Received: 29 July 2023 | Revised: 26 July 2024 | Accepted: 2 September 2024

DOI: 10.1111/fare.13105

RESEARCH

Family Relations
Interdisciplinary Journal of Applied Family Science

Parent and adolescent perspectives on family problems during the COVID-19 pandemic: Implications for family resilience

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Funding information
National Science Foundation, RAPID: SaTC: Information privacy tensions and decisions in families during COVID-19; Virginia Tech Institute for Society, Culture and Environment

Abstract

Objective: To understand how parents and adolescents perceive the major family problems they faced during a global pandemic, focusing on implications for family resilience.

Background: Families are challenged by the upheaval in contemporary life due to a global health pandemic and unrelenting changes to work, school, civic, and home routines. Family resilience theory guided our understanding of how families perceive and understand the problems they faced during a major disruption in their lives.

Method: A diverse sample of parent–adolescent pairs was surveyed at two points in time. Qualitative content analysis was used to analyze open-ended questions asking about family members' perceptions of the major problems they faced as a family during the pandemic.

Results: Most participants reported a major family problem during the pandemic (e.g., unemployment, online learning, isolation, fear of COVID-19), with financial issues being the most prevalent problem. Parents were more likely to identify a major family tension, compared with adolescents, who were more likely to say they were unaware of any major family problems.

Conclusion: Parents and adolescents reported substantial family stress and tension, especially around financial strain and social isolation, indicating their heightened awareness of the new risks they were facing. Both parents and

Author note: This study was funded by the National Science Foundation and the Virginia Tech Institute for Society, Culture and Environment.

adolescents also described a willingness to pull together on behalf of family well-being and adaptation.
Implications: Support mechanisms through public policy and from family life practitioners can help families navigate pandemic-related stressors, assess adverse events in adolescence, promote new pathways in navigating disrupted routines, and enhance family resilience.

KEYWORDS
COVID-19, family resilience, global pandemic, parent–adolescent relationships, stress

Contemporary families face ever-present reminders that the world as they think they know it is under threat. Although families have always encountered risks and vulnerabilities associated with macrolevel (societal) and microlevel (individual and family) events and transitions, the current ecosystem in which families interact internally and transact externally is characterized by a looming sense of global adversity that can challenge their resilience (Allen & Henderson, 2023; Crespo & Relvas, 2024; Henry & Harrist, 2022). Upheaval and turmoil now seem embedded in family life. This intensity is linked to the political, demographic, climate, and digital transformations of the early 21st century (Trask, 2020), where the onslaught of unrelenting change accumulates and is often experienced as beyond human capacity to understand or control (Harari, 2018). In particular, communication has been digitalized; media coverage and the Internet now substitute or even replace face-to-face interactions among kin groups (Longo, 2023). Most U.S. citizens are Internet users, from 99% of 18- to 29-year-old young adults to 75% of adults over age 65 (Johnson, 2022). Despite the many benefits of new technologies, there are also concerns. With the ubiquitous nature of digital technologies, such as smartphones and social media platforms that constantly stream emotionally fraught, contested, and "bad" news (Boler & Davis, 2018; Walker, 2021), a sense of doom from continual crises and the new risks imposed by global adversity can challenge individual and family resilience (Crespo & Relvas, 2024; Henry & Harrist, 2022; Twenge et al., 2021).

MULTISYSTEMIC CHALLENGES TO FAMILY RESILIENCE

Family life was noticeably upended by the COVID-19 global pandemic, a multisystem disaster that interrupted all aspects of social, political, and economic life (Masten & Motti-Stefanidi, 2020). The stress on families was exponential, where adults and children experienced unprecedented disruptions to work, school, childcare, mealtime, and other household routines, as well as major losses to their social safety net, including infection, depression and anxiety, disability, and death (e.g., Berge et al., 2021; Chaney, 2020; Gilligan et al., 2020; Harrist et al., 2019; Marceau et al., 2023). Along with these disruptions, the accumulation of risk and emotional spillover from the pandemic pushed external systems that families rely on, such as health care and mental health services, to the limit (Choi et al., 2020; He et al., 2022), exacerbating negative effects on families.

Certain groups, particularly the most vulnerable, experienced disproportionate challenges to family adaptation and resilience with the pandemic. On the one hand, economic well-being and racial privilege can serve as protective factors for families facing adversity. Families with higher education and household earnings were least likely to report a decline in couple relationship quality and to experience some relational benefits during lockdown (Perelli-Harris et al., 2023). On the other hand, African American families, already dealing with systemic racism, had a

higher rate of being infected and dying from COVID-19 (Chaney, 2020; Jones, 2022). Therefore, more insight is needed as to how youth, adults, and families from a variety of diverse backgrounds have fared during the COVID-19 pandemic (Pietromonaco & Overall, 2024), as well as the unique combinations of family risks (i.e., internal and external stressors) and protective (resources and strengths to prevent or navigate risk) factors that help families confront their vulnerabilities and adapt in new ways (Henry & Harrist, 2022). Researchers have found unanticipated strengths and challenges in ways that mothers, as primary caregivers, have navigated the risks and protective factors of family life during the pandemic. For example, mothers of school-age children, who provide more of the invisible, unpaid labor in families, were doubly burdened in caring for children during quarantine and balancing their own and their family's competing demands (Goldberg et al., 2021). Because women and families with lower levels of income often experience a disproportionate burden of both unpaid and lower paid labor, they can be at greater risk for mental health and family relationship problems during a significant crisis. The COVID-19 pandemic is likely to result in major health and social consequences that affect families for years into the future (American Psychological Association, 2020; Feinberg et al., 2022; Kerr et al., 2021).

