



**CCEPRA**  
Child Care and Early  
Education Policy and  
Research Analysis



# Child Care and Early Education Research during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Lessons Learned and Future Considerations

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# Key Highlights

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The COVID-19 pandemic negatively impacted child care and early education (CCEE) programs and the families they serve. During the pandemic, researchers working in CCEE programs paused and then shifted their research strategies to adapt to the new context. In April 2023, Child Trends hosted a virtual convening with researchers from nine research projects funded by the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE) to discuss the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on their research. Researchers also shared their reflections on how adaptations to their research processes or methods could be used in future research studies. In this brief, we share key takeaways from these discussions, including:

- **Researchers shifted from in-person research activities to virtual or remote research activities during the COVID-19 pandemic.** For example, researchers conducted virtual interviews, virtual focus groups, and live remote classroom observations. Researchers offered lessons learned from these virtual or remote research activities that could be applied to future studies. For example, virtual interviews and focus groups could be helpful for both participants and researchers since they offer participants more flexibility for scheduling and reduce the expense of traveling for research staff. Researchers shared that it is helpful to share options for virtual interviews and focus groups outside of typical working hours and to think through whether a virtual interview or focus group is best for each participant type (e.g., families, CCEE program staff). Lastly, although virtual training for research staff is often possible, researchers suggested that in-person training may be preferable and more effective.
- **Researchers provided examples of how they revised recruitment processes during the pandemic.** Researchers relied on CCEE program staff to assist with recruitment, which they noted has benefits (e.g., individuals may be more likely to participate in the research study if someone they trust recruits them) and drawbacks (e.g., participating in recruitment creates a burden for CCEE program staff). Researchers also shared evidence that tokens of appreciation, or incentives, can promote higher recruitment rates, especially a small token of appreciation offered to the participant at the time of recruitment and a larger one offered to the participant after they participate. For future studies, researchers suggested that research staff assisting with recruitment receive additional training to help understand and mitigate CCEE programs' concerns when enrolling in a research study. They also recommended that future studies plan for multiple options for recruitment methods (e.g., drafting both email and phone recruitment scripts).
- **Researchers experienced challenges ensuring equitable participation in research studies.** During the COVID-19 pandemic, CCEE programs that had greater staff resources (e.g., less staff turnover) were better able to participate in research studies compared to CCEE programs that were more affected by COVID-19 (e.g., had higher rates of staff turnover). To ensure that all types of programs have the opportunity to participate in research studies, future research studies could offer both virtual and in-person data collection, ask participants their preferences about what works best for them (e.g., timing of interviews, length of interviews), and identify other accommodations to support participation across a wider selection of participants.

## Introduction

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The COVID-19 pandemic impacted all aspects of child care and early education (CCEE). Beginning in March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic caused many CCEE programs to close temporarily.<sup>1,2</sup> Programs that remained open or reopened during the pandemic functioned differently due to health and safety precautions (e.g., visitors were not allowed, children's temperatures were taken at the door, masks may have been used, social distancing was observed).<sup>3,4</sup> Staffing shortages at CCEE programs during the pandemic also forced programs to reduce the number of children they were serving and care hours (e.g., programs opening later or closing earlier).<sup>5-7</sup> CCEE staff and families of children at CCEE programs also faced increased financial insecurity and tolls on their physical and mental health.<sup>8-11</sup>

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<sup>a</sup> Except for the first author, the authors of this brief are listed in alphabetical order.

During the pandemic, CCEE researchers, often in the middle of research studies, had to make difficult decisions about if and how to move forward with their projects. As part of the Child Care and Early Education Policy and Research Analysis (CCEEPRA) project with the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE), Child Trends hosted a virtual convening in April 2023 with researchers from nine OPRE-funded research projects. See Table 1 and Appendix A for a list of these projects. The purpose of the convening was to learn about the implications of researchers’ revised research processes and methods during the COVID-19 pandemic for participants and study findings. Another purpose of the convening was to ask, “Which of the revised methods and processes make sense to continue into the future because they could improve the experience of participants and the quality of the research findings?”

The key themes and future considerations that emerged from this virtual convening are not comprehensive or representative. The nine projects selected for the convening are a sample of OPRE-funded CCEE research projects. This brief shares these researchers’ experiences and reflections to inform the broader CCEE research field’s work moving forward. Many of the changes researchers made to their processes and methods, as well as their ideas for future considerations for CCEE research about flexibility and increasing equity, are not novel or relevant solely to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, conditions in CCEE during the COVID-19 pandemic heightened the need for researchers to adapt their protocols in creative ways that have the potential to advance the CCEE research field.

