

Children are falling behind in pandemic

Fewer kids ready for kindergarten as early childhood education impacted by outbreak

Alia Wong

USA TODAY

Cheryse Singleton-Nobles knows her 2-year-old son is regressing.

While the toddler is getting the hang of colors, numbers and shapes, she says, “he’s back to the stage of ‘me, me, me.’ ” He doesn’t want to share anymore. He struggles to follow a routine and gets distracted by all his toys.

Singleton-Nobles, 47, attributes this backtracking to the COVID-19 pandemic, which recently forced her son’s free Chicago preschool to close its campus.

That preschool, an early learning center that belongs to a national network of Head Start-funded programs called Educare, shut its doors in the spring but managed to reopen at limited capacity in the fall. The center had to revert to distance learning again in mid-November amid a surge in coronavirus infection rates.

Now, her son – like countless other children across the country – is sliding in his social-emotional skills. And those losses could be devastating for these children’s long-term success. Preschool years are among the most formative of a child’s life. A student who starts kindergarten without preschool is more likely to repeat a grade, require special education services or drop out.

“Unfortunately, for children, the impact of this pandemic will be felt for years,” said Dimitri Christakis, a pediatrician who directs the Seattle Children’s Hospital Center for Child Health, Behavior and Development.

Many kids were already behind

A slew of studies show that children who attend quality early learning programs are more likely to enter kindergarten with a solid grasp of language and math and to have positive relationships with their parents. They’re also less likely to struggle with behavioral problems. Some research suggests students who enter kindergarten without having learned how to share, express their emotions and listen to instructions are less likely to graduate high school.

Early childhood education, advocates stress, isn’t just babysitting. That’s particularly true when such education takes place in a formal setting. (Child care centers, while often more expensive, often strive to meet child development standards and therefore are better for kids’ development than home-based child care, research shows.)

How badly are kids slipping?

It’s hard to quantify how much the pandemic is undermining children’s readiness for kindergarten. Schools such as those in the Educare network are rolling out virtual assessments designed to measure students’ achievement levels, but experts warn that the findings from those evaluations will need to be taken with a grain of salt. Assessments performed by parents – versus a trained professional – are subject to all kinds of complications.

But anecdotal evidence – paired with existing research on early childhood education – suggests the damage could be severe.

“We won’t know the full impact for a



For America's low-income children, high-quality opportunities to prepare for kindergarten were already in short supply before the pandemic hit. Nationally, child care was out of reach for many Americans, costing as much as \$9,600 on average last year, an analysis by Child Care Aware of America found.

Head Start, a federal early childhood education program designated for low-income families, served just 36% of eligible 3- to 5-year-olds. Early Head Start reaches even fewer families, enrolling only 11% of eligible infants and toddlers.

As a result, as many as half of low-income children already were starting kindergarten without being ready for it.

Most brain development occurs before age 5 – the brain triples in size in the first two years of life – which is why a child's learning experiences during that window are so predictive of her success later on. "Children are born wired to learn," Christakis said. "Early learning experiences lay the foundations of their minds for the rest of their lives."

while," Christakis said, "but there's every reason to believe that it's sizable."

Since the pandemic hit, the cost of high-quality early childhood education has only increased. Research by the Center for American Progress, a left-leaning think tank, shows the monthly cost of center-based child care has grown by 47% on average nationwide. The trend has been particularly pronounced at programs for 3- and 4-year-olds, largely because of the significant decrease in recommended class sizes to reduce potential coronavirus spread.

In many cases, child care is simply no longer available. A survey this summer by the National Association for the Education of Young Children found 18% of child care centers nationwide had closed indefinitely.

Even if parents can find an opening for their child or afford the fee, many are choosing not to send their children to preschool out of fear of exposing them to the virus. And while some programs, including many

Rebecca Beebe drops off her 5-year-old son, Truman, at child care at University Avenue Discovery Center in Madison, Wis., on Aug. 13. AMBER ARNOLD/AP

The bright side is that children are remarkably resilient. And parents, as Stillwaggon Radeski explained, are more empowered to offset the losses than they may realize. While they may not have the training needed to foster their children's academic progress, they can invest their energy in teaching them other skills – whether it's how to use the potty or how to regulate their emotions.

But schools can't just bank on kids' resilience. Experts and advocates say an infusion of federal money is needed to ensure the country's youngest children thrive after the dust of the pandemic settles. The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act, which Congress passed in March, allocated just \$3.5 billion in block grants to improve access to child care. A separate \$50 billion proposal – introduced in the summer to offset that shortfall – has yet to get approval from the Senate.

And some researchers argue more money for better early learning isn't enough, either. For the benefits of such opportunities to stick, recent studies suggest, children will also need to receive quality elementary education. And that, too, is hanging in the balance during the pandemic.

of Educare’s 25 schools, have virtual programming, uneven internet access means many families don’t have that luxury.

Parents’ stress remains high

The upshot: Even fewer children than before the pandemic are getting the preparation they need to succeed in school. While enrollment is down for all schoolchildren, the dip is especially stark in kindergarten and preschool, according to an NPR analysis of data from 60 of the country’s school districts.

Initial data out of some states paint an even grimmer picture for preschool and child care. In Colorado, enrollment for infants, toddlers and preschoolers as of July had returned to only roughly half of what it was before the pandemic.

Parents who have taken on the role of early educator are under unprecedented levels of stress, potentially inhibiting their abilities to provide structured learning. As with Singleton-Nobles’ son, virtual programming has to be whittled into short chunks in part to accommodate children’s attention spans.

Indeed, it can also be especially difficult to engage young children in distance learning. They learn best when their learning is experiential – when they can touch and handle objects and gauge the reactions of their educators.

It’s also hard to give children what Jenny Stillwaggon Radesky, a pediatrics professor at the University of Michigan Medical School, described as “microbits of feedback” in a virtual setting.

Absent center-based schooling, young children also are missing out on early intervention services they may have received otherwise – specialists who help them develop their fine and gross motor skills, for example.

“You just don’t get that same level of observation and support that you would in an in-person classroom,” said Cynthia Jackson, who leads the Educare Learning Network.

‘Keep a child’s mind engaged’

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Kamryn Garves, 4, looks at the infrared thermometer that a teacher uses to check his temperature each morning before he can be dropped off at a school in Daytona Beach, Fla. Since the pandemic hit, the cost of high-quality early childhood education has only gone up. DAVID TUCKER/DAYTONA BEACH NEWS-JOURNAL



Adyson Snowell walks to the front of the class Aug. 27 as teacher Ashley Thompson looks over what Adyson wrote about herself

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