



# Accessing Child Care During the Coronavirus Pandemic

in Massachusetts

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## Accessing Child Care During the Coronavirus Pandemic in Massachusetts

When the coronavirus pandemic led Massachusetts to close all forms of child care except emergency care in March 2020, many parents found themselves working from home and caring for their young children at the same time. The same applied to families who could no longer rely on grandparents or other friends and relatives for child care given health and safety concerns. These challenges compounded the difficulties Robeson found in her research conducted in the fall of 2019 in a study with Sarah Savage of the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston. In interviews conducted in 2019, she found that parents reported difficulty finding care that met their needs as well as difficulty with the cost of that care. Many mothers also reported that once they found the child care that best met their needs, particularly if they had employers that were flexible and understanding of their needs, they stayed with the same employer and child care arrangement even if higher salaries or lower cost care were available.

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As Massachusetts prepared to re-open child care in the summer of 2020, with new health and safety guidelines, what did parents do about child care, especially given parents' fears and weak confidence in the child care system? The new health and safety guidelines including smaller group sizes and other limitations posed problems with fewer slots available for children and raised costs. COVID-19 also led to the closing of child care centers and family child care homes as well as fewer educators to care for and educate young children.

### Goal of the Study

The present study explored the “new normal” of child care and the implications for parents who require child care to work including how families with children under the age of 5 are accessing child care during the pandemic, the experiences and perceptions of the multiple dimensions of early child care among parents requiring care to work, and the implications for parents' daily lives as well as their employment, economic mobility, work hours, and advancement. A phenomenological approach was applied to the interviews to understand how parents experience and ascribe meaning to child care decision points and a grounded-theory approach was used in order to identify emerging categories of themes.

### Methods

Twenty-five Massachusetts families who had children under the age of 5 in child care prior to the pandemic and have or would like to continue child care were interviewed over the phone, using a semi-structured interview. Information about child care used before the pandemic, during the time child care was closed (except for emergency care) because of the pandemic and during the re-opening phase was gathered as well



as basic demographic information. In addition, families with children with school age children were not included as Robeson and Lucas (2020) found that in many cases, the plans made by public schools was determining whether families would send their younger children to child care. Families with children learning remotely at home often decided that they would keep their younger children home as well. For the present study, the parent that best knew about child care decision making and usage before, during, and after was interviewed. Each participant received a \$50 Target gift card sent over email.

It was decided to wait to recruit families until March 2021 given that many child care programs had been open for at least a few months by that time. Families were recruited using a convenience sample, using a flyer sent to various groups in the state including parenting organizations, child care referral agencies, other organizations that cater to young families and from other interviewed parents through email, word-of-mouth, and Facebook entries posted by the Wellesley Centers for Women. In the first week of recruitment, close to 100 parents emailed expressing their interest. Although a translator would have been used if needed, all interviews were conducted in English. While both mothers and fathers were eligible to participate, one father, one non-binary parent, and one foster mom were interviewed along with 23 mothers.

The parents interviewed lived throughout Massachusetts in their own homes, condos, and apartments. The majority identified as white, with two Latinx, two multiracial, and one Arabic. The parents' ages ranged from 24 to 46 years (see Table 1). The parents' education ranged from less than high school to having a graduate degree (see Table 2). Seventeen were married or partnered when interviewed and six were single. One mother was widowed. The families' income ranged from less than \$5,000/year to over \$200,000/year (see Table 3).

Of the 25 parents, 21 were working and two others were going to school before the pandemic. During the pandemic the majority of parents worked from home (WFH), one was furloughed, and one received unemployment. Some never stopped going to a worksite and one other stopped working altogether.

