

Social Support and Parenting Stress During the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

Several studies have documented the pivotal role of social support as a protective factor against parenting stress. However, the association between those variables in the covid-19 pandemic situation has yet to be understood. The present study examines the type of support associated with parenting stress during the Covid-19 pandemic. Furthermore, we also aim to identify the most important source of support for parents. An online survey provided quantitative data from 334 participants. They are 16.5% father (n = 55) and 83.5% mother (n = 279) who have children aged 2-18 years. The Indonesian version of the Social Support Questionnaire and Parenting Stress Scale was used to measure social support and parenting stress during the Covid-19 pandemic. The findings show that social support has a significant negative association with parenting stress. In terms of type, companionship support is significantly associated with parenting stress. The prominent support figure for fathers is their spouses, while the family became mothers' primary source of support. The findings can contribute to a better understanding of the support needed by parents during the covid-19 pandemic.

Keywords: Companionship support, Covid-19, parenting stress, parents, social support

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Introduction

At the end of 2019, the Covid-19 pandemic caused by a novel coronavirus emerged and spread worldwide (Zu et al., 2021; Wang & Wang, 2021). To prevent the spread of the virus, the Indonesian government urges the public to practice social distancing by avoiding physical contact and maintaining a minimum distance of one meter from other people (Sen-Crowe et al., 2020; Xie et al., 2020). The

Indonesian government also imposed public mobility restrictions by closing schools, workplaces, and other public facilities that can cause crowds and encourage the public to avoid leaving their homes unless necessary (Kementrian Kesehatan Republik Indonesia, 2020; Pramana et al., 2021). The policy effectively reduced the number of Covid-19 cases. However, these situations also impacted the psychological condition of the community due to the lack of social contact. In line with Huang & Zhao (2020) study, social distancing could make individuals feel lonely, increasing stress and anxiety in society.

Stress during the pandemic impacted individuals who played a role as parents (Elder & Greene, 2021; Wu & Xu, 2020). Parents reported suffering from the increased demands for parenting during the pandemic (Cox & Abrams, 2020; Power, 2020). They also expressed more concern about the coronavirus than individuals who were not parents (Cox & Abrams, 2020). Parenting stress occurs when parents lose resources such as time, energy, self-esteem, control, happiness, or love while parenting (Hobfoll, 1989; Zelman & Ferro, 2018). Parenting stress can lead to feelings of failure, incompetence, and parents' dissatisfaction in carrying out parenting roles (Lestari, 2012; Suzuki, 2010). Parents are also prone to practice negative parenting styles (such as authoritarian & permissive parenting) when experiencing parenting stress (Mak et al., 2020).

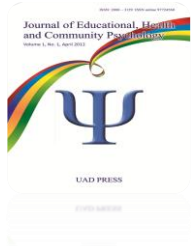
Stress can change the brain's structure and decrease cognitive functions such as decision-making, attention, and judgment (Scholey et al., 2014; Yaribeygi, 2017). Regarding social life, previous studies have found that stress increases negative self-evaluation and reduces prosocial behavior (Faber & Hausser, 2022; Kroll et al., 2021; von Dawans et al., 2018). High stress is also correlated with a high risk of several illnesses, including coronary heart disease (CHD), diabetes mellitus, migraine headaches, functional gastrointestinal disorders (FGID), and asthma (Duan et al., 2021; Khayyam-Nekouei et al., 2013; Landeo-Gutierrez et al., 2019; Rafique et al., 2020; Sharif et al., 2018).

One of the factors that can reduce parenting stress is social support. Social support is the comfort, attention, appreciation, or assistance provided by others or groups to individuals (Sarafino & Smith, 2011). Sarafino and Smith (2011) stated four forms of social support, namely (1) emotional support, characterized by empathy, care, and attention that makes individuals feel loved and cared for in

difficult times; (2) tangible support, which is the provision of direct assistance such as money and goods; (3) informational support, providing information in the form of advice, direction, opinion, or feedback on what the individual had done; and (4) companionship support, the presence of other people who accompany and give time to individuals who need friends when facing problems. Social support is useful when individuals experience stress and are very effective regardless of which strategy is used to deal with stress (Frazier, 1994). In other studies, Cohen and Wills (1985) define social support as the help and support one gets from interacting with others. Meanwhile, according to Jacob (in Orford, 1992), social support fosters a sense of comfort and makes individuals believe that individuals are respected, respected, loved, and willing to give attention and security. Szkody et al. (2021) reported that social support has a stress-buffering effect as it provides the necessary psychological and material resources to cope with stress; therefore, it has the potential to reduce parenting stress.