**Figure 1.** List of projects that participated in the April 2023 convening

Project Name and Website	Project Focus	Data Collection Methods Used
<a href="#">Access to a Supply of Quality Care in the District of Columbia (Project ASQC)</a>	Understanding the impacts of the District of Columbia’s Quality Rating and Improvement System on the supply and quality of child care, CCEE providers’ professional development, and parents’ experiences selecting CCEE providers	Administrative data, interviews/focus groups, and surveys
<a href="#">Assessing the Implementation and Cost of High Quality Early Care and Education (ICHQ)</a>	Developing and testing center-level measures of the implementation and cost of early care and education	Interviews, surveys, and electronic cost workbooks
<a href="#">Assessing Models of Coordinated Services for Low-Income Children and Their Families (AMCS)</a>	Identifying and understanding coordinated services approaches for families with low incomes	Interviews/focus groups and site visits
<a href="#">Child Care Access and Barriers to Family Stability in a Majority-Hispanic Border State</a>	Exploring facilitators and barriers to initial and continued enrollment in child care subsidies in New Mexico	Administrative data, interviews, and surveys
<a href="#">Early Care and Education Leadership Study (ExCELS)</a>	Defining and measuring leadership in CCEE centers	Interviews and surveys

Project Name and Website	Project Focus	Data Collection Methods Used
<a href="#">Head Start Family and Child Experiences Survey (FACES)</a>	Providing descriptive information on Head Start programs, children, and families	Surveys and teacher reports of child development
<a href="#">Inclusion in California Early Learning and Care</a>	Exploring facilitators and barriers to the inclusion of children with disabilities in CCEE in California	Administrative data, case studies, and interviews
<a href="#">Understanding Children's Transitions from Head Start to Kindergarten (HS2K)</a>	Identifying strategies Head Start programs and elementary schools use to support children transitioning from Head Start to kindergarten	Interviews/focus groups
<a href="#">Variations in Implementation of Quality Interventions (VIQI): Examining the Quality-Child Outcomes Relationship in Child Care and Early Education</a>	Exploring impacts of classroom quality on child outcomes	Classroom observations, coaching and training, teacher reports of child development, and direct child assessments

During the convening, researchers from the nine projects shared a description of their project, the stage of the project in March 2020, which research methods or activities they revised or canceled, decision-making processes related to project design and methodology, and any reflections on lessons learned for the future (see Appendix B). Meeting participants discussed the following guiding questions related to revised research methods:<sup>b</sup>

- What implications do these revised research methods have for research planning in the future (e.g., proposals, staffing/hiring, staff training, estimated durations for recruitment, more funding for incentives)?
- Which research activities are appropriate or feasible to conduct in a virtual format (i.e., conducting research on web-based platforms or via telephones) and which are better suited to in-person data collection?
- What are the implications of these revised research methods on participation patterns and effectiveness in reaching intended participants?
- What perceptions do researchers and participants have about the revised research methods, including their effectiveness?
- What evidence do researchers have about the reliability and validity of the revised methods?
- Although research methods may have changed during COVID-19, what research methods or activities do researchers suggest returning to, as COVID-19 restrictions subside?

In this brief, we share the challenges researchers experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic, changes made to their research projects, and the implications of these changes for CCEE program staff and families and children who use CCEE. We also share future considerations for the CCEE research field.

<sup>b</sup> In addition to participating in the virtual convening, each of the directors of the participating research projects had an individual 30-minute discussion with the Child Trends team to support the identification of key themes prior to the convening.

# CCEE Research Challenges and Changes During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Project directors shared details about how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted their project and reported several common experiences. All projects described challenges with recruitment. Additionally, most projects mentioned shifting at least one research activity from in person to virtual and canceling at least one research activity. About half of the projects revised their data collection protocols to also gather information specific to the COVID-19 context. We provide further details about each of these experiences in the following sections.

## Recruitment Challenges

**All projects faced challenges recruiting participants. Projects responded to these challenges by making changes to their recruitment processes, including extending or delaying recruitment timelines or adjusting recruitment criteria.** For example, Project ASQC researchers encountered temporary (and some permanent) program closures and CCEE staff shortages throughout 2020 and 2021 that made it challenging to reach and recruit child care program directors and classroom teachers for data collection. Additionally, in response to challenges recruiting CCEE centers during the pandemic, the VIQI project expanded their recruitment criteria. They had originally planned to only recruit centers with at least two eligible preschool classrooms. However, due to some centers closing during the pandemic, they expanded their criteria to include one-classroom centers. As another example, after considerable recruitment efforts, the HS2K project reduced the number of cases included in their multi-case study from six to five.

