



The Unique Experiences of Families of Young Children with Disabilities During the Pandemic: Evidence from Virginia

Anna Shapiro & Daphna Bassok

EdPolicyWorks at the University of Virginia

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Summary:

- This report describes findings from a survey of nearly 3,000 Virginia parents and caregivers of children ages 3-5 enrolled in early care and education programs in winter of 2020-21. It compares the experiences of caregivers whose child has a disability to those who have concerns about their child's development and those with no known disability.
- Caregivers whose child has a disability or who have concerns about their child's development reported more difficulty finding early care and education, higher levels of parental stress, and more concerns about their children's development.
- Parents and caregivers of children with disabilities were less likely to have in-person options for their young children. Nearly half (46%) reported they preferred an in-person option but ultimately were in a remote/hybrid option. Nearly all families of children without disabilities who wanted an in-person option got one.
- Concerns about development were most pronounced among caregivers whose children were in remote instruction.

Early care and education (ECE) programs can yield considerable benefits for children who have or may have disabilities. They can provide early identification and early service provision, increase kindergarten readiness skills, and potentially reduce the long-term need for special education services.¹ Unfortunately, caregivers of children with disabilities often struggle to find adequate care for their children and COVID-19 may have further exacerbated challenges,² disrupting early learning opportunities, early diagnosis, and early intervention. Understanding the unique experiences of families with very young children with disabilities during the pandemic can help policymakers and practitioners better target supports moving forward. However, to date there has not been much data specifically about the COVID experiences of families of young children with disabilities.

In the winter of 2020-2021, nearly 3,000 Virginia caregivers¹ of children ages 3-5 completed a survey about their ECE experiences during the pandemic. This report describes how the caregivers of children with disabilities, as well as those who reported their children may need evaluation for a disability, differed from caregivers of children without disabilities in their concerns about finding ECE programs, their stress, and their worries about their children’s development. Our findings illustrate that the challenges imposed by the pandemic, while pronounced for all families, were particularly so for caregivers of children with disabilities and those with concerns about their children’s development. This was especially true if these children were in remote or hybrid ECE options. The brief highlights the importance of incorporating targeted ECE support to families of children with disabilities as well as those concerned about their children’s development.

1. Data and Sample

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 to age five. The survey was disseminated by child care centers, schools, and other family-facing organizations (such as the Virginia Department of Education and Head Start) through social media, listservs, and other forms of communication. It was anonymous and was offered online, in both English and Spanish, from December 2020 to January 2021. This report focuses on the 2,857 respondents who reported that their youngest child was between ages 3 and 5, not yet in kindergarten at the time of the survey, and enrolled in a public or private school, child care center, or family day home.

Of the 2,857 caregivers in our sample, 459 (16%) reported that “Yes, my child was professionally evaluated and has special needs and/or an IFSP or IEP” and an additional 144 (5%) reported that their child “may need to be professionally evaluated.” The remaining 2,216 (78%) caregivers reported that their child did not have a disability.² We refer to these groups as “has disability,” “may need evaluation,” and “does not have disability” respectively.

¹ Caregivers include parents, grandparents, and other adults responsible for the care of a child.

² 38 respondents (1%) did not respond to the disability questions

As shown in Table 1, our sample is 63% White, non-Hispanic, 16% Black, and 10% Hispanic.³ The three groups of families we compare in this report were relatively similar in terms of race, home language, and age of child, but differ in important ways. For instance, caregivers of children with disabilities and those who may need evaluation were more likely to answer the survey about a male child (70% and 63% respectively) than caregivers of children without disabilities (48%).⁴ Also, caregivers who reported their children may need evaluation were more likely to report lower incomes.

Table 1: Characteristics of children and their caregivers, by disability group

	Total (n=2857)	Child has a disability (n=459)	Child may need evaluation (n=144)	Child does not have a disability (n= 2216)
Male	52.0	69.9	63.2	47.8
Child Race/Ethnicity				
Black	16.2	13.6	21.1	16.5
Hispanic	9.8	10.8	7.0	9.4
Other/multiracial	11.5	12.5	9.9	11.3
White	62.5	63.1	62.0	62.8
By FPL				
Under 150% FPL	16.2	16.6	32.6	15.0
150-300% FPL	28.9	35.9	27.8	27.7
Over 300% FPL	49.8	44.4	35.4	52.7
By Setting				
School	65.6	91.5	67.4	59.9
Center	32.1	7.8	29.9	37.6
Family Day Home	2.2	0.7	2.8	2.5
By instructional mode				
In-person only	49.1	22.6	45.7	55.2
Remote or hybrid	50.9	77.4	54.3	44.8

Note: Sample includes 2857 caregivers with preschool age children (3-5, not yet in kindergarten). Disability categories are parent/caregiver reported.