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic has caused a situation that will potentially become new stress for parents in raising children (Spinelli et al., 2020; Westrupp et al., 2021). It was conveyed through Patrick et al.'s (2020) research that parents interacted more with sources of stress and experienced a decline in mental health during the pandemic (American Psychological Association, 2020). The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic felt by parents is closely related to increased parenting stress (Chung et al., 2020; Brown et al., 2020; Gerard et al., 2020). Previous studies have shown that social support could reduce parenting stress (Hong & Liu, 2019; Putri & Lutfianawati, 2021). However, the specific type of support remains unclear, especially in the COVID-19 pandemic.

Moreover, the source of support in the Indonesian context is still not yet fully understood. Therefore, it is crucial to explore more about the type and resource of support that plays a vital role in parents during this pandemic. In the present study, we aim to examine the type of support associated with parenting stress during the Covid-19 pandemic. Furthermore, we also aim to identify the most important source of support for parents during the Covid-19 pandemic. This study provides an exciting opportunity to advance our knowledge of parenting stress and support mechanisms during the covid-19 pandemic in Indonesian parents.



Method

Ethical clearance

This study has received ethical approval from the Research Ethics Commission of the University of Padjadjaran (Number 721/UN6.KEP/EC/2021).

Participants

The population of this study is mothers or fathers with children in the age range of 2-18 years in Indonesia. Samples were selected using the convenience sampling method.

Procedures

Data collection was carried out for 16 days between September and October 2021. Research information is distributed through social media (Instagram and Facebook) and contact persons from various parent communities in Indonesia. Data were collected in an online survey using Google Forms that takes 15 minutes to complete.

Instruments

Demographic data collected in this study included gender, age, occupation, last education, family financial condition, marital status, number of children, age of the oldest child, and age of the youngest child. The variables measured were the level of social support as the independent variable and the level of parenting stress as the dependent variable.

Parenting stress was measured using Amalia et al. (2022)'s Indonesian version of the 17-items Parental Stress Scale (PSS; Berry & Jones, 1995), Average Variance Extracted (AVE) of 0,86. Participants responded on a Likert scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) regarding how well items described their experience as parents. Examples of the items are "My children are an important source of affection for me," "I feel close to my children," and "I feel overwhelmed by the responsibility of being a parent ."To calculate the PSS score, items with negative content were coded reversely (1 = 5, 2 = 4, 4 = 2, 5 = 1).

Social support was measured using the Indonesian version of the Social Support Questionnaire (SSQ)

developed by Rizki (2017) based on Sarafino's social support theory (Sarafino & Smith, 2011). This measuring tool was also re-adapted by adding the context of the Covid-19 pandemic to the items. There are four aspects of social support that are measured, namely emotional support (8 items; e.g., "There are people who support me to be better prepared to deal with the Covid-19 pandemic situation", "The support given makes me more confident in facing the Covid-19 pandemic situation", and "No one can understand how I feel when I will face the Covid-19 pandemic situation"), instrumental support (2 items), informational support (3 items), and companionship support (3 items). The total items for measuring social support are 16 items. Each item is rated on a Likert scale from 1 (not appropriate) to 4 (appropriate). The average Variance Extracted (AVE) of 0,863, and the reliability of each dimension is .640, .685, .707, and .751 for emotional support, instrumental support, informational support, and companionship support, respectively.

One open question was added to gather the data about the source of social support. The question is, "Who has so far given you the most support during the Covid-19 pandemic?". The one-item manipulation check was administered on each PSS and SSQ to check the respondent's attention in filling out the questionnaire (Kung et al., 2018). The statement is "Please choose number 2 for this question, then continue to fill in the next question". Data given by respondents other than number 2 will be excluded from the data analysis.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS software version 22.0. A total of 338 responses were obtained, four of which did not pass the item manipulation check. Therefore, only 334 data were analyzed further. Descriptive statistics describe the respondents' scores on parenting stress and social support. The data was found to be normally distributed based on the distribution of skewness and kurtosis (social support, ZSK = -0.416; parenting stress, ZSK = 0.042) and had a linear relationship pattern ($p > 0.05$). We conducted several bivariate analyses. Pearson correlation analysis was calculated to assess the correlation between parenting stress and total scores in the social support domain. The t-test test was employed to compare the total parenting stress scores between mothers and fathers). A $p < 0.05$ was considered statistically significant. Hierarchical linear regression analyses were conducted for multivariate analysis, where parenting stress total score served as the outcomes and dimension of

social support (emotional, informational, tangible, companionship) as predictors. The qualitative data is categorized into several categories and then presented in percentages.

