

Installment #2: A Little About the Experiences of Children and Families/Guardians of Our Youngest Participants, June 8, 2020

The Access and Engagement Survey probed a wide range of families/guardians (referred to as families for the remainder of this installment) and professionals who have been impacted by changes in early intervention services and preschool education due to COVID-19. In this second installment we want to tell you a little about how early intervention services and supports have changed for the families of children with visual impairments under 3 years of age and our preschool children. Preschool children were those under the age of 7 who were not enrolled in kindergarten during the 2019-2020 school year.

Demographic Data

We received 126 surveys from families regarding the experiences of 139 individual children who were either enrolled in early intervention or preschool. There were 13 families who completed surveys for both an early intervention age child and a preschool age child.

- There were 118 families from the United States and 8 families from Canada.
- 72 surveys were completed by families whose child was receiving early intervention services.
- 67 surveys were completed by families whose child was in preschool.

Of the families who provided their zip or postal code we know they represented 27 states plus Nova Scotia. States with the highest response rate were Colorado (n=12), Texas (n=11), Georgia (n=5), Massachusetts (n=5), Pennsylvania (n=5), California (n=4), and Washington (n=4).

Who Are the Early Intervention Families?

There were 66 families in the United States and 6 in Canada whose child was receiving early intervention services. The children's age ranges were:

- 28 (38.9%) were 30 months and 1 day to 3 years
- 17 (23.6%) were 2 years and 1 day to 30 months
- 6 (8.3%) were 18 months and 1 day to 2 years
- 8 (11.1%) were 1 year and 1 day to 18 months
- 7 (9.7%) were 6 months and 1 day to 1 year
- 6 (8.3%) were birth to 6 months

It's not surprising to us that the majority of families answering the survey had children over age 2. We were pleased to see representation from families of younger children.

When asked to describe their child, families told us the following:

- 8 (11.1%) described their child as blind (cannot see more than light and large objects) and has no other learning and/or medical challenges
- 18 (25%) described their child as having low vision (some usable vision) and no other learning and/or medical challenges
- 12 (16.7%) described their child as blind (cannot see more than light and large objects) and has other learning and/or medical challenges (e.g., a hearing impairment, motor delays).
- 34 (47.2%) described their child as having low vision (some usable vision) and has other learning and/or medical challenges (e.g., a hearing impairment, motor delays).

Typically, it is reported in the literature that 50% to 70% of children have additional learning and/or medical challenges. The families of 63.9% of those completing the survey reported that their birth to 3 year old child had additional challenges beyond visual impairment.

How has COVID-19 Impacted Early Intervention Service Delivery?

The COVID-19 pandemic is having a negative impact on young children's access to early intervention services. When asked about whether services changed after March 1, 2020, 32 (44.4%) of families responded "yes" with only 20 (27.8%) responding "no." There were 6 (8.3%) of the families who were unsure if early intervention services had changed for their family.

Families were asked how often their family received early intervention services prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. They reported:

- 25 (34.7%) twice or more per week
- 14 (19.4%) once a week
- 7 (9.7%) once every 2 weeks
- 6 (8.3%) once a month
- 5 (6.9%) selected "other" with 2 families stating they were not receiving early-intervention services prior to the pandemic.

After the COVID-19 pandemic struck, these same percentages plummeted with families reporting they received early intervention services for their child:

- 6 (8.3%) twice or more per week

- 12 (16.7%) once a week
- 6 (8.3%) once every 2 weeks
- 6 (2.8%) once a month
- 6 (2.8%) less than once a month
- 5 (6.9%) selected "other" with 2 families stating they received services via telehealth and 3 families responding they were not receiving any services (One of those families also stated they did not receive service prior to COVID-19.)

How has COVID-19 Impacted Communication with and Support from Early Intervention Teams?

The COVID-19 pandemic is also having an impact on the communication families are having with their early intervention teams. We learned that:

- 24 (33.3%) had the same amount of communication
- 14 (19.4%) had increased communication
- 12 (16.7%) had very little or limited communication
- 2 (2.8%) had no communication

When asked about the level of support they are receiving from the early intervention team, families reported:

- 26 (36.1%) had similar levels of support
- 14 (19.4%) had increased levels of support
- 11 (15.3%) had very little or limited support
- 3 (4.2%) had no support

Who are the Preschool-Aged Children?

