

# Not in the same boat

## Commentary on COVID-19 Special Section

Megan R. Gunnar 

Institute of Child Development, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA

### Correspondence

Megan R. Gunnar, Institute of Child Development, University of Minnesota, 51 East River Road, Minneapolis, MN 55455, USA.

Email: [gunnar@umn.edu](mailto:gunnar@umn.edu)

It has become almost trite to say that although we are all in the same storm, we are not in the same boat. Nonetheless, the papers in this special issue attest to the truth of this statement. Each paper provides a snapshot of how the parents and children on our planet are weathering this storm. When the pandemic struck, most research groups examining the emotional and cognitive well-being of children in face-to-face studies had to suspend their research. In every country, child developmental researchers pivoted to bring the science of child development to bear on how children and families were adjusting to the life-threatening nature of the virus and the economic and emotional threats posed by public health measures to contain and control it. The virus moved swiftly across the globe and so did the changes to children's lives. No week was like the next as events rapidly changed. There was little time to spend carefully planning excellent studies. If as a field we were to capture the impact of this constantly changing beast, we needed to be in the field, yesterday. Consequently, like the first sentences of *A Tale of Two Cities*, it was the best of research, it was the worst of research. *Child Development* is far from the only journal pulling together research done on COVID-19 and its effects. Journal editors are culling through the reams of manuscripts on the pandemic generated in 2020 to identify those whose methods, results and conclusion deserve being in the archival literature. This special issue of *Child Development* reflects a cross-section of research in our field that has met this criteria. As such, this special issue is a good read. Like the year we have lived through, however, it is not a coherent one. The papers are only bound together by two commonalities, COVID-19 and children. From there they cover a wide range of territory and methods from a simulation of learning and earning loss because of school closures by McCoy et al. (2021) to the ways that indigenous Yucatec

Mayan culture shielded children from the social disruptions experienced due to lockdowns by Alcalá, Gaskins and Richland (2021). That said there are common themes that can be highlighted.

### MATERNAL DEPRESSIVE SYMPTOMS AND NEGATIVE MOOD

While the pandemic has been hard on children, it has really been hard on their mothers and/or caregivers. Three of the papers in this special issue compared maternal depressive symptoms pre-pandemic to during the pandemic. The three samples were very different. One group was not only pregnant but were well-resourced, highly educated, and living in the United States (Gustafsson et al., 2021). One was of low to moderate income who were part of a food insecurity longitudinal study. These were also living in the United States (Steimle, Gassman-Pines, Johnson, Hines & Ryan, 2021). Finally, the third group was living in rural Bangladesh, some families had no income after the pandemic struck (Pitchik et al., 2021). Interestingly, while the first two groups showed an increase in depressive symptoms on average, the third group did not. While the first two groups showed not only a marked increase in depressive symptoms relative to pre-pandemic, they also showed a decline in these symptoms as the pandemic progressed, perhaps partly reflecting a reduction in uncertainty. For the first group of more highly resourced women, school closures demarcated the marked change in worry and depressive symptoms, while for the other two groups, increased symptoms were related to food insecurity combined with other material hardships. This is not surprising as poverty and maternal depression have long been observed

to co-occur (Smith & Mazure, 2021). Another perhaps an unsurprising finding is that social support buffered the effects of the pandemic on maternal depression (Gustafsson et al., 2021). Indeed, social support is well known to reduce depressive symptoms among those experiencing significant hardship (Taylor, 2011).

## THE CHAIN REACTION OF HARDSHIP

One reason for concern about maternal mental health during the pandemic is that when the mental health of the mother or caregiver is impaired it often affects her children's well-being. Studying the impact of material hardship, maternal depression and anxiety, and child functioning over the weeks and months of the pandemic, one group has written about the chain reaction of hardship (<https://medium.com/rapid-ec-project/a-hardship-chain-reaction-3c3f3577b30>). Several of the papers in this special issue also provide evidence that material hardship and lack of social support for mothers or caregivers is associated with a reduction in child well-being.

