



SUPPORTING CHILD CARE PROVIDERS AND THE DUAL LANGUAGE LEARNERS THEY SERVE DURING THE COVID-19 CRISIS

Insights From a Statewide Survey

Since March 2020, the COVID-19 crisis has dramatically changed the lives of California’s children and their families. As of July, more than three quarters of children lost their child care arrangement due to the pandemic. More than one third of programs remained closed this summer, and this, combined with restrictions on enrollment in programs that were open as well as family economic and health concerns, left many children without formal care arrangements. Dual language learners (DLLs)—children who are learning another language in addition to English and who comprise nearly 60% of children birth to age 5 in California—were disproportionately left out of their early learning and care programs. These were some of the key findings from the [second research brief](#) in a series on COVID-19 and DLLs in the early learning and care system from the American Institutes for Research (AIR) and Early Edge California.¹

This third brief in the series draws on data from the same survey of a representative sample of early learning and care programs in California² and examines the ways in which early learning programs supported these children and

1 Quick, H., White, L., Brodziak de los Reyes, I., Bergey, R., & Carbuca-Abbott, M. (2020). *A system in jeopardy: California's early learning system and its dual language learners during the COVID-19 pandemic*. American Institutes for Research. <https://www.air.org/system-in-jeopardy.pdf>

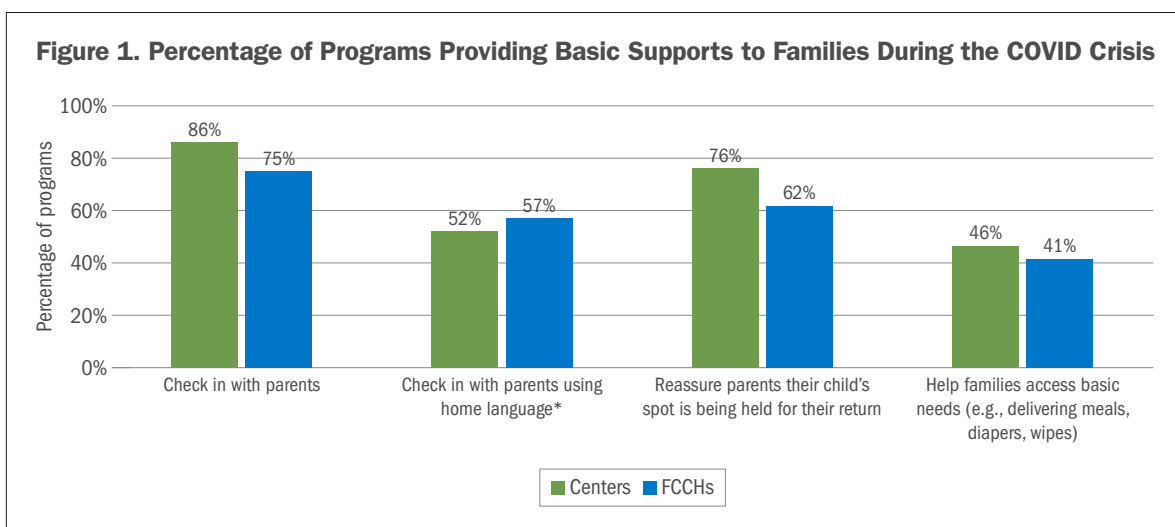
2 The survey was administered to directors from a stratified random sample of California early learning and care programs, including school-based, community-based, Head Start, and State Preschool programs, and family child care homes. Surveys were completed in English or Spanish between June 11 and July 16, 2020. The survey response rate was 34% and statistical adjustments were made to ensure the sample reflects the population of early learning programs.

their families during the program disruptions this summer. Overall, we find that many programs made efforts to maintain connections with these families and support them in various ways, including helping them gain access to basic resources and providing them with ideas for how to engage their children in learning activities. Many centers and a few family child care homes (FCCHs) also engaged children in virtual learning experiences. Although many programs worked to include DLLs in their distance learning opportunities, participation rates among DLLs were lower than for other families. Uncertainty about how to engage DLLs and their families, as well as language and technology barriers, may contribute to lower participation rates. Additional training and guidance are needed to ensure all children and families can participate fully in distance learning.

