

## Pandemic Parenting: A Thematic Analysis

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### ABSTRACT

With educational institutions and work organizations closing down due to the COVID-19 pandemic, parents have experienced changes in their routines due to increased parental demand. This study explored pandemic parenting and parent perceptions towards family well-being. 11 parents (Female = 7, Male = 4) of children between 2 to 26 years from urban and suburban areas were interviewed using snowball sampling and thematically analyzed. Early child-rearing experiences, spousal involvement, and social support seem to be excellent predictors of parent perception towards pandemic parenting. Parents have adjusted to changed routines, and have distinct outlooks towards the future. Specific positive and negative mediators to parental well-being were also identified. Compared to other studies, Indian parents seem to have adjusted well to the household changes brought about by the pandemic. These findings can be used by community healthcare providers to serve as a basis for creating better parent resources to support their well-being and allay their fears.

**Keywords:** *Pandemic Parenting, Indian Parenting, Physical Activity, Well-being, Online Education, Depression*

With educational institutions and work organizations closing down due to the COVID-19 pandemic, families are being subjected to increased home confinement. Parents have experienced changes in their plans and routine due to increased parental demand, with additional economic and health concerns. Along with parenting, they have multiple roles, like spouse, child, employee and other social roles. With restricted outings, stringent protocols of social distancing, and fear of disease among other health concerns, each role has to be restructured to meet specific needs. The same individual is subjected to numerous changes: as an employee, they have to work from home or take extra precautions if travelling to work. As a child, they worry about their elderly parents' vulnerability to the virus. As a spouse, they have to ensure that the family's needs are met amidst uncertainty. Many schools have also entrusted parents with the continuous evaluation of their child's academic performance during and after class hours, along with them having to handle their work life and house responsibilities (Mohanty, 2020).

Studies across the world have revealed a markedly significant decrease in parents' well-being. Four weeks into the lockdown, a study in Italy showed significant parenting-related

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exhaustion in parents, more severely in mothers (Marchetti et al., 2020). These symptoms were worse in parents with psychological distress, lower parental resilience, single parents, fewer perceived social connections, marital satisfaction, and those who had children with special needs (Wu, et al., 2020). These higher rates of psychological distress in parents have been found to be associated with higher rates of hyperactivity/inattention in children (Marchetti et al., 2020). While comparing before and after school closure, a significant increase in parenting stress has been reported in the latter (Hiraoka & Tomoda, 2020). Along with significantly high parental stress levels, increased home confinement has also been associated with depression, anxiety and burnout in parents (Johnson et al., 2020).

With schools and universities switching to virtual education, parents and guardians are expected to closely monitor and invigilate their child's classroom performance round the clock. A survey conducted by the online learning platform Canvas, suggested that parents are struggling to keep their children focused on schoolwork, balance their responsibilities with the children's academics and understand unclear instructions from their child's teachers (Canvas, 2020). Online classes have also led to a negative impact on children's behavior and health, which may be attributed to lesser outdoor activities and interaction with same-aged peers. Compared to pre-pandemic times, children were found to have poorer attention and concentration, reduced hygiene and self-care, and a general increase in irritability, which has become a matter of concern for their parents (Grover et al., 2020).

The suddenness of COVID-19 and the ensuing changes have urged people to find new ways to cope with the latest developments in every field. In an estimation of mental health problems during the first 7 months of the pandemic in India, depression (among 25% of the sample), anxiety (~28%) and stress (11.6%) have been found to be prevalent among the general public during the pandemic (Lakhan et al., 2020; Verma & Sharma, 2020). Another recent survey by the Indian Psychiatry Society revealed a 20% increase in patients with mental illness since the outbreak (Loiwal, 2020). These and similar other studies have confirmed that the pandemic has contributed to a significant deterioration in people's mental health. As COVID-19 continues to become a debilitating pandemic, people have been reporting concerns about their employment, spreading of the virus, and many other socioeconomic worries. Their fears would be intensified by intolerance of uncertainty, health anxiety, media exposure and risk for loved ones (Mertens et al., 2020). Although many studies have been conducted to examine the psychological impact and fear of COVID-19 on healthcare professionals, youth and the general population (Chatterjee et al., 2020; Sreelakshmi et al., 2020), minimal attention has been given to parenting in India (Malhi, et al., 2021).

