



**ZERO TO THREE**  
Early connections last a lifetime



TUNING IN  
NATIONAL PARENT SURVEY

# Report

## Tuning In: Parents of Young Children Speak Up About What They Think, Know and Need

*Studies about the lasting importance of a child's experiences in the first three years of life, once relegated to scientific or academic journals, are now fueling a broad national conversation about what this growing body of research means for families and communities across the country.*

So much more is known now than a generation ago about how and when brain architecture is built and how deeply it is influenced by early experiences. During the first 1,000 days of life, 700 neural connections are formed in the brain every second.<sup>1</sup> This is the time of greatest opportunity and highest risk. We know for certain now that the way adult caregivers, parents in particular, interact with children during the first 5 years can actually shape their brain architecture for life—for better and for worse. Children who have nurturing connections and positive early experiences have more secure, healthy relationships and are more likely to do well academically and socially into adulthood<sup>2</sup> than children who experience insensitive or harsh caregiving, which can lead to school failure, depression, anxiety, drug abuse, teen pregnancy and more.<sup>3</sup>

But is this information about early, rapid brain growth—and how it is influenced by the quality of caregiving young children receive—reaching the people who need it most? If we care about babies and toddlers, we need to care about, listen to and meet the needs of their parents. Any effort to nurture and support young children, and to set them up for success in the long term, will be strengthened by helping their parents put this valuable brain science into action.

That's why **ZERO TO THREE**, with the support and collaboration of the **Bezos Family Foundation**, undertook a comprehensive research effort to go directly to parents of young children—largely Millennials and Gen-X mothers and fathers—to gain a clear and in-depth understanding about the challenges they face, the help they seek and how satisfied they are with the support and information they receive.

### Specifically, we wanted to hear from parents of young children about:

- What they understand about brain development and the impact that early experiences have on children's long-term development;
- Whether they believe that parenting skills can be learned;
- What they struggle with most when it comes to childrearing;
- How their own childhood experiences affect how they approach parenting;
- What kind of information they want to receive, where they go for parenting help, whether it's serving their needs; and
- To what extent there might be some universality of experience and views among parents of different backgrounds.

We will use these findings to ensure that our programs and resources are providing parents the information they want in relatable and engaging ways, to elevate parents' voices in the national conversation about parenting young children, and to create opportunities for parents to share common experiences with each other. We also hope these findings will inform both the professionals who support young children and families and the policymakers whose decisions affect those parents who are responsible for raising our next generation.

More information on the research effort, findings, views and voices of parents of young children and resources for parents can be found at [www.zerotothree.org](http://www.zerotothree.org) and [www.joinvroom.org](http://www.joinvroom.org).

## Methodology

We conducted a two-phased, closely coordinated study. In Phase 1, we conducted 10 in-depth discussion groups with parents in Chicago and Dallas. These took place in the summer and fall of 2015 in the homes of a diverse range of parents (moms and dads; single and married; Caucasian, African-American and Hispanic). We employed a "social network" approach to these groups. A host parent was identified based on specific demographic criteria. Our host then invited several friends to participate in a discussion about child-rearing in the host's home. The fact that the parents who participated knew and trusted one another led to a sense of intimacy and resulted in participants sharing their experiences in very candid and often emotional ways. The insights from these groups informed the development of the survey questionnaire, and are shared throughout this report through their voices.

In Phase 2, we surveyed a nationally representative sample of 2,200 parents using a 50-question survey instrument, with oversampling of Hispanic, African-American and low-income parents. The survey was conducted in the first two weeks of October 2015. SoAct Consulting led this research effort on behalf of ZERO TO THREE and the Bezos Family Foundation.

## Key Insights

Below are the key themes and insights that emerged from the survey and in-home discussions. This topline report largely reflects overall findings from parents across all demographic segments in the survey. We will continue to mine the rich findings and will be communicating in more depth about what we've learned in future reports.

1

When it comes to attitudes, aspirations and parenting challenges, there is more that unites than divides parents. Parents of various backgrounds and circumstances show strikingly similar levels of passion for their roles as parents and an even more common desire to do keep doing better. The vast majority of moms and dads of different races, ethnicities, income and education levels feel that they're good parents already, and they report this with similar levels of intensity.

Across all segments, about 8 in 10 agree or strongly agree with the statement: "I feel as if I'm a really good parent." Across different backgrounds, nearly 9 in 10 also say they work hard to do even better:

- 7 out of 10 (70%) parents say they feel their life started when they became a parent.
- 9 out of 10 (91%) of all parents say parenting is their greatest joy
- 7 out of 10 (73%) say it is their biggest challenge

*"My daughter gives me a greater purpose...deeper than my life itself. So I feel like she's given me a purpose to get up and actually keep pushing no matter what." (William, Dallas)*

This chart shows the percentage of parents who agree or strongly agree with these statements:

	My greatest joy	My biggest challenge	Feel as if my life started	Feel I'm really good parent	Work hard to be more effective
Moms	92%	70%	67%	79%	88%
Dads	90%	76%	73%	84%	86%
White	92%	74%	71%	80%	88%
African-American	89%	66%	67%	83%	87%
Hispanic	89%	76%	73%	84%	87%
Asian	87%	65%	71%	77%	82%
Less than \$35K	91%	70%	71%	79%	88%
Less than \$75K	90%	75%	71%	83%	86%
High School Education or Less	92%	73%	79%	83%	87%
Some College or Associate's Degree	92%	70%	69%	81%	87%
Bachelor's Degree	92%	74%	66%	81%	89%
Graduate/ Post-Grad Degree	86%	77%	69%	80%	84%

*“I just worry that I’m making the right choice for my kids in all things; their schooling, what they play with, what I don’t allow them to play with, just everything. I think that is the biggest challenge for me is always wondering, am I doing this right?” (Carrie, Chicago)*

While there are some statistically significant differences across groups, overall there is more commonality among parents about the difficulties they face and ways they want to do better.

- More than half of parents across all economic, gender and racial/ethnic segments say that “figuring out the most effective way to discipline” is one of their biggest challenges, and about half across all segments say that “managing my child when he/she misbehaves” is among their top five challenges.

**What are your biggest challenges when it comes to being the parent of a young child?**

(Note: This chart shows the percentage of parents who identified the items listed below as one of their top five parenting challenges.)