RESEARCH CONTEXT: AN INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACH

As an interdisciplinary research team from family science, information systems, and psychology, our interest in these contemporary challenges to family resilience is with the intersection among families, technology, and well-being in the context of a global health crisis. We sought to understand family tensions and resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic by studying parent–adolescent pairs at two points in time. Our larger mixed methods study examined how parents and their adolescents perceived and intended to use contact tracing (CT) apps to cope with the uncertainty of the pandemic in light of possible privacy concerns. As part of the online survey, we included open-ended questions designed to invite families to expand on their experiences in their own words (Bélanger et al., 2022). In the course of studying how families adapt to new technologies (e.g., CT apps), we were struck by participants' self-reported family problems and stressors during the pandemic. In the current work, we draw from our qualitative data to gain a deeper look into the risks and vulnerabilities families faced, as perceived by parents and their adolescents at two points in time, with the goal of continuing to shed new light on the family as an adaptive, resilient system (Harrist et al., 2019; Henry & Harrist, 2022).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This research was guided by family resilience theory (Henry et al., 2015; Masten, 2018). We posited the necessity of understanding the multiple intersections across individuals, families, and society during a worldwide pandemic that put normative family interactions at risk, and disrupted work, school, and family routines (de Leeuw et al., 2023; Prime et al., 2020). Our framework allowed us to study ways in which family systems are vulnerable not only to everyday stressors but also to unanticipated disruptions and crises (Harrist et al., 2019). We sought to understand how the family can be experienced as a resilient system, as perceived by intergenerational members.

We began from the perspective that families are often stretched to the limit, with many challenges to their mental and physical health (Prime et al., 2020). In the digital age, we theorized that technological knowledge is a potential source of empowerment that can also challenge the intergenerational hierarchy, fueling uncertainty and exacerbating developmental tensions in families that are associated with adolescent development and parenting (Buehler, 2020;

Dworkin, 2018). New technologies are upending normative expectations that parents are the sole or ultimate authority figure in families (Bortz et al., 2019). As digital natives, younger generations in the 21st century not only have superior technological expertise and use more platforms than their parents, but they also develop and maintain their interpersonal relationships through technology and in the context of a media-saturated environment (Dworkin et al., 2019). This shift in technological knowledge from parent to adolescent reveals a new level of vulnerability and potential change in previously established patterns of family authority.

In keeping with a family resilience framework, we viewed individuals and families as possessing both strengths and challenges that would come into play during a global pandemic. Families have protective processes that moderate their ability to confront and adapt to hardship and demonstrate competence in the face of risk and vulnerability (Harrist et al., 2019; Henry & Harrist, 2022). Protective factors include structural components, such as financial stability and community support, as well as emotional and relational strengths, in terms of the ability to communicate and innovate (rather than resist or succumb) in the face of crisis and change (Allen & Henderson, 2023; Harrist et al., 2019). Families can be strong and malleable in the face of challenges, with both invisible capacities (such as having a teenager with excellent technological skills) and acknowledged resources (such as financial security, or extended kin on whom to depend in times of need). Thus, families inevitably experience risks and vulnerabilities, and they have the adaptive capacity to reorganize and grow in the face of adversity (Boss, 2006; Henry et al., 2015; Masten, 2018; Patterson, 2002; Walsh, 2016).

Research Question

Given our review of the literature and theoretical framework, we posed the following overarching research question to guide the current study: How do parents and adolescents perceive the risks and resilience their families experience during the progression of the COVID-19 pandemic?

METHOD

In this exploratory study, we leveraged our respective interdisciplinary theoretical and methodological expertise to examine the perceptions of parent–adolescent dyads at two points in time during the COVID-19 pandemic. Overall, we asked participants closed- and open-ended questions about family stress and vulnerability, parent–child alienation, life satisfaction, social norms, knowledge, and technology use. For the current analysis, we relied on participants' responses to the open-ended question "What is the number 1 problem your family is facing now?" at two points in time during the first year of the pandemic, after it was declared a national emergency. We used qualitative content analysis and descriptive statistics to analyze the results.

Sample selection and description

For the current analysis, we sampled parent–adolescent pairs at two timepoints (T1, September–October 2020; T2, February–March 2021). The first data collection (T1) was during the period when the number of people were working from home drastically increased from 3 to 4 times the number of people working from home before the pandemic (Gilligan, 2023), and no vaccine was yet available. The first vaccine was given on December 14, 2020. For T2, we initiated data collection after (a) the vaccine had become widely available and (b) people had time to adapt their lifestyles to living with the new health guidelines provided by the government.

For both timepoints, participants were compensated by the Qualtrics panel service, with the payment amount unknown to the research team. Qualtrics recruited a national sample with participant diversity in terms of gender, race, ethnicity, education, occupation, age, and geographic locations (based on U.S. zip codes) that reflect the demographics of the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023). Our eligibility criteria necessitated (among other factors) that one parent and their adolescent (13–17 years old, living at home) both had to be available to complete the survey. We surveyed adolescents as opposed to younger children to ensure that (a) they had a smartphone (with a filter question included) and (b) they had achieved the developmental capacity to make decisions about information sharing (Bélanger et al., 2013; Hiller et al., 2008). The survey was designed so that parents and adolescents could not access each other's answers. We had a number of controls in place to ensure that the data reflect only completed parent–adolescent pairs. Ultimately, we rejected participants from the data collection if both a parent and an adolescent were not present to fill out the survey.

