

RESEARCH REPORT



Seven Impacts of the Pandemic on Young Children and their Parents: Initial Findings from NIEER's December 2020 Preschool Learning Activities Survey

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February 2021

Acknowledgments

Funding for survey development and administration was provided by the PNC Foundation and the Foundation for Child Development. The authors are solely responsible for content of this report.

About NIEER

The National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) at the Graduate School of Education, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ, conducts and disseminates independent research and analysis to inform early childhood education policy.

Suggested Citation

Barnett, W.S., & Jung, K. (2021). Seven Impacts of the Pandemic on Young Children and their Parents: Initial Findings from NIEER's December 2020 Preschool Learning Activities Survey. New Brunswick, NJ: National Institute for Early Education Research.

About the Authors

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Introduction

Early learning experiences at home and in classrooms build the foundations for children's later success in school and life. The pandemic has upended homelife and preschool programs, making it more challenging for both parents and communities to provide optimal learning experiences for young children. These changes are likely to have important consequences for young children's learning and development (social, emotional, and physical as well as cognitive) and mental health.

To learn about the pandemic's impacts on young children's learning and development NIEER developed a parent survey regarding children's home learning activities and preschool participation during the pandemic. The first survey was conducted in Spring 2020.¹ We followed this up with a second survey in December 2020 with a national survey of parents of children ages 3 to 5 and not yet in kindergarten. As with the first survey, the second includes some questions from previous national surveys such as the National Household Education Survey to compare current circumstances with those prior to the pandemic. It also included a standardized measure of children's social and emotional development and well-being.

Overall, we found the pandemic resulted in significant loss of important learning opportunities for young children through the fall into December. Participation in preschool programs declined sharply from pre-pandemic levels. Although most who attended preschool programs did so in-person, this was not true for young children in poverty who had less than 1/3 the access to in-person education of children in higher income families. Parent supports for learning through booking reading and teaching basic skills also declined sharply. So children lost learning opportunities both at home and in preschool programs. Not surprisingly, parents reported unusually high rates of social-emotional or mental health problems for their young children.

We summarize key findings and then present charts with detailed information on seven impacts the pandemic has had on young children and their parents.

Seven Impacts: An Overview

1. Participation in center-based preschool programs in December was still substantially below pre-pandemic levels even though in-person participation rates had risen greatly since Spring. Prior to the pandemic 51 percent of 3-year-olds and 71 percent of 4-year-olds attended a preschool classroom.² In December 2020, the comparable figures were 39 percent and 54 percent (a nearly 25 percent decline in enrollment). This includes children attending remotely. The declines in enrollment and in-person participation from pre-pandemic levels were both larger at age 4 than age 3. Moreover, children in poverty (defined as those in families with incomes under \$25,000 per year) had the steepest declines in overall participation and, especially, in-person participation. Just 13 percent of those in poverty were reported to receive in-person preschool education (defined to include any type of child care center, preschool, or Head Start) in December 2020.

2. Support for young children with disabilities appears to have suffered from lower rates of identification as well as difficulties providing children with all the services they should be receiving. The percentage of young children with an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) declined from 9 percent to 7 percent ($p < .10$) from Spring to Fall 2020. This is a 22 percent

decline, about the same as the decline in program participation for the population. In addition, just 57 percent of those with IEPs were reported to receive full services, a big improvement over last Spring, but still far from desirable.

3. Many more young children had high levels of social and emotional difficulties than expected, as assessed by the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) completed by parents. The SDQ is widely used to screen for mental health problems in children. Although comparison to the available national data is complicated by differences in ages and other factors, the percentage of young children with significant difficulties is much higher than “normal.”

4. Assuring all young children who need nutritional support receive meals remains an issue. More families are receiving meals from programs than last Spring (for example the rate for those who reported they were in Head Start was up to 71 percent from 61 percent). However, preschool programs still seem to be missing a substantial number of those who are eligible for free and reduced price meals (who may be hard to reach with meals if they are attending virtually). A quarter of families with annual incomes below \$25,000 and participating in a preschool program (including Head Start, public school, and private schools and child care) did not receive meals. This may harm young children’s cognitive, emotional, and physical health and development.³

5. Parents experienced considerable difficulties with their children’s preschool programs in December 2020 particularly if they were attending remotely. Parents were much more likely to be very satisfied with a child’s preschool program if it was in-person (80 percent) than if it was remote (42 percent). Among those with a child attending remotely, 47 percent reported that they were very overwhelmed trying to facilitate learning and another 23 percent reported being moderately overwhelmed.

