

re. All of his activities were cancelled, and he's lost without it. We did park visits regularly. His entire life has
ed, and he is at an age where he expresses it with tantrums and testing limits. It's exhausting" "My child is
xtremely defiant and so we have resorted to allowing her to be on a screen for many hours every day. She
not want to do school and doesn't even show much interest in going outside. This is not unusual for her
mplified in the quarantine, making her sit on the iPad all day and not enjoy other activities
I need a major distraction eventually." "I want my children to be happy and healthy, but we're
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Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Ontario Families with Children: Findings from the Initial Lockdown

September 2020

   @OntarioParentSurvey

Acknowledgements

The research team would like to thank all caregivers who took the time to complete the survey and for their important contribution to this work. There are many people and organizations who assisted with the launch, communications and marketing of the survey including Sarah Carsley at Public Health Ontario, local/regional public health units, Public and Catholic district school boards, EarlyON Child and Family Centres, Ontario Nurses Association, Ontario Municipal Human Resources Association, Boys and Girls Clubs of Ontario, the Ys, Children's Mental Health Ontario, Ontario Association of Children's Societies, Canadian Mental Health Association, local United Ways, Elementary Teachers Federation (ETF), Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation (OSSTF), and the many parent/caregiver and child/youth organizations across the province.

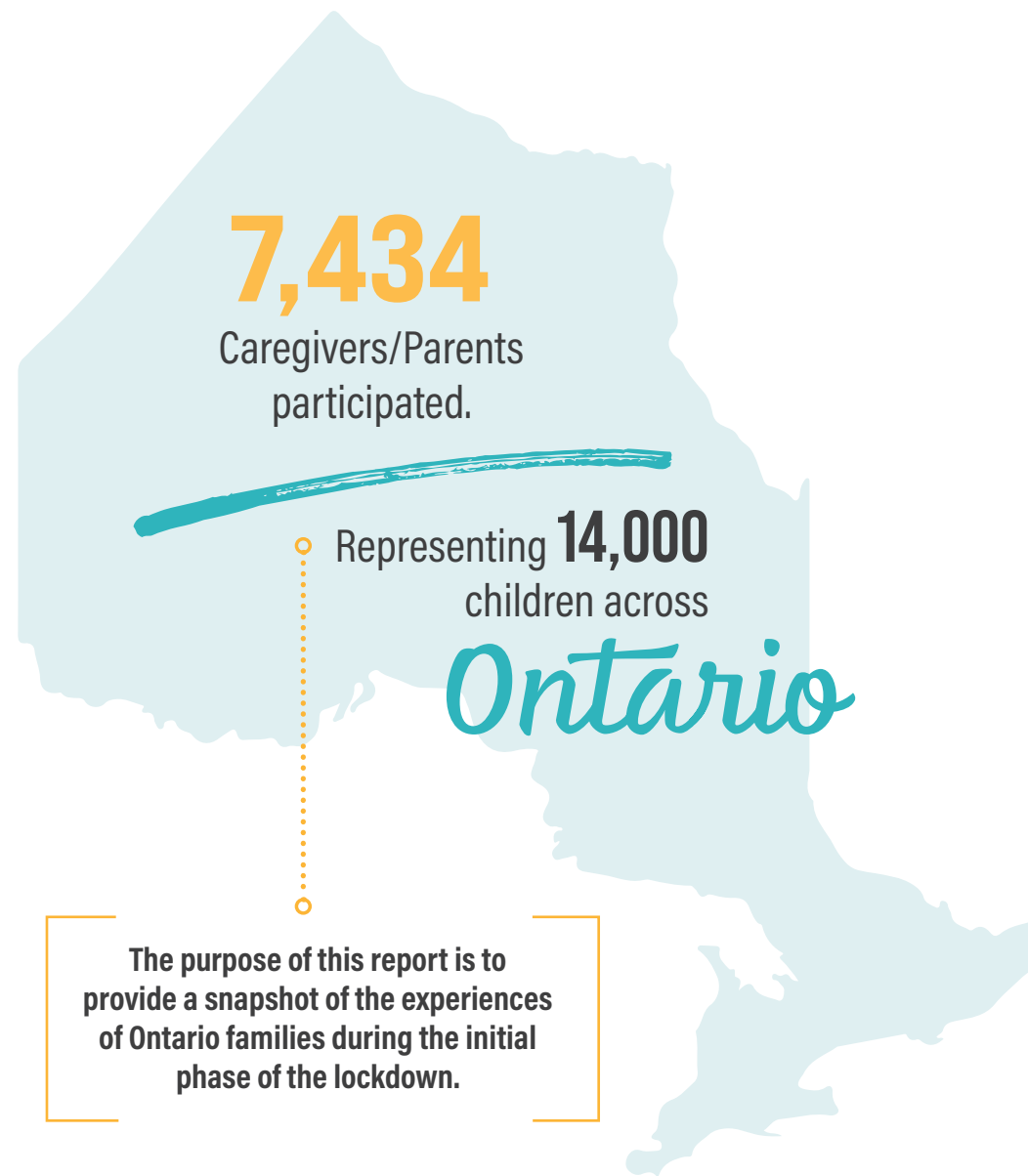
Special thanks to Jeffrey C. Martin (Quorum Communications), Meghan Kenny, Jane Allison, Sarah Lennox, Divya Joshi, Sharon Peck-Reid, Caroline Parkin, Anna DeSimone and Doug Campbell for all of their time and effort in making the study a success. Funding for this report was provided by the Public Health Agency of Canada to Drs. Andrea Gonzalez and Harriet MacMillan.

Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has imposed sudden and unprecedented levels of stress and adversity on the global population. Since initial declaration of the pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) on March 11, 2020, millions of Canadians have experienced some form of prolonged isolation alongside widespread economic hardship, due to a range of strict public health measures enacted at the global, federal, provincial and city/county level (Statistics Canada, 2020). These measures are being encouraged, and in some cases enforced, in order to reduce the transmission of the virus through practices of physical distancing from friends, family, colleagues, teachers, etc., who are not living in the family home as a primary member of the family unit.

In Ontario, from mid-March to the beginning of June (introduction of Stage 2 reopening), the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in closures of schools, daycare, extracurricular programs and outdoor recreational spaces. Furthermore, a significant portion of the workforce shifted operations to reduced or remote work from home routines. The rapidly evolving nature of the COVID-19 pandemic has left governmental, public health agencies, academic, and community organizations unprepared to rapidly adapt and fully respond to the increasing needs of caregivers and children who are coping with unparalleled challenges. The purpose of this report is to provide a snapshot of the experiences of Ontario families during the initial phase of the lockdown.

Between May 5, 2020 and June 19, 2020, a convenience sample of caregivers with children (aged 0-17 years) were recruited through multiple crowdsourcing techniques – advertisements online and via social media platforms as well as through email announcements through public health units, participating school boards, and municipal, community and professional organizations across Ontario. The survey was available online in both English and French. During this period, **7,434 caregivers/parents, representing over 14,000 children across Ontario completed the survey.** This executive summary highlights the main findings of the initial survey.



COVID-19 has negatively impacted parents' mental health.

Mood and anxiety disorders are the most common mental disorders in Canada and worldwide. Depression is characterized by the lowering of a person's mood, while anxiety disorders are characterized by excessive and persistent feelings of apprehension, worry and even fear. Using standardized, epidemiological measures to assess depression and anxiety, **almost 60 per cent of caregivers reported on symptoms that met the criteria for depression** within the last week.

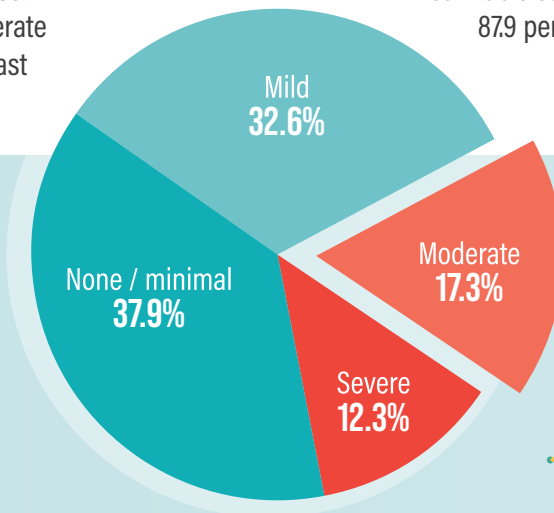
According to data from Statistics Canada's 2012 Canadian Community Health Survey (CCHS) on Mental Health, this reported rate during the COVID-19 pandemic is **10 times the rate of mood disorders** in adults over a 12-month period and more than five times lifetime prevalence rates.¹ One-third of caregivers reported moderate to severe levels of anxiety within the last two weeks.

