

# "It Kind of Broke All of Us."

## Navigating Child Care and Employment in the Era of COVID-19: Parents and Caregivers Tell Their Stories.

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# Introduction

Early in the COVID-19 pandemic, just about every working parent was scrambling when it came to child care. Many families with school-age children had to monitor “Zoom School” while juggling their own jobs. Parents with babies or preschoolers were forced to cobble together coverage at a time when many child care programs were closed, and at-home or family caretakers may have been unavailable due to their own vulnerability.

Today, all people over age five are vaccine-eligible, schools have re-opened, and many workplaces that had gone virtual are requiring their employees to trickle back into the office. Beyond that, most mask mandates have been lifted.

But many parents with young children are still facing significant disruptions and safety concerns due to the pandemic.

In the summer of 2021, GEEARS: Georgia Early Education Alliance for Ready Students conducted a [statewide survey](#) that revealed parents were more likely to report using a home-based child care arrangement than prior to the pandemic. The survey also underscored some of the financial and employment-related challenges families with young children are facing in the wake of the pandemic.

We wanted to learn more about these challenges and how they were affecting families’ child care decisions, so, in the fall of 2021, we commissioned a series of four focus groups with parents with young children from across Georgia.

Throughout the focus groups, parents shared how their child care arrangements changed during the pandemic. They told us which challenges had persisted beyond COVID-19’s earliest months, and how those factors were driving their child care decisions going forward.

As the pandemic continues, these findings have important implications for the future of Georgia’s working parents, their employers, and their child care providers. We think the findings will be useful to policymakers and advocates as well.

Below are the focus group participants’ stories and some of the themes they raised.



## Parents have ongoing concerns about safety

In the spring of 2020, families and child care providers often had to take drastic measures in the name of health and safety. Many programs closed temporarily or shifted to virtual instruction. Most of the parents who participated in our focus groups were forced to significantly alter their work routines.

In the post-vaccine world of autumn, 2021, keeping themselves and their children safe had become even more complicated for many of these parents. In part, this was because young children were ineligible for COVID-19 vaccines, and many were unable to wear masks correctly or consistently. Moreover, caregivers found themselves confused by child care programs' ever-shifting protocols for safety measures and closures. To them, the protocol changes in K-12 schools seemed more reliable and more clearly communicated.

One of our focus group participants, a mother from Columbia County, described the constant calculations parents must make when considering both their children's safety and their social, emotional, and academic needs.

"Kids are not going to wash their hands," she noted. "Kids are not going to wear masks. Kids are going to lick stuff and eat things and they're going to share germs. I think it would be more convenient to keep him home and not have to deal with the inconsistencies. But that's not necessarily what's best for him, nor is that what he wants...It did fall on me to make that decision to go ahead and let him continue to attend Pre-K there. But it's definitely a complicated decision to make as a parent."

With all these factors at play, safety continued to be top-of-mind for many of the focus group respondents.

"I would say for me, my main priority was the health and safety of my child," said a mother living in South Fulton County. "I wanted first and foremost to have a place where my child, I know for a fact would be as healthy as possible because of course, he can't get the vaccination right now."

A mother from Southeast Georgia told us, "I very much was approaching the Maslow's hierarchy of needs type thing if you're familiar with that. Physical safety was the biggest thing even though I would've liked my kids to be able to do some other things. But yeah, so that was really the biggest."

Not only did focus group parents want to be assured about their children's safety, they also wanted details about protocols. This far into the pandemic, the parents were knowledgeable about their children's needs.

"For me, it was, 'Hey, how are you keeping the kids safe?'" noted one Atlanta mother. "Are teachers getting regular testing? Are masks required? Are they not required? How often are you cleaning? And then what's the protocol for—I mean, there's so many protocols of course—but if someone has COVID? It was a lot to understand."

A mom from Hall County had similar concerns: "Because my child could be one part of the risk population, I just keep her home. I'm careful. I'm not even worried about myself; I'm just worried about her."

