Learning in a pandemic:
Parents' perspectives on children's virtual learning

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BACKGROUND

COVID-19 has been impacting families globally for almost two years. One impact is on children's education. Most schools world-wide were shuttered in March 2020 and children attended virtual classes. Although there is some research on how children and families are faring with virtual instruction (e.g., Sonnenschein et al., 2021; Stites et al., 2021), much still needs to be learned. Using Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model, this study considers how parents and their elementary school children are coping with virtual instruction.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

o How much do children enjoy virtual learning?

o What are the challenges experienced?

o How much are children reportedly learning?

DESIGN & PROCEDURE

Participants. 186 elementary school parents participated in an online survey.
- 69% female, 17% male, <1% non-binary, 13% did not report
- Parents resided in US (from 31 states and District of Columbia)

Children.
- 52% female, 45% male, 2% identified as both, 1% did not report
- Ethnicity: White (70%), American Indian or Alaskan Native (9%), Asian (4%), Black/African-American (4%), Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander (1%), 2+ ethnicities (8%), Other (2%), 2% did not report
- School type: 70% enrolled in public school, 19% in private school, 8% in public charter school, 2% home-schooled
- Instructional Modality during Fall 2020: Synchronous (36%), Asynchronous (2%), Both synchronous and asynchronous (31%), Hybrid (16%), In-person (10%), and other forms (5%)

Procedure. The online survey was administered in Spring 2021 and included 45 questions asking parents about different aspects of virtual learning including instructional modality, children's patterns of attention allocation, and the environmental context.

Parents also provided estimates of children's academic growth, enjoyment and frustration while learning, and their level of stress managing children's learning pre and during the Covid-19 pandemic.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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(Images obtained from Google images)

RESULTS

RQ1: How much do children enjoy virtual learning?
o Parents reported that their children neither liked nor disliked learning virtually
  - Children enjoyed learning face-to-face more than virtually ($p<.001$)
o Children demonstrated higher levels of frustration during virtual instruction compared to face-to-face instruction pre-Covid ($p<.001$)
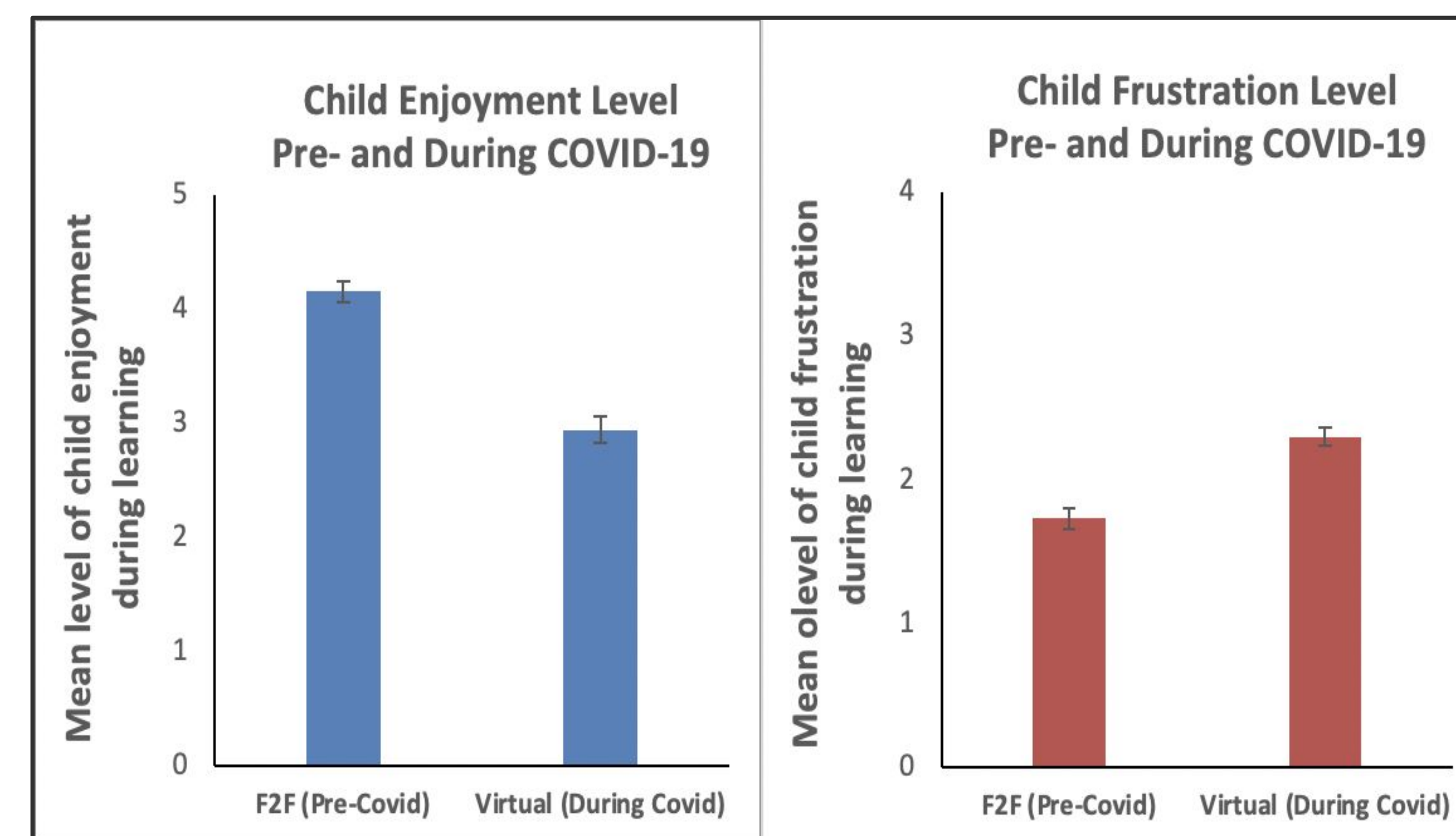

