

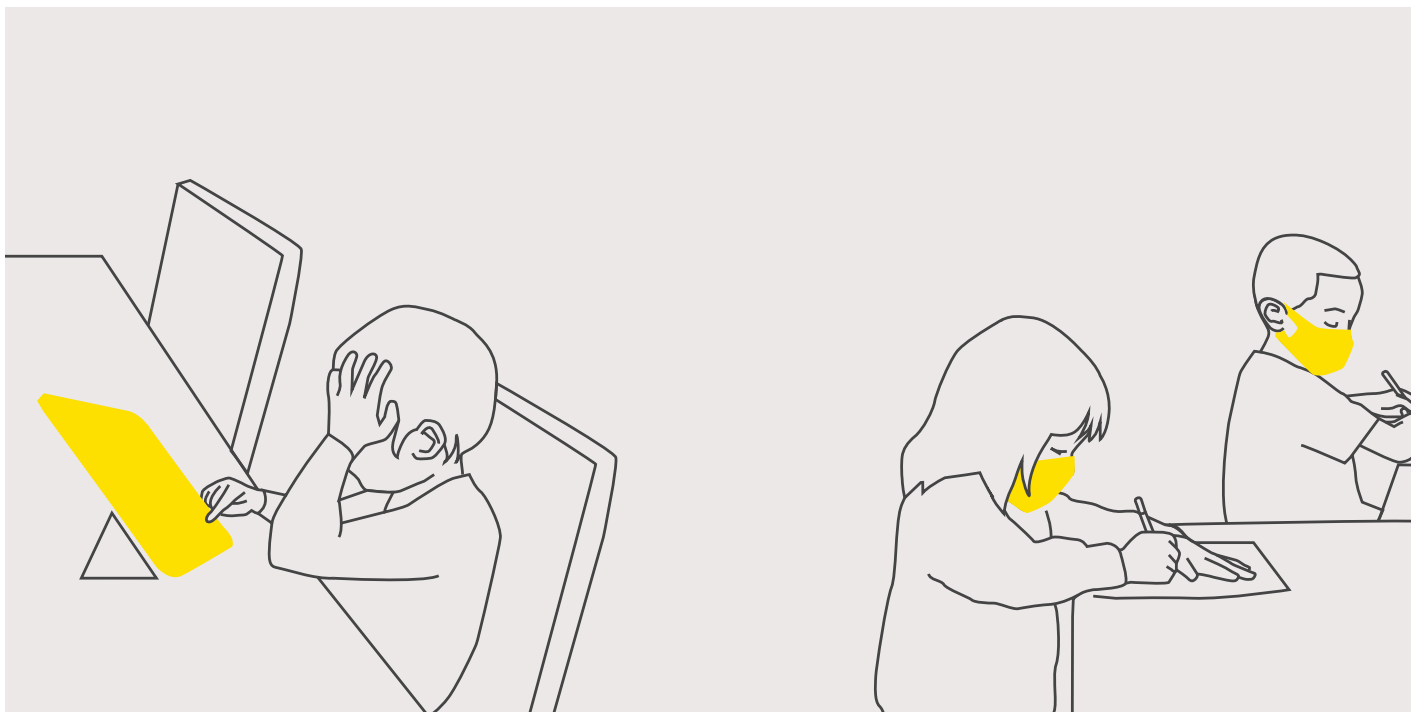
# SCHOOL DAZE: RENEWED UNCERTAINTY AND DIFFICULT DECISIONS

As the school year begins, parents of young children share significant concerns about their children's safety and education, and there is a range of opinions about what to do to address these concerns.

During the 2020-21 school year, we reported on how parents and other caregivers were managing their children's education, including balancing the competing obligations of work, child care, and remote learning.

We examined the prevalence of "redshirting" (parents deciding to delay enrolling their child in kindergarten), how parents were planning to support their children's

learning, and how disruptions of education were affecting families' well-being. With the 2021-22 school year getting underway, we revisit these topics with new data.



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Although our survey focuses primarily on children age 0-5, 43% of the participating families also have older children, which means that

in addition to questions about young children, we are able to ask questions of families with school-aged children about returning to school.

