

Title: Paternal Parenting Stress during Middle Childhood: The Impact of COVID-19

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Background: Parenting stress is the unpleasant psychological reaction to the demands of parenthood, including perceptions of competence at and knowledge of the day-to-day and long-term tasks of parenting (Deater-Deckard 2006). While most research has examined mothers, father parenting stress is also critical to children's development, predicting increased problem behaviors (Cabrera & Mitchell 2009) and poorer cognitive skills (Harwood, 2017). The COVID-19 pandemic may increase parental stress in multiple ways, as parents are at home more with their children while fulfilling occupational and personal responsibilities. Parents have reported increased stress due to job loss, school closures, and other stressors (van Tilburg et al., 2020) and COVID-19 stressors are associated with higher parental stress in mothers (Brown et al., 2020). This study aimed to examine: 1) how parenting stress in fathers relates to sociodemographics; 2) how COVID-19 may impact parenting stress, relative to sociodemographics. It was hypothesized that 1) fathers in families with less education or income, unmarried, or living in rural areas would report higher parenting stress, and 2) COVID-19 would contribute to parenting stress over and above sociodemographics.

Methods: Participants were fathers ($n=172$) of children ages 6-10, living in the United States, and had at least regular visitation with their child. Fathers were surveyed once through Amazon's Mechanical Turk between November 2020 through February 2021. The sample was 58% White, 18.6% Black, 7.6% Hispanic, 7.6% Asian American/Pacific Islander, 8.1% All Other Races and Ethnicities, and 97.1% worked full-time. Measures included the Parent-Child Dysfunctional Interaction subscale of the Parenting Stress Index, 4th Edition Short Form (Abidin, 2012), the COVID-19 Impact Scale (Kaufman & Stoddard, 2020), and demographic factors (father age, household income, perceived social class, marital status, education, and urban/rural environment).

Results: COVID-19 impact was positively associated with the parenting stress (parent-child dysfunction subscale; $r=.50$, $p<.001$). Greater parenting stress was also associated with higher perceived social class ($r=.237$, $p<.001$), more education ($r=.24$, $p<.001$), and being married ($t(155)=-2.81$, $p=.006$). Fathers in urban environments endorsed more parenting stress ($t(170)=2.57$, $p=.011$) than those in rural environments. There were no significant associations between father age or household income with parenting stress. Regressions indicated COVID-19 impact was associated with parenting stress ($\beta=.446$, $R^2=.318$, $p<.001$) over and above the impact of marital status, perceived social class, urban/rural environment, and education level. Blocked regression indicated that COVID-19 impact was associated with parenting stress over and above sociodemographic factors. Block 1 explained 12% of variance in parenting stress, while adding COVID-19 impact to Block 2 explained 31% of the variance in parenting stress.

Discussion: COVID-19 and parenting stress were strongly associated with one another. However, contrary to hypotheses, fathers who were married, more educated, identified with higher social classes, or lived in urban environments reported more parenting stress. This may be due the impact of COVID-19, such that married fathers may have more time with their children,

fathers with higher education or perceived social class may be working from home more, and urban areas may have seen more dramatic changes to daily life. Fathers more impacted by COVID-19 may benefit from additional supports or services to reduce demands and parenting stress. Although a single timepoint and single-reporter measurement, findings suggest that interventions designed to reduce COVID-19 related stressors may in turn benefit other aspects of family well-being.