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HEALTH

# Day-Care Centers Are Very Low Risk for Covid-19 Transmission, Study Says

Children in day-care programs present virtually no risk of transmitting Covid-19 to adults, according to a new Yale University study of more than 57,000 U.S. child-care providers.

By Robbie Whelan

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Children in day-care programs present virtually no risk of transmitting Covid-19 to adults, according to a new Yale University study of more than 57,000 U.S. child-care providers.

The study, believed to be the largest of its kind, indicated that keeping child-care centers open doesn't contribute to transmission of the disease caused by the new coronavirus, as long as they hew to sanitary guidelines like hand washing, small group sizes and staff wearing face coverings.

The research has broad implications for the U.S. economy, parents who depend on day-care centers and child-care workers. More than a third of child-care centers in the country closed between March and July, according to Child Care Aware, an advocacy group.

A June survey by the National Association for the Education of Young Children found that child-care center enrollment fell by 33% nationwide and that 70% of providers reported that parents told them they weren't comfortable sending kids back to day care.

“For parents, it might be a little bit of cold comfort, because they're worried about their particular child,” said Dr. Walter Gilliam, a child psychologist at Yale and lead author of the study, published Wednesday in

and lead author of the study, published Wednesday in the journal *Pediatrics*. “But it's clear that child care doesn't pose a threat to communities.”

Risk of infection for child-care professionals appears to be comparable with that for the broader population. The Yale study sought to control for factors such as the level of infection in the community where each center was located, as well as the gender, age and ethnicity of providers.

“It doesn’t appear that working in child care leads to the spread of Covid-19,” Dr. Gilliam said. “It is true that many child-care providers did get sick. Many of them even went to hospitals. But it was not the contact with children in child care that seems to be the source of that infection.”

The paper adds to growing research showing that young children aren’t major vectors in Covid-19 transmission, said Dr. Kristin Moffitt, a physician at Boston Children’s Hospital and professor of pediatrics at Harvard Medical School.

Scientists aren’t sure why children under the age of 10 seem less likely to spread the virus, but some theories have included a smaller viral load in their airways, smaller fluid droplets expelled when they cough or sneeze, or simply that small children are closer to the ground and thus less likely to transmit particles to adults’ airways. Most day-care centers go up to ages 5 or 6.

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Outbreaks have been more common among high-school and college students, in part, scientists believe, because they are more independent than young children and interact more with peers.

“You would think that day cares would be hotbeds, but they’re not, and this study is consistent with that,” Dr. Moffitt said. “The younger the age of the population, the less they seem to be contributing to transmission.”

The Yale study “provides a very important window into a crucial topic” and was conducted with a solid methodology, said Renee Boynton-Jarrett, a professor of pediatrics at Boston University School of Medicine. Both Drs. Moffitt and Boynton-Jarrett read prepublication copies of the study, though neither was involved with its peer-review process.

Dr. Boynton-Jarrett cautioned that the Yale study doesn’t indicate that children in day cares are immune

to the disease, although most research shows that adults suffer from more intense bouts of Covid-19 than most children. According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 296 children under the age of 14 had died from the infection through Oct. 7, or 0.14% of total U.S. deaths.

Survey responses in the study indicated that most professional child-care centers have rigidly observed guidelines like mask wearing, hand washing and contact tracing, the authors noted. While all day-care programs have low transmission rates, adults involved in home-based child-care programs were slightly more likely to become infected than those working in commercial day cares, the study said.

The Olive Treehouse Group, a network of three private preschools in Brooklyn, N.Y., with a total capacity for 90 children, closed its doors between March 13th and July 22nd. During that time, parents permanently pulled 25 students from the schools and the group lost 40% of the year's revenue, its executive director, Ashley Sobel, said.

Many parents who used to send their kids to the school described anxiousness around the uncertainty caused by various state and local orders to close, reopen and modify service at schools and child-care centers, Ms. Sobel said. Many of these parents pulled their kids from child care as a result. Last week, New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo declared child-care centers to be essential services and said they wouldn't be ordered closed again. The move has prompted a flood of returning parents, Ms. Sobel said, and the Yale report will come as good news to them.

"Some families wanted to get back to the pre-shutdown normalcy as quickly as possible but a lot of them fear that second wave and anticipate another shutdown," Ms. Sobel said.

Some parents, like Tzur Frenkel, an engineer who lives in Pittsburgh, have already adjusted to the new normal and are unlikely to be swayed by new research.

In March, the day care at a nearby synagogue attended by Mr. Frenkel's two children, then 5 and 3 years old, closed its doors. The children are still at home, even though most child-care centers in the city have reopened, and the family has struggled to rearrange its schedule around child-care needs. Mr. Frenkel's wife, a pharmaceutical researcher, is pregnant—considered a high risk case for Covid-19 by public health officials—and they worry one of their children could bring the infection home from day care.

"We didn't want to take any chances," said Mr. Frenkel. "We decided it's not worth the risk, even though there are a lot of benefits to day care."

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