

# BUILDING RESILIENCE IN YOUTH THROUGH SUMMER EXPERIENCES:

## Structured Summer Programs Promote Social and Emotional Growth and School Preparedness

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ISRY

Institute for the  
Study of  
Resilience in  
Youth



McLean  
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nsia

national summer  
learning association

## WHAT WAS THIS STUDY ABOUT?

This study was designed to help practitioners, policy-makers, and researchers understand the parent perspective on two kinds of summer experiences — structured programs and unstructured experiences outside of programs — including what children do under each scenario, and what they learn academically, recreationally, and socio-emotionally from those activities.

### Significance:

One of the most important choices every family makes is, “What should our child(ren) do this summer?” All families must **decide whether children should spend the summer in structured programs outside the home—with scheduled and organized activities facilitated by adults—or having unstructured experiences—with unscheduled, self-directed leisure.** Of course, many families choose both.

### COVID:

**Safety concerns due to the COVID-19 pandemic have made summer options more limited and the decision more fraught,** but parents, guardians, and other caretakers have always struggled to decide whether their children are better served in structured environments where they are being taught, supervised, and supported by adults outside the home.

### Team:

The Harvard Medical School/McLean Hospital team at the **Institute for the Study of Resilience in Youth (ISRY)** was commissioned by the National Summer Learning Association (NSLA) to conduct a nationally representative survey of parent attitudes and perceptions to gain more insight into the question of how structured summer programs, compared with unstructured experiences, impact children and youth in grades K through 12.

## WHAT WERE THE STUDY QUESTIONS?

### Exploring Structured and Unstructured Summer Experiences

How are “structured” summer program experiences and “unstructured” summer experiences (outside of programs) described by parents?

Are there socio-demographic differences between families that engage in structured programs vs. unstructured summer experiences?

How do structured summer programs support families, and what are the barriers to access?

### Understanding Social-Emotional Growth Over the Summer

Do parents perceive growth in their children’s social-emotional skills over the summer? Which and how much?

How do parent perceptions of social-emotional growth vary by experience type (structured program vs. unstructured experience)?

Do parent perceptions of their children’s social-emotional growth over the summer vary across socio-demographic groups?

### Examining the Value of Summer Experiences

Are parents satisfied with their children’s summer experiences, and do they feel that summer has prepared their children for the return to school?

How do parent satisfaction and perceptions of school preparedness vary by experience type (structured program vs. unstructured experience)?

Do parent satisfaction or perceptions of school preparedness vary across socio-demographic groups?

# 2,000 parents in 50 states—50% structured programs, 50% unstructured experiences outside of programs

## WHAT WERE THE STUDY METHODS?

A nationally representative survey was fielded between August 23 and September 8, 2021 of 2,000 respondents in the U.S. (inclusive of 50 states + Washington D.C.). The respondents were parents of K-12 children and youth who engaged in structured summer programs (the “structured” group,  $n = 1,000$ ) or unstructured summer experiences outside of programs (the “unstructured” group,  $n = 1,000$ ). Parents, broadly defined to include legal guardians and other caregivers, such as grandparents or aunts/uncles, were recruited through an online non-probability sample with quotas set to ensure demographically representative audiences, with oversamples of Black and Hispanic parents. Post-stratification weighting ensured survey results are reflective of the racial and Hispanic composition of the U.S. adult population based on [2021 U.S. Census population estimates](#).

Display logic was used throughout the survey, based on parent responses to earlier questions, to instruct parents on which child and summer experience to focus (e.g., “Please focus your answers on your *K-6 daughter who had a structured summer program experience* throughout this survey.”) Responses to quantitative survey items (social-emotional growth, school preparedness, satisfaction, etc.) were made using a 4-point Likert scale and statistically analyzed to examine differences between the structured program and unstructured experience groups, taking into account parent gender, child grade level, and family annual household income. Answers to open-response questions were thematically analyzed to better understand how parents characterize their children’s summer experiences and preparedness for the return to school.

## HOW WERE “STRUCTURED SUMMER PROGRAM EXPERIENCES” DEFINED?

The definition for structured summer program experiences was adapted from a [series of parent surveys](#) conducted by the Afterschool Alliance, which began in July 2020 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. At the outset of the survey, parents were presented with the following definition and question:

**Summer learning programs are safe, structured programs that operate either in-person or virtually to provide activities and encourage learning and development during the summer months. They are different from childcare. For children, they include summer learning and enrichment programs, sports programs, and summer camps. For older youth, jobs or internships may also be considered as summer learning programs.**

*Did your child(ren) participate in a summer learning program as described above this summer (2021)?*

Parents who answered yes were assigned to the “structured summer program” group, and parents who answered no were assigned to the “unstructured summer experiences” group (meaning, no program experience).



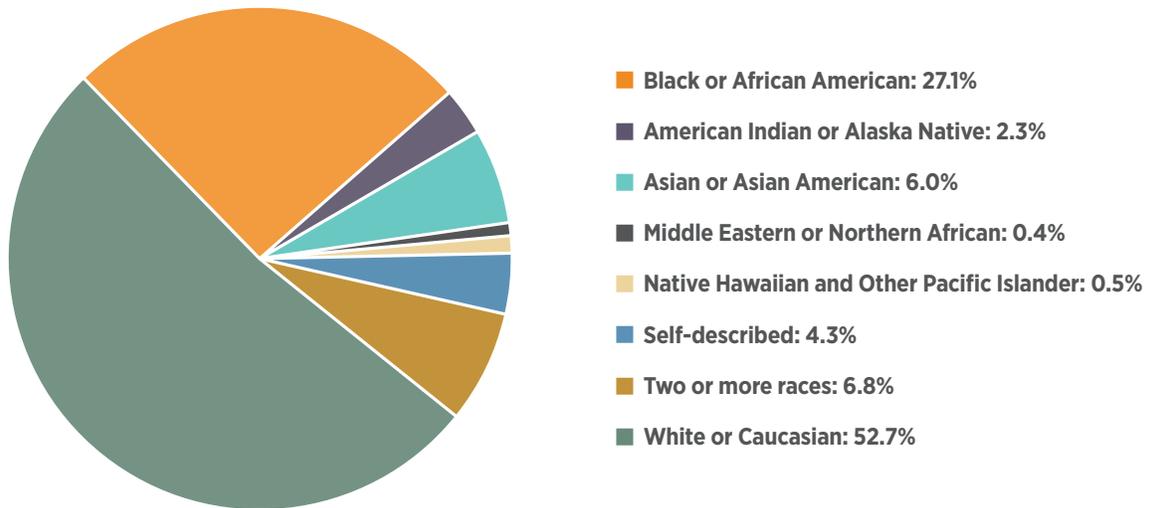
## WHAT WAS THE STUDY'S SAMPLE?

The structured and unstructured groups had similar numbers of parents by race, ethnicity, geography, and grade level of child (K to 12), as part of the sampling design. **Overall, the sample was racially and ethnically diverse** (see Figure 1). One in four parents identified as Hispanic, and one in three parents (32.8%) reported speaking a language other than English.

Seven out of 10 respondents were female (71.8%), and most parents self-described as mothers/step-mothers (69.6%) and fathers/step-fathers (27.0%). **Families represented a range of incomes**, with 40.4% lower income (\$40,000 or less), 41.2% middle income (\$40,001 to \$100,000), and 15.4% higher income (\$100,001 or more).

