

## RESEARCH BRIEF

# Impact of the COVID-19 Crisis on Family Dynamics in Economically Vulnerable Households • The Education Gradient in Maternal Enjoyment of Time in Childcare

*Based on BFI Working Paper 2020-143, “[Impact of the COVID-19 Crisis on Family Dynamics in Economically Vulnerable Households](#),” by Ariel Kalil, Professor, Harris Public Policy; Susan E. Mayer, Professor Emeritus, Harris Public Policy; and Rohen Shah, PhD student, Harris Public Policy; and on BFI Working Paper 2020-131, “[The Education Gradient in Maternal Enjoyment of Time in Childcare](#),” by Ariel Kalil and Susan E. Mayer; and William Delgado, Postdoctoral Scholar, Harris Public Policy; and Lisa A. Gennetian, Associate Professor, Duke’s Sanford School of Public Policy*

### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ✓ COVID-19 has put economic pressure on many US households.
- ✓ In addition, childcare time for parents has increased due in large part to shelter-in-place orders and home-schooling practices.
- ✓ New research reveals that loss of income is a key driver in parental mental health and stress and can negatively impact parent-child relationships.
- ✓ Related research reveals that the time mothers spend with children is driven, in part, by the mother’s education level.

A Google search of “parenting and mothers during covid” in mid-October 2020 returned nearly 300 million hits, with over 90 million news headlines including such words as “burnout,”<sup>1</sup> and “mental load,”<sup>2</sup> and such pointed phrases as “The moms are not alright.”<sup>3</sup>

But is that true? It turns out the answer is more nuanced than one might first assume. In “Impact of the COVID-19 Crisis on Family Dynamics in Economically Vulnerable Households,” Ariel Kalil, Susan E. Mayer, and Rohen Shah find that there are, indeed, negative effects for mothers (and their work is largely focused on mothers), many of whom are experiencing increased levels of stress. However, there are also positive effects for some mothers and their children. The difference is largely around whether mothers lose income or employment due to pandemic circumstances.

A recent related paper by Kalil and Mayer, along with William Delgado and Lisa A. Gennetian, “The Education Gradient in Maternal Enjoyment of Time in Childcare,” describes new findings about the degree to which mothers enjoy spending time with their children, and how they spend that time. Taken together, these papers offer insights into the effect that such external shocks,

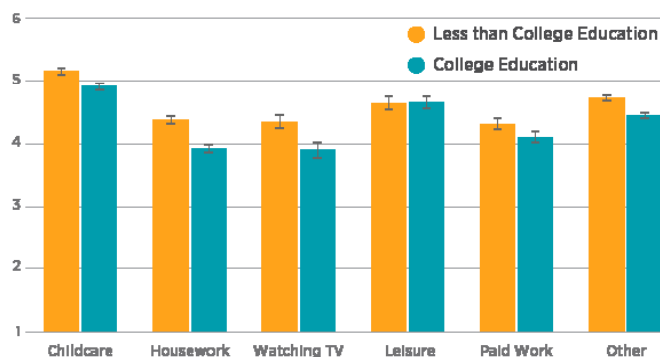
<sup>1</sup> [nytimes.com/2020/09/22/parenting/parental-burnout-pandemic.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/22/parenting/parental-burnout-pandemic.html)

<sup>2</sup> [today.com/parents/mental-load-coronavirus-pandemic-means-moms-take-more-t179021](https://www.today.com/parents/mental-load-coronavirus-pandemic-means-moms-take-more-t179021)

<sup>3</sup> [theconversation.com/the-moms-are-not-alright-how-coronavirus-pandemic-policies-penalize-mothers-144713](https://theconversation.com/the-moms-are-not-alright-how-coronavirus-pandemic-policies-penalize-mothers-144713)

**Figure 1 • Parents Enjoy Time with their Children**

**Positive Feelings (Average Happy and Meaningful)**



like the COVID-19 pandemic, can have on the quantity and quality of time spent between mothers and children, as well as the financial and emotional health of mothers.

### **Pandemic effects on family dynamics**

In their work on the effects of the pandemic on family dynamics, the authors focused on low-income families, where the virus has been more prevalent. These families, which often already face stresses associated with limited income, face additional pressures during the COVID-19 pandemic, including stress arising from stay-at-home orders and social distancing, separation from friends and other support resources, and disruptions to employment and daily routines. Children in low-income families tend on average to have lower academic and socio-emotional skills compared to their peers in economically better-off households.

