Research clearly indicates that high-quality preschool programs are one of the most successful education reforms, leading to as much as $17.07 in long-term savings for every dollar invested, by increasing high school and college graduation rates, decreasing arrest rates, and producing other long- and short-term benefits. Yet as the pandemic has shuttered schools across America, preschools have been especially hard hit. For one thing, online education is challenging for young children (picture a group of three-year-olds on a video conference!) who learn best through hands-on activities. The public preschool programs that are particularly vulnerable to shrinking state budgets typically prioritize students from low-income families in order to help close opportunity gaps. Children who live in poverty are also less likely to have access to technology like devices and adequate broadband.

Additionally, children with disabilities are entitled by federal law to receive special education preschool services designed to provide early assistance to help these children long into the future. With therapists and teachers sheltering in place, parents were asked to take on these unfamiliar roles.

In a report published this summer (and updated this past month), NEPC Fellow W. Steven Barnett of Rutgers and Kwanghee Jung of the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) sought to quantify some of these impacts, via a NIEER nationwide survey, administered in May and June to 945 households of children aged three to five who were not yet enrolled in kindergarten. The charts below draw upon that survey and the NIEER report to tell the story of the pandemic’s impact on the nation’s youngest students. All are based exclusively on the NIEER survey results, with the exception of the final chart, which also includes data from the 2019 National Household Education Survey, conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau on behalf of the National Center for Education Statistics. The picture they paint is bleak, with Barnett and Jong predicting that closures could lead to “negative
long-term consequences” that could continue to grow if schools remain closed—unless early childhood programs receive additional funding and resources to facilitate remote instruction, help parents teach their children at home, and compensate for the learning time that has already been lost.

1. Preschool participation rates for three- to five-year-old pre-kindergarteners have plunged during the pandemic.

   ![](http://nepc.colorado.edu/publication/newsletter-pandemic-preschool)

   - Pre-pandemic preschool participation: 61%
   - Remote plus in-person participation: 30%
   - In-person participation during pandemic: 8%

2. Pre-existing inequities have persisted.

   ![](http://nepc.colorado.edu/publication/newsletter-pandemic-preschool)

   - Pre-pandemic preschool participation:
     - Parent has less than a high school education: 31%
     - Some college: 43%
   - Remote plus in-person participation during pandemic:
     - Parent has less than a high school education: 1%
     - High school: 4%
     - Some college: 12%
   - In-person participation during pandemic:
     - Parent has less than a high school education: 19%
     - High school: 20%
     - Some college: 27%
     - Bachelor’s degree or higher: 42%
3. Parents say they have received limited remote support from their children’s preschools.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Support</th>
<th>Percent Who Reported Less Than Once a Week</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arts or crafts</td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading alone or with an adult</td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singing, listening to music</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listening to a story</td>
<td>66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Completing worksheets</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math or science activities</td>
<td>69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical activity</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visiting with a teacher via video chat</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activities with classmates by video chat</td>
<td>72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning apps or games</td>
<td>72%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4. Most parents of children with Individualized Education Programs said their children did not receive the full support they were entitled to under the law.
5. The amount of time parents spend on learning activities hasn’t really changed since the pandemic—which means that mom and dad have been unable to fill the void left by preschool closures.

- Told a story: 38% (47%)
- Worked on arts and crafts: 45% (37%)
- Sang songs: 67% (62%)
- Taught letters, words, numbers: 73% (61%)
- Read to child: 85% (80%)

- Engaged in activity with child three times a week or more DURING the pandemic
- Engaged in activity three times weekly or more BEFORE the pandemic

Again, the full NIEER report authored by Barnett and Jung is available here.

**NEPC Resources on Early Childhood Education**

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