At T1, 379 parent–adolescent pairs completed the survey. Six months later, at T2, 103 of the original parent–adolescent pairs provided usable data. Although only 103 of the original 379 pairs participated at T2, we were pleased to have this many parent–adolescent pairs return, given the challenges of collecting dyadic data at two disparate points in time (Wilson et al., 2024).

Our overall sample from both time points was geographically dispersed throughout the South (39.3%), West (21.4%), Northeast (19.8%), and Midwest (19.5%) regions of the United States and racially distributed similarly to that of the country. The majority of respondents were White (76% T1 to 82% T2), and the U.S. Census (2023) reports that 75% of Americans are White. Racial diversity was evident among participants, including African/African American (7%), Asian American (13%), Latin/Hispanic American (3%), and other/did not answer (1%). Most parents were employed full time (62.8% T1 and 67.8% T2), and more parents considered their employment essential at T1 (51.9%) than at T2 (46%). Both adolescent and parent samples had relatively equal gender distribution (45% male parents at T1 and 50% at T2; 56% male adolescents at T1 and 51% at T2), and the majority of parents were married. Parental status and household structure varied as follows: 69.7% of parents were married, 11% were single, 10.1% were divorced, 5.5% were cohabitating with a partner, and 3.7% indicated they preferred not to answer. There was a wide variety of educational backgrounds and income levels, again, as reflective of the diversity of the United States (U.S. Census, 2023).

Procedure

As part of the larger study, we collected online survey data related to the concerns and benefits of families' use of contact tracing apps during the COVID-19 pandemic. To develop the survey, we used the Qualtrics online survey tool. Separately, we paid the Qualtrics panel service to provide us with respondents that met our eligibility criteria, as described earlier. Qualtrics worked with participants that were in their pool to obtain the required number of respondents for our study at T1 that met the eligibility criteria. At T2, Qualtrics contacted those same respondents and asked them to participate a second time.

Parent–adolescent pairs took approximately 30 to 40 minutes to complete the surveys at each time point. The surveys were structured so that parents granted parental permission for their adolescent to participate, and adolescents assented electronically. Data were collected at two points in time to capture how family members' perceptions of their pandemic and technology-related concerns and benefits developed over time. Of interest to the current study, the qualitative, open-ended questions asked about issues related to family problems and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Qualitative data analysis process

The current analysis examines open-ended data on how parents and adolescents experienced and responded to stressful issues around COVID-19 and the nature of family life under quarantine. To initiate the qualitative data analysis process, we used sensitizing concepts, such as family problems, COVID-19 pandemic, and family resilience, which are terms derived from existing theory and disciplinary perspectives that are used to orient the analysis process (Daly, 2007; Goldberg & Allen, 2015). We employed a qualitative content analysis method (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) to code and interpret parents' and adolescents' open-ended responses from the question posed at T1 and T2, "What is the number 1 problem your family is facing right now?"

Every open-ended response (a total of 964 responses from parents and adolescents at two points in time) was coded by two members of the research team. At first, these two members individually coded all the responses (379 parents at T1; 379 adolescents at T1; 103 parents at T2; 103 adolescents at T2) and then compared notes and emerging codes to create a preliminary coding scheme. They shared the initial coding scheme and examples of how text was coded with the other team members and revised the coding to accommodate new perspectives. For example, initially, we had coded all of the "no response," "not sure," and "we have no problems" codes together as one coding category, called "none," and it became clear in group discussion that more adolescents ($n = 19$, yet only one parent) had written, "not sure" or "I don't know" in response to their perception of the number 1 problem. Realizations about such nuances in the data analysis and coding among the entire team led to creating three categories, where initially we only had one.

After several rounds of discussing the open-ended responses and emerging coding categories, two team members worked together to reaffirm the categorization of each response from all four groups, discussing disagreements and returning to the larger team meeting to discuss discrepancies until we reached 100% consensus on the organization of the coding scheme. Sometimes, there were instances where a participant indicated two or more family problems. We coded that type of response by the first or main issue the person described and indicated the secondary theme in parentheses. From this strategy, for example, we learned that when describing family tensions (one of our coding categories), participants often mentioned as secondary one of the other main issues, such as finances or schooling.

Ultimately, we identified 10 themes (see Table 1), seven of which were substantive (finances; social isolation; family tension and conflict; schooling; COVID-19; balancing among work, school, and home; macro issues), and three of which indicated a type of "no" response (no problems, not sure, no answer). These themes helped to guide our pursuit of significant relationships among variables and further probing in subsequent quantitative analyses. In Table 2, we report the frequency of each of the 10 codes for parents and adolescents at both points in time.

RESULTS

The qualitative results are organized to offer a window into parents' and adolescents' perceptions of their family risk and resilience in real time. We present the data descriptively and tell a collective story that characterizes the overall sample of parent–adolescent pairs as representative of intergenerational family risk and resilience. We define and illustrate each of the 10 coding categories identified in Table 1 and provide examples, in the participants' own words, of how they perceived the main problem their families faced in the first year of the pandemic. For example, only one coding category, finances, was consistently mentioned most frequently by both parents and adolescents, at both T1 and T2. Other than consensus that finances were

TABLE 1 Coding scheme.

