



# Child Well-Being within the Whole Family Approach



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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 2012 to 2022, WRI has conducted a comprehensive evaluation of the implementation of the Pascale Sykes Foundation's Whole Family Approach initiative across 18 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.

**Child well-being is defined in the context of this evaluation as a holistic state of being that takes into account a child's physical and mental health; social emotional learning capacity; academic success and the quality of parent-child and social relationships. The purpose of this summary report is to share the findings from this long-term evaluation with a specific focus on child well-being.**

#### **EVALUATION METHODS AND DATA ON CHILD WELL-BEING**

WRI engaged in multiple methods of data collection and analysis to identify family outcomes and understand collaborative processes including a quasi-experimental, longitudinal evaluation of families to identify changes in healthy relationships, financial stability, and child well-being. This main evaluation survey contained scales that prompted caregivers to report on their children's school performance, academic aspirations, food and nutrition, after-school activities, and caregivers' own expectations for the children's futures. A version of the survey was available to teenagers aged 13 to 17, prompting teenagers to share their perceptions on social support, use of social media use, and navigation of risky situations. Focus groups, interviews, and observations with collaboratives were utilized to understand the ways in which the Whole Family Approach was implemented across collaboratives to impact children. Lastly, four focused studies on key areas including social-emotional and educational outcomes, family advocacy, cultural responsiveness, and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic<sup>1</sup> were conducted to better understand how families responded to specific collaborative activities in different situations.

#### **FINDINGS FROM THE OVERALL EVALUATION**

There are multiple notable results that have been consistent throughout the evaluation. Data collection from the Whole Family Approach reported two consistent themes. (1) Relationships between children and their caregivers, in particular their primary

<sup>1</sup>WRI conducted targeted focused studies to better understand family impacts and processes within specific contexts: (1) *COVID Impacts, Supporting Collaboratives*, (2) *In the Child Connection Center Evaluation*, (3) *The Family Strengthening Network Evaluation*, (4) *The Whole Family Culturally Responsive Approach Evaluation*.

caregivers, were described as good and growing, with reports of good communication and positive relationships with other (often the secondary) caregivers. (2) Education was important to families, with most viewing high school completion and college experience as important to children achieving their life goals.

Child well-being was positively influenced throughout the evaluation as caregivers' educational aspirations and optimism for their educational futures improved over time. Several data points indicate significant improvements in children's math and language arts grades throughout the evaluation time period, which aligned with an increase in the number of caregivers who felt that a high school degree and college attendance would help their children achieve their goals in life. Lastly, the most consistent longitudinal findings uncovered that caregivers expressed higher optimism over time about their children's ability to achieve their educational aspirations.

More recent findings reflect upon the impact of COVID-19 and how the collaboratives have supported caregivers and children throughout the pandemic. Families reported positive experiences with effective supports at school and work. Parents were grateful for in-school therapy services, Spanish-speaking school staff, and when school staff sent extra food home from the school's meal program, especially during the height of the pandemic.

However, at the height of the pandemic, there were a number of changes to the overall well-being of the participating families. COVID-19 not only induced a health crisis, but also deeply and negatively impacted mental health, where uncertainty of the future caused much anxiety and fear. We saw this impact reflected through the findings of caregivers talking to their children about their futures more "often" in the wake of the pandemic; however, less frequently did parents express "always" talking about the future. While caregivers have increased their overall frequency of conversations about the future with their children, the decrease in doing so "always" might have lessened due to impacts of the pandemic.

COVID-19 has also made a significant impact on children directly. While prior findings suggest that about 90% of children were scoring A's and B's, most recent post-COVID-19 findings show a more

even split, with about 24% of children scoring C-level grades and an overall decrease in grades in comparison to pre and during COVID-19 times. This finding alludes to a number of pandemic-related consequences, including and not limited to resource availability and emotional support generally, and specifically for academic achievement.

Findings pertaining to physical health largely reflected that caregivers rated their child's health at lower levels post-COVID-19, in comparison to pre and during COVID-19. Specifically, caregivers became more concerned about their child becoming overweight during COVID-19 than pre-COVID-19, potentially due to activity restrictions caused by COVID-19 which led to increases in BMI and obesity during COVID-19.<sup>2</sup> Other findings connected to weight concerns in children include a lower likelihood of parents agreeing that their child should always eat all of the food on their plate during COVID-19 than pre-COVID-19 which may suggest a greater concern about the amount of food their child eats.

Target adults have also been less involved in deciding the food their child has been eating post-COVID-19. An increased number of caregivers reported preparing their child's food "always" and "most of the time" during and post-COVID-19, while the majority remained "never" or "rarely" preparing food for their children post-COVID-19. These results may be reflective of caregivers returning to more defined caregiving roles, or meals being provided at school after the quarantine period. This change may have been due to the return to in-person school and better access to meal assistance. However, this finding also may suggest that parents do not have a lot of supervision over the types of food their children are eating post-COVID-19. This is important as it may indicate that after COVID-19, children are needing more guidance, but also that during COVID-19, there was less of a need to regulate their children eating too much junk food.

Caregivers' knowledge of children's activities also changed throughout the pandemic. Caregivers reported being more aware of their children's after-school activities during and post-COVID compared

<sup>2</sup> Lange, S., Kompaniyets, L., Freedman, D., Kraus, E., Porter, R., Blanck, H., & Goodman, A. (2021, September 17). Longitudinal trends in body mass index before and during the COVID-19-19 Pandemic among persons aged 2-19 years — United States, 2018-2020. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. [https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/70/wr/mm7037a3.htm?s\\_cid=mm7037a3\\_w](https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/70/wr/mm7037a3.htm?s_cid=mm7037a3_w)

to pre-pandemic times. Caregivers' monitoring of children's social media usage also changed during the pandemic. Pre-COVID-19, there was an even split between caregivers who were very vigilant of social media or those who never checked their children's involvement in it. Monitoring increased during the first year of the pandemic to the point in which 86% of caregivers reported checking their children's use of social media to some degree. Although these percentages decreased slightly post-COVID-19 (82%), caregivers' monitoring of social media to some degree continued.

The impact of the pandemic on caregivers and children was evident in changes to children's academic performance, conversations around their future, and caregivers' knowledge of children's

after-school activities, social media use, and eating behaviors. The relationship quality between caregivers and children, however, remained largely positive. Although the number of caregivers who would rate their relationship with the children as "very good" or "excellent" decreased from 91% since the start of the pandemic to 74% two years after the pandemic, 97% of post-COVID respondents rated the relationship as "good" at the very least. These findings also point to caregivers' attentiveness to their relationships with their children. As these families continue growing and reaching for the goals, the collaboratives will continue offering events and services that contributed to the positive trends observed pre-pandemic.

## THE WHOLE FAMILY APPROACH IN PRACTICE

In the **Child Connection Center Evaluation WRI** evaluated outcomes for families' children in a school-based social-emotional learning program, finding significant improvements in math and language arts grades, reductions in total social-emotional challenges, and a positive impact on children's engagement in the classroom.

The **Family Strengthening Network Evaluation** revealed more stable family social supports and increased financial stability, and described the ways in which family advocates worked to build trust and support families to meet goals.

For more information visit the [Senator Walter Rand Institute for Public Affairs](#), the [Pascale Sykes Foundation](#), and the [Whole Family Approach](#) websites.



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