

The impact of the pandemic on childcare in the US: A social catastrophe affecting generations

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The coronavirus pandemic has exposed the complete inability of the capitalist system to serve the basic requirements of society at every level. In addition to the death and destruction of human life taking place across the planet, the capitalist system must be particularly indicted for the detrimental impacts upon the youngest and most vulnerable.

The broader impact of such a crisis on the childcare system is impossible to calculate. In the case of small childcare business owners, many will be followed by a trail of debt which will haunt them for years to come. Parents, under immense economic and social pressure to return to work, will find limited options for childcare available. Families will be uprooted, deeply affecting young lives in the process.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on early childhood development

Early childhood development programs which serve children at pre-Kindergarten ages (0-5 years of age) are vital to the cognitive and social functioning of the young in the first stages of their lives.

According to the federal government, there are roughly 21.4 million pre-Kindergarten children and 1.7 million childcare workers in the United States. Reports from the Hunt Institute show that as of last week, 17 states in the US have closed all childcare facilities for fear of contagion. All other states still allowing such facilities to remain open are doing so at risk to their staff and the families they serve.

As the pandemic has forced governments to enact social distancing protocols, many teachers and businesses have sought to maintain relationships with their students through online instruction. In early childhood development, such a medium holds little value.

An article published in March by Rhian Evans Allvin, CEO of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), titled “*Making Connections: There’s No*

Such Thing as Online Preschool,” plainly states: “The reality is that there is no online equivalent to preschool.”

The article references a 2015 National Research Council report on childhood development which establishes “the first eight years [as] a profound developmental period that impacts the whole life. Crucial, complex areas of development include the relationship between language and mathematics, self-regulation, social and emotional development, responsible decision-making, physical development, self-management, and relationship skills.”

For a child, such a period of life requires the most attentive care. A child’s future development may be forever altered amid a COVID-19 pandemic, in which they are forced to remain indoors in isolation due to social distancing, or are forced to keep physically separate from peers and adults in public.

“For my older son, online classes have already started [but] I haven’t heard anything yet from my younger son’s teacher,” a mother in California with school-aged children told the *World Socialist Web Site*. “My younger son thinks that school at home is the new norm now, he doesn’t really understand what’s going on. He might end up repeating the third grade if he has a difficult time,” she said.

Childcare providers

In addition to the impact on the individual child, an entire social ecosystem has been upended by the crisis. In a comment to *Education Dive*, NAEYC head Allvin stated that over 70 percent of child care facilities in the US were shuttered within a single week last month. “We’re in a position that so many providers are making decisions about whether they lay off their staff,” she said, that schools can’t “even start to wrap their heads around making content available for families.”

Allvin’s estimate does not include smaller entities and organizations which provide child care outside of the NAEYC accreditation system. An article in the Connecticut-based

Greenwich Times notes: “myriad small-business childcare providers... that are not incorporated into school readiness programs, and are therefore cut off from subsidy funding,” are being excluded from the various state-level support programs.

A 2019 report produced by Child Care Aware of America found that in over 20 states a majority of childcare establishments were home-based. Lacking corporate sponsorship, such facilities have been forced to consolidate expenses and focus simply on keeping their businesses open for the duration of the pandemic. “There’s no corporate entity—it is just us,” stated Allison Morton, owner of Portland, Oregon-based Small Wonders to *USA Today*.

According to the National Women’s Law Center, 30 percent of America’s childcare providers will be forced to go out of business after a closure of two weeks or more. Furthermore, a NAEYC survey found that 63 percent of childcare providers would go out of business after a month.

The recently-passed Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act provides merely \$3.5 billion to cover childcare costs for “essential workers” and support some childcare providers, but is totally inadequate to cover the costs of a \$99 billion industry in which most providers normally operate on a shoestring budget. The \$350 billion Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) contained in the bill will be on a “first-come, first-served basis,” states the same article in *USA Today*. Smaller businesses, lacking paid accountants and other financial advice, are at a disadvantage in securing such loans.

For many smaller businesses which operate based upon payment from families rather than state-provided subsidies, the impact of the coronavirus will lead to bankruptcy as working parents—themselves in dire financial straits after going a lengthy time without employment—will not be able to afford to re-enroll their children.

Childcare workers

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, early childhood caregivers represented one of the lowest paid and most exploited sections of the working class. According to *Vox*, the average hourly wage within the childcare industry is \$10.82. “We’re overworked, we’re underpaid, and we don’t even exist,” remarks Miren Algorri, a childcare provider from Chula Vista, California, of her situation.

Teachers and childcare staff can hardly afford the cost of a doctor’s bill, and are even less likely to be able to afford the cost of a major medical emergency. As in many industries, coming to work during an illness rather than staying home to recover while forgoing a paycheck is a regular part of daily existence. Likewise, many parents, knowing the health hazards which are posed in a preschool environment, will decide to

withdraw their child, leading many facilities to cut staff hours due to a lack of enrollment.

“Inside a preschool, a virus can spread like wildfire,” Suzanne, a childcare worker from San Diego, California, told the WSWS. “We encourage teachers to ‘scan’ the children in the morning at drop-off; if the child appears unwell, we tell the parent the child has to go home, but if it’s the middle of the day, it’s much harder to get hold of parents and parents are much more hesitant to pick up their child. They’ll say ‘I’m working right now, I can’t come get them’ or parents will try to bring in their child the next day while they are still exhibiting symptoms.”

While some facilities have continued providing childcare services to workers deemed essential, state regulators have sought to roll back staffing requirements and other safety regulations in order to allow providers to remain open at minimal costs. In the name of “offering necessary regulatory flexibility,” the New Jersey Department of Families and Children last month waived requirements that childcare facilities hire qualified staff while allowing schools to eliminate fire drills, limits on class sizes, and other rules. After outcry from childcare providers, the state was forced to reinstate its previous standards.

As the COVID-19 pandemic cuts deeper into the heart of modern society, the necessity for independent rank and file organizations representing the interests of all working people becomes all the more imperative. While essential workers such as health care workers and workers in logistics, transport, grocery and other industries deal with the COVID-19 pandemic, childcare professionals are tasked with the critical job of caring for their children, posing the objective need for the class unity of all workers involved in the vital tasks of social life.

As the pandemic exposes the failure of capitalism to address society’s basic needs, the working class must step in to pose a revolutionary challenge to the profit system through the strategy of international socialist revolution.



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