

**A qualitative forum analysis of fathers' stressors and support seeking behaviour during the  
COVID-19 pandemic**

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### **Abstract**

Fathers experienced high rates of mental health concerns during the COVID-19 pandemic. Social support is crucial to mitigate these problems; however, access to and quality of support were impacted by public health guidelines to increase physical distancing. Online forums offer an avenue for peer connection and support. Yet, minimal research has examined forum use during COVID-19 to describe the experiences, perceived stressors, and resource need of fathers during the pandemic. This study qualitatively analyzed fathers' experiences through a Framework Analytic Approach of reddit's sub-forum r/daddit. Posts ( $N=299$ ) and comments ( $N=2597$ ) between July and October 2020 were analyzed. Findings highlighted five main themes (with subthemes): forum use, family functioning, psychological and health factors, interpersonal functioning, and COVID-19. First and foremost, fathers used the online forum to provide support and advice to other fathers. Main themes are discussed in terms of informing the development of services to support father and family wellbeing.

**Keywords:** *online forum, fathers, COVID-19, qualitative analysis, mental health*

## **A qualitative forum analysis of fathers' stressors and support seeking behaviour during the COVID-19 pandemic**

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to poorer family well-being through elevated parenting stress and increases in parental mental health concerns (Cameron et al., 2020a; Cameron et al., 2020b; Lebel et al., 2020). Stressors impacting family well-being may be attributed to school and childcare intermittent closures, employment instability, and stringent public health restrictions during the pandemic (Hertz-Palmor et al., 2020; Lee & Parolin, 2021; Sheen et al., 2021). Research on fathers during the pandemic is relatively sparse; yet, rates of clinically significant anxiety and depression in fathers have been estimated at 6.8-22.9% and 6.5-37.1%, respectively, throughout the pandemic (Cameron et al., 2020b). These rates represent potentially significant elevations compared to pre-pandemic meta-estimates and systematic reviews (Nolvi et al., 2020) and are associated with increased financial concerns, employment loss, and marital stress (Cameron et al., 2020b; Mohler-Kuo et al., 2021). Untreated paternal mental illness is associated with lifelong adverse outcomes for child development across socioemotional, academic, cognitive, and psychological development (Yogman et al., 2016). Paternal well-being also impacts family functioning through associations with increased marital problems, parent-child conflict, and family violence increasing the risk for poor family outcomes (Letourneau et al., 2012; Yogman et al., 2016). Thus, programming to improve mental health concerns in fathers is imperative to promote child and family well-being during and post-pandemic.

The presence and perception of social support are key elements in managing the stressors of fatherhood. Social support enhances psychological health, buffers against the development of depression, and is repeatedly linked to psychological well-being (Castle et al., 2008). Having a reliable network of social supports can buffer stress responses to stressful life events by

decreasing negative self-appraisals, enhancing resilience, and increasing problem-solving to mitigate stressors (e.g., Ozbay et al., 2007). The provision of social support is particularly critical during key adjustment periods, such as the transition into parenthood where additional and novel stressors are incurred. Fathers actively acknowledge that peer support during the transition to fatherhood and throughout fatherhood is seen as helpful and valued (Letourneau et al., 2012). Similarly, research suggests that social support groups can facilitate coping and well-being during the stressful periods of fatherhood for diverse populations (Niela-Vilén et al., 2014). Yet, many fathers do not receive adequate support, with fathers reporting a lack of social and peer support, tailored support and information for fathers, and inclusion and support from healthcare professionals (Baldwin et al., 2018). Concerningly, the COVID-19 pandemic has further decreased the accessibility of such social support immensely, with fathers reporting lower social support than prior to the pandemic (Johnson et al., 2020).

Online forums are a way for fathers to connect and receive social support from anyone, anywhere, at any time. During the pandemic, public health guidelines led to increases in social isolation and engagement in virtual services (Koonin et al., 2020). Many guidelines restricted families from being with non-household individuals in-person resulting in many relying on virtual or online means for social connection (Garfin, 2020). Prior to the pandemic, qualitative studies of online forum use that asked fathers about their use or evaluated a specific population of fathers (e.g., preterm infants) indicated a primary use of seeking support and advice on topics such as child-rearing, marriage, child health, and child physical and social development (Ammari & Schoenebeck, 2015; Kim et al., 2016). These supports were used to document fatherhood (Ammari et al., 2018) and learn parenting strategies (Salzmann-Erikson & Eriksson, 2013). Yet, no research has studied online forum use of fathers in the general populace during COVID-19.

To date, little is known about the support needs of fathers during and following the COVID-19 pandemic. There is significant utility in using an online forum to analyze how to support fathers and on what topics they actively seek support, due to the naturalistic nature of the data and peer interactions. One qualitative study was conducted with fathers specifically in the perinatal period using a similar approach and time period (Cameron et al., 2021). This study found fathers sought and provided support through forums on topics related to COVID-19, psychological distress, family functioning, and child health and development. Such findings can be used to inform needed programming and supports for fathers in their transition to fatherhood. Yet, fathers outside the perinatal period are rarely included in research (Fisher, 2017), resulting in a significant gap in understanding of how to support families from a family-centred approach across childhood. Further, paternal distress and support needs continue well past the perinatal period (Fisher, 2017), with chronic parental mental illness playing a significant role in long-term quality of life for children (Reupert et al., 2013). Understanding how fathers of children of all ages seek support and connection during a time of increased stress has the potential to inform tailored programming for fathers to promote child development and family wellbeing.

The current study examined fathers' perspectives of stressors and support needs during the COVID-19 pandemic on an online sub-forum on reddit, r/daddit. The specific goals were to decipher how fathers interacted on the forum during COVID-19 to inform the development of clinical tools to prevent long-term negative family outcomes during and following the pandemic.

## **Methods**

### **Participant Characteristics**

All posts and comments from r/daddit were extracted from July 1 to October 31, 2020. This timeframe was chosen as it encompasses a period of time following the first wave of

COVID-19 and before/during a second wave (Roser et al., 2020). Due to limitations on confirming child age and inclusiveness given the secondary analysis of publicly available data, we included any father posting on the specific forum with the intention of including fathers of children <18 years old. Any content where the original poster identified as anyone other than a father was excluded from data collection. Additional exclusion criteria included non-English posts, posts from soon-to-be fathers, or posts from fathers whose child/children are above 18 years of age. Only posts with the “support,” “advice request,” or “discussion” flairs (i.e., reddit-specific filters) were extracted. Based on available data, use of the forum appeared to be common in fathers of young children. Of the posts that included an identifiable child age, there were 148 fathers of infants 0-1 years old, 49 fathers of children 1-5 years old, 26 fathers of children 6-12 years old, and 4 fathers of children 13-18 years old. The exact ages of children were not possible to determine nor was age mentioned by all fathers (3165 posts did not include).

