%).

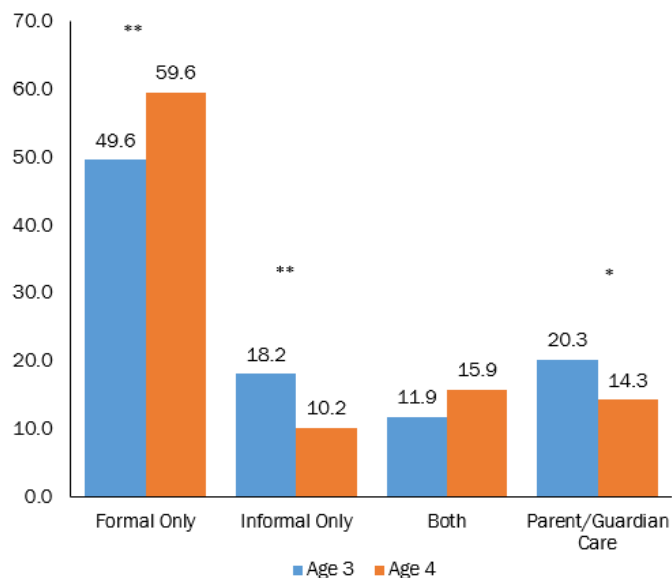


Figure 3: Percent of children in the Commonwealth enrolled in formal and informal settings, by child age



### Differences in patterns of early education and care use across the state, cont'd

Although patterns of informal and formal education and care use are generally similar in households across the Commonwealth, survey results indicate some differences in education and care use based on local poverty rates. As shown in Figure 4 (below), children in families in high-poverty communities are more likely to be in parent-only care (21% vs. 14%) or informal care only (18% vs. 10%). Children in families in high-poverty communities are also less likely than their peers in low-poverty communities to be in formal education and care (50% vs. 59%), or in a combination of formal and informal settings (11% vs. 17%).

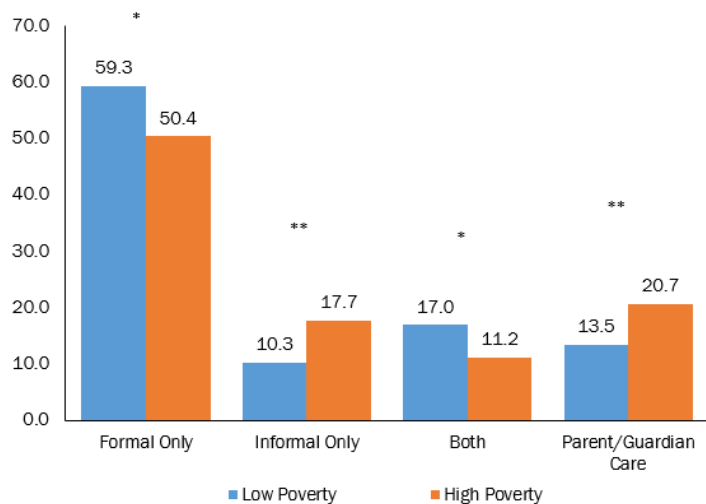


Figure 4: Percent of children in the Commonwealth enrolled in formal and informal settings, by family poverty level



### C. Parents' confidence in their child's early education and care

Overall, parents' confidence in their child's early education care is generally high. Although families of young children in Massachusetts rely on a variety of education and care settings, as shown in Figure 5 (below), parents report similar levels of confidence in their child's education and care regardless of whether their child is in a formal or informal setting.

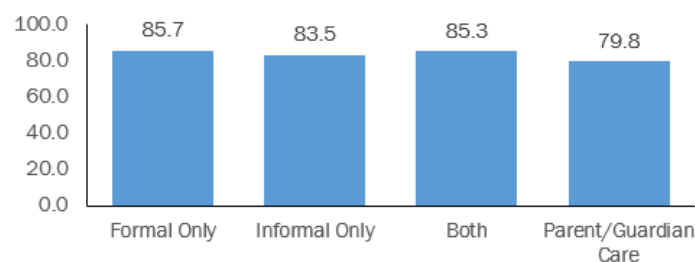


Figure 5: Proportion of parents reporting being "confident" or "very confident" in their child's education and care by type

When we examined confidence ratings by local poverty level, we found that parents from high-poverty communities are somewhat less confident in their children's education and care than those families in low-poverty communities. As shown in Figure 6 (below), parents in low-poverty communities are less likely to report being very confident in their child's education and care (57% vs. 47%). However, a similar proportion of parents in high- and low-poverty areas reported being only somewhat confident, slightly confident, or not confident at all in their child's education and care.

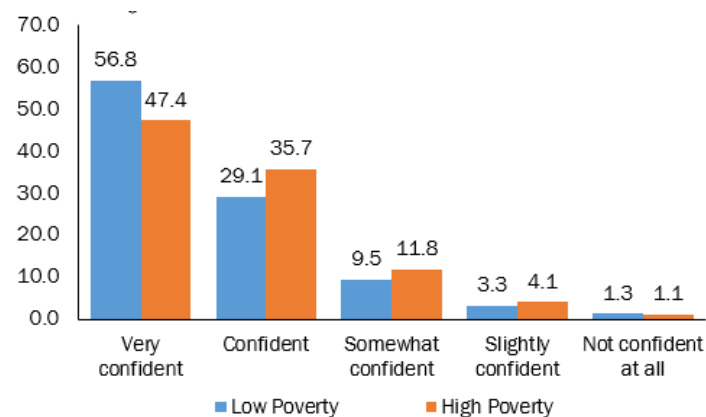


Figure 6: Proportion of parents reporting being "confident" or "very confident" in their child's education and care by levels of community poverty

#### D. Parents' concerns for their child's future

Not surprisingly, parents expressed a wide range of concerns regarding their children's futures. Through the household survey, we were able to create categories of concern and identify the "biggest worry" most common among parents of 3- and 4-year-olds in Massachusetts.



Figure 7: Parents' top three areas of concern for children's futures

As shown in Figure 7 (above), concern over children's academic and educational futures, which includes concerns about access to education at any level, the quality of the education available to children, and children's ability to acquire important skills for academic success, is the most common worry for parents and guardians (28% of responses). Children's social-emotional wellbeing (19% of responses) and physical wellbeing (16% of response) are also prominent worries.

#### IV. Implications

The findings from the household survey surface important questions and trends. The fact that 3-year-olds are less likely to be in formal early education and care environments than their 4-year-old counterparts may reflect a variety of underlying reasons, including a possible parental preference to keep younger preschoolers in home environments or differences in access to formal education and care settings. Questions of preference and access are also raised in regard to the finding that nearly one-fifth of parents and guardians rely on two or more settings. This finding may indicate that parents want their children to experience different types of settings or, alternately, that they may have difficulty finding one setting that meets all of their needs.

#### Suggested citation:

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