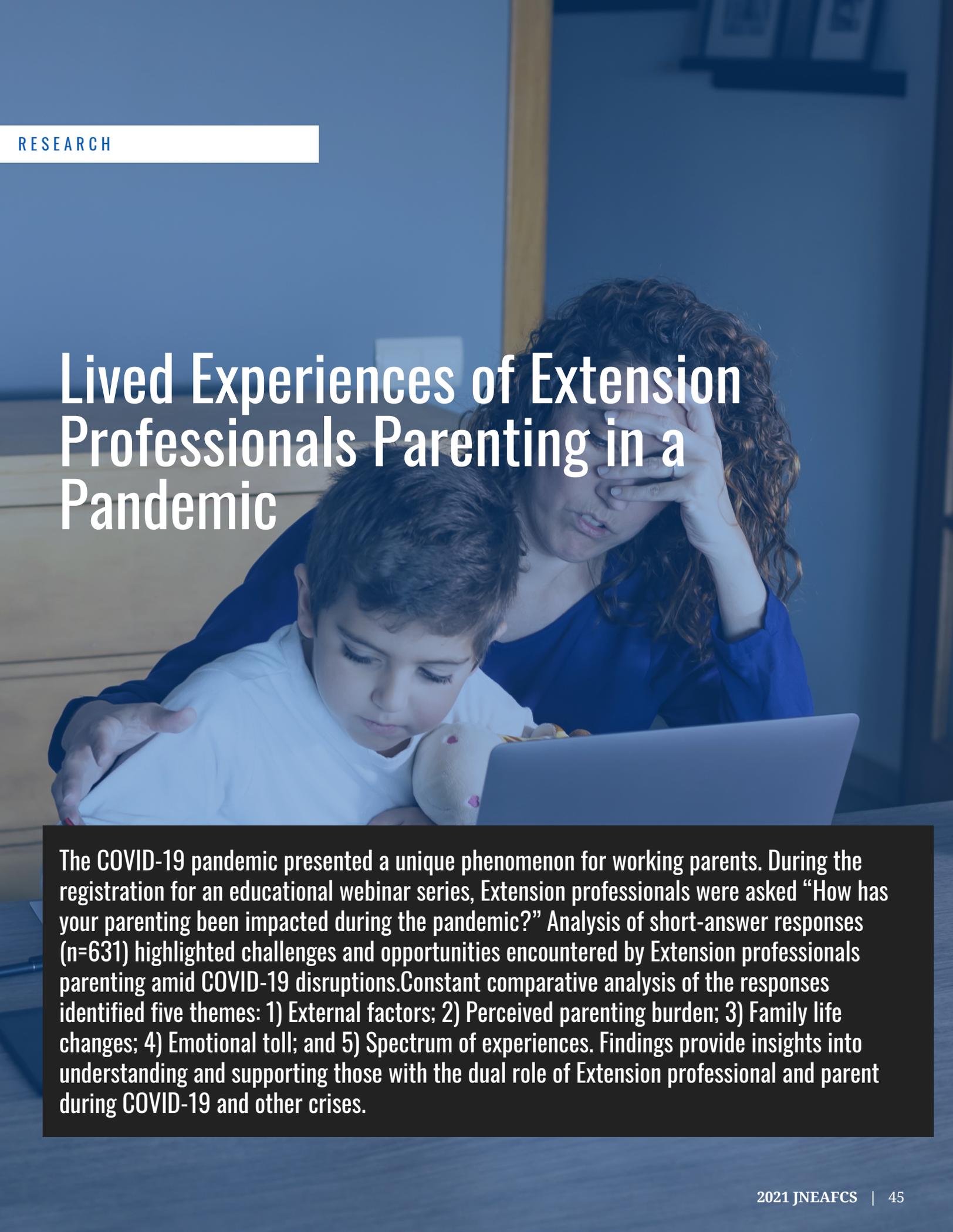# Lived Experiences of Extension Professionals Parenting in a Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic presented a unique phenomenon for working parents. During the registration for an educational webinar series, Extension professionals were asked "How has your parenting been impacted during the pandemic?" Analysis of short-answer responses (n=631) highlighted challenges and opportunities encountered by Extension professionals parenting amid COVID-19 disruptions.Constant comparative analysis of the responses identified five themes: 1) External factors; 2) Perceived parenting burden; 3) Family life changes; 4) Emotional toll; and 5) Spectrum of experiences. Findings provide insights into understanding and supporting those with the dual role of Extension professional and parent during COVID-19 and other crises.

