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AAP News

Study: Virtual education linked with decreased physical activity, worsening emotional health

by Melissa Jenco, News Content Editor



Editor's note: For the latest news on COVID-19, visit <http://bit.ly/AAPNewsCOVID19>.

A new study found virtual education during the pandemic is linked with decreased physical activity and worsening emotional health for parents and their children.

The results will come as little surprise to many families. They also confirm the AAP's repeated assertions about the importance of schools and the need to put measures in place that will allow them to reopen safely for in-person instruction.

Researchers analyzed data from a survey of 1,290 parents of children ages 5-12 years conducted in the fall of 2020. Their findings were published today in the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC's) *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*.

About 46% reported their child was receiving virtual education, 31% in-person and 23% combined. Hispanic, Black and non-Hispanic other/multiracial parents reported virtual instruction more often than White parents.

Among parents of virtual learners:

- 63% reported a decrease in their child's physical activity vs. 30% of in-person families,
- 58% reported a decrease in time spent outside vs. 27% of in-person families,
- 86% reported a decrease in in-person time with friends vs. 70% of in-person families and
- 25% reported worsened mental or emotional health vs. 16% of in-person families.

Children receiving combined instruction also fared worse compared to those receiving all in-person instruction, although the difference was not as pronounced as it was for those whose education was entirely virtual.



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Parents of virtual learners also struggled more than parents of children attending school in-person. The former group was more likely to report loss of work, concerns about job stability, challenges with child care and emotional distress, according to the report.

"Schools are central to supporting children and families, providing not only education, but also opportunities to engage in activities to support healthy development and access to social, mental health, and physical health services, which can buffer stress and mitigate negative outcomes," authors wrote. "However, the pandemic is disrupting many school-based services, increasing parental responsibilities and stress, and potentially affecting long-term health outcomes for parents and children alike, especially among families at risk for negative health outcomes from social and environmental factors."

They said families may need extra mental health support and opportunities for physical activity and highlighted the need to address inequities in services for racial/ethnic minorities.

Throughout the pandemic, the AAP repeatedly has stressed the important role of schools and **provided guidance on how to safely reopen schools**.

"As a pediatrician, I recognize the fundamental importance of schools to child and adolescent development and well-being, in addition to high-quality academic instruction that is best delivered in person," AAP President Lee Savio Beers, M.D., FAAP, **said in statement** last month. "As a nation, we should be prioritizing helping schools open safely so that children and adolescents can again benefit from everything that school provides, especially for children and adolescents who have already borne a disproportionate burden of the pandemic."

Resources

- [AAP interim COVID-19 guidance on physical activity, emotional/behavioral health and school reopening](#)
- [CDC guidance on school reopening](#)
- [Information from the CDC about COVID-19 for health care professionals](#)
- [Information for parents from HealthyChildren.org on COVID-19](#)