


# Social Class and Emotional Well-Being: Lessons From a Daily Diary Study of Families Engaged in Virtual Elementary School During COVID-19

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*To understand how parents adapted to virtual learning expectations during the initial COVID-19 school closures in spring 2020, this study investigated families' daily activities, including parents' emotions and their appraisals of the value of daily activities across two timepoints. Thirty-two parent-child dyads (Mean child age = 78 months, 50% male; 47% Latinx/Hispanic; 28% Spanish speaking) from a Southern California school district serving a diverse population completed a daily diary texting protocol (experience sampling method; ESM) five times per day over five days. Families spent most of their time together engaging in mealtime activities (preparing meals and eating). Families from low socioeconomic backgrounds reported appraising academic activities, social skills, and life skills more highly than families from high socioeconomic backgrounds. Parents reported more positive emotions than negative emotions. Findings provide opportunities for educators to mitigate learning loss by building on children's learning experiences and family adaptations to daily routines during COVID-19.*

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CHILDREN'S learning and development is widely recognized as being nested within the contexts of both school and home (Institute of Medicine and National Research Council, 2000), with the standards-driven learning centered in school and the informal, culturally bounded and adaptive learning centered in the home (Super & Harkness, 1997). The school closures in March 2020 spurred by the COVID-19 pandemic shifted formal school learning to the home context, requiring caregivers to adjust daily activities and routines to meet the demands of virtual school. Throughout the 2020–2021 academic year many children (65% as of February 2021) remained engaged in virtual learning at home (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.), exacerbating existing systemic barriers for students experiencing poverty and learning differences, or those learning a second language (Bailey et al., 2021). Some families adapted their activities to create an enriching home-learning environment, preventing academic decline. Other families experienced challenges

adapting home activities to meet academic expectations of distance learning, contributing to a widening achievement gap. Families reported inconsistent access to reliable technology and limited availability of adult support or quiet learning spaces (Reimers, 2022). Families also experienced continued trauma and stress, such as food or housing insecurities, and illness due to disproportionate COVID-19 diagnoses in low-income African American and Latino communities (Podewils et al., 2020).

Social distancing measures, while recommended for their public health benefits, are known to cause disruptions in daily life and impact well-being (Ares et al., 2021; Chu et al., 2020) and have resulted in significant and unequal learning loss for school-aged children (Kuhfeld et al., 2020). This study used an ecocultural niche theoretical framework (Weisner, 2002) coupled with a positive development orientation (Cabrera, 2013) to examine how children and families adjusted to social distancing mandates that forced families to



shift into virtual schooling during the COVID-19 stay-at-home orders in spring 2020. We specifically examined how families organized everyday life. We documented families' daily activities and parents' emotions and appraisal of the value of those activities. The ecocultural niche, constituted by the primary members of a community engaging in the everyday activities of life, is perhaps the most influential factor shaping children's developmental outcomes (Gallimore et al., 1993; Weisner, 2002). The ecocultural context examines the child and his or her caregivers engaging in daily activities and the values and goals underlying these activities within the family's "micro-niche" (Weisner, 1997, 2002). Daily activities serve to transmit cultural values and demonstrate how families adapt to various challenges (e.g., virtual learning during a pandemic).

Daily activities are also amenable to systematic observation in which researchers can document commonly unobservable phenomena (e.g., values and emotions that motivate daily activities). By documenting the everyday activities that occupy the lives of young, elementary school children in the United States, we sought to understand families' adaptations during the COVID-19 school closures of spring 2020. These adaptations are representations of what Moll and colleagues describe as *funds of knowledge*—families' knowledge, resources, and strengths that challenge deficit orientations (Moll, 2019). Findings from this study can guide educators to mitigate learning loss by building on children's learning experiences and family adaptations to daily routines. Teachers can build upon content their students learned at home to meet the individual needs of their students, to make their students feel safe and comfortable, and to elevate and integrate concepts and cultural artifacts of the home into the classroom. Moll's work has clearly demonstrated the pedagogical value of educators understanding how families cultivate and curate their children's learning at home (González et al., 2006). Recent studies have repeatedly identified specific cultural values that are reproduced in daily routine activities, particularly for Mexican heritage families (Fuller & García Coll, 2010; Bridges et al., 2015). Studies have also shown that seamless home-school connections improve children's outcomes (Puccioni, 2018; Puccioni et al., 2019).

### **Families' Daily Activities**

The predictable structure of families' daily routines and the value that parents and children place on these routine activities are considered protective in supporting both children's emotional well-being and academic outcomes (Felson, 1990; Ferretti & Bub, 2017; Turnbull et al., 2022). Previous studies have shown that when there are no social distancing mandates, children and families spend their days playing, reading, and engaging in academic activities. Important variations to these activities are based on their ecocultural niche (Copperman & Bhat, 2007; Parmar et al., 2004;

Weisner 1997, 2002; Woods et al., 2004). In one study by Parmar and colleagues (2004), Asian parents encouraged their preschool children to engage in formal academic daily activities whereas Euro-American families prioritized play activities and encouraged their children to play during routine home activities. Some Asian parents in their study reported seeing little developmental value in play for their young children.

A families' ecocultural niche is further shaped by their socioeconomic status, which also drives daily activities (Lareau, 2015). For example, parents' institutional knowledge about school and their involvement in school has been shown to vary by sociodemographic characteristics, with upper middle-class parents engaging in more deliberate and adult-directed stimulation of cognitive and social skills (e.g., weekly piano lessons) while low-income parents provide more unstructured time for children to make choices about how they spend their time. They also prioritize time spent with extended family or social networks (Lareau, 2011). These variations in the ways families organize their daily activities "transmit" different values and advantages to children and likely shaped how families engaged in carrying out learning activities in a remote setting during COVID-19 school closures. Little is known about how families were involved in their children's learning during the initial weeks of the pandemic.

