

Introduction to the Special Issue: Parenting and Family Dynamics in Times of the COVID-19 Pandemic

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On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization declared the outbreak of COVID-19 a pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic brought about worldwide challenges and had a profound impact on family dynamics, relationships, and routines. At the same time, the impact may differ largely due to regional differences in the numbers of infections and severity of preventive measures, as well as individual and contextual risk and protective factors. The aims of this special issue were therefore to (a) provide insight into the impact of the pandemic on the family system and (b) increase our understanding of how this impact may differ between families. This special issue consists of 13 original empirical studies that show how the pandemic affected families across different levels of the family system. At first sight, it seems that many families were able to cope relatively well with the stressors. Yet, for others the demands of the pandemic and pandemic-related measures seemed to exceed their capabilities and available resources. Importantly, the studies in this special issue suggest that the pandemic disproportionately affected children, caregivers and families who were already at risk. Together, the contributions to the special issue offer knowledge on the consequences of both the pandemic and preventive measures on family functioning. At the same time, it also raises questions on the long-term impact of the pandemic and its impact on families who are currently underrepresented in empirical research.

Keywords: COVID-19, family system, pandemic, parenting, preventive measures

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization declared the outbreak of COVID-19 a pandemic. Across the world the pandemic and the extensive preventive measures aimed at containing the virus have affected individuals' wellbeing, mental and physical health (Kontoangelos et al., 2020; Pollard et al., 2020) and financial situation (Patel, 2020). Although the number of infections and the severity of preventive measures varied per continent, country and region, the COVID-19 pandemic brought about worldwide challenges that had a profound impact on family dynamics, relationships and routines (e.g., Buonsenso et al., 2020; Calvano et al., 2021; Chung et al., 2020). Of all influences on the development of children and adolescents, the family system is among the most proximal and important ones (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Minuchin, 1988). This may be specifically true in times of disasters such as war or natural disasters, which cause large-scale disruption and

threaten the lives of many (Cobham et al., 2016). Family relationships can offer comfort and support, yet the pandemic may also disrupt the family system and ultimately affect child development (Masten & Motti-Stefanidi, 2020). Individual differences in the impact of the pandemic are likely to be large and have to be understood in the context of individual and contextual risk and protective factors. Rather than just focusing on the general impact of the pandemic, it is crucial to assess heterogeneity of its impact.

The aims of this special issue were therefore to (1) provide insight into the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the family system and (2) increase our understanding of how this impact may differ between families depending on individual and contextual risk and protective factors. The special issue consists of 13 original empirical studies that have been conducted on four different continents: North America (U.S., Canada), Europa (the Netherlands, Sweden, Italy, Norway, Germany, and U.K.), Asia (China, Philippines, and Thailand), and Australia (New Zealand). The studies used research methods ranging from ongoing longitudinal studies to daily diary studies and mixed method studies, and focus on different aspects of parenting and family dynamics (e.g., wellbeing of individual family members, relationships between family members and family routines). All contributions to this special issue focus on the impact of the pandemic before September 2020. It is commendable that the authors mobilized these research projects so quickly after the start of the pandemic. In her concluding commentary, Ann Masten (2021) places the studies comprising this special issue in a broader perspective of risk and resilience which may help advance our understanding of how the pandemic affected families differently.

Editor's Note. This is an introduction to the special issue "Parenting and Family Dynamics in Times of the COVID-19 Pandemic." Please see the Table of Contents here: <https://psycnet.apa.org/journals/dev/57/10>.—EFD

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The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Families and Children

The contributions to this special issue indicate that the pandemic and the measures affected aimed to prevent the virus from spreading impacted families across different levels of the family system, such as: (a) changed family routines and rules (Bülow et al., 2021; Eales et al., 2021) and increased chaos (Cassinat et al., 2021) at the family level; (b) both positive (Donker et al., 2021) and negative (McRae et al., 2021) changes in the qualities of the caregiver-child relationship at the dyadic level; and (c) changes in the wellbeing of individual family members, as evidenced by increased worry, concern, sadness, and stress in caregivers (Eales et al., 2021) and higher levels of internalizing (Gadassi Polack et al., 2021) and externalizing problems (Skinner et al., 2021) in children and adolescents.

Moreover, and in line with previous literature on disasters (Cobham et al., 2016; Eltanamly et al., 2021), caregivers report changes in their parenting strategies and behavior. In general, caregivers seemed to have increased authoritarian parenting behaviors, such as fear induction practices (Ren et al., 2021), and decreased autonomy support (although this decrease seemed temporary, Bülow et al., 2021), and became more knowledgeable of their children's behaviors and everyday activities (Cassinat et al., 2021). These changes may be partly instigated by the COVID-19 related restrictive measures causing family members to spend more time at home and with each other. At the same time, they could be explained by caregivers' need to protect their children from threat. Although these parenting strategies can thus be seen as caregivers' adjustment and adaptation to the situation (Patterson, 1988), on the longer-term they may negatively affect child development (Pinquart & Kausser, 2018).