FIGURE 1

CAREGIVER RACE AND ETHNICITY



# All kinds of summer experiences provided opportunities for growth, but parents of children in structured programs were more satisfied

## HOW DID CHILDREN SPEND THEIR SUMMER?

Parents were asked a series of questions about how their children spent their summer. The findings show that **children spent time on activities that supported their social, emotional, and academic development, whether or not they were engaged in a structured program.**

### STRUCTURED SUMMER PROGRAM EXPERIENCES:

Parents of children who engaged in structured programs characterized their children's summer in the following ways:

#### Program Type:

Most children participated in voluntary summer programs that provide a variety of learning and enrichment activities (58.5%) and specialty camps or programs, e.g., arts, sports, drama, or religious (42.5%).

#### Location:

The most common locations for summer programs were public or private schools (60.0%), community-based organizations like YMCA, Boys & Girls Club, and 4-H (30.3%), and city or town facilities including Parks and Recreation Departments (23.6%).

#### Activities:

The most common activities in summer programs were physical exercise and sports (41.9%), math activities, such as puzzles or working with geometric shapes (38.3%), and music or arts (38.0%). Academic help (34.4%), reading or writing time (35.8%), and science/STEM activities (25.1%) were also commonly reported by parents.

#### Dosage & Duration:

Children engaged in summer programs for an average of four hours per day, and an average of four weeks per summer. One in two parents reported their children spending less than one month in structured programming (53.7%), whereas about one in six parents reported their children spending two to three months in structured summer programming (17.7%).

#### Format:

About half of children (53.9%) engaged in summer programs in-person (15.0% engaged virtually only, and 30.9% engaged in a hybrid format).

#### Cost:

About half (49.4%) of children attended summer programs for free.

### UNSTRUCTURED SUMMER EXPERIENCES:

Parents of children with unstructured summer experiences self-described how their children primarily spent their summer. Their responses were organized into eight themes.

#### Home & Family:

43.0% of parents reported their children spent quality time at home and engaged in activities around the home, such as doing household chores or playing games with their siblings, cousins, parents, and/or grandparents.

*"We tried not to go out because of the COVID situation, so we tried to engage our kids into board games, video games and house chores. We took this time to connect with them. We rarely went to community parks but our backyard."*

#### Learning & Academics:

20.9% of parents reported their children spent time building academic and cognitive skills, such as by practicing reading and solving math problems, learning about life skills and culture, and attending disability services (e.g., Applied Behavioral Analysis, ABA Center).

*"My children worked in their learning books, read books, wrote in their journals, and played STEM games on their tablets."*

#### Digital Media:

24.3% of parents reported their children spent time using technology for entertainment, such as spending time on smartphones, tablets, or computers, watching TV shows, movies, or YouTube videos, playing computer/video games, or going on social media.

*"My 12-year-old mostly spent his time online making TikTok videos and uploading videos to his YouTube channel."*

#### Free Play:

28.8% of parents reported their children spent time exploring their world without rules, schedules, or adult intervention, such as playing outside with friends, running around in the backyard, and playing with toys and boardgames. Multiple parents referenced their children as simply spending their time "being a kid," for example:

*"My child spent her summer being a child and enjoying the summer months."*

#### Sports and Outdoors:

29.0% of parents reported their child participated in group or individual physical and outdoor activities, including biking, camping, exercising, gardening, hiking, running, swimming, and walking.

*"My child spent time at the park learning how to rollerblade."*

(Unstructured Summer Experiences cont.)

**Arts & Hobbies:**

89.9% of parents reported their children engaged in creative activities, including making art projects, drawing, painting, listening to/making music, playing musical instruments, or dancing.

*“He mostly spent his time drawing. He’s really been learning and improving his skills.”*

**Travel & Vacation:**

11.4% of parents reported that their children visited and/or traveled with family and/or friends.

*“They spent time camping, offroading, country life and vacation time.”*

**Community Activities:**

17.2% of parents reported that their children attended community events or visited local institutions or attractions, including church-related activities, zoos, parks, museums, and sponsored events, and volunteered their time to support their community.

*“We did lots of fun outings at the beach, park, library, Barnes & Nobles, etc.”*

**HOW SATISFIED WERE PARENTS WITH THEIR CHILDREN'S SUMMER EXPERIENCES?**

**Overall:**

On average, about 85% of all parents were somewhat/extremely satisfied with their children’s summer experiences.

**Type of Experience:**

While high satisfaction was reported by most parents of children in both structured programs and unstructured experiences, parents of children in structured programs (90.5%) were significantly more satisfied than parents in unstructured experiences (79.0%). See Figure 2, where all items are statistically significant for structured programs vs. unstructured experiences.

**Child Grade Level:**

On average, parents of children in grades K to 6 (87.3%) were more satisfied than parents of children in grades 7 to 12 (82.9%)—for all items except interaction with diverse groups of children. The least satisfied group was parents of children in grades 7 to 12 who had unstructured summer experiences (74.8%).

**Program Dosage and Duration:**

At the end of the summer, parents with children in summer programs for two to three months (higher duration) were more satisfied with their children’s opportunities to be physically active, to interact with diverse groups of children, and experience new things than parents with children in summer programs for one month or less (lower duration).

At the end of the summer, parents with children in summer programs for five hours or more per day (higher dosage) were more satisfied with their children’s opportunities to build life skills, build academic skills, and interact with diverse groups of children than parents with children in summer programs for four hours or less (lower dosage).

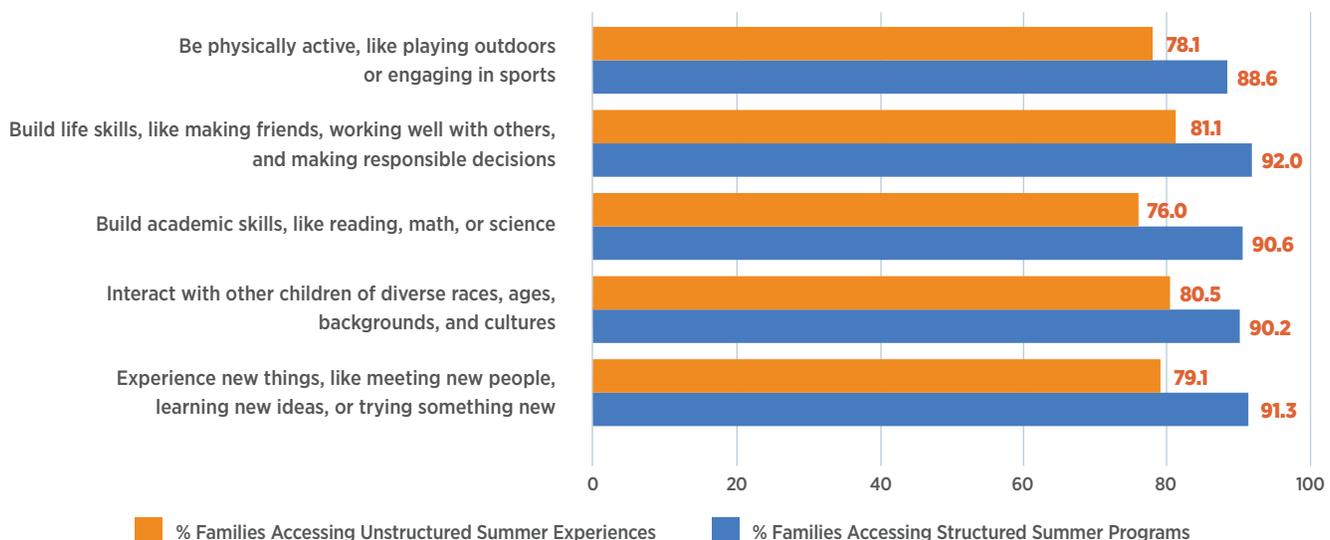
**Parent Gender, Income:**

There were no statistical differences in levels of satisfaction with summer experiences based on parent gender, race/ethnicity, or family income.

