The Impact of COVID-19

on Young Children, Families, and Teachers

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DEY

Defending the Early Years

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On June 22, 2020, Defending the Early Years released a survey to better understand the impact COVID-19 has had on young children, their families, and their teachers. Schools, centers, and childcare providers were forced to close their doors as the world implemented social distancing measures to slow the spread of the new deadly virus. Except for those deemed essential, most programs had to shift to some form of online learning/remote schooling. The resulting global pandemic impacted every facet of our daily life--altering our reality in many ways. Five months later, COVID-19 continues to spread as schools, centers, and childcare providers wrestle with the need to reopen and resume educating America's children while also wanting to keep everyone safe.

We wrote this survey so we could hear from parents and teachers of young children, a population often overlooked when discussing education. The survey contained 39 questions in three sections: demographics, parents, and teachers. Utilizing a mix of open-ended, multiple-choice, and Likert scale questions, we asked respondents about their experience with online learning/remote schooling, including participation, expectations, ease of adjustment, benefits, challenges, and concerns. From June 22 to August 17, 2020, we received 559 responses. We shared a web-based link to our survey in our newsletter, on our website, and on our social media sites.

This report documents our findings based on an analysis of the responses collected. We begin by sharing the demographic data. Then we provide an overview of the online learning/remote schooling participation, expectations, and reports of adjustment. Next, we share the benefits, challenges, and concerns of both parents and teachers. Finally, we offer some suggestions for parents and teachers based on our understanding of the data. We recognize that our survey did not reach many families; thus, we do not claim to have a generalizable sample. However, we feel as though many of the responses we received are representative of what many people experienced when schools were closed. We hope that by amplifying the voice of parents and teachers of young children, we can continue to protect and invest in childhood.

Demographics

From the 559 responses, we narrowed our analysis to 314 responses from parents and early childhood teachers. We designated four groups of early childhood teachers: infant/toddler, preschool, pre-k/kindergarten, and 1st/2nd grade and reported these numbers separately when appropriate. See Table 1. We received at least one response from 37 states plus the District of Columbia. See Table 2. We asked respondents to share their working status as a result of the pandemic. See Table 3 for an overview and Table 4 for a breakdown of teacher working status by type of ECE teacher. We enquired about the access to the internet, and the number of computers and tablets parents and teachers had at home. See Table 5.

Table 1: Number of Responses from Parents, ECE Teachers, ECE Parent and Teacher

Parent, ECE Teacher, ECE Parent and Teacher	Number of Responses
Parent of at least one child 0 to 8	122
Early Childhood Teacher	153
Infant/Toddler	15
Preschool	71
Pre-K/Kindergarten	54
1st/2nd Grade	13
ECE Parent and Teacher	39
Infant/Toddler	3
Preschool	21
Pre-K/Kindergarten	10
1st/2nd Grade	5

[1] We received no responses from Alabama, Alaska, Idaho, Mississippi, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Mexico, North Dakota, South Dakota, Utah Vermont, West Virginia, and Wyoming.

Table 2: States with Most Responses

Ohio	20
California	18
Massachusetts	18
New York	10
Illinois	9

Table 3: Parent and Teacher Working Status

Parents		Teachers	
Working Full-Time from Home	37%	Working Full-Time from Home	38%
Working Part-Time from Home	16%	Working Part-Time from Home	10%
Working Away from Home	15%	Working Away from Home	20%
Not Working	32%	Not Working	32%

Table 4: Teacher Working Status by ECE Teacher Type

	Infant/Toddler	Preschool	Pre-K/Kindergarten	1st/2nd Grade
Working Full-Time from Home	20%	28%	44%	62%
Working Part-Time from Home	13%	11%	6%	16%
Working Away from Home	13%	24%	22%	0
Not Working	53%	36%	28%	23%

Table 5: Internet, Computers, and Tablets

Parents		Teachers	
Reliable Internet at Home	95%	Reliable Internet at Home	97%
One Computer at Home	31%	One Computer at Home	38%
Two Computers at Home	37%	Two Computers at Home	31%
More Than Two Computers at Home	26%	More Than Two Computers at Home	25%
One Tablet at Home	28%	One Tablet at Home	31%
More Than One Tablet at Home	41%	More Than One Tablet at Home	40%

Online/Remote Schooling Participation, Expectations, and Adjustment

We asked eight questions related to child participation, expectations of, and adjustment to online learning/remote schooling. Parents reported their child's participation, expectations from the school district, how well their child adjusted, and how well they adjusted. Teachers also reported if their child participated in remote/online schooling, the work expectations as they provided online learning/remote schooling, how well they thought their students adjusted, and how well they adjusted. We report teacher work expectations, student adjustment, and teacher adjustment by the type of ECE teacher. See Tables 6-12.

