

Early Childhood Education Support in Korea amid the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract The purpose of this study is to examine the support provided by childcare-related educational/administrative organizations and child care centers vis-à-vis COVID-19. Data were collected through the websites of childcare-related professional organizations' and interviews with the directors or vice-directors of each childcare center. The targets that childcare-related organizations' support include young children, the parents, teachers, and childcare centers. The types of support provided by the organizations range from financial, emotional, and administrative in nature to those that involve program development and teacher training. Efforts from childcare centers include online video classes, sending activity plans and materials to families, and giving feedback on photos and videos of activities accomplished at home. In addition, special activities in childcare centers that were only possible and meaningful during the COVID-19 period, like conducting small-group activities, teaching about COVID-19, and practicing "Good Consumption" were also examined. It is encouraging that child care-related specialized institutions supported young children, their families, and childcare centers by making various attempts, and that childcare centers develop and implement programs suitable for their philosophy and size. It is expected that implementing more educational and meaningful practices in early childhood education institutions at the time of COVID-19 based on these results.

Keywords Covid-19, Childcare-related Organizations, Childcare Center, Support, Programs

1. Introduction

The Coronavirus, hereafter shortened to COVID-19, changed the way people live around the world. The global spread of COVID-19 has resulted in border closures, travel bans, isolation, social distancing, the collapse of the medical system, and the suspension of classes putting the global economy in crisis [1]. Like other countries, Korea faced various issues in addressing the pandemic, such as shortages of masks and hand sanitizers, closure of contact areas, the shutdown of factories, and restrictions in visiting multi-purpose facilities [2]. Of the various areas that COVID-19 has influenced, the field of education stands out. The Korean society experienced the paralysis of the educational field with the postponement of the opening of tertiary classes. The unprecedented postponement of kindergarten, elementary, middle, and high school classes and the closure of childcare centers further exacerbated the paralysis of education in Korea [2].

Children who attend classes in school have a higher chance of acquiring infectious diseases [3]. Research shows that young children who attend childcare centers tend to be sick more often than those who are home-schooled [4]. To prevent the continued spread of COVID-19, the Ministry of Health and Welfare (MOHW) issued a nationwide closure order for childcare centers on February 27. It is only on June 1 that MOHW lifted the closure order and allowed local governments to decide on the resumption of classes. When the second wave of COVID-19 infection struck in mid-August, the closure order for childcare centers has been reissued nationwide on August 18.

When it is difficult for children to go to an educational institution, parents play a crucial role more than ever in protecting them from stress and promoting their overall well-being [1]. Given the increased stress, overindulgence in media, and fear [5], family members' capacity to tolerate and think in a long-term manner is challenged [6]. In particular, many parents experience increased parenting stress and result in violence towards their children because of the economic crisis [6]. Such conditions and stressors make it harder for parents to take care of their children.

Against this backdrop, the government's responses to child care are as follows: (1) prevent collective infection through the closure of childcare centers, kindergartens, schools, and/or public institutions; (2) provide emergency care when domestic care is impossible; and (3) support flexible work and family care to minimize the occurrence of childcare gaps [7]. Despite the government's efforts, the burden of childcare for parents is increasing as the government further extends the closure of childcare centers and implements emergency childcare. Emergency childcare is a system in which an institution provides care to children in need of care, such as double-income families or grandparents' upbringing. This system is implemented to respond to meal demands and neglect as most children are receiving home care due to the spread of COVID-19 [8]. The rate of emergency childcare use started at 10.0% on February 27 and increased to 28.4% on March 23 and 72.7% on May 29 [9]. Despite such high rates of emergency child care, the increasing number of children applying for discharge or transition to home care due to the prolonged closure of childcare centers caused problems in managing childcare centers [10]. To address these difficulties and continue providing education to young children who receive home care, childcare centers have engaged in various programs.

During the COVID-19 crisis, areas related to early childhood education, include the child care industry, suffered losses, and widespread disruptions [11]. According to a report by the Institute for Childcare Policy, parents perceive the implementation of "leave-off" and "emergency care" positively. The report suggested a more detailed approach in implementing two-track support for emergency care and domestic care [7]. Kim (2020) proposes conducting qualitative research, such as action research or case studies, on educational fields and topics regarding COVID-19 in order to provide an in-depth

examination of the situation [12].