	Managing my child when he/she misbehaves	Figuring out the most effective way to discipline
Moms	61%	64%
Dads	50%	50%
White	50%	59%
African-American	49%	54%
Hispanic	48%	52%
Asian	54%	50%
Less than \$35K	58%	60%
\$35K to \$55K	58%	57%
\$55K to \$75K	54%	56%
Greater than \$75K	54%	55%
High School Education or Less	54%	59%
Some College or Associate’s Degree	59%	61%
Bachelor’s Degree	53%	54%
Graduate/ Post-Grad Degree	55%	52%

**Parents across the board wish they were more patient with their young children:** When asked what they wish they could do better, more than half of all parents said they would like to be more patient. When asked specifically what they would like to improve on, the lowest-income parents (less than \$35,000 household income) and the highest-income parents (above \$75,000 household income) had almost identical responses, reporting that having enough patience (58% and 57% respectively) was one of the top three things they wanted to improve on as parents.

Similar patterns emerged across race/ethnicity. However, moms (65%) more than dads (55%) feel they need to improve in this area.

**Is there anything you wish you could do a better job of?**

(Note: This chart shows the percentage of parents who ranked these items as one of the top three things they want to do better.)

	Controlling my own emotions and reactions	Having enough patience
Moms	47%	65%
Dads	47%	55%
White	49%	60%
African-American	42%	58%
Hispanic	46%	61%
Asian	44%	54%
Less than \$35K	43%	58%
\$35K to \$55K	47%	61%
\$55K to \$75K	47%	61%
Greater than \$75K	49%	57%
High School Education or Less	44%	58%
Some College or Associate's Degree	43%	62%
Bachelor's Degree	53%	57%
Graduate/ Post-Grad Degree	48%	62%

2

Parents universally believe that parenting can be learned and that if they had more positive parenting strategies they would use them. Across the board, parents want to know more about how to do better.

Fully 8 in 10 parents agree that “good parenting can be learned.” And there is consistency when broken down by gender, race/ethnicity, income and education:

Can good parenting be learned?	Agree or strongly agree that “good parenting can be learned”
Moms	84%
Dads	81%
White	84%
African-American	83%
Latino	78%
Asian	82%
Less than \$35K	81%
\$35K to \$55K	82%
\$55K to \$75K	86%
Greater than \$75K	83%
High School Education or Less	83%
Some College or Associate’s Degree	84%
Bachelor’s Degree	83%
Graduate/Post-Grad Degree	80%



**69% of parents** say that if they knew more positive parenting strategies, they would use them



**54% of parents** wish they had more information about how to be a better parent

Knowing that parents—from every race, ethnicity, income level, education level and gender—believe that good parenting can be learned and would use helpful strategies if they had them presents a rich opportunity to provide the help that parents say they want.

*“Am I being too hard on him? Is he going to remember this 10 years from now? It’s hard, as a parent. You’re responsible for a human being. I question myself every day—if I’m doing the right thing.” (Candi, LA)*

**About half of parents across all races/ethnicities wish they had known more about brain development when their children were younger:**

(Note: The chart below shows the percentage of parents who agree or strongly agree with each statement.)

	Good parenting can be learned	If I knew more positive parenting strategies, I would use them	New research about child development can help me to be a better parent	I wish I had more information about how to be a better parent	I wish I had known more about brain development when my child was younger
<b>Moms</b>	84%	66%	59%	47%	41%
<b>Dads</b>	81%	71%	68%	62%	58%
<b>White</b>	84%	68%	62%	55%	48%
<b>African-American</b>	83%	65%	60%	47%	50%
<b>Hispanic</b>	78%	72%	68%	63%	55%
<b>Asian</b>	82%	73%	73%	51%	61%
<b>Less than \$35K</b>	81%	62%	54%	42%	41%
<b>\$35K to \$55K</b>	82%	61%	51%	45%	44%
<b>\$55K to \$75K</b>	86%	73%	71%	61%	57%
<b>Greater than \$75K</b>	83%	73%	70%	62%	54%
<b>High School Education or Less</b>	83%	70%	60%	51%	57%
<b>Some College or Associate's Degree</b>	84%	66%	60%	49%	43%
<b>Bachelor's Degree</b>	83%	70%	67%	58%	50%
<b>Graduate/Post-Grad Degree</b>	80%	70%	69%	62%	53%

*"I just thought it was going to be like this TV show and it was great and everything was wonderful. I read the books. I felt super prepared and then reality hits. You are like, what the hell happened? None of that stuff is as it was planned. Things go wrong and things change." (Candice, Chicago)*

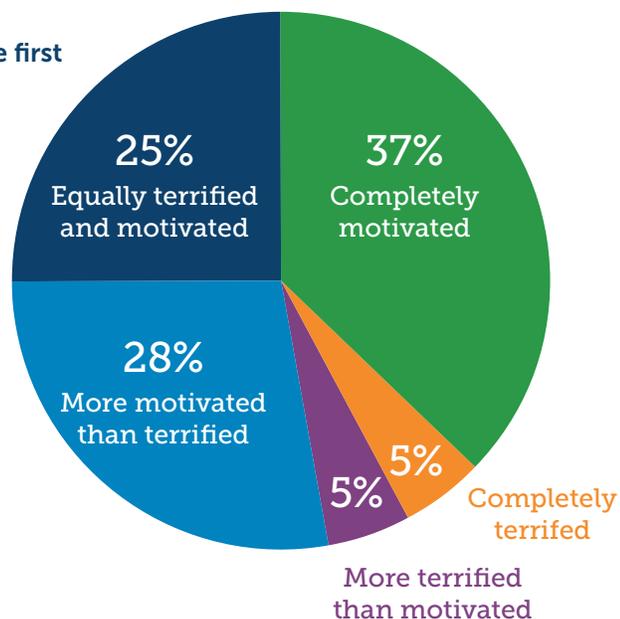
#### Dads are particularly eager for this information.

- 65% of dads vs. 57% of moms want information on effective parenting
- 58% of dads vs. 41% of moms wish they had known more about brain development when their child was younger.
- 62% of dads vs. 46% of moms want more information on how to be a better parent.

#### The importance of the early years is both motivating and terrifying to parents.

While many parents report feeling motivated by the fact that what happens in the earliest years can affect their children for life, more than half of parents find this notion both motivating and terrifying to varying degrees. Fully 1 in 4 parents say that they are just as motivated as they are terrified by this knowledge. Parents across all demographics share similar conflicting emotions.

Knowing how important the first 5 years are makes me feel...



*"I sit back and think, my gosh, how much damage could I have done?" (Victor, Dallas)*

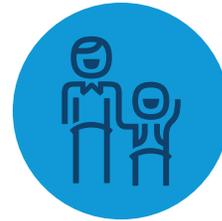
*"They're always watching. Even when you think they're not watching, they're watching, they're listening, they could quote your conversations on the phone. I mean it's kind of scary, but then it's like, wow. It makes you look at yourself. I'm always evaluating myself." (Selena, Dallas)*

3

Dads are more than babysitters. They love being involved fathers, and want—and deserve—more credit.

