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RESEARCH BRIEF – AUGUST 2020

PANDEMIC PARENTING IN WISCONSIN

KEY FINDINGS

- Two-thirds (66%) of parents reported that COVID-19 has negatively impacted their psychological health.
- Two out of every five parents (39%) reported symptoms of moderate to severe anxiety and/or depression.
- Many parents reported more feelings of frustration (57%) and worry (67%) than usual.
- Most parents felt that concerns around work (66%) and social distancing (60%) were interfering with parenting.
- The majority of families were spending more time in activities together, including shared meals (68% of families) and outdoor activities (69%).
- Most parents felt more gratitude (54%) and closer to their children (58%) than usual.

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic brought many changes to the daily lives of children, parents, and families around the world. A recent review of research on quarantine suggests that – while essential for containing and reducing the spread of contagious diseases – these practices can have short-term and lasting impacts on individual, child, and family well-being.¹ Additionally, school and childcare closures have placed parents in dual positions of teacher and caregiver as they balance working remotely, economic insecurity, and their own stress.² **In order to best support families both during and after the pandemic, it is critical to understand how COVID-19 is affecting parents and children.**

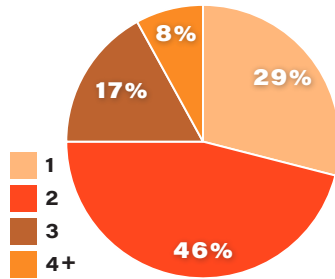
METHODS

Eligible participants were adults currently parenting at least one child under 13 years of age. The survey was launched with the Qualtrics online survey platform³ via listservs and social media. The total sample included 808 participants from Wisconsin. At the time of data collection (April 29th and 30th, 2020), Wisconsin was under state issued Stay-at-Home orders and schools were closed.

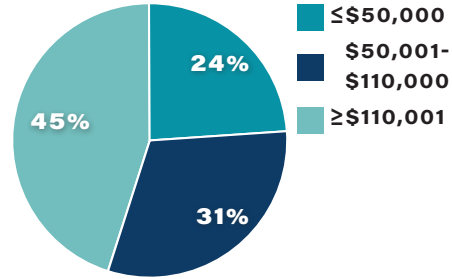
PARTICIPANTS

Of the 808 Wisconsin parents sampled, 89% identified as women, 11% identified as men, and <1% identified as other genders. The majority (82%) of parents identified as White, 3% Black/African American, 6% Asian/Asian American, 2% Hispanic or Spanish origin, 1% other, and 6% identified with multiple races. Approximately 1 out of 5 families (23%) were living at or below 200% of the federal poverty line.*

NUMBER OF CHILDREN



INCOME

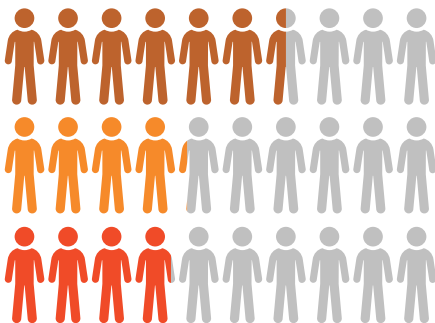
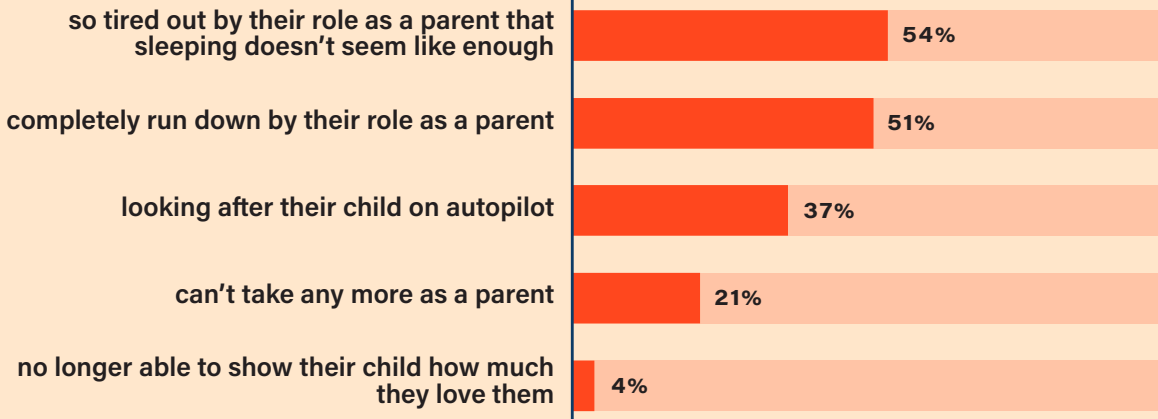


