

RESEARCH

**A Pandemic  
Parenting Split:  
What Does an Online  
Newsletter Reveal about  
Extension Outreach**

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## Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic had significant impacts on caregivers, parents, families, and children. Disruptions to daily life through illness, stay-at-home orders, missed school or childcare, limited in-person contacts, and constant uncertainties aggravated existing stressors. Furthermore, lack of parenting respite and lower in-person social support were thought to increase risk for parental burnout and isolation. Using pre- and mid-pandemic survey responses, this study examined whether survey respondent characteristics or usage of an online parenting newsletter differed pre- and mid-pandemic. Results show that financially secure parents may have experienced slightly more support, contrary to anecdotal reports. Different outreach might be needed for lower-income parents.

## A Pandemic Parenting Split: What Does an Online Newsletter Reveal about Extension Outreach?

On March 13, 2020, the United States declared a national emergency over COVID-19 which started rapidly spreading (The White House, 2021). For many parents, the home became the office, the classroom, and even the gym. Evidence is accumulating around parents' struggles to teach and keep their children occupied, work from home, and perform all other daily necessities (Fauzi, 2020).

Children's early experiences help brain development; and healthy relationships with adults are critical to children's development and learning. For all families, greater household chaos due to the COVID-19 pandemic increased risk (Johnson

et al., 2022). Experts reported that parents were at increased risk for psychosocial burdens during the pandemic (Cluver et al., 2020). Many families also experienced changes in income and employment (Jenco, 2020), and restrictions affected parents' access to social connection and instrumental support (Cameron et al., 2020). Furthermore, increased time with children and little social support led to increased risk for parental burnout and more parental isolation (Kerr et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2022). Protective factors such as mindfulness practices helped minimize the negative impact of household stress and the chaos of the pandemic (Johnson et al., 2022). Disruptions to daily life through illness, stay-at-home orders, missed school or childcare, and constant uncertainties especially aggravated existing stressors. Parents and caregivers who were already marginalized or at risk, such as single parents or grandparents, were at increased risk. Low-income and single-parent households were more likely to not receive medical care or be unable to access mental/emotional care (Radey et al., 2021; Xu et al., 2022). As other economic and physical supports were removed, family caregivers spent more hours caring for others with less information and support, which reduced caregiver well-being (Muldrew et al., 2022).

The stay-at-home orders also disrupted access to early care and education. Early care and education programs support children to prepare for school by monitoring and developing their skills and abilities. According to the National Institute for Early Education Research 2020 Preschool Learning Activities Survey (Barnett et al., 2020), as a consequence of the pandemic, preschool participation fell from 61 to 8 percent due to classroom closures or parents' decisions not to send their children. Many parents struggled to not only perform all other daily necessities of family life, but also to keep their young children occupied (McConnell et al., 2021).

Prior to the pandemic resources such as digital age-paced parenting newsletters showed significant benefits to families (Vilches et al., 2020). For instance, parents who received a nationally recognized, research-based parenting newsletter series for a year reported less stress, more confidence, and more patience with young children. Delivery of digital resources such as these newsletters continued without interruption during the pandemic. However, it is unknown if these positive parenting resources proved protective against the stresses of increased caregiving during the pandemic.

## Objective

The primary purpose of the current research study is to examine whether usage of an online parenting newsletter differed during the pandemic compared to before the pandemic. Specifically, did families with young children differ from before in demographic information, and did their online survey responses reveal differences in parenting practices, perceived usefulness of our online parenting newsletters, and family issues and life changes before and during COVID-19.

## Methods

On March 13, 2020, the United States declared a national emergency over the rapid spread of COVID-19. Therefore, we selected the three months preceding the official COVID-19 pandemic emergency declaration and one year later as our comparison groups.

A total of 95 survey respondents before COVID-19 (January – March, 2020) and 84 survey respondents one year later (January – March, 2021) completed our online survey. The survey was approved by the IRB at the University of Nevada, Reno. Both groups represent a little less than a quarter of the annual survey responses (total annual respondents in 2020 was 438 and in 2021 was 362). The 14 parents who completed the survey at both time points were removed from the sample for a separate within-subjects analysis. For a between-subjects analysis, a total of 81 survey respondents before COVID-19 and 70 survey respondents during COVID-19 were used. All data were derived from self-report questionnaires that included demographic information, changes in parenting practices after reading our newsletters, referral sources for our newsletters, the usefulness of our newsletter compared to other sources, and questions about family stability and life change (adapted from the FRIENDS National Center for Community-Based Child Abuse Prevention, <https://friendsnrc.org/evaluation/protective-factors-survey/>).