### **Selection of Forum**

An internet search for father and parent forums revealed that the vast majority of resources are for mothers or parents in general, while few forums existed exclusively for fathers. Of the forums available for fathers, several were excluded from consideration due to low engagement in recent years or engagement that was limited to a specific geographical region. Reddit ([reddit.com](https://www.reddit.com)) was found to be a popular forum with a frequently and currently used subreddit channel called r/daddit for fathers to discuss all aspects of fatherhood (r/daddit, 2021; Ammari et al., 2018). This subforum was created in 2010, contained over 291k members, and had 8.61 posts per day in November 2020, highlighting the popularity of and regular engagement for fathers on this forum during the period of data collection. Given its popularity and previously

identified use of other subreddit channels for qualitative research (Teague & Shatte, 2018), r/daddit was selected as the most useful forum for analysis in the current study.

### **Analytic Approach**

A qualitative approach to data analysis was chosen to elicit a rich understanding of the themes of stressors and support needs during the COVID-19 pandemic, as expressed by fathers on the subreddit r/daddit. The Framework Analytic Approach was selected as it provides flexibility in establishing themes and subthemes *a priori* while allowing for post-hoc adjustments to the framework based on findings (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994). This approach was deemed most appropriate given the lack of literature looking at fathers' use of forums to seek and offer support, particularly during COVID-19. There are five key stages: familiarization, identifying a thematic framework, indexing, charting, and mapping and interpretation (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994). Formal ethics review and the need for informed consent were waived by the university ethics board, given that forum content is publicly accessible data.

### **Initial Thematic Framework**

Prior to coding the extracted data, an initial thematic framework was developed collaboratively by all authors *a priori* to facilitate the coding process. Main themes within the initial framework included *psychosocial distress*, *household stressors*, *child health and development*, *COVID-19*, and *age groups*. Each main theme and its related subthemes from the initial framework can be seen in Table 1 in the supplemental material. The initial main themes were chosen due to the presence of these themes in related COVID-19 research by our group (e.g., Cameron et al., 2020a). The theme of COVID-19 was chosen to facilitate the aims of this research, and age groups were chosen to explore any variations in frequency and content of support interactions among fathers based on the age of their children. The initial framework was

adapted as needed to reflect nuances in the collected data that did not fit the initial framework.

### **Data Collection**

All posts and comments from r/daddit were extracted independently into Microsoft excel documents by three trained coders to gain familiarity with the data. Data pulled within the excel files included the retrieval date, post or comment creation date, the poster's username, the title of the post, all comments within the original post and related comments, and the number of upvotes (i.e., reddit defines upvotes as a button for users to express whether a post contributes, is relevant to the thread, or liked) and comments. The three Microsoft Excel sheets created by each coder were then combined into one excel sheet and imported into NVivo 12 (QSR International) for thematic coding. Posts and comments were deemed irrelevant if they were made by individuals who identified as anything other than a father of at least one child from the postpartum onwards (e.g., mothers, first-time expectant fathers), unfinished comments, comments that correct someone's spelling or grammar, and deleted comments.

### **Coding and Rigor**

A total of 299 posts and 2597 comments were extracted from the forum. There were 43 posts and 243 comments within the "advice request" flair, 121 posts and 1260 comments within the "support" flair, and 135 posts and 1094 comments within the "discussion" flair. Posts were divided among three trained coders and coded independently using the initial qualitative framework. All posts were analysed using NVivo 12 (QSR International). An audit trail was developed by having each coder take notes within a coding journal to track challenges in the coding process including possible adjustments to the framework. Authors one through seven met weekly to discuss content that was difficult to code or did not fit within the existing framework, to reach a unanimous agreement on which code to apply or how to adjust the framework. Posts



and comments could be coded to more than one code if applicable. If needed, discussions were extended to additional senior co-authors for consensus. Emerging patterns in the data and the degree to which data mapped onto main and subthemes were discussed during weekly meetings, in line with the mapping and interpretation stages of the Framework Analytic Approach. These meetings facilitated reflexivity in the coding process, by allowing space for collaborative discussion and resolution of coding decisions. Such practices align with standards for ensuring rigorous results in qualitative studies (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

## **Results**

### **Themes and Subthemes**

Our final thematic framework illustrates fathers' use of online forums and the themes discussed during COVID-19. Our final thematic framework consisted of five main themes and 22 subthemes (See Figure 1). The frequency of codes for each theme and subtheme is displayed in Table 1. The five main themes include general forum use, family functioning, psychological and health factors, interpersonal functioning, and COVID-19, all in order from most frequent to least frequent. From the initial framework, the main theme of psychological distress became psychological and health factors to ensure data relevant to both mental and physical health was captured. The subthemes of childcare, resource insecurity, and service access were collapsed into the theme COVID-19 due to the overlapping content. Quotes are presented in text as numbers (e.g., #1) with corresponding quotes displayed in Supplemental Table 2.

### **Main Theme of Forum Use (2289 codes, 61.9% of all codes)**

The most frequent main theme encompassed the main ways in which the forum was used. This theme included advice and support requests, advice and support giving, general engagement, and sharing information.

***Advice and Support Giving (978 codes, 42.7%)***

The advice and support giving subtheme was the most applied code as nearly every post of a father sharing a difficult situation or challenge was met with some form of advice or support. This was commonly the case regardless of whether users explicitly asked for advice or support. Common examples of advice and support giving included explicit advice (#1), encouragement (#2), sympathy (#3), and reassurance (#4). Fathers often provided meaningful statements of compassion and validation (e.g., “I'm sorry for what you are going through brother...” and “...nothing you're feeling is wrong in any way...”).

***General Engagement (883 codes, 38.6%)***

The general engagement subtheme was used to differentiate forum activity that was relevant to the analysis but neither a request or provision of advice nor support. General engagement posts and comments included topics such as politics, sports, videogames, and movie and music preferences.

