



## Study Summary

### ***New ECHO Cohort Research Finds Adolescents with Disabilities May Have Been More Vulnerable to Social Disruptions During COVID-19 Pandemic***

*Authors: Phillip Sherlock, Maxwell Mansolf, Courtney Blackwell, et al.*

#### Who sponsored this study?

The Environmental influences on Child Health Outcomes (ECHO) Program, Office of the Director, National Institutes of Health supported this research.

#### Why was this study needed?

Although researchers have looked at how the COVID-19 pandemic affected the mental health of children of all ages, few studies have examined the pandemic's impact on children and teens with pre-existing mental, emotional, behavioral, and developmental (MEBD) disabilities like depression, anxiety, attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD).

Health policies that were put in place to prevent the spread of COVID-19 caused disruption of normal activities for children and families. Schools paused in-person learning, extracurricular activities were cancelled, and stay-at-home orders meant children spent more time quarantined with family members instead of engaging with friends and peers.

This study was needed to understand how the stresses of the COVID-19 pandemic impacted life satisfaction for adolescents with disabilities, as adolescence is a critical period of social development. Researchers aimed to learn which groups of adolescents were most affected by the pandemic, so that mental health practitioners, pediatricians, and family physicians might be better informed of potential intervention and prevention practices that could be implemented to help particularly vulnerable adolescents through difficult times in the future.

#### What were the study results?

When exposed to certain stresses during the COVID-19 pandemic, adolescents with a history of depression, anxiety, ASD, or ADHD had lower life satisfaction compared to their peers. These stresses included decreased social connectedness, decreased family engagement, stress related to medical care access, pandemic-related traumatic stress, and living in a single-caregiver household.

This study also found that 80% of adolescents, regardless of pre-existing conditions, reported decreases in social connectedness during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although the detrimental effect of decreased social connectedness was amplified among individuals with certain pre-existing MEBD conditions, this risk factor was widespread among the majority of adolescents.

Footnote: Results reported here are for a single study. Other or future studies may provide new information or different results. You should not make changes to your health without first consulting your healthcare professional.

### What was the study's impact?

This study found that adolescents with decreased social connectedness typically had lower life satisfaction across several groups with different life circumstances. However, decreased social connectedness was more harmful for individuals with disabilities. This study allowed researchers to identify the groups of adolescents with disabilities who are most vulnerable and may need additional support during future emergencies. Findings from this study also highlight the importance of interventions aimed specifically at increasing social connectedness, family engagement, and access to medical support for all adolescents, and especially for those with disabilities.

### Who was involved?

This study included COVID-19 survey data collected from April 2020 to August 2021 from a sample of 1,084 adolescents ages 11–21 years old, and their caregivers. The sample included individuals with and without disabilities from seven ECHO observational research sites in the U.S.

### What happened during the study?

In addition to using pre-existing ECHO Cohort data about adolescents and their families, researchers administered a COVID-19-specific survey to better understand the physical, mental, and social impact of the pandemic on young people and their families. Data were analyzed using a machine-learning process.

### What happens next?

Findings from this study showed evidence of potential differences between adolescents with disabilities and their peers in terms of life satisfaction. Future research is needed to design studies that focus on the vulnerable subgroups identified in this study. Additionally, future studies may look into the long-term effects of decreased social connections and other risks resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic during developmentally critical time periods.

### Where can I learn more?

Access the full journal article, titled "Life Satisfaction for Adolescents with Developmental and Behavioral Disabilities during the COVID-19 Pandemic," in [Pediatric Research](#).

*The content is the responsibility of the authors and does not necessarily represent the official views of the National Institutes of Health.*