# **Original Research Article**

DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.18203/2394-6040.ijcmph20213006

# Family engagement amidst COVID-19 pandemic: a cross-sectional study from Pakistan

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Received: 14 June 2021 Revised: 14 June 2021 Accepted: 15 July 2021

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# **ABSTRACT**

**Background:** Family engagement in the early years of a child's life is one of the most powerful predictors of a child's development. Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, family engagement has been affected in numerous ways. Thus, this study aims to identify the perception of parents on the change in dynamics of family engagement between parents and their children during the pandemic in Pakistan.

**Methods:** A cross-sectional study design was followed using an online survey. The survey was administered to parents to assess their perception related to the effect of COVID-19 on family engagement as a whole.

**Results:** The 90 parents participated in this online survey majority of whom had children aged 9 years and above (n=30). Most of the parents talked to their children daily, had one mealtime together, watched Television, and spent time with each other daily. There were some statements over which the parents marked 'frequently' and 'hardly ever' such as doing exercise, reading to the child, and supervising screen time. Results of the study show that the COVID-19 pandemic has affected interactions between parents and their children.

**Conclusions:** Family is the basic unit of society. It plays a significant role in establishing life-long positive relationships. Family is a child's first exposure to a nurturing environment and impactful engagements which helps in growth and mental development. COVID-19 has posed an overwhelming burden and affected the social interactions of parents with children. Social media advocacy and schools have supported in providing resources for continued learning with the participation of other members of the family.

Keywords: Family engagement, Parenting, COVID-19

# INTRODUCTION

Family engagement is the process by which genuine relationships are built within families. It should be family-centric and should utilize a strength-based approach for creating and maintaining relationships within the family and must focus on accomplishing goals together. Family engagement also refers to the systematic inclusion of families in activities and programs

that promote children's development, learning, and wellness. This includes planning, development, and evaluation of various exercises and rituals to be conducted together. For family engagement to be integrated through early childhood systems and programs, teachers and schools must include families as essential and equal partners in delivering services to children that promote learning and development, foster positive

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relationships between families and staff, and also support families.<sup>2</sup>

Family engagement is conceptualized and addressed for reference in a wide range of capacities including child welfare, juvenile justice, education, and early childhood development All disciplines serve the shared purpose of sustained engagement and collaboration with the families in the holistic development of the child.<sup>3</sup> Family engagement in the early years of a child's life is one of the most powerful predictors of a child's development. Families are children's first teachers, and it is the quality of parent-child relationships and interactions that create the foundational skills that children need to be successful in school and further in life.<sup>4</sup>

The involvement of families in early education is particularly important for children as it helps create consistency between the home and school environments.<sup>5</sup> The outcomes of engaged parents are positive and powerful: increased support for children's learning at home, more impactful parenting, and improved family well-being. Parents and schoolteachers see benefits like a child's improved cognitive development and academic performance, better socio-emotional development, and better mental health).<sup>2</sup> This also helps in establishing strong home-school connections that support the children's achievement in the long term. Engaged parents and families better understand the curriculum and school expectations and facilitate learning at home. Moreover, they actively participate in policymaking at the school and community level.1

Literature supports that family engagement is important across all age groups and grades, but perhaps most significant in adolescents since that is where there is an increase in dropout rates and decrease in student performance at school.4 The connectedness of family in middle or secondary school students is vital for success in academics, excelling in one's career, and succeeding in achieving goals.<sup>2</sup> To encourage family engagement in the education system, educators should parents/families in a sophisticated manner and provide a diverse range of strategies to involve all levels of families in the growth and development of students. Research demonstrates that students show more adaptive and less dysfunctional behaviors when parents are more involved in their education and childhood development processes. In a healthy home environment, students also demonstrate more positive relationships with peers and adults, positive social skills, and decreased problematic behaviors. When parents are more involved, students show more interest in learning, apply effective academic strategies, pay more attention to schoolwork, and focus on achieving their goals.

