

children
atRisk

**VOICES FROM
THE FIELD, VOL. 2**

CHILD CARE CHALLENGES

EXPERIENCED DURING

THE PANDEMIC



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VOICES FROM THE FIELD:

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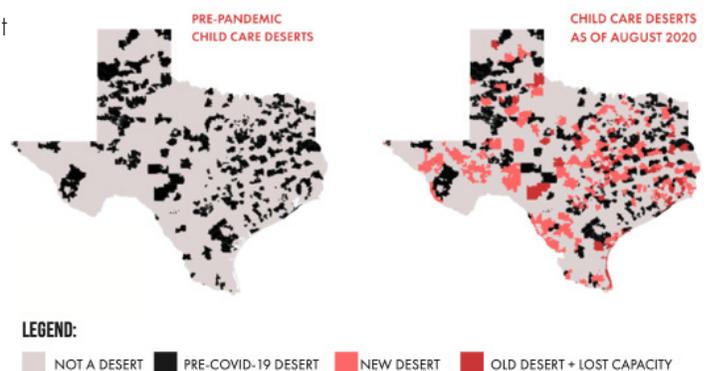


Child care centers and family child care homes provide an indispensable resource to parents across Texas. Quality child care is crucial for the development and early education of young children. Despite the importance of this essential industry, child care centers are among the most economically vulnerable businesses in Texas today. Temporary, extended, and permanent closures of child care facilities have made it difficult for thousands of Texas families to find the care they need for their young children.¹

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, child care was in short supply, and was often too costly for parents, especially in communities of color. The recommendation is that parents only spend 7% of their income on child care expenses. Yet, most families in Texas are paying close to 15% of their monthly income.² Cost to parents is not the only hurdle to accessing child care. Teacher shortages and limited availability of seats also contributes to the hardships many providers are facing. The pandemic greatly exacerbated child care shortages, and led to a drastic increase in the amount of child care deserts³ across the state. A more complicated enrollment process and changes to the parents work schedule were among the new hurdles facing parents seeking child care in 2020 and beyond. Throughout this report we will learn from parent experiences regarding the many hurdles they faced and the impact on their entire family.

Limited Options for Parents

In Texas, 1.3 million children qualify for child care subsidies. While 67% of child care providers accept subsidies, there are approximately 147,000 more low-income children (ages 0-5) with working parents than available subsidized child care spaces in child care centers and registered home. The simple reality here in Texas is that there are too few providers – and more specifically too few seats – to accept all the children enrolling with a subsidy. Currently, there are only 214 subsidized seats per thousand children. This number decreases even further when accounting for “quality” child care seats (defined in this case by seats that are certified in the Texas Rising Star (TRS) system). When considering enrollment in a quality child care program only 93 seats for every thousand low-income children are available in Texas. Only about 29% of subsidized seats are certified by Texas Rising Star.⁴



1 For additional reports and explanations of child care closures, visit our website at <https://childrenatrisk.org/childcare-closures/>
2 <https://www.procaresoftware.com/resources/child-care-costs-by-state-2020/#TX>
3 Child care deserts are defined a census area where at least 30 children ages newborn to 5 reside where the number of children seeking child care is at least 3X the amount of available licensed child care seats. For example in an area of 60 children 0-5, there are only 16 child care center spaces for children 0-5.

Child care is a significant expense for families across the state. Without subsidy funding, many families simply cannot afford to enroll their children in a program. Without adequate child care, it becomes significantly more difficult for parents to maintain their careers and earn the necessary income to provide for their children. The impact of child care availability on work options has been more heavily felt by mothers. “In the first quarter of 2021, female workforce participation nationwide was at its lowest rate in more than 30 years, and it is not expected to fully rebound to pre-pandemic levels until late 2024.”⁴ Having affordable access to safe, reliable, productive environments in which to send their children is a genuinely life-changing service for families across the state, especially to single-parents.

Voices From the Field: Parent Stories

The COVID-19 pandemic shook the child care system to the core, and presented a seemingly insurmountable hurdle for many parents across Texas. In this issue, CHILDREN AT RISK aims to highlight the experiences of six parents across the state who had to navigate the child care system in a very uncertain time. To capture the insurmountable hurdle many parents faced due to the COVID-19 pandemic, a section has been dedicated to voicing the concerns and hopes for improvement Texas parents have as we move forward and begin to restore child care options.

