

CHECKING IN:

How Georgia's Families are Navigating Child Care and Employment Impacts in the Era of COVID-19

SEPT 2021



Introduction

In July 2021, GEEARS: Georgia Early Education Alliance for Ready Students commissioned a statewide survey of 400 Georgia parents with children ages 0-4 that focused on a range of topics including childcare arrangements and satisfaction levels, general attitudes toward, perceptions of, and preferences for child care, and financial and employment impacts in relation to child care during these unprecedented times.

To ensure a representative sample where survey participants reflect the actual demographic composition of Georgia parents with children ages 0-4, interviews were stratified by age, race/ethnicity, educational attainment, employment status, gender, and geography using the 2012-2016 American Community Survey estimates and the ACS Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS) data.

This survey follows a 2018 public opinion study of Georgia parents with children ages 0-4—also commissioned by GEEARS—and we will draw comparisons with our 2018 study where appropriate. Parent and family compositions are similar to what we observed in 2018. Seventy-two percent (72%) of parents have one child four or under at an average age of 2.3 years. In 2018, a similar 66% had one child four or under at an average age of 2.4 years. Two-thirds (66%) are married, 29% are single, and 84% live with a spouse or partner. In 2018, 62% were married, 32% were single, and 80% lived with a spouse or partner. This demographic consistency helps ensure reliable comparative data.

A full methodological statement can be found at end of this report.

Understanding Past, Present, and Future Child Care Decisions

- **We have seen a significant increase in the share of parents who report primarily using a home-based child care arrangement, which was already the broadly preferred arrangement three years ago.** Furthermore, most parents indicated this will remain the primary arrangement come the fall. Home-based arrangements might include a parent, step-parent or guardian; another family member, friend, or neighbor; a nanny or babysitter; or a licensed family child care program, in which a professional caregiver provides care for small groups of children for pay. These four scenarios constitute the “home-based” arrangement category, and moving forward “home-based” will refer to the collective arrangements unless specified otherwise.
 - **Current Arrangements:** At the time of the survey, 83% of parents primarily used home-based child care, which is up from 71% in 2018. The most cited home-based arrangement was the child/children staying home with a parent, step-parent, or guardian at 67%, up from 52% in 2018. The next highest home-based arrangement, at 12%, was the child/children staying with another family member, friend, or neighbor. Four percent reported using a nanny or babysitter, and 2% said their child/children attend(s) a family child care program. Comparatively, a much lower 19% reported primarily using center- or school-based child care, which is lower than the 38% who used center- or school-based child care as their primary arrangement in 2018. Parents who had more than one child (88%) and stay-at-home parents (93%) were more likely to cite home-based care as their primary arrangement. Parents who reported an annual household income of over \$50,000 were more likely to use center- or school-based care as well as Hispanic parents, 23% and 30%, respectively. ***Due to the possibility of different arrangements within multi-child households, parents with more than one child were asked about arrangements for their oldest child under five and then separately about their arrangements for their next oldest child under five. Therefore, the 2021 and 2018 responses to the primary child care arrangement question as well as all subsequent questions related to arrangements and specific satisfaction level add up to greater than 100%. Any time respondents are permitted to give more than one response to a question, totals will exceed 100%.***

- **Secondary Arrangements:** Acknowledging that families may use multiple arrangements during a given week, we asked about secondary or alternative child care arrangements. Parents with secondary arrangements were still reporting using home-based care over center- or school-based care by a nearly four-to-one margin, 62% to 17%, with 26% indicating they had no alternate arrangement. Significantly, parents who primarily used center- or school-based care cited home-based care as a secondary arrangement by a 61% to 26% margin. Even 62% of parents who primarily used home-based care cited another home-based arrangement as a second choice. In this case, the child/children staying with another family member, friend, or neighbor was the highest home-based arrangement cited at 35%. When combining first and second choices by reallocating the 26% who had no alternative arrangement by their primary arrangement, overall, 82% reported using a home-based arrangement and 20% a center- or school-based arrangement.
- **Pre-Pandemic Arrangements:** In this current survey, we also asked parents about their child care arrangements prior to the onset of the coronavirus pandemic that began in March of 2020. Parents were still more likely to indicate that they had formerly used home-based care over center- or school-based care by a 67% to 23% margin. Another 11% said this question did not apply because their child was born after March of 2020, making comparisons with the other arrangement questions (i.e., current and anticipated Fall 2021 arrangements) slightly imperfect. Here, parents were mostly split on the home-based arrangements, with 31% saying they stayed home with their child/children and 29% saying their child/children stayed with another family member, friend, or neighbor. Notable differences existed by education level, with parents without a four-year college degree being more likely than parents with a four-year degree to indicate they were using home-based care pre-pandemic, 72% to 61%, respectively. Hispanic (74%) and white (75%) parents were also more likely than Black parents (60%) to have used home-based care pre-pandemic.