	What is the number 1 problem your family is facing right now?
1	Finances a. Financial hardship: need money, difficulty paying bills, debt, can't afford basics b. Lost employment: lost job, finding employment, laid off, can't work c. Loss of major family resources: food insecurity; housing insecurity
2	Social isolation a. Restrictions: can't socialize, can't travel, social distancing, quarantine, cabin fever; being together as a family too much b. Emotional reactions: loneliness, boredom, frustration, feeling stuck c. Longing for life before COVID, loss of and missing "normal" activities d. Missing family and friends
3	Family tension and conflict a. Critical family events and transitions—intergenerational: marital struggles, divorce, breakups, moving, pregnant teen, custody issues, death in the family b. Intense feelings and communication problems: anger, fear, sadness, negative talk, no communication, adjustment issues, tempers rising, fighting, conflict c. Parent–child relationship strain and conflict: parenting stress about child's behavior, kids don't listen, parents are intrusive, kids want more screen time
4	Schooling a. Online learning, in home school, can't go to school, academics, poor grades b. College decisions and uncertainty
5	COVID-19 a. Pandemic-related health issues: staying safe and healthy, fear of illness and death, fear of getting virus, awaiting vaccine b. Quality of food supply, stores out of stock
6	Balancing work, school, and home a. Coordinating, juggling work and school schedules, Internet problems, etc. b. Not having enough time for competing demands
7	Macro and environmental issues a. Politics, politicians, government, election, the economy b. Racism
8	None No problems, none, nothing
9	Not sure Not sure, don't know, uncertain
10	No answer Left blank, "no comment," gibberish, nonsensical answer

distressing, there was more variation from T1 to T2 in how each group perceived the other types of problems they were experiencing.

We also provide selective comparisons from data collection at T1 and T2. This analytic strategy addresses the value of gathering data at two points in time during a health crisis that affected individuals, families, and communities worldwide. At T1, U.S. society was characterized by an economic downturn, lockdown, high infection rates, increasing death tolls, and tremendous fear in the population. The United States was also gearing up for the November 2020 presidential election. At T2, about 6 months later, although infection rates and deaths were still high, people were becoming more accustomed to the disruptions in their typical routines. The presidency changed from Republican to Democratic, and political polarization was increasing. Importantly, vaccination programs were starting to appear, increasing hope that it might be possible to control the pandemic and thus revealing that some optimism about controlling the

TABLE 2 What is the number one problem your family is facing right now? Frequency of Responses at Times 1 and 2.

	Problem	Parents Time 1 $N = 379$	Parents Time 2 $N = 103$	Adolescents Time 1 $N = 379$	Adolescents Time 2 $N = 103$
1	Finances	91	33	75	25
		24.01%	32.03%	19.79%	24.27%
2	Social isolation	54	20	56	23
		14.25%	19.41%	14.78%	22.33%
3	Family tension and conflict	40	12	52	19
		10.55%	11.65%	13.72%	18.44%
4	Schooling	64	12	36	9
		16.89%	11.65%	9.50%	8.73%
5	COVID-19	40	6	51	8
		10.55%	5.82%	13.46%	7.76%
6	Balancing work, school, and home	17	5	9	1
		4.49%	4.85%	2.37%	1.00%
7	Macro and environmental issues	7	2	3	2
		1.85%	1.94%	0.79%	1.94%
8	No problems	50	12	71	12
		13.19%	11.65%	18.73%	11.65%
9	Not sure	1	0	15	4
		0.26%		3.96%	3.88%
10	No answer	15	1	11	0
		3.96%	1.00%	2.90%	

virus was returning (Porterfield, 2021). Next, we describe each coding category and illustrate them with relevant participant responses.

Finances

As Table 2 reveals, the most common problem parents and adolescents reported at both T1 (parents, 24.01%; adolescents, 19.79%) and T2 (parents 32.03%; adolescents, 24.27%) had to do with financial concerns about not having enough money, challenges in paying the bills and buying food, and looming job loss, unemployment, and underemployment. As one parent wrote at T1, "I'm on unemployment and looking for work and thinking this crisis is never going to end." At T2, another parent said, "The financial strain is the biggest concern. I have had my work hours reduced through the pandemic." By T2, the burdensome nature of not having enough money, coupled with uncertainty, was evident in the parents' responses.

Adolescents also reported financial issues as prominent at both times, although their fears about money were mostly at the household level. As one adolescent at T1 said,

> [My] parents are facing a money problem because my big sister is the only one working. My brother lost his job and has not been able to get another one which is causing my mom to be stressed. She tries to hide it from us, but we know anyway.

At T2, adolescents continued to worry about parents being able to work to support the household; as one said, "I'm worried about my parents losing their jobs."

At T1, there was general concern about financial hardship and food scarcity, and at T2, the reality had set in that parents were underemployed or out of work, and it was affecting the entire household. Common concerns among parents and adolescents were about eating only canned food, not having spending money, or not being able to pay the electricity bill. Both parents and adolescents also expressed worry about having enough money to pay for adolescents to be able to go to college, which was evident in responses where both finances and education were joined as the major problem they faced.