Indian parenting has been suggested to be extremely intensive and involved (Bapat, 2017). With the pandemic shifting education to online platforms and building pressure for parental involvement, parents may be vulnerable to increased parenting stress (Mohanty, 2020). Studies have also shown that home confinement due to lockdowns and COVID-19 protocols has a negative impact on children's behavior (Grover et al., 2020), which may be an added stressor for parents. The uncertainty due to the pandemic, augmented by economic stress and financial worries, may have affected parents in India, just like in other countries (Hiraoka & Tomoda, 2020; Marchetti, et al., 2020).

In India's family-centric society, parents feel the utmost responsibility to ensure their children are equipped well to have a bright future. The unpredictable scenario brought about by the virus may have affected a parent in their perceptions towards education, employment

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and the general safety of their child. Despite a number of studies being conducted to assess the psychological impact of the pandemic quantitatively, the underlying themes and contributing factors to parenting stress have not been examined. Due to multiple social roles, these individuals may be susceptible to prevalent pandemic stressors. Because of the dearth in related research, potential mental health hazards and contributors may go undetected. If stress due to the parental role was to be a major contributing factor to the prevalent stress in India, the existing stigma and negative attitudes associated with mental health problems (Gaiha et al., 2020) may place the already stressed parents into a vulnerable population.

According to parenting studies conducted in different countries, it is evident that the parent population is susceptible to added stress and increased psychological distress during the pandemic. These results may be exacerbated in Indian parents due to their intensive and involved style of parenting. The findings of this study could help understand the levels of well-being among parents and management of multiple social roles. These discussions could lead policy makers to develop parent-targeted interventions to help parents cope with the psychological stressors and manage the parental role more efficiently during the pandemic.

### **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

#### *Objective*

The study aimed to investigate the well-being of parents and observe the emerging themes in Indian parenting during COVID-19, like their perceptions towards online education, coping and co-parenting, continuous interaction with their child, fear of the virus, worries about their employment, and worries about their children's future in the face of the pandemic. Family dynamics were keenly observed to compare initial and current patterns of adjustment during the pandemic. By analyzing these themes, this study's objective was to explore the coping methods employed by parents during uncertainty to deal with stress and build resilience.

#### *Research Design*

This study followed a social constructivist paradigm with a phenomenological approach. Parenting experiences vary among parents and cultures, and the pandemic's effect could be possibly experienced differently. The reality of parenting and lived experiences of parents are created subjectively, and there is no single reality. Therefore, by taking up a constructivist paradigm, one-on-one interviews promise social interaction and construction of reality. A phenomenological perspective enables the study to explore pandemic parenting from the parents themselves.

This study was presented before and approved by the Institutional Review Board of the authors' affiliated university. There are no conflicts of interest for this study.

#### *Participants*

15 parents (Female=11, Male=4) of children in age ranges between 2 to 26 years from urban and suburban Indian areas were interviewed using snowball sampling. The inclusion criteria comprised of Indian heterosexual parents from nuclear families and whose children currently live with them. Two participants refused consent for audio recording, and these hand-written notes were eliminated to maintain trustworthiness. Transcripts of two participants illustrated data saturation, and were eliminated. Thus, the study retained 11 participants.

### Tools

The Subjective Well-Being Inventory (SUBI), developed by Sell and Nagpal (1992) was administered to gain a quantitative report on the sample's well-being levels. This scale categorises individuals on 11 factors, namely general wellbeing- positive affect, expectation-achievement congruence, confidence in coping, transcendence, family group support, social support, primary group concern, inadequate mental mastery, perceived ill-health, deficiency in social contacts, and general well being- negative affect.