Result

Participants consisted of 334 parents (279 mothers, 55 fathers) aged 21-57 years ($M = 39$). Most fathers are employed (72.7%), while most mothers are unemployed (47%). Based on their educational level, most participants received their last education at the Bachelor's level (father = 67.3%, mother = 65.9%). Financially, most participants can meet their daily needs and save. Most fathers and mothers in this study were married (96.4%).

Table 1
Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Variable	Mothers (N = 279)	Fathers (N = 55)
Occupation		
Full-time job	70 (25.1%)	40 (72.7%)
Part-time job	78 (28.0%)	9 (16.4%)
Unemployed	131 (47.0%)	6 (10.9%)
Marriage status		
Married	269 (96.4%)	53 (96.4%)
Single parent	10 (3.6%)	2 (3.6%)
Educational level		
Elementary school	3 (1.1%)	1 (1.8%)
Middle school	9 (3.2%)	-
High school	44 (15.8%)	8 (14.5%)
Diploma	36 (12.9%)	8 (14.5%)
Bachelor's degree	184 (65.9%)	37 (67.3%)
Master's degree	3 (1.1%)	1 (1.8%)
Financial status		
Unable to meet daily needs	4 (1.4%)	2 (3.6%)
Hardly meet daily needs	32 (11.5%)	9 (16.4%)
Able to meet daily needs but not enough for savings	86 (30.8%)	18 (32.7%)
Able to meet daily needs and enough for savings	157 (56.3%)	26 (47.3%)

Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics of the variables and their dimensions. The results showed no significant difference in perceived social support and parenting stress level between father and mother respondents ($p > 0.05$).

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics of Study Variables

Variable	Scale	Mean (SD)			t-test	
		All	Male	Female	t	P
1. Social support	1-4	2.87 (0.36)	2.97 (0.35)	2.85 (0.36)	- 2.415	0.398
2. Emotional support	1-4	2.72 (0.37)	2.85 (0.38)	2.70 (0.36)	2.891	0.651
3. Tangible support	1-4	2.82 (0.49)	2.90 (0.42)	2.80 (0.50)	1.348	0.094
4. Informational support	1-4	3.05 (0.85)	3.21 (0.85)	3.02 (0.85)	1.493	0.788
5. Companionship support	1-4	3.61 (0.54)	3.64 (0.48)	3.60 (0.55)	0.520	0.361
6. Parenting stress	1-5	1.94 (0.53)	1.77 (0.48)	1.98 (0.54)	2.311	0.552

Table 3 shows that social support and the dimensions significantly correlate with parenting stress. Parenting stress is moderately correlated with companionship support dimensions.

Table 3
Correlations of Study Variables and Their Dimensions

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Social support	-					
2. Emotional support	0.875**	-				
3. Tangible support	0.743**	0.532**	-			
4. Informational support	0.711**	0.552**	0.384**	-		
5. Companionship support	0.693**	0.467**	0.441**	0.462**	-	
6. Parenting stress	-0.307**	-0.209**	-0.203**	-0.214**	-0.352**	-

Note: **p < 0.05

The simple linear regression analysis shows that social support significantly predicts parenting stress ($\beta = -0.121$, $p < 0.05$). The regression coefficient with a negative value means that when social support for parents increases, the parenting stress experiences decrease. Social support provides a predictor contribution of 12% to parenting stress during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Furthermore, each dimension of social support was also analyzed using hierarchical linear regression.

The results are shown in Table 4, which shows that only companionship support predicts parenting stress during the Covid-19 pandemic ($\beta = -0.297, p < 0.05$).

