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Social support in a parenting Facebook group during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

Objective: This paper includes a mixed methods content analysis of a parenting Facebook group focused on COVID-19. We analyze participants' posts to identify the types of support parents sought and gave.

Background: The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in increased parental stress and challenges related to children's development. Many families turned to social media as a source of information and social support.

Method: We analyzed 1,180 posts from a large, closed Facebook group focused on parenting during COVID-19. We coded posts using a modified version of social support theory and supplemented this analysis with codes related to giving and receiving support, post format, and topic.

Results: Participants frequently offered informational support, typically reposting content from other sources. There were fewer instances of soliciting support, but these posts had significantly more comments. The most common topics discussed were parenting and child development, remote schooling support, literacy, and adult mental health.

Conclusion: Findings illustrate the benefits and challenges of online support communities for parents, especially those on social media platforms.

Implications: These results suggest areas where parents may need or want support during and after COVID-19 and ways in which social media can serve as a form of parenting social support.

KEYWORDS

COVID-19, parenting, social media, social support

There is no doubt that the COVID-19 pandemic has been a stressful time for families with young children. Quarantines and school closing left families with new stressors and less access to typical social supports. Many families looked online for support and resources as they

navigated staying at home, remote schooling, canceled activities and trips, and added stress and anxiety. They often sought this social support through social media platforms. Across platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok, there was a proliferation of content—humorous, academic, health related—geared toward families with young children navigating pandemic challenges. In fact, Americans relied on technology more than ever at the start of the pandemic (Anderson & Vogels, 2020). However, there is mixed evidence about the effectiveness of social media as a form of parenting support.

This study used social support theory (Cohen & McKay, 1984; Cutrona & Suhr, 1992) to examine the support given and received in a Facebook parenting group about COVID-19. Specifically, this research is among the first to explore online sources of support for families related to the pandemic. The primary goals were to identify the types of supports participants sought out and provided in the group and the most frequently discussed topics. This has implications for determining parents' support needs and the feasibility of social media to address social support needs related to COVID-19. Our goal was to use what we learned to identify ways policies and programs can be responsive to parenting needs during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Parenting challenges and stressors during COVID-19

When schools shut down in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, as many as a half-billion children worldwide switched to remote or virtual learning during COVID-19 (Cohen & Kupferschmidt, 2020). Overnight, parents of these remote learners took on the role of proxy educators (Davis et al., 2021), with suddenly increased responsibilities related to school and their children's learning (Schmidt et al., 2020).

Research from before the pandemic has found that parents vary in their feelings about remote learning; some feel more connected to what their child is learning (Selwyn et al., 2011), but many parents do not feel prepared to support their children's online learning and struggle to keep their children on a schedule and completing their schoolwork (Dong et al., 2020; Sørensen et al., 2012). Another challenge is schools' lack of preparation to help parents navigate online learning, including technology challenges (Goodall, 2016).

During the pandemic, parents cited feelings of self-doubt about their parenting and teaching skills as one of the main challenges they faced in maintaining a positive relationship with their children (Roos et al., 2021). These challenges related to lengthy school closures and remote schooling intersected with other challenges parents faced, including remote work, financial strains, and lack of child care (Garbe et al., 2020; Patrick et al., 2020; Stites et al., 2021). In particular, families in low-income or crowded households have experienced more significant challenges related to COVID-19 (Cluver et al., 2020).

Mental health of parents and children

There are mixed findings about how pandemic-related changes affected parents' mental health. Some studies found no relationship between supporting online learning and parent mental health (Janssen et al., 2020), whereas others found struggles with online learning were related to increased mental health challenges (e.g., Davis et al., 2021). Similarly, some parents viewed their additional time with their children as beneficial, whereas others found it stressful (Calarco et al., 2020).

Overall, crisis events like the COVID-19 pandemic tend to produce added stress and anxiety for those experiencing the event (Hobfoll, 1991). Stress related to COVID-19 has negatively

affected parents' psychological well-being (Brooks et al., 2020; Patrick et al., 2020). Similar to previous public health crises, stressors due to COVID-19 have been linked to higher perceived parenting stress (Brown et al., 2020; Sprang & Silman, 2013). Generally, high parenting stress is associated with an increased risk of child abuse, dysfunctional parent–child interactions, externalizing behaviors, and dysfunctional attachment styles (Baker et al., 2005; Pereira et al., 2012).

