

A Study on the Quality of Korean Mothers' life with Young Children since the Outbreak of COVID-19

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ABSTRACT : *The purpose of this study is to investigate the changes in life perceptions in such as parenting stress and marital satisfaction among mothers with young children after COVID-19 . A total of 186 mothers residing in Seoul, Korea and the metropolitan area participated in the study. Samples were collected by non-probability random sampling method and online surveys were conducted. Collected data were presented as descriptive statistics, t-test, one-way ANOVA, Scheffe and Cronbach's a using the SPSS 21.0 program. As a result, it was found that mothers' perceptions of quality of life changed from mild moderate to moderate. And the group that responded that they spent more time with their family due to 'social distancing' showed a lower quality of life in all aspects compared to the other groups. This study is meaningful in that it provided basic data to protect the mental health of mothers with children and to suggest policy, academic, and practical alternatives.*

KEYWORDS : *COVID-19, quality of mothers' life, parenting stress, marital satisfaction*

I. INTRODUCTION

As a July 2020, the world was becoming less and less personal contact than in the past, and humans were changing into a society engulfed in fear within a short time [1]. In Korea, since January 20, 2020, when the first confirmed case occurred, the number of COVID-19 infections has been increasing continuously, and on February 23, the nation raised the alert level to "Highest" [2]. But even before COVID-19, there were diseases that caused global panic, such as SARS, swine flu, Ebola, and MERS, since 2020. Whenever such outbreaks occurred, the Korean people suffered trauma like fear [2]. They were afraid of infecting themselves and their family members. They suffer from these fears, weakening their resistance to disease [3], and eventually harming their health.

Until early 2021, the COVID-19 virus was considered more serious than other contagious diseases, as no cure or vaccine has yet been found. As a result, the Korean government also established a District Psychological Support teams, and the education field itself also underwent major changes, such as unusually delayed start of school and online classes being held. Nurseries and kindergartens were closed indefinitely, requiring each family to look after their children. On May 27, 2020, the schools in Korea officially opened. But the situation was not the same as before: Physically, students in those days only had to go to school once a week. An 'Emergency Child Care' service was operated for families where both parents work. However, not many parents applied for this service for fear of infection. In this situation, parents of young children who cannot take care of themselves face unexpected difficulties. Therefore, ways to help protect mothers' mental health should be explored from both academic and policy perspectives. After modernization in Korea, more and more families are looking for parents who share childcare and housework, but this is because mothers are still doing a lot of these tasks.

In addition, as part of the Korean government's efforts to prevent the spread of COVID-19, 'social distancing' measures have been implemented. This means that mothers who have to take care of their children at home all day will have more parenting stress [4]. According to previous studies, it is known that high parenting stress is likely to decrease marital satisfaction [5] [6] [7]. However, there have been few studies on changes in mothers and quality of life since COVID-19. And many public health experts predict that COVID-19 pandemic is likely to last a long time and that there will be a second or third coronavirus wave [8]. This means that everyone should be well prepared rather than fearful in their field as the virus is expected to last a long time. Therefore, this study aims to prepare an alternative basis for protecting mothers' mental health by analyzing how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected mothers with young children, that is, whether they recognize changes in parenting stress and marital satisfaction.

The research questions are:

First, is there any difference in terms of parenting stress after COVID-19?

Second, is there any difference in terms of marital satisfaction after COVID-19?

II. QUALITY OF MOTHERS' LIFE WITH YOUNG CHILDREN AFTER COVID-19

2.1 Parenting stress after COVID-19

The concept of parenting stress includes the distress parents feel while raising children, dysfunctional interactions with children, and difficult characteristics of young children [9]. Mothers tend to be more stressed about these parenting issues than fathers. And given the complexity, competition, and uncertainty of modern society, these issues are becoming more intractable. After the COVID-19 outbreak, as a society with less personal contact spreads rapidly, parents and children spend more time at home than before COVID-19, which is expected to affect the level of parenting stress. Parenting stress levels are affected both in marital relationship and between parents and children [6]. The COVID-19 pandemic has put greater emphasis on limiting non-essential personal contact to contain the spread of the virus, which has led many parents to stay home and spend more time with their children. However, only people with particular professions or in certain companies can do it, and few parents can afford to take care of their children at home.

