



KINDERGARTEN READINESS 2021



FALL ASSESSMENT FINDINGS IN
**SUTTER
COUNTY**



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We also wish to thank the following teachers for their dedication of time and effort to make this study possible:

School	Teacher Name
Barry Elementary	Marissa Gonzalez
	Cari Lewis
Bridge Street Elementary	Tara Croghan
Butte Vista Elementary	Robin Hale
	Victoria Peterson
	Suzanne Price
Lincrest Elementary	Wendy Harvey
Luther Elementary	Rhiannon Benson
	Ashley Jensen
	Cathy Sasaki
Park Avenue Elementary	Manjit Mander
Riverbend Elementary	Kathy Palacios
Tierra Buena Elementary	Claribel Frenger
	Sara Pitts

Headline Findings

Data Highlights

School Readiness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ 40% of kindergartners were <i>Fully Ready</i> for kindergarten across all domains of readiness (<i>Self-Regulation, Social Expression, and Kindergarten Academics</i>), whereas 17% were <i>Not Ready</i> across any of these domains. The remaining 43% were ready in one or two domains (<i>Partially Ready</i>). Compared to 2018, fewer children were <i>Not Ready</i> and more children were <i>Partially Ready</i>. ▶ Higher readiness was strongly associated with: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Reading more frequently with parent(s) ○ Child well-being (not appearing tired at school) ○ Not having a special need ○ Having a father who worked from home during COVID-19
Pre-Kindergarten Experiences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ 75% of children had formal early childhood education (ECE) experience, the same proportion who attended in 2018. However, many ECE sites closed temporarily or permanently or offered only virtual programming during the pandemic, and the studies did not measure how many days per week or months in the year children attended nor if the program was delivered virtually or in-person.
Family Activities and Routines	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ 43% of families read together at least five days per week; engagement in reading was lower this year than in 2018. ▶ 22% of families used the library, fewer than half as many that used it in 2018.
Preparation for Kindergarten	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ 49% of parents reported receiving information about how ready their child was for kindergarten, fewer than in 2018.
Family Stressors, Including Impact of COVID-19	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ 67% of caregivers reported that the coronavirus had impacted their employment; mothers were impacted more than other caregivers. ▶ 48% of caregivers reported that COVID-19 led to increased stress, fear, anger, sadness, or worry.
Family Supports	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ 19% of families had participated in a program sponsored by SCCFC, including the Bright Futures health and developmental screening program, Family Resource Center (Family SOUP) programs, and Smart Start summer pre-K; fewer children participated in these programs in 2021 than in 2018.
Health and Developmental Services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ 95% of children had attended a well-child visit, and 90% had a dental exam in the last year; health care access was unchanged between 2018 and 2021. ▶ 30% of children who had a special need were unable to receive the help they needed during the pandemic.

Introduction

PURPOSE OF THE ASSESSMENT

Kindergarten readiness is multifaceted and means that children are healthy and ready to learn, families and communities are ready to support children’s growth and development, and schools are ready to meet the needs of all children and families.ⁱ Ensuring readiness supports are in place for children is essential considering research has found kindergarten readiness is linked to numerous long-term outcomes.ⁱⁱ

The COVID-19 pandemic had adverse effects on the conditions and experiences that often contribute to the kindergarten readiness of children, communities, and schools. Stay-at-home orders closed many schools and ECE sites or forced them to transition to online learning. Likewise, many educational resources in the community, such as museums and libraries, also closed or could only offer services online. During these closures, parents and caregivers faced challenges in simultaneously maintaining employment and keeping their children occupied and educated,ⁱⁱⁱ while children missed important learning and social experiences.^{iv} In addition, COVID-19 led to parental job loss and financial insecurity,^v as well as health and mental health challenges,^{vi} which also likely impacted children’s learning and socio-emotional well-being.^{vii} Although longitudinal studies will be needed to determine the long-term impact of COVID-19 on children’s social, emotional, and cognitive development, there is already some evidence that it has had detrimental effects.^{viii} Further research into the effects of COVID-19 on kindergarten readiness is warranted.

In order to further explore how COVID-19 may have impacted the kindergarten readiness of children and communities in Sutter County, Sutter County Children & Families Commission (SCCFC) sponsored the second formal kindergarten readiness assessment conducted in the county in fall 2021. The first assessment was conducted in 2018, allowing us to observe how kindergarten readiness and other experiences and outcomes have changed since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The goals of this study are to:

- ▶ Understand how prepared children in Sutter County are for kindergarten entry;
- ▶ Understand how kindergarten readiness and other child and family experiences have changed since 2018; and
- ▶ Understand the experiences that most strongly influence readiness, particularly those that can be modified with interventions.

The results will be used to inform policies, practices, and programs that can help the community recover from COVID-19 and ensure each child enters kindergarten ready to learn.

SAMPLE

This study involved the participation of 13 kindergarten teachers in Sutter County. There were 254 students assessed in these classes, representing nearly 14% of the total kindergarten population in the county and just under one-quarter of the total kindergarten population in the sampled districts (Yuba City and Live Oak Unified) were assessed. The sample this year was slightly smaller than it was in 2018, which

is partly due to the challenges schools and teachers continued to experience as they transitioned back to in-person learning in fall 2021.

Figure 1. Number of Kindergarten Classrooms and Students Assessed

School	Number of Classes Assessed, Fall 2018	Number of Students Assessed, Fall 2018	Number of Classes Assessed, Fall 2021	Number of Students Assessed, Fall 2021
Andros Karperos	1	22	0	0
April Lane Elementary	1	18	0	0
Barry Elementary	2	43	2	41
Bridge Street Elementary	1	19	1	25
Browns Elementary	1	15	0	0
Butte Vista Elementary	2	45	3	50
Central Gaither Elementary	1	22	0	0
King Avenue Elementary	1	23	0	0
Lincoln Elementary	1	20	0	0
Lincrest Elementary	1	17	1	26
Luther Elementary	0	0	2	40
Park Avenue Elementary	1	23	1	19
Riverbend Elementary	1	18	1	19
Tierra Buena Elementary	1	21	2	34
TOTAL	15	306	13	254

Source: Kindergarten Observation Form (2018, 2021).



METHODS USED TO ASSESS KINDERGARTEN READINESS

Kindergarten readiness was assessed by kindergarten teachers in the first few weeks of the 2021-22 school year using the Kindergarten Observation Form (KOF), a reliable and valid assessment that has been shown to predict third grade academic achievement. This tool has been used in 18 other California counties as well as in other states. The KOF has 20 kindergarten readiness skills scored on a four-point scale from 1 = *Not Yet* demonstrating the skill to 4 = *Proficient* on the skill. These readiness skills comprised three *Building Blocks* – *Self-Regulation*, *Social Expression*, and *Kindergarten Academics*. A fourth area includes two items related to fine and gross motor skills, which serve as a foundation for these *Building Blocks*.



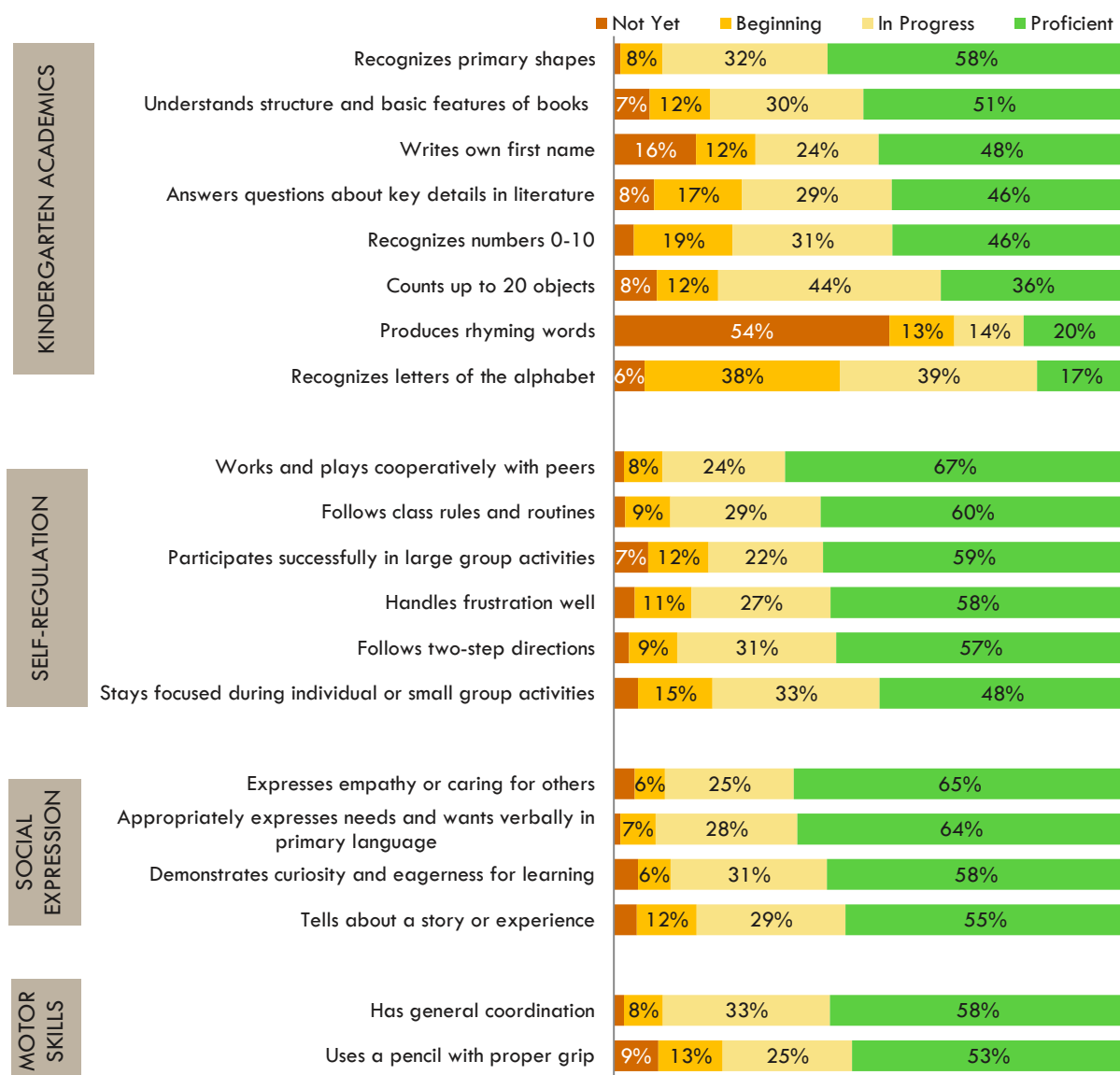
To better understand children’s experiences prior to kindergarten entry and identify factors most strongly predictive of readiness, parents completed the Parent Information Form (PIF). This survey was completed by 179 parents (70% of the sample), and it gathered data about child demographics, family background, parenting activities, family stressors, and child care experiences. Some questions this year also asked families to share how COVID-19 had affected them.

