

Providing Early Care and Education (ECE) During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Perspectives from Los Angeles County ECE Professionals

In Fall 2020, nearly 600 ECE professionals in Los Angeles County were surveyed about their COVID-related challenges and success strategies. Two focus groups were held with ECE professionals to further explore issues addressed in the survey.

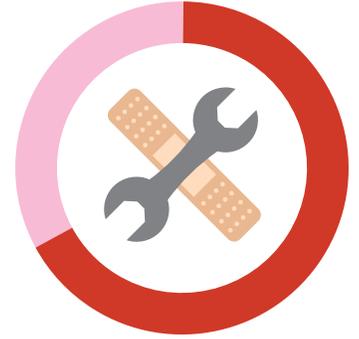
Survey Respondents:



74% center-based,
26% family child care
(FCC)



Nearly half provided both in-person
care *and* distance learning.



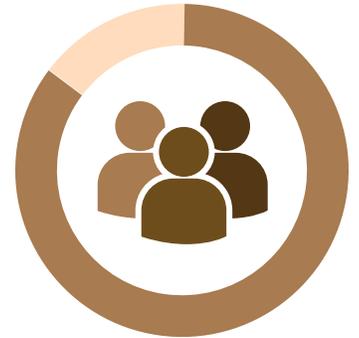
67% reported
serving children
of essential workers



364 providers,
220 teachers



84% served children who were
Dual Language Learners (DLLs)



Over 85% were
people of color

Findings

Respondents reported needing additional professional development in several areas:



Recommendations

Expand access to professional development trainings and higher education coursework on topics that will help educators support all children in their care. These topics include:

- Working with children with challenging behaviors
- Distance learning methods
- Social-emotional development
- Family engagement
- Supporting children with special needs
- Trauma-informed care

See reverse for additional findings & recommendations >>>

Respondents' most effective strategy for engaging with families from diverse linguistic backgrounds was having a bilingual staff member communicate with families in their primary language.

For 57% of respondents, a lack of staff training on second language acquisition and Dual Language Learner (DLL) strategies was one of the top challenges in serving DLLs.



Develop and implement strategies to recruit more bilingual candidates into the ECE workforce in order to support DLLs' home language development, family communication, and connections.

Offer more professional development (PD) trainings and higher education coursework on supporting DLLs and engaging with culturally and linguistically diverse families. Teachers' preparation to serve DLLs is crucial to children's academic success.

43% of respondents who offered distance learning reported that having children tune in to lessons was a challenge.

Over 50% of respondents believed that families' most significant unmet needs included:

- ↳ A stable and reliable internet connection • Technological devices (e.g. laptops or tablets) ←



Talk with families to assess their technology-related needs and determine the most feasible and effective digital home learning activities.

Particularly when digital learning is part of an ECE program's curriculum, work with public agencies, elected officials, and philanthropic partners to ensure each child has access to the following:

Most providers reported that revenue and reimbursement did not cover monthly costs.

Family child care (FCC) providers seemed to be hit especially hard. 73% of FCC providers were worried about rent or mortgage payments, and 71% of FCC providers were worried about costs for cleaning and PPE. Over 50% of all providers worried about being able to cover the following costs:

- ↳ Cleaning supplies • Personal protective equipment (PPE) • Facilities • Personnel ←



Increase provider reimbursement rates to ensure a livable wage that will hasten economic recovery, reduce high teacher turnover and stress, and recognize essential work.

To reopen, remain open, and safely serve families, ensure providers receive flexible funding to cover these and other costs:

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Introduction

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, early care and education (ECE) professionals have heroically cared for and educated thousands of California's children, enabling other essential workers to go to work and providing a critical measure of security and stability to families across the state. At the same time, many ECE providers have struggled to make ends meet as enrollment decreased, and additional costs related to new health and safety standards have remained a constant burden. Many of California's early childhood professionals – the majority of whom are women of color¹ – have also put their lives, and the lives of their families, at risk on a daily basis.

As California and our nation move through the reopening phases of the COVID-19 pandemic, vaccinations have become more widely available, more parents are returning to the workplace, and more children are returning to in-person care. However, whether ECE professionals provided in-person care, distance learning, or both during the last year, the reopening phase will not mean a return to “business as usual” as it existed pre-pandemic. Physical distancing, mask-wearing, and enhanced cleaning and sanitization practices will remain realities for ECE programs. Educators will be faced with the challenges of addressing children's learning losses and the trauma they have experienced during the pandemic, while in many cases continuing to address the financial fallout caused by low enrollment and COVID-related costs. From March 2020 through February 2021, over 4,000 licensed child care facilities in California permanently closed due to financial pressures, health concerns, and other issues.² Thousands more closed temporarily and continue to struggle to cover their costs. The child care workforce, which has bolstered all other industries, must receive support that recognizes its contributions and stabilizes its programs as the economy reopens.

This report highlights the COVID-19 pandemic experiences of nearly 600 Los Angeles County ECE professionals who responded to an online survey and/or participated in focus groups in Fall 2020. It provides critical data, recommendations, and lessons learned that can help guide policymakers and ECE stakeholders as they consider what investments are needed to stabilize ECE programs and to support educators and families in the months ahead. The report can also be used as a resource by educators on how best to facilitate physical distancing or to foster social-emotional learning, whether serving children in an in-person or virtual setting. The report can be used to help determine what resources must be available to support children's and parents' use of technology, how to effectively engage with families from diverse linguistic backgrounds, and how to better serve Dual Language Learners (DLLs), who represent nearly 60 percent of children under six in California.³ It can also be used to help determine what professional development investment strategies will best address needs exacerbated by the pandemic, and will best support educators in serving the children in their care.

1. Austin, L., Edwards, B., & Whitebook, M. (2018). *California's ECE workforce: What we know now and the data deficit that remains*. Berkeley, CA: Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, Institute for Research on Labor and Employment, University of California, Berkeley. Retrieved from: <https://csce.berkeley.edu/californias-eceworkforce/>

2. C. Wynne-Swan (personal communication, April 2, 2021) noted that from March 2020 through February 2021, 4,127 licensed child care facilities permanently closed.

3. Early Edge CA. *Dual Language Learners (DLLs)*. Accessed March 4, 2021, from <https://earlyedgecalifornia.org/ecepriorities/dual-language-learners/>.

The report highlights the diversity of ECE professionals' experiences during the pandemic and uplifts critical perspectives of Los Angeles County educators. It also demonstrates the need for a tailored approach to providing ECE services to California families, and it provides recommendations to consider as part of stabilization and innovative rebuilding efforts for the field.

Key recommendations are highlighted below, and are addressed in more detail throughout the report and on pages 21–22.

- Provide flexible stipends for ECE providers.
- Increase reimbursement rates for state-subsidized child development programs.
- Share best practices for supporting ECE parents' use of technology, and for helping children develop social skills.
- Ensure ECE families have adequate devices and stable internet connections.
- Expand access to professional development trainings and higher education coursework on trauma-informed care, social-emotional learning, family engagement, distance learning, and supporting children with special needs.
- Expand access to professional development trainings and higher education coursework on working with Dual Language Learners and engaging with culturally and linguistically diverse families.
- Develop and implement strategies to recruit more bilingual candidates into the ECE workforce.

Overview of ECE Survey Design, Respondents, and Focus Groups

In Fall 2020, Child360 and Early Edge California created an **online survey** designed to elicit feedback about the COVID-related challenges of ECE professionals and about in-person and virtual learning strategies that were working well, despite difficult conditions. The survey was administered to individuals working in ECE programs throughout Los Angeles County for whom Child360 and the Child Care Alliance of Los Angeles (CCALA) are providing quality improvement services.

In total, 584 early learning professionals completed the survey, including 364 providers and 220 teachers. Providers included executive directors; assistant directors; directors; principals; administrators; family child care owners; site supervisors; a child development supervisor; an education manager; two education coordinators; a program specialist; a supervisor; and a support service provider. Teachers included both assistant and lead teachers. **Over 85 percent of survey respondents were people of color⁴,** with over 60 percent identifying as "Latinx/Hispanic," and over 13 percent identifying as "Black/African."

Seventy-four percent of survey respondents worked at a center, and 26 percent worked at a family child care home.⁵ Of the respondents who worked at centers, most worked at an ECE program at a school district or at a non-profit or community-based organization. A smaller percentage worked at an independent/private program, or at an ECE program at a community college or four-year university.

Participants primarily worked for CBOs/non-profits, school districts, or family child care homes.



4. Eleven of the 584 survey respondents self-identified with multiple races / ethnicities.

5. Survey respondents included 215 providers and 217 teachers who worked at a center, and 149 providers and 3 teachers who worked at a family child care home.

Most providers funded their programs through multiple sources. **Forty-five percent received California State Preschool Program (CSPP) funding, and 43 percent received parent fees.** Other sources of funding included General Child Care funding (31%), Alternative Payment Program funding (26%), Early Head Start funding (13%), Head Start funding (12%), and funding to run Transitional Kindergarten (1%).

Twenty-two percent of respondents worked at sites serving all four of the following age groups: infants, toddlers, preschoolers, and school age children. In addition, the majority of respondents worked at sites serving multiple age groups, with **over 93 percent serving preschoolers, over 55 percent serving toddlers, over 36 percent serving infants, and over 30 percent serving school age children.** Furthermore, **67 percent of providers reported serving children of essential workers** (out of the 298 providers who responded to this question).

Nearly half of respondents provided both in-person care and distance learning, while 26.7 percent provided only distance learning and 26.5 percent provided only in-person care. **Of the respondents who provided only distance learning, the majority reported that their sites were required to close due to a local or state public health order.** The second and third most frequently cited reasons for providing only distance learning were low enrollment and concerns about their health and the health of their staff.

In the survey, both provider and teacher respondents were asked to identify:

- Significant challenges related to offering in-person care or distance learning during the pandemic
- Strategies that enabled their programs to help children stay socially distanced
- Distance learning strategies that worked well for their programs
- Effective methods of communication and engagement with families during the pandemic
- Significant unmet needs of families in their programs, as well as concerns they had for children in their programs
- Professional development or training they were most interested in receiving
- Challenges in meeting the needs of Dual Language Learners during the pandemic

In addition, provider respondents were asked to:

- Indicate the state of their program's financial situation
- Identify costs they were worried about being able to cover during the school year
- Indicate how they would use funding for facilities infrastructure improvement if it were available

In order to further explore key issues addressed in our online survey, we held **two small focus groups: one with eight providers and another with seven lead teachers.** Nearly all providers and lead teachers came from centers that were non-profit programs or were affiliated with a school district or community college. In addition, each focus group had one participant from a family child care home. All of the participants worked in Los Angeles County, and nearly all worked at sites that received some form of state funding. Focus group participants were asked to share their thoughts on the main issues that were addressed in survey responses. Findings from our online survey and focus groups are discussed in the sections below.

Financial Strain Caused by the Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a devastating financial impact on the early care and education sector. Many ECE providers have experienced significant drops in enrollment and incurred increased costs related to cleaning and sanitation, personnel, distance learning, and facilities modifications needed to meet health and safety guidelines. These financial pressures were particularly damaging, given that many ECE programs already operate on razor-thin margins⁶ and many ECE educators make near poverty wages.⁷ As previously noted, over 4,000 licensed child care facilities in California have permanently closed their doors, and thousands more have closed temporarily since the pandemic began in March 2020. Congress recognized that the child care sector is in crisis, and included nearly \$40 billion in child care relief in the American Rescue Plan Act⁸ that was signed into law on March 11, 2021. The survey data below illuminates some of the key cost pressures that providers have faced during the pandemic, many of which still remain.