Because of this, the Korean government is working hard to help parents with young children. In particular, the Korea Institute of Child Care and Education under Ministry of Education is making various efforts such as introducing various games that parents can play with their children at home and distributing information. But helping mothers become less stressed about parenting long before the pandemic is over remains still a challenge. Parenting stress can interfere with the formation of stable parent-child attachments [10]. These difficulties will lead to long-term parenting stress. Conversely, however, the situation may provide opportunities to spend more time with each other, giving mothers the chances to better understand their children and form a secure attachment with them.

2.2 Marital satisfaction after COVID-19

The Korean government has advised people to stay at home unless absolutely necessary. As a result, the married couple spent more time at home than before COVID-19. This has led to lower levels of marital satisfaction. The term 'marital satisfaction' refers to the level of satisfaction regarding overall marital relationship, including marriage life, parenting, and communication [11]. According to some previous studies, factors contributing to higher marital satisfaction among mothers include: low housework burden, co-parenting with their spouses [12], and flexibility in their roles [14]. However, the burden on mothers is expected to increase due to COVID-19. In addition, travel is restricted and limited outdoor recreational activities are possible as the government recommends staying home unless absolutely necessary. This will lead to a lower level of marital satisfaction.

On the other hand, there is a growing awareness that fathers have a great influence on the development of children when they raise them. Due to COVID-19, more than ever, active involvement of fathers in parenting is required. But there was no father's role in the family [14], which made the mother's marital satisfaction unfamiliar. According to a previous study, among the 12 countries of OECD members, Korea is ranked 11th when it comes to fathers' share in housework and childcare. Despite these changes in the discussion on the role of fathers, the traditional idea that fathers are engaged in economic activities and mothers are in charge of housework and childcare still remains [15]. For this reason, even before the COVID-19 pandemic, physical and psychological support for mothers, who have always been the main role in child rearing, has been an important issue.

With the sudden advent of the COVID-19, there are more challenges to deal with, such as difficult family economic conditions, lack of communication between spouses, and changes in their roles of child rearing. This means that levels of marital satisfaction is significantly lower [4]. Nevertheless, there are cases in which spouses adaptively deal with crises, hence resulting in higher marital satisfaction [16]. This is why 'satisfaction' is a subjective and relative thought associated with the attitudes or values people take when faced with challenge [17]. In terms of public health including medical treatment, diagnostic tests, and prevention systems, Korea is evaluated as one of the successful countries to cope with the pandemic. Given this, the COVID-19 may not have a serious impact on marital satisfaction.

III. RESEARCH METHOD

3.1 Research subjects

This study was conducted with 186 mothers with children aged from 3 to 5, and for analysis, used the non-probability random sampling method. The average age of the children was 6.04 (SD=3.56). To project the average age of the children, only the age of eldest was used. The average age of mothers was 37.28 (SD=5.24). Out of 186, 92 (49.46%) were university graduates, 118 (64.44%) were employed, and 136 (73.12%) responded that their monthly household income was over four million won in Korean currency. 88 (47.31%) of participants had two children. 151 (82%) and 85 (46%) of them responded that there had been changes in time they spent

with their children and spouses, respectively, 149 (97.56%) and 79 (92.44%) of them responded that were spending more time with them than before COVID-19.