Analysis of data collected early in the COVID-19 pandemic found that parents' caregiving burden, mental health, and perceptions of child stress were linked and that these were linked to parent–child closeness and conflict (Russell et al., 2020). Primary caregivers play a critical role in helping children manage stress during a crisis and serve as a protective factor promoting stress resilience (Flouri et al., 2015). During crises, parents must navigate the crisis themselves and help their children cope with the situation (Juth et al., 2015). When parents experienced higher stress during the pandemic, they were less involved with children's activities, which was associated with lower parent–child closeness and higher conflict (Russell et al., 2020).

Negative parenting behaviors and less than optimal parent–child interactions may, in turn, result in lower emotion regulation in children (Morelli et al., 2020; Spinelli et al., 2020) and increased child behavior problems (Pinquart, 2017). Overall, 25% of parents reported changes in children's behavior since the onset of the pandemic (J. Lee, 2020), and 14% reported more severe behavioral health concerns (Imran et al., 2020). Already, research is revealing a significant impact of COVID-19 on the mental health of children and adolescents (Whittle et al., 2020).

Parental support during COVID-19

Research before the pandemic has identified the positive impact of social support interventions on parenting practices (e.g., Harris et al., 2020). Social support also relates to a range of other positive outcomes, including reduced stress, increased resilience, and lower rates of mental health disorders (e.g., Antonucci et al., 1990; Feeney & Collins, 2015; House, 1981; Southwick et al., 2016; Taylor, 2011). Being part of a supportive social network has led to better infant and self-care among mothers in previous research (Nolan et al., 2012; Strange et al., 2014). However, not all mothers benefit from face-to-face support groups, including those in more marginalized social positions (Aston et al., 2014).

Given challenges in parent stress, child behavior, and remote schooling, many parents looked for support during the pandemic. Greater parental support during COVID-19 is related to lower perceived stress and lower risk of child abuse (Brown et al., 2020). Parents with more social support experienced more positive relationships with their children during the pandemic (Gambin et al., 2020). However, traditional means of parental support, such as home visits, parent education, and informal support from family and friends, were often not possible during the initial months of the pandemic. This led to many parents having less access to social support networks (Li et al., 2021), especially among families with fewer coping strategies to start (Lawson et al., 2020).

Social media as a form of social support for families

The lack of access to traditional means of support during the pandemic led many parents to seek parenting information and support online through social media networks, which was already becoming an increasingly common practice (Ammari et al., 2014; Mandell & Salzer, 2007), particularly during stressful periods (Haslam et al., 2017; Lupton, 2016) and among parents who live far from family and friends (Drentea & Moren-Cross, 2005). Pre-pandemic research found that parents look to social media networks to obtain social support

that helps them cope with their specific stressors and matches their particular needs (Green-Hamann & Sherblom, 2014), such as for parents of children who are fussy eaters (Fraser et al., 2021), children with undiagnosed medical needs (Deutch et al., 2021), children with disabilities (Ammari & Schoenebeck, 2015a), and parents of adolescents (Doty & Dworkin, 2014).

There is some evidence that social media is an effective platform for parenting information and social support (Wagg et al., 2019). For example, social media networks can help parents feel less isolated and enjoy social interaction (Valtchanov et al., 2014), find validation for their knowledge and practices (Johnson, 2015; Nolan et al., 2012; Strange et al., 2014), and test and explore a parenting role in nonjudgmental spaces (Ammari et al., 2014; Green-Hamann & Sherblom, 2014; Johnson, 2015). Additionally, social media provides the possibility of getting support in real time (Ammari & Schoenebeck, 2015a). However, there are challenges as well, as participants in social media groups may not receive the support they are seeking or may experience negative comments or abuse (Thurlow et al., 2007). Social media can be used in times of crisis to spread misinformation (Bradshaw & Howard, 2019) and incite fear (Fung et al., 2016). Parents can struggle to interpret the information they find on social media, especially its relevance to their own children (Deutch et al., 2021).

