



Impacts of COVID-19 on Child Care

Interviews with Native American/ American Indian Parents in the Portland Metro Area

In November 2020, five interviews were conducted with parents living in the Portland metro area 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 NAYA and Portland Public School District. 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 five of the parents interviewed were mothers, and they were caring for one to three children, ranging from 1-year old to school age. Families represented the Seminole, Navajo, and Lower Brule Sioux Tribes. In addition to Native American or Indigenous heritage, children of some of the parents interviewed were also African American, Eastern European, Pacific Islander, Mexican, and Filipino.

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. Some of those parents had children participating in virtual preschool, though parents noted that this was difficult to manage when parents were also trying to work from home or care for younger children as well. Parents reported that co-parents, other family members, and/or friends also provided support to them in ensuring child care arrangements. Two parents were not using formal child care; one of these reported a "patchwork" of informal care from family and friends.

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. Several noted that it was difficult for them to know if they were making the best decision for their family in the absence of clear nation-wide guidance. Inconsistent information created worries that that were not making the right decision.

"The weight and the stress of it is really falling on each state and each city and like, then it's, you know, on to each family to really decide like, 'Am I really comfortable sending my child into school?' Or is there like this national message that's coming through that says, like, 'We're all doing it this way together'. I think that's the part that's a little bit more like it weighs, like it weighs heavier I think onto each family in that regard. Yeah, so I think that's the part that makes a little bit more challenging too, to know like, am I really making the right decision?"

In addition, parents were worried about instability and the stress of potentially needing to rearrange child care plans if preschool had to close again. Parents worried they could not trust other families who may not have taken safety precautions. While keeping children home full time was identified as a stressor, that seemed less stressful than worrying about what could happen if they sent their child somewhere for child care.

"It's kind of become just like I would rather just, like number one priority keep everyone safe and be home and like be in my own little stress ball than have to be like stressed out about everyone else's family and everyone else's situation."

Cost was a second primary concern. Parents said it was challenging for them to afford child care while trying to look for a job, particularly when they did not need and could not afford all of the hours providers required. Single parents described the difficulty to pay for child care along with other basic family needs on one income. One parent described feeling a lack of choice, as she did not want to lose their free child care spot with Head Start. This parent felt that they had to send the child to preschool with Head Start because they could not afford to pay for another child care arrangement in the future.

At the same time, parents described that working from home and providing/arranging child care for multiple children was especially difficult. This was particularly true when school-age and preschool children also needed to be in virtual classrooms. Parents explained

that the balance required a lot of effort and coordination, trying to create structure for the children during the day, needing to fit in work when they could, and multitasking meetings while the children played outside. One parent decided to stop looking for employment (and not find child care for her youngest) because she needed to be able to help her older children with virtual school.

"One ear to them, one ear to the meeting, and it's a lot of like, 'Oh, hey, I didn't hear that, my kid was screaming, or I'm going to go on mute, or I'm going to turn my camera off for 5 minutes'. It's not really like blocks of time that I focused on work. It's more like I fit 10 minutes, 15 minutes, 30 minutes, an hour while he naps, whatever. And then the time I have with them, I've tried to carve out like that first hour and a half the day where it's just us doing our thing."

Some parents noted that full-time child care responsibilities took a toll on their mental health. While they may not use formal child care, having a co-parent, friend, or family member available to support and provide breaks for them was helpful. At the same time, some single parents noted additional challenges that they faced in making decisions about child care due to complicated relationships with co-parents.

"I'm actually grateful for the co-parenting right now, he just eased up my schedule. Thank you. So I don't have him 7 days a week like when we were married and living together. I love my baby dearly, but you know, every mom needs a break. Every parent needs a break."

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

Parents reported a variety of concerns about their children's development and how it was being impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. One common concern was the loss of the child's peer interactions, friendship, and social-emotional development.

"The other important thing is like social and emotional development too. That's really crucial for, especially in that younger age group for like preschool aged children."

Related to this, one parent mentioned the need for more spaces for outdoor social interactions, such as classrooms outside or community gardens.

"If there was just more accessibility, for especially BIPOC kids to be in nature in a safe way that's not at a playground, touching equipment that a lot of other kids have been touching. I just think there could be

a lot more space for working parents, for work and parenting. That hasn't really been an option because that wasn't an option even before this pandemic, right? Even just more public spaces that are nature-focused for kids to be that are maybe like WiFi accessible."