Given the current circumstances and recommendations of previous researchers, this study aims to provide timely information useful for early childhood education institutions and stakeholders by analyzing the initiatives and programs implemented by childcare-related professional organizations and childcare centers in Korea in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The research problems set by this research purpose to be addressed are as follows:

1. What are the efforts of professional childcare-related organizations to provide support during the COVID-19 period?
2. What are the efforts of childcare centers to provide support during the COVID-19 period?

2. Materials and Methods

This study mainly used two methods for gathering data. First, data about the efforts provided by childcare-related organizations were obtained from each organization's website. Second, the data about the efforts provided by childcare centers were collected through interviews with the directors or vice-directors.

2.1. Researcher

The researcher is a university professor who majored in early childhood education at the university and graduate school. Her department is involved with educating teachers and directors of childcare centers. She teaches courses on childcare every semester and has given more than 50 teachers/director thesis guidance on the subject related to childcare over the past six years.

2.2. Research Participants

The participants in this study were six directors or vice-directors majoring in early childhood education at the graduate school with more than ten years of field experience. The types of childcare centers studied vary from being home, private, or public. Among the six childcare centers studied, three of them are located in Seoul and three in Gyeonggi province. Information on participants and childcare centers is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Research Participants

Childcare center	Type	Age/Capacity	Location	Interviewee's Job position
Childcare center A	Family	0-2-years-old, 20 children	Seoul	Director
Childcare center B	Family	0-2-years-old, 20 children	Gyeonggi-do	Director
Childcare center C	Private	1-2-years-old, 34 children	Seoul	Director
Childcare center D	Private	1-5-years-old, 59 children	Seoul	Director
Childcare center E	Public	1-5-years-old, 80 children	Gyeonggi-do	Vice-director
Childcare center F	Public	1-5-years-old, 100 children	Gyeonggi-do	Vice-director

2.3. Research Method and Data Collection

This study is a qualitative study analyzing participants' perception regarding their experiences and the programs implemented at childcare centers where they worked during the COVID-19 period. Interviews were conducted after receiving the consent of the participants for a recorded interview. The interview period was from May 25 to August 14, 2020, with one to two interviews per participant. Interviews range from 35 minutes to 1 hour and 10 minutes. The research participants provided documents, photos, and videos pertinent to the interview. The recorded interview resources were transcribed in writing immediately, and any incomprehensible content or question was clarified through telephone calls or additional interviews.

3. Results

The results of this study are divided into two subsections. The first section presents the efforts of professional childcare-related organizations, while the second section focuses on childcare centers' efforts.

3.1. Support from Childcare-related Educational/Administrative Organizations

The Ministry of Health and Welfare provided preventive items such as masks, thermometers, and hand sanitizers to more than 37,000 childcare centers across the country, and childcare fees, personnel expenses, basic needs, and allowances [13, 14]. Moreover, MOHW composed and released COVID-19 Preventive Hand Washing songs through the support center for childcare [15]. MOHW also heightened its monitoring of child abuse cases as social distancing and non-face-to-face education due to COVID-19 rendered monitoring more difficult [16].

MOHW and the Central Support Center for Childcare disseminated examples of communication methods among childcare centers, children, and parents due to the postponement of face-to-face early childhood education. Some of these were in the form of a PowerPoint presentation introducing the environment of childcare centers and one's classmate and guide materials to be used for the new semester in line with the postponed opening of childcare centers [17]. In particular, two childcare organizations provided a "Grow up Playing at Home" play kit given the closure of the childcare centers. The play kit consisted of play materials and play method brochures intended for toddlers and young children [18].

The Central Support Center for Childcare provided information regarding childcare and a video playlist for children. Nineteen internet links include those about understanding child minds, parenthood, parent-child interaction play activity, Educational Broadcasting System

(EBS) playvideo material, and others [19]. It hosted a contest for COVID-19 response activities and contents for childcare centers between August 3 and 31. The theme of the contest is two-folds: (1) to formulate childcare activities that are safe during COVID-19 and (2) to feature childcare activities for children's psychological support [20].

