INTRODUCTION

From October 18th to November 8th, 2024, the DeltaKids Early Years action team distributed an online Microsoft Forms survey, with 3 questions, to early years agencies and childcare centers. The survey aimed to gather insights on the community's response to the impact of COVID-19 on children, families, and service providers, with the goal of informing future DKEY workplan initiatives.
The survey yielded 18 responses, which are summarized below. Link to the survey responses.

SUMMARY

1.   Since COVID, what trends have you noticed around children's development and/or behaviour?

Since COVID-19, children's development and behavior have shown notable trends, including a rise in anxiety, developmental delays, and social-emotional challenges. Key observations include:

1. **Increased Anxiety and Financial Need**: KidSport Delta has seen a significant rise in applications for financial assistance, with funds distributed increasing from $64,000 for 202 children in 2019 to $120,000 for 295 children by October 2024. This reflects a growing need for support as families cope with increased economic pressure and heightened child anxiety.

2. **Language and Social Delays**: There is a marked increase in speech delays, social challenges, and separation anxiety. Children are struggling more with social-emotional skills, requiring additional support in childcare and school settings to adjust and interact with peers.

3. **Behavioral and Emotional Regulation Issues**: Children are exhibiting more behavioral challenges, with difficulties in managing emotions and behaviors in social contexts. More children are displaying aggressive tendencies, needing instant gratification, and struggling with transitions.

4. **Increased Parental Stress and Screen Time Effects**: Parent burnout has risen, partly due to heightened developmental needs and cost-of-living challenges. More screen time and less initiative in seeking developmental support have contributed to delays and behavioral issues.

5. **Missed Early Interventions**: Many children missed early developmental assessments due to pandemic restrictions, such as virtual doctor visits, resulting in later diagnoses for conditions like autism and social-pragmatic difficulties. Wait times for public assessments have increased, leaving families in need of additional support.

6. **Adjustments in Childcare and Education**: Structured programs and "curriculum-based" daycare approaches may not meet all children's needs, particularly those requiring play-based learning and social-emotional skill-building. Adjustments are being made to provide more supportive, flexible environments.

In summary, the impact of COVID-19 has significantly amplified existing challenges in early childhood development, with increased anxiety, developmental delays, and behavioral issues. Families are experiencing higher financial stress, and there is a greater need for adaptive, flexible support systems to address these evolving needs.

November 12, 2024

2.   How have you (or your staff) adjusted to working/dealing with these trends?

Staff and providers have implemented a variety of strategies to adapt to the increasing developmental and social-emotional needs of children post-COVID:

1. **Enhanced Communication with Families**: Staff engage more frequently with parents, discussing observations, providing guidance, and connecting families to resources such as Speech-Language Pathologists (SLPs) and positive behavior support programs. They also educate families on managing screen time and addressing anxiety in children.

2. **Shift to Play-Based and Flexible Learning**: Structured activities have been reduced in favor of play-based learning, which supports natural social and emotional development. This approach allows children to explore and interact at their own pace, encouraging skill-building in a supportive environment. Routines have been simplified, with shortened circle times and more emphasis on open exploration.

3. **Classroom and Curriculum Adjustments**: Expectations are tailored to each child's developmental level, and additional support staff have been added to assist with basic self-help skills and social interactions. Staff model positive behaviors, guide children on emotional regulation, and encourage social engagement in manageable steps.

4. **Increased Professional Development**: Staff are pursuing additional training on child anxiety, attachment-based practices, and behavior management. These skills are essential for effectively supporting children with diverse needs and helping families waiting for specialized services.

5. **Self-Care and Mental Health Support**: Recognizing the emotional demands of their work, staff are prioritizing self-care by creating calm classroom environments with soft music and focusing on stress management. This approach fosters patience, resilience, and a positive atmosphere for both staff and children.

In sum, through these adjustments, staff aim to provide children with a nurturing and supportive environment that meets their evolving needs.

3.   Following COVID, what have been your biggest learning(s) or changes?
**   (This can be in any way you feel/see this has happened, personally or professionally)**

Following COVID, there have been several significant learnings and changes related to children's development, family needs, and professional practices:

1. **Impact of Trauma and Resilience**: The lockdowns and school disruptions caused trauma for some children and families, leading to fear and anxiety. The long-term effects are still being understood, though there have been signs of resilience in some children.

November 12, 2024

2. **Financial Strain on Families**: The financial challenges facing families have become more pronounced. Many applicants are struggling to make ends meet, which highlights the increased need for support.

3. **Shift to Virtual Support**: There was a steep learning curve for both parents and professionals in adapting to virtual platforms like Zoom and Teams. While this shift allowed for greater accessibility, it also highlighted the need for in-person engagement, especially for children's development.

4. **Increased Burnout and Service Delays**: Childcare center staff have experienced increased burnout, and there has been a backlog in services like Supported Child Development due to increased demand. The capacity of childcare providers has been stretched thin as a result.

5. **Work-Life Balance and Mental Health**: The ability to work from home brought a better work-life balance for some professionals, allowing for more family time and reduced work stress. However, anxiety levels, both personally and professionally, have increased, especially among parents and young children.

6. **Need for In-Person Interaction**: There is a growing emphasis on the importance of in-person learning and interactions, particularly in playgroups and educational settings. The shift to screens has isolated children and limited their social development, making personal connections with caregivers more crucial.

7. **Parenting Challenges**: Many parents are struggling with their parenting skills, often feeling overwhelmed and unsure of how to help their children. Increased mental health challenges in children and the lack of support from professionals have compounded these difficulties.

8. **Helicopter Parenting and Dependency**: There is a noticeable increase in "helicopter parenting," with parents overly focused on their children's specific needs. This has led to greater dependency in children, who often seek constant attention, even during independent play.

9. **Changes in Children's Behavior**: Children's self-regulation has declined, with many showing signs of being easily distracted, quick to complain, and struggling with empathy. Some children exhibit a sense of entitlement, feeling justified in demanding attention or resources, while others are better able to engage independently.

10. **Adaptation in Educational Settings**: Educators have had to adjust classroom environments to keep children engaged and safe. This includes rotating toys, changing settings, and being flexible to meet the evolving needs of children.

11. **Self-Care and Adaptation**: Professionals have learned the importance of self-care, taking time for personal health, and adapting to the changing needs of children and their families. Flexibility, understanding, and ongoing learning have become essential for success.

In summary, the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly reshaped the way families, educators, and service providers interact. While challenges have emerged, especially regarding children's emotional, social, and developmental needs, it has also led to a greater understanding of the importance of in-person interactions, the need for flexible services, and the value of adapting to children's evolving needs.

November 12, 2024

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the impact of COVID-19 has significantly amplified existing challenges in early childhood development, with increased anxiety, developmental delays, and behavioral issues. Families are experiencing higher financial stress, and there is a greater need for adaptive, flexible support systems to address these evolving needs. Staff have tried to adjust to these challenges by providing children with a nurturing and supportive environment that meets their evolving needs. COVID-19 pandemic has significantly reshaped the way families, educators, and service providers interact. While challenges have emerged, especially regarding children's emotional, social, and developmental needs, it has also led to a greater understanding of the importance of in-person interactions, the need for flexible services, and the value of adapting to children's evolving needs.

November 12, 2024