



The Impact of COVID-19 on the Early Childhood Community

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For more than a year the Coronavirus Disease 2019, also known as COVID-19 has interrupted life around the world. The effects of this pandemic have taken its toll on everyone, from children to adults, small to big businesses, and health care to education. Although all have experienced the effects of COVID-19 in some form or fashion, the impact on the development of our youngest children stands to be the greatest long term risk. “The scale of COVID-19 has shaken all aspects of young children’s lives, disrupting their education and their psychological, physical, social, emotional, and cognitive development and presents a significant and long-lasting risk to their health and well-being” (Benner and Mistry 2020; Gromada et al. 2020).

The purpose of this study is to gather a deeper insight of the impact the COVID-19 pandemic has had on the child care community across Tennessee. Through the lens of a focus group, it examines the effects of COVID-19 on early childhood professionals, parents, and their children by covering a broad range of child care groups within the state. Participants represent centers in the west, middle, and east regions of

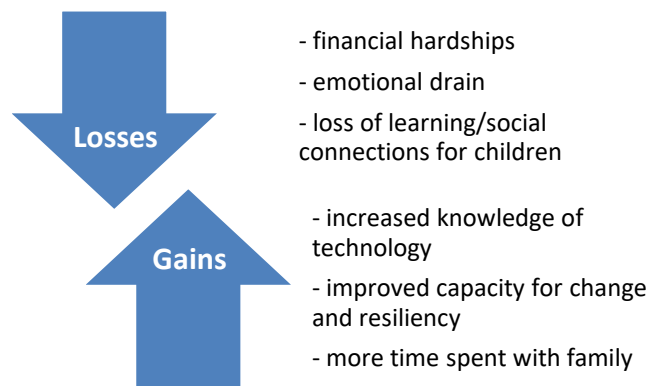


Figure 1.0. Common themes of participants

the state as well as rural, urban, and suburban communities. Specifically, this study sought information and feedback from the Early Head Start, family child care, and child care populations.

Problem Definition. COVID-19 has imposed increased dismay to the child care field. This global crisis has resulted in a delay in the development of the whole child, contributed to increased stress for families, and has caused greater economic turmoil on a field that was already besieged with financial constraints.

Findings. The focus group gleaned the impact of the pandemic from 38 participants. The diverse group was made up of child care

administrators (owners and executive directors), center directors, family child care providers, teachers, and parents.

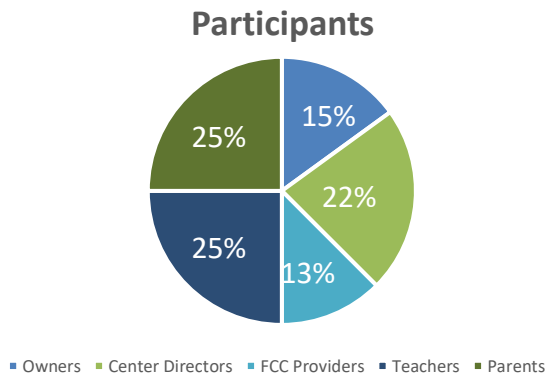


Figure 2.0. Total population in this analysis

The themes that evolved from the varying groups of participants were ubiquitous and included: financial hardships for families and businesses, emotional drain for everyone, and concern of loss of learning and social connections for children. However, amid these challenges, teachers and parents gained an increased knowledge of technology, improved capacity for change and resiliency, and welcomed the opportunity of more time with family.

Many families suffered some scale of financial loss and the financial impact on trickled down to child care providers. Some household incomes were decreased from a two-parent salary to one, and even worse, from a one-salary household to zero salary. Family child care providers and center-based administrators reported that due to reduction of income, some of their families had to remove their children from child care. One family child care provider shared, “COVID has had an enormous impact in every area of my life, that consists of financial, physical, and mental.” In the case of another family child care provider, enrollment decreased from fifteen students down to one. Results of this pandemic also took an emotional

toll on adults and children. A first-time mother tells the story of how the pandemic affected her as she went through postpartum depression. She asserted, “not being able to go visit or have visitors like normal was hard and did not help my mental health.” Other parents reported increased feelings of depression due to loss of work and lack of socialization with others such as friends and family. Additionally, parents and providers observed an increase in negative behaviors with children because of the disruption in their daily routine of going to school/center.

Children learn so much during a typical day in child care and as such, providers and parents alike expressed concerns about the development of their children. A child care director in middle Tennessee communicated her concern on the development of the whole child. “The lasting effects I foresee the pandemic having on the development of the whole child will be the time lost physically in the classroom. Time in the classroom develops those social skills through the daily interactions with teachers and peers and losing this time can have a lasting effect on the social emotional development collectively and individually.”