The interview protocol for the study was developed based on the existing body of literature and validated by three experts in developmental psychology and qualitative research.

### Procedure

An initial contact email was sent to the participants. If they responded with interest in participating, they were contacted then to set up a day and time for the interview. Following this, the participants provided consent and the Subjective Well-Being Inventory (SUBI) scale was administered. Using the developed interview protocol, interviews were conducted over audio calls during July 2021, each lasting an average of 45 minutes. The audio files were professionally transcribed using transcriptions software; research team members checked for accuracy by double-checking the audio files against the transcripts.

### Data Analysis

The interviews were transcribed, coded and sorted using Braun & Clarke's six sequential phases: (a) familiarizing with the data set, (b) generating initial codes, (c) searching for themes, (d) reviewing themes, (e) defining and naming themes, (f) and reporting data, and an overall thematic map will be constructed. Emerging themes were coded under master themes, mediators of parenting experiences, perceptions towards the pandemic, and adaptation to the 'new' normal. Further superordinate themes emerged under each master theme. The audio recordings ensured verbatim narratives from the participants.

### Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness of the research was validated using an audit trail. Samples of the audit trail are given in the results section of the study. Respondent validation was performed by checking with the participants about the consistency of their narratives with the transcribed codes. In order to ensure replicability, all procedures were documented.

### Tables

**Table 1 Participant variables**

Sl. No.	Participant ID	Sex	Age	Highest Level of Education	Profession	Children [Sex (Age)]
1	002	Female	44	Postgraduate	Media Consultant	Male (13); Female (13)
2	003	Female	44	Undergraduate	Freelance Yoga Trainer	Male (15); Male (10)
3	004	Female	54	Postgraduate	Homemaker	Female (26); Female (21)
4	006	Female	36	Postgraduate	Part-time Counselor	Male (8); Male (2)
5	007	Female	41	Undergraduate	Homemaker	Male (14); Female (11)
6	008	Female	52	Undergraduate	Homemaker	Female (23); Female (21)
7	009	Female	42	Undergraduate	Entrepreneur	Female (16); Male (14)
8	012	Male	45	Postgraduate	Missionary	Female (16); Female (13)
9	013	Male	50	Undergraduate	Working Professional	Female (22); Female (17); Female (14)

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10	014	Male	54	Undergraduate	Medical Transcription	Male (21)
11	015	Male	39	Postgraduate	Pastor; Entrepreneur	Male (8); Male (2)

**Table 2 Subjective Well-Being Inventory Participant Scores**

Participant ID	F1	F2	F3	F4	F5	F6	F7	F8	F9	F10	F11	Total
002	9	8	9	7	9	9	9	13**	15	9	8	<b>105</b>
003	7	7	6*	8	7	9	9	16	17	8	9	<b>103</b>
004	5**	5**	7	5**	9	6*	8	12**	16	8	7	<b>88*</b>
006	8	7	6*	7	9	9	8	11**	15	9	7	<b>96</b>
007	6*	5**	7	7	8	9	7	17	13	9	8	<b>96</b>
008	8	7	6*	8	7	6*	9	13**	13	6*	8	<b>91</b>
009	9	8	9	8	9	9	8	14*	17	9	9	<b>109</b>
012	9	9	9	8	9	9	9	17	16	8	9	<b>112</b>
013	8	9	8	8	9	9	8	16	17	9	7	<b>108</b>
014	6*	6*	6*	7	9	9	8	16	16	8	8	<b>99</b>
015	9	7	8	3**	9	9	6*	17	16	6*	8	<b>98</b>

*Note.* Factor 1: General Well Being- Positive Affect, Factor 2: Expectation-Achievement Congruence, Factor 3: Confidence in Coping, Factor 4: Transcendence, Factor 5: Family group support, Factor 6: Social support, Factor 7: Primary group concern, Factor 8: Inadequate mental mastery, Factor 9: Perceived Ill-health, Factor 10: Deficiency in social contacts, Factor 11: General Well Being- Negative Affect

