Finding early childhood education (ECE) programs is challenging for many families. Identifying programs that have openings, are affordable, align with adults’ work schedules, and meet children’s needs is often difficult. The coronavirus pandemic (COVID) made finding ECE programs that met families’ needs even harder.

Many ECE programs, particularly those in public school settings, moved to virtual instruction which requires a great deal of adult supervision. Providing this support was next to impossible for families juggling work and other family obligations. Virtual learning was also challenging for young children, who have short attention spans and learn best through hands-on experiences and interactions with peers.¹

Some programs—mostly those operating out of child care centers or private schools—continued to provide in-person options for families.²

**SUMMARY**

- This brief describes the experiences and preferences of nearly 3,000 Virginia families using virtual or in-person ECE programs for their 3- to 5-year-old children during the COVID pandemic.
- Most children from families in the highest income group experienced in-person programs (69%). This was only true for 22% of families with low incomes.
- While more than half of White families (58%) reported their child received in-person instruction, just one-fifth of children from Black families (20%) experienced in-person learning.
- These differences partially reflect differences in preferences: low-income families and Black families were nearly three times as likely as high-income families and White families to report they preferred a virtual option.
- However, preferences were only part of the story. Among families with low income who wanted in-person instruction for their child, fewer than half (42%) were in an in-person instructional setting. In contrast, 80% of families with high income who wanted in-person instruction received it.
- Similarly, less than half (48%) of Black families who preferred in-person instruction for their child were in an in-person setting, while roughly two-thirds of White, Hispanic, and multiracial families who wanted in-person instruction received it.
However, families worried about the potential health risks posed by these in-person options. ECE programs made changes intended to limit the risk of COVID exposure, such as reduced class sizes and child to teacher ratios. However, these changes sometimes meant fewer available slots. Families had to weigh the risks and constraints of imperfect options and make choices they may not have made in the absence of the pandemic.

Although there has been considerable discussion about the preferences and choices of families in the K-12 context, we know less about the decisions of families with preschool-aged children (ages 3-5). Enrollment in school-based preschool dropped considerably in Virginia—especially for Black and Hispanic families as well as those with lower incomes, suggesting available options did not work for families in the context of the pandemic. However, more evidence is needed on families’ preferences and their ability to access programs that met their needs.

Using data from a large statewide survey of families with young children (ages 3-5) in Virginia, this brief describes families’ preferences for virtual or in-person ECE options and examines whether these preferences aligned with the settings children actually experienced. Given the disparate impacts of the pandemic on families with lower incomes and Black and Hispanic families, we explore patterns by families’ income levels and race/ethnicity, highlighting large differences both in preferences, and in the likelihood of accessing preferred options.

ABOUT THE SURVEY

The Families with Young Children Survey was administered by the Study of Early Education through Partnerships at the University of Virginia and was open to all Virginia families with children ages birth through kindergarten from December 2020 to January 2021. The survey was disseminated to families through child care programs and schools, and it was also shared by other family-facing organizations (such as the Virginia Department of Education and Head Start) through social media, listservs, and other forms of communication.
This brief focuses on 2,793 respondents whose youngest child was 3-5 years old at the time of the survey, and who reported using some sort of center-based ECE during the pandemic. Table 1 shows that respondents were diverse with respect to both income and race/ethnicity. White families, families with income over 300% Federal Poverty Line (FPL), and families with 4- to 5-year-olds were somewhat over-represented in the sample relative to Virginia as a whole. Throughout this brief, we use abbreviated terms to refer to income and racial/ethnic groups. See Box 1 for specific definitions of these terms.

Table 1. Characteristics of respondents.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Child/Family Characteristics</th>
<th>Percent of Sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age Group</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age 3</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age 4-5, not yet in kindergarten</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>% of the Federal Poverty Line</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under 150% FPL</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>150-300% FPL</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over 300% FPL</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Race/Ethnicity</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White, non-Hispanic</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black, non-Hispanic</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiracial/Other</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: Based on 2,652 to 2,793 responses. The Federal Poverty Line accounts for total income and number of people in the family/household. It is often used to determine eligibility for federal programs. See Box 1 for more information about race/ethnicity categories.*

## Box 1. Defining income and race categories.

### Income Categories
- **Families with low income** are defined as those whose income and household size place them below 150% of the Federal Poverty Line (FPL).
- **Families with high income** refers to families whose income and household size place them above 300% of the Federal Poverty Line.

### Race/Ethnicity Categories
- Respondents identified their child as one or more of the following race/ethnicity groups: American Indian or Alaskan Native, Asian, Black or African American, Hispanic, Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, White, or other race/ethnicity. These are the race/ethnicity groups used by the Virginia Department of Education.
- This brief presents information for the three largest race/ethnicity groups (White, Black, and Hispanic). All other respondents are included in the group labeled Other/multiracial, due to small sample sizes.
- Race/ethnicity refers to the indicated race/ethnicity of the respondent’s youngest child, on whose care the survey focused.