Few studies have examined the daily activities of children and their families during the pandemic, aside from acknowledging the daily stressors and disruptions to daily life (Prime et al., 2020). Recent data suggests that the COVID-19 pandemic has shaped the daily activities of families by confining families to the home, preventing children from attending school, and stifling outdoor physical activities like playing team sports or accessing playgrounds and play structures (Guan et al., 2020; Waller et al., 2020). Low-income families are thought to have been further impacted due to limited access to school and other community services that provide emotional, social, and nutritional support to underserved children (Waller et al., 2020). Furthermore, as daily activities dramatically shifted for families with young children at school, parents instantly became proxy-educators, helping their children access and engage with virtual learning (Davis et al., 2021).

### **Parents' Emotions and the Daily Caregiving Context**

Parents' emotional states are shaped by the "care contexts"—the type of daily activity, the individuals involved in the activity, and the amount of care necessary for each activity (Cohen et al., 2020; McDonnell et al., 2019). McDonnell and colleagues (2019) examined the momentary affective experiences of parents during daily childcare activities (e.g., shuttling children to activities, changing diapers) using a

national sample from the American Time Use Survey (ATUS). All parents reported high levels of meaning and happiness from engaging in daily child-rearing experiences, yet mothers reported less happiness, more stress, and more exhaustion as compared to fathers (McDonnell et al., 2019). The caregiving context, including the daily activities, the individuals involved in those activities, and the amount of care required to meet the child's needs, shaped parents' emotional states.

During the pandemic, parenting tasks were shaped by the dramatic shift in daily activities, with the caregiving burden mostly falling on mothers (Ma et al., 2020) and many women either temporarily or permanently dropping out of the workforce (Collins et al., 2020). Furthermore, as parents became proxy-educators *and* caregivers in addition to their multiple other roles, many parents experienced increased mental distress when their children struggled with distance learning (Davis et al., 2021). Parent perceptions of their children's well-being and the value of the activities that their children were engaged in appeared to play an important role in shaping parents' own mental health and well-being. In addition to supporting children's engagement in distance learning, Davis et al. (2021) argued for ongoing support of parents during COVID-19 distance learning and during the transition to in-person learning.

In this study, we examined the moment-by-moment daily activities to understand the home-learning contexts—including parent appraisal of the value of their children's activities and parent emotions—of young, diverse children in the United States during spring 2020, when school abruptly closed physical operations and transitioned to remote delivery of instruction due to COVID-19. To understand how family activities changed over time as the pandemic wore on, we examined these phenomena first upon initial transition to virtual learning, in April 2020, when schools first closed. Then four weeks later toward the end of the academic school year. We wanted to understand how activity characteristics changed over time, as the realization set in that virtual schooling would continue indefinitely. In response to calls for studies to comprehensively characterize family routines for children from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds (Turnbull et al., 2022), we addressed three aims in this study.

#### *Aim 1*

To examine the care contexts (e.g., individuals involved, activity setting, technology used, historical time, time of day) families experienced during the initial school closures due to COVID-19 in spring 2020. We expected to find variations in family engagement in daily activities aligned with school schedules as well as variations by demographic factors (annual household income, ethnicity, language). We expected high-income families to be more involved in the care contexts given previous

studies showing that families from middle and high income engage in concerted cultivation for their children (Lareau, 2015).

#### *Aim 2*

To examine how parents appraised the value of their children's daily activities and whether parent appraisals varied by time or demographic factors. We expected to find both positive and negative appraisals of the value of their children's daily activities and variations across school-based and informal activities.

#### *Aim 3*

To examine the range of parents' emotions and how these emotions were associated with their specific care contexts. We expected to find variations in parents' reports of emotional well-being over time as well as variations by family demographics. We expected parents from low-income backgrounds to report fewer positive emotions given the added burden of losing work and losing reliable childcare during the pandemic (Collins et al., 2020; Ma et al., 2020).

### **Methods**

#### *Larger Study Context*

The larger study used a longitudinal integrated methods design with three data collection time points per year to complete individual child observations of the language occurring in the classrooms and individual cognitive assessments for each child participant. We followed a diverse group of children during the first three years of elementary school (Wishard Guerra et al., 2020). Students were recruited from a medium-sized, socioeconomically diverse school district, where 61% of students received free and reduced lunch in 2018–2019. Families in this sample had an average of 4.5 (range 2–10) people living in the home, an average of two adult wage earners per household (range 1–6), with a median household income of \$50,000 to \$75,000 per year.

In spring 2020, data collection strategies were shifted to a virtual data collection protocol. The data presented in this study come from a text-message-based observation protocol collected during spring 2020 while children were enrolled in a virtual learning program with their school district.

#### *Participants*

The sample included 32 primary caregivers (82% mother, mean age 40; 18% father, mean age 41; 44% Latinx/Hispanic,<sup>1</sup> 34% White, 22% mixed race, 34.6% Spanish-speaking home; 22% immigrants) of children in kindergarten (mean age 78 months, 50% male) who were recruited as part of the larger longitudinal study examining how young children learn in transitional kindergarten through first

grade. Families came from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, with 25% ( $n = 8$ ) from the lowest income group (less than \$50,000), 22% ( $n = 7$ ) from the middle-income group (\$50,000–\$75,000), 44% ( $n = 12$ ) from the highest income group (greater than \$75,001), and 15% ( $n = 5$ ) didn't know or refused to answer.

