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INTRODUCTION



The Effects of COVID-19 on Young Children’s and Their Parents’ Activities at Home

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ABSTRACT

The eight studies in this special section focus on different aspects of young children’s home learning environments during the early part of the COVID-19 pandemic. Children and their families came from four different countries – mainland China, Hong Kong, Israel, Spain, and the U.S. Of interest in all but one of the studies, was the nature of young children’s home learning environment, parents’ engagement with their children’s learning, and factors that improved what occurred at home. Parents’ stress levels and limited access to technology were negative predictors of children’s engagement in home learning activities. Parents’ education and income and teacher support were positive predictors as was children’s ease of use of technology. Parents also reported that they did not receive sufficient training to engage in virtual instruction and did not have sufficient time to do so. Other concerns were raised about whether virtual learning was appropriate for young children given their limited attention spans and the need for a better means of fostering social/emotional development. The special section concludes with an article demonstrating a successful means of virtual instruction the summer before children began formal schooling.

In January 2020 the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a public health emergency of great international concern (<https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/events-as-they-happenhe>). The effects of this pandemic have been felt world-wide. Reports of high death rates, illnesses, closing of businesses, and school closures crossed international lines. These closures resulted in families around the world being confined to their houses. Although parents have always been thought to play a large role in their young children’s education (Puccioni, 2015; Serpell et al., 2005), the switch from in-person classes to virtual learning significantly increased the need for parental involvement in learning. Virtual instruction changed the nature of parent-child interactions. In addition to parents experiencing stressors related to health issues, financial difficulties, and having to juggle work and child-care demands, they now needed to provide instruction for their children.

The eight studies in this special section focus on different aspects of the home learning environment for young children during the early part of the pandemic when in-class school was suspended. Seven of the studies took place early during the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., March-June 2020). Participants in the studies included residents in Israel, mainland China, Hong Kong, and the U.S.

The first three studies in this special section document the home learning activities, particularly literacy, that children from the United States and Spain participated in during COVID-19. The paper by Stites, Sonnenschein, and Galczyk (2021) addresses what activities preschool teachers in the U.S. assign to children for distance learning and parents’ views of these activities. One hundred sixty-

six parents of preschoolers in the U.S. responded to questions presented with a Qualtrics online survey. The surveys were distributed on social media sites. The investigators asked four questions: (1) What kinds of distance learning activities, particularly literacy and mathematics activities, do parents of preschoolers engage in during COVID-19? (2) What types of distance learning activities do parents view as successful (unsuccessful)? (3) What obstacles do parents of preschoolers face with distance learning? (4). What information or resources would parents of preschoolers find helpful to assist them with distance learning? Key findings were that parents received and engaged in more literacy virtual activities with their children than mathematics ones. Parents also were concerned about their children's social/emotional development and wanted activities that could foster that. Many reported that they did not have the time or materials needed to engage in all the activities that teachers suggested. They often noted that children this age did not have the attention skills to stay focused on the screen and do the assigned activities. Furthermore, the parents had too many other competing demands on their time.

Sonnenschein et al. (this issue) also used an online Qualtrics survey to document the literacy and digital activities children reportedly were engaged in during the early part of COVID, and parents' views about the use of digital tools. Participants were 162 U.S. parents of children ages two through nine years. Parents indicated that their children were growing up in homes where digital tools were commonly used by adults for work and recreation. Children between two and five years of age spent between two and three hours a day using digital tools; children between six and nine years spent between three and four hours a day so occupied. Children reportedly did more literacy activities and digital ones since the start of COVID-19 than before. Older children, ages 6 through 9 years, did more digital activities than younger ones. There was a positive association between children's use of digital activities and literacy ones.

López-Escribano et al. (this issue), used 337 Spanish parents to explore the types of literacy activities their children did at home during COVID-19, and whether there were sociodemographic group differences consistent with that of prior research on literacy engagement. Using a questionnaire about engagement in literacy activities also used by Sonnenschein et al. (this issue), they conducted a factor analysis which reliably categorized the types of literacy activities into four factors: reading activities, writing activities, digital literacy activities, and dialogic-creative literacy activities. A subsequent latent class cluster analysis found four parental clusters: prioritizing writing activities, practicing all types of literacy activities (both this and the prior cluster were selected more with children ages five and six years), willing to do digital activities (children over the age of six), or reading to practice dialogic-creative literacy activities (children two through four years). In general, the literacy activities that parents selected with their children during in-person school closures were appropriate for their children's age and paralleled findings with children in the U.S, Britain, and the Netherlands.

The next three papers considered relations between aspects of parenting behaviors and emotions, other environmental factors, children's competence at independent learning, and children's activities at home during COVID. In Lau et al. (this issue) reports from 3381 parents of primary school students from Hong Kong during the first few weeks of in-school closures illuminated 1) associations between the amount of learning assignments/length of online learning and parent satisfaction with children's online learning, and 2) a moderating effect of child competence of independent learning during online learning in the association between the amount of learning assignments/length of online learning and parents' satisfaction. Parents of primary school students were more likely to be significantly dissatisfied when the number and duration of online learning activities were higher and longer respectively, though the strength of the association was small. When children's ability to engage independently in online learning was high, parents were more likely to be satisfied with online learning.

Zhang et al. (this issue), information from families from mainland China helped to document various familial stressors: direct exposure to the virus, community exposure, length of physical distancing time, home learning environment, and the relation with parental stress during the pandemic. The 2784 participants with children between the ages of three and six years came from four cities in mainland China. Stress reported by parents was associated with children's behavioral and

emotional difficulties during the pandemic. Parents' education, income, and support from children's teachers were negatively associated with parents' reported stress. Similarly, the frequency of children's learning activities at home, other than digital ones, was negatively related to parents' stress. In contrast, direct exposure to COVID-19 was positively associated with parents' reported stress. There also was a positive relation between children's digital activities and parents' reported stress.