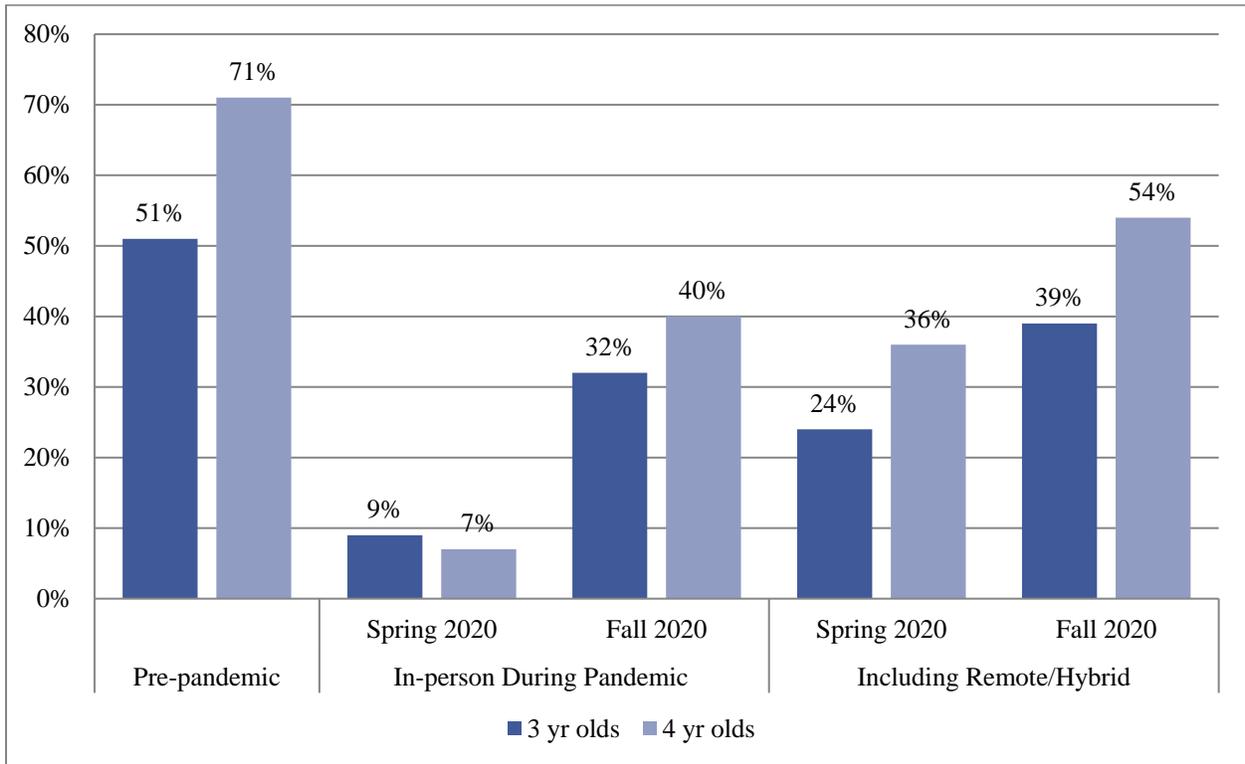
6. Parents experienced a range of hardships due to the pandemic. The most common was getting less work done due to child care and education issues. This problem was more frequent in the Northeast. Substantial percentages of parents reported losing jobs, reduced hours and lost wages all of which likely harmed young children’s learning and development including mental health.⁴

7. Parental supports for home learning activities declined for reading to their children and teaching fundamentals of literacy and numeracy. Small declines had been observed in the Spring. Much larger declines were found in December with parents who reported they read to their children 3 or more times per week falling from 85 percent pre-pandemic to just 71 percent in December 2020.⁵ Possibly some parents are exhausted by greater responsibilities for child care as well other stresses from the pandemic, and this reduced their capacity to support home learning activities.

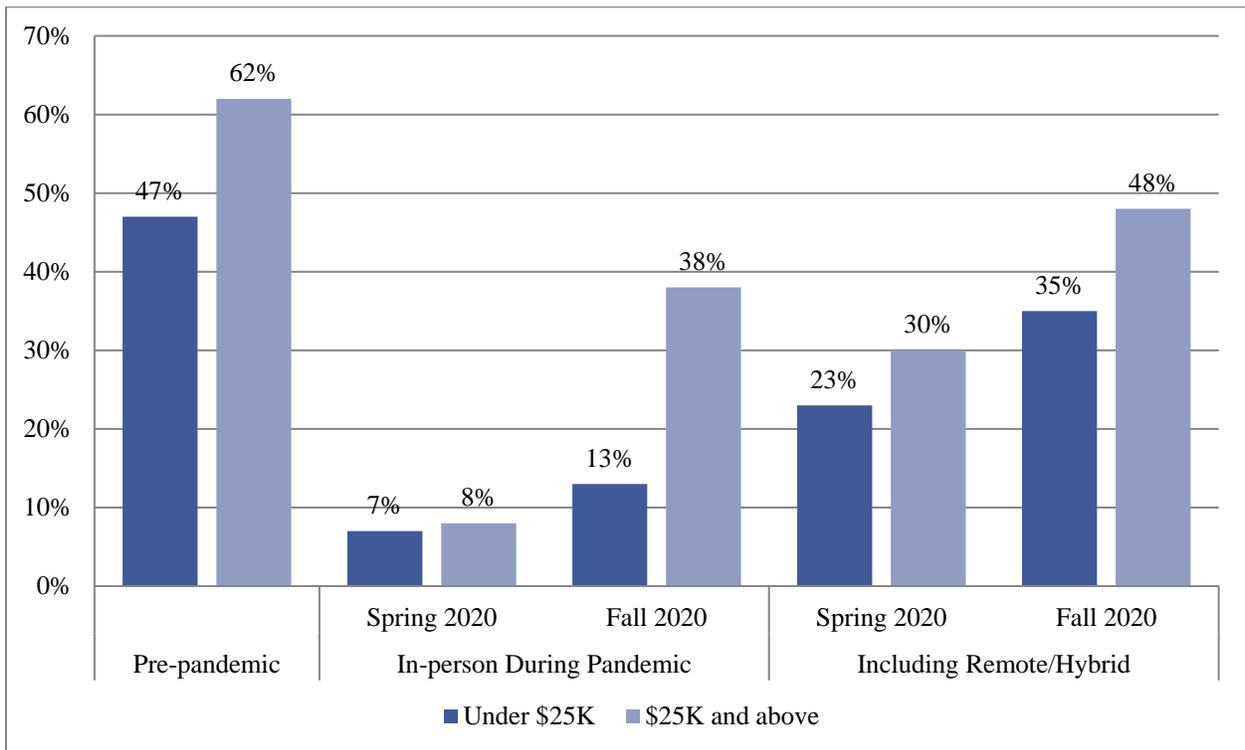
Charting the Impacts: A Deeper Dive

1. Preschool participation continues to be far below pre-pandemic levels both in-person and when remote and hybrid learning programs are included. In-person services increased from Spring to Fall of 2020 but were still far below pre-pandemic levels. Program participation declined more at age 4. Children in the lowest-income families had especially large declines in in-person participation (Figure 1-2).

