

# What Parents Need Now to Support Their Children's Learning



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Ready to Learn Research

## Introduction

- This study is designed to gain an understanding of how parents and caregivers living in low-income communities are thinking about and supporting learning at home with media. The study also explores how parents' practices and needs related to helping their children learn have changed because of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Between August and November of 2021, researchers conducted interviews and focus groups with parents and caregivers of young children across the country to explore and better understand how these adults are supporting young children's learning experiences now and how they have been working to support learning throughout the pandemic.
- The findings provide insights into the supports families need to help their children learn, the sources they turn to currently for resources, and their goals for supporting their children's learning.

## Background

- This study is part of a US Department of Education-funded initiative, Ready To Learn (RTL), that supports early learning through public media programming and outreach by public television stations across the country.
- At the beginning of the 2020-2025 RTL Initiative, staff from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) and PBS KIDS, and researchers at Education Development Center developed a plan to study the issues, successes, and challenges that families faced in learning at home, particularly during the pandemic.
- Effective programs to support family engagement in learning must build on families' knowledge, practices, and resources and align to their values, motivations, beliefs, and needs (Cortes et al., 2019; Gennetian et al., 2019; Stephan, 2020). For this reason, the study explores parent values and attitudes, as well as their reported learning practices and experiences.
- The timing for this study intersected with the re-opening of many schools, followed by the rapid spread of the Delta variant of SARS CoV2, causing disruptions and continued challenges for families.

## Research Questions

### Parent attitudes and knowledge:

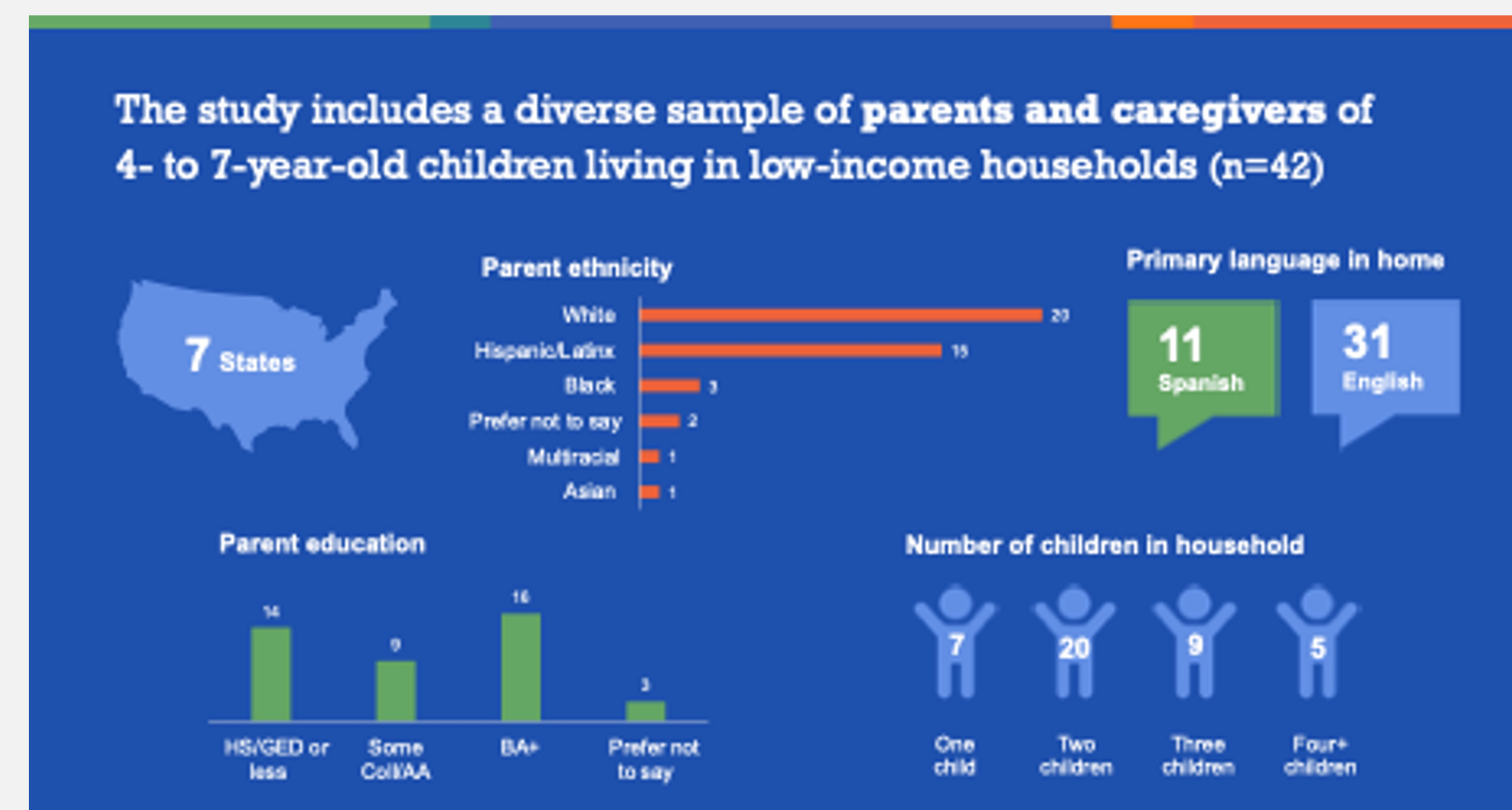
- How do parents think about supporting their children's learning?

