Impacts of COVID-19 on Child Care

Listening Sessions with African American Mothers

In November and December 2020, two listening sessions were conducted with parents living in the Portland, Oregon metro area who have at least one child who is not yet in kindergarten. These listening sessions 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 Self Enhancement, Inc. (SEI). The goal of the interviews was to understand the early learning needs and experiences of African American families during the COVID-19 pandemic. Ultimately, interviews will inform the development of the state's early learning plan.

There were six parents, all mothers, who participated in the first listening session. Four of those mothers joined a follow-up listening session for more in-depth discussion of their COVID-19 experiences. All six mothers were caring for one to three children, ranging from 11 months old to school age. Four of the mothers identified as African American; the women who participated also identified as White, Native American (Sauk-Suiattle), and Hispanic/Latina.

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

The pandemic impacted child care for most of the parents who participated in a listening session, either losing child care completely or having it reduced. Families have also faced the need for child care but an inability to find it, usually because of cost. These parents have managed child care responsibilities on their own, for the most part, though supportive friends and family were also noted as helping.

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

Of note is how often the mothers who participated in the listening sessions indicated that they did not have a choice about whether or not to use child care. While these parents may have wanted to use child care (for reasons related to the factors discussed below), that was not a possibility for their families for a variety of reasons.

"To either go back to work and look for child care, the decision was basically made for me with child care just being too expensive so that was not an option for me."

Health and safety concerns were a predominant factor in parent considerations about child care in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants worried that their families would face additional risk for the virus in child care settings. Some pointed out that while their families followed recommended guidelines with regard to wearing masks and avoiding exposure, they worried about the risks that others took that could jeopardize the health and safety of their families.

"You just don't want to put your kid that you protected from all of the outside influences like COVID stuff, not saying that daycares are carrying COVID, but just not knowing"

One mother who has not been using any child care pointed out that she still feels anxious about the potential for contracting COVID-19.

"It is a struggle too for stay-at-home moms too, always worrying about if people are going to bring COVID home to your children or even having to go out when we do have to go out to grocery stores and stuff to get things. It's a big concern for me."

Cost was also a primary concern. Child care costs were a major factor in parents' child care decisions. For some families, the high cost alone prevented them using any child care, even as some continued work or worked from home. For others, taking on the high cost of child care was risky in light of uncertainties such as work stability or available hours; parents also weighed health care concerns with high costs.

"I think that cost is a big barrier, just especially at a time like this when you don't know when you will be working or when you cannot work or what your income is going to be from month to month to take on the responsibility."

"That's why I'm finding it very difficult to pay five, six hundred dollars for child care and then find out they didn't do something and your child gets sick. Who's responsible if your kid comes home sick from child care, especially if it's during a pandemic? How much risk are we able to take, are we expected to take, just as a normal people? We didn't go to school for risk reduction."

Parents expressed particular frustration with having to pay for child care even if their child could not attend, a feeling exacerbated by the potential for absences caused by COVID-19 exposure. At the same time, mothers voiced that this was a challenge for them even outside of the COVID-19 context.

Balancing work and child care was a consideration for many parents as well. Parents explained the difficulties they face trying to work from home and care for their children. Maintaining this balance was especially challenging for parents with school-age children who need help with online schoolwork. Some mothers added that although employers expressed understanding, they continue to worry that their child care responsibilities could be disruptive to colleagues and their work. Managing multiple children at home was particularly difficult:

"I had to figure out how to work from home, which is still a struggling situation when you have kids that you have to be on 24/7 and then kids that are in school online, and you have to do that and then still try and work from home. It's a lot, but I didn't really have a choice. Child care is too expensive for me to pay by myself."

One parent acknowledged a benefit of being able to work and the important sense of pride that comes from working, saying,

"I think it's a mental thing, to be able to go to work, to be able to provide."

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

A few parents stated concerns about their children's development during the pandemic. Some of the mothers worried about the reduced interaction with other children and the valuable learning that comes from those interactions.

"With the kids being at home, the socialization piece that they're missing from not just socializing with kids, but the developmental part that comes from socializing away from your parents. The independence and things of that nature."

