

# Adult Stress, Resilience, and Caregiver-Child Relationship During COVID-19

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The Senator Walter Rand Institute for Public Affairs (WRI) at Rutgers University - Camden produces and highlights research leading to sound public policy and practice, and with that as a foundation, aims to convene and engage stakeholders in making the connections across research, policy, and practice in support of Southern New Jersey residents. From 2013 to 2022, WRI has conducted a comprehensive evaluation of the implementation of the Pascale Sykes Foundation's Whole Family Approach initiative across 12 nonprofit collaboratives in Southern New Jersey. The Whole Family Approach is a preventative, family-led strategy that provides adults and children tools to set, plan for, and achieve goals together. Collaborating agencies work together with families with two adult caregivers to develop long- and short-term goals to thrive. WRI's evaluation of the Whole Family Approach includes:

- A longitudinal, quasi-experimental evaluation of families' changes in forming healthy relationships, child wellbeing, and financial stability,
- A process evaluation to understand how the Whole Family Approach was implemented across collaboratives, including observations, interviews, focus groups, and document review, and
- Multiple focused evaluations that examine the impact of the Whole Family Approach in areas of interest including student social, emotional, and behavioral growth, service model delivery, family-community partner relationship development, and the cultural responsiveness of the Whole Family Approach.

This report presents data on adult stress and the relationship between caregivers and children during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the last two years, the COVID-19 pandemic has posed a series of new risks and challenges to families across the United States, including higher reports of anxiety and depression (National Center for Health Statistics, 2020). The uncertainty in some caregivers' working situations and lives and children engaging in virtual learning the dynamics of relationships in households shifted daily throughout the pandemic.

Research confirms that increases in caregiver stress at the height of the pandemic in the United States correlated with higher symptoms of caregiver anxiety and depression and perceived child stress, which in turn reflected more conflict and less closeness in the caregiver-child relationship (Russell, Hutchinson, Tambling, et al., 2020). Furthermore, many families have struggled to maintain healthy relationships since the initial pandemic outbreak due in part to a lack of access to mental health resources and support systems (Singh et al, 2020). Given that families involved in the Whole Family Approach have access to support systems through the collaboratives, we anticipated that adults would report higher degrees of stress and lower resilience due to the multi-faceted impact of the pandemic, but that their relationship with their children would be protected by the holistic approach of the collaboratives' services.

## METHODS

Adults participating in the Whole Family Approach completed self-report surveys once every six months on several aspects of well-being, including resilience and perceived stress as part of the longitudinal program evaluation. For this report, we used one time point for each participant between March 2020 - April 2021 to assess the state of individuals at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, which yielded data from 36 adult participants. We selected a number of survey questions from the Brief Resilience Scale (Smith et al., 2008), Perceived Stress Scale (Cohen, Kamarck, & Mermelstein, 1994), Social Capital and Generation of Human Capital and the Teens and Privacy Scale (Teachman, Paasch, & Carver, 2005). Some examples of the items analyzed included the ability to make it through stressful events, control over important things in life, and ability to handle personal problems. To assess the caregiver-child relationship between adults and their children, we analyzed items pertaining to the caregiver's perception of the quality of their relationship with the child and their knowledge of the child's whereabouts and online activities. Descriptive statistics of the responses were analyzed for the selected scale items.

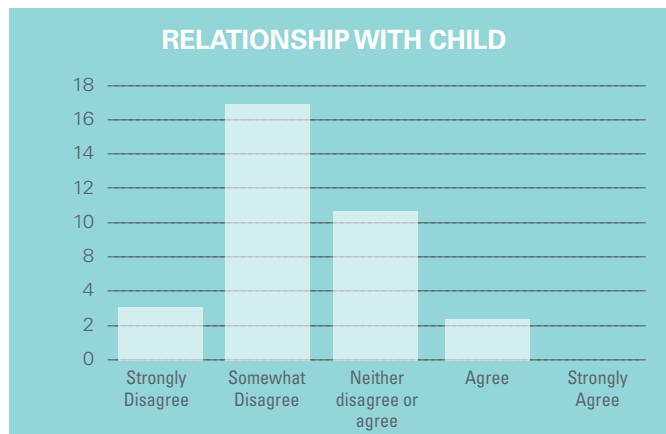
## FINDINGS

### ADULT STRESS AND RESILIENCE

Despite being surveyed at the height of the pandemic, the majority of adults reported signs of resilience and the ability



to handle stress. For instance, as shown in this graph, only 8.33% of adults strongly agreed that they had a hard time making it through stressful events. That is, the majority of adults indicated that they were able to cope with stressful events.



