



**Understanding Primary Caregiver  
Perceptions of Childcare Study in the  
Finger Lakes Region**  
**Focus Group Analysis and Recommendations**

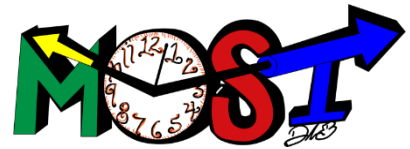
Data and summary prepared  
by the Healthi Kids Initiative  
at Common Ground Health

June 2021

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## Project Partners

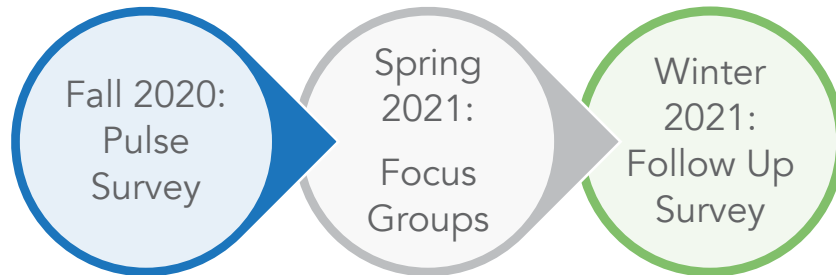


## Background

COVID-19 has changed so much in our community. We know all caregivers have been navigating challenges to keep their kids safe during the pandemic. We also know that many caregivers have had to find new and emergency forms of childcare for their babies, school-aged kids, and teens.

Community organizations across Monroe, Wayne, Livingston, Seneca, Ontario, and Yates counties are currently trying to meet the needs of caregivers. As we all continue to navigate this strange new world, we want to make sure that resources, supports, and assistance are informed by data.

This past fall, Healthi Kids, in partnership with the United Way of Greater Rochester and Finger Lakes Community Schools, surveyed 175 primary caregivers in Monroe and Wayne counties to understand what support they needed to meet their childcare needs during COVID-19. Primary caregivers identified the following needs: income support, flexible time off work policies, resources/supports for family members providing childcare, a vaccine for COVID-19, in-person learning, and accessible information about childcare options. The full results of the survey are [available here](#).



*Figure 1: Primary Caregiver Perceptions of Childcare During COVID-19 Study Timeline*

Following the success of the initial Pulse Survey, the childcare community asked the project partners to delve deeper into primary caregivers' childcare needs this summer. From March to May 2021, Healthi Kids partnered with [Finger Lakes Community Schools](#), the [United Way of Greater Rochester's](#) Childcare Task Force, the [Finger Lakes Reopening Schools Safely Task Force](#) at [Common Ground Health](#), [CF Resources](#), the [Child Care Council](#) and [Wayne M.O.S.T](#) to host focus groups with primary caregivers from Monroe, Wayne, Seneca, Yates, Ontario, and Livingston counties.

## The purpose of the focus groups:



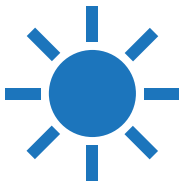
1. Better understand families' current needs/wants/desires for childcare and out of school time care for summer 2021



2. Center family voices in decisions being made about the childcare ecosystem



3. Learn what resources and supports primary caregivers have needed, and continue to need, for their children's childcare during COVID-19



4. Support local providers to plan for summer programs that meet the needs of families

The results of these focus groups are summarized below with particular attention paid to primary caregivers' concerns about their children and childcare needs moving forward in the pandemic and beyond.

## Methodology

In May 2021, Healthi Kids, Finger Lakes Community Schools, the United Way of Greater Rochester, CF Resources, the Child Care Council and Wayne MOST conducted primary caregiver focus groups in Monroe, Wayne, Livingston, Ontario, Seneca, and Yates counties and one in the City of Rochester.

For the purpose of our work, primary caregivers are defined as a person who has primary responsibility for the care of a child. This includes, but is not limited to parents, grandparents, other relatives, and other legal guardians.

Focus groups were conducted virtually in evenings throughout April-May 2021. Primary caregivers who participated in the focus groups had children between the ages of 0-12 and had either prior to COVID-19 and/or during COVID-19 participated in local childcare and/or out of school time opportunities in their county. The team interviewed 36 primary caregivers across the region.