## Results

### Demographic Differences

Survey respondents before COVID-19 and during COVID-19 were not significantly different in most of the demographic features. Approximately 80% of respondents were female, the average age for respondents was mid-thirties, one-third of respondents were parents of infants, over 80% were White/Caucasian, and over 95% were college-educated. One marginally significant difference found between the two groups was that there was a 15% drop in children attend childcare or preschool during COVID-19 (See Table 1).

### Family Stability and Life Changes between Survey Respondents Before and During COVID-19

A few of the family stability and life changes were significantly different before and during COVID-19 (See Table 2). In 2021, parents reported that they were more likely to have friends who will support their goals, were less likely to have childcare on short notice and were more likely to report life changes in the past year.

### Influence of Reading Parenting Newsletters between Survey Respondents Before and During COVID-19

Although both groups seemed to improve their parenting knowledge after reading parenting newsletters, no significant differences were found in the influence of reading digital

newsletters between subscribers before and during COVID-19. It was also reported that survey respondents' perception regarding the usefulness of parenting sources was not significantly different. Both groups thought that online parenting newsletters were very useful, compared to other sources such as other parenting websites, parenting classes, books or magazines, social media, family, or friends.

## Within-Subject Differences

There were 14 parents who completed the survey in both 2020 and 2021. Their demographic characteristics were similar to the respondents described earlier (See Table 4). A few differences in outcomes were found for this matched group before and during COVID-19. During COVID-19, more parents reported using parenting tips less in taking care of their child ( $t = 2.35, p < .05$ ), increased use of JITP and other parenting websites ( $t = 2.57, p < .05$ : they used JITP more than other sites), reported the future looks better for their family ( $t = 2.57, p < .05$ ), and thought that in their family, they took more time to listen to each other ( $t = 3.02, p < .05$ ).

## Discussion

The current study showed that this national digital parenting newsletter reached a similar group of parents before and during COVID-19. There were few significant differences found between these two timepoints suggesting that the newsletter remained useful to this group of secure parents. The current study confirmed that for this mostly White, middle-class group of parents, online parenting newsletters were very effective during COVID-19, same as before. Although these parents reported a few changes in the first year of the pandemic, such as less access to childcare, they continued to report that the online parenting newsletter was useful. Furthermore, they continued to report positive parenting practices after reading the newsletter. Delivering free and easily accessible parenting information during COVID-19 continued to be relevant and appreciated and our efforts still seem to be significant in supporting families.

Our findings do not reflect the reports of increased stress for lower-income families. The literature shows two populations emerged mid-point in the pandemic. One group of parents was strongly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and faced increased emotional and fiscal stress. Another more affluent group of parents reported feeling minimally affected by the pandemic and optimistic about the future. This evaluation only reflects the second, more affluent group of parents.

These findings indicate that Extension outreach is needed and useful to financially stable families but that more work needs to be done to access lower-income families. Future research on online resources for parents should focus on increasing access to all parent populations. Possible actions include increasing plain language, translating the resource into multiple languages, and decreasing the quantity of reading within the online resource. Furthermore, digital resource delivery could reach more parents within their social ecological systems such as at health care sites, neighborhood gathering places, schools, and libraries.

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**Table 1****Demographic Differences between Subscribers Before and During COVID-19**

	Before COVID-19 (N = 81)	During COVID-19 (N = 70)	P-value
Relationship to the child			.646 <sup>2</sup>
Mother	84%	81%	
Father	11%	9%	
Other caregivers	5%	9%	
Child attending child care or preschool, %			.056 <sup>2</sup>
Yes	79%	64.1%	
No	21%	35.9%	
Parent Age			.776 <sup>1</sup>
Mean	37.03	36.63	
Median	36	35.50	
Range	26-70	25-67	
Child Age			.889 <sup>2</sup>
0-1	26%	27.3%	
1-5	74%	72.7%	
Marital Status			.196 <sup>2</sup>
Married	92%	79.7%	
Single, not in a committed relationship	2.7%	9.4%	
Not married, but in a committed relationship	4%	7.8%	
Other	1.3%	3.1%	
Race			.399 <sup>2</sup>
White	87.7%	82.5%	
Others	12.3%	17.5%	
Highest Level of Education			.842 <sup>2</sup>
Some college/vocational training	4%	4.7%	
College degree	96%	95.3%	