#### *Experience Sampling Method Daily Activities Survey*

We used an experience sampling method (ESM; Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 2014) to examine the families' daily activities during the period of virtual schooling in spring 2020. ESM is an ecologically valid, time-sample method to reduce memory bias and enhance researchers' capacity to understand within-person processes (e.g., mood, feelings; Smyth et al., 2014; Weller, 2007). ESM consists of repeated online surveys sent via text message that represent the immediate context of the participant—including activity setting, participants, and emotions at the moment when the participant responds to the survey.

The survey consisted of multiple-choice and open-ended questions to learn about caregivers' interactions with their child during the stay-at-home orders and their own feelings regarding COVID-19 and parenting. Sample questions included: "What is the main thing your child is doing at the moment?" "Is your child using technology at this moment?" "Is this activity part of your child's school-related virtual learning?" "How much is this activity helping your child meet their academic needs?" "What was the main feeling you had when you were texted?" "What is causing you to feel this way?" Procedures and survey questions were provided in English and Spanish. See Appendix A for the full survey.

From the ESM data we created five variable categories: who the child was with, parents' main activities, child's main activities, parent appraisal of the value of child activities, and parents' enjoyment/emotions. Variables for who the child was with included (1) no one, (2) dad/stepdad, (3) mom/stepmom, (4) child's sibling, (5) friend, (6) partner, (7) other children, (8) other relative, (9) virtual teacher, (10) virtual classmates, (11) someone else. Parent and child main activities included 23 variables describing general activity setting(s) for parents and children (e.g., mealtime, technology, house chores, physical activity). See Appendix B for a description of activity setting codes.

Parent appraisal of the academic, social, and creative value of their child's activities was assessed using a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from (1) *not at all* to (5) *very much*. Parents' enjoyment of their activities was assessed using a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from (1) *not at all* to (5) *very much*.

Parent emotion responses were grouped into positive emotions (e.g., happy, calm, confident, proud), negative emotions (e.g., lonely, angry, bored, disappointed, worried, sad, scared), and overwhelm (e.g., exhausted, frustrated,

overwhelmed, confused). Parent justification of their emotions were coded into five types of explanations: (1) due to personal experience of the parent, (2) due to the activity the parent was participating in at the moment, (3) due to an experience the child was having, (4) related to COVID-19, or (5) some other reason.

#### *Procedures*

Upon study enrollment, all primary caregivers were invited to complete an online survey about their demographic characteristics. Two weeks after COVID-19-mandated school closures, all participating caregivers in the larger study were invited to participate in the text message protocol over two different weeks during spring 2020. The first time point began 3 weeks after the district launched its virtual learning platform via Google Classroom and the second time point occurred 4 weeks later, in the second to last week of school. ESM procedures were explained to each participant prior to being enrolled in the anonymous texting program. Each time point consisted of participants receiving five text messages sent randomly throughout the day from 7:30 am to 9 pm for five consecutive days. In order to capture variation in the participants' lives, the first time point occurred from Sunday through Thursday and the second time point ran from Tuesday through Saturday. Each text message included a link to a Qualtrics survey that participants completed in approximately 5 minutes. Participants were asked to complete the survey as close as possible to when they received the text message and were informed the survey link would expire after 1 hour.

#### *Data Reduction and Analysis Plan*

Thirty-two participants submitted 854 survey responses, 50% ( $n = 429$ ) were received during Time 1 and 49.8% ( $n = 425$ ) in Time 2, for an average of 27 total responses per participant (13.5 per time point and a response rate ranging from 35% to 80%). Across both time points, more overall responses were received from parents of girls ( $M = 33$  responses) compared to parents of boys ( $M = 22$  responses),  $F(1,29) = 6.4, p < .05$ , and from families with a home language of English (77.7%). There were no significant differences in response rates by ethnicity, home language, or income. Parents primarily responded to surveys outside of school hours, defined as Monday through Friday, 8:00 am until 2:30 pm (66.3%), and while they were with their child (73.7%). We used the time-varying text survey responses from parents as the unit of analysis to address the research aims. To assess group differences in parent responses by demographic factors, time variant data was aggregated using mean scores across time.

#### *Analysis Plan*

*Aim 1.* The first aim is focused on describing families' care contexts during the initial COVID-19-related school



closures of spring 2020. Care contexts were defined by the social context of who children were with, activity setting (e.g., technology use, engagement in school-related activities) situated within the specific time (e.g., weekday vs. weekend; early spring vs. later spring) during the COVID-19 stay-at-home orders in spring 2020. To assess variations in care contexts by demographic characteristics, we ran univariate or multivariate analysis of variance (ANOVAs) on aggregate parent responses with Pillai's trace test with one dependent variable (DV), income with three categories and two covariates—Latinx/Hispanic heritage and Spanish-dominant home language—with groups of independent variables (IVs) to test for differences in who the child was with, parents' main activities, child's main activities, parent appraisal of the value of child activities, and parents' enjoyment/emotions experienced during their main activities.

*Aim 2.* To examine how parents appraised the value of their children's daily activities and whether parent appraisals varied by time, a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) analysis of aggregate parent responses was used to assess whether there were differences in appraisal by "with child," weekday, or an interaction between the two, with time as a covariate.