3.2 Measurement tool

3.2.1 Parenting stress

The study used the Abidin's Parenting Stress Index (PSI) [9], which was translated into Korean by Kang [18]. This takes a form of self-report and consists of 29 questions. Of the 29 questions, 9 were on 'parental distress' that mothers feel while raising their children, 11 on 'dysfunctional interactions' and 9 on 'difficult child characteristics', and the questions' number 27 and 29 are supposed to be scored reversely. For each question the 5 point Likert scale was used, with the value 5 as 'strongly agree' and the value 1 as 'strongly disagree.' The higher the score, the higher parenting stress was. In this study, overall Cronbach's alpha was .95 and as for subdivisions, Cronbach's alpha for parenting distress was .87, for dysfunctional interaction, .92, and for difficult child characteristics, .92 respectively.

3.2.2 Marital satisfaction

This study used the Global Distress Scale (GDS), which was translated into Korean and modified to reflect the Korean situations, and selected and used by Kang [18]. It consists of 22 questions, of which questions' number 3-12, 13, and 20 are supposed to be scored reversely. It is based on the 5 point Likert scale, with the value 1 as 'strongly disagree,' and the value 5 as 'strongly agree.' The higher the score, the higher marital satisfaction was. Overall Cronbach's alpha was .95.

3.3 Research procedure

Prior to the study, preliminary research was conducted in a form of online survey for two days, from April 26 to 27, 2021. The survey was done with three mothers who had young children to evaluate the properness of questionnaire was used as it was. The study conducted in an online survey from April 28 to May 11, 2021 through the random probability sampling method, and the study obtained the participants' signatures regarding the use of their personal information and, to ensure that they understand their participation in the study.

3.4 Data analysis

In order to analyze the changes of mothers' perception in parenting stress, marital satisfaction after COVID-19, the study used SPSS 21.0. The study projected *Cronbach's alphas* for each measurement tool and presented descriptive statistics. In order to verify the mean differences between groups caused by mothers' background variables, the *t-test* was used and one-way analysis of variance was performed. As a post hoc test, *Scheffe-test* was conducted.

IV. RESULTS

4.1 Descriptive statistics of major variables

As a result of testing the normal distribution of 5 index variables, it was found that the condition for normality was satisfied. The overall average of mothers' parenting stress was 2.25 and marital satisfaction was 3.63. This shows that mother participants with young children perceived moderate changes in marital satisfaction and mild moderate changes in parenting stress. In details, as for parenting stress, parents' distress was the highest ($M=2.83$), followed by difficult characteristics ($M=2.04$) and dysfunctional interactions ($M=1.89$). [Table 1] shows the descriptive statistics of measuring variables.

[Table 1] Descriptive Statistics of Major Variables

($N=186$)

Major Variables		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Skewness</i>	<i>Kurtosis</i>
Mother's parenting stress	Parents' distress	2.83	.80	-.21	-.54
	Dysfunctional interactions	1.89	.72	.86	-.04
	Difficult characteristics	2.04	.75	.71	-.14
	Mean	2.25			
Marital satisfaction	Mean	3.63	.75	-.85	1.08

4.2 After COVID-19: Changes in mothers' perceptions of parenting stress

The mother participants with young children responded that they perceived a mild moderate change in parenting stress ($M=2.25$) after COVID-19. The independent samples *t-test* was conducted to test whether

mother's parenting stress was influenced by sub-factors (1), such as children's genders, mother's jobs, and the time they spent with their spouses or children since the COVID-19 pandemic. The result showed that there was a significant difference in the group who responded there was a difference after COVID-19 compared to the group who responded there was no difference. Notably, the majority in the group that responded 'yes' replied they spent more time with their children. Given this, it is safe to say that, when the time mothers spend with their children increases, this results in a significant increase in parenting stress. The group that said they spent a lot of time with their spouses responded there had been significant differences in distress and difficult child characteristics, which means that the more time mothers spend with their spouses after the outbreak of COVID-19, the more they are affected by parenting stress. Differences in parenting stress according to sub-factors (1) are as shown in [Table 2].

