

# Listening to Parents about the Kids in Transition to School (KITS) Program: Results from Parent Focus Groups



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During the summer and fall of 2016, children and families in 16 schools in Lane County participated in the Kids in Transition to School (KITS) Program. KITS includes 16 weeks of group-based child classes and 12 weeks of parenting workshops, using an evidence-based curriculum designed to improve school readiness skills and parenting. To learn more about the KITS program from the perspective of participating families, four focus groups were held with parents who participated in KITS. A total of 44 parents participated in the groups, which were located in four different schools (two small, rural locations and two larger more urban school districts). Focus groups were conducted in English, and 3 Spanish-speaking parents participated in 2 of the groups. Translation was provided for Spanish speaking parents who participated<sup>1</sup>. Groups were facilitated by members of the KITS evaluation team from the Center for Improvement of Child and Family Services at Portland State University. Participants reported mixed experiences prior to KITS in terms of children's experience with preschool, with about half reporting that their child had been to preschool and about half indicating no prior group-based experiences.

Focus group questions were designed to learn more about families' experience with the KITS program (e.g., the enrollment process, attendance supports, etc.), about the benefits of the program for parents and children, and about any challenges encountered with the program. Focus group discussions were transcribed and analyzed by the senior researcher to identify key themes. These themes and findings were then reviewed by the other team members and by the focus group facilitators to confirm and clarify findings. Results of the focus groups are summarized below.

## Biggest Benefits of the KITS Program for Children

When asked about the biggest benefits of the program for children and about what changes parents saw in their children during and after participating, several themes emerged. The most frequently mentioned benefits were related to the ways in which **KITS helped to improve behavior and social skills**. Parents described how their child learned to make friends and reduce social anxiety:

*"[My daughter] had high anxiety. Because of what [KITS] was teaching, over time her anxiety lessened and she was able to open up more around the class...it was awesome to see her not be afraid."*

*"In KITS they are teaching how to make friends. They role play on what to do in certain situations. It helped [daughter] to open up more and not be afraid of making friends."*

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<sup>1</sup> A series of interviews with Spanish speaking parents focused specifically on translation and cultural responsiveness is planned for Spring 2017.

Parents also described children **learning specific skills and gaining confidence** as helpful in preparing them for starting school:

*“For my stepson, he learned a little bit of conflict resolution. He can get over-emotional and so he is learning to be ok when people don’t want to play with him, and learning it is not ok to get mad about that.”*

This was true both for parents whose children had been in preschool before as well as for those children who had not been in a prior group based experience. Parents also commented on the benefit experienced in some KITS groups (but not all) of **having the KITS classroom on site** at the child’s future elementary school.

*“My daughter was in Head Start, which was a great school as well. I think this just pushed her even farther because she had the summer off. Having that extra time in KITS before school started made the transition really easy. It just kind of opened up the door and made it easier to just walk in school and she is ready to go!”*

**KITS homework** was also frequently mentioned as a benefit, although several parents also described this as challenging, at least at the beginning. One parent commented that having the homework helped the parent to “get more organized” around homework which paid off once school started and there were more homework assignments to be done.

*“One thing my child got out of [KITS] is that she is definitely doing homework. She had been in Head Start before, so she’s used to being with other children, but this was her first instance of every day having homework. That was a big change and was fun for her to learn.”*

*“With the homework, he struggled a lot when we first got the assignments, but they talked about sticker charts and stuff and now he will just sit at the table and breeze right through it. That has been huge for him.”*

*“The homework ended up being a good idea, but in the beginning it was not. He would just look at us, like, ‘what did I do wrong?’ It took him a while to understand that what you do at school carries home. Then, once he got it, it was like ‘watch what I can do.’ It was more ‘look what I can do’ rather than ‘why I have to keep doing this?’”*

For children who had been largely at home prior to KITS, the period of practice for **separating from parents** was seen as helpful in making the transition to school easier:

*“Before this, because both me and my husband are stay-at-home, [my son] never got much socialization. We didn’t really think about it and then, all of a sudden, we are like, ‘we have to register for kindergarten and that transition is going to be so drastic...so I was very happy with the program.’”*

Finally, several parents also noted the importance of KITS in **helping children gain an initial sense of confidence and mastery**. One parent described letter-writing as initially challenging, but eventually resulting in the child’s feeling confident and competent in this pre-academic skill. Other examples related to homework and bus-riding:

*“When we first got the KITS homework, he wouldn’t want to even trace the letters and he was crying and saying he couldn’t do it.....He was another that got confidence from this. I can’t even imagine not going through this and having to start kindergarten homework with all these pages...it would be hard.”*