*Aim 3.* To examine how parents' emotions and well-being were associated with their specific care contexts, a Pearson correlation was conducted to assess the association between parent enjoyment, child enjoyment, and parent appraisal of child activities. A MANOVA was used to assess whether there were differences in enjoyment by "with child," weekday, or an interaction between the two, with time as a covariate. To assess variations in emotions and well-being by demographic characteristics, we ran a MANOVA on aggregate parent responses for parent/child enjoyment and parent emotion with Pillai's trace test with one dependent variable, income with three categories.

## Results

### *Aim 1: Describing Care Contexts*

*With Whom Did Children Engage?* Parents reported whom their child was with, and what activities they were all engaged in at the time of receiving the text signal. The majority of the time (83%) children were with at least one parent (32% of the time with father). About half the time children were also with at least one sibling (48.5%). When children were not with a parent they tended to be with a sibling (50%), other relatives (14%), or playing or sleeping alone in a room while the parent was in another part of the house (34%). There were no statistically significant differences in whether the child was with their parent at the time of the survey response between T1 and T2,  $F(1, 852) = 3.47, p = .06$ , or time of day (weekday vs.

weekend),  $F(1, 852) = .002, p = .967$ . Low-income families ( $M = .92$ ) were more likely to report that they were with their child at the time of responding to the text survey than middle- ( $M = .64$ ) and high-income ( $M = .71$ ) families,  $F(2, 24) = 7.91, p = .002$ .

*Parent and Child Main Activity Settings.* The primary activities that parents and children were each involved in included mealtime, chores, educational activities, sleeping/resting, play, outside time, and technology use. There were some differences between the proportion of time that parents and children spent in these activities. As compared to parents, children spent significantly more time playing, spending time outside, using technology, and sleeping/resting, while parents spent significantly more time in mealtime (preparation and eating), doing chores, and working (see Table 1).

Given the rapid move to virtual schooling, we were interested in children's specific technology experiences. Parents reported that children were using some form of technology 38% ( $n = 362$  instances) of the time. When they were using technology, they were most often engaged in the district virtual learning platform (41.4%,  $n = 133$  instances), watching TV (36%,  $n = 117$  instances), using other educational programs not connected to the district (18.3%,  $n = 59$  instances), or engaged in noneducational games or apps (3.5%,  $n = 30$  instances).

*Variations in Activity Settings by Care Context.* To understand how activity settings varied by families' care contexts (e.g., time 1 early/time 2 late spring, weekday vs weekend, being with their child), we conducted three MANOVAs on each set of parent and child main activities and child use of technology with two IVs: with child and weekday, with time as a covariate.

*Parent and Child Main Activities.* For parent main activities, there was a significant main effect for weekday,  $F(10, 840) = 5.65, p < .01$ , parent with child,  $F(10, 840) = 6.35, p < .01$ , and the interaction between the two,  $F(10, 840) = 2.11, p = .02$ . Parents spent more time outdoors ( $M = .09$ ) and playing ( $M = .05$ ) on weekends than on weekdays (outdoors  $M = .04$ ; playing  $M = .04$ ) and more time working on weekdays ( $M = .16$ ) compared to weekend days ( $M = .01$ ). Main effects of parent being with the child indicates that parents spent more time engaged in mealtime ( $M = .23$ ), in educational activities ( $M = .18$ ), in play ( $M = .06$ ), and in self-care or sleeping/resting ( $M = .09$ ) and less time at work ( $M = .08$ ) when they were with their child.

Interaction effects indicate that both engagement in educational activities and work varied in accordance to the weekly structure (i.e., workday vs weekend) and whether the parent was with the child. Parents were significantly more likely to be involved in educational activities on weekdays

TABLE 1

*Mean Proportion of Time Spent in Parent and Child Main Activities*

	Parent <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	Child <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	<i>t</i> ( <i>df</i> = 853), <i>p</i>
Mealtimes	.20 (.40)	.12 (.35)	4.12**
Educational activity	.14 (.35)	.12 (.34)	1.56
Chores	.12 (.32)	.01 (.12)	9.78**
Outside time	.05 (.22)	.09 (.28)	-4.10**
Physical activity	.03 (.18)	.03 (.18)	.00
Play	.05 (.21)	.19 (.39)	-11.26**
Sleeping or resting	.09 (.31)	.11 (.31)	-7.38**
Technology	.11 (.32)	.22 (.41)	-3.11**
Working	.13 (.34)	0 (.00)	11.17**

Note: \*\* $p < .01$ .

TABLE 2

*Child Main Activities by Family Income Groups*

	Lowest <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	Middle <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	Highest <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	<i>F</i>	<i>DF</i>	<i>p</i>	Post hoc comparison
Mealtimes activities	.20 (.09)	.15 (.08)	.10 (.07)	5.84	2, 26	.01	Low, middle > high
Educational activities	.10 (.09)	.09 (.07)	.13 (.08)	0.15,	2, 26	.86	
Chores	.01 (.02)	.02 (.03)	.00 (.01)	3.30	2, 26	.05	Middle > high
Outdoor time	.07 (.08)	.05 (.08)	.15 (.12)	3.30	2, 26	.05	High > middle
Physical activity	.02 (.04)	.03 (.04)	.03 (.03)	0.69	2, 26	.51	
Play	.14 (.18)	.16 (.06)	.21 (.15)	0.32	2, 26	.73	
Sleeping or resting	.14 (.08)	.16 (.07)	.16 (.09)	0.02	2, 26	.98	
Technology related	.31 (.11)	.17 (.07)	.22 (.06)	7.17	2, 26	.00	Low > middle, high

when they were with their child and overall less likely to be involved in educational activities on weekends. Parents were also more likely to be working on weekdays when they were not with their child ( $M = .35$ ) compared to weekdays when they were with their child ( $M = .09$ ) or weekend days with or without ( $M = .00$ ) their child.