When asked about alcohol and substance use, 45.6 per cent reported no change in alcohol consumption since the pandemic started, 16.9 per cent reported a decrease and 37.5 per cent reported an increase in alcohol intake. These findings are consistent with, but higher than reports from the Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction (CCSUA), which reported increased amounts of alcohol intake in approximately one-quarter of respondents. In the CCSUA study, factors related to increased alcohol use were boredom, stress, and change in schedules.²

Cannabis use was much less common in parents, however trends in reported increased usage since the start of the pandemic are concerning. We found that most parents reported no cannabis consumption within the last six months (80.7%), with 3.2 per cent reporting weekly and 4.9 per cent reporting daily use; however, over a third of parents reported changes in the amount of cannabis consumption since the start of the pandemic; with 87.9 per cent indicating increased usage.



Percentages and levels of caregiver anxiety reported:



1 out of **3** caregivers reported **moderate to high** levels of anxiety.

¹ Knoll, A. D., & MacLennan, R. N. (2017). Prevalence and correlates of depression in Canada: Findings from the Canadian Community Health Survey. *Canadian Psychology/Psychologie canadienne*, 58(2), 116-123. <https://doi.org/10.1037/cap0000103>

² <https://preventionconversation.org/2020/04/15/covid-19-alcohol-and-cannabis-use>

Parents are struggling to manage routines and their children's behaviour and moods.

Specific questions were asked regarding parents' concerns about their children and the demands of parenting during the lockdown. **One-half of all parents also reported moderate to high levels of concern for managing their children's remote learning (48%), screen time (54%), and managing their child's anxiety and stress (48%) and behaviour (31%).** Many concerns were related to parent's managing their own time, with moderate to high levels of concerns expressed by 49 per cent of participants, and balancing work and caregiving (47%), and maintaining household routines, organization, and meals (48%). A third of parents (32%) reported needing assistance with their children's mood and/or behaviour during the pandemic.

57%
of caregivers
met the criteria
for **depression.**



Parents/caregivers reported moderate to high levels of concern for:



48%

Managing their children's
remote learning.



54%

Managing their children's
screen time.



48%

Managing their child's
anxiety and stress.



31%

Managing their
child's behaviour.



48%

Managing household routines,
organization and meals.

What parents are *saying*...

"I see my kids becoming more distanced from their activities and friends"

"My child is undereating and losing weight. Already too thin. Unsure how to address it. Want to take him to a doctor but not essential."

"I worry how my children will handle real life again."

"Our young kids enjoy being home with us and we have lots of games and crafts to do. They watch more TV than usual but are otherwise thriving well. I did this survey to balance the results."

"My middle child is in Grade 8 so while it's 'optional' he would be disadvantaged if he didn't participate. He also had to mourn the loss of graduating and grad trip. He has snuck out resulting in us calling the police in the middle of the night on a work night. This has been hell."

"The kids fight with each other often, they are bored, miss school and friends, they absolutely hate home schooling. I find it hard to picture another few months like this. I know we will get through it, but it's hard being cooped up with each other all the time."

"I'm very concerned that my active child is not getting enough exercise. I have to work all day and can only take short breaks. Also, my child is an only child, so I worry she doesn't have enough interaction with her peers right now. Also, is she falling behind in school? So many stresses right now."

"My child can't see his psychiatrist because his therapy is play-based but his stress and anxiety is elevated."

"Concern with my toddler losing social skills as he isn't interacting with anyone but mom and dad."

"My 11-year-old thinks everyone is going to die and says, 'it doesn't matter', and 'I don't care' a lot."

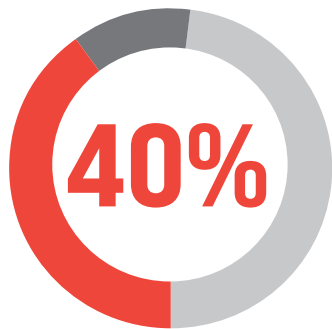
"They now live in fear of other people. I am scared that their social ability will be affected by this in the long run. They see people as germ carriers that can kill them."

"My oldest teen with diagnosed mental health issues... these issues have worsened due to pandemic i.e., no school, can't work, can't see friends or girlfriend and difficult to access therapy and difficulty with on-line courses."

COVID-19 has negatively impacted children's behaviour and well-being.

