

Considerations for Learning Pods: What Child Care System Professionals Can Do

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This fall, as schools make difficult decisions about when and how to reopen during the pandemic, families also face tough choices. Parents across the country are struggling to balance holding down a job or pursuing their own education with attending to their children's health, education, safety, and social connections. Some families have turned to "pandemic pods" also known as "learning pods" to provide supervision and social connections for their children.

Parents' child care needs during COVID-19 demand creative and flexible responses. However, pre-COVID-19 health and safety precautions didn't go away or become less important because of the pandemic. In fact, they may be even more important during these challenging times.

Schools closed to help minimize the spread of COVID-19 and keep children and families healthy. If learning pods are not well managed, they can defeat the purpose of necessary school closures. Child care system professionals have important roles in:

- Addressing health, safety, and developmentally appropriate practice in learning pods
- Ensuring that parents are aware of health and safety considerations that apply to all care settings regardless of children's ages

What Child Care System Professionals Can Do

The following considerations are intended to assist child care system professionals in responding to parents' needs for creative, flexible child care options during COVID-19 while ensuring that health and safety precautions are met. State rules requiring pods to register or become licensed child care programs may exceed these considerations.

What Is a Learning Pod?

In this resource, "learning pod" refers to situations in which families pool their resources to provide care and education for their children who are participating in e-learning provided by their local school district. The "pod" concept involves a small group of families who agree to follow health and safety guidelines to protect against the coronavirus. Children are supervised by parents in the pod, hired tutors, teachers or other adults. Participants meet in families' homes or arrange to meet in other spaces. **Learning pods are a form of child care and should be subject to child care regulations that keep children safe.**

Learning pods are different from "homeschooling." Children who are homeschooled are not enrolled in public or private school. Parents who homeschool prepare and design their own programs of study and materials. Or they use materials produced by companies specializing in homeschool resources. Accountability for homeschooling is coordinated with the state in which the family lives.

Learning pods are also different from private schools. Private schools are run by and largely funded by private entities independent from the government. In **learning pods**, students access curricula or e-learning provided by the school district in which children are enrolled.

Encourage parents to explore licensed child care options. Develop and share key messages that highlight the benefits of licensed and quality care. Consider which communication channels parents are using to find child care information and support, for example, [social media](#) and use these channels to promote quality and licensed care.

Support licensed child care programs in meeting the needs of school-age children. At the systems level, school superintendents and child care administrators should communicate and explore ways to foster connections between schools and licensed child care programs. At the local level, child care system professionals, including child care resource and referral agencies can reach out to schools and ask them explicitly to engage with local licensed child care providers.

Professionals at both levels, should find out what supports licensed child care programs need to enhance their school-age care practices. Learn about barriers they face in serving school-age children. Find out what training, technical assistance and concrete supports they need.

Encourage learning pods to register as child care programs. Learning pods tend to be an option for parents who have the financial resources and flexibility in their jobs to form a pod. In some cases, pods are bypassing the child care system while child care providers, many of whom earn low wages and are Black and Brown women, are subject to rigorous child care licensing requirements.

Approaches for engaging pods vary across states:

- [Pennsylvania](#) requires all non-licensed part-day school-age child care programs and learning pods with more than six children to submit a Notification of Intent to Operate. Non-licensed part-day school age child care programs and learning pods are subject to requirements for a health and safety plan, emergency plan, building use and safety, child protective services law (mandated reporting and background clearances), communication with families, and staff/student ratios.
- [Massachusetts](#) expanded access to licensed programs by allowing early childhood programs to care for school-age children while they are attending school (in addition to before and after school time). Approvals for licensed programs to expand capacity are expedited. Learning pods that have more than five families or hire someone else to supervise the children without a parent being onsite are required to obtain a license or license exemption.
- [Colorado](#) encourages learning pods to register with the state and strongly recommends that parents using pods request background checks, gather emergency information, create an emergency plan, discuss guidance strategies, develop a plan for meals, and adhere to COVID-19 mitigation strategies.

In each example, learning pods may exist in some smaller capacity without needing to register with the state or meet health and safety standards that child care programs typically comply with. Even though families may be familiar with the others joining their pod, child care systems professionals should strongly

Sample key messages:

[Quality school-age child care](#) supports children's health, safety, learning, and overall well-being.

Quality school-age child care settings have caregivers who know how to meet the physical, emotional, and developmental needs of school-age children.

When parents know that their children are in a [safe and quality program](#) that they enjoy, parents can have peace of mind and be more productive at work and school.

Licensed child care programs have met basic [health and safety standards](#). In learning pods, students access curricula or e-learning provided by the school district or private school in which children are enrolled.

urge families who choose to use pods to raise questions and join pods that provide the safest environment for their children.

Inform parents that learning pods may be operating as unlicensed child care under licensing rules (especially if hiring in-home care, a teacher or tutor). Share information about labor laws that may apply if pods are hiring in-home care, teachers, or tutors.