The Korea Institute of Child Care and Education (KICCE), government-run childcare research institution in Korea, published a research article titled "COVID-19 Response System in Child Care Area" [7]. It also developed the "Disaster Overcoming Psychological Prevention Series": my child's handling of disaster stress (April 13), parent's handling of disaster stress (April 20), handling of parental separation with children (April 27), post-disaster preparation (May 4), and the child prevention manual for overcoming infectious disease disasters (June 23) [21]. It developed a mental health support manual for young children to overcome infectious disease disasters [22].

The Korea Childcare Promotion Institute (KCPI) provided interesting and informative content to children and parents who had longer living hours at home due to the decrease in the number of outdoor activities, the closure of childcare centers, and the postponement of school opening. The materials were customized by age and divided into four areas, namely, play, education, safety, and career path [21]. KCPI also supported vulnerable young children to overcome COVID-19 through distributing COVID-19 emergency relief kits to 50 vulnerable families with young children on March 31 and delivering goods and snacks to childcare facilities on June 26 [24, 25]. Moreover, KCPI held a web-based seminar on July 29 entitled "Webinar to Seek Education Plan for Child Care Teachers and Education in the Uncontact Era" to construct an educational model suitable for online-based, non-face-to-face early childhood education for the COVID-19 period [26].

The Central Accident Prevention Headquarters distributed the COVID-19 infection prevention guidelines to childcare centers nationwide and urgently delivered the responding instructions for childcare centers [27]. In addition, municipal and provincial governments also provide goods and financial support to childcare centers and young children. The Seoul city, in particular, provided 13.8 billion won, including labor costs and quarantine supplies, to private and home-based childcare centers suffering from operational difficulties due to the COVID-19. Other cities, such as Seongnam City, provided 3 million won per childcare center, and Gimpo City provided 200,000 won per child. The Busan Metropolitan Office of Education opened the "Parents Online Counseling Room" for psychological stability and stress reduction of young children and parents [9]. The supports provided by the childcare-related organizations are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Supports by Childcare Related Educational/Administrative Organizations

Organization	Support
The Ministry of Health and Welfare	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Distributing preventive items such as masks, thermometer, and hand sanitizers • Conducting intensive checks on children in crisis of child abuse • Providing childcare fees, personnel expenses, and allowances • Distributing the COVID-19 preventive hand washing video
The Ministry of Health and Welfare & Central Support Center for Childcare	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Providing "Grow up playing at home" play kit • Providing examples of communication methods among childcare centers-children-parents
The Central Support Center for Childcare	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introducing play video with children • Case study and content contest for COVID-19 response of childcare center
The Korea Institute of Child Care & Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Publication of research materials: COVID-19 response system in child care field • Developing a mental health support manual for young children • Developing the disaster overcoming psychological prevention series
Korea Childcare Promotion Institute	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Providing childcare contents with children for parents • Supporting vulnerable young children <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Delivering COVID-19 emergency relief kits to vulnerable families with young children b. Delivering goods and snacks to child care facilities • Hosting of the webinar to seek education plan for child care teaching staff in the untact time
The Central Accident Prevention Headquarters	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Distributing the COVID-19 infection prevention guidelines to childcare centers nationwide
City-Level Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seoul City: providing 13.8 billion won to private and home-based childcare centers • Seongnam City: providing 3 million won per childcare center • Gimpo City: providing 200,000 won per child • Busan Metropolitan Office of Education: operating 'Parents Online Counseling Room'

3.2. Support from Childcare Centers

For this case study, six childcare centers were chosen, and the respective directors or vice-directors were interviewed regarding their attempts to extend support during the COVID-19 period.



Figure 1. Support from Childcare Center A

Childcare center A is a family-type childcare center for 20 infants aged 0-2. This childcare center held three home visits on March 10, March 30, and April 20. On the first visit, the director and the childcare teacher brought gifts in person, and on the second and third visits, they left the items in front of the child's house without prior notice. The parents appreciated these unanticipated events. On the first visit, five masks for parents and infants, snacks, and picture books were delivered, while energy drinks with the picture of the child, other five masks for parents and infants, hand sanitizers, sticker picture books, color clay, and various snacks were delivered on the second visit. The

contents of the package varied depending on the child's age. During the third visit, a tomato plantation kit and a childcare center bag were added to prepare new children for attendance. The parents posted pictures of the infants' activities and thanked the childcare center through the "Kids Note," a communication program between childcare centers and families. The support by the childcare center A is shown in Figure 1.