Caregivers were asked general questions regarding their children's overall well-being since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. **Forty per cent of parents indicated their children's behaviour/mood had deteriorated and children were "worse off" since the start of the lockdown, with only 12 per cent indicating children were doing better.**

When asked about specific concerns related to COVID-19, almost half of parents (49%) reported moderate to high levels of boredom in their children due to restrictions, challenges in entertaining their children (46%), and increases in arguments with their children due to COVID-19 restrictions (11%). Approximately 18 per cent of parents reported that their children had high levels of concern that they will catch COVID-19 and almost one quarter (23%) reporting children's concerns about someone they love catching COVID-19.



40% of parents indicated their **children's behaviour/mood had deteriorated.**

What parents are saying about what they need:

Parents were asked an open-ended question regarding anything else that may concern them about 'the impact of Coronavirus/COVID-19 on you or your child'. More than 3,000 responses were recorded — many themes were consistent and related to respite childcare, more virtual lessons and guidance from teachers and the school, and more options in terms of counselling services when needs either arose during the pandemic or for pre-existing conditions.

Parents need...

- *"Mental health help for my children with diagnosed mental health disorders. But this has been a problem since before the epidemic."*
- *"Support for my child's anxiety - she previously had therapy which has now been cancelled."*
- *"Better access to therapies or treatments for children (occupational therapy, speech, physio). Better online learning options or resources for children with special needs and/or Individual Education Plans."*
- *"Ideas on how to structure the day for tweens. Such a minor part of the day is for online schooling...she has a lot of time to put in and I am occupied with work and am not able to 'curate' for her...that's stressful. What is healthy for her mind, socialization, emotions?"*
- *"My younger daughter struggles with anxiety and free support with this for all children would be beneficial."*
- *"A resource for kids to go for info related to COVID geared to their age. A forum to speak with other kids, moderated by an informed adult who can answer questions and ease fears."*
- *"More online physical activities for ages 12+. There are adult Zoom classes and lots of things for younger children. More online social networking opportunities for 12+ beyond video games and school; safe environments where he could meet friends, discuss hobbies, etc."*
- *"I would have appreciated more support for healthcare workers at the beginning of the pandemic. Counselling services, help with organizing childcare and suggestions on how/when to protect our children from the virus."*
- *"Potential tutoring for my eldest, as he has learning difficulties. I am working full time from home and do not have time to plan activities for my children. If there are any suggestions as to how to manage and plan more of a routine/easy activities, I would be open to that."*

COVID-19 has affected family functioning.

We asked parents about how they were dealing with child behaviour issues or problems within the last two months. Some caregivers reported struggles with discipline strategies and challenges with parenting.

A third of parents reported higher levels of raising their voice or yelling when their child misbehaves, 21 per cent indicated getting into long arguments with their child due to misbehaviour or giving them a long lecture (13%), and 21 per cent reported getting frustrated or angry enough that their child can see that they are upset. Almost 40 per cent indicated being picky and “on their child’s back” when stressed or upset.

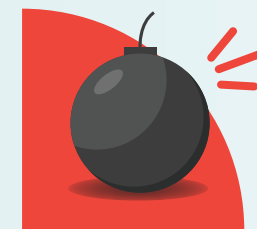
21% indicated getting into long arguments with their child due to misbehaviour.

40% indicated being picky and “on their child’s back” when stressed or upset.

Taken together, these responses indicated **moderate to high levels of interpersonal conflict between family members** during the initial lockdown period.

49%
reported a high level
of conflict with their
partner/spouse.

One quarter reported
having exploded at
their partner/spouse.

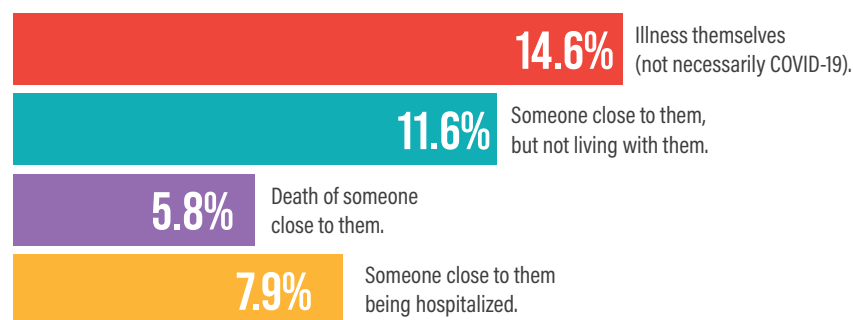


Parents also reported a high level of conflict (“somewhat” to “a lot”) with their partner/spouse since the lockdown began – 49 per cent reported feeling angry or annoyed with spouse; 34 per cent indicated moderate to high levels of criticizing or yelling at their partner; 47 per cent reported high levels of feeling distant from their partner, and almost one quarter reported having exploded at their partner in the last month. Similar patterns were observed when participants were asked about their spouse/partner’s behaviour towards them. **Almost 10 per cent of parents indicated increased verbal or physical conflict since the pandemic started.**

