

A young child with dark skin and curly hair, wearing a white bow and an orange long-sleeved shirt, is sitting on the grass and holding a small globe. The child is smiling and looking to the right. The background is a soft-focus outdoor scene with green grass and trees.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Impacts of COVID-19 on Families' Experiences with Child Care

A Summary of Listening Sessions with Families with Young Children

- African American Families
- Spanish-Speaking Latinx Families
- Native American/American Indian Families
- Families in Rural & Frontier Oregon
- Families with Children with Intellectual or Developmental Disabilities and/or Chronic Health Care Needs

Report to the Oregon Early Learning Division and the Early Learning Council

Acknowledgements

We would like to offer our thanks to the many families who graciously shared their time and their stories with us. We are also grateful for the support provided by staff from the following agencies and community groups in helping us connect with these parents:

- ▶ Bridging Communities
- ▶ Burns Paiute Tribe & Tuwakii Nobi
- ▶ The CaCoon Program
- ▶ Coos Bay School District Title VI
- ▶ Coos Health and Wellness
- ▶ Confederated Tribes of Grande Ronde
- ▶ Doulas Latinas International
- ▶ Frontier Early Learning Hub
- ▶ Klamath Tribe and Klamath School District Title VI
- ▶ The Native American Youth and Family Center (NAYA)
- ▶ Self Enhancement Inc.

Funding for this work was provided by the Oregon Early Learning Division as part of the Preschool Development Grant.

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.

Project Overview

In Fall 2020, remote interviews and listening sessions were held to learn from parents about their experiences and needs related to finding and using quality childcare during the COVID-19 pandemic. The interviews/listening sessions were co-designed, organized, and facilitated by Portland State University, OSLC Developments Inc., and the Oregon Early Learning Division, with input from our community partners. Native American/American Indian families as well as African American families were identified as a priority for this effort as these perspectives were not well represented in the 2019 Preschool Development Grant Statewide Needs Assessment (see [www.https://oregonearlylearning.com/PDGAssessment](https://oregonearlylearning.com/PDGAssessment)). Additionally, interviews were held with families who represented some of the same communities that were included in 2019 to hear more about the impact of COVID-19 on their childcare situations and needs. Ultimately, the purpose of these interviews and listening sessions is to inform the development of the state's early learning plan.

Fifty-eight (58) participants (referred to throughout as parents—participants were mothers with the exception of two grandparents) in the interviews/listening sessions included the following (see Table 1 for additional detail):

1. 19 parents who identified as having Native American/American Indian Indigenous heritage¹
2. 5 Latinx parents living in rural areas of Oregon
3. 6 African American parents living in the Portland metro region
4. 16 parents living in frontier or very rural areas of Oregon
5. 12 parents of children with special needs living in rural areas of Oregon

Specific research briefs were developed for each of the five groups of families and are available on the Oregon Early Learning Division website (www.oregonearlylearning.com). Below we summarize key themes that emerged across the listening sessions.



Key Takeaway

Gaps in the existing formal systems of support for families with young children have been exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic, and families clearly identified the places where these systems need to be strengthened, expanded, or changed. At the same time, families shared stories of incredible strength and resilience. These families continue to make heroic efforts to balance their work, child care, education, and other demands, and continue to prioritize the well-being of their young children. Work to improve the early childhood system to reduce the burden on families and to better promote healthy thriving children has never been more important.

¹ The families represented the Seminole Tribe, Navajo Nation, Lower Brule Sioux Tribe, Burns Paiute Tribe, Te-Moak Tribe of Western Shoshone, Pit River Tribe, Confederated Tribes of Coos, Lower Umpqua and Siuslaw, the Coquille Indian Tribe, the Confederated Tribes of Grande Ronde (Umpqua, Rogue River, Kalapuya, Shasta, Molalla), the Klamath Tribes (Klamath, Modoc, Yahooskin), Cherokee Nation, and Sauk Suiattle Indian Tribe. In addition to having Native American or Indigenous heritage, some of the parents and/or their children were also African American, Eastern European, Pacific Islander, Mexican, and Filipino.

Impacts on Childcare Use, Quality, and Availability

Across all the parents we spoke with, there was a shared experience of disruption to their ability to access and pay for quality childcare due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Most reported currently relying on what can best be described as a “patchwork” of family, friends, and neighbors to provide childcare. Those who were not patching together care to be able to work outside the home reported juggling childcare with remote work, or leaving employment to care for young (ages 0–5 years) and school-aged children. Several parents told us that they were relying on their adolescent children to take care of young children while parents were working and childcare was closed.