A Southeast Georgia parent who was also a Pre-K teacher expressed similar concerns about safety protocols, while acknowledging how difficult it could be to execute them with very young children.





"I know this past year, in the Pre-K class, parents wanted to know at open house, 'How are we going to social distance? And what are your handwashing rules? And what are your rules on masks and everything like that?' Well, truth be told in the classroom with 22 Pre-K students, it's hard to social distance. We wash hands every hour on the hour. We sanitize and we clean all day long. But it's still hard to reach every single germ. That's nearly impossible. So, parents still wanted to know, 'How can I be sure that my child is really safe in your care? What are you doing to help ease our fears when it comes to COVID and the pandemic that we're going through?'"

Some parents said class size was a major factor in their child care decisions. The smaller the class or group size, the safer they felt their children would be.

"Yeah, that was my main consideration," said a Cobb County father. "A smaller situation was the main reason we decided to even entertain [a child care program] again."

No class could be small enough for the child of one Hall County mother, who said her daughter's health needs made it unsafe for her to attend school with others. "My daughter actually has a chronic condition," she said. "So, I really haven't been looking for child care. I've really been home-pre-schooling her."

Even though most people over age five were eligible to be vaccinated, for the parents in our focus group, concerns persisted about protecting those who came into contact with their children. Grandparents, who are often a significant support and/or child care resource, were a particular concern.

"I have a friend who has an elderly mom that lives with her," said a Fulton County mother. "And so, they decided to keep their child at home, her husband and her, just due to, they didn't want the kid to bring back something to the grandma, basically. So, they decided to homeschool their child."

Many of our focus group respondents felt weary and demoralized, left behind while many others—including other parents of young children—moved on to a more carefree lifestyle.

"We have some parents who still seem, I don't know, almost oblivious," said a Gwinnett County mother who also works full-time in a child care center. "Oh, I can't wait for this pandemic to pass so that I can just get back to my normal life."



## COVID's disruption and constantly changing landscape hampered parents' ability to plan and work

In the best of times, juggling work and family can be a monumental task. If they're able, many working parents achieve this balancing act by planning assiduously. They often assemble a reliable "village" of helpers and carefully arrange schedules so they can both make a living and raise a healthy, happy family.

During the pandemic, the parents in our focus groups agreed that their carefully laid child care and work plans were upended. The threat of a COVID-19 disruption was an ever-present specter and their lists of "what ifs" were long. Parents worried about being sidelined by illness or quarantine and/or their child being isolated from caretakers and peers. They also worried about more lasting disruptions like the closure of a child care center or resignation of a caretaker. And, of course, sometimes these fears were realized.



"And then if I go to work," says a Newton County mother, "[there are] all the different inconsistencies with kids getting sick, kids having to stay home, kids going in quarantine, because I have four children. So, everything can just change for all of us. It makes it scary to want to go to work."

An Atlanta-area parent chose a new child care situation specifically to stave off a COVID-19 upheaval.

"So, I actually moved him from a different daycare right for that reason when COVID was starting," she shared. "The child care that he was at, they didn't have any type of protocols in place. It was so inconsistent. They'd be closed this day, open this day because of staffing challenges, and it was too much ... It was like every day, you didn't know what was going on."

When their kids were unexpectedly home, working parents found they were in a bind. And employers weren't always sympathetic.

"The employer wasn't understanding whatsoever," a mother from Flowery Branch told us. "They said, 'Well, you said you had an area without distraction.' And I said, 'Well, yeah, because I thought I had a sitter. She canceled. She bailed on me.' And the employer wasn't forgiving at all. They just said, 'Oh, well, you lost the job.'"

For some parents, this felt like a bait and switch. Employers who'd been flexible and compassionate during the early days of the pandemic now held expectations that weren't realistic for parents of children under five. These young children still couldn't be vaccinated and their child care situations were more likely to be disrupted than K-12 schools.