[Table 2] Differences in Parenting Stress of According to Sub-factors (1)

(N=186)

Variables	Group	n	Parenting stress					
			Distress		Dysfunctional interactions		Difficult characteristics	
			M(SD)	t	M(SD)	t	M(SD)	t
Children's gender	Boy	97	2.86(.75)	.36	1.91(.75)	.46	2.05(.78)	.17
	Girl	86	2.82(.85)		1.87(.68)		2.03(.73)	
Mothers' job	Yes	118	2.81(.81)	-.37	1.86(.73)	-.59	2.00(.74)	-.80
	No	68	2.86(.78)		1.93(.69)		2.09(.76)	
The time spent with children	Change	151	2.91(.79)	2.70**	1.93(.73)	2.00*	2.09(.77)	2.61**
	No change	35	2.51(.78)		1.70(.60)		1.79(.59)	
The time spent with spouse	Change	85	2.96(.72)	2.13*	1.98(.78)	1.53	2.16(.76)	2.14*
	No change	99	2.72(.85)		1.81(.66)		1.93(.73)	

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

[Table 3] shows the results of one-way ANOVA to determine whether sub-factors (2) such as mother's age, mother's educational background, monthly household income, and number of children, have a significant effect on parenting stress. First, there were significant differences in the parental distress of parenting stress by mother's age. The mother group under 30 years of age showed a higher level of stress in the distress section, but there was no significant difference in the *Scheffe* post hoc test. Second, there were significant differences in dysfunctional interaction according to age, and in *Scheffe* post hoc test, the 31-35 year old mother group had higher score than 41-45 year old mother group. Third, the difficult characteristics showed a significant differences according to the monthly household income. According to the *Scheffe* post hoc test, the group with monthly household income of less than 2 million won had a lower average score in difficult characteristics than the group with monthly income of 2 to 4 million won and 4 million won or more.

[Table 3] Differences in Parenting Stress of According to Sub-factors (2)

(N=186)

Variables	Group	n	Parenting stress								
			Distress			Dysfunctional interactions			Difficult characteristics		
			M(SD)	F	Scheffe	M(SD)	F	Scheffe	M(SD)	F	Scheffe
Mother's age	-30	8	3.24(.96)			2.30(.95)			2.32(.92)		
	31-351	38	3.13(.71)			2.16(.75)			2.22(.70)		
	36-40	69	2.78(.77)	2.60*	n.s	1.88(.76)	3.14*	b>d	2.07(.81)	1.47	-
	41-45	34	2.64(.92)			1.64(.58)			1.88(.76)		
	45-	5	2.47(.69)			1.64(.46)			1.64(.36)		
Mother's educational background	High school	14	2.41(.69)			1.68(.59)			1.79(.15)		
	College	37	2.92(.82)			1.94(.73)			2.02(.12)		
	University	92	2.79(.78)	1.91	-	1.88(.72)	.48	-	2.04(.08)	.56	-
	Graduate school	42	2.96(.83)			1.91(.75)			2.08(.13)		
Monthly income	-2 million(won)	6	2.57(.58)			1.41(.40)			1.31(.29)		
	2-4 million(won)	44	2.97(.81)	1.16	-	1.91(.70)	1.39	-	2.00(.67)	3.13*	a<b, c
	4 million(won)-	136	2.80(.80)			1.90(.73)			2.08(.77)		
Number of children	One	74	2.89(.71)			1.88(.67)			2.06(.75)		
	Two	88	2.80(.86)	.06	-	1.90(.75)	.36	-	2.02(.75)	.03	-
	Three	24	2.77(.82)			1.87(.76)			2.02(.75)		

* p<.05

4. 3 After COVID-19: Changes in mothers' perceptions of marital satisfaction

The mother participants with young children responded 'moderate' to marital satisfaction (M=3.63). Dependent sample t-test was conducted to find out whether there were significant differences according to sub-factors (1), such as children's genders, mother's job, and changes in the time they spent with their spouses or children after COVID-19 outbreak. As a result, in terms of mother's marital satisfaction, there was a significant difference between the group that answered that there was a change in the amount of time spent with their spouse or children and the group that there was no change. This may show marital satisfaction is lower for mothers who spend more time with their spouse or children. Differences in parenting stress according to sub-factors (1) are as shown in [Table 4].

