



Impacts of COVID-19 on Child Care

Interviews with Native American/Indigenous Parents in Coos Bay, Oregon

In November and December 2020, five interviews were conducted with parents living in the Coos Bay region of Oregon who have at least one child who has Native American or Indigenous heritage. These interviews were part of a series of interviews and listening sessions funded by the Preschool Development Grant as an expansion of the 2019 statewide early learning needs assessment. The interviews were co-designed, organized, and facilitated by Portland State University and OSLC Developments, Inc., in partnership with the Coos Bay School District Tribal Attendance Promising Practices Family Advocate, Bre Landrum. The goal of the interviews was to include the perspectives of Native American, Indigenous, and American Indian families to understand early learning needs and experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. Ultimately, interviews will inform the development of the state's early learning plan.

All five interviews were conducted with mothers who were recruited through the Coos Bay School District or Head Start programs in the region. Families represented the Coos Tribe, the Coquille Indian Tribe, and the Confederated Tribes of Grande Ronde. Mothers interviewed were caring for two to four children total, with at least one school-aged child and one to three children who were not yet in kindergarten. Only one mother had a child under 1 year of age; most were caring for at least one toddler or preschooler. In addition, two of the participating mothers also had experience in the early learning field as a program director, teacher, and/or home visitor.

What does child care look like during the COVID-19 pandemic?

What are the impacts of the pandemic on child care?

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted child care for all five mothers interviewed. Two families reported losing child care support they were previously using and are currently caring for their children on their own. Child care for the three other families has been in constant flux since the start of the pandemic, and care resembles a patchwork of supports including grandparents, aunts, friends, babysitters, co-workers' families, in-home child care, Head Start, and taking paid time off. Care during the pandemic has been limited, with fewer available hours, lower capacity, and less child care support from family and friends.

In the spring, there was confusion about which programs were open, when they could re-open, and who could attend, and two families paid for child care slots for up to 2 months to save their child's slot but did not send their child to care, which was an enormous financial burden.

Regardless of their current child care situations, all five mothers discussed how stressful child care has been since March. Stressors included cost; instability of child care options, parenting all day, every day without breaks, limitations on where care can be given (i.e., needing to stay at home or in safe spaces); and figuring out how to support their children's learning now that they spend more time at home.

For the majority of these families, access to more (and more affordable, quality) child care is desperately needed.

What factors influence families' decisions to send their child to care or stay at home?

Concerns about **contracting and spreading COVID** were most commonly cited as a consideration related to child care, regardless of whether or not families ultimately decided to send their children to care. For some families, the need for child care during work hours outweighed health risks; however, these decisions were not and are not made lightly.

Parental stress and declining emotional and mental health are weighing heavily on many parents in the community and impacting parenting, relationships, children's learning and development, and work. Although child care would greatly improve parents' mental well-being, some families cannot afford to send their child to care or find care that they feel is safe at this point in time. Supporting positive mental health for their children during the pandemic also led some families to connect with select family and friends or return to care.

"And people are really stressed... I've talked to quite a few parents who are really struggling with their own mental health right now and the daily stresses of life on top of the pandemic, on top of trying to figure out their child's school and all the details around that, on top of the constant changes with the metrics and how that's affecting their child's education and just their daily lives, really. And I really think that we need to really focus on mental health for our parents and our students for sure... I think that they're trying to support their kids, but they can hardly support themselves in the process."

—Mother who also works in an early learning setting

Advancing and expanding **children's learning and education**—especially related to socialization, early intervention supports, and diverse educational materials and activities—were also large factors in parents' decisions around sending their children to care.

Unsurprisingly, **financial needs and constraints** were also mentioned by many of the mothers interviewed as a top consideration when deciding whether or not to send their child to care. However, the high cost of child care has also put a significant strain on parents, and some cannot afford as much care as is needed. Although none of the mothers interviewed quit their jobs to care for their children, there was recognition that this is happening within their community.

Finally, availability of **safe, quality care** was mentioned by over one half of the five mothers as major factors in sending their children to care. Mothers also noted that the pandemic has exacerbated problems finding affordable, quality child care in their community.

"I would consider myself lower middle class, like right above the poverty line that they put out all the time, and while we have nice things, we definitely live paycheck to paycheck unless we do side jobs or extra work or something to build into our savings. And then with COVID and my husband being a mill worker, we've already had to dip into our savings, and it's almost depleted."

What are parents most concerned about for their children during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Beyond concerns about their children's health and safety in child care settings, all expressed concern about the lasting impacts that limited social interactions with peers will have on their children's social and emotional development.

Several mothers highlighted concerns related to their child's speech development. Two children with speech delays were only receiving supports for speech development at home. Limited access to diagnostic testing, supports, and resources has heightened frustrations for one mother in particular. However, both mothers who were working on their child's speech development at home were proud to report that their child had made progress because they were able to spend more time at home with them and intentionally focus on speech.

The long-term impacts of limited access to preschool and early learning supports on school readiness was expressed as the ultimate concern for some of the mothers.

"And I fear my daughter will not be ready socially, emotionally or academically for kindergarten, even though... I feel like she may be more academically bright... But I do have that fear that because I can't make that choice [sending her to full-time child care] for her right now. Is that going to be damaging later on? And is she going to suffer in kindergarten?" –Child is currently in part-time care

What supports are parents receiving?

