



Impacts of COVID-19 on Child Care

Interviews with Parents in Rural/Frontier Oregon

In November 2020, 16 interviews were conducted with parents living in the 5 rural counties in Oregon (Lake, Harney, Curry, Coos, and Jackson). Parents had at least one child aged birth to five years who had not yet entered kindergarten. 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 living in rural and frontier areas of Oregon and 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.

The parents interviewed all identified as mothers and included 1 grandmother raising her grandchildren, 1 adoptive and foster mom, 3 single moms, and 11 others who shared parenting responsibilities with a co-parent or partner. These mothers were caring for two to eight children total and all but three had at least one school-aged child. Three had a child under 1 year of age and most were caring for at least one toddler or preschooler. Of the 16 families, 15 mothers described themselves as White and one identified as American Indian.

What are the impacts of the pandemic on child care?

While almost all parents interviewed mentioned the lack of child care options in their area prior to the pandemic, it was clear that this situation was exacerbated by the COVID-19 closures. Some families shared that COVID-19 had made it even more difficult to find care, and that they had given up looking. Since March, many parents reported that they or their spouse currently stay home with their child, and would use child care to run errands (grocery shopping, doctor visits) or to cover a few hours of their working day. COVID-19 also was seen as limiting their ability to drop off their children with friends or family to run errands, due to concerns of either party catching the virus.

Families who had children in care or in preschool also mentioned the stress and psychological impact of making daily decisions around whether to send their child to care or school. This was particularly the case when their child had the sniffles, or when cases of COVID-19 spiked in their area.

"It's a very nerve-racking struggle trying to send your kid to school with a cough and a runny nose because, first of all, you have to make sure he doesn't have COVID-19, obviously. Second of all, you're going to feel guilty about it regardless because...that cough and that snuffle's gonna get other kids sick, and parents aren't going to know and then they're going to freak out. But the teacher told me that it's very important for him to come to school regardless of the cough and the snuffle because of the pandemic and kids really need those two physical days."

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

Again, all parents commented on the lack of access to child care in their community. Of the child care options available, most were open to emergency workers only, or had closed due to the pandemic. One parent reported that spaces were also taken by school-aged children from the same families. Certified in-home options were also very limited, or the hours of availability did not match the needs of working parents. Many parents mentioned that their decision was based on whether the cost of child care was equal to or greater than what they earned at work. For some families, this led to a compromise in the quality of care. For example, one family described feeling like they needed to choose whatever care was available so they could put food on the table. Another parent was relying on neighborhood teenagers to watch her children while she worked, while others adjusted their hours in order to be able to rely on friends and family for care. Related to this, some families reported loss of hours or of their job due to the pandemic. This affected their ability to pay for care and/or to a decision to stay home rather than send their child to care. In one instance, a family shared that, due to loss of income, they moved their family to another location in order to afford rent. Only one family reported that their concerns over COVID-19 specific health and safety issues caused them to choose not to send their child to care. Finally, it is worth noting that only 1 of these 16 families reported being able to do their job remotely.

"So it's just, there really is no one. People in town in general, if they have kids, you know, five and under are staying home, one of the parents has to stay home because there's nobody to watch the kids."

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

Parents expressed a number of concerns with their children's health and development. Some parents were specifically worried that their child or someone else at their child's care facility might get COVID-19. For some, this was a concern about their child bringing home the virus, and for others it was around concerns that this would lead the facility to shut down and for them to lose consistent care.

Families were also concerned with the quality of care being provided. One parent shared that the time spent cleaning and sanitizing may be taking time away from providers' ability to spend time with children in care. A few parents had concerns about their children not receiving the kind of quality Pre-K experience that would prepare them for school.

"Just concerned with school readiness and handwriting... Just with the school closing, with our recent activity of COVID cases, unfortunately the kids do suffer that they can't go to school when the school closes."

Parents also described the ways that the pandemic changed their daily connection with their provider. One parent was disappointed in the change in the quality of her relationship with her child's provider, while other parents expressed concern with the decline in communication, or ability to see and be inside the care facility.

Families with children in care generally felt comfortable with the procedures and policies in place for COVID-related safety. Only a few families voiced concerns that their children, or themselves, would contract COVID-19. Centers were seen as providing good communication about protocols and in one case a mom and her home provider discussed what would help make them each feel comfortable. Finally, two families noted their appreciation for the work the local Head Start has been doing to stay open and continue to offer quality care. A parent who also works for Head Start commented that children being in preschool is clearly important to equity in education.

"Oh, sure. I mean, they actually just had an outbreak here in Burns. Like, we've had more people, more positive cases, and so yeah I question, like should I have my preschooler continue to go to school? Or should I just keep her home? So far we've been okay that she's been able to continue going. But I definitely think about, more about, like, her health, than I would have before."

What supports are parents receiving? What would they like to receive?

