



Themes from Focus Groups with Parents of Young Children in Hartford

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Background

The Connecticut Data Collaborative, in partnership with the Division of Early Learning in the City of Hartford's Department of Families, Children, Youth, and Recreation, conducted focus groups with parents of young children in Hartford. These focus groups were conducted to hear parents' perspectives on the impact of the pandemic on their families and current challenges with child care access in the city. All focus groups were conducted in April of 2023.

This work was supported in part by funding from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation through their "Data to Improve Community Conditions Shaped by Structural Racism" grant program. All research protocols were approved by Solutions IRB.

Recruitment & Eligibility

Parents of young children were recruited through flyers in both English and Spanish distributed to parents by Hartford Public Schools, state-funded child care centers, and family child care providers. Parents were eligible to participate if they lived in Hartford and had any child under 8 years old as of April 2023 (that is, they had a child who was under 5 years old when the pandemic began in the spring of 2020). Legal guardians

were also eligible to participate. Each parent or legal guardian who participated in a focus group received a \$35 gift card.

Sample

In total, 15 parents or legal guardians participated in the focus groups. The focus groups were held in three sessions with between four and seven parents in each session.

All of the participating parents spoke English. Spanish interpretation was offered for each focus group but was not needed.

Other characteristics of the parents and guardians who participated in the focus groups are provided in the table below.

Characteristics of parents and guardians who participated in the focus groups

	Number	Percent
Total number of parents/guardians	15	100%
Age ranges of children		
Any child < 3 years old (born after March 2020)	2	13%
Any child 3 – 5 years old (0 to 2 years old in April 2020)	11	73%
Any child 6 – 7 years old (3 to 4 years old in April 2020)	5	33%
Any child > 7 years old (> 4 years old in April 2020)	7	47%
Number of children		
1 child	5	33%
2 children	8	53%
3 children	1	7%
5 children	1	7%
Relationship to child(ren)		
Parent	13	87%
Legal guardian	1	7%
Parent and legal guardian	1	7%
Neighborhood of residence		
Asylum Hill	4	27%
Clay-Arsenal	2	13%
Barry Square	1	7%
Sheldon-Charter Oak	1	7%
Parkville	1	7%
South End	1	7%
Blue Hills	1	7%
South Green	1	7%
Upper Albany	1	7%
Downtown	1	7%
Frog Hollow	1	7%
Types of child care used		
Child care center	8	53%
Family child care provider	2	13%
Parent/guardian care only	5	33%

Themes

Barriers to Child Care Access in Hartford

(1) More outreach is needed to inform parents about affordable child care programs in Hartford.

None of the participating parents were aware of 211 Child Care as a resource for finding child care, and many expressed that they did not know how to go about finding affordable child care programs in their area. Some parents said they knew 211 offered help with “an emergency” or “housing and food” but they were not aware that 211 could help them find child care (and it’s worth noting that, even if they had been aware of 211 Child Care, information about subsidized programs is not easy to find on the 211 Child Care website). Also, no parents mentioned Hartford Early Learning’s website as a resource for finding affordable care. The most commonly mentioned approaches to finding child care were word of mouth / asking around and using Google searches.

One parent wanted to send her child to preschool but didn’t know how to find a program she could afford, until she “finally” found out about a subsidized Hartford public schools pre-K program and enrolled her child just 6 months before he started kindergarten. If she had known about this option earlier, her child would have had more preschool experience before starting kindergarten.

Participants suggested the following ways of sharing information about child care options with parents:

- Providing information about child care options to parents in hospitals after the birth of their child
- Posting information in public libraries
- Social media (Facebook, TikTok, Instagram)

- Newsletters and other communications to parents from Hartford Public Schools (e.g., ParentSquare)
- Information sharing through community partners

(2) Cost is a major barrier to obtaining child care, and many parents who need help paying for child care are not eligible for Care 4 Kids subsidies.

