Factors Affecting Parents’ (and Others’) Reactions and Decisions Related to COVID-19 Risks

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Some Key Ideas about Risk Perceptions

1. We don’t like tradeoffs
2. Harms of omission ≠ Harms of commission
3. Focus on probability vs. possibility
4. New / uncertain things scare us more than familiar ones
5. Psychic numbing to large numbers
6. Risk acceptance is different for ourselves vs. for others

Parents face risk decision fatigue
Risk Tradeoffs

1. We don’t like risk tradeoffs

X chance of A Vs. Y chance of B

“Finite pool of worry” – Elke Weber

So, WHICH risks do we focus on?
Perceptions of COVID-19 Tradeoff Risks

• Risks from the Disease
  • Death
  • Short-term illness
  • Long COVID

• Risks from the Vaccine
  • Newness (including new technology of mRNA)
  • Speed of development / trust in process
  • Adverse events (e.g., myocarditis)

• Risks of Protective Measures
  • Education lost
  • Socialization lost
  • Economic costs
  • Other health risks
  • Loss of control / autonomy
Did We Cause the Risk?

2. Harms of Omission ≠ Harms of Commission
   (Ritov & Baron, Journal of Behavioral Decision Making, 1990)

COVID-19 harms us Vs. We cause harms
3. People differ in how much their emotional reactions to risk depend on **probability vs. possibility**
   (Lacey et al, Journal of Behavioral Decision Making, 2021)

% chance  Vs.  “might happen”
Fear of Risk Changes Over Time

4. New / uncertain things scare us more than familiar ones
   (Slovic, Science, 1987)

Early pandemic: everything new = fear

Now: familiar = exhaustion
5. **Psychic Numbing**: Large case numbers evoke *less* emotion than the first few cases

(Paul Slovic, *Judgment and Decision Making*, 2007)
Self-Other Differences

6. Risk acceptance is different for ourselves vs. for others
   (Zikmund-Fisher et al., Journal of General Internal Medicine, 2006)

Risk for me ≠ Risk for you

Kids as vulnerable...BUT to what?

• To disease? Then want to protect from that
• To vaccine risks or external control? Then want to protect from that
The Current Moment

- COVID-19 risks feel less critical than before, but in different ways
  - Vaccinated: chance of severe disease much lower, so the tradeoff is different
  - Unvaccinated: accumulated experience of safety (or survival) builds confidence
    - “have lived this long without it…”

- But, burden of protective measures remain high
  - And, we now know protective measures aren’t perfect

**So, what is worth doing, and what isn’t?**
Decision Fatigue

Parents have to make **daily** risk choices, and choices are hard

1. Every aspect of daily life is a risk **tradeoff**
2. Information and guidance is constantly **changing**
3. Choices are driven by **values**, but our values are in **conflict**
   - Want safety for my kid AND learning at school
   - Want my child to get attention AND to be able to get work done
   - Want my child to play with grandparent AND for grandparent to be safe
4. **Responsibility**: Parents can’t get it wrong, but there is no clear right
Economics and the Role of Childcare during the Pandemic

Alicia Sasser Modestino
Associate Professor, School of Public Policy and Urban Affairs
Research Director, Dukakis Center for Urban and Regional Policy
About 50 million workers live with a child under age 14 in their household, representing one out of every two prime aged workers (25-54 years).

Childcare usage varies considerably across states, ranging from a low of 33% in Nevada to a high of 70% in Massachusetts among children age 5 and under.

Share of Children Ages 0-5 in Non-parental Care for More than 10 Hours per Week

Even before the pandemic, Hispanic and American Indian/Native Alaskan families were more likely to live in childcare deserts with few childcare options.

The disruption caused by the pandemic has raised concerns about the viability of the childcare industry and the consequences for childcare workers, parents, and children.

• **Childcare Industry:** Margins have always been thin for providers and the imposition of COVID-19 restrictions has caused many providers to go out of business, potentially leading to a **loss of 450,000 childcare slots**. Prior to the pandemic, U.S. businesses lost an estimated **$13 billion annually** because of their employees’ childcare challenges.

• **Childcare Workers:** Before the pandemic, the childcare industry employed 1.5 million individuals with $24 million in earnings, of whom 350K lost their jobs in March 2020. As of February 2022, employment was still 12% below pre-pandemic levels versus 2% overall—in part due to the very low pay in the industry.

• **Parents:** Before the pandemic, infant center-based care for a single child cost $11,000 per year or 18% of median household income, more than the cost of college tuition in 28 states. With greater demand and lower supply, the cost of care now averages $15,000.