“But the teenagers are, they do great, and I don’t work that much. I only work like 2 or 3 hours. I feel like I have had to compromise... I would rather have an adult. But, there’s just not always that availability there though.” –Parent from a frontier county

“You hear horror stories all the time about...babysitters and even childcare centers... How do I know someone is trustworthy? But then again, so many other families are trying to find people. I never did find anybody to watch them.” –American Indian/Native American parent

“Work just [kept] telling us, ‘Find it, you know you have a couple more weeks... Don’t wait till the last minute to find childcare.’ I’m like, ‘Yeah, I don’t think anybody is waiting to the last minute to find childcare. I think we’ve all been trying to find it’.” –American Indian/Native American parent

Many of the parents whose children were in care perceived that the quality of care was diminished since the COVID-19 pandemic. In particular, they reported getting less communication from teachers/providers. Even the relatively few parents whose children were currently in what they experienced to be quality childcare (most typically, Head Start) described the constantly changing nature of this care, including closures, re-openings, and loss of slots due to prioritization of space for essential workers. These disruptions to routine and day-to-day experiences were hard on parents themselves and their children. At the same time, they acknowledged and valued the hard work that these programs and staff were doing to stay open and continue to provide care.



“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.” –Parent of child with special needs

Concerns about Using Childcare

By far, the predominant concern for these parents in making decisions about whether to place children in childcare was a fear of COVID-19. Even those who reported feeling relatively comfortable with safety protocols in place worried about the safety practices of other families sharing the same provider.

“When I was working, I would worry about him, I was concerned if he was going to be fed or if he was going to get mistreated or something like that. But now with this virus, if I had to work another week and had to take him somewhere for babysitting, I would worry about him. There will be other kids and I don’t know if they are sick, he could get the virus there too and bring it home, and the whole situation would happen all over again.” –Spanish speaking parent

Antes sí me pasaba cuando trabajaba, por sí me preocupaba de él; que si le iban a dar de comer o le pegaban o algo así, ¿qué le iba a pasar?. Pues ahorita con el virus, p. Pues sí, si me fuera a trabajar [...]no en otra semana y le diera cuidar, pues sí me preocuparía de él; que como van otros niños y no sé si los niños también estarán enfermos, también ahí se contagie, lno traen para casa y vuelve otra vez la situación [de enfermarme de COVID].”

A second major concern was cost; many parents reported loss of employment and family income during the pandemic. Moreover, some parents shared that the rates being charged during the pandemic were considerably higher than they had been before the shut downs. Those with accessible, publicly funded care described feeling that they had little choice but to keep their child in care in order to protect their child's slot from being given to another child.



"[At my previous care provider] I only would have had to pay like \$50 a month. And right now, I'm paying \$250 a month for my kids to go to somebody for 2... days a week. So, money wise, it's been a big impact." –Native American/American Indian parent

"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." –African American parent

Concerns about Children's Development and Need for Resources

Parents are worried about the impact of the pandemic on children's development, including concerns about the loss of peer interactions; early academic skills; and, perhaps most predominantly, impacts on social-emotional development and readiness for kindergarten. This was especially pronounced for parents when talking about their preschool-aged children.

"It was getting really bad with not having the socialization and his behavior was changing like dramatically so I made the decision, you know, if he's going to go back he'll learn. He's already so far behind anyway. I think he needed it more than anything." –Parent of child with special needs

"I'm not sure if he's going to get scared to go see people after this, or if he was going to always have caution. You know, if he's just going to always remember, 'hey, it's COVID we can't do that stuff'. You know because it's been a good full year that he's been trying to learn the rules." –American Indian/Native American parent

Parents shared their sense of feeling increasingly overwhelmed by the ongoing economic strain and social isolation brought on by the pandemic; at the same time, few reported receiving needed resources—and many described feeling the loss of previously available supports. While a few parents described receiving materials and activities for their children that they felt were useful (these were mainly reported in interviews with mothers involved in formal ECE programs, primarily Head Start, and parents with children with special needs), most parents received few if any helpful supports for their children or their family. The resources that parents described as being most important include:

- ▶ More access to adult emotional supports, parent-to-parent connections, and mental health resources;
- ▶ More personal and intentional outreach from childcare providers and other persons/organizations who provided pre-pandemic resources and supports;
- ▶ Help with basic resources (food, diapers, etc.) and economic/financial supports;

- ▶ More opportunities for children to have virtual social connections, talk to their friends, and interact with their teachers and peers;
- ▶ More interactive and helpful educational supports and early learning resources that could be incorporated into families' daily lives, especially for preschoolers and young children in early elementary school who are unable to attend school online independently.



