

Supporting Families During COVID-19: An Interview with Niloufar Rezai

Early Childhood Program Director

Niloufar Rezai is the Director of the Child and Family Development Resource Center (CFDRC) at Eastern Connecticut State University. In March, Niloufar was informed that the center would not be able to operate during the closure of the campus due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Terry Surprenant, Center for Early Childhood Education, interviewed her about the experience of the program's staff in response to the closure. Niloufar described how they have been providing continued support for the families served and their considerations about re-opening.



Terry Surprenant: What were your greatest concerns when you realized that you wouldn't be able to keep the center open during this time?

Niloufar Rezai: Our biggest concern when we realized we couldn't open the center obviously was the children and how we would be able to support them. Of course when we closed, we didn't know how long it would be. We thought it would be just a couple of weeks or so; maybe two weeks at most. And so our main focus when first found out we were going to close was, "How are we going to make sure these kids are fed?" Because we serve them snack, lunch, and then an afternoon snack. So when we found out we were closing that Friday, the teachers and I spent time brainstorming about how we would be able to meet some of their nutritional needs, because we do

have a lot of families who have food insecurity. Thankfully, the public school which is directly located across the street from us, was providing meals. So the next thing that the teachers did was to communicate that information to the families so they knew they had a place to go to pick up any additional meals to help supplement their family. So that was really priority for us.

T.S.: Beyond ensuring that children's basic needs were met, what kinds of conversations did you have about meeting their educational needs?

N.R.: Other issues start to come up as the time goes on and on. For example, meeting their social-emotional needs. We're working with preschool children, so interaction with their peers is the best way that they learn, and now they no longer have that. So how do we support families to be able to meet those needs? We were on such a great trajectory, three-quarters of the way into the academic year, and seeing so much growth on the part of the children. And so that sort of became our next question "How do we support that development without other peers around?" And then the next question became, okay, so we have this social emotional piece that we're not necessarily addressing, "How do we get families engaged to be able to do that?" But now we started to

realize, (we have some teachers that are parents and that are working from home, and home-schooling their own children), so just in talking to the teachers, realizing that families have other priorities and to drop everything just to home-school a preschooler is not a realistic expectation.


T.S.: Certainly not! So, how have you adjusted your expectations?

N.R.: So we started to shift gears and try to think of ways to lighten families' load. So one thing that we came up with is that families in their day-to-day, and this is something that we try to let families know about from early on, the things they do with their child on a day-to-day basis actually have such important value – educational value if you will; self-help skills. All of those things that we really find important in preschoolers to develop, they are already doing. So, sort of taking some of that burden and stress off of the families and letting them know, “You don't have to sit down in front of a computer with your preschooler and do a 'lesson.' But when you're cooking, invite your child to help. When you're doing laundry, sorting socks by size, shape, color, all of that is so valuable.



Get outside! So that's one thing again we've always stressed in our program, and we want families to know that, if they do have a backyard space, where their aren't other people around, and again, reminding them, social distance, but if you do have that backyard area where there aren't other people

around, just your immediate family living in your household, to get out there and to explore nature with your child.



“What you are already doing is teaching your preschooler.”

Again, going back to once we realized this is a lot longer than we initially anticipated, helping families through that challenge of, “How do I teach my preschooler?” to lightening their load to, “What you are already doing is teaching your preschooler. You're okay.” So shifting some of that. Taking some of that stress off of families.

So the next thing we are addressing, is hopefully, reentry into our program. But we've really been talking about re-entry as having its own set of challenges. We don't know how children necessarily are processing what's going on around them. So we want to be prepared for that re-entry and be able to meet children's social and emotional needs after this. I guess you can call it a traumatic experience. Each child processes it differently.

The teachers and I continue to meet weekly as a group. I meet with them as a whole group, and then we have individual meetings as well. So keeping that communication going among the staff is really important. They share with me their communication with families, and I have communication with families. So really continuing that communication like we do when we're back at the building has really been helpful.

T.S.: What are some of the methods that you and the teachers have been using to maintain communication with the families?