**The vast majority of dads are passionate about the positive role that fatherhood plays in their lives:**

- 90% of dads say being a parent is their greatest joy.
- 85% of dads say that being a father is the best job in the world.
- 73% say their lives began when they became a dad.



*"Honestly, being a dad helped me change a lot of things that I used to do. I really didn't care. Just being carefree, you really didn't care. It made me start thinking about more people than just myself. I tell people all the time if it wasn't for my kids, I don't know where I'd be. I don't know what I'd be doing." (Damien, Dallas)*

**Dads from all backgrounds report that they are more present and engaged with their children than they recall their own parents were with them.**

When asked to indicate whether they engage in the following experiences more, less or as much as their own parents did when they were a child, dads say they:

- Show more affection (52%)
- Participate more in playtime and other quality time (47%)
- Read more to their child (46%)
- Say "I love you" more (54%)

**Two thirds of moms and dads agree that dads don't get enough credit for their involvement in raising and caring for young children. More than 8 in 10 parents believe that children are better off when both parents are involved. However, many dads report feeling frustrated and shut out.**

- 40% of dads, versus 17% of moms, agree that "I'd like to be more involved in raising my child but my parenting partner interferes with my involvement."
- They feel almost exactly the same way about the statement "My parenting partner often takes too much control of parenting," with 43% of dads versus 16% of moms agreeing this is true.

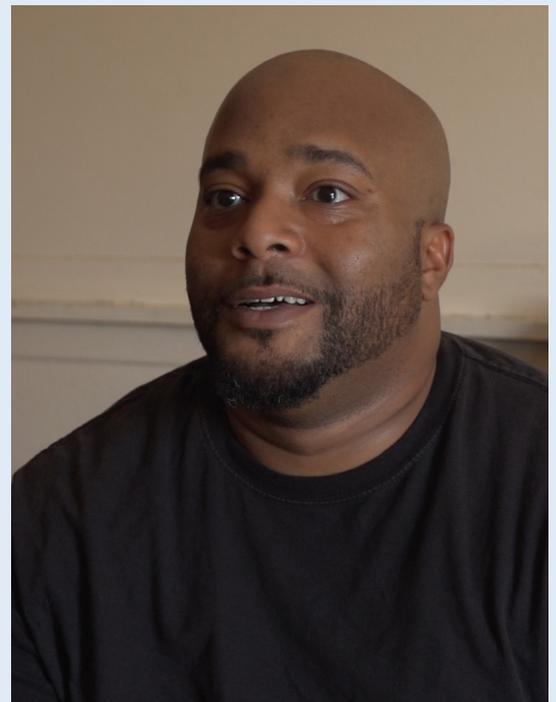
The dads in our discussion groups expressed resentment about the stereotype that being present and engaged in their young children's lives is the exception rather than the norm.

## Dads love being involved fathers, and deserve more credit.

*"The biggest thing I hate, [when people say] 'Oh, you're babysitting your kids?' They're my kids. I can't babysit my kids... How do you babysit what you brought into this world?" (Damien, Dallas)*

*"There may be times I went outside when I was a kid throwing the football to myself because Dad wasn't there throwing the football to me. I want to be the catcher. I want [my kids] to know that they've always got a safety net." (Donavon, Dallas)*

*"My dad was always so strict. It's like 'dude, why are you so damn mean?' I'd say about five years ago he finally gave me a hug and I was blown away. I said, 'wow, I don't want to be that.' I hug Destiny and kiss Destiny every day I see her." (Bobby, Dallas)*



*"That's why I say the more you're in their life, the more you're teaching them or showing them, the less they have to go out and look for it [elsewhere]. Me having a daughter, I always thought I don't want her to have to search for love or whatever it is from another man. That's why I'm here. I'm her dad. She doesn't need another dad. I'm here. (Donavon, Dallas)*

4

There is a "missing" first year.

While parents have a general understanding that what happens in a child’s early years can last a lifetime, many don’t realize just how young babies are when they can begin to feel complex emotions, and how deeply they can be affected by the way parents interact with them in the first months of life. A notable portion of parents miss the mark by months, or even years.

The time of most rapid brain development occurs during the first 3 years. While the majority of parents (63%) identified this correctly, 34% said that the time of most rapid brain growth is 3 to 5 years, a significant underestimation of the importance of earliest years.

**Parents overall consistently underestimate just how early children can be affected by some critical experiences.** Because of the rapid growth of the brain in the first months and years of life, gaps in parents’ understanding of what children are capable of taking in, and at what age—even if they miss the mark by just a few months—can make a big difference in the first 3-5 years.

- When asked “at what age the quality of a parent’s care has a long-term impact on a child’s development,” half of all parents said this begins at 6 months or older, when in fact it starts at birth.
- When asked to identify the age at which children can begin to feel sad or fearful, 4 in 10 parents say one year or older. In fact, this happens as early as 3-5 months. The majority of parents, 6 in 10 (59%), believe this begins at 6 months or older.

Parents were asked to choose at what age on average (birth, 3 months, 6 months, 1 year up to 8 years) a child is capable of being affected by the following experiences:

Child’s Experience	Approximate age by which children can be affected by these experiences	Age when parents (overall) believe children begin to be affected by these experiences.
Quality of a parent’s care has long-term impact on a child’s development	Birth <sup>4</sup>	✗ 50% said 6 months or older ✓ Birth-43%, 3 mths-8%, 6 mths-10%, 1 yr-13%, 2 yrs-11%, 3 yrs-7%, 4+ yrs-9%
Can experience feelings like sadness & fear	3 to 5 Months <sup>5</sup>	✗ 42% said 1 year or older ✗ 59% said 6 months or older ✓ Birth-29%, 3 mths-14%, 6 mths-17%, 1 yr-19%, 2 yr-10%, 3 yrs-7%, 4+ yrs-6%
Sense if parents are angry/sad; affected by parents’ moods	3 Months <sup>6</sup>	✗ 47% said 1 year or older ✗ 63% said 6 months or older ✓ Birth-26%, 3mths-13%, 6 mths-16%, 1 yr-19%, 2 yrs-13%, 3 yrs-8%, 4+ yrs-7%
Witnessing repeated violence has effect on brain development	6 Months <sup>7</sup>	✗ 47% said 1 year or older ✓ Birth-29%, 3mths-9%, 6 mths-16%, 1 yr-20%, 2 yrs-12%, 3 yrs-8%, 4+ yrs-7%
Affected by shouting in the home, even when asleep	6 Months <sup>8</sup>	✗ 47% said 1 year or older ✓ Birth-29%, 3mths-10%, 6 mths-14%, 1 yr-19%, 2 yrs-13%, 3 yrs-8%, 4+ yrs-7%

About half of all parents underestimate how early and deeply their babies and toddlers are able to pick up on other people's intentions and feelings. This means that there is a months-long, and in some cases even year-long, period at the most critical time of life when parents may be missing out on opportunities to provide the kind of interactions that are specifically geared toward their child's needs and capabilities.

