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Experiences of Families With Young Children During the COVID-19 Pandemic, 2020 to 2021

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

- > Families in California with children ages 0–5 experienced a range of financial stressors during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021, struggling to pay for housing, basic necessities, and child care – when they could find child care. Latinx and Black or African American parents experienced more COVID-related financial stressors than other racial and ethnic groups.
- > From 2019 to 2021, which includes the pandemic years, daily reading to young children by a parent or family member showed a significant downward trend. Latinx and Black or African American parents, as well as parents in the lowest and highest income categories, had the greatest decreases in daily reading.

This policy brief uses California Health Interview Survey (CHIS) data to describe the financial, employment, and child care–related stressors the pandemic placed on families with young children. In addition, we examine changes in parental involvement behaviors that may have long-term effects on children’s development and health, and we also look at the disproportionate impacts experienced by families of color.

Parental stress, worsened by the pandemic, may decrease parental involvement behaviors, which include reading and singing to children and taking them out to a park or playground.



INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic amplified existing health and socioeconomic disparities in the United States. The ongoing health and socioeconomic effects on families with young children (0–5 years old) are being uncovered as restrictions loosen and as policies made to address the public health emergency are phased out.^{1,2} A recent National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM) report discussed short-term effects of the pandemic, such as negative physical and mental health outcomes, economic effects (such as increased job loss and food insecurity), and educational effects (such as declines in school enrollment), also noting that the long-term effects of the pandemic are yet to be determined. The NASEM report also emphasized the disproportionate effect of the pandemic on Latinx, Black, and Native American children.³

Moreover, according to the American Academy of Pediatrics, more than 140,000 children in the

U.S. have experienced the loss of a parent or caregiver since June 2021, with Latinx, Black, and American Indian or Alaska Native children having a higher risk than white children of losing a parent or grandparent to COVID-19. Such a loss is considered an adverse childhood experience (ACE), which is associated with negative mental health outcomes.⁴

Using 2020 and 2021 California Health Interview Survey (CHIS) data, this brief explores the experiences of parents or guardians of young children in California (hereafter called “parents”) during the first two years of the COVID-19 pandemic (see separate Data Source and Methods section). This brief discusses the heightened financial, employment, and child care–related stressors placed on parents, as well as changes in parental involvement behaviors during those two years. National data from the first six months of the pandemic showed that 40% of U.S. parents with a child under age 6 lost a job or had income reduced,



and 23% experienced food insecurity.⁵ The strain of finding child care felt by many parents also intensified as pandemic stay-at-home orders interrupted established child care resources.⁵ Essential workers in the U.S. — predominantly people of color, women, and people from communities most hard-hit by COVID-19 — also faced considerable child care challenges during the pandemic.^{6–9}