**FIGURE 2**

**PARENT SATISFACTION WITH CHILDREN'S SUMMER EXPERIENCES BY TYPE OF SUMMER EXPERIENCE (STRUCTURED PROGRAM VS. UNSTRUCTURED EXPERIENCE) ACROSS ALL GRADE LEVELS (GRADES K TO 12)**

“Thinking about all your child’s summer experiences, how satisfied are you with your child’s opportunities to...”



# Families experienced inequitable access to structured program opportunities

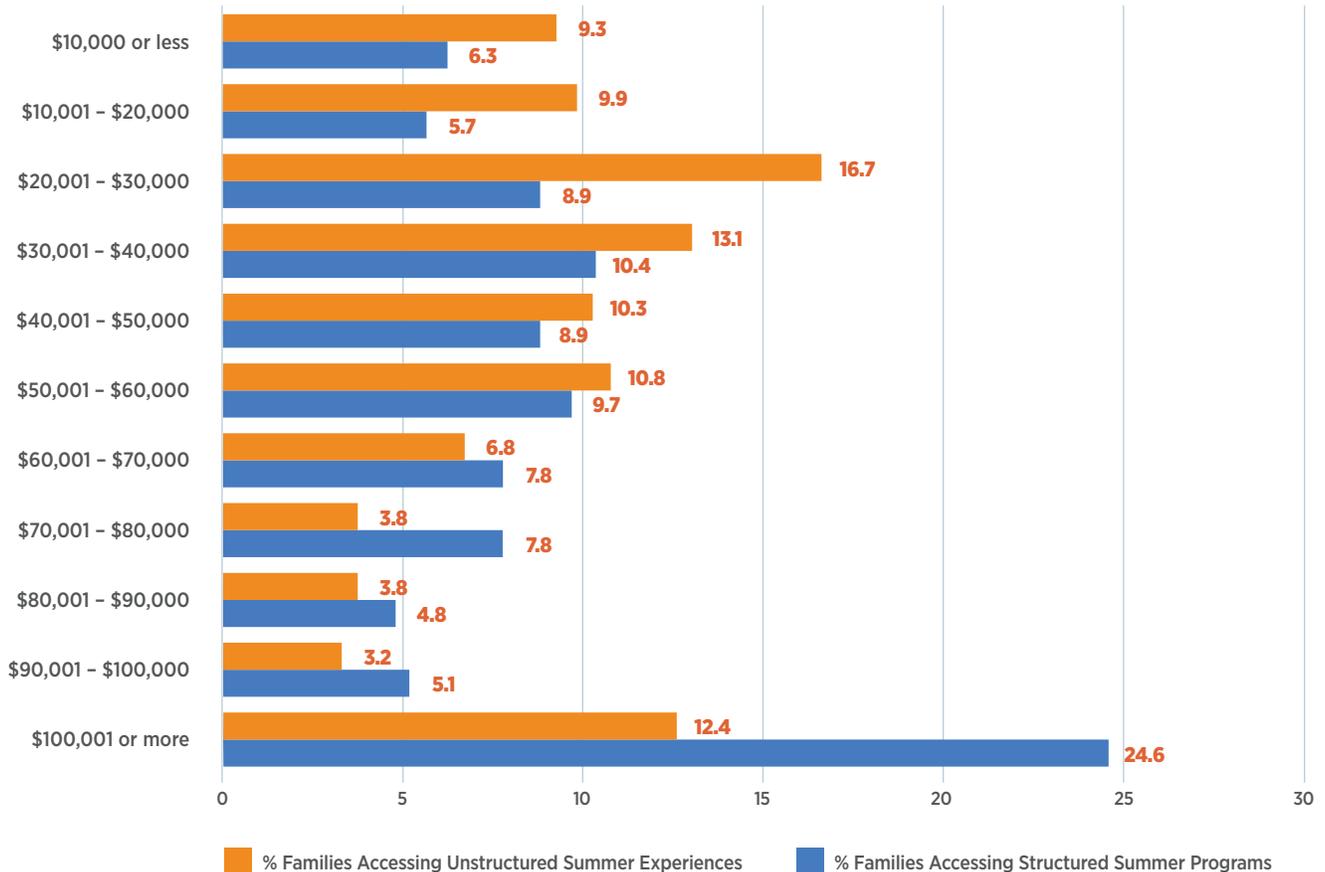
## DID ALL FAMILIES HAVE EQUAL ACCESS TO STRUCTURED SUMMER PROGRAMS?

Families accessing structured summer programs reported higher incomes, on average, than families engaging in unstructured experiences (see Figure 3).

- Higher income (\$100,001 or more per year):  
**24.6% structured > 12.4% unstructured**
- Middle income (\$40,001-100,000 per year):  
**35.2% structured > 28.4% unstructured**
- Lower income (\$40,000 or less per year):  
**40.2% structured < 59.3% unstructured**
- White parents (20.6%) reported higher annual income than Black (8.5%) or Hispanic (12.9%) parents.

FIGURE 3

PARENT-REPORTED ANNUAL HOUSEHOLD INCOME BY TYPE OF SUMMER EXPERIENCE (STRUCTURED PROGRAM VS. UNSTRUCTURED EXPERIENCE)

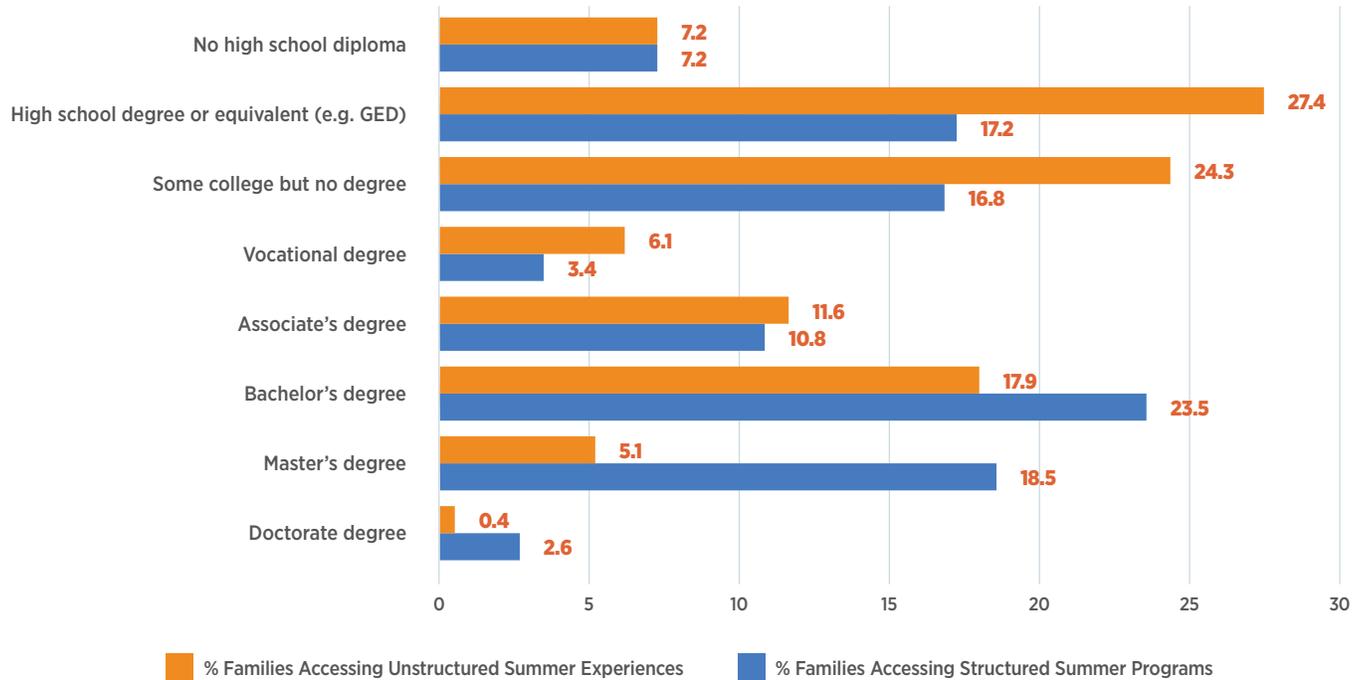


**Families accessing structured summer programs reported having higher educational attainment** (four-year college degree or higher) than families engaging in unstructured experiences (see Figure 4).