Parents were asked to choose at what age on average (birth, 3 months, 6 months, 1 year up to 8 years) a child is capable of the following skills:

Skill	Approximate age when skill is attained	Age at which parents believe children attain this skill (percent of all parent responses)
Can understand the intent of another person's actions	15 Months <sup>9</sup>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✗ 32% said 3 years or older</li> <li>✗ 20% said 2 years</li> <li>✗ 23% said 1 year</li> </ul>
Aware others have different feelings and thoughts	18 Months <sup>10</sup>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✗ 49% said 3 years or older</li> <li>✗ 18% said 2 years</li> </ul>

Nearly half of parents think that reading to children starts to benefit long-term language development about a year and a half later than it actually does. 1 in 3 parents believe that talking to children starts to benefit their language skills at a year old or later, when in fact it begins at birth. Almost two thirds (63%) of parents say the benefits of talking begin at 3 months or older.

This suggests that there may be missed opportunities for parents to be engaged in activities that research shows are extremely important to children's lasting cognitive, language and social-emotional development. It also suggests opportunities to build on parents' understanding of the importance of the earliest months and years by providing them with more age-specific information and guidance.

Parents were asked to choose at what age on average (birth, 3 months, 6 months, 1 year up to 8 years) a child is capable of the following skills:

Skill	Approximate age when skill is attained	Age at which parents believe children attain this skill (percent of all parent responses)
Age when reading aloud to a child builds future language skills	6 Months <sup>11</sup>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✗ 45% said 2 years or older</li> <li>✗ 16% said 1 year</li> </ul>
Age when talking to a child can support growing language skills	Birth <sup>12</sup>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✗ 63% said 3 months or older</li> <li>✗ 34% said 1 year or older</li> </ul>

## In their own words...

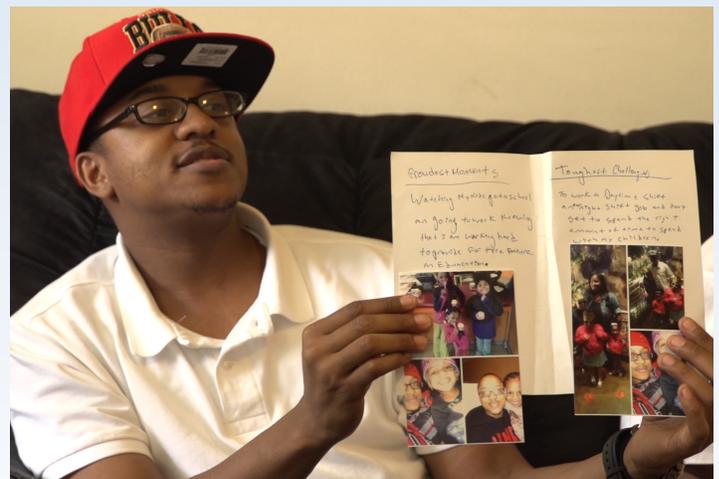
*"These are the years that I have to do my very best because these are the years that are going to take them through their 30s, 40s, 50s and beyond."  
(Victor, Dallas)*



*"Basically from when they're born up until age five, they're picking up everything, so everything you say, they hear, they see, they're picking it up."  
(Veronica, Dallas)*



*"From zero to five anytime you walk past them, anytime you make eye contact, they are watching you, they are recording you, and your bad habits become their new habits."  
(Chris, Chicago)*



*"I wish that I could go back, even when I was pregnant... I wish I was reading more or talking more, showing more love... You wish that you could go back and pour more into the baby, so it will set the foundation."  
(Jasmine, Dallas)*

5

**There is an expectation gap when it comes to understanding children's capabilities.**

While parents underestimate how soon children are capable of feeling complex emotions and can be affected by the world around them, they overestimate the age at which children master some important developmental skills.

- 43% of parents think children can share and take turns with other children before age 2. In fact, this skill develops between 3 to 4 years.
- 36% said that children under age 2 have enough impulse control to resist the desire to do something forbidden and 56% say this happens before age 3. In fact, most children are not able to master this until between 3.5 to 4 years of age.

This is especially important because the way that parents interpret the meaning of a child's behavior can influence the sensitivity of their responses—including when and how they discipline. If a parent thinks a child is capable of greater self-control than he actually is, and in reality that ability is still six months away, it can lead to a punitive rather than supportive response.

**Parents were asked to choose at what age on average (birth, 3 months, 6 months, 1 year up to 8 years) a child is capable of the following skills:**

Skill	Approximate age when skill is attained	Age at which parents believe children attain this skill (percent of all parent responses)
Can share and take turns with other children	3 to 4 years	✗ 20% said birth 6 months or younger ✗ 23% said 1 year ✗ 28% said 2 years ✓ 29% said 3 or older
Can resist desire to do something parents have forbidden	3.5 to 4 years	✗ 18% said birth 6 months or younger ✗ 18% said 1 year ✗ 20% said 2 years ✓ 44% said 3 or older
Can control his/her emotions, such as not having a tantrum when frustrated	3.5 to 4 years	✗ 24% said 1 year or younger ✗ 18% said 2 years ✓ 58% said 3 or older

Despite the fact that many parents aren't fully aware of when some important milestones are achieved, parents of all backgrounds are eager to learn more about child development:

**When asked about what they want to learn more about, the two topics of greatest interest for all parents are children's emotional development (55%) and brain development (51%).**

In addition:

- 45% of parents want to know how and when children develop self-control, and a nearly equal number (44%) want to know what skills to expect at different ages.
- 42% of parents want to know more about how their own relationship with their children affects development.

**"Which of the following topics are you interested in learning more about?"**

(Note: Parents could check all that applied.)

- 55%** Children's emotional development
- 51%** Early brain development
- 45%** How and when children develop self-control
- 44%** Knowing what skills to expect at different ages
- 42%** How a parent's relationship with his/her child affects the child's development
- 31%** Recognizing when a child's development might be delayed
- 28%** The development of thinking and language in the early years
- 8%** None of these

6

## Parents face a discipline dilemma.

Parents are equally likely to view discipline as a way to nurture their children as it is a way to stop bad behavior. While parents use a range of discipline strategies, many are not seen as the “most effective” approach.

- 68% of parents says they use discipline to nurture; 68% say they use discipline to stop bad behavior.
- 71% of parents say discipline is to teach good behavior; 65% say it is to protect their children.