N.R.: So we use a variety of methods to communicate with families. The teachers use an app called the Remind app and the families are set up on that we sign them up right upon registration. Families love it and it gives the ability for teachers to communicate individually to families or as a whole group, or center-wide, so I could send out a blast if I needed to. So that's really the number one way of communicating. But since Covid-19 some teachers have expanded their way of communicating, so they have an Instagram page, or a Twitter page where teachers share information – here's an activity – again, we don't want it to be heavily involved, it could just be, a scavenger hunt of some nature items where the family takes their phone with them and, "Oh, let's find a leaf or a pine cone," or something fun and simple like that. And then there's telephone. I personally have reached out to all families via telephone in the first few weeks, and checked in on everyone. "How are you doing? What do you need? How are the children adjusting?" So that's another form of communication. Email – I think people have kind of moved away from email a little bit, but we do have email of families if they do prefer that. But they really do like the Remind app, it comes up right on their phone, they don't have to log in to email or anything, it just pops up as a message. So that's really been the most effective way.



T.S.: Is it problematic to rely on technology? I'm sure not all families have equal access.

N.R.: We do have families who struggle financially, but we also sent out a link early on when we heard that a lot of internet companies and cable companies were providing free internet to families who otherwise wouldn't have it, who needed to home-school. So we shared that link as well, with our families. Just to ensure that they were able to have access if needed. That was so beneficial that those companies stepped up and did that.

T.S.: How did you initially ascertain what families might need from you?

N.R.: When we shut down we didn't know how long this would be. So the teachers were just being supportive of the families and checking-in with them. But as time went on, I think it was probably about week three or so, and beyond, when we realized, "Okay, we don't know when we're coming out of this." Then teachers started to really reach out to individual families and say, "How are you doing? What might you need? Here's a resource." We started collecting resources as a team. But there's also a fine line, we didn't want to bombard families with resources. We didn't just want to send them continuous notification of here's this, here's this, here's this. So we started to individualize it based on what they need. One thing that we did find helpful as a resource, was we found a very developmentally appropriate book just talking about what Covid is. We sent it to families. We do have teachers that are reading books to children, and sending the links, but with this particular topic, we decided to share it with the families – it was available in English and Spanish – and have them decide, if they wanted to read it. Maybe they had a different way of explaining it. So we were really respectful of that, and families' preferences. So we shared that with them in the event they needed some guidance on how to talk to young children about this. And then other thing that we recently shared, just last week, since the executive order from the State about wearing masks came down, was that we found a very similar text that

talked about wearing masks, that sort of explained it to children because that can be very confusing as well. So, again, we sent that link to families and said, “Do with it what you feel is appropriate for your family.” Again, it’s such a sensitive topic. So, really finding that boundary between sharing resources with families but being respectful of *how* they communicate, and *what* they communicate, and *when* they communicate, and *if* they want to communicate this type of information with their child – it’s so important.



T.S.: So it sounds like it’s about how you frame the information when you’re sharing. Here it is, do what you choose with it. The families aren’t being made to feel like there is an expectation...

N.R.: No, there is definitely a preface that says, “This is just an FYI. Do not feel...” I mean, we had a team meeting about both of those texts. I sent it to everyone as an email and said, “I’d like to hear your thoughts.” As a director, I don’t send something and say, “Share this.” I really wanted to hear everyone’s thoughts on these texts and they had some really good reflections. And, again, we have some teachers that have young children of their own so, of course, they come at it with a different perspective and it’s nice to hear. Unanimously, everybody liked the texts and everyone agreed that this is a personal decision that has to be made by each family. So, it was good to sort of have that. I hate to say it but we don’t know exactly what we’re doing. This is all uncharted territory for us. So, we’re sort of navigating through as things come up.

T.S.: Can you give a few examples of some of the types of things that teachers are sharing with families to support children’s development?

