How family economic insecurity can hurt child mental health

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Economic difficulty caused by the COVID-19 pandemic led to a cascade of connected problems for some parents—resulting in mental health problems for their children, a new study suggests.

Researchers found that economic insecurity was linked to higher levels of depressive symptoms for parents, which was then associated with poorer relationship quality for the couples. That was linked with more harsh parenting and then to increased internalizing behaviors for their
children.

"Pandemic-induced economic hardship had this downstream spillover effect that was ultimately linked negatively with their children's mental health," said Joyce Lee, lead author of the study and assistant professor of social work at The Ohio State University.

"Our findings parallel with other descriptive research showing that children's mental health plummeted during the pandemic."

The study was published online last week in the journal Child & Family Social Work.

The study involved 259 parents raising one or more children ages 12 years or younger who said they experienced at least one pandemic-related economic hardship. The longitudinal survey, which included participants from across the country, focused on two different points during the early weeks of the pandemic.

One of the strengths of this research is that it didn't just include middle-income families—in 31% of the families studied, the parents' income was below $30,000.

Parents were asked about their depressive symptoms, relationship quality and harsh parenting practices. They were also asked about their children's internalizing behaviors such as complaining of loneliness, crying a lot, and being fearful or anxious.

The researchers found a clear connection between these issues, Lee said.

It started with the pandemic-induced economic insecurity. Those parents who reported higher levels of economic insecurity at the time of the first survey also had higher levels of depressive symptoms at the same time.
And that was linked to a more negative relationship with their partner at the time of the second survey.

"They were reporting more disagreements and arguments and fights among themselves during the pandemic," Lee said.

That in turn was linked to reports of using more harsh parenting with their children. This included yelling, screaming and shouting at their child; and physical punishment such as spanking.

And finally, harsh parenting was linked to children who had internalizing behaviors such as frequent crying and loneliness. (Data from the study did not include externalizing behaviors, such as physical aggression and tantrums.)

"There are these cascading effects that begin with pandemic-initiated economic difficulties that all trickle down to children's mental health," Lee said.

While other studies have found that depressive symptoms in parents can be related to harsh parenting, one strength of this study is that it also included partner relationship quality, she said.

"Relationship quality is an important part of this. If you're not doing well with your partner, that speaks to a wider family dynamic that can spill over to how you deal with your children," Lee explained.

Findings also showed that there was not a significant gender difference in how mothers and fathers reacted when faced with economic problems during the pandemic. That was somewhat of a surprise since some reports said mothers took a larger hit to their careers because of COVID-19 and were more likely to take care of children at home when schools closed. That suggested mothers might do worse than fathers, but
it wasn't found in this study.

Lee noted that this was a relatively small sample, so more research is needed to confirm gender differences in reactions to the pandemic.

While this study was done during the early weeks of the COVID-19 pandemic, Lee said that the findings could be relevant to other disasters or issues that lead to economic downturns.

One implication is the need for interventions that could help mothers and fathers who are struggling economically to stop the cascade of problems leading to child mental health issues, she said.

But it goes beyond that.

"We need a better social safety net to catch these parents early on before the economic pressures lead to these negative consequences," she said.

Co-authors on the study were Sehun Oh, Amy Xu and Angelise Radney of Ohio State; Shawna J. Lee of the University of Michigan; and Christina M. Rodriguez of Old Dominion University.


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