Data in this report were weighted to be representative of the population of children entering kindergarten in terms of English Learner status and race/ethnicity. However, the study was voluntarily, meaning the data presented in this report reflect the experiences and outcomes of children and parents who participated, who may differ in important ways from those who did not participate. The remainder of this report describes findings from the 2021 study related to kindergarten readiness and other child and family characteristics and experiences. Where possible, data from 2018 is compared to data from 2021 to better understand how COVID-19 might have impacted children and families.

Kindergarten Readiness

Children were assessed on 20 kindergarten readiness skills on a 4-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (*Not Yet*) to 4 (*Proficient*). The figure below shows the percentage of children with each skill rating. Children were most likely to be proficient in working and playing cooperatively with peers, expressing needs and wants verbally, and expressing empathy or caring for others, but least likely to be proficient in recognizing letters of the alphabet, producing words that rhyme, and counting up to 20 objects.

Figure 2. Students' Proficiency Levels across 20 School Readiness Skills

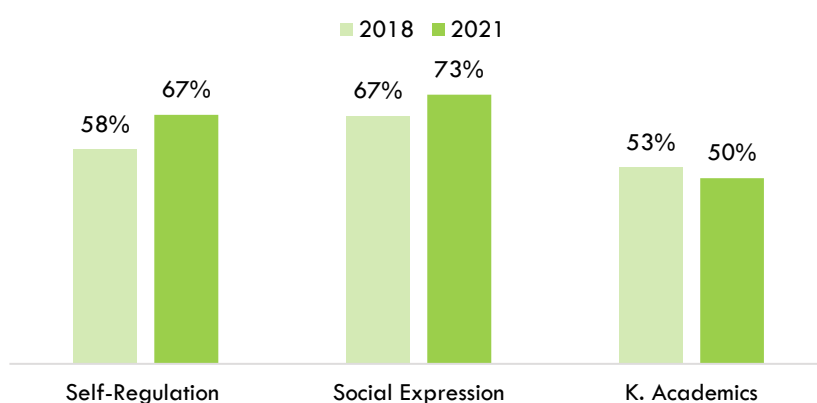


Source: Kindergarten Observation Form (2021). N=217-254. Note: Scores range from 1 (Not Yet) to 4 (Proficient). Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding. Proportions of less than 5% are not labeled. Scores were omitted for students for whom language barriers were a concern.

CHILDREN'S OVERALL READINESS FOR KINDERGARTEN

Across three large longitudinal studies involving the KOF, researchers found that an average readiness score of 3.25 out of 4.00 is the threshold above which about 70% of children will be reading at grade level by third grade; below 3.25, only about 15% of children will be proficient readers at third grade. Therefore, 3.25 is the benchmark above which children assessed on the KOF are considered “ready” for kindergarten. To determine how ready children in Sutter County were for kindergarten, children’s scores on the readiness items within each domain were averaged. The figure below shows the percent of students who had a score of 3.25 or higher within each of the *Building Blocks*. Just over two-thirds of the students (67%) were ready in the area of *Self-Regulation*, 73% were ready in *Social Expression*, and 50% were ready in *Kindergarten Academics*. Compared to 2018, children’s social-emotional readiness in the current year was higher, but their academic readiness was slightly lower.

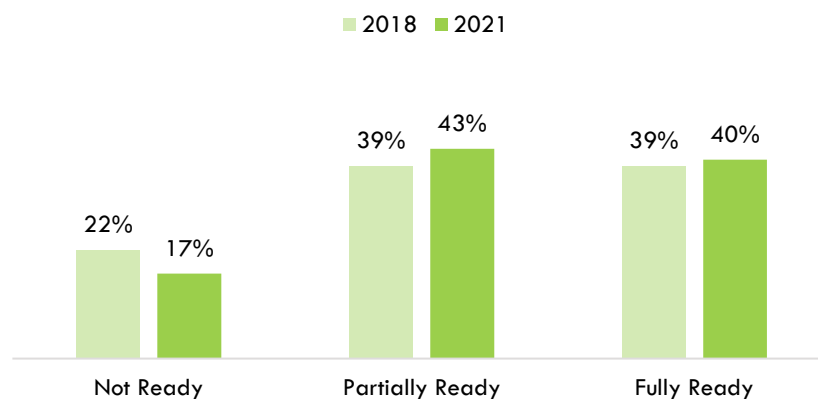
Figure 3. Percent of Children Ready for Kindergarten, by Building Block



Source: Kindergarten Observation Form (2018, 2021). N=289-306 (2018), N=233-254 (2021). Weights are applied to correct for EL and race/ethnicity.

Children were considered *Fully Ready* for kindergarten if they scored at or above 3.25 out of 4.00 on all three *Building Blocks*; *Partially Ready* if they scored at or above 3.25 in one or two *Building Blocks*; and *Not Ready* if they did not have scores at or above 3.25 in any of the three *Building Blocks*. Using these criteria, **40%** of students were *Fully Ready* for kindergarten. Another 43% were *Partially Ready*, and 17% were *Not Ready*. The proportion of students *Not Ready* was lower in 2021 compared to 2018, while the proportion of students *Partially Ready* increased.

Figure 4. Percent of Children Ready for Kindergarten, across Building Blocks

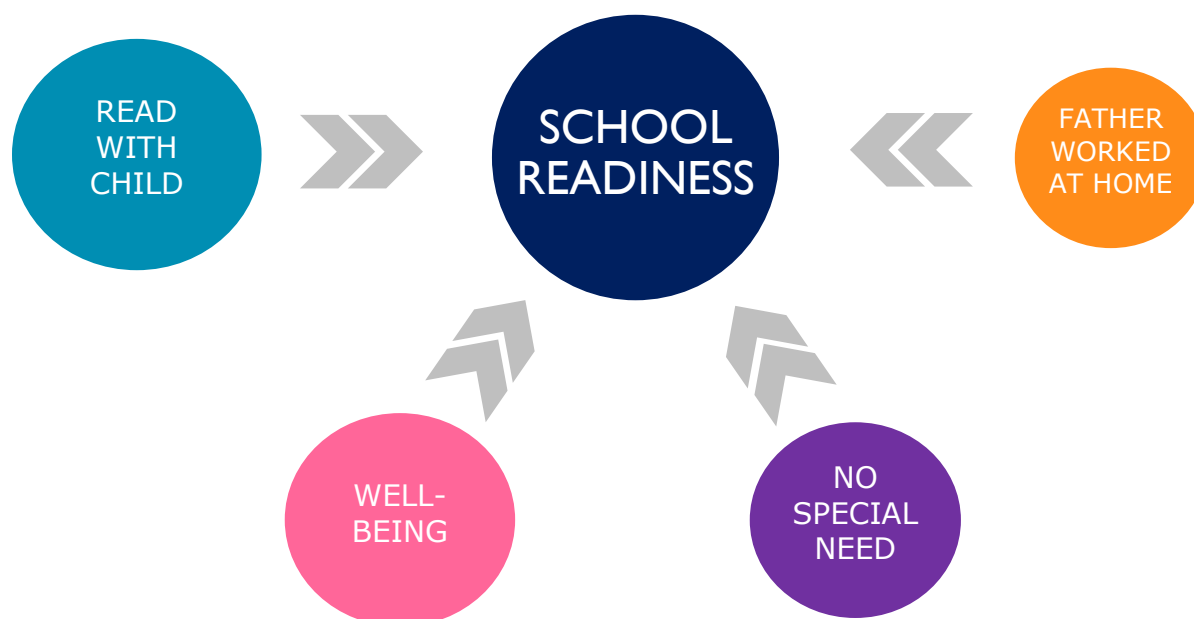


Source: Kindergarten Observation Form (2018, 2021). N=291 (2018), 233 (2021). Weights are applied to adjust for EL and race/ethnicity.

WHAT FACTORS ARE INDEPENDENTLY ASSOCIATED WITH KINDERGARTEN READINESS?

A multivariate regression model was used to determine the factors that have an independent association with kindergarten readiness in Sutter County, over and above the influence of other related factors. The overall continuous scores of readiness were used as the outcome. All variables correlated with readiness were first entered into the regression and then only significant variables or those approaching significance were kept in the final model. The diagram that follows illustrates the relative strength of the associations between each factor and readiness, with larger bubbles representing stronger relationships with readiness. The strongest independent predictor of school readiness was reading with the child at home, followed by child well-being (i.e., not coming to school tired, according to their teachers), not having a diagnosed special need, and having a father who worked at home during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Figure 5. Key Predictors of Overall School Readiness (in Order of Strength)



Source: Kindergarten Observation Form (2021), Parent Information Form (2021). N=137. Multivariate linear regression with seventeen factors. The overall model accounted for 31% of the variance ($R^2 = .31$), and predictors shown were associated with readiness at the $p < .10$ level.

READING WITH CHILD

The strongest predictor of kindergarten readiness was reading with the child. Children who read with their parents frequently showed greater levels of school readiness than children who read with their family less frequently.