Families were asked six key questions about their childcare experience during COVID-19:

1. What does childcare look like for you right now?
2. How did you make decisions around childcare throughout the pandemic?
3. How are you going to make decisions moving forward?
4. What do providers need to do to make you feel more comfortable to let your children participate in their programs?
5. What does summer look like for you when it comes to your childcare needs?
6. We know the pandemic has impacted everyone. What are you worried about with your kids?

This report summarizes the responses received in all the focus groups. We know the needs and barriers to care for many city parents may be different from the parents in rural and suburban areas but given the limited data the report results focus on the summation of the data collected.



## The Results

### What primary caregivers are concerned about with their children

1. *Mental health and social emotional well-being*
2. *A return toward normalcy for their children*

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*“I know with my kids; the mental health thing was an issue. With my kids, my stepson couldn’t come and see us for the first few months of the pandemic. It took a toll on them socially, not being able to see their friends. Skyping and calling on the phone wasn’t the same. They’re still struggling.”*

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Primary caregivers discussed the pandemic’s impact on their children, with the majority worried about their children’s mental health and emotional well-being due to virtual learning and prolonged isolation. Most primary caregivers reported their children have become less productive and enjoyed school less since the transition to virtual learning. In addition to a return to in-person education, primary caregivers believe their children need to spend more time with other children for healthy socialization.



While several primary caregivers recognized their children’s remarkable resilience, there was a consensus that their children need more interaction with friends and more time outside of the house. Overall, primary caregivers desperately want both childcare and school to return to a semblance of normalcy for their children. One parent even observed that their child has no idea that masks are not the norm in schools.

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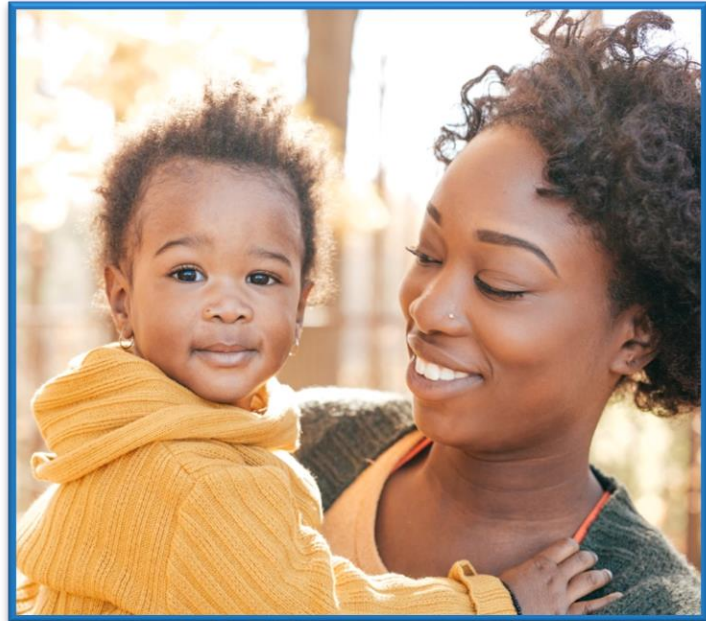
*“They’re still trying to understand how things have changed, and what’s going on. It’s still difficult to explain to them everything that’s happened. [COVID-19]’s changed them a little bit.”*

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## What primary caregivers value from childcare providers

1. *Consistent communication from providers*
2. *Flexibility from providers*
3. *Cleaning procedures & enhanced safety standards throughout COVID-19*

Throughout the pandemic, primary caregivers have most appreciated clear and consistent communication from providers, understanding from daycare staff (and supervisors at work) about scheduling difficulties, and transparent messaging about cleaning/safety protocols in daycare centers. Across all counties, primary caregivers emphasized the importance of childcare centers maintaining open communication and providing sufficient information. For instance, primary caregivers in Livingston County expressed considerable appreciation at how well childcare providers have communicated changes in daycare center policy amidst the chaos of the pandemic.



Primary caregivers, especially those who are essential workers, also wanted flexibility and understanding from providers about their scheduling difficulties. Lastly, all primary caregivers agree their children’s safety is their top priority during the pandemic, but they disagree on how to ensure safety. Almost all primary caregivers were impressed by the thorough cleaning procedures of daycare centers and would like the enhanced cleaning protocol to continue post-pandemic.