Not surprisingly, cost was the most commonly cited barrier to obtaining child care. Multiple parents stated that they did not enroll their children in care or delayed their enrollment because the cost was too high, or that they were turned away from programs because they could not afford to pay the tuition.

Multiple parents also mentioned that the Care 4 Kids eligibility criteria should be loosened. One parent said:

"I didn't qualify for [Care 4 Kids] but I need it.... The limits for Care 4 Kids have to go up a little bit.... Sometimes the limits are just like - you're basically on the borderline, you're just scraping through. I think they should consider your income and also maybe your rent and different expenses that you're paying."

Another parent said she tried to ask people about how she can get assistance paying for child care but no one gave her any useful information. She felt that they did not want to help her.

(3) For some parents, not having a car greatly limits the child care options available to them.

Several focus group participants mentioned that their child care options were limited because they needed a place that was within walking distance or a short bus ride away, since they don't have a car.

(4) More before and after school care options are needed.

Several parents mentioned that more before and after school care options are needed in Hartford, and that the lack of child care outside of school hours limits what

jobs they can take. One parent had to switch jobs due to a lack of after-school care for her child. Another parent mentioned that she applied to a school with after-school care, but the school had two branches and the branch where her child was admitted did not have an after-school program. Another parent said:

“At the school my son goes to they don’t have before school [care] at all so if you did need to go in early or something you can’t really, and after-school programs fill up. There’s not even enough space for even half of the kids in the school. So, I think there’s more need for that. And the before and after school programs have to be low cost or free, honestly.”

Challenges Related to the Pandemic

(1) Many parents are worried that the pandemic has negatively impacted their young children’s development of social skills.

Many parents expressed concern that the pandemic has disrupted their young children’s development of age-appropriate social skills because they had less exposure to their peers than they would have otherwise. Parents spoke of keeping their children at home due to their fear of them becoming sick at daycare, stopping visiting family and friends, and not allowing their children to play with other kids during the pandemic.

Several parents mentioned that their children have developed shyness, social anxiety or separation anxiety which they attribute to the pandemic. Another parent said that her now 7-year-old has a tantrum every time a playdate is over because she doesn’t know if she’ll be disconnected again, and she is receiving therapy. One parent mentioned that she believes the pandemic negatively impacted her child’s verbal communication skills. Some representative comments from parents include:

“Definitely [the pandemic impacted] social interactions, learning simple things like sharing and being amongst other kids and making friends and stuff like that. It impacted starting school. Having that separation anxiety because of spending so much time together during the pandemic and then having to be out on our own. The social anxiety definitely was major because of the

pandemic and not being able to stay in childcare as much and always having to be away, and not having that constant routine and that constant exposure.”

“I faced similar issues with my 4 and 5 year old as far as a little bit of separation anxiety as well as having a hard time communicating with other kids... It took them a long time to adjust and be able to just play with other kids and talk with other kids regularly. I do know that that had a lot to do with the pandemic because they were inside most of the time.”

(2) Frequent disruptions to child care during the pandemic made it hard for working parents to maintain sufficient work hours.

Multiple parents described needing to drop a lot of work hours to care for their children during frequent, unpredictable gaps in childcare due to sickness (or perceived sickness), quarantines, and childcare facility closures. For example:

“Being a single parent to one child [during the pandemic] was very difficult because [my child] was diagnosed with asthma... she would have her cough from asthma, [and the child care provider would say] ‘oh, she can’t come in because she has a cough,’ and I’m like, ‘it’s asthma...’ Ultimately it would result in me just having to miss work, and just having to be home. So still just trying to make ends meet because of that, that was just really difficult... It resulted in a lot of reduced hours which led to trying to apply for a lot of assistance, which was also very hard because they were looking at your overall pay and it was a constant battle to be like, ‘I know what I make, [and] I’m not making that.’ So it was a constant battle of them saying ‘you make this an hour’ and just going based off of that. So it resulted in reduced hours. Trying to work from home, but not all the time was that an option.”