³ Our sample is fairly similar to the statewide population of children 0-18 by race (20% Black, 14% Hispanic, 53% White) and by household income (ACS 2019 estimates, S0901).

⁴ This gender imbalance mirrors Virginia’s statewide figures, with male children comprising 70% of children receiving early childhood special education services in the 2019-2020 school year (Virginia Department of Education, 2021a).

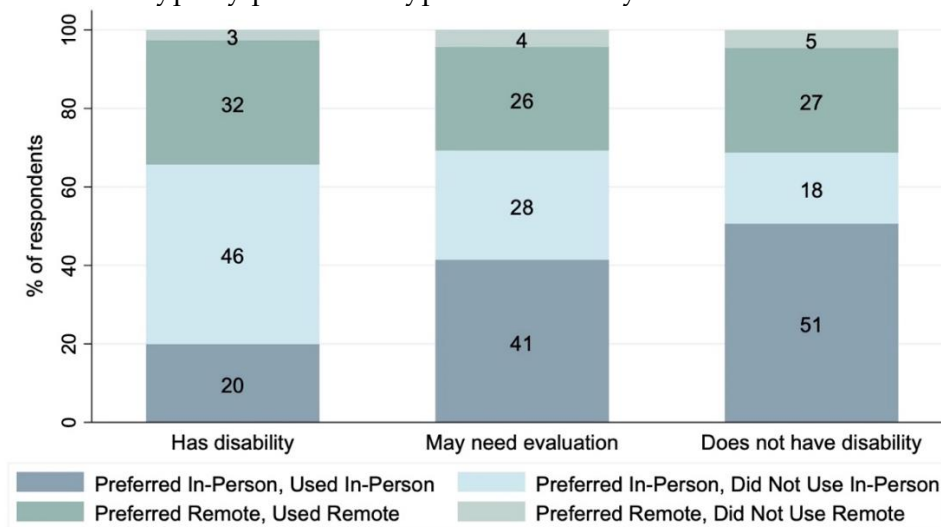
2. Finding Care

The type of ECE children experienced varied considerably across groups: Caregivers of children with disabilities were far more likely to report that their child was enrolled in school-based settings (90%), compared to those who may need evaluation (67%) and those children without a disability (60%).

Because children with disabilities were much more likely to be served in schools, and because most Virginia schools were offering primarily remote or hybrid options during this period, it is not surprising that we also observe large differences in instructional mode. Children with disabilities were considerably more likely to be enrolled in remote or hybrid settings (77%) compared to children who may need evaluation (54%) or without disabilities (45%).

The higher use of remote/hybrid learning among children with disabilities *does not* reflect a preference among these families for remote/hybrid learning. The survey asked caregivers to report their *preferred* instructional mode. Across all three groups, about two thirds of families (66-69%) reported they preferred in-person instruction for their child. The other third (30-35%) reported they preferred remote or hybrid. However, as shown in Figure 1, there were large differences across groups in the likelihood that parents who wanted in-person care actually got it. Among parents of children with disabilities, nearly half (46%) reported they preferred an in-person option but ultimately were in a remote/hybrid option. This was only true for 18% of caregivers whose child did not have a disability. For this group, nearly all families who wanted an in-person option (69% preferred in-person) got one (51% used in-person).