COVID-19 pandemic has had an overwhelming effect on all phases of life including early childhood development and the mental health of children. Early childhood is a crucial time for brain development, social-behavioral learning, learning connection-making, and approach to education.<sup>4</sup> The foundation is based on genes and exposure-family and caregiver's involvement and interaction with other people and the surroundings. During the pandemic, disease risk, parental job loss, food insecurity, and disruption in health and social support system caused stress and impacted the quality of interactions of children with parents or caregivers and therefore it misbalanced the environment which children need for socio-mental development.<sup>6</sup>

The change of learning activities from school to home has brought a challenge. The readiness of students, parents. and teachers to online teaching and remote learning, accessibility of the internet, and the skill and expertise required to operate the devices used for teaching are just a few of the limitations faced by families and schools.<sup>6</sup> A study was conducted in Pekanbaru, Riau Province back in August 2020 aiming to find out the parental engagement in children's online learning. The study participants were 148 parents of children in the first and second grades of the elementary school in Pekanbaru. Among all parental engagement indicators in children's online learning, the indicator of supervising the children's study time score was 81.7% whereas providing learning facilities scored the lowest (64.8%). This study also reported that most mothers (87.84%) were the ones assisting children in home learning activities<sup>6</sup>. Most parents were engaged in online activities with their children, however, a few parents faced obstacles and difficulty in coping with this challenge. Studies also support that schools and communities should promote the concept of family engagement and acknowledge the role of both parents from early ages till the continuity of higher education<sup>7</sup>. The timely inclusion of families in early childhood development and education paves a path to a more efficient home learning environment that acts as a foundation of academic success, bringing children and parents together and creating strong relationships with the school and community. The limitations presented with the COVID-19 pandemic have affected the dynamics of the families and communities as a whole and consequently have presented a hindrance in the development and growth of the younger generations.

# Purpose

The present study aims to identify the perception of parents on the dynamics of family engagement between parents and their children during the COVID-19 pandemic in Pakistan.

#### **METHODS**

This was a cross-sectional study design was followed using an online survey to the parents and families who attended training sessions on family engagement at a tertiary care hospital setting in Karachi, Pakistan. The purpose of choosing these participants were the easy approachability element during times of COVID-19 as

our hospital was providing free of charge online family education on various child development elements. The total study period was six months started from its conception in May 2020 till December 2020. The study got an ethical review committee's (ERC) exemption from the Aga Khan university hospital, Karachi with the number 2021-5887-15504.

## Sampling

Since there were no prior studies conducted understanding the family engagement at the time our study, we choose universal sampling design to explore the trends of family engagement amongst our participants. There was a total of 139 people who attended the workshop and all were provided with this survey form out of which 94 parents consented to use their data for research and scholarly purposes.

#### Data collection method

A self-reported questionnaire was administered to the parents who had children of ages 2.5-10 years. They were divided into four categories-parents of children 0-3 years, 3-6 years, 6-9 years, and >9 years. The survey was administered to the parents to assess their perception related to family engagement during the time of the COVID pandemic. The data collection was done as a part of a pre-webinar survey from the parents in Pakistan. This online survey was made using the web-based Google forms link. The survey contained both close-ended questions and open-ended questions related to the parent's engagement with their children during the COVID-19 pandemic. This questionnaire was made by the members of the research team to extract the preliminary findings on family engagement during the pandemic. The participants who showed interest in attending the webinar were sent this link via email and the responses received were used for data analysis. The survey link also had a page for informed consent at the beginning where participants were given the details related to the study and their right to withdraw/not participate in the study. The confidentiality of the participants was maintained by ensuring that data was not shared with any person other than the members of the research team.