- Overall, a greater percentage of White (34.6%) and Hispanic (33.5%) parents reported a four-year college degree or higher than Black parents (24.4%).
- Within the structured summer program group, compared with the unstructured group, the level of educational attainment was higher for all three groups—White (47.2%), Hispanic (42.2%), and Black (28.3%)—but the difference between groups by race/ethnicity remained.

**FIGURE 4**

**PARENT EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT BY TYPE OF SUMMER EXPERIENCE  
(STRUCTURED PROGRAM VS. UNSTRUCTURED EXPERIENCE)**



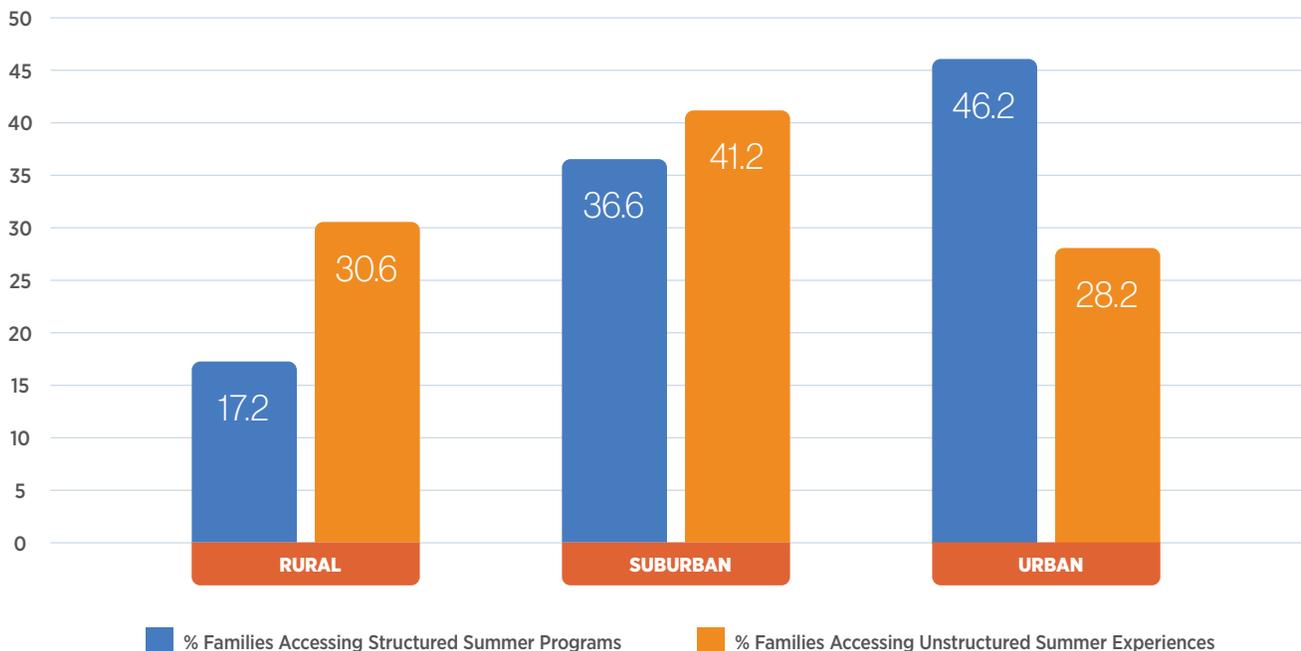


**Families accessing structured summer programs were more likely to reside in urban communities** (see Figure 5).

- Overall, a higher percentage of White (36.5%) parents reported living in rural areas than Black (16.3%) or Hispanic (17.4%) parents, whereas a higher percentage of Black (47.4%) and Hispanic (41.7%) parents reported living in urban areas than White parents (26.5%).
- Within the structured summer program group, compared with the unstructured group, the number of parents living in rural communities was lower for all three groups—White (18.9%), Black (12.9%), and Hispanic (13.2%)—whereas the number of parents living in urban communities was higher for all three groups—White (47.1%), Black (51.0%), and Hispanic (46.5%).

**FIGURE 5**

**RESIDENCE IN RURAL, SUBURBAN, AND URBAN COMMUNITIES BY TYPE OF SUMMER EXPERIENCE (STRUCTURED PROGRAM VS. UNSTRUCTURED EXPERIENCE)**



## DID FAMILIES BENEFIT FROM ACCESS TO STRUCTURED SUMMER PROGRAMS?

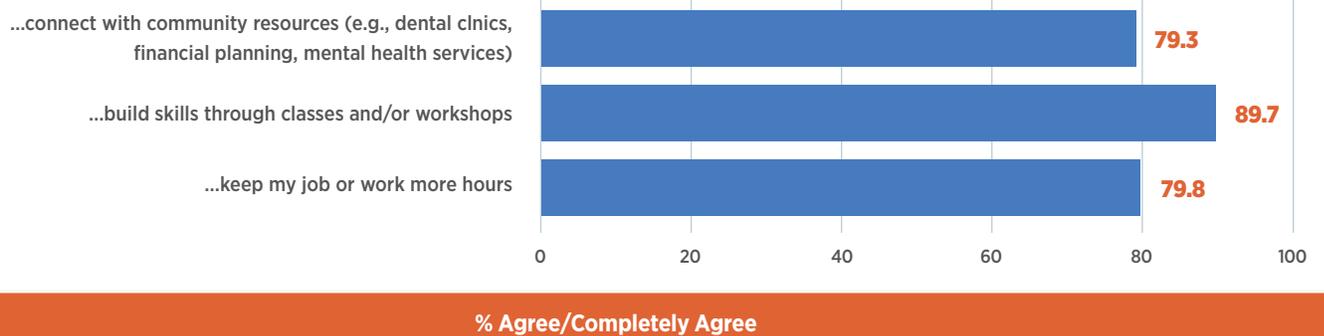
Most parents felt their families benefited from their children participating in structured summer programs (see Figure 6).

- Most parents (~80 to 90%) agreed or completely agreed that **having access to structured summer programs helped build parent capacity to support themselves and their family.**
- On average, Hispanic parents (89.0%) perceived greater benefits of structured summer programs than Black (82.4%) or White (83.2%) parents.

FIGURE 6

### PARENT LEVEL OF AGREEMENT WITH BENEFITS OF STRUCTURED SUMMER PROGRAMS

“This summer program allows me to...”