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*“In these circumstances they’re [the childcare providers] doing the best they can. With schoolwork, they had 100s of Zooms a week to do with these kids. They didn’t sign up for that. [My provider sends me a] weekly email sharing what’s going on, reminders, etc. They also send an option so that [we get a] text message...so they can get their message across. But e-mail is great for me, it’s not the case for most primary caregivers.*”

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However, primary caregivers across counties disagree about the use of masks and vaccinated staff. Primary caregivers in Monroe county, for instance, found masks in daycare settings to be useless and interfering with their children's socialization. In Ontario county, primary caregivers appreciated and supported the additional health and safety measures and had no problem with their children wearing masks. Regarding vaccines, there was consensus across the region among primary caregivers that it should be left up to the choice of staff to get vaccinated. They did not support mandated vaccines. Families did express however a slight preference towards vaccinated staff.

## What primary caregivers still need

1. *Accessibility to childcare*
2. *Lower cost of childcare*
3. *Flexibility in childcare*
4. *Continuation of safety procedures*

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*It's not affordable to pay \$18,000 for the year for childcare.*

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The pandemic exposed and exacerbated primary caregivers' problems with childcare, including its high cost, lack of flexibility in scheduling, and limited number of options. Childcare serves as a constant source of stress for most primary caregivers who reported feeling a tension between being able to keep their job and finding care for their children. While COVID-19 increased primary caregivers' reliance on their family members and friends as caregivers, daycare centers remain the primary source of childcare.

Many primary caregivers expressed frustration at the high financial cost of childcare and providers requiring them to pay to reserve their child's spot (even when not using it). Some simply stated they cannot afford to pay hundreds of dollars per month for childcare.



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*Can I pick up extra hours at work – will I have someone to watch my kids if I do this? Is it worth it if I don't have daycare? If you don't have a good network for care you are in trouble.*

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Primary caregivers also desired more flexibility in scheduling. Primary caregivers wished providers offered hours outside of traditional work hours. The lack of flexibility coupled with

heightened safety concerns during COVID-19 pushed some primary caregivers to seek alternatives, such as at-home daycare or private babysitters.

Finally, primary caregivers indicated inconvenience of location due to a lack of options as a major problem. For instance, primary caregivers in Livingston County reported Pride and Joy as their only viable option for a childcare center. One parent in Wayne county remarked that there were already too few options before the pandemic further limited accessibility. In sum, primary caregivers want more affordability, more flexibility in hours, and more locations for childcare.

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*“[We] can’t get our kids to daycare because there’s no options. [Our local center] is full and has been full for a while, and that’s the only option in our area. There’s not enough options in each town.”*

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Primary caregivers would like many of the safety measures daycare providers have taken due to COVID-19, such as enhanced cleaning protocols, to continue after the pandemic. Most importantly, COVID-19 exposed rather than caused most of primary caregivers’ problems with daycare and they must be addressed both now and post-pandemic.

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*“I would never ask anyone to go get vaccinated, but I would go for a provider that was vaccinated over someone that wasn’t. That’s an extra layer of protection to the kids because they’re not eligible for vaccination [yet]. As long as they’re following PPE, social distancing, it is effective and works. I’ve been sending my kids all along, I feel comfortable with sanitation and protection [my provider has supported]”*

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## Overall Recommendations and Insights

