

# Parenting in the Pandemic: Investigating the Impact of COVID-19 on Families

Dr Kammi Schmeer

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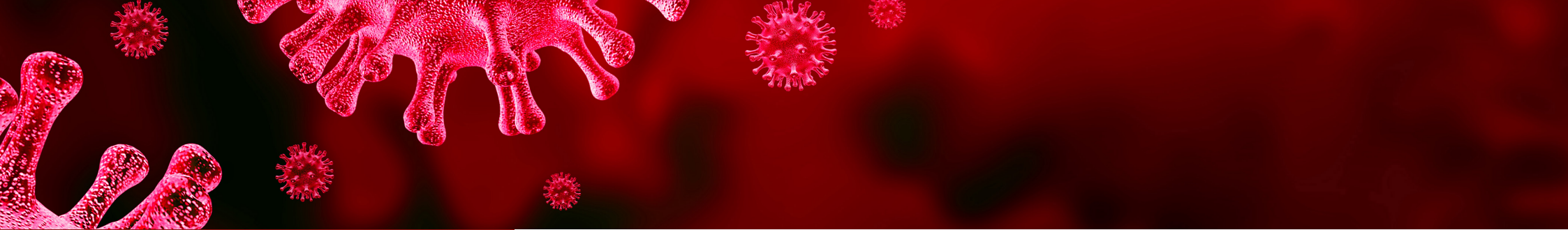
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# Parenting in the Pandemic: Investigating the Impact of COVID-19 on Families

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted daily life for families around the world, presenting unique challenges for parents and their children. Dr Kammi Schmeer and her colleagues from Ohio State University have been studying the impact of the pandemic on family social and economic conditions and parenting activities among a diverse sample of families in Ohio. Their research provides valuable insights into how families have navigated this unprecedented crisis and the potential long-term consequences for child development and well-being.

## The COVID-19 Crisis and Families with Young Children

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 brought about sudden and dramatic changes to the lives of families across the US. As schools and businesses closed and stay-at-home orders were implemented, families found themselves facing new social and economic pressures. The challenges were particularly acute for families with young children, as parents struggled to balance work, childcare, and their children's education and well-being.

In Ohio, Governor Mike DeWine was one of the first state leaders to implement a stay-at-home order, which began on 24 March 2020. This order required all non-essential businesses to close and limited out-of-home activities to those deemed essential, such as obtaining food or medical care. Schools remained closed for the remainder of the academic year, and many families found themselves navigating the challenges of remote learning and increased time at home together.

Dr Kammi Schmeer, a sociologist at Ohio State University, recognised the need to understand how these unprecedented changes impacted families with young children. Along with her colleagues, Dr Schmeer set out to investigate the social and economic disruptions experienced by families during this time, changes in parenting activities, and potential long-term consequences for child development.

## Assessing Family Disruption and Parenting

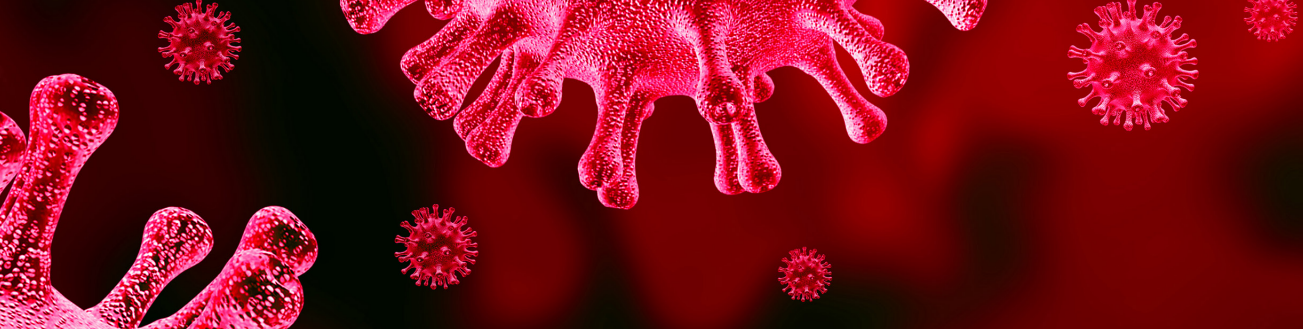
To study the impact of the pandemic on families with young children, Dr Schmeer and a team of researchers from the Ohio State Crane Center for Early Childhood Research and Policy surveyed caregivers who were actively enrolled in three ongoing

Crane Center longitudinal studies of families and learning environments in Ohio. The COVID and Families Study (CFS) was conducted in May 2020, during the height of the state's stay-at-home order, and included a diverse sample of 473 caregivers with children aged 4 to 9 years.

