

Isolation, parental stress, and young children: The urgent need to improve social connectedness

Summary: It takes a village

Young children and families benefit from having many caring people in their lives. Communities—which include family, child care providers, friends, neighbours, or health and social services professionals—enhance child well-being and provide parents with essential support.

Social support helps us bounce back from stress and adversity. Unfortunately, public health measures during the pandemic have isolated children, parents and caregivers from their “villages” at a time when families most need connection. In-person contact with friends and extended families has been restricted, and the spaces and places where parents gather and turn to for support have been closed, restricted, or disrupted. These include:

- Home visiting programs;
- Early years and literacy centres;
- Community programs;
- Libraries and recreation centres; and
- Access to supportive therapies for children.

While some services have moved online, a virtual connection is usually not an adequate substitute.

How will this prolonged social isolation affect families? [Physical isolation](#) is associated with adverse psychological outcomes, four times greater post-traumatic stress symptoms in parents and children, and increased family stress. Preliminary data and anecdotal reports from health professionals point to a disturbing trend of parental stress and negative consequences for young children, including effects on social-emotional development and behavioural health, as well as maltreatment.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Parental stress is heightened during the pandemic, making it more difficult to parent in a loving, consistent way.
- Babies and young children are especially vulnerable to parenting that is harsh or inattentive.
- The sources and severity of parental stress are not evenly distributed: Some communities have experienced more than others.
- Social isolation is a significant factor in parental stress, but social connectedness can help alleviate it.
- By prioritizing policies that reduce social isolation, governments at all levels can promote the well-being of young children and families.



Babies and young children, especially those not in child care settings, are almost entirely dependent on their parents for physical, social, emotional and developmental needs. Yet families are facing a range of stressors—from financial and employment instability to relationship conflict—brought on or made worse by the pandemic.

Parental stress is a significant risk to children and by extension, all of society. But it is something we can change. [The Mental Health Commission of Canada and the Canadian Paediatric Society have reviewed the available evidence](#) on parental mental health and child well-being in the context of the pandemic, and made a number of recommendations for strategic investments by governments. This issue brief summarizes how policies that enhance social connectedness can help improve both parental mental health and child well-being.

Parental mental health during the pandemic

Since the start of the pandemic, measures to curb the spread of COVID-19 have had unintended effects on mental health across the lifespan. Families with young children have been among those most negatively affected. Whether a parent is trying to juggle work-from-home and caregiving or has lost employment income, being isolated from community and support networks exacerbates these challenges.

The situation is even more acute for: parents with pre-existing mental health problems; families already experiencing financial or social disparities; working

mothers; racialized communities; and parents of children with physical or developmental disabilities.

Predictably, these added and persistent stressors have affected parental mental health:

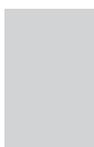
- Data suggest that [rates of maternal depression](#) are on the rise.
- One-third of parents in an [Ontario study](#) said they needed help with their own mood and stress.
- [A study of pregnant women](#) found elevated symptoms of depression and anxiety, in part due to relationship strain and social isolation.

[The loss of social and family supports](#) also increases risk for substance use, overdose and relapse, all of which are on the rise.

Parental mental health and child well-being

Healthy child development depends on the relationships children have with parents and other important people in their lives, including extended family members and communities. Children learn to speak, think, and express emotion in an environment of relationships, and the [parent-child relationship](#) is the one that most strongly affects a child's emotional and behavioural health.

Not surprisingly, parental stress affects parenting. When it is not consistent, loving and emotionally responsive,



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children are at risk. Too much stress can lead to harsh or punitive parenting, and even child maltreatment.

Many Canadians report diminished mental health as a result of the pandemic. In the case of parents and caregivers experiencing depression, anxiety, or stress, the need is especially acute: Their mental health affects not only their own well-being, but that of their children. Parental mental illness may also increase child stress and spur [child-parent conflicts](#). It is also considered an [adverse childhood experience](#) (ACE), which can have lifelong health consequences.

