

Learning Pods:

Considerations for Parents

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This fall, as schools make difficult decisions about when and how to reopen during the pandemic, many parents 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.

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.**

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.

What Parents Can Do

The following considerations are intended to assist parents in making informed decisions about child care and learning pods. Check the [child care licensing requirements](#) for where you live as they may exceed these considerations.

Explore licensed child care options. Licensed child care programs have met basic health and safety standards. If licensed programs have vacancies, and many do right now, they remain the safest option for care and supervision when you can't be with your children. Contact your local [Child Care Resource and Referral Agency](#) to get a list of licensed child care programs near you.

Explore benefits associated with registering your learning pod or becoming licensed as a child care program. Registered and licensed programs:

- Have access to valuable supports such as free training, help with background checks, and critical health updates related to COVID-19
- May be able to share contact information with other parents so that they can join
- Help create an accurate picture of families' needs and options in your area

Requirements for registering as a child care program vary across states. Learning pods may be considered operating unlicensed child care, especially if in-home care, a teacher, or tutor is hired. Labor laws may also apply. Contact your local [Child Care Resource and Referral Agency](#) to learn about requirements for your area.

Use of licensed child care is strongly encouraged, however, if you choose to use a learning pod, and have the financial resources and work flexibility to organize a pod, work with other parents to reach out to all children in your child's class. Such outreach can help ensure that families who otherwise may not have the financial or social capital to participate in a pod have the option of joining.



Explore community learning hubs run by reputable organizations in your community. For many families, costs, work conflicts, limited transportation, internet access, and other challenges create barriers to learning pods. In some communities, local school districts, afterschool programs, and other community partners, including Child Care Resource and Referral agencies have collaborated to create [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.

Take nothing for granted—look for, ask about, and verify health and safety precautions that should be in place regardless of the child care setting you choose. Whether you are using licensed child care, a learning pod, or a community learning hub, it is important to choose a setting that will make sure your child is safe, healthy, and learning. It can be hard to know what to look for, ask about, and verify.

Use the following list of considerations to inform your decision-making. You can also use these considerations as a guide for discussing health and safety precautions with your child care provider, other parents in your learning pod, or community learning hub 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](#)

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

[Pandemic Safety Checklist](#)