



Pandemic stress and coping strategies for families with young children

New research

Mullins, C., Ullery, M.A., Bulotsky-Shearer, R., Mallar, C., Hernandez, J., Berkovits, M., Jent, J., Delameter, A., Natale, R. (2025). The longitudinal psychological impacts of covid-19 pandemic on caregivers with young children. Accepted to *Family Relations*.

The COVID-19 pandemic had adverse impacts on family functioning and well-being. However, few studies have examined the longer-term psychological impacts on the mental health of caregivers of young children. To explore these relationships, we examined how caregiver stress, child mental health, caregiver use of coping strategies, and caregiver self-efficacy (defined as caregivers' confidence in performing healthy parenting behaviors) at the start of the pandemic affected caregiver depression and anxiety two years after the height of the pandemic.

Risk and Resilience Survey: A two-year study of the effects of COVID-19. We surveyed 325 caregivers about their mental health at three time points during the pandemic. We examined the relationships between caregiver stress and child behavioral problems in March 2020, at the start of the pandemic; caregiver self-efficacy and use of coping skills three months later, in June 2020; and caregiver depression and anxiety two years later, in July 2022.

Using coping strategies decreased caregiver depression and anxiety post-pandemic. We found that caregiver stress and concern for their children's behavior in the early COVID-19 pandemic affected their mental health after two years. However, caregiver use of effective coping strategies helped reduce their later anxiety and depression symptoms. Coping strategies included focusing on physical health, social connection, meditation, and enjoying fun activities.

Effects on caregiver mental health two years after the pandemic

We examined connections between child behavior issues, caregiver stress, and the mental health for caregivers of young children. Our analyses revealed the effectiveness of coping strategies to lessen the mental health concerns.

WHAT WE MEASURED

Caregiver stress: *Everyday Stress Index* (Hall, 1983)

Child behavior concerns: *Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire* (Goodman & Scott, 1999)

Use of coping strategies: *Researcher-developed measure*

WHAT WE FOUND

Caregiver stress in March 2020 predicted caregiver anxiety and depression in July 2022.

Child behavior concerns in March 2020 also predicted caregiver anxiety and depression in July 2022.

Use of coping strategies in June 2020 predicted lower mental health concerns. Use of effective coping strategies in June 2020 was related to self-efficacy in June 2020 and related to less depression/anxiety in July 2022.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS: Focus on caregiver mental health & family functioning

- Advocate for family-friendly policies that increase the use of effective coping strategies to support caregiver mental health. Family-friendly policies are those that support family well-being, particularly for families with fewer economic resources.
- Challenges related to employment, housing, and childcare were documented as sources of stress. Family-friendly policies should be considered in these areas to help relieve caregiver stress and improve family functioning.