Many programs reached out to families unable to attend in person to check in on them and offer basic supports during program closures, but communicating with DLL families was challenging

Although a large proportion of children lost care as a result of the pandemic, many early learning programs were still actively engaging with families they had previously served and providing basic supports as of June or July 2020 (Figure 1). Among programs that reported not being able to serve at least some of their children in person, most (86% of centers and 75% of FCCHs) reported that they were reaching out to families—by phone, text, e-mail, or other means—to check on how they were doing. The majority of programs (76% of centers and 62% of FCCHs) reported reaching out to families to reassure them that they would have a spot available for their child upon reopening, responding perhaps to parents' concerns about loss of care as well as programs' need to maintain enrollment for financial stability. Many programs also played a role in connecting families to resources to help them meet basic needs; nearly half (46% of centers and 41% of FCCHs) reported helping families access basic resources such as food and diapers.

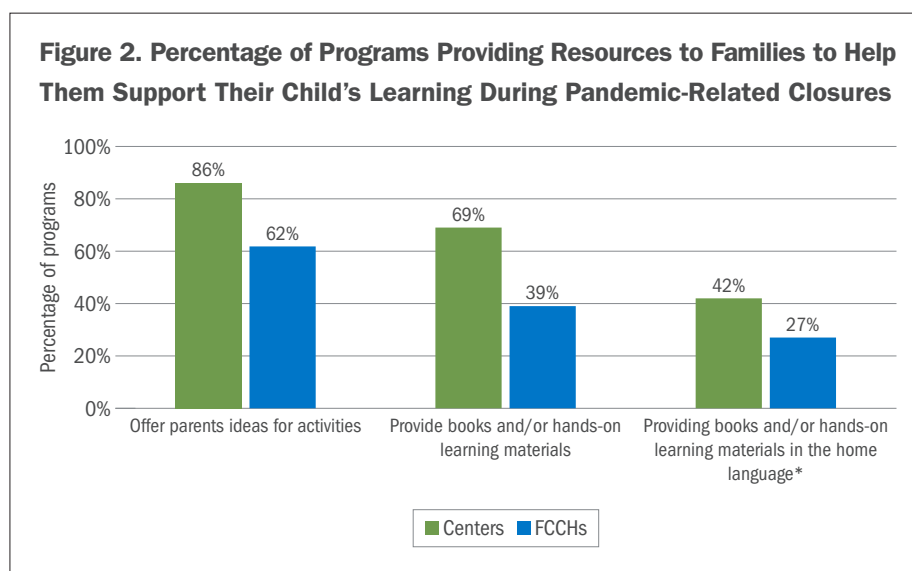
Programs also reported reaching out to families of DLLs and the challenges in doing so. Slightly more than half of programs that serve DLLs (52% of centers and 57% of FCCHs) reported reaching out to these families using their home language to check in on how they are doing (see Figure 1). Two out of five programs (40%) reported that it was more difficult to communicate with families of DLLs than other families, and more than one third (35%) said that families of DLLs were less likely to take advantage of family supports offered by the program. Programs may need additional resources for outreach to ensure that all families get the support they need.



*Percentages reported for this item include only those programs that serve DLLs.

The majority of programs—especially centers—engaged families to support children’s learning at home

Although the loss of child care created a substantial shift in children’s learning routines, most programs engaged in a variety of activities to help parents support their children’s learning during the disruptions. Offering parents ideas for activities to do with their children was a common approach to engaging families in their children’s learning, reported by 86% of centers and 62% of FCCHs (Figure 2). More than two thirds of centers (69%) also reported providing books or other hands-on learning materials to families; fewer FCCHs (39%) reported providing these resources to families. Responding to the specific needs of families of DLLs, some programs (42% of centers and 27% of FCCHs that serve DLLs) also provided these kinds of learning resources in the home language. This approach helps to ensure that families of DLLs have access to the instructional content and can also support their children’s home language development.