"But [my employer] as a whole, they weren't very accommodating initially," a Bulloch County mom said. "They tried to be, and then once things went back in person, it basically is, 'This is your problem. You have kids so figure it out.' That has not been great, but thankfully my boss has been great. I would not be able to keep working if I hadn't had somebody who was willing to be flexible."

The ability to work wasn't the only concern that nagged at parents when they considered the uncertainty of their children's care. They also worried how their children would be affected socially and emotionally by disruptions.

"We had like three different teachers and when you're a toddler, you want for your child to have that consistent teacher," said a metro Atlanta mother. "They feel more comfortable."

A mom living in Fulton County felt that her child's independence and adaptability could be compromised if she wasn't in school.

"I didn't want her to get used to me just working with her and nobody else," she said. "It's very important that they have that teacher, those two teachers, they know their names, and they know them and it's just, all of that is important."

Another mom from Southeast Georgia says being home, away from peers and teachers, has definitely had an effect on her children: "They kind of lost a year of that structure and the type of development that they would've gotten," she admitted. "I joke about them kind of being feral but sometimes that's how they seem. I'm very, very thankful that my mother-in-law watched them, but it was still grandma watching them. Kind of developmentally and boundaries wise that that was not something that was quite what you would've gotten in the school setting."

With ever-shifting guidelines and safety protocols for child care centers and workplaces, it was hard for parents to find stability for themselves and their children.

"At first, they closed it, then they open it back up. But when a child gets sick, they'll close it again," observed a DeKalb County mother. "So, I might have to stay at the house and then I might not have to stay at the house. Just depends on the daycare."



“That’s kind of the discussion of, ‘What do we do?’ Because I guess in our community, there’s no clear [answer],” admitted a Statesboro mother. “It’s like, you can send your kid to school as long as they have not been knowingly exposed and they’re not having symptoms. I could send my kid to school with the sniffles thinking it’s the flu or cold, whatever, just regular kid stuff. But it could be COVID. But that’s my choice as a parent here.”

Even more unsettling to some parents was the way changes were communicated—or not—to families.

“When they go back and forth with the communication, I think that can be a little bit frustrating,” a mother from Gwinnett County told us. “It was a little bit of shock because they didn’t explain there was a policy change. It was just, ‘Here’s what we’re gonna do with this situation.’”

A father from Cobb County also felt left out of the loop by his child’s school district. “So, some of the concerns have been, when there’s a change in guidance from the public health department or with the CDC, [that] does not necessarily mean that your district will follow those guidances.”

In fact, many parents identified consistency and clear communication as important criteria when choosing child care. As one mother from Columbia County shared, “For me [my priority] has been consistency. Both consistency and stability for my children as they’re in the program every day. But also, consistent communication with the preschool and the parents.”

## Many parents yearned for their original child care preference, but the pandemic often interfered

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For many parents, choosing a particular kind of child care isn’t just logistical—it’s also nuanced and philosophical. When selecting a child care center, a family child care home, or care provided by a family member, friend, or neighbor, parents might be influenced by many factors.

These could include. . .

- The norms within their family or community.
- The needs of their child.
- Child care availability and affordability where they live.
- Perceived quality, including formal credentials or ratings.

In our focus group discussions, parents shared that the pandemic didn’t change their values around their child care choices.

And some of these parents were able to stick with their original child care plans, despite the upheaval caused by the pandemic.

“For my friends, everything has pretty much stayed the same,” one Fulton County mom told us. “For those kids who were at a center, they’re still at the center.”

Still others didn’t even consider straying from their original child care path. Their previous choices were entrenched enough that they didn’t feel the need to ponder alternatives.

“For us, most people have stayed the same . . . Nothing really changed for them,” observed a mother from Carroll County. “A lot of them already had something set in stone, whether it was family watching them or older siblings watching them. A lot of them, once their daycares opened back up, they were sending their kids back in, too.”