Table 6: Online Learning/Remote Schooling Participation

Parent		ECE Parent & Teacher	
Child Participated in Online/Remote Schooling	64%	Child Participated in Online/Remote Schooling	76%
Child Did Not Participate in Online/Remote Schooling	17%	Child Did Not Participate in Online/Remote Schooling	11%
Other (i.e., not required, too young, etc.)	19%	Other (i.e., not required, too young, etc.)	14%

Table 7: Expectations for Online/Learning Remote Schooling- Parents

Child(ren) Expected to Participate in Daily Remote Lessons for Less Than 1 Hour	24%
Child(ren) Expected to Participate in Daily Remote Lessons for 1-2 Hours	23%
Child(ren) Expected to Participate in Daily Remote Lessons for 2+ Hours	19%
Child(ren) Expected to Submit Daily Assignments	31%
Child(ren) Expected to Submit Weekly Assignments	38%

Table 8: Parent Report of Child(ren) Adjustment to Online Learning/Remote Schooling

Child(ren) had a Very Difficult Adjustment	19%
Child(ren) had a Difficult Adjustment	47%
Child(ren) had Neither an Easy nor a Difficult Adjustment	1%
Child(ren) had an Easy Adjustment	11%
Child(ren) had a Very Easy Adjustment	4%

Table 9: Parent Adjustment to Online Learning/Remote Schooling

Parent had a Very Difficult Adjustment	19%
Parent had a Difficult Adjustment	31%
Parent had Neither an Easy nor a Difficult Adjustment	20%
Parent had an Easy Adjustment	17%
Parent had a Very Adjustment	6%

Table 10: Expectations for Online Learning/Remote Schooling-Teachers

|	Infant/Toddler	Preschool	PreK/Kindergarten	1st/2nd Grade
Provide Daily Remote Lessons for Less Than 1 Hour	71%	41%	45%	17%
Provide Daily Remote Lessons For 1-2 Hours	14%	5%	18%	8%
Provide Daily Remote Lessons for 2 or More Hours	0	3%	6%	33%

Table 11: Teacher Report of Student Adjustment to Online Learning/Remote Schooling

	Infant/Toddler	Preschool	PreK/Kindergarten	1st/2nd Grade
All Students Adjusted Well	0	0	2%	0
More Than Half of Students Adjusted Well	20%	19%	19%	15%
Half Adjusted Well, and Half had a Difficult Adjustment	40%	27%	33%	46%
More Than Half had a Difficult Adjustment	30%	47%	42%	31%
All Students Had a Difficult Adjustment	10%	8%	4%	9%

Table 12: Teacher Adjustment to Online Learning/Remote Schooling by Type of ECE Teacher