***Advice and Support Requests (182 codes, 8.0%)***

Nearly every post under the “support” and “advice request” flairs and many of the “discussion” posts were coded as an advice or support request. The requests themselves were heterogenous in nature; however, fathers tended to see the forum as a safe place in which to seek opinions and support across a wide range of areas, as discussed across the other main themes of the analysis. At times, fathers simply used the forum to seek social support for issues not easily resolved and vent to others who may have experienced something similar.

***Sharing Information (111 codes, 4.8%)***

Fathers used the forum to share different types of information, including products they like (e.g., formula brands), parenting and children's books, and news articles.

**Main Theme of Family Functioning (517 Codes, 14.0% of all codes)**

Fathers used the forum to talk about family functioning across resource insecurity, maternal support, parenting, parent-child interactions, and child health and development.

***Child Health and Development (235 codes, 45.5%)***

The child health and development subtheme most commonly included concerns over children's health. Users discussed concerns over their children's health and development with a focus on newborns and infants. Children's health topics ranged from reactions to standard medical procedures (e.g., vaccines; "...just got his flu shots and now he has a fever...is this normal?"; #5) to adverse complications from illness (#6). Similarly, developmental concerns tended to focus on feeding (#7), sleeping (#8), and excessive crying (#9). A common concern among fathers was also the impact of screen use on child development. This concern included both length, timing, and purpose (e.g., academic, recreational) of screen use and content being consumed. Videogames were discussed both casually in terms of developmental appropriateness (e.g., age at which children should play videogames) and with some concern (e.g., "addiction").

***Parent-Child Interactions (120 codes, 23.2%)***

The parent-child interactions subtheme included all instances of fathers interacting with their children, such as parent-child play activities, bonding with their child, disciplining, and their child's parental preference. Many discussed their interactions with their children in a positive way (#10-11), while others shared frustrations around children violating household rules (#12-13). Other discussions surrounded children preferring one parent over the other. One father described how his son was more attached to his mother and posted, "I didn't think it would make me as... 'jealous' as it does." This notion of feeling secondary appeared multiple times throughout the forum with one father sharing, "If my wife and I are together, I may as well not

exist.” Others responded highlighting the importance of spending quality time with children, regardless of their own emotional reactions or concerns over perceived parental preferences.

***Parenting (88 codes, 17.0%)***

Discussions about parenting included both parental decision-making and self-efficacy. Parental decision-making commonly included discussions on having more children. Fathers asked how many children other users had and how they decided to have more children (#14-15). Motivations for having only one child included being able to direct financial, attentional, and emotional resources more effectively (#16). Conversely, motivations for having more children included wanting the child to have a sibling and fond memories of their first child as a newborn. The parental self-efficacy posts were specific to fathers' parenting skills or sharing of personal doubts. Fathers most commonly expressed doubt about their ability to be effective fathers (#17). Although less common, fathers occasionally also shared proud moments demonstrating self-efficacy: “...I pick him up and walk, shush, sing, talk, and he calms down and falls back asleep.”

***Maternal Support (54 codes, 10.4%)***

Fathers discussed how to support their partner, including specific questions following childbirth (#18) and sharing parenting and household tasks fairly. Challenges to supporting mothers included paternal sleep deprivation (#19), being away from home (#20), and returning to work after paternity leave. Overall comments on how to best support mothers ranged from broad encouragement (e.g., “keep supporting your wife however you can”) to more specific advice (e.g., “Go to work, come home and take over the kiddo and give mom a break”).

***Resource Insecurity (20 codes, 3.9%)***

Users discussed resource insecurity, which included posts about the cost of raising children, income, or job loss/insecurity. Many fathers expressed dismay over the cost of essential

goods (e.g., diapers, strollers; #21) or services for children (e.g., medical care; #22). One father shared his discontent by asking “To anyone who actually buys Pampers baby wipes regularly... How did you earn your first million dollars?” While income was not directly discussed, job loss and searching for employment was a topic of discussion. Job loss often appeared in the context of COVID-19 and was perceived both positively and negatively. For some, job loss allowed fathers to spend more quality time with their children (#23), but for others, it was a significant stressor (#24). When discussing obstacles to finding employment, fathers talked about difficulty due to the job market disruption during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Main Theme of Psychological and Health Factors (485 codes, 13.1% of all codes)**

Fathers posted about a variety of psychological and health factors. These posts included discussions about paternal mental health, physical health, role identity, and coping.

#### ***Role identity (158 codes, 32.6%)***

Identity was discussed among fathers both in the context of fatherhood and masculinity. Most posts included two primary ideas: (1) discussions about when fathers begin to truly identify as fathers and (2) conversations about the public perception of fathers and fatherhood. Some fathers reported feeling “no difference” after the birth of their child while others described their new role as a father as “totally foreign” (#25-26). Others offered insight saying “[the transition] takes a bit” (#27). Users posted about the public perception of fatherhood and how fathers are treated. Fathers expressed being upset at receiving praise for performing primary caregiver tasks like taking their children to the park or changing diapers, as it seemed to infer that it was not a standard expectation of their role (#28). Fathers also shared experiences where they felt undermined, insulted, or demeaned in their role (#29-31). Further, fathers shared experiences

where baby changing stations were limited to the women's restrooms, restricting their access. Fathers were told to "just ask mommy" or find someone else to change the baby.

***Coping (122 codes, 25.2%)***

The coping subtheme included self-care, reassurance seeking, and catharsis. Self-care was discussed primarily in response to fathers expressing feelings of stress or mental health concerns. Some advice from fathers simply provided a reminder to engage in self-care practices (e.g., "Don't forget to take care of yourself;" #32), while others were specific such as pursuing therapy, engaging in hobbies, and reading. Fathers also shared stories after which they asked for reassurance from others on the normality of these experiences or support for their decision-making. These posts typically revolved around child development and behaviour (#33-34) as well as paternal stress and mental health. For instance, one father shared his feelings about his daughter beginning puberty, which included fear, uncertainty, and sadness, ending his post with "Am I overreacting or have any of you felt the same?" Lastly, fathers used the forum as a place to "rant," seemingly for a sense of catharsis. Topics were diverse and ranged from venting about the lack of representation of fathers in children's books (#35) to sharing frustrations about not being able to engage in recreational activities without interruptions from children (#36).