In Fall 2020, when provider respondents answered a question about their program's financial situation, 24.7 percent of the 328 providers who answered the question reported that they had implemented furloughs. In addition, 40 percent indicated that they would only be able to cover their costs through December 2020.⁹ **Further, of the 308 providers who answered a question about their revenue, 50.6 percent reported that there was a gap between their monthly costs and their revenue and reimbursement.** Sixty-three percent of providers reporting a gap were family child care homes. In addition, when 133 respondents answered a question about the size of the gap, the majority of family child care homes reported gaps of up to \$5,000 per month, and the majority of centers reported gaps between \$10,000 and over \$20,000 per month.¹⁰

Low enrollment

Several key challenges have contributed to the financial strain felt by many ECE providers. **When providers were asked about the significant challenges their programs were facing, low enrollment was the most frequently cited challenge.** Of the 380 providers who answered a question about whether they were operating at or below capacity, **71.6 percent reported that they were operating below capacity.** In addition, of these providers operating below capacity, 64 percent were centers. As a result of low enrollment, revenue for many providers has decreased, leaving programs struggling to cover staff salaries, overhead, and new COVID-related costs. A provider in our focus group explained that some families are not sending their children to in-person care because they are afraid their children will become ill. Another provider noted that even though she received state funding for children enrolled in "subsidized" spaces, she had trouble making ends meet because private-paying parents decided to keep their children at home. In addition, multiple focus group participants explained that some parents are prioritizing school age children's participation in distance learning over that of younger children in the home. According to one provider, "When there are multiple children in the home . . . [parents] are spread pretty thin and they have to prioritize . . . children who are in the upper grades to assist and to make sure that their attendance is kept up [because] it's expected in the K-12 system . . . they have to prioritize based on the limited time and resources they have." Another provider explained that when the pandemic hit, "there was a lot of stress going on in the families; financial stress, emotional stress. Lots of parents having to multitask; being a spouse, being a mom, being a teacher, playing different roles was also very stressful. And I think our families probably prioritize the older siblings versus the younger siblings."

6. Oncken, L. (2016). The first pillar of care: Cost. In B. Schulte, A. Durana, N. Mooney, S. Howe, L. Oncken, A. Lieberman, A. Garcia, & E. Weingarten, *The New America Care Report*. Washington, DC: New America. Retrieved from: <https://www.newamerica.org/in-depth/care-report/first-pillar-care-cost/>

7. McClean, C., Whitebook, M., & Roh, E. (2019). *From unlivable wages to just pay for early educators*. Berkeley, CA: Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley. Retrieved from: <https://cscce.berkeley.edu/from-unlivable-wages-to-just-pay-for-early-educators/>

8. American Rescue Plan Act of 2021, 2 U.S.C. §§ 2201-2202.

9. Survey data was collected between mid-October and early November, so we do not know whether providers who anticipated that they could cover costs through December 2020 were able to do so.

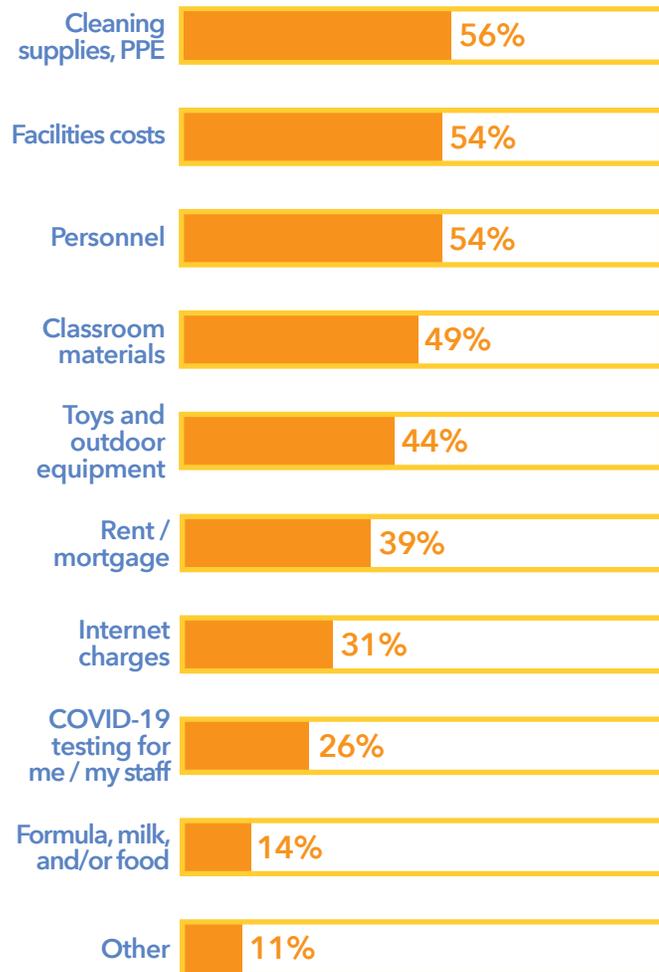
10. Shortly after the beginning of the pandemic, Congress approved funding for the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) - a relief program designed to help businesses keep their workforce employed during the COVID-19 crisis. Of the 298 providers in our survey who responded to a question about PPP loans, 92 applied for a loan and only 55 received one.

Worrisome costs for providers

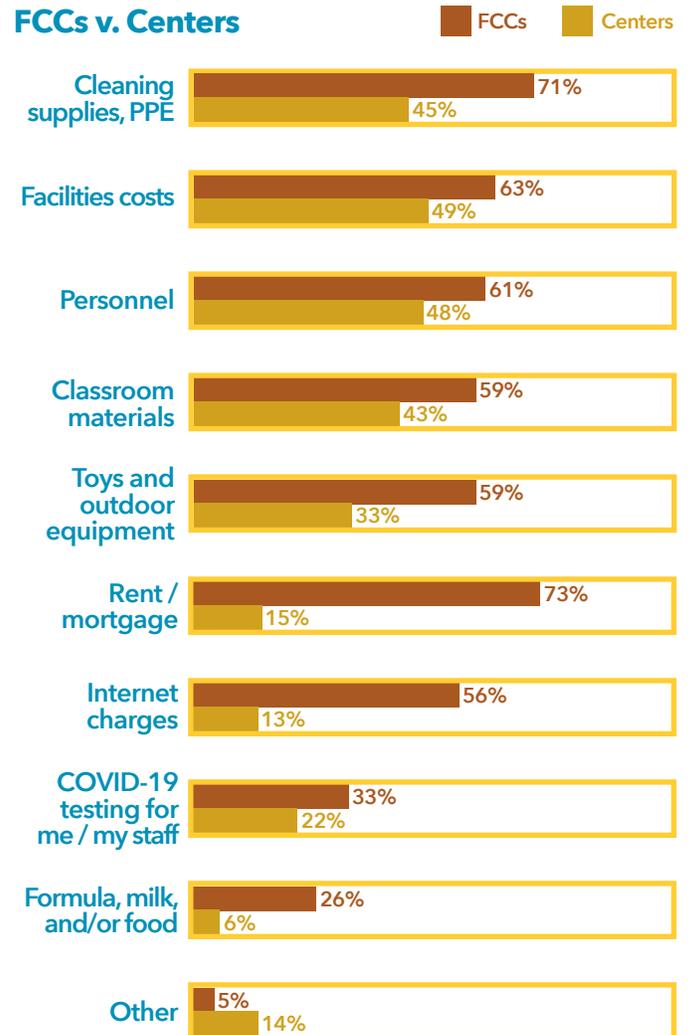
When asked about the costs they were worried about being able to cover during the school year, providers most frequently cited cleaning supplies and personal protective equipment (PPE), personnel, and facilities costs. In addition, rent/mortgage costs were cited by family child care providers as a top challenge, while facilities costs and personnel were the two costs most frequently cited by center providers. Classroom materials were also high on the list of worrisome costs for both types of providers.

Which, if any, of the following costs are you worried about being able to cover during this school year? Please check all that apply. Number of respondents: 356

All providers combined



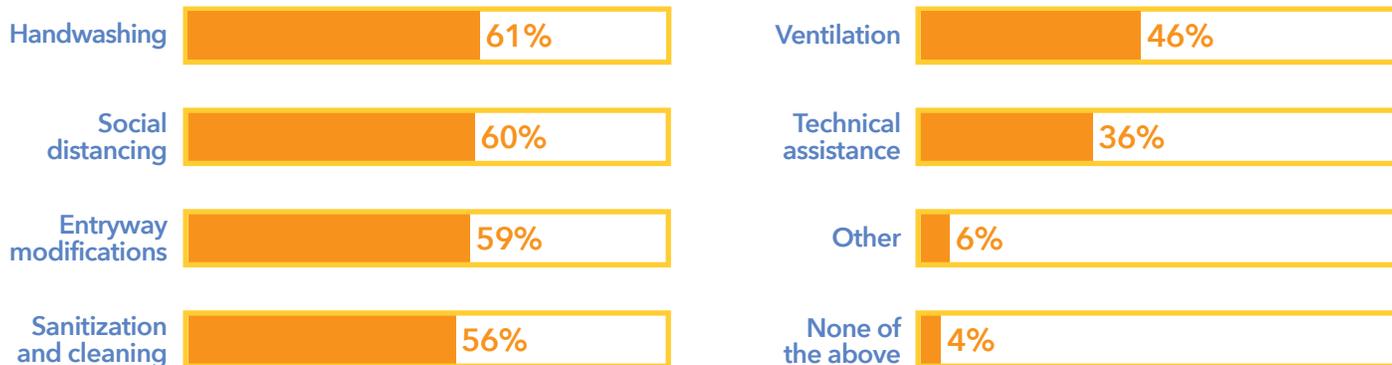
FCCs v. Centers



Many survey respondents indicated that they received cleaning supplies, PPE, diapers, or other supplies from their local resource and referral agencies, as well as from other sources. Of the 298 providers who answered a question about receiving supplies, over 57 percent indicated that they received supplies from their local resource and referral agency. However, providers must consistently clean and disinfect common surfaces and toys, conduct temperature checks and utilize various types of PPE, so the need for supplies is ongoing.

There are also facilities costs associated with meeting COVID-related health and safety requirements related to physical distancing and sanitation. **Provider respondents most frequently indicated that they would utilize any facilities improvement dollars to better support handwashing, physical distancing, and entryway modifications.** For example, this funding might be used for portable sinks, no-touch faucets, or soap and paper towel dispensers to help with handwashing; alternatively, funding might be used for conversions of spaces into classrooms in order to maintain social distancing. Such funding might also be used to make modifications to ensure greater outdoor shade/weather protection during pick up and drop off and to enable children to spend more time outdoors.

If funding was available for facilities infrastructure improvement, for which of the following areas would you be most likely to seek support? Please check all that apply. Number of respondents: 347



Both survey and focus group respondents highlighted the difficulty of covering personnel costs when revenue and/or reimbursement was reduced. Several focus group participants explained that even when enrollment was lower, they still needed sufficient staff in order to meet new requirements for smaller group sizes (with several teachers to support each group), to cover staff breaks, to conduct temperature checks and, in some cases, to assist with distance learning and technology.