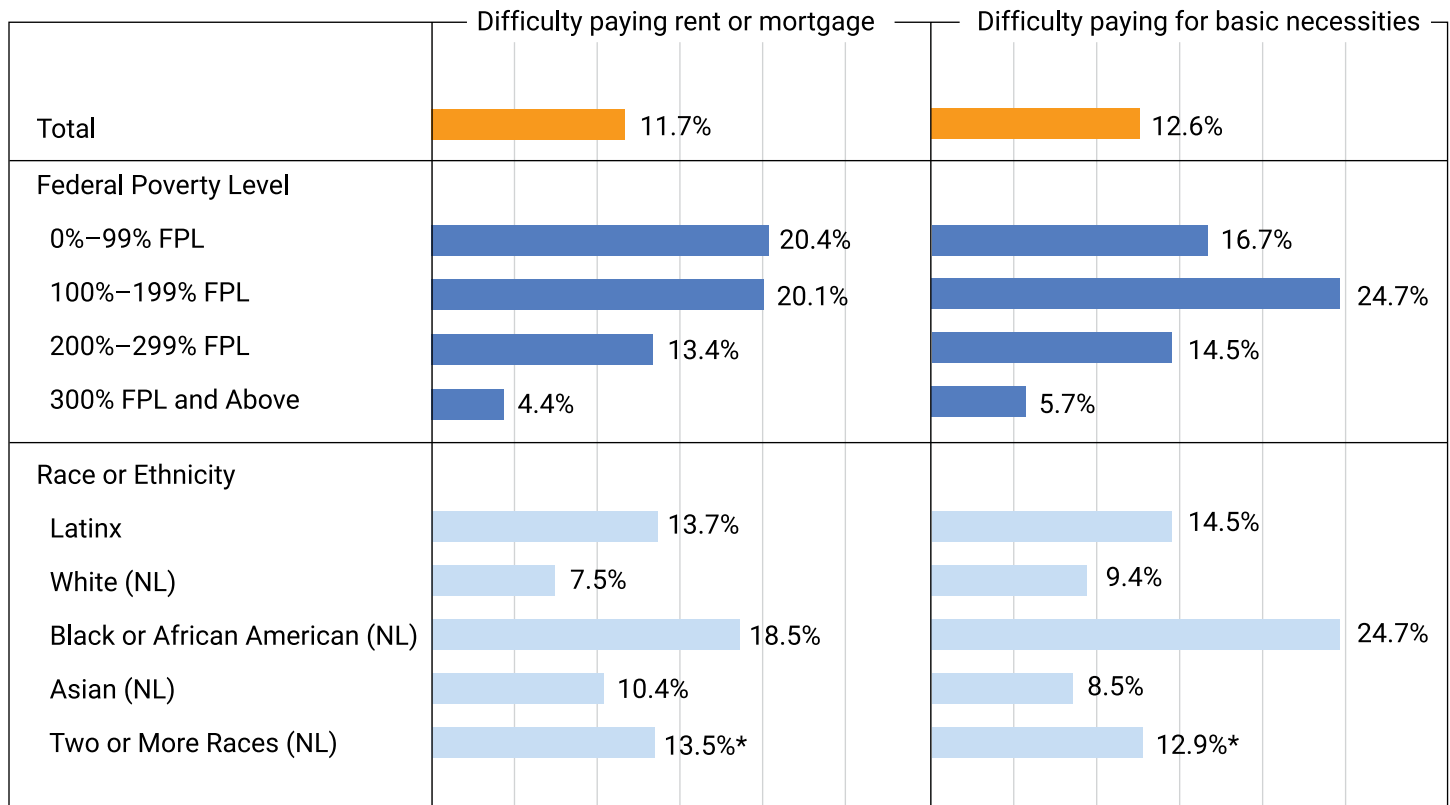
This brief also explores changes in parental involvement behaviors during the pandemic. Parental stress, worsened by the pandemic, may decrease parental involvement behaviors, which include reading and singing to children and taking them out to a park or playground. These interactive activities, particularly reading daily with young children, are positively associated with parental bonding, language and vocabulary development, better educational outcomes, and social development.^{10–12}

Financial, Employment, and Child Care Stressors

According to CHIS data, the percentage of parents with young children living below the federal poverty level (FPL) decreased from 21.2% in 2019 to 17.1% in 2021 (see Appendix, Exhibit A1). However, parents in California still experienced financial stressors during this time, such as struggling to pay for housing and basic necessities (see Appendix, Exhibit A2).

Nearly 12% of parents reported difficulties making their rent and mortgage payments due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and almost 13% reported difficulties paying for necessities such as bills or groceries. Comparisons with pre-pandemic data suggest that parents experienced heightened stressors during the pandemic. For example, CHIS data show that the percentage of parents with incomes below 200% FPL who reported receiving food stamps increased from 23.7% in 2019 to 31.2% in 2021, indicating a greater need for assistance among low-income parents.

Exhibit 1 / Financial Stressors due to COVID-19 Among Families With Children Ages 0–5, by Household Income and by Race or Ethnicity, California 2020–2021



Note: Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (NHPI) and American Indian or Alaska Native (AIAN) values are not displayed due to small sample sizes.

