Principles of Conducting HBCC Research and Evaluation

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This resource shares principles for conducting research and evaluation of home-based child care (HBCC) that is focused on participatory research methods that engage HBCC providers as research and evaluation partners. This guide is intended for researchers and evaluators working with the full range of HBCC, including licensed, license-exempt, and unlicensed settings and family child care (FCC) and family, friend, and neighbor (FFN) providers. Engaging providers offers an opportunity to design studies that reflect the needs of providers, describe the nuances of the HBCC sector, and build trust with providers who may be more likely to participate in the research if they are seen as partners. It also offers an opportunity for researchers to learn with and from providers to develop policy-relevant research that may inform efforts to build supply and improve stability of the sector.

For each principle listed, a set of strategies is shared to guide researchers, evaluators, data analysts, and others who are interested in conducting HBCC participatory research that includes providers. The five principles outlined in this resource are: **(1) Strengths-Based, (2) Authentic Engagement, (3) Provider Voice, (4) Tailoring Research Approaches That Meet Provider Needs, and (5) Creating Bridges Among Research, Practice, and Policy.** These principles are based on the collective experiences of the authors as well as previous efforts to guide HBCC research. For example, this resource builds on prior work describing promising approaches to including HBCC providers in research and evaluation.[1]

Strengths-Based Approaches

Research that recognizes the strengths of HBCC providers and the sector may be more likely to engage providers in participation. Taking a strengths-based approach means understanding the assets of HBCC and the role of HBCC providers in the child care and early education (CCEE) landscape. When research highlights these strengths, HBCC providers may be more encouraged to participate and engage in the research. Provider engagement may also help strengthen the validity of research by helping researchers focus on the needs and nuances of the HBCC sector.

HBCC has many strengths and assets that include:[2]

- *Continuity of care over time for children and families.*
- *Allowing mixed-age groups of children (e.g., siblings) to be cared for together.*
- *Flexibility for family schedules, including offering nontraditional hours such as evening or overnight care.*
- *Individualized and personal care through small groups.*
- *Familiarity, trust, and prior relationships with families of children in care.*

Tips for Researchers and Evaluators

- Design research agendas, evaluation plans, study materials, and messaging to focus on the strengths of HBCC providers.
- Include positive aspects of HBCC experiences alongside descriptions of challenges.
- Use visuals and graphics for research products that depict distinct aspects of HBCC settings, such as mixed-age groups of children, one-on-one attention, and the home environment. For example, if the study focuses on FFN or relative care, use images that depict familial relationships.
- Provide testimonials from families that share the importance and strengths of HBCC.

Authentic Engagement and Outreach

Engaging HBCC providers as research and evaluation partners is important because providers are the best sources of knowledge about what they need and what happens every day in HBCC settings across the country. Authentic engagement entails intentional efforts to develop trusting relationships with providers, many of whom may not be familiar with research or may feel distrustful of researchers' intentions. Using data collectors from an HBCC provider's community, with whom they may be familiar, may also help engage participants.[4]

Tips for Researchers and Evaluators

- Work with local or state CCEE agencies, child care resource and referral agencies, networks, parent organizations, or other trusted organizations (e.g., local kinship support groups) that can facilitate introductions to providers and that can assist with outreach during the study.
    - » *In a study focused on FFN caregivers, researchers used referrals from parents as well as support from resource and referral agencies and other focused associations and organizations.*[5]
- Engage providers at the onset of the study to inform the study purpose, research design, study questions, and methods.
- Schedule an introductory call with HBCC providers for research team members to introduce themselves and describe the purpose of their research study, including how it may support providers and the HBCC sector.
- Ask for provider and trusted partner feedback in planning logistics of the study and answer any questions that providers may have. This can build rapport and open lines of communication.
    - » *In one study, researchers established relationships and partnered with trusted partner organizations in local communities that supported and worked with FFN providers. These trusted partners assisted researchers with outreach about the study to encourage providers' willingness to participate because they were already familiar with these organizations. They also provided guidance to the research team around recruitment, study design, and data collection.*[6]
- Articulate the goals and purpose of the research study or evaluation with an emphasis on how the research may help answer pressing questions that may also address specific needs and potential support for the HBCC sector. Providers may be more willing to collaborate if a study aims to improve support for the sector and drive meaningful policy change, strategies, or initiatives.
- Engage providers as data collectors or co-facilitators for interviews or focus groups, and develop trainings to give providers the necessary skills to support data collection efforts.
- Find opportunities to engage with providers outside of research to foster trust and close relationships. This can also help develop trust and familiarity that can assist with future engagement in research.