## CONCERNS ABOUT THE RETURN TO SCHOOL AND CARE AND EMOTIONAL DISTRESS

Parents in our survey have a number of concerns about the upcoming academic year, and the more concern a parent has, the more emotional distress they report for both themselves and their young child:

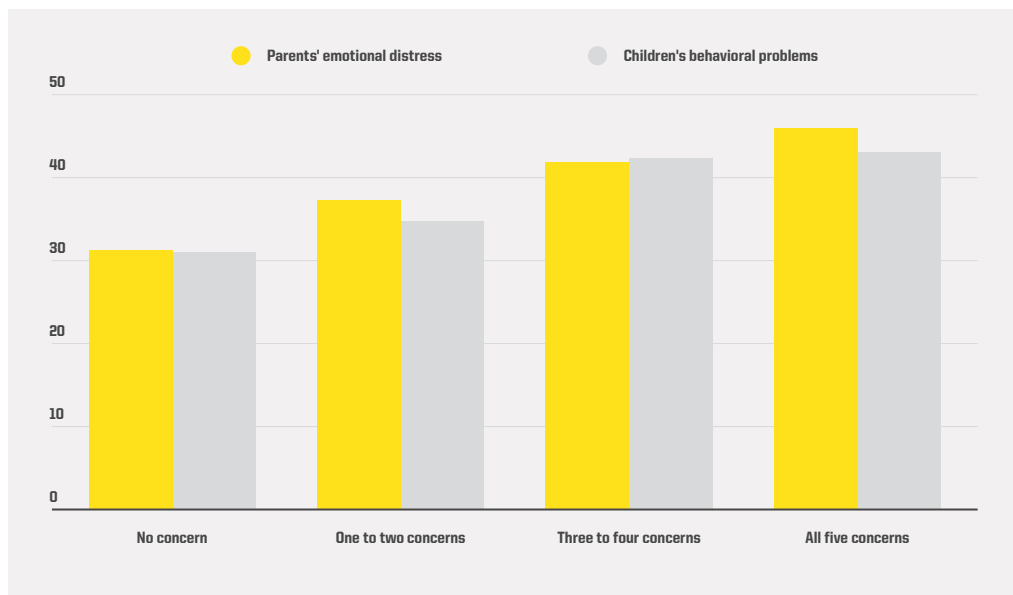
- 47% are concerned about negative effects of the pandemic on their children’s education, 49% are worried about the safety of child care centers or programs, 62% report concerns about the potential disruption to their daily routines if virtual learning is necessary, 58% express worries about

children contracting COVID-19, and 46% are worried that their children will infect others in the family after being exposed to COVID-19 in child care centers or programs.

- Parents’ total number of concerns about the upcoming academic year are significantly associated with their worsened emotional distress and worse behavioral problems for their children. In other words, the more concern, the more emotional distress parents reported for themselves and the more behavior issues they reported in their children.

**“We decided that 6 hours of preschool (one speech therapy session a week) was important for our family as a whole. Because the kids wear masks at all times, we think it’s a benefit that greatly outweighs the risk.”**  
Parent in Michigan

Associations between parents’ concerns about the upcoming school year and emotional well-being\*



\* We ask caregivers about their experiences with four symptoms of emotional distress: stress, loneliness, anxiety, and depression. We also ask caregivers about their child’s externalizing and internalizing behaviors. To facilitate aggregation, responses for each symptom were averaged to create a single score and transformed to a range of 0-100 (with 0 being no distress) for each caregiver and child.

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## DELAYING KINDERGARTEN ENROLLMENT

When we look at the subset of families in our survey with a child due to begin kindergarten this fall, 11% of caregivers report delaying enrolling their child in school until next fall (2022).

This number is slightly lower than at this time last year (17%), but applying these numbers to the US population, this still represents close to half a million American children who will not be starting kindergarten as planned this fall. The ultimate impact of these trends over the past two years on children and the American education system will not be known for some time, but as with other areas in which there are structural inequalities, effects are likely to be unequal across the population. These issues require immediate attention from researchers, advocates, and policy makers in order to ensure the best possible outcomes for children and families.

The reasons parents give for delaying kindergarten enrollment include:

- concerns about safety (63%)
- uncertainty about whether schools will be in-person or remote (51%)

Instead of going to kindergarten:

- 41% of children who were due to begin this fall will be staying home with a parent
- 38% of children will be attending pre-K in a center or program
- 10% will be staying home with a child care provider
- 12% will be attending other activities

We don't see any significant group differences in rates of redshirting based on families' race/ethnicity, income levels, or family structure.

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**"I'm worried about my kids' learning and getting the engagement they need. My kids went to daycare for the first day today and I was impressed with their organization and attention to detail. My kids came home really energized from being back in a school environment."**

Parent in Pennsylvania

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## CONCERNS ABOUT SCHOOL-AGED CHILDREN

Parents in our survey who also have school-aged children express concerns about their older children's safety, learning, and socio-emotional development as the school year begins.

