

# CAREGIVING CHANGES FOR WORKING FAMILIES RAISING YOUNG CHILDREN DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

January 2021

By: Madeleine deBlois, ScD; Kara Haberstock Tanoue, MA; & Michele Walsh, PhD

The authors are part of the Community Research, Evaluation, & Development (CRED) Team at the University of Arizona <https://cals.arizona.edu/fcs/cred>

## INTRODUCTION

The pandemic's effect on traditional school and child care arrangements can be enormously stressful for parents and caregivers and has the potential to widen pre-existing inequities in work, income, and well-being. Mothers, particularly of young children, are reducing their working hours much more than fathers and women who do not have children.<sup>1,2</sup> A survey of working parents in five countries showed that parents are spending 27 additional hours per week on education and household tasks since the pandemic, and women in particular are spending 15 more hours on these tasks than men.<sup>3</sup> Women also reported sleeping fewer hours and being more worried about their mental well-being than men surveyed,<sup>3</sup> a finding echoed in another study that found higher rates of psychological distress among women with children than women without children during the pandemic.<sup>1</sup> Several studies have found a drop in publications, research productivity, and working hours for female academics and scientists compared to their male peers.<sup>4-6</sup>

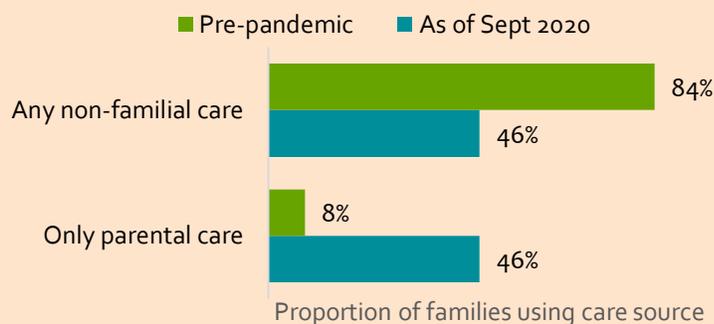


Photo by Standsome Worklifestyle on Unsplash

## UARIZONA RESEARCH

The UArizona Care Study aims to (1) estimate how many employees and students from UArizona are raising children and (2) document the burden and potential implications of these responsibilities on parents & caregivers during the pandemic. All UArizona employees and students were eligible to participate in a short survey including questions on their UArizona role, stress level, and whether they identify as a primary caregiver for a minor. Those identifying as a primary caregiver for a child were invited to a longer survey (customized by UArizona role) about their experience with childcare and school disruptions during the COVID-19 pandemic, including managing caregiving responsibilities with their responsibilities working and/or studying at UArizona. As of October 23, 2020, 3790 employees (staff & faculty) had completed the short survey. The 2793 staff respondents represent 29% of staff, and the 977 faculty respondents represent 31% of faculty. The data presented in this brief represent the 270 employees who completed the longer parent/caregiver survey and were raising at least one child under age five. Study details are available at: <https://cals.arizona.edu/fcs/cred/UAcare>

**During the pandemic, working families are much more likely to rely on parents – not outside sources like child care programs – to provide care for their young children.**



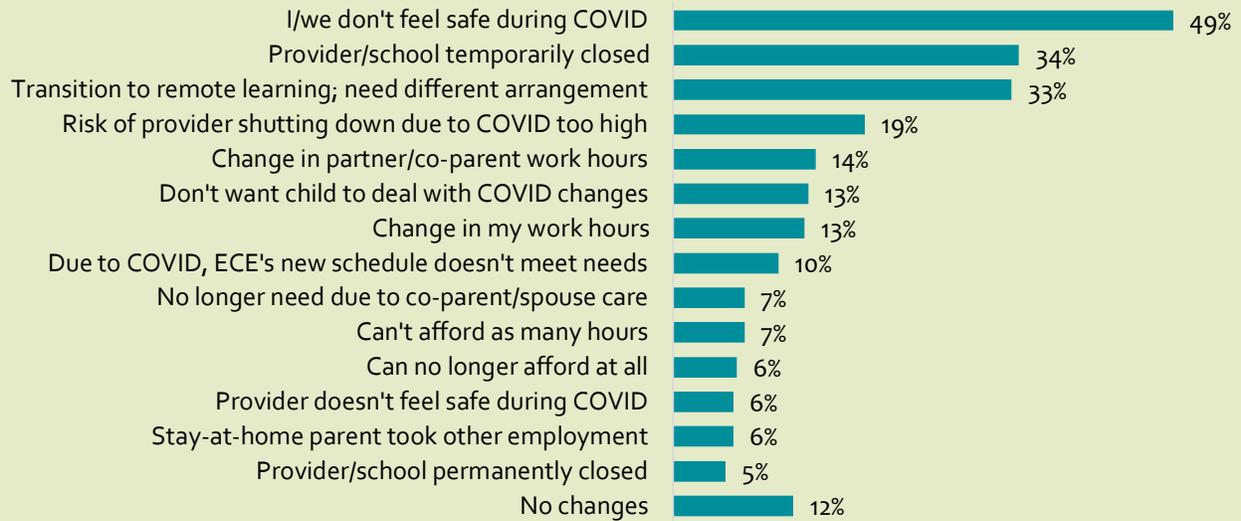
Before the pandemic, a large majority (84%) of families raising young children relied on some sort of non-familial care, with nearly three-quarters of families using early care & education (ECE) programs. As of September, 2020, that dropped to less than half (46%). Meanwhile, the proportion of families where **only** parents were caregiving for the children jumped nearly six-fold, from 8% to 46%. All in all, nearly three-quarters of families with young children experienced a disruption to their child care as a result of the pandemic.

