

From pandemic to endemic: Stress of COVID-19 on families

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The novel coronavirus has created unprecedented challenges that were unforeseeable two years ago. The DU Newsroom has been speaking with faculty experts about issues that have arisen or have been exacerbated because of the pandemic. Tracy Vozar is a clinical associate professor

and director of the Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health (IECMH) Specialty in the Graduate School of Professional Psychology. She shares her thoughts about the stress of COVID-19 on families in this interview with the DU Newsroom.

What are some of the challenges that families face during the pandemic?

Families are facing all the challenges they were up against before the [pandemic](#) as well as the additional stressors and strains the pandemic adds to their plates. Families we speak with personally and professionally are experiencing additional financial, educational, occupational, childcare, health, mental health and social support concerns, among others. Parenting is challenging no matter what. Parenting during a pandemic is unprecedented in our lifetime and not something we have a guidebook for.

How does pandemic-related stress on parents affect child mental health?

I think of mental health and well-being in relational terms. Within a [family](#), when one person is struggling, others will be impacted. Children are very attuned to their caregivers' well-being. When a parent or [caregiver](#) is stressed, children will notice and can experience that stress, as well. Depending on children's ages, they may show signs of stress via sleep, eating, toileting difficulties or behavioral or learning issues at school, for example.

Who is most at risk of longer-term mental health issues due to pandemic conditions?

When we think of risk in early childhood, we know that numerous risk factors are more predictive of difficulties than any one risk factor. When families are experiencing hardships and then additional risk factors due to COVID or other concerns are added, those are the families I'm most concerned about for longer term mental health and well-being.

What are some strategies that promote family well-being?

The good news is there is a lot that caregivers can do to support their children during this time. On a daily basis, caregivers can check in with children on how they're feeling and can provide support and affirm their emotions. Children may have mixed emotions and may experience confusion—especially during the pandemic—and can look to caregivers for support, understanding and discussions of what they're experiencing. Doing something fun or enjoyable together, even for five minutes, is another great way to show kids you love and care about them which is protective for their mental health and well-being.

Another essential piece is caregivers paying attention to how they are doing themselves and being mindful of their own mental and physical [health](#). I'm not a fan of the term "self-care" as I think it conjures images of taking a spa day (and who has the time or funding for that!) However, I do think caregivers being aware of how they're doing and feeling is helpful so that they can also be healthy and available to their child(ren). Having some practices in place that adults find rejuvenating and restorative will be supportive for them and for their [children](#). These can be simple things—having your cup of coffee before you start the day, taking a short walk around the block, texting or connecting with friends over the phone or over Zoom. Having some of these simple practices in place throughout the week is good prevention and these practices can also be used in times when you're feeling especially stressed or stretched

thin.

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