FPL = federal poverty level

NL = non-Latinx

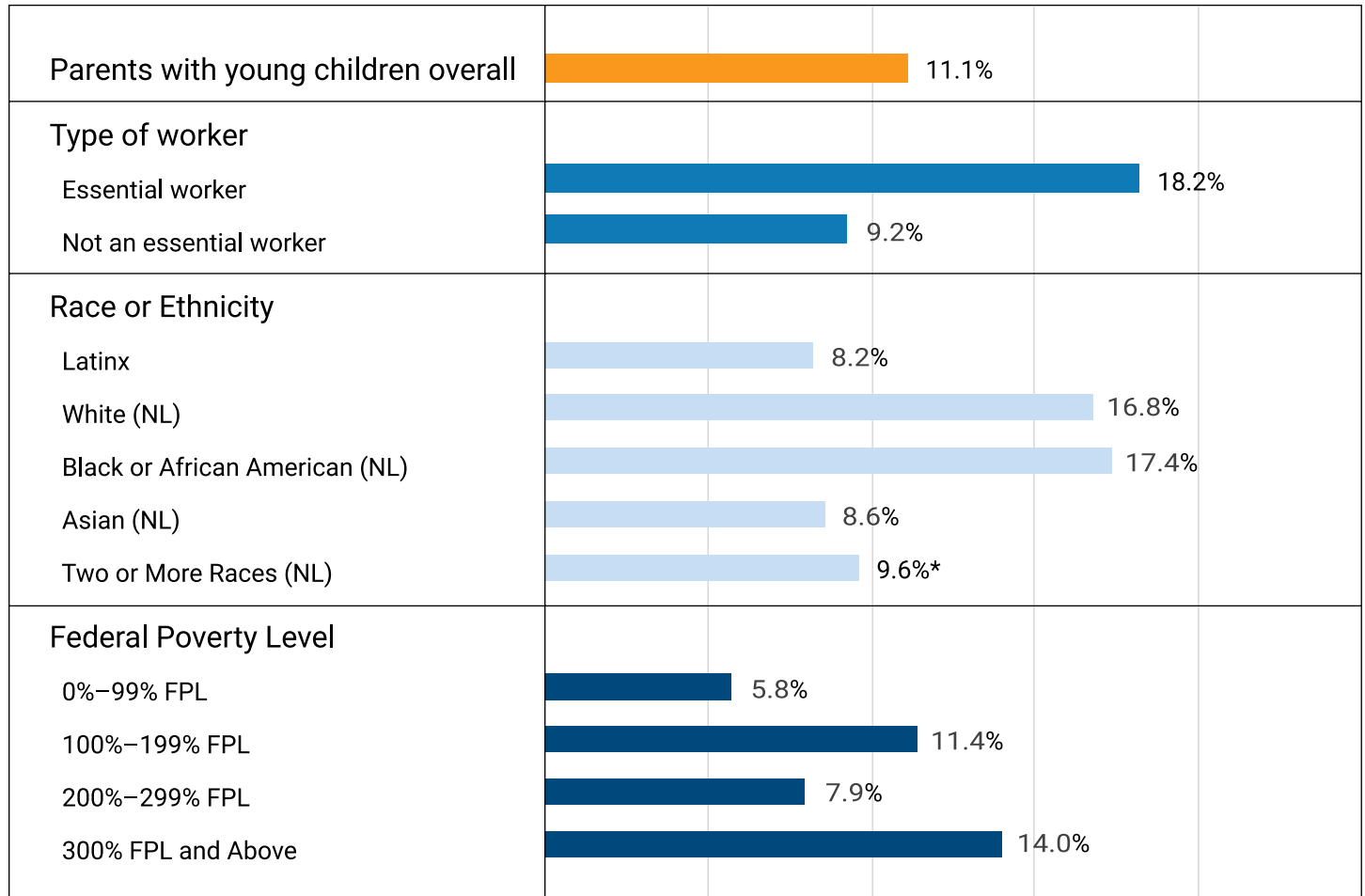
* Estimate is statistically unstable.

Source: Pooled 2020 and 2021 California Health Interview Survey data

The proportion of families with incomes below 300% FPL who reported having difficulties paying for housing was about five times that of families living at or above 300% FPL (Exhibit 1). Likewise, the proportion of families living below 300% FPL who reported difficulties paying for basic necessities was about four times that of families living at or above 300% FPL. Latinx and Black or African American parents experienced these pandemic financial stressors more often than any other racial or ethnic group, with almost one-quarter of Black or African American parents (24.7%) reporting they had trouble paying for basic necessities.

In 2020, 1 in 5 (20%) California parents reported that they were essential workers. This percentage increased to nearly one-quarter (24%) of parents in 2021. Parents who were essential workers in 2020 and 2021 were more likely to be from households with incomes at or above 100% FPL (see Appendix, Exhibit A3). However, the percentage of parents who reported being essential workers and having difficulty paying for housing or basic necessities was similar to the percentage of parents who were not essential workers.

Exhibit 2 / Difficulties Obtaining or Affording Child Care due to COVID-19 Among Parents With Children Ages 0–5, by Essential Worker Status, Race or Ethnicity, and Household Income, California, 2020 and 2021



Note: Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (NHPI) and American Indian or Alaska Native (AIAN) values are not displayed due to small sample sizes.

FPL = federal poverty level

NL = non-Latinx

* Estimate is statistically unstable.