	Infant/Toddler	Preschool	PreK/Kindergarten	1st/2nd Grade
Teacher had a Very Difficult Adjustment	8%	8%	4%	8%
Teacher had a Difficult Adjustment	25%	43%	51%	46%
Teacher had Neither an Easy nor Difficult Adjustment	50%	30%	26%	38%
Teacher had an Easy Adjustment	8%	18%	17%	8%
Teacher has Very Easy Adjustment	8%	0	2%	0
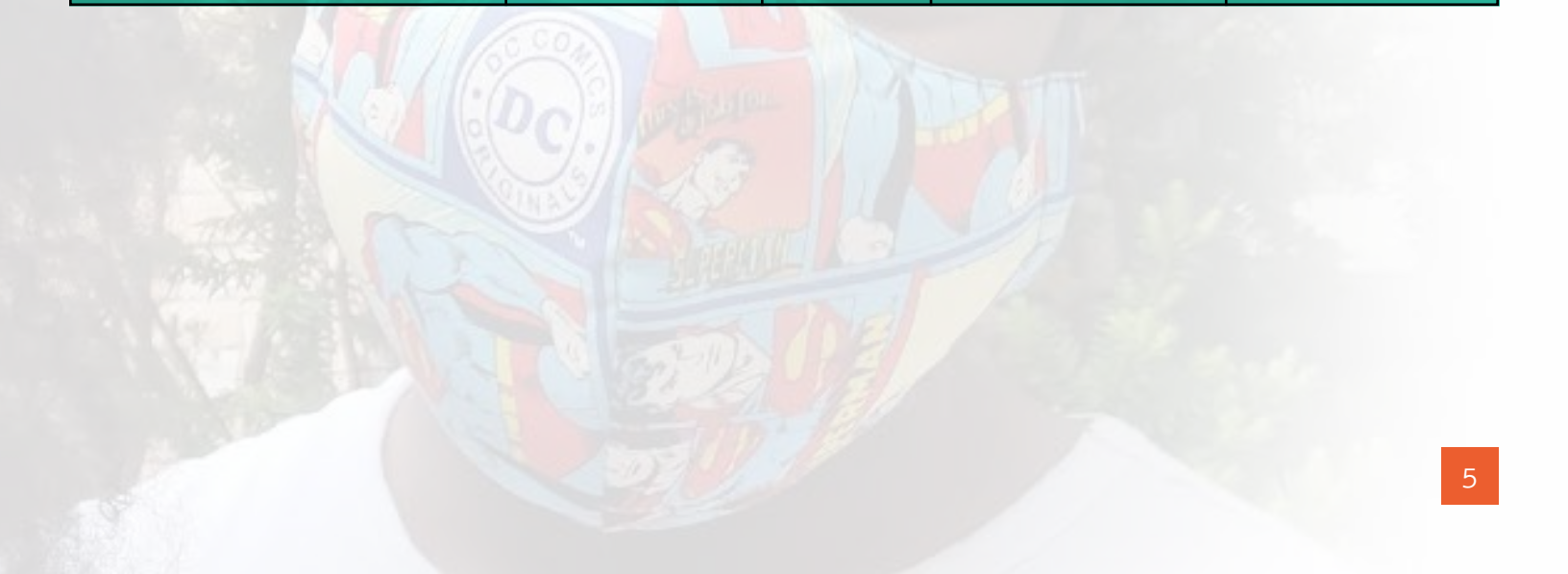
Concerns and Adjustment

We asked parents to identify the level of concern they had for each of the following issues: financial (i.e., job loss, etc.), returning to work, academic instruction, child(ren) falling behind, child(ren) missing out on social interaction and play with peers, safely reopening schools, increase in child(ren)'s stress, and an increase in adults' stress. We asked teachers to identify the level of concern they had for each of the following issues: job security (2020-2021 school year), safely reopening schools, loss of instructional time, returning to the classroom, establishing relationships with students (while online/remote), job expectations (while online/remote), increase in overall stress of children, and increase in overall stress of self. See Tables 13 and 14.

Table 13: Percentage of Parents Somewhat to Very Concerned

Financial Issues (i.e., job loss, etc.)	55%
Returning to Work (not from home)	59%
Academic Instruction	72%
Child(ren) Falling Behind	55%
Child(ren) Missing Social Interaction/Play with Peers	90%
Safely Reopening Schools	87%
Increase in Child(ren) Stress	91% (60% very concerned)
Increase in Parent Stress	95% (64% very concerned)

Table 14: Percentage of Teachers Somewhat to Very Concerned

Job Security (2020-2021 school year)	54%
Safely Reopening Schools	94% (67% very concerned)
Loss of Instructional Time	57%
Returning to the Classroom	83%
Establishing Relationships with Students (online/remote)	90% (62% very concerned)
Job Expectations (while online/remote)	75%
Increase in Overall Stress of Children	95% (66% very concerned)
Increase in Overall Stress of Teacher	91% (57% very concerned)

We compared parents' and teachers' level of adjustment with each area of concern. We noticed that teachers who reported being somewhat and very concerned about establishing relationships with children, increase in overall stress of children, and increase in overall stress reported higher levels of difficult and very difficult adjustment to online learning/remote schooling. We did not notice this trend with the other concerns nor did we see a trend in any of the concerns from parents compared with their self-reports of adjustment and online learning/remote schooling.