Most changes in family functioning seemed modest in size, but may nevertheless have developmental significance. Moreover, since family subsystems are interdependent, it is likely that stress on one of the family subsystems also affects other subsystems. Indeed, Browne and colleagues (2021) showed that caregiver pandemic-related distress has spillover effects on family dysfunction and children's mental health problems. Comparably, health-related stress was related to coparental conflict, which, in turn, was associated with drops in family cohesion (Peltz et al., 2021). The pandemic-related stress on the family system may have cascading effects, possibly affecting longer-term child development (Prime et al., 2020).

Differential Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Families and Children

Besides the negative impact of the pandemic on families, studies also indicate stability, resilience, and even positive effects on family dynamics in some families (Donker et al., 2021; Gadassi Polack et al., 2021). The collection of studies in this special issue suggests that both the unique context and phase of the pandemic in a specific country and individual risk and resilience factors might explain why some families are more severely impacted by the pandemic than others. Some of the changes in family functioning were specifically related to preventive measures and restrictions on public life in that current time and region (Schmidt et al., 2021; Qu et al., 2021). In addition, levels of stress and coping with the pandemic within families varied from day to day, with more negative interactions between parents and children, as well as lower positive and higher negative affect in both caregiver and child,

on days with more caregiver involvement in distance learning (Schmidt et al., 2021). This indicates that families may not only be in need of support in dealing with the pandemic as a disaster, but also with collateral effects of the preventive measures.

Some of the factors predicting family adjustment during the pandemic often were already present before the pandemic. Prepandemic child and family risk factors, such as low socioeconomic status (Sun et al., 2021), stress (Peltz et al., 2021), and mental health problems (Browne et al., 2021; Ren et al., 2021), directly or indirectly exacerbated the effects of the pandemic. Families already experiencing more negative interactions before the pandemic tended to have more difficulties adjusting during the pandemic, possibly further accentuating difficulties between family members (Qu et al., 2021; Sun et al., 2021). At the same time, positive family functioning seemed to buffer against the effects of the pandemic (McRae et al., 2021; Skinner et al., 2021). These findings suggest that the pandemic disproportionately affects children, caregivers and families who are already at risk, either through limited resources at the relationship level, or through other well-known risk factors, such as low socioeconomic status and mental health vulnerabilities.

Implications

Together, the contributions to the special issue offer knowledge on the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and preventive measures on family functioning which may inform practice and policy. This knowledge is important, not only for the current, ongoing pandemic, but also for possible future pandemics. At first sight, it seems that many families were able to cope relatively well with the stressors. Besides negative effects of the pandemic, the studies in this special issue also indicate stability, recovery and even positive effects in some families. Yet, for others the demands of the pandemic and pandemic-related measures seem to exceed their capabilities and available resources (Masten & Motti-Stefanidi, 2020; Patterson, 1988). The preventive measures meant to stop the virus from spreading may have come at a price for healthy family functioning, and the longer-term consequences need to be carefully monitored. Specifically, families with low socioeconomic status and preexisting problems in family relations or mental health seem to be affected by the pandemic and are in need of support, both in dealing with the pandemic as a disaster and with collateral effects of the preventive measures.

This collection of studies also provides important directions for future research. First, since the studies in this issue were conducted in the first months of the pandemic, we do not know its long-term effects on children, caregivers and families. Theoretically, based on the 'ordinary magic' of resilience (Masten, 2001), a systems natural capacity to adapt to disasters and threat, most families will likely recover. However, in others the pandemic may lead to increasing and lasting negative effects. Since the pandemic affects multiple, interrelated, aspects of family functioning, it may have a cumulative effect over time (cumulative risk hypothesis, see, e.g., Morales & Guerra, 2006). Additionally, its negative effect on families' resources may lead to lasting vulnerability (scar hypothesis, see, e.g., Wickrama et al., 2012).

Second, nonwestern countries and minority groups within western countries were underrepresented in this special issue. Since minority families (Patel et al., 2020) and families in developing countries (Shadmi et al., 2020) are disproportionately affected by

the pandemic, the current results on the overall impact of the pandemic may be an underestimation of its negative effects. Moreover, we might observe increasing inequalities between families. Although we should thus continue to study the impact of the pandemic on families across the world, when it comes to supporting families we may not have the luxury to await their results. An investment in families now is needed to avoid more severe and lasting problems and decrease inequalities (Chatterton et al., 2020; Hajizadeh et al., 2017).

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Received June 29, 2021

Accepted June 29, 2021 ■

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