## WHAT PREVENTED FAMILIES FROM ACCESSING STRUCTURED SUMMER PROGRAMS?

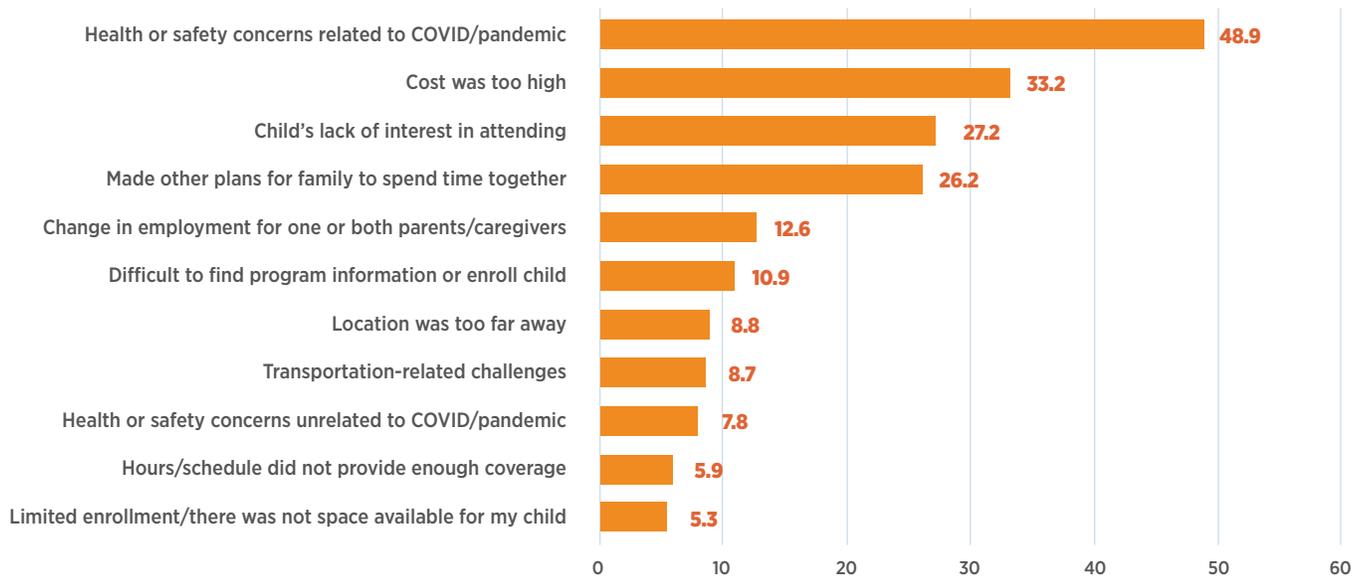
**COVID, cost, and child's lack of interest were the most common reasons why parents did not enroll their children in structured summer programs in 2021** (see Figure 7).

- Concerns about COVID-related safety and program costs were more often reported by parents with lower income (cost: 47.9%; COVID: 51.1%) and parents with children entering Grades K-6 (cost: 58.6%; COVID: 56.5%). Child's lack of interest was most frequently reported by parents of children entering Grades 7 to 12 (60.1%).
- The most common reasons not to enroll were the same regardless of race/ethnicity. However, Black (62.5%) and Hispanic (57.2%) parents more often reported COVID-19-related safety concerns than White parents (44.6%), and White parents (28.7%) more often reported their child's lack of interest in a summer program than Black (19.9%) and Hispanic (20.8%) parents.

FIGURE 7

### PARENT-REPORTED BARRIERS TO SUMMER PROGRAM ACCESS

“What were the main reasons you decided to not have your child attend a program this summer (2021)?”



% Families Accessing Unstructured Summer Experiences



# Parents perceived more social-emotional growth in children when engaged in structured programming

## DID PARENTS BELIEVE THEIR CHILDREN WERE DEVELOPING SOCIALLY, EMOTIONALLY, AND ACADEMICALLY OVER THE SUMMER?

### CHILD'S SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL GROWTH:

The Holistic Student Assessment-Parent (HSA-Parent) is a 44-item questionnaire that was used to assess 10 dimensions of child social-emotional well-being (see Table 1). Each item was formatted with a 4-point rating scale indicating the frequency of the behavior described: 0 (*not at all*) to 3 (*almost always*). Parents rated each item twice, corresponding to the start and end of summer. Key findings from the HSA-Parent are described on the following pages.

TABLE 1		HOLISTIC STUDENT ASSESSMENT FOR PARENTS (HSA-PARENT): SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL SKILLS OF CHILDREN AS PERCEIVED BY THEIR PARENTS	
	HSA-PARENT SCALE	DEFINITION	SAMPLE ITEM
RESILIENCIES	<b>Action Orientation</b>	Engagement in physical and hands-on activities.	Likes to move their body.
	<b>Emotion Control</b>	Self-regulation of distress and management of anger.	Reacts to things so quickly that they get in trouble.
	<b>Assertiveness</b>	Confidence in putting oneself forward, advancing personal beliefs and in standing up for what one believes.	Sticks up for themselves against unfair rules.
	<b>Perseverance</b>	Persistence in work and problem solving despite obstacles.	Achieves the things they try to accomplish.
	<b>Trust</b>	Perception of other people as helpful and trustworthy.	Thinks most people are fair.
	<b>Empathy</b>	Recognition of other's feelings and experiences.	Likes to help people with their problems.
	<b>Reflection</b>	Inner thought processes and self-awareness, and internal responsiveness toward broader societal issues.	Tries to understand the world they live in.
	<b>Optimism</b>	Enthusiasm for and hopefulness about one's life.	Believes that more good things than bad things will happen to them.
RELATIONSHIPS	<b>Relationships with Peers</b>	Positive and supportive social connections with friends and classmates.	Believes they have friends who care about them.
	<b>Relationships with Adults</b>	Positive connections and attitudes toward interactions with adults.	Has adult role models they look up to and admire.

Parent perceptions of their children’s social-emotional growth, measured using the HSA-Parent, varied by social-emotional skill, type of experience (structured or unstructured), parent gender (mother/father), child grade level (Grades K to 6/7 to 12), family income (lower, middle, and higher income), and program dosage/ duration. See Figure 8.

**Social-emotional skills:**

When engaged in structured summer programs, parents reported significantly more social-emotional growth in their children—from beginning to end of summer—for six out of 10 social-emotional skills: action orientation, quality of relationships with adults, assertiveness, empathy, optimism, and perseverance (relative to parents of children engaged in unstructured experiences). By the end of summer, parents of children engaging in structured programs rated their children higher for nine out of 10 social-emotional skills (all except emotion control, data not shown).

**Parent Gender:**

Overall, mothers (and other female caregivers) believed their children had higher quality relationships with peers and adults as well as more empathy (relative to fathers), and fathers (and other male caregivers) believed their children were more trusting of others (relative to mothers).

Fathers believed their children, when engaged in structured programs, were more assertive and had developed higher quality relationships (relative to fathers of children in unstructured experiences).

**FIGURE 8**

**PARENT PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR CHILDREN’S SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL GROWTH VARIED BY TYPE OF SUMMER EXPERIENCE (STRUCTURED VS. UNSTRUCTURED) AND BY GRADE LEVEL (GRADES K TO 6 AND GRADES 7 TO 12)**



**Child Grade Level:**

Overall, parents of younger children (Grades K to 6) believed their children had higher quality relationships with adults and peers and were more active, empathetic, optimistic, and trusting (relative to parents of older children, Grades 7 to 12).

When their children were engaged in structured programs, parents of children in Grades 7 to 12 believed their children were more active, assertive, empathetic, optimistic, reflective, and trusting, as well as had higher quality relationships with adults and peers (relative to parents of children in Grades 7 to 12 who had unstructured experiences).

**Income:**

Overall, parents with higher income believed their children had higher quality relationships (relative to parents with lower income, but not middle income) and were more trusting and assertive (relative to parents with lower and middle income).