Figure 1: Teachers somewhat and very concerned about establishing relationships with children (while remote/online) compared with self-report of adjustment to online learning/remote schooling.
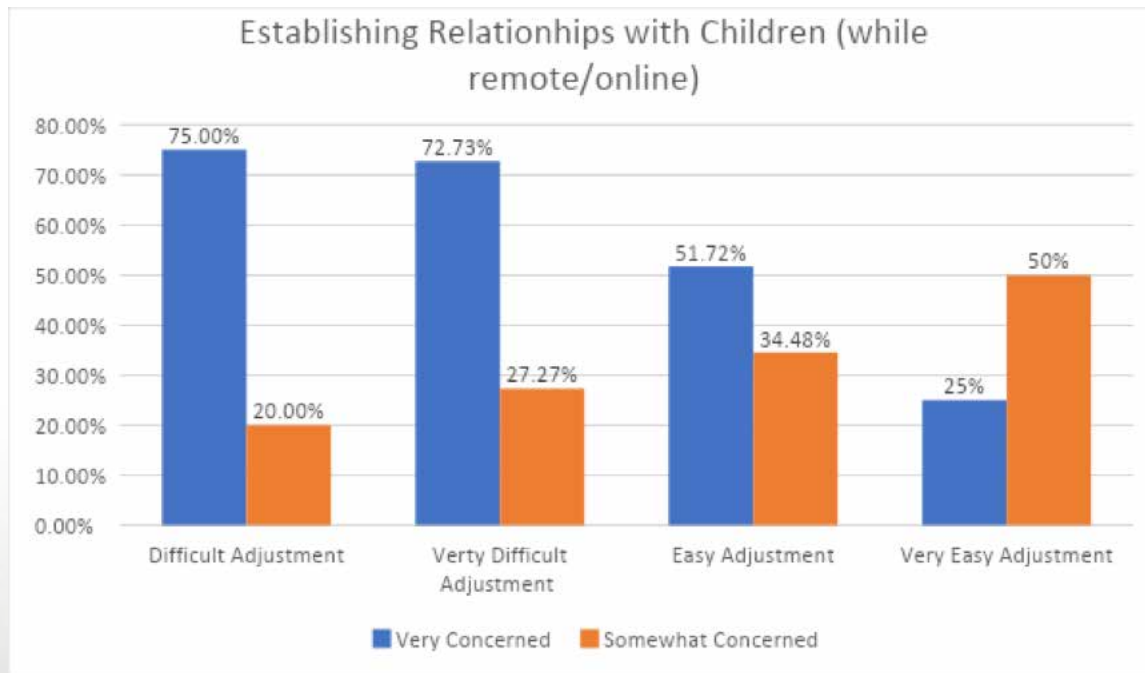

