

Researchers to study impact of COVID-19 and social distancing on families

April 23 2020, by Sara P. Brennen



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Since social distancing has been implemented to slow the spread of COVID-19, many families are experiencing high levels of stress and conflict—arguments and conflict between parents, between parents and children, and between siblings.

And though social distancing is a frequently used intervention deployed in infectious disease epidemics, little is known about what influences a household's ability to successfully maintain social distancing during a period of prolonged isolation and confinement.

"On the one hand, to target resources and develop supports for families during prolonged social distancing, we need more information about the extent of increases in family stress and [conflict](#), including physical aggression—and how this impacts parents' and children's immediate and long-term well-being," said Mark Feinberg, research professor of health and human development at the Edna Bennett Pierce Prevention Center (PRC.)

"On the other hand, we know very little about whether such stress and conflict drives parents and children out of the house—literally—and whether this undermines social distancing and presents a weak point in our fight against a disease epidemic," he added.

Feinberg and Gregory Fosco, associate professor of human development and family studies and PRC associate director, are leading a team studying the impact of COVID-19 and social distancing on children and families, through a seed grant funded by the Huck Institutes of the Life Sciences.

They will evaluate the impact of social distancing on family conflict and adult and child health, and assess which children and parents are the most vulnerable to the negative impacts of social distancing.

At the same time, the team will examine the reverse—whether parents' ability to sustain long-term implementation of social distancing practices is influenced by increases in family stress and conflict.

"Ultimately, we hope to discover what are the points of resilience that

enable families to manage social distancing in optimal ways," said Feinberg. "My hypothesis is that parents' coparenting relationship—that is, their ability to support each other, listen to each other and problem-solve family difficulties—will be a key resource during the confined isolation of households during social distancing."

This work is being conducted in two different samples of families with children aged between two and 10 that Penn State researchers have been following for 10 and 15 years, respectively. The first sample includes participants in a study funded by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD), in which Feinberg has been assessing the long-term impact of Family Foundations, an evidence-based, transition-to-parenthood program focused on enhancing coparenting skills to promote the mental, behavioral, and physical health of parents and their children.

In the second sample, Feinberg and Fosco have been examining the long-term impact of adolescent substance-use prevention programming delivered by Promoting School-Community-University Partnerships (PROSPER), in a randomized trial originally funded by the National Institute on Drug Abuse. In the current follow-up study funded by NICHD, the researchers are examining the long-term impact of substance use prevention with people who participated in PROSPER as teens, and who now are in their late 20s and have [children](#) of their own.

One question the researchers are investigating is whether well-timed prevention programming can yield long-term resilience of families. Participants in Family Foundations and PROSPER were randomly assigned to prevention or control conditions, and now the researchers will examine whether those in the prevention conditions are more capable of coping with the acute stress of the COVID-19 pandemic and prolonged social distancing as parents.

Similar questions about the relation of [social distancing](#) and [family stress/conflict](#) are being assessed in a separate sample of gender-diverse [parents](#), in a study led by team member Samantha Tornello, assistant professor of [human development](#) and [family studies](#).

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

Citation: Researchers to study impact of COVID-19 and social distancing on families (2020, April 23) retrieved 17 July 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2020-04-impact-covid-social-distancing-families.html>

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