Promote the benefits of registering as a child care program, e.g., access to free trainings and other supports, being able to receive critical health updates relating to COVID-19, being able to provide other parents with pod leaders' contact information for potential enrollment, and helping to create an accurate picture of families' child care needs and options in the state. Appeal to parents' desires to keep their children safe. Remind parents that registering helps assure that basic health and safety standards are met.

In cases where the demand for licensed school-age care exceeds the supply, support equitable access to safe, alternative options by working with community partners to create, support, or enhance the quality of community learning hubs. For many families, costs, work conflicts, limited transportation, internet access, and other challenges create barriers to learning pods. One way that child care system professionals can address inequities in families' access to learning pods is to collaborate with local school districts, afterschool programs, and other community partners to create, support, or enhance the quality of [community learning hubs](#).



Community learning hubs have the same basic functions as learning pods (they are temporary arrangements, centered on consistent small groups of children, and provide supervision and social connections for children), but are run by and located in community agencies such as local YMCAs, faith-based organizations, homeless youth agencies, and other non-profits, and businesses. Child care system professionals can support these efforts. For example, they can convene partners, help families connect with hubs, and offer training and technical assistance to hub leaders and staff.

Though use of licensed care is strongly encouraged, another way to address equitable access to alternative options is to encourage parents using a pod (typically parents who have the financial resources and work flexibility to organize a pod) to work with other parents to ensure they are reaching out to all students in their child's class. Such outreach can help ensure that families who may not have the financial or social capital to participate in the pods have the option of joining. **Emphasize the importance of health and safety precautions that should be in place regardless of the setting or ages of the children.** Parents using learning pods may take for granted that certain health and safety precautions are in place. They may not realize that they need to ask about or observe certain precautions that should be in place regardless of the setting or the ages of the children.

Here are some examples of health and safety considerations to share with parents and learning pod leaders:

Environment

- Is the location safe and free from hazards, both indoors and outdoors?
- Does the location have working smoke detectors and fire extinguishers?
- Are there at least two exits? Do not count windows.
- Does the location have running water? A place for handwashing? An accessible bathroom?
- Are any and all firearms, ammunition, poisons, harmful chemicals, alcoholic beverages, or medications on the premises locked up so that they are inaccessible to children?
- Are agreements in place to forbid tobacco, alcohol and illegal or recreational drug use while children are present?



Emergency Preparedness

- Is there an emergency plan that includes evacuation and sheltering-in-place responses? Does it include alternative pick up locations?
- Is there a first aid kit onsite?
- Is there someone present at all times who is certified in pediatric CPR and first aid?
- Is emergency contact information collected and maintained for each child?
- Are plans in place to accommodate children's special health needs such as allergies, medications, dietary restrictions, or other concerns?

Daily Operations

- Are there plans in place for who is allowed to pick up and leave with each child?

- Are there plans for what will children eat? Who will supply the food? Where will meals be eaten? Is the eating area sanitary? How will physical distancing be maintained? Contact your [local CCR&R](#) to learn about healthy eating guidelines and the [Child and Adult Care Food Program](#).
- Are recommended handwashing, cleaning, and sanitation protocols implemented?
- Are children actively supervised at all times, both indoors and outdoors?
- Are any fees and payment arrangements clearly outlined?
- Are the hours of operation clearly defined? e.g. when can parents drop off their child? What time is pick up?
- Is there a plan in place for when the learning pod will end? Learning pods are understood to be temporary arrangements.
- Is there time for children to relax and socialize (while maintaining physical distance)?

Staffing and Visitors

- Are there rules for who else can be present while children are present? Consider other adults and children. Are visitors allowed?
- Have all adults who are left alone with children had [background checks](#)?
- How many children and how many adults will be present? Contact your [local CCR&R](#) to learn about best practices and requirements for [group sizes and ratios](#).
- Are there plans in place for who can transport children and under what circumstances?

Educational and Tech Support

- What expectations are in place for providing learning support to children?
- Is there a reliable internet connection for children who are e-learning? Who is responsible for the cost of the internet connection?
- Will children bring their own electronic devices? Is there ample access to outlets for charging devices?
- Is the environment conducive to children's learning? Are distractions minimized? Are workspaces comfortable?

Preventing the Spread of COVID-19

- Are strategies in place to protect children and adults from the spread of COVID-19? Refer to [guidance for child care programs](#) and for [households](#).

Learn more about what states are doing to support child care through school opening plans on our blog, [Reviewing State Policies: School Opening Plans and Child Care](#).

Additional Resources

[The Child Care Supply Crisis: Why Deregulation is Not the Answer](#)

[Selecting a Quality School-Age Child Care](#)

[School-Age Child Care Program Checklist](#)

[Pandemic Safety Checklist](#)