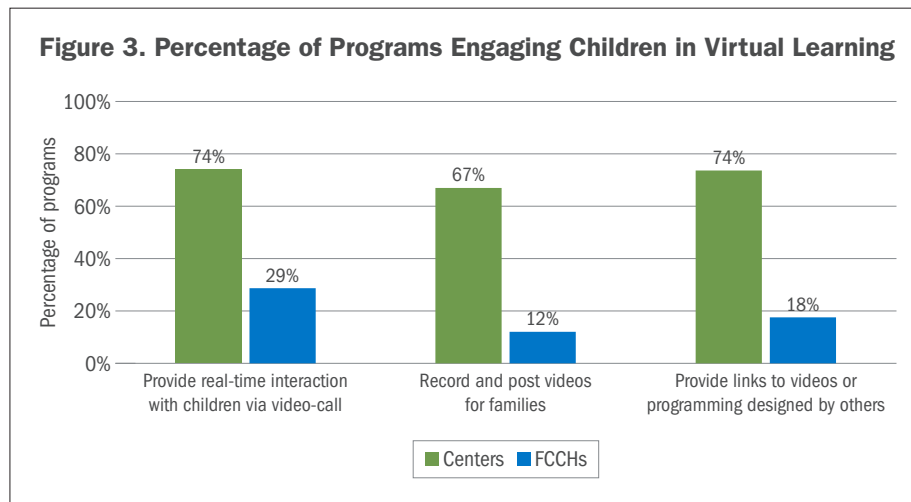
*Percentages reported for this item include only programs that serve DLLs.

Not all programs were able to offer these family engagement opportunities. Three out of four programs (75%) reported a need for ideas about how to communicate with family members and children who could not be served in person on site. A similar proportion (76%) indicated a need for better access to technology (e.g., computers, software, hotspots) for staff so they can communicate with families. Programs reported needing additional information to share directly with parents as well—81% of programs overall indicated that they needed more ideas to share with parents about activities they could do with their children at home. These findings highlight the need for both tangible guidance and logistical supports as programs navigate how to communicate with and support families during closures.

Many centers engaged children directly in virtual learning experiences; few FCCHs did so

Some early learning programs also supported children through virtual learning experiences and resources. Center-based programs were much more likely to offer all types of virtual learning for children, including real-time interaction, recording and posting videos, and providing links to educational programming, compared to family

child care homes (Figure 3). In particular, although 74% of centers provided real-time interactions with children, such as circle time or book reading through a video call, only 29% of FCCHs did so. The majority of centers also recorded and posted videos on YouTube or other websites for families to view (67% of centers) or provided links to videos or programming designed by others (74% of centers); activities that were much less common among FCCHs (12% and 18%, respectively).



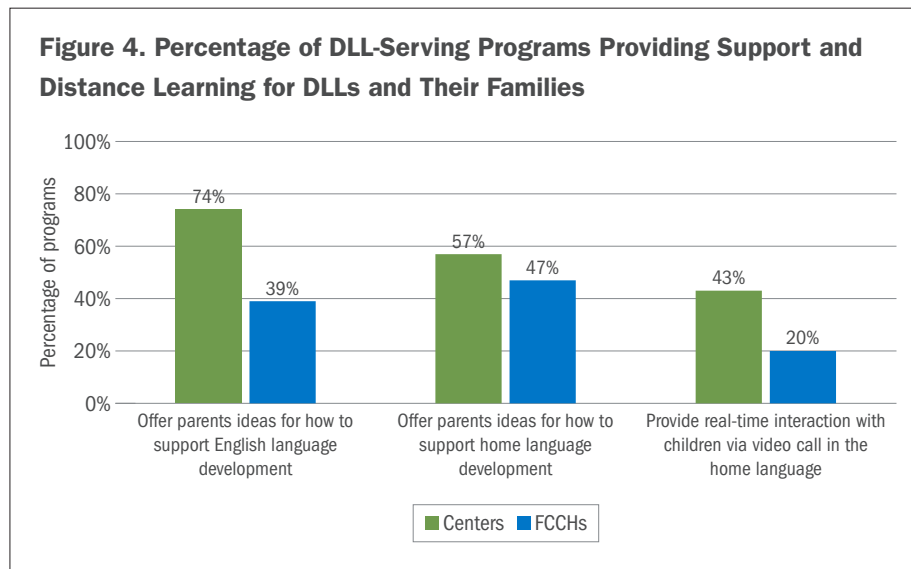
Although many centers and a few FCCHs provided distance learning experiences for children, they expressed some hesitation about the appropriateness of engaging young children virtually. The majority of programs (60%) reported that they felt implementing distance learning with children this young was “impossible.” And many noted that they were not prepared to provide distance learning. Only about half of programs (54%) reported they had the support they needed to provide distance learning, and 84% reported that they need ideas or resources for activities that teachers can use for distance learning. Technology issues for both staff and families were also barriers. More than three quarters of programs highlighted the need for guidance or training for staff on how to use technology (82%) and how to help parents use technology (79%) for distance learning. Distance learning was a new approach to instruction for most programs, and with the possibility of recurring program closures or limitations on in-person instruction, additional supports and resources are needed to ensure that programs can effectively support children’s learning from afar.