Brief Resilience Scale: "I have a hard time making it through stressful events"

Similarly, 61.11% of adults reported that they were able to snap back when something bad happened. When asked about perceived control over the important things in life in the previous 30 days, almost 60% of adults responded that they rarely (33.3%) or never (27.78%) felt that they lost control. Over half of adults surveyed also reported feeling confident about their ability to handle personal problems, with 25% indicating often and 27.78% most of the time.

## CAREGIVER-CHILD RELATIONSHIP AND KNOWLEDGE OF CHILD'S ACTIVITIES

Descriptive analyses showed that 91.89% of caregivers identified that their relationship with their child was very good to excellent. Caregivers also reported high knowledge of their children's activities. The vast majority (78.57%) indicated that they always knew if their child was going to be home late and also expected a call from them to let them know if they were going to be late. Over three quarters of adults (85.64%) knew what their child was doing after school always or most of the time. None of the respondents indicated lack of awareness of their child's location at any given point. Regarding online activities such as Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat, over three in four families with children active on social media reported some degree of surveillance: 35.71% of adults reported checking their children's social media activities sometimes, and 42.85% of adults reported checking their children's social media activities always or most of the time. Only 7.14% of caregivers indicated that their children did not have any social media accounts.

## DISCUSSION

Descriptive analyses revealed that the majority of adults involved with the Whole Family Approach were able to

manage the stress experienced during the pandemic. This result could be attributed to the ways in which resilience can protect individuals' assessment of stress in their lives. Further research by Russell, Tomkunas, & Hutchison (2022) revealed that although parents experienced greater stress and depression during the pandemic, those parents who presented higher resilience at the beginning also reported higher quality in the parent-child relationship even at the 30-day follow-up. It is also worth noting that the stress reported by these parents were not specifically due to COVID-19 related factors, but rather to universal and temporary challenges experienced, most notably financial instability (Russell, Tomkunas, & Hutchison. et al. 2022.). It is possible that the higher resilience and lower stress reported by the families involved with the Whole Family Approach could be connected to the variety of basic resources and financial preparation offered by the collaboratives prior to and during the pandemic (Walter Rand Institute, 2020).

As anticipated, the vast majority of adults also reported that they had a positive relationship with their child. This finding suggests that in addition to the benefits of high adult resilience, caregivers may have benefited from the sources of parental support offered by collaboratives. Another pandemic study (Brown et al., 2020) examined the impact of pandemic-related stressors on parental stress and risks factors for child abuse. Results revealed that the likelihood of child abuse and parental stress decreased with higher parental support and perceived control. Caregivers involved with the collaboratives received technical support during the transition to virtual learning, tutoring for their children, and advocacy support for school needs (Walter Rand Institute, 2020). Additionally, collaborative staff increased the frequency of calls and messages to families to keep up with upcoming family needs and offer any needed support promptly (Walter Rand Institute, 2020).

Caregivers involved with the Whole Family Approach also reported high levels of parental knowledge regarding their children's activities on and offline. Traditionally, higher parental monitoring of child location has been connected to a lower incidence of child externalizing behaviors and conduct problems (Barber, Olsen, & Shagle, 1994), but the quality of the relationship between parents and children has also been found to be an important factor in the connection between the parental awareness of their children's activities and their child's behavior (Stattin & Kerr, 2000; Smetana, 2008). That is, parental knowledge that comes from a child who willingly offers the information is related to fewer conduct problems (Stattin & Kerr, 2000). Although teens have been found to be strategic around their disclosure of topics and details depending on their families' cultural background, trust and reciprocity between parent and child play an important role in their relationship (Smetana, 2008). When it comes to internet

and social media use, previous research also has found that monitoring strategies that do not involve the child can be perceived as a violation of their autonomy; instead, honest discussions around internet privacy and safety may influence teen's internet activity positively (Biernesser, Montano, Miller, & Radovic, 2020). The high rates of parental knowledge reported by families in the Whole Family Approach suggest that caregivers and children share a trusting relationship that persisted through the pandemic.

This report showcases signs of high resilience and healthy caregiver-child relationships even during a time of historical, widespread uncertainty such as the onset of the pandemic in the United States. This descriptive data reveals patterns reflective of support sources available to these caregivers through their own family members or the collaboratives that work with them. The evidence of trusting and reciprocal communication between caregivers and children further underlines the importance of service agencies working with the whole family to foster the development of healthy relationships.

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