

Open Strong

Five Crucial Issue Areas for State Early Childhood Advocates and Policymakers to Promote the Reopening of a Strong, Safe, Equitable, and Well-Funded Child-Care Sector in Their States

A strong, safe, equitable, and well-funded child care system is essential in order to provide developmentally appropriate care for young children and enable parents to participate in the labor market.

INTRODUCTION: Child Care is Essential



Download the full report at earlysuccess.org/openstrong

Our youngest children are experiencing this pandemic during the most critical period of their brain development, when they are laying the foundation for future learning and lifelong success. While the threat of the COVID-19 virus may be temporary, the impact on our youngest children and their families will be long lasting. Parents and caregivers should not have to choose between work and their children's safety and healthy development.

A strong child care sector is necessary to bolster a robust economic recovery. With no child care, there is no recovery. This fundamental truth, however, must be balanced equally with the health and developmental needs of our future workforce, our children. State governments have a role in ensuring that essential child care infrastructure is in place support working parents and child development — and, now to jumpstart the economy. This Open Strong document

was developed to assist state advocates in raising key issues and questions, to provoke conversations and solutions that are particular to operating child care programs during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Our youngest children and families of color, those living in poverty, and those from rural communities will continue to be disproportionately impacted by COVID-19. Just as there must be a commitment to protecting all people from contracting and ultimately dying from the virus, there must also be a recognition that the economic impact of the pandemic falls disproportionately upon these populations. Accordingly, policy choices regarding the reopening and rebuilding of the child care system without consideration of equity will exacerbate inequities among these children, families, and early childhood professionals. Swift state action is critical to address the disparate impact of the pandemic and recession.

Open Strong means...



A significant investment of state and federal funds.

According to a survey conducted by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), 50% of child care centers and 27% of family child care homes have closed.¹ Revised health and safety standards, including lower staff-child ratios, smaller group sizes, and required cleaning supplies and personnel to ensure safety will all require additional funding.



Clear and timely communication.

Child care programs, the child care workforce, and families need to understand new health and safety guidance, regulations, and procedures to slow the spread of COVID-19.



Collecting real-time supply and demand data.

States need reliable data on where care is available and parent preferences, in order to better direct resources.



Building the essential child care infrastructure.

The way we fund and deliver child care requires new ways of thinking to meet the needs of children, parents and employers.

In order to keep families safe and strong, and support economic recovery, states must ensure the strength and viability of their child care infrastructure.

For this to happen, leaders must carefully address five crucial issue areas:

- 1 Health, Safety, and Quality**
- 2 Parents' Ability and Willingness to Send Children to Child Care**
- 3 Child Care Availability and Affordability**
- 4 Transitioning from Emergency Child Care**
- 5 Child Care Infrastructure**

These guiding principles, considerations, questions, and recommendations support economic recovery by advancing the needs of children, families, and child care staff through a safe, strong, and supported child care reopening.

¹ https://www.naeyc.org/sites/default/files/globally-shared/downloads/PDFs/resources/topics/naeyc_coronavirus_ongoingeffectsonchildcare.pdf

ISSUE AREA 1: Health, Safety, and Quality

Guiding Principle 1: The physical and mental health of children, families, and child care staff are the primary decision drivers of when and how to reopen child care.

Guiding Principle 2: All child care providers have the knowledge, support, and financial resources needed to ensure the health, safety, and social and emotional well-being of the children and families they serve and the staff they employ.

Guiding Principle 3: States adopt health and safety standards of care and protocols that are scientifically based and responsive to the developmental needs of young children and the unique circumstances of working with young children. Incorporate the comprehensive Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)² and American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP)³ child care standards of care into state child care reopening plans.

Guiding Principle 4: The early care and education workforce have the provisions necessary to protect their health and well-being, including access to supplies, unemployment benefits, and health insurance.

Guiding Principle 5: Expert advisors are available when health and safety measures interfere with the developmental needs of children or are very difficult or impossible to implement.

ISSUE AREA 2: Parents' Ability and Willingness to Send Children to Child Care

Guiding Principle 1: Data about parents' needs and preferences drive policy and funding decisions about which child care services reopen. Data on the demand for child care is collected in multiple ways and with special attention to hearing the voices of underrepresented communities.

Guiding Principle 2: Parents are able to find safe, affordable, quality child care in a variety of settings (centers, family child care homes, care by a family member, friend or neighbor, care in a child's home provided by a consistent trained professional).

Guiding Principle 3: Parents have easy access to clear information regarding new health and safety protocols.

