

Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Young Children and their Families

Purpose

The purpose of this document is to inform Canadian policy-makers and decision-makers about the experiences of families of children between 0 to 6 years of age during the COVID-19 pandemic. This document provides recommendations for the next steps toward developing more inclusive policies that integrate the unique needs of the families and children during recovery strategies and future health emergencies. The document could also be used by Canadian service delivery agencies, including health care institutes, practitioners and non-profit organizations, as an informational piece regarding the families' experiences during the pandemic.

The issue

The COVID-19 pandemic has had far-reaching impacts on the health and well-being of young children and their families. The implementation of public health guidelines to curb the spread of the COVID-19 virus during the first wave of the pandemic led to limited opportunities for recreation and closures of schools. As a result, it disrupted children's daily routine, increased physical and social isolation, and resulted in their poor mental health and well-being. Families of young children also faced competing demands of managing child care, online schooling and work from home.

What we know [contextualizing the research]

The COVID-19 pandemic has had an adverse impact on families and young children:

- 75% of parents were worried about their children's social engagement and parental capacity to balance multiple responsibilities (Statistics Canada's survey about 'Impacts of COVID-19 on Canadian families and children, 2020).
- Initial waves of the pandemic and associated public health measures disproportionately affected the health of children and families (Towards Common Goal 2020).

The prevalence of mental health and well-being challenges among children and their families due to the pandemic underscores the need for urgent intervention. Understanding the needs is essential to designing more appropriate policies and interventions. **However, there is a lack of information explicitly looking at the mental health of very young children.**

What we did

During the first wave of the pandemic, Infant and Early Mental Health Promotion (IEMHP) at the Hospital for Sick Children, in collaboration with the Knowledge Institute on Child and Youth Mental Health and Addictions, Kids Brain Health Network (KBHN), and Children First conducted an online survey across Canada. The survey aimed to understand the impact of the pandemic on families of children between 0 to 6 years.

2,147 Canadians with children between 0 to 6 years of age participated in the survey during late summer/early fall of 2020. Overall, 1,186 respondents fully completed the survey and shared their experiences in open-ended questions in the following key areas:

- **Access to Services**
- **Families' Well-being**
- **New Mothers' Health**
- **Children's Well-being**

Key findings

Access to services has always been a challenge, but the COVID-19 pandemic worsened access to services and caused longer wait times. Key groups that are particularly impacted include:

- **Families:**
Additional caregiving responsibilities and limited supports adversely impacted family well-being resulting in parental stress and more isolation than pre-pandemic levels.
- **New Mothers:**
Impacts on postpartum care and caregiving abilities due to disruptions and delays in the delivered essential services
- **Children:**
Impacts on emotional regulation and socialization of young children
- **Infants and Babies:**
Impacts on quality of care along with their growth and development

What we found

[snapshot of survey findings]

ACCESS TO SERVICES

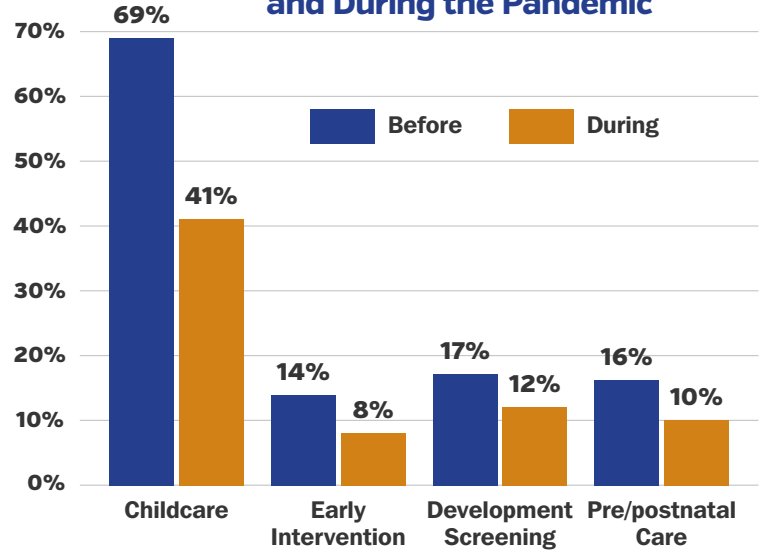


72%
of respondents reported challenges in accessing children's services

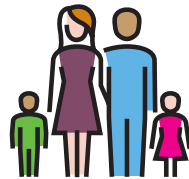
43%
of respondents highlighted longer than expected wait times in accessing virtual healthcare