Table 4
Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analysis Between The Four Types of Social Support on Parenting Stress

Variable	B	SE B (std Error)	B	T
Step 1				
Emotional	-.641	.165	-.209	-3.866***
Step 2				
Emotional	-.413	.191	-.134	-2.165*
Informational	-.899	.383	-.146	-2.346*
Step 3				
Emotional	-.257	.209	-.084	-1.231
Informational	-.807	.386	-.131	-2.093*
Tangible	-.595	.336	-.111	-.1772
Step 4				
Emotional	-.117	.204	-.038	-.572
Informational	-.356	.384	-.058	-.928
Tangible	-.191	.335	-.036	-.570
Companionship	-1.672	.339	-.297	-4.928***

Note: for step 1: $R = .209, R^2 = .041, \Delta R^2 = .044, *** p < .005$; for step 2: $R = .243, R^2 = .053, \Delta R^2 = .016, * p < .05$; for step 3: $R = .261, R^2 = .068, \Delta R^2 = .009, *** p < .05$; for step 4: $R = .363, R^2 = .132, \Delta R^2 = .064, *** p = .001; * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .005$.

Table 5 presents the percentage of participants' responses to the question about the central support source. More than half of fathers reported that their primary social support source is their spouse, while mothers mentioned family as their primary social support source.

Table 5
Participants' Main Source of Social Support

Main social support source	Mothers (N = 279)	Fathers (N = 55)
Spouse	30 (55,6%)	103 (35%)
Family	9 (16,7%)	110 (40,7%)
Sibling	2 (3,7%)	9 (3,3 %)
Parent	5 (9,3%)	18 (6,7%)
Close friends	-	1 (0,4%)
Neighbors	1 (1,9%)	16 (5,9%)
Community	2 (3,6%)	7 (2,6%)

Discussion

The current study explains the role of social support in parenting stress during the Covid-19 pandemic through three important findings. First, social support has a significant negative association with parenting stress. Social support received by parents was associated with decreasing parenting stress. Likewise, if parents feel they lack or do not get social support, the parenting stress they experience can increase. Second, the type of social support that was found to associate with parenting stress during the Covid-19 pandemic is companionship support. Third, the prominent support figure for fathers is their spouses, while the family became the primary source of support for mothers.

Our first finding is in line with Purnomo and Kristiana's (2016) study, which found that mothers who perceive low social support in parenting lead to higher parenting stress. Another study by Kurnia et al. (2019) also explains a significant relationship between social support and parenting stress levels, where parents with high perceived social support experienced lower stress levels and vice versa. According to (Taylor et al., 2004), social support effectively overcomes psychological stress during difficult and stressful times, such as pandemic situations. Social support makes individuals feel calm,

cared for, loved to feel confident, and competent (Kumalasari & Ahyani, 2012).

Only companionship support was associated with parenting stress among the four types of social support. This type of support reflects the presence of other people who accompany and give time to individuals who need friends when facing problems (Sarafino & Smith, 2011). The plausible explanation for this finding is that the existence of Large-Scale Social Restrictions (PSBB) or the Enforcement of Restrictions on Community Activities (PPKM) prevents parents from meeting directly with their primary source of support. Parents then feel disconnected from extended family and neighbors (Weems et al., 2020). Consequently, this kind of support is what parents need the most.

In this study, the other three types of social support (emotional support, instrumental support, and informational support) were correlated but did not predict the low level of parenting stress. Several factors could explain this observation. Firstly, demographic data obtained from our survey showed that most participants could economically meet their daily needs and have savings. Most participants are economically able to meet their daily needs and have savings. Consequently, as reflected in tangible support, social support related to money/materials is not significantly associated with parenting stress. Secondly, the majority of parents in this study are highly educated. As a result, they can independently seek information about the situation, understand how to manage their emotions, and solve their problems (Mappiare, 1983). Thus, informational support is also not much needed by parents.

Regarding the source of social support for parents, our study revealed the various sources of support involved. The fact that mothers rely more on support from the family is consistent with that of Rossi & Rossi (1990), who argue that women play as a kin keepers, which makes them consistently receive domestic help.

This research was conducted in a condition with limited mobility due to various policies to reduce the spread of the virus. In this situation, an online platform was used to obtain research data. The use of this online platform can reach a wider population but lacks diversity in social and economic aspects. Therefore, the generalization of the results of this study is limited to members of the

population with the same characteristics. Future research may consider using various research methods to reach more diverse participants and gain more representative data.

Conclusion

This study found that social support is an important protective factor for parenting stress during the Covid-19 pandemic. The type of support associated with lower parenting stress for high socioeconomic and high education levels is companionship support. Furthermore, the prominent support figure for fathers is their spouses, while the family became mothers' primary support source.

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