

BRITISH FAMILIES IN LOCKDOWN STUDY:

The Impact of COVID 19 on Education and Children's Services

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'British Families in Lockdown' is a qualitative study led by Leeds Trinity University which has investigated the day-to-day experiences of British families during the first seven weeks of lockdown. Fifty-six families from a diverse set of socio-economic backgrounds, geographies, religions and cultures participated in telephone or video calling semi-structured interviews and they shared their detailed, personal stories and experiences of employment, children's schooling, health, well-being, family life, leisure time and technology use during the first phase of lockdown.

Outside of this study, reported Covid-19 evidence is overwhelmingly quantitative based, scientific, clinical, anecdotal or journalistic, as such, these qualitative insights will help build a more rounded picture of British family experiences. The study was quick to respond to the pandemic and is one of the few qualitative studies collecting data from the UK population during the initial stage of lockdown. Our initial findings demonstrate some of the complex ways in which Covid-19 has impacted children's services and education. Our data supports quantitative reports to some extent but there is contrasting evidence and wider issues to also consider.

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS

- Some families who were provided a school place for their child, did not necessarily take up the school offer. They felt that keeping their children at home was safer.
- Access to support services for some families discontinued and there was limited, or no further contact made with the children during the initial period of lockdown.
- There were significant inconsistencies in terms of the provision and support offered by schools and nurseries to parents and pupils during lockdown.
- Many parents were critical of their children's schools in terms of the work that was sent home, the lack of it, or the perception that it was too difficult. These parents were often disappointed that their children had little or no contact with teachers.
- Privately run schools seemed to offer much better outcomes for pupils including regular video conferencing and more teacher to pupil time and peer to peer contact online.
- For most families, feelings of closeness and bonding improved during lockdown which was seen as highly beneficial for well-being.
- Some children were far more suited to learning from home as school and early years settings were seen as a cause of distress and anxiety for various reasons. For these children lockdown was a positive experience.
- Parents felt that children of all ages missed physical contact with their peers and socialising opportunities.
- Children with SEN (special educational needs) or disabilities received little or no additional support for home learning during lockdown.
- Children appeared to be positive and engaged with their home-learning to varying degrees. It was noticeable that some children were willing to complete their studying either independently or under parental guidance without conflict.
- Parents noted that some children were only able to actively engage with learning for a few hours each day.

- Other parents experienced more tension in the household if they dictated lengthy and fixed hours of studying or attempted to force learning.
- Many parents prioritised their child’s well-being as being more important than their educational attainment and allowed their children to set their own work timetables.
- For several families, lockdown allowed parents to focus on their children’s needs and education, in a way that they had not done before, which resulted in reports of positive child outcomes.
- Some families appeared more resilient to lockdown than others. For most families there were positive impacts of lockdown in terms of their children’s outcomes.
- For families that appeared less resilient, there were pressures on the household such as additional support needs, or significant work pressures for the parents.
- Some families spoke of constant financial worries due to loss of actual and potential earnings and an increase in utility and grocery bills as a result of lockdown.
- Several financially disadvantaged families were having more positive experiences during lockdown compared to pre-lockdown circumstances. Particularly in terms of perceived well-being and family closeness.
- BAME (Black Asian Minority Ethnic) parents often felt that there were culturally distinct experiences and attitudes to viral infections which resulted in different manifested behaviours.
- Some parents plan to work more flexibly in the future as a direct result of lockdown, so they can spend more time with their children and rely less on formal childcare.
- Several parents considered the prospect of their children attending school/nursery part-time in the future as beneficial for their child, both academically and in terms of mental well-being.

CRITICAL WORKERS AND ACCESS TO EDUCATION

A number of our families had one parent who was classed as a critical worker. There were some difficulties accessing families where both parents were critical workers. Often the invitation to take part in the research was declined by such families due to heavy constraints on their time and work pressures. Nevertheless, our study did include several families where both the mother and father were critical workers. It is also important to note that in all of the families we spoke to, at least one of the parents continued to work, during lockdown, either working from home or by going to work outside of the household (this included both critical and non-critical workers).