*“You’re cheating them if you don’t [discipline] because I feel like they could go out there in the world and do anything and expect no repercussions.” (William, Dallas)*

Most parents agree that discipline is an important part of parenting: 75% say “It’s my duty as a parent to discipline my child.” They want to use effective approaches, but many say that finding the right way to discipline is hard.

When asked about their top five parenting challenges:

- 57% of all parents say they struggle with figuring out the most effective way to discipline.
- 56% of all parents say managing their child when he/she misbehaves is a top challenge.

*“If I could learn [something] besides the no’s, the time outs don’t work... if there is another way they can listen to me without a spanking, I would prefer not to spank them.” (Sandy, Dallas)*

### Parents say that harsh discipline strategies, like spanking and yelling, are not the most effective, including those who use these methods frequently.

- Almost a third (30%) of all parents say “I spank even though I don’t feel okay about it.”
- 69% of all parents recognize that “shaming (verbally putting a child down or calling him/her names) can be as harmful as physical abuse.”
- Of those parents who say they spank their children frequently—several times a week or more—fully 77% do not count it as “one of the most effective methods of discipline.”

*“I’ve spanked my daughter before. It hurts. Every time I whoop her I cry; I go to the bathroom and cry, it just kills me.” (Roshondrea, Dallas)*

This chart below shows the percentage of parents who say they use these discipline strategies frequently (once a day or more or a few times a week) and whether they think each of these methods is among the most effective.

Discipline method	% of all parents who use this method a few times a week or more	% of those parents who use these methods a few times a week or more who think it is one of the most effective discipline strategies
Set limits and stick to them	65%	39%
Redirect or distract with another activity	61%	40%
Teach the child versus punish them when they make mistakes	60%	38%
Give a time-out	45%	40%
Yell	38%	12%
Say "Because I said so"	34%	15%
Pop or swat	26%	20%
Spank	21%	23%
Discipline by calling child names or putting child down	19%	22%
Hit with an object (belt, ruler, wooden spoon, etc.)	17%	15%
Intentionally embarrass	16%	15%

*"I really don't believe in spankings...But when they do something that's just outrageous, taking anything away doesn't work... Even though you're supposed to step back, stop, wait a minute, talk about it later, sometimes you don't... you just spank." (Jasmine, Dallas)*

**Parents want more effective discipline methods:**

- 58% wish they knew more effective ways to discipline their child.
- 53% say they want to learn more about effective discipline.

**Parents also struggle with having patience.** Almost two thirds rate having enough patience among the top three improvements they would like to make in their disciplinary approach. Almost half say they don't want to yell or raise their voice as quickly, and about a third don't want to lose their temper so fast.

**"Is there anything you wish you could do a better job of?"**

- 60%** Having enough patience
- 47%** Controlling my own emotions and reaction
- 47%** Finding a discipline method that works for my child
- 42%** Not yelling or raising my voice as quickly
- 35%** Not losing my own temper so fast
- 23%** Figuring out how to reconnect after conflict
- 20%** Deciding if or when to use physical punishment
- 10%** Not calling my child names when I get angry

**When asked whether they would rather be their child's friend or authority figure, 54% of parents chose being their friend.** This offers important insight into how challenging it is for parents to balance a loving, affectionate relationship with their children with the need to be an effective disciplinarian.

*"I think if you were raised to yell and scream, because that's what you're accustomed to, then it may be easier for you to do that to your child—to yell and scream. If you were raised not to do that because it didn't happen to you, it's a little easier to not do that." (Victor, Dallas)*

7

**Parents are drawing a new roadmap.**

While moms and dads say that the way they were raised is a primary influence on their own parenting, they want to do some important things differently. Many feel that they are more positive and present and use fewer harsh disciplinary tactics than their own parents did with them.

The overwhelming majority of parents—9 in 10—say that the way they were raised is a key influence on their own parenting, and 6 out of 10 say that what they learned from their parents is useful.

Still, roughly half of all Millennial and Gen-X parents see themselves as more affectionate and playful and feel that they are more engaged and present than they recall their own parents were:

**Parents were given a list of statements and were asked to indicate “whether you use each of the following approaches more, as much as, or less, than your parents did when you were a child”, or if “neither I nor my parents do this.” Here is what they said:**

- Say “I love you” more (57%)
- Show more affection (53%)
- Spend more time listening and talking with their children (49%)
- Participate more in play (49%)
- Read to their children more (47%)
- Have more fun together as a family (48%)

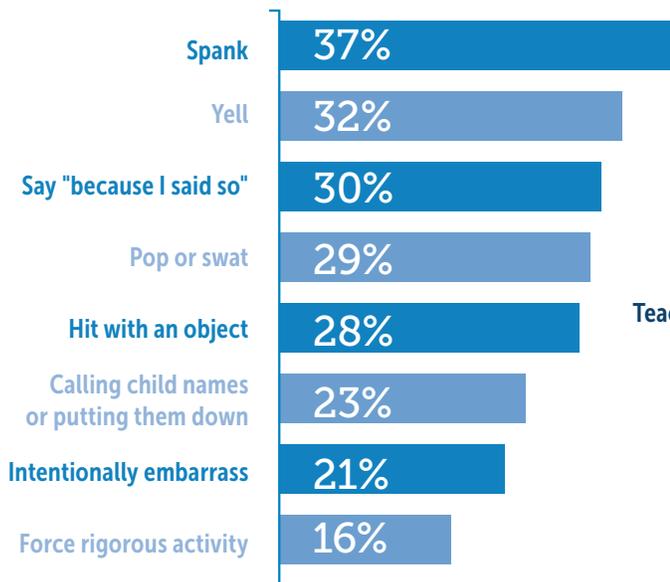
*“You kind of take on some of the things that you learned from your mom and your dad, from your friends and family, but it’s still really difficult to prepare because these children, these kids, they have different personalities. You don’t know what you’re getting into.” (Jose, Chicago)*

*“When my dad was around... I can only remember him saying “I love you” one time before he passed—one time. And I do make sure that my kids know I love them. I tell all my kids I love them, give them hugs.” (Damien, Dallas)*

In addition to feeling more present and involved with their children, parents say use less harsh and physical punishment and more positive strategies than they recall their own parents used.