WELL-BEING (NOT TIRED)

The second strongest predictor of readiness was child well-being, defined by the child not appearing tired in class. Children who appeared to be tired less frequently had higher readiness levels than children who appeared to be tired more frequently.

NO SPECIAL NEEDS

The third strongest predictor of readiness was the presence of special needs. Children without special needs had higher school readiness scores than children with special needs.

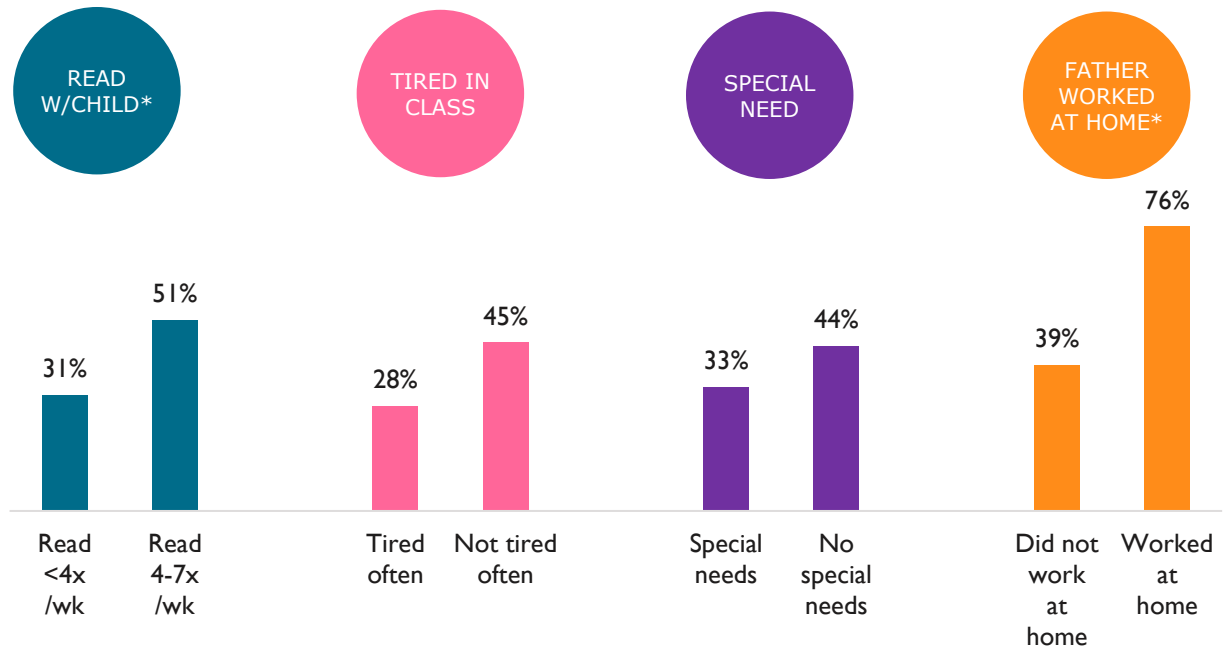
FATHER WORKED AT HOME DURING COVID-19

The fourth strongest predictor of kindergarten readiness was the father's working conditions during the COVID-19 pandemic. Children whose fathers were reported to work from home during COVID-19 showed greater levels of school readiness than children whose fathers were not working from home.

READINESS LEVELS BY KEY PREDICTORS

The chart that follows shows how readiness levels differed on each of the significant predictors of readiness, after adjusting for all other factors. For example, 51% of children whose parents read to them at least four times per week at the time of the assessment were proficient or nearly proficient across all *Building Blocks* of readiness (i.e., *Fully Ready*), whereas only 31% of children whose parents read to them less frequently were proficient or nearly proficient.

Figure 6. Adjusted Percent of Children Fully Ready, by Significant Predictors

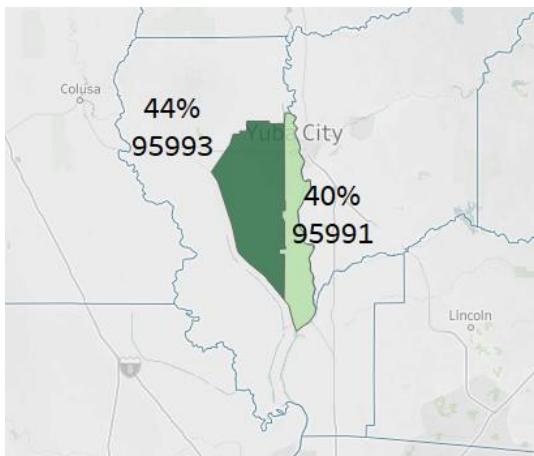


Source: Kindergarten Observation Form (2021), Parent Information Form (2021). N=148. * $p < .05$. Each comparison is adjusted for all other significant predictors in the regression model.

GEOGRAPHIC DIFFERENCES IN READINESS

Readiness was somewhat higher in the 95993 ZIP Code (44%, N=62), in the western part of the county, compared to readiness in the 95991 ZIP Code (40%, N=61), in the eastern part of the county. However, this difference was not significant once we controlled for other factors, such as family socioeconomic status. Very few families lived in other ZIP Codes.

Figure 7. Percent of Children Fully Ready, by ZIP Code



Source: Kindergarten Observation Form, Parent Information Form (2021). N=123. Adjusted for income and significant predictors in the regression model.

WHO IS “NOT READY”?

More than one in six children (17%) in Sutter County was *Not Ready* on any of the *Building Blocks* of readiness. These children are at significant risk for poor outcomes later in school. An analysis of the characteristics of these children revealed that they were more likely to have parents who read to them less often; more likely to have been tired at school at least once per week, according to the teacher; more likely to be unable to calm themselves when upset, according to the parent; and more likely to have a special need.

Figure 8. Characteristics of Children who are *Not Ready*

Factor	Classification	All Students [^]	Not Ready
READING WITH CHILD*	Parents read to their child less than four times per week	39%	59%
TIRED**	Child appeared tired in class once per week or more	10%	23%
RESILIENCE**	Child does not calm her/himself when upset	7%	19%
SPECIAL NEED*	Child has a special need	7%	15%

Source: Kindergarten Observation Form, Parent Information Form (2021). N=158-232. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$. [^]Only includes participants with valid data on all *Building Blocks*.

PARTICIPATION IN SUTTER COUNTY CHILDREN & FAMILIES COMMISSION PROGRAMS

This study also sought to investigate whether there was any relationship between participation in SCCFC services and kindergarten readiness or other factors that might be related to readiness. As seen below, of the 173 students with available data, 19% (32 students) had participated in SCCFC programs, such as Smart Start summer pre-K program or Bright Futures health and developmental program. This represents a decline in participation from 2018, when close to a quarter of students had participated in a program.

Figure 9. Participation in SCCFC Programs

	Number of Students, 2018	Number of Students, 2021
Any SCCFC program participation	52	32
Play group programs (e.g., FLIP)	16	13
Smart Start summer pre-K program	23	13
Bright Futures health and developmental program	16	7
Family Resource Center (Family SOUP)	4	4
Other SCCFC programs	8	5
No SCCFC program participation	174	141
TOTAL	226	173

Source: Kindergarten Observation Form, Parent Information Form (2018, 2021). The sum of participants of the programs is greater than the total because children could participate in multiple programs.

Next, we examined the characteristics of children in SCCFC programs on the key predictors of readiness: reading, tiredness, the presence of special needs, and whether the father worked from home. As shown below, children who had received SCCFC services were not significantly different on these characteristics from those who had not received services (e.g., although more SCCFC participants were read to at least four times per week and had a father who worked from home during COVID-19, the differences were not statistically significant).

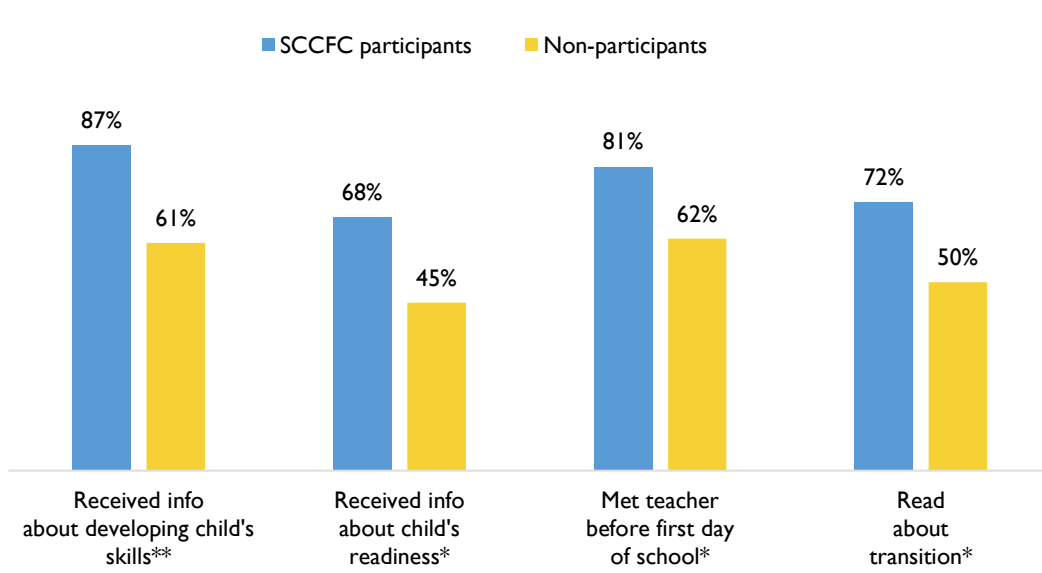
Figure 10. Differences Between SCCFC Families & Non-SCCFC Families on Key Readiness Predictors

Factor	Classification	All Students [^]	SCCFC	No SCCFC
READING	Read to the child at least 4 times/week	59%	72%	56%
HEALTH	Child rarely or never tired in class	96%	94%	97%
DEVELOPMENT	No diagnosed special need	94%	94%	94%
PARENTAL WORK	Father worked from home during COVID-19	11%	16%	10%

Source: Kindergarten Observation Form, Parent Information Form (2021). N=162-173. [^]Only includes participants with valid data on SCCFC participation.

