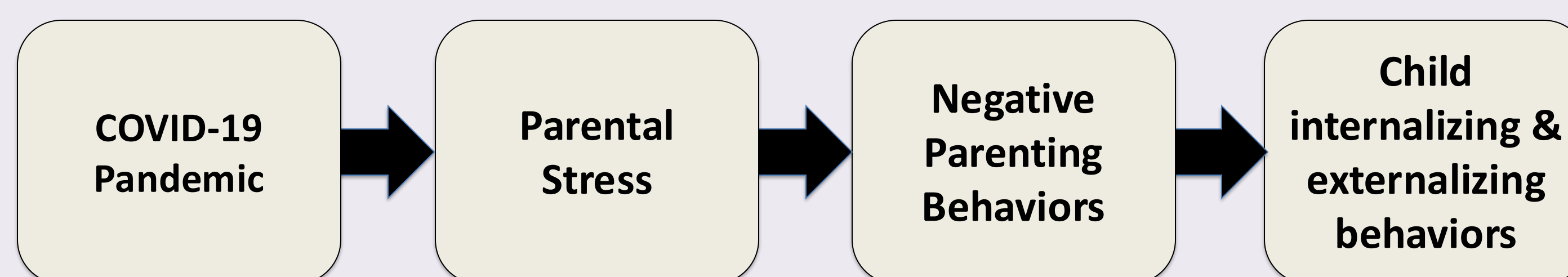


Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly affected the lives of many families and increased levels of parental stress (Helland et al., 2021; Pascheke et al., 2021). The additional responsibilities and stressors associated with the pandemic have had a negative impact on parenting practices (Gassman-Pines et al., 2020; Griffith et al., 2022). In turn, parental stress during the COVID-19 pandemic has been linked to various long-term outcomes, including children's internalizing and externalizing behaviors, poor parent-child relationships, and reduced engagement from parents (Chung et al., 2024). Through the lens of the *Family Stress Model* (Conger et al., 2010), which describes how external stressors impact the quality of parent-child relationships and subsequent child outcomes, the present study examined the associations between COVID-19-related stress, parenting practices, and children's current behavior (i.e., internalizing and externalizing behaviors).