For child main activities, there was a significant main effect for parent with child,  $F(10, 840) = 5.07$ ,  $p < .01$ , while weekday and the interaction between weekday and with child were nonsignificant. When children were with their parents they were more likely to be engaged in eating or meal preparation,  $F = 13.87$ ,  $p < .01$ , or educational activities,  $F = 6.52$ ,  $p = .01$ .

*Child's Specific Use of Technology.* For children's use of technology (entertainment, virtual school related, and social communication), there was a significant main effect for parent with child,  $F(10, 831) = 1.998$ ,  $p = .03$ , and weekday,  $F(10, 831) = 2.979$ ,  $p = .001$ ; the interaction was not significant. When children were with their parents ( $M = .25$ ) and on weekdays ( $M = .24$ ), they were more likely to be engaged in the district

virtual platform compared to when they were not with their parents ( $M = .10$ ) or on the weekend ( $M = .09$ ).

*Socioeconomic Variations in Care Contexts.* We analyzed aggregated responses on parent and child main activities and children's specific use of technology for socioeconomic variations, controlling for Latinx and Spanish home language using multivariate analysis with Pillai's trace test. There were no main effects of income on parents' main activities,  $F(16, 32) = 1.08$ ,  $p = .42$ . However, there were four significant differences in child main activities  $F(18, 30) = 2.81$ ,  $p < .01$ , across income brackets after controlling for ethnicity and home language.

Low- and middle-income children were more likely than high-income children to be engaged in mealtime activities. Middle-income children were marginally more likely to be engaged in chores than high-income children. High-income children had higher rates of being outdoors than middle-income children. And low-income children were more likely to be engaged in an activity that included technology than middle- or high-income children (see Table 2).

TABLE 3

*Parent Appraisal of Children's Activities by Family Income*

	Lowest <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	Middle <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	Highest <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> )	<i>F</i>	<i>DF</i>	<i>P</i>	Post hoc comparison
Academic skills	3.27 (.47)	2.45 (.62)	2.58 (.64)	4.59	2, 24	.02	Low > middle, high
Social skills	3.77 (.28)	2.98 (.60)	3.14 (.42)	7.29	2, 24	.003	Low > middle, high
Practical life skills	3.56 (.20)	2.78 (.53)	2.97 (.83)	3.25	2, 24	.057	
Creative skills	3.43 (.57)	3.05 (.92)	3.18 (.61)	.61	2, 24	.55	

*Aim 2: Appraisal of the Value of Activities*

Our second research aim focused on how parents appraised the value of the activities their children were engaged in during spring 2020 school closures. Parents appraised the value of the activity the child was engaging in to build specific skills on a 5-point Likert-type scale: academic ( $M = 2.52$ ,  $SD = 1.40$ ), social ( $M = 3.15$ ,  $SD = 1.23$ ), practical life ( $M = 2.82$ ,  $SD = 1.31$ ), and creativity skills ( $M = 3.09$ ,  $SD = 1.309$ ).

*Variations in Appraisal by Care Context.* There was no main effect between T1 and T2,  $F(4, 827) = 2.22$ ,  $p = .065$ , while there was a significant main effect for both weekday,  $F(4, 827) = 3.20$ ,  $p = .013$ , and with child,  $F(4, 827) = 4.677$ ,  $p = .001$  but no interaction effect  $F(4, 827) = 1.214$ ,  $p = .303$ . Parents reported higher academic value of children's activities during weekdays ( $M = 2.53$ ) and gave a higher appraisal for building social skills ( $M = 3.297$ ) and practical life skills ( $M = 2.971$ ) when they were with their child.

*Socioeconomic Variations in Parent Appraisal.* There was a significant main effect of income on parents' appraisals of their child's activities. Low-income families (<\$50,000 per year) appraised a higher value for their children's academic skills and social skills than middle- or high-income families. There were no income differences in appraisal of value for building life skills or creativity (see Table 3).

*Aim 3: Emotions and Well-Being*

The third aim focused on parents' emotions and well-being while engaged in main activities with their children. Overall, parents reported high levels of enjoyment in their own activities ( $M = 3.95$ ) and their children's activities ( $M = 4.09$  on a 5-point Likert scale). Parents reported feeling positive emotions the majority of the time (66%), followed by overwhelmed emotions (18%). Parents infrequently used a negative emotion term (3%). When asked what was causing their emotion, parents attributed the cause of their emotion to a personal experience (51%), the activity the parent was participating in (45%), an experience their child was having such as enjoying playing outside or struggling

with distance learning (21%), a concern related to COVID-19 (10%), or some other reason (4%).

Parent enjoyment was correlated with children's enjoyment ( $r = .54^{**}$ ) and with parent appraisal of child activities that build social skills ( $r = .23^{**}$ ), practical life skills ( $r = .16^{**}$ ) and creativity ( $r = .13^{**}$ ). Children's enjoyment was associated with activities that build social skills ( $r = .26^{**}$ ) and creativity ( $r = .25^{**}$ ). Notably, neither parent nor child enjoyment were associated with activities appraised as building academic skills.