A small body of research has examined parents' use of online information and support during the pandemic. For example, parents frequently used humor to discuss their parenting challenges on social media early in the pandemic (Lemish & Elias, 2020). Parents also used social media to access educational support. A survey of parents found that 77.1% reported using online tools to support their child's education, including apps, social media, and other electronic resources, and 26% specifically reported using social media, including Facebook groups, to supplement their child's learning (S. J. Lee et al., 2021).

A study of parent communication on Reddit during COVID-19 (Yatziv et al., 2022) found decreased mental-state language, meaning language related to their own and their child's mental state (e.g., happy, curious, etc.), and more language around physical activities. The authors suggest this may be due to the increased demands and stress parents faced. Another study by J. Y. Lee et al. (2021) analyzed foster parents and former foster youth discussions on Reddit during COVID to identify the concerns families faced. Based on their results, the authors recommended that the child welfare system leverage online technology, including social media, to address foster parents' and youths' needs, such as through sharing parent education resources.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Social capital theory: Strong- and weak-tie networks

Social support networks allow people to ask for and receive social support, both from close friends and acquaintances (Donath, 2007; Tufekci, 2008). Social capital theory conceptualizes networks as strong-tie or weak-tie networks, a distinction that helps to illustrate how social media may function as social support for parents during COVID-19.

Strong-tie networks are often geographically limited and restricted to family and close friends (Drentea & Moren-Cross, 2005). Research has found that participation in strong-tie online networks is more strongly linked to improved well-being than in weak-tie online networks (Bessière et al., 2008; Burke & Kraut, 2013). In contrast, weak-tie networks often feature more public conversations and interactions between people who do not consider themselves part of the same social circle (Wright & Miller, 2010). These interactions often focus on one topic (Walther & Boyd, 2002) and offer less tangible, direct assistance (Wright & Miller, 2010).

There are several important reasons why people, especially parents, may sometimes choose a weak-tie network over a strong-tie one. First, they may feel safer opening up and seeking support from those with whom they have less interpersonal connection. They can disclose personal

information without risking embarrassment and judgment from people close to them (Walther & Boyd, 2002; Wright & Miller, 2010). They also may get more objective feedback (Wright & Miller, 2010). Finally, they can communicate with a more diverse group, including those with a wide range of experiences and knowledge (Walther & Boyd, 2002).

Furthermore, research has found that weak-tie networks play an important role for people facing stressful situations, with unique advantages over strong-tie networks (Granovetter, 1973; Adelman et al., 1987). Though members are less likely to offer support in all circumstances, they are more likely to provide useful information about a specific topic (Fingerman, 2009). Weak-tie networks can also give members access to new ideas and opportunities (Granovetter, 1973). As a result, they can provide an additional resource to help parents cope with challenges in parenthood (Madge & O'Connor, 2006).

The growth of the internet and social media platforms has allowed parents to easily establish new weak-tie connections and thereby gain access to social capital resources, support systems, and parenting knowledge (Drentea & Moren-Cross, 2005; Madge & O'Connor, 2006). Facebook is primarily a weak-tie network (Gilbert & Karahalios, 2009). The platform has over 500 million active users and is an increasingly popular place for parents to build social connections through weak-tie networks (Bartholomew et al., 2012).

Social support theory

We use social support theory (Cohen & McKay, 1984; Cutrona & Suhr, 1992; House, 1981) to examine the support given and received in the Parenting During a Pandemic Facebook group. *Social support* here refers to how social relationships relate to well-being (Cohen & McKay, 1984). Social support is most beneficial when the type of support is matched with the stressor; this is known as the optimal matching model of social support (Cutrona & Russell, 1990). Support recipients feel that their needs are understood when the support type is appropriate (Cutrona et al., 2007).

According to social support theory, there are four types of social support: emotional, informational, tangible, and esteem. *Emotional support* behaviors communicate trust, concern, and empathy. *Informational support* behaviors are those that offer suggestions, information, or advice. *Tangible support* includes practice assistance, such as help with tasks. *Esteem support* includes encouragement given through affirmation and feedback.

We focus on the two types that were most relevant to our context: informational and emotional. This is consistent with previous research about social media groups that has found that social networks may provide helpful informational and emotional support but are less likely to offer tangible and esteem support (Hosterman et al., 2018; Rains et al., 2015; Rui et al., 2013).