### References

1. Zamarro G, Perez-Arce F, Prados MJ. *Gender Differences in the Impact of COVID-19*; 2020. <https://dornsife.usc.edu/news/stories/3234/understanding-coronavirus-survey-gender-disparities/>
2. Collins C, Landivar LC, Ruppner L, Scarborough WJ. COVID-19 and the Gender Gap in Work Hours. *Gender, Work Organ*. Published online 2020:0-2. doi:10.1111/gwao.12506 <https://www.bcg.com/publications/2020/helping-working-parents-ease-the-burden-of-covid-19>
3. Krentz M, Kos E, Green A, Garcia-Alonso J. Easing the COVID-19 Burden on Working Parents | BCG. Boston Consulting Group. Published May 21, 2020. Accessed August 11, 2020.
4. Cui R, Ding H, Zhu F. Gender Inequality in Research Productivity During the COVID-19 Pandemic. *SSRN Electron J*. 2020;(June). doi:10.2139/ssrn.3623492
5. Johnston E, Barnett A, Bhaskaran M, et al. The Impact of COVID-19 on Women in the STEM Workforce. *Rapid Res Inf Forum*. 2020;(May). <https://www.science.org.au/sites/default/files/rrif-covid19-women-stem-workforce.pdf>
6. Myers KR, Tham WY, Yin Y, et al. Unequal effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on scientists. *Nat Hum Behav*. Published online 2020. doi:10.1038/s41562-020-0921-y

## Nearly 9 in 10 families had altered child care arrangements as of fall 2020.

Reasons varied (see figure for details), but safety and ECE provider closures played major roles.



Nearly half (49%) of families felt that sending a child back to their prior care arrangement during the pandemic was unsafe. Over a third (34%) of families had no choice on whether to send their child back to a former care provider as that provider was still closed or operating remotely in September; 1 in 20 families noted that their prior provider had permanently closed. Shifts in parent/caregiver work schedules and ECE schedules also drove changes. Economic challenges brought forth during the pandemic (e.g., job loss or reduction in wages) were at play as well, with about 1 in 8 families noting they could no longer afford as much or any of the child care they had used prior to the pandemic. About 1 in 6 families were paying to hold an ECE spot they weren't currently using.

## Mental health concerns have risen, and parents & caregivers experience stress as a result of changes in child care

- 37% of parents/caregivers had symptoms of anxiety disorder
- 23% of parents/caregivers had symptoms of depressive disorder
- These rates were similar among Arizonans overall during the same time in the COVID-19 pandemic,<sup>7</sup> but are several times higher than pre-pandemic population rates (about 8% for anxiety and 7% for depression, nationally).

### Top Stressors for Parents & Caregivers

- Figuring out a caregiving plan for my child(ren)
- Keeping my family healthy
- Coping with uncertainty related to child care or preschool
- My child(ren)'s development & education
- Directly caring for my child(ren)

## How to support working parents and caregivers

Eighty-five percent of parents/caregivers reported needing some sort of accommodation to continue working as they managed caring for a young child during the pandemic. Over half had considered leaving their job in order to manage their caregiving responsibilities. Although our study focused on University of Arizona families, their experiences and needs reflect those of working parents and caregivers across the U.S. Here are ways employers can help support families:

- ✓ Continue to allow & encourage **remote work** whenever possible until schools & ECEs are fully operational.
- ✓ Embrace **flexible work schedules** whenever possible.
- ✓ Create **family-friendly workplaces**, i.e., ones that allow children to accompany parents if it is safe to do so. Provide or support on-site or nearby child care if possible. Ensure that private breastfeeding/lactation spaces are available.
- ✓ Have – and communicate – clear organizational plans to eliminate or **minimize any negative career impacts** that could arise (in ordinary years) from reduced productivity.
- ✓ If your organization offers **child care benefits**, work to make these as flexible as possible (e.g., usable to pay a nanny or informal child care provider, not just a licensed center) during the pandemic. Consider increasing these benefits or offering them if not currently available.

7. National Center for Health Statistics. Anxiety and Depression, Household Pulse Survey. 2020. <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/covid19/pulse/mental-health.htm>