Social isolation

The restrictions on gathering in public and needing to live in lockdown conditions were also prominent for both parents and adolescents, going from third place in the frequency of problems identified at T1 (14.25% for parents and 14.78% for adolescents) to second place at T2 for both parents (19.41%) and adolescents (22.33%). The initial experience of social distancing was difficult and only worsened as the pandemic ensued. At T1, parents expressed the ennui of being restricted to home and the social isolation that accompanied it as "Boredom. That's it. We have money, we have things, we just can't go anywhere fun or do anything and that's taken its toll on us all." By T2, the frustration, loneliness, and boredom with not being able to leave the house or visit other family members had increased. One parent indicated, "I worry about the effects of isolation from others on the mental and social health of my children." Another parent described the ongoing boredom as starting to take its toll by T2, saying, "Trying to come up with different things to keep us all from going stir crazy."

Adolescents, as well, revealed a sharp increase in social isolation as the major problem they faced. At T1, they tended to just be concerned in a general way, as in "nowhere to go." But by T2, they were very specific in how their favorite activities were being disrupted, as exemplified by the adolescent who said, "We can't go to sports or play sports or other events." For some, the loss of spending time with friends was especially difficult; one adolescent at T1 said about his family, "We have to spend so much time together and little time with others," and another said, "Hard to socialize with my friends." At T2, the experience of social isolation was described more precisely, as adolescents said their family's number 1 problem was "not seeing grandparents" and "missing outdoor time." Another adolescent at T2 said, "We're all locked in the house together!!! I miss school, my friends and playing sports." In sum, social isolation revealed the toll it was taking on parents, adolescents, and their families to be missing out on the "normal" activities of daily life, pre-pandemic, most of which included loss of contact with close family members and friends.

Family tension and conflict

This category contained three types of perspectives, often overlapping, and typically involved a statement concerning the parent's and/or the adolescent's familial relationships. Sometimes, parents and adolescents mentioned the major problem they faced was some type of critical family event or transition, as in the parents were getting a divorce, a hospital stay, or a death in the family. As one adolescent at T2 said, "My parents are going through a divorce and fighting over me and money." Another adolescent at T2 said, "My mom and dad have both had surgery in the last month."

Often, strong emotions were expressed around these issues, especially communication difficulties, with rising tempers, conflict, and "fury" as one parent said at T2. An adolescent said, at

T2, that their family's number 1 problem was characterized by the lack of independence that was resulting in constant conflict: "Freedom. Everyone is in close quarters and nobody can escape so there's constant conflict." Another aspect of this kind of family tension was an intense concern for children's potentially missed opportunities, piled on top of other worries and concerns, as one mother explained at T1:

> My kids are both hockey players and very good academic students. My son has worked hard for an opportunity to play at the college level and I just want this opportunity to happen. Covid has put a lot of uncertainties with this. My husband and I are adjusting to everything else.

The family tension and conflict category was typically characterized by parent–adolescent conflict and misunderstandings, as exemplified by the parent who said at T1, "My teenager is having behavior issues and lack of discipline," and the adolescent from that same family saying, "My parents put rules on me." The stress of parenting under quarantine was evident in an adolescent at T1, who felt too much parental scrutiny: "My parents are involved too much in my life" and a parent who said, "My parenting abilities go down the drain. My kids don't listen to me anymore." Thus, we coded parent–adolescent conflicts as evidence of family tension.

And yet, some adolescents expressed great insight into the new vulnerabilities they and their parents were experiencing, thereby revealing compassion and implying that their family was a source of strength. As one adolescent said at T1, "I think since the 3 of us are in the house 24/7, it's caused some changes to what we are used to, but we are working hard to adjust. We love each other and this is what counts." At T2, another adolescent said about their parents:

> I know they care deeply about their children and their future. They are saddened by the missed opportunities for us and are worried about helping me select the right college for this point in time and paying for it. They are sad for seeing others in our community struggling to pay bills, manage jobs with remote schooling, seeing others so afraid.

Schooling

This category revealed an interesting trend. Schooling was more of a problem for parents than for adolescents. At T1, it was the second most frequent problem mentioned by parents, as in "Doing school work from home," but by T2, it dropped to fourth place for parents. For adolescents, schooling was the sixth most frequent problem, and then was the fifth at T2. Perhaps parents and adolescents got used to the "new normal," where expectations for educational institutions to fulfill their traditional responsibilities were being compromised. As one parent said (at T1), revealing the challenges of not having the expected support of in-person school, "Our public school district has not returned to any face to face learning and our children need to return to face to face and we can't afford private school."

The primary issue associated with schooling was either virtual learning or hybrid learning. Parents were worried about deficits in their children's academic achievement that were starting to show up at T2 and about the burden on mothers to "make sure kids are focused during hybrid education." Although several adolescents complained about deficits in remote learning compared with "regular" schooling, by T2, they seemed almost resigned to the disruption in their education; for example, one adolescent said, "We never know what the schedule is and the schools keep changing stuff."

Of interest is that parents and adolescents often expressed concerns over making college selection choices and worrying about how to pay for college during a pandemic, but this was

mainly at T1. A parent said their major problem was "figuring out college options for our son for next year." At T1, many adolescents, as well, said their main problem was worrying about college decisions, as in "deciding where to go to college" or "preparing for college." At T2, however, adolescents' concerns about schooling were linked to the immediacy of virtual, remote, and hybrid learning environments, and no adolescent at T2 mentioned college.