*See Box 3 at the end of the brief for more details on how income and race/ethnicity categories were defined.*
The survey asked families about the impact of COVID on their ECE choice, which mode of instruction their children experienced (see Box 2), and which was their preferred mode of instruction.

MODE OF INSTRUCTION: IN-PERSON OR VIRTUAL

Survey respondents indicated whether their child participated in virtual or in-person learning in the past month (see Box 2). About half of families (51%) reported their child was in virtual instruction, and the rest reported they were in-person (see Figure 1).

There were large differences in mode of instruction by families’ income and race. More than two-thirds of children (69%) from families with high income were in programs that offered in-person instruction. This was only true for 22% of families with low incomes. Put another way, families with high income were more than three times as likely to have their 3-5 year old child in in-person care. While more than half of White families (58%) reported their child received in-person instruction, just one-fifth of children from Black families (20%) were in-person, and 40% of Hispanic families reported their child was learning in-person.

Figure 1. Mode of instruction by income and race.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Income Level</th>
<th>Virtual (%)</th>
<th>In-Person (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under 150% FPL</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>150-300% FPL</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over 300% FPL</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black, non-Hispanic</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other/multiracial</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White, non-Hispanic</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Figure displays families’ responses to the question, “In the past month, which best describes how your child attended their program?” Based on 2,782 responses.

Box 2. Defining mode of instruction.

Modes of Instruction
- Virtual: a child attended an ECE program either “virtual/remote only” or “both virtual/remote and in-person.” in the past month
- In-person: a child attended an ECE program “in-person only” in the past month
FAMILIES’ PREFERRED MODE OF INSTRUCTION DURING THE PANDEMIC

The striking differences in the use of virtual versus in-person instruction partially reflect differences in families’ preferences.

Most families (68%) indicated they preferred in-person instruction for their child during the pandemic, while the remainder (32%) indicated they preferred virtual instruction (see Figure 2). However, families with lower incomes were much more likely to prefer virtual options for their child than families with high income: more than half of families with low income (55%) indicated they preferred virtual options. In contrast, less than one in five of families with high income (19%) wanted virtual instruction for their youngest child.

Two-thirds of Black families (66%) indicated that they would rather their child receive virtual instruction, while about one-fifth of White families (22%) preferred virtual/hybrid learning over in-person.

DID THE INSTRUCTIONAL MODE CHILDREN RECEIVED MATCH FAMILIES’ PREFERENCES?

Because families reported whether they preferred virtual or in-person instruction as well as the type of instruction their child received, it was possible to check how often these preferences and experiences matched. Overall, for about three-fourths of all
families (73%), the mode of instruction their child received matched their preferred mode. However, this alignment varied by mode. Nearly all (87%) families who preferred a virtual option had children enrolled in a virtual program. Of families who preferred an in-person option, considerably fewer (66%) actually used one (Figure 3). In other words, about 1 in 3 families (34%) who indicated they preferred in-person instruction reported their child was instead experiencing virtual learning.

**Figure 3.** Respondents in preferred mode of instruction by income and race.

![Figure 3](image)

*Note: 3a) Percent of respondents who preferred virtual instruction and whose child was in virtual instruction in the past month. 3b) Percent of respondents who preferred in-person instruction and whose child was in-person in the past month. Based on 2,770 responses.*

The likelihood that children received the mode of instruction their family preferred varied substantially by income and race/ethnicity, particularly for those families who preferred in-person instruction (Figure 3b). Among families who reported they wanted in-person instruction, families with high income were nearly twice as likely as families with low income to actually use an in-person option (80% compared to 42%). While about two-thirds of White (68%) and Hispanic (64%) families who preferred in-person were in an in-person setting, less than half (48%) of Black families who preferred in-person instruction for their child were in an in-person setting.
“I really didn’t have a choice. School was closed to in person and private school was in no way affordable. So we HAD to do school virtually with our children. It has put an enormous strain on the family and has had a large negative impact on our children.”

These patterns likely relate, at least in part, to the higher cost of in-person ECE options, which were largely offered in child care centers and private schools. One respondent wrote: “I really didn’t have a choice. School was closed to in person and private school was in no way affordable. So we HAD to do school virtually with our children. It has put an enormous strain on the family and has had a large negative impact on our children.” Another reflected: “We are fortunate to have the option to attend private preschool, but to me it is very disappointing that families who can only afford a public option did not have the same opportunity. It has been hugely important to my children’s well-being to be able to attend preschool in person.”

