

YOUNG CHILDREN, FAMILIES & TEACHERS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

DECEMBER 2020

AUTHORS: LEAH DURÁN, PH.D. AND REBECCA LOPEZ

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has created hardship for everyone, as many people contend with illness, anxiety, isolation, and grief over losing a loved one and financial stress. Additionally, young children, their families and their teachers also face a unique set of challenges, as the schools and early education centers have closed, re-structured and re-opened. The pandemic has been particularly devastating to Black, Indigenous and people of color communities (Laster Pirtle, 2020) and the economic consequences have been particularly hard for women; a large number of early childhood educators are part of both groups. Here we describe some of the challenges and ways to cope suggested by emerging research.



CHALLENGES FOR YOUNG CHILDREN'S LEARNING

In re-opening schools during the COVID-19 pandemic, some countries have made early education the top priority, both because young children benefit the least from distance learning and because they need the most supervision and care from working parents (Melnick & Darling-Hammond, 2020). Many key aspects of early education, like play and hands-on exploration, are challenging to replicate in online classrooms. Some of the children who benefit most from early childhood education are also those with the least access to remote learning. Not all children have access to their own device, reliable Wi-Fi, or a quiet place of their own to connect from, and many young children need adult support in order to connect to or participate in remote learning activities.

CHALLENGES FOR TEACHERS

Teachers are currently caught in a dilemma, balancing their professional commitments to educating young children and their concerns about personal and public safety (Samuellson, Wagner, & Odengaard, 2020). Likewise, the shift to remote instruction has required teachers to quickly learn new technologies and teaching approaches. As schools shift to hybrid models, many teachers are being required to plan for and teach both in-person and remote lessons simultaneously. This dramatic shift in pedagogy is an important challenge, for new teachers and veterans alike. Many teachers feel that the level of stress and challenge is not sustainable, and worry about burning out. In the words of Anissa Jimenez, a first-grade teacher in Tucson, AZ, "We're all first year teachers again because none of us have done this in the way we're doing it now" (Cavazos, 2020).

CHALLENGES FOR FAMILIES

With many families juggling full-time job(s) as well as parenting, the demands of monitoring remote and hybrid schooling have caused many parents and caregivers to feel guilty and unsure how to maneuver this new way of life (Dong, Cao & Li, 2020). At the same time, many families are experiencing new financial stress from the economic fallout of the pandemic. The unpredictability of the length of time COVID-19 will persist means that families should expect remote schooling to continue for some time. They may need support managing time constraints and the technology now necessary for learning (Vanderloo et al, 2020).

SUGGESTIONS FOR TEACHERS

Our suggestions for teachers include (first and foremost) to find time to take care of themselves. Teachers are being asked to make extraordinary efforts and rapid changes and need to protect their own mental health and wellbeing. We encourage teachers to advocate for themselves, both individually and collectively.

Regarding pedagogy, early childhood educators should focus on providing opportunities for students and families to engage with one another and avoid the temptation to send home worksheets. Activities that include creativity, investigation and physical activity are still important. Lastly, issues of equity are exacerbated due to this global pandemic. Educators must be mindful of expectations for students that require internet access, which includes maintaining flexibility with assignment submissions, and not expecting children to spend the same number of hours online as they would in person.

SILVER LININGS

Although the challenges regarding this pandemic seem insurmountable, there are some bright spots. Some teachers expressed an appreciation for the benefit of smaller class sizes as well as more opportunities to engage with specific children on an individual basis. Others have noted an increase in their technology skills (Samuellson, Wagner, & Odengaard, 2020). Remote learning can create opportunities for teachers to interact daily with their students' siblings and caregivers, building relationships and understanding about children's out-of-school lives. For families, the lack of commuting can lead to more family time and less logistical stress. Finally, some Black parents have found that remote schooling has allowed them to better advocate for their children, and that their children are less likely to be policed or harassed (Anderson, 2020).

REFERENCES

- Anderson, M.D. (October 28, 2020). "You're out of your mind if you think I'm ever going back to school". The New York Times. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com>.
- Cavazos, V. (August 21, 2020). Tucson teacher's message to families of youngest students. Retrieved from www.kgun9.com.
- Dong, C., Cao, S. & Li, H. (2020). Young children's online learning during COVID-19 pandemic: Chinese parents' beliefs and attitudes. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 118.
- Laster Pirtle, W.N. (2020). Racial capitalism: A fundamental cause of novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic inequities in the United States. *Health Educ Behav*. Doi: 10.1177/1090198120922942
- Melnick, H., & Darling-Hammond, L. (with Leung, M., Yun, C., Schachner, A., Plasencia, S., & Ondrasek, N.). (2020). Reopening schools in the context of COVID-19: Health and safety guidelines from other countries (policy brief). Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute.
- Samuellson, I.P., Wagner, J.T., & Odengaard, E.E. (2020). The coronavirus pandemic and lessons learned in preschools in Norway, Sweden, and the United States: OMEP Policy Forum. *International Journal of Early Childhood*, 52, 129-144.
- Vanderloo, L. M., Carsley, S., Aglipay, M., Cost, K. T., Maguire, J., & Birken, C. S. (2020). Applying harm reduction principles to address screen time in young children amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of Developmental & Behavioral Pediatrics*, 41(5), 335-336.

This report is the first in a brief series on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children, youth, and families. To learn more about FMI and our other publications, please visit <https://fmi.arizona.edu/publications>

Leah Durán, Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor in the College of Education at the University of Arizona. Rebecca Lopez is a Ph.D. candidate in the College of Education at the University of Arizona.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FAMILIES

A key suggestion for parents and caregivers is to let go of feelings of guilt about screen time (Vanderloo et al, 2020). Many parents feel conflicted about exceeding recommended guidelines for screen time for young children; however, this may be unavoidable in current circumstances, when learning and maintaining social and family relationships can all depend on screens. Some recommendations for parents include prioritizing screen-free mealtimes, bedtimes and playtimes, creating predictable routines, and prioritizing physical activity.