- The critical workers we spoke to, by and large had a partner or spouse who was able to stay at home with the children to provide home-schooling. Either because they were unemployed, self-employed, were furloughed or were in education themselves.
- For families in which both parents were critical workers, the children were offered a school place.
- Some families who were provided a school place for their child, did not necessarily take up the school offer. Some parents chose to work from home to be with their children and could work flexible hours, had an understanding employer or in one case, a parent decided to resign in

order to look after the children. A small number of parents relied on relatives for childcare as an alternative.

- Being a critical worker did not guarantee a school place, even if the child had severe care needs. This caused distress for the parents and led to difficulties at home.
- Families of non-critical workers with children who had additional care needs such as disabilities or SEN reported that they were not given the opportunity to send their children into school.
- Despite not being critical workers, many parents were still under pressure to work full time hours, sometimes to the same or increased workloads. These families would have benefitted from being given the choice of school spaces. Especially those who had additional care needs within the home.

CHILDREN'S SUPPORT SERVICES

A number of our parents had children who were engaging with support services prior to lockdown either for physical or mental health needs, or due to their disabilities or SEN. For most, this support stopped and although some parents were accepting of this and recognised the unprecedented nature of the lockdown, it did lead to some parental reports of negative outcomes for the children.

- Parents whose children had either disabilities or SEN, commented on the lack of support or provision for their children whilst they were at home.
- In some cases, children with SEN were not given differentiated homework and the work they were expected to do was perceived to be beyond their capacity without support.

- Some children's mental health support discontinued once lockdown began. This resulted in additional worries for the parents and the children concerned.
- The difficulties some parents faced in managing their children's additional needs alongside the expectations of their employers, resulted in increased levels of anxiety and fraught family relationships.

EARLY YEARS CLOSURES: CHILDCARE AND CHILD DEVELOPMENT

Several parents had children who were registered with early years settings, this included nurseries (private and local authority led), pre-schools and childminders. There were mixed parental responses in terms of the envisaged and actual impact of early years closures on families and children. Parents reported both benefits and challenges of having young children at home during the lockdown with respect to child development.

- Several parents were not overly concerned about the impact of closures on their child's early years development. Parents here, felt that their children would 'catch up' when early years settings resumed, and children were also at an early stage of their development and learning journey.
- A number of parents felt that their child had benefited from the increased level of parental attention as a result of the lockdown with positive benefits for home learning, including improved developmental outcomes for some pre-school children.
- A minority of parents expressed concerns about early years closures and the negative impact that this may have on their child's physical, social,

emotional development and well-being.

- For parents, whose children would be transitioning to reception class in September later this year, they expressed concerns about their child's level of school 'readiness' and the possible missed learning and developmental opportunities at the early years setting.
- Some parents were particularly concerned about the risk of Covid-19 infection within early years settings and chose to withdraw their child before the lockdown measures formally began.
- Most parents were satisfied with the early years' settings in terms of communication to parents, home-learning support and the nature of the resources provided.
- Some early years settings were proactive in communication, offering ideas for home activities.
- Some early years settings utilised online resources to help facilitate home learning, but not all.
- Where one or both parents worked, productivity levels were reportedly affected by the lack of early years childcare which could cause feelings of parental stress and anxiety.
- Some parents with young children normally in nurseries or with childminders were not used to spending so many full days with babies and toddlers.
- Parents were surprised and pleased to learn and develop new skills in terms of entertaining and understanding their young children during lockdown.
- Learning that children could be happy and entertained simply by being included in day-to-day family life and tasks was a surprise to some first-time parents.

- Some parents aim to rely less on excursions, clubs and external activities in the future and spend more time on activities at home.
- Some parents plan to work more flexibly in the future so they can spend more time with their children and rely less on formal childcare.
- Parents who usually worked long hours and saw little of their children, enjoyed the opportunity offered by lockdown to work from home and build stronger bonds with their children.
- Some parents perceived that their children were generally happier after spending more time with them.
- Some parents thought their child had developed and matured whilst being out of nursery and early years settings, but they were unsure if that development would have taken place anyway, regardless of lockdown.
- Parents had worries about their children settling into nursery again after lockdown, given that the first transition was not an easy one.