1-1. Preschool participation before and during Spring (n=945) and Fall 2020 (n=992) during the pandemic by age.

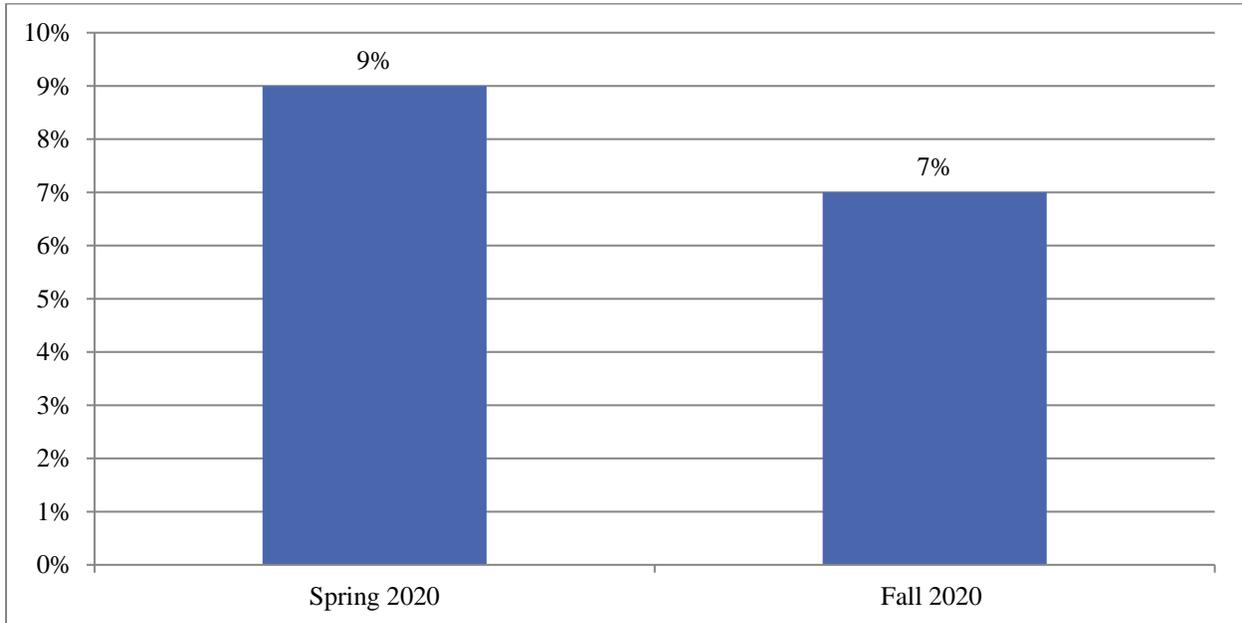


1-2. Preschool participation by income (Spring n=945, Fall n=992).



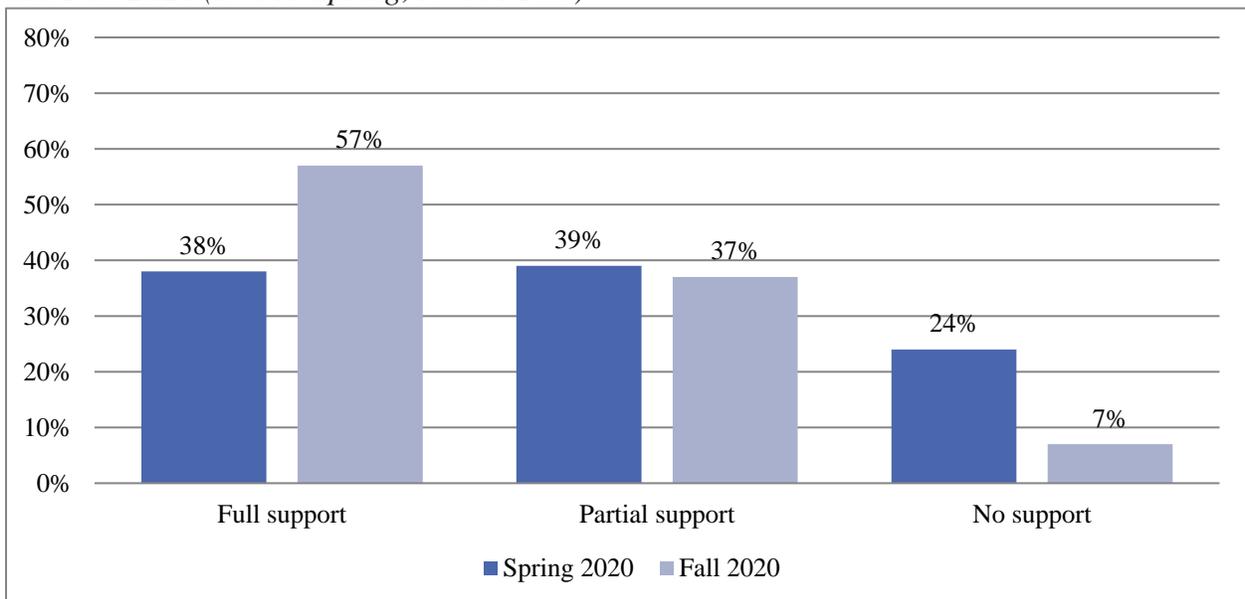
2. Support for young children with special needs continued to suffer. Comparison to last spring indicates that fewer preschool children with disabilities were identified for services in the 2020-21 school year. Services to children identified as having special needs as indicated by an Individualized Education Program (IEP) improved compared to last spring but many young children with IEP still received less than their full services.