## Virtual and Remote Research Activities

**Most research projects modified at least one in-person research activity to be virtual or remote.** At the convening, project staff discussed conducting online surveys and virtual classroom observations, interviews, and focus groups instead of in-person data collection. For example, the HS2K project originally planned to conduct in-person interviews with families, Head Start staff, and elementary school staff as part of their case study approach. Because of the pandemic, they shifted to conduct virtual interviews instead.

**Many projects had planned for on-site research field staff to assist with recruitment, but instead shifted to remote recruitment methods.** For example, rather than having on-site field staff to assist with recruitment, the Child Care Access and Barriers to Family Stability project in New Mexico shared flyers with Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) clinics. These flyers contained a printed QR code for participants to use to sign up for the study. Project ASQC in the District of Columbia similarly relied on distributing flyers with a QR code linked to a sign-up form to facilitate parent recruitment for a computer-assisted telephone interview. Project ASQC emailed and mailed the flyers to licensed child care programs, with a cover letter asking the child care programs to support the distribution of the flyers to parents. To boost the response in underrepresented areas, researchers gave a subset of child care programs a gift card incentive and reached out by phone to encourage child care programs to recruit parents into the study since on-site recruitment was not allowed.

## Canceled Research Activities

**Most projects had to cancel at least one research activity because it was not feasible during the COVID-19 pandemic. Some research activities were too difficult to switch to a virtual format, too burdensome on participants, and/or too challenging to train staff on virtually.** A few projects canceled the classroom observation component of their projects. For example, the Inclusion in California Early Learning and Care project canceled site visits that included classroom observations because CCEE program directors thought the visits would be burdensome to teachers who were already stressed by pandemic-related classroom changes. To attempt to gather information on the quality of inclusion, the researchers instead added questions to their teacher interview protocol. Additionally, FACES canceled classroom observations which they had planned to start in March 2020 due to widespread CCEE program closures. For spring 2022, FACES again planned for in-person classroom observations, which they later had to cancel due to the COVID-19 Omicron variant. FACES researchers considered remote live observations, but raised concerns that remote observation data may not be comparable to previous rounds of the study, which included in-person observations. Further, not all observation measures used in the study had been validated for remote use.

Project ASQC had planned to obtain annual Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) data to track changes in participation and quality ratings over time. When the District of Columbia canceled classroom observations that feed into QRIS ratings, the research team had to adjust their plans. They did not examine year-to-year quality changes and dropped the plan to collect child outcome data because of the burden it would put on programs. Similarly, the VIQI project was unable to conduct child assessments in the fall of 2021 because of visitor restrictions in some CCEE programs.

## Revised Research Protocols

**About half of the projects revised their interview or survey protocols to gather information specific to the context of the COVID-19 pandemic:**

- **Revised interview protocols:** The AMCS team added a question within each topic area to ask respondents about the impact of COVID-19 on service delivery. For example, they asked programs about how the needs of families served had changed due to the pandemic and about whether the way services are funded, organized, or delivered had changed. Additionally, the ICHQ team added questions to the implementation interview to understand and interpret how practices to support quality in key areas of center functioning might have been carried out differently in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., lower than typical group sizes or virtual communications with parents). The HS2K team also revised questions on their interview protocols to ask participants about how they supported kindergarten transitions “before the pandemic” or “in a typical year” instead of “last year” and added questions about the implications of COVID-19 on their practices.
- **Revised surveys:** In discussion with District of Columbia partners, the Project ASQC team expanded the focus of its early educator survey to gather additional information on priority topics beyond professional development and the Quality Rating and Improvement System, including health and mental health, material hardship, job satisfaction, and turnover intentions—topics that were especially significant during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Opportunities to Advance CCEE Research

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The adaptations to research methods during the COVID-19 pandemic exemplified flexibility and respect for research participants’ time, effort, and life circumstances. This section includes reflections from the research teams on how the lessons learned about recruitment, participation, and virtual research activities can inform and advance future research studies.

## Recruitment Methods



**Recruitment strategies:** With restrictions to having on-site field staff at CCEE programs during the pandemic, researchers on some projects requested that CCEE program staff assist with recruitment and data collection. For example, some asked center directors to distribute surveys to teachers or help with recruitment for parent focus groups. Researchers appreciated the support from CCEE program staff and noted that involving trusted CCEE staff or community members in the recruitment process helped facilitate recruitment with teachers and families by creating a more comfortable and welcoming environment. Future research teams can consider how authentic and collaborative partnerships with CCEE program staff can improve the research process while also identifying strategies that acknowledge this additional work placed on CCEE program staff. For example, researchers could ask program staff for input on the best ways to engage staff, families, and children as research participants, in addition to asking program staff to support recruitment. Incentives or honoraria paid directly to the individuals assisting the research team are one way to reimburse the staff for their time. Additionally, one research team which used flyers about the research study with a QR code linked to a sign-up form found this to be an easy and effective way for study participants to express interest in the study, confirm their eligibility, and provide their contact information for follow-up from the study team. When using QR codes or online forms for recruitment, researchers noted it is important to also include the research team's email address and phone number in case some individuals would rather contact the research team directly.