“For me, my youngest... tended to run a higher fever and [the child care center she was attending] would send her home so frequently and she was never sick. It was really hard for me to figure out what to do with childcare when they would send her home so much. That was difficult for her and me, because she did like the consistency and the school and everything like that. I just would have to pick her up, I didn’t have any option, I had to get her. So I was her child

care, I was the backup. I'd just have to drop work or whatever I was doing and pick her up."

Multiple parents described a cycle of children being sent to childcare sick with COVID (sometimes because their parents needed to work and had no other option), and the entire facility shutting down repeatedly. Some parents opted to take their children out of childcare entirely because of repeated illnesses and quarantine periods. A particularly stark example:

"I just took my daughter out of child care. She got accepted when she was 6 months old, and the first week she got super, super sick and [the hospital] admitted her for 2 days, and then as soon as she got better they shut the whole facility down because all the staff members had COVID. So once it re-opened, we sent her back for one day, she got sick and was hospitalized for seven straight days... It was rough because even if they don't go, we still have to pay. So, we decided we have to take her out because she's going to keep getting sick and we're going to be emptying our pockets for no reason... My husband and I switch off [taking care of her now]. When he has to work, work, work, I call out, and when I have to work, work, work, he calls out. We try to make it work... It's a struggle."

(3) Some parents needed to quit their job to allow them to care for their children during the pandemic.

"I actually had to quit my job during the pandemic in order to stay home. My husband was working so I had to stay home and keep the kids, which was hard because obviously less money was coming in, but it was what we had to do."

(4) Working parents relied on family and friends to watch their children during the pandemic, if they were lucky enough to have that option.

Several parents said they had to ask family, such as aunts or grandparents, and friends to help watch their children during the pandemic, particularly toward the

beginning of the pandemic. Other parents did not have this option available to them.

(5) Some parents experienced barriers to receiving basic medical care for their children due to the pandemic.

“When [the children] would get a cold or fever, we were not able to go to the hospital as we were doing before, because of the pandemic and doctors were busy with handling all the critical COVID patients. We were not able to go to the hospital to get the proper care.”

“When the child was sick it was difficult to get an in-person appointment for a normal cold, cough or fever or anything. Everyone was very cautious and the doctor was calling the child through drive-through and testing and everything. With a very little baby even when she had a normal cold or cough we were very scared it could be COVID... We were not sure what medication to give.”

(6) Parents talked about mental health challenges during the pandemic, stress in the home, and the grief of losing family members and friends to COVID.

“The hardest thing I faced during the pandemic was... a couple of my friends who were really young got impacted by COVID and when they died we weren't even able to attend their funerals, that was really the hardest thing.”

“Mental health [was the hardest thing about the pandemic]... The pandemic took my mom out, so it really affected the whole household because she was our only family besides my husband. It really messed us up.”

“[My husband] got laid off for the pandemic and he stayed home with the kids but it was very stressful, especially dealing with the [now] 6-year-old. At the time she was bouncing off the walls, and we didn't know how to control her... It was an adjustment, it was hard. We didn't have a social life...”

“After COVID a lot of family stopped visiting, and I stopped visiting my family members... We were always going to everybody's house or they were coming here, sharing family time, the kids together playing around... and when the

COVID started...they all spread away. There's no family meetings or kids playing around. And that really affected the kids, because they were used to going to classes and playing and then after that stopped, they wanted to keep going out but... it's hard to explain to a toddler that you can go out but you can't touch this kid or you cannot get near people, or don't put your hands in your mouth when kids put their hands in their mouths a lot. So it's hard, really, really hard... It has affected my kids a lot, because first they were used to going outside playing and seeing a lot of people, different faces... When we had to be inside the house locked up, they were crying a lot, they were fighting... and me personally, I have stress, anxiety, depression – it was hard.”