Figure 2: Teachers somewhat and very concerned about increase in overall stress of children compared with self-report of adjustment to online learning/remote schooling.
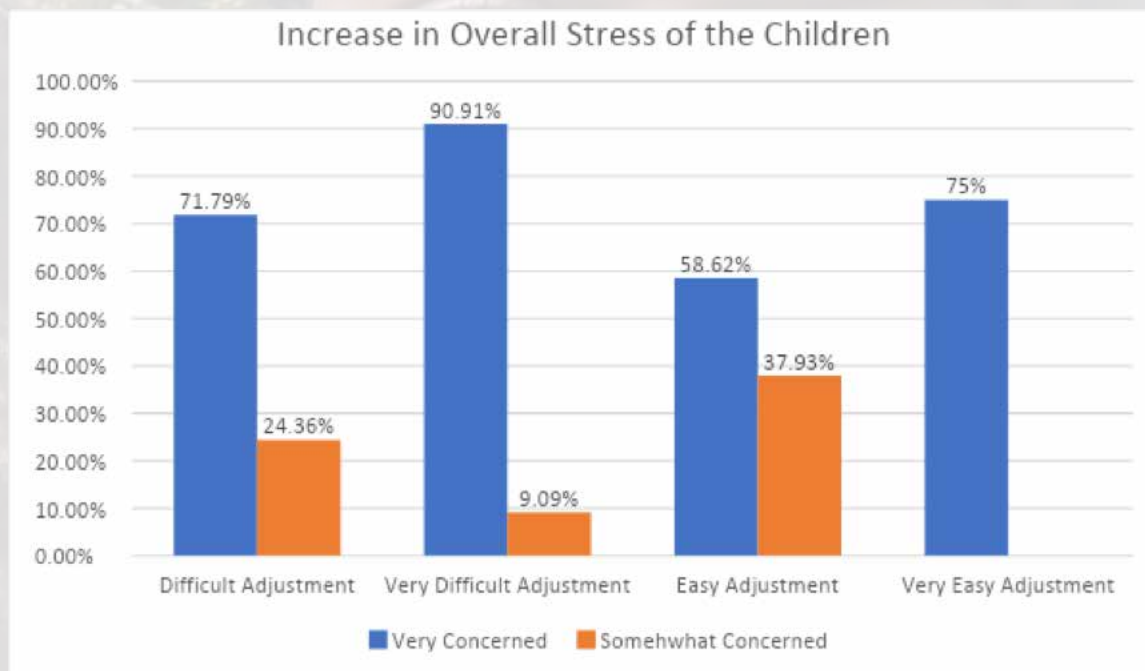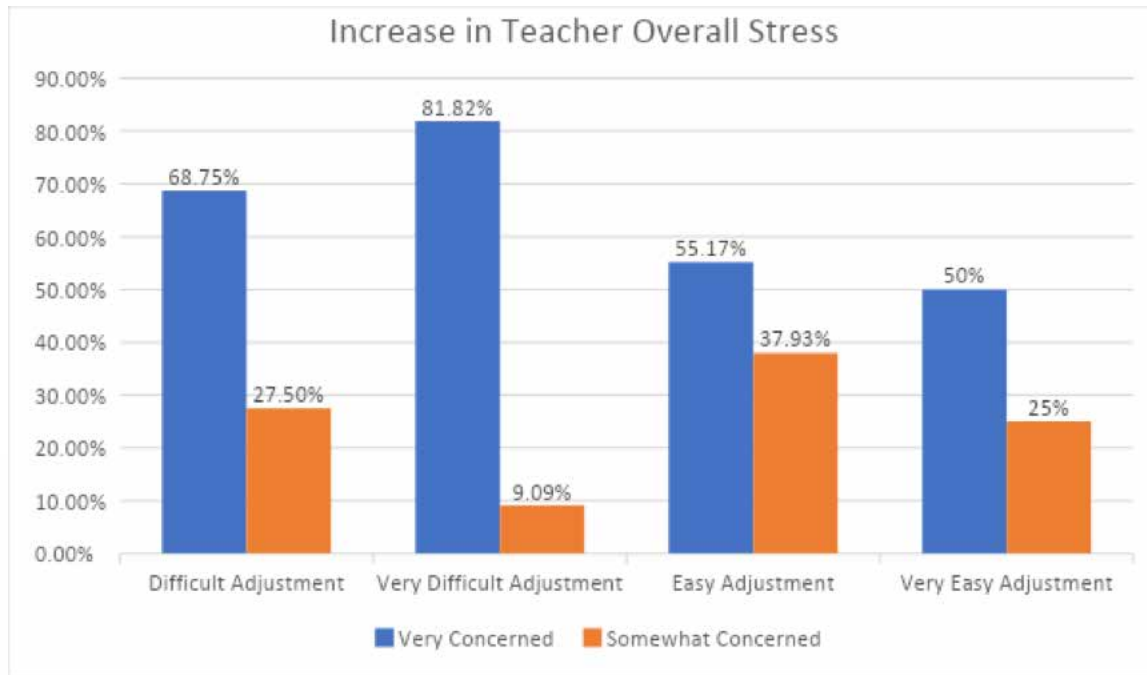
Figure 3: Teachers somewhat and very concerned about increase in their overall stress compared with self-report of adjustment to online learning/remote schooling.

Increase in Teacher Overall Stress

Benefits and Challenges

We asked participants to share any benefits and challenges related to online learning/remote schooling during the spring of 2020. We analyzed the responses from teachers and parents, compared responses based on reports of child and self-adjustment, and based on the type of ECE teacher completing the survey. Parents who said their child had a very easy or easy adjustment to online learning/remote schooling identified a positive increase in family time and improved relationships with siblings as the top benefits of online learning/remote schooling. Additional benefits included more flexibility, more time to sleep, enjoyment of self-directed learning, staying connected with peers and teachers, and receiving one-on-one instruction.