In the coming weeks, as many ECE programs reopen for in-person care and more families receive COVID-19 vaccinations, more parents will feel comfortable sending their children to in-person programs and enrollment will increase. However, it is unclear how long it will take for enrollment to reach pre-pandemic levels. In addition, ECE providers will continue to incur additional cleaning and sanitation costs, as well as costs for facilities modifications necessary for physical distancing, handwashing, ventilation, and other related health measures. Further, some ECE providers struggling to cover rent or mortgage costs need immediate assistance. Others struggle to cover current personnel costs, or will need financial assistance in order to hire additional staff as more children return to the classroom. The California State Legislature recently allocated \$244 million in federal Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Act (CRRSA) funds¹¹ to provide flexible stipends for state-subsidized child care and development programs to help meet the needs referenced above. In addition, the Legislature should strongly consider using a portion of California's designated federal child care funding from the American Rescue Plan Act to create flexible stipends for ECE providers, both to help stabilize their programs and to cover the diversity of costs they have and will accrue. Further, reimbursement rates for state-subsidized child care and development programs must be increased, to ensure that early educators are fairly compensated and to address chronic issues of high teacher turnover¹² and stress within the profession.

Providing In-Person Care During the Pandemic

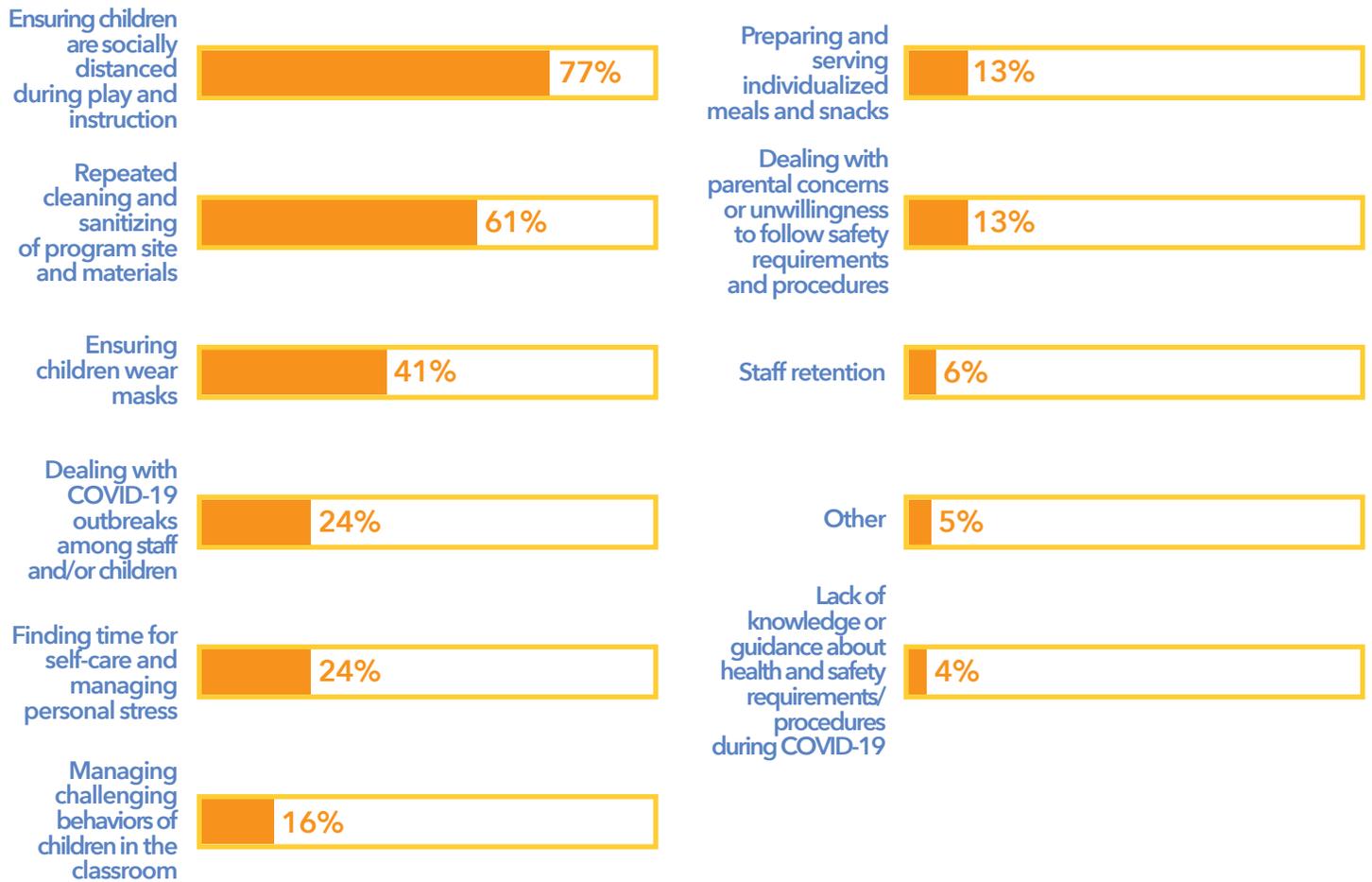
ECE providers who have offered in-person care during the pandemic have been required to follow a host of new health and safety protocols which have necessitated physical distancing methods that limit critical social interactions and are foreign to traditional ECE practice. The data below highlights some of the challenges experienced by ECE professionals who provided in-person care, as well as recommendations regarding how to facilitate physical distancing (when necessary) in ways that keep adults and children safe while simultaneously providing opportunities for play and development.

11. California State Legislature. Assembly Bill 82. California State Legislature, 23 Feb. 2021, https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill_id=202120220AB82.

12. Bassok, D., Markowitz, A., & Bellows, L. (2021). *Stabilizing child care requires more than COVID-19 relief funds*. Brown Center Chalkboard, The Brookings Institution. Retrieved from: <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/brown-center-chalkboard/2021/02/16/stabilizing-child-care-requires-more-than-emergency-covid-19-relief-funds/>

For early educators who were offering in-person care during the pandemic, several challenges were particularly prevalent. When asked to identify the three most significant challenges they faced in providing in-person care, **survey respondents most frequently identified the following: 1) ensuring that children are socially distanced during play and instruction; 2) repeated cleaning and sanitizing of the program site and materials; and 3) ensuring that children wear masks.**

If you are offering in-person learning and care, what have been the three most significant challenges? Number of respondents: 432

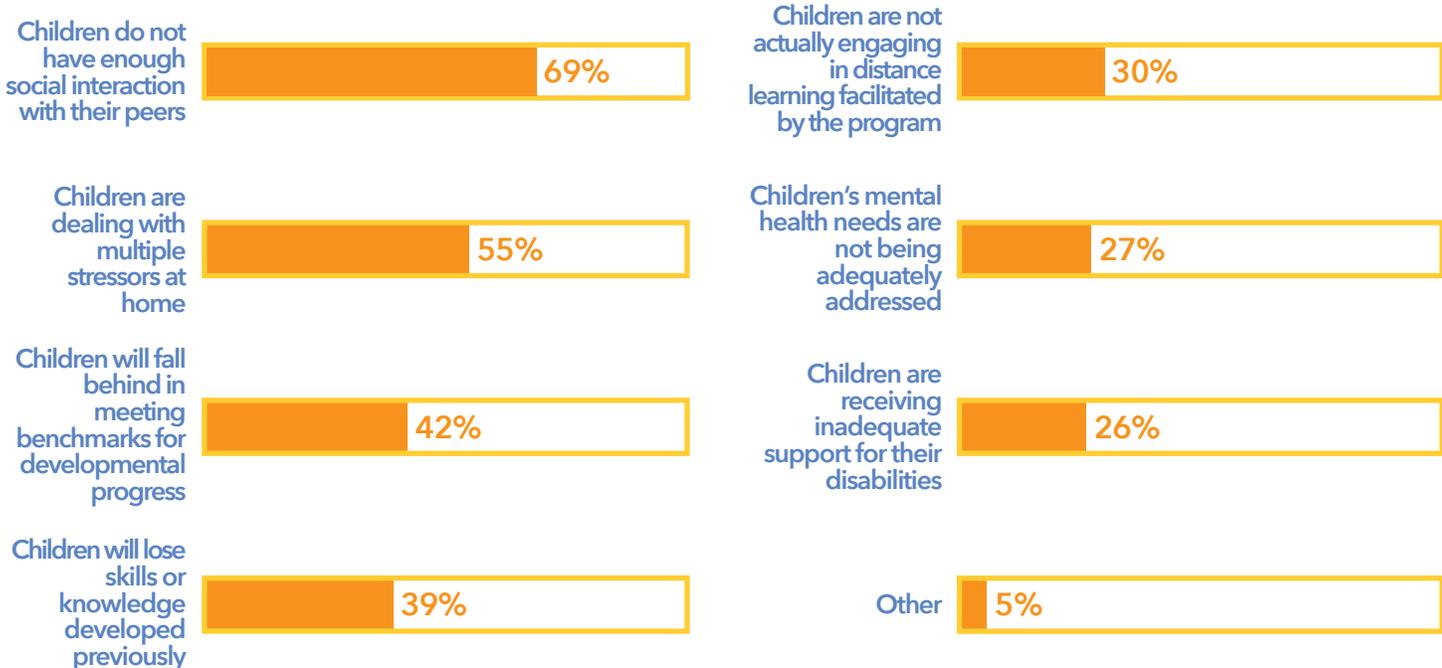


In Los Angeles, early educators received guidance from the County Department of Public Health on measures they should take to protect the health of children, families, and staff, and to ensure physical distancing and infection control. For example, this guidance recommends that staff and children remain at least six feet apart in lines and at other times; that circle time and other activities that bring children close together be eliminated; and that individualized activities be emphasized.¹³ Focus group participants explained that implementing physical distancing protocols is difficult because young children want to play and be close to one another, and it is confusing for them to be told that they need to stay socially distant. According to one provider in our focus group, “Kids attract and they want to play with each other . . . And they were not understanding why we had to separate [them] when we always told them, ‘Work together, play together’ . . . And now we’re like, ‘Nope. No, we’re not doing that anymore. You have to be away from each other.’” In addition, a teacher in our focus group shared that the more she and other staff tried to separate the children, “the less engaged they were.” She said that at her site, children worked best when they had at least one peer with whom to work. She stated, “they need that interaction, and they thrive in the classroom when they get to interact with a peer.” This meant that children did not always maintain a six-foot distance, but she said that she and other staff were “honest with parents about [their] observations,” and parents approved of the arrangement.