On the one hand, given the stresses and pressures placed on low-income families during the pandemic, as noted above, one would assume that mothers are facing more ill-effects than otherwise and that such negative effects are impacting relationships with their children. This conforms with much of the news coverage and other cultural assumptions prevalent during the pandemic.

Parents who lost both their job and income were significantly more likely to report depressive symptoms relative to the comparison group, as well as increases in life stress. However, losing a job with no loss of household income proved to have no impact on depression and stress.

On the other hand, many of those mothers received federal stimulus funds in late spring 2020 and, if they lost their job, received expanded unemployment insurance that, in some cases, amounted to a higher income during their unemployment. In effect, these families experienced a type of paid family leave (albeit with an uncertain future).

To address this “two-handed” question, the authors investigated the effects on parental mental health and stress, parent-child interactions (again, with emphasis on mothers), and children’s behavioral adjustment. And they did this by comparing the relative importance of pandemic-induced economic hardships, like job and income loss and inability to make ends meet, vs. pandemic-induced social conditions, like exposure to the virus and pandemic-induced increases in childcare time.

The authors surveyed low-income parents of preschool-age children in Chicago between May 3 and July 20, 2020. Participants were those who currently or recently participated in other research studies conducted by the Behavioral Insights and Parenting Lab at the University of Chicago. Of 784 parents who were invited to participate in the survey, 572 responded, or 73 percent. Key results include:

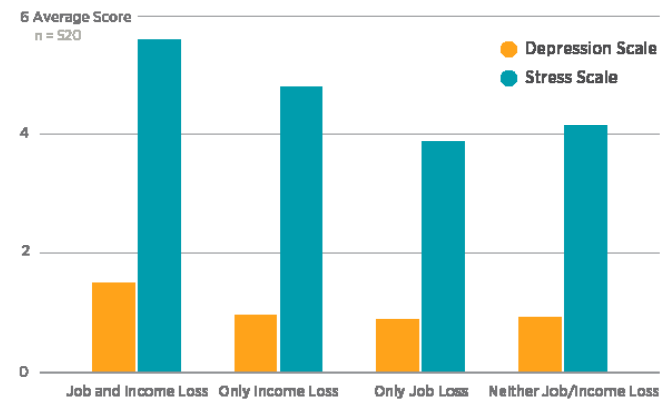
#### **Parents’ mental health and stress:**

- Parents who lost both their job and income were significantly more likely to report depressive symptoms relative to the comparison group, as well as increases in life stress. Such parents also experienced increased hopelessness.
- However, losing a job with no loss of household income had no impact on depression and stress.
- Interestingly, parents’ exposure to COVID did not significantly increase stress levels of parents, although exposure did lead to a decrease in feeling hopeful.

#### **Parent-Child Relationships**

- Parents who lost their job but not income had more positive relationships with their children. Relatedly, those parents spending more time with their children and reported much higher levels of positive interaction with their children.
- Perhaps not surprisingly, COVID exposure for parents resulted in less positive interactions with children.
- One benefit of job and even income loss for children was that the parents who experienced those negative effects tend to spend more time reading to their kids.

**Figure 2 • Parental Mental Health by Job and Income Loss Status**



Note: Depressive Symptoms are measured on a 6-point scale and Stress on a 10-point scale. Those with both job and income loss have a statistically significant difference (at the .05 level) from the other groups for both depressive symptoms and stress levels. Those with only income loss have a statistically significant difference for stress.

### Children's behavioral adjustment

- Parents who lost their job but not their income reported that their children enjoyed spending time with them.
- An increase in childcare time also resulted in a significant increase in how much a child enjoyed spending time with parents.
- For parents struggling with loss of income, though, and for parents with COVID exposure, the effects are negative for parent-child relationships and for children's behavior.

Of course, there are more ways to distinguish households than levels of income. For a different take on the quantity and quality of time that parents spend with their children, another recent study released by Kalil and Mayer, along with Delgado and Gennetian, parses the effects of parental education. That work is briefly described in the following section.