There appear to be some differences between the results of Zhang et al. and Stites et al. Zhang et al. found that parent reported stress was lower when children engaged in home learning activities. Although Stites et al. did not directly assess stress, qualitative comments in her study suggested that parents were stressed. The differences in findings across the two studies might be due to the type and amount of teacher support the families in the two countries received. Another possibility may be differences in how parents in China and the U.S. view the importance of preschool.

Lau and Lee (this issue) investigated parents' views of kindergarten and primary school children's distance learning experiences and the support they needed as well as the amount of time they spent on screen media during the pandemic. Participants were 6702 parents from Hong Kong who responded to a survey during February 2020, about three weeks after in-school classes were suspended. Families were recruited through social media sites. There were three major sets of findings. One, most children were not able to complete the learning tasks independently. This finding was consistent with Stites et al. (2021). Two, although many parents were dissatisfied with distance learning, not surprisingly, those without access to online learning were more dissatisfied. Three, there was a high usage of digital devices during this period where in-class schools were suspended.

Meoded Karabanov et al. (this issue) considered parents' behaviors and the association with children's digital activities for a group of 487 Israeli parents of children ages two through eight years (290 Jewish families, 197 Arab families). They used a model of parenting called the Parenting Pentagon Model which includes five constructs of daily parenting behaviors found to be beneficial for children: Love Behaviors, Parental Leadership, Adherence to Rules, Encouraging Independence, Partnership. Of particular interest was would there be significant differences in the use of each parenting behavior across cultures, which ones would be foremost during the pandemic, and how do these parenting behaviors relate to children's digital use? Arab and Jewish children spent between two and three hours a day using digital devices. There was a positive association between parenting behaviors, particularly Love and Parental Leadership, and parents' involvement with their children's digital activities, even after controlling for children's age, parents' education, and family size. Patterns for Jewish and Arab families were similar.

The final paper in this special issue was by Dore et al. They investigated the development and preliminary impact of a virtual summer learning program designed to improve school readiness for children entering kindergarten. Participants were 91 U.S. preschoolers and their parents. The four week program included a weekly teacher- caregiver meeting and several other structured play and reading activities. The caregivers and teachers reported high to moderate satisfaction with the program. Children showed significant gains in emotion knowledge, patterning, and alphabet knowledge.

There were similarities in findings across the studies. Meoded Karabanov et al., Lau & Lee, Sonnenschein et al., and Zhang et al. (all this issue) found that children displayed a higher use of digital devices than recommended by the American Academy of Pediatrics (2016). Such usage was higher than before the pandemic (Sonnenschein et al., 2021). Parents in many of the studies expressed dissatisfaction with the distance learning programs their children received (see also Sonnenschein et al., 2021). However, as findings by Dore et al. (this issue) suggest, if parents received a more structured distance learning program with direct communication with teachers about how things are going, parents were much more satisfied.

Strength, Limitations and Future Research

These papers provide important information about the experiences young children from several different countries had with home learning during COVID-19 when in-class school was suspended. Participants in these eight studies came from mainland China, Hong Kong, Israel (Jews and Arabs), Spain, and the

United States. It is important to get a sense of the impact of COVID-19 on families from different cultures and countries. Interestingly, work by Aram et al. (2021) found fairly limited differences in reported parenting behaviors with families from Bulgaria, Israel, Spain and the United States.

Although the impact of COVID-19 is hopefully lessening and children have been or will be returning to in-school classes, the lessons learned from their distant learning experiences will be beneficial moving forward. Many parents experienced stress with providing their children instruction and doing what was expected of them. This stress was negatively associated with the frequency of children's engagement in home learning activities. Parents' education and income as well as teacher support were protective factors as was easy access to technology.

These papers provide an important contribution to the field. As is common with all research, however, there are several limitations to these studies which are summarized below and described more fully in the individual studies. One, these participants were a convenience sample, not a random, representative selection. Such is common in psychological research but nevertheless may limit the generalizability of the results (Dearing & Zachrisson, 2019; Etikan et al., 2016; Sedgwick, 2013). Relatedly, most of the studies included mainly educated and affluent participants. And, within two of the U.S. samples, the respondents were primarily White and mothers. Although parents around the world are increasingly having access to technology, low-income parents and their children continue to have less access (Collis & Vegas, 2020; Galea & Tracy, 2007; Pew Research Center, 2019; Sonnenschein et al., 2021).

Two, the data reported in these studies were a snapshot taken early in the pandemic. Will things change, either positively or negatively, as the pandemic continues, and families and teachers accommodated to its demands? Barnett and Jung (2021) results from 981 U.S. parents showed a decrease in reading activities over time. Seventy-one percent of parents reported reading to their children at least three times per week in December compared to 85% of the parents during the prior spring. Such findings show the need to conduct studies that explore distance learning at different points in the pandemic in order to understand and, if needed, optimize home learning over time.

Three, relatedly, these papers do not consider for the most part the short- and long-term impact on the children. Only Dore et al. (this issue) addressed the short-term impact of an intervention. As many have noted, an important limitation of virtual instruction for young children is the lack of a context that fosters children's social/emotional development (Hirsch-Pasek et al., 2020; Stites et al., 2021). Future research should document children's academic and social/emotional development as they return to and progress through school. Do these trajectories vary for children from different demographic groups or from different countries?

Despite these limitations listed above, we think these eight papers make important contributions to our knowledge of what young children in different countries experienced at home during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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