

## Correlates of Parent-child Relationship Quality among Working Mothers during Covid-19 Pandemic in Malaysia

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### Abstract

During the Covid-19 outbreak, parents, particularly working mothers, encountered difficulties balancing their careers and home related tasks especially when dealing with children at home throughout the pandemic. Challenges in coping with various issues during the pandemic have been found to play an important role in impacting parent-child relationships. The present study examines the relationships between perceived impact of Covid-19 pandemic, parental stress, harsh parenting and parent-child relationship quality among working mothers in Malaysia. A total of 295 working mothers with at least one child aged three to twelve years old, participated in this study. The findings revealed that perceived impact of Covid-19 pandemic, parental stress and harsh-parenting were significantly related with each other and were critical predictors of parent-child relationship quality. Parental stress was found to be the strongest predictor, implying the importance of mental health in helping parents to survive the ordeal during the difficult time. Fundamentally, working mothers who reported a higher impact of Covid-19 pandemic, higher parental stress, and practiced a high level of harsh parenting tend to have poor parent-child relationship quality. Stress management is deemed critical in helping parents to perform their roles and preventing negative consequences on parent-child relationships.

**Keywords:** Covid-19 Pandemic, Parental Stress, Harsh Parenting, Parent-child Relationship, Working Mothers.

### Introduction

In early 2020, the Coronavirus disease was declared by the World Health Organization (WHO) as a public health emergency. In Malaysia, the government imposed the first Movement

Control Order (MCO) after the increase in cases to curb the infection of the virus. Covid-19 has induced much stress in the community, including parents, due to the fear of the virus, concern about family well-being, and financial implications. During the pandemic, many activities were halted, and individuals were forced to adjust to a new normal that includes working from home and distance learning. Due to MCO, more family members were expected to be confined to their homes and families tend to spend more time together (Thavarajah et al., 2020). Vincent (2021) stated that the Covid-19 pandemic had caused considerable alterations in both the caregivers' and their children's everyday lives, such as childcare, employment, time spent at home, and the economy. The increase in parents' workloads at home, such as having to work from home, performing household chores, and monitoring the children, may compromise their well-being and lead to an increase in daily stress.

Working mothers can be best described as women who can juggle their jobs with the additional responsibilities of caring for their children and families. In Malaysia, 50% of women are employed, and 70% of them are married working women (Sabil & Marican, 2010). According to Ravindranath et al (2021) Malaysian women make up 39.1% of the labour force, with 62% of them reportedly being mothers. Working mothers frequently struggle to divide their responsibilities between home and work, such as allocating time for both childcare and occupation. When raising children at home, a mother must be kind and caring, while at workplace, the mother must devote her all and work diligently (Yusuf & Sim, 2017). However, due to closing of preschools, schools and childcare centers, working mothers need to balance between both employment and family duties all at home (Kirwin & Ettinger, 2022). According to Yokoyama and Takaku (2020), anxiety, depression, and the development of other mental health conditions have been triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic's stress on mothers of children who are school-age or younger. In addition, working mothers in Malaysia also reported that daily tasks affected their mental health and emotional well-being (Hadjicharalambous et al., 2020).

### **Parent-child relationship quality**

In any family structure, parent-child relationships are fundamental, especially during vital times in order to maintain a functional family system. Past research discovered that the quality of parent-child interactions was associated with parents' negative emotional symptoms (Vincent, 2021). With a solid parent-child relationship, parents and children will have enough resources and support to cope with the difficulties that are related to the pandemic. Moreover, the impacts of Covid-19 may become a factor of a relationship constraint between the parent and the child. Impacts such as financial difficulties and psychological problems are studied in this research to determine their association with parent-child relationship. Changes in the family system due to the pandemic have a massive impact on parent-child relationships.