Figure 1. Child Enjoyment and Frustration Level while learning Pre-Covid-19 and During Covid-19
Notes. F2F = Face-to-face instruction pre-Covid-19; Virtual = Online instruction during Covid-19

RESULTS

RQ2: What are the challenges experienced?
o Parents reported greater stress managing virtual instruction vs. face-to-face instruction pre-covid ($p<.001$)
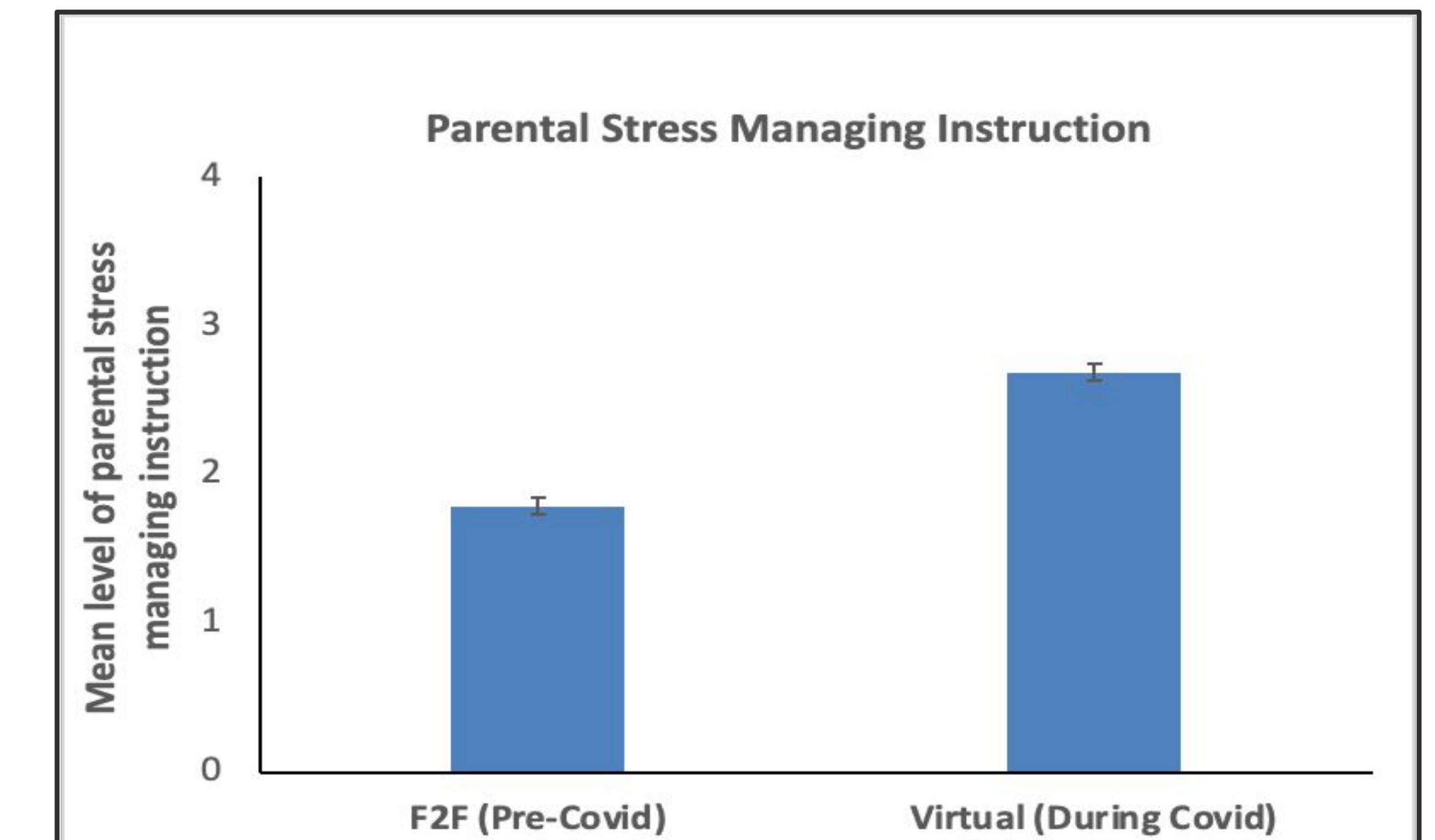