- **Looking Ahead:** A decisive plurality (46%) said they had no plans to change their current childcare arrangements when the next school year starts this fall. Among those who indicated plans to change their arrangement in the fall, 38% said they would move towards a home-based arrangement and 24% said they would move towards a center- or school-based arrangement. Among the 24% who said they would move towards a center- or school-based arrangement, 87% reported currently using a home-based arrangement at the time of the survey. Taken together by reallocating the parents who had no plans to change their current arrangement, this amounts to 72% of parents intending to use a home-based arrangement this fall and 30% intending to use a center-based arrangement. The top home-based arrangement cited was the child/children staying at home with a parent or guardian (37%), followed by the child/children staying with another family member, friend, or neighbor (24%), then the child/children attending a family child care program (9%), and finally using a nanny or babysitter (7%).

- **Greater than nine in ten parents (92%) said they were satisfied with their current childcare arrangements,** including 59% who said they were “very satisfied.” Just 8% reported that they were dissatisfied. Among the 92% who were satisfied, “Kids Staying Home” (26%), a generally positive comment (e.g., “works for me,” “good arrangement”) (18%), and “Safety/Trust Issues” (13%) were the top verbatim reasons why they were satisfied. “Dependability/Access” (32%) was the top open-ended reason why parents were *dissatisfied*.

- **Notably, in a separate question among parents whose childcare arrangements had changed since the onset of the coronavirus pandemic, 49% were more satisfied with their current arrangement compared to the ones prior to the onset of the coronavirus pandemic, and 29% were less satisfied.** Three in ten (31%) said there was no difference.

- Although most parents are satisfied, there is still a lack of consensus on the ease of securing child care arrangements since the onset of the coronavirus pandemic.** A slight plurality (38%) said it has been harder to secure child care, while 36% said it has been easier to secure child care, which is a statistically insignificant difference. Another 27% reported it not being much different since the onset of the coronavirus pandemic. Geographically, parents in urban counties were more likely to say it has been harder, at 46%, as well as parents in northern counties, at 52%. The “harder” response also increases to 45% among parents whose primary arrangement is center-based and to 44% among parents not receiving financial assistance for child care. Among parents who haven’t changed their primary child care arrangement since the onset of the coronavirus pandemic and do not plan to change it this fall, 49% said it has been no different.
- A slight majority (51%) said they are now more stressed about their role as a parent compared to before the onset of the coronavirus pandemic, and only 17% said they are less stressed.** Nearly a third (32%) said their stress levels are unchanged. Parents in urban counties were more likely to report being more stressed, at 56%. Parents who have children both 0 to 4 and over 4 and those who do not live with a spouse or partner were more likely to report being more stressed, 58% and 56%, respectively. Two-thirds of Hispanic parents (66%) reported being more stressed. Women (54%) were more likely to report being more stressed than men (48%).



Overarching Attitudes, Perceptions, and Preferences Related to Child Care

- **Eight in ten (81%) agreed that “the coronavirus pandemic has changed how I think about child care arrangements for my children.”** Notably, fewer stay-at-home parents (71%) agreed that the coronavirus pandemic changed how they think about child care arrangements. On the other hand, agreement increases to 90% among single parents, 89% among Black parents, and 87% in South Georgia.
- **Greater than six in ten (62%) said in light of the coronavirus pandemic, they are more likely to consider smaller, home-based care compared to larger group settings.** Only 10% would be less likely, and 27% said the coronavirus pandemic had made no difference. Seventy-two percent (72%) of Hispanic parents are more likely to consider home-based care, which is noteworthy considering Hispanic parents were also more likely to report using center-based care as their primary child care arrangement. This sentiment towards home-based care is consistent with the self-reported child care arrangements described in the previous section.
- **When given a list of choices, parents cited health and safety measures as the biggest factor they take into consideration when deciding on a child care arrangement, at 39%.** Cost concerns were second, but at a distant 18%, followed by hours of operation (10%), curriculum (10%), teacher qualifications (8%), location (8%), and teacher-to-child ratio (6%). When asked to provide a second biggest factor, there was no consensus, with 18% citing teacher qualifications, another 18% citing health and safety measures, followed by cost (16%), location (16%), teacher-to-child ratio (13%), curriculum (9%), and hours of operation (8%). When combining the first and second choices, this amounts to 57% of parents citing health and safety measures. While 34% of parents cited cost as either the biggest or second biggest factor, it increases to 41% among single parents and 50% among stay-at-home parents. This is noteworthy considering stay-at-home parents have a much lower household income than parents overall, an average of \$46,000 annually versus \$74,000 annually, respectively. In a follow-up question, nearly six in ten (58%) say they always cared most about their top two factors, even before the onset of the coronavirus pandemic, with 40% saying they cared more about others. Black (49%) and Hispanic (43%) parents were more likely than white parents (31%) to indicate that they had different concerns prior to the onset of the coronavirus pandemic.

