

RESEARCH BRIEF

STRESS AND PARENTING DURING THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

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SUMMARY OF KEY POINTS

- 83% of parents said their children's schools were closed due to the Coronavirus pandemic.
- Parents are engaging in parent-child activities much more frequently since Coronavirus.
- Most parents are worried they can't afford to pay bills (50%) and that money will run out (55%).
- Most parents (52%) said financial concerns and social isolation (50%) were getting in the way of their parenting.
- Despite displaying warmth to their child and feeling close to their child, a majority of parents (61%) shouted, yelled or screamed at their children at least once in the past 2 weeks; about 1 in 5 (20%) spanked or slapped their child at least once in the past 2 weeks.
- Parents reported they have yelled or screamed at their children more often (19%) or increased discipline (15%) since the Coronavirus pandemic.

INTRODUCTION

Parenting is hard, even in good times. In the midst of the Coronavirus pandemic, American parents are being presented with new challenges on how best to meet their child's needs. With schools and child care centers closed, parents are providing more direct care for their children, with little respite from teachers and other caregivers. Furthermore, many are parenting their children under stressful conditions with a high degree of economic uncertainty. This research brief examines how parents are responding to their children during the Coronavirus pandemic.

METHODOLOGY

In order to be eligible for the survey, individuals had to have U.S. nationality and be age 18 or older. This report focuses on data from parents who had at least one child age 12 or younger living with them at least part of the time. The survey was launched on March 24, 2020, approximately one week after the White House administered social distancing guidelines to slow

the spread of the Coronavirus. The survey was administered through Prolific, a company that conducts online survey research. A total of 562 adults participated, of which 288 (or 51%) were parents of at least one child age 12 and under. The survey asked respondents to report on their mental health and wellbeing, parenting, and economic situation during the Coronavirus pandemic.

STUDY PARTICIPANTS

58% of the parents in this study were mothers. The average age of parents was 35 years, and the average number of children was 2. The majority of the participants had at least a bachelor's degree (53%) and identified as White (White: 73%, Black: 12%, Hispanic: 9%, Asian: 3%, Other: 3%). On average, participants had household incomes between \$50,000 and \$70,000. Many of the parents in our study (46%) had at least one child between the ages of 2 and 5, while 23% had at least one child under the age of 1, 38% had at least one child between the ages of 6 and 8, and 40% had at least one child between the ages of 9 and 12.

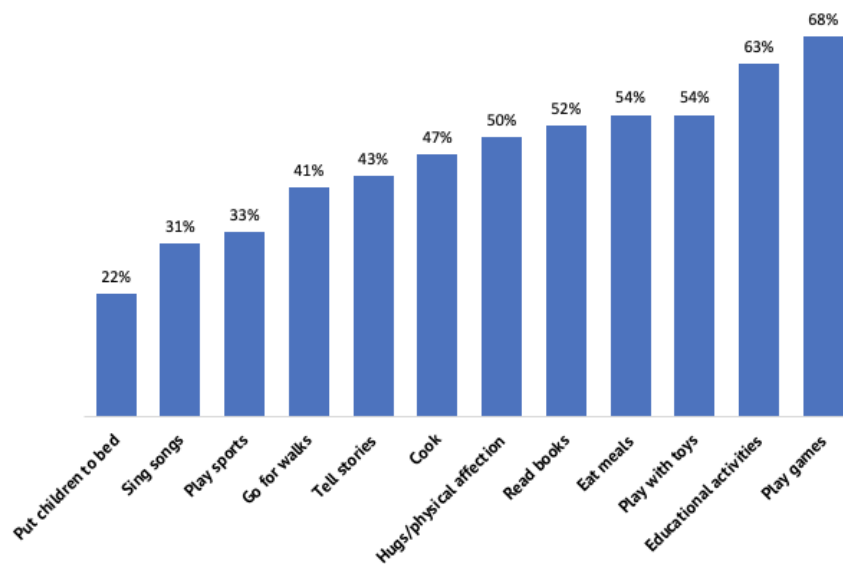
RESULTS: OVERALL CONCERN ABOUT CORONAVIRUS

Parents were asked how concerned they were about the Coronavirus, with 0 being not at all concerned and 10 being highly concerned. On average, parents rated their concern as a 7.6/10, suggesting a high but not urgent level of concern. However, nearly 14% agreed with the statement, "*concerns about Coronavirus/ COVID-19 are exaggerated*". When asked about worries associated with pandemic, 50% of parents said that they worry they can't afford to pay bills, and 55% worry that money will run out.

RESULTS: PARENTING AND ACTIVITIES WITH CHILD

83% of respondents said their children's schools had been closed due to Coronavirus. Parents reported that they are spending more time with their children. Figure 1 displays the percentage of parents who reported engaging in activities more than usual in the past 2 weeks, since the Coronavirus pandemic.