### 1. Cost of childcare continues to be a struggle for primary caregivers

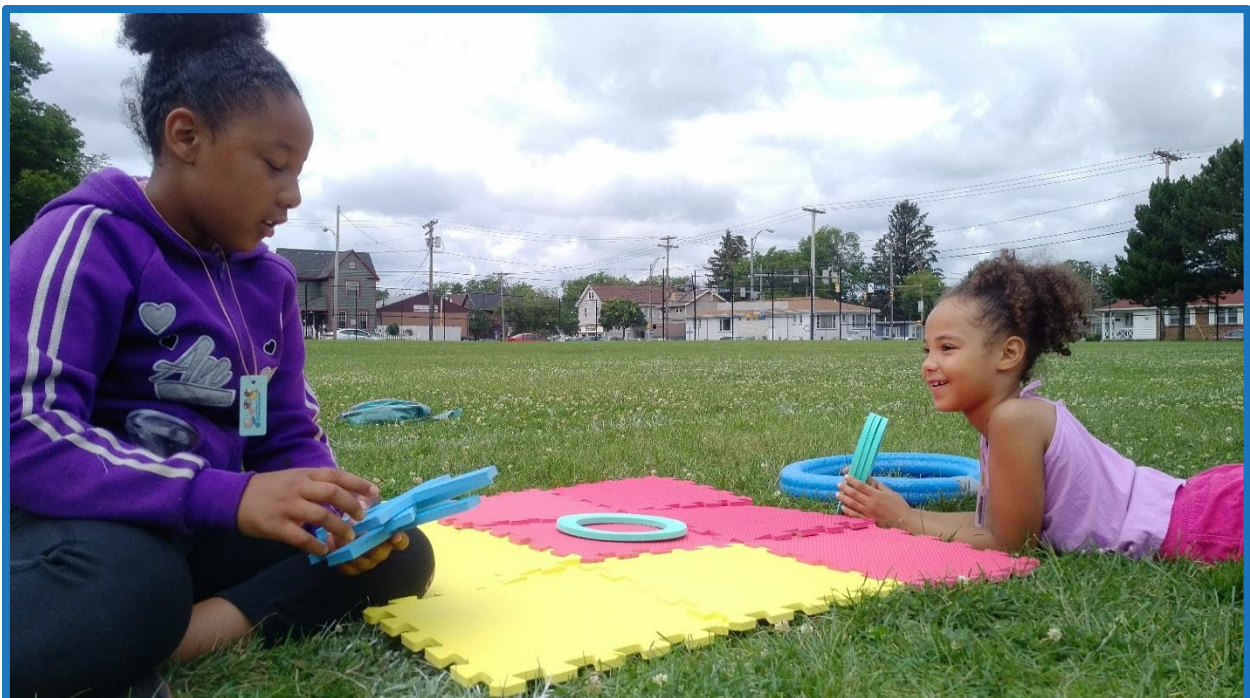
The pandemic has exacerbated the need for childcare services, but many families expressed that the cost of childcare continues to be a struggle for their family. This was particularly harder during the pandemic with loss of jobs – and with the inconsistency the pandemic brought. Many families shared that they pulled their children from childcare because the overall cost, and requirements to “hold their place” when their child didn’t attend, meant their family could no longer afford it.

### 2. Availability and accessibility of childcare is limited

Families across the region continue to struggle with available and accessible childcare. In our rural regions, many families noted that there either isn’t a childcare provider in their town, or their hours are too rigid to accommodate shift work schedules. Families shared if they did have something closer to their house and if providers could offer more flexible hours, they would certainly take advantage of it.

### 3. Build a system that works for families

Primary caregivers shared that it would be so much easier if the childcare system catered to family needs. Families in our rural counties in particular shared the struggles of accessing childcare and expressed the need to rethink services to address the needs of the population who utilizes these services.



#### 4. Continue with existing safety measures but ensure adequate funding

The policies and safety measures put in place during COVID are working. Primary caregivers shared very loudly that they have been incredibly impressed with their providers on cleaning protocols and communication throughout the pandemic. The regulations set by the state have been working well, and families even understood the need to quarantine when necessary. As we move forward into the fall, families stressed the need to continue to uphold health and safety standards – the increased cleaning protocols; and urged the state to provide adequate funding to the providers to do so.



#### 5. Continuously changing messages from the state made it hard for families to follow

While our local providers did a great job with the regulations and communicating with families, we did hear a lot of frustration from families. The uncertainty of the pandemic and the ever-changing rules (particularly with school) made it harder for families to arrange for care. Many families had to rely on family members.

#### 6. Majority of families want in-person summer programming

Families expressed that they plan to take advantage of in-person summer programming when available. They are much more comfortable with their kids participating with in-person programming, and many expressed they have signed their children up for extended learning opportunities (e.g. sports). They did share that they wish more options were available for this summer but understood the challenges providers are facing in setting those up for families.

#### 7. Majority of families are comfortable with in-person learning and childcare in the fall

Families are ready to get back to a new normal and are looking forward to in-person learning and childcare/OST opportunities in the fall. They hope that the providers/childcare



system can provide options for their children to socialize and get back to a sense of normalcy.

## 8. Families are concerned about the impact the pandemic has had on their children

All family members who participated in the focus groups shared that they are concerned about the impact the pandemic has had on their kids. Many expressed that they have seen the impact that social isolation and remote learning has had on their kids. Families shared they are now concerned about the mental health of their children, and some even expressed that they are worried about developmental delays in their younger kids (0-3).

Increased investment in social emotional learning, opportunities for authentic relationship building between peers and adults (e.g. out of school time, sports, experiential learning), mental health resources and supports and early intervention services will be critical for children moving forward in the pandemic.





