

The covid pandemic and its effects on childhood education

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Early childhood education has always been an inherently difficult field to work in. This is a known fact which is a direct result of the delicacy in which you must treat both the care and education of young children and for the simple fact that it is still customer service which regardless of the field you're in, will have its trials and tribulations. For instance, while providing this service one must not only have in mind the wellbeing of the children, but also that of the family and provide them with any aid they may need. Be it emotional support or resources which will help them with anything they might be struggling with, as an early childhood professional you must be ready to provide all kinds of services not only to the children you care for and teach, but their family as well. While working with young children has always had its struggles due to the difficulties that children face with learning and behavior, it is also crucial to keep in mind that it is also a challenge working along with their families since there are times they are not as collaborative as one may wish them to be.

With all the previously mentioned in mind, we must now add upon the clearly stated difficulties of this field the COVID-19 pandemic which according to the World Health Organization has resulted in over 6.000.000 deaths worldwide, (WHO Coronavirus (COVID-19), and has left countless with permanent damage. However, the pandemic has also affected the development of young children who were born during this time. These children have been referred to as “covid babies” and in a study conducted earlier this year from the Harvard Medical School, researchers discovered that these children scored lower in areas such as gross motor, fine motor, and social-emotional development during screenings than those who were born before the pandemic, (McCarthy, 2022). This became apparent once they began to enter childcare centers who had to accommodate and adapt to the best of their abilities to adequately care for and teach them. Unfortunately, this was a very difficult thing to do since the pandemic also affected the aid, which the state previously provided such as observations for children who demonstrated learning deficits as well as autistic tendencies. Not only this, but childcare professionals were not exempt from being personally affected by the pandemic, many lost loved ones and others were affected economically.

All the previously mentioned caused even more strain upon the already difficult and stressful workload childcare professionals face, this is shown a study conducted by the Yale School of Medicine’s CARES team in October of this year where, “[...], 46% of childcare providers screened positive for potentially diagnosable levels of major depression two to three months

into the pandemic, with 67% reporting moderate to high stress. Additionally, 14% reported moderate to severe asthma, which is an approximately 20% higher asthma rate compared to the general public[...].” (Childcare Professionals Endured Higher Rates of Depression, Stress, and Asthma During the Pandemic, U.S. Study, 2022). As one can imagine, all that has been mentioned can lead to even more hardships in this field.

As someone who worked in early childhood education prior to, during and after the pandemic I can say that children who were born during this time posed a great challenge to us, but the lack of aid, support, and resources I personally saw and experienced during and after the pandemic was a greater challenge yet. I worked nearly three years in early childhood education and the greater part of that time I spent in the infant classrooms where I saw the effect of the pandemic at its fullest. One of the main issues which all classrooms faced was that in the beginning of the pandemic, when there was a case, the entire classroom had to be closed and children would lose up to weeks at a time of learning and care due to it. This was incredibly frustrating not only for teachers and administrative staff who also had to isolate, but to families as well. As my mom—who was also the director of the center I worked at—said to me once, “Of course parents are going to be furious when we close their child’s classroom, they aren’t paying for childcare for fun, but because they truly do need it”.

Now—in terms of the effect the pandemic had on the infant classroom—during this time I saw many children struggle greatly. I vividly remember one child, he was born during the pandemic and started at our center when he was around four months old. When we began caring for him, I immediately noticed that he was a little behind on both his gross and fine motor development, but after some time he began to advance more and more in all areas of infant development. He was a very active child, I would even say hyperactive, he was never still and as a normal infant, he was quite curious of everything around him. Sadly, when he was barely a week away from walking, he tested positive for COVID. At first, I thought nothing of it and believed he would return even more hyperactive and a little behind in his language acquisition—I worked at a Spanish immersion daycare—but nothing too severe. Alas, when he finally did return, he was behind on everything, as a matter of fact, he had regressed to when he was four months

old when he was in fact about to turn one. This child went from being a very bright lightbulb, to one who no longer shined. It wasn't until this year that he finally caught up in all areas of his development, he did not walk nor speak until he was around two and a half.

Regrettably, this wasn't the only instance where a child regressed in their development or showed slower rates of development as a direct result of the pandemic, nor would it be the last. On top of this worrisome new reality, we as teachers had to also manage and provide help to families. At times it was easy, many parents were very understanding and willing to cooperate with us during those tough times. Yet, there were those who were utterly frustrating and rude. From my experience, the few families that were difficult were extremely hard to deal with. One instance I remember very well was a family who had been with us for years and we had never had an issue with them, but one day—when the pandemic was finally dying down—their daughter was expressing that her stomach hurt bad and when we took her temperature, she had a mild fever. Our director then called her mom, who surprisingly, lashed out in an extremely rude fashion and expressed how displeased she was. Nevertheless, she picked up her daughter and took her to get tested. Roughly, four hours later, we received a call from her in which she heavily apologized and explained how ashamed she was of her behavior and that her daughter did in fact have COVID. This was one of the more positive encounters, many weren't this simple and easily resolved.

Finally, one of the things that mainly worried me towards the end of my time in the center I was working at was the rate in which teachers were burning out compared to before. Comparing the team of teachers, we had when we started to when I left, there were only four of the 14 teachers we originally had. It has always been known that as early childhood professionals, we burn out quite quickly and the pandemic only increased this regrettable reality. When I finally quit, I realized how exhausted I truly was and I am not alone in that sentiment, many have also said the same thing. The most concerning result of this is the effect it has on the children since the departure of multiple teachers and the rotation of new ones causes holes in the children learning and negatively affects, they social emotional development since by the time they begin to adjust to a teacher she leaves causing trust is-

sues and leading to behavior issues as well as increased attachment issues.

To finalize, I want to emphasize the importance of correcting these issues by providing further assistance to childcare professionals such as further classes that train them to prepare for the issues we are facing since the pandemic began, there must also be a stronger support system from the state for parents so that they receive the aid and resources they need as well. All in all, as I mentioned beforehand and demonstrated using both statistics and my own experience, the pandemic created a vast amount of additional difficulties for the field of early childhood education which had no need for added hardships, but nonetheless it happened and it is crucial that it is acknowledged and corrected in order to better serve children, their families and those who work in the field as well. ■

Resources

WHO Coronavirus (COVID-19) Dashboard. (n. d.). With Vaccination Data. <https://covid19.who.int>

McCarthy, C., MD. (2022, January 13). Pandemic challenges may affect babies — possibly in long-lasting ways. Harvard Health. <https://www.health.harvard.edu/blog/pandemic-challenges-may-affect-babies-possibly-in-long-lasting-ways-202201132668>

Childcare Professionals Endured Higher Rates of Depression, Stress, and Asthma During the Pandemic, U.S. Study. (2022, October 4). Yale School of Medicine. <https://medicine.yale.edu/news-article/childcare-professionals-endured-higher-rates-of-depression-stress-and-asthma-during-the-pandemic-us-study-reveals/>