Parents who said their child had neither an easy nor a difficult adjustment found the flexibility to move at their own pace and more time with family as the main benefits. Less stress, more time spent outside, more sleep, and enjoying having children at home to better understand what they were learning at school were also identified as benefits for this group. Though some parents who said their child had a difficult or very difficult adjustment to online learning/remote schooling were able to identify benefits, this group had the highest number of parents stating there were no benefits at all. More family time, an increase in time to play outside, improved relationships with siblings, more time to play and be creative, and a decrease in anxiety were additional benefits identified by this group.

Challenges shared by parents were consistent regardless of their self-reported adjustment to online learning/remote schooling. Balancing working from home and supporting children was the number one challenge for parents. This was especially prevalent in families with multiple children in different grade levels or with one child under the age of 4. Several parents noted the impossibility of doing their own work at home and supporting their child. Often they had to prioritize helping their child and do their work early in the morning and late in the evening.

Other challenges were an increase in screen time, lack of social engagement, lack of focus/engagement/interest with online learning, and technology-related issues. **Parents with younger children reported that online learning was not age-appropriate and that they rarely stayed engaged with Zoom meetings.** For parents who reported having a difficult or very difficult adjustment to online learning/remote schooling, several indicated that their child lacked the self-directed learning skills needed to succeed. Others stated that their child was bored with the repetitiveness of the online work or resisted doing schoolwork at home. Some parents noted that the expectation that the child should be able to complete numerous online lessons on multiple platforms without any assistance was unrealistic. Parents of older children noted that many refused to do any work that was not counted or graded.

Teachers' reports of benefits to online learning/remote schooling were consistent across their reports of self-adjustment. Learning new technology and improving their technological skills was the most significant benefit identified by teachers. Some teachers shared how the use of technology allowed them to be more creative, collaborate with colleagues, and stay in touch with families. Another benefit to online learning/remote schooling was being at home and an increase in time with their own family. Teachers who were also parents of young children noted that their children benefited from having them at home to assist. **Increased communication/partnership/engagement with family was another benefit identified by many teachers.** Additional time to complete professional development, an improved work environment, no commute, and a better work-life balance was also identified as benefits by teachers.

We analyzed challenges teachers experienced related to COVID-19 by type of ECE teachers. Many infant/toddler teachers reported financial issues as a result of being laid off while their center was closed. Other challenges for this group included connecting with parents and families, keeping children and families engaged with online learning/remote schooling, and connecting to children. For preschool teachers, issues with technology and the internet were the dominant challenge. Supporting parents was also a significant challenge reported by preschool teachers. Many shared how difficult it was to encourage parents to participate in online learning/remote schooling. Others said communicating with families who have limited access to technology was also a challenge. Preschool teachers found it difficult to connect with students and keep them engaged with online schooling/remote learning.

Technology and internet access and supporting families were the more prevalent challenges for pre-k/kindergarten teachers. They also indicated the increase in screen time was problematic, it was difficult to keep students engaged, and they often felt disconnected from their students. First and second-grade teachers identified the same challenges: lack of connection to students, keeping students engaged, supporting parents, and dealing with technology.

Though the push to online learning/remote schooling was necessary to deal with a global pandemic, it ushered in fundamental changes to the lives of young children, their families, and their teachers. The speed at which schools were closed and how quickly we expected children and families to learn online or at home made it difficult for parents and teachers to prepare children for this new reality adequately. Now that another school year has begun, time to adjust to hybrid or full online/remote schooling has slipped away. As children and families spent their summer trying to regain a sense of normalcy, they now face the reality that a return to schooling as we knew it might not happen for quite some time. Some families will send their children back to socially distant schooling while others will keep them home and hire tutors or teachers and replace traditional schooling with "pandemic pods." We recognize that all families, regardless of the option they can choose, continue to want the best for their child's education and health and need support, resources, and guidance. We propose the following recommendations to assist families of young children and their teachers to reap as many benefits from online learning/remote schooling as possible and mitigate the challenges.