**Tokens of appreciation to support survey responses:** One strategy that researchers often use to increase participation rates, as well as thank participants for their time, is tokens of appreciation. The ICHQ project conducted two experiments on the use and amount of prepaid tokens of appreciation (i.e., gift cards) to increase response rates on surveys of teaching staff in participating CCEE centers. Prepaid tokens of appreciation are offered to respondents along with the invitation to participate in the research study, while postpaid tokens of appreciation are offered to individuals after they participate in the research study. Prior to the pandemic, the researchers usually relied on field staff to introduce and distribute information about the surveys and provide physical gift cards upon survey completion. The project wanted to replicate this experience even though researchers could not be on site at CCEE programs by offering prepaid tokens of appreciation in survey invitation packets (distributed by the center director) and postpaid tokens of appreciation delivered electronically as gift card codes immediately upon survey completion. The experiments found that (1) prepaid tokens of appreciation (in addition to postpaid) were more effective in producing high response rates than postpaid tokens of appreciation alone, and (2) a structure of a small prepaid token of appreciation with a larger postpaid token of appreciation was more effective than equal amounts of prepaid and postpaid tokens.<sup>12</sup> Given these promising findings, researchers on future studies may want to consider offering participants both a prepaid and postpaid token of appreciation.



**Additional training:** Given challenges recruiting CCEE programs into research studies, researchers reflected on the need to provide additional training for internal recruitment staff who are part of the research team. Internal recruitment staff must frequently communicate with CCEE program staff who may be dealing with multiple challenges, including staffing shortages, staff turnover, and health and safety concerns. This extra training on future studies could support recruitment staff in being sensitive to and aware of what programs are experiencing and to know when not to make requests that place additional stress on programs.



**Office of Management and Budget (OMB)<sup>c</sup> and Institutional Review Board (IRB) packages:** During the COVID-19 pandemic, researchers had to adjust their research work plans. Researchers recommended submitting OMB and IRB packages with multiple options for recruitment and data collection (e.g., telephone scripts, email scripts, text message scripts, virtual interviews, in-person interviews) that apply to different contexts and participant needs. This strategy could be helpful

<sup>c</sup> OMB packages are required for federally-directed program evaluation and research efforts that involve more than nine participants per the [Paperwork Reduction Act \(PRA\)](#). The packages include the rationale behind the research project, data collection instruments, and an estimate of the time burden for respondents.

for researchers on future studies who may face challenges and delays (e.g., CCEE program staffing shortages) to their work plans since it could increase the flexibility of their work. This strategy could also allow researchers on future studies to adjust their research work plans to participants' needs and preferences throughout the research project, increasing participants' ability to participate in the research.

## Equitable Participation

Though recruitment protocols typically require research teams to consider how to avoid selection biases, researchers who attended the convening reported a greater awareness of the need to promote equitable participation in CCEE research during the COVID-19 pandemic. Researchers offered additional time and supports to CCEE programs that may not otherwise have been able to participate. As noted above, researchers also submitted OMB and IRB packages with options for recruitment and data collection that could be adjusted based on individual research participant needs. Despite these provisions, researchers still perceived that some CCEE programs, typically those with greater staff resources (e.g., less turnover, fewer absences due to illness, more supportive work environments), were better able to participate in research studies during the pandemic than CCEE programs that were more negatively affected by COVID-19 (e.g., higher rates of staff absences or turnover, challenges implementing health and safety protocols).

Additionally, researchers cautioned that future research studies refrain from offering solely virtual data collection. Although virtual research activities have many benefits for both participants and researchers (e.g., flexibility in scheduling and location, cost), some populations, such as rural populations, older populations, and individuals with lower incomes, may not be able to access the internet to engage in virtual research as easily as others. For example, the Child Care Access and Barriers to Family Stability project in New Mexico noted that it was extremely difficult to recruit populations living on tribal lands during the COVID-19 pandemic due to limited internet connectivity. Alternatively, one researcher mentioned that, although they previously experienced challenges reaching some populations (e.g., young parents), those challenges were lessened during the pandemic due to the population's preference for virtual research methods. Future discussions or research studies could explore the effects of virtual research methods on participation rates.

