



COVID-19 Turns Child Care Programs Upside Down

By Sharon Easterling, Partner, Opportunities Exchange

In a few short weeks, the Coronavirus Pandemic has turned our world upside down. In the early childhood education world, two things we have always known about our work are now playing out before us in real time.

The first truth is this: **Our work is vital to a functioning society.** For years advocates have discussed “a day without daycare” to demonstrate the critical role of child care. The prospect of asking parents to go a day without child care seemed too daunting; now that scenario has been thrust upon us. And yes, the absence of child care has a devastating impact on the world of work and it is self-evident that child care is an “essential service”.

The second truth laid bare in this crisis is: **the fragile economic condition of our child care system.** Discussions about continuing to guarantee subsidy payments to providers are helpful, but insufficient because the vast majority of child care revenue comes from private parent tuition payments. Our current market-based system not only results in inadequate levels of support (especially for the youngest children in the system), but it also undermines any level of durability in the child care infrastructure. If parents aren’t working, they cannot be expected to pay for child care; and if funding dries up, there is likely to be no child care system when normal life resumes.

Is there a way to preserve our programs, protect the workforce, and provide essential services while we wait for the storm to pass? It is encouraging to hear talk about relief packages from federal leaders. I offer a few “friendly amendments” to these ideas that could make all the difference for our child care infrastructure.

Protecting the workforce

Child Care workforce compensation is problematic in the best of economic times, but chronic low pay has made ECE educators among the most vulnerable among us. We need an unemployment compensation package that guarantees full salary for those earning under \$75,000/year and waives future penalties on employers who use it. Centers who must temporarily close should have the option to furlough employees and know that both their employees and their businesses will have a safety net.

Protecting child care businesses

Federal level discussions about economic relief for industries (airline, cruise, etc.) have also acknowledged the need to protect small businesses. Creating a pool of funds to ensure that businesses remain viable while their doors are shuttered will be essential to retaining our child care business infrastructure. Just as the workforce is precariously situated from chronic under funding —so are child care businesses. Rare is the program able to build cash reserves that would fund a few months of operations during closures.

When this crisis ends, we need to have a serious discussion about how we build a child care infrastructure that is resilient enough to survive challenges. How can Shared Service Alliances build stronger, more stable child care programs that have a greater capacity to withstand more typical business cycles?

Supporting First Responders

Perhaps the most vexing problem is how to provide child care services for our front-line essential service workers—health care, police and fire, and other critical workers. There are no perfect solutions, but guidelines are emerging from local communities that can begin to shape our response:

- Keeping groups of children small and consistent (and including daily health checks) via lower ratios in classrooms as well as family child care and new in-home care options
- Encouraging staff who can work from home to do so. This means maximizing the capacity of automation (which ECE has been loathe to do) and testing new leadership and supervision structures
- Recruiting child care workers who are willing and able to serve as ‘ECE first responders’ in these challenging times and offering higher compensation as “hazard pay”
- Deep, regular cleaning of facilities and rigorous attention to health and safety routines
- Supporting shared nursing and health care staff as well as regular communication with local health and medical facilities
- Daily communication with families, via best practice use of technology and mobile app

At Opportunities Exchange, our core value—Together we are Better—is truer now more than ever. What ideas and suggestions are you considering? How are you managing through this unprecedented challenge? We’d love to hear from you and share your stories in our virtual Shared Services community.

Above all else...take care of yourselves and those around you.




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