Figure 1. Parents are Spending More Time in Activities with Their Children Since Coronavirus

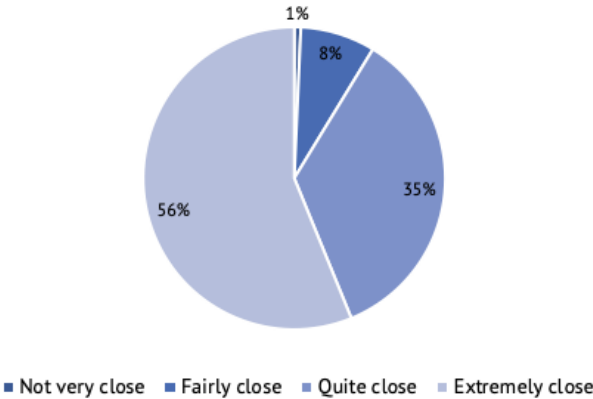


RESULTS: PARENTAL WARMTH AND CLOSENESS WITH CHILDREN

81% of parents said that they praised or complimented their child(ren) very often, and 88% of parents said they and their children had shown love to each other very often in the past 2 weeks.

Parents also reported high feelings of closeness with their children over the past two weeks (Figure 2).

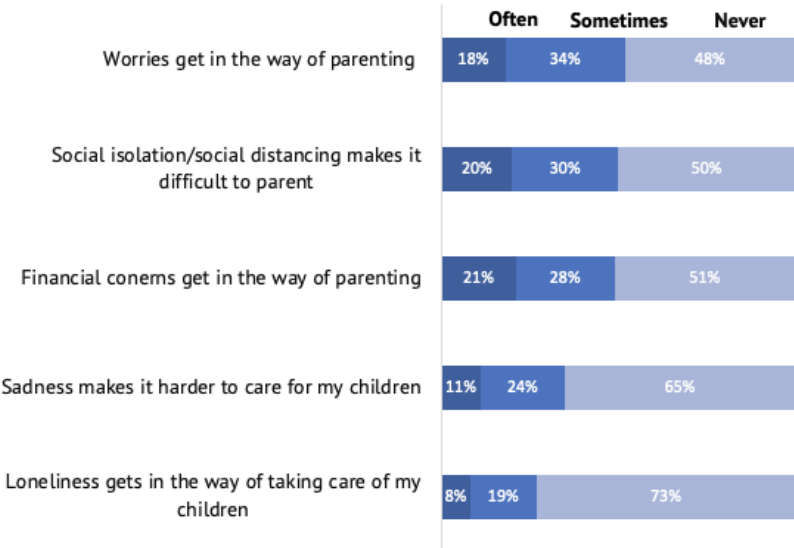
Figure 2. Most Parents Feel Close to Their Children During the Coronavirus



RESULTS: PARENTING STRESS

Parents were asked about how Coronavirus has impacted their parenting (Figure 3). 52% of parents reported that financial concerns and worries were “sometimes” or “often” getting in the way of their parenting; social isolation and social distancing (50%), sadness (35%), and loneliness (27%) were getting in the way of their parenting “sometimes” or “often.” 22% of parents stated that they have received criticism from someone else (spouse/ partner, mother or father, in-laws, friends, commenters on social media) about their parenting during Coronavirus.

Figure 3. Parenting Stress and Worries Since Coronavirus

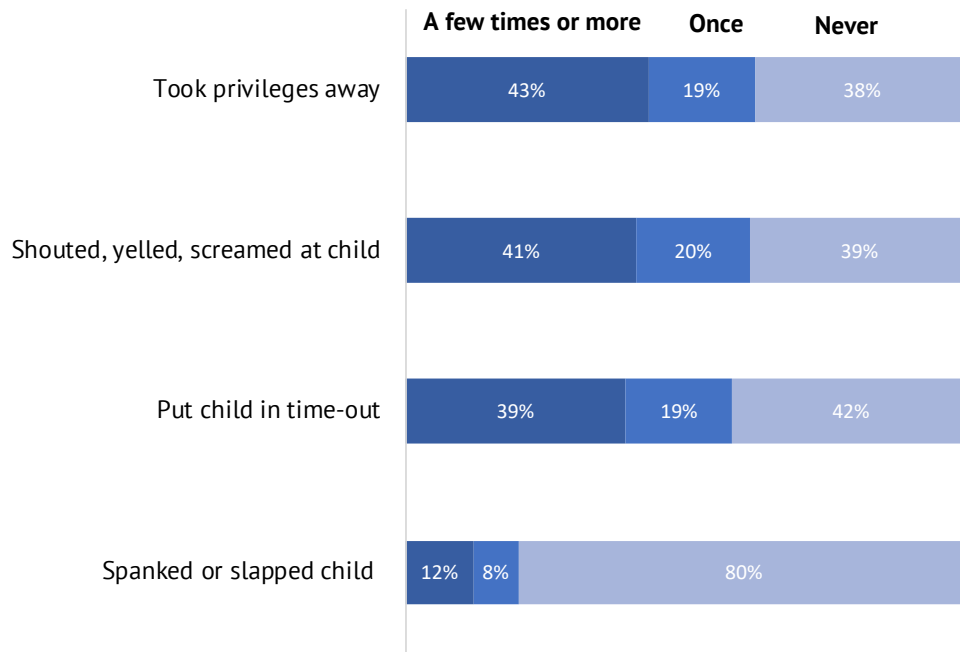


RESULTS: PARENTING AND PUNISHMENT

Even though parents reported high levels of engagement in activities with their children, and closeness and warmth since the Coronavirus pandemic, parents also reported a high level of discipline and verbal and physical punishment of their children. Specifically, parents were asked about how often they used various forms of punishment of their child in the past 2 weeks. As seen