N.R.: So, we use what’s called a Second Step curriculum when we’re on ground, if you will. It’s to foster social emotional development and it’s a really great program. So during this Covid time, they had a free online training for teachers and so I sent that link. I guess as an administrator it’s sort of part of my charge is to find some of these resources that are going to help teachers navigate through this as well, as well as provide some professional development, webinars, things that are meaningful during this time. And so that was one that I was able to find on, “How do we sort of provide that support?” I guess where it got tricky was when we do that on ground, when we have those times where we have these conversations about different feelings and navigating through, it’s interactive. So, the child is right there so they’re able to ask these questions and the teacher is right there to respond to those questions. It’s live. And you’re able to sort of gauge with your body language and the child’s body language how they’re feeling, how they’re processing that. So, one of the things we talked about as a team is we have to be so careful when presenting that information if it’s only one-sided. And to send videos or information that’s kind of on the heavy side to families. We don’t know if families are able to sit and view with their child what we’re presenting just because they’re in this awkward situation and they’re busy and they’re stressed. So, we have to be so careful when we’re sort of presenting that kind of sensitive topic. We want to be able to have an adult there to facilitate, ask questions, assess what the child might be thinking or feeling and help them process through that. So, that’s been sort of challenging to navigate how are we able to meet that need, that social emotional need. So, again, sharing resources with the families and kind of letting them. There’s a lot of resources out there on how your child might be feeling, what they might be experiencing, and questions to ask that we share with families. So, we sort of take in what we do at school and, I don’t want to say, “Put it on families.” But give them the tools and resources to able to navigate.

T.S.: I know that you don't know when you'll be able to reopen the center. What are you considering as you plan for that?

N. R.: I am concerned about reentry. I'm not hearing a lot on the news or in the materials that I'm reading, professional materials and so on, about how to support children when they do re-enter whether it's preschool or a toddler classroom, kindergarten or any grade level. I feel like there is going to be a lot of support that will be needed once they re-enter, especially the younger age groups are going to have a lot of questions. And, so I want to be prepared and want the teachers to be prepared. And so one thing that came up last week surrounding the executive order and wearing masks – we don't know how long this executive order is going to last. We don't know if it's going to translate to early childcare. We don't know. But children not being able to see your face is huge in this profession. So, that's something that we've already started talking about. What if? How do you navigate through that? If a child can't see you smiling? There's just so many questions that we have that there's no answers to right now and that being one of them.



T.S.: Can you share an example of something that you have been planning to do differently?

N. R.: Not sharing sensory materials, is one topic that we would definitely have to explore further. That's what children do at this age.

T.S.: Sensory play is so important for children, and is especially useful when they are dealing with stress. It'll be important to provide ample opportunities for that.



N.R.: They use sensory materials and they use it together. So I think right now what we're sort of doing is having Plan B and C sort of on the back burner. So we've gone ahead and ordered individual bins with lids for children that we can write their names on in the event, when we return, this is still something that's in effect that they can't share sensory materials. At least each child will have their own bin of sensory items and they can sort of pick. "This week I want water." "This week I want moon sand in my bin." There's so much that happens at a sensory table. As you know, there's sharing of materials, language, and "Can I please have the scoop when you're done?" and "Can you help me fill my bucket?" And now it's sort of, "Wait a minute, we may not be able to do that." So how are we going to still support that interaction among peers. So, it's really uncharted territory. We are going to have to shift our teaching strategies at least for a while.

T.S.: I hadn't even thought about that. You'll have to be very intentional about how to manage materials! What have you learned from this experience, overall?

N.R.: Wow. To be ready for anything. Never in my wildest dreams did I think we would be in this situation. So, to be ready. I mean, we have emergency plans in place and, you know, what do you do if there's a fire, if there's a natural disaster? What do you do if there's a flu outbreak? You start excluding

children until they're better and so on. But never thought that we would be in this sort of situation where we had this shut down.

“What we are continuing to learn is that technology is now your friend. It’s not an ideal situation to be in obviously, but there are still modes of communication that we can utilize to be available and accessible to children and families.”

Children are responding very differently. There’s a couple of children whose parents shared, “We really appreciate the videos that your teachers are sending, but they can’t watch the videos anymore because it upsets them so much.” It confuses them. “Why can’t I be there? Why can’t I be with my teacher?” So they said that they have to be selective about when, and what, and if they share the videos with their child because it was just so upsetting. We had one child, a parent said to me, who woke up and just started crying saying, “Why can’t I be in school? Is anyone mad at me?” He just didn’t understand what was going on.

