



Parent-Teen Communication: Before and During COVID-19

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October 2020



Project Overview

Our research team put together an online survey for parents of high school students. We collected 328 surveys from parents throughout the United States from March to June 2020 using Amazon Mechanical Turk. Our survey consisted of questions about parent-teen communication about dating and relationships, monitoring of teens' activities outside the house, and parents' level of stress. We asked parents to report on each of these experiences 1) before schools closed due to COVID-19 and 2) after schools closed due to COVID-19.

Description of Sample

Most participants were mothers (66%), white (77%), and held either a four-year college degree or post-graduate degree (60%). Equal numbers of parents of teen boys (49%) and parents of teen girls (51%) answered the survey.

All participants had children in high school. The average age of participants' children was between 15 and 16 years old. Among participants' children, 28% were in 9th grade, 27% in 10th grade, 27% in 11th grade, and 18% in 12th grade. Seventy-four percent of teens were identified by parents as living in a two-parent household.

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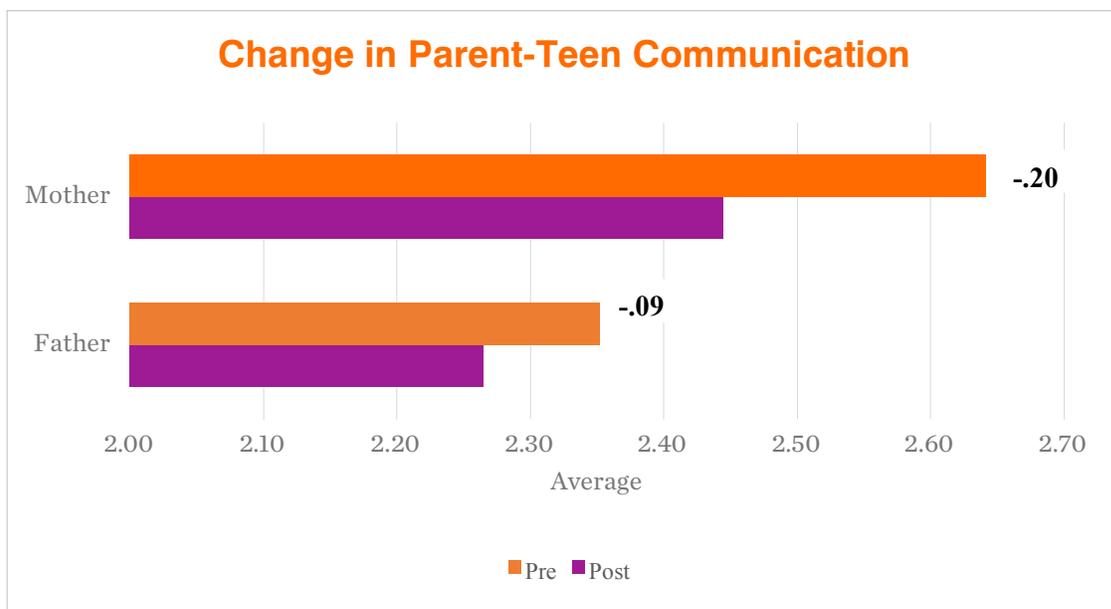
Results

Communication with teens about sex has decreased

Both mothers’ and fathers’ communication with their teens about sex and relationships decreased during COVID compared to before COVID. This decrease in communication was bigger for mothers than fathers. However, mothers’ communication with teens was still higher than fathers’ communication both before and during COVID.

Parents’ overall drop in communication with their teens about sex and relationships may reflect a drop in concern about teens’ dating and relationships during a time when many teens were not permitted to spend in-person time with friends or partners.

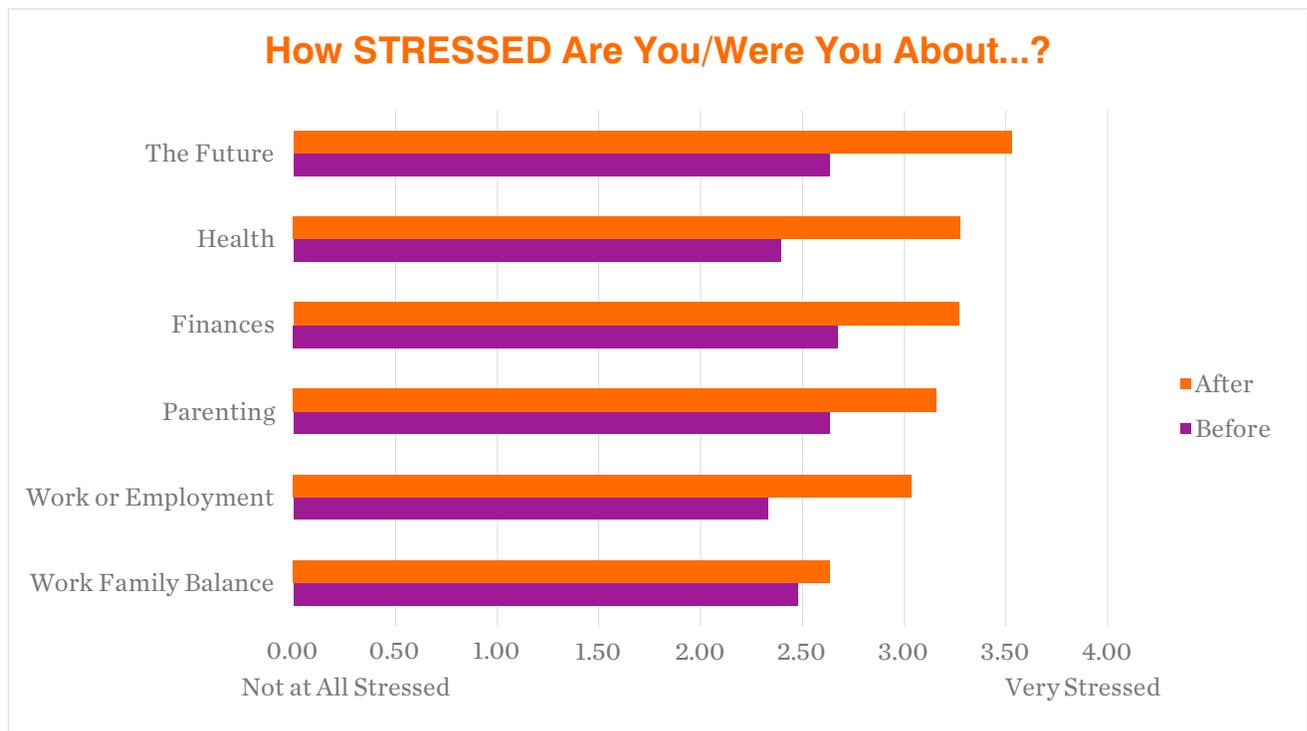
For example, a parent shared, “The fact that kids are not interacting, thus there is no ‘dating’ taking place which is a little bit more difficult to talk about and put in context when it isn’t happening.”



