

PARENTS OF CHILDREN RECEIVING SPECIAL EDUCATION SERVICES DURING DISTANCE LEARNING ARE WORRIED: SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGISTS CAN HELP

Since the onset of COVID-19 in March 2020, students, parents, and educators across the U.S. have been impacted by sudden and long-lasting school closures (Barnett & Jung, 2021; Song et al., 2020), and transitions to hybrid learning. Most people agree that the difficulties brought on by COVID-19 have been challenging for all students. However, these challenges may be exacerbated for students with disabilities who need to receive individualized supports, aides, and accommodations in addition to their regular education services (Hill, 2020). These students represent a nontrivial percentage of the school-age population. For example, students with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) comprise about 14% of the U.S. public school students (IES, 2020). This makes the lack of COVID-19 research related to special education even more concerning because these students and their families may be negatively affected by difficulties receiving special education and/or regular education services. While the data we present below may not be surprising, they are no less important. As students return to school, we need to be aware of the challenges they may have faced during distance learning. Even with our best efforts, distance learning was new to everyone. And, in the event there is a return to distance learning in the future we need to avoid making the same mistakes.

School psychologists can play an important role for these students and their families, but it may be more challenging for them to do so now than in more typical times. As part of their training, school psychologists take coursework in the cognitive, social, emotional development of children, something they can apply

to improving these children's well-being. However, it may be harder to do so when so much of what would be normative in-person interactions

are now virtual. Thus, school psychologists may need to depend more on others to learn the needs of these families.



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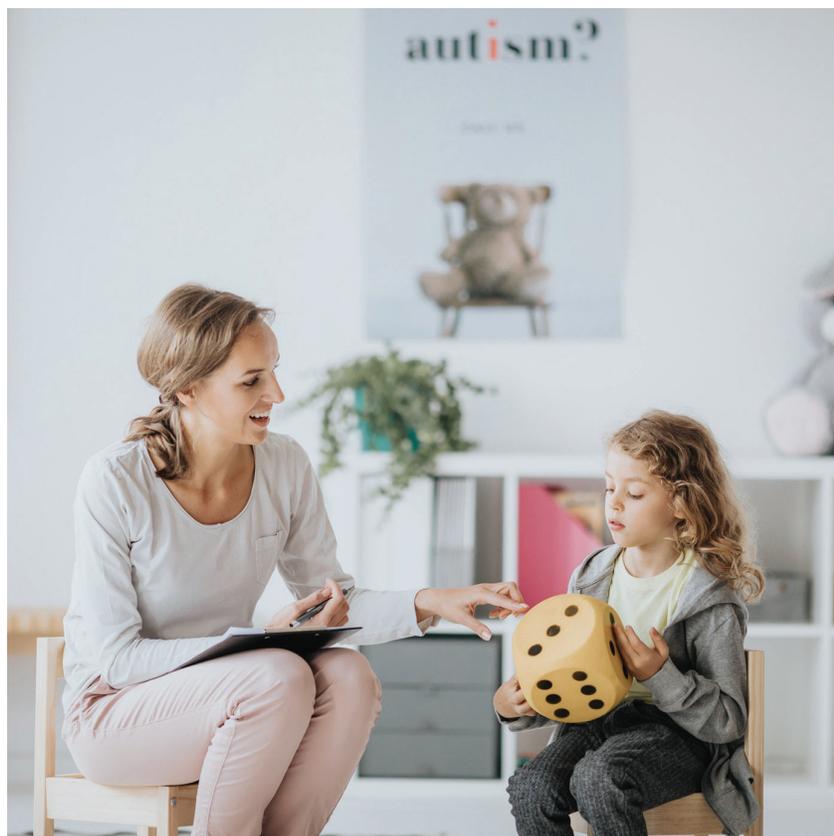
In September 2020, we conducted a study exploring how K-12 students receiving special education services and their families were affected by the delivery of services during COVID-19. Data were collected from 214 parents (typically mothers) of children receiving special education services from elementary through high school. We used online list-servs to recruit parents. Most of the respondents came from Maryland. The majority of parents who responded to our online survey (79%) indicated that their child was included in the general education classroom for a majority of the school day. Special education services

fewer hours of services than pre-COVID-19. Only 40% of these students had received the number of special education hours that their IEP/504 plans required. In addition to their special education hours, parents reported that their children received significantly fewer related service hours this school year. Interestingly, parents of children in elementary school were more likely than those in middle and high school to indicate their child received the number of special education hours outlined on their IEP.

Parents reported concerns about limited special education services

as well as concerns about how to assist their children with general education issues. As we found with parents whose children did not require special education services, two thirds of parents in this study whose children had IEPs or 504 plans, reported significant concerns about the constant need for parental support during distance learning. These findings are consistent with Barnett and Jung (2021). While the need for constant parental support is not an unusual concern with distance learning, parents of children with special needs face the unique challenge during distance learning of also needing to differentiate and reteach academic content that is too difficult for their child. Many parents also indicated that lessons often were above the academic level of their child. In short, parents are being asked to facilitate distance learning, but also take on differentiating instruction and reteaching content. This compounds the stressors in families. One parent referred to the differentiating and reteaching content during distance learning as “impossible without sending a special education teacher or paraprofessional to assist in the home,” while another parent indicated she had hired two tutors to help facilitate, reteach, and differentiate content during distance learning. Many parents spontaneously mentioned that nothing was working for their child when it came to distance learning due to a combination of facilitation, differentiation, and reteaching. Quite simply, there were not enough hours in the day, especially for parents who were also working full time.

In addition to the general challenges parents faced, they also reported concerns for the future when their



were received both in and out of general education and therefore we requested information on both. Most parents reported that their children had received some special education (88%) and related services (93%) this school year, but they received far

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children returned to school. Not surprisingly, 67% of parents indicated concerns about long term academic skill loss and what that meant for their child. It was not just academic skills losses that were of concern; 85% of parents indicated they also were concerned about the loss of social interaction for their children. However, despite these concerns some parents of children with special needs also were worried about returning to in-person learning. Concerns about children not wearing masks and teachers being overwhelmed trying to teach both in-person and virtually weighed heavily.

How can school psychologists help? They can draw upon their training in the cognitive and social/emotional development of children to serve as a resource and provide advice to teachers and families. School psychologists know about individual differences in how children learn best and the social context of learning. Their insights may be more needed now than usual. As members of the IEP team, school psychologists should be aware of the need to potentially increase communications between team members and parents. Thirty-three percent of the parents in our study indicated that they received

fewer communications than prior to COVID-19. School psychologists also can help provide resources to parents to support their children's academics and emotional well-being. This includes ideas for setting children up to be more independent (e.g., ways to scaffold assignments), developing flexible schedules, and behavior plans. School psychologists also can provide training and workshops to parents and teachers.

Although we believe that COVID-19 is on the decline, its effects are still being felt by parents, students, and educators and may continue far into the future. We need to use the information parents are telling us to assist children's learning as much as possible. ●

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