Programs that serve DLLs offered some specialized supports for DLLs, although real-time interactions were not common

Many programs serving DLLs provided some supports specifically aimed at helping DLLs access learning opportunities and developing their language skills, though centers and FCCHs differed in their focus. Almost three out of four centers that serve DLLs (74%) offered ideas to parents of DLLs for ways to support their child’s English language development; somewhat fewer (57%) provided ideas for developing the home language. Conversely, FCCHs were more likely to offer parents ideas for how to support home language development (47% did so), while fewer (39%) provided ideas for supporting English language development (Figure 4).

Less common, however, were programs that offered support directly to DLL children in the home language. Only 43% of centers that served DLLs provided real-time virtual interaction opportunities in the home language—

an indication that even among centers that offer any virtual interactions in real time, many do not conduct these sessions in children’s home language(s). Even fewer FCCHs (20%) provided real-time virtual interactions in the home language. Limited opportunities for home language interactions with teachers may mean that many DLLs are not able to benefit from the same opportunities to develop language and engage in educational activities that their monolingual peers have.

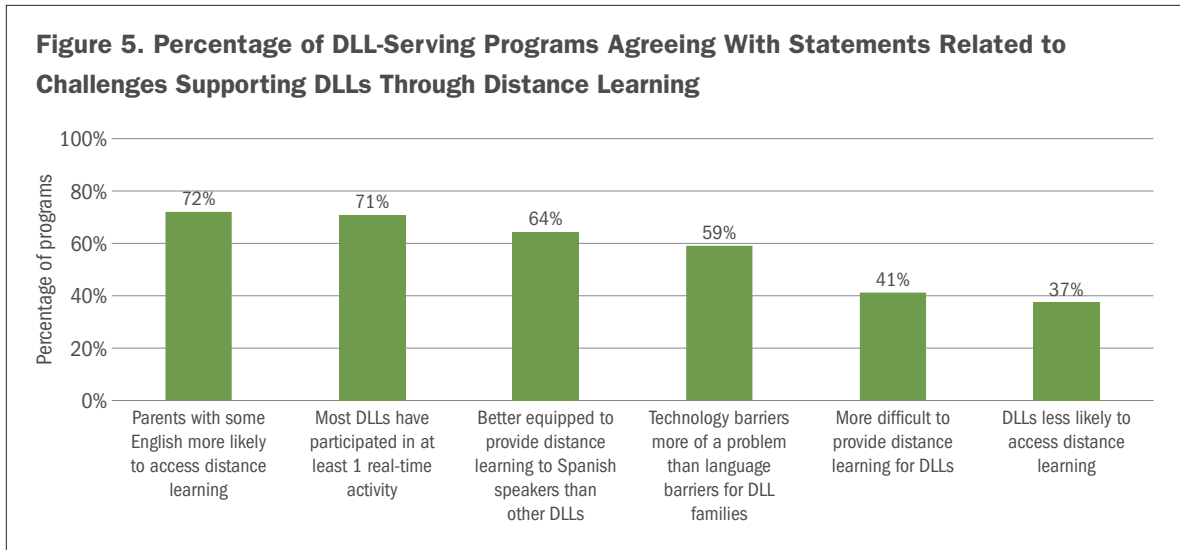


Providers reported challenges including DLLs in distance learning and lower rates of participation for DLLs overall

The majority of DLL-serving programs (71%) that provided some real-time interactions for children said that most or all of their DLLs have participated in their real-time learning activities (Figure 5). However, more than one third (37%) reported that DLLs were less likely than other children to access those distance learning opportunities, and 41% indicated it was more difficult to provide distance learning for DLLs than non-DLLs. Many programs were unsure how best to engage DLLs; only 22% indicated they had received any guidance or resources for serving DLL children during COVID-19, and 73% indicated a need for this guidance.

