How Immigration Enforcement Is Affecting the Child Care Systems Families Depend On

Health Equity

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*Editor's Note: This post is part of our **Blind Spots series**, exploring how current and potential future policy changes will affect children, families, and communities, and what can be done to mitigate harm.*

Young children, including children in immigrant families, thrive when they have stable routines, consistent and nurturing caregivers, and safe and predictable caregiving environments. Decades of evidence demonstrate that these conditions are foundational to child development, emotional well-being and lifelong health. Child care plays a critical role in providing that stability, offering young children safe, consistent environments where they learn, build relationships, and develop the social and emotional skills that support lifelong success.

As a health researcher and early childhood education systems leader who works at the intersection of research, policy, and systems change, I have become increasingly concerned about the ways immigration enforcement is affecting the child care systems that children and families depend on every day. When fear and uncertainty enter the environments children rely on most, the effects extend beyond individual families to child development, provider well-being, workforce instability and the resilience of the systems that support entire communities. In this post, I explore some of the emerging research around these far-reaching effects.

Fear Changes How Families Engage With Child Care

Child care is far more than supervision. It is where young children build routines, develop social connections, practice emotional regulation and engage in early learning experiences that support healthy development.

But fear changes how families and child care workers engage with child care. Emerging evidence suggests that immigration enforcement can disrupt both families' engagement with child care and the stability of the early childhood system. Studies have found that immigration-related fears may lead some families to avoid or reduce participation in essential services, while increased enforcement has also been associated with declines in employment among immigrant child care workers in center-based care and broader workforce instability. Together, these changes can disrupt participation in child care, reduce access to care and further strain systems that are already operating with limited capacity.

When child care becomes inaccessible or families no longer feel comfortable using it, they are often forced into difficult choices. Some rely on temporary or informal caregiving arrangements, while others piece together schedules that strain parents, caregivers and children alike. These disruptions can reduce children's access to the consistent routines, stable relationships and developmentally enriching experiences that high-quality early care is designed to provide.

A Child Care Workforce Already in Crisis Absorbing the Impact

Child care providers are an essential part of the infrastructure families rely on every day, and immigrants comprise approximately 1 in 5 child care workers nationally. Immigration enforcement-related disruptions are occurring at a time when the child care sector is already facing significant workforce and market challenges.

When enforcement activity intensifies, that vulnerability can increase. Programs may lose trusted staff unexpectedly as educators leave positions because of fear or uncertainty. Combined with the increased risk of families reducing or withdrawing from care, this creates sudden enrollment shifts and additional financial strain for providers. In a system already experiencing workforce shortages and financial fragility, even relatively small disruptions can have cascading effects.

Why This Matters for Everyone

Child care stability should matter to everyone, not only because immigrant families deserve safe and reliable care, but because child care is infrastructure that supports children's development, parent's ability to work and local economies. When instability weakens child care systems, the consequences extend well beyond the families most directly affected. Providers struggle to remain financially viable, employers face increased workforce disruptions and communities have fewer high-quality child care options.

This is why the issue is ultimately about more than immigration. It is about preserving the relationships, routines and trusted community systems that help all young children thrive.

How Communities Can Respond

Guidance consistently emphasizes that supportive responses focus on strengthening relationships, reducing uncertainty, protecting family privacy, and maintaining trusted connections between families and the systems they rely on.

Across sectors, there are practical steps that organizations and communities can take.

- Early childhood programs can establish welcoming environments, review privacy and information-sharing practices, communicate clearly with families about available supports and strengthen partnerships with trusted community organizations.
- Employers can recognize that disruptions in child care affect workforce stability and provide flexibility for families experiencing uncertainty.
- Health care providers, schools, and community organizations can coordinate with one another to ensure families receive consistent information and remain connected to services.
- Community members also play an important role by sharing accurate information, supporting organizations that serve immigrant families, and fostering inclusive environments where all children and families feel they belong.

Supporting families also means supporting the professionals who care for them. Early childhood educators, pediatric providers, and community-based staff benefit from training, opportunities for cross-sector collaboration, and access to resources that strengthen trauma-informed practice and help them respond effectively to children and families experiencing chronic stress. Investing in these supports not only benefits the workforce—it strengthens the resilience of the broader early childhood system.

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