



# Impacts of COVID-19 on Child Care

## Interviews with Families with Children Who Have Special Needs

In November 2020, 12 interviews were conducted with parents living in the Coos, Curry, Harney, and Jackson Counties who had at least one child experiencing intellectual or developmental disabilities and/or long-term special health care needs. These interviews were part of a series of interviews and listening sessions funded by the Preschool Development Grant as a part of a statewide early learning needs assessment. The interviews were co-designed, organized, and facilitated by OSLC Developments Inc. and Portland State University. The goal of the interviews was to include the perspectives of families who have children with special needs and to understand their early learning needs and experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. Ultimately, interviews will inform the development of the state's early learning plan.

All interviews were completed by phone, with the exception of one parent who responded to the questions in written form due to hearing loss. All of the parents interviewed have at least one child aged birth to 5 years who had not yet entered kindergarten. Parents interviewed were caring for two to four children total and all but two had at least one school-aged child. Only one had a child under 1 year of age. Most families were caring for at least one toddler or preschooler. The interviews were completed by 1 grandmother and 11 mothers, 4 of whom identified as single parents. Of the 12 parents, 6 described themselves as White, 1 as American Indian, and 5 as having multiple ethnicities (1 American Indian and White, 1 American Indian and African American, and 3 White and Hispanic).

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

### What are the impacts of the pandemic on child care?

COVID-19 has clearly affected the availability of child care. Parents reported having a difficult time finding child care because most programs were closed or only open to essential workers. These families had to turn to friends and family for child care or change their work schedules so they could be home during the day with their children. Further, parents who were previously able to rely on friends and family members for child care described how COVID impacted these informal systems of support. For example, one mom spoke about not being able to ask her parents for help because of their compromised immune systems. Another mom spoke about not being able to ask her sister for child care help because she herself was busy homeschooling her own children.

Parents expressed concerns with their children contracting COVID-19 if they were in child care, and several were choosing to stay home or have a limited number of trusted people care for their children, such as only asking friends and family for child care help when they need to run errands.

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

A number of parents shared that the decision about whether or not to send children to care was difficult. They want their children to have the opportunity to learn and have socialization with their peers, but they are worried about contracting COVID. Fully one half of the parents interviewed chose to keep their children home because of COVID-19 related concerns and/or lack of child care in their town. The remaining six parents had their children in Head Start or another formal child care setting. Some parents shared that they felt the benefits to children's social-emotional development outweighed the risks. Cost was another major factor that led parents to keep their children at home.

*"I was kind of apprehensive about putting her in school (Head Start) but I'm like, OK, she needs the socialization. She needs it."*

*"It's been hard to actually go back to work since then, because of the fact that it's so expensive for three kids and if you make minimum wage, you're not make anything, it's all going to child care."*

When regular care options were not available, parents generally felt uncomfortable with alternative care options, and described adjusting work schedules and dealing with inconsistency in care during the pandemic. One mom described that she had not been able to find care that felt safe and comfortable so both parents have chosen to work graveyard shifts to be home during the day with their children. Another mom reported switching her work schedule to be able to stay home during the day with her children. Parents whose children were in care also described dealing with periodic closures due to localized outbreaks of COVID. This led to parents needing to look for immediate alternatives, such as family and friends or to parents needing to take off work.

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

Parents primarily expressed concern about socialization, quality of learning, safety, and school readiness.

Most parents expressed concern with their children's lack of socialization and peer interaction, and felt that their children may be falling behind socially and academically. Some parents noticed a change in their child's behavior when not attending a child care program or preschool. One family, although concerned with contracting COVID, felt that their son's social development was worth the risk and decided to send him to school. Moreover, parents shared that they felt their children might not be ready for kindergarten when the time comes due to the break from their normal educational setting and concerns with the quality of remote/distance learning.

*"It was getting really bad with not having the socialization and his behavior was changing like dramatically so I made the decision, you know, if he's going to go back he'll learn. He's already so far behind anyway. I think he needed it more than anything."*

*"My kids learn better in person, hands on. Now a lot of it is, oh well, we can't have your kids come in today. We have a Zoom meeting for speech therapy. My kids cannot sit. My daughter has an attention span of 2 seconds. Then the other kids have an attention span of 5 seconds. So, I don't understand how I am supposed to have them sit there in front of a computer and learn that way. They don't learn that way at all. After a couple seconds, they're often doing something else."*

Safety and health was another primary concern, with many parents worrying about their children becoming sick. For these families in particular, a few parents gave specific examples of times in which the physical needs of their children were delayed at school, leading to issues that could possibly impact their already compromised health. Parents felt that this was due to reduced staffing.