*Variations in Emotions and Well-Being by Care Context*

*Enjoyment.* There was no main effect for time,  $F(2, 825) = .39$ ,  $p = .677$ , while there was a significant main effect for both weekday,  $F(2, 825) = 7.169$ ,  $p = .001$ , and with child,  $F(2, 825) = 5.361$ ,  $p = .005$  but no interaction effect  $F(2, 825) = .14$ ,  $p = .87$ . Parent and child enjoyment were both higher when the parent was with their child (parent  $M = 4.01$ , child  $M = 4.12$ ) and on weekends (parent  $M = 4.17$ , child  $M = 4.29$ ) compared to not being with child (parent  $M = 3.67$ , child  $M = 3.92$ ) or on weekdays (parent  $M = 4.02$ , child  $M = 4.02$ ).

*Parent Emotions.* Overall parents reported more positive emotions,  $F(1, 852) = 7.858$ ,  $p < .01$ , and fewer negative emotions,  $F(1, 852) = 4.573$ ,  $p < .05$  on the weekends. There were no differences in the cause parents attributed to their emotions by weekend or weekday. There were also some notable changes in parents' reports of main emotions and the cause of their emotions from time 1 to time 2. Parents' reports of negative emotions were less frequent at time 2 (T1  $M = .047$ , T2  $M = .019$ ),  $F(1, 852) = 5.221$ ,  $p < .05$ . In addition, parent attribution of the cause of their feeling to COVID-19-related issues declined at time 2 (T1  $M = .14$ ; T2  $M = .05$ ),  $F(1, 711) = 5.113$ ,  $p < .05$ .

*Sociocultural Variations in Enjoyment and Emotions.* There was a significant multivariate main effect for income on parent/child enjoyment and parent emotion,  $F(10, 42) = 2.89$ ,  $p = .01$ . Between-subject effects demonstrate that low-income parents reported more positive parent emotions than high-income parents (see Table 4).

TABLE 4

*Enjoyment and Emotions by Family Income*

	Lowest <i>M (SD)</i>	Middle <i>M (SD)</i>	Highest <i>M (SD)</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>DF</i>	<i>p</i>	Post-hoc comparison
<i>Enjoyment</i>							
Child enjoy	4.10 (.41)	3.83 (.35)	4.24 (.42)	2.40	2, 24	.11	
Parent enjoy	4.11 (.37)	3.86 (.55)	3.97 (.46)	.52	2, 24	.02	
<i>Parent Emotions</i>							
Positive	.87 (.11)	.76 (.15)	.56 (.18)	10.20	2, 24	.00	Low > high, middle
Negative	.03 (.04)	.02 (.02)	.04 (.05)	0.45	2, 24	.64	
Overwhelmed	.09 (.10)	.16 (.11)	.21 (.12)	2.74	2, 24	.09	

**Discussion**

This study examined the daily activities and emotions of young children and their families during the COVID-19 global pandemic when schools shut down due to COVID-19 social distancing orders. Findings from this study provide evidence that families are actively involved in their children's learning. They reported engaging with their children in a variety of daily routine and educational activities. Parents and children equally enjoyed engaging in these activities together, and families from low socioeconomic backgrounds enjoyed these activities more than middle-income families. As schools prepare for postpandemic, in-person learning, these findings highlight the strengths and adaptive practices of children and families from economically and culturally diverse backgrounds. Some home practices counter the deficit stereotypes and support teachers to utilize these strengths to promote academic and social outcomes (Cabrera, 2013).

*Family Activities Shaped by Social Class and Cultural Practices*

While school closures and stay-at-home orders resulting from COVID-19 created an unprecedented disruption to daily routines—an experience known to create stress and have negative impacts on family well-being—families appeared to spend their time engaged in activities known to promote both social and academic skills. The single most frequent activity for families was mealtime (preparation and eating). Low-income families were both more likely to report being with their child and also being engaged in mealtime activities than high-income families. Additionally, when children were with a parent they were more likely to be engaged in mealtime or educational activities. Decades of research have shown that mealtime activities offer important opportunities for families to engage in co-constructed family narratives that allow for the development of a shared history (Ochs & Capps, 2001), an experience known to promote resilience during times of trauma (Duke et al., 2008), in addition to promoting cognitive skills such as language,

literacy, executive function (Leyva, et al., 2022; Snow & Beals, 2006), social-emotional understanding, and well-being (Fivush et al., 2006; Lora et al., 2014).

Lareau (2015) and others have also shown that family routines are shaped by social class status. Lareau studied white and Black families and found that families from middle-class backgrounds engaged in “concerted cultivation” and supported children's talents through organized extracurricular activities. Families from low-income backgrounds spent more time with kinship networks and engaged in “natural growth,” providing the conditions for their children to grow but allowing the children to select and engage in their own leisure activities (Lareau, 2002). Other scholars have also examined how culturally specific practices influence children's and families' daily routines. Studies of Mexican heritage families have examined the social architecture of routine activities and parents' socialization practices, finding that both social class characteristics (e.g., maternal education) and cultural practices (e.g., heritage language) shape the content and structure of routine activities like mealtime (Bridges et al., 2015; Cyclic & Hammer, 2020; Fuller & García Coll, 2010; Leyva et al., 2022; Livas-Dlott et al., 2010). In order to capitalize on the time families are already spending together, educators must learn from families about their goals and expectations for their children and equip families with knowledge about the social-emotional and academic value of family mealtime activities (Iruka et al., 2020; Leyva et al., 2022). Luis Moll's funds-of-knowledge framework has shown that understanding the ample cultural and cognitive resources of families can be used to develop a “participatory pedagogy” that encourages educators to learn about families' contexts and meaningfully incorporate them into the classroom (Moll et al., 1992).