The families who’d decided, pre-pandemic, to have a parent or caregiver stay home to provide care were perhaps least likely to stray from their original plans.

“That was something that we had discussed early on,” a metro Atlanta mother said. “And we just kind of stuck with what we discussed.”



A Newton County mom's stay-at-home parenting plan was immutable due to finances, rather than values. "Having that affordability is very crucial for me, which I don't have," she said. "So, I can't put her anywhere."

If parents did make a new child care plan, it was often because they felt the pandemic had forced them to diverge from their preferred arrangement.

"I have other friends that sent their kids to daycare just because they had to, because of their job," said the same DeKalb-based mother. "It was just impossible to work from home with [their children] home, and they had to work, they had no choice."

A west Georgia mother said much the same thing. "Being a teacher, you don't really get to choose to stay home. My husband is a teacher as well, so is my mother-in-law," she observed. "If we could have kept them home, we might have."

And for some, the experience of juggling child care and work during the last lockdown will color their decisions if the pandemic intensifies again.

"My friends and I have talked a lot about if things did shut down again," shared a Bulloch County mother. "We would all just take family medical leave because the mental strain of trying to watch kids, keep kids and work at the same time, kind of broke all of us the last time when we tried to do it. There have been a lot of discussions about if this happens, we're just all going to have to say, 'Sorry, we can't keep up.'"

## Parents are more likely to factor family into care decisions

Before the pandemic, our focus group participants made their child care decisions on their own or with a spouse or partner. Once COVID-19 disrupted so many aspects of child care, however, planning and decision-making became a family affair. Parents found themselves turning to their children's grandparents or other relatives, both as a source for child care or as a factor informing their decisions.

One Atlanta-based mother, for instance, hadn't considered asking her child's grandparents for help. But when they offered, she found herself accepting.

"It had happened naturally," she said. "The grandparents kind of approached us."

For some, having family help with child care was so compelling, it inspired a move to a new home.

"A lot of people are moving closer to their families," said another Fulton County mother. "So, that's been the biggest change—just having a friend leave Atlanta to go where they grew up because they need that right now. And they feel more comfortable having their mom or dad or family member help out, instead of staying in Atlanta, where it's just them, and having a sitter, or nanny or whatever. A lot of grandparents are moving out of their houses, or [their grown] kids are moving where [the grandparents] are."

Family members—often elderly grandparents—becoming involved in child care gave some parents a heightened sense of responsibility for their safety.

"Well Granny's there and you wanting to keep Granny and [my daughter] safe," said a Washington County mother. "So, we had all come together and agreed on that."

"Now that everyone in the family has been vaccinated," said a Bulloch County mother, "then we feel better with grandma and grandpa helping out with that when we need it."



# Conclusion:

## What do parents need now and moving forward?

A theme emerged from our focus groups: Parents of children under five feel *forgotten and left behind* in this pandemic. They feel like afterthoughts—rarely the focus when those in power are making policy, administering services, or formulating employment practices. Their very young children remained unvaccinated months past their slightly older peers and while child care consistency has improved, parents with young children continue to face more uncertainty than their counterparts with school-age children. And without access to reliable, high-quality care, parents lack a crucial work support while their children miss out on enriching learning opportunities. With these facts seemingly as endemic as the virus that causes COVID-19, these parents say they need acknowledgment and inclusion.

And they have suggestions about how to make this happen:

### **Families should have universal access to programs like Georgia's Pre-K.**

Amongst our respondents, there was overwhelming support for universal Pre-K. Georgia's lottery-funded Pre-K serves many of the state's four-year-olds in both child care centers and local school systems. Our parents want every Georgia child to have access to this program, in part so they can plan around the certainty of Pre-K enrollment. This allows, as a Newton County parent put it, "everyone who wants an opportunity to do Pre-K to have that chance."

They'd also like to see more programs like this for younger children; programs that are universal, high-quality, and free of charge, or at least affordable.