*"We don't know who the other kids are around, and there are some parents out there who can't find a babysitter or things like that, even when their kids are sick, and they still send their kids to school sick."*

*"I just don't want my kids to fall more behind. They are already behind with their disability. My biggest fear is, this whole school year has been very hard, and they only get to go a couple hours a day, and I'm scared that next year when starting kindergarten that they're not going to be where they should be for that grade."*

### **What supports are parents receiving?**

Most of these parents reported that they were receiving supports for their children's educational development and specific special needs, but that some forms of support had been comprised due to COVID-19. For example, Telehealth visits have replaced in-person visits; this was clearly not ideal for some families with children with special needs.

Several families spoke about programs (ESD, Head Start, OHP) that were important in helping with services such as speech and feeding, including arranging for an Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) device to help a child communicate. However, one family said they were not currently receiving any supports for their child, and that they were getting her ready for kindergarten at home.

### **What is different about finding care during the pandemic?**

Finding care during the pandemic has been difficult for most families. Of the families interviewed, most of them did not look for child care outside the home but rather chose to use friends and family members. People who used friends or family members for child care also reported having difficulties with consistent availability. The families who did search for child care outside the home found that most places were either shut down or only available to essential workers.

*"I think the most challenging part is just hoping that somebody is gonna be available the times that I need them. There's been a few times I've had to actually cancel appointments or try to reschedule because I didn't have anybody available."*

### **Are parents experiencing discrimination while searching for care?**

A few parents spoke about feeling discriminated against for their race, income, and the special needs of their children. One mom, for example, spoke about feeling discriminated against because of her children's race and their special needs. She felt that other children were getting preference over hers when applying for school.

Two families spoke about businesses either raising their prices or private daycares not accepting people who received state aid. They felt this was a form of income discrimination. Finally, a few parents shared that they had difficult scheduling appointments for their children with special needs because siblings were not allowed to come with them, and they could not find child care for the siblings during appointments.

*"Yes. People don't like to take care of special needs kids. I've been turned away because my daughter has epilepsy. They don't want to deal with seizures. I've also been turned away, because my other daughter has to have assistive devices. She can't walk on her own."*

*"Well, I believe it's a type of discrimination if you are not able to pay for the services, because they have raised their prices so that IS a type of discrimination, low-income discrimination, for sure."*

*"Where we live there are a lot of people who do not like African Americans, or a lot of people make fun of disabilities here and you, they don't really say certain things, but you can tell by the look at their face when you go in there for an interview, or they see it like my kids are darker. There's been a few like I know a few people who have gotten into Head Start, the first day they apply, then when I apply, I am always denied. My kids are always put last, even though my kids should still have the same opportunities as everybody else. I understand that there's kids out there who need more help but my kids need help too."*

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

### How are child care providers including parent voices?

Most of these parents shared that their providers are working to make sure parents are included in decisions about care. During the pandemic, they talked about the multiple ways that providers were communicating with families via phone calls, emails, surveys, and notebooks that are sent between home and school. A few families, however, expressed concern about decreased communication from their providers, especially one-on-one communication, since the pandemic started. One family reported not being able to participate in online meetings with their provider.

*"I know they don't really reach out much and if I want an update or anything you know on my kid I have to ask. Which, that's not how it was last year. So, it's difficult. But yeah, the communication is definitely not there with the school. Definitely was last year."*

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

Most parents reported that it was important for their child care providers to reflect their culture and traditions, including learning about and accepting other cultural and religious traditions. Most families spoke about different activities or crafts that child care providers did around the holidays related to their culture. However, one parent talked about how it was important for her culture and traditions to be reflected, but because of a hearing loss she wasn't able to communicate this with her child care providers. However, parents did not report that the way that providers were working to reflect their culture and traditions had changed during the pandemic.

*"I think it is very important because my culture and parenting skills matter."*

*"My son is, Alaskan Native American and he had some really good care because they really respect that. That's been nice they would do projects with him and respect certain dates, etc. We don't celebrate Thanksgiving. We celebrate Remembrance Day and so all of those things his teachers were onboard with and his providers."*

## Key Takeaways

- ▶ Children's need for social-emotional support and socialization was a major concern for parents, and often a major factor in weighing the risks and benefits of sending their children to school or care.
- ▶ Safety was the main concern for parents who chose to keep their children home.
- ▶ The pandemic had exacerbated what was perceived as a shortage of high-quality care for these children. Parents noted that many places closed or were only open to essential workers.
- ▶ Because of the lack of available formal care, many families are relying on other family members for child care.
- ▶ Parents want high-quality child care that is able to support the unique needs of their children and is affordable for the family.

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