

# Area child care centers start school year dealing with COVID, staff shortages



Preschoolers, left to right, Ace Howard, Alana Rivera and Abby Vera work on their self portraits while at the Meriden YMCA Martin Gaffey Child Care Center at 66 Crown St. on Wednesday. Dave Zajac, Record-Journal



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Calvin Harlow IV, 3, keeps the beat during a music and movement class at the Meriden YMCA Martin Gaffey Child Care Center on Wednesday. Dave Zajac, Record-Journal





The Meriden YMCA Martin Gaffey Child Care Center at 66 Crown St., Wed., Aug. 25, 2021. Dave Zajac, Record-Journal



A social distancing sign is seen at the entrance to the Meriden YMCA Martin Gaffey Child Care Center at 66 Crown St. on Wednesday. Dave Zajac, Record-Journal



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**By Jessica Simms, Special to the Record-Journal**

With the school year about to start, early childhood educators are preparing while facing a variety of challenges.

Tina Valentin, director of child care operations for the Meriden-New Britain-Berlin YMCA, said she is handling COVID-19 precautions, while also dealing with a shortage of staff.

Valentin said some parents are apprehensive about sending children back to childcare due to the pandemic.

She is also constantly asked about whether children will wear masks.

“Under the age of three, they are definitely not wearing masks, but three and up they are,” Valentin said. “... You have to remember a lot of these kids at three years old, they are not always wearing their masks...we are serving three meals a day, they are playing outside, they are napping, during all of those times they are not wearing masks.”

Valentin said she is looking to get clear masks for staff so children can see their facial expressions.

“These poor kids have never seen a smile on our face,” Valentin said. “When you are an infant or a toddler, that’s what you’re looking for. That’s how you learn about people and how to navigate the world. I am fearful like what’s going to happen to this generation? How are we going to teach them those things?”

Valentin said finding staff has also been a struggle since a lot of early childhood educators have resigned.

“Sometimes they are older adults who had their own health issues or they were like, ‘This isn’t for me. I can’t do this. I am working too closely with these kids who are unvaccinated,’” Valentin said. “There’s been a lot of fear around that.”

Joanne Kelleher, director of the Early Childhood Collaborative of Southington, said nine of the 11 licensed centers in the town are trying to hire more staff.

“Some of them have had openings for many months and they still can’t find anybody,” Kelleher said.

Nationwide, Kelleher said the biggest reasons people are leaving the industry is low pay and lack of benefits.

“The pandemic added in health concerns,” Kelleher said. “Children can’t be vaccinated at this point ... Especially with the delta variant there’s concerns about the younger children now getting sick at a higher rate than they were earlier in the pandemic.”

A state requirement that all early childhood educators must be vaccinated or submit a weekly COVID-19 test could be another reason people are leaving the industry, Kelleher said.

With the lack of staff impacting child care centers in the area and nationwide, Kelleher is concerned about the impact on families.

“If families can’t find quality child care at a price they can afford, then they are not going to be able to enter the workforce,” Kelleher said. “It’s going to impact their family income and it’s also going to impact the employers.”

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