***Paternal mental health (119 codes, 24.5%)***

Paternal mental health was a common theme occurring throughout the forum. Fathers discussed mental health in a variety of ways with some seeking advice on managing mental health concerns (#37) and others looking for reassurance in their mental health experiences (#38). There was also a focus on adverse mental health during the postpartum period specifically, with one father posting about severe postpartum depressive symptoms which led to a recent suicide attempt (#39). When discussing mental health difficulties, fathers often discussed their

reluctance to share these difficulties due to the social pressures of being a “strong man” and fears about being “vulnerable.” One father posted about his postpartum mental health difficulties stating “... I always felt I had to suck it up and hide it” to which others agreed and affirmed the need to share and express these feelings.

***Paternal physical health (86 codes, 17.7%)***

When fathers discussed physical health within the forum three primary topics emerged: sleep deprivation, weight, and vasectomies. Sleep deprivation was prevalent for fathers with infants and often was accompanied by questions about their child’s sleep patterns (“...any tips or ideas on how long this [sleep difficulty] might last...”; #40). Concerns around gaining and losing weight were also expressed (#41). In response, others shared their routines for diet and exercise. Notably, within the forum, there was an overlap between the subtheme of physical health and COVID-19 with fathers discussing weight gain as a result of gym closures and a more sedentary lifestyle during the pandemic. Fathers were also interested in discussing family planning. For instance, fathers sought advice from others on whether to have a vasectomy to which forum users shared their decision-making and personal experiences. These discussions were found to be helpful for those who were unsure of their future family plans.

**Main Theme of Interpersonal Functioning (255 codes, 6.9% of all codes)**

Fathers used the forum to discuss items related to interpersonal functioning such as co-parenting relationships, social difficulties with family, social isolation, and social support.

***Co-Parenting Relationships (123 codes, 48.2%)***

Users discussed challenges faced in raising a child, parenting skills and strategies, separation and divorce, and navigating shared custody. These topics were discussed within the context of both married and separated parents. One father asked, “Do your wives listen to your

parenting input?” to which other fathers affirmed that his input did matter (#42) and offered advice. Fathers discussed an increase in marital conflict since their children were born (#43-44). Other discussions about co-parenting pertained to separation, divorce, and child custody. In some cases, fathers disclosed the impact of their relationship ending (e.g., the possibility of seeing their child less, increased workload of single parenting; #45-46). The logistics of shared custody following divorce were also discussed, including legal implications (#47-48). Fathers asked others for legal advice, how to co-parent when separated, and tips to manage this adjustment.

***Social Support (76 codes, 29.8%)***

The discussions surrounding social support mainly focused on experiences of the presence or absence of social support in their lives, as well as the social support offered by the r/daddit forum (#49). The utility of social support, especially during the initial transition to parenthood, was a common theme for fathers (#50). Fathers also discussed the absence of social support and parenting groups for fathers. One father shared that he had attended many parenting groups, but that “...there were only mothers. I’ve not met a single other dad in these groups ever.” Another father recently moved to a new city and asked for advice in seeking out a support network specifically for fathers. Comments on how to connect directly with other fathers included attending church, taking his child to a playground, or finding father groups through Facebook. The value of the support provided through the r/daddit forum was also commonly discussed, including many fathers commenting on the valuable support. One user posted, “there are dads of every race, creed, color, gender, etc. here and it’s just awesome to see... thank you to all of you.” This post was met with unanimous agreement with others reaffirming the valuable, wholesome, and welcoming nature of r/daddit. One user shared, “[the forum is] one of the few Dad spaces I've been welcomed into because I'm a trans dude. It's been amazing.”



***Social Difficulties with Family (42 codes, 16.5%)***

Social difficulties with family were a common area of discussion within the forum. Family difficulties often pertained to the fathers' own parents or their in-laws, including grandparents interfering with parenting decisions (e.g., upholding rules) and lack of assistance (e.g., childcare). For instance, one father expressed frustration at his parents for not respecting the sleep schedule of his child ("They are the worst offenders of waking her up..."; #51) to which others affirmed these frustrations and suggested setting firm boundaries with his parents.

***Social Isolation or Loneliness (14 codes, 5.5%)***

Fathers' experiences of social isolation or loneliness were related to the social changes of parenthood, mental health difficulties, or COVID-19. Fathers often shared how the demands of fatherhood reduced their social functioning (e.g., "I've got no social life"; #52). Notably, the social isolation experienced by many was exacerbated by various COVID-19 restrictions (#53). Of concern, many fathers shared mental health difficulties related to isolation and loneliness.

***Main Theme of COVID-19 (154 codes, 4.2% of all codes)***

Finally, fathers used the forum to discuss COVID-19 and how they were impacted by the pandemic. Discussions related to COVID-19 included conversations about service access or disruption, changes to child schooling and childcare, and COVID-19-related stress and anxiety.

***COVID-19 related stress and anxiety (48 codes, 31.2%)***

Fathers discussed stress or anxiety caused by or related to COVID-19. Often COVID-19 itself was not expressed as a unique source of stress to fathers; rather, users explained COVID-19 as an additional layer on top of existing stressors. Fathers reported feelings of tiredness (#54), burnout, and short-temperedness with one father speculating: "some of this is due to me working in healthcare since COVID began and them not letting us have any days off." Additionally,

fathers expressed concerns over the impact of COVID-19 on their mental health and the parent-child bond. One father shared, "I'm struggling. I feel like I can't even connect with my newborn because of it. This stacked on top of COVID-19 and quarantine is taking its toll on me mentally." Users also shared fears about themselves, or their children contracting COVID-19 and discussed precautions they were taking such as delaying introducing their newborn children to family and friends, wearing masks, and decreasing social outings. Fathers were often conflicted by these decisions and concerned about the lack of socialization for their children (#55-56).

***Service Access or Disruption (43 codes, 27.9%)***

Fathers wrote about changes in service access and disruptions to previously accessible services. Topics mainly surrounded decreased access to medical services as a result of COVID-19, which were met with frustration, stress, and guilt. Fathers expressed feeling "systematically cut out" of interactions to which they would normally have access, such as routine perinatal appointments or being in the room during their partners' labour and delivery. Such changes in service access were shared among many fathers with one father posting: "I was there for EVERYTHING for my first son. Missing out on so much for my second." Another father shared, "I have been allowed to see her OB once...every visit has been extremely limited and [I] never get the opportunity to ask any questions...I was recently informed that I may not be allowed into labor and delivery." Despite these disruptions, some fathers noted accommodations within pandemic-related restrictions were given (e.g., attending an ultrasound via Facetime; #57).

