

Study shows pandemic stress affects how parents feed their children

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The COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically affected the lives of families everywhere. Household routines have changed, with families forced to spend more time than usual at home. School-aged children may have to prepare their own snacks and meals in between virtual classes, and parents might have less time to cook family meals because of their work-from-home schedules. Also, some parents have lost income, reducing family food budgets and changing the ability to afford healthy foods.

Johns Hopkins Medicine researchers surveyed families across the United States to learn how stress related to the [pandemic](#) is affecting the ways parents feed their children and in turn, what the children are eating.

A report on the findings was posted online as part of the journal *Appetite*'s January 2021 special issue about COVID-19 impacts on [food intake](#), appetite and weight status.

"Providing healthy meals and snacks to our kids can be a challenge even when we're not

experiencing a pandemic," says study senior author Susan Carnell, Ph.D., associate professor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine. "The pandemic has massively disrupted families and caused a lot of stress, and this has naturally affected interactions around food."

In the Johns Hopkins Medicine study, 318 parents of children ages 2-12 answered survey questions about interactions with their children regarding meals and snacks, and their youngsters' diets during the pandemic. During the survey, parents were asked about stress related to the COVID-19 pandemic, pre-COVID-19 stress, financial stress (e.g. food insecurity), their feeding practices as parents and how frequently children ate snacks.

The results showed that parents who reported higher levels of stress due to the pandemic also were more likely to use food to manage children's emotions and behaviors. For example, they might offer less nutritious food and snacks, such as cookies, as rewards. These findings are consistent with those of previous research studies showing that parental stress levels and a [family's](#) inadequate access to food impact the behaviors of parents when feeding their kids. COVID-19-specific stress also was linked to children eating more sweet and savory snacks throughout the day.

However, other results suggest positive effects of pandemic disruption. For example, the researchers say that 75% of families reported their children had regular breakfast, lunch and dinner times, and less consistent snack times. Lower reported [stress](#) also was associated with consistent mealtimes and routines, and positive interactions regarding food, such as parents eating or engaging with their children around mealtimes. This, the researchers say, likely reflects the effects of parents and children spending more time at home and having more chances to interact regarding food.

"The pandemic seems to have produced both negative and positive impacts on food parenting practices," says study lead author Elena Jansen, Ph.D., a postdoctoral fellow in psychiatry and [behavioral sciences](#) at the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine. "We look forward to learning how new routines will become habitual as the pandemic progresses."

To help ensure healthier children during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond, the researchers recommend that [parents](#) follow proven practices, such as establishing regular meal times, involving children in meal preparation, arranging to eat together as a family without television and other distractions, modeling healthy eating habits for children, and being responsive to the hunger and fullness levels of their [children](#) when offering [food](#).

The researchers say their ongoing research across socioeconomically diverse families will investigate how parent-child mealtime interactions and child snack intake evolve as the pandemic continues and eventually resolves.

More information: E. Jansen et al. Parental stress, food parenting practices and child snack intake during the COVID-19 pandemic, *Appetite* (2021). [DOI: 10.1016/j.appet.2021.105119](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appet.2021.105119)

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