

Immigration Policy's Harmful Impacts on Early Care and Education

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You do go home and think about [families' wellbeing]. It's heart-wrenching for me. It can be a little depressing because you're worried about your families. We work not only with the children but the whole family... It seems like the harder it gets, the harder we work.

– Family services worker in California

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Demographic changes in recent decades have strongly connected immigration policy to early childhood education policy and practice. More than one in four children under age 8 lives in an immigrant family. Additionally, the early childhood workforce—including professionals who work in child care and preschool settings and as home visitors—has also become more diverse. As a result, immigration policy decisions made by the Administration and Congress impact a large share of our country's children as well as our early childhood workforce.

In 2017, CLASP conducted a six-month study to understand how young children and early childhood professionals are affected by immigration policy changes. This first-of-its kind research included interviews and focus groups with more than 150 early care and education providers and parents in six states. Our study shows that early childhood providers play a central role supporting millions of young children and their parents during a time of stress and fear.

What We Learned

Children are losing access to early care and education, health, and nutrition services. Providers reported drops in enrollment, attendance, and parent participation in early care and education programs. “It's been hard. It's never been hard before,” said a provider in California. “We still have a center that needs children. We used to fill up... but now we're scrounging for children. They think maybe they're going to be deported if they sign up.”

Providers also reported difficulty connecting immigrant families to health, nutrition, and social services. Parents are increasingly reluctant to enroll or maintain enrollment in public assistance programs—even for their U.S. citizen children. They are concerned about their information being shared with immigration officials and about how participation in programs will affect their immigration status.

Many early care and education providers feel overwhelmed and unprepared to meet families' needs. Immigrant families are increasingly seeking resources—such as legal advice and information on how immigration policies affect them—that are typically outside the expertise of early childhood providers. Many providers weren't sure where to turn for accurate, up-to-date information on immigration policy changes. Providers reported feeling worried and overwhelmed by how difficult their jobs have become.

On top of this increased professional stress, many providers are personally affected by immigration policy changes as well. Multiple program directors described how challenging it is for members of their staff to work with families who are being impacted by immigration while having their own family members or friends affected as well. Several programs employed teachers with Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) status, who were worried about their futures.



We provide trauma-informed services, but even so... we're not CPS. Our expertise is not to work with families who are going to be separated from their kids.

– Home visiting director in New Mexico



Early care and education programs have responded differently to the current environment. Some programs are intentionally changing the way they work with families. Providers described taking on new roles, offering new resources, and developing new partnerships to better meet families' needs. Others are struggling to find their roles in the changing climate. Multi-service organizations and programs with strong community-based partnerships are most likely to meet a broader set of families' needs and see themselves as advocates on immigration issues.

Notably, even the programs that sought to work with families in more meaningful ways lack the capacity to provide staff with support. Only a handful of programs are offering formal outlets for staff to seek emotional or mental health support and participate in training related to immigration issues. Few providers have formalized policies or clear procedures related to immigration enforcement activity. Most were unaware that child care and early education programs generally fall under the Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) "sensitive locations" policies.

Why It Matters

Immigrant families are facing immense trauma and hardship—detailed in *Our Children's Fear: Immigration Policy's Effects on Young Children*—which makes access to early care and education more important than ever. Research shows that a safe, nurturing environment with trusted caregivers can act as a buffer when everything else in a child's world is uncertain. But in order to reap the benefits, children and their families must feel safe and secure attending programs in the first place. And early childhood professionals must be equipped with the right information, skills, supports, and partnerships to meet families' most pressing needs. The current emotional strain on early care and education providers is harmful to their wellbeing and to that of the children in their care.

What We Can Do

Immigration policy is a children's issue. Our research shows that child care and early education providers are on the front lines in combatting the effects of fear, stress, and instability on young children and their parents. Policymakers, program administrators, philanthropists, and providers all have a role to play in ensuring early childhood professionals have the resources and support to meet families' unprecedented needs.

However, we should not overstate the extent to which early care and education policymakers and practitioners can mitigate immigration policies' harmful effects. Ultimately, our country must change course to safeguard the health and wellbeing of **all** our nation's children.

Recommendations for a Better Path Forward

The philanthropic community should:

- Speak out about the needs of children in immigrant families and the developmental consequences of the current policy context.
- Mount a major effort to protect, defend, and elevate the wellbeing of children in immigrant families by strategically investing in:
 - Federal and state advocacy efforts;
 - Collaborations across the immigration and early childhood sectors;
 - Development and dissemination of resources to the early childhood workforce and immigrant parents; and
 - Comprehensive research to document the effects of immigration policies on young children and their caregivers.

State and local policymakers and program administrators should:

- Oppose laws that encourage more immigration enforcement, such as collaborative agreements between ICE and local police.
- Ensure immigrant families and their children are not deterred from enrolling in critical basic needs programs by opposing laws that create barriers to access; issuing guidance on immigrant eligibility rules; analyzing data to identify declines in public benefit use; and conducting targeted outreach to immigrant communities.
- Provide resources to meet the needs of the early childhood workforce for training, education, and support related to immigration issues and trauma-informed care.
- Center the voices of immigrants and their families in key coalitions, councils, and activities.
- Increase funding for legal services in communities and build links to pro bono services.

Early care and education programs should:

- Create an intentional focus on the needs of children in immigrant families by engaging leadership in a dialogue on harmful immigration policies and their consequences.
- Partner with trusted immigrant-serving organizations to connect parents and staff to information and resources.
- Adopt policies to safeguard their physical locations and families' personal data and share these policies with staff and parents.
- Encourage families to create family deportation safety plans as well as share them with program staff.
- Talk to parents, social service providers, and immigrant-serving organizations to identify community-specific solutions to program participation.

Read the full report at clasp.org/eceimmigration.