

Executive Summary

A new study conducted by researchers at Yale University shows that child care programs that remained open during the COVID-19 pandemic did not contribute to the spread of the virus to providers. The findings showed that exposure to child care was not associated with an elevated risk of spreading COVID-19 from children to adults as long the child care programs took multiple safety measures, including disinfecting, hand washing, symptom screening, social distancing, wearing masks, and limiting group size.

The study, which was supported by the efforts of the National Workforce Registry Alliance (NWRA) and workforce registries throughout the country, was published on October 14, 2020, on the website for Pediatrics, the peer-reviewed journal of the American Academy of Pediatrics.



“...this data represents the child care workforce who basically provided essential child care to emergency workers during the early months of the pandemic.”

- Dr. Gilliam,
Yale University

“ Providers who stayed open, took a big risk. We were essentially asking them to do something incredibly brave, and they did.”

- Dr. Gilliam,
Yale University



Evidence suggests these amazing providers were so committed to the safety of children in their care that they were taking better care and making choices to keep themselves and the community safe from transmission in or out of the center.

The findings are part of the first large-scale assessment of the risk of working in child care throughout the pandemic. Yale researchers surveyed more than 50,000 child care providers in all 50 states, Washington, D.C., and Puerto Rico, which represented 71.3% of America's counties (2,241 of 3,141). In May and June of 2020, researchers compared self-reported COVID-19 infections and hospitalizations among workers whose programs stayed open and those whose programs closed.

"This study was made possible by the state workforce registries, who are the strongest connecting link to actual providers. Through the support of 28 states, the National Workforce Registry Alliance (NWRA) was able to coordinate survey access to more than 700,000 child care providers," said Dr. Kimberlee Belcher-Badal, NWRA, Executive Director.

No differences in COVID-19 outcomes were observed between workers who continued to provide in-person care for young children and those who did not. These findings suggest that child care providers do not have a heightened risk from their work, assuming that workplaces continue to follow core health and safety practices.

"Until now, decision-makers had no way to assess whether opening child care centers would put staff at greater risk of contracting COVID-19," said Dr. Walter Gilliam of the Yale University Child Study Center and the study's lead author. "This study tells us that as long as there are strong on-site measures to prevent infection, providing care for young children doesn't seem to add to the provider's risk of getting sick."

The main factors in whether a child care worker got sick were the level of community transmission in the county where they lived and race/ethnicity, with Black, Latino, and Native American people more likely to test positive or be hospitalized. These findings are in line with other studies that have found that both policy and social contexts affect people's risks and outcomes related to COVID-19.

Importantly, the research revealed that child care programs that stayed open were particularly conscientious in following recommended infection control measures. More than 90% of child care providers in open programs reported frequent hand washing and disinfection of surfaces. The survey also showed that child care sites had high rates of other infection-control measures such as daily symptom checks, physical distancing, and "cohorting," which means not mixing children or items between groups of children. Researchers emphasized that infection control practices remain critical, especially in light of "vigilance fatigue," a tendency to become less careful and consistent in efforts to protect against a threat as time goes on.

The study's authors caution that their findings do not necessarily apply to teachers who work in schools or other settings with older children.



Mother and daughter wearing masks while conversing.

There is a real risk of "mitigation fatigue" without providing the workforce with sustainability efforts to make this a long term commitment to provider health and the health of the children and families they care for.