COVID-19

This coding category was explicitly about the health concerns related to the pandemic, from staying safe and not getting the virus, to fear of death, to worrying about the availability and quality of food supplies. Health-related fears about COVID-19 were the sixth most frequent problem mentioned by parents at both T1 and T2 and by adolescents at T2. Adolescents were worried about "getting infected with COVID-19," sharing very specific concerns at T1, as in "Making sure we don't get sick. My little brother has asthma" and "The fear of one of us getting sick and passing it on to the other family members." Parents, too, expressed the fear of getting COVID and not being able to stay healthy. At T1, a parent wrote, "The fear that one of our family will get the Coronavirus. We have several autoimmune diseases in our immediate family." At T2, parents still expressed the anxiety with staying safe and healthy, and some described the toll it was taking on their routines, as in the parent who said their number 1 problem was "decision on planning summer trips, concerned making plans and not having vaccinations by then."

Balancing work, school, and home

This category was evident by the number of times parents and adolescents used the word *balance* to characterize the stressful conditions of coordinating and juggling common family activities associated with work, school, home life, transportation, and the competing demands these daily family functions entail. As one adolescent at T1 said of the juggling process, with mom at the center, "Everybody seemingly at home at the same time and all the time. My older brother and I are remotely learning online and dad is working primarily from home. Mom is keeping us all together." At T2, a mother concurred: "Time management with all the schooling and work going on under one roof." Of course, the balancing was not always easy, as an adolescent at T2 revealed: "My parents seem stressed out from work demands while trying to help me and my siblings with online school."

Macro and environmental issues

The final coding category was rare (only 1%–2% of the responses at each time period), but the comments were valuable in providing a broader context for what families were experiencing and how they were perceiving the pandemic in relation to institutional-level problems facing the country. Often, these comments were just one-word responses, as in "government," "congress," or "economy." Other times, they indicated a particular political opinion, as the parent who said at T1, "Unable to plan for vacations and travel due to state liberal virus restrictions" or the adolescent who described his family's experience of "racial profiling." Another adolescent, at T1, put the upheaval in the country in perspective, saying, "My parents are worried about the election, the violence occurring because of it and that kids are not getting a good education and people are not able to get the services they need." A parent at T2 expressed vitriol about the

government, taking the opportunity to let off steam about issues facing the United States in a global pandemic:

> Government control and our corrupt leaders are creating unhealthy environment … the mainstream media and social media is keeping vital information from all the people. I hope all of them at some point held accountable for all of this. Accurate information is a fundamental right and we are not getting it. This is a dangerous slope that we are in and kids are paying most of the price.

No problems, not sure, or no response

One of the most interesting aspects of the responses were the number of parents and adolescents who responded that their families were not facing any problems, saying, "none," "no problems," or "we don't really have problems." The "none" response was more prominent at T1 than at T2, with a more pronounced change occurring for adolescents, who went from about 19% at T1 to 11.65% at T2. In comparison, parents went from 13% at T1 to 11.65% at T2.

Also noteworthy was that more adolescents than parents indicated they were "not sure" or "didn't know" if their family had problems. Whereas only one parent answered the query about the number 1 problem they faced as "not sure" at either time period, almost 4% of the adolescents, at both T1 and T2, did. Perhaps parents were more likely to shield their adolescents from the extent of family problems, and parents were more likely to be forthcoming about the problems they faced. Further, adolescents' capacity for perspective taking is less developed than adults, and they may be more focused on self and less aware of familial problems (Blakemore & Choudhury, 2006).

DISCUSSION

Our analysis of parents' and adolescents' open-ended responses from the online survey question "What is the number 1 problem your family is facing right now?" revealed primarily that participants were most concerned about issues affecting them at the individual and/or family level. For example, the most frequent problem, finances, was mostly perceived as a family problem, as both parents and adolescents worried about parental job loss, economic uncertainty, and income deficits. Schooling, however, was mostly experienced as a problem at the individual level, especially in terms of the deficits of remote or hybrid learning. Only rarely did participants mention a problem at the societal level, such as the election, the economy, or racism. Yet the few individuals who did comment about macro-level issues provided an important context for external pressures on families from institutions, such as media, economics, and politics.

We note that most of the open-ended responses were brief phrases, such as "cash/money shortage," "my parents lost their jobs," "virtual learning at home," or "not seeing family much." Given the large number of total responses ($N = 964$), however, we observed a consistency across the entire sample and at both points in time that led us to present the data as an intergenerational family story of risk and resilience. That is, a common storyline emerged when stepping back from the data and thinking about the responses as a whole. The consistent storyline—about the pandemic's impact on *families*—was also supported by the participants' written responses that were more detailed and lengthy. The in-depth responses, some of which are quoted here, offer insights about the problems that parents and adolescents perceived their families as a whole faced as the pandemic wore on. These deeper insights reveal the narrative that family members grew weary, and tensions sometimes escalated over time in trying to manage their lives differently from the arrangements they had in place pre-pandemic.

