



Experiences of Albertan Families with Young Children during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Executive Report Prepared by:

Dr. Sheila McDonald, Dr. Sarah Edwards, Dr. Erin Hetherington, Dr. Nicole Racine, Melissa Mueller (MSc), Dr. Brae Anne McArthur, Dr. Sheri Madigan, Dr. Deborah Dewey, Dr. Gerald Geisbrecht, Dr. Nicole Letourneau, Dr. Suzanne Tough

The psychological, economic and social effects of the pandemic are pervasive. Contemporary quality data on family coping during this unprecedented global pandemic is crucial to inform strategies and resource allocation to minimize adverse health, mental health and financial outcomes for families.

In a May 2020 study, data was collected from approximately 2,000 Albertan families from a COVID-19 Impact Survey based on two longitudinal cohorts in Alberta: The All Our Families study (AOF) and the Alberta Pregnancy Outcomes and Nutrition study (APrON). Results from the study identify opportunities for prevention and intervention to promote well-being and resilience during a pandemic in Alberta.

For Urban Alberta families parenting at least one child in elementary during a time when home schooling, working from home and access to typical services such as childcare and domestic services has been disrupted, **over half (58%) of all families, at least one parent experienced job loss, loss of main income source, or reduction in employment hours. Up to 35% of mothers reported elevated stress, anxiety and depression. Over 40% reported tension in their partner relationship. Almost 30% of mothers are concerned about their child's behavior and mood. Families experiencing a high number of stresses may reach a 'tipping point' in coping and require services and supports to minimize long-term threats to health and well-being.**

To contextualize the findings, two main impacts were discussed. They are:

- 1) Financial Impact: Job losses and reduced incomes affect the financial and mental health of all family members and can strain relationships that can lead to poor coping strategies and escalated tension or abuse. Cumulative impacts of these stressors are related to adverse individual and family functioning with long-term impacts to families and increased costs to the health, social services and other systems.
- 2) Mental Health and Relationship Impact: In families where women experience mental health concerns and partnership tension, addressing these concerns improves adult functioning that in turn can improve child behavior and self-regulation. These children are better able to learn, make friends, and engage in typical activities of childhood. Although the impacts from COVID-19 on children will take time to unravel, strategies that support child well-being and family functioning are critically urgent now and will continue to be throughout the pandemic.

Recommendations resulting from the study, align with the Government of Alberta documents, including the Well-Being and Resiliency Framework (March 2019). Some of the suggestions include the following:

- Government jurisdictions are required to ensure food and housing security for families.
- Mobilize Public Health strategies that place emphasis on healthy lifestyle choices.
- Emphasize routines and habitual activities like game night or reading books together to help families cope in times of stress.
- Normalize help seeking through Public Health approaches to empower families.
- Existing investments are to minimize financial barriers to those in need of mental health and addiction support, thereby easing access to services.
- Public investments in approaches that enhance natural supports and naturally supportive environments to improve well-being, a sense of belonging and purpose, and potentially reducing stress associated with COVID-19 related restrictions.

Addressing both economic needs and relational poverty during a pandemic is crucial. Communities and families can focus resources to ensure children and youth experience safety, physical and emotional well-being, sense of purpose and belonging, and skill acquisition with the recognition that these are core elements for healthy development. Public Health resources that focus on strategies for coping, conflict resolution and enhancing mental health are important for adult well-being. Collective efforts across jurisdictions, including health, education, children's services, labour, economy and innovation will be required to mitigate adverse outcomes consequent to this global pandemic. Collaborative efforts from individual to family to community and across service and government sectors will ensure that the best possible outcomes are achieved for all Albertans.

The full descriptive report can be found at: Allourfamiliesstudy.com and Apronstudy.ca

For further information, please contact Sheila McDonald at sheila.mcdonald@albertahealthservices.ca

Reference

McDonald S, Edwards S, Hetherington E, Racine N, Mueller M, McArthur BA, Madigan S, Dewey D, Geisbrecht G, Letourneau N, Tough S. Experiences of Albertan Families with Young Children during the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Descriptive Report. Calgary, Alberta: University of Calgary; 2020.



The Owerko Centre
at the Alberta Children's Hospital
Research Institute