Pre-existing disparities increase risks to mental health

The sources and severity of parental stress during the pandemic have not affected everyone in the same way. Indeed, many inequalities that existed before the pandemic have worsened. For example:

- Job losses or disruptions have disproportionately affected [people living with multiple disadvantages](#) across gender, race, class, education, disability, and immigration categories.
- 41% of First Nations, Inuit and Métis families in Canada [reported very high or extreme concern about the impacts of quarantine on family stress](#), versus 28% for non-Indigenous families.
- [Women](#)—particularly those working in service-sector jobs—have been hard hit economically and have

assumed additional caregiving responsibilities. [RBC economists report](#) that 12 times as many mothers as fathers left their jobs to care for toddlers or school-aged children.

- [Financial stress](#) has been especially acute for mothers of young children and single mothers.

These findings underscore the need for measures that respond to the needs of specific populations.

How social connectedness can help improve child and family health

[Social connectedness](#)—relationships and bonds with family and community—creates a sense of belonging and provides pathways to opportunities, services, and resources. For parents, these supports can [mitigate the effects of stress](#) and improve parenting behaviours. Strong social infrastructure—which could include libraries, cultural groups, and peer groups—is essential to healthy child development and healthy communities. Many of these services and activities have been replaced by “virtual” screen-based alternatives.

Social isolation: Inadequate quantity and quality of social relations with other people.

Social connectedness: Meaningful and trusting relations and bonds with peers, families, and communities.

Source: Synergos 2014

Policies must respond to the unique needs of specific populations including: working women; single and low-income parents; parents of children with developmental disabilities, mental health problems or medical complexity; and parents in First Nations, Inuit, Métis, and other racialized communities.

SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS

While these digital connections have potential benefits, they are not a sustainable substitute for in-person, authentic human connections. In jurisdictions where public health staff deliver critical supports for young children and their families (for example, home visiting programs), many of these essential workers have been redirected to COVID-related services such as testing or immunization.

Improving social connectedness: Policy options

To protect the health and well-being of children and youth in the pandemic recovery, we must support their parents. Restoring the human, social and financial resources that are essential to being a responsive and nurturing parent will help families bounce back from COVID-19.

Improving social connectedness is one of a number of measures—which must include short- and long-term economic investments—to help improve the mental health of parents, especially given the crucial role they play in the well-being of young children, and therefore society.

Policies must respond to the unique needs of specific populations including: working women; single and low-income parents; parents of children with developmental disabilities, mental health problems or medical complexity; and parents in First Nations, Inuit, Métis, and other racialized communities.

As we look forward to the end of the pandemic and subsequent recovery, reducing widespread social isolation and harnessing the power of social connectedness to foster resilience must be a priority.

In particular, governments and agencies should:

1. Rapidly expand services and supports that foster social connection, with particular focus on parents who report high levels of social isolation or substance use.
2. Encourage increased collaboration and integration of mental health and developmental service providers for families of children living with physical or developmental disabilities, as they are especially vulnerable to the effects of social isolation.
3. Expand novel social and community mental health supports for families of children from birth to 6 years, such as mental health first aid and peer support programs, ensuring these initiatives are tailored to broad and diverse parent populations.
4. Improve access to greenspaces, parks, and recreational activities in the community. This is especially critical to reduce the widespread increases in screen time and decreases in physical activity.
5. Ensure funding is available to deliver and sustain services over the long term, given that the effects of prolonged social isolation may persist and emerge over many years.
6. Ensure parents can contribute to pandemic recovery solutions that respond to their needs.

If current data and past disaster research are any indication, the mental health effects of the pandemic on infants, children, families and parents are likely to be felt for some time. Bolstering the resilience of parents through social support can help mitigate negative outcomes for Canada's youngest residents.

References

Visit www.cps.ca for a complete reference list

This document was adapted from: Covid-19, Early Years and Mental Health: Fostering systems change and resilience, prepared by the Mental Health Commission of Canada and the Canadian Paediatric Society, 2021. Available at www.mhcc.ca



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