Furthermore, parent-child relationships are also influenced by the parent's stress level. Working mothers are expected to multitask their jobs, especially those who work from home. With increasing workloads, stress may happen that will cause a constraint on the parent-child relationship. In addition, working mothers in Malaysia also reported that daily tasks affected their mental health and emotional well-being (Hadjicharalambous et al., 2020). According to UNICEF Malaysia (2021), among 500 households surveyed, half of them experienced a decrease in income from May to September 2020, and the stress among the head of families is reported to be higher from September (19%) to December (27%). As a result, these socio-economic difficulties and stress factors are associated with an increased emotional response, such as feeling overwhelmed among parents, leading to a negative relationship with children

(Belsky 1984; Conger et al., 1992). Consequently, a significant relationship between stress within a family with parenting problems also leads to child maltreatment, especially during the pandemic when families are exposed to many new stressors that may compromise their health, safety, and economic well-being (Brown et al., 2020). Moreover, securing a healthy relationship with children is essential so that the children will grow up to be healthy individuals (Uzun et al., 2021).

Also, due to all the stress and the impacts of the pandemic, it will lead parents to adopt a harsher way of parenting. Jackson and Choi (2018) determined that harsh parenting was directly linked to parental stress. Hence, parents need to connect and have deep relationships with their children since the quality of the parent-child relationship will always be critical in eliminating the adverse outcomes that the children may develop growing up. Romero et al. (2020) discovered that positive parenting had been shown to lessen adverse child outcomes and promote growth in the face of adversity. In brief, it is essential to understand the variables that predict the parent-child relationship among working mothers. Covid-19 impacts, parental stress, and harsh parenting are variables that are interrelated with each other.

Based on the above rationale, the current study aims to determine the relationships between perceived Covid-19 impact, parental stress, harsh parenting, and parent-child relationship quality among the respondents.

## **Methods**

### **Research Design**

The design of the study is non-experimental correlational design based on the structure of the study.

### **Participants and Procedure**

A total of 295 working mothers with at least one child aged between three to twelve years old were recruited by using social-media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and WhatsApp to invite participants to participate in this research. The participants must be a working mother with at least one child aged between three to twelve years old and a Malaysian citizen. The link to the Google form questionnaire was shared with respondents in the social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and WhatsApp. The participants required approximately 10-15 minutes to complete the questionnaire. Due to the unknown sample size, the Cochran sample size formula was used. The sample size in this study was determined to be 385 from the total population of the groups by using the sample size formulation by (Cochran, 1963)

$$n = \frac{z^2 pq}{e^2}$$
$$n = \frac{(1.96^2)(0.5)(0.5)}{0.05^2}$$
$$n = 384$$

$n$  = sample size

$z$  = z-value

$p$  = estimated proportion of the population

$e$  = margin of error

### **Measures**

A demographic questionnaire was used to secure information on age, race, number of children, age of children, maternal education level, education, work status (WFH), and household incomes.

**Coronavirus Impacts Questionnaire (CIQ).** The financial, resource, and psychological impacts of Covid-19 were measured using the Coronavirus Impacts Questionnaire (CIQ) developed by

(Conway et al., 2020). The shortened 6-item version of CIQ was used since it has the same psychometrics characters as the longer version, and each factor has two items (Chung et al., 2020). The item response was designed on four Likert scale, ranging from 1 (not true of me at all) to 4 (very true of me). A higher total score of this scale indicates a higher perceived Covid-19 impacts. Examples of item are “I have lost job-related income due to the Coronavirus (Covid-19)” and “I have become depressed because of the Coronavirus (Covid-19)”. The Cronbach’s alpha for CIQ is 0.86 in this study.

**Parental Stress Scale (PSS).** Parental stress was assessed by using the Parental Stress Scale (PSS). The 18-item scale by Berry and Jones (1995) measured an individual’s perception and feelings of stress directly related to being a parent. The scale is assessed by using 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (never) to 4 (often). Examples of the items are “I am happy in my role as a parent” and “I feel close to my children”. The Cronbach’s alpha for parental stress scale is 0.86 in this study.

**Fragile Families Study.** Harsh parenting was measured using statements that have been adapted to local study in Singapore which was used in the Fragile Families Study (Chung et al., 2020). This 3-item instrument measured the level of harsh parenting among respondents. The instrument uses a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (not true to me at all) to 4 (very true of me). Higher scores indicated more use of harsh parenting in the past weeks. Examples of the items are “Yelled/screamed at children” and “Spanked or caned children” The Cronbach’s alpha for Fragile Families Study is 0.62 in this current study.