RESULTS

PARENT MENTAL HEALTH AND CONCERN ABOUT COVID-19

Specific to parenting, most parents (69%) reported at least one symptom of parental burnout.⁴ About half (51%) reported that they are “completely run down by their role as a parent,” while more than a third (37%) reported they are “looking after their child on autopilot.”

PARENTS ARE FEELING BURNED OUT



Nearly **7 in 10 (66%)** parents reported that COVID-19 has negatively impacted their psychological health.

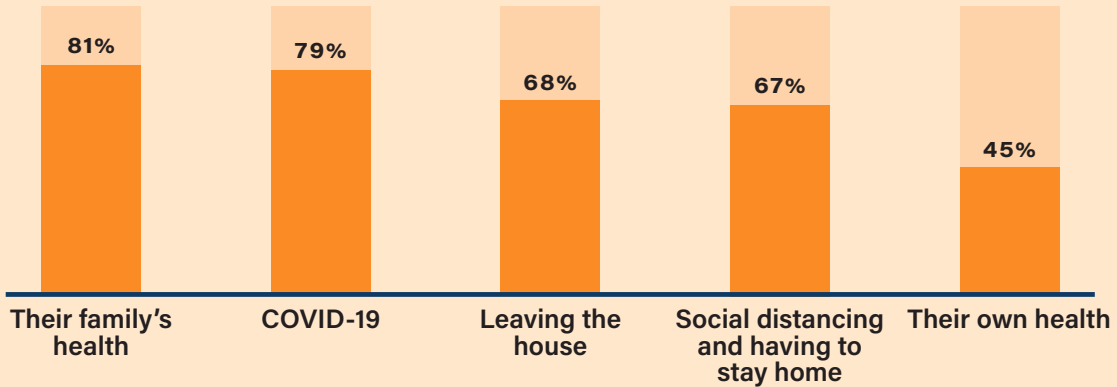
Around **4 in 10 (42%)** parents reported being at least somewhat depressed due to COVID-19.

Around **2 in 5 (39%)** parents reported symptoms of moderate to severe anxiety and/or depression.

CHANGES IN PARENTS' EMOTIONS

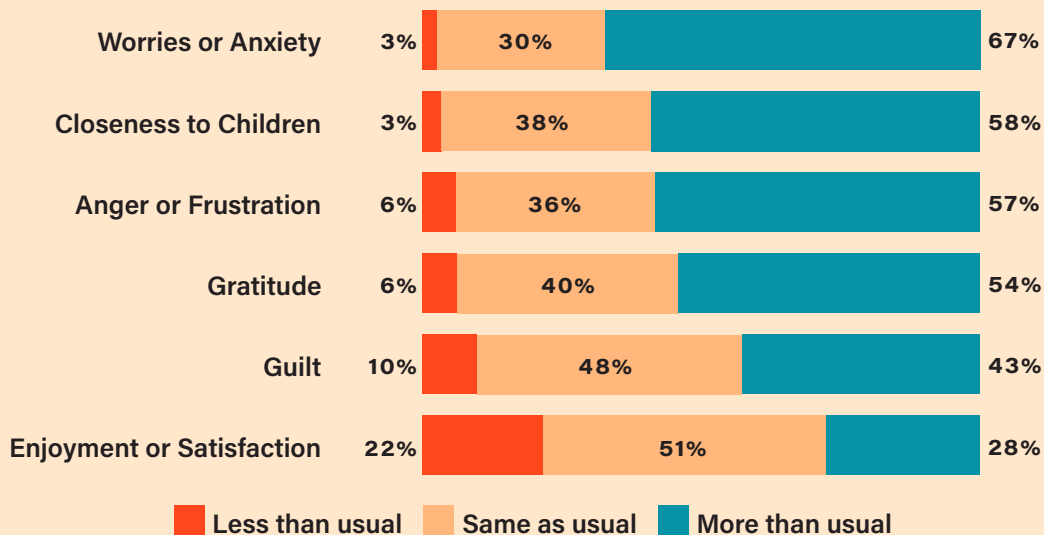
Parents reported feeling nervous, worried, or stressed about various aspects of the pandemic such as their family's health and leaving the house.