2-1. Percentage of children 3-5 not yet in kindergarten with an IEP.



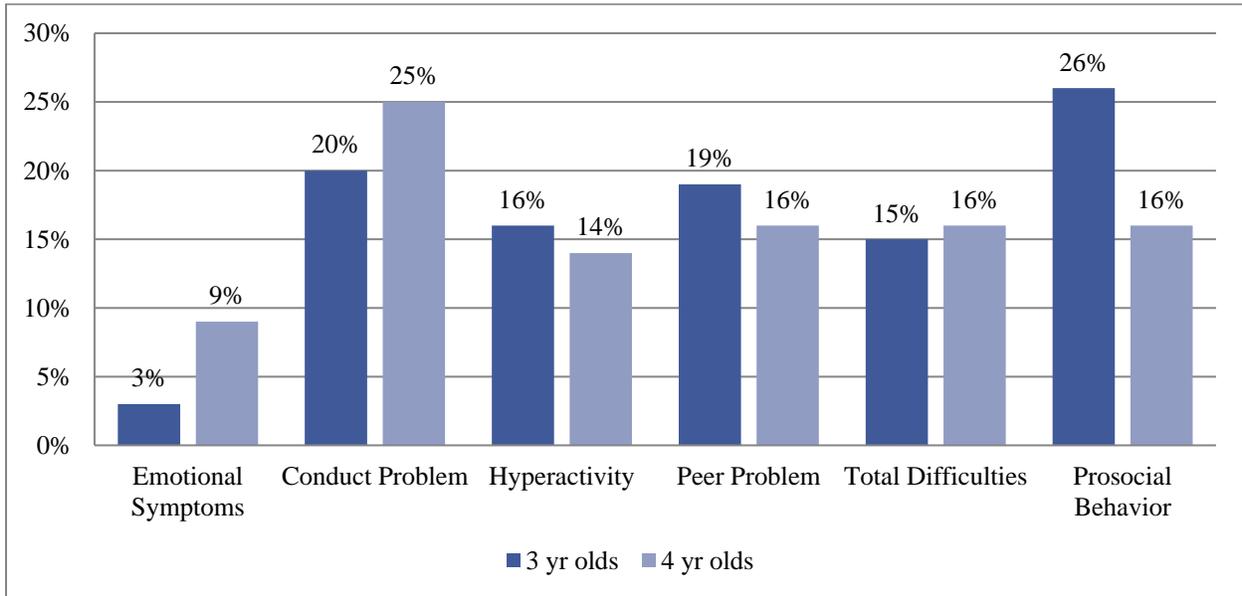
Chi-Square test: $p = 0.07$, statistically significant at $p < .10$ ($n=945$ Spring; $n=984$ Fall).

2-2. Degree of support for children with Individualized Education Programs (IEP) Spring and Fall 2020 ($n=945$ Spring; $n=984$ Fall)

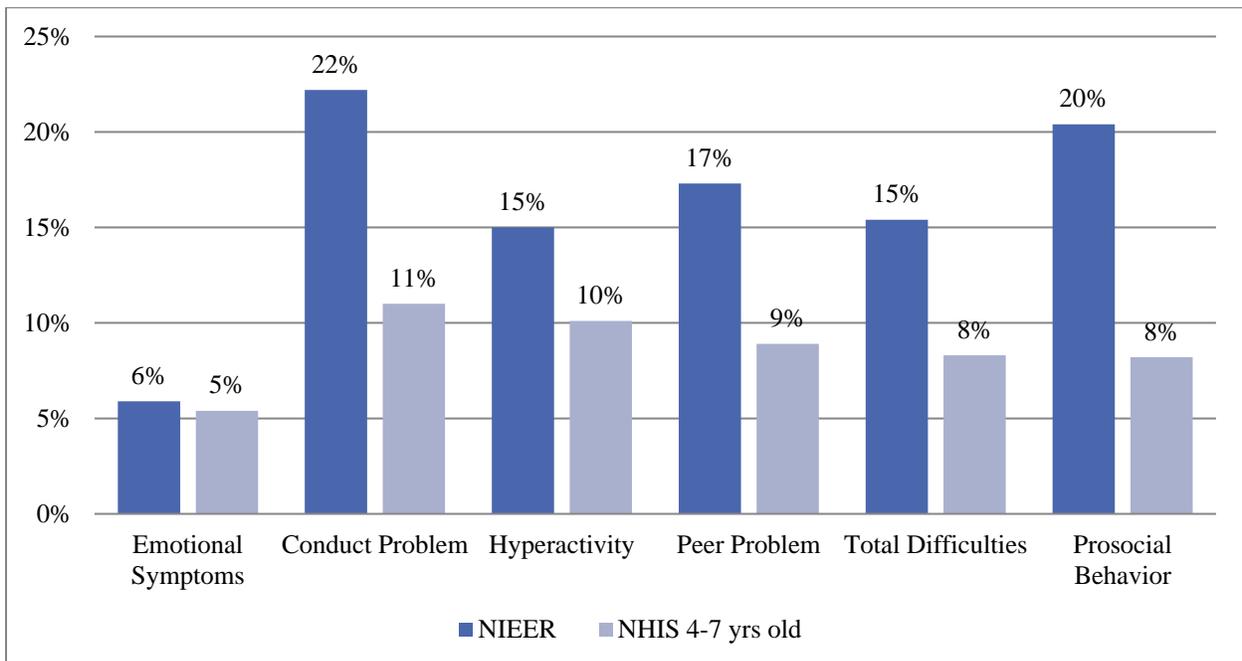


3. Parents reported elevated levels of significant social-emotional problems. This indicates the percentage of children with potentially serious social emotional problems has greatly increased, especially for high levels of conduct problems and lack of prosocial behavior, as measured by Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire.