We credit the opportunity to survey the same families at two points in time, about 6 months apart, for helping to understand this dynamic aspect of family functioning, which is consistent with family resilience theory (Henry & Harrist, 2022; Henry et al., 2015; Patterson, 2002). In the early months of the pandemic, parents and adolescents consistently expressed concerns about financial worries, social isolation, and remote learning. Six months later, these concerns were still strong, but we also saw the toll of living with these problems and the accumulated uncertainty at T2. Families were distressed by the feeling of "no end in sight" as the pandemic ensued. Of concern were adolescents' responses at T2, where they no longer mentioned "where they would go to college" as something on their minds but instead noted the inadequacy and tedium of being away from in-person schooling and confined to home. Concern over educational deficits during the pandemic has been born out in recent research (Betthauser et al., 2023).

New layers of risk, vulnerability, and stress are being added to families who are already reacting to an increasingly digital world, a global health pandemic, and the unrelenting changes to work, school, civic, and home life routines. Our qualitative results found that a substantial number of parents and adolescents acknowledged their family was facing a serious problem during the COVID-19 pandemic. At T1 (during fall 2020), 82.59% of parents and 74.41% of adolescents identified a major family problem. By T2 (end of winter 2021), the numbers reporting a major family problem increased to 87.38% of parents and 84.47% of adolescents. Of note is that 15% to 25% of the sample at both time periods said that they were not facing any major problem, which we suggest is linked to how well families with sufficient economic means, in particular, fared better on the whole than other families with more limited resources (Bulow et al., 2021; Feinberg et al., 2022). Another possibility, and a limitation of the study, is that we have no way of knowing if people who reported "no problems" simply did not want to disclose any that they were aware of. Still, the vast majority of the sample reported at least one serious problem, including a loss of family finances and trouble paying bills, the uncertainty and hassles associated with disrupted schooling, the social isolation of being restricted to home, the fear of contracting and spreading the virus, and the frustration and helplessness in plans being put on hold or watching children's potential be diminished. They shared the intensity of emotions from these losses and restrictions and a vulnerable concern about "when will this end." These findings are supported in the emerging literature on family interaction, challenges, and adaptation during the pandemic (e.g., Feinberg et al., 2022; Goldberg et al., 2021; Kerr et al., 2021; Prime et al., 2020).

Early in the pandemic, fear impacted the stress that people experienced in their lives. There were no treatments or vaccines for COVID-19, and the only way to avoid it was not to put oneself in the position to catch it. With this being the only solution when the constant narrative was one of fear of getting COVID, which we found in our qualitative findings and has been documented in a great deal of research to date, it is not surprising that fear may have led to an increased level of family tension and conflict. However, over time, as vaccines became available, treatments were shown to be effective, and more information about COVID-19 became known, some of the fear of contracting the virus dissipated (Stevens et al., 2021). In its place, we found weariness as the pandemic dragged on. Parents, especially mothers, were trying to balance all the competing demands affecting their families, as other research has shown (Feinberg et al., 2022; Goldberg et al., 2021; Piotrowski, 2023).

For both parents and adolescents, family tension grew along with the social isolation that came from lockdown. From a mental health perspective, this suggests that the COVID-induced issues that individuals dealt with increased their experience of stress. Throughout the pandemic, mental health challenges grew significantly (Choi et al., 2020; Czeisler et al., 2020; He et al., 2022), and we found that it could be due, in part, to the loneliness resulting from social isolation and parents and children becoming alienated during the pandemic. Considering mental health, the open-ended responses indicate that adolescents were feeling more isolated and

even despondent. Research has shown the need for social support, financial resources, and family professionals to intervene, particularly when the problem is experienced by families everywhere. It seems that the shock of having so much go wrong and out of control so quickly affected adolescents, who might not yet have been accustomed to life's disappointments and disruptions. An important line of future inquiry is to examine what resilient family processes, such as the family's capacity to manage disruption and restore family functioning, help adolescents in these circumstances (Harrist et al., 2019).

Implications for practice

This research sheds new light on the intersections among families and resilience in a global context. Family science practitioners, educators, and scholars have long touted the value of interdisciplinary research and practice for meeting the complex needs of families, in that the family science worldview promotes the well-being of diverse individuals and families across complex social institutions (Allen & Lavender-Stott, 2020; Grzywacz & Middlemiss, 2017). In the current study, we pooled the expertise of scholars from a relatively new vein of interdisciplinary collaboration. The expertise of scholars from information systems brought new ideas about digital communication and information as well as how technology alters and challenges individuals in their social environment. Linking families, technology, and health to understand the unprecedented changes currently experienced by families helps to move beyond individual assessments to understand how families interface with various ecosystems (Henry & Harrist, 2022; McCall et al., 2024). We suggest that practitioners at the community and broader societal levels (e.g., cooperative extension, public health, political institutions) use the perspectives from interdisciplinary collaboration for community education and media campaigns to encourage the development of healthy family processes that foster social support through technology during times of crisis. As the digitization of everyday life continues—be it school, work, health, or social elements—it is more likely than ever that technologies will be, if not the first, at least a main line of defense for major health or other global crises. These technologies and media campaigns may help to bridge the digital divide that exists between younger digital natives and older nonnatives (Dworkin et al., 2019; Livingstone & Blum-Ross, 2020; McCall et al., 2024). For families, this may mean relying on technology to connect with family and community members, such as attending virtual church service, happy hours, and book clubs (Bryson et al., 2020; Fortune et al., 2021), video chatting and group chatting with family and friends (Gong et al., 2021), and playing virtual games together (Pearce et al., 2022). Many of these virtual options still exist even as the pandemic has waned. Previous research has shown that these family connections and leisure-time activities can facilitate positive family functioning and well-being (Offer, 2013; Zabriskie & McCormick, 2001). Family life education programs may wish to provide resources for navigating youth's behavior and boredom during a pandemic and strategies for reducing family tensions.

