In our inaugural report for the Family and Child Health Innovations Program we are focusing on and celebrating the ways mothers influence the health of their children. While this may seem implicit to being a mother, we are constantly surprised to learn the scientific contributions mothers contribute in unexpected ways to their offspring’s wellbeing. Below are examples from the scientific literature published recently. These examples cover the biological, psychological and sociological interface of mothers and children in the midst of most recent issue affecting motherhood—the COVID-19 Pandemic. For future updates from FCHIP, please sign up here.

BECOMING A MOTHER DURING COVID-19

- **Rest assured, pregnancy and having a baby is safe during COVID-19**

  Although pregnancy is a time of immune suppression, pregnancy does not seem to infer a higher risk of COVID-19 infection, despite pregnancy being a risk factor in prior outbreaks (1918, H1N1 2009 flu, SARS epidemics). When pregnant women with COVID-19 pneumonia had testing of their amniotic fluid, cord blood and breastmilk done, as well as their baby’s throat swabbed there was no evidence for mother to child (vertical) transmission in late pregnancy. Pregnant women also experience respiratory symptoms such as fever and cough that are similar to non-pregnant adults, suggesting that being pregnant with COVID-19 appears to be well tolerated for mother and baby.


- **Breastfeeding is safe and protective for babies**

  The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) advocates breastfeeding for COVID-19 positive women, as breast milk protects the baby from illness and is still considered the best source of nutrition for new babies. Further, COVID-19 has not been detected in breast milk. To avoid mother to newborn (horizontal) transmission, mothers can wear a facemask and wash hands before breastfeeding. If expressing breast milk, wash hands and clean breast pump carefully. Families can also consider having a healthy family member feed the expressed milk to the baby.

  *CDC website*, page last reviewed April 15, 2020
**MOTHERING DURING COVID-19**

- **Tune into your children’s concerns and model healthy choices**
  In social isolation, parents can attune to their children’s physical and mental needs. Home isolation can negatively affect health due to irregular sleep, more screen time, less physical activity, poorer diets, limited outdoor time and decreased time with friends. Children may be more stressed due to fears of themselves or their parents getting sick, frustration and boredom, lack of personal space, and family financial and other stressors. Parents, schools, and communities can work together to manage student academic needs with advocacy for healthy lifestyles, including guidance from school psychologists and social workers. Parents can model good health behaviors as well as talk directly about the pandemic at an age appropriate level.

  “Home confinement could offer a good opportunity to enhance the interaction between parents and children, involve children in family activities, and improve their self-sufficiency skills.”

- **Share your COVID-19 concerns with your children**
  Parents should share their own honest concerns about the uncertainties and psychological challenges of the COVID-19, which allows children to feel comfortable sharing their feelings. Children will feel reassured and that their feelings are normal, which can reduce their anxiety and help them cope. Parents should account for their child’s age and level of understanding, and work to make sure children are reassured and do not feel frightened or guilty.

- **Continue your family routines and bring an abundance of patience**
  The World Health Organization Department of Mental Health and Substance Use developed messages to support mental and psychosocial well-being, including those specific to parents. Children should be allowed to express emotions and communicate their feelings, stay close to parents, and be encouraged to socialize and play responsibly. Parents can help by continuing daily routines, having honest and age-appropriate discussions, and understand that children may be more demanding and attached during this time of crisis.

- **Family functions are changing in the pandemic**
  
  *Women’s work more likely “essential”*
  One in three jobs held by women has been deemed essential, higher than the percentage for men, with women of color more likely to be performing essential jobs compared to white women. Women also represent 73 percent of U.S. health care workers who have been infected with COVID-19.

  [The Lancet, March 2020]
  [The Lancet Child & Adolescent Health, March 2020]
  [World Health Organization, March 2020]
  [New York Times, April 2020]
Established in 2019, the central tenet of the Family and Child Health Innovations Program (FCHIP) is "Children Thrive when Families Thrive." FCHIP is housed at Ann & Robert H. Lurie Children’s Hospital of Chicago, FCHIP is part of the Mary Ann & J. Milburn Smith Child Health Research, Outreach, and Advocacy (SCHROA) Center and directed by Craig F. Garfield, MD, MAPP.

Opportunities for gender equity
Due to closures in schools and childcare centers, and less grandparent-provided childcare, more parents are currently watching children without help. Changing social norms and expectations, and more fathers at home taking care of children, could improve progress towards increased gender equality with more equal divisions of child care and household work. Businesses may also work to reduce gender inequalities by offering more flexible work schedules and ability to telecommute, which will allow more family flexibility.


SELF-CARE DURING A PANDEMIC

• Moms: When you care for yourself, you can better care for your children

Parents are currently dealing with fear and uncertainty about the future and keeping families safe, while also managing multiple roles, responsibilities and expectations. Parents can care for their own needs in order to be more present and available to nurture their children during this difficult time. This self-care, or preserving one’s own health, is necessary, as is the ability to be flexible in recognizing and adapting to changing family needs, which can help cope with the stress and uncertainty of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In Press, Behavior Analysis in Practice, April 2020

• Sleep hygiene and rest are essential to your wellbeing

Home confinement…working from home, homeschooling children, minimizing outings, reducing social interactions can disrupt sleep, which has consequences for daily functioning and emotional regulation. Pandemic sleep recommendations for women who have young children include keeping regular sleep times for your children and for yourself, keeping busy with activities you are familiar with and enjoy doing, exercise regularly, follow your natural sleep rhythm and circadian preference, and making the last 30 minutes before bedtime a regular routine that includes calming activities.

Journal of Sleep Research, April 2020

The next FCHIP report will be a celebration of Father’s Day and the role fathers play in child health. If you would like future updates from FCHIP, please sign up here.