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The COVID-19 pandemic affected parents and family life like no other phenomenon in recent history. Social distancing directives associated with the pandemic disconnected families from support systems (The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, 2020). As a result, families were isolated from community, educational, family, and social systems that typically aid them in difficult times. Additionally, millions of children suffered distinct educational challenges resulting from the pandemic (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, 2020). Students were unexpectedly detached from in-person formal education. The abrupt shift from a traditional school-based model to a variety of home-education and/or virtual educational modes left parents with little transition time to manage their child's schooling (United Nations Children's Fund, 2020).

The pandemic public health protections imposed had consequences for families across the United States. Schools and childcare closures required many working parents to adjust to the loss of these resources while continuing to nurture and educate their children. This experience aligns with the definition of family stress: "a disturbance to the steady state of the family system" (Boss, 2014, p. 1). While most parents experienced some impact of these external and nonnormative stressors, some found it particularly difficult, even catastrophic, because the family was already vulnerable. Furthermore, the circumstances of each family presented unique opportunities and challenges impacting parents' reactions during the pandemic. This aligns with Rosino's (2016) double ABC-X model of family stress and coping which describes how a multitude of factors affect the ways families adapt to crisis. Each with their own set of resources and stressors, parents adapted to the pandemic changes and stress in their own way. This data related to the cohort experience of Extension professionals parenting in a pandemic can provide insight into family stress, resilience, and work-life balance literature.

PURPOSE

This paper reports pandemic parenting experiences described in short-answer responses collected during registration for an educational webinar series targeting Extension professionals. The personal and professional development opportunity was promoted through national Extension networks, professional organizations, and social media platforms. While the original data were collected to inform the webinar series, qualitative analysis of the experiences described have implications for Extension professionals and supervisors. These responses provide insight into the unique opportunities and challenges Extension professionals who are parents/caregivers faced amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, while these findings describe the experiences of an arguably homogenous group, the findings may be relevant to other working parents.

METHOD

Extension professionals registering for the educational webinar series were asked to respond to a pre-questionnaire which included an open-ended question about impact of the pandemic on participants' parenting experiences - "How has the pandemic affected your parenting?". Data was collected between October 7 and November 18, 2020. The University of New Hampshire Institutional Review Board approved the study protocol.

The authors analyzed de-identified qualitative data from responses using Corbin's and Strauss' (2015) constant comparative method of immersion and incubation to identify explanatory patterns (Hatch, 2002). In the initial round of analysis, data were coded and categorized, and a codebook was created by the study team (DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2011). The second round of analysis examined themes across the data corpus, and researchers collapsed the open codes into non-overlapping categories. One member of the project team refined the coding on the entire data set, and another independently recoded the sample using the final codebook. (See codebook in Appendix). Three team members discussed the codebook after reviewing and independently coding a sample of approximately 20% of responses. Inter-rater agreement was 87.5%.

The initial data set included 769 responses; 631 responses were included in the analysis. Excluded responses include those indicating they are not a parent (n=47) and those that were too vague for analysis (n=91) (e. g. responses of "yes", "no", "okay").

FINDINGS

Analysis of the responses yielded themes in five areas: 1) External factors; 2) Perceived parenting burden; 3) Family life changes; 4) Emotional toll; and 5) Spectrum of experiences.