- **Another eight in ten (79%) agreed that “finding quality and affordable child care was a challenge before the coronavirus pandemic and the pandemic has only made these challenges more difficult.”**
- **Nearly nine in ten (88%) agreed that “the coronavirus pandemic has demonstrated that many families need more assistance with child care.”** The extent of agreement was relatively consistent across all sociodemographic lines, demonstrating the importance of child care assistance.
- **Support for early childhood educators drew the broadest agreement, as 90% agreed that “the coronavirus pandemic has demonstrated the importance of the work that early childhood educators do.”**
- **Three in four parents (74%) said it is important that employees in the child care setting who interact with children be vaccinated against COVID-19, including 49% who said it is “very important.”** One in four (25%) said it is not important. Eighty-seven percent (87%) of parents in urban counties said it is important, compared to only 64% of parents in rural counties. Employed parents were more likely to say it is important than stay-at-home parents, 76% to 64%, respectively. Parents with a bachelor’s degree or higher were more likely to say it is important than parents without a bachelor’s degree, 84% to 67%, respectively. Black (84%) and Hispanic (79%) parents were more likely than white parents (68%) to say it is important.



Financial Impacts

- **The plurality (42%) said they are paying about the same for child care for their children four-years-old or younger compared to what they were paying prior to the onset of the coronavirus pandemic.** Thirty-four percent (34%) said they are paying more per month, and 21% said they are paying less per month. Parents in rural counties were more likely to report paying more per month, at 42%, compared to those in urban and suburban counties, 29% and 26%, respectively. Parents who have children that are both 0 to 4 and over 4 were more likely to report paying more per month than parents who only have children 0 to 4, 40% to 20%, respectively. Parents who work from home (43%) or have a hybrid arrangement (41%) were more likely than parents who work outside the home (34%) to say they are paying more per month. Parents who haven't changed their arrangement and do not plan on changing it this fall were most likely to report they are paying about the same per month, at 73%, as were stay-at-home parents, at 61%.
- **Thirty-four percent of parents said they receive financial assistance to help pay for child care, including 21% who receive assistance from a family member or friend, 10% from an employer, and 8% from the government.** This is twice as high as the 17% who reported receiving financial assistance in 2018. For the sake of consistency, the question was identical to how it was asked in 2018; however, in light of the federal and state assistance administered during the coronavirus pandemic, we suspect this question may have drawn confusion. Parents in rural counties were most likely to indicate they receive financial assistance, at 41%. Single parents were more likely to report they receive financial assistance than married parents, 44% to 28%, respectively, as well as employed parents compared to stay-at-home parents, 38% to 28%, respectively. By income, parents who make under \$50,000 were more likely to report they receive assistance than those who make over \$50,000, 41% to 29%, respectively. Black (45%) and Hispanic (42%) parents were more likely than white parents (28%) to report they receive assistance. In a follow-up question among just those receiving financial assistance, 41% said they began receiving financial assistance during the coronavirus pandemic, and 58% said they received it prior to the pandemic.

Employment-Related Impacts

- **One in three (34%) said they or someone in their family had to quit a job, not take a job, or greatly change a job in the past 12 months because of problems with child care, up from 26% in 2018.** Parents in rural counties were most likely to be disrupted, at 40%, as well as single parents (41%) and stay-at-home parents (42%), parents in households making under \$50,000 annually (39%), and parents without a bachelor's degree (38%). These dynamics are similar to what we observed in 2018.
- **In terms of the coronavirus pandemic's impact on employment, 53% of parents said the pandemic has changed their employment status to some degree.** Among the 53%, 22% said child care needs were the primary factor impacting their work status, another 22% said child care needs were partially a factor, and only 8% said their work status changed but not because of child care needs. Considering this number (53%) is higher than the 34% reported in the previous question on "disruptions," we are led to believe respondents may have considered changes *within* their current employment (e.g., working fewer hours per week or working from home) in addition to *the changing of an actual employment status* (e.g., going from employed to unemployed). Single parents were more likely than married parents to say their employment status changed, 67% to 46%, respectively. Those with a household income under \$50,000 were more likely than those with a household income over \$50,000 to say their employment status changed, 63% to 46%, respectively. By race, Black respondents were most likely to say their employment status changed, at 63%, and by age, parents under 30 were most likely to say their employment status changed, at 61%. Nearly eight in ten (79%) parents who receive financial assistance said their employment status changed, compared to only 40% of parents who do not receive assistance.
- **Nearly nine in ten (88%) said their current employer has been accommodating to them as they manage their child care situation in light of the coronavirus pandemic, including 53% who stated their employers have been "very accommodating."** Only 11% said their current employers have not been accommodating.

