

# Issue Brief

## Ensuring Access to Quality Early Childhood Programs for Immigrant Children

### Introduction

Quality early childhood programs level the playing field for all young children so they have the opportunity to enter school ready to succeed. Research shows that children from low-income homes and children from immigrant families often start school one to two years behind their peers in language and other skills important to school success.<sup>1,2</sup> Ensuring children from immigrant families have access to quality early learning opportunities can help increase their English language skills and socialization skills important for school success.

Immigrant children remain the fastest growing segment of the United States population; one in five American children under the age of 18 in the United States is the child of an immigrant.<sup>3</sup> In order to effectively increase participation in quality early learning opportunities by children from immigrant families it is important to understand the unique challenges and strengths of the immigrant population.

This issue brief addresses the accessibility of early childhood programs in Kentucky for children in immigrant families. Through a number of qualitative interviews with practitioners in Kentucky and a review of the current literature on the topic we identified barriers preventing greater participation in early childhood programs and make recommendations for improvements.

*An English language learner is an individual who is learning English for the first time and has a language other than English as his or her primary language. Other terms found in the literature include: dual language learner, limited English proficiency, and English as a second language.*

### Demographic Portrait

In the last twenty years the number of children in immigrant families in the United States has more than doubled from 8.3 million in 1990<sup>4</sup> to approximately 17.3 million in 2009.<sup>5</sup> By the year 2020, one in three children is projected to live in an immigrant home.<sup>6</sup> The vast majority of these children are White (non-Hispanic) followed by Hispanic.<sup>7</sup> In addition, many of these children are not immigrants themselves, rather they are children born in the United States to first generation immigrant families making them second generation United States citizens.<sup>8</sup>

Similarly, in Kentucky, the percentage of children in immigrant families who are English language learners has dramatically increased in recent years.<sup>9</sup> In 2009, children under 17 from immigrant families composed approximately 6.4 percent of the child population – up from 4 percent in 2006. Nearly 40 percent of immigrant children in Kentucky are of Hispanic origin, followed by White, non-Hispanic children of immigrants who account for 29.4 percent of the total immigrant child population in Kentucky.<sup>10</sup> (See Chart 1 on following page)

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*“We must close the gap between what we know and what we do to promote the healthy development of young children.”*

— Dr. Jack Shonkoff  
Pediatrician and Co-Author,  
*Beyond Neurons to  
Neighborhoods*