[Table 4] Differences in Marital Satisfaction of According to Sub-factors (1)

(N=186)

Variables	Group	n	M	SD	t
Children's gender	Boy	97	3.62	.80	-.19
	Girl	86	3.64	.69	
Mother's job	Yes	118	3.66	.76	.84
	No	68	3.57	.74	
The time spent with children	Change	151	3.56	.76	-2.55*
	No change	35	3.91	.63	
The time spent with spouse	Change	85	3.49	.70	-2.38*
	No change	99	3.75	.78	

* p<.05

In order to see whether sub-factors (2), such as mother's age, mother's education level, monthly household income, and number of children, significantly affected their marital satisfaction, the one-way ANOVA was conducted. The result shown in [Table 5] said that there were significant differences depending on their monthly household incomes. The groups whose monthly household income was higher than 4 million won displayed higher marital satisfaction than other groups. However, the Scheffe post hoc test revealed no significant differences.

[Table 5] Differences in Marital Satisfaction of According to Sub-factors (2)

(N=186)

Variables	Group	n	M	SD	F	Scheffe
Mother's age	-30	8	3.42	.61	.86	-
	31-35	38	3.67	.54		
	36-40	69	3.65	.70		
	41-45	34	3.44	1.04		
	46-	5	3.88	.49		
Mother's educational background	High school	14	3.71	.72	.38	-
	College	37	3.73	.70		
	University	92	3.59	.74		
	Graduate school	42	3.58	.84		
Monthly income	-2 million(won)	6	2.59	1.54	6.38**	n.s
	2-4 million(won)	44	3.61	.62		
	4 million(won)-	136	3.68	.72		
Number of children	One	74	3.50	.74	1.87	-
	Two	88	3.70	.69		
	Three	24	3.76	.94		

** $p < .01$

V. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

5.1 Discussion

This study analyzed the parenting stress and marital satisfaction of mothers with young children after the outbreak of COVID-19. The purpose of this study is to promote a general understanding of mothers' quality of life in order to provide basic data that are helpful in protecting mothers' mental health. This study looked at how these factors have been recognized since the outbreak of COVID-19. And as a result, it was found that mothers' perception of quality of life changed from mild moderate to moderate. That is, the outbreak of COVID-19 has not had a significant impact on how they felt about the quality of their life.

Another study using the same questionnaire used in this study for these factors before COVID-19 also showed 'moderate' results [7] [11] [18]. This shows that the lives of mothers with young children are not being damaged while the COVID-19 situation is calming down. As the possibility of the COVID-19 pandemic increases for a long time, most Koreans are adapting to the situation by following the precautions in their daily life. These appear to be major contributing factors for mothers staying undisturbed in the epidemic. However, there are some concerns, as well. COVID-19 is an infectious disease that has caused a huge worldwide pandemic. It can be fatal, so we need to understand how serious the virus is. Moreover, we cannot rule out the possibility that there are people who are not so vigilant [19].

The study revealed one noteworthy point: The group that answered that they spent more time with their family members as a result of 'social distancing' was found to have difficulties in all aspects, including parenting stress and marital satisfaction. The results were significantly different when compared to other groups. First, as for parenting stress, mothers with young children felt a mild moderate change after COVID-19. And the sub contributing factors did not change significantly overall. However, there are several other aspects to this. So, it would be safe to say that COVID-19 is having a negative impact on people.