13. County of Los Angeles Department of Public Health (February 11, 2021). *Guidance for early care and education providers*. Retrieved from: <http://publichealth.lacounty.gov/media/Coronavirus/docs/education/GuidanceEarlyChildhoodEducation.pdf>

Survey respondents offering in-person care *and* respondents offering distance learning demonstrated concern that children did not have enough social interaction with their peers. They were asked what concerns they had for the children in their programs, and they were given a list of potential concerns and were asked to check all that applied. **The concern that was most frequently selected was that “children do not have enough social interaction with their peers.”**

Which, if any, of the following concerns do you have for the children in your program? Please check all that apply. Number of respondents: 500

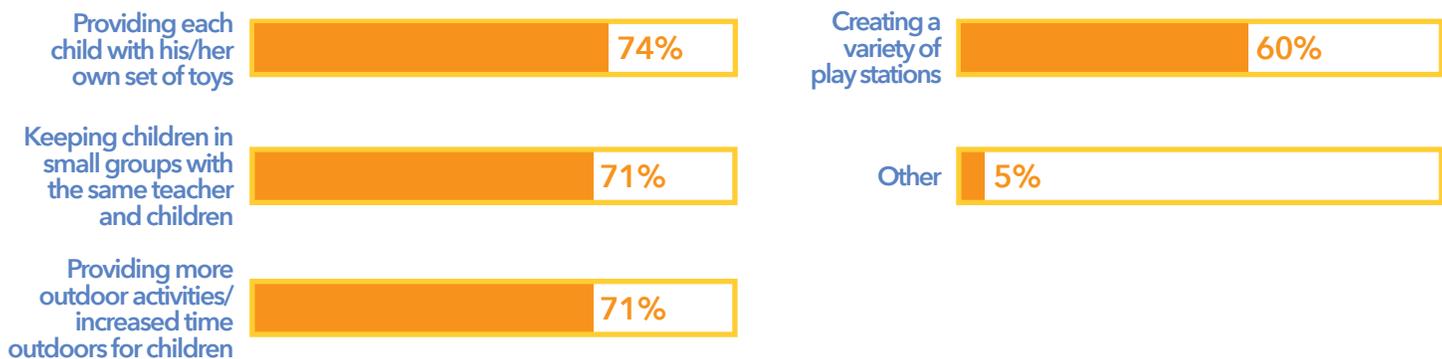


Providers in our focus group also explained that physical distancing and some other COVID-related protocols make it more difficult for children to develop critical social-emotional skills. As one provider explained, “Everything children do is through social interaction. They learn . . . language development [through social interaction]. They learn to share. They learn to do their numbers by singing . . . So everything is social for children. That’s how they develop. They develop cognitively, emotionally.”

Successful strategies for providing in-person care during the pandemic

Survey respondents who were providing in-person care were asked what strategies worked well for them during the pandemic. They were provided with a list of options and were asked to check all that applied to them. **The most frequently referenced strategies were: 1) providing each child with his/her own set of toys; 2) keeping children in small groups with the same teacher and children; and 3) providing more outdoor activities/increased time outdoors.**

If you are offering in-person learning and care, which activities have worked well during COVID-19? Please check all that apply. Number of respondents: 422



In addition to the strategies identified in the survey, **focus group respondents shared multiple creative methods that helped children stay physically distanced and that prevented the spread of COVID-19.** For example, one provider shared that she and her team arranged individual rugs around the room where children could sit and play, and they placed X's on the floor to show children where they could stand and be socially distanced. Another provider noted that at her site, they asked children to stretch out their arms to ensure they were not touching their neighbors, and another provider shared that children decorated six-foot-long tubes that they played with and used to measure how far apart they were from one another. One of these same providers also shared that at her site, each child was given their own small box with a pencil, crayons, markers, scissors and a glue stick to prevent children from sharing writing supplies during the day.

Several providers in our focus group also shared that they found ways to help children feel socially and emotionally connected, even while wearing masks and being more physically distanced than usual. For example, one provider shared that she and her staff spoke with the children about different ways they could greet their friends, such as saying "hi," telling their friends they loved and appreciated them, or "doing the elbow" (bumping elbows with each other instead of hugging). In explaining the way that young children need "human connection," this same provider noted, "I have a really cute picture of two children sitting in circle time outside. And their little toes are getting towards each other and touching just so that they could be connected."

As more children return to in-person ECE settings, it is important that best practices for facilitating social-emotional learning - whether in an in-person setting, or through technology - be collected and shared with the ECE field. It is likely that teachers will also need additional support to serve children who have not benefited from social-emotional learning opportunities or instruction during the pandemic. In addition, best practices on how to facilitate physical distancing should be collected and shared with the ECE field. Sufficient funding must be provided to enable practitioners to implement these best practices and meet any COVID-related health and safety requirements.

Providing Distance Learning During the Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic ushered in new methods of teaching and supporting young learners and families, and for many educators, necessitated a far greater reliance on technology. Hundreds of ECE providers quickly set up distance learning programs, helped parents troubleshoot technology issues, and created both digital and non-digital home learning activities to reach families with varying resources and technology access. For some ECE educators, these methodologies were not new. Yet, for many, relying heavily on technology to facilitate learning and to communicate with families was a new experience - one that came with challenges and several unexpected benefits. The data below highlights some of the challenges and successes experienced by ECE professionals who facilitated distance learning, as well as recommendations regarding resources that must be available to support children's and families' use of technology, both now and in the future.

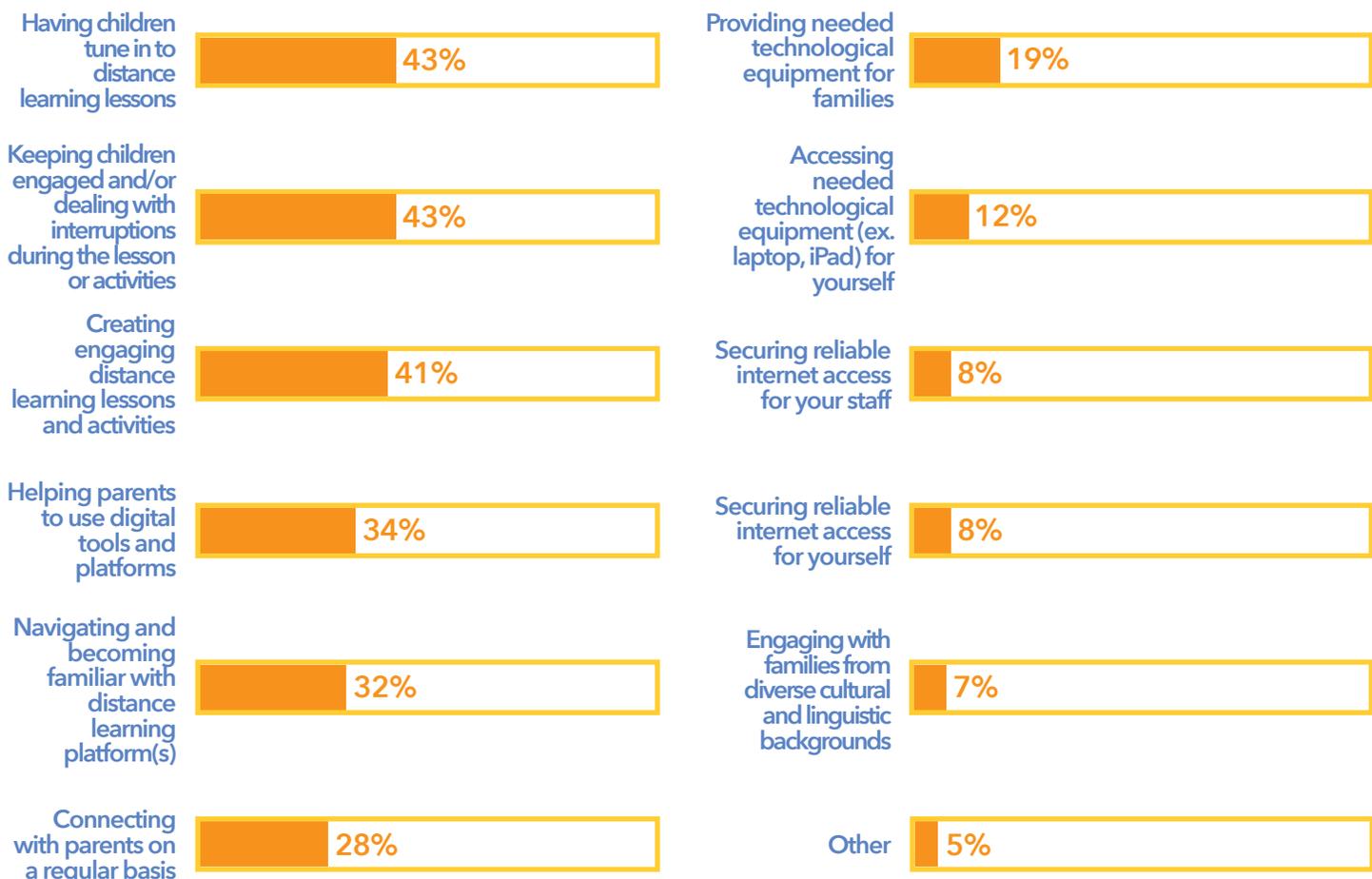
Nearly 70 percent of survey respondents provided distance learning for young children, whether through a hybrid model (both in-person care and distance learning), or through distance learning exclusively. **The vast majority of respondents who offered distance learning through school district sites provided this instruction five times per week.** For survey respondents offering distance learning in other settings, the number of times per week that distance learning was offered was more mixed. **In addition, the majority of respondents offering distance learning reported that they provided online, synchronous instruction for between 20 minutes to one hour per week,** while 19 percent reported providing this instruction for two and a half hours per week.

If your program is providing distance learning, how many minutes per week, in total, do you provide opportunities for children ages 2.5 to 4 to tune in for online, live (synchronous) instruction? Number of respondents: 433

20–40 minutes: 38%	95–150 minutes (2.5 hours): 19%	335–420 minutes (7 hours): 3%	755 minutes or more: 1%
45–60 minutes (1 hour): 16%	155–240 minutes (4 hours): 8%	425–600 minutes (10 hours): 2%	
65–90 minutes (1.5 hours): 7%	245–330 minutes (5.5 hours): 4%	605–750 minutes (12.5 hours): 3%	