PARENTS REPORT FEELING NERVOUS, WORRIED, OR STRESSED ABOUT...



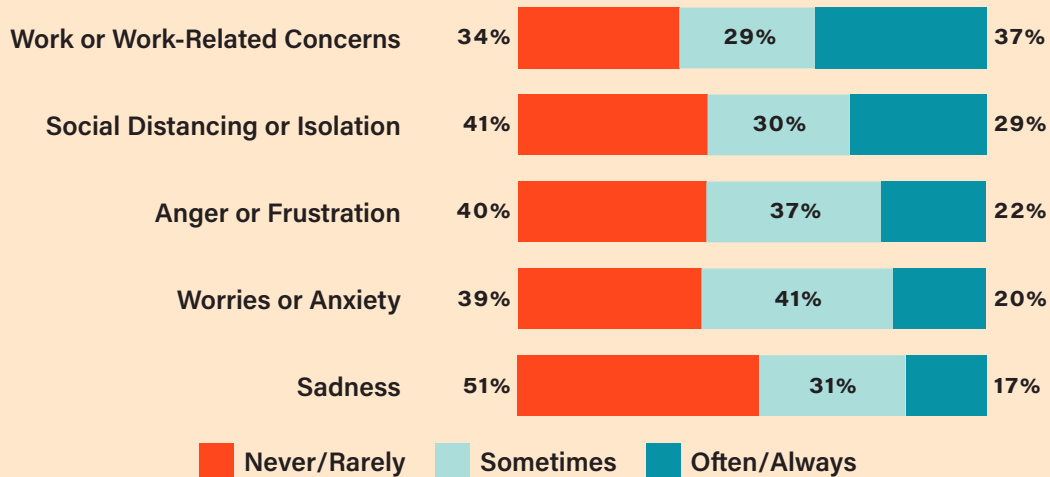
When asked specifically to report on their feelings about parenting, many parents reported changes since the start of the pandemic, including more frustration, guilt, and gratitude. While 28% of parents reported feeling more enjoyment or satisfaction in their role as a parent, 22% reported feeling less than usual.

PARENTS REPORT MORE FREQUENT POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE EMOTIONS



Many parents (66%) agreed that work or work-related concerns sometimes (29%) or often (37%) interfered with their ability to parent. Most parents also reported that emotions, such as frustration (60%) and anxiety (61%), sometimes, often, or always interfered with their ability to parent.