ISSUE AREA 3: Child Care Availability and Affordability

Guiding Principle 1: Increasing the availability and affordability of safe, quality child care is critical to getting America back to work and to supporting children's development and learning.

Guiding Principle 2: Use state and federal funding to ensure that parents have equitable access to quality care that meets their needs, with focused attention on ensuring adequate supply in underserved communities.

ISSUE AREA 4: Transitioning from Emergency Child Care

Guiding Principle 1: Provide clear plans and timely communication to smoothly transition children and families from emergency child care to more permanent care settings.

Guiding Principle 2: Ensure that providers who sacrificed during the peak of the pandemic to provide care for the children of essential workers are adequately supported in making the transition.

ISSUE AREA 5: Child Care Infrastructure

Guiding Principle 1: Real-time data collected by states on child care supply and demand is used to inform decisions on early care and education finance and policy, as well as to help families locate and enroll their child(ren) in care.

Guiding Principle 2: Adequate compensation and benefits — including health insurance, paid sick time, and professional development pathways — are provided to the child care workforce, with special emphasis on classroom teachers, and sustained beyond the pandemic.

Guiding Principle 3: States incentivize all center- and home-based child care programs to use an automated Child Care Management System for long-term financial sustainability and to support the collection of real-time supply and demand data.

Guiding Principle 4: Use cost-based methods to establish child care reimbursement rates that are more accurate and equitable than relying on data from market price surveys.

Guiding Principle 5: The rate-setting, eligibility, and co-payment changes established by states for COVID-19 emergency child care are continued and adopted broadly for all child care policy going forward while ensuring quality and safety measures are firmly held.

Guiding Principle 6: Small, independent child care programs are encouraged to join networks or partner with umbrella organizations that enable scale and administrative stability.

Guiding Principle 7: Technical assistance staff is deployed in new ways that focus on helping center-based and home-based early care and education programs re-open.

² <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/schools-childcare/index.html>

³ <https://services.aap.org/en/pages/2019-novel-coronavirus-covid-19-infections/clinical-guidance/guidance-related-to-childcare-during-covid-19/>

CONCLUSION

As this document has emphasized numerous times, a strong, safe, equitable, and well-funded child care system is essential to provide developmentally appropriate care for young children and enable parents to participate in the labor market. Prior to the effects of COVID-19, the child care system was broken and the pandemic has exacerbated and demonstrated its weaknesses. Most parents cannot afford to pay the true cost of quality child care and child care programs struggle to cover operating costs, especially with the increased costs associated with operating safely during the pandemic. Furthermore, access to quality child care is too often determined by poverty, race, and geography. Our current child care system fails to advance equitable outcomes for all children, families, and early childhood professionals.

The key issues, considerations, questions, and state examples in this document can be used in advocacy efforts with state leaders to develop strategies and supports to improve child care for children, families, child care staff, communities, and the economy. There must be substantial public investments to improve and sustain the child care system or there will not be economic recovery.

These key issue areas and guiding principles should form the foundation of advocacy efforts with state leaders to develop strategies and supports to improve child care for children, families, child care staff, communities, and the economy.

ABOUT THIS GUIDANCE

This document was compiled by the Open Strong Working Group of the Alliance for Early Success. The Alliance wishes to acknowledge and thank the state and national advocates who spent many hours collaborating to create this document. The Open Strong working group members are:

- Colorado - Christina Walker, Clayton Early Learning
- Massachusetts - Amy O'Leary, Strategies for Children
- Missouri - Casey Hanson, Kids Win Missouri
- North Carolina - Michele Rivest, NC Early Education Coalition
- New Hampshire - Christina D'Allesandro, MomsRising
- Ohio - Lynanne Gutierrez, Groundwork Ohio
- Rhode Island - Leanne Barrett, Rhode Island KIDSCOUNT
- Texas - Nneka Ibekwe-Okafor, Children at Risk
- Wisconsin - Paula Drew, Wisconsin Early Childhood Association
- Center for Law and Social Policy - Christine Johnson-Staub
- Opportunities Exchange - Louise Stoney
- Ounce of Prevention - Judy Reidt-Parker
- Alliance for Early Success - Mimi Aledo-Sandoval
- Gail Nourse, early childhood policy consultant

The Alliance would also like to thank Child Care Aware of America and the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment for reviewing this document and providing helpful feedback.

We are living in rapidly evolving times, and as child care opens more broadly, there may be additional issues to consider, such as operating during a subsequent severe resurgence of the virus or the impacts of decisions regarding the reopening schools in the fall. Recognizing this, this document is the Open Strong Working Group's best thinking on issues impacting the reopening of child care as of June 7, 2020.