Informational support is the most commonly expressed form of social support shared online (e.g., Andalibi et al., 2016; Rains et al., 2015; Rui et al., 2013; Trepte et al., 2015). This is likely because the characteristics of online networks are particularly conducive to sharing this type of support (Trepte et al., 2015). Informational support is most beneficial in contexts where participants may have limited knowledge (Spear, 2006). However, informational support offered online can sometimes include conflicting messages, which can be frustrating and unhelpful for those seeking the support (Grassley, 2010). Additionally, the information shared may be outdated, not based in evidence, or intentionally false (Buchanan, 2020). For example, an analysis of infant sleep images on Instagram found that only 7.5% of the over 1,500 images analyzed aligned with safe sleep guidelines (Chin et al., 2021). A study of pediatric sun exposure information on parenting blogs found both accurate information and misinformation, but users engaged more with the misinformation (Tamminga & Lipoff, 2021).

Emotional support online often shows care and concern or expresses happiness or sadness for others (Yan & Tan, 2014). Specifically, social media allows a platform for supportive

interactions with others facing similar situations or challenges, as found in research about social media and health care (Nambisan, 2011; Yan et al., 2015).

Current study

This study aimed to explore how members engaged in a Facebook parents support group related to COVID-19. Specifically, we analyzed data from a closed Facebook group, Parenting During a Pandemic (PDP), from March to May 2020. We address the following research questions: (1) How often and in what ways do members give and seek informational and emotional social support in the PDP group?; (2) What topics do group members discuss when giving or seeking social support?; and (3) What are the characteristics of posts that receive the most participant engagement?

METHOD

The PDP group was started by one of the study authors to support families with young children and offer a place for parents to network and share ideas and resources. This group was not created for research purposes. However, as the group membership and engagement grew, we saw the potential to explore the group's content to learn how families interacted in an online space focused on parenting. Therefore, we sought and received Institutional Review Board approval to extract and code the group's posts following specific protocol to protect group members' confidentiality, such as removing all participant names from extracted posts before coding.

PDP posts were accessible to all members of the closed group. A group of 21 moderators and administrators collaborated to admit new members and moderate the content of the group, only removing posts that violated the group's rules, which included (a) respect one another; (b) sharing permitted, selling not permitted; and (c) duplicate resources may be deleted. On average, there were 29.3 posts per day, ranging from a high of 166 to a low of two posts during the study period.

Participants

Participants in this study were the members of a closed Facebook group about parenting during COVID-19. Although the group was closed, membership was available to anyone who requested access. Because of the nature of the data analyzed and how it was obtained, we have minimal demographic characteristics of participants of group members. As of May 2020, the group had 4,117 members. This was up from 3,539 members at the end of March and 4,112 members at the end of April. According to aggregated data from participants' Facebook profiles available to group moderators, almost all members, 98.0%, were from the United States, and 94.0% were female. Most were 35–44 years old (48.3%), followed by 25–34 years (29.4%), 45–54 years (12.6%), 55 and over (6.7%), and 18–24 years (3.0%).

Data collection

Data were collected using a nonparticipant design to avoid influencing the group's content and maintain ecological validity (Hewson et al., 2016). We manually extracted 1,220 posts made from March to May 2020 from the group and transferred these posts into Excel for content analysis. The units of study were the online posts made by members of the PDP group. We

eliminated 40 posts because the content was no longer available when we extracted the post, such as if the original post was removed by the author or Facebook. This resulted in a final analytic sample of 1,180 posts.

Data analysis

Systematic message content analysis

Data were analyzed using systematic message content analysis. Before coding, the research team collaboratively developed a codebook. Coders discussed codes and their definitions and established interrater reliability of greater than 95% agreement before beginning analysis (Neuendorf, 2017). Then, two research assistants assigned codes for the variables in the codebook, resulting in quantitative data. Interrater reliability was calculated for 20% of posts, and agreement was greater than 90%. Any discrepancies were resolved by discussing and reaching consensus with the first author. We continued to refine definitions in the codebook throughout the coding and reanalyzed posts as definitions evolved.

Posts were coded manually using a modified version of Cutrona and Suhr's (1992) social support category system. This coding system has been used in other studies about social support through social media platforms (Ellway et al., 2019). Similar to previous research, we removed the tangible and esteem support categories (Hosterman et al., 2018; Rui et al., 2013).