*“Riding the bus was a huge thing. He loves that. He will not let me take him to school. He has to take the bus and he loves the independence and he knows what he is doing. It really boosted his confidence.”*

## Benefits of the KITS Program for Parents

Parents were also asked to talk about the ways that the KITS program was helpful to them as parents. Two themes predominated these responses. First, parents described the specific skills and strategies that they learned from participating in the parent workshops. In particular, parents mentioned learning **ways to support children’s positive behavior** such as time-outs/time-aways, positive reinforcement, and being consistent and following through when requests were made of children:

*“I think [the most helpful thing] was using the time out, but looking at it differently, less as a punishment and more as a safety break. I’m trying to incorporate that.”*

*“I learned to stick with what you say. In the heat of the moment, you have to stick to what you say. Keep it where you can actually do it.”*

*“I learned I need to finish my sentences, basically. If I tell her to do something, rather than ‘[daughter], stop’ – she is talking, walking, breathing – I didn’t mean to stop any of that. I meant ‘stop hitting that’...I meant stop hitting the wall or whatever it might have been.”*

Parents also talked about the program’s general approach that focused on **reducing parenting stress and frustration** and helping parents **communicate more effectively** with their child, especially during times of behavioral challenge, including things like the “10-second rule” (giving children 10 seconds to respond to requests) and developing more patience:

*“Just approaching her more gently versus getting frustrated myself. That just helped remind me of everything I’ve already learned, and to use those strategies versus getting frustrated.”*

*“I think the biggest thing for me was the patience. I think it has calmed me down by giving me that 10 seconds. I know that he’s going to do it – I know he’s going to do it. That is something I liked.”*

The other major benefit that parents described was having the **opportunity to meet, share ideas with, and be supported by other parents**. This included sharing specific parenting practices as well as the sense of normalizing children’s behavior and parenting issues by gaining understanding that other parents are “in the same boat.” In fact, in 3 of the 4 parent focus groups held, parents spontaneously raised the idea of holding ongoing parent potluck dinners or other get-togethers now that the program was over.

*“I liked to hear that my kid is not the only one having this issue. That is really, really nice to hear.”*

*“I kind of feel like our parent group has been more like a support group. That one aspect I felt was awesome, probably one of the best experiences about this whole program was that there were other parents in the same boat as me.”*

*“Just being with other parents and hearing everybody’s struggles and achievements in a safe place, and knowing we are all in the same boat together and we are not alone in this...At first it was really awkward and kind of weird, in all honesty. I am a lot more comfortable now that we have been together for so long and just having that connection...giving each other advice to help each other out.”*

*“Getting ideas from advice from other parents helped me a lot, because [my son] can be a little difficult.”*

Parents acknowledged the **benefit of having homework assignments** that involved using different KITS strategies during the week. This was generally seen as helpful, and parents described that having the expectation for doing this was motivating in changing their behavior.

*“There were things I said, ‘oh, this isn’t going to work,’ but I gave it a shot. One of them was time outs – this isn’t going to work, we’ve tried this. Within two days of doing it, it was like, ‘wow, this is working and we are still implementing that now. Wow, it worked!”*

At the same time, a few parents described challenges related to specific parenting strategies that were part of the KITS curriculum but which were inconsistent with their own family values and beliefs about parenting; in particular, the use of time out was mentioned as something that made a few of the parents uncomfortable. Some parents also described adapting the KITS strategy to their own family culture:

*“It is different for everyone. There were some techniques we liked and some we didn’t. We are still recovering from the week of doing time outs!”*

*“Even though [facilitator] said after the time out, to leave it alone, you are done, we would always discuss what happened and why she was sitting there and what she could do differently. We discuss after we are cooled off and we’ve both had time. Then we can have a strategy and we can problem solve together to make a solution for next time versus just leaving it.”*

Similarly parents acknowledged the challenge of doing the role playing, but also noted how it helped:

*“For me, the role playing helped. I hated the role playing! But it is helpful for me to see some of this because logically it seems simple, but you have to go, ‘OK, how do I make this into a positive if I can’t see anything positive out of it?’”*

Another benefit mentioned by several parents was learning ideas about how to **improve communication with kindergarten teachers**:

*“My anxiety is through the roof socially, so when I was in school the teacher was a big scary monster...I was always scared I would bother my son’s teacher. But I’ve actually done a lot more with him in his class and his teacher than I thought I would, just because I know a few kids in the class and just being comfortable here in the school.”*

*“Before, I didn’t know how to, I don’t know the word – confront? My daughter’s teacher about some issues I had. But then I was able to learn some skills and strategies that helped me kind of get past that.”*