*Virtual Learning and Technology Usage During COVID-19*

Children also spent over one third of their time engaged in some technology that mostly included participation in the district's virtual classroom activities. This finding did not differ by socioeconomic status or cultural background, highlighting the value families place on school engagement. Recent studies



have shown that technology use among young children has increased children's anxiety, stress, and depression (Xie, 2020; Xu et al., 2020). Teachers in this district complemented virtual engagement via technology with printed worksheets to be completed at home, to reduce time spent on technology.

When children were engaged in technology during weekdays, they were frequently interacting in the district virtual learning platform, a technology reported to require significant parental involvement in the early grades. Garbe and colleagues (2020) found that during COVID-19 the majority of parents reported spending 1 to 2 hours daily, supporting their child's online learning during school closures. Other studies have shown that parents (mostly mothers) of young children have had to take time off from work or stop working all together in order to support their children's virtual learning (Alon et al., 2020; Waller et al., 2020). Previous studies have shown that parent engagement in their child's learning enhances social-emotional and academic development (Fan & Chen, 2001; Iruka et al., 2020; Jeynes, 2012). Current study findings show that how parents are engaged in their child's learning has had to change dramatically during the pandemic. More recently, parents have had to become proxy teaching assistants, facilitating the use of technology and communication with teachers while also engaging with their children in household activities like eating and meal preparation (Davis et al., 2021). Parents can be seen as actively engaged in creating a balanced set of activities for children, including a mix of technology and nontechnology-based learning activities—outdoor, physically active, and creative activities—in addition to basic daily routines such as meal-time and self-care.

#### *Social Class Shapes Parent Appraisals of Routine Activities*

With regards to research aim 2, families generally had positive appraisals of their children's activities as supporting academic, social, creative, and life skills. Parents tended to value the social and practical life skills of their activities more highly when they were with their children, and the academic activities were more highly valued during weekdays. This is evidence of a care context that is responsive to the needs and values of the caregiver and the child. There were some interesting socioeconomic variations. Low-income families reported appraising academic activities, social skills, and life skills more highly than high-income families. Scholars investigating the cultural process of parenting and development have pointed to important variations on family appraisal of the value of specific activities in line with their socialization and developmental goals for their children (e.g., Bridges et al., 2012; Rogoff, 2003; Valdés, 1996). For example, some Mexican heritage families have reported valuing "bien educado" (well-educated) socialization goals over grades-based academic achievement (Bridges et al., 2012). Notably, there were no differences in appraisal of the

academic value of activities, further highlighting the importance of culturally based socialization values such as *bien educado*, rooted in family interactions and relationships.

#### *Parents Reported Positive Emotions During COVID-19*

In response to research aim 3, parents reported positive emotions overall during the stay-at-home orders of spring 2020, with parent reports of negative emotions decreasing later in spring 2020. This change suggests perhaps that as the stay-at-home orders persisted, parents developed new home routines that helped to reduce negative emotions and stress. Although this may be counterintuitive, given the stress and uncertainty resulting from the repercussions of the global pandemic, it also aligns with past research showing that even during times of challenge and struggle, keeping a positive attitude and maintaining warmth during childcare activities shapes parenting behaviors and promotes positive emotion regulation and other child outcomes (Cohen et al., 2020; Davidov & Grusec, 2006; Eisenberg et al., 2001). In one study of Mexican heritage mothers rearing a child with autism, a potentially stress-inducing experience, mothers not only reported positive emotions, but they also reported preferring to be alone with their autistic child than with any other family member (Cohen et al., 2020).

Given relationship-based theories of development, it is not surprising that families took comfort and experienced positive emotions during the time they had together, even with the challenging circumstances disrupting the world around them. Future work will examine how parents made sense of the pandemic-induced stay-at-home orders and what they valued from their experiences during these times. For example, in subsequent interviews with families conducted during the pandemic (not analyzed in this study), immigrant parents reflected upon how their cultural values aligned with this unique opportunity to be together as a family. Mothers reported that the child's father spent more time at home having meals with the family, siblings played and worked together, and families engaged in more consistent interactions with their extended family in Mexico using technology (Wishard Guerra et al., 2021).

Positive and negative emotions were not associated with building academic skills, suggesting that parents may have a neutral emotional response to academic activities. Moreover, parents' enjoyment was positively associated with child enjoyment, and parents often attributed the cause of their own emotions to their child's experiences. Davis and colleagues (2021) also found that parent emotional well-being was directly connected to children's academic and social experiences. Notably, during this early phase of the pandemic, high- and middle-income families felt fewer positive emotions than low-income families. It is possible that the sudden change in daily life due to COVID-19 launched a chain of potentially devastating economic stressors on middle- and upper-income

families. Families from low-income backgrounds may have experienced less job loss due to the presence of an existing stay-at-home parent or a working parent who qualified as an “essential” worker. While loss of income during the COVID-19 crisis has been linked to negative effects on parent well-being, families also had opportunities to spend significantly more time with their children. This has led to positive impacts on parent-child interactions and parent well-being (Kalil et al., 2020). Studies have shown that trauma and resilience are shaped and defined by the ecological context of the family and experienced differently by individuals of different races, cultures, and ethnicities (Tummala-Narra, 2007).

### *Implications for Practice*

To address practical implications from study findings, we encourage educators to look for competency and capacity among their students and their families. Educators are encouraged to engage in a “participatory pedagogy” that draws on their students’ cultural and individual experiences from their homes to be used in the classroom (Moll et al., 1992). Focusing on the strengths and adaptive practices that children demonstrate allows educators to recognize and scaffold child- and family-driven learning and to hold positive expectations of their students that counter deficit stereotypes often attributed to children from low-income or ethnically diverse backgrounds.

