



Impacts of COVID-19 on Child Care

Interviews with Native American/Indigenous Parents in Klamath County, Oregon

In November 2020, three interviews were conducted with parents living in Klamath County who identify as being of 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 Klamath County School District Title VI program. The goal of the interviews was to understand the early learning needs and experiences of Native American, Indigenous, and American Indian families during the COVID-19 pandemic. Ultimately, interviews will inform the development of the state's early learning plan.

All three of the parents interviewed were mothers, and they were caring for one to three children, ranging from 1-year old to school age. In addition to American Indian heritage, some of the parents interviewed were also Mexican and Eastern European.

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

The pandemic impacted child care for most of the mothers interviewed, who reported losing their child care during closures related to the pandemic. All of the parents interviewed ended up using a patchwork of family care (e.g., co-parents, other family members, or friends); informal care (e.g., babysitters); and, in some cases, formal care. One parent described the care they were able to cobble together as "really scattered".

The parents described how challenging it was to arrange care for their children. It was hard to find someone consistently available, let alone someone the parents trusted. Additionally, programs were opening, closing, and limiting care to only children of essential workers unpredictably.

"I was considered essential, but once they started closing that gap of how many kids they could have there, I was considered not as essential as medical professionals, which is good, understandable."

"There [are] a lot of people that won't watch [my children] because they're scared that they're going to catch COVID or...they don't know where other people have been."

"I mean, you hear horror stories all the time about, you know, babysitters and even child care centers... How do I know someone is trustworthy? But then again, so many other families are trying to find people. I never did find anybody to watch them."

At some point in the pandemic, all interviewed parents worked from home to care for their children, some using paid time off to make it easier to manage remote work and child care. One parent stopped working and went on unemployment because working from home and managing virtual kindergarten for her oldest child was too much to manage.

"I just think it's really hard for parents, especially single parents that don't have another parent's help with child care for Zoom, because a lot of times the teachers are expecting the parents to teach so much to their kids. It's so hard to be a woman working and taking care of these kids and having Zoom."

One parent described the pressure that she felt from her job to find child care before coming back into the office.

"Work just [kept] telling us, 'Find it, you know you have a couple more weeks... Don't wait till the last minute to find child care.' I'm like, Yeah, I don't think anybody is waiting to the last minute to find child care. I think we've all been trying to find it."

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

Health and safety concerns were a predominant factor in parent decision making about child care. One parent was particularly nervous about her family's exposure to COVID due to pre-existing conditions.

"I was nervous about my kids getting sick because my youngest has slight asthma and I have rheumatoid arthritis, so I have an autoimmune disease. So I kept all my kids at home."

Parents without pre-existing conditions also had concerns, particularly about contact tracing with other children, families, and caregivers in group care settings.

"I don't know where anybody has been, you know, from A to B. You don't know if they're going out here or there or [have] gotten contact with somebody that might have...had COVID."

While all parents shared health and safety concerns, they took comfort in seeing the precautions that caregivers took to maintain a safe environment for their children.

"The current nanny, she's safe. If my kids have a cough, she doesn't want them there... She, you know, does the temperature checks and makes sure kids wear masks that are big enough. She's pretty cautious because I was concerned, so I'm happy about that."

However, one parent was not able to observe the health and safety measures that her children's center put into place, as the classrooms were closed to parents to help minimize COVID spread. She shared that this made her feel uncomfortable and uncertain about what her children were experiencing at the center.

"[I'm concerned about] not knowing what my kids are actually doing now. Are they adhering to safety standards? Because when I would go pick them up, I know the director was never masked up."

The interviewed parents shared that despite the pandemic health concerns, they needed to work to support their families.

"I have a steady job and it does pay me fairly well... I work all year round, whereas my husband is seasonal and then he'll be on unemployment soon... And so I know how tight it can get in the winter months. I had to keep my job for as long as possible because who's to say in, you know, two months we're not all going to be in the same [position]."

