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Contact: Ernest Landante, Jr.
elandante@nieer.org, 848-932-0770

America's Preschoolers Lose Important Learning Opportunities Due to Pandemic, Raising Concerns for the Future

Survey: Preschools Provided Little or No Effective Learning and Development Supports as some Parent-provided Home Learning Activities Declined

NEW BRUNSWICK, NJ — America's preschools schools failed to provide students adequate support after shutting down in-person instruction in March due to the coronavirus pandemic according to a nationwide survey by the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) at the Rutgers Graduate School of Education.

Most parents reported their children received some remote educational support services when preschool classrooms closed, but support often was minimal. Within two months less than half of preschool children continued to receive remote learning support from their programs. Among those receiving supports, large majorities participated less than once a week in activities provided by preschools. In addition to the loss of 2 to 4 months of classroom learning time, the survey found evidence of declines in some parent-child activities, which could worsen to learning losses.

"Neither parents nor preschools were prepared for the sudden transition forced on us by the pandemic," said Dr. Steve Barnett, NIEER's senior co-director and a study author. "Perhaps ten percent of preschool children received a robust replacement for in-person preschool attendance. Preschools should either reopen or prepare a much stronger response to remote support for young children's learning and development."

Study co-author Dr. Kwanghee Jung noted that parents face unprecedented stresses from the pandemic shutdown including working from home, travel restrictions, lost income, and difficulties providing for basic needs. This has made it difficult for parents to continue their usual home supports for young children's learning much less expand their efforts to replace preschool classroom activities.

Barnett encourages parents and educational leaders making decisions for the next school year to consider the learning opportunities that have already been lost as well as future losses if classrooms remain closed. Designing programs to support learning and development at home presents great challenges. In addition to adding to the demands on already stressed parents, many of whom will be working, there are no real replacements for social play, which promotes many aspects of child development that contribute success in school and life beyond school.

Preschool shutdowns also appeared likely to worsen educational inequalities. Home learning environments are more unequal than preschools, and public preschool programs provide their greatest benefits to the most disadvantaged children. Also, most young children with disabilities experienced a loss of the services required by their Individualized Education Plans, with almost a quarter receiving no supports after classrooms closed. Provision of services for young children with disabilities poses serious challenges, but that does not excuse failure to provide services, says Barnett.

"The best way to address this inequality is to reopen schools for our youngest children, who learn best through hands-on activities and engaging with responsive adults and other children," said Barnett. "The challenge of protecting the health of our young children—and their family members and teachers—even if much less than for older children and adults should not be underestimated, and preschools will need funding to mitigate risks. However, the costs and difficulties of providing even partially effective supports for preschool learners with classrooms closed must not be underestimated either."

Survey results were collected from a nationally representative sample of one thousand parents of children age three to five. The online survey was conducted between May 22 and June 5, 2020. This research was funded with support from Overdeck Family Foundation and the PNC Foundation. The PNC Foundation also provided support for disseminating this research.

The National Institute for Early Education Research (www.nieer.org) at the Rutgers Graduate School of Education, New Brunswick, NJ, supports early childhood education policy and practice through independent, objective research.

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