

COVID-19 turned parents into proxy educators; new research examines the stress it caused

December 16 2020



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When the emerging COVID-19 pandemic caused most U.S. schools to close and transition to distance learning last spring, many parents were

forced into new roles as proxy educators for their children. A study published today in *Educational Researcher*, a peer-reviewed journal of the American Educational Research Association, finds that roughly 51 percent of all parents surveyed in March and April had at least one child struggling with distance learning and were themselves experiencing significantly higher levels of stress.

The study authors found that [parents](#) with at least one student struggling with distance learning were 19 percentage points more likely than other parents to report anxiety. These parents also were 22 percentage points more likely to experience depression, and were 20 percentage points more likely to have trouble sleeping. In addition, they were 20 percentage points more likely to feel worried and 23 percentage points more likely to have little interest or pleasure in doing things. The results of the analysis remain consistent even after accounting for other school and demographic characteristics.

The study found that these levels of heightened mental distress were felt by parents across all socioeconomic categories, regardless of family income, the number of children struggling (above one), or the number of days that had passed since school closure.

For this study, authors Cassandra R. Davis (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill), Jevay Grooms (Howard University), Alberto Ortega (Indiana University Bloomington), Joaquin Alfredo-Angel Rubalcaba (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill), and Edward Vargas (Arizona State University) analyzed data from the National Panel Study of COVID-19, a nationally representative survey of 3,338 U.S. households collected in March and April. The multi-wave survey was conducted by the authors in collaboration with researchers across multiple U.S. universities.

"Students' academic success ultimately relies on their parents' emotional

health during this fragile time, which sets the [learning environment](#) for their children," said Ortega, an assistant professor at Indiana University Bloomington. "Without proper support, both parents and students will likely suffer."

Prior research has shown that stressful learning environments tend to stifle students' academic achievement.

"It is not clear when schools will return to normal," said Ortega. "Since students will likely rely on some form of distance learning for the foreseeable future, parents could face longer periods of elevated stress and mental health disruptions. Addressing parents' emotional needs during the pandemic has become essential for students' success."

According to the authors, schools can build a relationship with parents through ongoing check-ins to discuss how their children cope with distance learning and whether supplemental learning resources are needed to support students.

"Parents, as proxy educators, should be supported by their child's [school](#) during this period," said Ortega. "This was beneficial for student success before the COVID-19 pandemic, but now it is essential. Doing so also enables parents to reinforce the efforts of teachers, many of whom are stretched thin and may be experiencing burnout."

The authors note that they do not suggest that schools be re-opened to salvage parents' mental health. "Instead, schools and policymakers may want to create plans for providing mental health resources and virtual spaces to parents, in addition to helping them with questions about the schoolwork itself," Ortega said. "And it is crucial for parents to be open about their needs and to communicate with their schools when they need additional help."

The authors note that their study was conducted in spring 2020 and that the relationship between [distance learning](#), mental health, and other demographic characteristics may change as the pandemic continues to unfold.

More information: Cassandra R. Davis et al, Distance Learning and Parental Mental Health During COVID-19, *Educational Researcher* (2020). [DOI: 10.3102/0013189X20978806](https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X20978806)

Provided by American Educational Research Association

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