1. Tested using an independent t-test

2. Tested using a chi-square test.

**Table 2****Family Stability and Life Changes before and during COVID-19**

	Before COVID-19 (N = 81)	During COVID-19 (N = 70)	P-value
How much do these statements look like your life? <sup>1</sup>			
• The future looks good for our family.	4.36 (.63)	4.44 (.61)	.47
• In my family, we take time to listen to each other.	4.17 (.74)	4.16 (.70)	.89
• There are things we do as a family that are special just to us.	4.13 (.86)	4.20 (.80)	.62
• My child misbehaves just to upset me.	1.99 (.76)	1.80 (.74)	.14
• I feel like I'm always telling my kids no or stop.	2.61 (.90)	2.55 (.93)	.67
• I have frequent power struggles with my kids.	2.53 (.94)	2.28 (.92)	.11
• How I respond to my child depend on how I am feeling.	3.00 (.92)	2.92 (.87)	.60
• I have people who believe in me.	4.43 (.66)	4.59 (.56)	.11
• I have someone in my life who gives me advice, even when it's hard to hear.	3.93 (1.02)	4.05 (.86)	.11
• When I am trying to work on achieving a goal, I have friends who will support me.	4.07 (1.08)	4.14 (.81)	.07
• When I need someone to look after my kids on short notice, I can find someone I trust.	3.73 (1.20)	3.65 (1.30)	.08
In the past year, my life was changed (e.g., medical or dental care, places to stay, transportation, employment).	19.7%	32.8%	.08 <sup>chi-square</sup>
In the past month, I was unable to pay for rent or mortgage, utilities or bills, groceries/food, child care/daycare, medicine, medical expenses, or health insurance or co-pays or changes, basic households or personal hygiene items, transportation).	2.7%	6.3%	.30 <sup>chid-square</sup>
I have trouble affording what I need each month <sup>2</sup>	1.47 (.78)	1.39 (.68)	.54
I am able to afford the food I want to feed my family <sup>2</sup>	4.71 (.94)	4.75 (.89)	.78

1. Not at all like my life: 1 – Just like my life: 5

2. Never: 1 – Almost always: 5

**Table 3****Influence of Online Newsletter Before and During COVID-19**

	Before COVID-19 (N = 81)	During COVID-19 (N = 70)	P-value
Reading the online newsletter caused me to			
• know more about what to expect my child to be able to do at each age.	3.41 (.76)	3.37 (.82)	.78
• use the parenting tips in taking care of my child.	3.21 (.72)	3.09 (.76)	.30
• provide more opportunities for my child to explore and learn.	3.10 (.72)	3.09 (.78)	.45
• feel more confident in my skills as a parent.	3.21 (.74)	3.23 (.84)	.44
• feel less stressed about parenting	3.14 (.71)	3.06 (.81)	.26
• notice my child's cues more (what my child needed and was trying to tell me)	3.15 (.68)	3.16 (.79)	.97
• have more patience when my child was fussy or did something that was annoying	3.13 (.71)	3.04 (.77)	.48
• use ideas about how to get my child to behave (Like having a few food rules, explaining them to my child, and sticking to them)	3.14 (.69)	3.06 (.78)	.50
• help my child learn and use new words, such as by naming things, reading books together, and talking about what we were doing	3.09 (.75)	3.09 (.79)	.98
• have ideas to support my child's healthy eating	3.04 (.61)	2.91 (.83)	.30

Strongly disagree: 1 – Strongly agree: 4

**Table 4****Demographic Characteristics of Matched Survey Respondents**

	Percent/Mean
Relationship to the child	
Mother	69%
Father	31%
Other caregivers	0
Child attending child care or preschool	
Yes	69%
No	31%
Parent Age	36.57
Child Age	
0-1	23%
1-5	77%
Marital Status	
Married	92%
Single, not in a committed relationship	8%
Not married, but in a committed relationship	0
Other	0
Race	
White	100%
Others	0
Highest Level of Education	
Some college/vocational training	8%
College degree	92%