"It's that learning and picking up from the other children, they're not going to get that. They're just going to learn and pick up from mom and dad and siblings in the home versus a variety of things that help them figure out who they are and what they like and things like that."

While most academic concerns related to their school-age children, one parent explained a major impact that COVID-19 had on her younger child's education:

"My daughter was really looking forward to going to kindergarten this year and, unfortunately, we're gonna have to hold her back until next year when I'm hoping the schools are opening."

Parents also worried about the fear being instilled in their children due to the pandemic, as well as anger.

"The fear I feel is being passed along to our kids is the anger out there. The anger of people who don't wear masks; the anger of people who do wear masks. The fact that there's physical fights happening out there because of this. The fact that little kids are hearing parents and talk about how that, you know SOB, didn't have a mask on at that store—or how that fearful whatever had a mask on, had rubber gloves on. What is this doing to our kids?"

Although parents verbalized concerns for their children during the pandemic, the additional time at home with them was also identified as a benefit.

"One benefit that's coming out of all this…is for us to learn about each other. They're really learning a lot about my expectations, which they hopefully know, but I'm getting to see them, overall their whole day—how they like to eat, and how if you wake them up too early, how it's a problem they go to bed too late, so it is really being able to get to know each other in the family even though some of the school things and social things are not going how they usually go. Home base is really getting tight and strong. We've got lots of cuddling and kisses."

What supports are parents receiving and what do they need?

Parents described a number of helpful supports that they have sought out on their own during the pandemic. This included finding family members to help them with child care as well as help them process difficult choices and provide emotional support. Facebook groups specifically for African Americans were also named as a helpful tool in learning about available resources.

Parents shared that the assistance they sought from formal social services (e.g., TANF, ERDC, child welfare) was not particularly helpful to them during the COVID-19 pandemic. They expressed frustrations with delays and general lack of responsiveness, particularly in getting the economic support that their families need. While child care providers may not be able to alleviate financial challenges, parents recommended that the state be more lenient about what is considered child care that can be subsidized.

"For them not to be so strict on what counts as child care because even if you're trying, or going to try, you can't take them with you to interview. You can't sit there and constantly be on the computer for however many hours of the day if you have to still attend to them… How are you supposed to fix one problem when you have five other problems going?"

The mothers also discussed difficulties within the overall child care system and the perception that this system is not helpful. One mother shared the irony that child care was only available to her because she was DHS involved (although none of her children were currently in out of home placement):

"The only reason why my son's in daycare right now is because the [foster care] system is like, 'Oh, well, you're going to be stuck with us for 6 more months, so let's pay for a year of it.' That's crazy. Why can't you just pay for that year without me being in your life?"

Related to this, the parents discussed that families in the most need may be hesitant to accept a service for which they qualify, such as child care, because they "are just very terrified to even get themselves into the system because the system has not been good to people."

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

Most parents said that there was no point in them looking for child care. This was because they did not need it or because they doubted a provider existed that was open and affordable. However, a few of the mothers reported looking for child care during the COVID-19 pandemic. They indicated that the process of gathering information about providers was easy and the same as it was prior to the pandemic. However, the difficulty came in finding a child care provider with availability, that was affordable, and that had acceptable COVID-19 protocols. Ultimately, these parents did not find child care they could use.

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. None of the parents reported any formal ways that child care providers requested their feedback. The opportunities for input that parents did discuss were through informal and ongoing conversations about what the child care providers were doing. One parent expressed disappointment that her child care situation went from full time to 2 days a month without any feedback from her.

"DHS just switched it. They didn't care, okay. They just sat there and took away all my daycare, pretty much."

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 some ways that child care providers incorporated cultural traditions, and they provided examples such as birthday and holiday celebrations and crafts. One parent explained how her child care provider brought in diverse cultural practices directly from families:

"They asked families, 'Is there anything in particular that you guys would do on these days to celebrate?' so my kids got a lot of cultural learning of not just their culture, but other students' cultures."

This parent also discussed the value of being involved in local African American groups where she could seek recommendations for culturally specific child care providers.