In addition to coding the type of social support (emotional or informational), we coded (a) whether the post included original content or a reposting of someone else's content, (b) the direction of the support—giving or receiving/requesting, and (c) whether the post contained text, images, videos, and/or links.

Topic coding

We used emergent open coding to code the topic of the posts. We followed a similar process to develop and define codes and establish initial and ongoing interrater reliability. We generated 12 topic codes and defined them through an iterative process of reviewing the posts, coding, and discussing. Two coders independently coded all posts for their primary topic. The first author reviewed all coding and resolved any discrepancies in coding. Although posts often related to multiple topics, we identified and coded only the primary topic of each post. To help us code reliably, we created a code hierarchy defined in our codebook. For example, posts about books were always coded as literacy, even if the book was about feelings or counting. Each coder also kept analytic memos while coding for topics. At the end of the coding process, the coding team met to review coding and discuss our memos, and we used this data along with topic codes to inform our development of two overarching themes.

We then analyzed coded data using descriptive statistics, cross-tabulations, independent samples *t* tests, and one-way analyses of variance (ANOVAs) to look at relationships between coding categories.

RESULTS

Using mixed methods content analysis, we examined PDP posts to determine how members gave and received social support and the topics they discussed in the group. We review these results below, beginning with the social support results.

Informational and emotional support

Of the 1,180 posts, 15.7% were emotional in nature, 82.8% were informational, and 1.5% offered no support; 76.5% of posts contained a link, 84.3% contained some text, 85.3% contained an image, and 14.1% contained a video. Almost all posts, 96.38%, were giving support, with only 3.2% soliciting support. Few posts had only original content created by the poster, 8.5%. The rest reposted content from another place; 70.5% of posts contained reposted content only, and 21.0% contained reposted content with some original content, like a note recommending others check out a resource. Posts soliciting support were more likely to contain original content than those offering support, 73.7% compared to 6.3%. This difference was statistically significant, $\chi^2(2, N = 1,180) = 215.75, p < .001$.

Although infrequent, posts seeking support received significantly more comments than posts offering support, $t(37) = 5.24, p < .001$. Posts seeking support received an average of 24.45 comments ($SD = 27.52$), and posts offering support received an average of 1.06 comments ($SD = 3.18$). For example, a post asking about school closures and how long they may last received 81 comments, and a post about ideas for how to motivate virtual learners that started with, "I'm really struggling. My kids started online learning last week and EVERY morning since it has been a tearful, stressful and frustrating for ALL of us," received 41 comments. In comparison, a post offering a link to free sign language classes received no comments.

There was wide variation in how many reactions posts received. For example, posts giving support received an average of 14.08 reactions ($SD = 27.93$), and posts soliciting support received an average of 10.18 reactions ($SD = 15.34$), although this difference was not statistically significant, $t(45.6) = 1.49, p = .14$. Posts coded as emotional support ($M = 32.18, SD = 41.50$) received significantly more reactions than those coded as informational support ($M = 10.25, SD = 21.90$), $t(203.8) = 7.01, p < .001$.

A one-way ANOVA revealed that the number of reactions varied significantly based on the posts' originality, $F(2,1177) = 3.17, p = .04$. Posts with only original content got significantly more reactions ($M = 20.12, SD = 33.48$) than those with reposted content only ($M = 12.96, SD = 24.90$) using Tukey's honestly significance difference (HSD) test for multiple comparisons ($p = .04, 95\%$ confidence interval [CI] = [.31, 14.01]).

Similarly, the number of comments differed significantly by post originality, $F(2, 1177) = 77.91, p < .001$. Again, posts with only original content got significantly more comments ($M = 9.79, SD = 18.98$) than those with reposted content only ($M = 1.01, SD = 3.99$) using Tukey's HSD test for multiple comparisons ($p < .001, 95\%$ CI = [7.12, 10.44]). Original posts also had more comments than those with a combination of original and reposted content ($M = 1.28, SD = 3.92; p < .001, CI = [6.65, 10.37]$).

Topics

We coded each post with one of the 12 topic codes. Overall, the primary topics discussed were parenting and child development (17.7%), remote schooling support (15.3%), literacy (14.2%), and adult mental health (12.6%). The remaining topics were coded in less than 10% of the posts. Table 1 shows all of the topics, their frequency, and an example post for each. Posts about parenting and child development commonly focused on how to foster children's social-emotional skills, resources about brain development, and the importance of play. Several group members regularly shared resources from Conscious Discipline, a specific social-emotional learning program for classrooms and parents. Like many other programs and resources, Conscious Discipline frequently posted content on Facebook during the initial months of the pandemic, and group members reposted this to the PDP group.