Provider Voice

Including provider voice is important for understanding the experiences of providers, learning from those who most directly provide care, and informing the research process. This entails capturing the experiences, perspectives, and needs of providers through methods that allow HBCC providers to take an active role in the research process. Given the nuances of the HBCC sector, ensuring that providers represent the variety of HBCC settings or that represent the HBCC setting that is the focus of the study (e.g., licensed, license-exempt, FCC, FFN). Offering opportunities for HBCC providers to guide the research and evaluation process through participatory methods and provider advisory groups can ensure that providers' voices are represented in the research design.

Tips for Researchers and Evaluators

- Use participatory methods that give participants an active role in the research process and transfer some of the control from researcher to participant. Methods such as Photovoice allow HBCC providers to choose what they share with a research team in their own time.[7]
- Create HBCC provider advisory groups to guide the research process. Interacting with community advisory boards is a participatory research practice that can support authentic engagement with the HBCC sector.[8] Providers can help co-create research questions and survey protocols, weigh in on preliminary data analysis, and develop dissemination strategies to ensure research is reflective of the experiences of the HBCC sector and responsive to the needs of the field.
- Include provider voice across the broad range of HBCC settings in which care may take place (e.g., licensed, unlicensed, FCC, FFN) unless the research is specifically focused on a particular setting.

Tailoring Research Approaches That Meet Provider Needs

Tailoring research approaches that meet provider needs is important to ensure that providers can engage in research and evaluation efforts. Some providers work long hours, and many also have caregiving responsibilities within their own families. These responsibilities as well as technology or language barriers may pose challenges to participation in research and evaluation activities. Tailoring research approaches involves strategies and methods that directly account for providers' needs and circumstances.

Tips for Researchers and Evaluators

- Schedule focus groups or interviews at convenient times for providers based on their schedules, given their long work hours and care during nontraditional hours. Also consider school-district calendars that may impact the work and schedules of HBCC providers who often care for school-age children or may have their own school-age children.

- Consider convenient platforms and locations (online, at a local library or community center, close to transportation).[9] If using Zoom or another online platform, explain or offer technical support for those who may not be familiar.

- Offer various modalities for participation, such as virtual or in-person, that may include text messaging, QR codes, pencil and paper surveys, and phone calls.

- Create data collection materials or methods that are short and can be completed in a reasonable timeframe. This can also help with a study's response rate.

- Provide tokens of appreciation to providers for sharing their expertise and knowledge. This may include gift cards, direct deposit, entry into a raffle for a prize, honorarium, or another token of appreciation that is easy for providers to access and that recognizes the provider's contributions to the research.[10]

    » *Tokens of appreciation can take into consideration the time commitment and providers' circumstances (e.g., if a provider has a bank account to receive a direct deposit) and can be modified based on the type and length of research activity. For example, researchers conducting a focus group may consider offering a larger token of appreciation for participants because focus groups often require more time than taking a survey.*

    » *If offering a gift card, asking providers what gift card vendors they prefer.*

Creating Bridges Among Research, Practice, and Policy

Ensuring HBCC providers understand the purpose of the research when engaging them in research efforts. Recruiting and onboarding providers into a research project might include explaining how research may inform caregiving practices, working and caregiving conditions, and child care policies. In the research dissemination phase, it's important to find ways to amplify key findings from research for relevant audiences. This may be through various types of dissemination materials (e.g., reports, briefs, infographics) designed for different types of audiences. HBCC providers may be more likely to participate in research if they think it will help improve their own experiences as caregivers and the experiences of the children (and families) in their care.

Tips for Researchers and Evaluators

- Offer concrete solutions and calls for action that come directly from research findings and that may support or strengthen the HBCC sector.
- Allow opportunities for providers to be involved in the development and review of materials that may help inform messaging and tone that resonate with the sector.
- Use traditional, innovative, and social media approaches. This may include slide decks, photo carousals, serial blog posts, webinars, and town halls.
- Coordinate with providers, administrators, networks, and others who can help disseminate and amplify products through their networks for further impact and reach.
- Send final products and dissemination materials to providers who participated in the research. Be sure that this type of follow-up happens in a timely manner so providers know what happened to the information they shared with the research project.

Endnotes

[1]Coffey, A. & Isaacs, J. (2019). *Evaluating training and professional development for home-based providers: A brief for CCDF lead agencies and researchers.* (OPRE Report No. 2019-11). Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. https://acf.gov/sites/default/files/documents/opre/evaluating_training_and_professional_development_revised_508.pdf

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[7] Bromer, J., Ragonese-Barnes, M., and Miguel, J. (2025). *Quality in family, friend, and neighbor child care: Summary of findings from the Home-Based Child Care Practices and Experiences Study* (OPRE Report No. 2025-136). U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation.

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[9] Coffey & Issacs, 2019.

[10] Coffey & Issacs, 2019; Melvin et al., 2025.

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