CANCELLED EXAMS

Some of the children in our sample were due to be sitting either their SATS, GCSE exams or A-Levels this year, and so for them there were mixed feelings about the impact of lockdown.

- Parents of children whose exams had been cancelled largely felt that it was unfair from their child's perspective.
- Parents also felt that children had lost out on a "rite of passage".
- Most parents felt that their children would have preferred to have sat their exams, although many parents seemed satisfied with the plans to award exam results based on predicted grades and mock exam results.

- Some parents felt that the use of predicted grades and mock exam results as a mechanism to award grades was unfair.
- The parents who seemed most concerned were those whose children are due to take exams next year, and there is significant worry about the effect that this year's lockdown will have on the children's preparedness for a year's time.

CONTACT WITH SCHOOLS

Our study gathered data from children of all ages from 0-18, who were educated across a range of geographical locations and school types including state-run and private schools, urban and rural schools, outstanding schools and those in or recently out of special measures.

- There was little consistency between schools concerning how much contact was made between the schools and the lockdown families. Some schools had regular contact with the pupils including daily video conferencing. Other schools were in contact as little as once a week via email.
- In general parents felt that the work sent home from school demanded a higher academic standard than they thought was appropriate. Some parents concluded that perhaps children are being schooled to higher standards than they were.
- Some of the learning sent home was expecting the pupils to undertake work that they had not been taught about previously.
- Some parents felt the schoolwork was beyond their own capabilities and worried about their abilities to teach the subject material as a result.
- Other parents thought that the homework provided by schools was of a low standard.
- In the main it seemed that those children who were at private schools were getting better standards of teaching. All of the private schools in our study were undertaking video conferencing and the pupils could attend virtual lessons.
- Many pupils at state-run schools had no personal contact or direct dialogue with their teachers.
- Whilst some parents felt that their children missed school, others felt that their children were thriving at home whilst home learning.
- Whilst some schools provided a several hours' worth of studying expectations each day, other schools expected less.
- Despite the school's expectations, most children would only study for around three hours or less each day and parents felt this was the maximum amount of time children could concentrate for.
- However, some parents did insist that their children studied for a full school day, but they noticed that their children would not respond well to this and struggled to maintain concentration.
- Most parents felt that their children were having different and varied learning experiences whilst at home which were as valuable and, in some cases, more valuable than the missed schoolwork.
- Some parents are now considering home-schooling their children as a result of the lockdown experience.

CHILDREN'S MENTAL HEALTH

Parents largely had mixed responses concerning their children's well-being. Some parents felt that their children were benefiting from spending more time at home

and increased time with family members, whilst others felt that their children were missing out on social interactions. For parents of children at primary school and in the early years, there were largely positive stories about increased levels of closeness which had benefits for the whole family. That the younger children seemed happier, more content. There were a smaller number of parents who were worried about their child's mental health, these were mostly parents who expressed difficulties with adjusting to lockdown themselves.