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**Parents described it as a nightmare, survival mode, and chaos.**

## Results

For all the parents, being home with their children from March 2020 until July or later was tough. As the majority tried to work while caring for their children, many tried the best they could and worked during naps, before children woke, or long after bed time. One mother said it wasn't feasible to be 100% parent and 100% worker and that she felt she wasn't doing anything well. Another mother who taught remotely referred to the beginning of the pandemic as a nightmare. One other mother said she was in survival mode. Another said that with two parents, two jobs, and two children under 2 it was chaos. A mom that was still working remotely 3 days/week told me that the spring was one of the most difficult times she has been through and it was exhausting to work full time. Similarly, another said that she sacrificed her physical and emotional health. A mom that was in school woke up at 4 am take her final exams and feels she sacrificed her sanity and that she didn't do anything for herself. The one mother that stopped working during the pandemic had been working all the way through February 2021. She was a CNA at a rehab/nursing home and felt work was terrifying as 80-90% of the patients had COVID-19, and masks had to be reused.

## The majority of families preferred center-based care, but the price often led to a mix of both center-based and relative care.

At the time of the interviews, most parents were still WFH. Many had not returned yet to their workplaces. Some parents who were teachers had been teaching remotely and were about to return to their classrooms. Others returned to work once every few weeks, once a week, or even twice a week. It will not be the same— as one mother told me—We will never return to the office work culture.

The number of children in the families ranged from one (13 families), two (11 families), and three (one family). Before the pandemic all families used child care for one or more children ranging from center-based care (including two who used Early Head Start and/or Head Start), family child care homes, friend/grandparent care, or a mixture of care arrangements. The majority of families preferred center-based care when first choosing child care but the price often led to a mix of both center-based and relative care for their children or having the mom and/or dad work at home at least one day/week. One mother exclaimed “Holy mackerel!” when faced with paying for two children in center-based care. Even with the high price, parents often cited the structure and educators’ training as why they chose centers. A small minority preferred family child care homes often because of the price of center-based programs but also because of the family-like feel of a home-based program.

Child care programs were able to open again in June 2020 but none of the families’ arrangements opened that soon. Some opened as soon as July 2020, while others opened again in September 2020, and still others like two different Head Starts did not open until November 2020. Two families changed the centers their children attended and one mother who had thought she would use a center changed her mind and changed from a friend watching her child to a family child care home due to fears around COVID-19. Four families received vouchers from the state to pay for child care and were happy that the state decided that there would be no parent co-pays needed once their programs reopened (the state may go back to co-pays in the fall of 2021). One mother who is a director of a center-based program cut back her hours and could no longer afford to bring her two children to the center where she works. At first, she hired a babysitter but that proved too expensive so now the children’s grandmother watches the children.

It was surprising to learn that the families in this study sent their children back to care as soon as it reopened. Many felt their children had to go back to what they had known. One mother said her child needed to return because his mental health needed it. Another parent felt torn about returning her child and nervous about



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COVID-19 but her child socially and mentally needed an outlet, her friends, plus other adults so it was worth the exposure. One other mom felt her daughter needed the normalcy and education that she couldn't get with a baby brother at home.

## Discussion

COVID-19 turned families' lives upside down beginning in March 2020. Child care closed as did the worksites for so many parents. The first few months of the pandemic brought into the spotlight how hard and near impossible it was to both work from home and care for young children. The parents of this study told me about their struggles in trying to do both. A new kind of work culture needs to be one that is more flexible. The business community needs to ease output expectations, incorporate more paid family leave programs, and implement innovative accommodations for their employees with young children.

When child care programs reopened, most of the families went back to the child care they used before the pandemic even though it often was more than they could afford and often led them to multiple arrangements. Child care needs to be affordable, accessible, and meet the needs of working families. We need to advocate for federal and state funding specifically for child care.

We also need to tend to the mental toll the pandemic has taken on families' lives. Exhausted parents and their children need to be provided with mental, emotional, and trauma-related support. Parents can only parent when they themselves are provided with the care they need.

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## Tables

Table 1 Age of Participants

Age of Parent	Number of parents
24-29	3
30-35	9
36-40	10
41-46	3

Table 2 Education of Parent

Highest Education	Number of parents
Less than High School	1
High School Degree	1
Some College	2
Associate's Degree	2
Bachelor's Degree	9
Graduate Degree	10

Table 3 Family Income

Income range (for year)	Number of families
Less than \$5000	1
\$5100-\$30,000	5
\$31000-\$60,000	1
\$60,000-\$100,000	7
\$101,000-150,000	7
\$151,000-\$200,000+	5

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