Sandra⁶

For Sandra, a mother of 5 children ranging from ages 3-8, she feels that one of the biggest impacts of the pandemic on her family is the increased mental stress experienced by parents. Like many, Sandra temporarily lost her job at the dawn of the COVID-19 pandemic, which meant there was another burden added to the already difficult circumstances: financial insecurity. Prior to the pandemic, **Sandra enjoyed the communication and interaction shared between parent and provider at drop off and pick up. Removing these touchpoints created a lack of connection to her children’s day that Sandra struggled to accept.** Fortunately, Sandra’s child care provider took initiatives in addressing the mental health of parents during the pandemic, and helped connect her with amazing counseling resources.

Rachel

For Rachel, a mom with a 10-month old daughter born during the pandemic, she felt that COVID has greatly affected both her personal life and her options for childcare. **While working remotely, she sought a more flexible, part-time child care option. She quickly found that many childcare options were at capacity and had 6-10 month long waitlists.** With so little known about the transmission and impacts of COVID on infants, Rachel had her own reservations about how well sanitation and social distancing protocols would be enforced while seeking a child care facility. She wanted to receive clear details from child care providers about how they were handling the pandemic. Like Sandra and many other parents, Rachel noticed a huge communication gap between parents and child care providers that needs to be fixed. Other issues that Rachel faced when conducting her search for childcare options were the expensive costs of childcare facilities, the lack of programs specializing in younger infant care and the limited offering of part-time childcare services for infants. While she says that she loves the system she has with her current childcare provider, she emphasized that the process of finding them took about 3 months.

Jenna

Like many of the other parents, Jenna-- a mom with a 3 year-old and 4 year-old in public preschool-- feels that the pandemic has hindered social growth for children and has caused severe mental health issues for parents throughout the nation. Jenna shares with other parents an appreciation for the importance of childcare for both kids and parents since children need to move around, play, and interact with others-- but doing so with parents alone is draining for both the children and parents. She opened up about her own struggles with mental health, especially as a single mom during the pandemic. **“[Childcare] gives single parents that cushion [and] safe space... some single parents don’t have any support system.”**

4 <https://childrenatrisk.org/child-care-desert-analysis-22/>

5 “Child Care is Key to Texas’ Economic Recovery from COVID-19.” Council for a Strong America. 31 March 2022. Accessed from: <https://www.strongnation.org/articles/1895-child-care-is-key-to-texas-economic-recovery-from-covid-19>

6 All names used are pseudonyms to protect the identity and respect the privacy of our parent contributors.

Michael

Michael -- a father of a 3-year-old daughter -- faced unemployment during the COVID-19 pandemic. His daughter was in Head Start for an average of 6-7 hours a day, and he also had two other older children to consider. He ended up choosing to go back to business school in hopes of increasing job security for himself. Balancing work and school while raising a child presents challenges for some parents that makes access to quality child care an absolute necessity. However, **Michael said it was “difficult to find a good place, and child care is very expensive.”** He found it challenging to find places that were safe and fun with satisfactory COVID protocols. He is now satisfied with his Head Start location and feels sincere gratitude for the support that the child care system offers parents. The Head Start program has helped him go back to his career as an environmental consultant. Having a productive environment to leave his daughter during the week allows him to take on the hours that he needs to maintain his career and support his children.

Isabel

Isabel is both a family child care provider, and a parent (whose children attend her own program). In her program, Isabel uses her Master's in Applied Behavior Analysis to help children who struggle with “extreme behaviors,” through social and emotional development assistance. Still, she faced considerable mental and emotional stress, since no one (aside from the children she cares for) were allowed to come to her house, due to health concerns of a high-risk pregnancy and husband's ongoing health concerns.

Isabel feels that home-based care is undervalued, and in her opinion the large-scale centers get far more attention. She believes that many children may be best-served by smaller centers. She hopes that home-based daycares will get the credit and attention that they deserve, for the unique services they are able to provide for children. Citing the COVID-19 federal relief funds, she said **“it's great that all this funding is coming now, but before there was nothing... it's funny that no one noticed how important child care is until this pandemic really hit.”**

Carla

Carla-- a mother of a 4 year-old and 3 month-old -- utilized a family child care home during the pandemic. She had previously used military-affiliated child care but transferred to an in-home service for convenience. Luckily, her child was established in their child care program when the pandemic started, so there were no concerns with having to seek out a new care provider amidst the confusion of the pandemic. **Carla vastly prefers home-based care for her children and appreciates the additional supervision that comes with family child care providers.** While she kept her child at home for the first two months of the pandemic, their child care provider, Isabel, dropped off activity boxes to help parents and maintain progress towards development goals. This meticulous, above-and-beyond level of care, even for children who stayed home, was not the norm for families at large.