Although we did not find significant differences between SCCFC-linked children and other children in the sample on the predictors of readiness, we did find SCCFC participants were significantly more likely to engage in preparatory activities for kindergarten, such as receiving specific information about how to help their child develop skills for kindergarten and how ready for kindergarten their child was, meeting with their child’s kindergarten teacher before the first day of school, or reading books or articles about kindergarten.

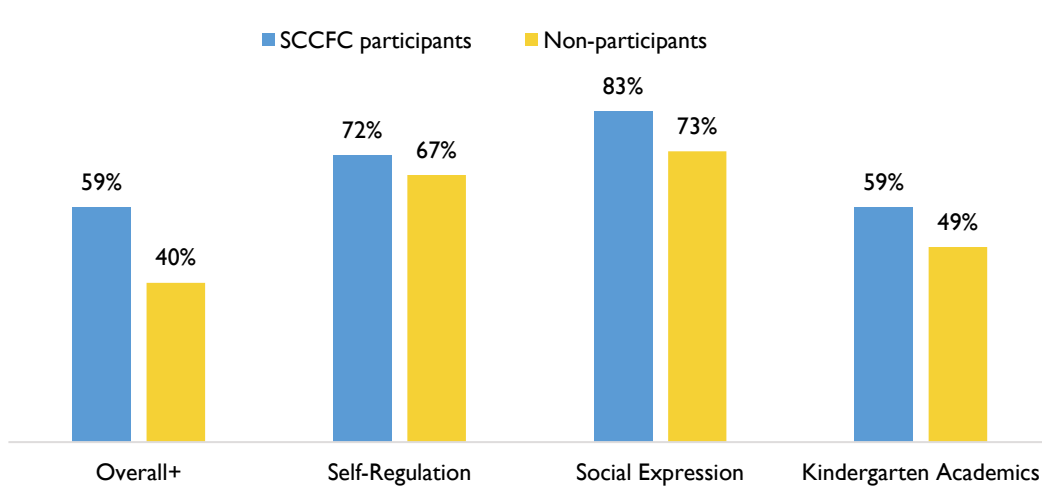
Figure 11. Differences in Preparatory Activities, by SCCFC Participation



Source: Kindergarten Observation Form, Parent Information Form (2021). N=167-169. *p < .05; **p < .01.

Overall, SCCFC participants had readiness levels that were somewhat higher than their peers who did not receive services. The difference between SCCFC participants and other children in the percent who were *Fully Ready* approached significance.

Figure 12. Percent of Children Fully Ready, by SCCFC Participation



Source: Kindergarten Observation Form (2021). N=163-173. * $p < .10$.



Profile of Children and Families in Sutter County

This section illustrates the characteristics of children and families in the study, including demographics, participation in ECE, family activities and services, family stressors, and child health. In addition, comparisons are made to the sample who participated in 2018, and data are presented on the impact of COVID-19 on families.

DEMOGRAPHIC AND SOCIOECONOMIC PROFILE

There were slightly more girls than boys in the sample, and 55% of children were at least 5 ½ years old at the time of the assessment. Just over one in five (22%) students was an English Learner. Compared to 2018, more children in the current year were female and at least 5 ½ years old, and fewer children were English Learners.

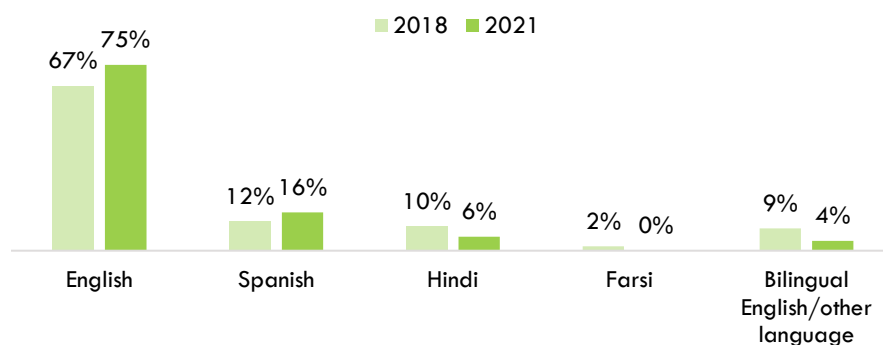
Figure 13. Characteristics of Participating Children

	2018	2021
Female	49%	50%
5.5 years and older	54%	55%
Identified as English Learner by teacher	30%	22%

Source: Kindergarten Observation Form, Parent Information Form (2018, 2021). N=299-305 (2018), 251-254 (2021).

The majority of children (75%) spoke only English at home, while 14% spoke only Spanish. About 6% spoke Hindi, and 4% were bilingual in English and another language. More children this year than in 2018 spoke only English at home.

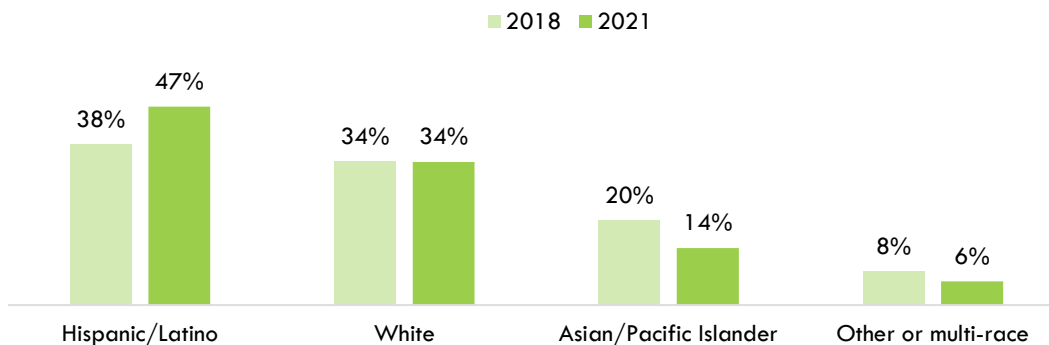
Figure 14. Home Languages of Participating Children



Source: Parent Information Form (2018, 2021). N=227 (2018), 252 (2021).

Close to half (47%) of the children assessed this year were Hispanic/Latino, 34% were White, and 14% were Asian/Pacific Islander. Relative to the 2018 sample, a greater proportion of students in the 2021 sample were Hispanic/Latino, and a smaller proportion were Asian/Pacific Islander or other/multi-race.

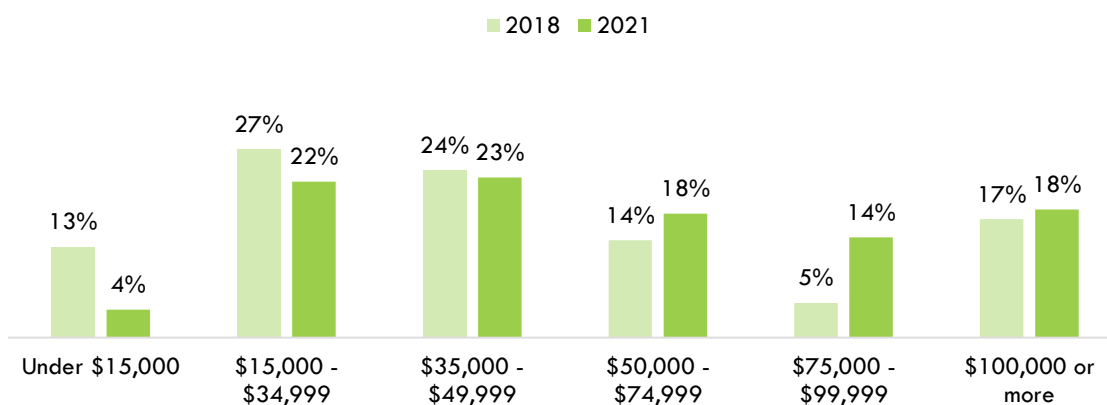
Figure 15. Ethnicity of Participating Children



Source: Kindergarten Observation Form, Parent Information Form (2018, 2021). N=304 (2018), 251 (2021). The kindergarten population in Sutter County in 2020-21 was 40% Hispanic/Latino, 38% White, 14% Asian/PI, and 7% other/multi.

The figure below displays the income levels of families who participated in the study. About one-quarter (26%) of students lived in households earning less than \$35,000 annually, including 4% who came from families earning less than \$15,000 per year. Close to one-quarter (23%) of families earned between \$35,000 and \$49,999, 18% earned \$50,000-\$74,999, and 32% earned at least \$75,000. Families were somewhat more likely to be higher-income in 2021 than in 2018.

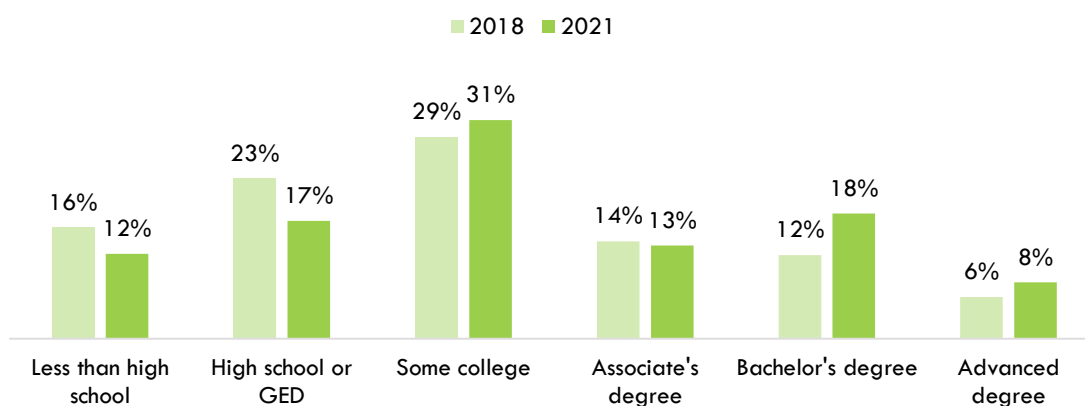
Figure 16. Household Income of Participating Families



Source: Parent Information Form (2018, 2021). N=224 (2018), 174 (2021).

