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Child Care Decision Making During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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The COVID-19 pandemic has had a massive impact on the child care industry in the United States. At the onset of the crisis, over 60% of centers and 25% of family providers shut their doors in response to public health orders¹ — and studies project that between 11 and 27% will never reopen, with higher percentages of permanently closed programs in lower income areas.^{2,3,4,5} By the end of 2020, the supply of providers showed substantial recovery with 81–91% of licensed providers open to care for children, depending on geographic region and type.⁶

Providers who continued operating throughout the pandemic generally had to operate under limited capacity — at least for a time — and therefore served fewer families and brought in less revenue.^{4,7} Even providers able to operate at full capacity reported a drop in attendance.^{7,8} At the same time, the need for additional health and safety supplies and procedures led to an increase in operating costs.^{9,10} To stay in business, providers have taken on personal debt,⁸ increased tuition,^{8,11} and/or reduced hours, but continue to express uncertainty about their ability to remain open.⁷



Nearly two-thirds of parents continue to work remotely, despite the reopening of their workplaces, due to their child care responsibilities. Parents have had to find new approaches to managing child care on top of work responsibilities.

Parents' work situations have changed dramatically because of the pandemic as well. Among parents with young children, one nationwide survey from August 2020 found that 86% of households experienced a change in their work situation (e.g., loss of work, reduction in hours, required telework).² In the fall of 2020, most American workers who could fulfill their job responsibilities from home were teleworking all or most of the time, and more than half reported a desire to continue their telework arrangement after the COVID-19 outbreak ends.¹² Despite the generally favorable feelings toward telework, half of parents who telework report having difficulty working without interruption and having an increasingly difficult time handling child care.^{12,13} Furthermore, telework is primarily an option for upper income workers who also have more resources to pursue a variety of child care choices.

For many parents, the changes in work situations — for better or worse — appear likely to endure beyond the pandemic. Nearly two-thirds

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of parents whose workplaces are now open report they continue to work from home because of child care responsibilities.¹²

Parents' evolving work situations, in combination with provider closures, mean some parents have had to implement new approaches

to care for their children at home, such as splitting care with another adult in the household or working outside normal business hours.¹⁴ Low-income families and families of color have been disproportionately negatively impacted, including experiencing higher rates of job and wage loss and of working jobs with inflexible schedules.¹⁵

While some parents have been able to care for their children at home during the pandemic, others have had to find new child care providers to work essential or inflexible low-wage jobs. Many parents, especially mothers, left the workforce completely.^{16,17} Now, as more of the population is vaccinated and more parents are returning to work, many are looking to return their children to care and finding fewer available options than pre-pandemic.

Searching for Care During the Pandemic: What Have Parents Shared?

Searching for child care has always been challenging, with parents having to compromise on their preferences for warm, supportive, and academically enriching care. However, surveys of parents suggest that searching for care has become even more difficult.^{2,18} Since the onset of the pandemic, nearly one-quarter of parents report having to compromise on cost and hours of care, and nearly one-fifth report having to compromise on location and staff qualifications.¹⁴

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It is particularly challenging to find quality care that is affordable, and families with lower incomes are more likely than other families to report that the child care search is difficult.^{14,19}

Choosing Care During the Pandemic: What Have Parents Shared?

Working parents expressed hesitation around using child care throughout the pandemic. Parents' concerns included affordability, provider availability, and COVID-19 exposure.^{2,20,21,22,23,24,25} In one state survey from spring 2020, almost two-thirds of parents indicated they were not planning to return their children to care right away.¹⁹ In a survey in another state, 60% of parents planned to send their children to care in the fall of 2020, but this percentage was still lower than pre-pandemic.²⁶ Some parents have indicated they wanted to wait until public schools in their area fully re-opened or until a vaccine is widely available.¹⁴ As of the end of March 2021, nearly 80% of teachers, school staff, and child care workers had received at least their first dose of a COVID-19 vaccine.²⁷ However, many families remain hesitant to return their children to school or child care.^{6, 28}

For those parents who have decided to send their children to care, pre-pandemic arrangements are often not available due to lack of open child care slots, provider closure, or staff turnover affecting the continuity of care parents find so important. This is especially true for lower-income households.⁵ Additionally, the types of care chosen by parents have shifted over the course of the pandemic. In one study, use of center-based care diminished substantially at the beginning of the pandemic but has gradually increased. At that time, a higher proportion of families chose home-based providers.²¹ It is unknown whether this is due to fewer options or changes in preferences.

Have Parents' Preferences and Priorities Changed?

Compared to pre-pandemic, a greater percentage of parents indicate they prefer smaller groups or home-based care (which generally has smaller groups than centers), perhaps because smaller care settings limit exposure to the number of people outside of the household.^{17,21,29,30,31} This is particularly true among higher-income families.²⁵ It should be noted that one survey found a slight increase in parents wishing to use center-based care.²⁹ Those parents may feel more secure in the perceived level of oversight and resources to meet the enhanced health and safety precautions.