# Data collection tool

This survey was a self-made tool to extract the preliminary findings related to parent's perception of the engagement of their children with them during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study did not use any identifiers of the respondents to maintain confidentiality. The questionnaire included the age of the children, which was divided into four categories: 0-3 years, 3-6 years, 6-9 years, 9 years, and above. This was then followed by a series of questions related to the parent's interest in talking to the child, asking about the daily routine, playing with, reading to, helping with academic work,

and exercising with the child. Further questions about eating at least one meal a day with the child, watching television, supervising screen time, and being available to the child on call, were also asked. The answer to all these statements was given as "daily, frequently, hardly ever and never". The survey also had four open-ended questions: (1) What is the role of the family/parents in times of COVID-19 to keep children engaged at home? Enlist 3-5 pointers. (2) What do you think about family engagement and its impact on children? (3) How often should families engage with the children and why? (4) Who should engage with the children and why? The open-ended questions were additionally intended to explore the parents' perceptions of family engagement during the pandemic.

# Data analysis plan

Simple descriptive analysis was done using SPSS and manual qualitative analysis were performed to explore the trends.

### **RESULTS**

Altogether, 94 parents participated in the survey. Out of 94 parents, 23 (24.5%) had their children within the age category of 0-3 years, 21 parents (22.3%) had their children within the age category of 3-6 years, 20 (21.3%) had their children within the age category of 6-9 years, and 30 (31.9%) had their children aged 9 years and above (Table 1).

Table 1: Children age category.

Age (years)	Frequency
0-3	23
3-6	21
6-9	20
9 and above	30
Total	94

There were altogether 10 statements to assess the parent's thoughts on family engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic. The first statement of the survey was related to talking to the child. Out of 94 parents, 71 (75.5%) responded as daily, 20 (21.3%) responded as frequently, 2 (2.1%) responded as hardly ever and 1 (1.1%) responded as never to the statement. The second statement of the survey was related to asking children about their routines. Out of 94 parents, 57 (60.6%) responded as daily, 30 (31.9%) responded as frequently, 6 (6.4%) responded as hardly ever, and 1 (1.1%) responded as never to the statement.

The third statement of the survey was related to playing with the child. Out of 94 parents, 55 (58.5%) responded as daily, 31 (33%) responded as frequently, and 8 (8.5%) responded as hardly ever to the statement. None of the parents responded never to this statement. The fourth statement of survey was related to reading to the child.

Out of 94 parents, 46 (48.9%) responded as daily, 34 (36.2%) responded as frequently, 12 (12.8%) responded as hardly ever, and 2 (2.1%) responded as never.

The fifth statement of the survey was related to helping in the homework/schoolwork/academics. Out of 94 parents, 51 (54.3%) responded as daily, 33 (35.1%) responded as frequently, 5 (5.3%) responded as hardly frequent, and 5 (5.3%) responded as never to this statement. The sixth statement of the survey was related to exercising with the child. Out of 94 parents, 32 (34%) responded as daily, 38 (40.4%) responded as frequently, 16 (17%) responded as hardly ever, and 8 (8.5%) responded as never to this statement.

The seventh statement of the survey was related to eating a one-time meal with the child. Out of 94 parents, 73 (77.7%) responded as daily, 17 (18.1%) responded as

frequently, and 4 (4.3%) responded as hardly ever. None of the parents responded never to this statement. The eighth statement of the survey was related to watching TV with the child. Out of 94 parents, 54 (57.4%) responded as daily, 26 (27.7%) responded as frequently, 11 (11.7%) responded as hardly ever, and 3 (3.2%) responded as never to this statement.

The ninth statement of the survey was related to supervising the screen time. Out of 94 parents, 49 (52.1%) responded as daily, 34 (36.2%) responded as frequently, 8 (8.5%) responded as hardly ever, and 3 (3.2%) responded as never to this statement. The tenth statement of the survey was related to the availability of on-call. Out of 94 parents, 68 (72.3%) responded as daily, 23 (24.5%) responded as frequently, 2 (2.1%) responded as hardly ever, and 1 (1.1%) responded as never to this statement.