Source: Pooled 2020 and 2021 California Health Interview Survey data

Child care–related stressors include securing and affording child care. More than 1 in 10 parents reported difficulties securing child care or affording increased expenses for child care due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Exhibit 2). Comparable data also showed that the percentage of parents who reported they could not find child care for a week or longer in the past year increased from 9.8% in 2019 to 14.4% in 2021 (data not shown), further reinforcing

the heightened stressors that parents experienced during the pandemic. Parents in the highest income category (300% FPL or above) were more likely to report problems with child care than parents in the lowest income category (Exhibit 2). While one might expect parents in the lowest income category to have reported the greatest difficulty in securing or affording child care, both federal and state child care subsidies prioritized low-

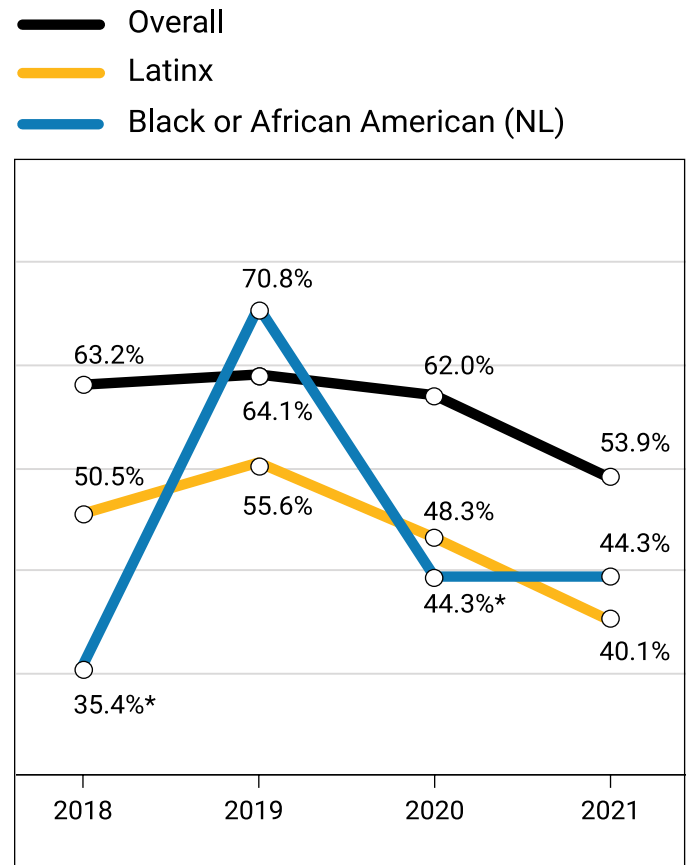
income families, which may have mitigated potential child care challenges facing parents in the lowest income category. It is also possible that some subsidy-eligible families with higher incomes may not have received financial assistance due to the limited state budget allotted to the subsidy program.¹³ CHIS data also indicate that a higher percentage of white and Black or African American parents than Latinx parents reported experiencing difficulties with child care. Furthermore, twice the proportion of parents who were essential workers reported difficulties with child care compared with parents who were not essential workers (Exhibit 2).

Parental Involvement Behaviors

The parental involvement behaviors examined included singing, reading, and taking a child on an outing. There were no significant changes in the percentage of Californians who reported singing to their children every day from 2018 (71.9%) to 2021 (67.3%) (not shown). However, there was a significant decrease in the proportion who read to young children every day, from 64.1% in 2019 to 53.9% in 2021. Racial disparities in daily reading were evident (Appendix, Exhibit A4). Among Latinx parents, daily reading to children in 2021 (40.1%) was 8 percentage points lower than in 2020, and more than 15 percentage points lower than in 2019 (55.6%). Among Black or African American parents, daily reading dropped more than 26 percentage points from 2019 to 2021 (Exhibit 3).