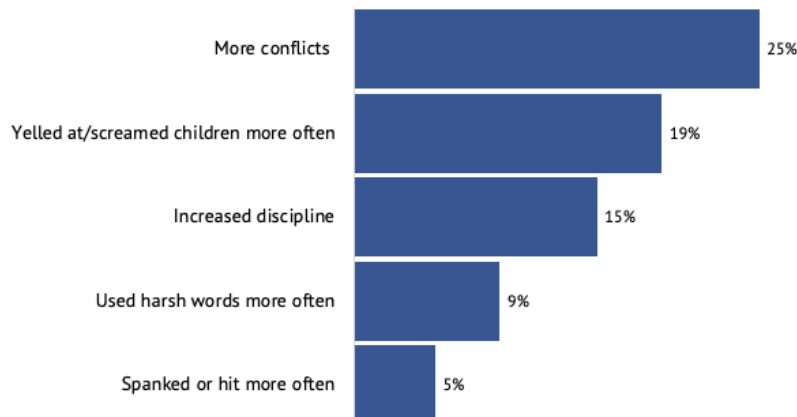
in Figure 4, a majority of parents (61%) “shouted, yelled, or screamed” at their children at least once in the past 2 weeks; 20% of parents spanked or slapped children at least once in the past 2 weeks. Parents are using taking away privileges (62%) and verbal aggression (61%) at equivalent levels, slightly more than the use of time out (58%). 1 out of 5 parents used physical punishment – spanking, hitting or slapping their child in the past 2 weeks.

Figure 4. Parental Punishment Since Coronavirus



Parents indicated that this was an increase over their usual behaviors (Figure 5). Since the Coronavirus pandemic, parents reported more conflicts with children (25%), yelled and screamed more often (19%), increased discipline (15%), used harsh words more often (9%) and spanked or hit more often (5%).

Figure 5. Many Parents are Reporting Increased Child Discipline Since Coronavirus



COMMENTS FROM PARENTS

Parents provided responses to open-ended questions about how their child's behavior and their parenting have changed since the Coronavirus global health crisis. Responses help to illustrate the stresses parents are under since Coronavirus. In response to how your child or children's behavior has changed in the past 2 weeks, parents said:

- "My younger child is autistic and is struggling with the big changes happening as well as the loss of his therapies. He is more anxious & aggressive than usual."
- "They are confused. They don't understand fully the dangers of a pandemic. They want to play with their friends and are getting annoyed with the same routine at home, and playing only with each other. We are also rationing food and household items, and they are anxious and scared by that. I can see it in their faces and their volunteering to make sacrifices for us."
- "She is just sad because she misses her friends at school and her teachers... She is tired of being stuck in the house and extremely bored. She has been quite mouthy the last couple of weeks, but I think it's out of sheer boredom."
- "They have gotten scared of getting sick or losing grandparents"
- "Not only has my daughter been less energetic, she has expressed worry regarding the virus. This differs from her usual happy-go-lucky demeanor..."

About their own parenting, respondents said:

- "It is harder to keep my stress down to effectively parent"
- "We are suddenly responsible for 1/3 of the school year's education and we are lost."
- "I feel I've been somewhat distant even though I've been spending more time with the kids than ever."
- "I am providing more discipline and consistency."

SUMMARY

When this survey was launched on March 24, 2020, about 1 out of 7, or 14% of respondents felt that concerns about Coronavirus were exaggerated. Not surprisingly, given that nearly all schools are closed, parents are spending more time than ever before with their child since the Coronavirus crisis. On the positive side, most parents say they feel close to their child. Yet, there is no doubt that many parents are more stressed out than ever before. For a large number of parents, financial concerns, other worries, social isolation, loneliness and sadness are getting in the way of parenting.

Experts may be right to worry about whether the increased economic insecurity and parenting stress will result in an uptick in child abuse rates. Parents reported a high level of psychological and physical punishment of children. About 1 in 5 parents (20%) said they had spanked or slapped their child or children in the past two weeks at least once. 11% said they had done this a few times or more. Furthermore, rates of shouting, yelling and screaming at children were very high, with 4 out of 10 parents (41%) saying they had done this a few times or more in the past 2 weeks. Given that these data were collected relatively early in the Coronavirus pandemic lockdown, we can expect these rates to increase over time as economic conditions worsen and parents' stress levels increase. Advocates for children should be concerned about whether these conditions will contribute to higher rates of child physical abuse and emotional abuse.



For more information about the **Stress and Parenting During a Pandemic** study:

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