Approximately 12% of mothers had less than a high school education, while 17% had earned a high school diploma, 31% had attended some college, and 40% had completed post-secondary education (Associate’s degree or higher). Mothers in the current sample were more highly educated than mothers in the 2018 sample.

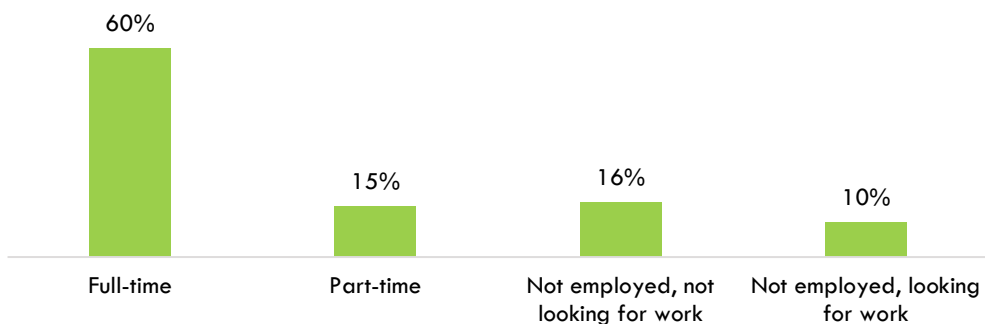
Figure 17. Highest Education Level of Students' Mothers



Source: Parent Information Form (2018, 2021). N=221, 172 (2021).

The chart that follows shows the employment status of the caregiver responding to the survey. Three-quarters (75%) of caregivers were employed, including 60% who were employed full-time. Sixteen percent were not employed and not looking for work, and 10% were not employed and looking for work. This question was not asked in 2018.

Figure 18. Employment Status



Source: Parent Information Form (2021). N=172. Question not asked in 2018.

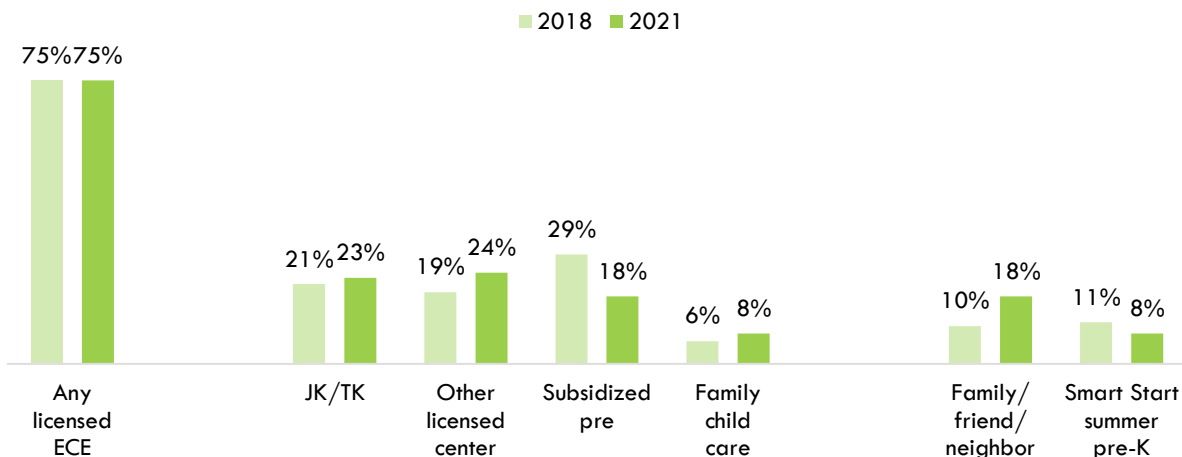
EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Children with quality early childhood education experiences (ECE) are often better prepared for kindergarten than those without ECE. In 2021, 75% of the children had attended licensed ECE, including Junior Kindergarten/Transitional Kindergarten (JK/TK; 23%), free or low-cost preschool, including Head Start (18%), another type of center-based preschool (24%), and/or a licensed family child care home (8%). Additionally, 18% of children were cared for by family, friends, or neighbors, and 8% of the children had attended Smart Start, a short-term summer preschool program supported by SCCFC.

Despite the temporary and permanent closure of many ECE sites during COVID-19, the same proportion of children accessed formal ECE in 2021 as did in 2018. However, fewer children in the current year

attended subsidized preschool and more children attended other licensed preschools, JK/TK, or family child care. Children were also more likely to have been cared for by a family, friend, or neighbor and less likely to have attended Smart Start in 2021 relative to 2018.

Figure 19. Early Childhood Education Experience

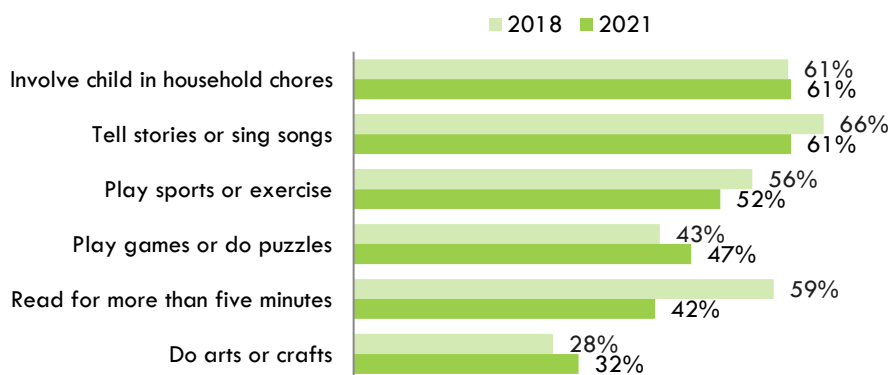


Source: Kindergarten Observation Form, Parent Information Form (2018, 2021). N=272-292 (2018), 162-176 (2021). Respondents could choose multiple options.

FAMILY ACTIVITIES AND ROUTINES

Family engagement with their children at home also often predicts school readiness. The majority of families involved their child in household chores, told stories or sang songs, and played sports or exercised, at least five times per week. Families tended to read or play games or do puzzles or do arts and crafts with their children less often. Families engaged in some activities, like telling stories or singing songs, playing sports or exercising, and reading, less frequently in 2021 than in 2018.

Figure 20. Family Activities 5-7 Days per Week

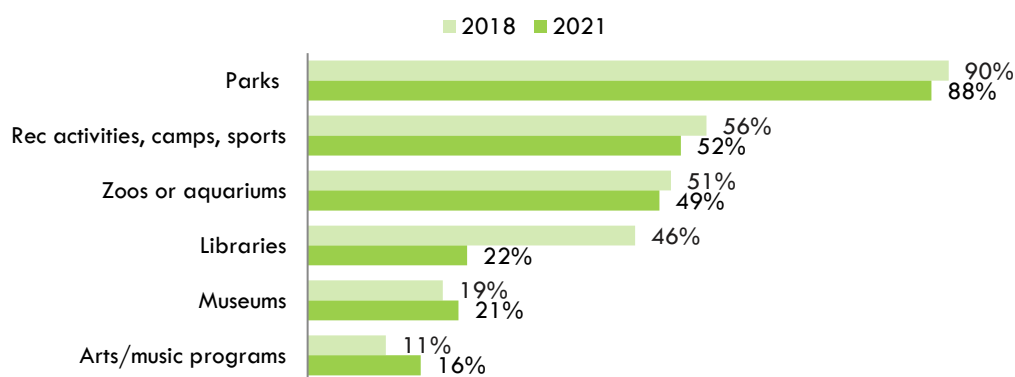


Source: Parent Information Form (2018, 2021). N=208-215 (2018), N=171 (2021).

The table that follows summarizes the use of community resources among the sample. Close to nine in 10 families (88%) had visited parks in the last year. Around a half of families had attended recreational

activities, camps, or sports (52%) or visited zoos or aquariums (49%) with their child. The least frequently used resources were libraries (22%), museums (21%), and arts/music programs (16%). Differences between 2018 and 2021 in the use of community resources were relatively small apart from libraries, which were used by fewer than half as many families in 2021 as in 2018.

Figure 21. Family Use of Community Resources



Source: Parent Information Form (2018, 2021). N=223 (2018), N=170 (2021).

Children’s sleep behavior is closely related to their health and well-being, which is important for school readiness. In 2021, 74% of children went to bed by 9:00 PM, compared to 80% who went to bed this early in 2018.

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that children ages 2 to 5 have no more than one hour each day of screen time, which includes TV, computers, tablets, or phones. About 34% of children in the sample met the AAP recommendations during weekdays, whereas only 19% were exposed to no more than one hour of screen time on the weekends. Screen time was higher on the weekends, but slightly lower on weekdays, in the current year than in 2018.