Parents were asked to indicate whether they use each of the following approaches more, less or as much as their own parents did when they were children:

I do this less than my parents did



I do this more than my parents did



Some of the parents in our discussion groups recalled being hit with objects and shamed. They don't want to do this to their children and are looking for better, less harsh options:

*"I got my fair share of spankings... It's tough for our generation to break that cycle of 'this is what I got, so this is how I'm going to raise you.'" (Michael, Los Angeles)*

*"That's why I don't want to instill that on my child, because I didn't like it. I didn't want to get whooped with an extension cord. It's not a great feeling." (James, Chicago)*

*"When we were younger, some of us had discipline with belts... a lot of paddles, any things like that... We don't want to do that to our children, but at the same time, you really want to just teach them. It's all about teaching." (Aishana, Chicago)*

## 8

**There is a trust gap.**

Parents want advice, but are overwhelmed by sources of help and underwhelmed by the quality of what they're getting. Parents report relying on guidance and information about parenting from many sources—friends, family, doctors, teachers, religious leaders and a range of digital media outlets. However, they are overwhelmed by the volume of information and conflicting advice and are underwhelmed by the usefulness of the information.

- 54% say they would like to information from a “special website or blog from child development experts.”
- However, a majority of moms and dads (58%) say there is so much parenting information available that it's hard to know whom to trust.
- 63% of parents say they are “skeptical of people who give parenting advice and recommendations if they don't know my child and my situation specifically.”
- Almost half of dads (47%), versus 3 in 10 moms (29%), say they don't know where to find information they can trust.

**Just because parents turn to a particular resource for advice doesn't mean they find it very useful.**

While parents do want help from reliable experts on parenting issues, if the messenger doesn't personally know their child, the majority of parents are likely to be skeptical.

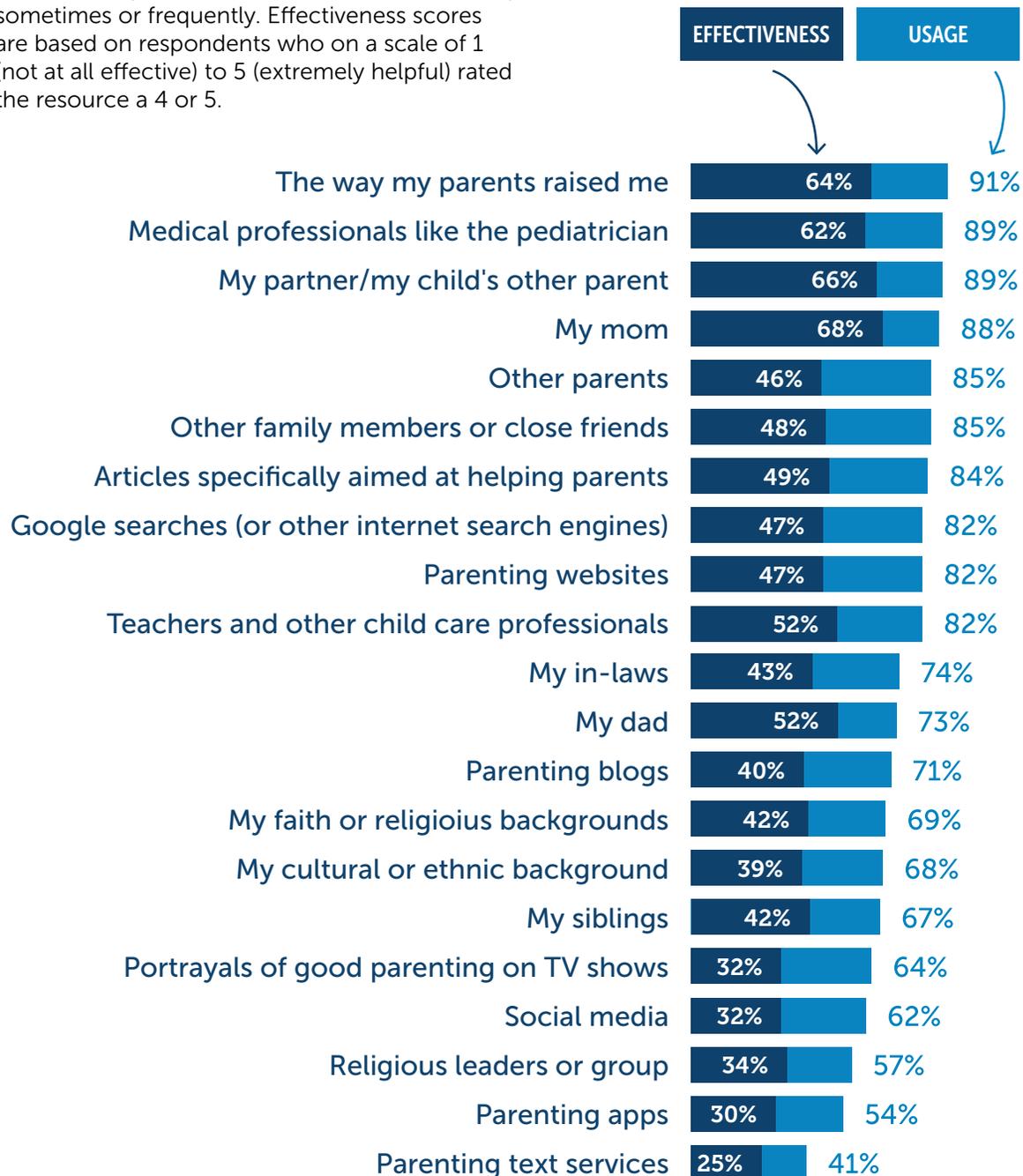
- 63% of parents say “I am skeptical of people who give parenting advice and recommendations if they don't know my child and my situation specifically.”
- Dads (64%), lowest income parents (66%), middle income parents (66%), parents with high school or less (67%) and parents with bachelor's degrees (65%) are just about equally likely to express skepticism.

*“The very first thing... is we go online and we Google. I don't think that's a good thing; it's convenient... I don't think there's anything out there that can give you a definitive answer as to what your child's going to do, what your child's going to grow up to be or how to raise him.” (Amelio, Chicago)*

*“There is too much information and it's too conflicting. (Debbie, Chicago)*

**How often do you get parenting advice, information or guidance from each of the following and how helpful do you find these resources?**

Note: Usage of resources is based on parents who said they used these resources: occasionally, sometimes or frequently. Effectiveness scores are based on respondents who on a scale of 1 (not at all effective) to 5 (extremely helpful) rated the resource a 4 or 5.



## Almost all parents feel judged, almost all the time.

Moms are more likely to feel judged than dads, with one important exception: dads feel more judged by their spouse or significant other than moms do.

- Nearly 9 in 10 parents across the board feel judged (90% moms and 85% dads).
- Almost half say they feel judged all the time or nearly all the time (46% moms; 45% dads)

### Who do they feel judged by?

- Parents rank strangers in the community at the top of that list. Moms are significantly more likely (48%) than dads (24%) to report this.
- Moms also say they feel judged by other parents (33%) more than fathers say they do (19%), and by other family members (30% vs 20%) and in-laws (35% vs. 20%).
- The only time dads say they feel more judged for their parenting than moms do is when the judgment comes from their child's other parent: 22% of dads say their spouse or co-parent judges them vs 17% of moms.