Experiences of families in Ontario during COVID-19

The announcement of the COVID-19 pandemic led to the closure of schools and most daycare facilities, the cancellation of extracurricular activities and social events. In addition, physical distancing guidelines resulted in the closure of businesses, increased unemployment, and economic uncertainty. Socially these guidelines resulted in parents and children being cut off from extended families and friends. Distance learning and the lack of daycare options has led to dramatic alternations in work-life balance. To understand exposure to health risks, caregiving duties, the financial and economic ramifications of the pandemic, as well as some positive experiences related to the lockdown, we asked parents about a range of experiences since the pandemic had started.

Almost one-third of families experienced health issue:

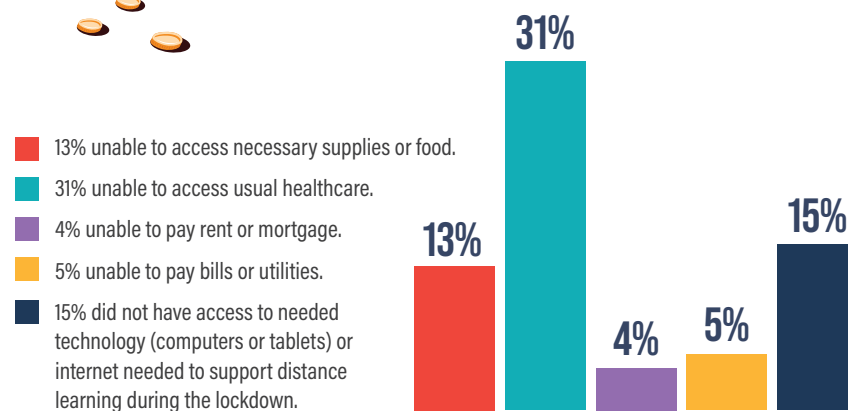


Not surprisingly, in terms of caregiving experiences, an overwhelming number of parents reported **increased time caregiving for young and/or school-aged children (76%) and assisting adolescents (26%).**

Almost 10 per cent of parents reported additional time caregiving for older adults, whereas approximately five per cent indicated they were unable to care for people who require assistance due to health conditions or limitations.



One-half of caregivers reported resource issues, with 34 per cent reporting some loss of income, and 48 per cent indicating that a household member had applied for financial help offered by the federal or provincial governments.



Despite these many stressors, parents also reported several positive experiences during COVID-19 including eating meals with family more often (61%), increased exercise or physical activity (36%), spending more time in nature or being outdoors (56%), spending more time doing enjoyable activities (e.g., reading books, puzzles), and having greater appreciation for things usually taken for granted (57%).



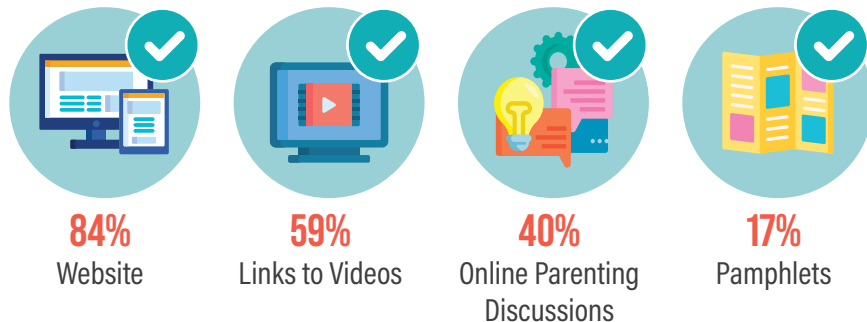
Family needs during the COVID-19 pandemic

We asked parents to identify assistance or needs during the COVID-19 pandemic. Almost 15 per cent indicated the need to access more technology for their children's remote learning and 10 per cent reported needing internet access. Approximately five per cent of families stated they need assistance accessing or completing forms to obtain financial aid from government sources and five per cent need to receive food supplements.