Researchers also recommended that future studies allow time and resources for partnering with participant communities to understand the contextual factors that affect research participation for entire communities, in addition to individuals. Engaging community members and seeking input on study design and measurement decisions (e.g., questions to ask on a web survey) can help produce more meaningful study findings that reflect what CCEE programs, staff, and families want to know—and what they want decision makers to know.



## Respect and Empathy for Research Participants

Researchers demonstrated high levels of respect and empathy for research participants, acknowledging the added burdens of research on participants, and on CCEE program staff who may not be formal study participants, during the COVID-19 pandemic. Researchers agreed there is value in meaningfully including participants or their community at an early design stage and hoped that future research studies continue to do so. Researchers also agreed that future studies can be thoughtful about the burdens that participants face, irrespective of the pandemic. For example, researchers from the Child Care Access and Barriers to Family Stability project in New Mexico discussed the importance of building partnerships and trust within participant communities, which was also essential prior to the pandemic and will remain so for research in the future. This project struggled to recruit individuals living on tribal lands, in part because roads into these areas were closed for much of the COVID-19 pandemic and internet and phone service were limited for many families. Over time, this project team succeeded in recruiting some tribal participants, in part by delaying certain data collection activities until mid-2022 when the pandemic had entered a less acute stage. Research partners from tribal communities helped guide recruitment and advised the project team about the appropriateness of outreach during different stages of the pandemic, in the context of the disproportionate trauma and loss experienced by New Mexico's 23 sovereign tribal nations.

Similarly, a researcher from Project ASQC in the District of Columbia described the importance of being empathetic to the lives and experiences of research participants. During recruitment for this study, some child care providers expressed distress and a lack of time to participate. For example, some center directors were stressed due to staffing shortages and struggled to keep their centers open. In response, the project team adjusted interview protocols to acknowledge the situation providers were facing and give providers space to discuss the issues they were dealing with. Additionally, after AMCS delayed their data collection, researchers checked in with participants to discuss when it might be appropriate and comfortable to begin research activities; the team took guidance from the CCEE program staff about when they and the families they served might be able to participate. When planning to conduct research with families, the research team also asked parents for their preferences in terms of the format, length, and timing of interviews and focus groups.

## Virtual Research Activities



**Virtual interviews and focus groups:** Virtual interviews and focus groups can be helpful for both participants and researchers. In the future, even when in-person interviews and focus groups are an option, researchers may want to continue virtual interviews and focus groups, as they offer participants more flexibility for scheduling and reduce the expense of traveling for research staff. Researchers who attended the convening provided some recommendations for conducting virtual interviews and focus groups. For example, to increase the accessibility of virtual interviews and focus groups for families, it is helpful for researchers to be able to work nontraditional hours and conduct data collection in the languages spoken most comfortably by participants. Additionally, researchers noted it is important to develop a plan to provide support to participants with technology issues or limitations, as well as a plan to build rapport through virtual activities, which can be more difficult than when meeting in person. For example, the Inclusion in California Early Learning and Care project began virtual family interviews by asking the participant to tell the interviewer a little bit about their child before continuing with the structured interview protocol. Adjusting consent language to remind participants to find a private space where conversations cannot be overheard and encouraging participation and webcam use were also mentioned as important considerations in a virtual setting. Researchers on future studies can also consider which virtual interview format (e.g., focus groups, individual interviews) may work best for engaging participants. For example, researchers from both AMCS and Project ASQC originally planned to conduct virtual focus groups with families. However, this turned out to be logistically difficult, so they shifted to virtual one-on-one and small group interviews with families instead.



**Classroom observations:** Researchers on future studies may also consider conducting virtual classroom observations as these have the potential to be less disruptive to the classroom. However, researchers noted that conducting virtual classroom observations requires both researchers and CCEE programs to have significant technological support. For example, VIQI researchers who conducted live remote classroom observations described the various tools and resources needed to conduct virtual classroom observations: technology hardware and software (e.g., tablets, special robots for remotely moving tablets, a video-conferencing platform, Bluetooth microphones for the teachers), a hotspot if the program didn't have reliable internet access, and dedicated technology support staff on the research team who worked with CCEE program staff to set up the equipment.