Adapted Family Stress Model



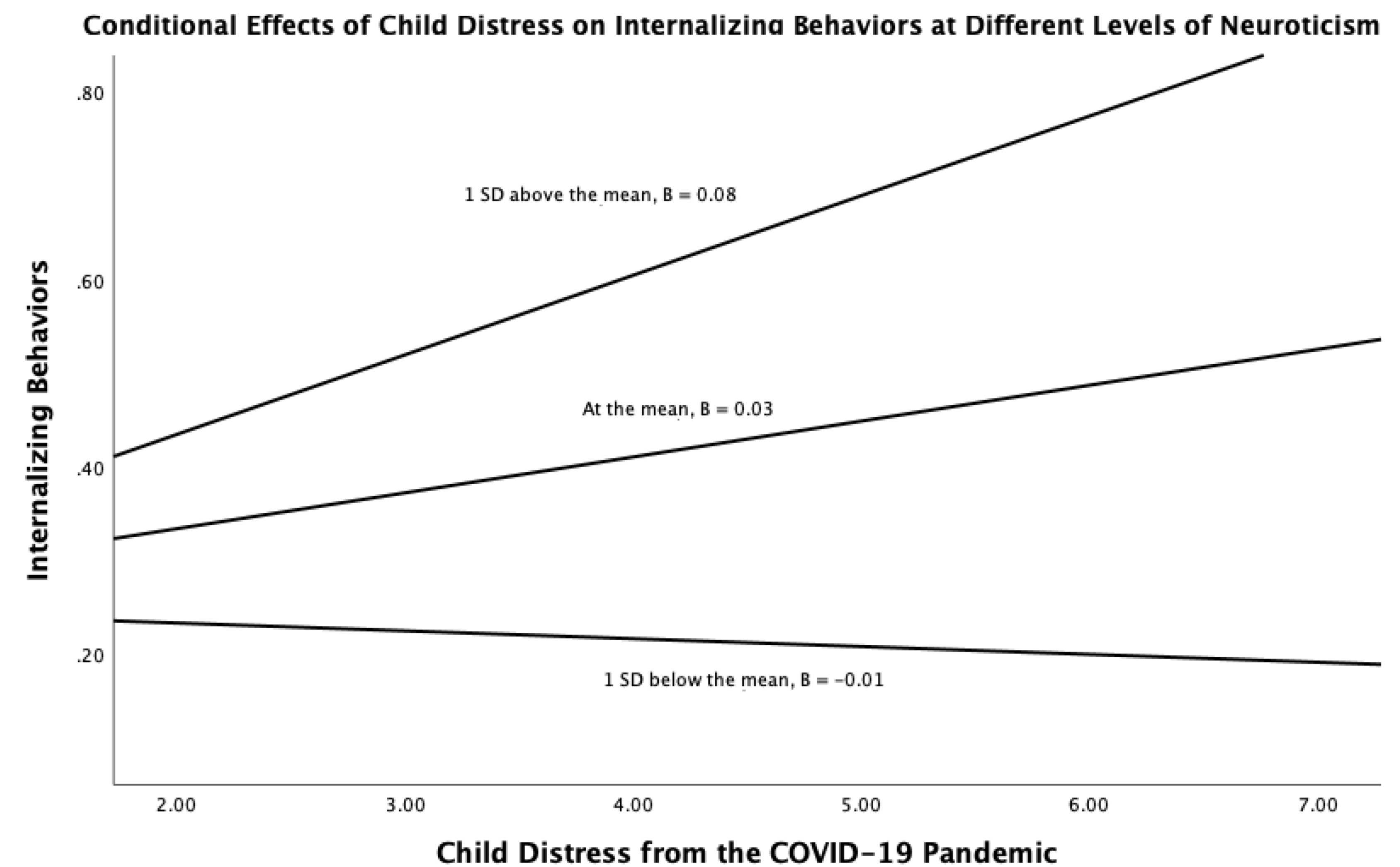
Method

Participants and Procedure. As part of a larger study on the COVID-19 pandemic, 100 parents who indicated having a child born between 2013 and 2017 were recruited via social media and consented to the Qualtrics survey. After removing invalid data, 56 participants were included in the final analyses (M parent age = 40.45; 98.2% white; 94.6% female) (M child age = 8.36; 96.4% white; 60.7% male).

Measures. Parents completed a Demographic form; the 37-item COVID-19 Exposure and Family Impact Scale (CEFIS; Kazak et al., 2021); the 25-item Strengths & Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ; Goodman, 1997); the 50-item Inventory of Children's Individual Differences-Short (ICID-S; Deal et al., 2006); and the 33-item Parenting Behaviors and Dimensions Questionnaire (PBDQ; Reid et al., 2015).

Results

Bivariate correlations found no significant associations between COVID-19 exposure, parenting, and child internalizing/externalizing behaviors. Exploratory analyses evaluated the impact of parent-reported child distress during the COVID-19 pandemic on child outcomes. After bivariate associations were confirmed, a regression equation model predicting internalizing behaviors (SDQ scores) from child distress during COVID-19 (CEFIS distress scores), child personality traits (ICID neuroticism and conscientiousness) and an interaction term between child neuroticism and COVID-19 distress was significant ($R^2 = .40$, $F(4, 51) = 10.46$, $p < .001$). Because the interaction term was significant, a simple moderator analysis was performed using PROCESS macro V4.3 (Hayes, 2017). Among children high on neuroticism, greater levels of parent-report distress from the pandemic predicted higher levels of internalizing behaviors ($B = 0.08$, $SE = 0.03$, $t(56) = 2.66$, $p = .01$). The Johnson-Neyman technique revealed that the effect of child distress on internalizing behaviors was significant for values of neuroticism above 3.83 ($M = 3.68$, $SD = 0.88$).



Discussion

Findings suggest that for among children who are more neurotic, distress during the COVID-19 pandemic significantly predicts current internalizing behaviors. Having a better understanding the ongoing impact of COVID-19 related stressors on parents and children is essential in identifying ways to increase parental support and address children's difficulties. This may be particularly relevant in the context of internalizing problems, which often go unnoticed. Study limitations include sample size and homogeneity, cross-sectional design, correlational data, and retrospective reports. Future studies should also examine the impact of childhood trauma or adversity, peer support, and parent-child relationships on children's internalizing and externalizing behaviors following the COVID-19 pandemic.

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Among children who are higher in neuroticism, greater reported distress from the COVID-19 pandemic significantly predicts current levels of internalizing behaviors.