

Parents' pandemic-induced stress can do long-term harm to children, says expert

July 7 2020, by Avery Ruxer Franklin



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The COVID-19 pandemic, which has accentuated long-standing challenges many families face, has put additional stress on parents that could harm the development of their children, according to a new brief

from Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy.

Preexisting stressors such as housing and [food insecurity](#), marital discord and dysfunctional parenting are magnified during a crisis, and now many [support systems](#) are difficult to access with social distancing measures in place, said Quianta Moore, the fellow in child health policy at the Baker Institute and author of the brief.

"For many families, stressors that were manageable before the pandemic are now exacerbated. They are worried about becoming ill, and their financial stability and security," Moore wrote. "Children are at home for extended periods of time, while parents try to manage work demands, provide support for their children and cope with rapidly changing circumstances."

Stress can adversely affect parent-child interactions, potentially causing long-lasting harm to a child's brain, according to the brief. Loving parents may uncharacteristically lash out at their children physically or emotionally during stressful times. Families that experience daily challenges like poverty, [mental illness](#) and structural injustice are more affected by crises, which can result in "profound" child distress, Moore wrote.

"The normal physiologic response to stress includes the release of cortisol (the 'stress hormone')," she wrote. "While cortisol has many actions, one of its most clearly articulated effects is to slow neuronal growth. Thus, a growing infant brain that is subjected to persistent negative stress may be bathed in high levels of cortisol. This 'toxic stress' has been demonstrated to result in anatomic and functional alteration in the growing brain."

Moore said the pandemic highlights the need for policies and practices that will mitigate parental [stress](#).

"While we do not want to be alarmist, the research presented in this brief is supported by decades of studies in many disciplines; all demonstrate the negative impact of [parental stress](#), which is heightened during natural disasters, on brain development," Moore wrote. "The resultant cognitive and language delays will hinder academic ability and the potential for success in adulthood. We must plan now with the [future generation](#) in mind."

The brief proposes federal and state governments help stressed families by expanding small business relief funds, increasing health insurance enrollment through the Affordable Care Act, offering income tax credits and providing additional parental support services.

"Given the major economic losses caused by the pandemic, it is important to have systems in place that allow agencies and nonprofits to identify and proactively reach out to families most at risk," Moore wrote. "Meeting families' basic needs increases parental capacity to receive parenting support and to engage with their children in ways that reduce the risk of adverse brain development in their child."

More information: America's Children: Responding to the Crisis Now with the Future in Mind: www.bakerinstitute.org/media/f...b-crisis-covid19.pdf

Provided by Rice University

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