Figure 2. Mean Parental Stress reported by parents during F2F vs. Virtual Instruction
Notes. F2F = Face-to-face instruction pre-Covid-19; Virtual = Online instruction during Covid-19

o Children were largely dependent on adult support
  - Parents/guardians typically guided instruction (72%)
  - 45% of children were rated by parents as being capable of completing lessons independently.
o Children struggled to maintain attention during virtual instruction
  - Children spent more than a third of instructional time off-task
  - Common off-task behaviors: self-distractions, supplies, toys, family members

RQ3: How much are children reportedly learning?
o 77% of parents felt their children's current academic growth was similar to or above the level of their child's peers.
o 35% of children reportedly exhibited less academic growth in Fall 2020 vs. Fall 2019 (pre-covid)
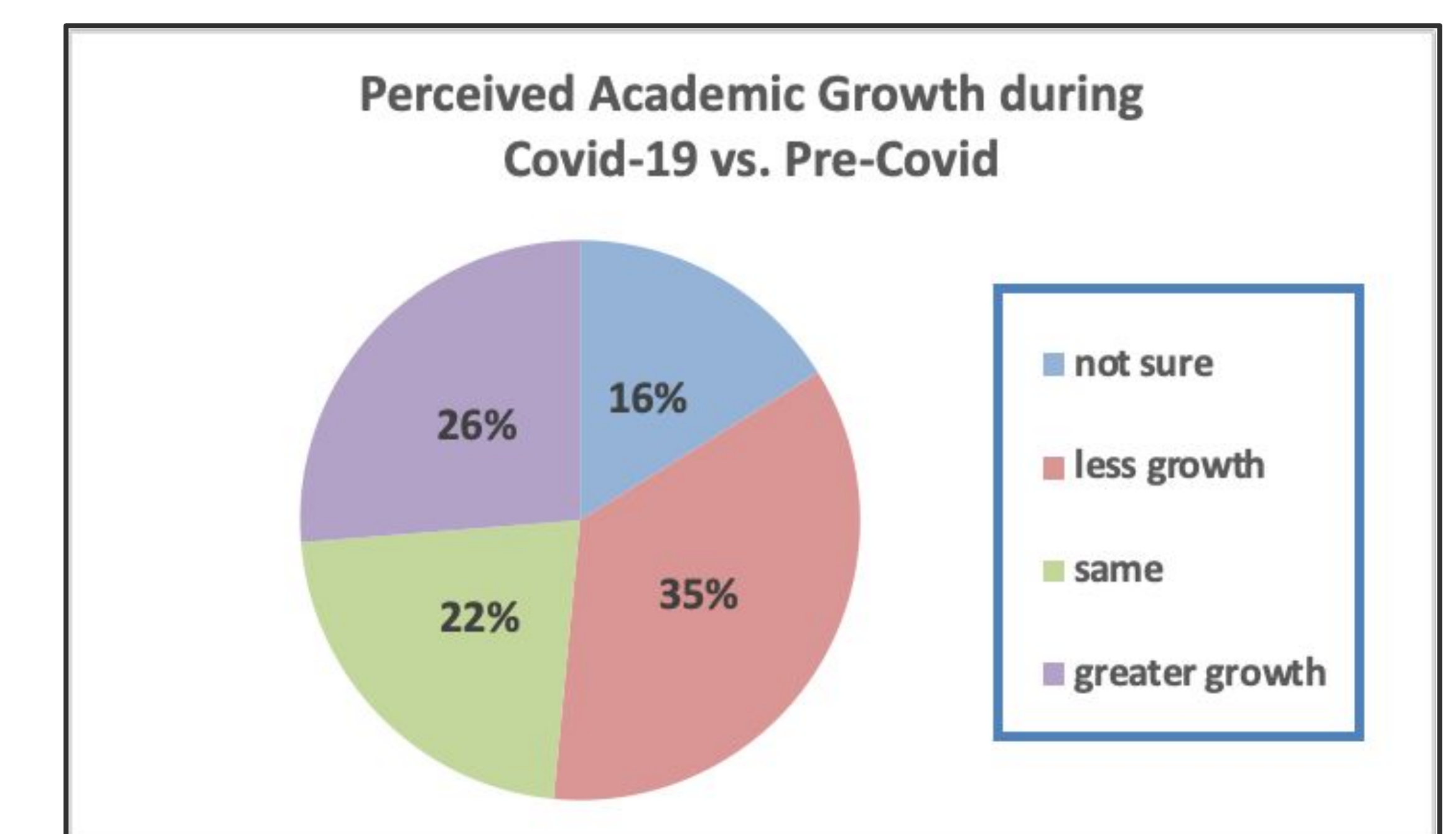

Figure 3. Parent's perception of their child's Academic Growth during Covid-19 as compared to pre-covid

CONCLUSIONS

o Findings highlight the need to better understand the experience and challenges families face in coping with virtual instruction during a global pandemic, in order to provide more targeted support.