- 49% are concerned about pandemic's negative impacts on their school aged children's education, 48% are worried about the safety of school, 49% report concerns about the potential disruption to their

daily routines if virtual learning is necessary, 56% express worries about children contracting COVID-19, and 53% are worried that their children infect others in the family as a result of exposure to COVID-19 in educational programs.

- In terms of school-aged children's learning activities, 44% report concerns about children's learning of core academic skills, 48% are worried about

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**"[Our biggest concern] if school doesn't open this fall, [is] how my partner and I will split the work so one of us can be home with our son when the other is working."**

Parent in Texas

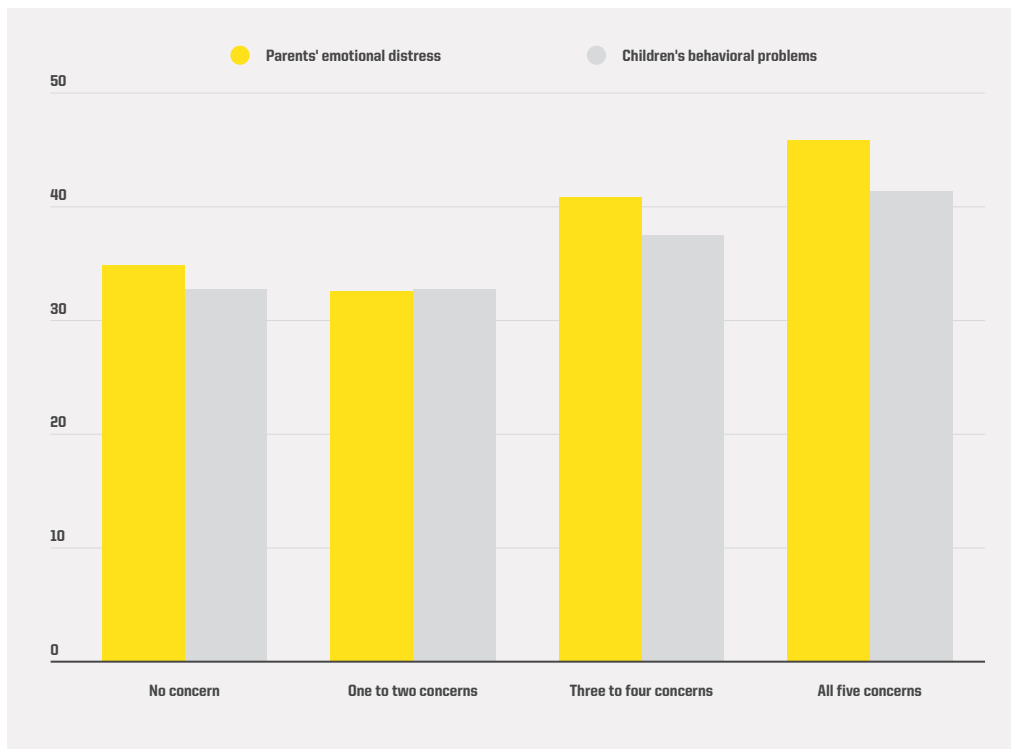
children’s opportunities to learn advanced concepts, and 58% are concerned about children’s access to extracurricular activities such as sports and music.

- In terms of socio-emotional outcomes, 60% of parents are worried about their children’s ability to maintain or form friendships, and 57% report concerns about

children’s connection to the school community.

- Parents’ total number of concerns about school-aged children’s learning and socio-emotional development in the upcoming school year are also significantly linked to their worsened emotional distress and their younger children’s worsened behavioral problems.

Associations between parents’ concerns about children’s learning & socio-emotional development and emotional well-being\*