- Several parents identified schools as a cause of negative mental health outcomes for their children and thought lockdown and the home learning environment was beneficial.
 - Some children who had been victims of bullying or who experienced anxiety at school were benefitting from being at home.
 - A significant number of parents thought that the experience of being at home was positive for the children's mental health. They were spending more time with their parents and siblings and strengthening family bonds.
 - Concerns about the lack of contact with friends, were often overcome by children having online contact with their classmates and peer groups.
 - Children were often perceived as spending a lot of time communicating with their friends either through online gaming or through social media.
 - Most parents were not concerned about their children's ability to engage with and complete work at home. Children were mostly perceived as positive and engaged with their home-learning and would begin their studying either independently or under parental guidance without conflict.
- Parents noted that some children could only actively engage with learning for a few hours each day.
 - Some parents were concerned about the possible effects of social isolation and their child's well-being. These parents were often those who reported difficulties adapting to lockdown themselves.
 - Some children were encouraged to ignore social distancing rules so that they could see their friends. This is because the parents either wanted them to "get out of the house" or they thought it was good for their children's mental health to see their friends.
 - It was acknowledged that time apart as a family was just as important as time spent together during lockdown for positive mental health.
 - A small number of secondary aged children did not want to leave the house on their own, due to pre-existing social anxiety and/or fears of conflicts and confrontations with others on the streets.
 - Parents of older children typically worried more about their children's well-being than parents of younger children.
 - Most parents reported improvements in the levels of family closeness and perceived this to have had a positive effect on the household including a sense of well-being.
 - Sibling relationships improved during lockdown in many cases.
 - For some parents, such as full-time workers, the number of hours spent together as a family had dramatically increased as a result of lockdown.
 - Parents felt closer to their children and enjoyed the family time together.
 - There were concerns from some parents about the potential negative

mental health impacts for their children when returning to school.

- Other parents felt that their children's lack of physical contact with their romantic partners, friends and peers was potentially harmful for their well-being.
- Several parents considered the prospect of their children attending school part-time in the future as being beneficial for their child, both academically and in terms of mental well-being.
- Some parents and children felt that having the option to home-school and/or flexible schooling options would be beneficial.
- A small number of parents recognised that their own negative mental health could have had a negative impact on their children.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

Families were asked about their financial concerns and worries. Most families noted that their outgoings had reduced during lockdown, however, for many their income had been negatively affected.

- Some families talked about constant financial worries due to loss of actual and potential earnings and an increase in utility and grocery bills as a result of lockdown.
- Some parents were worried about losing their jobs and businesses as a result of lockdown.
- Some families were spending less money during lockdown and so they were able to save more.
- There were no parental concerns about children's pocket or spending money since outings had been curtailed and many shops and venues were closed.

- Some families who can be described as financially disadvantaged were often displaying positive outcomes during lockdown as a result of increased family time, leading to bonding and feelings of closeness, although financial worries were still present in these parents' minds.
- For those parents who were having to work harder, either because of their critical role or because of the financial risks to their businesses and livelihoods, they were spending less time with their families. This generally led to more negative outcomes for the household.

IMPACT ON DISADVANTAGED GROUPS

In our sample there were parents who can be described as on low incomes, unemployed, single, separated, care leavers, young, BAME (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic) and some parents had care needs. In addition to this, a number of parents identified their children as having specific needs ranging from disabilities and learning difficulties through to poor mental health, victims of bullying and grieving children.

- For families who had additional support needs, there was a general lack of support during the initial weeks of lockdown. Families perceived that they were expected to be able to manage.
- As lockdown progressed, a small number of support services were conducting home visits whilst social distancing or utilising video conferencing calling to contact families.
- Several BAME parents were concerned about anti-Asian and anti-ethnic hate crimes and attitudes as seen in the media and felt unsafe when they were outside of the home.

- A minority of BAME families had experienced anti-Asian hate crime, especially when wearing face masks before the lockdown began and in the first few weeks of lockdown. Some families did not wear face masks to avoid drawing attention to themselves, despite wanting to use them for protection.
- Many BAME parents who wore face masks were treated with suspicion and intolerance before the lockdown began. One primary school did not permit the wearing of face masks when requested by one British Chinese parent before the school closures began. Another British Chinese parent was not permitted to use a taxi when wearing a face mask.
- Public attitudes towards face masks were said to be changing over the course of lockdown and British Chinese parents reported less fears about their use in public and encouraged their children to use them as a result.
- Parents who were unemployed were unable to seek employment during the lockdown with financial implications for the household.
- Single parent households we spoke to received varied levels of support and contact from the non-resident parent. Some were unsure about the non-resident parents' visitation or child contact rights during the lockdown.
- The absence of a separated parent's support often led to negative outcomes for the home.
- For parents who had limited or no English language skills, government guidance with regards to Covid-19 and the lockdown was not clear or well understood. Advice was often sought from friends and families instead.
- Some BAME parents perceived there to be culturally distinct experiences and attitudes to viral threats which affected the way that some cultural groups responded to lockdown.
- One British and Pakistani participant felt that there were religious and cultural reasons why BAME rates of infection were higher in their community.
- Parents who relied upon informal support means such as grandparents for childcare and other types of support were negatively affected by the social restrictions.
- Some disadvantaged parents had to provide support for other family members outside of the home and this created additional strains on the household in terms of finances, availability of time and childcare.
- For some parents, keeping young children indoors was difficult especially when living in small spaces, where no garden was available or there were a lack of resources and toys at home, or the inability to purchase new play items for children.
- Lack of personal outdoor space coupled with the closure of parks and playgrounds negatively affected several disadvantaged families who wanted to spend time outside with their children.