**Child-Parent Relationship Scale (CPRS).** Parent-child relationship quality was determined by the Child-Parent Relationship Scale (CPRS) (Driscoll & Pianta, 2011). This scale measured parents’ views of their relationship with their children. This scale consisted of 15 items based on a 5- point Likert scale responses ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (always). The examples of items are “I share an affectionate, warm relationship with my child” and “My child values his/her relationship with me”. The Cronbach’s alpha for parental stress scale is 0.87 in this study.

### **Data Analysis**

Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) Version 25.0 was used to input data, recode, compute data, and analyze the data. There were two types of data analysis used to analyze the obtained data. The analyses are as below:

- 1) Bivariate Analysis Spearman correlation analysis was used to test the correlation and determine between three variables in this present study which was the correlation between perceived impacts of Covid with parent-child relationship quality, parental stress with parent-child relationship quality, and harsh parenting with parent-child relationship quality was investigated to fulfill the objective of this study.
- 2) Multivariate Analysis Multiple regression was used to determine the unique predictors of parent-child relationship quality among the respondents.

### **Results and Discussion**

#### **Relationships between the variables**

Correlation analyses were performed to determine the relationships between perceived impact of Covid-19 pandemic, parental stress, harsh parenting and parent-child relationship quality. Results from the analyses were reported in Table 1. The findings revealed that

perceived impact of Covid-19 pandemic is significantly and inversely correlated with parent-child relationship among working mothers ( $r = -0.47, p < 0.01$ ). This results is compatible with past research that showed there is a significant association between parents' burden, mental health, and perceptions of children's stress with a parent-child relationship because of Covid-19, where families have to be confined together for a long period of time (Russell et al., 2020). Gadermann et al (2021) also discovered that the pandemic also influenced adverse interactions between parents with their children, where more increased arguments happened.

Table 1

*Results of Spearman's Correlation Analysis between independent variables and parent-child relationship quality (N=295)*

Independent Variable	<i>r</i>
Perceived impact of Covid-19 pandemic	-0.47
Parental stress	-0.63
Harsh parenting	-0.45

Note: \*\* $p < 0.01$

The results also showed a significant negative relationship between parental stress and parent-child relationship quality among working mothers ( $r = -0.63, p < 0.01$ ). Thus, it is supported that there is a significant negative association between parental stress and parent-child relationship, indicating that higher parenting stress can reduce the parent-child relationship quality. This result is in line with the findings of Prime et al (2020), which claimed high levels of stress when mental and emotional resources are lacking, caregivers face the challenges to adopt a positive leadership in the family hence affecting the relationship of the parent and child negatively. Referring to Liu et al (2020), stress that comes from unemployment, low income, and low education were positively linked with the use of severe discipline and conflicts between parent and the child.

Moreover, a significant association was found between harsh parenting and parent-child relationship ( $r = -0.45, p < 0.01$ ). This result is consistent with the findings of (Deater and Deckard, 1998). Parents use harsh, negative, and authoritarian approaches if they are in a stressful condition, and this may make them become less engaged towards their children and feel less connection with them that leading to a poor parent-child relationship. This finding is consistent with the findings from a recent research in the United States whereby it shows that more negative mother-child interactions and higher levels of corporal punishment by mothers and fathers were linked to parental stress (Jackson & Choi, 2018). Moreover, in Chung et al (2020) research, the researchers also discovered a significant link between parenting stress and a higher occurrence of harsh parenting (i.e., caning, spanking, use of harsh words, and yelling) as well as a decrease in the closeness of the relationship between parents and children. Based on the data from UNICEF (2019), it was found that many of the children in Africa and Asia had the experience of harsh parenting such as physical punishment and psychological hostility.

### **Predicting Parent-child Relationship Quality**

A forced entry multiple regression was performed to identify the predictors of parent-child relationship quality among working mothers. Table 2 below shows the result of the forced entry multiple regression analysis.