Childcare center B is a family-type childcare center for 20 infants aged 0-2. In this childcare center, young children learned about COVID-19 and safety rules to stay healthy. They were taught that anyone potentially infected by COVID-19 would be examined and treated in a screening clinic and participated in the role play of a screening clinic. The children tried wearing protective clothing to feel like medical staff. Some children said, "I wanted to take it off quickly because it's more stuffy and sweaty than a mask." "I was so thankful to know that there were people who worked hard for us in this hot weather." "Please cheer up a little more. Fighting!" They expressed their gratitude in words and sign language, "Thanks to you." Children also studied ways on how to stay healthy, such as washing hands and wearing masks properly. After learning about immune system-enhancing foods, they made banana milk. After playing milking by pouring milk into medical plastic gloves from a cow model, the children mashed bananas and then mixed the mashed bananas with milk in a cup. At home, they made banana milk in a similar way. The support by the childcare center B is shown in Figure 2.



Figure 2. Support from Childcare Center B

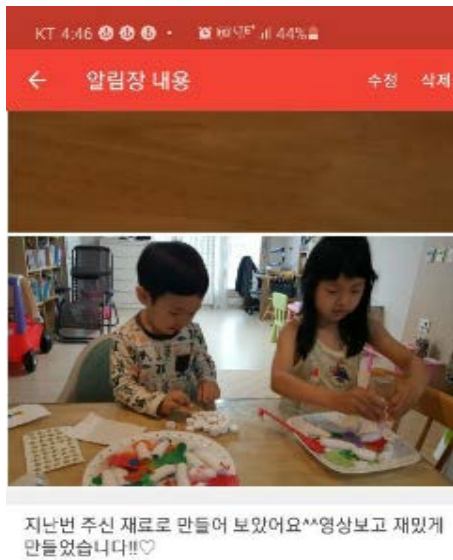


Figure 3. Support from Childcare Center C

Childcare center C is a private childcare center with 34 infants aged 0-2. Childcare teachers delivered activity materials three times to the family who provides home care and posts the video regarding the activities on the “Kids Note.” After the childcare homeroom teacher in each class agreed on a schedule, the teacher and guardian met in front of the house where the package was delivered. The package included books about spring and caterpillars, materials needed for spring-related activities, props for physical play, and toy cars favored by children. Playing traditional games seems impossible before when every child came to the childcare center. However, the center is currently able to occasionally host traditional games because of the few numbers of children going to the center due to COVID-19. On Arbor Day, infants planted lettuce seedlings at the center. Additional vegetables such as cucumbers, strawberries, celery, and tomatoes were likewise planted because of the unexpected positive feedback. Under the supervision of the teacher, the children then harvested the vegetables that they planted and used in making side dishes. The teacher explained how the food was made from the vegetables the infants planted while sharing a meal. The support by the childcare center C is shown in Figure 3.

Childcare center D is a private childcare center with 59 children aged 1-5. From February and April, the number

of children who shifted to home care to prevent the spread of COVID-19 increased. In line with this, packages were sent to the children’s home on March 20, 27, and April 3. The package included educational materials for family-related activities and snacks. On the first visit, the childcare center provided two masks for children and various snacks, including bread, crackers, fruits, and beverages. Additional necessary items for educational activities were distributed teachers of each class recorded videos about the proper conduct of educational activities and safe education contents eleven times, which they uploaded on the “Kids Note.” Families were able to coordinate with the childcare center by sending pictures and videos of children in action. The support by the childcare center D is shown in Figure 4.



Figure 4. Support from Childcare Center D

Childcare center E is a public childcare center that provides care for 85 infants aged 1-5. Between March 16 and June 1, and a “Fun Play Package” was distributed to each family six times. This package included materials needed for educational activities. On March 20, April 21, and May 21, each class teacher forwarded to parents, a hand play clip, a greeting message, and a gymnastics video. When the Korean government issued nationwide vouchers for buying goods to help revive the local economy, Childcare Center D used the vouchers to purchase Ganghwa Island rice and sent it to children’s homes to illustrate to the children the benefits of working with the community to overcome adversities. As shown in Figure 4, a detachable stand made with transparent acrylic was presented to enable interaction while maintaining

proper distance during the COVID-19 period. The support by the childcare center E is shown in Figure 5.



