

Research Matters

COVID-19 and Children with Brain Injury: Impact on Mental Health

The parents of children who were in the early stages of brain injury were surveyed to find out the positive and negative impacts of COVID-19 on their child's recovery, well-being, and parental outlook. Outcomes suggest that children with brain injury were impacted by the pandemic in many ways similar to the general population. The following outcomes were highlighted for this population.

COVID-19 STRESSORS: IMPACT ON MENTAL HEALTH

Impact on Child

- Of the 64 participants only 2 children were identified as having mental health concerns pre-COVID. Yet, almost half of the parents reported current concern around mental health status due to the pandemic.
- Limited social contact and restrictions on leaving the home were reported as a stressor for many children. Yet, parents reported improved relationships between family members as a result of being together more often due to the pandemic.
- Children with comorbid intellectual/developmental disability and/or ADHD were described as having greater mental health concerns than typically developing peers and siblings by their parents. Yet, brain injury severity (i.e., mild vs. moderate/severe) was not found to influence the parent's reporting of their child's mental health.
- Additionally, social isolation was found to have similar impact on children despite brain injury severity, presence of a seizure disorder, and timing of injury. For example, limited social interaction was a factor for newly injured children as well as those in recovery.

Impact on Parent

- **All** parents reported COVID's negative impact on their own mental health with more than half of the respondents describing this impact as moderate to extreme.
- The most common stressor among parents was facilitating their child's education and daily activities. Additional stress was reported to be caused by limited contact with people outside of the home and being home-bound.
- Parents also described benefits of family togetherness, having more patience, and slowing down due to less commitments.

Economic Worry

- Most of the parent participants continued to work from home throughout the pandemic with only a few losing their jobs. Yet, parents reported concern for their future financial situation. While some reported concern of extreme financial problems, the number of parents reporting worry in meeting basic needs (e.g., food) were very few.

Study Outcomes and Practical Recommendations

- COVID-19 has negatively impacted the mental health of children and parents. This is true for families impacted by brain injury as well.
- Restrictions related to the pandemic cause many stressors. These included limited contact with teachers, friends, and family members outside of the household for long periods of time.
- Parents reported that the balance of working from home with the added demand of remote-schooling for their children caused the greatest amount of stress. None-the-less, parents reported this stress had little impact on their mental health overall. Many reporting the positive outcome of being together with their immediate family members.

- When all factors contributing to mental health were considered (for example, money, parental well-being), the factor that was thought to have the greatest influence was social isolation.
- Future practice and care for children with brain injury and other associated concerns should consider the impact of social isolation due to global crisis such as COVID-19 as well isolation due to recovery time. This is a particularly important for young children and adolescents who are developing social relationship as part of their development. Isolation may increase stress and result in mental health concerns due to a lack of social contact associated with brain injury rehabilitation.

REFERENCE

Williams, T.S., Deotto, A., Roberts, S.D., Ford, M.K., Désiré, N., & Cunningham, S. (2021). COVID-19 mental health impact among children with early brain injury and associated conditions. *Child Neuropsychology*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09297049.2021.1998407>