Figure 22. Bedtime and Screen Time Routines

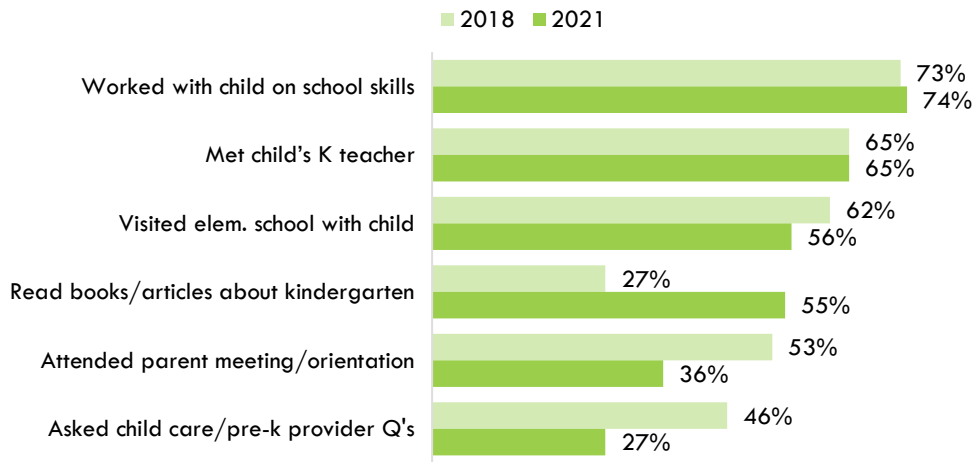
		2018	2021
CHILD’S BEDTIME	Before 8:00	9%	5%
	8:00	20%	15%
	8:30	29%	26%
	9:00	21%	29%
	After 9:00	20%	26%
CHILD’S SCREEN TIME on WEEKDAYS	1 hour or less	38%	34%
	~2 hours	35%	42%
	~3 hours	17%	14%
	~4 hours	6%	5%
	More than 4 hours	3%	5%
CHILD’S SCREEN TIME on WEEKENDS	1 hour or less	14%	19%
	~2 hours	31%	26%
	~3 hours	26%	24%
	~4 hours	17%	16%
	More than 4 hours	13%	15%

Source: Parent Information Form (2018, 2021). N=220-225 (2018), N=166-176 (2021).

FAMILY PREPARATION FOR KINDERGARTEN

Parents also indicated the types of activities they had engaged in to promote their child’s transition to school. Almost all (94%) of the parents reported engaging in at least one preparatory activity with their children. The most common readiness activity reported by parents was working with the child on school skills (reported by 74% of parents). A majority of parents also connected with their child’s school prior to kindergarten, including meeting their child’s kindergarten teacher (65%) and visiting the school with the child (56%). Compared to 2018, more parents reported reading books or articles about their child’s transition to kindergarten in the current year, but fewer parents attended parent meetings and orientations at the kindergarten school, or asked their child care or pre-k provider questions about the kindergarten transition.

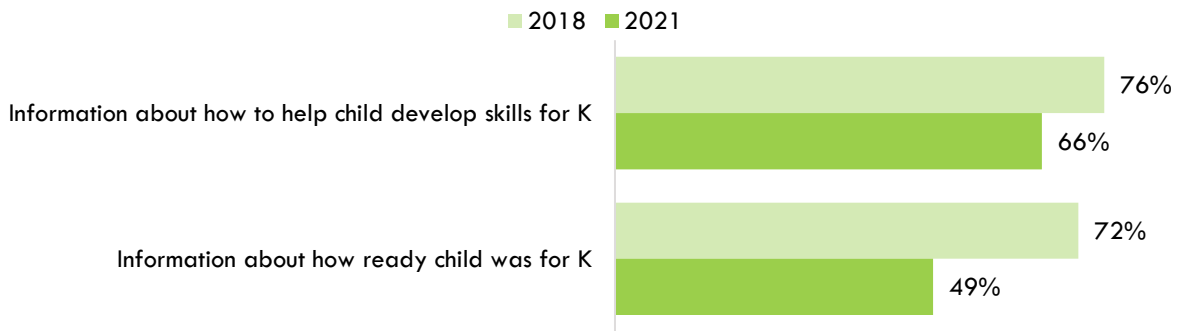
Figure 23. Parent Engagement in Kindergarten Readiness Activities



Source: Parent Information Form (2018, 2021). N=226 (2018), N=172 (2021).

When asked what kind of information they received about kindergarten, 66% of parents said they received specific information about how to help their child develop the skills for kindergarten, and 49% said they received specific information about how ready their child was for kindergarten. Relative to 2018, fewer parents in the current year received kindergarten readiness information.

Figure 24. Information Received about Kindergarten



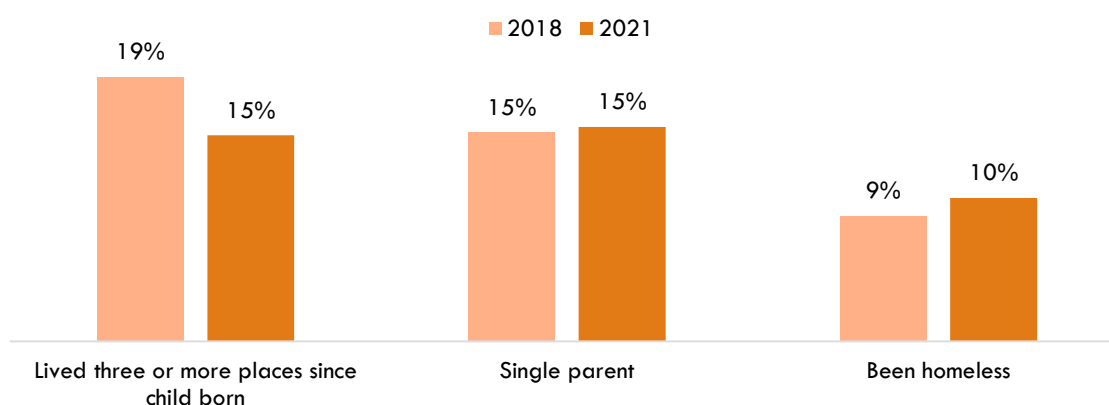
Source: Parent Information Form (2018, 2021). N=226 (2018), N=170-172 (2021).

FAMILY STRESSORS, INCLUDING IMPACT OF COVID-19

High levels of stress make it difficult for families to support their children’s readiness. In this section we report on the challenges families faced, including how COVID-19 affected them and their children.

Parents reported various stressors on the PIF. For example, 15% of children had lived in at least three different places since they were born, 15% were being raised in single parent households, and 10% had reportedly experienced homelessness in their lifetime (which could have entailed sleeping in hotels, staying with family or friends, sleeping in their car, staying in a shelter, or living on the street). Reported homelessness among sampled families rose from 2018 to 2021, but the number of times families moved declined.

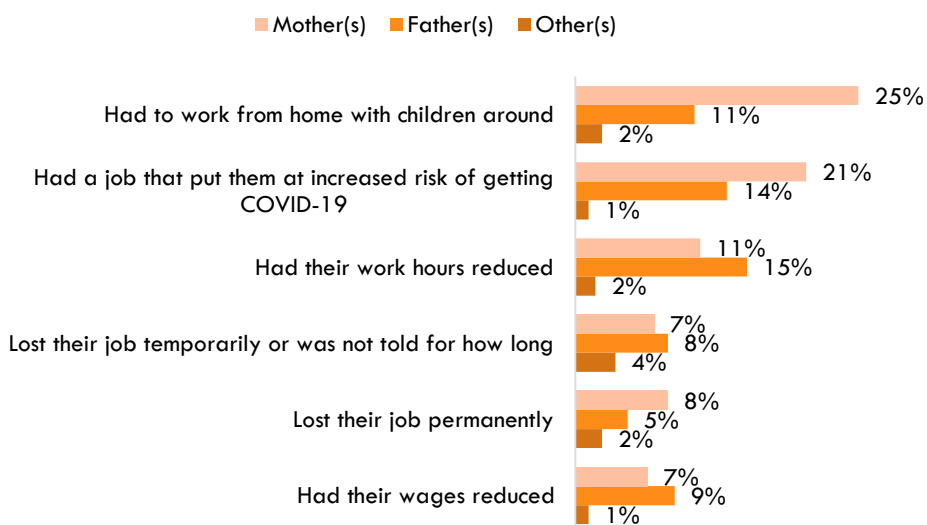
Figure 25. Family Stressors



Source: Parent Information Form (2018, 2021). N=214-223, N=174-176 (2021).

Parents also reported on various ways in which COVID-19 had impacted the employment of the child’s primary caregivers. Approximately two-thirds (67%) of caregivers reported that the coronavirus had impacted their employment in some way, with the most common of effects being working from home with children around, having a job that increased one's risk of getting COVID-19, and work hour reductions. As shown in the chart, mothers were more likely than other caregivers to report working jobs that increased their exposure to COVID-19 or working from home with children around.

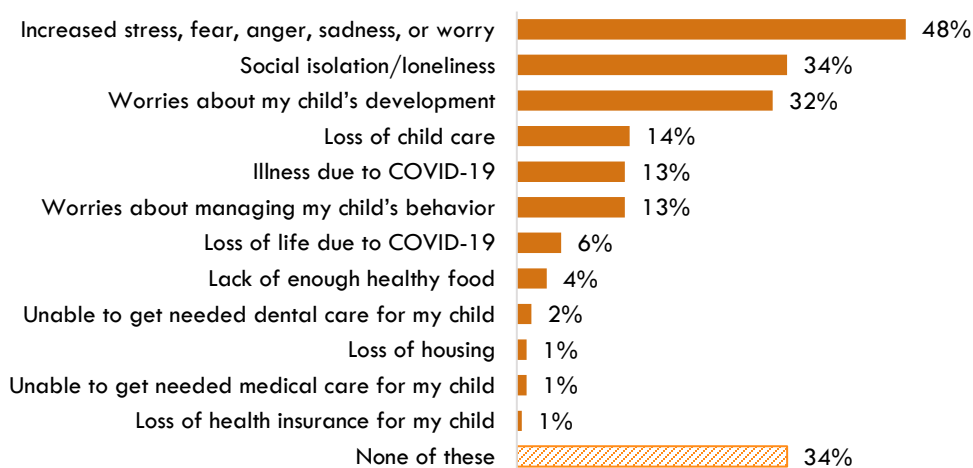
Figure 26. Impact of COVID-19 on Employment



Source: Parent Information Form (2021). N=169. Question not asked in 2018.