Behavioral concerns were also described, with some mothers noting that their children were displaying hyperactive and other behavioral challenges. Parents were interested in more help with behavior, and mentioned early childhood mental health supports that could also help parents learn techniques to address children's emotional and behavioral issues.

"At his age, even though it's preschool, a school counselor would be so helpful because if they had check-ins just about their mental health at this age. Even if that was like through play, just about them and their feelings of what's going on in their little world, that would be really helpful... It'd be really helpful if he had his own therapist or even his own time with the teacher, that's not in this group setting of like 10 kids."

Parents also talked about the potential learning loss for their children:

"She's eager. She wants to learn, but I just can't. I don't have that energy, and I'd be lying if I said, Yeah, I'm just supermom, I gotta sit down with her. No, I do not have energy."

What supports are parents receiving and what do they need?

Parents identified a number of helpful supports that they received related to child care. This included resources for self-care (parents and children) along with tips and activities for supporting children's learning and development at home. They are also reported that receiving food, diapers, and other basic needs was helpful. At the same time, some supports were felt to be less helpful, though the positive intention was recognized. One such example was an offer for the preschool teacher to facilitate additional virtual play time; however, the parent stated that this was merely more of the same, not the emotional support her child needed.

Parents more commonly expressed feeling an absence of support and the feeling of being on their own to deal with their material circumstances and cope with the additional stresses for their children and themselves. At the same time, there was a sense of the need to "just carry on" and keep going despite the stresses and changes.

"It's one of those things where you keep telling people like, this is a thing like, what's going on? And everyone's like, 'Oh, you seem like you're handling it so well.' So you just keep going."

"As of right now, it's just me by myself. I've kind of isolated myself from everybody due to all this, and you know, it's not saying I'm isolating myself and my kids because I want to. It's just that, you know, I'm trying to be aware of that, them not getting sick, myself not getting sick."

Parents frequently expressed a desire for more opportunities to connect with other parents, even if virtually, and continue the feeling of community and provide support one another and problem solve together. Parents also talked about the importance of having community supports for parents and children who do not feel safe. This includes specific supports for families experiencing interpersonal or domestic violence, as well as more general support for safe housing and safe spaces to shelter in place.

"I'm talking about like families that I talked to, you know, when I do home visits virtually. Not all families are feeling safe at home. So this whole 'shelter at home, be safe' it's like, that's not safe for everyone or maybe even if it's safe, it's not supportive."

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

We asked parents about how child care providers were seeking their input since the start of the pandemic. Most parents reported having some opportunities to share information about their needs and preferences for child care, both in-person and virtual groups. The primary ways that parents stated that they were asked for feedback was through informal discussions and through surveys.

"Once late August hit, the school has been very intentional about keeping really good communication with all of the families and went through many surveys and different thoughts from the parent community about what we would like school to be like this year. And what would make us feel safe and comfortable on behalf of our children."

However, one parent expressed her disappointment at the lack of input requested and offered at the start of the pandemic.

"It's more just, like, not very much interaction at all. We're just kind of out here like, 'Hey, we did provide child care, but now we don't so good luck!' Kind of like, it's like nothing. And I think that to me is more the thing, like can you say anything?"

Parents were asked to talk about the extent to which their early care and education providers were providing care that met their children's cultural and linguistic needs. Parents identified various ways that child care providers incorporated cultural traditions, practices, and languages. They provided examples such as dancing, books, talking circles, and including children and providers with diverse identities.

"They do pow wow dancing almost every day, either pow wow dancing or yoga almost every day, and they have native books every day and they talk about like animals and stories in a native lens."

Some parents indicated that while the providers did not include cultural practices regularly, they did offer or at least allow opportunities for parents to share about their cultures.

"The children are aware of what it's like for the native or indigenous side or tribal community... I would say that it isn't as much. And it's more on parents, you know, families, such as us coming in and say, you know, we've done this with our older child—we just remind the teacher, 'Hey, it's November and it's Native American Heritage Month.' We've always done like a presentation with the children and offered that out to teachers along the way, and they have always been very open in that regard. So I would say that they're responsive, for sure."

Parents clearly felt that including cultural practices in their children's child care experiences was important. They connected their own background and upbringing with their hopes for continuing traditions with their children. One parent explained her disappointment with the lack of cultural diversity in child care as compared to her own experience being homeschooled.