**Child assessments:** Researchers on future studies may find that in-person child assessments are not feasible for several reasons, such as the cost of travel expenses for researchers or the CCEE program not wanting a disruption to their classrooms. Researchers who attended the convening discussed other options such as parent reports, teacher reports, and an at-home kit for parents to conduct the data collection. Researchers cautioned, however, that virtual child assessments conducted by research staff and teacher reports may add burden for CCEE staff. Also, as new methods are tested, it is important to consider their limitations. For example, researchers noted that the validity of teacher- and parent-reported child assessments could vary from standardized in-person child assessments. When researchers from FACES were unable to conduct in-person child assessments in spring 2020, they relied on teacher-reported child assessments. In a 2022 research brief, the FACES researchers noted that, although teacher-reported child assessments can be effective measures of children's skills and development, they also include limitations, such as inability to measure certain skills. Teachers' biases (e.g., related to children's gender or primary language) may also impact teacher reports.<sup>13</sup>



**Research staff training:** During the COVID-19 pandemic, many individuals, including researchers, began working from home and having virtual meetings and trainings. Although future studies may continue to offer virtual trainings for research staff, researchers who attended the convening generally perceived multiple advantages to conducting in-person training for research staff when possible. For example, researchers preferred in-person training on classroom observation tools and noted that certain tools don't allow for the option of virtual training. When virtual training is feasible, researchers recommended hiring more trainees and planning for additional time for trainees to become fully trained. For instance, the VIQI project noticed higher rates of certification failures after virtual training on classroom observational tools and recommended planning for additional training time in the future.

## Conclusion

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Reflecting on the lessons learned from the research teams about changes made to CCEE research studies during the COVID-19 pandemic, a common theme is a vision of future CCEE research that is hybrid (i.e., a combination of in-person and virtual activities), individualized, and grounded in deep respect and consideration for research participants. Care and concern about the CCEE workforce, families, and children was at the core of the adaptive procedures researchers put in place. These adaptations were crucial to ensuring CCEE research continued during the COVID-19 pandemic, and for understanding the severe impacts of the pandemic on CCEE programs. As the pandemic's effects subside, these adaptations will continue to be useful and relevant for future studies as they can reduce burden for researchers and participants and increase flexibility in participation.

To deepen the CCEE field's understanding of the lessons learned from conducting research with CCEE programs during the pandemic, it will be important to hear directly from the CCEE workforce and families who participated in research studies about their experiences. Their insights can help shape responsive and flexible research approaches that balance the time and energy participants contribute with study findings that have the potential to result in improvements to support CCEE programs, the workforce, children, and families.

# Appendix A. Projects Represented at the 2023 Convening on the Impact of COVID-19 on CCEE Research

Project Name and Website	Grantee/Contractor	Years Active
<a href="#">Access to a Supply of Quality Care in the District of Columbia (Project ASQC)</a>	Urban Institute	2019-ongoing
<a href="#">Assessing the Implementation and Cost of High Quality Early Care and Education (ICHQ)</a>	Mathematica	2014-2024
<a href="#">Assessing Models of Coordinated Services for Low-Income Children and Their Families (AMCS)</a>	Mathematica	2018-2022
<a href="#">Child Care Access and Barriers to Family Stability in a Majority-Hispanic Border State</a>	University of New Mexico, Cradle to Career Policy Institute	2019-2024
<a href="#">Early Care and Education Leadership Study (ExCELS)</a>	Mathematica & University of Massachusetts, Boston	2018-2024
<a href="#">Head Start Family and Child Experiences Survey (FACES)</a>	Mathematica (2006-2026)	1997-2026
<a href="#">Inclusion in California Early Learning and Care</a>	SRI International, the California Department of Social Services, & the California Department of Education	2019-2024
<a href="#">Understanding Children's Transitions from Head Start to Kindergarten (HS2K)</a>	NORC	2019-2023
<a href="#">Variations in Implementation of Quality Interventions (VIQI): Examining the Quality-Child Outcomes Relationship in Child Care and Early Education</a>	MDRC	2016-2025

# Appendix B. Summaries of Impact of COVID-19 on Projects

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## Access to a Supply of Quality Care in the District of Columbia (Project ASQC) - Urban Institute

