

When COVID-19 disrupts multi-child families, one sibling is affected more

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COVID-19 disruptions in homes with two or more children affect one sibling more than the other, according to a new study.

When caregivers are experiencing stress associated with the [pandemic](#), many other areas of [family](#) life are disrupted—often with higher levels of [mental-health](#) struggle for children, including anger, anxiety, and depression.

Researchers found that one sibling tends to present greater mental-health problems. That, in turn, elicits more negative parenting.

"Our study shows that parents tend to be most reactive and least positive to the child showing the highest levels of mental health difficulties," said Dillon Browne, the study's lead author and a professor of clinical psychology at the University of Waterloo.

"Struggles with mental health among [family members](#) exacerbate each other in a feedback loop," Browne said. "Our study suggests that the direction of influence appears to go from the child's mental health to parenting, not parenting to child mental health.

To conduct the study, the research team collected and analyzed data from more than 500 caregivers and 1,000 siblings. Caregivers with two children between five and 18 years old completed questionnaires on COVID stress, family functioning and mental health at repeated times throughout a two-month period during the COVID-19 pandemic.

"Understanding children's mental health difficulties during COVID-19 requires a family system lens because of the numerous ways the pandemic affects the family as a unit. Comprehensive interventions for children's mental health require an examination of caregiver, sibling, and whole-family dynamics," said Browne, who holds the Canada Research Chair in Child and Family Clinical Psychology.

The findings suggest that family therapy, in addition to individual psychotherapy for children and adults, might be helpful for households

who are struggling with adjustments in response to the pandemic. Browne adds that future research needs to examine the uptake and effectiveness of [family therapy](#) services during the pandemic.

"A lot of research studies have pointed to mental-health challenges associated with the pandemic for [children](#) and parents. This work adds insight into how pandemic-related disruption goes beyond the individual and infiltrates the relational environment of the family unit," Brown said.

"COVID-19 Disruption Gets Inside the Family: A Two-Month Multilevel Study of Family Stress During the Pandemic" by Browne, University of Toronto researchers Mark Wade, Shealyn S. May and Jennifer M. Jenkins and Heather Prime of York University was published in the journal *Developmental Psychology*.

More information: Dillon T. Browne et al, COVID-19 disruption gets inside the family: A two-month multilevel study of family stress during the pandemic., *Developmental Psychology* (2021). [DOI: 10.1037/dev0001237](#)

Provided by University of Waterloo

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