

Child and Parental Wellbeing during the COVID-19 pandemic

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How 'one year of Covid-19', from spring 2020 to spring 2021, affected the wellbeing of families with children aged 0-15.



Mixed-methods approach using:

- two nationally representative data sets (Understanding Society – UKHLS; Longitudinal Cohort Studies survey - Next Steps)
- 50 qualitative interviews with families in Scotland

KEY POINTS

- School/childcare closures, while important public health measures to control the spread of Covid-19, negatively affected the mental health and behaviour of children. Older children struggled due to reduced social interactions, but generally recovered post-lockdown. Young children displayed more longstanding behavioural changes.
- The pandemic has had a negative impact on the wellbeing of parents. Juggling work (paid or domestic) with childcare/home-schooling has been one of the strongest stressors for parents. Families greatly missed access to informal support (in particular grandparents) and social networks.
- The decline in wellbeing was greatest for mothers with two or more children, young mothers, and single mothers. Many reported exhaustion and significant lack of 'self-time'. This may have long-term negative effects on women's health and gender equality.
- Access to outdoor space, establishing home routines and sharing care or domestic responsibilities between partners or 'household bubbles' were the most important factors supporting family wellbeing during lockdowns.
- Our research highlights the importance of crisis-resilient school and childcare infrastructure to support family wellbeing and combat gender inequalities.

BACKGROUND

The Covid-pandemic and the public health measures aimed at containing the virus, such as lockdowns, physical distancing and self-isolating, radically changed family life and daily routines. The pandemic has had particularly dramatic effects on households with dependent children due to the closure of schools and childcare settings.

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CHILDREN'S WELLBEING DURING THE PANDEMIC

Rising incidents in poor mental wellbeing in older children seem to coincide with lockdown and school closure periods. Based on our analysis on UKLHS, in November 2020 ('lockdown' period) 17% of girls and 8.3% of boys, aged 10-15, reported a change from average standards to **high or very high behavioural and mental health difficulties compared to pre-pandemic times.** Similarly, between July 2020 (eased restrictions) and March 2021 ('lockdown' period), 12.1% of girls and 4.1% of boys (aged 10-15) reported a change from average to 'high' or 'very high' difficulties scores (Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire), suggesting **poorer behavioural and mental health in spring 2021. Girls and boys aged 10 to 15 reacted differently** to the difficulties they faced with **girls presenting substantially more difficulties in emotional symptoms** and **boys having more difficulties with 'conduct problems'.** A slightly different picture emerges regarding the mental health of **younger children, aged 5-11:** while the number of **boys with mental health problems had increased slightly** by March 2021 compared to pre-COVID, the mental health of **young girls remained fairly stable** in this period. Mothers of younger children did not find important differences in the emotional difficulties between girls and boys but, again, there were more 'conduct problems' in boys. In line with this, our interviews confirmed that **younger children seemed to adapt more easily** to the changed life circumstances and enjoyed spending more time with their parents and close environment. However, **they also displayed stronger behavioural changes,** with many parents voicing concern over their children internalising Covid-related restrictions as 'normal'.

CHILDREN'S AND PARENTS' WELLBEING: CONNECTIONS

A key finding is that **children's mental health during the pandemic was connected with their parents'/carers' mental health** and particularly, mothers: in cases where mothers experienced a substantial decline in wellbeing, their children's mental health also deteriorated. Younger children were more strongly affected by their mothers' mental wellbeing during the pandemic, with the effect being more pronounced during nation-wide lockdown periods.

PARENTS' WELLBEING DURING THE PANDEMIC

The negative effects of the pandemic on mental wellbeing was stronger for parents with children aged 0-15 compared to non-parents. **Women consistently reported poorer mental wellbeing than men, with mothers particularly suffering in their mental health during the pandemic.** Moreover, during the second national-wide lockdown (January to March 2021), there was a sharp decrease in mothers mental health with two or more children, based on our analysis of *UKHLS data*. These findings are corroborated by another set of representative data that consists of responses from young adults (aged 30-31) in the *Next Steps* cohort study on their experience of stress during the pandemic: generally, **women were more likely to report feeling stressed than men; parents were more stressed than those without children; and mothers expressed the highest levels of stress.** Particularly concerning is where individuals suffer a sharp decline in their mental health in the context of changing circumstances. Returning to the *UKHLS data*, we found that **mothers with two or more children, younger parents and single parents experienced the highest risk of suffering a sharp decline in their mental wellbeing.**