- **Brief project description/context:** Project ASQC is a Child Care Policy Research Partnership grant awarded in September 2019. Urban Institute partnered with the District of Columbia's Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE), Division of Early Learning to examine the roll-out of the District of Columbia's new Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS), Capital Quality. Project ASQC explores how the QRIS impacts the supply and quality of child care, CCEE providers' professional development, and parents' experiences selecting CCEE providers.
- **Stage of project in March 2020:** The project's grant was awarded only a few months before the pandemic hit. By March 2020, the team had completed initial planning to recruit child care providers participating in Capital Quality for data collection and had established a data sharing agreement with OSSE to obtain child care licensing and QRIS data.
- **What changed due to COVID-19:** Project ASQC shifted to virtual recruitment and data collection, including virtual interviews with child care program directors and virtual interviews and focus groups with parents and Capital Quality coaches. Additionally, Project ASQC shifted priorities to focus more on the well-being of the CCEE workforce and parents' search for child care during the pandemic and less on changes in program quality. Project ASQC decided not to collect data on child outcomes. Project ASQC also experienced delays, particularly delays in obtaining state administrative data because of OSSE's staffing constraints, and delays in launching an early educator survey because of continued program closures and staff departures. The project saw low response rates because of recruitment challenges.
- **Lessons learned/implications:** Virtual focus groups were hard to schedule, and turnout was often low. Flexible protocols allowed for virtual one-on-one and small group interviews when a focus group design was not feasible. Incentives, strong research partnerships, and community engagement were important for achieving research goals.

## Assessing the Implementation and Cost of High Quality Early Care and Education (ICHQ) - Mathematica

- **Brief project description/context:** ICHQ is creating center-level measures of the implementation and cost of early care and education.
- **Stage of project in March 2020:** ICHQ was about to launch the field test of their measures.
- **What changed due to COVID-19:** ICHQ delayed the field test. The research team decided not to conduct classroom observations, switched to fully virtual data collection, conducted an experiment on using prepaid tokens of appreciation for surveys, and adjusted research protocols to incorporate the COVID-19 context.
- **Lessons learned/implications:** Researchers speculated that centers that participated in the field test had a higher capacity for navigating the COVID-19 pandemic than centers that did not participate in the field test. Virtual data collection appeared to reduce burden on participants by allowing flexibility, but in some cases, program participants did not have equal access to the technology needed to participate in the research virtually. A small prepaid token of appreciation combined with a larger postpaid token of appreciation seem effective at encouraging survey completion.

### **Assessing Models of Coordinated Services for Low-Income Children and Their Families (AMCS) – Mathematica**

- **Brief project description/context:** AMCS explored coordinated services approaches for families with low incomes. AMCS included a model scan, telephone interviews, and site visits as research methods.
- **Stage of project in March 2020:** AMCS was about to begin telephone interviews and site visits, which were then delayed.
- **What changed due to COVID-19:** AMCS had a longer data collection period and added probes to telephone interviews and site visit protocols about how COVID-19 influenced program services. Additionally, AMCS switched from in-person to virtual site visits. The original in-person site visits were planned to take place during one full day on-site, include staff interviews and parent focus groups, and be scheduled by the coordinated services approach. The virtual site visits took up to two weeks, included individual parent interviews more than focus groups, and were scheduled by the AMCS team.
- **Lessons learned/implications:** AMCS found that some programs were less able to participate in AMCS due to the pandemic. However, the flexibility of virtual site visits, over in-person site visits, was helpful for many participants, particularly program staff. For some families, engaging virtually was more challenging, although other families said it removed barriers to their participation (i.e., they did not have to travel or find childcare).

### **Child Care Access and Barriers to Family Stability in a Majority-Hispanic Border State – University of New Mexico, Cradle to Career Policy Institute**

- **Brief project description/context:** This Child Care Policy Research Partnership grant in New Mexico aims to understand what facilitates and prevents enrollment in subsidies, subsidy enrollment continuity, and the consequences for families.
- **Stage of project in March 2020:** The project was in its early stages in March 2020, with the IRB just approved.
- **What changed due to COVID-19:** Survey deployment was delayed multiple times. Researchers revised protocols to include questions about COVID-19. Researchers recruited individuals by flyers, rather than in person. The team had significant difficulty recruiting tribal families since tribal nations had high COVID-19 rates and limited internet connectivity, and there were closed roads onto tribal lands.
- **Lessons learned/implications:** Virtual research activities work well for some families, but others, especially tribal families, may not have the technology (e.g., internet connectivity) to access these research activities.

### **Early Care and Education Leadership Study (ExCELS) – Mathematica**

- **Brief project description/context:** ExCELS examined how leadership in CCEE centers can improve quality experiences for children. ExCELS developed a measure of leadership that reflects both center managers and teaching staff as leaders.
- **Stage of project in March 2020:** ExCELS was engaging stakeholders and experts to refine the survey items they had developed.
- **What changed due to COVID-19:** ExCELS revised items to include virtual approaches to leadership activities (e.g., virtual community meetings). ExCELS also offered prepaid and postpaid tokens of appreciation to all survey respondents, instead of conducting a planned experiment to compare the effectiveness of onsite recruitment field staff versus different structures for tokens of appreciation. ExCELS extended recruitment and data collection by two months.

