

# Early Childhood Care in the time of Covid 19

*“The more healthy relationships a child has, the more likely he will be to recover from trauma and thrive. Relationships are the agents of change and the most powerful form of therapy is human love.” –Bruce Perry*

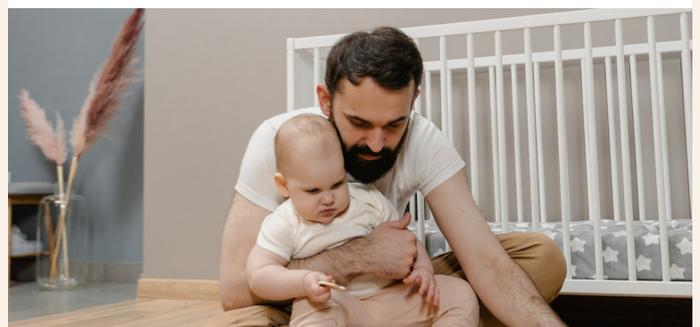
By: Susannah Burgess

Many children spend the vast majority of their waking hours in the care of an adult outside of their home. The role of these caregivers is of supreme importance for the development and well-being of our nation's children. Caregiving is a highly skilled and nuanced job that requires careful attention and essential understanding of the physical, developmental, and social and emotional needs of children. And as one can imagine and as research has shown, the quality of care children receive is directly related to the well-being of those providing it. Managing personal well-being is hard enough during normal times, but during the pandemic it has become unsustainable and, in many cases, impossible. What factors have led to caregiver hardships and have these hardships had an impact on the quality of care they can provide? The answers are quite clear and quite unsurprising.

Before the pandemic, the child care system struggled to adequately compensate caregivers for their time and expertise. But now, during the pandemic, the struggle has turned into a full-blown crisis. In addition to persistently low wages, the pandemic has created significant material hardships. Food insecurity and eviction due to inability to pay utility and living expense has been experienced by 1 in 3 caregivers. A lack of benefits and paid leave create another layer of financial insecurity. Many have had to shoulder the burden of managing remote schooling of children, as well as the fear of harm to loved ones who may be immunocompromised or too young for vaccination. All these forces have added up to a predictable outcome: many caregivers have had no choice but to quit. As caregivers have quit and available slots have decreased, providers are increasingly unable to cover operating expenses. This has resulted in even lower wages, which in turn has forced even more caregivers to leave the field, possibly never to return.



For caregivers who remain employed, their quality of life and their ability to provide exceptional care are severely impaired. 1 in 4 have been forced to work multiple jobs on top of their child care employment just to make ends meet. These hardships have increased stress, anxiety, and depression among caregivers. Unsurprisingly, hardship is not experienced equally, with persons of ethnic and racial minorities faring worse across all measures. Caregiver stress doesn't stop at the door—it walks right in, directly presenting itself in the classroom setting. Early childhood educators, struggling to make ends meet and self-regulate, find it difficult to attune to the needs of the little people in their care. Caregivers unable to be emotionally present for children and provide the vital attachment necessary for healthy development, may also be unable to provide the reparative care necessary to support children's pandemic related emotional needs.



As family routines get disrupted, guardians suffer from mental distress, and material hardship rises, anxiety in children also rises. We know stress can cause significant biological changes if left unchecked. Unremedied changes are thought to account for 45% of childhood mental health disorders (and 30% of disorders in adults). Children in earlier stages of development are particularly vulnerable to repeated adversity and stress brought on by the pandemic. In the worst-case scenario, this sadly includes the death of an at-home caregiver. Nationally, nearly 150,000 children have lost their primary or secondary caregiver to Covid-19. In New York State, which is ranked third, 7,175 children have lost a primary or secondary caregiver.

What can be done, then, to improve the conditions for caregivers and, subsequently, our children and communities? The single greatest factor in improving the quality of care is increasing caregiver pay. Cash payments—like those dispensed during the Economic Impact Payments in early 2021—decreased hardship and resulted in a reduction of associated emotional distress. The “Build Back Better” legislation proposals include provisions for increasing educator wages and subsidies for families. Making Child Tax Credits available to all families would reduce poverty and associated stressors. Adding care for children into Covid 19 emergency response priorities could prevent caregiver death, prepare family-based support services, and protect children by using evidence-based methods to address the increased risk in adverse experiences.



Trauma informed care training for early childhood professionals would improve care for children and provide an additional avenue for grief intervention for families who could benefit. When we begin to understand behavior as meaning—that fussiness and increased anxiety may be signs of increased need, for example—and we allow children to feel and express a full range of emotions, we gift them with the lifelong tool of resilience. And while some children may experience stress, the plasticity of the brain and reparative nature of relationships can reverse the negative effects.

Connecting caregivers to community supports and CCR&R related services is beneficial in enhancing caregiver wellness and retention. Infant Toddler Mental Health Consultation is a free service available to educators in home, center-based, and Early Head Start programs. Consultation takes place over four months, with pre and post consultation assessments used to measure growth. Infant Toddler Mental Health Consultants observe classroom dynamics, set goals, and partner collaboratively with educators to improve the quality of the social and emotional climate for 0–36-month-old children. Infant Toddler Mental Health Consultation is a service shown to positively influence caregiver efficacy and success.

The hopeful news is we know what to do to provide for caregivers and the children they serve. The desperately important question is: will we gather our efforts and resources and do the work that needs to be done to support them all?

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## Resources

Coping with Covid-19

<https://www.naeyc.org/resources/topics/covid-19>

Coronavirus Resources for Early Childhood Professionals

<https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/3291-coronavirus-resources-for-early-childhood-professionals>

fastt (Family Assistance and Support Text and Telephone line)

<https://www.fasttline.com/>  
541-262-1550

NY Project Hope: Coping with Covid

<https://nyprojecthope.org/?>

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