Families also reported other ways in which COVID-19 impacted them. The most common effects included increased stress or other upsetting feelings (48%), social isolation and loneliness (34%), and worries about their child’s development (32%). Somewhat fewer caregivers (14%) reported loss of child care. Direct medical impacts of COVID-19 infection were also reported, including illness (13%) and loss of life (6%) due to COVID-19. Just over one-third of parents reported experiencing no ill effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Figure 27. Additional Impacts of COVID-19

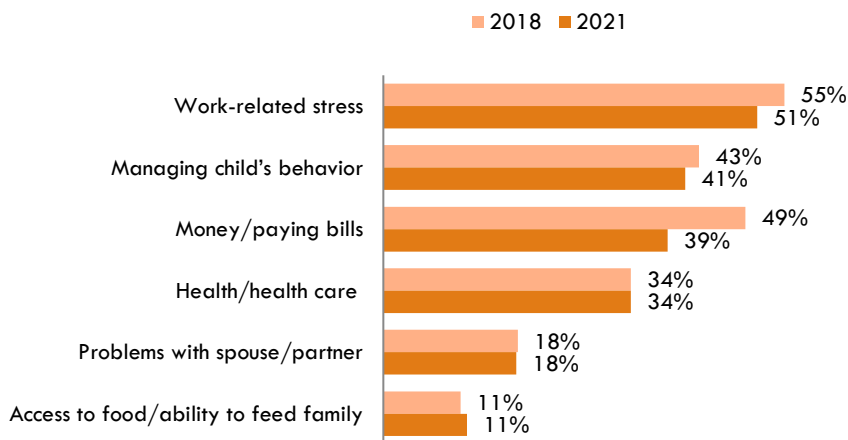


Source: Parent Information Form (2021). N=164. Question not asked in 2018.

Over half (51%) of parents were at least a little concerned about work, and approximately four in 10 were worried about managing their child’s behavior (41%) or money and paying bills (39%). Just over one-third (34%) were concerned about health or health care, 18% were concerned about problems with their spouse or partner, and 11% were worried about access to food. Overall parental concerns were largely

unchanged from 2018, with a modest decline in parents reporting that they were at least a little concerned about work-related stress, or about money and paying bills, likely because families in the current sample had higher incomes on average.

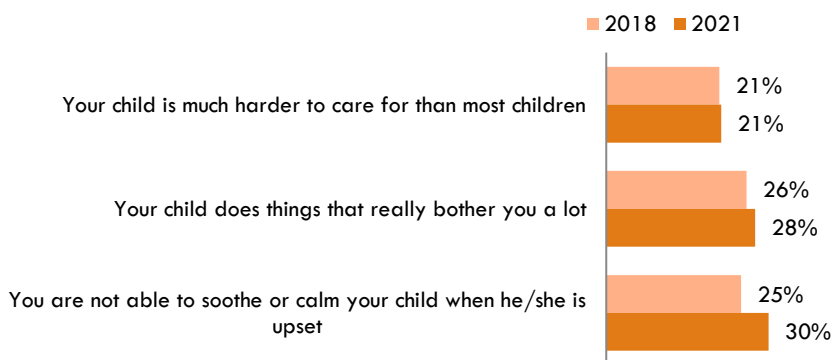
Figure 28. Parents Concerned about Family, Work, and Basic Needs Issues



Source: Parent Information Form (2018, 2021). N=216-219 (2018), N=163-168 (2021). Percentages represent those who reported being at least “a little” concerned.

Most parents in the sample also reported low levels of parenting stress. Most rarely felt that their child was much harder to care for than other children (21%), that their child did things that bothered them a lot (26%), or that they are not able to soothe or calm their child (25%).

Figure 29. Parents Reporting Parenting Stress



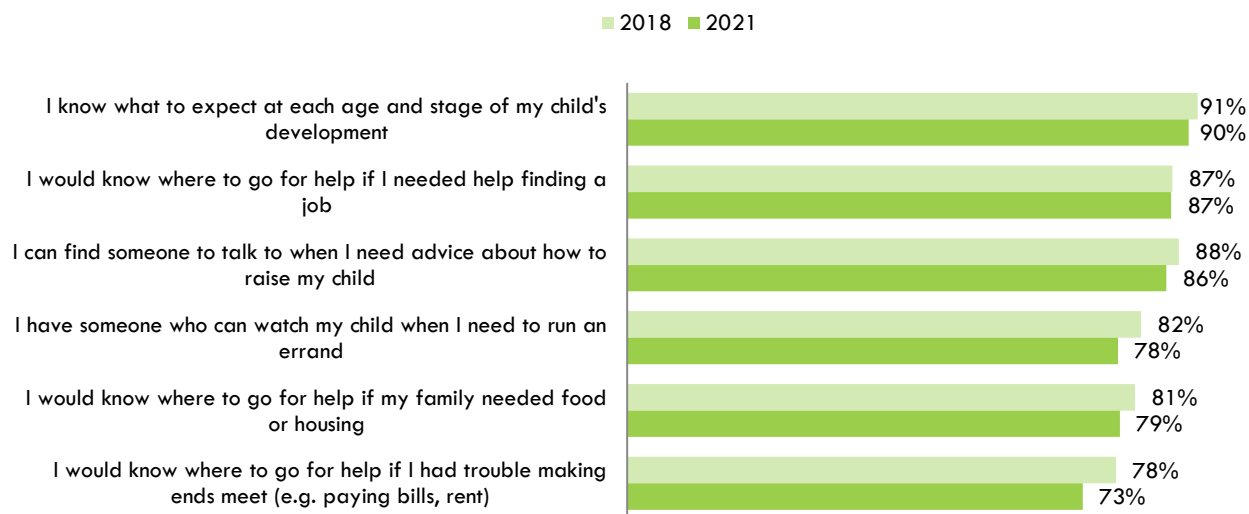
Source: Parent Information Form (2018, 2021). N=217-219 (2018), N=173-174 (2021). Percentages represent those who reported feeling parenting stress at least “sometimes”.

FAMILY SUPPORTS

This section describes the types of assets and resources parents said they had to support their child and family.

Parents reported relatively high levels of parenting and basic needs support. Nine in 10 (90%) parents reported some knowledge about child development. The vast majority of parents also said that they know where to go if they needed help finding a job (87%), needed food or housing (79%), or needed help making ends meet (73%); that they have someone that they can talk to when they need advice about raising their child (86%); and that they have someone they could rely on to watch their child if they needed to run an errand (78%). Families in 2021 were somewhat less likely than families in 2018 to know where to go if they had trouble making ends meet, but access to other types of supports was relatively unchanged.

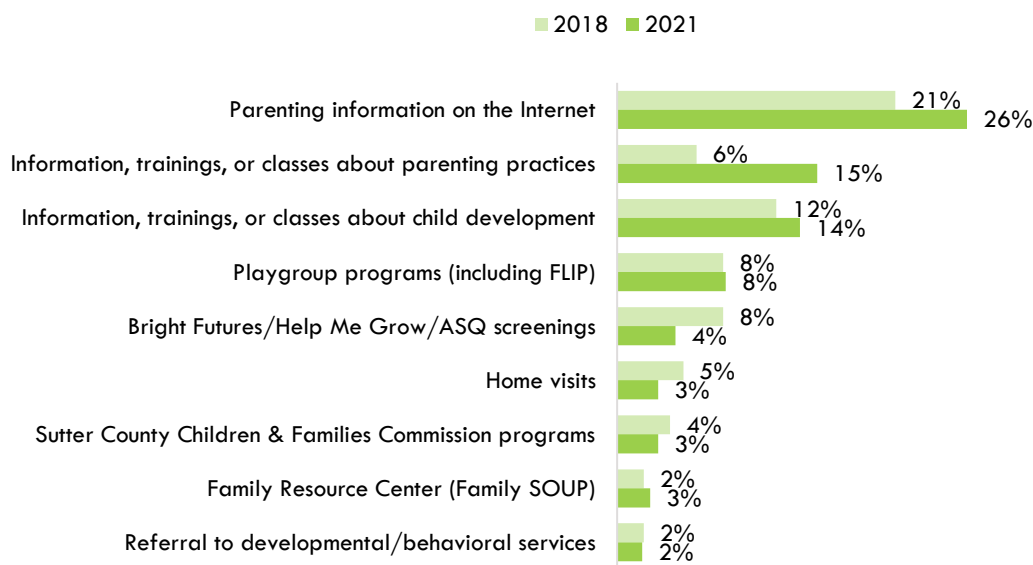
Figure 30. Parenting and Basic Needs Support



Source: Parent Information Form (2018, 2021). N=218-221, N=172-175 (2021). Percentages represent those who reported the statement is at least “somewhat true” for them.

Parents were also asked about the types of parenting services they had received, some of which are supported by SCCFC. While the greatest number of parents said they accessed parenting information on the Internet (26%), 15% of parents had participated in trainings or classes about parenting, and 14% of parents had participated in trainings or classes about child development – an increase in participation rates from 2018 for each type of parenting service. About 8% of children had participated in a playgroup program (including FLIP), 3% of families received a home visit, and 2% had received a referral to developmental or behavioral services. There were minimal changes between 2018 and 2021 in the percentage of families who reported receiving these services. Finally, 4% of families had participated in the Bright Futures health and developmental screening program, 3% had used the Family Resource Center (Family SOUP), and 3% had participated in other SCCFC programs. Fewer children participated in Bright Futures in 2021 compared to 2018, but participation in the other programs was unchanged.

Figure 31. Parenting Resources

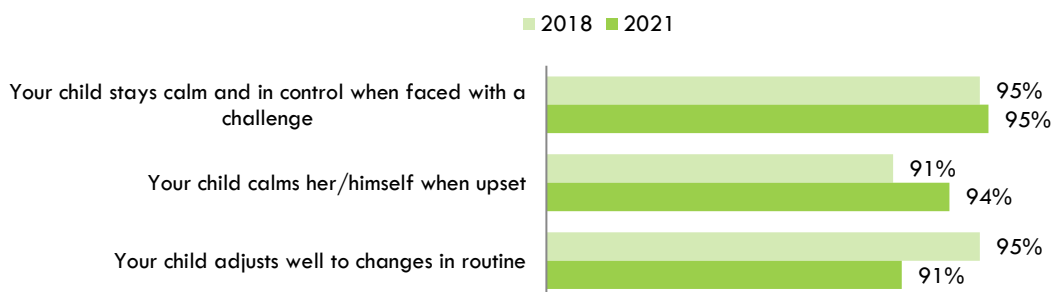


Source: Parent Information Form (2018, 2021). N=202, N=159 (2021).