\*Average range \*\*Low range

**Table 3 Master themes and superordinate themes emerged during coding**

Master Themes	Superordinate Themes
Mediators of Parenting Experiences	Perceived reasons behind well-being Early child-rearing experiences and other influences Spousal involvement and social support
Perceptions towards the Pandemic	Benefits and drawbacks Perception towards virtual education and work
Adaptation to the 'new' normal	Initial reactions towards the pandemic and adjustment Outlook towards future

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Descriptive statistics describing the participant scores in the subjective well-being inventory are displayed in Table 1. All participants, except one, scored above the well-being norm for the Indian adult sample (90.8). The one exception (88) scored between 81-120, reflecting higher well-being according to the scale's broad categorisation.

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The results of this exploratory, qualitative study provide insight into the parenting experiences of Indian parents during the pandemic. Other studies conducted to understand the same have been of a quantitative nature, only generating statistical and objective data. To the researchers' knowledge, this is one of the first studies to explore comprehensively parental perceptions towards the pandemic and changed family dynamics from the onset of the pandemic to the current impasse to the future ahead. The current study emphasizes the psychosocial impact of the pandemic on parents who are by and large overlooked in such studies.

Unlike the decline in parents' well-being in India and other countries found in literature from early in the COVID-19 pandemic (Malhi, et al., 2021; Johnson, et al., 2020; Marchetti, et al., 2020; Wu, et al., 2020), this sample perceived no significant impact on their well-being; they were mostly the same or higher, with changes only in everyday routines. These were quantified using the subjective well-being inventory, where parents reported higher levels of well-being. This perception may be attributed to the fact that data was collected almost a year after the onset of the pandemic. Parents have reported that they have adjusted to the changes and have attained family resilience (Simon, et al., 2005) Their current concerns gravitate more towards the return to the 'new normal'.

A commonly cited theme in this study was the lack of physical activity for children. The lethargy and frequent outbursts exhibited by the children can be a result of this absence. Although a couple of families with access to playgrounds agree to some amount of physical activity, most of them unanimously complain about the lack of it. This finding is consistent with early pandemic studies which emphasized parental perceptions of physical inactivity and sedentary lifestyles during the pandemic (Dunton, et al., 2020; Schmidt, et al., 2020). On the contrary, a more recent study appears to refute the present study's finding, by suggesting that parents found their children's physical activity levels as the same or higher before home confinement protocol (Eyler, et al., 2021). This parental perception may have been influenced by factors like a relatively supportive environment for physical activity, especially for outdoor play, and the presence of neighborhood, yard, and home factors supportive of outdoor physical activity. This difference in findings may be explained by the reasons parents in the current study attribute to this concern, which are continuous demands from school (online classes, assignments, projects), concerns about children's safety due to the virus, lack of access to playgrounds (due to pandemic protocol) and the absence of social interaction with peers. One remedy that a parent suggested was that parents ensure that their children take a walk or play games daily, even if it means missing a few hours of class.

Contrary to existing studies which suggested a rising concern for children's safety with respect to the virus and its aftermath, parents in this study dismissed worries in this area. This change in thinking can be attributed to the time of adjustment (more than a year) since the onset of the pandemic. Children have understood the gravity of the situation and since outings and trips are limited, parents feel in control of the situation. Another factor that contributes to this finding is that most parents do not perceive the virus as extremely dangerous now; with lockdown restrictions being lifted in many Indian states and regular vaccination drives, the fear of the virus is not very prominent. Nevertheless, parents claim that they do not take the disease very lightly; everyone knows of at least one person or family who has succumbed to the virus, with a couple of participants being survivors. They ensure that caution is taken and that they are careful with interactions. While discussing the common precautionary measures taken, the recurring ones are taking quick baths once they come home, vaccinating the house help and an increase in online grocery shopping. Parental

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concern seemed to revolve more around the physical and mental health of children to the extent that one parent remarked that ‘if not careful, (problems with) mental health would be the next pandemic’, which seems to be consistent with Jones’ (2020) findings.