"Well, if I don't work, who's going to support my family?"

"After my unemployment runs out, I would only get a limited fund from the state. And that wouldn't be enough to pay the bills at all. So it just makes sense to work so I could provide for my children."

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

Beyond health and safety, parents were concerned about the quality of care their children were receiving during the pandemic.

"I think the growth and development part got put on hold a lot, even for their [center] program. I feel like private education, you know, that's kind of what they go for. And I think that really lacked for the kids."

"The current nanny, because she is a state certified nanny, she does have to have kind of a curriculum. So that's okay, but it's not anything like what I would want."

One parent shared that the pandemic changed the way her children's program communicated with her about her children's time in their care. Daily updates about her children's day stopped, and the center staff failed to communicate to her the details of an accident that her child had on the playground that resulted in a visit to the hospital. The lack of transparent communication contributed to mistrust of the people caring for her children.

"As I look back on this whole pandemic, communication could have prevented a lot of ill feelings or ill will, any of these like feelings that kind of makes people feel less-than."

What supports are parents receiving and what do they need?

Parents did not report receiving much support from their child care providers. One parent shared that a previous provider invited her children to a birthday celebration for another child as a helpful opportunity for her children to have social interactions. Another reported that her children's center sent some activities on YouTube designed by the center's national headquarters when the local center was closed. This support was not as helpful, because the videos did not feature familiar teachers, classrooms, or activities. That parent wished that her children's teachers were able to put together the videos themselves, send home a curriculum packet of familiar activities, and hold Zoom activities to help maintain relationships over the closure.

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

We asked parents about how their child care providers were seeking their input since the start of the pandemic. Only one parent reported that their child care program asked for their input during the pandemic, and it was in the form of a formal survey sent out in July asking about parents' child care needs.

We also asked parents if their early care and education providers were providing care that met their children's cultural and linguistic needs. Parents' current child care providers (during the pandemic) were not specifically supporting children's cultural needs, but parents did describe how previous care providers have provided this support.

"With my oldest child and I was really happy because she was at a tribal school...she'd be singing me [a] whole song in a Native American language, you know, and I was really happy about stuff like that."

The parents explained why it is important to have their child care providers support their children's cultural and linguistic needs.

"I grew up around my culture and elders, and my children haven't... I just think there should be more of our heritage taught because it's not in, you know, public schools that much. Not the right stuff, anyway."

"They need to know where they come from, but also... I hope they never experienced some things I've had to in my past."

One parent described the context of the "water wars" in Klamath County between the Tribes and local farmers as a reason why teachers and children, not only her own, should learn about American Indian culture.

"It's pretty racially divided, racially charged here. We have senior water rights, of course. And the farmers have junior water rights. They took it to DC, to the Supreme Court to try and overthrow these decisions... It can get pretty ugly here. It's important for me for my kids to know where they come from. I think it's also important for their peers to also know... I think cultural competency training would be super important, not just for the teachers who have an Indian kid in their class right now, but just in general, overall... Especially for those communities who have Tribes, to learn about local history. I think that it could really benefit people."

Negative Experiences in Child Care

Each parent described instances where providers were disrespectful to them or their children. The experiences ranged from those providing care not respecting parents' instructions about boundaries or nutritional needs, to care providers failing to document and communicate their child's severe accident that resulted in a broken bone. One parent described how, when her children had a new teacher, basic respectful communication stopped.

"With the new teacher, there was no more acknowledgement when I would even take the kids to school. There was no well, how are they doing today and oh good...it just wasn't there."

When asked if she thought the treatment she and her children experienced might be due to her and her children's race, she responded,

"I really tried not to go there, like, oh, someone doesn't like me, it must be because I'm Indian... But I did have to, I did go there. I did think, you know, it must have something to do with who I am... I mean like I try not to go there, but also experience is experience, especially in Klamath County."

These relational supports and active work from providers to build relationships with parents are clearly important to the mothers we interviewed.

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