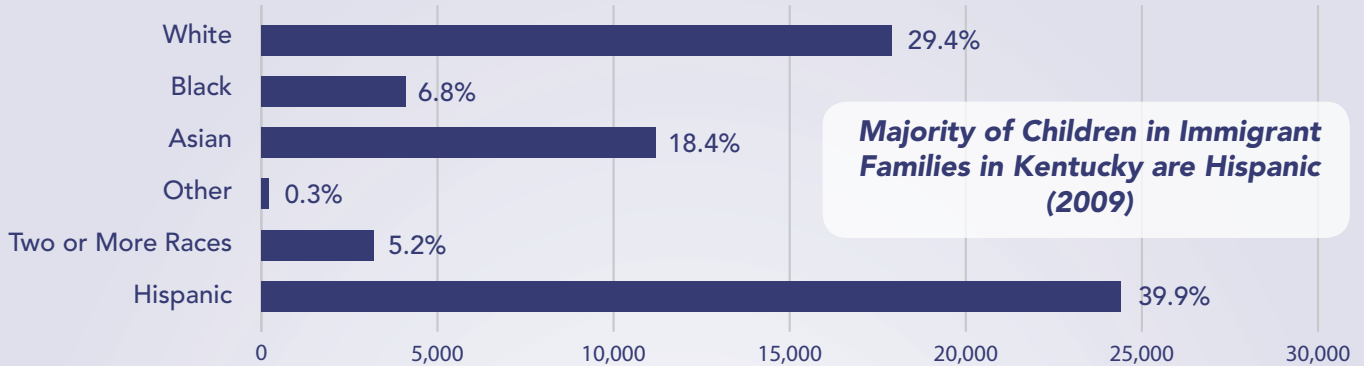


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### CHART 1

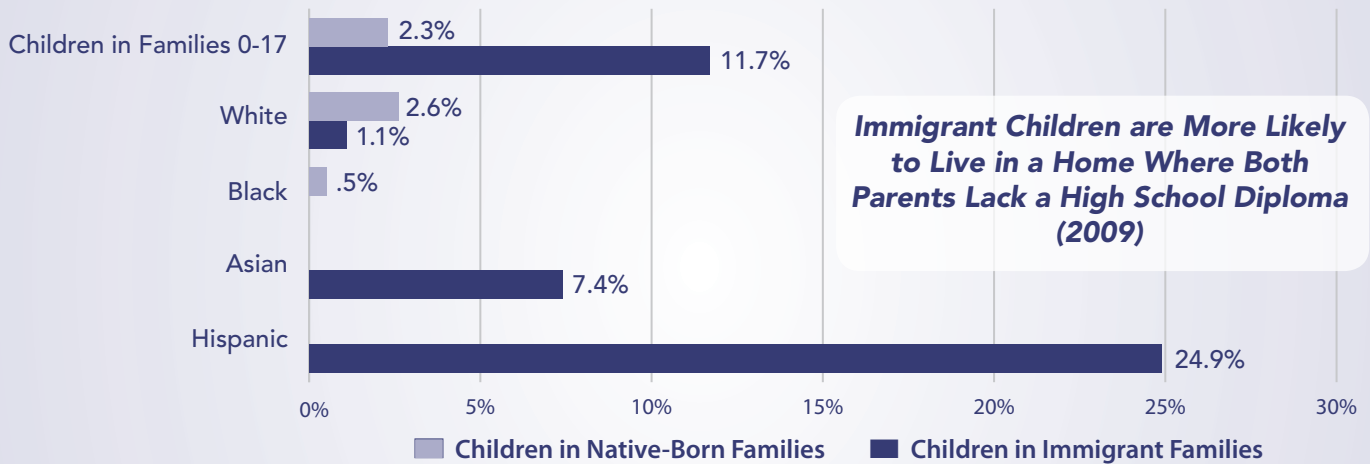
#### Number of Immigrant Children by Race/Ethnicity



Source: 2009 American Community Survey; Kentucky State Data Center

### CHART 2

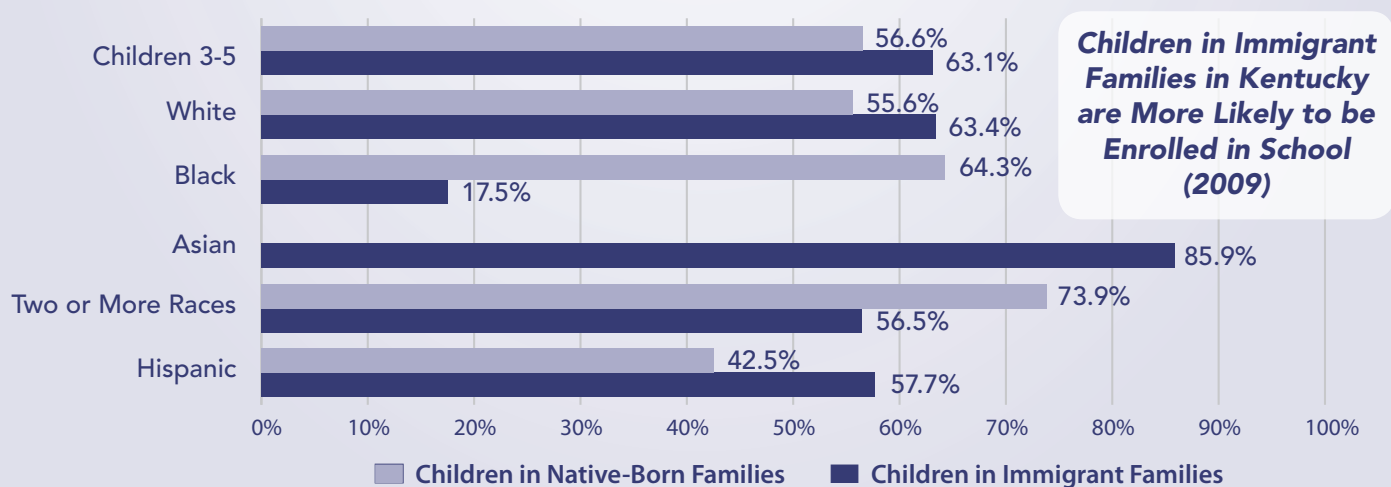
#### % of Children in Families Where Both Parents Lack a High School Diploma



Source: 2009 American Community Survey; Kentucky State Data Center

### CHART 3

#### % of Children Ages 3-5 Enrolled in School



Source: 2009 American Community Survey; Kentucky State Data Center

Note: The data does not include children enrolled in center-based child care

## Educational Status of Immigrant Families

Immigrant children are more likely than children in native-born families to have parents with low levels of education.<sup>11</sup> Nationally, 1 in 4 immigrant mothers and nearly 1 in 2 immigrant fathers lack a high school education.<sup>12</sup> As a result, many immigrant families have very low household earnings and are underemployed because they have only part-time or seasonal employment. Therefore, children in immigrant families are much more likely to live in poverty than other children in the United States. Poverty for all children is linked to a variety of risk factors that can undermine their future success: poor health outcomes, low social-emotional development, and risk of school failure.