"It's never been my first choice to send my kids to school. I would so much rather do it at home, just because of that [cultural] piece. And I, and I was raised with like cultural specificity woven into my childhood... So it was like that was our daily life. And so to me, as a parent, I didn't think I'd feel that way, but now I'm like, oh, that was really important. That shaped me, right, and so it is weird to like, when we had to send [child] to this random school, it was like, 'Oh, this is so nice to bring art' and it's cute and stuff, but it was just like guitar and like other White kids. And we're like, my kids, my kid didn't see himself in

the curriculum. So it was just kind of like, well, I guess it's fine. They're safe, but it's not like really super rich."

Mothers who did describe culturally responsive practices expressed appreciation for how the provider recognized and valued their children's cultural identities. They also connected that to their goal of teaching their children to respect and celebrate diverse identities.

"So long story short, [child] needs to know who he is, so that he can better integrate in the world, so that he can be okay with being all three races, being predominantly African American. With what society standards are for tri-racial babies, you know, and the difficulties he will have in that, but also the positives that will come from it."

"She's been doing it for almost 30 years. She worked from her home and had four children. They're children of all colors, which I appreciate and that's not necessarily the case in Oregon. He was able to see a reflection, really, of the world... So I was just appreciative that she was cognizant of making sure that he felt included, he felt loved there."

Finally, one mother shared that the COVID-19 pandemic circumstances had created changes that she observed in the child care provider.

"I think, especially considering that the pandemic has really raised awareness of like racial and ethnic health disparities related to COVID, but also of course you know like the raising of awareness of the Black community and how that impacts education and racial equity in education. The school has been really centered on that. And the way that they're thinking about their curriculum from preschool, all the way through the fifth grade, that is there. So I think that's definitely been a focus more than it has been in the past. [For example] one of the heads of the school or like principals, if you will, is retiring at the end of this year. So the school has been in the process of hiring a new principal. And so, in that process, one of their major focuses is on racial equity in education—and so that's helping whoever's applying to this position know that the school in general has a message that the kids who are both there in the school, or maybe if they're not, that that's a priority for them."

Negative Experiences in Child Care

Several parents also described instances where providers were disrespectful to them or their children. For example, one parent felt their child was treated as a number, not receiving the care and attention they truly needed, though this was something she has advocated for in the past and expressed her continued advocacy if needed.

"I don't feel like it's the best care that he's getting anymore, and I feel like sometimes with state care, it's a numbers game. And so you have to get your number so that you can still have your funding... It's par for the course. You know, over the years, I will have teachers that I don't mind for him, or principals or people that I have to you know, I'll remedy the situation if he needs to be placed somewhere else."

Parents shared the feeling of being dismissed by providers when they expressed concerns about their children. Examples included not supporting a child's transition to a new preschool or ignoring parental distress about potential developmental delays. Finally, one parent reported suspecting that the child care provider had physically injured her child, observing an adult handprint on her child's face. This mother described that the child care provider changed the explanation of what happened multiple times, even blaming the child for running into someone else's hand. Although that child is now in school, the experience affected how she thinks about child care for her youngest child.

"So that's where my hesitation comes a lot with looking for daycares. And you know what, like just really thoroughly investigating into finding a good daycare for, you know, my daughter. I don't want her to have a bad experience."

Despite this event, when directly asked if they felt they or their child had been discriminated against by a provider because of their racial, ethnic, or cultural background, none of these mothers reported that this had happened.

"No, I've always felt the teachers and the specialist staff are always really welcome and open and always, even if it's just via email or setting up a quick Zoom call, are very receptive to input or if there's any concerns like, even when we had to do our parent teacher conferences over Zoom, you know all of them just continued to echo 'just reach out anytime'. The communication lines are constantly open."

Acknowledgments

Funding for this work was provided by the Oregon Early Learning Division as part of the Preschool Development Grant. We would like to thank staff from NAYA and Portland Public School District for agreeing to work with us to create an opportunity to hear from families. We are especially grateful to the families who took the time to share their experiences, needs, and hopes with us.

These briefs were developed by the Center for the Improvement of Child and Family Services at Portland State University and OSLC Developments, Inc. Research funded by a federal Preschool Development Grant to the Oregon Early Learning Division. For more information, contact Beth L. Green, Ph.D., beth.green@pdx.edu.