CHILD RESILIENCY

Most parents responded positively to questions about their children’s resiliency. Over nine in 10 parents said it was “somewhat true” or “very true” that their child stays calm and in control when faced with a challenge (95%), calms him or herself when upset (94%), and adjusts well to changes in routine (91%). Child resiliency levels reported by parents were similar across the two study years.

Figure 32. Child Resiliency



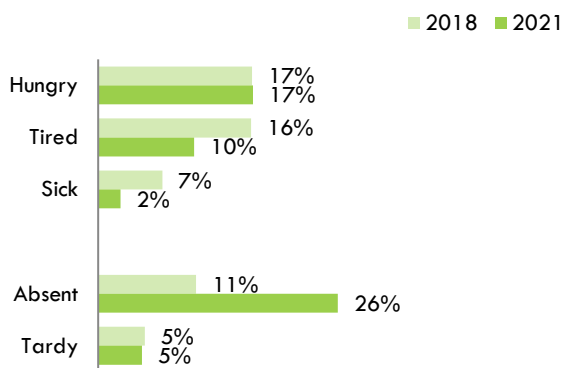
Source: Parent Information Form (2018, 2021). N=218-222, N=173-175 (2021). Percentages represent those who reported statement is at least “somewhat true” for their child.

CHILD HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

Child well-being is a fundamental foundation of development and kindergarten readiness. We asked teachers to indicate the frequency with which children appeared tired, hungry, or sick, in the first few days of school. Most children did not have any of these well-being concerns, but just over one in six (17%)

children appeared hungry on at least some days, while one in ten (10%) appeared tired, and about 2% were sick this often. Perhaps also indicative of health and well-being problems, 26% of students were absent on at least some days, and 5% were at least sometimes tardy. Compared to 2018, more children were absent, but fewer children appeared tired or sick in class in 2021.

Figure 33. Child Well-being and Attendance Concerns



Source: Kindergarten Observation Form (2018, 2021). N=303-306, N=253 (2021). Percentages represent those who reported concerns on at least “some days”.

In this study, parents were asked about various aspects of their children’s health. In terms of health insurance, 99% of children had some kind of health insurance, with Medi-Cal being the most common source of coverage (54%). Similarly, 98% of children had a regular doctor, while 93% had a regular dentist. Ninety-five percent of children had attended a well-child exam, and 90% had received a dental exam in the last 12 months. Access to care in 2021 was virtually unchanged from 2018.

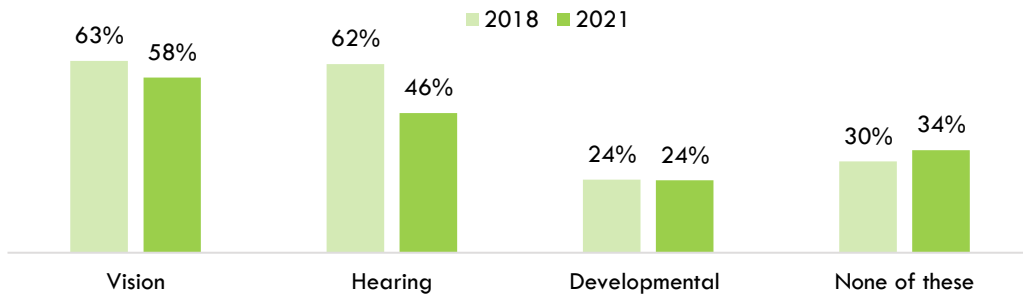
Figure 34. Child Health Background

		2018	2021
HEALTH INSURANCE	Medi-Cal	55%	54%
	Insurance from parent’s employer	41%	42%
	Covered California	2%	4%
	None of the above	2%	1%
PRIMARY CARE	Has a regular doctor	98%	98%
	Well-child exam in last 12 months	N/A	95%
DENTAL HISTORY	Has a regular dentist	92%	93%
	Dental exam in last 12 months	90%	90%

Source: Parent Information Form (2018, 2021). N=211-228, N=171-174 (2021).

Parents in the study were asked about the kind of screenings their child may have had. As the chart below indicates, the most common types of screenings were for vision (58%) and hearing (46%) issues, whereas only 24% of parents indicated their child had had a developmental screening. Thirty-four percent of children were reported to have had no screenings at all. Fewer children received a hearing screening in the current year than in 2018, but the proportions who received other screenings were similar across the two years.

Figure 35. Health Screenings



Source: Parent Information Form (2018, 2021). N=217 (2018), N=172 (2021).

About 5% of children in the sample had a diagnosed special need according to their teacher or parent, and these children had significantly lower school readiness levels in the study than their typically developing peers. Among those parents who answered a question about treatment received, 58% reported that their child had received professional help, a significant drop from 2018 when 77% had received professional help. In addition, 30% of children who had a special need were unable to receive the help they needed during the pandemic according to their parents.

Figure 36. Special Needs

	2018	2021
Child has special need	9%	5%
Children with special need who received professional help	77%	58%
Children with special need who were <u>unable</u> to receive help during COVID-19	N/A	30%

Source: Parent Information Form (2018, 2021). N=149 (2018), N=171 (2021). Children may have had more than one type of special need.



Summary and Implications

The goals of the 2021 Sutter County Kindergarten Readiness Assessment were to determine how ready children were for kindergarten and understand the characteristics and experiences of children and their families as well as how those characteristics and experiences related to readiness. In addition, comparisons to findings from the 2018 study and COVID-related questions on the parent survey helped us explore how children and families were impacted by COVID-19.

In 2021, **40% of entering kindergartners were *Fully Ready*** across all domains of readiness (*Self-Regulation, Social Expression, and Kindergarten Academics*), 17% were *Not Ready* in any domain of readiness, and the remaining 43% were ready in one or two domains (*Partially Ready*). Compared to 2018, the percent who were *Fully Ready* was similar this year, but somewhat fewer children were *Not Ready* and more were *Partially Ready*. Also, children entering kindergarten in 2021 were more likely to be ready in social-emotional skills and less ready in academic skills relative to children who entered in 2018. This suggests the pandemic did not adversely impact overall readiness in 2021, but, as discussed below, COVID-related challenges may have limited children’s acquisition of academic skills.

Readiness this year was strongly related to several developmental and environmental factors that have been associated with readiness in other studies. For example, as was found in the current study, other research has found typically developing students demonstrate higher readiness than students with special needs.^{ix} Other strong predictors of readiness included the frequency with which children and parents read together. Children whose parents read to them more often were substantially more likely to be ready for kindergarten. As is well-known, reading with children has numerous benefits, including improved social, emotional, and academic skill development.^x In addition, children must be healthy and well-rested to be ready to learn.^{xi} In our study, we found children who often appeared tired were less ready for school than their peers. Finally, children whose fathers worked at home during the pandemic tended to have higher readiness. This may be because their presence at home allowed them to be more involved with their children; other studies have demonstrated numerous beneficial effects of father involvement on children’s development.^{xii} These findings point to the importance of interventions that promote the involvement of all caregivers in readiness activities, regular bedtime routines, and access to basic needs and health care to address any issues that prevent children from being well-rested at school.

We also found that participation in programs sponsored by SCCFC was positively correlated with the readiness of children and families. SCCFC families were more likely to receive information about how to help their child prepare for kindergarten and to engage in kindergarten preparation activities like meeting the child’s kindergarten teacher and reading books and articles about kindergarten. Their children were also somewhat more likely to be ready for kindergarten than the children of families who didn’t participate in SCCFC programs. These positive results suggest SCCFC is playing an important role in supporting the kindergarten readiness of families in the county.

In addition to examining readiness, the current study assessed various ways in which COVID-19 affected children and families, including their access to developmental and kindergarten readiness supports. Despite widespread closures of child care and preschool sites during the pandemic, children in the current study were just as likely to have attended formal early care and education (ECE) as were children in 2018, likely because most ECE site closures were temporary. However, we did not measure how many days per week nor how many months in the year children were in care, and some programs only offered virtual instruction; it’s possible we saw lower academic readiness skills this year because children’s in-person ECE attendance was more limited during COVID-19. School and ECE site closures may have also

been responsible for our finding that fewer families this year received kindergarten readiness information, attended parent meetings and orientations at the kindergarten school, or asked their child's child care or preschool provider questions about the kindergarten transition. In addition, lower academic readiness among children this year may be partly due to the fact that, relative to families in the 2018 study, families this year reported reading to their children less often – the strongest predictor of kindergarten readiness in our model – and fewer accessed libraries, which also temporarily closed during the pandemic. Finally, children's access to general health and dental care this year was similar to their access in 2018, but children with special needs were substantially less likely to receive professional help for their needs, and fewer families participated in the Bright Futures health and developmental screening program. It appears that, during the pandemic, many families need additional information, resources, and assistance to help prepare themselves and their children for kindergarten and to access needed developmental services.

Families experience of stressors also changed during the pandemic. The majority of caregivers reported that the coronavirus had impacted their employment in some way, with the most common of effects being working from home with children around, having a job that increased their risk of getting COVID-19, and work hour reductions. We also found the pandemic appeared to have a greater impact on the employment of mothers than other caregivers, similar to the findings of other research on employment during COVID-19.^{xiii} Many parents also reported that COVID-19 led to increased stress, social isolation, loneliness, and worries about their child's development. Employment and social-emotional and mental health supports are critical to help address the pandemic's impact on the health and well-being of caregivers of young children.

As the community continues to experience the effects of COVID-19, services and resources to support children and families are needed now more than ever. Given the relationship between children's experiences in the first five years of life and their long-term health and well-being, it is wise for communities to invest in comprehensive, high-quality early childhood programs.^{xiv} SCCFC looks forward to continuing to partner with other agencies, families, and the broader community to promote enriching early experiences that help ensure every child achieves optimal development and enters kindergarten ready to learn.



Endnotes

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