"[My daughter] really doesn't know any different whatsoever... she thinks we should stay home all the time, so when we take her out now she just wants to come home, and she's only three, you know, it's not fair. She doesn't understand that you can go out and do things"
(Judith, 2 children)

WHAT FAMILIES IN SCOTLAND TOLD US

"It's either you're parenting or you're working...there's no sort of rest" (Joanne, 1 child, employed not on furlough)

"I did see me nipping to the shop... and then sitting in the car for 10 minutes just to get that sanity, and having to brace myself to go back in... to more home-schooling, or fighting" (Kerri, 3 children)

"[My daughter] was like: "Well actually, I would really like to do dissection." Okay, so we went down to the butchers and got an eyeball and a heart from the butchers, and we actually did dissection, which she thoroughly loved" (Marina, 1 child)

"We effectively went into a 'shift system' where I would work 5am till 2pm and [my wife] would work 2pm until 9pm...the weekends we would have alternate days and one of us would stay home with the kids" (Allan, 2 children)

"We are blessed and lucky to have a big garden... we've just utilised what we've had and made the most of it which we've been lucky for" (Mary, 2 children)

The most challenging aspect of family life during COVID-19, which could explain the afore-reported declines in wellbeing, was the intense experience of **multiple and simultaneous responsibilities and demands** around home-schooling, childcare, and employment, combined with increased household chores. The situation was particularly acute in families where both parents were working during Covid-lockdowns (either from their 'home office' or as key workers), in one-parent families, and in households with family members having life-limiting illness.

Mothers bore the brunt of the pandemic: they put in the extra hours of domestic work, did most of the home-schooling and childcare, while juggling their day jobs resulting in **experiences of severe 'time poverty'** for many. Highlighting the **lack of 'self-time'** and the sense of **deep exhaustion**, mothers often **sacrificed their own wellbeing** to avert harm from their children and keep family life functioning. The mothers we interviewed pointed out that things were **particularly difficult when they had children of different age groups** in the home and had to support their education simultaneously and for different educational levels, whilst also keeping up with their jobs and household chores. Mothers expressed feelings of guilt and conflict in such cases; of not being able to be there for everyone at the same time. Home-schooling seemed to be a difficult experience for many, but for some, it was also an enriching activity that allowed them to bring creativity and a personalised element into their children's education.

Another stressor for families was the **falling away of tried and tested family routines** during the COVID-pandemic. During lockdowns, families had to cope without the support of grandparents and other relatives and friends. The challenge of being cut off from regular informal support networks was a recurring theme. To overcome the challenges, families developed **new daily routines or 'rotas'** between parents/carers to manage childcare effectively during Covid-restrictions.

The introduction of the Covid-measure of '**extended households**' in July 2020 greatly **alleviated the situation** for those families that were able to include close ones into a 'bubble' to support childcare and family life. The most important **source of family resilience** during Covid-lockdowns was **green outdoor space**. While the overarching impact of the Covid-pandemic seems to be exhaustion in parents, parents also reported positive effects of the unprecedented new situations such as enjoying the extra family time with loved ones or **strengthening family bonds**. Families also enjoyed engaging in social activities together (cooking, crafts).

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Schools and childcare services** (including ELC and ‘wrap around care’) need to be understood as **core social infrastructure** in policy frameworks and planning; they are important not only for children’s education, but also **vital for the wellbeing of families**.
- Where closures of schools and childcare facilities are necessary for health & safety reasons, **remedial action plans following closures are needed to support the wellbeing of children and their parents, particularly mothers**.
- Green outdoor space and informal support networks are important for family wellbeing and resilience; yet not all families have access to these resources. **Availability of communal spaces** for informal gatherings and ‘buddy support networks’, including **access to communal green outdoor space should be built into all place-making and community planning**.
- Policymakers need to **address the time poverty** parents, and in particular, **mothers face** in their daily lives by juggling work, home and childcare responsibilities, and the impact this has on family wellbeing. For working parents, a national 4-day working week or a general roll-out of flexible working-time policies could help address this issue.
- Establishing a **universal childcare system** (including ELC, year-round ‘wrap around care’ and emergency care) **that offers accessible, affordable and flexible high-quality childcare to all families is paramount for effectively combatting health and gender inequalities in Scotland**.

About the ‘Childcare and Wellbeing in the Times of COVID-19’ project

This briefing forms part of a series of resources published from the UKRI rapid response project ‘Childcare and Wellbeing in Times of Covid-19’. To see the full report and find out more about the research go to www.childcare-covid.org or contact Ingela.Naumann@ed.ac.uk

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