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Remote learning caused behavioural difficulties for students, says study

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According to a new study, elementary school-aged children enrolled in remote learning experienced greater behavioural, learning-related, and sleep difficulties compared with children receiving in-person instruction. The findings of the study were published in the journal, 'Journal of Developmental and Behavioural Paediatrics. Researchers surveyed roughly 300 parents with children ages 5 to 10 - ranging from kindergarten to fifth grade - across the state between February and March 2021.

"In the early days of learning about how the virus spread and who was at risk, everyone made the best decisions they could with the information they had," said lead author Kimberley Levitt, M.D., a developmental-behavioural paediatrician at the University of Michigan Health C.S. Mott Children's Hospital and Michigan Medicine researcher.

"We wanted to explore differences in parent and child wellbeing at a time when some school districts had returned to in-person school, while others remained remote or hybrid."

An estimated more than 55 million students in the U.S. were impacted by a change in school formats during spring 2020 of the COVID-19 pandemic, with many in fully remote schools that school year. The study authors said they focused on younger children who are still building foundational academic skills and require more adult support during instruction.

"We're now seeing the manifestation of these disruptions in families' lives and how different school formats affected our kids, not only academically but emotionally and socially," Levitt said.

"Our findings reinforce challenges families faced during the pandemic and suggest children in virtual school had more behavioural issues at home, social challenges with peers and may have potentially been less motivated to learn." The new study is among few specifically examining how family well-being varied by school format.

Children in remote schools showed significantly more signs of hyperactivity, peer problems and overall behaviour issues compared to those attending in-person school, the study suggests.among potential factors: Fast-changing demands and expectations as they navigated new school platforms and workloads. Adjusting to interactions with teachers and classes through screens. Being home for extended periods of time with fewer outlets to let off energy and less interaction with positive role models at school.

"COVID dramatically disrupted schedules," Levitt said. "There's a certain amount of comfort and safety in knowing what to expect and having routines to fall back on. In general, any sudden changes to routines can trigger stress and emotional dysregulation in kids."

"We want to be mindful of changes in family support systems and how we can support those children and families moving forward." School was an overall more challenging experience for remote learners, researchers found.

Virtual school attendees were less likely to be academically motivated or socially engaged and more likely to show defiance and resistance in doing schoolwork.

"Remote learners appeared to be less excited about learning," Levitt said. "We know that children's enthusiasm and engagement in school helps predict how they cope with academic challenges throughout the year."

Families in both hybrid school and remote formats also reported children having more difficulties with socially relevant learning. Parents of remote learners were less likely to report that the teacher knew their child well, the child knew their classmates well, was motivated to get ready for school in the morning, has enough opportunities to socialize, or has a best friend.