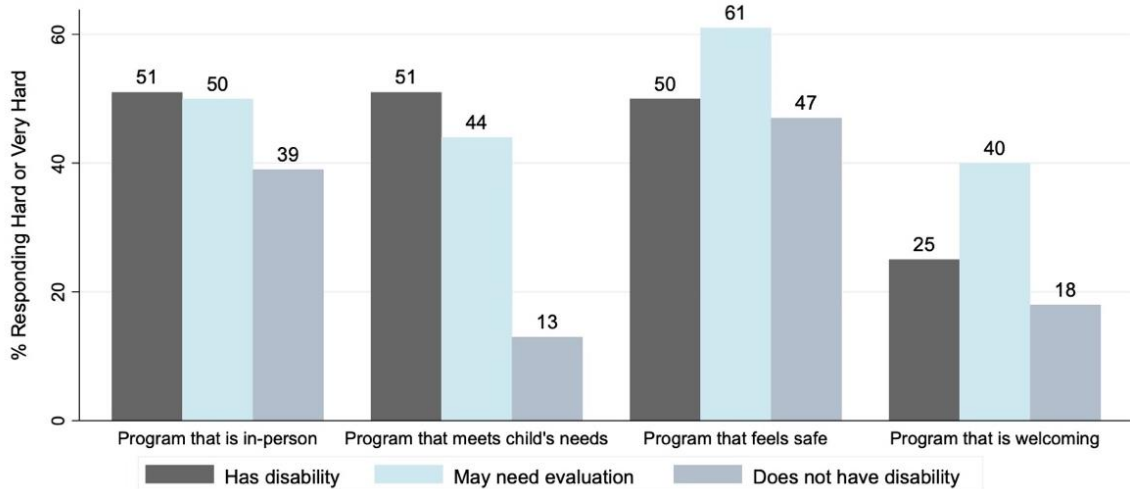
Figure 1: Percent of caregivers whose preferred instruction type matched actual instruction type by preference type and disability



Note: Based on 2745 responses.

The survey also asked parents how hard it has been to find ECE programs that are in-person, meet their child’s needs, feel safe, and feel welcoming. On all four dimensions, caregivers of children with disabilities and caregivers of children who may need evaluation reported more difficulties than did caregivers of children without disabilities. Figure 2 shows that caregivers of children with disabilities and who may need evaluation were far more likely than caregivers of children without disabilities to report it being hard or very hard to find options that were in-person and that met their child’s needs. Caregivers of children who may need evaluation were the most likely to report that it is hard to find a program that feels safe during the pandemic (61% compared with 47-50% of other caregivers), and to report that it is hard to find a welcoming program (40% compared with caregivers of children with disabilities (25%) and children without disabilities (18%).

Figure 2: Percent of caregivers reporting difficulties finding ECE for their child, by disability group



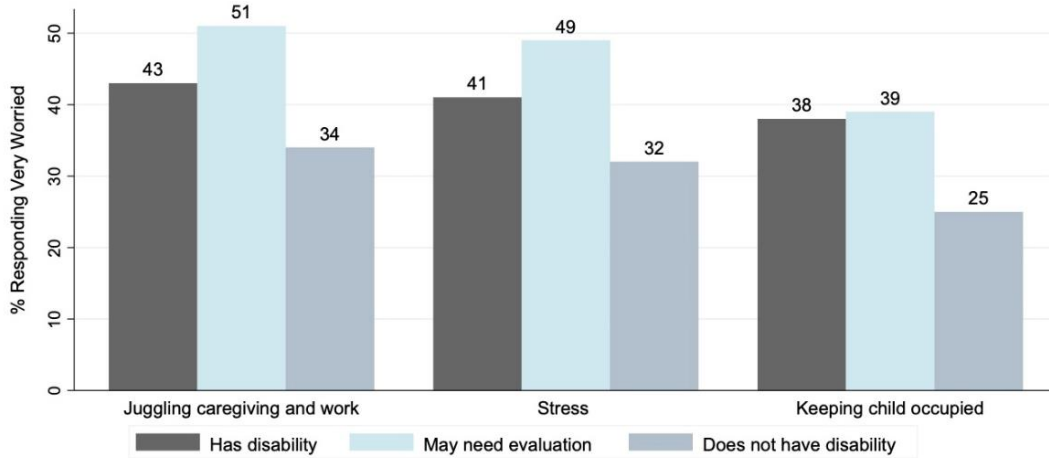
Note: Based on 2772-2793 responses.

3. Parental Stress

While across-the-board parents reported high levels of worry about juggling their caregiving and work responsibilities, their own stress, and keeping their child occupied, in all cases they were lowest for caregivers who indicated their child did not have a disability.