Parents are also placing much higher emphasis on ensuring providers follow health and safety measures, including CDC guidelines.^{14,24,28,32} Health and safety practices have always been important to parents when looking for a child care provider, but parents now want to know more about providers' specific plans for cleaning procedures, group size, and social distancing.³³

Some practical factors, such as cost, schedule, and location, continue to be important to parents. However, they are no longer the top priority.^{24,28}

Transition to 'Normal'

As of spring 2021, states and localities are lifting restrictions, meaning more providers can operate at increased or full capacity. This is promising for providers who have struggled to operate at reduced capacity. However, the increased capacity is not necessarily in sync with parents' preferences for smaller groups to limit exposure to disease.

COVID-19 cases are expected to continue to decline as more of the population is vaccinated, but case spikes and surges continue in some areas. At this point in the pandemic, it seems

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unlikely that states will re-impose restrictions on child care operations. Parents' decision-making around whether to send children back to (or continue to use) care may be complicated in the face of surging cases, particularly if providers are operating at full capacity. Further, some parents may not have the flexibility to make child care decisions around case spikes due to work obligations or financial commitments to providers.

The infusion of federal and state recovery and stabilization funds into the economy will help families return to work and support child care programs. Child care operations, however, may look different over the short- and long-term, and supporting families should be a priority.

How Can Families Be Supported in Their Child Care Decision-Making?

Child care resource and referral (CCR&R) agencies and similar entities continue to help parents find child care. These professionals can share with parents the health and safety requirements that providers are expected to follow as well as protocols for suspected or confirmed COVID-19 cases in a child care setting. Many CCR&Rs already give parents checklists and other tools that guide parents on what to look for when considering a new provider, but parents may find it more helpful and empowering to build upon available checklists to create their own unique list that fits their needs and preferences.

Providers should be transparent about their health and safety practices. Social distancing and other measures mean that parents may not have the same access to the provider as before (e.g., parents may not be allowed in the classroom or may not see their children's teachers regularly with limited or no face-to-face interactions). Because parents may not have physical access to their children's classrooms or providers, providers should consider increasing other types of communication with families to build trusting provider-parent relationships (e.g., newsletters, virtual open houses, apps for sharing photos and messages). Helping parents feel connected to their children's daily activities and environment can ease some of the anxiety around sending their children to care. For parents who are seeking care with a particular provider for the first time and in-person tours are not available, providers should consider how to best introduce parents to the program and teachers to determine if it is a good fit. Virtual open houses or outdoor meetings are two promising options.

Child care subsidy programs have had to adapt and change during the pandemic. Policy changes such as waiving family copayments, paying based on enrollment rather than attendance, and expanding eligibility served as important family supports during this crisis



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but are likely only temporary. In the aftermath, it will be important to better understand parent circumstances, needs, and preferences. More data and information are needed to understand how child care policies and practices affect families and their decisions to better support family work and children's development.

How will the American Rescue Plan help?

The American Rescue Plan, passed in March 2021, will give states, territories, and tribes \$39 billion to address the child care crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.³⁴ Qualified child care providers who are either open to serve children or temporarily closed due to hardships related to COVID-19 will receive \$24 billion in stabilization funding. This funding will allow providers to remain open or reopen; reduce the financial burden of maintaining a safe learning environment (e.g., pay for PPE, cleaning and sanitation, and health and safety training); retain and/or hire employees; and provide health supports for children and employees. Ideally, funds will be targeted at providers and communities in most need. The remaining \$15 billion in flexible funding will support states' child care subsidy programs, making high quality child care more affordable for working families.

The goal of this historic investment in child care is to stabilize the child care market and bolster the availability of high-quality care available for all families. With the new funds, continuing decline in COVID-19 cases, and the implementation of lessons learned by providers and policymakers, there is reason for optimism. As funds are dispersed, parents should expect a new child care landscape that provides them with more and higher-quality choices that meet their newly defined needs.

Families can access the following resources for help in their decision-making:

Child Care Aware of America has tracked provider operating status, current capacity, and available slots throughout the pandemic: <https://www.childcareaware.org/resources/ccrr-search-form/>

The Early Childhood Training and Technical Assistance System has compiled a range of resources on COVID-19 and child care: <https://childcareta.acf.hhs.gov/covid-19-resources>

The Office of Child Care has an extensive list of state- and territory-specific information: <https://childcare.gov/covid-19>

The Centers for Disease Control has a decision-making tool to assist parents in deciding whether to send their children back to school. It is specific to returning to K-12 school settings; however, parents with younger children in care may find part or all of it helpful as well: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/schools-childcare/decision-tool.html>

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