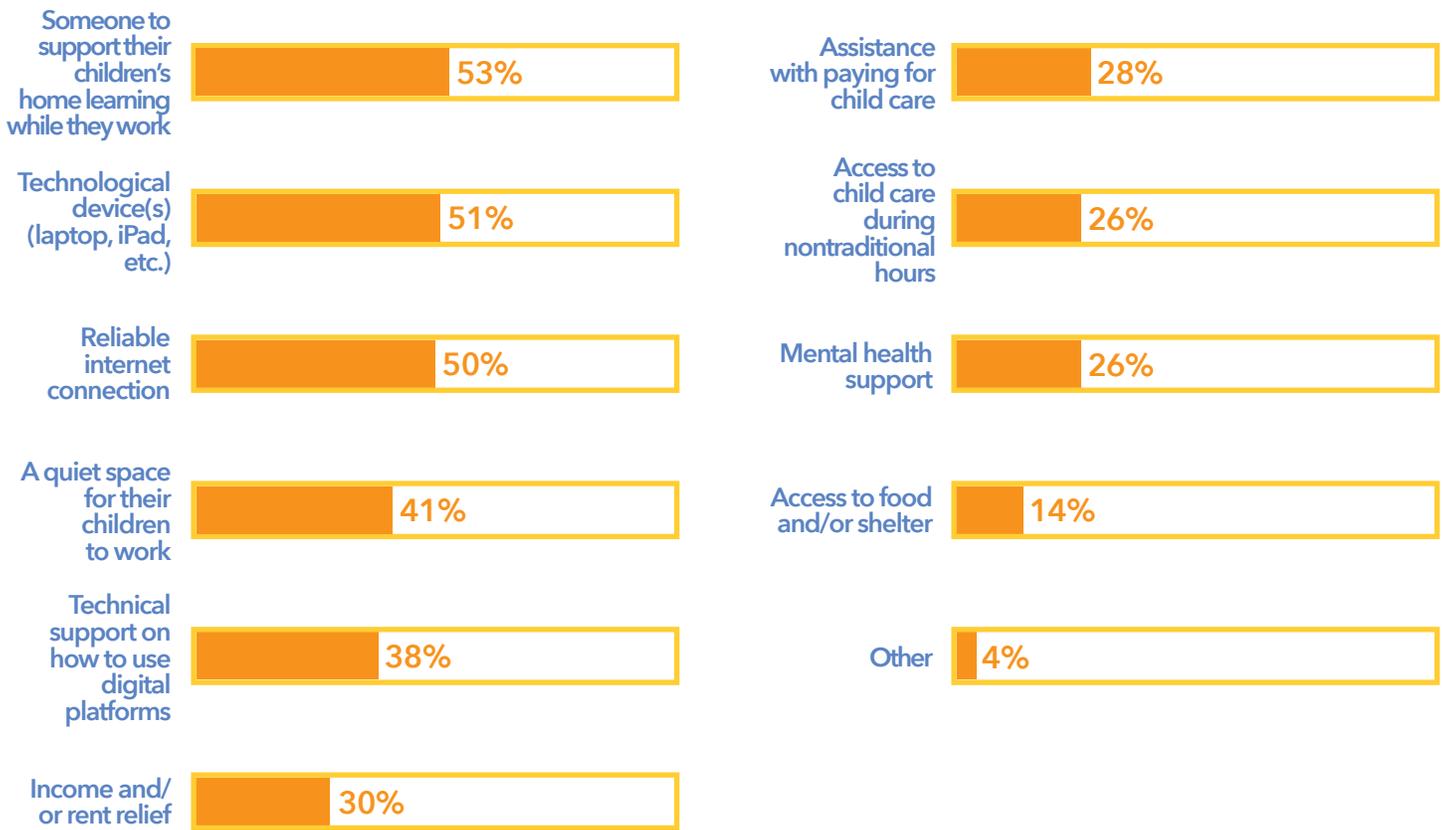
Survey respondents were also asked to identify significant challenges related to providing distance learning, and the **three challenges cited most frequently were: 1) having children tune in to distance learning lessons; 2) keeping children engaged and/or dealing with interruptions during the lesson or activities; and 3) creating engaging distance learning lessons and activities.**

If you are providing distance learning, what have been the three most significant challenges?



Our focus group participants highlighted struggles families were facing that made it challenging for them to consistently tune in for, or even to access, distance learning. In this same vein, when survey respondents were asked about the most significant unmet needs of the families in their programs, the most frequently cited were: **1) someone to support their children’s home learning while they work; 2) technological device(s), such as a laptop or iPad; and 3) a reliable internet connection.** All three of these issues relate to a family’s ability to tune in to, and to participate in, distance learning lessons. They also lay bare the stark digital divide that has prevented some children from equitably accessing instruction and educational support, both before and during the pandemic.

What, in your opinion, are the most significant unmet needs of families in your program? Please check all that apply. Number of respondents: 529



Participants in our focus group confirmed that some children did not tune in to distance learning lessons because their parent(s) were working or attending to other children and could not supervise their learning. Focus group participants also noted that in some cases where parents were working, the individual caring for their children lacked knowledge of how to support the distance learning process. For example, one provider stated, "We have parents who have children who are in [the] K-12 system, and they have to choose who to support. Some parents are single parents and are working parents, and they have to take their children to other caregivers to support them while they're working. Some [of these caregivers] . . . may not be savvy with technology and lack devices." Another provider added that, in some cases, the individual tending to the child/ren is a grandmother or babysitter who "lack[s] the technological ability to support the [distance] learning process." A teacher further added, "Having an adult, obviously that is so important for the children to be able to stay a little more focused on the activities. And, again, that is a very difficult thing because . . . they don't have sometimes someone who can stay with them, supervising the children [when they have distance learning lessons]."

Participants in our focus group also confirmed that some children did not tune in to distance learning lessons because they lacked a device (or sufficient devices for all children in the household) or a reliable internet connection, or because their parents were not tech-savvy. According to one teacher, "I think the lack of technology; the lack of knowledge on how to use the technology; lack of internet access; all of that in parents, I think, have been the hardest part." For example, one provider shared that her program has not been able to provide families with iPads or hotspots. She explained, "We do have a lot of families who are working out of their cell phones . . . or they are using their older siblings', either computer or iPad set they were provided from their schools. So, they have to be sharing those devices . . . that's something that we're struggling with." This same provider shared that some families did not even have internet access on their phones. In addition, several focus group participants who worked at school districts shared that even though devices have been provided to families by the district, some families are still not tuning in for distance learning, or are struggling with technology to support their children's learning. According to one provider, "We have the devices available . . . but because some of the caregivers are not [technologically] savvy . . . it's still a challenge. It's just not as great of a challenge as it was prior to getting individual devices."

Several teachers in our focus group also indicated that, initially, some parents were skeptical that virtual learning for preschoolers could be meaningful, or they did not have their children log on because what they really needed was in-person care. According to one teacher, “They [parents] don’t understand how we could teach preschool through a computer, and they’re not giving it a chance . . . So, we started doing individual calls . . . we were having one-on-ones with the children and conversations directed to specific parents, to where they were finally able to see this is [how] we do learning virtually, and this is how it works. And that seemed to pick up the class participation.” This same teacher noted, “I think it just mainly comes down to the parents and getting them to understand that it’s still preschool, it’s not ideal, it’s not the typical learning environment, but we’re doing our best to make it [work] for the children.” According to another teacher, some parents indicated that they were not tuning in for distance learning because what they really needed was child care, so they could “leave the house [and] even risk their own health in order to be able to provide for [their] children.” He explained that for these parents, “the priority was child care, not as much as the educational, the academic component.”

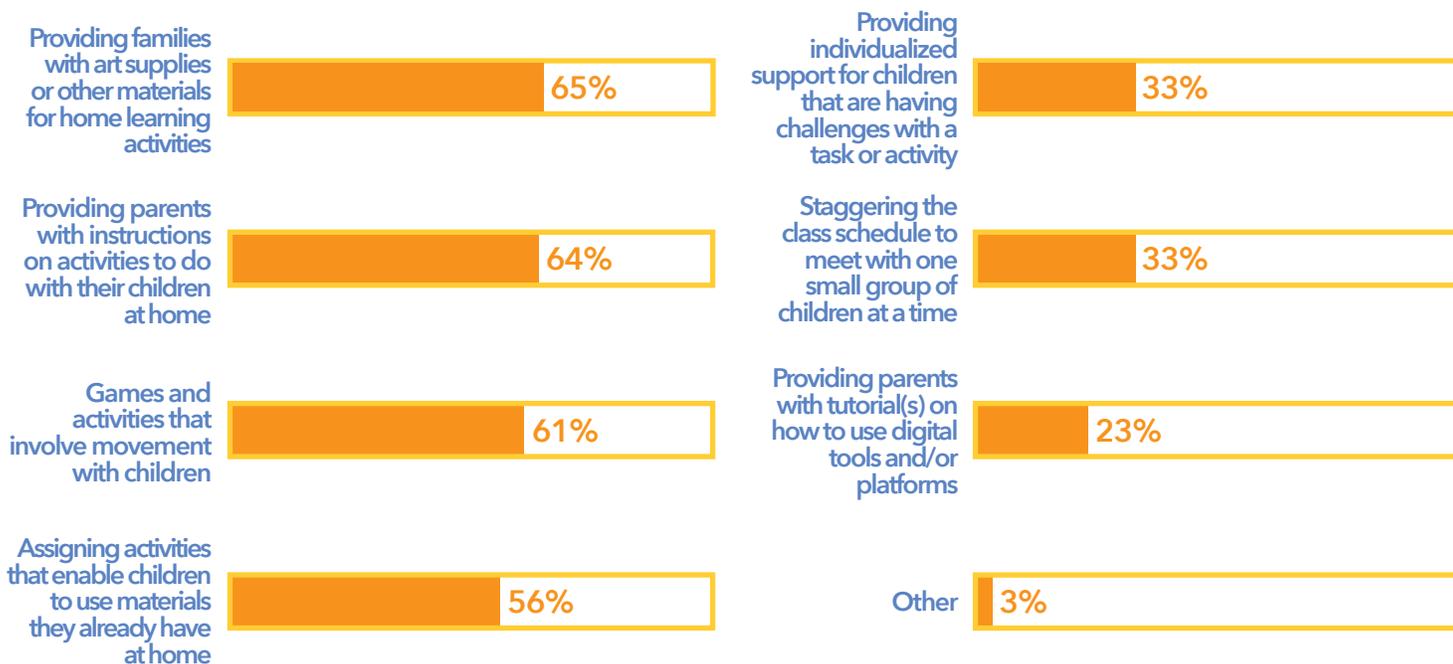
Challenges in keeping children engaged during distance learning

Both providers and lead teachers in our focus groups noted that keeping children engaged during distance learning can be challenging because there are often distractions in the home and because young children have shorter attention spans. One teacher in our focus group explained, “We’re competing with everything else that’s going on in the household . . . sometimes the siblings are crawling and wanting to play and crawling on our students, which is fine. We always try to say, ‘Oh, your little sister can join too’ . . . but . . . if there’s somebody in the background watching TV, or the mom’s in the kitchen cooking dinner, and they want to go see what’s going on, we’re fighting for their attention from what else is going on in the household.” A provider in our focus group further explained that younger children “only have so much attention that they can spend on a screen.” Focus group participants also indicated that children miss their friends, and that distance learning does not inherently provide the social interaction that children crave and need for their social and emotional development.

Successful strategies for facilitating distance learning

Survey respondents who were offering distance learning were asked what strategies had worked well for their programs. They were provided with a list of strategies and asked to check all that applied to them. **The most frequently selected strategies were: 1) providing families with art supplies or other materials that they can use for home learning activities; 2) providing parents with instructions on activities to do with their children at home; and 3) playing games/facilitating activities that involve movement with children.**

If you are providing distance learning, which, if any, of the following strategies have worked well for your program? Please check all that apply. Number of respondents: 431



One of the teachers in our focus group shared that her program initially assigned home learning activities that required the ability to navigate technology or to print worksheets from home, but they soon realized that many of their families did not have these resources. As a result, her program shifted to assigning more activities that required materials that families would already have at home, or that did not require any materials at all. She said her program saw “a lot more activities completed by . . . families and the children” as a result. Another teacher shared that his program distributed tote bags to families on a monthly basis. He said that parents could drive by and pick up the materials “because what is the point of doing an activity if they don’t have anything to work with at home?” In addition, survey respondents highlighted the importance of providing instruction to parents on home learning activities in their home language. Of the 277 respondents who reported providing instructions on home learning activities to parents, **91 percent indicated that they provided these instructions in the parents’ home language.**

In addition to the strategies highlighted in the survey, focus group participants shared multiple strategies to effectively facilitate distance learning. **For example, multiple providers found it effective to provide pre-recorded videos or digital activities that children could watch or do on their own time.** One provider explained, “We try to post a lot of . . . things on ClassDojo where parents can just play YouTube videos that are showing the book of the week or the Mighty Minute or book discussion cards, and so forth.” Another provider noted, “For us, having the recorded videos for distance learning has been very helpful because the kids can do it on their own time, and they have all day to do it.”