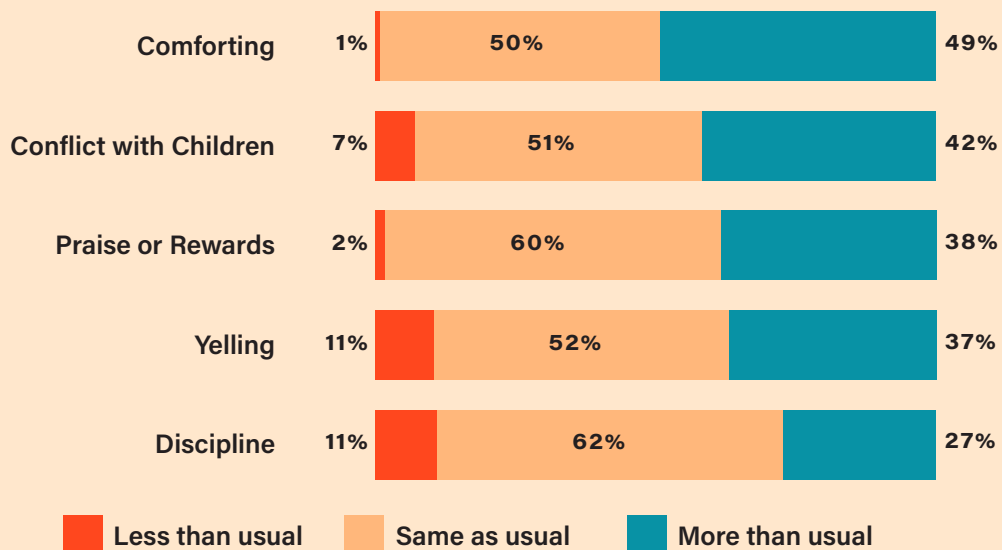
PARENTS' EMOTIONS AND CONCERNS INTERFERE WITH PARENTING



CHANGES IN PARENTING BEHAVIOR

Parents reported experiencing a range of both positive and negative behavior changes since the start of the pandemic. Many parents reported more conflicts with their children (42%) and more yelling (37%) than usual. On the other hand, nearly half (49%) reported doing more comforting or soothing and 38% used more praise and rewards than usual. Most parents, however, reported no changes in their use of these parenting strategies.

CHANGES IN PARENTING BEHAVIOR SINCE COVID-19

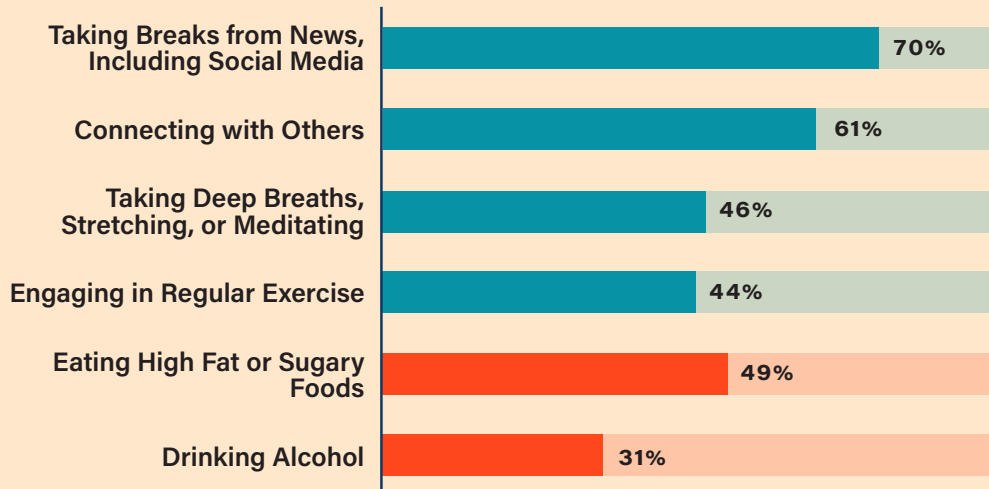


SELF-CARE, SOCIAL SUPPORT AND COPING

Almost all parents (93%) reported engaging in at least one positive coping behavior with the most common strategies being taking breaks from the news (70%) and connecting with others (61%). Most parents (66%) also reported engaging in at least one negative coping behavior. The most common were eating unhealthy foods (49%) and drinking more alcohol than usual (32%).