Several other parents also noted that having both parents (in a two parent family) participate was an unanticipated benefit. These parents described the helpfulness of both parents getting the same information and working together with similar tools:

*“It helps you and your partner to integrate and [figure out] how to take care of it together.”*

*“It helped a lot for me because that is where we would clash...it was always like, tell the girls to do this and the boys not to do this, and so this was, like, perfect.”*

*“I have 6 kids, and I thought ‘oh I don’t really need this.’ But I did it because I wanted my husband to get more help with his parenting...but, I am not a perfect parent and there is so much more knowledge about parenting stuff.”*

## What made it easier to participate?

**Child care was by far the most frequently mentioned** aspect of the program that supported parent attendance. Most of the participating parents in these focus groups had other children, and noted that without child care they would not have been able to attend.

*“The child care is wonderful! My youngest one, who is 2 ½, he calls it his class. He wants to go every week. That made it work, for me. I could just sit here and talk.”*

A few parents also mentioned the raffle/prizes for attendance, the snacks and food provided, the ability to attend make up sessions. Others shared that the parent group facilitator had made helpful reminder calls.

## Barriers to enrollment and participation

**Scheduling conflicts** were by far the most frequently mentioned challenge, and although all four groups discussed the relative merits of different timing and scheduling options, it seemed clear that no one time of day or day of the week would work for all parents. One suggestion was having more than one option for parent workshops as a way to get more parents to attend. Several parents also noted that, at the beginning of the program, they did not have a good understanding of what the parent group was about or what the potential benefits for them might be. **Better communication about the importance of the parent group** and the benefits for parents of having opportunities to learn parenting skills and meet other parents might also help increase motivation to participate. Another suggestion was to offer “make up classes” for parents who missed more than one group so that they could meet separately to cover material from missed sessions. Several parents also noted that not learning about the time of the parent groups until just a few short weeks before the groups started made it difficult, if not impossible, for some parents.

## Suggestions for Next Year

In terms of the initial enrollment process, parents suggested that it would be helpful for schools to let parents know earlier whether their child would be able to participate; waiting until a few weeks before KITS programming started was a challenge mentioned by more than a few participants. Parents also suggested that schools provide more information about details (time, location, transportation, etc.) as well as do a better job communicating about the importance of the parent group, what it involves and what they will learn about. Having **good communication about the program as early as possible** was

described as important in helping parents understand what the expected commitment for KITS would be:

*“I played phone tag for 3 days [with KITS contact person], but she was really clear when she did call, and she let us know everything, all the details. She went over it twice with us to make sure we understood.”*

Another suggestion made by parents was to provide them with **more information about what children are doing in the child classroom/SRG**. Parents suggested allowing parents to observe the SRG, being explicit about what is being covered in SRG so parents can help at home; and generally coordinating what is happening across the child and parent classes more explicitly:

*“Maybe provide a course outline for them [the children]. We got one for us, and we are following it, but what are they actually doing in class?”*

*“It might be helpful maybe even for parents to sit through a class, just so the parents could do a model of what the kids are doing. And we can see how they are teaching the kids to sit in a circle, and what they do at group time...to see how teachers are laying it out more at the beginning so we can support them more at home.”*

*“It would be nice to know if what we are learning is actually being applied in the classroom at the same time, to see if it is actually coordinated with our curriculum. It would be nice to observe that a couple of times, to see it in action.”*

Finally, several parents noted that their only concern or worry in signing their child up was not understanding who the child’s teacher would be. **Knowing that staff were credentialed in some way**, or even better, were school district staff and/or teachers, would have helped these parents feel more comfortable enrolling the program, as illustrated by the following exchange:

*“I was concerned about who the teachers would be...” ...“Yea, we just gave our kids to strangers.” “I think they are all District employees”...“but this is the last day and I’m just finding that out.”*

In summary, however, these parents were very enthusiastic in their support of the model and saw it as beneficial to families, experienced parents, and children with a variety of prior experiences. In fact, some **parents expressed excitement about the opportunity for their younger children** to participate in KITS before they started kindergarten:

*“I think KITS is valuable for the whole family, not just the kid going in kindergarten. We are all parents, and some of us have multiple kids, so yeah, we know what we are doing. But the strategies are still helpful. It helps everybody, even the siblings – the child care gives my other child some time away from me. I know it is a program that is focused on transitioning to kindergarten, but it kind of transitions the whole family into the process.”*

*“I have raised two kids of my own, but having this parent class and learning new strategies for helping [son] really helped me.”*