T.S.: Each child probably doesn’t understand that all children are home. They might imagine that the other children are still at school without them.

N.R.: So, again, it goes back to my big concern about re-entry and how children are going to be feeling about coming back and questions they might have. And some of our children might not come back. They might go right to kindergarten so they won’t have that closure. And they’ve been with us, some of them since 18 months and now they’re five and up. We might not get a chance to have closure with them and their friends. So, it’s just not an ideal situation all around. I just worry about how they will fare with all of this. Teachers do drive by kids homes and wave, which has been really nice. Birthday drive-bys, teacher parades. It’s been so nice. We all miss the

children. We were talking about how the next time we see them they’re going to appear so much bigger physically. But socially, emotionally, we don’t know what to expect.

T.S.: You mentioned that the teachers have made videos. What kind of videos have they been making to share with kids?

N.R.: So they are reading some of the children’s favorite books. Recording it and sending it. They’ve gotten so tech savvy. I can think of a few staff that were really unsure about how to use some of this new-fangled technology, myself included. One classroom in particular shared a video with me that somehow they managed to have all of the staff on the screen. They did a Bear Hunt which is their class’s favorite book. They’re keeping what they share light, happy, music, sort of things. They might ask a questions or two of the children. So it’s so hard because it’s not interactive. You’re hoping there’s, a sibling even with the child who can sort of follow-up and help that child sort of answer the questions or think about it, or promote some critical thinking.

T.S.: I’m sure you have some families that are working at home. How does that impact your approach?

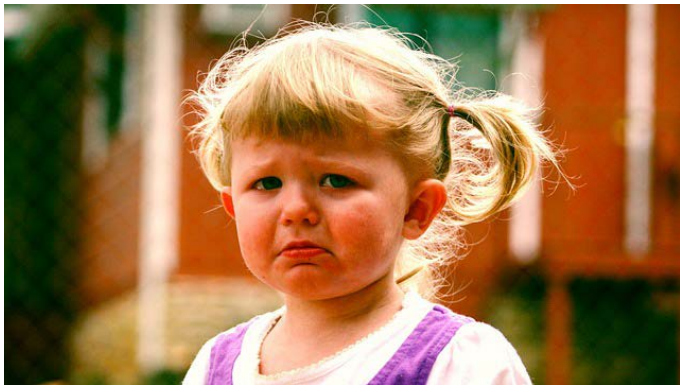
N.R.: We have a lot of families who are working from home, and home-schooling multiple children of different age groups. I think of one family in particular, she has four children, a preschooler, a kindergartener, and two middle-schoolers, you’re talking, all over the place developmentally, academically. We have families who have high-schoolers as well so it’s really challenging for any family to be able to juggle all of that simultaneously, which is why we didn’t want to add the extra stress of “You must do this with your preschooler.” What they are doing is just great. “Just spend time with them.” That’s been my communication. Enjoy each other, have fun, They are just so happy to be with their primary caregiver. Our everyday lives are so busy, this is just, maybe for some children a real treat. To get to be with that person that they love more than

anybody. But, with that said, we know that with stress in the home can also lead to some negative situations, so we're hoping that children are not in that predicament either.

T.S.: Have some parents been expressing to the teachers that what they really need is someone **they** can talk to? Is that an appropriate role for a teacher?

N.R.: We work with a social worker in town who has done parenting classes for our families, so rather than our teachers becoming the therapists, if you will. That was one of the first resources that we shared, when we realized we could be doing this for a while, was we sent out her information to families, for them and she's offering her services at very reduced or almost free rates at this point out of the kindness of her heart. So leaving it to the professionals I think is a much better way to handle the situation.

T.S.: Maybe the parent just needs to talk about the child, "This really isn't working, do you have any strategies for me?" because the teacher knows the child so well. How then do you help families navigate children's reactions to the change?