Focus group participants also talked about the importance of assisting parents with technology. One teacher noted, “If we do have an activity that [requires] technology . . . for instance, getting on Zoom . . . it is our responsibility to help our families figure out how to join.” This same teacher noted that every time her site sent an email about an upcoming Zoom meeting, they provided a link to a Zoom tutorial at the bottom of the email. She also said that she and other staff members made sure families knew they could contact the staff if they needed assistance with the technology. Another teacher stated that he helped families learn to use iPads by providing live Zoom coaching, and that he had an assistant who could assist families with technological questions during distance learning lessons. However, one provider shared that it was most effective to provide *in-person* technical support to families who were having a particularly difficult time with technology. She noted that if her program really needed these families to download an app on their phone, then they had the families come briefly to the site. She said, “We’ll download it for them very quickly and just show them one time. Look, this is all you have to do, have them take notes or provide them with a video of how we did it.”

Focus group participants also provided examples of how to foster social and emotional skills through distance learning. One provider shared that her program reserved the first ten minutes of distance learning lessons for children to have open conversations with one another. She said, “They’re greeting their friends and they’re shouting, ‘Hello’ . . . Now, the kids are excited. They want to come in. They want to see their friends, whereas before it was more structured and the kids’ . . . microphones were on mute . . . but when there’s opportunities for them to interact on a social level, we see the difference in the kids wanting to come and participate.” Focus group participants also talked about the importance of helping children process and verbalize the challenges and trauma they are experiencing as a result of COVID-19. A teacher in our focus group shared that during a discussion about feelings, he played a video that showed a specific emotion, and one of the children said she felt that emotion (which was sadness). When he inquired why, she said that she really missed her grandmother and was unable to see her. She explained, “Because of the virus . . . we don’t want to go to see my grandma and get her sick because she’s old.” This teacher noted, “That was a huge breakthrough for me and for that child to be able to express in that particular way.” This same teacher said he uses thirty minutes every Friday to talk about social-emotional issues with the children and their parents.

Finally, a teacher in one of our focus groups emphasized the importance of being flexible about children’s participation in distance learning and their families’ ability to support them. He explained, “If we . . . have difficulty with technology and the instructional part, how much more difficult could [it] be for them as parents?” He also shared that when parents become upset or embarrassed when their child doesn’t want to come to class or throws a tantrum in the middle of class, he says, “It’s okay. You want some time off? Do that. You want [insert name of child] . . . to be away from the computer, give him some time for him to cool down, to relax and to get back on his feet and just turn off the camera or the microphone and come back when he . . . is ready.” This same teacher added, “I think that it is very important for us to make sure that we make parents feel that we understand what they’re going through at this time and this moment.”

In the coming days, as more ECE programs provide in-person care, offer hybrid learning models, and create virtual summer learning activities, it will be important to consider the following issues related to the use of technology. First, for educators who integrate digital learning into their programs, it will be imperative to ensure that families have a stable internet connection as well as a device (iPad or computer) for each child. If families need assistance in navigating technology, it will be important to meet these needs – whether through in-person or online guidance, individualized support, or other measures. Consistently checking in with parents or other caregivers to determine their technological needs and to assess which digital home learning activities are feasible and effective will be essential. Ultimately, effectively integrating technology into early childhood education – whether by choice, or by necessity – will require additional financial investment and professional development support.

Family Engagement

Whether an ECE provider offered in-person care, distance learning, or a hybrid model during the pandemic, their engagement with families looked different from engagement prior to COVID-19. In in-person settings, physical distancing permitted extremely limited in-person interactions. In programs offering distance learning, educators and parents were often required to communicate and co-facilitate learning in new ways. The data below highlights the frequency of educator-family communications in different settings, the variety of methods educators used to connect with families, and the strategies educators found to be most effective.

Survey respondents were asked to indicate whether their interactions with the parents/caregivers in their program were more or less frequent than they had been prior to COVID-19. Interestingly, the majority of respondents offering distance learning or a hybrid model reported *more frequent* interactions, whereas just over half of respondents providing in-person care reported *less frequent* interactions.

Would you characterize your interactions with the parents/caregivers of children in your program as being MORE frequent than before COVID-19, or LESS frequent than before COVID-19?



For survey respondents providing *in-person* learning, one of the common reasons given to explain why interactions with parents/caregivers were *more frequent* was that parents had more questions, particularly about their children’s health and safety. One provider explained, “Parents have more questions about protocols [and] procedures related to COVID-19.” Another provider noted, “Parents need reassurance that we are doing everything we can to keep their child safe, as well as provide them info about their child’s day.” Multiple survey respondents also noted that **early childhood professionals were communicating with parents/caregivers frequently about their health and about health policies.** One provider said that her site obtains “constant updates on children’s health and family interactions.” Another provider noted, “We always have good interaction with parents, but now, due to the pandemic, our interactions are more frequent to make sure everything is going well with the children and their families or [to see if they] need resources and help.”

For survey respondents providing *in-person* learning, several common reasons given to explain why interactions with parents/caregivers were *less frequent* were that due to COVID-19, parents could not come into the classroom or enter the site, and time spent speaking with parents during drop off and pick up was more brief than it had been prior to COVID-19. As one provider noted, “The parents are no longer allowed to enter the program. I walk the children out, and our greetings are from far away and super brief.” Another provider noted, “Previously, parents would spend quite a bit of time in classrooms at the beginning and end of the day. They no longer enter the center.” In addition, another provider added,

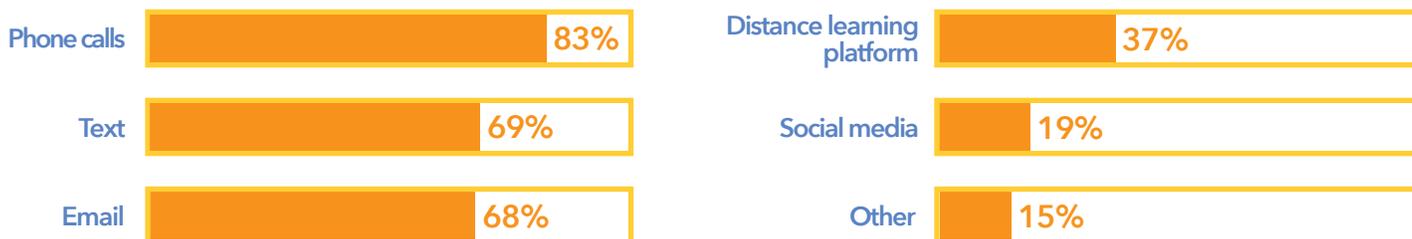
“With parents dropping off and picking up the children outside of the building, there is less opportunity to chat with teachers on a daily basis. We certainly make time for them to speak, when necessary, but casual contact has diminished considerably.”

For survey respondents providing *distance learning*, one of the common reasons given to explain why interactions with parents/caregivers were *more frequent* was that parents participated in and supported their children during virtual classes and activities. As one lead teacher explained, “Parents are involved with our sessions. They often sit with their child during read aloud, [and] are observed doing exercise activities and helping with desired results activities. It’s like parents are my assistants helping to model and guide children. I also think that parents are now, more than ever, aware of what we actually do as educators and appreciate us so much more.” Several respondents indicated that they had daily check-ins with parents, and many noted that they were in constant communication with families about daily activities, assignments, technical support issues and parent questions. Multiple respondents also noted that they connected with families through a variety of means, including Zoom meetings, phone calls, emails, Class Dojo, Google Classroom, and/or Learning Genie.

For survey respondents providing *distance learning*, one of the common reasons given to explain why interactions with parents/caregivers were *less frequent* was that parents did not tune in to distance learning lessons, or did not respond (or took a while to respond) to texts and emails. Survey respondents attributed this to parents’ lack of access to or facility with technology, busy work schedules, and/or the need to tend to other children. For example, one teacher explained, “Interactions are less frequent because parents seem to be stressed out and have less time due to having other children log in to Zoom. Many parents work and don’t have time to do online Zoom classes or interact with teachers.” In addition, a provider noted, “When we were on site, parents would accompany the child to sign-in or sign-out, so there were more opportunities to see the parent in person and converse about upcoming events, activities, needs or concerns. With the use of technology to communicate, not all parents are responsive to ClassDojo, emails, voicemails or phone calls.” Another provider explained, “Not all the parents have access to technology, and some of them have more than two children at home and they focus on the older siblings.” Finally, one provider noted, “Most of the students’ parents work during the week. The children who are connecting through technology are being cared [for by] relatives, such as aunts, uncles, older cousins and grandparents. Therefore, the interaction [with] parents has decreased.”

Survey respondents were also asked what method(s) of communication they found were most effective in reaching parents during COVID-19. Communicating with parents by phone was most frequently cited as an effective method of communication, followed by text and email.

What method(s) of communication have you found are effective in reaching parents during COVID-19? Please check all that apply. Number of respondents: 563



Focus group participants were also asked what methods of communication they found were most effective in reaching parents during the pandemic, and their responses were mixed. Some expressed a preference for email, some expressed a preference for phone calls, and some expressed a preference for multiple forms of communication, including Zoom. **Several focus group participants also offered suggestions for fostering more effective family engagement.** One teacher said that she leaves her Zoom portal open after class, so if parents want to speak with her privately, then they have this opportunity. Another teacher said he offered parents individual Zoom meetings if they wanted to discuss anything privately with him. A provider said that her program keeps a log of the communications teachers have with

parents. She said that even if a teacher is unable to reach a parent after multiple attempts, “The family knows that we’re not just forgetting about them; that we are persistent and consistently looking for them.” Another provider emphasized the importance of responding promptly to parent concerns and questions and letting them know that she is there to support them. This same provider noted that she checks her email “constantly” for messages from families and responds within 24 hours, if not sooner. In addition, another provider shared that she encourages teachers to call parents with positive news or feedback about their child’s progress. She tells her teachers, “If you noticed something really good, that the child was able to write their name for the first time, call the parent and let them know.” She further explained, “Those things are very important, especially because with everything that’s going on, they [parents] want to hear the good news.”

As more ECE programs offer in-person care and children return to the classroom, it will be important for providers to communicate frequently with families – to provide updates, to determine child and family needs, and to reassure parents and caregivers of the safety of their programs. It will also be imperative for local, state, and federal education leaders and elected officials to highlight the safety of ECE program environments. Such efforts are needed to help assuage parent concerns and to recognize the significant work providers have accomplished to meet rigorous health and safety protocols. Given that different ECE programs have had varying success with different communication strategies, it will be important for each program to take stock of which methods worked best and to evaluate how, if at all, these methods will prove effective as more children return to the classroom. ECE programs might even consider surveying families, or speaking with each individual family (if possible) to gauge how best to communicate with that family going forward. These individual conversations will also be critical to determine family needs, particularly in situations where ECE providers have not been able to reach a family during the pandemic.