One third of parents identified needing assistance with their own stress and/or mood (32%) and a third reported needing assistance with their children's behaviour and/or stress (32%). More than one-half of parents stated that they would be interested in receiving parenting tips and information about children during the COVID-19 pandemic. In open ended questions, many parents cited the need for respite care, daycare, or a nanny/babysitter either more frequently or just occasionally for a break. Parents also cited greater assistance with distance learning and more restructure around lessons and homework needed to be provided.

Mode of delivery for parenting and child information during COVID-19

Parents indicated they would appreciate receiving tips through:



Parents say they need help with:

"Information on parenting/homeschooling children with "exceptionalities"

"Food banks that could deliver to help with snacks/food for the kids"

"Better supports for online learning. More clarity in public health information."

"Entertainment ideas for small kids, they do not enjoy FaceTime as older ones."

"Parenting Program for everyone through a virtual platform (Zoom) — good reminder of how to parent at home and juggle work responsibilities."

"Childcare or educational entertainment/activities that require little to no mental energy or preparations on my part (my brain and time is maxed out just trying to keep my two kids fed and healthy and somewhat occupied while I'm trying to work full time from home, and keep the basics of life running)."

"Help with schooling has been out only issue. I don't have the patience and he doesn't get some of the things being thought online and it's stressful for the both of us. I hate seeing my child end up in tears over it."

*"Parenting support, parenting support, PARENTING SUPPORT *shout it from the roof tops*"*

"Mental health strategies available in a form similar to an IEP"

"I have a child that has behavior and mental health problems to begin with. But now with this pandemic I've been able to access more assistance. Some that I've been waiting on list for years. So as far as services, we are on the right track for my children. My doctor is also well aware of my mental health state that has been an issue prior to this and has been making more phone calls."

"Not services, policy changes to allow parents to work part-time during the pandemic, so that we can be present for the children."

Summary

Ontario families are struggling. An overwhelming number of caregivers report clinical levels of depressive symptoms and moderate to severe levels of anxiety. Many parents indicate that their children are worse off in terms of behaviour and mood since the COVID-19 pandemic started. Various factors play into these outcomes including caregiving stressors related to distance learning, work-child care balance, finances and health.

Findings from this survey also represent a call for help – one third of parents indicate that they need assistance with their own mood and stress, and a third report needing help with their children's behaviour and mood. Despite these findings, some positive aspects emerged, including spending more time with family and engaging in outdoor activities.

When the pandemic was declared by the World Health Organization in mid-March and the subsequent measures to protect families during lockdown were put in place, all occurred at such speed that our traditional organizations and sources of community support could not pivot easily. Everyone worked within the new parameters of an unprecedented situation. We are now six months into the pandemic and although a phased approach to re-opening is underway and plans are in place for full return to school, uncertainties remain.

Moving forward, should we find ourselves in this position again, with all the structures involved and a return to distance learning, we must be prepared to respond more efficiently and effectively. Based on what families told us about supports they would value, this may involve access to online videos, materials, and forums for support for families and children. More specifically, this would involve technology-assisted, remote mental health supports and interventions for both parents and children, and parenting information for caregivers related to strategies on how to deal with child stress and behaviours.

High speed internet access and associated equipment for distance learning for all children within a family should be provided if needed. Access to parks, community spaces and outdoor activities that meet standard health requirements and do not isolate families and children should be carefully considered. Training and support for teachers on interactive curriculum delivery is necessary should distance learning be resumed. Increased access to tutors and other educational resources are necessary to facilitate distance learning. If there is a single positive to emerge from this pandemic, it is that we have learned much about its impact. We must be prepared to exploit this knowledge now, even as the pandemic continues.

Next Steps

This report will be shared with all partner organizations including Child and Youth Mental Health agencies and public health units across the province, EarlyON and Family Centres, Public Health Ontario, district school boards, Ontario Municipal Human Resources Association and the Ontario Nurses Association.

We will also be presenting the data and sharing the summaries with our funder, the Public Health Agency of Canada. We will hold roundtable discussions regarding the best way to support families moving forward. Over half of the respondents provided contact information for potential follow up. Our team is now preparing the next survey to see how families are coping since re-opening and with the start of the new school year.

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