22%
reported a lack of a centralized place to access mental health and well-being resources

Services Accessed Before and During the Pandemic



FAMILIES' WELL-BEING



66%
of respondents reported difficulty managing work & children as the top mental health stressor

Commonly reported mental health symptoms were:



Stress

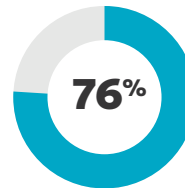


Burnout

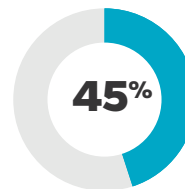


Frustration

CHILDREN'S WELL-BEING



Children's mental health was the topmost concern mentioned by **three-quarters** of respondents



Nearly **one-half** of respondents were concerned about their children's poor ability to manage their emotions

NEW MOTHERS' HEALTH










47%
of respondents reported disruption and delays in services such as:

- New mothers counselling
- Infant wellness checks
- Mental health support
- Postpartum care after birth

"I am worried about my child's mental health. She is only 3. I am especially worried about her interaction with other children and don't know how to facilitate a meaningful engagement while keeping her safe."

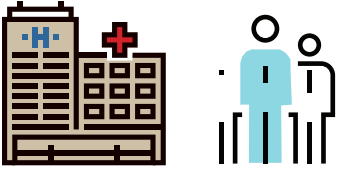





- Mother of a child

What we can do (Federal and Provincial Governments)

Stakeholders	Federal 	Provincial 	Federal with Provincial 
Key Areas			
Access to Services 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Facilitate access to information and services essential for the well-being of young children and their families by <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Creating a centralized COVID-19 information hub to access resources Creating a website that contains developmental milestones, frequently asked questions, articles on topics of interest to families with children Create a public awareness campaign to support early development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consider access-related barriers in policy response for vulnerable families and those living in rural areas Equip agencies serving young children and their families with a standardized information package containing easily reproducible materials for parents. It may include frequently asked questions, information sheets on daily topics, and a list of agencies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create a parent helpline modelled on Kids Help Phone where parents can call and get answers to their questions Allocate more funding and develop essential resources for child care services to reduce access based delays
Families' Well-being 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensure employers accommodate the unique needs of working parents with young children 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strengthen family care by introducing well-being interventions, respite and parental stress management programs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Adapt child care and job protection policies for working parents to mitigate the effects of health emergencies
New Mothers' Health 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create a perinatal and postnatal strategy in Canada to ensure a patient-centric approach and continuum of care for mothers of babies, infants Provide compassionate accommodations, such as flexible visitor policies during and after birth 	
Children's Well-being 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide infant and early mental health training to all agencies serving young children and their families 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Collaborate with pediatricians, researchers and healthcare providers to develop strategies and programs to reduce mental health impacts on children

What we can do

[Service Providers and Provincial Government]

Stakeholders Key Areas	Service Providers 	Provincial Government with Service Providers 
Access to Services 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When redeploying professionals and resources, understand the impact of reduced services for families with young children – it looks different! • Provide access to services at locations where families usually go (shopping malls, community centers) versus stand-alone locations. Ensure that locations are easily accessible by public transport 	
Families' Well-being 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide virtual services and models of care to be shared among agencies and evaluate virtual care, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Family experience - Challenges with either - Benefits of either - Various models of care such as, virtual, phone, hybrid and in-person 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strengthen family care by introducing well-being interventions, respite and parental stress management programs
New Mothers' Health 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Simplify visitation policies for support persons, especially at the times of breastfeeding and postpartum care • Give parents the option to access care in person or virtually • Review policies for families in NICU (Neo-natal Intensive Care Unit). Restricting parent time in NICU has significant impact on baby and mom as well as on issues such as, breast feeding 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide ethical and compassionate accommodations such as, flexible visitor policies especially during and after the birth • Create uniform and national standards for NICUs and perinatal supports
Children's Well-being 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prioritize children's well-being by providing targeted supports centred around the unique needs of young children • Consider the unique needs of neonatal age-group and their families in the policy response