External factors. Parenting impacts included loss of childcare, shifts to virtual school, and working from home. These shifts changed the context of day-to-day family functioning. Extension professionals who were working parents reliant on school or childcare were operating in a new environment with fewer supports and a need to limit activities. One parent remarked, "I have had to be a parent and a teacher while still working a full-time job, all at home." Another felt they had to be "the bad guy" saying no to a lot of gatherings their son wanted to attend. One parent remarked, "The isolation is harming them more than the virus would."

Perceived parenting burden. Participants reported tension between parenting and work responsibilities, in addition to the burden of guiding their children attending virtual school. Parents juggled multiple roles with few additional resources. One parent said, "It is hard to parent and teach. I don't get any breaks anymore. I'm with them all the time." To meet obligations in these multiple roles, some parents sacrificed time: "I assist [my] child with online learning during school day and often spend weekday evenings/nights catching up on work obligations." Another said, "I am a better parent and have loved being around my kids more, but my work has suffered." In contrast, others had less time for family because of workload or "difficulty unplugging", and problems "trying to set boundaries [to] get some work done at home."

Limited interaction outside the household increased demands on parents to meet their children's social and emotional needs. Some parents were unprepared to provide this level of emotional support in addition to handling their own stress. A parent noted, "I don't have the tools to deal with some of the things my kids are dealing with." While some parents reported no negative experiences, the strain of increased parenting demands and dealing with uncertainty affected the well-being of others. Some found having offer more emotional support and be the stabilizing force for their children to be draining. One remarked, "I am trying to maintain [my child's] emotional health, but I am not taking care of my health." The lack of time for parents to practice self-care was also evident. One parent shared, "I feel like I need more time to myself but I don't get it."

Family life changes. The uncertainty and lack of structure caused by the pandemic, combined with more time at home, influenced families in different ways. Some spent more time with children and gained a deeper understanding of their needs. One said, "I really love the extra time with my kids. I am immersed in their lives in a way I wasn't prior to COVID. I'm a better mom." Others described impacts as positive and negative: "24/7 togetherness without a release valve increased tensions but also increased bonding." Some found the closeness in the house to be exasperating and described having "too much time together." Other concerns included "Inconsistent schedules with less structure" because routines changed and had not reached "a new normal yet." Relaxed standards and increased leniency,

particularly for screen time, were reported as ways to compensate for loss of normalcy or as a way for parents to complete work tasks. One parent said, "I actually became much more lenient because I felt bad they were missing so much."

Emotional toll. Parents reported feeling stressed, tired, and distracted. Additionally, having to choose work over family created tension and hard feelings. Remarks included, "I've never felt like a worse parent. Having to ignore my kids in order to work is awful" and "feeling agitated and putting my work over my child daily." Others said, "I haven't felt as present or that I am offering them what they need all the time." One said simply, "I don't get to be a good mom. I don't get a break from anything."

One of the most frequently reported pandemic parenting impacts was decreased patience, which was influenced by increased parenting demands and fewer breaks. One parent said the stress of working and childcare "made me snap at my kids when I normally wouldn't." Others reported having a "short fuse" or short temper, and one described "lashing out at my child over a small issue that would normally not bother me." One said, "[I am] just so low on parenting patience when I feel like I am working 18 hours straight many days of the week to keep up."

Spectrum of experiences. Responses from this group of Extension professionals parenting amid COVID-19 disruptions suggest a wide range of experiences – positive and negative – due to the pandemic. More than 10% (n=69) of respondents reported "no change"; the pandemic did not impact their parenting. Conversely, some became parents during the pandemic, compounding the stress that normally accompanies a new baby. Parents of adult children notably shared an array of experiences, including grief over not being able to comfort their child in person after losing a baby in childbirth and another feeling helpless to protect college-age children from the virus. Additionally, some reported significant effort caring for adult children: "Parenting and providing for adult children have been extremely difficult". While other respondents expressed "No [change], my children are adults".