**IMPLICATIONS**

Families have always weighed competing factors when selecting ECE programs for their young children, and the pandemic added more considerations and complications. Many families of young children had to make the difficult choice between sending their child to an in-person preschool program, using virtual learning at home, or opting to rely entirely on informal care options such as family members, babysitters, or family day homes. Due to cost, availability, and/or families’ work and caregiving needs, some families felt they did not even have a choice.

In our sample, families with lower incomes and Black families were about three times more likely to report preferring virtual/hybrid instruction. These patterns mirror those found in national polls of families with school-aged children. However, the findings from this brief show that differences in preferences are not the whole story. There were also important differences in access, especially with respect to in-person programs for those families who wanted it. Of those who responded to our survey, families with incomes over 300% of the FPL who preferred an in-person setting were twice as likely to actually have accessed one as those under 300% of the FPL. Striking differences by race were also evident. Less than half of Black families who wanted an in-person option used one. Among White, Hispanic, and other/multiracial families, roughly two thirds
were able to use an in-person option.

These differences point to longstanding systematic inequities in the ECE system as well as the larger impacts of COVID on families of color and those with low income. While COVID-related fears about safety are likely to gradually diminish as cases decrease and vaccination rates rise, some concerns may persist, and finding ways to understand families’ needs will be important for meeting them moving forward. Developing this understanding will help to ensure all families have access to affordable, culturally responsive ECE options that are sensitive to children’s disparate experiences during the pandemic.

To read more about the differences in satisfaction and experiences by virtual versus in-person instructional settings, see the companion research brief “The Impact of the Coronavirus Pandemic on Preschoolers in Virtual and In-Person Classrooms: Lessons from a Large Survey of Virginia Families.”

Box 3: Defining income and race/ethnicity categories, detailed.

**Income Categories**
- Federal Poverty Line (FPL) category was estimated based on families’ responses to questions about household income and household size. It was calculated by assuming respondents were at the top of their reported income range (reported in bands of $20,000 up to $100,000). FPL thresholds were based on the US Department of Health and Human Services’ 2020 Poverty Guidelines. As an example, 150% FPL for a family of 3 was $32,580 in 2020.

**Race/Ethnicity Categories**
- In this brief, **Black, non-Hispanic** refers to families who identified their child as Black or African American and no other race.
- **White, non-Hispanic** refers to families who identified their child as White and no other race.
- **Hispanic** refers to families who identified their child as Hispanic, regardless of whether they selected any other race.
- **Other/multiracial** consists of 231 respondents who selected more than one race/ethnicity group (excluding Hispanic) and/or wrote-in some form of “multiracial” or “biracial,” 65 respondents who identified their child as Asian, 8 respondents who identified their child as “Other” race/ethnicity, and 2 respondents who identified their child as Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander.
ENDNOTES


Washington Post poll found 44% of parents preferred hybrid learning (not specific to preschool aged children, but they are included) - https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/post-poll-schools-parents-covid-trump/2020/08/05/f04ae490-d722-11ea-9c3b-dfc394c03988_story.html


6 The survey was anonymous and was offered online, in both English and Spanish. The survey was completed by parents, grandparents, foster parents/legal guardians, or other caregivers.

7 In our sample, the majority of families with children ages 3-5 reported their child was enrolled in some form of center-based care (i.e., in a child care center, private school, or public school): about 42% reported using center/private care, 41% were in a public school, and the remaining 17% used care in their or someone else’s home. Overall, 83% of families reported their child was in a center-based settings. Families with low income (76%) and Black (80%), Hispanic (79%), and other/multiracial (79%) families were somewhat less likely to be enrolled in centers.
It is important to consider the intersection of income and race. Relative to their overall proportion of our sample, White families were overrepresented in the highest income group, while Black families were overrepresented in the two lowest income groups. Of families earning 150% of FPL, 39% were White, 35% were Black, 15% were Hispanic, and 11% were other/multiracial. For families earning 150-300% of FPL, 56% were White, 23% were Black, 10% were Hispanic, and 10% were other/multiracial. Finally, families earning more than 300% of FPL were 75% White, 6% Black, 7% Hispanic, and 12% were other/multiracial.

Based on data from Kids Count Data Center, 20% of children aged 0-4 in Virginia are Black, non-Hispanic; 16% are Hispanic; 52% are White, non-Hispanic; and 12% are some other race or multiracial. Therefore, families with White children are somewhat overrepresented in this sample compared to Virginia families with young children overall. About 22% of Virginian families with children aged 0-4 have an income below 150% FPL, meaning that lower income families are somewhat underrepresented in the survey sample.

Note families who relied on informal care options are not included in the results of this brief as they were not asked questions about in-person versus virtual instruction for their child.