HOW PARENTS ARE COPING

% that reported using each behavior more than usual

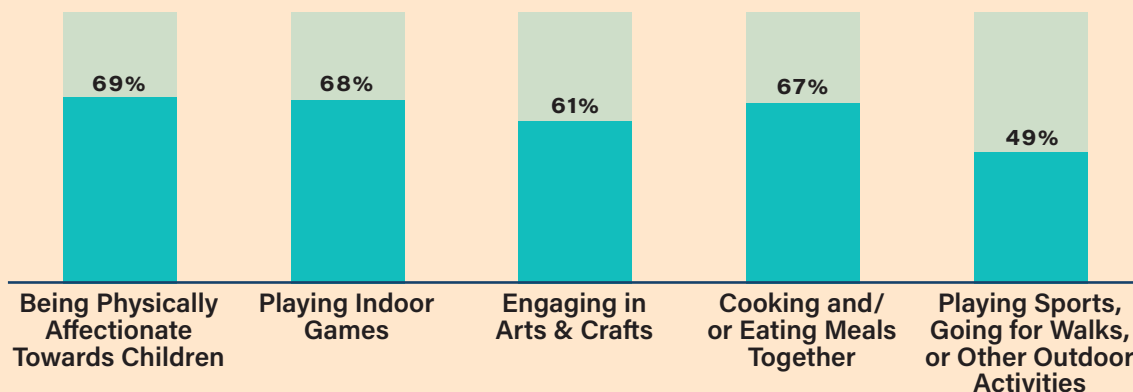


FAMILY ACTIVITY CHANGES

Parents reported spending more time with their families in a variety of activities, such as cuddling, arts & crafts, and taking walks since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

FAMILIES ARE DOING MORE ACTIVITIES TOGETHER

% of parents who said their family did this activity more than usual



CHILD STRESS-RELATED BEHAVIORS

Though this study focused on parents' experiences, respondents were also asked about stress-related behaviors in their children during the pandemic, such as mood swings, crying, feeling sad, or nightmares.



Over **9 in 10 (91%)** of parents reported an increase in at least one stress-related behavior in their child.

This suggests many children are feeling increased stress since the start of COVID-19, which may place additional burdens on parents as they navigate supporting their child.**

OPEN-ENDED RESULTS

We asked participants to respond to the three open-ended questions listed below. A few select responses were chosen to represent common themes.

How do you think your parenting practices and/or your relationship(s) with your child(ren) will be different after the COVID-19 pandemic?

- “There will be more appreciation for leaving the house to do activities... I think we will miss each other more since we won't see each other as much during the day.”
- “I think we will be more patient with each other.”

What are the most challenging parts of parenting during the COVID-19 pandemic?

- “Balancing working from home and trying to educate my children. It's impossible and I feel guilty in regards to my job and parenting.”

What are the most rewarding parts of parenting during the COVID-19 pandemic?

- “Spending time with family, being outdoors on nature hikes, connecting with friends on FaceTime.”
- “Not busy running here and there every night of the week or weekend. Slow down and enjoy the time.”

Through the open-ended responses, parents commonly expressed difficulties around virtual learning, and balancing work and parenting at the same time. Parents also identified rewarding parts of parenting during the pandemic, such as slowing down, spending more time together, and strengthening their relationships with their children.

LIMITATIONS

This survey was distributed across social media and email channels (convenience sampling method). This method of data collection allowed for ease of contacting potential participants, but is a non-probability method. The survey sample overrepresents people who are White (82% in our sample vs. 72% of the U.S. population), women (89%), and with higher incomes (62% of our sample earns more than \$70,000/year compared to WI median family income of \$59,209⁷). Further research is needed to understand the experiences of parents who are Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) and parents earning poverty-level incomes.

SUMMARY

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought about unprecedented change to the lives of parents, children, and families. This survey found that the pandemic is a significant stressor for Wisconsin families, having negative implications for parents' mental health, emotions, and behaviors, while also bringing unexpected opportunities for strengthening family relationships. Parents reported high levels of anxiety and depression, as well as increases in negative emotions such as anger, frustration, and sadness. For many parents, current emotions and pandemic-related concerns are interfering with their ability to parent. On the other hand, this study indicated that parents feel closer to their children and have made the most of this time by slowing down, spending more time together, and engaging in family activities. To help inform critical support for families in Wisconsin, practitioners and policy makers need to consider how parents' concerns about their family's health along with the changes in work, school, and daily life are impacting their mental health and ability to care for their children. This is especially important as the new school year begins while the rates of COVID-19 continue to rise.

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- * 200% federal poverty line calculations were approximated on income categories, family size, and receipt of SNAP/WIC benefits based on 2020 federal poverty line estimates by the U.S. Census Bureau.
- ** In cases of multiple children, parents reported based on their child with the most recent birthday.



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