### Education effects on parent-child relationships

Recent research has revealed that education levels are correlated with the amount of time that mothers spend with their children. For example, mothers with at least a college education spend about 4.5 hours more per week in childcare than mothers with a high school degree or less. This adds up. Over the course of one year, children with college-educated mothers spend 234 more hours with their mothers, or the equivalent of 40 six-hour school days.

However, is that the end of the story? Or is there more to learn about these mother-child relationships? For example, what motivates mothers to spend time with

their kids? Does it matter how the mothers feel about the time they spend with their children?

These and similar questions motivated the authors to examine data from the 2010-2013 American Time Use Study from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, and in particular the Well-Being Module of that survey, which allowed them to test whether differences in mothers' feelings during childcare time differ by education.<sup>4</sup>

There may be a number of reasons why education plays a role in shaping maternal feelings about childcare. More educated mothers may have more material advantages and more resources to enjoy expanded activities that may make childcare more enjoyable. Educated mothers are also more often married, which means they likely have more support at home. Less-educated mothers may also have more time constraints owing to employment, commuting, and other demands on their time, especially if they are single mothers.

In summary, the authors reveal that within each education group, childcare time yields the highest scores for happiness and meaningfulness and the lowest score for sadness of all categories of activities in which people spend their time, although watching TV and leisure activities generate as much happiness as childcare time. In other words, spending time with kids is good for mothers, generally speaking. However, such childcare time is a more positive experience for less-educated mothers. The authors find that mothers with no college degree report higher scores for happiness and meaningfulness during childcare relative to mothers with a college degree. This is true even though less-educated mothers were also more likely to report feeling more sad and tired than their college-educated peers.

If college-educated mothers do not enjoy their time with children as much as less-educated mothers, then why do educated mothers spend more time with their kids? The authors posit that educated mothers are driven by an investment motive; that is, more time spent with children, especially in educational activities like reading, will improve their child's outcomes.

### Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic induced a severe economic recession that negatively impacted millions of US households. Much of this effect is captured in employment and income data, but for most of those families the effects extend beyond jobs and income to include the emotional well-being of parents and children. This is especially true as families experience shelter-in-place orders and children are attending school from home.

<sup>4</sup> The American Time Use Survey measures the amount of time people spend doing various activities, such as paid work, childcare, volunteering, and socializing. ([bls.gov/tus/](https://bls.gov/tus/))

## CLOSING TAKEAWAY

Spending time with kids is a positive experience for mothers, generally speaking. However, such childcare time is a more positive experience for less-educated mothers. The authors find that mothers with no college degree report higher scores for happiness and meaningfulness during childcare time relative to mothers with a college degree.

In “Impact of the COVID-19 Crisis on Family Dynamics in Economically Vulnerable Households,” the authors find that the important factor in determining a parent’s well-being is loss of income, and not losing a job. Loss of income not only diminishes a parent’s happiness and increases stress, but also negatively impacts their relationships with their children. Further, the children themselves are impacted, as parents report that while children enjoy having extra time with their parents, the stresses that occur from a loss of income put a damper on that time.

Digging deeper into the value of parent-child time, the findings related in “The Education Gradient in Maternal Enjoyment of Time in Childcare” show that while less-educated mothers enjoy time with their children more than college-educated mothers, the latter group spends more aggregate time with their kids in the hope, theoretically, that such time will pay dividends for their children’s future.

For policymakers and others concerned about the well-being of US households, one lesson here is to consider the impact of income loss on the people within those households. Income matters more than jobs when it comes to how parents feel about themselves, how they relate with their children and, ultimately, to what degree children enjoy time with their parents. And time with parents matters—both for the development of the children and for the well-being of parents. Considering all the extra time that parents and children are spending together, and also considering the long-term benefits of such time, these are important lessons.

## READ THE WORKING PAPERS

NO. 2020-143 · OCTOBER 2020

### Impact of the COVID-19 Crisis on Family Dynamics in Economically Vulnerable Households

[bfi.uchicago.edu/working-paper/2020143](https://bfi.uchicago.edu/working-paper/2020143)

NO. 2020-131 · SEPTEMBER 2020

### The Education Gradient in Maternal Enjoyment of Time in Childcare

[bfi.uchicago.edu/working-paper/2020131](https://bfi.uchicago.edu/working-paper/2020131)

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