TABLE 1 Topic codes, definitions, frequencies, and examples

Topic	Definition	Frequency	Example
Parenting and child development	Dealing with challenging behavior, how to get a child to eat, what is typical for a 2-year-old, daily routine (not about school), how much screen time to allow, what to serve your child to eat (recipes), etc.	17.7%	Reposted social media post about how to create a family cell phone agreement
Remote schooling support	Not focused on one specific content area, help for doing schooling at home, includes academic help resources like tutoring, test prep, speech therapy	15.3%	Reposted resource for virtual learning lessons from an educational resources company
Literacy	Related to reading, alphabet, books, rhyming, language arts, writing, letter formation, etc.	14.2%	Reposted schedule of virtual story times on Instagram
Adult mental health	Adult stress, mindfulness, staying healthy, self-care, etc.	12.6%	"Don't give up, ladies ... We will overcome ... I am so proud of every one of you."
STEM	Related to science, math, engineering, or technology (includes class pets, plants, earth science, biology, dinosaurs, planets, nature, etc.)	8.7%	Original photo showing a Skittles rainbow science activity with the text "A little science, a little fun and a little snack. Skittles rainbow was today's lesson."
Entertainment resource	Just for fun, leisure activities, keeping kids entertained, play ideas, not explicitly academic	8.5%	Reposted article with the headline "Amazon Prime Video is streaming kids' movies and TV for free, no Prime membership required"
Art	Anything related to visual art (drawing, painting, sculpting) and art appreciation (e.g., art museums)	6.3%	Original photo of a chalk tape art activity with the text "I highly recommend this chalk tape art/math project if you haven't done it yet!!!"
Humor	Doesn't fit elsewhere, purpose seems to be to make reader laugh	5.0%	"Dear Teachers, Next year you better make those school supply list extravagant. You want 20 glue sticks? You got it! You want those fancy, pre sharpened pencils by the dozens? Done. You want 12 bottles of Titos Vodka? I wont even question it. I got you boo..."
COVID	Resources about COVID, general news and information about COVID (e.g., CDC guidelines), handwashing	4.5%	Reposted table from WebMD showing how long COVID-19 lives on surfaces
Physical education	Movement, fitness, etc.	3.3%	Reposted link to "The Best Kid Yoga Videos"
History/ social studies	History activities, history museums, cultural awareness, etc.	2.2%	Reposted YouTube video: "Trail of Tears National Historic Trail"
Music	Music content, songs not about a specific content area, vocal and instrumental music, videos of music for children	1.7%	"Join us for some bucket drumming for children ages 2 and up on Facebook Live at 10:30 am!"

Note. STEM = science, technology, engineering, and mathematics.

Many literacy posts shared read-aloud videos, at-home literacy activities (e.g., using a Nerf gun to practice identifying alphabet letters and sight words), and book suggestions for children. Adult mental health posts often offered encouragement to parents, such as reminders to take breaks and make time for themselves.

On average, posts coded as humor received the most reactions, an average of 62.43 ($SD = 66.17$). The post with the most reactions was reposted content about a parent talking about trying to work while their child was dressed like Spiderman whispering in their ear. This received 352 total reactions, including 263 laughing faces. A meme that said, “When you catch your kids eating a family size bag of tortilla chips for breakfast but then realize you don’t have to cook,” received 193 reactions.

Posts about remote schooling support received the most comments ($M = 3.16$, $SD = 10.92$), followed by posts about humor ($M = 2.91$, $SD = 4.71$) and parenting and child development ($M = 2.38$, $SD = 10.78$). Ten posts had over 40 comments, and all of these were soliciting support. Four were about remote schooling support, three about parenting and child development, two about literacy, and one about adult mental health. For example, a post coded as remote schooling support—“Anyone heard of extended closures past April 6th?”—received 81 comments. The post with the most comments, 108, was soliciting help with what to make for their family for dinner.