Fathers also posted about loss of access to fitness centres, parks, or playgrounds due to the restrictions. Some fathers noted adverse effects of these closures, such as weight gain due to gyms being closed. Fathers who were unable to access parks or playgrounds felt as though they were failing to provide outdoor activities for their children (#58).

***School (32 codes, 20.8%)***

Fathers posted about changes to their child's schooling, such as transitioning to remote learning. Remote learning was seen to present a new set of challenges and required adjustments (e.g., changes in expectations, scheduling, work-life balance) that increased parental fatigue and stress. Within the forum, fathers reported experiencing fatigue as a result of managing their child's remote learning in addition to other added stressors (e.g., working from home; #59). One father expressed his fatigue: "My three kids (6, 4, 2) are absolute angels but are zapping every ounce of energy that I've got daily. To say that I'm struggling in only the third week of school is a massive understatement." When fathers expressed challenges managing their child(ren)'s remote learning, they were often met with support and validation from others. Shared sentiments were also observed regarding the transition to online learning, such as seeking support to familiarize children with the technology required as well as being upset about the amount of screen time for children. For instance, one father shared: "My partner and I [tried] to limit screen time while she was growing up...and now, she is being asked to spend hours on a screen."

***Childcare (31 Codes, 20.1%)***

Fathers discussed the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on childcare, with a main focus on their child's return to daycare. Some fathers posted trepidation and safety concerns about sending their children to childcare facilities (e.g., #60-61). For example, one father commented that he and his partner disenrolled their child from daycare as they "...did not want [their] son at daycare during this time, it is a breeding ground for germs." In response, many fathers reassured others of the safety of childcare facilities due to mask-wearing, temperature checks, and not permitting parents to enter the facility (#62-63). Others also noted the importance of children returning to daycare for socialization purposes (#64).

### **Discussion**

This study is amongst the first to highlight fathers' voices during a historic period of intense disruption to family life. This work employed an innovative naturalistic observation approach to elucidate the thematic content of fathers across childhood seeking support on a reddit forum during the COVID-19 pandemic. Broad themes emerged, including forum use, family functioning, psychological and health factors, interpersonal functioning, and COVID-19. Subthemes on the importance of paternal mental health, childcare and schooling challenges, and the impact of limited supports and services for fathers further demonstrated general unmet needs as well as pandemic-specific needs. This work holds key relevance for building the evidence base on the current unmet needs of fathers to inform tailored services to ensure fathers are adequately supported during the pandemic and beyond.

Based on the substantial percentage of posts and comments coded to forum use in the current study, the primary forum use included to seek advice, support other fathers, and foster discussions with other fathers. While some fathers used the forum to seek support and advice, a majority of fathers (2289/2896 posts and comments; 79%) used the forum to simply engage with other fathers, highlighting the sheer need for social support during a time of social isolation and increased stressors. This need was particularly apparent in the support offered by fathers to their peers undergoing tough experiences, such as emotional abuse, 'toxic' relationships, financial stressors and job loss, single parenting, foster parenting, child custody, and health concerns. This finding is consistent with pre-pandemic research that has documented the utility and support offered by fathers to other fathers (Salzmann-Erikson & Eriksson, 2013). In the context of a global stressors, fathers appeared to turn to the online forum to continue to connect with peers to process related concerns (e.g., school closures, childcare).

A primary use of the forum was to gather information, advice, and support on parenting, father-child interactions, supporting co-parents, and child health and development. Fathers were clearly trying to advance their knowledge and parenting ability with the support of their peers. Consistent with related research, fathers show a desire to be a strong parent figure, support their partner, and manage their mental health (McLeod, 2020; Rominov et al., 2018). They seek out opportunities to learn and improve their parenting ability and capacity (Da Costa et al., 2017). Further, it was evident that the social forum offered a strong social support network for fathers. Fathers praised the forum for being a space for fathers only, noting that fathers-only spaces rarely exist and are difficult to find. Despite these identified needs, there is little professional, evidence-based support available that is tailored to fathers. This finding underscores the need to develop services and father-only spaces that would incorporate the desired peer support.

Salient themes for fathers in this work and throughout the literature are the role identity shifts and societal perspectives of fathers. Within reddit, fathers noted frustration with how fathers are viewed in society compared to mothers. They often felt that others undervalued the importance of their role in that they were a secondary lesser caregiver, despite research demonstrating the pivotal role and involvement of fathers in their child's life for a child's development (Yogman et al., 2016). Conversely, fathers discussed being overly praised and appreciated by others for what they saw as typical caregiver responsibilities (e.g., others being impressed or surprised when a father does a basic parenting task), further diminishing their equality as a parent. Important barriers to fathers taking a primary caregiver role in some situations were also important, such as obstacles to accessing change tables in public places due to them being exclusively within women's washrooms. Many fathers expressed psychological

distress and serious mental health concerns (e.g., suicidal thoughts), noting their mental health challenges needed to be hidden due to the stigma around masculinity and societal norms.

The psychosocial and societal complexities discussed on the forum are critical points requiring intervention to support the whole family system. Specifically, barriers to supporting fathers to be the primary caregiver inhibit mothers' ability to navigate the parenting role they desire. For a feminine theory perspective (Allen, 2016), it is vital to make father-centered parenting accessible to promote mothers to flexibly transition and assume their professional, parenting, and self-identify roles; this includes mothers taking on the primary earner role or having their partner take a paternity leave. There is an increasing shift towards more fathers assuming the primary caregiver position (Livingston, 2014), yet few efforts have been made to address these barriers. Similarly, it is important from an equity lens to center fathers as equal parents within the family to reduce the heavy cognitive load typically carried by mothers. This is especially critical given the role of cognitive load in negative attributions of child behaviour and risk for child maltreatment (Beckerman et al., 2020; Hiraoka & Nomura, 2016).

The subforum r/daddit appears to provide a safe online space where fathers can discuss father-specific concerns and supports needed. As a result, the anticipated subthemes of maternal mental health and child mental health were not included in the final thematic framework as they were rarely discussed within the forum. Fathers using r/daddit appeared to have relatively younger children, which may have influenced the amount that fathers discussed child mental health given that many mental health concerns generally emerge later in childhood and adolescence (Kessler et al., 2007). Moreover, there may be a lower awareness in fathers of child mental health, given that male caregivers are less likely to note their children's problems as

severe compared to female caregivers (Butler et al., 2015). Finally, it is possible that fathers engage in discussions on these topics elsewhere outside of the r/daddit forum.