3-1. Percentage with “high” levels of problems by age (n=981).

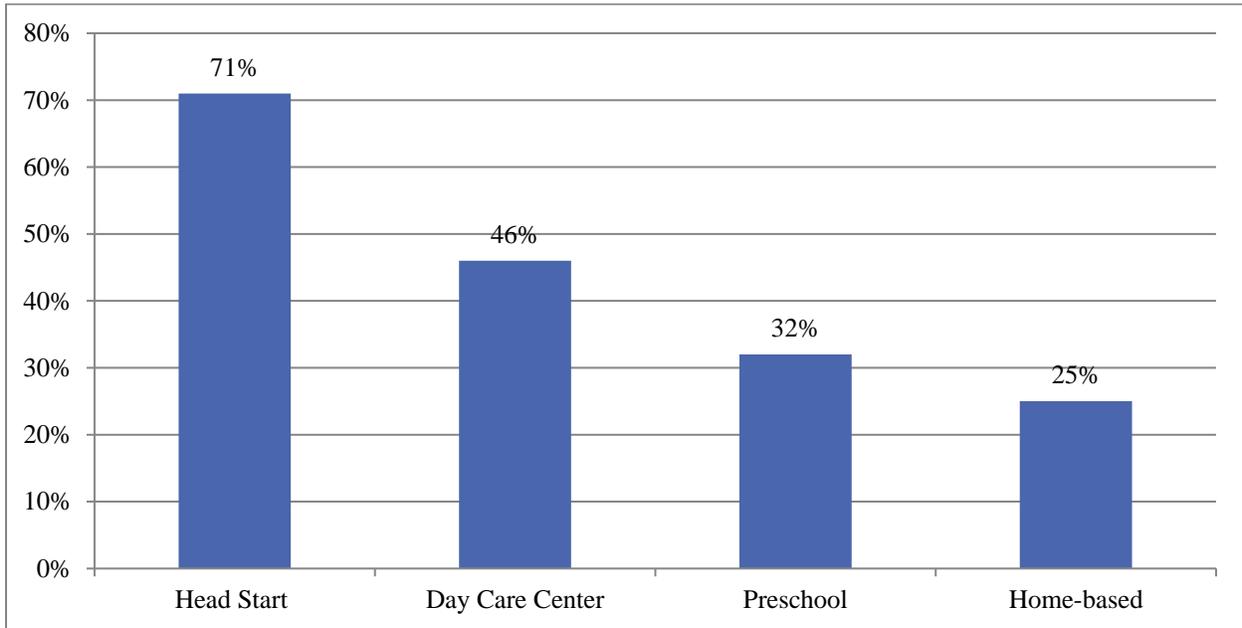


3-2. Percentage with “high” levels of problems in the Fall NIEER survey compared to national normative data from the National Health Interview Survey (n=981).

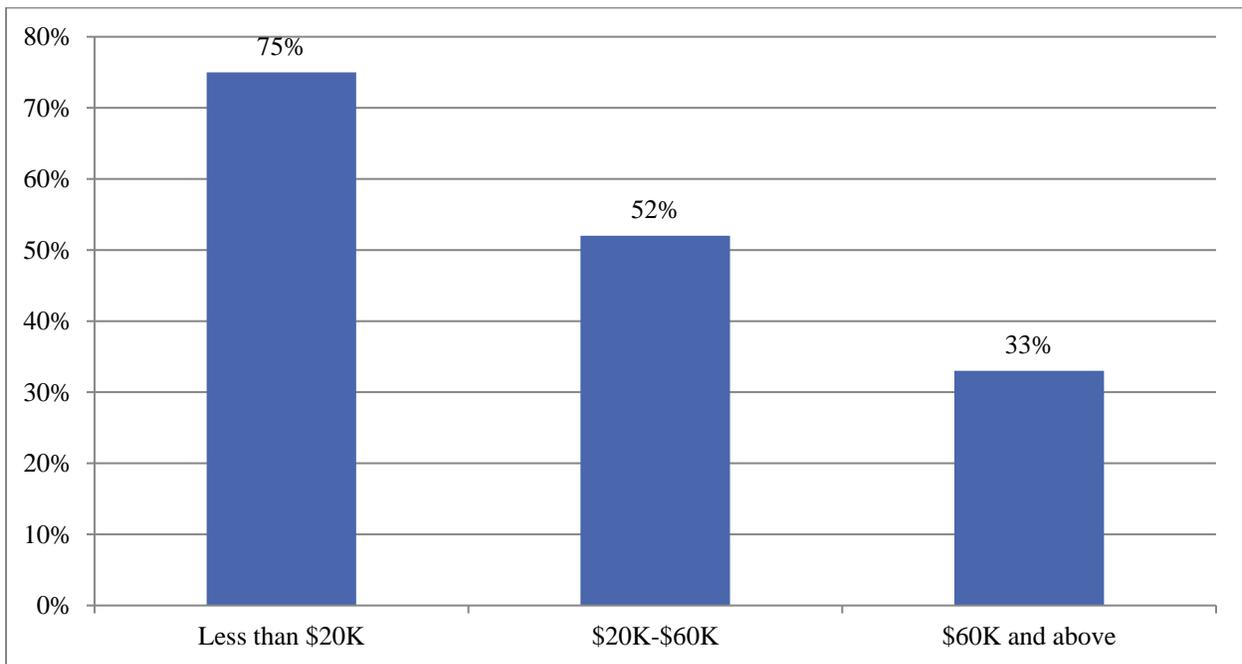


4. Many children who should receive meals through preschool programs did not. For example, nearly all Head Start children and all children in families with incomes below \$25,000 per year qualify for free meals but not all received meals. Additionally, children who did not enroll in a preschool program likely missed out on nutritional support, as well.