One primary challenge to engaging DLLs is the potential language barrier. More than seven in ten (72%) programs said children whose parents speak at least some English were more likely to access distance learning offerings. Among those families with more limited English, the Spanish speakers seem to have greater access. Almost two thirds of providers (64%) said they were better equipped to provide distance learning for Spanish speakers than speakers of other languages. Staffing changes at programs as a result of the COVID-19 disruptions may also affect programs’ capacity to support DLLs. About one third (32%) of programs reported that they had lost staff who can speak with DLLs in their home language due to COVID-19, and 72% wished they had more translation and interpretation support.

But language is not the only barrier. Families of DLLs may face other challenges, such as economic or other resource constraints, making their participation more difficult. In particular, 59% of providers agreed that technology barriers have been a greater challenge to DLLs’ access to supports than language barriers.



Programs have focused additional attention on supporting children’s social and emotional well-being

In addition to general learning supports, attention to social and emotional health and well-being is critical for healthy development for all children—DLLs and non-DLLs alike. This is especially true during the COVID-19 pandemic, which has disrupted the lives of children and their families, impacting their health, job security, and overall well-being. These disruptions, which have disproportionately affected communities of color and immigrant communities across the state and nationally, make social and emotional supports for young children in early learning settings that serve DLLs all the more important. Early learning sites have responded to this need by focusing additional attention on this priority. Most programs (86%) said that their distance learning offerings focus on children’s social-emotional well-being. For sites that were providing in-person instruction, many had changed their approach to instruction, with 76% reporting focusing more on social-emotional learning than they had prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

However, most programs said they need additional resources and guidance on how to support children’s social-emotional well-being during this time (91%) and information and training on trauma-informed care (91%). The majority of program directors (74%) also indicated a need for more guidance and resources on how to support children with special needs, who may have social and emotional needs as well as other needs that may be particularly difficult to address through distance learning. As programs and the families they serve navigate challenging times and transition to recovery, guidance and resources related to healthy social and emotional development will likely continue to be an area of need.

Conclusions and Next Steps

As the pandemic wears on, early learning providers continue to adapt and respond to the needs of California’s families, offering a range of services including virtual learning, activities to help parents support their children’s learning at home, and resources to support social and emotional development for children. For DLLs, the widespread program closures, reductions in enrollment for in-person learning, and a shift to virtual learning has

come with added challenges and lower rates of participation. Supporting California's young learners, of which nearly 60% are DLLs, requires addressing families' and programs' immediate needs as well as developing strategies for reentry when the virus is under control. Supporting the learning needs of DLLs, in particular, is highlighted as a priority in California's Master Plan for Early Learning and Care,³ and there are several steps that can be taken toward this goal.

Specifically, early learning programs need support in the following key areas to ensure that all young children, including DLLs, and their families have the support and opportunities to learn that they need and deserve:

1. Resources and ideas for activities to help families engage their children in learning throughout the day and to help families of DLLs support their children's language development
2. Training on best practices for providing developmentally appropriate distance learning opportunities, including specialized trainings and supports tailored to the unique needs and contexts of FCCHs
3. Training and support to ensure that distance learning opportunities are culturally and linguistically responsive and accessible to DLLs
4. Additional training on how to support children's social and emotional health and well-being
5. Access to technology, training on its use, and resources to help parents use the technology for distance learning and communication with families

With the supports and resources needed to provide stimulating and developmentally appropriate early learning experiences for children during—and after—the COVID-19 pandemic, California's early learning system can help young children, including DLLs, to be resilient and continue to thrive.

To learn more about these and other findings from the study, visit www.air.org/covid-early-learning

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This work was supported by the Heising-Simons Foundation. The study benefitted from the contributions of Patricia Lozano and Carolyne Crolotte at Early Edge California.

[Early Edge California](#) is a nonprofit advocacy organization dedicated to improving access to high-quality Early Learning experiences for all California children so they can have a strong foundation for future success.

3 Alcalá, L., et al. (2020). *Master Plan for Early Learning and Care: Making California For All Kids*. California Health and Human Services. [https://californiaforallkids.chhs.ca.gov/assets/pdfs/Master Plan for Early Learning and Care - Making California For All Kids \(English\).pdf](https://californiaforallkids.chhs.ca.gov/assets/pdfs/Master%20Plan%20for%20Early%20Learning%20and%20Care%20-%20Making%20California%20For%20All%20Kids%20(English).pdf)

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