From 2019 to 2021, families in the lowest and highest income categories had the greatest

Exhibit 3 / Read to Child Daily, Parents of Children Ages 0–5, California, 2018–2021

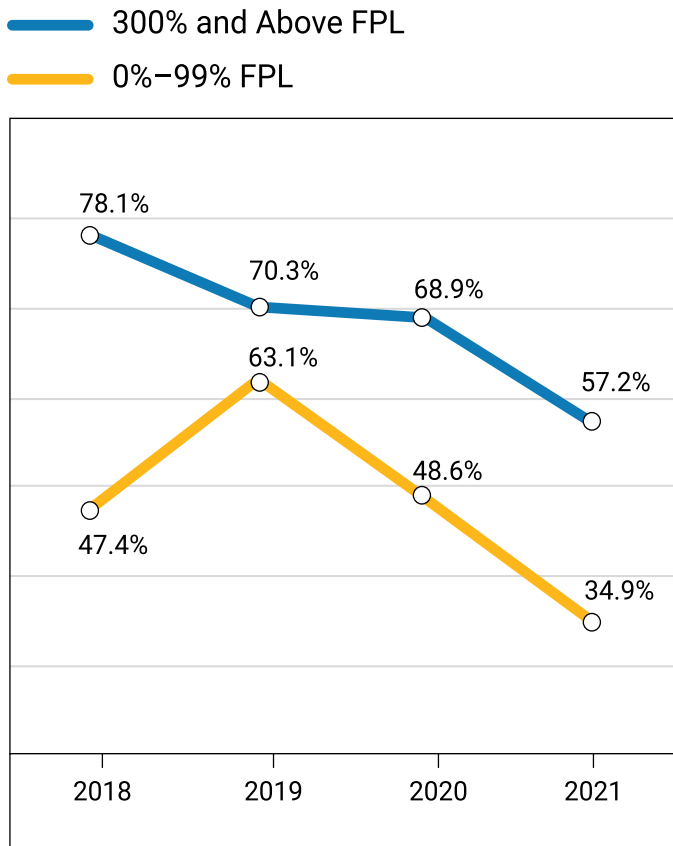


* Estimate is statistically unstable.

Source: 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021 California Health Interview Survey

decreases in daily reading, by around 27 and 13 percentage points, respectively (Exhibit 4). In 2021, families living below the federal poverty level were less likely to report reading daily to their children than families in households with incomes at or above 300% FPL. Parent-reported barriers to reading to their children included not having enough time (29.3%), child’s lack of interest in reading (11.6%), and having no books (7.4%). Percentages of parents who reported not having enough time to read to their children were similar across income and racial or ethnic groups.

Exhibit 4 / Trends in Reading Every Day Among Parents of Children Ages 0-5, by Household Income, California, 2018–2021



FPL = federal poverty level
 Source: 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021 California Health Interview Survey

Taking young children to a park, playground, or other place offers them a chance to socialize, an activity that was curtailed by pandemic-related shutdowns.¹ The percentage of parents who reported taking their child out of the house three or more days per week decreased significantly in 2020 but rebounded in 2021 (Appendix, Exhibit A5). A smaller proportion of Asian (57.7%) and Latinx (67.7%) parents reported taking their children out of the house than white parents (79.6%) or parents of two or more races (84.5%) (see Appendix, Exhibit A6). CHIS data also show differences between

parents with incomes below 100% FPL and at or above 300% FPL (61.5% vs. 74.1%, respectively) (Appendix, Exhibit A6).

DISCUSSION

Along with the threat of COVID-19, California parents faced socioeconomic and child care-related challenges during the pandemic, with families of color experiencing disproportionate socioeconomic and child care burdens. In 2021, the Child Tax Credit (CTC) and Child and Dependent Care Tax Credit (CDCTC) through the federal American Rescue Plan (ARP) Act were expanded to provide families with children greater financial assistance during the ongoing pandemic. U.S. Treasury data indicated that an estimated 4.6 million families and 7.5 million children in California benefited from the expanded CTC.¹⁴ U.S. Census data also determined that the expanded CTC, along with the federal economic stimulus package, lifted around 1 million children under age 6 out of poverty and cut child poverty from 9.7% in 2020 to 5.2% in the United States in 2021, a rate not seen since 1967.¹⁵ In addition, the ARP created temporary changes to the CDCTC, such as increasing the maximum child care expenses that families could claim on their tax returns (up to \$8,000, depending on the number of child dependents), increasing the percentage of expenses that families could receive as credit from 35% to 50%, and making the CDCTC refundable. All of these changes helped lessen child care obstacles for many families during the pandemic.¹⁶

However, the changes to CDCTC and CTC expired at the end of 2021, potentially erasing



the gains made in reducing childhood poverty and alleviating the financial burden of child care on families, especially families of color.¹⁷ Just one month after the expanded CTC payments expired, the monthly childhood poverty rate increased from 12.1% to 17%, disproportionately affecting Latinx and Black or African American children.¹⁷