Working with Dual Language Learners and Their Families During the Pandemic

In California, nearly 60 percent of children ages five and younger live in a home where a language other than English is spoken.¹⁴ These children, who are learning two or more languages at the same time, or are learning a second language while continuing to develop their first (or home) language, are known as Dual Language Learners (DLLs).¹⁵ Survey respondents identified multiple challenges in meeting the needs of DLLs and in working with families from diverse linguistic backgrounds during the pandemic, which are reflected in the data below. These issues should be considered when determining future investments that will better equip ECE professionals to serve DLLs and their families.

Eighty-four percent of survey respondents reported serving children who were DLLs. Of those, 45 percent reported that the majority of their students were DLLs, and **61 percent indicated that they served children in a dual-language program - one in which children were taught literacy and content in both English and another language.** Of the respondents who served children in a dual-language program, **94.4 percent reported that the non-English language of instruction was Spanish**, followed by 1.4 percent who reported that the non-English language of instruction was Mandarin and 1 percent who reported that the non-English language of instruction was Korean.¹⁶

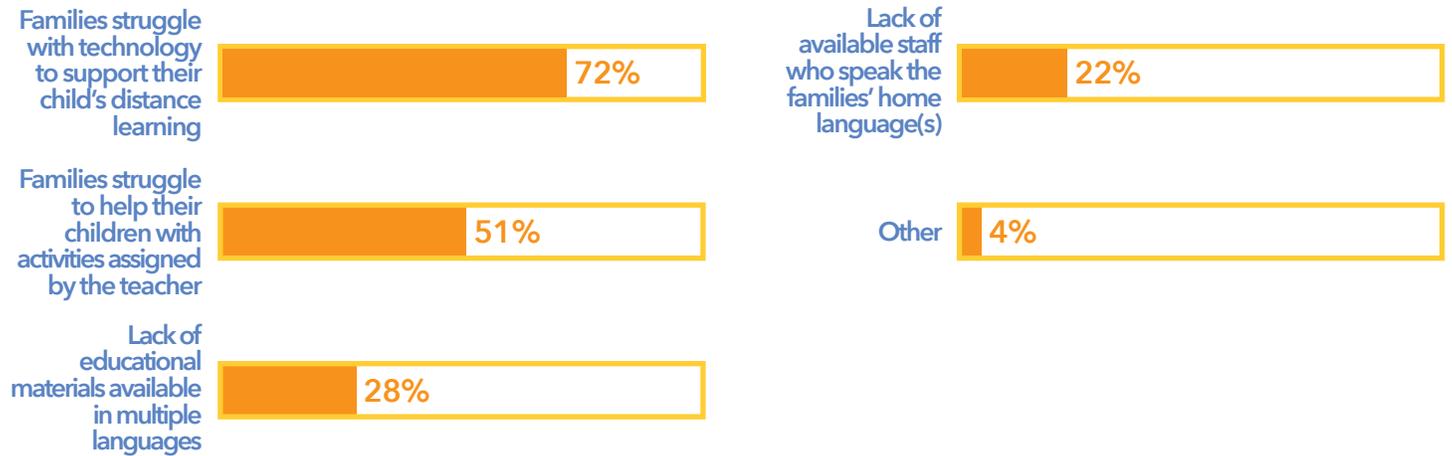
Survey respondents were asked what challenges, if any, they had experienced in engaging with families from diverse linguistic backgrounds, and were given a list of potential challenges to review. The challenge most frequently cited by respondents was that families struggled with technology to support their children’s distance learning. This finding was consistent with other survey results in which providers and teachers offering distance learning pointed to a lack of tech savviness on the part of some parents and caregivers to help explain why interactions with them were less frequent than they had been prior to the pandemic. **The second most frequently cited challenge by respondents was that families struggle to help their children with activities assigned by the teacher**, which could be due to language barriers experienced by the family.

14. Early Edge CA. *Dual Language Learners (DLLs)*. Accessed March 4, 2021, from <https://earlyedgecalifornia.org/ece-priorities/dual-language-learners/>.

15. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and U.S. Department of Education (2016). *Policy statement on supporting the development of children who are Dual Language Learners in early childhood programs*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and U.S. Department of Education.

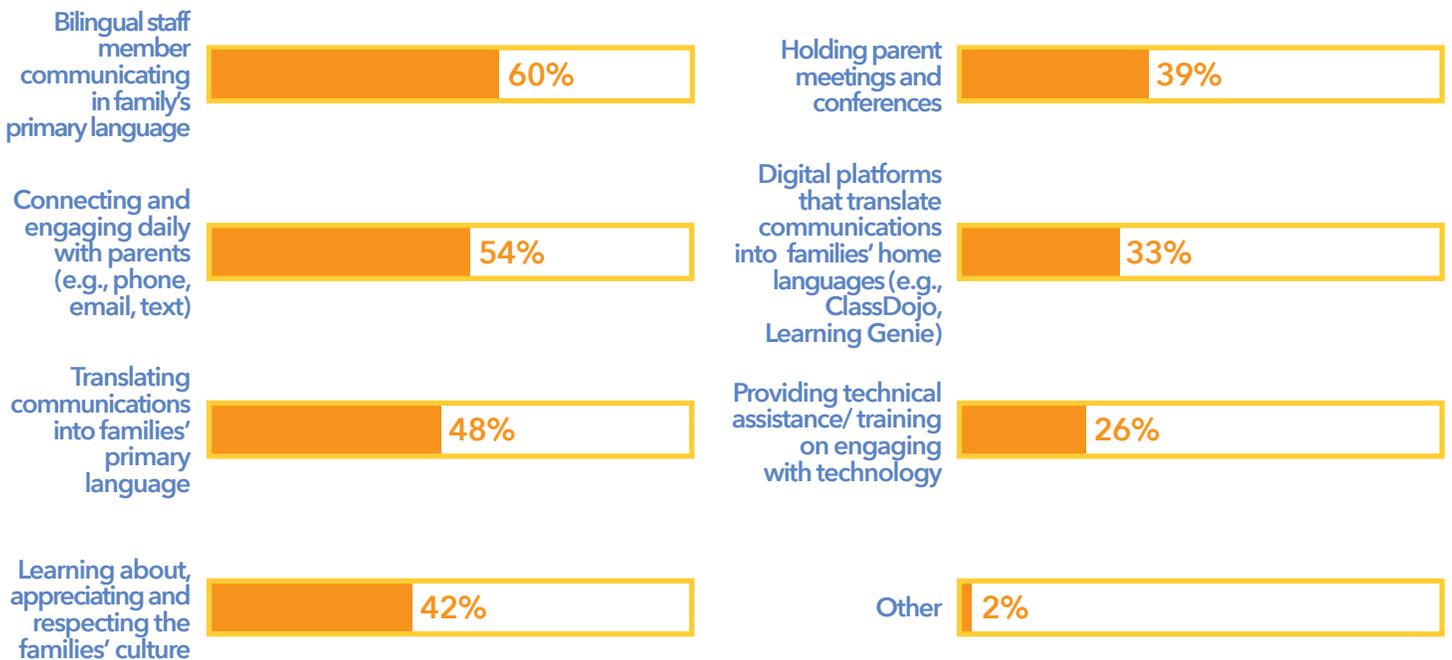
16. Of the survey respondents who served children in a dual-language program, 3.1 percent marked “other” for the non-English language of instruction and wrote in their responses. These responses included American Sign Language, Arabic, Armenian, Chinese – Mandarin, and Russian. Several respondents also indicated that they incorporated multiple non-English languages into their instruction.

What challenges, if any, have you experienced in engaging with families from diverse linguistic backgrounds? Please check all that apply. Number of respondents: 457



Survey respondents were also asked what strategies were most effective in engaging families from diverse linguistic backgrounds. They were provided with a list of strategies and asked to check all that applied. The strategy that was most frequently cited as effective was having a bilingual staff member communicating in the family's primary language, followed by connecting and engaging daily with parents (e.g., by phone, email, or text). The third most frequently cited strategy was translating communications into families' primary language.

What have you found to be most effective in engaging families from diverse linguistic backgrounds? Please check all that apply. Number of respondents: 498



Multiple focus group participants confirmed the benefit of having bilingual staff members who can communicate in the family's home language. One provider stated, "I would say our success has been with having bilingual teachers, either in distance learning or in the classroom that . . . can really accompany the children and their process and their parents." Several focus group participants also highlighted the value of having staff to support teachers who are working with DLLs but do not speak the family's home language. One teacher who was providing distance learning instruction noted that her co-teacher spoke Spanish and that it was challenging to communicate with families when this teacher was not with her. She

explained, “When she does participate on a Zoom call, she . . . is able to translate, but obviously she can’t come every single time that I’m communicating with the family. And so that’s when it gets challenging.” This same teacher also said she had a child in her class who spoke English but preferred to respond to her in Spanish, and who became frustrated when she or others in the classroom did not understand him. The teacher said, “That was eye opening for me . . . I need to figure something out, especially if he’s going to be in my class for the next however long we’re going to be [doing] virtual learning . . . Because of the demographic of my school, I do need to do something to be able to support those Dual Language Learners.”

Survey respondents were also asked what they had found to be most challenging in meeting the needs of DLLs during COVID-19. They were provided with a list of options and were asked to rank them in order from most challenging to least challenging. **Ultimately, while a lack of materials, books or other resources available in children’s home language(s) was ranked as the most significant challenge,** there was not a great deal of variation in the rankings, which indicates that all of the challenges are noteworthy.

What have you found to be most challenging in meeting the needs of Dual Language Learners (DLLs) during COVID-19? Please rank in order from most challenging (1) to least challenging (4).	Number of Responses (N)	Average Rank
Lack of materials, books or other resources available in children’s home language(s)	301	1.90
Difficulty engaging DLLs through distance learning	286	2.08
Staff are not trained on second language acquisition and DLL strategies	243	2.26
Lack of staff who speak the children’s home language(s)	239	2.69

Dual Language Learners and their families should be at the front of legislators’ minds as they consider future early childhood investments. Funding is needed for books and materials in children’s home languages, for professional development and training on second language acquisition and DLL strategies, and for efforts to recruit more multilingual candidates into the early care and education workforce. As the ECE field emerges from a season when many families from diverse backgrounds have struggled to access distance learning and learning loss is a significant concern, centering DLLs and their families should be a top priority. Investments must also be made to help DLLs develop strong language and literacy skills in both English and their home language, so they can reap the short- and long-term benefits of bilingualism.

Professional Development Preferences

Whether ECE professionals are serving children under emergency conditions or teaching under more traditional circumstances, they need professional development support to help them continually hone their craft and respond to new challenges, conditions, and child needs. The data below highlights the professional development preferences of survey respondents, which illuminate child and educator needs and can be used to help determine future professional development investments.

Survey respondents were asked what professional trainings they were most interested in receiving during the pandemic. Specifically, they were provided with a list of potential topics and were asked to rank them in order of interest. **Overall, the topic that received the highest ranking was “working with children with challenging behaviors,” followed by “distance learning methods” and “helping children develop social skills.”¹⁷**

17. 507 respondents provided at least one answer to this question, but not every respondent provided a ranking for all options.

