Predicting parents’ stress during the pandemic: Loneliness, children’s social skills, and financial concerns
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INTRODUCTION

In early 2020, governments around the world took emergency measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Previous research looking at the effects of quarantine due to outbreaks of various diseases and viruses (e.g., SARS, MERS) have reported a variety of psychological and socioemotional problems that range from stress, emotional difficulties, insomnia, and post-traumatic stress symptoms. (1)

Additionally, the World Health Organization postulated that essential measures to stop the spread of COVID-19 included social distancing.

OBJECTIVE

To gain a deeper understanding of the potential impacts of COVID-19, this study examined how the ongoing pandemic and measures put in place to stop the spread of COVID-19, relate to parents’ socioemotional well-being.

Our aim was to identify which factors were the greatest predictors of parents’ stress during the early part of the pandemic (June-August 2020).

METHOD

80 parents of 3-12-year-old children completed an online survey reporting on:
- Their own social-emotional health using the Perceived Stress Scale (2) and Revised UCLA Loneliness Scale (3)
- Their child’s social-emotional difficulties using the Strengths & Difficulties Questionnaire (5)
- Their child’s social skills using the Social Skills Improvement System (6)
- Their child’s social understanding using the Children’s Social Understanding Scale (7)
- Their child’s social interactions by estimating the # of hours in in-person vs. virtual interactions with adults and other children

RESULTS

Predicting Parents Stress

Using stepwise regression we predicted parents stress from:
1) Loneliness
2) Financial concerns
3) Number of children
4) Amount of in-person social interaction with friends and family during the pandemic
5) The change in the amount of in-person social interaction with friends and family (i.e., before vs. during pandemic)
6) Their child’s social skills
7) Their child’s social-emotional difficulties
8) Their child’s social understanding.

3 factors accounted for 39% of the differences in parents’ reported stress in our sample:
- Parents’ loneliness accounted for 27% of the variance (p = .009)
- child’s social skills accounted for an additional 7% (p = .01)
- Parents’ financial concerns accounted for an additional 5% (p = .03).

Table 1: Means and standard deviations of social-emotional health measures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure Total Scores</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Perceived Stress Scale</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>16.96</td>
<td>8.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UCLA Loneliness Scale</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>41.99</td>
<td>11.92</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

CONCLUSIONS

Parents self-reported loneliness was the best predictor of stress. Their child’s level of social skills was also a significant predictor, with parents of children with greater social skills reporting less stress. Financial concerns were also a predictor of parents’ stress.

Limitations include the correlational design and the reliance on parent-report. Additionally, parents were predominantly female and from a high SES background, which means that our results may not be representative of other populations.

Findings highlight 3 areas for potential interventions to reduce parental stress: addressing loneliness, minimizing financial burdens, and promoting children’s social skills.

REFERENCES AND NOTES

Footnotes:
*More information on the child’s social-emotional health is presented in an SRDC webinar by Smith, Stewardson, & Birch.
*Video walkthrough of our poster presentation.