4-1. Received meals by type of preschool program (n=468).

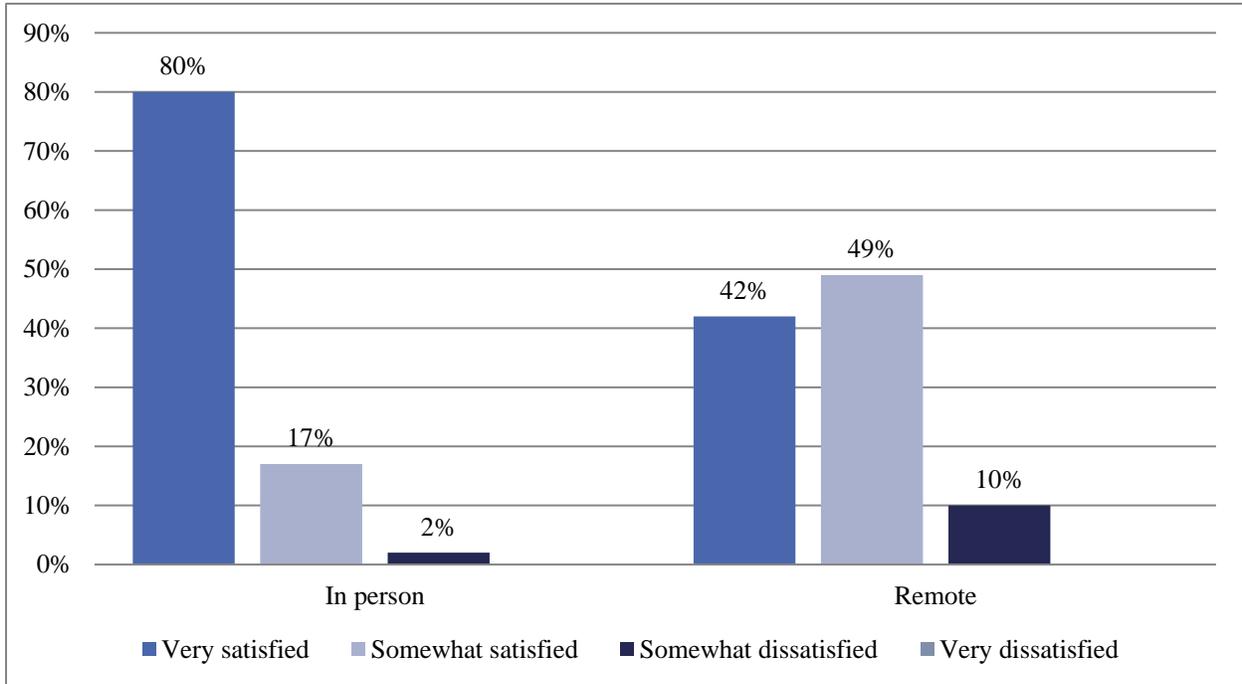


4-2. Received meals by income (n=459, children in programs only).

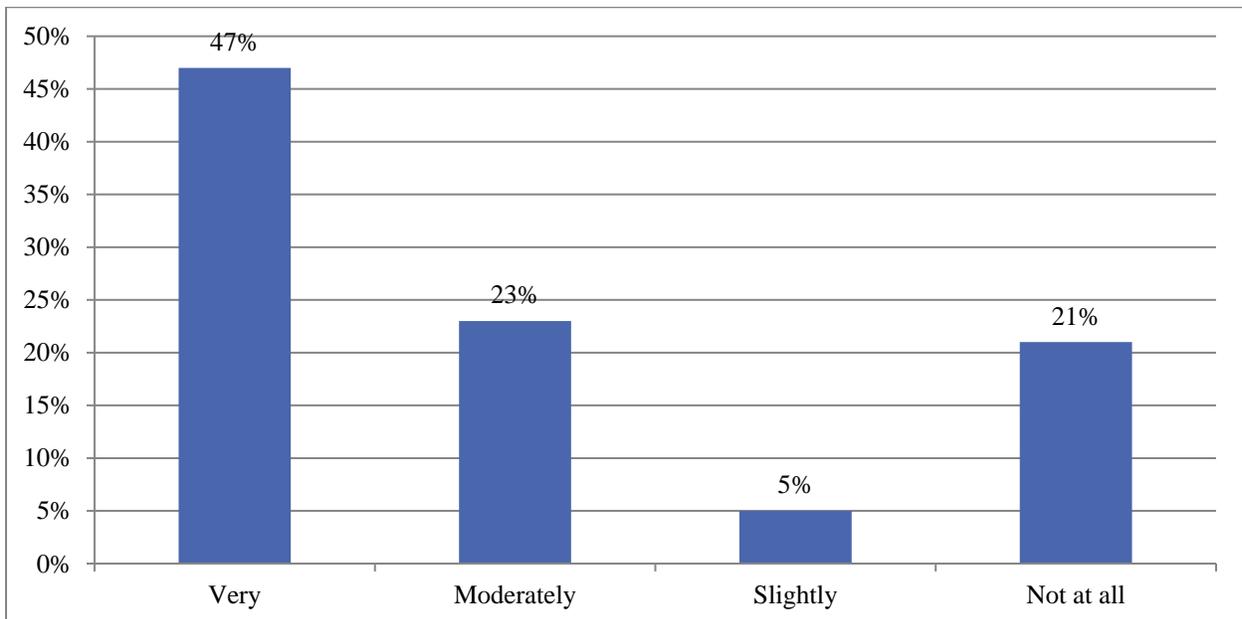


5. Parents reported less satisfaction with remote preschool education and most found they were overwhelmed by the demands of supporting remote learning for preschools.