Due to home confinement measures, parents are unable to meet their families of origin. To the researchers’ knowledge, this theme has not been explored in other similar studies. In India’s collectivistic culture (Avasthi, 2010), this would have meant significant distress on both parties. However, parents in this sample rationalized this gap, by prioritizing their older parents’ safety with minimal risks of infection. This ability to rationalize the drawbacks of the pandemic may be a direct cause for their relatively higher levels of subjective well-being.

One of the reasons why this study produces findings contrary to the early pandemic studies that emphasized increased levels of stress, anxiety, depression, and parenting-related exhaustion may be the temporal dimensions to them. With the pandemic surging high and low through the course of a year and a half, most parents have adjusted healthily to the accompanying changes. Although the preliminary reactions included obvious surprise, distress, depression, and overwhelm, they are able to clearly trace their adaptation and factors influencing them. This finding is contrary to Gayatri’s study (2020) which predicted that staying at home may increase parental stressors, especially for working parents. This discrepancy may be supported by the fact that the sample here consisted of mostly stay-at-home or work-from-home mothers, who believe that they are expected to multi-task. Besides, the one year has given them time to negotiate and create new routines and rituals which have brought about balance in family dynamics through feedback loops. Optimism appears to outweigh concerns about the future, where parents are confident about new avenues opening up and their children being raised independent enough to thrive in uncertain situations.

Lee (2020) suggested that one of the go-to coping mechanisms for working parents during the pandemic are rethinking parenting with a focus on simple and quiet lives instead of busy schedules with several activities. In this context, parents in this study were invited to revisit their childhood. Parents who perceived their childhood to be good felt positive about practicing similar parenting styles and practices to their children. On the other hand, many parents perceived lack of freedom, orthodox rules and narrow opportunities as characteristic of their childhood, and some still carry ‘baggage’ from then. These parents presented a picture of good communication, independent thinking and autonomy as indicators of an ideal childhood. While comparing the pandemic childhood where children are forced to remain indoors with their childhood where they enjoyed living in joint families and a lot of play time, parents regretted the lack of opportunities for outdoor activities. Nevertheless, they feel that parenting during the pandemic has changed to facilitate parent-child relationship and understanding, and that this familial support (that parents seldom received in their childhood) would be beneficial for future challenges and make up for lost opportunities.

Although the stay-at-home orders and switch to a virtual mode of education and work minimized social interaction, parents were able to maintain equal if not higher levels of connectedness with their family and peers. The presence of online social media giants like WhatsApp and Zoom facilitated this interaction. Since they had relatively more time on their hands, especially during the early pandemic days, parents were able to connect with long-lost acquaintances and organize reunions. Although they faced initial difficulties with

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technology, they received constant support from their children and they feel happy with this development. Parents in the study were amused and thrilled at the ability to attend social gatherings like weddings and funerals through live streaming. On the other hand, a recurring negative theme that was prominent was the news. Parents felt that keeping themselves updated with the total positivity rate, number of deaths, and rates of infection took an extreme toll on their mental health. They found that refraining from discussing these gory details and only subscribing to necessary information about restrictions and lockdowns had a better impact psychologically.

Social support has also been a significant predictor of parent well-being. These were in the form of their own parents, siblings, friends or mentors. Parents discussed their struggles and joys with these systems and often found timely advice and comfort in sharing stories. Parents in this study also experienced adequate spousal involvement, which again contributed to better psychological well-being. Even if spouses had to leave home for work, they ensured to compensate in areas like helping children with homework, preparing weekend meals, and holding family rituals like games or movie nights.

