

Kansas Child Care Providers and COVID-19: Prevention and Mitigation Practices

September 2021 survey of providers highlights mitigation measures taken, existing opportunities to implement evidence-based practices, and challenges moving forward

To understand how child care providers have been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, Child Care Aware of Kansas and the United Methodist Health Ministry Fund partnered to survey providers from across the state. The survey focused on which precautions were being implemented to prevent the spread of COVID-19 as well as what challenges child care providers have faced throughout the pandemic.

More than one-fourth (28.9%) of the state's providers responded to the survey and represented all program types and nearly all counties:

- 57.1% were licensed day care homes
- 27.9% were group day care homes
- 15% were day care centers
- They represented 102 out of 105 counties (97%)

COVID-19 PRECAUTIONS

A large majority of providers (98.6%) reported that they were taking precautions to reduce the spread of COVID-19. The most frequent precautions taken were:

- extra disinfecting/cleaning (91%)
- increased handwashing (90%)
- temperature taking (73%)

Proven public health measures were not as prevalent:

- masking of staff or children (26% and 12%)
- social distancing (36%)
- vaccinating staff (47%)

Only 19 providers said they were not taking precautions. Their reasons varied:

"The cases in my county are not that high so I am doing my normal precautions for any virus to spread."

"All kids/parents coming in/out have had Covid already. They are new to my program but since they've all had it, I didn't [see] the need to screen/etc."

Delta Variant Response. The more contagious delta

variant of COVID-19 prompted 37.9% of providers to change their approach—of those 92% increased precautionary procedures and approximately one-fourth implemented testing requirements or staff vaccination requirements.

Staff Vaccination. Most respondents were vaccinated. Of those who were not vaccinated or whose program does not require vaccinations, 64% (511) reported it was because of personal beliefs.

BY THE NUMBERS: COVID-19 VACCINATION

47% 

of Kansans vaccinated as of 10/1/2021¹

47% 

of child care providers have been utilizing vaccination as a mitigation strategy

58% 

of home-based child care respondents vaccinated

77% 

of center-based child care respondents vaccinated

Exposure Protocol. Most providers are following current guidance regarding COVID-19 exposure. A majority quarantine exposed children (83%), notify the local health department (79%), quarantine exposed staff (74%), or test exposed staff (54%).

COVID-19 Testing. Respondents were asked about their testing requirements:

- 61% require staff to be tested when exposed
- 4% require it regularly as a precaution
- 35% do not require testing

Of the sites that require testing, 94% of homes and 95% of centers require staff to stay home while waiting for results.

Motivation or Assistance. Providers were asked which requirements or incentives would help them implement COVID-19 precautions. They shared the following would help:

- financial support or incentives (70%)
- support from parents and their community (49%)
- mandates or requirements from the state (43%)
- 29% would not make changes if new requirements or incentives were implemented; the most common reason was the feeling that they were already doing enough and were not sure what else they could do

Some barriers reported in the responses were pushback from parents regarding more strict policies (e.g., mask wearing, quarantining if exposed, symptom screening).

“I would offer to close my daycare more often if I was guaranteed pay. It’s hard to tell families their kids with colds can’t come to daycare and it’s hard to keep people when you do.”

“Yes, we have already increased our precautions, but we would be able to do more if we had more funding to keep extra staff in place for even more extra cleaning.”

“I feel I’m doing all I can. And I don’t want to get vaccine until there’s been a long while of seeing what side [effects] come from it.”

OVERALL IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC

Most programs reported that this time has been extremely stressful and has even caused many to consider closing their centers or home-based programs and seeking other forms of income. Many common themes emerged about the impacts of the pandemic, roadblocks they have faced, and ways they have adapted.

Staffing. The largest impact has been staffing. Providers

have had difficulty finding and keeping qualified staff as well as appropriately compensating them due to financial strain.

“The ability to pay higher wages will attract more qualified staff who can work right away and give us the ability to provide more quality childcare in our rural community.”

“The roadblocks are finding teachers. I would like to require my teachers to all be vaccinated, however some do not want to get the vaccine and I would not have enough staff to operate if I required it.”

“Our waitlist has increased and our staffing has decreased. We are struggling to find qualified staff. With reduced enrollment, offering more attractive salaries is not an option.”

Relationships with Families and Communities. Providers’ relationships with families have been strained due to disagreements on policies, lack of knowledge of what families are doing at home, and families not keeping their sick children home.

“The pandemic has made things very difficult. Everyone has their own opinions about how to stay safe which makes it difficult to make rules, enforce rules, and keep everyone happy without losing families.”

“The biggest problem is parents not wanting to quarantine their children when needed due to the misinformation out there about covid 19.”

“Parents want more space to distance children and with a small place, there’s not enough room to distance AND provide enough floor space to play.”

Financial Strain. Financial strain has increased due to lower enrollment numbers, closures, changes in hours of operations, and purchasing of additional cleaning supplies, among other reasons.

“My attendance was down which affected my working capital and my income. Attendance was back up but now that school has started, people are getting quarantined again and my attendance is down again.”

“It has been difficult to continue operating due to wage inflation and the inability to charge what it actually costs to provide a high quality program. We have been able to navigate the changes and we have adapted as needed.”

“HUGE loss of income. All of my kids (7) left when parents worked from home. We are living off of the generosity of friends and family... Might have to retire after 35 years. We think that we will have to sell our home if things continue like this. I only have 2 kids right now.”

Stress and Burnout. Providers shared their emotional stress and burnout from making difficult decisions and implementing additional precautions for the safety of kids, families, and staff.

“It has been very hard to be a daycare provider during this pandemic. I have had to close. I have had to modify my home as I take care of my elderly mom also, to keep her safe. We are getting through it and trying to figure it all out!”

“Lots of staff burnout, poor morale, frustration with increased precautions now when at the beginning it did not seem like as much of an issue. I have done things to help the staff, decrease stress, feel appreciated but it is still not always enough.”

“It has impacted me financially, and emotionally. It has been a struggle to see how much the children have changed and things they are missing out on.”

SUPPORT NEEDED MOVING FORWARD

Providers were asked what they still needed to recover from the pandemic. The most common responses were financial support, clear information, community support, and higher pay for child care workers.

“My hope is that now childcare is recognized as an essential part of the American economy, and there will be financial help in the near future.”

“Support and recognition that if we were not here daily for all parents, they would not be able to do their job. Teachers are daily hailed as [heroes] but childcare is just expected. I

FOOTNOTES

1. “Kansas COVID-19 Vaccination Overview”, Kansas Department of Health and Environment, last modified October 1, 2021, <https://www.kansasvaccine.gov/158/Data>.

feel we have been kicked to the ground.”

OPPORTUNITIES TO SUPPORT CHILD CARE

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted issues that child care providers face across Kansas. Providers are enduring financial strain and emotional burnout while trying to keep children safe and their facilities open.

As mitigation of the COVID-19 pandemic continues, there is an opportunity to reset the emphasis on which preventative strategies should be used among child care providers. A majority have implemented extra cleaning while less than half of providers have been utilizing proven public health measures such as masking, social distancing, and vaccinating staff. Seventy percent said financial support would help them implement precautions and 43% reported state mandates would help.

To ensure high-quality child care remains available across Kansas, policymakers and funders can provide financial support tied to specific health mandates, such as masking or vaccination, in conjunction with educational materials and discussion guides to help maintain positive relationships between providers and families.

“**Stop recommending and start mandating if you want our parents to comply.**”

“**If mandates were in place I feel it would be easier to have support from parents.**”

“**With more money we could hire more staff and fewer children per class.**”

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