Also of note is that 43% of parents say: "I discipline my child differently when we're out in public," which suggests that they are concerned about judgment by other parents for being too harsh or too lenient (or both), sentiments we heard repeatedly in our parent discussion groups.

*"I go to restaurants and sometimes I have my kids screaming and that's when you get looked at—people who just don't understand or maybe forgot how it was." (Sandra, Dallas)*

*"If you discipline your kids, another parent might think that you're being abusive. If you don't discipline your kids then they'll think you don't care about your child. Like the police, if you spank your children, you're beating them and you can go to jail. If you don't discipline your child then they're caught doing something and they go to jail and the police assume, oh, they come from a bad background." (Mosetta, Dallas)*

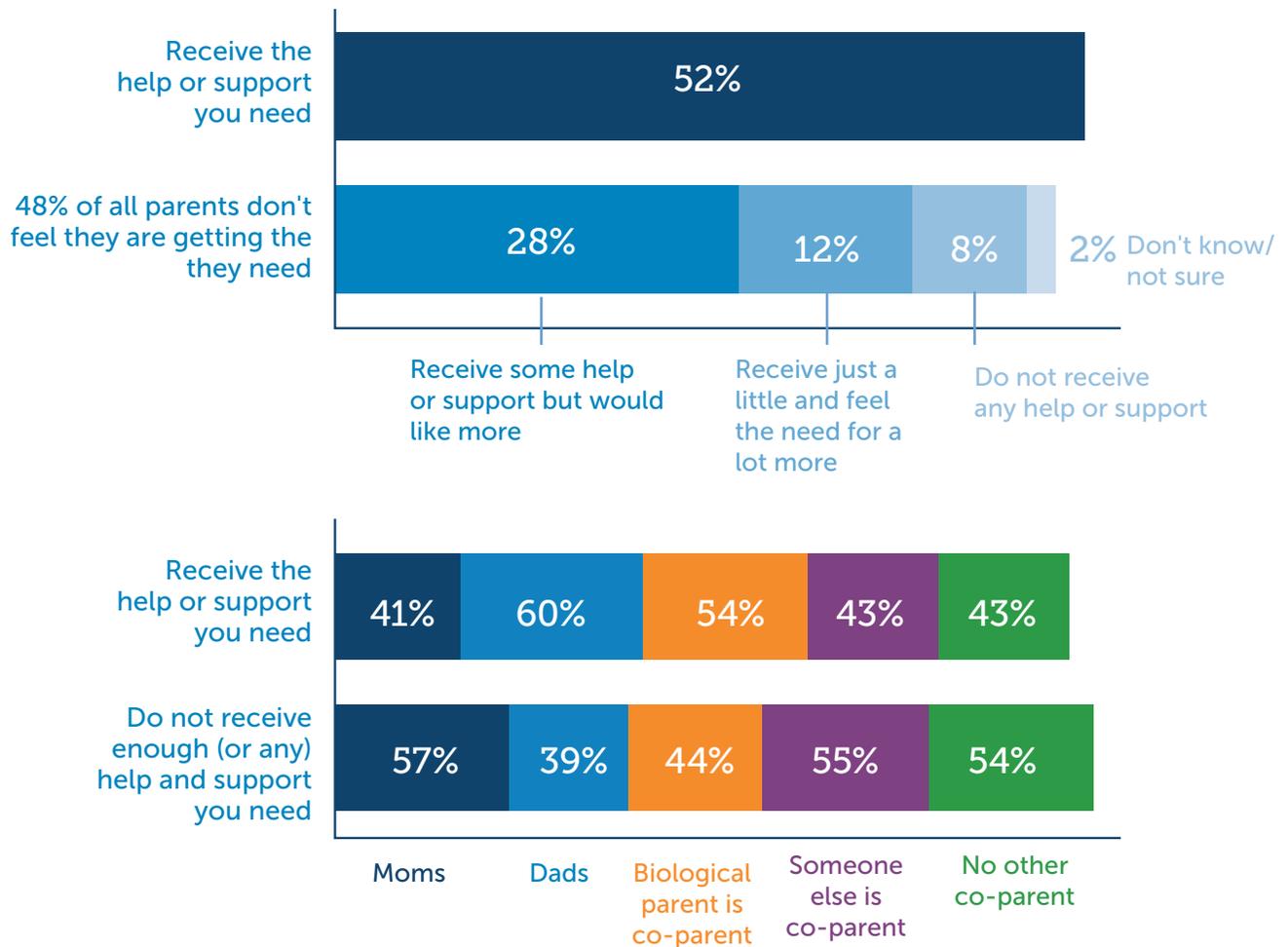
10

Half of parents aren't getting the support they need when they feel overwhelmed or stressed—the time when help is most important.

When parents are overwhelmed or stressed, they lack adequate support, and some get no support at all:

- Almost half of all parents don't feel they are getting the support they need when they feel stressed (48%).
- Moms (57%) are more likely to say they have inadequate support than dads are (39%).
- Over half of single parents who have no other co-parent involved in their child's care don't get the help they need (54%).
- 8% of parents overall say they get no support at all.

Thinking about the times when you feel overwhelmed or stressed as a parent, do you get the support you need?



*"I'm a single mom so for me it's stressful when you don't have a father figure for your daughter... it's kind of hard when he's not there and doing his responsibilities." (Candice, Chicago)*

The fact that fully half of parents say they aren't getting the support they need presents a risk and an opportunity. We know from decades of research that, especially during times of stress, the more parents feel supported the better able they are to provide a caring and healthy environment for their children, who then fare better on a variety of academic and social well-being measures into the long term.<sup>13</sup>

*"It's easier when you have somebody else to help you than being by yourself the whole time because there are times you want to give up. What am I not doing right? What else can I do? You can only do so much by yourself." (Evelyn, Chicago)*

## 11

### Parents want more from the media.

They welcome information about parenting in all kinds of content—from expert-informed websites to portrayals of real parenting challenges and helpful solutions incorporated more broadly into popular media. Parents want help from child development experts through special websites, blogs and other digital content delivered directly to them. They also say they learn from what they see on TV and want to see portrayals of the kinds of realistic parenting challenges they face, as well as some positive solutions, in their TV shows.