Some researchers and practitioners consider the COVID-19 pandemic to be an adverse childhood experience (ACE; McManus & Ball, 2020). If not an ACE itself, the pandemic certainly exacerbated other ACEs, such as housing and food insecurity (Sanders, 2020). Congruent with our findings, Sanders (2020) described how the pandemic may have increased familial adversity because children became more exposed to their parents and caregivers' stress and vulnerabilities. Our findings support the need for trauma-informed practices to navigate the multiple and complex stressors that adolescents and families face. For example, for teachers, counselors, and marriage and family therapists, it is important to assess family members' perceptions and experiences during a health crisis even by simply asking how the crisis experience (e.g., COVID lockdown) was for them (McManus & Ball, 2020; Sanders, 2020). Family therapy can work with families as a system to promote resilience, meaning-making, and navigate changes (Harrist et al., 2019; Singh & Sim, 2021).

Regarding how distal ecosystems interact with family adaptation processes (Henry & Harrist, 2022), these findings also shed light on families' economic hardship during COVID, with implications for pandemic-related public policies, such as the dissemination of stimulus check monies and the Child Tax Credit initiated through the 2021 American Rescue Plan. Although the Child Tax Credit increased during the pandemic and gave families valuable support, our data suggest that it was not enough to alleviate families' financial concerns. These results may inform decisions about economic support and assistance to families during future crises and pandemics; the data may be helpful in identifying areas of focus for the federal Office of Pandemic Prepared and Response Policy to assist in future pandemic preparedness. We encourage this office to consider the tangible (e.g., resources) and the intangible (e.g., loneliness, isolation) direct impact that public health threats have on American families. Our data may point to the need for ongoing support from governments as countries come out of global or major crises because clearly the pandemic's effects on families may linger for years and disproportionally affect families of color and those with less resources (Chaney, 2020; Feinberg et al., 2022; Pietromonaco & Overall, 2024; Sanders, 2020). Our findings also have implications for the decisions regarding school formatting during the pandemic. As the adolescents and their parents in our study so poignantly revealed, effectiveness of virtual and hybrid learning should be assessed, and best practices for shifting modalities in the case of another pandemic should be developed.

Theoretically, our findings were most related to two family adaptive systems: the family emotion system and the family maintenance system (Harrist et al., 2019; Henry & Harrist, 2022). The family emotion system may have been disrupted by the pandemic as parents and adolescents alike expressed negative emotions while families tried to find what activities they could safely do to maintain balanced connectedness. Regarding the family maintenance system, families were most concerned about meeting their basic needs, such as food and shelter, and tried to adapt by applying for jobs and navigating the needs of multiple family members. Through the multitude of stressors, families may have aimed to return to pre-pandemic routines or by creating a new normal for their families (Harrist et al., 2019; Weisner et al., 2014). Resilience remains an ongoing process for families coming out of the pandemic, as families are confronted by both normative and disruptive risks that challenge their capacity for adaptation and change.

Limitations

Our goal was to shed new light on family resilience at a time when normative family transitions are exacerbated by a major disruptive experience—a global health pandemic. Although we were able to gather data from a substantial number of parent–adolescent pairs at two time periods, we still lack a full family perspective that could provide richer and more meaningful data, as well as data from families with no access to the Internet to participate in the study. We acknowledge the attrition of participants from T1 to T2, although such attrition is expected in longitudinal datasets. We also note that our qualitative data are somewhat limited by the reliance on an online survey, where we were unable to follow up with probes and requests for clarification or to explore the "no problem" response during an in-person interview. We see these limitations as a trade-off of securing a nationally representative sample. We also acknowledge the limitation that both data points occurred during the pandemic, not offering insights from post-pandemic experiences.

On balance, the data allowed us to enter family worlds over a 6-month period during one of the transformational experiences of the 21st century, thereby revealing an intergenerational storyline in participants' own words. The limitations, in fact, offer several avenues for future research, including a lengthier investigation of longitudinal parent–adolescent interactions

during other global crises, such that feedback loops concerning the effectiveness of new routines can be studied. Future research should also address the time-limited versus persistent effects of global crises on family risk and resilience.

Conclusion

Faced with a global pandemic, families felt their capacity to handle even normative risks associated with daily life to be stretched thin. In this study, we examined how families, as a system, responded to ecosystemic challenges with both vulnerability and resilience. The vast majority of families said they were facing significant economic, educational, emotional, and social challenges to their adaptative capacity. Considered collectively, at two points in time during the pandemic, they were relatively clear-sighted about their problems and the introduction of new risks and vulnerabilities from an unprecedented health crisis. They also revealed an overall portrait of resilience by adaptively maintaining their families.

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How to cite this article: Allen, K. R., Crossler, R. E., Bélanger, F., Resor, J., & Kissel, H. A. (2025). Parent and adolescent perspectives on family problems during the COVID-19 pandemic: Implications for family resilience. *Family Relations*, *74*(1), 7–25. https://doi.org/10.1111/fare.13105