In Their Own Words: Child and Adolescent Perceptions of Caregiver Stress in Early COVID-19 Pandemic

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BACKGROUND: The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has exacerbated multiple stressors for caregivers of children in the United States, raising concern for increased family conflict, harsh parenting, and child maltreatment. Little is known regarding children's perceptions and experiences of caregiver stress during the COVID-19 pandemic. OBJECTIVE: To examine how children and adolescents identify and experience caregiver stress during the early COVID-19 pandemic. METHODS: We analyzed 105 de-identified helpline text and online chat transcripts from children under age 18 who submitted inquiries to the Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline from March to June of 2020, with COVID-19 as a presenting issue. Inductive, thematic analysis was used to identify how child helpline users: 1) perceived and experienced drivers of caregiver stress and 2) used words to describe manifestations of caregiver stress during the COVID-19 pandemic. RESULTS: Children experienced multiple drivers of caregiver stress during COVID-19, including intrapersonal (e.g. caregiver health concerns), interpersonal (e.g. parental discord, perceived dislike of child), and extrapersonal (e.g. financial insecurity, sheltering in place) stressors. Regardless of the driver, caregivers' stress was internalized by children. "Anger," "control," and "blame" were most commonly used to label manifestations of caregiver stress, which were often externalizing behaviors, including yelling, name calling, and blaming of others. CONCLUSION: In text and online chat inquiries to a national child helpline during the COVID-19 pandemic, children described multiple drivers of caregiver stress, often feeling as though they were to blame. Providers serving children should address household stress spillover effects by including caregivers and directly acknowledging children's concerns using their own words.

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