

CHALLENGES IN TEACHING PRESCHOOL REMOTELY: HOW CAN SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGISTS HELP?



Written By
Michele L. Stites, Ed.D.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought increased attention to education, with teachers, even preschool teachers, shifting from traditional, in-person learning to remote teaching, often in a matter of days. While popular news outlets (e.g., Associated Press, 4.28.2020, Washington Post, 2020, August 12) have reported on distance learning, information about preschool teachers and the distance learning they provide, has been largely left out of the conversation. This is both concerning and surprising given the importance of early childhood education (e.g. Barnett & Frede, 2010).

As an education community, we are beginning to learn more about distance learning and how it may be best facilitated for young children. However, school psychologists have been largely left out of discussions on how to support teachers, despite their educational expertise (Fischer, A. J., 2020, May 14). To help modify principles of effective instruction for distance learning, we need to better understand how distance learning is implemented in preschools and the personal and professional barriers faced by teachers. It is important that we identify the challenges preschool teachers face with distance learning so that school psychologists may



Written By
Susan Sonnenschein, Ph.D.

provide them the support they need to make preschool distance learning effective.

We recently distributed an online survey to preschool teachers in both private and public preschools in the U.S. to learn more about distance learning in preschools during COVID-19.

Responding teachers taught children from varying socio-economic backgrounds in both public and private preschools. While the survey was distributed nationally, most of the respondents came from Maryland. Using this survey, we not only examined the strategies used by preschool teachers to create preschool distance learning

environments, but also the personal and professional stressors that the teachers faced day-to-day.

Most of the preschool teachers who responded to our survey (91%) indicated that they provided distance learning during the COVID-19 crisis, even though only about half of them (53%) were required to do so by their administration. Of the teachers who provided distance learning, most did so in a synchronous fashion, that is all of the children logged on for live, group lesson. Typically, teachers used platforms like Zoom to host these learning sessions.

Despite their best efforts, preschool teachers reported that distance learning with young children was challenging. One of the most significant stressors for teachers, regardless of whether or not they taught in a public or private preschool, was the developmental level of the children. That is, young children of this age needed a significant amount of adult support for distance learning to be successful. The teachers reported that parents complained that distance learning required too much parental support. It also required a set schedule for the





children's instruction, something that was unattainable for many families. In addition to developmental level, teachers from publicly funded programs were more likely to report that parents lacked the technological tools and/or internet connectivity. Teachers in public programs also reported many of their parents had limited English proficiency and reading skills, which interfered with their ability to understand the lessons for their children.

It is important to realize that during this time of crisis, teachers themselves are dealing with the impacts of COVID-19. Fifty-four percent of the responding teachers indicated that they were impacted by COVID-19 on a personal level. Teachers were also dealing with a lack of childcare and needing to support their own children's learning. Teachers also reported experiencing personal family issues and having less time to work on professional tasks. Food insecurity and salary loss also had a negative impact on teachers' ability to attend to distance learning.

Where do school psychologists fit into the preschool distance learning equation? First, as experts in child development, school psychologists can provide resources on instructional basics such as amount of time online and developmentally appropriate materials. This includes stepping in when sweeping preschool to grade 12 recommendations are made by system administrators without consideration for the developmental level

“DESPITE THEIR BEST EFFORTS, PRESCHOOL TEACHERS REPORTED THAT DISTANCE LEARNING WITH YOUNG CHILDREN WAS CHALLENGING. ONE OF THE MOST SIGNIFICANT STRESSORS FOR TEACHERS, REGARDLESS OF WHETHER OR NOT THEY TAUGHT IN A PUBLIC OR PRIVATE PRESCHOOL, WAS THE DEVELOPMENTAL LEVEL OF THE CHILDREN.”



of the children. School psychologists can also assist teachers and administrators with helping families seek out free and low-cost technological tools (such as tablets and laptops) and internet service.

Once these basic supports are in place, school psychologists can put in specialized supports focused on social emotional development, a critical component of preschool (Hirsh-Pasek, et al., 2020). This may include setting up virtual social and requisite learning groups. These groups can help preschoolers strengthen their social skills in a developmentally appropriate manner to ensure they are ready for kindergarten when the time comes. Something as simple as reading time using stories targeting social-emotional issues can help reinforce appropriate social skills and requisite learning behaviors. Given that we do not know how long we will be in a virtual learning environment, these groups can focus on in-person and online interactions (e.g. answering questions in person and online).

We all have a lot to learn about distance learning. By sharing information and supports, the entire educational community can make it more effective for preschool children and their

families. School psychologists bring an expertise that is critical to making distance learning work for young children. ●

REFERENCES

Barnett, W. S., & Frede, E. C. (2010). The promise of preschool: Why we need early education for all. *American Educator*, 34(1), 21–40.

Fischer, A. J. (2020, May 14). How to school psych during a global pandemic: Supporting students through teleconsultation with caregivers and educators [Webinar]. From APA division 16. <http://apadivision16.org/2020/05/webinar-recording-for-how-to-school-psych-during-a-global-pandemic-supporting-students-through-teleconsultation-with-caregivers-and-educators/>

Hirsh-Pasek, K., Yogman, M., & Gollinkoff, R.M. (2020, July 21). Should schools reopen? Balancing COVID-19 and learning loss for young children. www.brookings.edu/blog/education-plus-development/2020/07/21/should-schools-reopen-balancing-covid-19-and-learning-loss-for-young-children/.

Michele L. Stites is an assistant professor of early childhood education at UMBC. Michele's professional interests include early childhood education, early childhood mathematics, and children with disabilities.

Email: mstites@umbc.edu

Susan Sonnenschein is a professor of psychology at UMBC. Susan's professional interests include promoting children's educational well-being and a focus on factors that facilitate the educational development of children from different ethnic backgrounds.

Email: sonnensc@umbc.edu