For instance, as shown in Figure 3, caregivers of children who may need evaluation were the most likely to report feeling very worried about juggling their caregiving and work responsibilities (51% compared with 43% of caregivers with a child with disabilities and 34% of caregivers with a child without disabilities).

Figure 3: Percent of caregivers reporting high levels of worry about their own wellbeing, by child's disability group

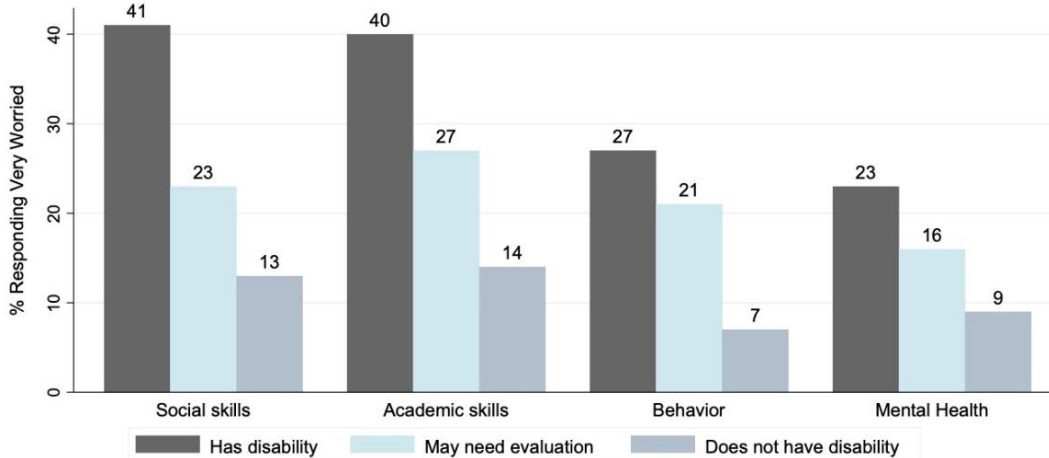


Note: Based on 2797-2805 responses.

4. Worries about Children

Finally, the survey asked parents to report how worried they were about their child's social skills, academic skills, behaviors, and mental health. As shown in Figure 4, caregivers of children with disabilities were 2.5 to 4 times as likely to report feeling very worried about their child's social and academic skills, behavior, and mental health than caregivers of children without disabilities. On all four dimensions, caregivers of children who may need evaluation reported levels of worry between the other two groups.

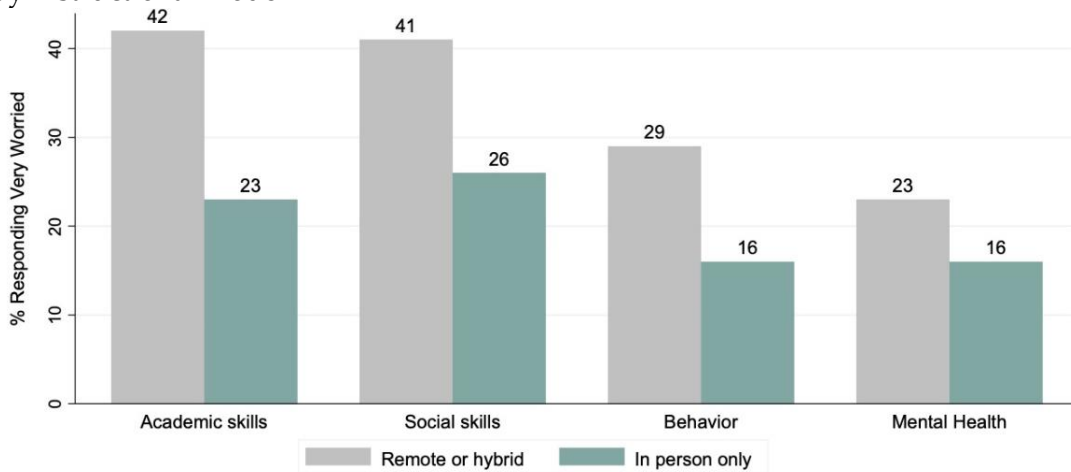
Figure 4: Percent of caregivers reporting feeling *very* worried about their child's social skills, academic skills, mental health, and behavior, by child's disability group



Note: Based on 2794-2798 responses.