Some parents lamented that they did not see their culture reflected in child care. One Native American parent indicated that she has never experienced her culture being included in her children's child care. While African American child care providers were noted as available, parents indicated they had to compromise in favor of other factors, discussed above. One parent stressed the importance of affordability and culture, suggesting that both should be components of all early learning:

"Everybody should qualify for early learning school and I think that culture should be a part of it. I think that our culture should be a part of it. I think that it's so important to know the people around us and what their backgrounds are and what they're about."

Another parent explained that, since her culture was not incorporated at her children's child care, practicing cultural traditions and values was a responsibility for her to do with her children outside of child care.

"You compromise. When you have to work you compromise, and I guess you hope that you can make that up on your days off, or the weekends, or wherever you can make that up."

Recognition and practice of their cultures in child care settings was clearly perceived as valuable for their children.

"I just for as long as possible wanted my kids to be able to see people that look like them in positions of authority and power or whatever and understand that, you know, they can be there too."

Feeling comfortable being themselves was noted as important as well.

"It's a part of the culture you get immersed into code switching and I don't want to have to call and ask how my baby is doing and have to use language that I would not use in a regular conversation. I would like to just ask them questions and know that you know that I'm, what I'm talking about. I don't want to have to speak differently because of some sort of cultural barrier when I'm just checking on my child."

Understanding COVID-19 experiences in the context of racism

"You gotta be humble in a system that isn't working with you and I'm not trying to talk for every single Black person or every single Brown person, but I feel like it's astronomical the things that we're going through."

During the second listening session, the discussion often focused on the experiences of racism for the African American mothers, though these experiences were unrelated to specific child care providers. While these parents acknowledged this conversation as somewhat tangential to the focus on child care, they also explained how such experiences influence their perspectives in all facets of daily life. One parent described the precautions that she has regularly taken and underlying concerns for her own safety:

"Racial tensions have always been an issue, but during this pandemic time there's been a lot of times, places, whatever, where I didn't feel safe leaving my house. I didn't want to go grocery shopping. There was a whole time where we were like, as a culture, passing on Facebook messages—the proud boys are going to be in town, get what you got to get so you're not out from this time to this time.

And what's crazy is I knew that, and I forgot, and I went to Walmart one day, and I pulled in and there's this White guy and this White lady staring at me like I was lost. And I go to this Walmart all the time. And then I look over and there's pallets piled high in front of the windows and I'm like what is going on? I don't even remember, I just had to grab something, 'Let me just run to the Walmart real quick' and then I started seeing flags and I was like, Oh my God, let me hurry up before I get literally get killed for driving while Black in a place where I normally go all the time, in a neighborhood in the area where I grew up, where my grandparents and great grandparents were."

Participants shared how situations, such as that one, impact their thinking about child care.

"I don't want to leave my house, and I'm definitely not going to drop my kids off somewhere to where if something jumps off, I'm across town and I got to figure out if I can get to my babies to make sure they're safe and then get us away from wherever to make sure that we're safe after the fact."

"When you have to imagine if you can actually get home to your kids because you're this color that people hate, it's a hard thing. And also, I think it does tie into everything that's been going on, the pandemic, including what we're talking about right now, which is child care. How can I get across town in order for me to be safe, in order for my children to be safe? What if there's an all Black child care center and someone knows about that, and then they try to burn it down or something? These are things that are real life."

These parents also emphasized the importance of the discussions about racism in the context of thinking about child care needs and how the system could be changed. They shared that their desire to talk more about this issue largely motivated their participation in the follow-up listening session.

"We're still here because it's important to us to add our voices to the conversations because you can't fix things for me without speaking to me about what the problem is, or what is what works well, or does not."

Although participating mothers talked about the difficulties they must face regularly because of racism, there was also a sense that speaking candidly about their experiences was an initial step towards bringing the problems to light and addressing them.

"The fact that we've been in the house and not able to do this, that, and the other, and it's changing the way we think about how we work and how we do child care. It [COVID] has highlighted and exacerbated a lot of issues that you know as a Black woman I'm definitely aware of, but a lot of other people were not."

Acknowledgments