



INNOVATE

EVIDENCE-BASED MENTAL HEALTH RESEARCH

Parenting during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Implications for Parent and Child Mental Health and Well-being

Parents and children are substantially affected by changes in our society due to the coronavirus. School closures, working remotely and physical distancing have created a new environment for families.

Paul D. Hastings, Ph.D., and Camelia Hostinar, Ph.D. are assessing the long-term ramifications of pandemic-related stressors on the mental and physical health of parents and children in their research study, “Parenting during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Implications for Parent and Child Mental Health and Well-being.” The project is one of two to receive funding from the Center for Healthcare Policy and Research (CHPR), the Center for Health and Technology (CHT), and the Behavioral Health Center of Excellence (BHCOE) pilot award program.

“We know that pervasive and chronic stressors are not good for people and that they adversely impact mental health and well-

being, something we’ve seen with localized quarantines for previous health emergencies,” Hastings said. “We don’t know very much about the effects of a pandemic on families today. What are the implications for family functioning and for the mental health and well-being of parents and children?”

Conducting Research During COVID-19

Hastings and Hostinar, both affiliated with the Center for Mind & Brain and professors in the Department of Psychology at UC Davis, and their research teams have already conducted surveys with over 500 American families. As the pandemic spread across the United States and protective measures were enacted, the team had to adapt to a new way of conducting research. Without the ability to conduct in-person interviews, they pivoted to a fully virtual study and used online tools for recruitment, including university websites and social media.

Hastings, along with many research teams around the world, turned their efforts to studying the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on families.

Seeking Sources of Strength in Families

This unique research not only examines adults and children and the quality of their family dynamics, but also seeks to understand the potential resilience factors that allow some families to navigate the COVID-19 quarantine more effectively than others.

“We’re taking a really careful effort to try and understand sources of strength and resilience. How are families coping with the situation effectively?” Hastings explained. “What are the pivot points that allow some of these families, despite all of the stresses, to do well and preserve their mental health, or even to thrive and function better than they were before the pandemic?”



Healthy Emotions, Relationships & Development (HERD) Lab

“We need to be ready to recognize and respond to the ongoing mental health concerns that are likely to develop in children, adolescents and parents as a result of this pandemic.”

-Paul Hastings, Ph.D.

According to Hastings, an understanding of personal, social, and financial factors that contribute to parents’ abilities to cope with pandemic-related stressors will allow for better assistance for struggling families and prepare us for future crises. The research team is working to capture usable information from survey data to make recommendations to families and practitioners. “One of my hopes for this work is that by identifying sources of strength that have helped people do better, we can inform efforts to assist those who haven’t fared as well,” said Hastings.

The analysis of data from parent assessments will prepare the research team to launch the next phase of the project, which focuses on children and adolescents. Questionnaire-based assessments and objective computer-based tasks assess executive functions to understand how financial, employment and social stressors in families affect child and adolescent functioning and well-being.

This study will provide critical pilot data that the team will use for an National Institutes of Health grant proposal to follow these participants longitudinally and assess the long-term ramifications of pandemic-related stressors on the mental and physical health of parents and children.

Hastings and Hostinar also conduct research on biological embedding, which involves looking at how stressors get under the skin and affect the development of regulatory systems, like the immune system. They hope to expand their current work into these physiological and neurobiological spaces to explore the physical impacts of pandemic-related stressors.

The Physical Impact of Pandemic-Related Stressors

Hastings explained future directions for the study, “One of our goals with this work, if we’re able to keep it moving forward, is to follow a large population of children and parents over time. We want to see how their diverse experiences within the quarantine situation predict the developmental trajectories of their neurobiological systems and the implications of that for their future physical and mental health.”

Behavioral Health Center of Excellence at UC Davis

UC Davis launched the Behavioral Health Center of Excellence in October 2014 to advance mental health research and policy with initial funding from the Mental Health Services Act. The Innovate series highlights the Center’s research pilot award program.

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Center for Healthcare Policy and Research

The Center of Healthcare Policy and Research was established in 1994 to conduct interdisciplinary and collaborative research and research synthesis to improve health outcomes and services, educate the next generation of health services researchers, and assist policymakers in formulating effective health policies. The funded pilot projects align with the mission of CHPR to improve healthcare outcomes and healthcare quality.

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