

# Keys to Rebuilding Enrollment Post COVID-19

by Julie Wassom

John F. Kennedy described the Chinese symbol for crisis as having two brush strokes: one for danger and the other for opportunity. Even though current times are uncertain and even scary for your ECE business, they are ripe with opportunity for ways to build and execute an effective enrollment recovery plan.

Taking essential actions within your control now can help you regain enrollment on the time-to-profit runway you have planned, and to rebuild for business sustainability.

## Refocus your Business Model to be More Customer-centric

Though the core business of early care and education will remain the same,



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there will undoubtedly be changes in how families use and choose your services.

Business experts indicate that this recovery will not be V-shaped. Employer models will change, the way parents work will be different, and the economy could struggle for some time. Rules around reopening will change center policies and procedures. That means your customer families will likely require more flexibility, heightened communication, and absolute clarity in the value-exchange they get for the tuition they spend on child care.

Your current families have now become prospects for re-enrollment. You cannot assume they will just come back once you re-open. New prospects will be even more concerned about cleanliness and safety protocols. To fill your centers faster and generate the revenue you need, you must think in terms of the prospect's perspective in every part of your recovery plan rollout.

## Prepare Now to Rebuild Enrollment Rapidly

Reach out to existing families. Call a specific number of them daily to find

out how they are doing and to learn more about what their needs will be as they emerge from this quarantine. When do they expect to return to the center? Will the days and times they need child care change? What would they like to know about your new cleanliness protocols? Would they like you to continue to provide take-home learning activities? Consider scheduling a private Zoom call with those who are really hesitant and need more face-to-face reassurance. Use the information you gather to guide your ongoing communication, re-enrollment incentives, and the changes you will make as you re-open.

**Communicate through multiple venues, beginning now.** The more you can do to be a helpful resource, the better your chances of retaining families. Provide resources your parents need most right now, such as "porch pick-up" bags of learning activities or links for snack ideas, family workouts, virtual children's museum tours, or parenting advice from experts. Keep your social media active and monitored for topics of greatest interest on which you could provide further information in mailings, through your social media and website, and in virtual gatherings that help your parents retain a sense of

community and camaraderie with your program.

**Define and market your benefits, not just features.** Parents will return or enroll where they feel they get the top value exchange. This means you absolutely must know what I call your “basic competitive advantages,” and how to speak and write them as benefit statements. Start by taking a careful look at what makes you unique and of greatest value to your families. Then, look at the websites of your nearest competitors. Incorporate your unique benefits into your marketing messages. A good visual way to do this is to create “Documentation of Differences” via flyers, posters, and posts. An example might be a large poster of your new health and safety measures. Put these up in the center, add them to your parent packets, and post them on your website and social media.

**Update your website.** Now is the time to be truly objective and assure your site has the elements needed to be a strong connection for existing families and to generate the highest number of qualified new prospect inquiries. Review your analytics, especially for pages most visited and where visitors take action. Make sure your site has a “Schedule a Visit” button on every page, linked to a complete lead form that drops into a calendar or your CRM. Update the site with multiple recent reviews, new videos, a robust staff recruiting section, a resource library, and a current, comprehensive parent portal.

**Sharpen enrollment conversion skills.** Every prospect counts as you rebuild, so everyone responsible for converting inquiries into tours and registrations must be proficient in conversion skills, including follow-up. How can you provide that training now, when centers are closed? Use a virtual training program that is easy-access,

user-friendly, and gives your center managers the tools they need to maximize conversions.

**Create re-enrollment incentives.** Work with your teams now to develop and promote incentives for re-enrollment. For example, could you schedule staggered tuition savings into the first three months after you re-open, offer a “Welcome Back Gift,” thank health care professionals and essential workers with no tuition increase until 2021, or increase sibling discounts for any family who returns within 30 days of re-opening? Many schools will offer re-enrollment incentives, so make sure yours are unique and meaningful to your families.

**Implement enrollment growth incentive programs for managers.** Develop programs now to launch once you open. Make them results-driven, time-sensitive, and achievable, with rewards meaningful to directors, staff and other managers. An example might be a contest with a team goal of the return of a specific number of existing families within the first three months after you re-open.

**Treat re-opening almost like a new school launch.** Perhaps you host a “Bring-a-Friend Grand Re-opening” event and waive the registration fee for new families who attend, or host a Zoom gathering with teachers and families the week prior to re-opening to reconnect, build anticipation and answer questions.

**Enlist parent, staff, and community partners to help rebuild enrollment.** Making partner programs an essential element of your enrollment recovery plan is smart marketing. As states begin to allow businesses to reopen, and you launch your enrollment recovery plan, building strong referral partners is something within your control.

- **Parent Referral Program.** If you do not already have a parent referral program, now is the time to develop and widely promote one. If you have an existing program, consider bumping up the reward for any new family referred who enrolls within the first three months after you are fully open.
- **Staff Referral Program.** Staff who refer either parents for enrollment or other qualified teacher candidates can be a valuable inquiry-generating resource for your center. Clear guidelines and meaningful referral rewards will be an incentive to staff who love your school and want more children and colleagues to experience it.
- **Parent Ambassador Programs.** Partnering with enthusiastic parents to be ambassadors for your center is a cost-free way to help you convert inquiries and retain enrollment.
- **Community Marketing Partners.** Who are the influencers right in your center’s geographical draw radius with whom a partnership with your center could yield mutual benefits? Now is a perfect time to reach out to them, as many are also kick-starting their own businesses in the wake of the shutdown. Ask these community partners to make an in-kind donation to include in the “Welcome Back” gift you are creating for your families or invite them to exhibit at your grand re-opening event.

As you emerge from this unprecedented pandemic, much is still uncertain. However, taking these actions now is within your control and certain to help you reach your enrollment goals faster.