Table 2: Statements related to family engagement during COVID-19 pandemic.

Statements	Daily (%)	Frequently (%)	Hardly ever (%)	Never (%)
Talk to the child	71 (75.5)	20 (21.3)	2 (2.1)	1 (1.1)
Ask children about their routine	57 (60.6)	30 (31.9)	6 (6.4)	1 (1.1)
Play with the child	55 (58.5)	31 (33)	8 (8.5)	-
Read to the child	46 (48.9)	34 (36.2)	12 (12.8)	2 (2.1)
Help in homework/ schoolwork/academic	51 (54.3)	33 (35.1)	5 (5.3)	5 (5.3)
Exercise with the child	32 (34)	38 (40.4)	16 (17)	8 (8.5)
Eat one-time meal with the child	73 (77.7)	17 (18.1)	4 (4.3)	-
Watch TV with the child	54 (57.4)	26 (27.7)	11 (11.7)	3 (3.2)
Supervise screen time	49 (52.1)	34 (36.2)	8 (8.5)	3 (3.2)
Available on call	68 (72.3)	23 (24.5)	2 (2.1)	1 (1.1)

The survey also contained 4 open-ended questions. The first question was related to the parent's perception of their role in the times of COVID-19 to keep their children engaged at home. The common themes emerging from their responses included counseling the children, playing with them, giving emotional support, spending quality time and engaging with the children in extra-curricular activities (cooking, painting, drawing, planting, playing, etc.), keeping them updated about the current situation related to the pandemic, and keeping children engaged in productive work.

The second question was related to parent's perception of family engagement and its impact on the children. The common theme derived from their responses included that the COVID pandemic had given parents the chance to stay connected with the children 24 hours which enabled the building of social and emotional health while also building confidence in the kids. One of the parents stated:

"Child gets closer to family member especially adult members, sense of love and security build-up, responsibility develops and family bonding with the child becomes stronger".

The third question was related to the parent's perception of how often the family should engage with the child and why? Their responses concluded that the engagement should be very often as it helps children to learn to take care of themselves and other essential social skills. One of the parents stated:

"It must be done regularly with different activities so that they feel important and understand their role and responsibilities in the family".

The last question was related to the parent's perception of who should engage with the child and why? Most of the parents responded that both mother and father are important to engage with the child because they believe that children need the support of both the parents when they are under pressure. While some also added that other family members including sibling interactions are also important for the child. One of the parents stated:

"Everyone for everything"

# **DISCUSSION**

The findings of the data revealed that the activities like talking together, eating one meal, making sure family is available on call were happening almost regularly. Whereas, asking children about their daily routine, playing with them, participating in their home, and watching TV were reported to be done with 50% and above regularity. However, activities like reading with the children, doing exercise, and supervising screen time were rated below 50% on regularity.

Family and parental engagement and connectedness are crucial to a child's overall development and wellbeing at all ages from infancy to adolescence. Moreover, the quality of child-parent relationships and interaction significantly impacts a child's skill development and growth. Family engagement plays a still greater role in the early education of a child, consequently improving academic performance, cognitive development, and overall enhancing physical and mental health. During the COVID-19 pandemic when schools were closed and online/remote teaching started, parents and families played more expansive roles including that of teachers, mentors, guides, and counselors of their children and the relevance of family engagement was enhanced many folds. 1.4.6.8

As our study set out to explore parent's engagement with their children during the COVID-19 pandemic, we found that during these challenging times not all parents actively spoke to their children daily and even lesser inquired about their routines. The figures/percentages were further reduced when we asked about activities and interactions such as playing and reading to their children. Studies show that play is essential for the cognitive, physical, social, and emotional well-being of children and youth.9 Playtime also offers an ideal opportunity for parents to engage fully with their children and strengthen their bond. <sup>10</sup> However, the playtime with parents was not enjoyed by all children. Previous studies have attributed this to hurried lifestyle, changes in family structure, increased attention to academics, and enrichment activities at the expense of child-centered play. However, during the COVID-19 pandemic factors like quarantines, economic issues, stress and anxiety of parents regarding the infection, etc. may have further decreased time for playing with their children. Whereas, during these burdened times when children were not going to school and were restricted to their homes, they needed more parental attention and playtime.