N.R.: Absolutely, yes. The teachers are always available for that kind of conversation. "Help me figure out what to do. My child is just having tantrums repeatedly." The teachers are definitely there to support that as best as they can. Again, these are uncharted times and the response that may have worked before Covid, may not necessarily work for this time. But like I said, our families do have busy households, so the stress of it all, and you put a

preschooler in the mix who's vying for attention when everybody is now in the house. It's understandable that there might be some behavior challenges that arise that maybe weren't there before. So, how are you to tell a family, "Find time to spend one-on-one time with that child?" It's really hard to put that on that parent at that moment. "*When am I supposed to do that?*"

T.S.: Hopefully this isn't going to go on for too much longer, but we don't know. Are some of the children going to age out and not come back to you? How are you partnering with families and preparing for those transitions?

N.R.: I know that some of the teachers have been talking about at least doing a goodbye. I don't know what that's going to look like. I don't know what group size is going to look like I don't know if there's going to be restrictions on that. So again, all of that remains to be seen. One of the things that we are doing right now, is that we're working with our public school system and helping the transition from preschool to kindergarten. So there's placement cards involved. The teachers are working on doing that and sharing their assessments with the public schools. And we're trying to figure out a way to easily, again without putting too much stress or burden on the family, to include some information from the family. So, we're looking at options on how to do that. How to provide that to families in a way that's reasonable. They are not teachers, they are not educators, they're parents, so how can we get their input in a way that's appropriate. But they have been with their child for the last X weeks, so they're going to have some really important information to add to that transition piece.

T.S.: What are the lessons learned about how we foster relationships with families that might be carried over when things return to normal?

N.R.: I think if nothing else, you see even though it's a stressful time and families have a lot on their plate, you really see how strong and resilient they can be. And how, with support and communication from their teachers, and the administrator of their program, that they don't feel alone. And they have some of the

supports at least. We don't have all of the answers, but, again, it just underscores the importance of that relationship and how it is so important to keep that communication. I know for myself as an administrator, when I've called families, they've been so happy to hear my voice on the other end. And just to ask them, How are you doing? Do you need anything?" So it's nice that they see not just the teachers but the administrator, as the whole Center group as a support network for them. I'm hoping that that's something that we can continue to build on and it's definitely underscored the importance of relationships, and trust and understanding. And not only that, but among staff, everybody misses each other. Everybody misses working together. They miss seeing each other. They miss joking in the halls. So that camaraderie, part of that work environment, I think we will, hopefully all go back with this new-found appreciation for each other and what we do. So that's what I'm hoping will come out of this.

T.S.: I can imagine that when this is over, for those families who do return, that those relationships will have been strengthened.

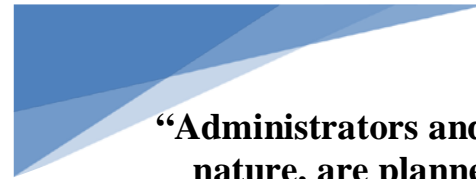
N.R.: I think so, yeah. *"Thank you for looking out for me when we were in that situation. I appreciate it very much."* It goes a long way. It shows that we genuinely have a vested interest in their child and their whole family. To drive by their house and wish their child a happy birthday and to have a parade down their street. That's huge. It shows that, "We're not happy being away from you. We miss being with you and your child."

T.S.: There are always gaps, but maybe sharing this experience is sort of a leveler?

N.R.: We're all in it together. I don't think there are many times that we can say, "We've all shared one experience." This is one of those rare times when we have. Hopefully, it'll be unifying.

T.S.: Have you had a chance to interact with other directors and learn about what other programs are doing?

N.R.: We're all in that "What happens when we all go back?" train of thought. That's where everyone's head is. "What happens when we go back? What's it going to look like? What's the new norm?" So we have very common shared anxieties about the unknown.



"Administrators and teachers, by nature, are planners and this is one of those rare times where you don't know what you're planning for – so that's just kind of anxiety provoking."

That's the sense from talking to administrators of other child care programs. There's a lot more questions than answers right now. A lot more.

In closing, Niloufar acknowledged her appreciation for those staff who were able to keep their centers open.

"I know there are some centers that are open, that are providing care for children of front-line workers and I commend those people – so much! Today at the webinar, the commissioner was saying that this has got to be one of the things that gives early childhood professional the status that they deserve. Look at what these people are doing! These are important people do our day to day lives. So let's compensate them better and acknowledge and recognize their work. So that will hopefully come out of this."

Images from Pixabay.