



COVID-19 and Early Childhood Mental Health: Fostering Systems Change and Resilience

ABOUT THE ISSUE

Global health emergencies such as the COVID-19 pandemic can have serious impacts on the mental health of parents, children, and families. Lockdowns and quarantines have led to social isolation, disruptions to child care and schooling, financial worries, loss of employment, housing insecurity, and increased spousal/family conflict, placing an incredible amount of stress on parents. And all that stress is directly affecting the mental health, well-being, and social and emotional development of infants and children.

When a person experiences mental health issues in their early years, the adverse effects on health outcomes and resilience may be seen throughout their entire life – even if they come from well-resourced, well-educated families. With pre-existing service gaps and inequities intensified by the pandemic, a stronger focus on early childhood mental health is needed more than ever.

CHALLENGES




Parents under pandemic-related stress can be less responsive to their children.

A child's social and emotional development depends on positive, high-quality relationships with their parents.¹ But when parents are under severe and prolonged stress created by the pandemic, their relationships with their children may break down. This can lead to parental alcohol and drug consumption, spousal conflict, parental separation, or abuse and neglect, all of which can affect early childhood mental health.

Mental health services are not equipped to handle increasing behavioural issues in young children.

Emotional-behavioural issues in children were on the rise before COVID-19 hit, as were precursors to child mental illness. Yet mental health services have struggled to keep pace due to long wait times, inadequate training of practitioners in early years mental health, and weak accountability mechanisms for public funding. The pandemic has only exacerbated both the rise in behavioural issues and the challenges of the mental health system.

Key Facts

-  **40%** of Ontario parents report behavioural-emotional challenges in their children
-  Rates of depression increased from **9% to 42%** among mothers of infants and children (aged 18 months to 8 years)
-  **61%** of parents are very or extremely concerned about managing their child's behaviour, anxiety, emotions, and stress

1 [A parent is "anyone who is a primary caregiver for children, whether in a biological or other kind of relationship." \(Waddell et al., 2020. COVID-19 and the impact on children's mental health.\)](#)

CONSIDERATIONS

Unprecedented events such as pandemics can affect brain development in early childhood.

The first six years of a child's life are crucial for brain development. Events such as economic downturns, recessions and natural disasters, including infectious disease outbreaks, can negatively affect this development, with chronic stress able to activate genetic markers implicated in mental illness. They can also disrupt parent-child relationships and interfere with how sensitive parents are to their children's needs.

Parental coping strategies are critical to healthy childhood development.

When parents are coping well with stress, they can model appropriate behaviours to their children. But when the stress and pressure are too much, it can worsen their coping strategies and trigger mental health symptoms, such as depressive episodes. It can also lead to detrimental behaviours, such as punitive parenting and maltreatment, increasing the risk of emotional and mental health problems in children.

Pandemic-related parental stress is multiplied by inequity.

People living with multiple disadvantages across race, class, education, disability, and immigration status have been hit the hardest by the pandemic, disproportionately affected by unemployment, stress, and the risk of illness and death. When combined with parental stress, the situation becomes significantly worse – and can further affect the mental health and brain development of infants and children.

HIGHLIGHTS OF POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

To improve the mental health and wellness of parents, children and infants during the pandemic and beyond, policymakers should:

- ✓ Prioritize interventions that will **reduce parental stress**.
- ✓ Provide targeted mental health supports to **parents of very young children**, and foster increased collaboration with and integration of mental health and developmental service providers.
- ✓ Expand **community services and supports that foster social connection**, with direct outreach to parents who are reporting high levels of social isolation or substance use.
- ✓ Invest in and expand access to universally available, high quality, **culturally safe mental health and substance use services** for diverse parent and child populations.
- ✓ Research the mental health and social support needs of **diverse parent groups**.
- ✓ Ensure **virtual services** are culturally appropriate and available to people of all socio-economic backgrounds, while also continuing to provide access to in-person services as needed.
- ✓ Continue to provide **income support measures for parents**, especially for those dealing with disproportionate economic impacts of the pandemic.
- ✓ Expand **access to housing and shelter** for parents and families at risk of homelessness, precarious housing, and domestic violence.
- ✓ Ensure all policies, programs, and research on early childhood mental health are guided by **increased attention to sex, gender, and other aspects of social identity**.



Key Fact



Licensed early childhood education centres, which are benchmarked to best practices and professional standards, were unavailable to **75–80%** of all families before COVID-19

[Download the full policy brief](#), developed with the Canadian Paediatric Society, to learn more about this important topic.

You can also visit our website for more information about [our COVID-19 policy work](#) or about [early childhood mental health](#).



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