### Parent practices related to learning:

- How do families describe how they support learning?
- How do parents use media for intergenerational learning, if at all?
- How do families describe how their use of media for learning has changed during the pandemic and after?

## Methods

- Design: Descriptive study
- Sample: 42 parents or caregivers from low-income households with young children participated in 30 virtual focus groups and interviews.
- Methods: Semi-structured protocols guided conversations.
  - Conversations explored 1) parent attitudes and knowledge about their children's learning; 2) family practices related to learning; and, 3) family use of public educational media.
- Follow-up diary-based data collection with 12 parents and caregivers to understand family learning practices in context and how media supports these efforts.
- Researchers double-coded audio transcriptions using online coding software and resolved discrepancies, and then iteratively and inductively developed subcodes within each main code and developed summaries based on these codes (Deterding & Waters, 2021).



## Findings

### Social emotional learning and literacy is priority for parents of young children

- In most of the interviews, parents prioritized social-emotional development and academics and schooling, especially basic literacy skills.
- Parents voiced concerns about their children's social and emotional development.
- Emphasis was on supporting emotional well-being and skills, such as frustration, anger, persistence, resilience.
- Others described the importance of relationship skills related to sharing, conflict, emotional regulation, as well as problem-solving.
- Parent descriptions of learning experiences focused on SEL, direct instruction and in-the-moment
- Parents embed learning, especially social-emotional learning, in everyday interactions.

## Findings Continued

### Role of digital media in young children's lives

- Used by nearly all children participants for entertainment, relaxing, and learning.
- Parents have broad views of what constitutes educational media.
- Parents talk about media with their children more often than they watch with them. Much of children's time with technology is child-selected and takes place alone.
- Challenge of monitoring/limiting screen-time; managing this by seeking out media perceived as educational, restricting times during which media available.

### Pandemic effects

- Parents gained new perspectives during pandemic-related online learning.
- Many parents struggled to keep their child engaged in learning during the pandemic.
  - Fewer opportunities to engage children in learning outside of school; required them to come up with new or creative ways to do so.
- Parents also talked about supporting their children's emotional well-being with routines around learning and increased family time was an important support for some.
- Despite children struggling to stay engaged with remote school, families still turned to tech to help support learning outside of school time.

## Implications

- Help parents recognize that opportunities to support learning are present throughout the day – emphasize the importance of interactions that take place in these small moments.
- Build on children's agency as active learners by helping parents identify, extend and encourage areas of interest over time.
- Educators can reach out to families and provide support about how to build social-emotional skills when there are insufficient formal learning opportunities.
- Media resources need to fit into families' everyday routines, build on their existing practices, and connect to their existing priorities and needs.

## Conclusion

Many families are struggling to find the attention, time and resources to help their children learn. More than ever, media resources need to meet families where they are. Media-based learning resources will need to build on children's agency as active learners. Providing families with guidance about educational media and ways to expand learning opportunities presented with digital media connected to family routines can extend family learning.

## Limitations

- Pandemic context may impact generalizability.
- Parents and caregivers who had the interest and time to participate in interviews may be more motivated than typical parents, also potentially limiting generalizability.

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