In the CFS, multiple sources of family social and economic disruption, including changes in household conflict, chaos, and demographic structure; exposure to the death of family members or friends; job and income losses; and the movement of work into the home environment, were assessed. Caregivers were also asked about changes in the time they spent engaging in various parenting activities with their children, such as playing, reading, helping with schoolwork, and disciplining.

Dr Schmeer's team found that families experienced significant social and economic challenges during this time. Nearly one-third of caregivers reported increased household conflict, and the average level of household chaos was high. Job and income losses were also common, particularly among lower-income households. At the same time, many caregivers, especially those in higher-income households, reported shifting to working from home.

Despite these challenges, the majority of caregivers reported increasing the time they spent in play and learning activities with their children during the stay-at-home period. However, changes in parenting activities varied across the sample. Time spent helping with schoolwork increased for nearly all families, while changes in playing, 'showing how', reading or telling stories, and disciplining were more variable.



## The Role of Social and Economic Conditions in Shaping Parenting

Dr Schmeer and her colleagues conducted multiple regression analyses to understand how social and economic disruptions were associated with changes in parenting activities. They found that social conditions, such as increased household conflict and chaos, were associated with changes in parenting time, but economic factors were not.

Higher levels of household chaos were consistently associated with lower odds of caregivers increasing time spent in learning-related activities, such as playing, reading, and helping with schoolwork, and higher odds of increasing time spent disciplining the focal child. Increased household conflict was associated with more time spent disciplining children as well, but also more time spent helping with school work. This may reflect both higher conflict and time spent disciplining with the sudden increase in caregivers' need to help children with schooling and parenting responses to stress in the home environment.

Interestingly, while economic disruptions, such as job and income losses, were not strongly associated with changes in parenting activities overall, there were some differences according to household income level. Job loss among higher-income households was associated with increased playtime with children, suggesting that caregivers in more economically secure households may have had more flexibility and other resources needed to weather job loss and invest time in parenting than those in lower-income households.

## Implications for Child Development and Family Well-Being

The COVID and Families Study findings have important implications for understanding the potential long-term consequences of the pandemic on child development and family well-being. While many caregivers reported increasing their time spent in play and learning activities with their children, the quality and context of these interactions may have been compromised by the stressful conditions of the pandemic.

Dr Schmeer and her colleagues note that parenting under duress, even when it involves increased time investment, may not confer the same benefits to parent and child well-being as when parents actively engage in these activities. Moreover, the social disruptions experienced by families, such as increased conflict and chaos, may have negative impacts on child development that outweigh the potential benefits of increased parenting time.

The study also highlights the importance of considering the unique challenges lower-income families face during the pandemic. These families were more likely to experience job and income losses, as well as the death of family members or friends, which may have limited their ability to invest in parenting activities and support their children's development.



As families navigate new challenges in the aftermath of the pandemic, studying the longer-term impacts on parenting, child development, and family well-being will be important. Future research should also aim to identify factors that promote resilience and positive adaptation among families in the face of adversity.



## Future Directions

Dr Schmeer and her team acknowledge the limitations of their study, including the non-representative nature of the sample and the reliance on caregiver reports. However, their findings provide valuable insights into the experiences of families with young children during the early stages of the pandemic and lay the groundwork for future research.

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Dr Schmeer's work highlights the critical role of social and economic conditions in shaping parenting and child development, particularly during times of crisis. By understanding how families have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, researchers, policymakers, and practitioners can work to develop targeted interventions and support systems that promote the well-being of children and families in the years to come.

The COVID and Families Study offers a valuable contribution to our understanding of the pandemic's impact on families with young children. As Dr Schmeer and her colleagues continue their research in this area, their findings will undoubtedly inform efforts to support families and promote positive child development in the face of unprecedented challenges.



## MEET THE RESEARCHER

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Dr Kammi Schmeer obtained her PhD in Sociology from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 2007. She is currently a Professor in the Department of Sociology at Ohio State University, where she also serves as the Associate Director of the Institute for Population Research and as an Affiliate of the Crane Center for Early Childhood Research and Policy. Dr Schmeer's research focuses on how social contexts, particularly families, affect health and well-being across the life course and in diverse populations. She has published extensively on topics such as poverty, family structure, household dynamics, and child health in the US and abroad. Dr Schmeer's work has been supported by major grants from the National Institutes of Health and other prestigious funders.

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### FUNDING

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### FURTHER READING

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