5-1. Parent satisfaction was higher when their preschool programs provided in-person (n=462) services.

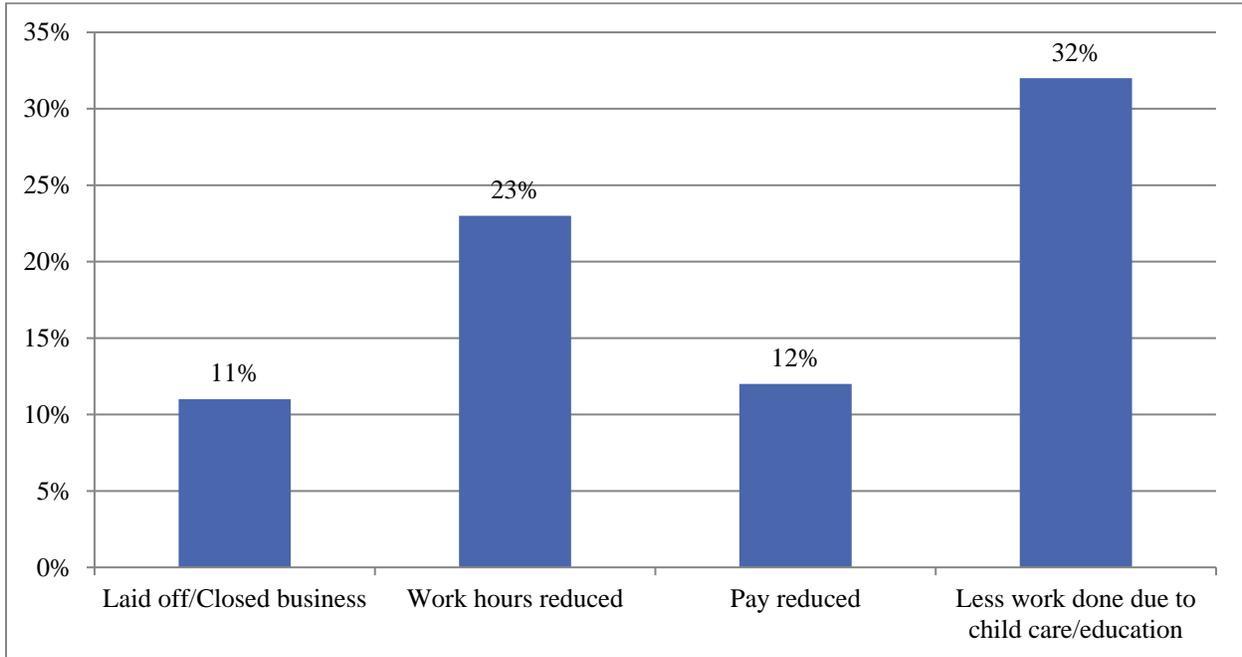


5-2. Most parents whose children received remote/hybrid preschool programs felt overwhelmed by the responsibility of facilitating at-home learning for the child. Nearly half felt very overwhelmed (n=105).

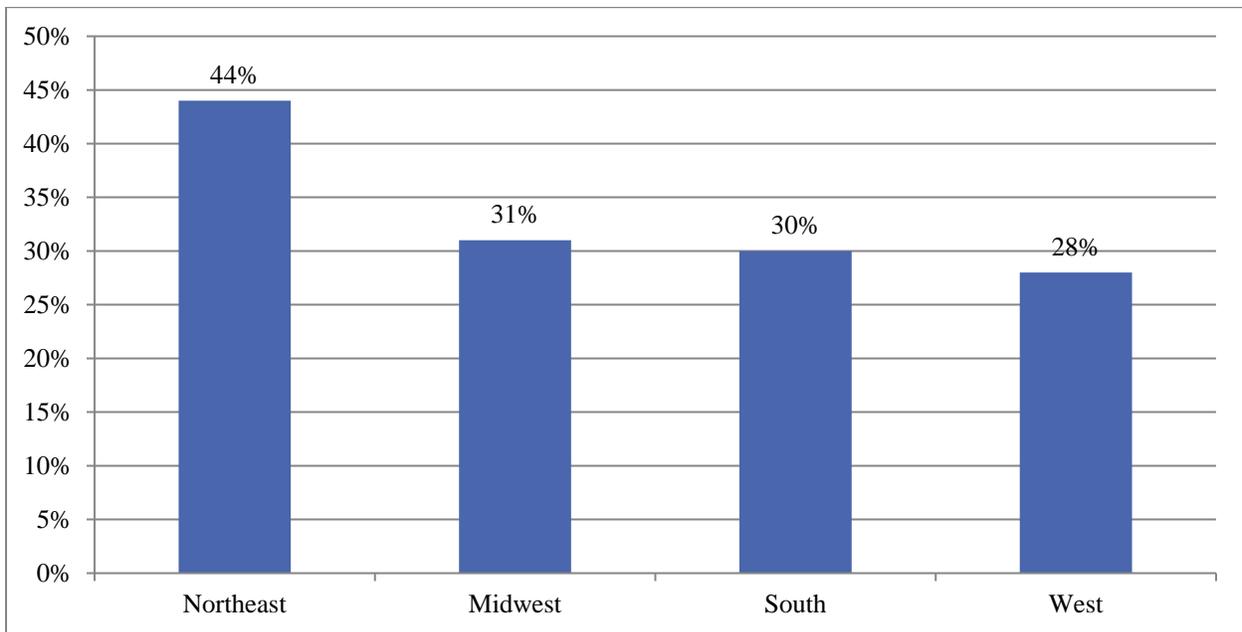


6. Parents experienced a range of hardships due to the pandemic; the most common was getting less work done due to child care and education issues. This problem was more frequent in the Northeast than in other regions.