Carla doesn't have any close family in their city, so she relies heavily on child care providers, and wouldn't have any other avenues for help otherwise. She's thankful for the educational and developmental opportunities that child care offers to her children, which would be unattainable otherwise. The nutritional help provided is also a big plus, and contributes to the healthy, physical growth of the children. Carla joked that “sometimes the food looks better than what I make at home.”

Shared Parent Experiences

After listening to the experiences of these six parents, there were three key themes highlighted in several of the interviews: cost of care, the need for diverse child care options, and appreciation for the child care system.

Cost of Care

The most common point of agreement among all the parents that were interviewed was the cost of child care is too high. Since child care is an absolute necessity for most working parents, additional support and more state funding need to be added to the current Texas child care system to help lower the out-of-pocket cost to parents. Increased funding to subsidize the cost of child care would be immensely helpful to families who are struggling to keep up with the costs, and

especially with working families who rely on child care to maintain their careers. Funding for providers would also help mitigate the vast amount of closures that resulted from the pandemic, and help alleviate the burden on parents of searching for adequate child care without worrying about long wait lists, or lack of options.

Funding should be explored in other areas, in addition to tuition subsidies. Sandra, Rachel, and Jenna mentioned the importance of parents' mental health. As Rachel put it, "social connections have been challenging, because [people] without infants are not taking the same protocols as I feel are necessary if you have an infant..." Increased access and funding for counseling resources would help parents cope with the stress of parenting, working, etc. Sandra felt that she benefited greatly from the counseling that she received through her program. These benefits are passed forward to children, when they come home to parents who are emotionally available and able to focus on creating a nurturing home life. The burden of cost for keeping a child enrolled in care is an area of our child care system that needs attention to help support families throughout Texas.

Diversifying Child Care Options

No family is going to have identical needs for their children. Some parents need full-time care, and others need part-time due to work schedules. Many parents (particularly during COVID) changed employment statuses creating an inconsistency of care. Rachel sought part-time, flexible infant care while she worked from home, while Isabel works with parents who need specific support for medical or behavioral needs that cannot be accommodated in a larger program. Parents' priorities for their child care program are reflective of their specific situation and are often not met by a traditional, center-based 6am-6pm model. Diversifying child care offerings is needed to give parents more options for finding affordable care.

Appreciation for the Child Care System

While the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated many of the existing issues within the child care system, it also laid bare how important it is for parents to have an available support structure when they are faced with unprecedented challenges. Despite clear acknowledgements of the imperfections of the child care system, it's important to remember the vast positive impact that child care has on the lives of families. As Michael said, "having a good child care system is the best thing that could happen to parents." Most of the parents interviewed would not be able to maintain their careers if they didn't have a safe and productive environment to bring their children during work hours. Parents generally feel that their children benefit from being in environments conducive to learning and interaction with other children. Child care providers even position themselves as a close substitute for family assistance. Carla's lack of family that lives close to her means that she does not have an immediate alternative place to send her kids if she has to; child care facilities fill that gap. In particular, the support for single parents cannot be overstated. The benefits to both the child and the parent can create a positive feedback loop of care within the family which leads to a better, lower-stress environment at home.

Learning from the Field

As we continue thinking about key steps to relieve families, businesses and communities of the impacts of the COVID pandemic, stabilizing the child care industry remains a top priority. Providing our youngest residents with options to develop their brain, engage their peers and indulge in nutritious meals and snacks, gives the assurance that we are providing a safe place for them to learn about themselves and the world. Additionally, safe places for infants, toddlers and young children helps to maintain a productive adult workforce. When parents question the well-being of their children it leads to inconsistencies and challenges in the workforce. The type of uncertainty collectively experienced by all Texans over the past 2 years gives us the opportunity to work together to see all Texans thrive. By allocating additional funds to lessen the cost of child care and helping establish centers with a wider variety of services offered, we will know that Texas families are positioned to thrive. While the parents considered here are small in number, they give a picture of just how vital an investment in child care is for the entire state of Texas.

THANK YOU!

CHILDREN AT RISK is grateful to the parents across the state who shared their experiences and insights for the production of this newsletter.

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