Posts coded as emotional support were most often related to adult mental health (51.4%), parenting and child development (15.7%), or humor (15.7%). For example, one post coded as emotional support and adult mental health shared an inspirational meme: “You are not working from home. You are at home, during a crisis, trying to work.” A post coded as humor and emotional support reposted a social media thread with puns about clothing—“So they really clothes school tomorrow? That socks.”

The most frequent topics for posts soliciting support were remote schooling support (42.9%), parenting and child development (25.7%), and literacy (17.1%). For example, a post soliciting support for remote schooling read, in part:

My two and four year old are not doing “school” with me ... My husband and I are both trying to work full time and parent. ... We typically just let them play. We live in the suburbs, so it’s easy to go on a lot of walks. We have watched Frozen 2 and Zootopia more times than I care to admit, but right now my four year old is playing with her Barbies and my two year old is dumping crackers out of a bag and then putting them back. Is this wrong? My friends are posting pictures of themselves “homeschooling” preschoolers!? Idk if it’s just for a Facebook pic or this is really what everyone else is doing.

This post received 34 reactions and 82 comments. We did not specifically code and analyze the content of the comments, but a quick review revealed that they were almost all supportive in nature, although some offered simple suggestions for learning activities along with affirmations.

DISCUSSION

Giving and seeking social support

These results highlight the wealth of information shared through a Facebook group to support parents during COVID-19. Specifically, participants frequently offered informational support to one another, often through sharing links to existing content like websites, videos, and other social media pages. There were far fewer instances of emotional support and few instances of

soliciting support. Similarly, only 8.5% of posts contained only original content, although posts requesting support were much more likely to have original content than those offering support.

Topics discussed

Group members most frequently posted about parenting and child development, remote schooling support, literacy, and adult mental health. This suggests parents likely had concerns about their children's learning and development and were anxious for ideas and resources. Luckily, the group had a wealth of resources, given the frequency with which members posted and most posts offering support and reposting other content.

The topics discussed suggest that digital resources were frequently used tools among parents, especially ones related to remote schooling support. This makes sense, given that many families supported children's schooling at home for the first time and sought additional resources to supplement what the school was providing (Davis et al., 2021; Schmidt et al., 2020). Notably, while parents shared concerns around children's screen time use, group members shared many online resources, such as websites and videos for children. At the same time, there was a large group of posts emphasizing outdoor activities, nature, and free play. Together, this represents some of the challenges parents faced early in the pandemic. Many parents are aware of the American Academic of Pediatrics' screen time recommendations, and their children were using screens for virtual learning. Parents were also trying to work remotely, often without child care. As a result, this often meant children had frequent screen time, and parents experienced guilt about this (Vanderloo et al., 2020).

The frequency of content focused on parenting and child development, including content offering and soliciting support, aligns with research about parents' feelings of self-doubt about their parenting skills (Roos et al., 2021), the impact of increased parental stress on caregiver-child interactions (Russell et al., 2020), and the effect of COVID-19 on children's behavior (J. Lee, 2020). Overall, this is likely an area where families could continue to benefit from support in the form of resources and opportunities to connect with other parents in similar circumstances, especially while families may remain somewhat disconnected from their previous networks due to the ongoing impact of the pandemic (Li et al., 2021).

The abundance of content about adult mental health aligns with concerns about parents' well-being as they supported online learning (Davis et al., 2021), dealt with the stress and uncertainty of a public health crisis (Juth et al., 2015), and tried to manage challenging behaviors (Imran et al., 2020). The PDP group may have helped group members find validation for their feelings of stress and overwhelm (Strange et al., 2014) without feeling judged (Ammari et al., 2014). Notably, the vast majority of content in the group was positive and supportive. This was particularly noticeable given that much of the social media content related to COVID-19 during the coding period was quite divisive. Although the moderators may have removed offensive content before we extracted posts for coding, in line with the group's rules, they would not have removed content that was disagreeing or offering an alternative perspective if it was not offensive or blatantly false.

Posts with the most participant engagement

Reactions did not differ significantly by direction of support, but emotional support posts received more reactions than informational support ones, and posts with original content received more reactions than those with any reposted content. Posts seeking support received many more comments on average than those offering support, about 23 more comments per post. Additionally, those with only original content got more comments, an average of about

nine more comments per post than those with reposted content and eight more comments than those with a combination of original and reposted content. This suggests that although this group served as a weak-tie network for participants, parents seemed to be able to find support when they asked for it (Madge & O'Connor, 2006; Wright & Miller, 2010).