Figure 5. Support from Childcare Center E

Identical with childcare center E, childcare center F is a public institution. It has a capacity of 50 children aged 1-5. The teachers in this center produced videos and posted them on “Band,” an app created by Naver, an internet service company in Korea, every week between March and May when the COVID-19 crisis was at its peak. The contents of the video varied from class to class every week. The contents included reading picture books, singing children’s songs, quizzes (e.g., finding different parts), origami, balloon art, art activities (e.g., making animal shapes with clothes pegs, secret paintings, making honeybees), planting tomato seedlings, observing and telling stories concerning cherry tomatoes, and singing in sign language. The support by the childcare center F is shown in Figure 6.



Figure 6. Support from Childcare Center F

4. Discussion

The results of this study are discussed on the basis of the results or arguments of the preceding studies. Although it is difficult to strictly distinguish between activities conducted by the professional childcare-related organizations and the child care centers, the approximate distinction is as follows.

4.1. Support from Professional Childcare-related Organizations

With respect to COVID-19, the targets of support from childcare-related professional organizations and institutions are divided into young children, parents, teachers, and childcare centers. The nature of the support can be further classified into monetary support, activity and program development, emotional support, administrative support, and teacher training. Specifically, financial support involves the Ministry of Health and Welfare's providing preventive items, Korea Childcare Promotion Institute's prioritization of the vulnerable young section of the population through delivering goods to poor children and child protection institutions, and the provision of family care leave of absence and support funds at the national level. The government-passed family care leave system of 2020 allows workers to apply for up to ten days leave of absence from work to take care of their family. While on leave, workers receive 50,000 won per day.

The development and distribution of programs and activity materials include providing play kits or variable activities at home, introducing play video with children, and distributing the COVID-19 preventive hand washing video. Emotional support includes developing a mental health support manual for young children, developing the disaster overcoming psychological prevention series, conducting intensive checks on children in danger of child abuse, and holding online counseling for parents. Administrative support and teacher training include distributing the COVID-19 infection prevention guidelines, providing examples of communication methods among childcare centers, children, and parents, and hosting a webinar to formulate an education plan for child care teaching staff during the COVID-19 period. These efforts are in line with the following COVID-19 policy tasks and directions presented by Choi and others (2020): (1) distribution of household living rules to prevent infectious diseases, (2) distribution of parent education materials containing childcare contents for households, (3) activation of “online counseling rooms” to communicate with homeroom teachers or professional counselors at childcare centers, and (4) preparation of guidelines for utilizing online video materials [10].

Health and safety affect a child’s learning. Therefore, both serve as the most important aspect of childcare [29].

For this reason, the video clip educating the viewers about COVID-19 and the video clip about washing hands from the Ministry of Health and Welfare were perceived as advisable. Such efforts reflect Choi's view [2] that support is needed for childcare centers to prevent infectious diseases in times of crisis, such as COVID-19.

4.2. Support from Childcare Centers

The childcare centers examined provided varying support for young children's education, such as sending online video classes, delivering activity plans and materials to households, and giving feedback on photos and videos of activities at home. However, similarities remain apparent with the study conducted by Lee (2000) that posited the formulation of action research exploring the possibility of learning in kindergarten during the COVID-19 pandemic. In Lee's study, the following was also done. In the first visit, notifications and notices were given to the parents using the mobile notification app "Kids Note," and the play package at home was delivered to the home by shuttle bus and mail. In the second visit, the teachers produced a video and linked it to a YouTube channel and delivered the play package at home through a drive-through. Video clips of activities related to growing shiitake mushrooms and introducing class teachers, classrooms, and friends were sent. Teachers then gave feedback using the "Kids Note" app after parents posted play videos or photos of their children at home. In the third visit, video clips about pre-adapted kindergarten life, songs loved by kindergartens, and forest plays in nature were produced and distributed to compensate for the absence of face-to-face classes and enhance the effectiveness of kindergarten-specific programs. Moreover, teachers and parents communicated by sharing feedback with their children's videos and photos using the "Kids Note" app as done in the second visit [28].