The following are the results of each study, including distress, difficult characteristics, and dysfunctional interaction related stress. In the studies by Kang [18] and Park [7], most participants responded well mild moderates, but listed contributing factors differently; distress, dysfunctional interaction, and difficult characteristics. Therefore, the result of the two studies are somewhat similar but have somewhat different aspects. This could be interpreted as follows: due to COVID-19, educational institutes are closed for a period of time and people are advised to stay at home unless absolutely necessary. For this, some mothers may feel sorry for their children, which may have made it more difficult for them to ideally interact with their children. So it has a hard time dealing with difficult characteristics. The 31-35 year old mother group that responded they felt a change in their interactions with their children, and the difference was significant when compared to the 41-45 year old mother group. This means that the younger mothers are, the more likely they are to feel the impact of COVID-19 and the harder it is to build relationships with their children. Also, as society transforms into a society that avoids non-essential personal contact, the most noticeable changes in daily life are increasing, time to spend with family. And the group who responded that they spent more time with their spouses or children than before the outbreak of COVID-19 showed a significantly higher awareness of parenting stress.

The study also revealed one interesting aspect: In other words, the higher the monthly household income, the more significant the response to parenting stress. This may be because children from high-income families tend to receive more diverse private education than children from low-income families [20]. Considering this, it is possible that mothers in this income group may have experienced more parenting stress as their children could not receive private education due to the COVID-19 outbreak. This is consistent with findings from one study [21]. According to this study, young children are unable to use private education facilities such as sports, music, games or go out due to COVID-19. As a result, they began to show behavioral problems, which increased the mothers' parenting stress.

To the next, marital satisfaction showed that mothers' with young children felt there was a slight change due to COVID-19. According to Kang, before COVID-19, mothers with young children responded moderately [11]. Considering these facts, there was little change in marital satisfaction before and after the outbreak of COVID-19. However, this is consistent with the results presented by Wang et al. [1]. For their study, marital satisfaction was surveyed among 1,210 people in 194 cities in China, and participants reported that the participants reported moderate to severe responses.

This rises one question: Why do Korean mothers of young children not show significant changes in marital satisfaction compared to other countries? As mentioned earlier, foreign media continued to release positive articles about the preventive measures taken in Korea, and this seems to act as a psychological intervention for mothers [22] [1]. More and more people realize that COVID-19 will likely last long, and they have understood that they would not see dramatic changes in the current situation. Nevertheless, those mother, whose time with their young children increased because of the COVID-19, showed significant low level of marital satisfaction compared to the other groups. Thus, it can be derived that 'social distancing,' one of the representative social phenomena amid the COVID-19 pandemic, has a negative impact on marital satisfaction. In addition, it is interesting to see that mothers from higher household income showed higher levels of marital satisfaction. This is consistent with the result from a study before the COVID-19 pandemic [23]. Therefore it is impossible to say the COVID-19 pandemic contributed to a change in the relations between the two variables.

5.2 Conclusion

In conclusion, even before COVID-19, the world was getting gradually preparing for the advent of society that requires less personal contact due to the rapid development of IT technology. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has forcefully accelerated the advent of this society, which is also shown in this study. This has lowered the quality of life for some mothers. For the time being, the world cannot return to the normal life it had before the outbreak of COVID-19. Given this, the outlook for the quality of life for mothers with children may not be very bright. However, a society with less personal contact can bring people new forms of adaptation, which can lead to the formation of different relationships, such as in anxiety. People will start to looking for something more convenient than now [24].

When the hyper-connectivity and ubiquitousness of the 4th industrial revolution are combined, this kind of society will expand and we can expect a new creative world where online and offline are fused. COVID-19 is still serious as no cure has yet been found, and some public health experts predict that there could be a second or third wave of another viruses similar to the COVID-19. But our concerns with these viruses can also help provide an opportunity for us to step into another world. Therefore, we need to be well prepared to live a better life in all aspects of life. As part of that, this study is meaningful in that it provided basic data that can help mothers with children to protect their mental health. And based on this study, it is expected that future studies will be able to discuss policy, academic, and practical alternatives for such mothers.

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