

INFORMATION ADVISORY | May 20, 2020

Family well-being the focus of Ontario study

Goal to better understand how parents and children are coping during COVID-19 pandemic

HAMILTON, ON — McMaster University researchers have launched a province-wide online survey—*OntarioParentSurvey.ca*—to help understand what families with children are experiencing in the context of COVID-19, and what services families and caregivers may need. The Ontario Parent Survey, which launched Tuesday May 5, is part of a larger intervention study funded by the Public Health Agency of Canada created to promote positive parenting practices and improve child outcomes.

The study's general themes focus on the well-being and health of children and caregivers, family stressors, family relations, and how COVID-19 has specifically had an impact on individuals. The online questionnaire explores more specifically, family constructs—overall family functioning, couples' relationship quality, caregiver-child relationship quality, parenting and discipline strategies, caregiver and child mental health, and COVID-19-specific adversity.

Canadians are experiencing some form of prolonged isolation alongside widespread economic hardship, due to public health measures such as physical distancing and staying-in-place policies enacted across all government levels. The Ontario Parent Survey aims to investigate the impact of COVID-19 and its associated restrictions on families across Ontario.

“We need a better understanding of how the current lockdown measures are affecting families and children aged 0 to 17 years,” said lead researcher Andrea Gonzalez, Associate Professor and Tier II Canada Research Chair in Family Health and Preventive Interventions. “This study will help inform community practice on how to assist families through these challenging times, now and in the future. So, we want to hear from parents from across the province.”

While community agencies are moving quickly to offer their programming via different venues and platforms, the rapidly evolving nature of the COVID-19 pandemic has left governmental, public health agencies, academic, and community organizations unprepared to rapidly adapt and fully respond to the increasing and changing needs of caregivers and children who are coping with unparalleled challenges.

“The COVID-19 pandemic is a time of increased stressors and reduced supports for children and families, which raises the risk for a wide range of health problems, including family violence,” said Harriet MacMillan, Distinguished University Professor, Chedoke Health Chair in Child Psychiatry. “We need to find ways to reach out to families and support them while emphasizing safety.”

The Ontario Parent Study is important as the evidence generated from this study will be used to help develop pragmatic and methodological strategies required for implementing online interventions in humanitarian settings like COVID-19 and possible future pandemics.

“We know existing family strengthening and parenting interventions that have been previously implemented in humanitarian settings have been effective in improving caregiver mental health, improving couple’s relationship quality, reducing harsh parenting strategies, and improving child outcomes,” said Gonzalez.

Starting Tuesday, May 5 and for six weeks, parents and caregivers can participate in the survey by going to www.OntarioParentSurvey.ca

The Offord Centre for Child Studies is a multi-disciplinary research institute established in 1992. Through collaboration across fields such as child psychiatry, psychology, epidemiology, pediatrics, policy development, social work, and nursing, the Centre’s aim is to better understand children’s mental health problems with the overall goal of improving the lives of children and youth.

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