

# What happens when child care runs out? <sup>[1]</sup>

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## EXCERPTS

The American workforce has had a lot to celebrate in recent months. Employment and job opportunities are on the rise, companies are offering more flexibility, and more employees are getting vaccinated and shedding their pajamas in favor of real pants. But there's still a major challenge — many American workers also happen to be parents of young children who need a supportive, nurturing place to learn, play and grow while their parents work.

Decades of science have shown us that high-quality child care promotes positive development, but just as more parents are returning to work, the programs they rely on to support their children's development are closing down and options are running out. The disappearance of child care now, when parents need it most, is one of the most pressing social and economic issues of our time.

Child care is not a new “pandemic problem” — for decades, child care providers have been overworked and underpaid; the need for care has far exceeded available spots; and tuition costs have surpassed what most parents can pay. Rather, it is a longstanding, teetering-on-the-edge-of-collapse issue that the pandemic sent into freefall.

Since the early days of the pandemic, the Rapid Assessment of Pandemic Impact on Development (RAPID) team has been surveying a large, national and longitudinal sample of parents with young children to see how COVID-19 is affecting American families. Early in the pandemic, millions of parents of young children reduced their work hours or quit their jobs when child care centers temporarily closed (including a full third of mothers in the RAPID survey). Over time, some of these closures became permanent and parents returning to work were left with few options. A parent in California told us, “Daycare informed us yesterday that they will be closing permanently. We have two months to find [child care]. If we can't, I will have to leave my job.”

Approximately one-fifth (19 percent) of families in the RAPID survey have experienced disruptions in child care, and it is taking a toll on their emotional well-being. These parents are experiencing more anxiety, depression, stress and loneliness. And previous RAPID data tell us that when parents' well-being declines, there are typically comparable declines in their children's well-being — indeed, we found that the children in families with child care disruptions are having more fear, anxiety and fussiness than families with more stable child care. This all points clearly to the fact that child care challenges are not just a blip in family life logistics; they make day-to-day living difficult and upend the emotional balance of both parents and children.

And the effects of America's child care meltdown go further. It is not just parents and children who are affected. A complementary RAPID survey of child care providers has shown that they suffer alongside the families they serve. Nearly two-thirds (59 percent of child care providers in the survey have experienced recent staff shortages (a significant increase from the pre-pandemic rate of 36 percent). Most of these providers are stressed (86 percent) and burned out (67 percent) as a result. Approximately half of these providers experiencing staff shortages are also more anxious (47 percent) and having a harder time engaging in activities outside of work (41 percent). One teacher in Minnesota told us that “understaffed and over-enrolled classrooms [have left staff] unable to take time off,” while a center director in Nebraska explained, “We are not valued. ... We do not make enough money to support ourselves.”

Providers in the RAPID survey overwhelmingly attribute child care staff shortages to challenges with hiring and retention — 87 percent of child care center directors and 72 percent of home-based providers say that recruiting and retaining qualified staff is harder now than it was before the pandemic. One center director in Washington state told us, “No one is applying for jobs, so it's hard to keep the classrooms afloat. Everyone is stressed and turnover is high.” Another director in Michigan “had to completely close a center because all of the staff left for other better paying or less stressful jobs.”

Over time, staff shortages are putting immense pressure on child care providers, and leaving the workforce or switching fields is becoming a more attractive and/or necessary option. Nearly one-fifth (18 percent) of child care providers surveyed were considering leaving their job or closing their program in the next year, and another 20 percent were considering leaving the field entirely. These providers reported twice as much emotional distress as those not considering a career change, and the situation likely will deteriorate in the coming months without government action. As staff shortages persist, providers who remain will feel more pressure. As their emotional well-being deteriorates, more of them will choose to leave and staff shortages will worsen still. If this cycle isn't broken, disruptions in child care will become more common and the mental health of providers and the families they serve will continue to decline.

What the child care system, its providers and the families who rely on these services need now is to see that the country is behind them. Child care is an essential service and key to the social infrastructure that allows America to work. It is time for Congress to act. Lawmakers have an opportunity to provide the critical investment needed to ensure that child care is affordable, that we build a better supply of available child care options, that we promote quality, and that we support providers who care for our children and families.

Ultimately, we must shift the way that we think about child care in America. Rather than a small logistic that parents are expected to sort out, we must recognize that child care is a fundamental prerequisite for American families to function. If we don't better support child care, it will continue to disappear — and so will a large swath of our country's workforce.

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**Region:** United States <sup>[3]</sup>

**Tags:** child care shortage <sup>[4]</sup>

parents' labour force participation <sup>[5]</sup>

governments <sup>[6]</sup>

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