## SELF REGULATION AND PROSOCIAL BEHAVIOR

However, children are not passive entities on whom experience exerts its effects. It is common in research on negative life events to parse the events into those independent of the participant's behavior and those to which the participant contributed. Certainly, a pandemic would be independent of the person's behavior. However, in a number of the papers we see evidence that individual differences in self-regulation and prosocial orientation were important to both behavior and consequences during the pandemic.

Children with poorer self-regulatory skills and more behavior problems were found to experience more negative influences during the pandemic. In Eales, Gillespie, Alstate, Ferguson, and Carlson (2021), children with behavior problems engaged in more problematic media use during the pandemic. Hastings and colleagues (Hastings, Partington, Dajani, & von Suchodoletz, 2021) found that among low-income families in Jordan, children who pre-pandemic scored more poorly on an executive function task, had families who were described as experiencing more negative changes in response to the pandemic.

Interestingly, out of the mouths of babes comes a fairly accurate understanding of how the virus spreads. Specifically, DeJesus, Venkatesh, and Kinzler (2021) assessed what preschool-age children understood about how illness spreads. They did not think that being tired or hungry spreads illness, but rather thought that being in close contact with someone who is sick could make you sick. Perhaps, we can build on this understanding

so that as a global society we are better prepared for the next novel virus.

## DIFFERENT CONCERNS

One of the questions that reveals the different boats that we have been in during this storm are the hierarchy of maternal concerns for their children and their families during the pandemic. For some mothers, their greatest concerns are whether they can feed and clothe their children and keep the creditors at bay, while for others for whom material hardships are fewer, concerns about social isolation and their children's emotional functioning keep them up at night. This difference which has been noted in other work is highlighted in the paper by Alcala, Gaskins and Richaland (2021). They compared the concerns of Mayan parents with those of middle-class parents in the United States. The Mayan parents were concerned about their ability to provide for their children's education once the schools closed and the children were trying to complete worksheets at home. The parents in the United States were worried about their children's social development. Of course, it might have been more instructive to keep the social class of the families constant when comparing the two cultures. However, whether social class or cultural differences or both, it seems clear that parents' worries for their children were not uniform across families.

One potentially somewhat universal concern, nonetheless, might be how much time their children were spending on screens each day. As parents tried to work from home while also entertaining children, children spent more time on screens. In addition to screen time for virtual learning, Eales et al. (2021) found that parents reported about an hour more of screen time for their children post-compared to pre-pandemic. Interestingly, the word guilt came up less in their discussions of media use post-compared to pre-pandemic, perhaps as parents felt they had little choice. Stress came up more often post-pandemic, meaning parenting stress in relation to screen media use. Finally, as is often the case, the best predictor of future behavior was past behavior. Families with children who used more screen media before the pandemic used more post-pandemic, even as the average use increased.

The pandemic's public health recommendations and requirements called on all of us to behave in solidarity with one another. We needed to curb our independence and follow social distancing and masking rules not only to save ourselves, but to save others. In the case of adolescents and young adults, who were at less risk of being seriously ill or dying from COVID-19, adherence was altruistic. The paper by Grütter and Buchmann (2021) provides a fascinating examination of the predictors of low, average, and high adherence among Swiss young adults who had been followed for years a part of a large longitudinal study. Young adults who in early adolescence scored higher on sympathy for others, social acceptance

by peers and the belief that others are generally honest and trustworthy behaved in a more socially responsible manner during the pandemic, something the authors described as *solidarity* with other. In the case of these prosocial predictors of solidarity, pre-pandemic behavior was not only keeping others safer, it was keeping the young adult safer.