1. Do not try to replicate school at home.

This might seem unrealistic faced with another quarter, semester, or year of online learning/remote schooling, but it is essential to recognize that we cannot do at home all the things we do at school. First, parents are not teachers and even if you are a teacher, teaching your child is different than teaching someone else's child. If you are homeschooling your child during the 2020-2021 school year, then you are your child's teacher, but if you are working from home, you should not expect to be a full-time teacher, full-time parent, and full-time or part-time employee. Online learning/remote schooling is not traditional schooling. It is a substitute for the educational environment we typically provide children and, just like when your child has a substitute teacher at school, things cannot be precisely the same. Traditional schooling is set up to function very differently than online teaching/remote schooling. We expect children to spend an entire day in a room with many other children and at least one adult and to complete a variety of tasks in a variety of different formats. Teachers come prepared to facilitate this environment, and, over time, many children adjust to it. Online teaching/remote schooling should not have the same expectations. Yes, children are at home all day, and yes, parents who are working from home need to keep them engaged, but that does not mean we should sit them down in front of a computer or tablet and expect them to do the same things they would do in school. In-person instruction cannot transform into online teaching for young children. Remote schooling should not mean that we expect children to do the same things that they did in school at home. For children, their families, and their teachers to gain benefits from online learning/remote schooling, we must separate the functions of traditional schooling from the realities of online learning/remote schooling.

2. Use screens and technology sparingly and wisely.

Many of us are aware that an increase in screen use can be harmful to young children. But we also know that Zoom and other platforms provide valuable connections for children whose lives have been disrupted by COVID-19. Even before the pandemic, many families used technology-based communication platforms to stay connected when they lived in different geographical locations. Infants, toddlers, and preschoolers love seeing grandma and grandpa on the tablet, and many love seeing their teachers and peers as well. Thus, we must find ways to incorporate these platforms that maximize their benefits but also limit their exposure. We should not expect young children to spend more than 30 minutes a day, a few days a week, on technology. Brief opportunities to connect with their teacher and classmates that are engaging and developmentally appropriate are crucial to maximizing the use of technology. Reading stories, sharing items from home, singing songs, watching a puppet show, and playing are good examples of how technology can bring young learners and their teachers together. However, we must keep these sessions brief and optional. We know not all children want or need to be on Zoom every day. Even if the teacher offers daily 30-minutes class meetings, families should be able to decide whether to attend as many or as few as their child can handle each week. We do not recommend longer remote schooling sessions that include online teaching for young children. Just as we did not (or should not) expect young children to sit still at a desk and listen to a teacher for extended periods of time in schools, we cannot expect them to do the same at home. Remote schooling does not mean that all teaching and learning has to happen through direct online instruction.

3. Prepare children to be self-directed learners.

If we are not replicating school at home and using technology sparingly and only for certain activities, then we must help children become self-directed learners. By self-directed, we mean children who can engage in an activity for a block of time with minimal assistance. The amount of time children are able to sustain their involvement usually gets longer with age and experience. The projects and activities children engage in will also vary depending on their developmental levels and interests. But when activities and children are well-matched, it becomes much easier for kids to become self-directed learners.

For teachers and parents familiar with project-based learning, this approach likely sounds similar, but it is an at-home version. When in school, children spend time completing a variety of tasks related to a project theme. Some work together in small groups, while others work independently. Some do the same activities, while others work on parts of the project that appeal to them the most. The teacher scaffolds their learning by providing support where needed, and eventually, the project culminates with a whole group sharing of what they learned with parents and families.

Teachers can get very creative in designing projects and activities that will engage children at home and help them become more self-directed as learners. It works best when teachers collaborate with parents so the activities chosen for children are right for them and for families. Projects and activities will be less complicated and shorter in duration for younger children, and can get more involved as kids get older. A weekly video chat with parents is a good idea so activities stay well-matched to the needs of children and families.

An example of an activity for four-year olds could look like this:

The teacher and class have a Zoom call so the children can see each other and the teacher. The teacher could do a read-aloud, tell a story, act out a scene with puppets, sing a song, etc. Then s/he could tell children to do a task at home that they will share at the next zoom meeting:

Find a box in your house, decorate the box with crayons or paper and glue and find something to hide in the box. When we meet in class next time, we will look at your boxes and try to guess what's inside. Then you can show us!

An example of an activity for five-year olds could be:

Today I am reading the book to you called Abiyoyo. After class, find some material in your house--it could be paper and markers, or playdough, or something else-- to show a part of the book you really like. When we meet again, we can read the book again and you can show us what you made and tell us what part of the book you like.