#### Parents were asked to choose which of the following digital media were their most preferred sources of information and advice on parenting (check all that apply):

- Special website or blog site from child development experts (54%)
- Emails from child development experts (39%)
- Smartphone/tablet app from child development experts (34%)
- Text messages from child development experts (18%)

#### The majority of parents want TV shows to provide guidance:

- 64% of parents say they get parenting advice, information or guidance from portrayals of parenting on TV occasionally, sometimes or frequently.
- 64% would like to see more examples on TV of parents handling a challenging situation in a positive way.
- 66% want to see more TV shows portraying the realities of parenting young children.



**ZERO to THREE**  
Early connections last a lifetime



We asked parents: "What advice do you have for someone who is about to become a parent?" Here's what they said:

*"The thing about children, they never will forget. They don't remember everything. They don't remember certain moments, but really emotional moments, I feel like they remember."  
(William, Dallas)*

*"It is your responsibility to lay the foundation for your children to be successful in this world. You have to lay that foundation and that starts with making them feel loved and secure."  
(Victor, Dallas)*

*"The whole parenting role is not just giving orders, but about nurturing and guidance and leadership and showing them the way and teaching responsibility early."  
(Michael, Dallas)*

*"If you show a child love in the first five, they're going to remember that forever. If only thing they see is arguing and hatred, that's all they're going to know."  
(Damien, Dallas)*

*"I would compare it to like a baby tree growing. If you give it a strong foundation to grow straight, it'll grow straight... If you build a good foundation for them while they're at this age, like before five, I believe that you'll see it as they get older."  
(Angelo, Chicago)*



*"Children close their ears to advice but open their eyes to example... "To be in your child's memories tomorrow, be in their life today."  
(Veronica, Dallas)*

## Conclusions and Recommendations:

### *Nurturing and supporting young children means listening to and supporting their parents.*

Parents of young children understand that the first five years have a life-long impact. This message has clearly taken hold over the past two decades. But how early that influence begins, the depth of children's capacity to experience complex emotions and how influential parents are (and how they feel about this huge responsibility) is still a rich area for exploration and communication. **Parents believe that parenting can be learned, and they are seeking help but are not getting all they need.** Parents also want to teach. They have a deep need to share their experiences and wisdom with their peers.

### The Call to Action

For professionals who serve families with young children:

1. **Provide parents with clear, specific, science-based information about early development and ways that they can best nurture their children's overall healthy growth.** To that end, organizations should provide parents with science-based information that is clear and actionable, in a tone that is easy to relate to and respectful, with messages that are motivating and not overwhelming or that come across as blaming. In particular, parents crave information about brain development and early child development, and need more guidance in understanding developmental milestones and the impact the interactions with their children have on their development into the long-term, starting at birth. Gaps in knowledge can be seen as opportunities to provide specific information that acknowledges parents' desire to learn more.
2. **Harness and elevate the voices and experiences of real parents in any efforts to support parents of young children.** Link expert information and resources to parents' stated needs. Acknowledge and demonstrate that parents are truly the experts on their own children by avoiding a didactic approach ("This is what you should do...") that can turn parents off and seem patronizing. Parents of all backgrounds do want expert help in making informed parenting decisions, but they are also skeptical of advice from people who aren't in their shoes and don't know their children personally. Acknowledging this can help start a more open, and ultimately meaningful, conversation.
3. **Help parents find positive disciplinary strategies that work.** Build on their appreciation that discipline is a fundamental part of parenting, and that all parents—including those who use harsh methods—are seeking better options. Provide parents opportunities to talk openly about their experiences with discipline. Build on their desire to find approaches that strengthen parent-child connections while setting clear limits and dealing effectively with challenging behavior. Parents universally agree that effective discipline is one of their most important responsibilities, but they struggle to find effective strategies and want alternatives to spanking and other harsh methods.
4. **Celebrate and harness fathers' commitment to be involved in raising their young children.** Recognize that if fathers are not involved in their children's lives, it may in part be because they feel pushed out, demoralized and devalued. Training and support for professionals on how best to reach and engage fathers should be standard for anyone serving young children. The voices of fathers should be elevated as a powerful way to reach out to educate and motivate fathers who are not regularly involved in their children's care. Dads need to know that they are not alone, and that there are opportunities to share advice and experiences with other dads who look, sound and live like they do.

5. **Parents want the media to help. Parents welcome advice on child-rearing strategies that are delivered in relatable ways.** Encourage and work with media leaders to include information for parents of young children in their content and to elevate the voices of real parents along with actionable advice from experts. Share information about brain science and give examples of specific ways to put it into action. Portray typical parenting challenges in popular media. Bring to life what positive parenting solutions might look like (e.g., effectively dealing with challenging toddler behaviors), and show a variety of ways that parents can recover from, and have a “redo” after, a “parenting fail.” Help parents feel less alone: tell stories about real parents, and provide conversation-starters in social/digital media to encourage parents to share their experiences with one another.
6. **Create opportunities for parents to learn from each other—to share challenges, brainstorm solutions, and offer support.** Parents rely heavily on other parents for guidance on child development and have a strong desire to share their experiences and insights with other parents; that is, parents wish to learn as well as to teach. Programs and communities should explore ways to facilitate informed conversations between parents at the local level, which are different from typical parent workshops. The experiences parents tell us they want are more akin to the “parent café” model, in which issues are raised for parents to discuss together, and facilitation is provided to guide parents to come up with solutions. Expert guidance is offered as part of the collaborative discussion, versus a top-down model that is designed to “educate” about what parents “need to know.” Our discussion groups showed that when parents are provided the chance to reflect on their parenting experiences, they not only feel much less alone, but they often gain important insights that can lead to more positive parenting.

To learn more about **Tuning In: Parents of Young Children Tell Us What They Think, Know and Need** visit [www.zerotothree.org](http://www.zerotothree.org).

## SUGGESTED CITATION

Tuning In: Parents of Young Children Tell Us What They Think, Know and Need is a comprehensive research undertaking by ZERO TO THREE and the Bezos Family Foundation, 2016.

## METHODOLOGY

Data presented here are drawn from an online survey of adults conducted for ZERO TO THREE and the Bezos Family Foundation by SoAct Consulting, an independent research company. The survey was conducted in October 2015 among a nationally representative sample of 2,200 parents of children aged birth through 5 years. The margin of error at the 95% confidence level for a sample of 2,200 is +/- 2.1%. In the final total dataset, booster samples were weighted back to their appropriate proportion of parents of young children nationally. The margin of error at the 95% confidence level for a sample of 2,200 is +/- 2.1%

	Dads	Moms	Total
<b>National Sample</b>	500	500	1,000
<b>African American Booster Sample</b>	200	200	400
<b>Hispanic Booster Sample</b>	200	200	400
<b>Lower Income Booster Sample (HHI &lt; \$35k)</b>	200	200	400
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,100</b>	<b>1,100</b>	<b>2,200</b>

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