



Health and Resilience During COVID-19 Among Families in the Pascale Sykes's Strengthening Families Initiative



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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.

For families, the ability to overcome stress and adversity is critical as families navigate shifting economic conditions and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Resilience includes the ways people use coping resources in the face of stressors, and includes their ability to effectively adapt those resources to manage stressful situations (Rutter, 2007). The Whole Family Approach seeks to build family resilience by strengthening both family and social ties, and through the goal-based development of healthy habits, including physical exercise and healthy eating habits. The development of family resilience was especially critical in the months leading up to the COVID-19 pandemic as families navigated increased isolation and changes in job, housing, and food security. This report examines the relationship between resilience and physical activity and healthy eating habits to determine whether the Whole Family Approach's focus on goal-focused family health contributes to family resilience.

Physical inactivity has been identified as the fourth leading risk factor for global mortality (6% of deaths globally). Participation in regular physical activity reduces the risk of coronary heart disease and stroke, diabetes, hypertension, colon cancer, breast cancer and depression. Additionally, physical activity is a determinant of energy expenditure, and is important for energy balance and weight control (World Health Organization, 2010). Research shows that regular engagement in physical activity during the first week of isolation increases a person's resilience, including a belief that they have control over their lives, believe in their ability to make decisions, and are optimistic about the future. Other studies have found positive relationships between resilience and mental and physical health. People

who regularly engaged in vigorous physical activity during the first week of confinement reported higher resilience in terms of higher locus of control, higher self-efficacy, and higher optimism (Carriedo, Cecchini, Fernandez-Rio, & Mendez-Gimenez, 2020). Higher levels of resilience have been found positively related to mental and physical health in the general population (Schure, Odden, & Goins, 2013). This focused study seeks to identify a relationship between resilience and physical health in Whole Family Approach participants.

METHODS

Data from a large, longitudinal data set surveying families involved with nonprofits implementing the Whole Family Approach over a 24 month period from March 2016 to March 2020 were analyzed using a question-focused descriptive analysis for this study. Adult caregivers involved with nonprofits implementing the Whole Family Approach were surveyed every six months with questions focused on their health, relationships, financial wellbeing, and child wellbeing. Questions included demographics, eating habits, level and frequency of physical activity, and a scale measuring resilience that includes the individual's ability to cope with stressful situations, implementation of resources, and ability to adapt to new situations. This evaluation examines the relationship between questions related to physical health and the resilience scale.

RESULTS

- There was a significant, positive relationship between resilience and a healthier diet and increased physical activity.
- Adults who responded that they were able to bounce back and manage through stressful events also more frequently responded that they ate a healthy diet including green vegetables and fruits at least 1-3 days a week, and had at least a moderate level of physical activity.

The relationship between diet, physical activity, and resilience in this analysis suggests that encouraging healthy eating and physical activity may support families' individual resilience.

CONCLUSION

This analysis identifies a relationship between relationship and physical activity, a finding that has been identified in other literature. In addition, the Whole Family Approach may have an impact on the development of healthy habits and resilience through individualized, Whole-Family-focused goal setting that prioritizes building skills that result in family self-sufficiency. This study identifies a link between resilience and physical activity and healthy eating habits among families who engage in the Whole Family Approach.

between evaluator, funder, and grantee to facilitate access to resources for communities during this time.



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RUTGERS

UNIVERSITY | CAMDEN

Senator Walter Rand Institute
for Public Affairs

411 Cooper Street | Camden, NJ 08102
(856) 225-6566 | wrand@camden.rutgers.edu

rand.camden.rutgers.edu

 Officialwri

 @walterrandinstitute