## AND WHAT NOW?

While we document and analyze the impact of the pandemic on families, of at least as much and likely more concern is what it will mean for the future of this generation. McCoy et al. (2021) map out a truly bleak set of predictions based on well-designed simulations. But these are based on past behavior and policies. We can change our stars and as Fredman (2021) in the other commentary argues, we really must if we are to meet the challenge and recognize the human rights of all children. If this pandemic has taught us nothing else, it should have taught us that we are indeed inter-connected. What happens to one can quickly spread to affect the whole planet of people. Furthermore, what happens to the animals and plants and water of our planet will spill over to affect our health and well-being in complex and profound ways. We have seen in Grütter and Buchmann's (2021) work that sympathy for the vulnerable, trust in the goodness of others, and the experience of social acceptance predict the likelihood of acting in solidarity with others when we are all threatened. Perhaps, as we worry about helping children make up for the time lost to learning the three R's, we can also focus our efforts to enhance the roots of empathy, compassion, inclusivity, and other traits. Traits that we as citizens of the planet will need to avert coming pandemics and other disasters producing dislocations and societal-challenging changes that will threaten us all.

## ORCID

Megan R. Gunnar  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2296-9739>

## REFERENCES

- Alcalá, L., Gaskins, S., & Richland, L. E. (2021). A cultural lens on Yucatec Maya families' COVID-19 experiences. *Child Development, 92*, e851–e865.
- DeJesus, J. M., Venkatesh, S., & Kinzler, K. D. (2021). Young children's ability to make predictions about novel illnesses. *Child Development, 92*, e817–e831.
- Eales, L., Gillespie, S., Alstat, R. A., Ferguson, G. M., & Carlson, S. M. (2021). Children's screen media use in the United States before and during the COVID 19 pandemic. *Child Development, 92*, e866–e882.
- Fredman, S. (2021). Comment: A human rights approach: The right to education in the time of COVID-19. *Child Development, 92*, e900–e903.
- Grütter, J., & Buchmann, M. (2021). Developmental antecedents of adolescents' solidarity during the COVID-19 pandemic: The role of childhood sympathy, social trust, and social acceptance. *Child Development, 92*, e832–e850.
- Gustafsson, H., Young, A., Doyle, O., Nagel, B., Mackiewicz Seghete, K., Nigg, J., Sullivan, E., & Graham, A. (2021). Trajectories of perinatal depressive symptoms in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. *Child Development, 92*, e749–e763.
- Hastings, P. D., Partington, L., Dajani, R., & von Suchodoletz, A. (2021). Adrenocortical and psychosocial responses of families in Jordan to the COVID 19 pandemic. *Child Development, 92*, e798–e816.
- McCoy, D., Cuartas, J., Behrman, J., Cappa, C., Heymann, J., Lopez-Boo, F., Lu, C., Raikes, A., Richter, L., Stein, A., & Fink, G. (2021). Global estimates of the implications of COVID-19 related preprimary school closures for children's instructional access, development, learning, and economic wellbeing. *Child Development, 92*, e883–e899.
- Pitchik, H. O., Tofail, F., Akter, F., Sultana, J., Shoab, A. K., Huda, T. M. N., Forsyth, J. E., Kaushal, N., Amin, M. R., Jahir, T., Yeasmin, F., Khan, R., Das, J. B., Hossain, K., Hasan, M. R., Rahman, M., Winch, P. J., Luby, S. P., & Fernald, L. C. H. (2021). Effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on caregiver mental health and the child caregiving environment in a low-resource, rural context. *Child Development, 92*:e764–e780.
- Steimle, S., Gassman-Pines, A., Johnson, A. D., Hines, C. T., & Ryan, R. M. (2021). Understanding patterns of food insecurity and family wellbeing amid the COVID 19 pandemic using daily surveys. *Child Development, 92*, e781–e797.
- Smith, M. V., & Mazure, C. M. (2021). Mental health and wealth: Depression, gender, poverty, and parenting. *Annual Review of Clinical Psychology, 17*, 181–205. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-clinpsy-071219-022710>
- Taylor, S. E. (2011). Social support: A review. In H. S. Friedman (Ed.), *Oxford handbook of health psychology* (pp. 189–214). Oxford University Press.