A majority of the studies conducted across the globe (APA, 2020; Grover, et al., 2020; Hiraoka & Tomoda, 2020) and quantitative analyses in India (Malhi, et al., 2021) reported that involvement in children's online education was one of the key indicators of parenting. In shocking contrast, none of the parents in this study echoed this sentiment. Only the children who are perceived as slow-learners required extra assistance; other parents felt they were in control of the situation. Parents find that structured study time and routines have helped in tackling online classes. Although they report that teacher-child interactions are necessary and are lacking in this mode, they find this scenario more relaxed because of reduced morning rush. Parents also report that their children feel more relaxed in the comfort of their homes, especially introverted children. The age of children and levels of perceived autonomy too play an important role in this finding; parents of older children feel that they are capable of completing their work without assistance. Moreover, the former acknowledge and commend schools and teachers for their adaptability to pandemic education.

Adams, et al. (2021) suggested that parents mostly perceived stress in areas related to their children's online education, changed routine structure and lack of time due to increased work tasks. While discussing these, Indian parents believe that the reason for the inconsistency in findings between India and other countries is the difference in cultural practices. One of the helpful elements noted by parents is the presence of close-knit families in India. Since this has always been the norm, increased home confinement during the pandemic may not have had a tougher impact on them while compared with individualistic cultures, where children leave the home of origin early on. Another key factor that they find different in other countries is the absence of house help. Parents in this sample repeatedly remark how helpful this factor has been in managing changed schedules now that the family is home more often. Parents also find that having one or more channels to release stress has helped maintain adequate well-being levels during the pandemic. These stress-busters include going on long drives, yoga, adult coloring books, binge-watching series, cooking among others.

To sum up, parents in this study were clearly aware of the negatives induced by the pandemic, but in retrospect, they believe that there were more impactful positives. Because of the reduction in eating out and food take-outs owing to safety reasons, families resort to



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cooking new meals and experiments at home. Since they had more time to plan their meals, parents feel happy with the practice of eating healthy. Sustainable living was another positive that emerged from the pandemic. Reduced trips to the store meant reduced expenditure on unnecessary items that were often bought on a whim. Nevertheless, there seems to have been an increase in online shopping too, due to ease, accessibility, and varieties of options. Work hours have not been longer than pre-pandemic times and the flexibility in work timings ensured that mornings could be spent relaxed. Increased family time was a prominent pro of the pandemic. Parents also observed increased mindfulness among themselves and their children about the struggles experienced by people during the pandemic, and altruism levels have increased through participation in food drives, campaigns, and the like. The lack of physical activities, decrease in time for self and reduced social interaction topped the list of negatives; however, most families have come up with alternatives through practices like yoga, online football training and evening walks for physical health, and video calls and virtual meets for social connectedness.

There are some limitations to this study. The group of fathers is somewhat small ( $n= 4$ ), as it was more difficult to recruit fathers than mothers. Another limitation is that this sample was mostly highly educated in urban and semi-urban areas which can limit the generalizability of the findings. Future research should target parents with low socioeconomic status, as they might be more at risk to experience lower levels of well-being due to low quality of life. Despite this limitation, the findings illustrate Indian parenting experiences during the pandemic which could not be covered through quantitative analyses.

### CONCLUSION

COVID-19 has become a pervasive problem all around the world and it is a challenging time for children and parents. Parents have a salient role to play that could highly impact children's overall well-being and healthy development. Although this study reports positive findings about parents' well-being and healthy perceptions towards the pandemic, most parents' optimism is based on the hope of resumption of normal routines in the near future. There is a high probability that if this situation continues, there can be an impact on the physiological and mental health of parents, just like any other population. This can adversely affect their parenting styles and patterns and can prove to be detrimental to children. It is necessary therefore to adopt pre-emptive measures like parent support systems and parent-friendly school syllabi, especially for younger children to retain high levels of well-being in parents. As policy makers consider additional measures to negotiate the health and economic concerns of the pandemic, they should consider the unique needs of parents and children.

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### **Conflict of Interest**

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