Two mothers described receiving formal supports to expand their child's learning and development, including early intervention services and trauma support that did not seem to be impacted by the pandemic. However, one child had yet to be evaluated for her speech delay, which has caused frustration and a delay in age-appropriate services. Others noted that they had received helpful informal supports from providers and family, including conversations and internet links to help resolve issues that developed as a result of COVID (e.g., behavioral issues).

Although some parents described access to supports and resources for their children, it was more common for the mothers to talk about what they are doing to help support their children at home, suggesting that there are very few resources currently available. Two mothers explicitly stated that they are unlikely to ask for help, even if they really need it. If it is not offered or readily available, as has been the case during the pandemic, they will make things work with what they have.

What supports do parents want most?

For the most part, the mothers interviewed felt like the supports they have are sufficient, especially the two interviewees who work in early learning and education settings. One mother felt like she could use a little more support related to her son's behavioral issues.

All five parents talked about different stressors in life during the pandemic. For some mothers, the impacts of the pandemic on health and well-being are great. Although not explicitly mentioned, resources and supports to help these families decrease financial, emotional, and other burdens might be an important way to provide supports for the entire family.

How do parents find child care support during the COVID-19 pandemic?

What are the challenges in finding care?

Cost is large factor in determining what type and how many hours parents are able to send their child to care. **Feeling comfortable with COVID safety protocols** was also a challenge for all five mothers; for one mother, no child care option (program or person) has adequately addressed health and safety issues. Finally, it's worth noting that one mother did not know that programs had reopened by June and lost her spot in the Head Start program her child attended.

What is different about finding care during the pandemic?

The greatest impact on finding safe, affordable, quality care is the fact that the pandemic has **exacerbated previously existing issues**, particularly the high cost of care. Two mothers discussed feeling significant financial strain as a result of the pandemic, and four mentioned that friends, coworkers, and other families in the community are also experiencing similar economic hardship right now.

Are parents experiencing discrimination while searching for care?

None of the mothers interviewed had felt they had experienced discrimination in searching for care during the pandemic. That said, none of the mothers had contacted child care providers that they did not already know and trust.

How do child care settings include parent voice and family culture?

How are child care providers including parent voices?

Most communication with providers was described as informal, happening at drop off and pick up and via text messaging about activities, programming, and individual child needs (e.g., behavior, socialization strategies). One mother, who works for the program that two of her children attend, did describe formal opportunities for parents to provide input through annual surveys. More conversations related to state-mandated and individual COVID safety protocols are currently dominating many of the conversations between these mothers and their providers.

How are child care providers reflecting families' culture and traditions in their work?

Two mothers, one of whom identified as White but whose children are half Native American, were very pleased with the cultural education their children received through the Head Start run by the Coquille Indian Tribe. The strong partnership with the tribe's Culture, Education, and Learning Services Department was credited as promoting cultural curricula. For these two mothers, embedding cultural heritage and traditions in their early learning experiences is incredibly important.

Early learning settings in the broader community, run primarily by White staff, were less likely to embed Native American history, traditions, and materials in care. While families reported that providers were open to suggestions, books about or that include Native Americans were the most common ways that White providers in their community typically discuss Native culture.

However, most of these mothers felt that their family and friends are the primary sources of their children's cultural education. It was also noted that once children enter elementary school, children have more opportunities to learn about Native American culture and traditions through specific programming at the School District.

"I would say that that is a number one for me, a priority. I think that if my kids are losing that, then we're losing generations that forget the meaning and the importance behind their traditions and their heritage. And I also think, when I talk about my child's identity and kind of what I identify as or what they view themselves as, it's really important that they understand where they come from and also that they understand the amazing things the generations before them did and how they're overcoming, all the prejudice and all that stuff that happened years ago with a lot of Native American groups."

Has the pandemic impacted the inclusion of parent voice and family cultural practices in child care settings?

Many of the conversations that parents and their child care providers are having these days are related to health and safety, which was noted as a change. Moreover, the way in which parents and providers are communicating has also changed for some during the pandemic, including more emails and virtual meetings. Relying on technology as a primary means for communication has not worked well for some. In fact, one child's slot was lost because the mother was unable to find the email notification and respond quickly. No other follow-up attempts were made by program staff before the slot was filled. The mother who also works in an early learning setting also recognized that many of the families that attend her program are unable to transition to electronic forms of communication and that more accommodations are needed.

"I do feel frustrated with COVID right now with my current provider, but it's nothing that she's doing. It's just super frustrating. But the rules are so tight... But as a parent, it's super frustrating because I have work to respond to. And I can't I can't just drop what I'm doing without having that organized because of my line of work... And you feel like it's disrespectful and that they're not being considerate of you. But I think that's just because the COVID-19... It's like she's not very clear on things herself. So she's having to like message sometimes her licensing person, whoever it is that's in charge of those licensed people, she's sometimes messaging her saying, 'Oh, I have this circumstance come up. So how long do they have to stay out? Or if they didn't actually have a fever?'"

Key Takeaways

- ▶ Parents and children alike are under a lot of stress during the pandemic, which is impacting their mental well-being, parenting, and learning and growth opportunities.
- ▶ The pandemic has exacerbated issues related to a lack of affordable, quality child care that previously existed in the community.
- ▶ In addition to more access to child care and financial supports to pay for care, families are in need of other community-based resources and supports to address serious financial and emotional strains on individuals and families as a whole.
- ▶ Providers, especially those working within White-dominant organizations, could be supported to more intentionally leverage family cultural strengths and assets to a greater degree in their work with children.

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