6-1. Percent of employed parents reporting they experienced a hardship due to the pandemic (n=697).

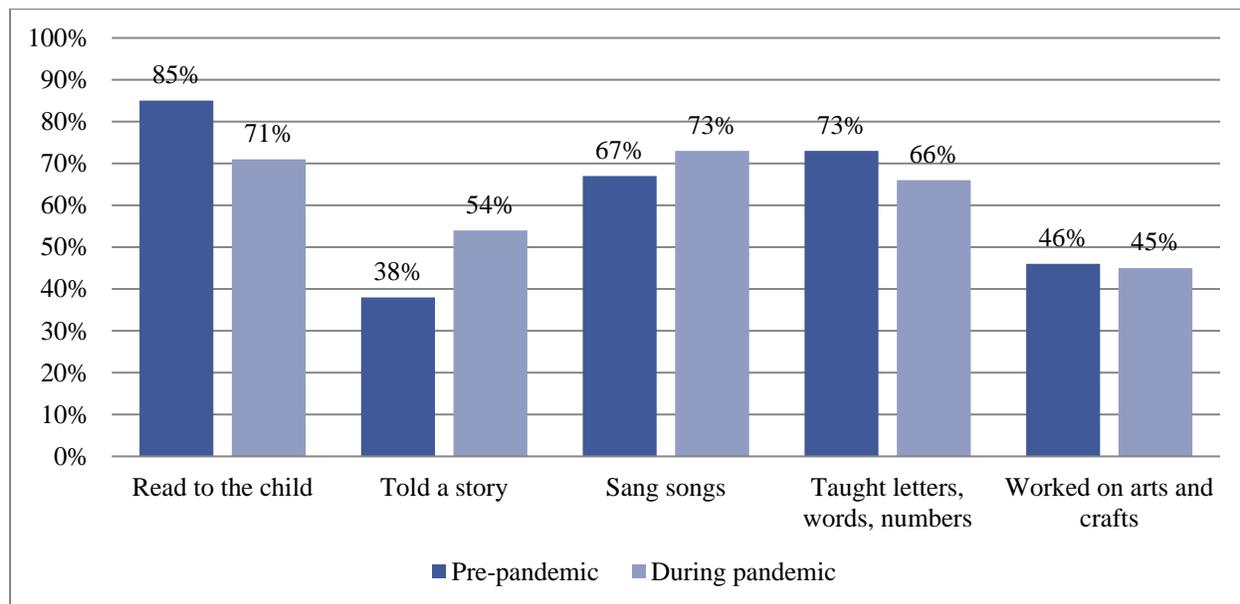


6-2. Percent of employed parents reporting they got less work done due to child care and education issues during by region (n = 697).



7. Declines in some key parental supports for early learning likely contributed to learning losses during the pandemic. Parent reading had an especially large decline in Fall 2020 compared to the pre-pandemic level.

7.1 Percentage of parents reporting an activity 3 or more times per week Pre-Pandemic (2019 NHES) and during Pandemic Fall 2020 (n=992).



Technical Details

Ipsos Public Affairs (Ipsos) conducted the survey on KnowledgePanel®, a probability-based web panel designed to be representative of the United States. Panel members are randomly recruited through probability-based sampling, and households are provided with access to the Internet and hardware if needed. The target population for this survey consisted of non-institutionalized U.S. adults age 18 and older with at least one child aged 3-, 4-, or 5-years-old in the household. Ipsos sampled U.S. adults with children in their household aged 3-, 4-, or 5-years-old to obtain a total of 1,001 interviews with families of children not yet in kindergarten.

The survey was conducted between December 11, 2020 and December 21, 2020. Selected panel members received an email invitation to complete the survey and were asked to do so at their earliest convenience. The survey was fielded in both English and Spanish. Respondents answered questions about a 3-, 4-, or 5-year-old child in their household, including items about the child’s daily activities during the pandemic and the child’s childcare and preschool, and program experiences before and during the pandemic.

Study-specific post-stratification weights have been applied to the final sample to adjust for survey nonresponse and to ensure the proper distributions for the specific target population (i.e., race/ethnicity, education level of parents, household income, language proficiency and census region). In addition, the sample was weighted to adjust for the presence of more than one preschool child in some families. A complete description of survey and weighting procedures is provided in a separate *NIEER Methodology Report*.⁶

Endnotes

¹Barnett, W.S.. & Jung, K. (2020). Understanding and responding to the pandemic’s impacts on preschool education: What can we learn from last spring? New Brunswick, NJ: NIEER.

Barnett, W.S., Jung, K., & Nores, M. (2020). Young children’s home learning and preschool participation experiences during the pandemic. NIEER 2020 Preschool Learning Activities Survey: Technical report and selected findings. New Brunswick, NJ: NIEER.

² NIEER estimates from NHES 2019: 49% at age 3, 70 percent at age 4, and 81 percent for the much smaller number of 5-year-olds not yet in kindergarten.

³ Dunn, C. G., Kenney, E., Fleischhacker, S. E., & Bleich, S. N. (2020). Feeding low-income children during the Covid-19 pandemic. *New England Journal of Medicine*, 382(18), e40.

⁴ Almond, D., Currie, J., & Duque, V. (2018). Childhood circumstances and adult outcomes: Act II. *Journal of Economic Literature*, 56(4), 1360-1446.

⁵ NIEER estimates from the NHES 2019.

⁶ Koning, A., & Morgan, K. (2021). Fall 2020 methodology report. New Brunswick, NJ: Eagleton Center for Public Interest Polling, Rutgers the State University of New Jersey.