Families’ Sources of Information and Concerns About Their Children Related to COVID-19

Alabama Families’ Experience with Child Care During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Brief #3

Authors

Dr. Alison Hooper
The University of Alabama

Gail Piggott, Tammy Walker, Caliste Chong
Alabama Partnership for Children
RESEARCH QUESTIONS:
What are families’ concerns about child care and the COVID-19 pandemic?

What are the main reasons families report being hesitant to return to child care?

What sources of information do families rely on to help them make decisions about returning to child care?

KEY FINDINGS:
Families across income levels have two primary concerns related to child care and the pandemic: the spread of COVID-19 in child care, and their children missing important developmental opportunities.

The most frequent reason families report being hesitant to return to child care is concern about health and safety.

Families rely primarily on their child care programs and friends and family to help them make decisions about returning to child care.

INTRODUCTION:
The Alabama Partnership for Children (APC) conducted an online survey of working families between May 18, 2020 and June 9, 2020 that received over 500 responses. You can find a report with full survey results at https://alabamapartnershipforchildren.org/parent-survey-results/. The results are pertinent to reopening child care programs safely, understanding the needs of families, and reconciling the competing needs of returning to work and providing child care.

This is the third brief highlighting key findings from the survey. You can read the first brief about child care experiences by household income at: https://alabamapartnershipforchildren.org/parent-survey-brief-1/.

You can find the second brief about the increased preference for home-based child care arrangements at: https://alabamapartnershipforchildren.org/parent-survey-brief-2/.
BACKGROUND:

This brief uses survey responses from the 494 families who meet these criteria: 1) they report having at least one child under six years of age, and 2) they used some form of non-parental child care prior to the pandemic.

FINDINGS:

WHAT ARE FAMILIES’ CONCERNS RELATED TO CHILD CARE AND THE PANDEMIC?

A majority of families report concerns about their children missing out on important developmental opportunities during the pandemic (70%) and about the spread of COVID-19 in child care (68%).

"My husband and I are both working full time jobs from home. We’ve been splitting child care, but it’s been difficult. We worry about our daughter’s lack of socialization with other kids since March.”
Families at the highest household income level more frequently report concerns related to children missing out on developmental opportunities, the spread of COVID-19 in child care, struggling to work from home without child care, and employment. Lower-income families report higher levels of financial concerns, such as meeting their families’ basic financial needs and not being able to afford child care in the future.

Although there are some differences in frequency of concerns across income levels, these results highlight the high levels of concern across all groups regarding children’s development and the spread of COVID-19 in child care.

WHY ARE FAMILIES HESITANT TO RETURN TO CHILD CARE?

88% of families report that they are hesitant to return to child care. The majority of families, 79%, report health concerns as one of the reasons. Far fewer families report concerns related to employment or finances, transportation, or other reasons.

The other reasons families identify relate mostly to policies at the child care program, like those related to mask wearing and parents not being able to enter the program.
Sources of Information Families Rely On to Help Them Make Decisions

Families most frequently report that they rely on their child care programs and their friends and family for information to help them make decisions about returning to child care. 39% report relying on their employer, which may suggest that families intend to return to child care when they are allowed or required to return to work in person. Approximately one-third of families say they rely on their pediatrician (35%), or on guidance from a state or federal agency (29%) like the Alabama Department for Public Health or the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Families report similar sources of information across household income levels.

Survey results show that 94% of families have remained in contact with their child care programs during closures or partial closures through methods like email, text messages, social media, and phone. Since many families rely on child care providers for information, this continued contact with families is important.

“This has been challenging. As a parent, I wonder if it is safe to have my kids in daycare or school this fall. I hope all leaders really look at the pros and cons and do what is best to protect our children.”

Together, results show that the majority of families, regardless of income, are concerned about returning to child care and about their children’s health and development. Families more often report looking to a child care program or to friends and family than to a pediatrician or public health agency for help with decisions about returning to child care.
RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on these results, following are recommendations for child care programs and other agencies and programs that interact with families.

1. **Connect families to resources** to support their child’s development during the pandemic. Examples of resources available to support Alabama families are below.

2. **Gather and publish information** about child care so families have easy access to it. This may include local program openings and closures, public health guidance for child care programs, and special programs available to help families find care or work remotely while caring for children.

3. **Increase access to home visiting support and infant and early childhood mental health consultation.**

4. **Engage families in the Parent Leadership Network and Strengthening Families programs.** These statewide programs provide opportunities for families to build skills as advocates for themselves and their children.

5. **Connect families to programs that offer free and appropriate developmental screening.** Help Me Grow Alabama provides free developmental assessment and referral to relevant programs and resources when indicated.

6. **Promote "Learn the Signs. Act Early."** by sharing the website or milestone tracking app and offering families free materials.

RESOURCES

- Born Ready: [https://bornready.org/](https://bornready.org/)
- Parenting Assistance Line: [https://pal.ua.edu/](https://pal.ua.edu/) or 866-962-3030
- Alabama Family Central: [https://alabamafamilycentral.org/](https://alabamafamilycentral.org/)
- Help Me Grow Alabama: [https://helpmegrowalabama.org/](https://helpmegrowalabama.org/)

For more information or if you have questions related to this report, please contact Dr. Alison Hooper at alhooper2@ua.edu.