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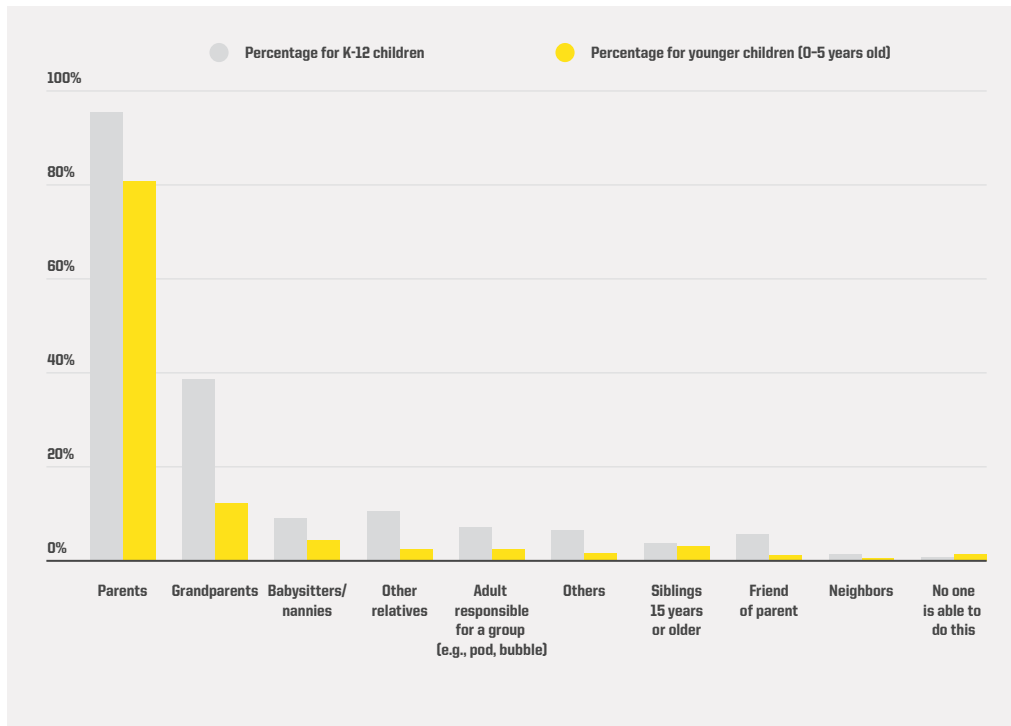
We ask caregivers about their experiences with four symptoms of emotional distress: stress, loneliness, anxiety, and depression. We also ask caregivers about their child’s externalizing and internalizing behaviors. To facilitate aggregation, responses for each symptom were averaged to create a single score and transformed to a range of 0-100 (with 0 being no distress) for each caregiver and child.

## WHO IS SUPPORTING EARLY LEARNING AND EDUCATIONAL ACTIVITIES?

When we look at who is supporting learning and education activities for young and older school-aged children we see that the majority of these responsibilities fall on parents: 95% of parents are assisting their young children’s learning, and

81% are also providing support to their school-aged children’s education. Grandparents are also providing assistance especially for young children (39%). This is consistent with the data from the 2020-2021 academic year.

Who is supporting children's learning and educational activities?



**“We believe in keeping [our child] in in-person preschool for her wellbeing and keeping her routines mostly unchanged.”**  
Parent in Illinois

**“We will not be sending our children back to school until a vaccine is available. We don’t think it is safe. They will be learning remotely.”**  
Parent in New York

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## CAREGIVERS' ATTITUDES ABOUT COVID-19-RELATED POLICIES AND PLANS

We ask parents about their attitudes towards school reopening plans, safety operations, and learning formats. Our data show differing opinions about what should be done.

- Many parents are worried about children's health and safety in school: 58% of parents are worried about students complying with social distancing and mask mandates even if measures are put in place, and 25% indicate that they would rather homeschool their children until they have received the COVID-19 vaccine. However, many parents also prioritize in-school experiences: 59% of parents believe that schools should reopen to all students, and 61% think that the overall school experiences are more important despite the ongoing COVID-19 concerns.
- Approximately half of parents support mask mandates, one in four parents disagree with mask mandates, and another one in four parents are unsure.
- In terms of different school operating formats, 55% of parents are comfortable with school or child care centers/programs operating in-person at full capacity, and 47% of parents are comfortable with hybrid formats (i.e., 50% in-person and 50% virtual at-home). Only 16% of parents are comfortable with school or child care centers/programs operating exclusively with virtual learning.

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**"I still don't feel safe and everyone is like living like the pandemic is over. Schools are getting ready to open and I'm afraid for my kids and myself. I'll continue distance learning."**

Parent in California

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**"[What is helping us most right now] is finding age appropriate and safe activities for the kids that are educational and not screen time related."**

State not given

# ABOUT THE RAPID-EC PROJECT

RAPID-EC is under the direction of Philip Fisher, PhD, Director of the Center for Translational Neuroscience at the University of Oregon

The RAPID-EC project is an early childhood family well-being survey designed to gather essential information in a continuous manner regarding the needs, health promoting behaviors, and well-being of children and their families during the COVID-19 outbreak and recovery in the United States. The survey focuses on better understanding child development (and parents' concerns about development over time), caregiver mental health and well-being, and caregiver needs and utilization of resources.

RAPID-EC collects data from 1,000 caregivers in all 50 states twice per month. The survey collects snapshots of data across time with the ability to assess trends longitudinally.

Twice per month, the team posts analyses of survey findings, including policy recommendations and resources for additional reading.

1,000+

surveyed  
bi-weekly

74

surveys

10,000

unique  
households

50

US states