Despite pressures from the pandemic, some respondents reported positive experiences stemming from more time for family and connection. Some parents reported the pandemic "allowed more quality time" and being "able to spend more time with children." In contrast with virtual school challenges

conveyed by some, one person remarked, "Our family is closer. We have really enjoyed being together more. So much that my son chose to do virtual school." Another said, "My parenting has been enhanced greatly; working remotely from home has provided many wonderful opportunities."

DISCUSSION

The pandemic created conditions that changed the routines, rules, and relationships in families. External factors affecting these changes support findings of others related to challenges resulting from virtual schooling, social isolation, and safety precautions (Brown et al., 2020; Toran et al., 2021). A model provided by Prime et al., (2020) explains, "… social disruptions from the pandemic will generate heightened levels of psychological distress for caregivers, impacting the quality of relationships…" (p. 632). Alignment of findings with this model demonstrates how pandemic contextual factors led to impacts described in the other four themes.

The concept of role conflict and overload was evident throughout responses. Previous studies captured perceived burdens of parents during the pandemic: managing working from home (Brown et al., 2020); changes to family routines (Prime et al., 2020; Toran et al., 2021; Chen et al., 2021); and challenges managing children's academics (Brown et al., 2020; Prime et al., 2020; Chen et al., 2021; Lee et al., 2020). Findings from this study highlight how these pandemic parenting experiences related to the concept of role overload. As one parent described, "my parenting has become about triage". These working parents were expected to nurture children's emotional needs, manage children's education, and contribute to their Extension careers and supervisors' expectations – often simultaneously and under one roof.

Increased demands on parents altered how families operated day-to-day. Consistent with other studies, findings indicate disrupted family routines (Patrick et al., 2020; Toran et al., 2021), increased time together (Brown et al., 2020; Toran et al., 2021), and increased dependence on children's use of electronics (Cellini et al., 2020). Parents creatively adapted to and navigated increased demands and shifting expectations. Responses suggest the cumulative burden of greater demands and uncertainty on multiple fronts took a

great emotional toll, which is confirmed by other studies reporting poorer mental health among parents (Patrick et al., 2020; Lee et al., 2020; Brown et al., 2020), increased stress (Brown et al., 2020), and changes in how they parented and interacted with their children (Toran et al., 2021). Feelings of inadequacy and guilt from impatience with children, and battling fatigue and distractions, weighed heavy on parents.

One subtheme unique to this study and unrepresented in the literature is tending to the needs of adult children. Most studies define parents as caretakers of children from birth through eighteen years of age (or a subgroup) and do not include parents of adult children. This subtheme was the most frequently reported in the dataset, demonstrating that parenting does not necessarily end when children stop residing in their parents' home. Some respondents reported supporting the emotional needs of adult children or caring for grandchildren, while other reported no change with their adult children. The topic of working parents supporting adult children may be worthy of further exploration.

Finally, apparent throughout the responses was the range and variety of experiences. Some Extension professionals expressed challenges with parenting while others reported no change in their parenting during the pandemic. A subset shared positive comments and narratives demonstrating resilience. The heterogeneity of experiences and consequences of the pandemic were clear. Experiences spanned a continuum, starting with becoming parents for the first time during a pandemic, to caring for grandchildren or checking in on their adult child. Yet, age of children was not the only factor likely to affect parents' experience and perceptions. In fact, the double ABC-X model of family stress and coping (Rosino, 2016) outlines factors affecting the ways families adapt to crisis: the pileup of stressors, existing and new family resources, and families' perception of these stressors and resources. Prime et al., (2020) likened the challenges parents experienced and changes in parent-child relationships during the pandemic with impacts from the 2008 global recession. Findings reported here indicate factors contributing to family stress in the COVID-19 pandemic align with the double ABC-X model, which helps explain the different experiences among respondents. Further, alignment of findings with the double ABC-X model suggests that family scientists can anticipate how future crises may impact families and plan ways to provide meaningful support. Finally, while Extension

professionals and supervisors cannot control all aspects of parents' stress during crises, recognition of these reported themes, changed circumstances, and the variety of parent experiences during the pandemic can inform how to best serve Extension professionals who are also parents in the future.