CONCLUSIONS

Families who had children with support needs including disabilities and SEN received little or no support during the first stages of lockdown. For parents who were having to work and look after their children, including caring for a child with additional needs, the home environment became increasingly difficult and hard to manage. Alongside critical workers, there were other parents who would benefit from the option of a school place, particularly

those who were still working full time and had additional care needs within the home.

For a number of families, there were perceived benefits for their children's mental health by spending more time at home and out of the school environment. Whereas most families found the experience of lockdown to be positive in terms of increasing family time, strengthening bonds and enhancing closeness, it is uncertain whether these improvements in well-being have translated into increased levels of educational attainment for older children and learning for younger children, although some parents would suggest so.

The majority of parents noted that children (particularly older children) needed to be spending more time outside with their peers and some parents encouraged their teenagers to break social distancing guidelines in order to meet up with their friends. These meet-ups were encouraged for social and mental health reasons but not necessarily for educational purposes.

Parents noted that their children were not able to effectively learn for a full teaching day, even with parental support, as such most children would study for fewer hours than would be expected in a normal school day.

Some parents were positive regarding the schools' and early years settings efforts during the lockdown and expressed some degree of satisfaction with the support provided. Other parents were unhappy with the remote learning guidance offered to their children, particularly within state-run schools and felt the expectations of teachers were unrealistic considering the low levels of support received. An exception to this was made in terms of fee-paying schools, who had higher levels of pupil contact and offered regular online classes and guidance.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONTINGENCY PLANNING

- Societal perceptions and general attitudes to the wearing of face masks needs to improve.
- There appears to be perceived positive impacts from lockdown for some children. More time spent with their families has been suggested by some parents to improve feelings of closeness within the family which in turn, possibly encourages more resilience in the children. Amidst rising mental health concerns for children, further research is suggested with regards to the potential positive impact of families spending more time together and less time working inflexibly or in formal education.
- From our initial findings, a small number of families expressed the view that less time in formal childcare and education was better for their child's mental health and potentially for their capacity to learn and enjoy learning. This requires further investigation.
- Positive home-schooling experiences expressed by some parents and children, requires more research. Particularly as home-schooling has been growing in popularity in recent years and trends may increase as a result of lockdown experiences. Some of the parents in this study spoke positively about the prospect of partial home-schooling in the future and would welcome such an option.
- Initial data suggests that effective learning and studying at home appears to be only possible for a few hours each day, which supports existing literature suggesting that the school day is too long for children in terms of active learning capacity. This needs to be investigated further.
- Families who have children with additional support needs at school, also need professional support at

home if effective home learning is to take place during future lockdowns.

- During lockdown, not only children of critical workers need places at school, but potentially children with SEN or disabilities, also children of parents who are both working full-time hours from home.
- Schools (particularly in the state sector) should develop their home learning capabilities, to involve regular online classes/learning sessions with video conferencing support since these have been shown to have positive outcomes for home learners.
- Parents would benefit from a deeper understanding of how children learn and develop if future lockdowns occur.
- To help parents become more prepared for future lockdowns and in order to build up resilience, work and employment should consider becoming more flexible in order to support parents spending more time with their children.

PROJECT DETAILS

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