- **Despite an identical share of parents reporting that they were employed (77%) in both years, there is a noticeable difference in the amount of self-reported hours worked per week.** In 2018, 60% of employed parents said they worked over 40 hours a week (with a mean weekly hours worked of 40.5), while this has fallen to 38% in 2021 (mean weekly hours worked of 35). More specifically, only 23% of employed parents making under \$50,000 per year reported working over 40 hours per week compared to 47% of parents making over \$50,000 per year. Men (48%) were more likely than women (28%) to report working over 40 hours per week.
- **The majority of working parents (55%) reported that they currently work outside of their home, with 26% reporting working from home, and 19% reporting a hybrid work arrangement.** Employed parents without a bachelor's degree were more likely to report working outside the home than employed parents with at least a bachelor's degree, 59% to 49%, respectively. Younger parents under 30 were also more likely to report working outside the home, at 60%.



Conclusions

While some form of home-based care—either by a parent, step-parent or guardian; another family member, friend, or neighbor; a nanny or babysitter; or a licensed family child care program—was the predominant arrangement reported by parents three years ago, even more parents reported relying on such arrangements in the summer of 2021. These findings are consistent with a significant proportion of parents reporting that the coronavirus pandemic has changed how they think about child care arrangements (81%) and that, in light of the pandemic, they are more likely to consider smaller, home-based care (62%). The most common changes in primary child care arrangements during the coronavirus pandemic have been parents shifting from one type of home-based arrangement to another (e.g., parents staying home with their child to the child staying with another family member, friend, or neighbor) rather than children moving from a center-based arrangement to a home-based arrangement. Despite slightly more parents intending to use a center-based arrangement in the fall (30% vs. 19% in the summer of 2021), the vast majority (72%) still plan on using a home-based arrangement.

Despite high reported levels of satisfaction among parents with their current arrangement, it is clear that the coronavirus pandemic has highlighted the difficulties parents face in finding quality and affordable child care (79% agreement on this statement) and the belief that more families need assistance with child care (88% agreement on this statement). Greater than half reported being more stressed about their role as a parent compared to before the onset of the pandemic. More parents—over a third of those surveyed—reported a significant employment disruption compared to 2018. On a more positive note, nearly nine in ten working parents indicated their current employer has been accommodating to them as they manage their child care situation during the pandemic. Another encouraging finding was that parents almost uniformly recognized that the pandemic has underscored the importance of the work of early childhood educators.

These findings underscore for policymakers and other stakeholders the importance of supporting the evolving child care needs of Georgia's families. The survey findings suggest that child care challenges continue to negatively affect parents' participation in the workforce, and likely the state's economy as a result. As policymakers, philanthropy, and business leaders consider ways to support young children and their families in light of the coronavirus pandemic, efforts should recognize the range of settings—including home-based and informal child care arrangements—parents utilize.

Methodology

McLaughlin and Associates conducted a survey of 400 Georgia parents with children ages 0-4 from July 1st to 19th, 2021. A multi-modal approach was employed via live telephone calls, self-administered text messages and online interviews. The live telephone interviews were conducted by professional interviewers with respondents contacted by both landline phone and cell phone. The text message respondents were sent a personalized invitation to complete the survey on a secure online platform. The online respondents were carefully selected and screened from a representative platform of individuals who elect to participate in online surveys. Interviews were stratified by age, race/ethnicity, educational attainment, employment status, gender and geography using the 2012-2016 American Community Survey estimates and the ACS Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS) data to best reflect the actual demographic composition of Georgia parents with children ages 0-4. Because the internet sample is based on those who initially self-selected for participation rather than a probability sample, no estimates of sampling error can be calculated. However, a confidence interval of 95% was calculated in order to produce an error estimate of +/- 4.9% for the 400 respondents. This error estimate should be taken into consideration in much the same way that analysis of probability polls takes into account the margin of sampling error. The error estimate increases for cross-tabulations. Totals may not add up to exactly 100% due to rounding, refusals, and the ability for respondents to give multiple answers to certain questions.



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