In Kentucky, 11.7 percent of immigrant children ages 0-17 live in a family where neither parent completed high school; compared to 2.3 percent of children in native-born families. Race alone does not account for this disparity as both White and Black subgroups of children born to native families have a higher proportion of children living in less educated families than their immigrant counterparts. The opposite holds true for Hispanic families, with 24.9 percent of children in immigrant Hispanic families living in homes where both parents lack a high school diploma but all children in native-born Hispanic families having at least one parent that finished high school. Immigrant children in Hispanic families account for nearly 40 percent of all children in immigrant families, yet they account for 85 percent of all children living in families where both parents have less than a high school degree.<sup>13</sup> (*See Chart 2 on previous page*)

Nationally, children between the ages of 3-5 in immigrant families are typically less likely to be enrolled in early education programs such as preschool and center-based child care.<sup>14</sup> However, in Kentucky more than 63 percent of children ages 3-5 from immigrant families are enrolled in school compared to just 57 percent of children in native-born families. For most races and ethnicities young children of immigrant families in Kentucky are more likely to be enrolled in school than their peers born to native families. The only exception is for children of Black immigrant families and children of mixed race immigrant families.<sup>15</sup> (*See Chart 3 on previous page*)

## Benefits of Early Childhood Education for Immigrant Children

Children's brains develop rapidly in the early years of life. Much of the development that contributes to success in school and life is learned and absorbed through the environment that surrounds young children. Studies show that economically disadvantaged children enter school one to two years behind in language and other skills important to school success. For example, the vocabularies of children differ significantly by

socio-economic status. Children of economically advantaged families have a vocabulary that is more than twice the size of children growing up in poverty.<sup>16</sup>

High quality early childhood education programs can have a significant and positive effect on a child's development; effectively leveling the playing field for children in poverty and children in homes where English is not the primary language.<sup>17</sup> Participation in high quality early childhood education ensures rich exposure to the English language through active listening, speaking, and beginning reading. These programs also provide children of immigrants the opportunity to build social competencies important for success in school as they play and interact with other immigrant and non-immigrant children.

Federal and state programs seek to support the early education and development of disadvantaged young children as a means to counteract gaps experienced as a result of poverty, disability, or limited English-speaking skills. Effective programs support the child directly through structured learning activities and can support the child indirectly by providing training for parents. Especially for immigrant families, family literacy programs are a good way to improve the literacy skills of both children and their parents.<sup>18</sup>

Nationally, children in immigrant families are far less likely than their native-born peers to participate in early childhood education programs.<sup>19</sup> In Kentucky, children ages 3-5 in immigrant families are actually more likely to be enrolled in school than their peers in native-born families. However, 37 percent of immigrant children ages 3-5 are still not enrolled in preschool programs.

Kentucky offers an array of programs for children and families from birth to kindergarten entry to help ensure a child's readiness for success in school. These programs include early childhood education and care as well as support and training for parents. Some of the programs are offered statewide while others are only offered in certain counties or regions. Many of the programs have eligibility requirements based on family income or a child's disability status. (*See Table 1 on following page*)

## Identified Barriers and Recommendations for Improvements

Interviews with early childhood professionals in Kentucky and national research on the topic document a variety of reasons that more immigrant children are not participating in early childhood programs. Participation can be limited due to a lack of awareness of programs and because it is not part of the immigrant families culture to place their children in programs outside of the family at a young age. Barriers to participation can also exist because of a limited number of placements available in public preschool programs; children not meeting the eligibility requirement for preschool

**TABLE 1**

**State and Federal Programs Offering Early Education Opportunities in Kentucky**

<b>HOME VISITING AND PARENTING EDUCATION</b>	
<b>HANDS (Health Access; Nurturing Development Services)<sup>20</sup></b>	Provides parenting resources and home visitation services for first-time parents and their child (prenatal through age two) who are facing multiple challenges. Services are provided regardless of income and are available across the state.
<b>HIPPY (Home Instruction Program for Preschool Youngsters) USA<sup>21</sup></b>	Provides parenting education to support early learning development for children ages 3-5. Currently available in parts of northern Kentucky. Services are provided regardless of income.
<b>PARENT EDUCATION COMBINED WITH EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION</b>	
<b>Early Head Start<sup>22</sup></b>	Serves Kentucky's low-income families and children (prenatal through age 3). Available in 66 of the 120 counties in Kentucky.
<b>Head Start<sup>23</sup></b>	Serves Kentucky's low-income families and preschool children ages 3-5. Available in all of Kentucky's 120 counties. <sup>24</sup>
<b>First Steps<sup>25</sup></b>	Provides services to children birth to age three with developmental disabilities and/or delays. Services are provided regardless of income. The program is administered through the 15 Kentucky Area Development Districts and is available statewide.
<b>Even Start<sup>26</sup></b>	Provides intensive literacy services for parents and children. Services are provided to families based on the level of literacy in the home, income, and if English is a second language. The program is provided in 8 counties in Kentucky.
<b>Migrant Head Start<sup>27</sup></b>	Provides early childhood opportunities and parent education for immigrant families and families of migrant workers. Families must be income eligible. The program is available in 41 of Kentucky's 120 counties.
<b>EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE AND EDUCATION</b>	
<b>Child Care &amp; Development Block Grant<sup>28</sup></b>	Provides subsidies to help families pay for child care services. Income must be within 150 percent of the federal poverty level. Child care assistance is available statewide.
<b>Public Preschool<sup>29</sup></b>	Preschool education programs are provided for all four-year-old children with family income no more than 150 percent of the federal poverty level. All three- and four-year-old children with developmental delays or disabilities are eligible regardless of income. Available in all 120 Kentucky counties.