Concerns about children’s development were particularly high among caregivers whose child was in a remote/hybrid setting. Figure 5 highlights this for caregivers of children with disabilities or needing evaluation. The percentage of caregivers reporting they were very worried was much more pronounced (1.5 to 1.8 times larger) among parents whose child was in a remote/hybrid setting. Caregivers of children who did not have disabilities were also more likely to be concerned about their child’s development when they were in remote instructional settings, though both their average levels of stress and their differences across modes were generally smaller.

Figure 5: Percent of caregivers of children with disabilities or who may need evaluation who reported feeling very worried about their child’s development, by instructional mode



Note: Based on 591-592 responses.

Many caregivers elaborated on the challenges of receiving special education supports for their children in a free response question about their child’s experiences. One parent of a 3-year-old with special needs wrote, “He is

“My child is autistic and virtual learning does absolutely nothing for him. The constant closure of schools and reduced hours means he’s barely developing at all....”

struggling with behavioral issues, language/speech difficulties, and lack of socialization. If it wasn’t for covid I feel that his needs would be well met by the Head Start program... Without other people/children to interact with he is going to continue to lag behind in his language, behavior, and

socialization issues.” These concerns were echoed by many caregivers worried about the impact receiving special education services virtually will have on their children’s social development. One wrote, “My youngest son is autistic...Being virtual has definitely hindered how the [autism] program is supposed to function for

him...His behavioral milestones cannot be met via virtual learning..." Another said, "My child is autistic and virtual learning does absolutely nothing for him. The constant closure of schools and reduced hours means he's barely developing at all... Early intervention can't be done later." Other caregivers wrote that changes to schooling because of COVID had hindered their ability to receive services at all. One wrote, "He has been in [Speech Language Pathology/Occupational Therapy/Physical Therapy] since he [was] 18 months old and we were finally seeing gains and improvement, all of that is gone. 3 years of growth just gone and now he is even further behind than when he started. This is devastating."

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5. Conclusion

Caregivers of young children with disabilities have long faced challenges finding ECE for their children.³ They often experience higher levels of stress and mental health concerns than caregivers of children without disabilities.⁴ To date, however, there has been little research about the experiences of these families during the pandemic. We found that during the pandemic caregivers of young children with disabilities were more likely to struggle finding ECE programs for their child, more likely to struggle with their own stress and wellbeing, and more likely to report concerns about their children's development than were parents of children without disabilities. Concerns about children's development were particularly pronounced among caregivers whose children were in remote/hybrid care, a finding that is not surprising, but troubling given how many caregivers of children with disabilities reported they preferred in-person option but did not use them.

Our findings also highlighted the unique challenges of caregivers of children not yet diagnosed with a disability but who may need evaluation. These families reported particularly high levels of difficulty finding programs that felt welcoming and safe, and they reported high levels of stress. The pandemic may have exacerbated the challenges families face getting their young children assessed or getting them access to needed services.

As we work to address the impact of the pandemic on young learners, policies and programs targeted specifically towards children at-risk for or diagnosed with disabilities are needed.

First, agencies should invest in high-quality compensatory services to support the development of children with disabilities or who may have missed the opportunity for early identification, particularly those who experienced remote

or hybrid service provision. Second, young children are often excluded from statewide assessments of learning, but measures of children’s cognitive, socioemotional, and physical health are needed to assess the impact that ECE disruptions have had on the development of all young children. Third, our findings highlight the challenges faced by caregivers whose children may have needed evaluation for services but had not been diagnosed. Simplifying the evaluation process across sectors and increasing the outreach to parents in center-based programs, which are not the agencies responsible for Early Childhood Special Education, is needed. However, our findings suggest that even school-based programs fell short in helping parents who were concerned about their child’s development access evaluation and intervention during the pandemic. Increased funding to support the universal developmental screenings recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention could increase access to early intervention services for children not yet identified with development differences across the early care and education sectors.⁵ Finally, our findings show the negative impact that the pandemic has had on parents’/caregivers’ own well-being. Resources to support caregivers’ mental health should be considered as part of pandemic responses.

Endnotes

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