Only one of these parents reported receiving COVID-related supports for themselves or their children from providers (in this case, specifically that the child care sent home educational supports at the beginning of the pandemic).

"Oddly enough, like when we were home for the pandemic [at the beginning] we were sent home weekly stuff to kind of work through with him. And when he was out for his 2-week quarantine [this fall], we didn't receive anything for him to do at home. But, I was, it was a little bit weird that there was no, like educational support for kids home on, whatever medical, whether it be exposure, or not feeling well."

"As far as support, I feel like we could use more assistance with this particular thing. With child care, we could use easier access to people."

That said, parents expressed a desire for more support, related both to more access to child care providers for communication and information, and more educational materials and resources. For example, one parent reported wishing that she had more support from the school/daycare when her child had to quarantine for 2 weeks due to exposure

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

Availability was the primary challenge for many families when finding child care during the pandemic (and, to a considerable extent before the pandemic started). Parents stated many reasons for these challenges; flexibility in hours, educational experience for their child, quality, and expertise or certified providers made finding child care difficult. Some parents reported that finding available child care was even more difficult under the tightened requirements of providers and facilities.

"There's not a lot of daycare in town and there hasn't been for a long time even before COVID."

"The people in my [DHS TANF classes] are being handed packets to certify themselves. It's not, 'hey, here's a list of [providers] that are certified.' It's, 'all right, guys, we've tried to find certified babysitters. There are not really any available, but we would definitely encourage you to look into possibly certifying yourself or see if you have any family or friends.'"

"And then with the pandemic, it's been extremely difficult to get non-school aged kids into daycare because a lot of, like, for instance, my daycare, like, we have a family of three. So normally, what would happen is my 4-year-old goes there, but now, so, would his older siblings, so there's less spots in the daycare because our daycare provider gives priority to the family she already serves. That makes sense. So, you know the kids that are normally in school, the 6- and 7-year olds, are now going back to their primary daycare provider. So we have had, it's impossible to find daycare open spots in daycare."

Cost of care was a challenge for many families. A few parents reported they had to pay to hold their spot when they could not attend due to quarantine.

What is different about finding care during the pandemic?

One change that several parents described was that the places that did have availability were first filling spaces for emergency workers, which left very few other open spots. A few parents said that child care facilities were shutting down because they weren't making money, which made finding care even more difficult. One parent said that the limited openings in decent facilities were too expensive to consider.

Are parents experiencing discrimination while searching for care?

Parents did not share specific instances of discrimination, although it is important to note that parents seemed to feel that providers were not as friendly or fair (cost) as before the pandemic, stating:

"No, not discriminations, just price gouging."

"But the teenagers are, they do great, and I don't work that much. I only work like 2 or 3 hours. So I don't know if it's the most ideal, but it's nothing I'm concerned about. So, yes, I feel like I have had to compromise just because, like I said before, you know, I would rather have an adult. But there's just not always that availability there though."

"Because we had to wait a long period of time before [we got a spot], and to get this scholarship, because we make \$2 more than what they allow us. And they gave us a scholarship. So that was nice. But they were extremely rude."

How are child care providers including parent voices?

When asked how providers were seeking input from them, parents generally reported their providers asking them directly for their input on things like schedules and specific needs of the child, and saying providers were checking in with them about their child's day. One parent said that she had been offered the choice for the fall parent teacher meeting [at Head Start] to be virtual or in person. Parents described more one-way information sharing than being asked for input.

Finally, two parents reported that their provider was rude when communicating. And one parent shared frustration around not being able to go into the classroom to see what was going on.

"We have a running dialog, like I said earlier, about, you know, if one of our kids has the sniffles, we communicate that with one another, you know... And together, make a choice about what both of us are most comfortable with, as far as, you know, risk of exposure or anything like that... We can communicate if there's a change in our schedule... But we maintain a very open dialog."

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

Most parents felt that their culture, traditions, and language were celebrated. One parent said that she felt her provider was in sync with her family practices. Many of the parents stated that it was important for their children to see family culture and traditions reflected in their activities and materials when involved in child care programs. That said, parents reported that the celebrations of family traditions had been discontinued at the start of the pandemic.

"Yes, they would ask about that kind of stuff. My children are Hispanic and so they, they ask, oh, is there any specific way that you celebrate holidays differently? Are there different meals that you guys have or languages that are spoken?"

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Key Takeaways for Rural Families

- ▶ Availability was the paramount issue described by parents. The pandemic exacerbated what was already experienced as a lack of available, quality care. Parents described challenges in finding certified, high-quality providers, open spots, providers with flexible schedules, and in secure consistent care because of closures, turnover, and patchwork child care arrangements.
- ▶ Parents who currently were using care outside the home did not feel overly concerned for their child's health and safety.
- ▶ Cost of care is another huge barrier for many parents. Cost was most frequently the reason parents chose to stay home instead of using child care.