Our society has learned that to be responsive to public health crises like COVID-19 we have to be united in keeping our children mentally and physically healthy and academically challenged. We must continue to shift our understanding of academic learning as directed exclusively by administrators and teachers who push adult-driven and standards-based academic instruction. Instead, academic learning should leverage families’ ecocultural assets to empower culturally and economically diverse children in the classroom. Families’ cultural practices, and their socially meaningful interactions with others during their daily routines, are what motivate and guide families to be joyful, engaged learners. These strategies also promote positive approaches to learning in the classroom for young children (Bustamante & Hindman, 2020). Learning activities should be collaboratively driven by families’ everyday practices informed by their goals and expectations for their children.

Findings from our study showed that children and their caregivers exhibited fewer positive emotions when they were doing worksheets or logged into the school districts’ virtual learning platform as compared to when they were playing outside with their family or engaging in culturally meaningful activities (e.g., food routines). In the event of future shifts to virtual learning, districts may consider more intentional integration of family-driven learning interactions into the academic material distributed by virtual learning platforms as well as working with parents to

develop a list of simple pedagogical techniques (e.g., asking open-ended questions, having conversations about shared experiences, planning joint daily activities such as meals, observing and encouraging children’s play with cultural artifacts found at home that extend classroom learning standards) and activities that can be used to integrate academic learning standards into culturally meaningful routine activities. One evidence-based approach to this is through integration of a “tinkering” or engineering curriculum, a hands-on, design-based learning where children and families are encouraged to create, build, and experiment with everyday items found at home (Brophy et al., 2008). Tinkering-engineering curriculum has proven effective for illuminating talents among low-income children that were otherwise unseen in traditional adult-driven academic instruction (Robinson et al., 2017).

Our study findings showed that mealtime activities were important for families to engage with each other and build rapport. Educators may consider supporting family food routines and other activities in which families are engaged and interacting together, building relationships and experimenting with combining individual food ingredients to create new meals. Rather than sending home academic worksheets that aim to prevent “learning loss,” teachers should encourage families to spend time together, preparing meals, playing, and enjoying each other. Educators can suggest strategies and tools for incorporating academic goals into these joint activities. For example, teachers may consider asking children to share a recipe that they enjoy making with their family to create a classroom cookbook. Teachers can include suggestions for how to incorporate measuring and math concepts for children to practice while cooking with their family. Recent studies have shown moderate to strong impacts on children’s language and positive approaches to learning when they engaged with their caregivers in food routines embedded within the family’s daily routines (Leyva et al., 2022).

Storytelling is another way to elevate and value family experiences and cultural understandings. Educators can build creative, safe spaces in their classrooms and invite students to share their “COVID-19” stories and experiences living through a pandemic with their families. Teachers can support their students to tell their stories through a variety of mediums: writing, telling a friend, audio or video recording their story. This provides an opportunity for students to learn about how other families were occupied, it allows teachers to learn about and build upon children’s interests, talents, and meaningful experiences at home with their families.

### *Limitations*

At the time of data collection, schools had recently shut down. Over time, families’ positive emotions may have

subsided as virtual learning continued through the 2020–2021 academic year. If this daily diary data were collected again during the 2020–2021 academic year, it is possible that families may not have experienced similar positive emotions. Caregivers may have reported more varied emotions such as exhaustion and overwhelm as schools continued operating virtually. In addition, the study methodology, focused on examining time spent in activities, and the individuals present did not allow for a rich, contextual understanding of the family activities. Parent interviews conducted in the summer of 2020 following the collection of the present data are currently being analyzed to capture the nuance and complexity of how, when, and why families engaged in certain activities.

It is also possible that there may have been a social desirability effect (Hawthorne effect) stemming from families' awareness of being "monitored" during data collection. Given the lack of differences in main activities reported by income group, we do not consider this to be a significant risk. This was also one of the only methods to observe how families used their time during the stay-at-home mandate. Given the mundane nature of using one's phone to periodically share daily updates with friends and family, we considered the ESM methodology to be unobtrusive and an effective strategy to mitigate the Hawthorne effect (Frey, 2018). The study also had a small sample size of similarly aged children and a short window of data collection (i.e., 2 weeks). Future studies should explore the daily routine activities of children and families of different ages and different economic and cultural backgrounds over a longer period of time.

### Conclusion

From this study we learned that economically and culturally diverse families persevered through the initial months of the COVID-19 pandemic by playing, engaging in academic activities, and sharing meals together. Despite significant disruptions in daily routines, including child participation in virtual schooling, our study described family adaptations to the changing stressors induced by the stay-at-home orders. Families appeared to readjust their priorities, valuing life and social skills more closely connected to the families' daily activities. Parents experienced a different level of engagement in their children's schooling, which, while certainly stressful, created opportunities for deeper home-school connections. We noted important, unexpected positive experiences among low-income families during the initial months of the stay-at-home orders that can potentially shift the conversation from remediating the inevitable learning loss to building on family capacity and children's home-learning experiences. Educators and administrators can learn from families' individual experiences to support both academic and socioemotional goals. These findings should be

used to reframe and redefine how families and educators can work together to support learning and development in school and at home.

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### Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

### Note

1. This term is based on participants yes or no response to the question "Is the mother/father Spanish, Hispanic or Latino?" Participants were also able to identify via racial categories (i.e., White, Black, Pacific Islander, other). In order to be inclusive and representative of participant's ethnic background, the term Latinx/Hispanic is used in this paper.

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