“And people are really stressed...I’ve talked to quite a few parents who are really struggling with their own mental health right now and the daily stresses of life on top of the pandemic, on top of trying to figure out their child’s school and all the details around that, on top of the constant changes with the metrics and how that’s affecting their child’s education and just their daily lives, really. And I really think that we need to really focus on mental health for our parents and our students for sure...I think that they’re trying to support their kids, but they can hardly support themselves in the process.” –**American Indian/Native American parent [and mother who also works in an early learning setting]**

“I cannot afford to not work. There’s no way that I can’t work, not just financially, but I also have always really enjoyed my career, the job that I’m working. So, I felt like not only money wise, but for my own mental health, if I lost that part of me, that would be really hurtful and impact me really negatively.” –**American Indian/Native American parent**

Experiences of Racism and Marginalization

A number of families shared their experience of feeling marginalized and/or unheard by their childcare providers (both during and before the pandemic). Very few reported having been asked to provide input to their ECE providers or others about their needs and preferences for remote services or other resources. Families of color, in particular, shared experiences from both before and during the pandemic of feeling “unheard” and “ignored” by providers in terms of their stated preferences for care for their children, for methods of communication, and of being dismissed for expressing concerns with safety or health procedures. Some, but not all, attributed this at least in part to racism and/or income-related discrimination. A number of parents from the rural/frontier region felt that childcare providers were increasing rates and discriminating against lower-income families by declining to accept public subsidies for childcare payment. In the Portland metro area, several parents shared concerns with leaving their BIPOC children in childcare because of the racial tensions during summer protests, compounding existing worries related to the pandemic.

“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 childcare. 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 childcare center and someone knows about that, and then they try to burn it down or something? These are things that are real life.” –**African American parent**

“I grew up around my culture and elders, and my children haven’t... I just think there should be more of our heritage taught because it’s not in, you know, public schools that much. Not the right stuff, anyway.” –**American Indian/Native American parent**

Key Takeaways

- ▶ COVID-19 has exacerbated families' needs for more access to high-quality, affordable childcare.
- ▶ Families are patching together care, relying heavily on family, friends, and neighbors, while making tradeoffs in terms of quality of care and taking on additional financial burden to obtain care when it is needed.
- ▶ Many families do not have the choice to not use childcare so that they can work.
- ▶ At the same time, BIPOC families in particular are concerned about the health and safety of their children and families if they choose to use care. While most felt that protocols being put in place by childcare providers related to COVID-19 were adequate, they did not have confidence that other families were following recommended public health guidelines and worried about these more indirect routes of transmission.
- ▶ A second major concern was cost, with some noting increases in costs during the pandemic, and others describing the uncertainty of their own family income and employment.
- ▶ By far, the primary reason families were opting out of childcare was fear of COVID-19 transmission.
- ▶ The decision to not use childcare resulted in additional stresses on family well-being and clear concerns about children's social emotional and school readiness skills. Families, especially those who were Spanish-speaking or Native American/American Indian, worried that their children would not be "ready for school" because of inadequate preschool opportunities.
- ▶ Parents shared a desire for more opportunities for input and discussion with providers about care in general, health precautions, and how to bring their families' cultural traditions and experience into the childcare setting.
- ▶ Native American/American Indian parents whose children were able to attend a tribal-run preschool were more likely to describe embedded, culturally specific practices being implemented.
- ▶ Despite all this, families shared stories of resilience, adaptability, and strength. There was a clear message of prioritizing their children's health and developmental needs in the face of ongoing challenges.



Table 1. Family Voice Participants Demographic Characteristics (n=57)

Total number of children currently in their care		
Minimum	1	
Maximum	8	
Average	3	
Different childcare situation before COVID-19 pandemic	Yes	No
All	48 (84.2%)	9 (15.8%)
White	34 (87.2%)	5 (12.8%)
Native American / Alaska Native	16 (76.2%)	5 (23.8%)
Hispanic / Latinx	12 (85.7%)	2 (14.3%)
African American	7 (100%)	0
Race/ethnicity <small>select all that apply</small>		
White	39 (68.4%)	
Native American / Alaska Native	21 (36.8%)	
Hispanic / Latinx	14 (24.6%)	
African American	7 (12.3%)	
Language(s) spoken at home <small>select all that apply</small>		
English	53 (93%)	
Spanish	10 (17.5%)	
Sign Language	6 (10.5%)	
Other	5 (8.8%)	