

Study shows less parent-child interaction during COVID-19

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Child care challenges and financial stresses during the pandemic may have greatly diminished opportunities for California parents to interact with their youngest children, according to a study published today by the UCLA Center for Health Policy Research.

Parental involvement behaviors that contribute to a child's learning and

development include reading and singing to the child and taking them to the park or playground. The UCLA study revealed that during the COVID-19 pandemic, parents struggled to provide these kinds of experiences for children in the first five years of life. Young children thus had fewer opportunities to engage in activities that promote language, literacy and interpersonal skills.

"Our findings suggest that the pandemic stole precious time from parents to interact with their [young children](#)," said Sean Tan, senior public administration analyst at the center and co-author of the study.

According to [data](#) from the center's California Health Interview Survey, the proportion of parents or caregivers overall who read to young children every day decreased from 64.1% in 2019 to 53.9% in 2021. These changes in parental involvement behaviors may have long-term effects on a young child's development and health, said the study's authors.

Declines in reading to a child daily among some parent groups:

- Families in the lowest and highest income categories had the greatest percentage point decreases in daily reading—around 27 and 13 percentage points, respectively.
- Among Black parents, daily reading dropped more than 26 percentage points from 2019 (70.8%) to 2021 (44.3%).
- Among Latino parents, daily reading to children (40.1%) was 8 percentage points lower in 2021 than in 2020 and more than 15 percentage points lower than in 2019 (55.6%).

Although the percentage of parents who took their young children out to play dropped from 80% in 2019 to 67.1% in 2020, that figure climbed to 75.1% in 2021. The proportion of parents who sang daily to their children—67.3% in 2021—remained statistically the same during the

pandemic.

Financial stressors and child care difficulties impacted parent-child activities

Nearly 12% of parents reported difficulties making their rent and mortgage payments due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and nearly 13% reported difficulties paying for necessities such as bills or groceries.

The [pandemic](#) worsened [child care](#) challenges, with 11.1% of parents reporting difficulties securing child care or paying increased costs. Data also suggested that twice the number of [parents](#) who were essential workers reported difficulties with child care compared with those who were not essential workers (18.2% vs. 9.2%).

"The first few years of a child's life are some of the most critical to future growth," said Nicole Lordi, program director at the nonprofit Public Health Institute and co-author of the center's study. "Parents should have access to child care programs that offer developmental opportunities for young children."

More information: Study: [Experiences of Families With Young Children During the COVID-19 Pandemic, 2020 to 2021](#)

Provided by University of California, Los Angeles

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