When their children were engaged in structured programs, parents with higher income believed their children developed better relationships with adults and became more optimistic and reflective (relative to parents with lower and middle income); however, when their children engaged in unstructured experiences, parents with higher income perceived less growth in these same skills (relative to parents with lower and middle income).

**Race/ethnicity:**

When their children were engaged in structured programs: Black parents reported the most growth in relationships with adults (34.2%) and assertiveness (34.2%); Hispanic parents reported the most growth in perseverance (41.6%) and action orientation (40.0%); and White Parents reported the most growth in perseverance (43.3%) and optimism (38.0%).

When their children were engaged in unstructured experiences: Black parents reported the most growth in reflection (29.2%) and emotion control (27.0%); Hispanic parents reported the most growth in perseverance (36.4%) and reflection (36.0%); and White parents reported the most growth in reflection (29.3%) and perseverance (28.7%)

**Duration and Dosage:**

At the end of the summer, parents with children in programs for two to three months (higher duration) perceived significantly higher levels of emotion control and perseverance than parents with children in programs for one month or less (lower duration).

At the end of the summer, parents with children in programs for five hours or more per day (higher dosage) perceived significantly higher levels of action orientation, quality of relationships with adults, empathy, optimism, perseverance, and reflection than parents with children in programs for four hours or less (lower dosage).

...



# Parents believed their children were better prepared for school when engaged in structured summer programs

## HOW DID PARENTS FEEL ABOUT THEIR CHILDREN RETURNING TO SCHOOL?

### CONFIDENCE CHILD WILL SUCCEED IN SCHOOL:

#### Overall:

On average, about 89% of parents were fairly/very confident that their children’s summer experiences will help them succeed socially, emotionally, and academically in the upcoming school year.

#### Type of Experience:

While most parents reported high confidence in their children’s success in school for both structured programs and unstructured summer experiences, parents of children in structured summer programs (average of 92.0%) were significantly more confident that their child will succeed in school (average of 86.8%). See Figure 9 (all items statistically significant).

Parents of children in structured summer programs (regardless of demographics) were the most confident that their children “will be socially and emotionally ready to handle the upcoming school year.”

#### Child Grade Level:

When engaged in structured summer programs, parents of children in Grades 7 to 12 were more confident that their child will succeed in school (relative to parents of children in Grades 7 to 12 with unstructured experiences). The effect was observed for parents of children in Grades K to 6, but to a lesser degree. Data not shown.

#### Race/Ethnicity:

Overall, considering ratings across four confidence-related items, Black (89.3%) and Hispanic (97.4%) parents were most confident that their children “will stay on track academically this upcoming school year,” whereas White parents were most confident that their children “will have more friends and personal connections” (90.7%).

#### Dosage and Duration:

At the end of the summer, parents with children in summer programs for two to three months (higher duration) were more confident that their children would be “socially and emotionally ready to handle the upcoming school year” than parents with children in summer programs for one month or less (lower duration).

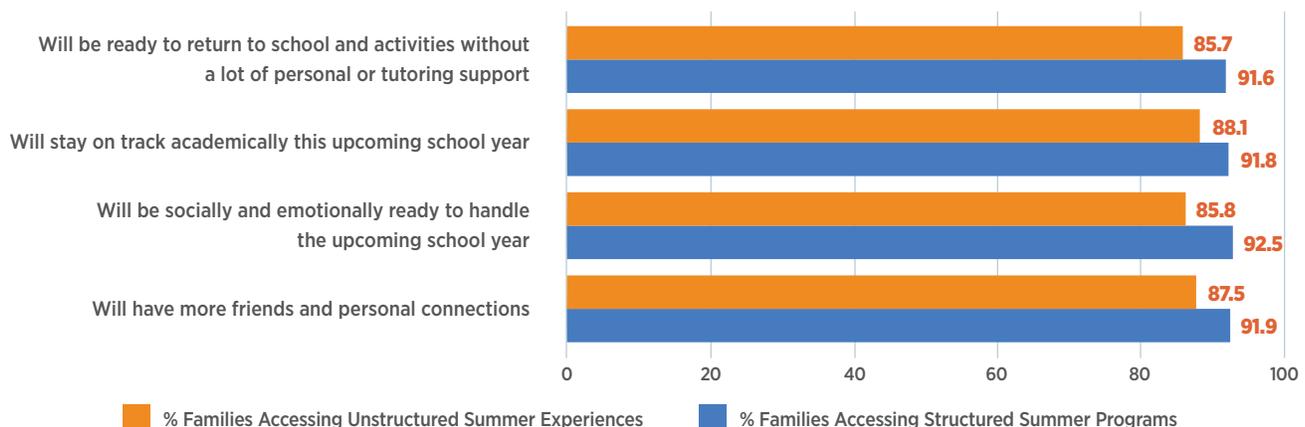
At the end of the summer, parents with children in summer programs for five hours or more per day (higher dosage) were more confident that their children would be “socially and emotionally ready to handle the upcoming school year” and “will have more friends and personal connections” than parents with children in summer programs for four hours or less (lower dosage).

#### Parent Gender, Family Income, Race/ethnicity:

There were no statistical differences in levels of confidence based on parent gender, family income, or race/ethnicity.

FIGURE 9

PARENTS’ LEVELS OF CONFIDENCE THAT THEIR CHILD WILL SUCCEED IN SCHOOL BY TYPE OF SUMMER EXPERIENCE (STRUCTURED VS. UNSTRUCTURED)



**CHILD'S PREPAREDNESS FOR THE RETURN TO SCHOOL:**

**Overall:**

On average, ~67% of parents felt their children's summer experiences prepared them very well or extremely well for the return to school.

**Type of Experience:**

While this was true for structured program and unstructured experiences, parents of children in structured summer programs were significantly more likely to feel that their child was well-prepared (78.2%), relative to parents of children in unstructured summer experiences (57.1%). See Figure 10 for mean ratings of preparedness (disaggregated by parent gender, race/ethnicity, and income).

**Parent Gender:**

Mothers and other female caregivers (64.4%) felt that their children's summer experiences prepared them less well than fathers and other male caregivers (76.2%). This difference was greater among parents of children in Grades 7 to 12 than Grades K to 6 (see Figure 10).

**Grade:**

When engaged in structured summer programs, parents of children in Grades 7 to 12 believed their child was more prepared for the upcoming school year (relative to parents of children in Grades 7 to 12 with unstructured experiences). The same difference between structured vs. unstructured groups was found among parents of children in Grades K to 6, but to a lesser degree.