• **Children:** One survey in Massachusetts found that 84% of parents reported that they were “worried that my child is missing out on important developmental opportunities (socialization and learning)” while daycares have been closed.
The labor force for women aged 20 and older is down by roughly 1 million from February of 2020, whereas men in the same age bracket have fully recovered.

Black and Hispanic women have suffered some of the steepest drops in employment since the pandemic began, almost twice that of men.

Note: Data are seasonally adjusted and represent workers age 20 years and older for gender breakdowns. No gender breakdown is available for Asian.
During 2020, nearly 20% of working parents reported that they lost a job or reduced their hours due to a lack of childcare—separate from other economic impacts.

- The impact of childcare on labor market outcomes largely fell on women who significantly increased time spent per week on schoolwork and playing with children, as well as household chores, compared to men.

- Among the unemployed, 26% of moms said it was due to childcare versus 14% of dads. Women were less likely to cite childcare as a reason for becoming unemployed if they had access to paid family leave, the ability to work from home, or support from coworkers.

- Moms were more likely than dads to reduce their hours if they were not able to work from home, losing 16 hours per week due to childcare. Women were less likely to cite childcare as a reason for reducing their hours if they had access to a childcare subsidy or support from managers.

- The lack of childcare had a greater impact on moms with lower incomes, younger children, or less flexible (in-person) jobs. Only 1/3 working parents has access to back-up childcare. Low-income parents were less likely to have back-up childcare and when they did, it was mostly to rely on grandparents as caregivers.
The pandemic has only served to increase inequality among groups of parents able to access childcare supports such as flexible hours and childcare subsidies.

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By The New York Times | Source: Morning Consult

Although the CARES Act provided an additional $3.5 billion for the Childcare Development Block Grant (CCDBG) for emergency support, the funding was inadequate and less than what each of the three major airlines received.

- In Massachusetts CCDBG funds covered only $2,200 per month to eligible childcare centers in July and August, where we had lost 13% of licensed childcare programs by summer 2021.

Barriers to the application process for the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) hampered its effectiveness in addressing the needs of the childcare industry.

- Only 53% of childcare centers and 25% of family childcare providers applied for a PPP loan and of those, only half of were approved for a loan—roughly equivalent to one-quarter of the childcare market.

The Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA) provided 10 weeks of paid family and medical leave at two-thirds of the individual’s salary, but workers had difficulty accessing those benefits through their employers.

- Paid leave benefit expired in December 2020 and only applied to employers with greater than 50 but less than 500 people, excluding hospitals and other employers of front-line workers.
American Rescue Plan Act provided much-needed relief for both parents and childcare providers but did little to help parents of school-aged children or childcare workers.

For Parents
- Expanded the child tax credit from $2,000 to $3,000, with an extra $600 supplement for kids five and younger.
- Set higher limits to deduct the cost of caregiving for dependents.
- Estimated 3.7 million children fell into poverty when payments stopped in 2022.

For Childcare Providers
- Included $15 billion allocation for child-development block grants.
- Plus $1 billion for the Head Start early education program.
- Established a $24 billion stabilization fund for child care providers to be distributed at the state level.

What’s Still Missing: Build Back Better
- Paid leave for new parents or workers experiencing caregiving needs.
- Universal pre-K for 3 and 4 year olds.
- Subsidies that make care affordable for households beyond the neediest (no more than 7% of income) and pay childcare workers a living wage.
Preparing leaders to address complex problems, serve communities, and build a just, sustainable, and resilient world.

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COVID-19 impacts on parents

Dr. Margaret Kerr
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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.

Kerr et al., 2021
Parental burnout: Intense exhaustion in the parental role; parents become emotionally detached from their children and doubtful of their capacity to be a good parent (Mikolajczak et al. 2019)
Women, low-income parents, and parents of color experienced disproportionate impacts to their mental health.

Chen et al., 2022; Clawson et al., 2021; Kerr et al., 2021; Zamarro et al., 2021
PARENTS REPORT MORE FREQUENT POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE EMOTIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Emotion</th>
<th>Less than usual</th>
<th>Same as usual</th>
<th>More than usual</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Worries or Anxiety</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Closeness to Children</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anger or Frustration</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gratitude</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guilt</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enjoyment or Satisfaction</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Less than usual | Same as usual | More than usual

Kerr et al., 2021
Additional Information

APA Stress in America Survey (February 2022)

Highs and Lows of Parenting in a Pandemic Research Brief

APA Monitor: The impact of parental burnout
References