Table 2

*Multiple Regression Analysis on Parent-child Relationship Quality*

Variables	Parent-Child Relationship Quality		
	B	$\beta$	<i>p</i>
Perceived Impact of Covid-19 Pandemic	-0.32	-0.32	0.00*
Parental Stress	-0.42	-0.42	0.00***
Harsh Parenting	-0.98	-0.22	0.00***
R <sup>2</sup> = 0.53			
F=110.64 (df = 291,3)			

Note: \**p* < 0.05, \*\*\**p* < 0.001,  $\beta$  = Beta Coefficient

The result shown in Table 2 revealed that the overall model was significant with a  $R^2 = 0.53$ . This model explained 53.00% of the variance of parent-child relationship score with  $F = 110.64$ ,  $p < 0.001$ . As demonstrated in Table 2, the results showed that perceived impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic, parental stress, and harsh parenting were found to be significant predictors of parent-child relationship quality among mothers in Malaysia. The result revealed parental stress ( $\beta = -0.42$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) is the most significant predictor of parent-child relationship quality among mothers in Malaysia, followed by perceived impacts of Covid-19 ( $\beta = -0.32$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and harsh parenting ( $\beta = -0.22$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ).

### Discussion

The present study examined the relationships between perceived Covid-19 impact, parental stress, harsh parenting and parent-child relationship quality among selected working mothers in Malaysia. The results indicated that parental stress was the strongest predictor for parent-child relationship quality among working mothers. A study by Bauch et al (2022) discovered that child neglect was known to have an association with parental stress. Hence, parental stress not only influences parents to adopt a negative way in parenting, but it also can cause further detrimental issues such as child abuse if the stress is not well-managed.

The result of the present study also showed that perceived Covid-19 impact was found to be a significant predictor for parent-child relationship quality among working mothers. As mentioned in an article written by Shanmugam et al (2020), a study in Malaysia discovered that mental stress increased due to fear and anxiety because of Covid-19. The pandemic had restricted individuals daily activities and had interrupted people's goals and plans. People experienced the unexpected economic situation, fear of infection, social withdrawal, and disruptions to their education and employment during the pandemic, and these problems were associated with negative emotional results (Whitehead & Torossian, 2021). For this reason, it is quite understandable that a higher level of perceived Covid-19 impact will decrease the quality of parent-child relationship.

Furthermore, it is reported that higher levels of harsh parenting tend to have more negative parent-child relationship quality. A transactional relationship was found between harsh parenting and children's behaviour. MacKenzie et al (2015) discovered that the initial time a child has been spanked had a lasting impact on the association between the child's behaviour and the frequency with which the parents used spanking in the future. A study by Kumaraswamy et al (2020) the practice of whipping or spanking a child on the buttock or hand was traditionally not considered to constitute physical abuse but rather as one of several techniques for disciplining misbehaving children. However, based on Gershoff et al (2018) these techniques may not be beneficial in controlling kids' conduct and may even promote

negative behaviour and leading to a greater level of hostility in their preschool-aged kids (Sim & Ong, 2005). Instead of being harsh towards the children, parents could engage in healthy communication with their children. Healthy communication between the parents and the children might assist in alleviating tension in the family (Jang et al., 2021).

### **Conclusion**

Findings from the present study provide empirical support on the significant roles of perceived Covid-19 impact, parental stress and harsh parenting on parent-child relationship quality among working mothers. Given that parental stress is the strongest predictor for parent-child relationship quality, parents should find ways to cope and regulate with the stress in order to maintain a healthy parent-child relationship. The perceived Covid-19 impact was also a significant predictor of parent-child relationship. On top of that, instead of practicing harsh parenting to discipline their children, parents should learn on how to adopt positive parenting skills in handling children in order to foster a positive relationship and encouraging positive character building in their children. Thus, providing a warm and supportive home environment will strengthen the bond between parent and child, allowing children to grow up healthily.

A suggestion for future study that should be brought into light is to incorporate fathers in the target population to gain better knowledge about their parent-child relationship quality. This study also had a limited number of race diversity since most of the respondents are Malays. Hence, to make better generalizations, balanced racial diversity is recommended for future research. It is crucial to explore post pandemic parent-child relationship quality with similar correlates to check on the phenomenon. Lastly, the consequences of parent-child relationship quality have gained a lot of attention, be it in the eastern countries or the western countries. However, there is still a lack of research about parent-child relationship quality in a local setting. Other approaches such as quantitative and mix method research would certainly lend support for better understandings on the critical variables. A lot of other issues or factors related to parent-child relationships are yet to be explored, for instance, family mental illness history, family background, types of occupation, and so forth. In addition, instruments on perceived impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic, parental stress, harsh parenting as well as parent-child relationship from local research are still lacking. More instruments that are culturally suitable in the local environment should be developed by experts in relevant field of studies.

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