**Dosage and Duration:**

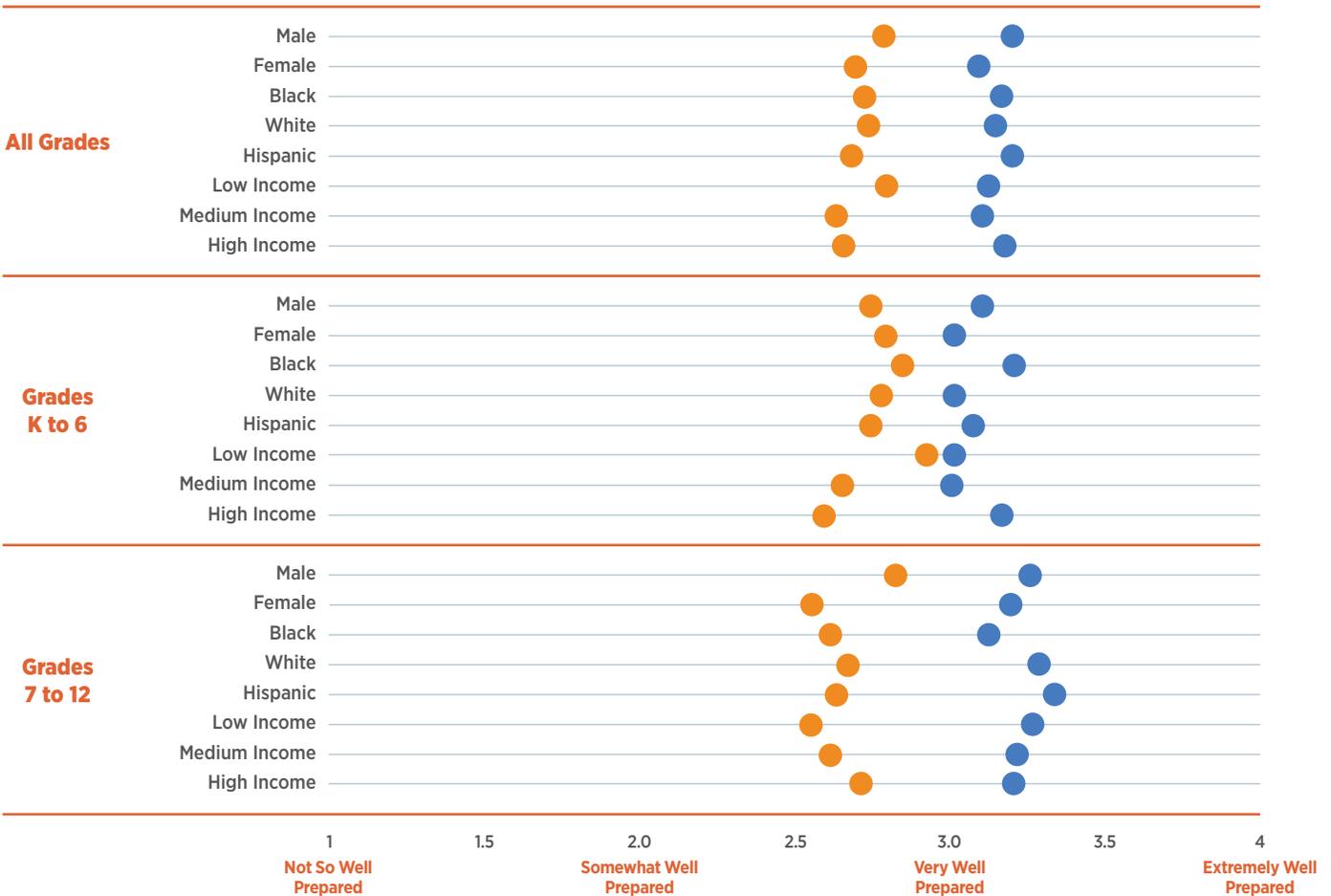
At the end of the summer, parents with children in summer programs for five hours or more per day (higher dosage) felt their children's summer experiences prepared them more for the return to school than parents with children in programs for four hours or less per day (lower dosage). There were no differences in parents' perceptions of preparedness for the return to school based on duration of participation in structured programs.

**Income, Race/Ethnicity:**

There were no statistical differences in preparedness for the return to school based on family income, parent race/ethnicity, or duration of program participation.

**FIGURE 10**

**PARENT PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR CHILDREN'S PREPAREDNESS FOR THE RETURN TO SCHOOL BY TYPE OF SUMMER EXPERIENCE (STRUCTURED VS. UNSTRUCTURED), BY PARENT DEMOGRAPHICS, AND BY CHILD GRADE LEVEL**



## HOW DID PARENTS THINK SUMMER COULD BETTER PREPARE THEIR CHILD FOR SCHOOL?

When asked to elaborate on what would better prepare their child over the summer for the upcoming school year, parents provided written responses that were organized into five themes (Table 2).

TABLE 2 THEMES THAT CHARACTERIZE PARENTS' THOUGHTS ON HOW SUMMER CAN PREPARE CHILDREN FOR SCHOOL		
THEME	SUMMARY	PARENT INSIGHTS
<p><b>1</b></p> <p><b>Increasing Participation in Structured Programs and Activities (23%)</b></p>	<p>Attending structured summer programs, which provides children with enriching activities and helps children develop consistency and routine.</p>	<p>“Honestly. The programs they attend are extremely beneficial to them. They learn many things that I myself as a child never had access to. It enriches them greatly and they constantly amaze me how quickly they pick up on skills and interactions.”</p> <p>“A more rigid routine as far as time and schedule through the summer. I see his first week of school feels draining to him because during the summer he had so much idle time off.”</p>
<p><b>2</b></p> <p><b>Providing More Academic and School-Related Offerings (22%)</b></p>	<p>Helping children get ahead on academic learning (especially reading, math, and science), and addressing learning loss/unfinished learning, with educational activities, such as hands-on learning, tutoring, homework, summer school, and homeschooling.</p>	<p>“An academic summer program... My son didn't practice his academics on a regular basis, so he lost a lot of what he learned the school year prior.”</p> <p>“Doing educational courses for important and difficult subjects, so that the child can find them somewhat easier before the beginning of the school year.”</p>
<p><b>3</b></p> <p><b>Increasing Opportunities for Social and Behavioral Development (20%)</b></p>	<p>Developing 21st-century/social and emotional skills in children, by socializing and making new friends, being challenged by activities and adventures, and learning to express their thoughts and identify their feelings in positive ways.</p>	<p>“I think more problem-solving capabilities and learning to communicate with others.”</p> <p>“Being in some form of summer camp learning how to socialize with other children.”</p>
<p><b>4</b></p> <p><b>Prioritizing Flexibility, Safety, and Communication Due to COVID-19 (11%)</b></p>	<p>Helping families cope with the stress and setbacks of the constantly changing landscape of COVID-19, by providing clear communications about safety and schedule changes and adapting programs to ensure safe participation in activities, time outdoors, and opportunities to socialize (even when limited to virtual offerings).</p>	<p>“Being around more kids, being more activate[sic], going to summer camp. He was unable to do a lot due to covid.”</p> <p>“Knowing what was going to happen due to Covid. The school system was unsure if kids were going to be going back in person full-time until the last minute”</p>
<p><b>5</b></p> <p><b>Providing or Expanding Access to Resources, Services, and Supports (5%)</b></p>	<p>Addressing unmet needs in child and family services (especially related mental health, physical and cognitive disabilities, and autism), and removing financial and logistical constraints that impede access to summer programs, so children can access necessary resources, services, and supports they may need to be healthy, productive, and successful upon returning to school.</p>	<p>“Mental health counseling”</p> <p>“If I could afford to pay for a summer camp for them to continue to learn.”</p> <p>“Having a bus pick up so child can attend activity”</p>

## WHAT DID PARENTS WANT SUMMER PERSONNEL AND DECISION-MAKERS TO KNOW ABOUT SUMMER?

Parents were asked if there was anything else they would like to share about themselves, their families, or their children's summer experiences. Common themes in the reflections parents shared include:

### Summer is restorative and resilience-building:

Regardless of how children spent their summer--whether in a structured program or an unstructured experience--many parents shared that fun, enjoyment, and just taking a break from school were important for their children's social, emotional, and academic growth and happiness. Parents shared how their children get to play and explore outside, contribute to the local community, and try out new interests and hobbies they might not have time for during the academic year. Parents also described the importance of summer for doing lessons to prepare for the school year: "We have them read books and some lessons so they won't forget what they learned in school last year." Some parents noticed there were more options for structured summer programs this year relative to previous years: "The federal grant money given to the education [sic] allowed for my child's school to offer a very WIDE variety of summer enrichment classes."

