

SUPPORTING YOUNG CHILDREN AND THEIR FAMILIES FROM AFAR: EARLY EDUCATORS' AND CAREGIVERS' REMOTE ENGAGEMENT

December 2020

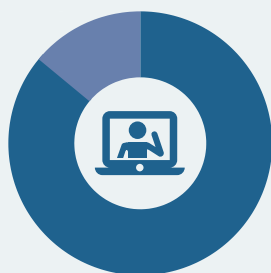
Brief 4

WHAT DO WE KNOW?

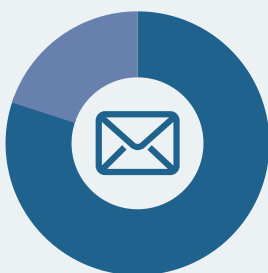
Although most early education and care programs ceased brick-and-mortar operations due to the COVID-19 pandemic, educators' and caregivers' efforts to support their students' learning and development did not stop. Our survey of educators and caregivers across Massachusetts showed that almost all educators and caregivers continued to engage with children and families remotely. Most educators and caregivers provided some form of online instruction to children in their settings (86%), including live sessions and pre-recorded lessons on platforms like Zoom and Google Hangouts.

Ongoing communication with children and families was also a key component of the remote work undertaken by educators and caregivers, as most of them reported emailing (80%) and making phone calls to or texting with families (76%). Social media and video calls were also popular methods for staying connected. A little over half of educators and caregivers provided physical materials to children and families (54%). Materials ranged from educational materials, such as books and games, to essential supports, such as food and diapers.

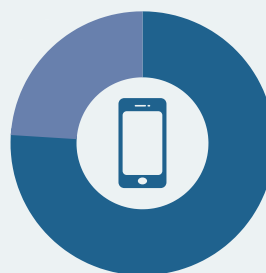
“ We do not usually support "screen time" for young children, but we have found it helpful to do Zoom circle times and some small group times for children. It helps them feel a connection with friends and teachers. ”



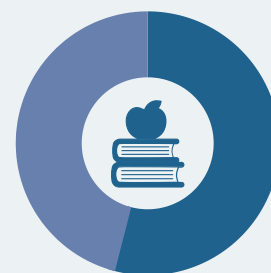
86% provided some form of online instruction



80% connected with families via email



76% connected with families via phone or text



54% provided physical materials

Although educators and caregivers have worked creatively to support children from afar, many in our sample were candid about the challenges of engaging remotely with young children. Even in the best circumstances, it can be difficult to capture young children's attention for sustained periods of time; doing so through a screen can be all the more challenging. Moreover, educators and caregivers now rely on support from families like never before as young children depend on adults to participate in remote learning. Educators' and caregivers' efforts to use new technologies and engage in deep family partnerships all take place in the context of navigating the pandemic with their own families.

“ The balance of staying connected with parents, up to date with daycare requirements/policies/virtual trainings, children's school/work, household chores, limited physical activities for kids to exercise and get energy out, with my own mental and physical health, is a real challenge. ”

WHAT CAN WE DO?

Many early education and care programs continue remote work as the pandemic persists nationwide. Although distance learning is a particular challenge with young children and cannot replicate the rich, responsive nature of in-person instruction and care, there are a number of ways to support the early educators and caregivers charged with engaging with young children and their families from afar:



Share strategies that facilitate strong, ongoing communication with families.

Families are essential partners in distance learning and building consistent lines of communication with parents and guardians can enrich remote activities. Moreover, positive, ongoing communication with educators and caregivers can make families feel more supported and empowered to foster their young children's learning at home. Effective strategies for establishing ongoing communication and partnership with families include understanding families' [preferred communication methods](#) (e.g., text, email, social media) and setting up a schedule for regular check-ins.



Support adaptation of existing, developmentally appropriate learning activities for remote formats.

Common early education and care activities, such as dramatic play and block building, cannot be directly replicated in an online context, but there is room for creative adaptation. This might look like educators encouraging children to act out new vocabulary words during an online read-aloud, for example. Adapting common activities for the online space is likely to require a mix of formats, including live online and pre-recorded sessions, as well as whole and small group sessions. Whereas live online sessions are a great way to build community and support children's social skills, pre-recorded sessions that review material and concepts can often provide a flexible option that fits a variety of schedules. Providing educators with collaborative planning time and concrete examples of early learning activities adapted for online settings can support the development of high-quality remote learning activities that meet the diverse needs of children and families.



Offer accessible professional supports for early educators and caregivers.

Many early educators and caregivers are now using remote learning technologies for the first time. Providing educators and caregivers with clear, actionable information about how to use various digital platforms can ensure educators and caregivers are able to successfully navigate distance learning. Making learning technology experts accessible can also help educators and caregivers apply learning technologies in their own contexts.

Methodology: This brief is based on findings from a survey of 693 early educators and caregivers representing 310 early learning programs in Massachusetts. Surveys were completed between April 21 and June 17, 2020, a period when early education and care programs were still shuttered under state mandate (with the exception of a small number of emergency child care programs operating for the children of frontline workers and vulnerable families).

For additional information, see the full report: [Pandemic Meets Preschool: Impacts of the COVID-19 Outbreak on Early Education and Care in Massachusetts](#).

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