There were 65 families in the United States and 4 in Canada whose child was receiving preschool education. The children's age ranges were:

- 2 (3.0%) 7 years old, but not yet in kindergarten
- 3 (4.5%) 6 years old, but not yet in kindergarten
- 19 (28.4%) 5 years old, but not yet in kindergarten
- 29 (43.0%) 4 years old
- 9 (13.4%) 3 years old

When asked to describe their child, families told us the following:

- 8 (11.9%) described their child as blind (cannot see more than light and large objects) and has no other learning and/or medical challenges
- 14 (20.9%) described their child as having low vision (some usable vision) and no other learning and/or medical challenges

- 8 (11.9%) described their child as blind (cannot see more than light and large objects) and has other learning and/or medical challenges (e.g., a hearing impairment, motor delays).
- 32 (47.8%) described their child as having low vision (some usable vision) and has other learning and/or medical challenges (e.g., a hearing impairment, motor delays).

Similar to the children receiving early intervention services, 59.7% of children enrolled in preschool had additional learning and/or medical challenges.

How has COVID-19 Impacted Preschool Education?

Families of preschool-aged children were provided a list of statements about school attendance and asked to select the one that applied to their child.

- 2 (3.0%) selected "Before the COVID-19 pandemic my child attended school in a school building. Currently my child is still attending school in the school building."
- 47 (70.1%) selected "Before the COVID-19 pandemic my child attended school in a school building. Currently my child is not attending school in the school building."
- 1 (1.5%) selected "My child was not attending school in a school building before the COVID-19 pandemic."

Families were asked about how often their child attended preschool. They reported:

- 22 (32.8%) 5 days per week
- 12 (17.9%) 4 days per week
- 3 (4.5%) 3 days per week
- 7 (10.4%) 2 days per week
- 1 (1.5%) 1 day per week
- 2 (17.9%) families selected "other" with one child attending a preschool for children with visual impairments 3 days a week and a church preschool 2 days a week. The other child attended classroom preschool 3 days a week and received early intervention services at home 2 days a week.

We wanted to understand which professionals were serving the preschool children prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

- Teacher of students with visual impairments (TSVI)

39 (58.2%) had been receiving services
5 (7.5%) had not been receiving services
1 (1.5%) was unsure if the child had been receiving services

- Orientation and mobility (O&M) instructor
31 (46.4%) had been receiving services
16 (23.9%) had not been receiving services
5 (7.5%) were unsure if the child had been receiving services

How has the Response to COVID-19 Impacted Families' Communication with Vision Service Professionals?

Only 32 (47.8%) families reported that their child's TSVI had been in contact with their family regarding plans for TSVI service during the COVID-19 pandemic. Only 22 (32.8%) families reported that their child was currently working with a TSVI.

Twenty (29.9%) families reported that their child's O&M instructor had been in contact with their family regarding plans for O&M service during the COVID-19 pandemic. Twelve (17.9%) families reported that their child was currently working with an O&M instructor.

How has the Response to COVID-19 Impacted Preschool Students' Access to Specialized Equipment?

Children with visual impairments rely on a wide variety of specialized equipment to access and engage in education. These tools range from braille to optical devices like hand-held magnifiers or electronic magnification devices to technology such as iPads, tablets, and even braille notetakers. Access to this equipment is critical for leveling the playing field of learning and ensuring children have access to the same curriculum as their fully-sighted peers.

When asked about their child's access to specialized equipment at home during the COVID-19 pandemic, only 18 (26.9%) families of preschool children answered "My child has all the tools at home they need to continue learning at home." Forty-nine (73.1%) families did not select this option but went on to select tools that their child had at school that were not available at home during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the future, our research team needs to look at this information carefully as not all preschool children were receiving preschool services during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In Installment #3 we will share information from the families of our older students with visual impairments, including those with multiple disabilities and deafblindness.