### Barriers exist to structured program access:

Parents elaborated on the variety of barriers that have prevented their children from accessing structured summer programs. At the top of the list were COVID-19 safety concerns, program expense, and distance/transportation: "I would have loved to send my children to any kind of summer program but unfortunately everything is too far and too expensive." Parents of children with physical and cognitive disabilities also described challenges of finding programs that could accommodate their children's needs: "My son is hard of hearing and sometimes it's hard to find activities for him" and "Include special needs camps and activities. Most people don't know about them and they are important too. Be a good way to get the word out." Lastly, several parents noted the need for programs tailored to different age groups to develop age-appropriate life skills: "Wish there were more summer programs of different sorts for different ages that could help them prepare for whatever comes next or is expected for or from them in life."

### Parents are grateful for summer program providers and educators:

Parents expressed a lot of gratitude for the work that program providers and educators doing to address the social, emotional, and academic needs of their children, especially in the midst of a pandemic: "I would just like to commend educators for returning to school during the pandemic." Parents acknowledged how the pandemic is unprecedented and that the work to keep programs open was very challenging for programs and educators: "...given the situation they have done the best they can and as a parent I am grateful for it." Many parents provided examples of the positive impacts that programs and educators had on their children: "My daughter could not stop talking about how fun her camp experience was and all her new friends she made."

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# Structured summer programs yielded positive results, but access was unequal

## WHAT INSIGHTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS CAN BE SHARED?

The results of this study show that parents believe structured summer program experiences have significant, positive impacts on multiple domains of learning and thriving – but these benefits are not reaching all families equally. Below we summarize key findings and our recommendations.

### Positive Results for Structured Programs

- Parents across multiple demographics see value in both structured programs and unstructured experiences outside of programs, but **satisfaction and perceptions of youth social-emotional growth and school preparedness were significantly more positive among parents of children in structured programming**, with the strongest positive effects of structured programming for Grades 7 to 12.
- **Parents whose children spent more time in summer programming**—in terms of hours per day, and weeks per summer—**reported more satisfaction** with their children’s summer experiences, **more confidence** that their children would succeed in school, and **more social-emotional growth in their children** than parents whose children spent less time in summer programming.
- To protect summer from becoming more time on school-related tasks (“time-on-task”), the field should **find exemplar programs that successfully promote youth social, emotional, and academic growth and preparedness** for school. These examples will indicate what training and tools are needed to improve youth social, emotional, and academic outcomes over the summer.

### Access to Programs is Not Equitably Distributed

- Parent responses suggest that **access to structured programs is not equitably distributed**. Families with higher educational attainment and income are more likely to engage in structured summer programming.

- We recommend the creation of policies to **fund and scale high-quality structured summer programming for families, especially those with less access**, with attention to racially and ethnically diverse communities and rural communities, as well as childcare considerations, and transportation issues.

### COVID Concerns are a Significant Barrier

- **Pandemic-related health and safety concerns, program costs, and child’s lack of interest were the most commonly cited barriers** to participation in structured summer program experiences. Black and Hispanic parents more often reported COVID-19-related safety concerns than White parents, a finding that is consistent with health and economic data suggesting that the pandemic disproportionately affected Black and Hispanic households than White households.
- Programs must prioritize safety and become more affordable and engaging. Leadership should **work with youth and families to co-design and co-create programming** that meets the interests and needs of the community, and that can be adapted to virtual and hybrid learning environments.

### More Data Are Needed on Summer Learning

- This survey’s **measure of social-emotional development (HSA-Parent) builds on developmental theory and connects to a student self-report survey**. The measure was sensitive to differences between groups and socio-demographic factors, providing useful information to assess summer trends.
- The field should **conduct research and evaluation to define and assess “quality” summer programming and identify the factors that lead to stronger outcomes**, including program dosage and duration or social and emotional practices. Data are also needed to understand which investments in summer programs translate into more families served. This will require the collection of evidence from multiple perspectives (children, educators, parents, etc.).



## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FAMILIES, PROGRAMS, AND POLICY-MAKERS

This study demonstrates the value of structured summer program experiences for youth and families, leading to some suggestions and recommendations for different stakeholders.

### Families: Youth, Parents, and Other Caregivers

- Voice your interests, ideas, and concerns. Find opportunities to inform school and program leadership about what would be more interesting or would make it easier to participate in programming.
- Get involved with networks or communities. Attend meetings or join online groups for local youth and/or parents, to share information about resources and elevate family voices so that decision-makers understand how to support and prioritize summer programming based on constituents' needs and interests.

### Program Providers: Schools, Youth-Serving Organizations, and Non-profits

- Develop and maintain community partnerships to increase capacity and expertise and alleviate barriers that prevent families from accessing programs. For instance, schools can host structured programming on their campuses as these locations are familiar, and often more accessible to families. Summer programming can be hosted at popular, centrally-located community areas such as libraries or parks, with accessibility/proximity to public transportation.
- Prioritize flexibility, safety, and engagement, even when activities are delivered in a remote/online environment. For example, COVID-19 remains a large barrier to participation in structured programming for families. Partnering with an edtech company that can provide free or low-cost technical support, devices, and connectivity can make more engaging virtual options available to families with COVID-related safety concerns. Community public access broadcasting can share educational material and programming for families. Activity kits can be distributed or made available for pickup at libraries, food distribution centers, and schools.
- Create program offerings that are tailored to meet children's developmental needs and interests. For instance, parents of children in Grades 7 to 12 were more likely to report that their children lacked interest in summer program offerings. Middle school and high school youth may be more interested in summer internships or externships, which could be created through partnerships with local businesses. Also, more advanced or age-appropriate topics can be offered and advertised as "teen activities" to draw notice from older youth who might feel that "summer camp" is for little kids.
- Make it easier for families to find information on programs, including resources to help families access quality programs. Make sure all materials include clear information around program accessibility, affordability, and logistics.

- Implement feedback mechanisms for families and children to ensure that summer programming meets community needs. This can be as simple as an online survey or an informal conversation at drop-off/pick-up from school, but can also involve parent focus groups or town-hall style meetings. Feedback can be used to adjust the content of programming as well as the manner of delivery.
- Consider expanding and improving upon available resources, integrating support systems, and creating the infrastructure needed to meet specific needs of children and families. Parents felt that their child's needs tied to mental health, physical and cognitive disabilities, and developmental challenges were not sufficiently met during the summer. Summer is an opportunity for inclusion and mainstreaming (for example, camps with wheelchair-accessible swimming facilities so nobody feels left out), and also a time to target specific needs (for example, kids with social challenges and autism spectrum disorder can be coached through informal peer interactions).

### Decision-makers: Policy-makers and funders

- Target investments and make grants and aid available to underserved families and programs. Cost continues to prevent many families from accessing structured programming, but policymakers and funders can defray the cost of participation, program fees, transportation, etc. Better funding for summer programming would help organizations retain high-quality staff and devote more effort to assessment and quality improvement.
- Centralize and organize data regarding available summer programs and their offerings to close information gaps for families. Ensure that information on programs is available in multiple languages and distributed widely, so that families can find organizations that fit their needs. Compiling this information could also help providers and funders identify service gaps.
- Parents reported that some populations of children, including those with mental health needs, physical and cognitive disabilities, and autism, did not receive sufficient support during the summer. Provide funding targeted towards these needs and develop resources to address shortfalls in service provision and delivery.
- Private-public partnerships can be used to meet demand for out-of-school time programming. Initiating and fostering partnerships that target and support populations with limited access to summer programming, such as low-income and rural communities, can increase availability.
- Increase program provider awareness of available resources at the federal, state, and local level.

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