When the survey results about professional development preferences were broken down by the type of instruction respondents were providing (in-person care, distance learning or a hybrid model), the results were very similar. However, “serving children with special needs” was the third highest ranked topic by respondents providing in-person care, and these same respondents did not express as strong a preference for trainings on distance learning methods. Additionally, it may be concerning that programs providing distance learning did not rank “serving children with special needs” as one of their preferred professional development trainings. In distance learning situations, educators may tend to deprioritize training related to children with special needs, because they are not interacting with the children in person on a daily basis. It will be important to ensure that educators continue to receive professional development enabling them to meet the needs of all children in their classrooms.

Most requested professional development trainings in order of ranking. Number of respondents: 507

Programs providing in-person care	Programs providing distance learning	Hybrid programs providing both in-person care and distance learning
Working with children with challenging behaviors	Distance learning methods	Working with children with challenging behaviors
Helping children develop social skills	Working with children with challenging behaviors	Distance learning methods
Serving children with special needs	Helping children develop social skills	Helping children develop social skills
Self-care	Family engagement strategies	Family engagement strategies
Family engagement strategies	Trauma-informed care	Serving children with special needs

Participants in our focus groups confirmed the need for training on working with children with challenging behaviors, and they noted that both they and parents were seeing challenging behaviors exhibited more frequently by young children. A challenging behavior has been defined as “any repeated pattern of behavior, or perception of behavior, that interferes with or is at risk of interfering with the child’s optimal learning or engagement in pro-social interactions with peers and adults.”¹⁸ The Center for the Developing Child at Harvard University also explains that “problematic behaviors may need to be treated as a result of the ACEs or other traumatic experiences someone has had, as opposed to addressing them as simply willful and/or punishable actions.”¹⁹ Trauma-informed care or services are characterized by this understanding. In addition, a joint statement from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the U.S. Department of Education cites the troubling fact that “expulsions and suspensions occur at high rates in preschool settings,” and that young boys of color are “suspended and expelled much more than other children.”²⁰ Research suggests that implicit bias may play a role in how child behavior is perceived and addressed. A research study brief from the Yale Child Study Center notes, “These tendencies to view child behaviors differentially based on the race of the child may be a manifestation of

18. Smith, B., & Fox, L. (2003). *Systems of service delivery: A synthesis of evidence relevant to young children at risk of or who have challenging behavior*. Tampa, FL: University of South Florida, Center of Evidence-Based Practice; Young Children with Challenging Behavior. Retrieved from: <http://ohiofamilyrights.com/Reports/Special-Reports-Page-4/Systems-of-Service-Delivery-A-Synthesis-of-Evidence-Relevant-to-Young.pdf>.

19. Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University. *ACES and toxic stress: Frequently asked questions*. Accessed March 21, 2021 from <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/aces-and-toxic-stress-frequently-asked-questions/>

20. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services & U.S. Department of Education (2014). *Policy statement on expulsion and suspension policies in early childhood settings*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and U.S. Department of Education. Retrieved from: <https://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/school-discipline/policy-statement-ece-expulsions-suspensions.pdf>

more generalized implicit biases regarding race and criminal or delinquent behavior.”²¹ In addition, an issue brief from the Schubert Center for Child Studies suggests that “supporting preschool providers and teachers in strengthening their behavioral and class management skills, including addressing potential implicit biases, can help to ensure that all children are treated in a fair and equitable manner.”²²

A teacher in our focus group noted that both general education and special education students were demonstrating challenging behaviors, perhaps due to a general increase in family stress during COVID-19, and emphasized that it was important for all teachers and staff to know how to assist them. A provider added, “We’re finding that there’s an increase of behavior problems at home. There’s some resources that [parents] don’t know where to find if their child has some speech problems or some delays that they’re noticing that they want to get help [with], but they don’t know where to go . . . so we are finding a lot of stress in our families.” In addition, another teacher in our focus group highlighted the benefit of having a child interventionist on site to assist the teacher. She stated, “I thought that [having a child interventionist] was the most helpful resource tool I could have ever had, because whenever we felt like we had a child with special needs, special rights or challenging behaviors, she [the child interventionist] was my go-to. And not only [was] she focused on the child, but she would come and give you strategies as a teacher . . . She would look at the classroom as a whole to see what’s impacting the child.”

As more young children return to the classroom, ECE professionals must be supported in helping children make the adjustment from distance learning to in-person care, or from not participating in ECE programs to reengaging with teachers and peers. ECE professionals must also receive support in serving children who have suffered learning loss, or who have experienced trauma that in some cases was caused or exacerbated by COVID-19. Given these realities and the professional development preferences expressed by survey respondents, policymakers should strongly consider investing in professional development on social-emotional learning and on trauma-informed care, including support for behavior management in the classroom. Training on trauma-informed practices can help educators identify childhood trauma and understand how to use strategies that build child resilience, health, and well-being. Such training can also help educators develop a trauma-informed approach to discipline and more sensitivity in responding to young children who may have experienced trauma. Professional development training on implicit bias and cultural competency could go hand-in-hand with training on trauma-informed care.

21. Gilliam, W., Maupin, A., Reyes, C., Accavitti, M., & Shic, F. (2016). *Do early educators’ implicit biases regarding sex and race relate to behavior expectations and recommendations of preschool expulsions and suspensions?* New Haven, CT: Yale School of Medicine, Yale University Child Study Center. Retrieved from: <https://modules.nceIn.fpg.unc.edu/sites/modules.nceIn.fpg.unc.edu/files/foundations/handouts/M2H2-PreschoolImplicitBiasResearchBrief.pdf>

22. Schubert Center for Child Studies (2014). *Play, implicit bias and discrimination in early childhood: Implications for child development*. Cleveland, Ohio: Case Western Reserve University, Schubert Center for Child Studies. Retrieved from: <https://case.edu/schubertcenter/sites/case.edu.schubertcenter/files/2020-04/Play-and-Implicit-Bias-Brief.pdf>.

Recommendations

The results of our ECE survey and focus groups indicate a need for the following investments and practices to better support the early care and education workforce and families with young children, both now and in the months ahead.

Direct funding for the ECE field

- **Provide flexible stipends to ECE providers:** Ensure that providers receive flexible funding that can be used to cover cleaning costs and PPE, personnel, rent/mortgage payments, distance learning costs, facilities modifications, and other costs necessary for reopening, remaining open, and safely serving families.
- **Increase reimbursement rates:** Increase reimbursement rates for state-subsidized child care and development programs to ensure that early educators are fairly compensated and to address chronic issues of high teacher turnover and stress within the profession.
- **Distribute ECE funding using an equity-based approach:** Data clearly demonstrates that people of color are not only more likely to contract and die from COVID-19, but have also been disproportionately impacted by the economic consequences of the pandemic.²³ When determining funding allocations for provider stipends, professional development, or other supports, it will be critical to ensure an equitable distribution of funding that prioritizes high need communities and recognizes the economic insecurity, racial injustice, and COVID-19 impacts that these communities have experienced.

Technology investments and practices

- **Share best practices for supporting parents' use of technology:** Survey a wide array of early educators to identify effective ways to help parents and caregivers utilize technology and remote learning platforms, and share best practices with the ECE field.
 - Best practices shared by our survey and focus group participants included: providing pre-recorded videos or digital activities that children could watch or do on their own time, providing parents with instructions on activities to do with their children at home, and assisting parents in utilizing technology (through Zoom tutorials or coaching, by providing in-person technical support, and/or by having a designated staff person provide technology support).
- **Ensure ECE families have adequate devices and stable internet connections:** Particularly when digital learning is part of ECE programs' curriculum, work with public agencies, elected officials, and philanthropic partners to ensure that families have a stable internet connection as well as a device (iPad or computer) for each child.
- **Assess families' technology-related needs:** Consistently check in with parents or other caregivers to determine their technology-related needs and to assess which digital home learning activities are feasible and effective.

Professional Development

- **Fund high-quality professional development:** Expand access to professional development trainings and higher education coursework on topics that will help educators support all children in their care, including trauma-informed care and support for behavior management in the classroom; helping children develop socially and emotionally; and effective strategies for distance learning, family engagement, and supporting children with special needs.
- **Share best practices for fostering social-emotional learning:** Survey a wide array of early educators to identify effective ways to foster social-emotional learning – whether through technology or in an in-person setting – and share best practices with the ECE field.

23. Mitchell, F. (2020, August 17). *COVID-19's disproportionate effects on children of color will challenge the next generation*. Urban Wire. The blog of the Urban Institute. <https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/covid-19s-disproportionate-effects-children-color-will-challenge-next-generation>

- Best distance learning, technologically based practices shared by our survey and focus group participants included: viewing a video that showed a specific emotion and having a discussion with the children about that emotion; reserving a designated amount of time for open conversations, particularly to help children process and verbalize the challenges and trauma they have experienced as a result of COVID-19; and facilitating movement-based activities via Zoom or other technologies.
- Best in-person, physically distanced practices shared by our survey and focus group participants included: having children greet each other verbally and express appreciation for one another, and “doing the elbow” (greeting one another with an elbow bump rather than by hugging).

Family Engagement

- **Maintain regular communication with parents and caregivers:** ECE professionals have been communicating frequently with families during the pandemic to provide program updates, to build relationships, to assess child and family needs, to share information about children’s development, and to partner on learning activities. These are best practices that should continue. Utilizing communication strategies that work well for both parents and educators is also essential.
- **Assure families of the safety of in-person early learning environments:** Education leaders and elected officials should join early educators in highlighting the safety of ECE program environments to help encourage parents to return their children to in-person care.
- **Better coordinate social services and supports for families and create community navigators:** ECE providers not only provide children with care and instruction, but often serve as trusted messengers in their communities. Particularly during the pandemic, some providers are connecting families to an array of supports, including health, mental health and dental services, food, and other resources. While these efforts are laudable and vital to families, most ECE professionals do not receive compensation for serving as community liaisons. The state should make efforts to better coordinate the array of services and supports that are available to working families and to inform families of how to access these resources. The creation of community navigators who could help parents determine the supports for which they qualify, and how to access them, would be a worthy investment.

Working with Dual Language Learners

- **Expand the bilingual ECE workforce:** Develop and implement strategies to recruit more bilingual candidates into the ECE workforce to support DLLs’ home language development as well as family communication and connections.
- **Fund DLL-specific professional development:** Offer more professional development trainings and higher education coursework on supporting DLLs and engaging with culturally and linguistically diverse families. Teacher preparation and ongoing professional development with an explicit emphasis on serving DLLs/English Learners (ELs) is crucial to promoting these children’s academic success.²⁴
- **Increase funding for books and materials in children’s home languages:** Providing these resources is important for DLL children’s socio-emotional and positive identity development. In addition, the availability of books in children’s home language supports their literacy development in both their home language and in English.

The aforementioned recommendations that pertain to working with DLLs are aligned with the **Master Plan on Early Learning and Care**, which was released in December 2020 by the California Health and Human Services Agency.

24. Zepeda, M. (2017). *California’s gold: An advocacy framework for young Dual Language Learners*. Retrieved from: <https://dllframework.org/workforce-development/>

Implementing these recommendations will enable early educators to offer culturally and linguistically responsive care and instruction that meets the needs of children and families as they recover from trauma and other short- and long-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. These improvements will also help to strengthen family-educator connections, foster innovative teaching practices, and stabilize ECE programs so that they can safely and effectively serve working families, ensuring a successful return to the workforce for parents, and a return to normalcy for our communities.

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