### **Clinical Implications**

Based on the number of posts coded to mental health, parenting, and social isolation subthemes, there is a critical need for combined mental health services and parenting programs tailored to fathers. To date, there are few programs tailored specifically to fathers and no programs that combine best practices in interventions for mental health and parenting skills. While some programming is available that includes fathers in the perinatal period (Rominov et al., 2016), very few father-specific treatments are available in the later parenting periods (Wilson et al., 2016). Previous research suggests that fathers in the perinatal period prefer psychotherapy options (Cameron et al., 2017). While similar research is not available for fathers outside the perinatal period, men in the general populace identify a similar treatment preference (Liddon et al., 2017). Programs that seek to improve mental health, increase parenting self-efficacy, reduce social isolation, and increase social support have the potential to significantly improve fathers' wellbeing and quality of life, as well as improve overall family wellbeing and child development. While the current findings may only capture a subset of fathers who are more likely to use reddit, this particular group of fathers appear to be seeking engagement and opportunities to improve across facets of parenting and wellbeing. Given the established evidence linking fathers' mental wellbeing and parenting practices with long-term detrimental child developmental outcomes, it is imperative to provide supports when supports are needed and desired. In fact, treatment outcomes are more positive when individuals connect the available treatment options to their preferred method of intervention (Swift & Callahan, 2009). Future research efforts should focus on developing and evaluating father-tailored programming from a patient-oriented approach that

incorporates the voices of fathers with lived experience.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

As this analysis used publicly available forum data, information was not collected on participant characteristics. Demographic characteristics such as age, number of children, and country of origin could not be ascertained, limiting the generalizability of our findings. Further, our team extracted forum data for the two flairs (“discussion” and “support”) from a four-month period (July 1<sup>st</sup>, 2020, to October 31<sup>st</sup>, 2020). However, data for the “advice request” flair could only be collected for two weeks (October 14<sup>th</sup> to 31<sup>st</sup>, 2020), as it had significantly more posts compared to the other two flairs and reached the limit of archival posts available. These posts were unable to be obtained despite requests to the forum moderators. Despite the noted limitations, the present study's themes align with previous pre-pandemic forum analyses conducted. Further, this study was the first to examine the support and needs of fathers through the qualitative analysis of a social forum during the COVID-19 pandemic and demonstrated the value of online social forums for fathers in the context of the pandemic.

### **Conclusion**

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted families. While research often examines the needs of mothers and services and programs that support mothers, fathers' needs often remain unmet and understudied. This study explored how fathers sought and offered support within the context of COVID-19 to inform the development of clinical tools to support fathers and prevent negative family outcomes during and following the pandemic. This research highlights the importance and value of online forums in fathers' mental health, social support, and knowledge sharing. Future clinicians and researchers should consider incorporating online forums into their provisions of mental health support.



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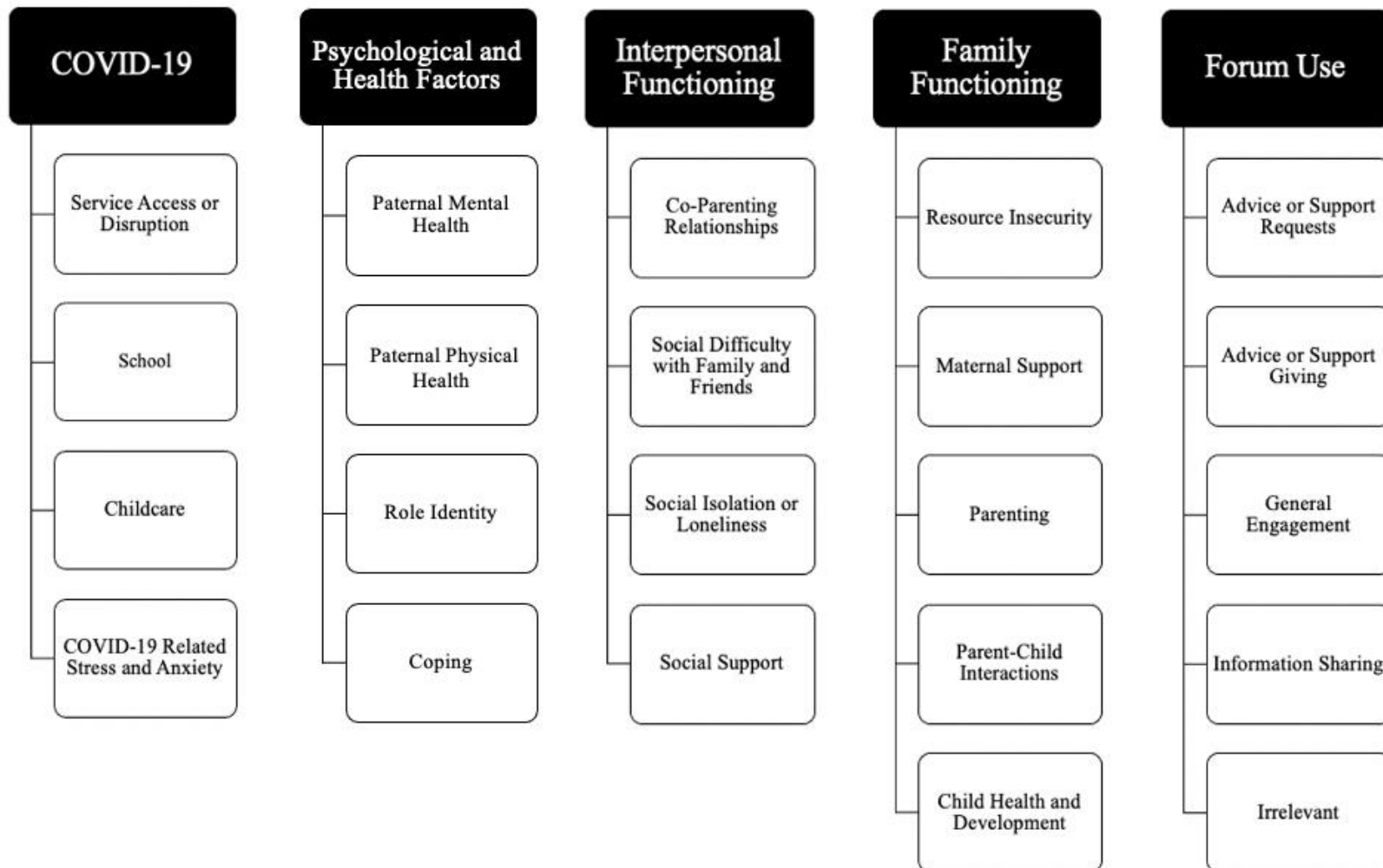
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**Table 1***Frequency of Themes and Subthemes*