Ongoing financial support for child care is only one side of the equation. The pandemic exacerbated child care challenges, which have evolved into a crisis. Child care center closures resulted in a shortage of child care providers even after pandemic restrictions began to lift. By 2022, 100,000 staff across the U.S. had left the field for higher-paying, lower-stress jobs.¹⁸ As of May 2022, employment in the child care sector in California was still 9% lower than it had been before the pandemic.¹⁹ Research on the Early Care and Education (ECE) workforce in the U.S. showed that the share of Black ECE workers declined by 7 percentage points between 2019 and 2021, while those who stayed faced increasing health issues and

low pay.²⁰ Child care disruptions can be a considerable burden on parents and can affect a young child's socioemotional development due to a lack of peer interactions and the loss of caretakers with whom they can read, sing, and play games.^{21,22}

The pandemic had impacts beyond child care disruptions. Parents also struggled to provide learning and development opportunities for their children. The frequency of parents or family members reading to a young child or taking the child on outings decreased during the pandemic. Reading and playing with young children are critical activities for promoting language and literacy development and are associated with the development of interpersonal skills and prosocial behavior.^{23,24} Some research suggests that being born during the pandemic could be a developmental risk factor regardless of whether there was a COVID-19 diagnosis. Studies have shown that among children under 3 years of age, those born during the pandemic had lower scores on assessments of motor skills, as

well as less vocalization and fewer interactive behaviors, than those born prior to the start of the pandemic.^{25,26} However, other researchers have found only slight differences in pre- and post-pandemic developmental scores.²⁷ While more investigative work is needed to establish cause and effect, researchers have proposed strategies to ensure that young children can thrive post-pandemic. Such strategies include increased attention to socioemotional development, investment in expanded learning opportunities, increased attention to best practices for teaching young children, and investment in learning supports for parents.²⁸

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Implement strategies to ensure the retention of child care workers, including increasing wages and benefits, especially for workers of color.** According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, California has the third-largest child care workforce in the country, after New York and Texas. However, California's share of child care workers is less than the national average, indicating a gap in child care workers employed in the state. In addition, while the average yearly wages for California child care workers was around \$35,000 a year (or \$17 per hour) in 2021— which was around the 90th percentile of child care worker wages across the country — that average salary is not enough to be considered a living wage (the statewide average for a living wage is \$21 an hour for an individual). California has already made a step on the policy path toward this goal. The current 2023–2024 governor's budget

proposes a cost-of-living adjustment for general child care (GCC), Alternative Payment (AP) child care programs, and other child care program activities.²⁹

- **Give attention to, and provide guidance for, the contracting process for new child care providers.** Based on the governor's 2023–2024 budget, no new child care slots will be added in 2023 — a cost-saving measure as California faces a budgetary shortfall. However, due to delays in contracting new child care providers from the 2022–2023 budget slot allotment, more funding would not alleviate the child care crisis.²⁹
- **Invest in strengths-based approaches to bolster family resiliency.** Providing parents and their children with positive experiences can help them weather disasters such as the COVID-19 pandemic.^{30,31} The American Academy of Pediatrics' Bright Futures initiative advocates for supporting and encouraging family-level protective factors

More than

1 in 10

parents reported difficulties securing child care or affording increased expenses for child care due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

to increase parental resilience – for instance, civic and social engagements and opportunities for social and emotional development.³² Social marketing campaigns and intervention programs that promote children’s engagement and positive childhood experiences are critical. Examples are First 5 California’s Talk.Read.Sing® program and Día de los Libros, a bilingual virtual story time from First 5 California and the California State Library.

- **Reinstate changes to the CTC and CDCTC to support families’ financial and child care needs.** In his 2023 State of the Union address, President Biden urged Congress to reinstate the changes to the CTC, which lapsed in 2021.³³ In lieu of the CTC and CDCTC, the state should increase the tax credit amount provided to families with young children through California’s Young Child Tax Credit (YCTC).

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The California Health Interview Survey covers a wide array of health-related topics, including health insurance coverage, health status and behaviors, and access to health care. It is based on interviews conducted continuously throughout the year with respondents from more than 20,000 California households. CHIS interviews were offered in English, Spanish, Chinese (both Mandarin and Cantonese), Vietnamese, Korean, and Tagalog. CHIS is designed with complex survey methods requiring analysts to use complex survey weights in order to provide accurate variance estimates and statistical testing. CHIS is a collaboration of the UCLA Center for Health Policy Research, the California Department of Public Health, the California Department of Health Care Services, and the Public Health Institute. For more information about CHIS, visit chis.ucla.edu.

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