An example of an activity for seven-year olds (again, you are working with parents and finding appropriate activities for your families) could be:

We've been learning about all kinds of vehicles in our class. Can you make a vehicle from things you find around the house? You can use boxes, cardboard, building materials like Legos, whatever you can find. It can be a real vehicle like a truck or plane, or an imaginary vehicle you make up. Can anyone make a vehicle that moves on the ground? What if you blow it with a fan? Can anyone make a vehicle that flies? Can anyone make a vehicle that floats? What if you put "passengers" on it? Let's all make one and share them in our next zoom chat.

This approach to teaching and learning has many benefits and is ideal for remote schooling. Instead of expecting children to receive hours of online teaching a week passively, we must reconceptualize the curriculum to allow for children to learn on their own at home. When teachers work closely with parents, project learning can be a great way to support children's learning and engagement with others. Through Q and A and class "discussions" on video, we can help children reflect on what they do and assess it. This this kind of engaged learning will help children build the skills they need to succeed in the future. When we go beyond pure remote learning, we can find opportunity even within this pandemic to support children in meaningful learning, skill-building, and social connection.

4. Take advantage of being out of school.

Whether your child loved school or hated it, if they do not have to return this quarter, semester, or year, parents and families should seek to reap as many benefits as possible. In addition to knowing your child is safe at home, out-of-school time must mean more time for play! All children learn through play and, now that they do not have to go to school, they should be playing as much as possible every day. Time for play in the morning before engaging in project work or online teaching sessions will help children channel their energy and process their emotions. Long breaks for play midday will help children focus better for structured sessions later in the afternoon. And play in the evening will support children in processing all the lessons and activities from earlier in the day. Freedom from school must result in more freedom to play and to be outside safely. The benefits of play are endless and we can best mitigate the challenges from this global pandemic by providing an increase in opportunities to play. Imagine how great it would be if the best memory children had from COVID-19 was there was more time for play!

5. Parents and teachers must work together.

Parents need teachers, and teachers need parents now more than ever! Instead of buying into the concerted efforts of some to pit parents and teachers against each other, we must stay committed to maintaining a healthy partnership between the two most important aspects of a young child's life. Parents and teachers must work together to establish a plan that will work for the child. Instead of expecting every child to do the same thing, we must make room for the various needs of children to take precedent. Some children need daily connections with their teachers, while others don't. Some children need a highly structured schedule, while others do not. What all children need is the flexibility to adapt to the new reality. This may seem hard on teachers, but most teachers are skilled at differentiating multiple aspects of teaching and learning to support a diverse group of learners. Parents of multiple children also know that what one child needs is not necessarily going to be the same for the other. If parents and teachers commit to collaborating and supporting each other, children will have the best chance of succeeding. Both parents and teachers must be clear about the expectations, the needs of the child, and their plan to accomplish shared goals. And we must include children in this partnership! Children have no say in the learning expectations in traditional public schooling, but self-directed learners need an understanding of the bigger picture. If we want children to take charge of their learning, we must invite them to collaborate with parents and teachers from the beginning and throughout the process.

Conclusion

We hope the data from this study and these recommendations provide some assistance to parents and teachers of young children. As we move forward through these unprecedented times, we must learn from each other to sustain continual improvements. In many ways, we are constructing this new reality each day through trial-and-error. Though mistakes are inevitable, the best mistakes become life-long lessons. If we remain committed to education as a pillar of democracy, protecting children and childhood, and ensuring all children receive a just and equitable start in the early years, there is a chance we can create a new normal that is better than what we had before.

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Defending the Early Years (DEY) is a non-profit organization working for a just, equitable, and quality early childhood education for every young child. DEY advocates for strong economic and social safety nets for all children because equitable education can only occur when society meets children's basic needs for whole health and well-being. Founded in 2012 by experts in the field of early childhood education, Dr. Nancy Carlsson-Paige and Dr. Diane Levin, and steered by a National Advisory Board, DEY advocates for active, developmentally appropriate, play-based approaches to learning. DEY provides educators, parents and advocates with resources—from mini-documentaries and grants to position statements, reports, and opinion pieces; advises on early education policies and legislation; presents at conferences and events; stands with allies on issues and trends; and rallies the ECE community to influence change.

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