

COVID study shows children's mental health tied to mothers'

October 18 2022, by Kanaga Rajan



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Parenting is hard, and COVID-19 added many new layers of difficulty to an already herculean job. A new study highlights how maternal mental health—and a mother's own adverse childhood experiences—impacted

children's mental health during the pandemic. The findings were published in the *Journal of Affective Disorders*.

"As COVID was unfolding, I was interested in thinking about the pandemic, including lockdown and COVID-19 transmission, as a traumatic stressor rather than just a difficult event. [I wanted to think] about our reactions to it in a more psychologically and trauma-informed way," said first author Melissa Hagan, San Francisco State University associate professor of Psychology. For this project, she worked with long-term collaborators Nicole Bush and Danielle Roubinov at the University of California, San Francisco (UCSF), where Hagan is also an adjunct assistant professor.

Hagan and colleagues surveyed 111 mothers of young children (approximately 7 years old) who were already enrolled in an ongoing, multi-year UCSF study. Along with data collected in the pre-pandemic years, researchers gave mothers a questionnaire asking about their own and their children's [mental health](#) and about the quality and nature of their interactions early in the pandemic (May–November 2020).

"When we talk about trauma reactions, we're not just talking about sadness or frustration. We're talking about high levels of anxiety or fear and hypervigilance," Hagan said. "There are all of these things that were part of the pandemic experience that were very relevant to thinking about it through a trauma lens."

The study revealed that although the pandemic took a toll on mothers' mental [health](#), the mother-child relationship seemed to deepen early in the pandemic, even if COVID-related negative events increased. Hagan explained that children in this study were more impacted by their mothers' response to pandemic events than the events themselves. In addition, researchers found that [childhood adversity](#) experienced by mothers was directly associated with their children's mental health

during the pandemic. The findings could not be fully explained by the scope of this study, Hagan explained.

"It's important to consider moms' history and types of adversity, because we know that parents' histories of [parental care](#) or adversity outside of the home influences how they parent the next generation," she added.

This study cohort mainly included Black, Latinx/Hispanic and multiracial mothers. On average, these mothers reported approximately three [adverse childhood experiences](#), most frequently citing [emotional abuse](#), parental divorce or separation from caregiver, or significant financial hardship.

During the pandemic, most mothers said that they experienced changes in finances and employment. Nearly 75% of mothers reported challenges in paying for [basic needs](#) because they or their partners had cuts in [work hours](#) or lost jobs.

"So many of the large-scale studies and surveys that are being done looking at the effects of COVID-19 on groups of people are finding that COVID has a disproportionate impact for communities of color," Hagan said. "I think what is less focused on is mental health in these communities."

Hagan hopes that medical providers take into consideration the mental health toll of the [pandemic](#) and how it has not just elevated stress but introduced a toxic or traumatic impact on mothers.

"It sort of reemphasizes what has been said for years, which is that parental mental health is important. Child mental health cannot be considered outside the context of parental mental health," she concluded.

More information: Melissa J. Hagan et al, Young children's traumatic

stress reactions to the COVID-19 pandemic: The long reach of mothers' adverse childhood experiences, *Journal of Affective Disorders* (2022).
[DOI: 10.1016/j.jad.2022.08.061](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2022.08.061)

Provided by San Francisco State University

Citation: COVID study shows children's mental health tied to mothers' (2022, October 18)
retrieved 19 April 2024 from
<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2022-10-covid-children-mental-health-tied.html>

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