Overall considerations

Because of the nature of the group, including that anyone could join and share resources, the quality of the content members shared was not always high. It may have been challenging for parents to discern which resources were worth using. Although we did not specifically code for the quality of the resources, as early educators, we noticed the range in quality as we coded the posts and discussed this in our analytic memos and as a research team.

Given that this group grew to be over 3,000 members during data collection, the group seemed to function more as a vehicle for sharing information than for deeper social support than might have existed in a smaller, more selective online community. Despite this, the size of the group and the frequency of posts indicate the need for and interest in such a group. The coding results suggest that many participants may not have only—or even primarily—been seeking specific information but also a sense of solidarity with other parents (Bartholomew et al., 2012).

It is notable that 94% of members identified as female. This suggests that the group did not attract and engage fathers, and the perspective of fathers is not represented here. Previous research suggests that fathers may seek more specialized online social support, such as places to connect with other fathers or access information about fatherhood (Ammari & Schoenebeck, 2015b). It is important that research continues to develop parenting education supports that are inclusive of fathers.

Additionally, although adult mental health was one of the top topics coded overall at 12.6% of posts, it was almost never the topic of posts soliciting support at just 5.7%. This may have to do with the weak-tie social support provided by the group (Bessièrè et al., 2008), which featured very public conversations between group members (Wright & Miller, 2010). Therefore, it is likely group members' individual mental health support needs may not have been met through the group, even though mental health appeared to be a frequent topic. This may indicate an unmet need that local parenting supports could meet through in-person or online resources, such as smaller, local social media groups of parents within a specific school. This could offer more meaningful connection between parents, a greater vetting of the quality of resources shared, and a stronger focus on meeting individuals' needs for support.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, social support was inferred from coding the content of participants' posts. Future research could gather data directly from participants through surveys, interviews, or focus groups to learn about how they interacted with the group, how they decided which resources to use and when to ask for support, and how often they checked the group's new content. We used percent agreement to calculate interrater reliability, which may overestimate agreement (Hayes & Krippendorff, 2007). Additionally, we do not have demographic data from the participants, such as how many group members were in our state and how many were parents themselves. Anecdotally, given that the group was started by university faculty, we suspect several members who posted frequently were in roles that supported parents,

such as home visitors, elementary teachers, and behavior consultants, rather than or in addition to being parents themselves.

We focused on informational and emotional support and excluded tangible and esteem support, in line with related previous research on online social support (e.g., Hosterman et al., 2018; Rui et al., 2013). However, we identified several examples of posts that may fit with esteem support, such as posts providing encouragement and affirmation and those addressing feelings of self-doubt related to parenting and remote schooling. Because we did not code for esteem support, we cannot draw any conclusions about its prevalence, but it did seem to be present in the coded posts.

Implications and future directions

Results raise the question of the benefits of a group where participants frequently share others' resources, such as posting links to lists of activities for children. Families may have found it helpful to have a central location to find resources related to parenting during COVID-19. However, they are unlikely to have received meaningful support related to their specific challenges (Fingerman, 2009). In thinking about supporting families through online communities, it may be best to provide a narrower focus to support groups, such as a focus on parents of adolescents or parents of children with dyslexia rather than a broad, nonspecific focus on parenting. Many parents may have been seeking strong-tie networks due to the challenges of COVID-19 and possible disconnection or separation from their typical social networks. For those parents, the PDP group may not have met their needs for meaningful support. However, previous research highlights the benefits of weak-tie networks provided through social media. Especially related to COVID-19, this weak-tie social network group may have helped parents—specifically mothers—feel less isolated simply by seeing frequent posts from others they perceived to be in similar situations (Madge & O'Connor, 2006).

Given the popularity of the group and the high levels of activity and engagement during the period of our study, there was clearly a need for online parenting support. However, this frequent activity and the high percentage of giving informational support meant that the quality of the support offered varied widely, with many resources intended for supporting children's learning and development that may not have been high quality. Moving forward, existing parenting support programs can consider making greater use of online networks, including social media, to share parent education resources (S. J. Lee et al., 2021). In this way, they can share high-quality content with a wide audience, extending their reach.

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