## Appendix-1: County Specific Key Insights

### Livingston County

- + Flexible scheduling and open communication are key for primary caregivers
- + Providers have communicated with families in several ways (phone, text, email)
- + Primary caregivers appreciated when providers took understanding attitudes towards primary caregivers' difficulties
- + Families shared that the Dansville community center is great and has a wonderful program that accommodates nontraditional hours. They stressed the importance of having the flexibility of that center and how that's helped a lot of families they know
- + Primary caregivers want their kids back at school
- Limited options for daycare centers – really the only childcare provider available to them is Pride and Joy
- Transportation continues to be a large barrier. Many families can't get their kids to daycare because there are no locations close by, and it would take too long to utilize public transit
- Primary caregivers would like more locations, open earlier, flexible hours, and more affordable pricing
- One mom could not put her children in daycare because she had to get to work by 6:30 am and no childcare options in her area provided care that early
- Finding childcare was constant stressor for all primary caregivers in the focus group
- Stressed the mental health challenges both caregivers and children have faced throughout the pandemic and the need for supports for both moving forward

### Monroe County

- + Emphasized importance of proper cleaning procedures (and wanted them to continue post-pandemic)
- + Emphasized clear and consistent messaging from providers was so helpful to them as they made decisions about their childcare
- + Many families are relying on family members for additional care needs
- + Children are participating in camps and other enrichment opportunities in the summer
- Primary caregivers most focused on their frustration of mask requirements and concerns about the ever changing guidance from the health department.
- Said mental health and socialization are most important for their children. Stressed that mental health issues have increased due to COVID-19.
- Majority of primary caregivers in this focus group shared that masking was useless and harmful for their children

## City of Rochester

- + Want their kids to be engaged at childcare
- + Families have been using a variety of childcare opportunities throughout the pandemic including libraries, recreation centers, daycare, and Head Start.
- + Shared importance of messaging throughout the COVID-19 pandemic
- + Families select childcare with enrichment activities for their kids
- Cost and convenience of location are key
- Constant tension between going to work and finding care for children
- Challenging to find daycare for those working evening or nightshifts
- Appreciate and emphasize flexibility and understanding from work and daycare providers
- Not all providers provide cooked meals for kids – many families shared they prefer home daycares because they will provide a good meal for their kids.
- Families want a one-stop-shop for finding out about after-school activities, camps, and daycare

## Ontario County

- + Emphasized importance of clear communication and sufficient information about childcare
- + Families like when they hear about their child's day and what they may need to work on at home with their kids. Wish providers had more time for individualized attention and education
- + Families are registered for summer camps
- Expressed frustration at limited childcare options
- Family-based childcare was often sporadic throughout the pandemic
- Concerned about children's isolation and excessive time at home
- Concerned about mental health of teen children
- COVID-19 was a reminder to primary caregivers about how stressful and difficult finding childcare can be
- Would ideally like more individual attention for children but understand that would require more teachers and higher price

## Seneca County

- + Want extra safety precautions but recognize that would raise price
- + Appreciate additional training and equipment that are available in their childcare facilities to navigate COVID-19
- Expressed frustration at limited number of locations and slots
- Shared how the cost of childcare is becoming more difficult to manage and that it's easier to afford those childcare providers who are not registered or licensed

- Lack of summer options for families in the region
- Emphasized the need for schools to return to in-person because Zoom does not allow for proper connections or education
- Expressed concern that their children don't even know what normal school is like at this point
- Shared concern about the emotional wellbeing of their kids and the lack of socialization their children have had since the pandemic began

### Yates County

- + Families in the focus group were relying on other families or looking after their children at home because of flexibility of working from home
- Families shared there are no bilingual options for childcare in their area
- Challenging to find childcare throughout the pandemic, local home care providers were full
- Cost was a major concern
- Wanted more and clearer exposure to daycare centers, not being allowed into the facility was a huge drawback; wanted more information about safety protocols
- Concerned about younger children's development: the families want socialization for their little ones, and now they are concerned about delayed development because they have been at home and not with childcare professionals

### Wayne County

- + Safety is number one priority for primary caregivers
- + Health and safety standards are what makes the caregivers more comfortable
- + Feel comfortable sending children to programs now if they're available
- + Kids are participating in summer programming (particularly sports)
- Already too few options before COVID which was only made worse during pandemic
- More primary caregivers use at-home daycare in the county because it is much more flexible
- Children generally hate virtual learning and miss out on social component entirely
- Concerns about mental health of children and how social isolation has impacted social and language skills