SUMMARY

Study findings confirm that Extension professionals who are parenting can struggle, adapt, and persevere in the face of crisis. The pandemic created a new context and a sweeping set of stressful conditions for families. The variety of parent experiences aligns with Rosino's (2016) double ABC-X model of family stress, supporting consideration of a variety of factors influencing how families adapt to crisis. Similar to findings reported by others, respondents reported changes in family life, discussed perceptions of parenting burden and role overload, and commented on the emotional toll of pandemic parenting. The theme of parenting adult children is unique to this study. Some reported minimal change or even positive outcomes from their pandemic experience. Regardless of the way each family experienced and interpreted the pandemic and its effects, this crisis created a cohort of working parents who continued nurturing and supporting their children while facing extraordinary challenges.

LIMITATIONS

While efforts were made to minimize bias, potential author bias in coding and analysis may have unintentionally influenced the findings. Some families may have been more vulnerable to negative pandemic effects due to demographic factors like race, income, and family type (e. g. single parents) (Chen et al., 2021; Patrick et al., 2020). The authors did not collect demographic data and cannot speculate on differences in experience due to these factors. Finally, researchers included responses from participants who may not have attended the educational webinar in the final data set. However, the final set of responses provides insight into challenges of a broad group of Extension professionals parenting in a pandemic. Responses provide a snapshot into the challenges of working for Extension and parenting during the pandemic, and

highlight some positive effects resulting from pandemic-induced changes to work and social life.

You may click here to access the references, tables, and graphs for this article.

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Appendix

Extension Professional Parenting in a Pandemic Codebook

1) Context, External Factors, Pandemic Factors
   A. Childcare challenges – loss or challenges related to daycare or childcare
   B. Virtual School – school at home, online school, managing children's school work
   C. Isolation – social distance, distance from loved ones, missing out
   D. Pandemic concerns – safety, health, practicing precautions, fear or infection
2) Changes in Family Life
   A. Screen time – mention of children's electronic use
   B. Leniency – parents allowing things they normally wouldn't, changing rules, easier going
   C. Changes to structure – related to scheduling, routines, or changes to normal
   D. Stuck at home – quarantine, all at home, trapped
   E. More family time – related to increase amount of family time or quality of time
3) Perceived Parenting Burden
   A. Role Overload or Role Tension – managing work, parenting, and child's school
   B. Changes in Work-Life – related to overlap of personal and professional life, work from home, more work time, less family time
   C. Concern for child – expressing specific concern for their child's wellbeing (academic, emotional, etc.) – *not related to isolation*
   D. Meeting needs – supporting child, teaching coping skills, listening, "demanding"
   E. Unpredictable – not knowing what's coming, chaotic, constant change
   F. Communication – answering child's questions, explaining situation, communicating new expectations
   G. No "Me Time" - no breaks, always with people, no alone time
4) Emotional Toll
   A. Inadequate – related to parents feeling inadequate, bad parent, children suffering, not doing enough
   B. Less patience – related to parents' short temper, short fuse, more frustration
   C. Stress – related to parents' own emotions like anxiety, high pressure, mental health, overwhelm, unpredictable emotions
   D. Tired – parent expressing exhaustion, fatigue, worn out
   E. Distracted – hard to focus, split attention, multitasking, less present
5) Spectrum of Experience
   A. Pandemic Positives – a focus or perspective with a positive spin
   B. No change – expressions of little to no change in parenting or about the same
   C. Pandemic Baby – having a child during the pandemic
   D. Family Caregiving – related to non-child family caregiving (e.g. elderly parent, neighbor)
   E. Closer with kids – mention of stronger parent/child relationships, being more in-tune
   F. Interacting with Adult child – mention of adult child, includes grandparenting or grandchildren