- **Lessons learned/implications:** Prepaid and postpaid tokens of appreciation were correlated with a high survey response rate. Recruitment was very challenging, with about a 3-4% participation rate. Centers that participated in this research may have had a higher capacity for dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic than non-participating centers.

### Head Start Family and Child Experiences Survey (FACES) – Mathematica

- **Brief project description/context:** FACES collects national data on Head Start programs, children, and families in Regions 1 through 10. FACES can include child assessments, classroom observations, parent surveys, teacher surveys, and program and center director surveys.
- **Stage of project in March 2020:** FACES was beginning data collection and had just conducted a training for research staff about classroom observations.
- **What changed due to COVID-19:** FACES canceled in-person data collection (direct child assessments and classroom observations) in spring 2020. FACES did not pursue direct child assessments in 2021-2022, and canceled planned in-person classroom observations in light of the Omicron surge in early 2022. Additionally, FACES used virtual sampling and consent form distribution and collection. FACES also extended the recruitment period.
- **Lessons learned/implications:** Building sufficient time for recruitment and being creative and flexible were key to successful data collection. FACES researchers tested the measurement properties of teacher report scales of children’s development (approaches to learning and language/literacy) from previous rounds of the project to consider their use in the spring 2020 data collection. The researchers determined that the language/literacy report might be a good proxy for direct assessment. The approaches to learning report was not a good proxy for direct assessment of executive function but was still a valid measurement approach to understand an important developmental construct. Importantly, though, there were indications of potential bias with both teacher-reported scales (i.e., associations with background characteristics that were not seen in direct assessments).<sup>14</sup>

### Inclusion in California Early Learning and Care – SRI International

- **Brief project description/context:** This Child Care Policy Research Partnership grant describes the status of children with disabilities in subsidized CCEE programs in California, including facilitators and barriers to the inclusion of children with disabilities.
- **Stage of project in March 2020:** The project was analyzing administrative data and preparing for key informant interviews.
- **What changed due to COVID-19:** Key informant interviews and case studies were delayed. The researchers changed recruitment procedures for case studies and canceled classroom observations. Additionally, new policies about subsidy enrollment and program attendance during COVID-19 affected interpretation of administrative data.
- **Lessons learned/implications:** Recruitment was a challenge due to additional stress on CCEE programs and providers, and there may be differences in those who chose to participate versus those who did not. Additionally, state policy changes limited the researchers’ ability to meaningfully interpret the administrative data.

### Understanding Children’s Transitions from Head Start to Kindergarten (HS2K) – NORC

- **Brief project description/context:** HS2K used a systems perspective to understand how Head Start programs and elementary schools support children as they transition from Head Start to kindergarten, including facilitators of and barriers to successful transitions.
- **Stage of project in March 2020:** HS2K was in the first year of the contract, conducting key informant interviews and planning for case study data collection.

- **What changed due to COVID-19:** Data collection was delayed by one year and interview and focus group protocols were revised to include some COVID-19-related questions or to acknowledge the COVID context. All data collection was shifted from in-person site visits to virtual data collection.
- **Lessons learned/implications:** Virtual interviews allowed participants to have more flexibility and reduced scheduling difficulties and cost. However, it was more difficult to build rapport virtually and to recruit families for focus groups. Everyone needed access to technology to participate, which may have posed a barrier for some. The research team also had to be available during non-traditional work hours to account for different schedules and time zones.

### Variations in Implementation of Quality Interventions (VIQI) - MDRC

- **Brief project description/context:** VIQI explores how classroom quality is linked to child outcomes and tests two curricula and professional development interventions that target different dimensions of quality.
- **Stage of project in March 2020:** VIQI was in the middle of recruitment and decision making about measurement for an impact evaluation and process study.
- **What changed due to COVID-19:** VIQI stopped in-person recruitment and switched to a variety of virtual methods for recruitment (e.g., Skype, FaceTime). VIQI also had to expand their selection criteria for the project and switched teacher and coach training from in person to virtual. VIQI also used live virtual coaching instead of in-person coaching.
- **Lessons learned/implications:** With many centers closed during the pandemic, VIQI had to expand their recruitment criteria. Additionally, VIQI recommended offering multiple teacher training times to allow for flexibility for participants. VIQI also noted difficulties with live virtual coaching and a higher rate of certification failures after virtual trainings on child assessment and classroom observational tools. VIQI used a technology solution (i.e., Kubi, a robot that can move around an iPad) for classroom observations, which worked well, but required technical support staff and CCEE program staff time.

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# Child Care and Early Education Research during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Lessons Learned and Future Considerations

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