enrollment; and lack of interpreters and informational documents in a family's first language. We offer the following recommendations to decrease barriers and increase the participation rate of immigrant families so that all of Kentucky's children enter school ready to succeed.

**Include English as a second language as criteria for preschool eligibility.** In Kentucky children are allowed entrance into public preschool at the age of three if they are diagnosed with a disability. At the age of four, children are admitted if they have a disability or are eligible based on family income. Having English as a second language does not qualify a child for public preschool services and school districts are required to evaluate immigrant children for an educational disability using materials administered in the child's native language to the greatest extent possible. Evaluating a child in their native language ensures that children are not unnecessarily enrolled in special education programs.<sup>30</sup> Therefore, many immigrant children who would likely benefit from early exposure to an English-speaking environment cannot enter public preschool until they are 4 years old and then only if their families are income-eligible. Adding English as a second language to the eligibility options for Kentucky's public preschool program would ensure immigrant children have access to preschool services at the age of three and regardless of income, thus helping them build English language skills and vocabulary important for success in school.

**Ensure availability of interpreters and translation of written documents.** National research and interviews with early childhood practitioners in Kentucky referenced language barriers as the foremost hindrance for immigrant families. Families with limited English proficiency require interpretive services and/or translation of documents, yet such services are not always available in the immigrant's community or local school district. Under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 individuals assisting in school classrooms or with students must have a high school diploma and pass a para-educator exam administered in English.<sup>31</sup> Although there is merit to requiring a certain level of education for school employees, some practitioners stated that this requirement can make it difficult for school systems to secure interpreters for immigrant populations. Regardless of the education requirement, finding even volunteer interpreters for some small immigrant populations in Kentucky, like African immigrants currently seeking refuge, can prove exceptionally difficult. In addition, most written materials and websites with information on early childhood programs are not translated, or if they are, the translation is limited to the Spanish language. This presents a barrier for parents seeking information on available programs for their children and will likely continue to be a challenge as the number of languages and specific dialects spoken increases.

**Intensify outreach and education about the benefits of early childhood education.** Americans have been learning for some time now about the rapid brain development of very young children and the importance of rich early learning experiences to facilitate their child's development. As a result the demand for quality early childhood programs has increased. Many immigrants come from cultures where participation in early childhood programs is not part of the family tradition. Further, immigrant and refugee families may consider preschool programs the equivalent of childcare, making it less of a priority. Targeted outreach to immigrant families that includes an appropriate interpreter is an important step toward increasing participation rates and eliminating a lack of information.

**Expand access to preschool through increased collaboration among preschool and other early childhood programs.** According to interviews, some school districts are unable to enroll all eligible children for preschool due to limited capacity and therefore have children on waiting lists. Encouraging collaboration between preschools, Head Start, and private child care providers is one way to expand the availability of quality preschool programming to all children eligible while not overburdening the existing public preschool system.

**Increase supports for struggling families.** Immigrant and refugee families face significant challenges on a daily basis – particularly if living in poverty. Adult English language learners face difficulties finding and maintaining financially supportive employment, navigating transportation systems, communicating with resource agencies, and engaging with their children's schools. These pressing daily struggles may make usage of early childhood programs a lower priority. Connecting immigrant and refugee families with support services available in their communities would improve their capacity to actively pursue early childhood education opportunities for their children.

## Conclusion

For all the challenges that immigrant families face, they bring with them strong traits that benefit their families. Immigrants typically have a strong work ethic, evidenced by the fact that 96 percent of children in immigrant families have at least one parent that works outside the home. Immigrant families place a high value on family and are eager to improve their quality of life. Research shows babies born to immigrant mothers are generally healthier than babies born to native-born mothers, and their children are more likely to benefit from the supportive environment of a two-parent home and a strong extended family and ethnic community.<sup>32</sup>

Ensuring the proven benefits of early childhood education are readily available to children in immigrant families will go a long way toward supporting an eager and

vibrant sector of our population. Those benefits will pay dividends later evidenced in academic achievement, greater employability, and adult financial stability.

## Endnotes

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