An additional concern of hers was the overuse of technology as an alternative to being in the classroom. A study by Spiteri (2021) highlighted the same sentiments, “It is likely that the transition to online learning will negatively impact young children attending early childhood education and care (ECEC) contexts since early years education is aimed at providing real-life sensory experiences, hands-on activities, and meaningful face-to-face interactions, which are hard to achieve virtually.” Both families and providers of this study shared concerns about children missing those valuable experiences. Although the coronavirus pandemic has taken a financial, mental, and social toll on mostly everyone, not all has been bad. By default, many explored the world of technology in new ways.

As a parent from west Tennessee revealed, “the pandemic has enhanced my children’s learning methods and they have learned how to use different applications on the computer.” More than ever before, parents, professionals, and students communicated via cloud platforms such as Zoom and video chat services such as Facetime by way of work meetings, virtual school, parent/teacher communication, and telehealth visits, to name a few. Overall, the increased use of technology lead to an amplified understanding, and an improved comfort level with using technology.

Another trending topic within the study was a spirit of adaptability and flexibility. Individuals from each group represented in the study mentioned how quarantine has affected their ability to handle change and revealed an awareness of resiliency in themselves and their children. One parent said, “COVID has taught me how to adjust to changes quickly.” Likewise, an administrator stated, “the pandemic has been a vehicle to teach change and it has shown that our children are really resilient.”

Quarantine mandates caused businesses and schools to either close or operate remotely, which led to many parents being home with their children 24 hours a day. Seventy percent of the parents in this focus group acknowledged that although being home with their children all day was at times challenging, it did not override their appreciation to have more time to spend with their children. One parent of a toddler in center-based care shared, “this time of quarantine was a reminder of what is important in life...life itself.”

Solution. The child care business is a mainstay of the economy. This global crisis “is widening existing attainment gaps; it is not only a health



crisis but also an education crisis” (UNESCO, 2020b). If the child care industry is to be sustained after this pandemic, and if the economy as a whole is to recover, it will require a reimagined approach to financing and structuring the systems that support high-quality child care” (Allvin & Hogan, 2020). Thus, investments in child care and child care professionals must be maintained and improved. The envisioned goal of such endeavors is an increase of high-quality child care options for all families and enhanced supports for the workforce such as education and financial compensation. “If resolved appropriately, it will support a strong American workforce and economy, propel far more children into high-quality child care, and ensure the essential status of early childhood educators is permanently reflected by increased investments in their education and compensation” (Allvin & Hogan, 2020).

Responsibility. The coronavirus pandemic has proven that early education is essential to a child’s development and it solidified the notion that early educators are indeed, essential to the workforce. Thus, it is the responsibility of everyone vested in children’s development to advocate for improved supports for the child care community. “Governments, policymakers, and educators need to understand that the early years are a critical developmental period, a building block on which social learning, emotional well-being, and academic achievement occur over

time. Additionally, ECEC educators need to be mindful that the social and emotional needs of these young people may be qualitatively different as a result of the trauma experienced during the Covid-19 pandemic” (Spiteri, 2021).

Summary. Research has shown “the early years of a person’s life are the foundation on which the rest of life is built” (UNESCO, 2020a) and this pandemic has demonstrated how vital early education is to the development of young children and how important child care services are for parents. Parents need child care services for more than the educational benefits they provide, child care offers parents a safe and nurturing environment for their children to learn and grow while they are at work. Many economists agree that once parents can safely return to the workplace, “quality, affordable child care is an essential precondition for a successful economic recovery” (Malik, 2021).

Tennessee has long been committed to investing in child care. Unlike most other states, Tennessee addresses the needs of the workforce with statewide training systems and financial assistance through programs such as TECTA and WAGES, however, in order to improve the child care infrastructure, government must be “committed to expanding investment in solutions that support the nation’s youngest children and their parents’ participation in the workforce” (McSorely, 2021).

If there is any light to this grim tunnel it is that in the midst of this unprecedented virus, parents and child care professionals have managed to keep an optimistic eye open. These trying times have confirmed that early childhood professionals are steadfast and remain resilient to obstacles. Their persistent dedication and commitment to children and families continue to be the core of why they do what they do.

While remote interaction will never take the place of face-to-face and human interaction, “caring educators who are attuned to children’s emotional well-being will help them bounce back more quickly from the trauma the pandemic has caused” (Spiteri, 2021).

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