An Atlanta mother pointed out that these qualities are even more essential during pandemic times, when many parents' employment has been in flux. "And I know a lot of parents at the start of the pandemic were saying, 'I just lost my job. I can't even pay for my child to come for one day,'" she recalled. "But I need to go look for another job. So, I need someone to watch them."

"Accessible and affordable childcare as the norm for those not yet school-aged and guaranteed Pre-K for those who are of school age would absolutely be ideal," said a Statesboro mother. "The discussions my friends and I have had over the last five-plus years about waitlists for day care, how day care is essentially a second mortgage, and then hoping and praying that we win the lottery for Pre-K highlight the stress and anxiety that surrounds the current system for working parents."

### **Families with younger children need access to comprehensive, connected services.**

Care and services for young children and families, our parents told us, are scattered and more complicated than they could be.

"An ideal system would use partnerships," advised a mother from South Fulton County. "Programs would work in conjunction to provide care for families, even virtually. Additionally, facilities would provide other service information with contacts for parents."

A father from Cobb County echoed her sentiment: "An ideal child care system in Georgia [would] ensure a continuity of care, curriculum and overall service such as food (breakfast, lunch, snack), transportation, and aftercare."

A mother from Gwinnett County cited both service limitations and cost as barriers when she sought child care. It was community help, rather than institutional services, that allowed her to get the care her children needed while she went to work.





"I have two kids, but they just charged me for one. If I had to pay for all of that there's no way I'd be able to afford it," she said. "And when they were doing preschool, a member from church, she would come over in the mornings and take them because it was nine to two which didn't work with my schedule. There was no way I could drop them off at nine and pick them up at two. She helped me for three years, doing that for free. That was a huge, huge help. So, without the community ... really the church community, I don't know how I would have been able to do it."

Many parents added that they believe connectivity between K-12 schools and early education programs could address the shortfalls that babies and young children face. The change they want to see is a system that includes all children, not just those over five.

### **Employers should help with sustainable solutions for the ongoing pandemic and accompanying child care challenges.**



Many parents had similar experiences with their employers as the pandemic wore on. In the early months, employers were lenient when parents had to work irregular or diminished hours because child care wasn't available. They had patience when toddlers interrupted Zoom meetings.

By the summer of 2021, though, our focus group respondents felt employers had become less understanding. Yet parents' child care situations had become no less challenging. What they needed, they said, was *continued flexibility*.

"If I had employers in front of me, the only thing I would do is ask that there be some type of way that they could be flexible with me being able to check on my kid," said a mother from Washington County. "Or what if she's sick? I do have to be out of work. How can I secure my spot still at work until she's better or if I get sick?"

In addition to allowing flexible schedules, work hours and/or work locations, parents wish their employers would help them find reliable, affordable, safe child care. This means care with hours that can accommodate working parents and where the professionals are given job security and livable wages.

"I don't think employers really understand what we're going through. They expect us just to be available and they're not helping us," said a mother from Hall County. "Maybe they have a way to help us find child care? Maybe they can contract with Care.com or Sitter City or something. And that way, we can work and make sure our children are cared for. And I don't think employers respect that at all."

This mother's suggestion was specific and actionable. But parents also wished for more generalized compassion and humanity during this extraordinary moment in history.

"I think employers just need to show a little more grace," a Statesboro mom said. "We are in a strange time and it's something that we've never seen before. And we... each employee has a unique stance."

The stories we heard from the parents in these focus groups were specific to the pandemic. And yet, they illuminated a more general truth—even in "normal times," young children and their families are sometimes forgotten when it comes to policies, budgets, and workplace practices.

The first five years of a child's life may be relatively brief, but they have a tremendous impact on a child's social, emotional, and academic development.

And so, as we continue to navigate the era of COVID-19 and look ahead to what comes next, we at GEEARS hope that these "pandemic lessons" will inspire change that will help young children during both tumultuous times *and* more peaceful ones. We will continue to advocate for policies that center families with young children.