

# APSAC Research to Practice Brief

**Study Title:** Experiences with COVID-19 Stressors and Parents' Use of Neglectful, Harsh, and Positive Parenting Practices in the Northeastern United States

**Study Authors:** Christian M. Connell and Michael J. Strambler

**Brief Author:** Bri Stormer, MSW

## Introduction:

The public health response to COVID-19 was extensive and far-reaching and led to disruptions across many aspects of family life. School closures brought a rapid shift to remote learning. Workplace disruptions led to layoffs and more people working from home. Those who were still required to go into work were often doing so under stressful conditions, with a lack of personal protective equipment and potential fear over bringing illness home to their families. As the pandemic continues to impact the way we live, learn, and work, it remains critical to understand the impact of these stressors on the safety and wellbeing of children to support informed decision making around response and resource allocations during this period and future periods of crises.

The purpose of this study was to explore the rates of COVID-19-related stress among parents and the association of those stressors with harsh or neglectful parenting.

## Hypotheses:

- 1) Rates of harsh and neglectful parenting would be higher than estimates derived from studies published prior to the current pandemic response.
- 2) Parents who experienced elevated rates of COVID-19 stressors, including higher rates of exposure or greater subjective levels of distress, would report higher rates of engaging in harsh discipline or neglectful parenting.

## Study Sample and Variables:

The study sample was drawn from an internet panel of parents and caregivers of children ages 0-18 years across six states in the northeastern U.S. The survey was distributed via a third-party market research platform on two separate occasions, approximately 40 days apart in April and June of 2020, resulting in a total of 2,068 participants. Nearly two-thirds of participants were female and over three-quarters were under 45. Over 80% had a college degree (Associate, Bachelors, or Graduate), three-quarters were white, and three-quarters were married or cohabitated with a partner.

Independent variables included demographic indicators (e.g., age, gender, race, ethnicity, education, marital status, household income, number of adults and children in the home, state, zip code, focal child age, and focal child gender), COVID-19 stressors, both for the respondent and other household members (e.g. COVID-19 symptoms, testing, diagnosis, and treatment; work and school stressors; having an underlying medical condition), and distress related to COVID-19 concerns (e.g. difficulty finding childcare due to school and daycare closures and worries about your own or loved ones' health).

Dependent variables included parental neglect and parental discipline. Parental neglect was measured using the cognitive, supervisory, physical, and family neglect subscales of the *Multidimensional Neglect Behavior Scale*. Parental discipline was measured using items from the positive (non-violent) discipline, psychological punishment, and physical corporal punishment scales of the *Parent-Child Conflict Tactics Scale*. Both dependent variables were measured using a four-point frequency scale (never happened, sometimes happened, frequently happened, always happened) over the previous 30 days.

### **Findings:**

Respondents reported an average of 2.75 COVID-related stressors and reported household members had experienced an average of 2.83 household stressors. The most common stressors were canceling a trip or vacation, financial loss, and being forced to work from home. 82.3% of respondents reported a school or childcare closure due to the pandemic. The number of personal and household COVID-19 stressors were moderately correlated to higher reports of distress, as was the experience of school or childcare closures.

55.6% of caregivers reported engaging in neglectful parenting behavior over the previous month. Higher levels of personal and household COVID-19 stressors and distress were associated with higher levels of physical and family-based neglect, but not with higher levels of supervisory or cognitive neglect. Each additional personal stressor increased odds of physical neglect by 13% and family-based neglect by 14%, and each additional household member stressor increased odds by 6% and 18%, respectively. Higher levels of COVID-19 distress was associated with decreased emotional neglect.

57.2% of parents reported use of psychological aggression over the previous month and 26.9% reported use of physical discipline. 67.1% reported use of positive discipline over the previous month. Household levels of exposure to COVID-19 stressors and higher levels of caregiver distress were associated with increased risk of exposure to harsh discipline, although personal exposure did not predict occurrences of harsher discipline. Each additional stressor experienced by a household member increased the likelihood of physical discipline by 13% and harsh psychological discipline by 5%. Use of positive discipline was associated with personal and household members' exposure to COVID-19 stressors when modeled separately from distress, but only household members' exposure to stressors was associated with positive discipline when distress was included.

### **Recommendation:**

Even at the early stage of the pandemic in which this data was collected, parents were experiencing stressors and additional distress associated with COVID-19. These additional stressors increased the likelihood of physical and family-based neglect, with each additional stressor adding risk for these neglect subtypes. Professionals working directly with children and families should take care to continually assess physical family needs during this difficult and ever-changing time. Future research might examine the impact of COVID-19 relief legislation (e.g. stimulus checks, the expanded Child Tax Credit) on parental stress and neglect. Further, because the authors found that higher distress was related with decreased emotional neglect, future research might focus on the relationship between COVID-related distress and parental warmth and compassion.

COVID-19 stressors were also associated with both increased positive and negative parenting practices. It stands to reason that the additional parent-child interaction occurring when both work and school takes place at home results in more conflicts and discipline in general. The authors suggest that parents with knowledge of positive discipline may be opting for those strategies more to manage increased household conflict. This suggests that teaching positive discipline strategies remains a key strategy to help parents manage conflict. As the pandemic continues across the United States and the world, virtual supports for families and children, employing strategies to reduce parental stress, and continued economic support will remain necessary for child and family wellbeing.

**Bottom Line:**

Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic is far from over. This research demonstrates the cumulative impact of COVID-related parental stress and distress on physical neglect, family-based neglect, and negative discipline strategies. Offering material support, emotional support, and positive discipline alternatives remains key for practitioners and policymakers, as does the ability to respond rapidly and dynamically to an ever-changing situation.

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**About the Research to Practice Author:**

Bri Stormer, MSW, is Director of Publications and Member Services for APSAC. Bri earned her Bachelor of Arts in Psychology and Theatre from Case Western Reserve University and her Master's in Social Work with a concentration in Community Organizing, Planning, and Administration from University of Southern California.