Themes & Subthemes	Frequency
Forum Use	2289
Advice or support giving (1)	978
General engagement (2)	883
Advice or support requests (3)	182
Irrelevant (4)	135
Sharing information (5)	111
Family Functioning	517
Child health and development (6)	235
Parent-child interactions (7)	120
Parenting (8)	88
Maternal support (9)	54
Resource insecurity (10)	20
Psychological Factors	485
Role identity (11)	158
Coping (12)	122
Paternal mental health (13)	119
Paternal physical health (14)	86
Interpersonal Functioning	255
Co-parenting relationships (15)	123
Social support (16)	76
Difficulties with family (17)	42
Social isolation or loneliness (18)	14
COVID-19	154
COVID-19-related stress and anxiety (19)	48
Service access or disruption (20)	43
School (21)	32
Childcare (22)	31

**Figure 1**  
*Themes and Subthemes*





### **Supplementary Material**

**A qualitative forum analysis of fathers' stressors and support seeking behaviour during the  
COVID-19 pandemic**

**Table 1***Initial Framework for the Guided Content Analysis*

Themes	Subthemes
Age groups	Pregnancy Infancy (0 – 1 years old) Early Childhood (1 – 5 years old) Middle Childhood (6 – 12 years old) Adolescence (13 – 18 years old)
Psychosocial Distress	Mental health Physical health Self-care Sleep Social support Social isolation or loneliness COVID-related health anxiety
COVID-19	All mentions of COVID-19
Household Stressors	Childcare Resource insecurity Co-parenting relationships School Parent-child interactions Service access Domestic conflict
Child health and development	Age-appropriate activities Child development Child mental health Medical decision making Health information access Social/emotional development Screen time usage

**Table 2***Comments Within Themes*

Comment	Subtheme	Comment
1	1	If at all possible, talk to your doctor's office about what therapy options may be available to you in your area (for example, can you still get on your parents' insurance based on your age? Etc.).
2	1	You got this, my dude. One foot in front of the other.
3	1	I'm sorry for what you are going through brother, but having been in a toxic relationship myself, where I was emotionally abused from time to time, and now being a single parent for my kids, I can honestly say I have it a lot better, once you come out on the other side of this, you'll start healing and becoming better.
4	1	Firstly, nothing you're feeling is wrong in any way. We all get caught up in the way things are or the way we want things to be, and then things change and it's jarring.
5	6	My 6 month old just got his flu shots and now he has a fever. I've taken him to the hospital now. Is this normal?
6	6	Doctors have named it benign acute childhood myositis. Does anyone have experience with this? Thanks in advance!
7	6	Now he's refusing to feed at the breast and will only take a bottle. Problem here is, there's no milk stash due to the food allergies being eliminated.
8	6	Hey guys, my baby girl is 3 weeks old today! The last few nights she has had so much trouble going back to sleep after feedings and I was wondering if anyone had any tips or ideas on how long this might last. I am scheduled to go back to work on the 26th and I'm hoping she can get back to her schedule of waking up every 3-4 hours for feeding and then going back to sleep within the hour. The no sleep is killing my wife and I.
9	6	Baby is now 7 weeks. Feel like she cries and gets upset more than when she was a newborn. When do babies get more chilled out and become less of a "crybaby"?
10	7	I love just laying around watching movies with little guy sleeping on me.
11	7	Children's sheer joy, when you give them your time, is priceless.
12	7	We recently took in a foster to adopt 16-year-old boy, who is testing the boundaries with what he can get away with.
13	7	My oldest is only 8 but still she pushes what she can get away with, and I want to be able to control what she sees and hears online as well.
14	8	Anyone intentionally decided not to have a 2nd?
15	8	Once they start talking and you realize how they're actually an incredible little person you'll start thinking of a second one...that's how it was with my wife anyway...
16	8	One-and-done... best decision ever. We can concentrate on our daughter, not stretch ourselves financially or emotionally...

17	8	I just feel like a terrible father that I'm not able to soothe my crying baby.
18	9	What meals can I make for my wife after [her] C-section? And how should I help her during this period?
19	9	I wanted to let my wife sleep...so I got up almost every night. Eventually, it caught up to me and I was exhausted all day.
20	9	How do you cope? How do you support your wife and child while you're gone?
21	10	<i>HOW DID STROLLERS GET SO EXPENSIVE?</i>
22	10	It's hurting me I am a 24 year old father in a third world country all my savings are going into this surgery and I'm not sure how to make the other surgeries happen.
23	10	I've been in furlough from when she was about 6 months old and she's nearly 10 months old. The time I've had off has been so valuable.
24	10	Oh, and I was laid off back in May and our savings are rapidly disappearing even with government assistance due to health insurance costs for my wife and I on top of her needed specialized diet...This all just seems so impossible. What can I possibly do?
25	11	I know I've only been a dad for 1 day and counting but the funny thing is I feel no difference, well I'm more emotional than ever and my capacity for love grew about million percent.
26	11	My little guy...is 8 weeks and 2 days now, and the thought of me literally being a father still seems totally foreign to me.
27	11	It takes a bit. Don't be surprised if the mother is ecstatic and feeling a lot and you're like, hey, this kid is cool, I guess. You're exhausted. It really dulls the emotions.
28	11	I don't know what the deal is with society and their expectations of dads. I get praised by strangers for taking my kid to the god damn park...I know my wife wouldn't get praised from strangers for taking our kid to the park, why is it any different for a dad?
29	11	Is anyone else annoyed by being called Mr. Mom?
30	11	I hate hearing "oh is dad babysitting today?" No, Karen, Dad is being a parent.
31	11	Or when people say something to the tune of "it must be mom's day off"... Like, no... I just really enjoy watching my kid be happy. It's not moms day off and she didn't "dump" the kid on me. I took the kid out because I ACTUALLY ENJOY IT.
32	12	Take care of yourself so you can be the dad and partner you need to be.
33	12	Anyone else have these feeding behavior changes happen?
34	12	Does anyone relate to having a baby that refuses binkys?
35	12	My daughter and son constantly receive story books as gifts entitled "I love my mummy" or "mummy's love" or something like that. I don't mind that, that's fine, but there are never any just "I love you" books, or if there are they're hard to find. We had a book that I used to read to my son every night, and it had two bunnies, a parent and their