exploring activities like helping homework/schoolwork/academics approximately half of the parents responded as 'affirmative' daily, around a quarter selected 'frequently' and 10% 'hardly ever' or 'never' helped in their child's homework. This could be detrimental to a child's development and acquisition of academic skills since online teaching requires greater parental involvement, guidance, and monitoring. Studies suggest that parental engagement in home-based learning activities is linked to children's academic skills. 11 Among other life skills, resilience and a growth-driven mindset are believed to be most important to survive in the increasingly uncertain present and an even more uncertain and unpredictable future. The world relearnt an important lesson that compassion, collaboration, and cooperation are integral for humans to coexist in harmony, succeed, and feel worthy. Schools, hospitals, academia, and media have played an important role in sharing stories and providing support to strengthen the institution of the family. Schools and academia across the globe have begun to reimagine and redefine the taught and hidden curriculum to focus more on teaching life skills and making life-ready learners. Hospitals and professional caregivers have started thinking of ways to promote holistic wellness of the body, mind, and heart. 12,13

Our study found that less than half of the parents read with/to their children every day even though this activity has been highly valued by literature. A study attributes a quantity of parent-child book reading interactions predicting children's later receptive vocabulary, reading, comprehension, and internal motivation to read. Moreover, early parent-child book reading can have positive collateral impacts on parents' stress and the parent-child relationship over time. Lower parent-child reading in our context could be attributed to low literacy of parents, time constraints attributed to financial stresses, the diversified interest of parents, multiple children of different ages, etc.

Our study also revealed, lack of supervised screen time. Social media has been sharing stories to emotionally move the people, create awareness of social issues and advocate peace, respect, gender equality, the importance of quality of life, wellness, and education, along with many other topics. Schools, hospitals, academia, and media can continue to provide support to families by drawing attention to the importance of the institution and the mutual benefit for humankind by providing resources for continued learning. These resources include training opportunities, availability of related literature, support groups and community programs, health awareness campaigns, and advocacy in the media.

# Limitation

As COVID-19 was on surge at the time of this project diverse population or selective sampling could not be managed. Hence, the findings cannot be generalized. Another study with diverse population and intervention-based family engagement is recommended for the further research.

#### **CONCLUSION**

A family is the basic unit of society. A child in the growing years must have one positive relationship with an adult male and female each. These relationships are capable of nurturing an individual's capacity to learn, develop and nurture positive relationships. The child gains confidence with reassurance and support, enabling him to feel worthy and competent to contribute his share to the world The caring adults derive a sense of

fulfillment and worthiness to have made a positive impact in a child's life, especially in the capacity of a parent. Family engagement is perhaps the most fundamental requirement to ensure the healthy growth development of children and the family. The Covid-19 pandemic posed a great burden on many families with a quick transition to remote learning and limited social activities. Reduced income and furloughing put families under greater stress, especially with the threat of contracting the virus and illness in the family. Public institutions such as schools tried to respond to the need of supporting families in these times. Activities to foster engagement helped by building knowledge and skills to strengthen their relationship with their children. This provided much-needed emotional and physiological safety and support.

Funding: No funding sources

Conflict of interest: None declared

Ethical approval: The study was approved by the

Institutional Ethics Committee

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Cite this article as: Hussain M, Rahim KA, Shafiq F, Allana A, Bhamani S. Family engagement amidst COVID-19 pandemic: a cross-sectional study from Pakistan. Int J Community Med Public Health 2021:8:3805-10.