The first thing that parents consider when deciding on a child care institution is whether classrooms offer a quality curriculum and a conducive environment for learning [4]. Children thrive when they build warm and healthy relationships with their teachers/caregivers, especially in an environment that provides appropriate learning and development opportunities [29]. In addition to providing quality programs at childcare centers, connection and cooperation with parents are also important. Young children learn through healthy relationships with primary caregivers/teachers. Therefore, a relationship-based plan should be shared with them. Parents/guardians are potentially key partners for relationships to grow stronger, hence their importance in relationship-building [3].

Most of the materials provided by childcare centers during the COVID-19 period are activity materials and teaching plans, such as about teaching and interacting with children in a home-based childcare arrangement. It is argued that parents might learn about child development

and how to educate their children through the data provided. Through the collaboration in learning activities, the bond between the parent and the child becomes stronger as parents could be a source of comfort to ease the pain and anxiety brought about by the current situation [30]. A majority of the items brought to households were activity materials that young children could use and explore at home. The reason behind hands-on materials is that young children learn through exploring and playing with the materials. As in child care center classrooms, the idea is that children can also learn through touching, listening, and observing the materials [4] even in their own homes. In addition, one childcare center purchased Gang-wha Island rice to promote "Good Consumption." It is expected that these efforts will help young children understand COVID-19 clearly, while simultaneously deepening the spirit of citizenship.

The psychological support for children and parents is one of the essential areas educators, policymakers, and organizations need to consider during the COVID-19 period. The spread of COVID-19 has caused not only social and economic depression but also emotional and psychological damage. In these trying times, psychological pressure and anxiety are prevalent among individuals, making special care a requirement at present. Sufficient care is one of the basic needs of people when exploring the unknown and living in a restricted area of life [5] To boost an individual's health, for instance, childcare center A provided adult masks (Koreans were able to purchase only two masks a week for a few months) and energy drinks made with each child's picture. This became popular not only among parents but also among grandparents so the teachers made and sent two more extra energy drinks with pictures attached. Small gifts that can comfort parents during these difficult times are seen as an effective form of psychological support.

This study is limited by its methodology. Primarily, it analyzed internet data from childcare-related institutions and conducted case studies at five childcare centers. Nevertheless, it is meaningful as it is timely in reflecting the proposal made by the Korea Institute of Child Care and Education, which calls for specific guidelines on the role of childcare centers, kindergartens, and schools, teachers, education, and childcare in infectious disease control, such as COVID-19 [7]. Based on Kim's (2020) [30] suggestion and the given limitations, this study recommends following up studies that analyze the unequal educational opportunities for underprivileged children and the difficulties and demands faced in childcare centers.

5. Conclusions

The nature of support extended by childcare-related educational/administrative organizations is divided into monetary support, activity and program development,

emotional support, administrative support, and teacher training. There are professional childcare-related organizations that distribute COVID-19 preventive kits and provide financial support according to the institution's goals. Some organizations develop and distribute educational activities and materials that help parents and young children. Some other institutions likewise provide administrative support and teacher training, such as those involving counseling programs for mental health issues, the development of guidelines for preventing infectious diseases, the formation of administrative data needed at the beginning of the semester, and educational seminars for teachers.

On the other hand, childcare centers extend their support for early childhood education despite the COVID-19 crisis. The support given by childcare centers included producing online video classes, sending activity materials to the children's families, receiving pictures or videos of young children, and coordinating with the parents. The efforts made by childcare centers provide a timely attempt to initiate activities to understand COVID-19 further. For instance, producing video lessons on COVID, talking in a space blocked by transparent acrylic plates, and promoting good nationalistic consumption in the childcare center were explored.

Based on this study and other existing research, the researcher argues for programs that would (1) develop educational strategies suitable for young children and parents during the COVID-19 period; (2) relieve the exhaustion of childcare agents (e.g., teachers, parents, administrators); and (3) strengthen currently implemented pathological, mental, and administrative support.

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