		offspring and each page just said things like "I love you in the morning..." "I love it when you laugh..." and it had lovely illustrations. I read it for years to him, then one night I read the back and it said "A story of a mother's love" wtf? There was nothing in the book that would make you think the parent was a mother, or a father for that matter. I know it's silly, but it utterly ruined the book for me!
36	12	I bought Necromunda yesterday, and I think for 12 hours that I've had it on, I've gotten about an hour and a half of play time. I swear I'm going through this 30 seconds at a time. Kiddo is 2 and a half now. FFS I just want to have something I can do all the way through for more than a couple minutes at a time without having to fucking stop. I'm struggling, man. I just [want to] be able to do something. Anything. Anything at all without having to stop in the goddamn middle. Sorry for the rant. Carry on with your lives now.
37	13	A.D.D. dads. How has medication effected your life and parenting?
38	13	Have any of you guys suffered anything similar or know of any techniques to manage my mental health better?
39	13	When my son was less than 24 hours old I suddenly came over with an immense depression. I felt like I wasn't worthy to have my children. That one day I'd let them down or they'd grow to hate me. I just felt totally useless and overwhelmed... This led to a suicide attempt the very next day. I felt they'd be better off without me, My partner included... I am currently seeing what services I can for my mental health however I'm struggling to shake them feelings still, a year on, plus now I'm riddled with the guilt that I nearly did that to my young family.
40	14	...The last few nights [my 3-year-old] has had so much trouble going back to sleep after feedings and I was wondering if anyone had any tips or ideas on how long this might last... The no sleep is killing my wife and I.
41	14	Who has lost weight or trying to lose weight since the birth of your first child?
42	15	Your parenting preferences should be adhered to by her just as much as you adhere to hers.
43	15	Me and my wife brought home our twin girls about 9 weeks ago and to be honest it has been a nightmare. ...it seems like we keep butting heads on everything, even things we agree on. I hate that it feels like we're starting to resent each other...
44	15	My wife and I have been married for 5 years, we never had a single fight before our son came. Now we almost fight every day.
45	15	After staying with my parents for about a week after a fight, I just got the news that we're over. I'm really upset because I really thought we were [going to] be a happy family and I was [going to] be living with my daughter everyday like I had been since she was born on January 21st. It's all because of my depression, sleep needs and problems, and her feeling like she couldn't rely on me to take care of the kids for her to go back to school.
46	15	Single dad of 2 and (almost) 5 [year-old] boys here. It's felt like a marathon since their mom and I split last year... I feel overwhelmed in a way that I never have in my life.
47	15	But now it's of extreme importance that I get some type of custody of my child. I wasn't able to sign her birth certificate at birth because of unfortunate circumstances and being I was 15 at the time.

48	15	I wasn't allowed in the delivery room because the hospital only warranted one person, she chose her sister. With that being said, I didn't sign the birth certificate... I want to see my son more. She won't allow me. She says she doesn't trust me. She says she doesn't have to let me see him. She says I have no rights to him.
49	16	I have been going through some emotional distress, and I'm hoping that talking to some good people might help.
50	16	Accept as many offers to help as you can, and learn to ask for help.
51	17	They are the worst offenders of waking her up mid-nap just so they can see her eyes and in hopes to get a smile. She has a lot of reflux issues, so we savor every second of sleep that she can get.
52	18	Since we had kids (currently [4-year-old female] and [1.5-year-old male]), I've got no social life. I work, I come home and help clean the house and sort the kids out, then I go to bed. Rinse and repeat.
53	18	Yep, I know exactly what you mean. I have always been an introvert with few friends but now I basically have none. Prior to COVID I would meet with some friends once every two weeks...But now even that is gone and I have almost no social interactions outside family or work.
54	19	I've been so overworked because of Coronavirus that I see my kids less, even though I'm working from home. When I'm not working I'm so exhausted that I'm no longer a fun dad like I used to be.
55	19	I'm not at all complaining about all the necessary safety measures put in place, and I encourage everyone to continue to be safe wherever possible. But we do feel that all this has completely shifted our mindset in being new parents. We feel absolutely terrible that our newborn can't experience the simple pleasures of life outdoors with even just a brisk walk around the block in a stroller. We still see so many people not wearing masks, not obeying the social distancing, even still openly coughing and sneezing without any foresight of covering up. All of this in plain sight, we feel the only safe place for our newborn is to stay away from it all and be protected at home.
56	19	Our kid can't meet our friends. He can't meet our friends' kids. We can't wear him in the grocery store on a grocery trip and have a conversation with the nice cashier who talked to us each week about my wife's pregnancy.
57	20	Just got to FaceTime in to my second child's first ultrasound. I'm sitting in my car outside crying my eyes out. I'm so happy they let my wife FaceTime me. We are 10 weeks right now. This is a lot harder this time around.
58	20	I've been kind of bummed lately because I feel like I never make it outside with my 3 year old and feel terrible about it. I feel like I'm letting him down. He loves to go outside, but the issue is he never seems to listen when I tell him not to run off. Where I live, he could easily bolt toward the street. There's a playground out back at the elementary school but it's currently got a sign saying its closed due to COVID.
59	21	I have three kids in online school and a three-year-old who makes it nearly impossible to get anything done with them.
60	22	I have been really struggling here for the past month, and haven't really known where to turn to, but then this sub popped into my mind, so here we are. My wife and I have been blessed to be able to keep our 1- and 3-year-old kids home with us since March...but now we are facing a point where they have to go back. I'm pretty sure all our friends and acquaintances have already made the jump to sending their kids back, but I just can't help but feel like there has to be a better option. That, or I just need more to feel reassured that they will be safe.

61	22	What have been your experiences with daycare and COVID?
62	22	We just started at the beginning of July with our 2 [year old] and haven't seen any issues. All adults have to wear masks in the building and they check your temp when you go inside.
63	22	They're being as safe as they could; daily temp checks and hand sanitizer before the kid is allowed in, no parents ever in the building, workers and older children are wearing masks all day, etc.
64	22	I think the big things are that they are being as safe as they can possibly be, and the socialization and learning aspects are so very important. My 3 year old needs some other kids in his life!