Parent stress has increased

Parental stress increased across multiple areas of their lives. Increased parental stress during the pandemic may have also made it more difficult to bring up potentially awkward or embarrassing topics with their teens. Parents' and particularly mothers' juggling of numerous responsibilities during COVID (e.g., work, supporting teens' schooling) may have left them with less time and energy for communication than before.

For example, one parent explained, "Having the added stress of constantly being together, and now having to not only be his parent, but his makeshift teacher, and then trying to talk about serious things too, has all been just too much."

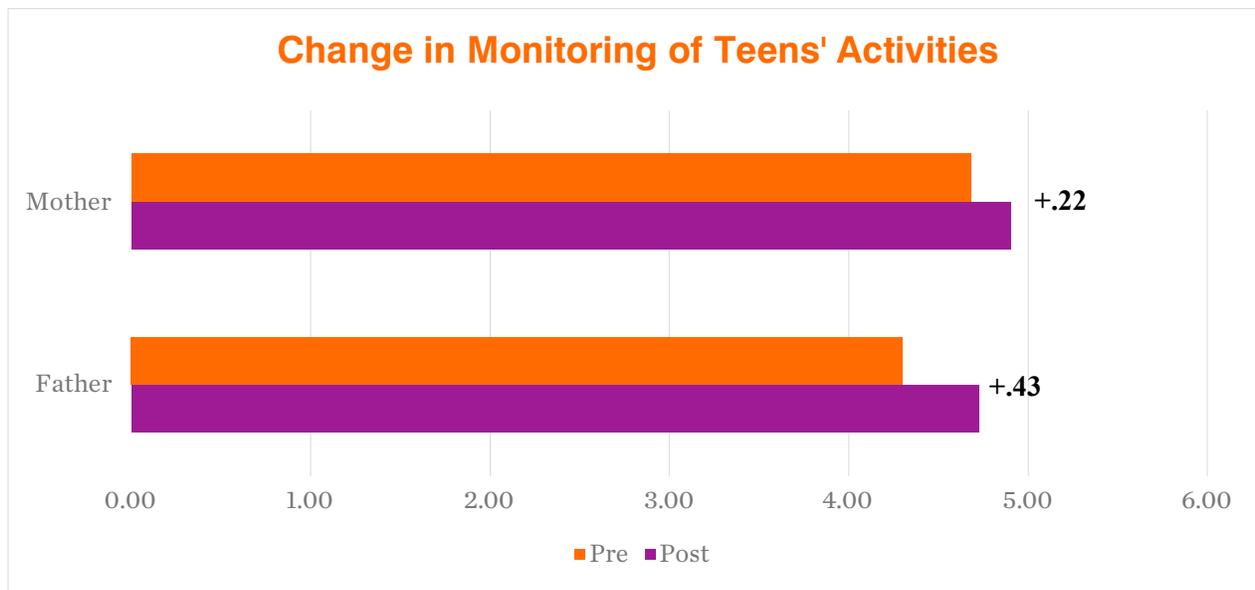


Parent monitoring of teens' activities has increased

Not surprisingly, both mothers' and fathers' monitoring of their teens' activities outside the house increased during COVID compared to before COVID. This increase in monitoring was bigger for fathers than mothers. However, mothers' monitoring of teens was still higher than fathers' monitoring both before and during COVID. This increase in monitoring may reflect parents' increased concerns about teens' in-person contact with friends when they leave the house due to the risks of COVID. Parents may feel that communication with teens about sex and relationships (described above) may be less necessary because of their increased monitoring (as well as reduced opportunities for teen dating and sex during COVID).

Some parents were also in the home more than before COVID, so they may have more opportunities to monitor their children’s behavior. In this study, more fathers than mothers transitioned from working outside the home to being in the home during COVID (61% of fathers vs. 39% of mothers), which could account for the greater increase in monitoring for fathers compared to mothers.

For example, one parent said, “I don’t really talk with her about dating other than making sure I know where she is, who she is with, and when to expect her home.”



Ideas and opportunities to support parent-teen communication

Research suggests that when parents communicate with teens about dating and sex, teens are better prepared to make healthy decisions. Amidst the major challenges and changes to parents’ lives, it is important that they continue to find ways to support these conversations. Whether or not teens return to in-person school, they may need help to re-envision sex and dating given new risks and physical distancing guidelines associated with the pandemic.

For example, parents can talk with teens about challenges related to online dating and new risks that may be associated with in-person dating and sex. The fact that many fathers are now home during the day, representing a major shift, may open up opportunities for them to become more involved in both monitoring and communication with their teens about sex and relationships.