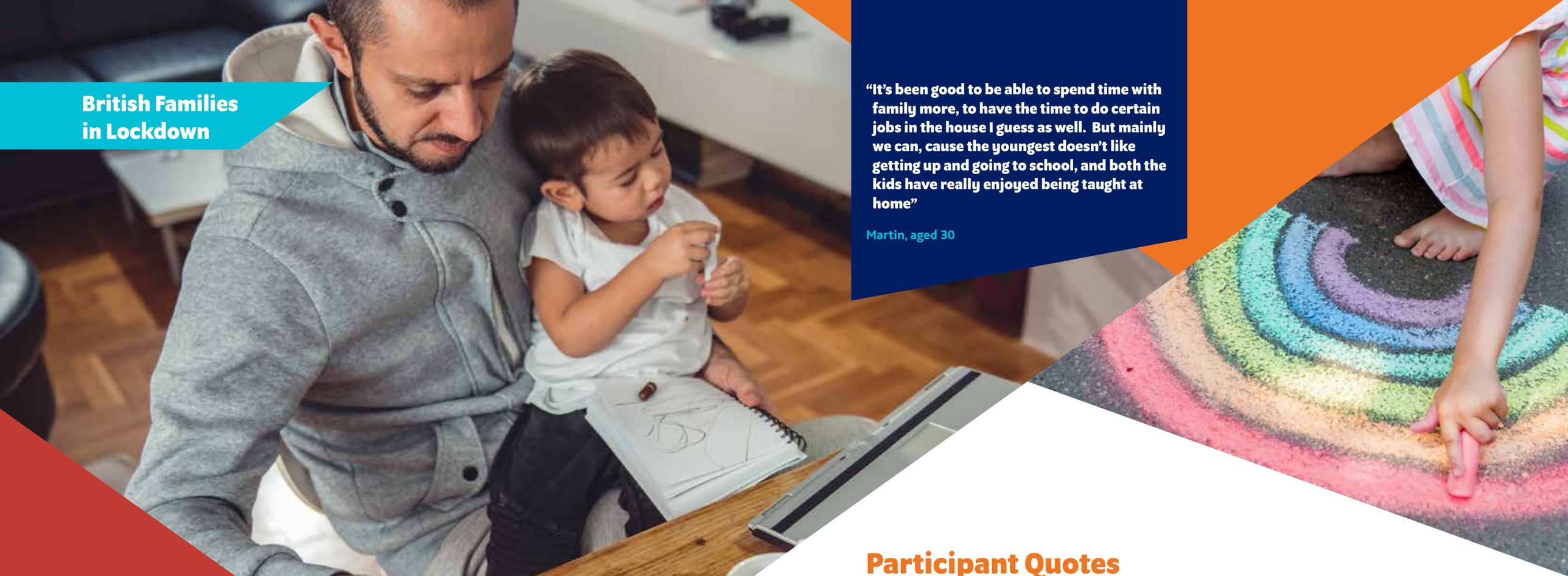
Leeds Trinity University

British Families in Lockdown

Initial Findings

July 2020





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Leeds Trinity University

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Acknowledgments:

We would like to thank all the parents who have participated in the study and shared their lockdown experiences. The study is supported by Research England funding.

UKRI Research England

"It's been good to be able to spend time with family more, to have the time to do certain jobs in the house I guess as well. But mainly we can, cause the youngest doesn't like getting up and going to school, and both the kids have really enjoyed being taught at home"

Martin, aged 30

Participant Quotes

"Whilst my wife is working from home, there are quite strict boundaries. No one goes to speak to her, she is kind of shut off"

Jeremy, aged 38

"I think it's actually brought us closer as a family, cause we're spending some really good quality time together ... Me and my girls have started our own little beauty shop going, we've been perming eyelashes, colouring hair, doing nails, things that we wouldn't have, you know, that we'd have gone to a salon to be done, we've actually done them together"

Andrea, aged 42

"We were already beginning to do some contingency planning. So, by the time the lockdown itself was announced, I was expecting it. I think what surprised me was that it didn't happen sooner"

Tamaka, aged 44

"My dad got COVID in a care home and he passed away a couple of weeks ago... And it was hard that I couldn't see him and be with him"

Lydia, aged 48

"We're going for more walks, we are baking more, we're making things, pizza at weekend. We've had a lot of bonfires and marshmallows in the garden"

Ruth, aged 43

"You get a different sense of self, when your idea of yourself isn't reflected through external eyes, and I think I watched my children flourish in a different way that couldn't have happened if they were constantly leaving the house"

Colette, aged 43

"I worry about them all the time; you know what I mean. There's a new type of symptom linked with the coronavirus that children are getting"

Luke, aged 23

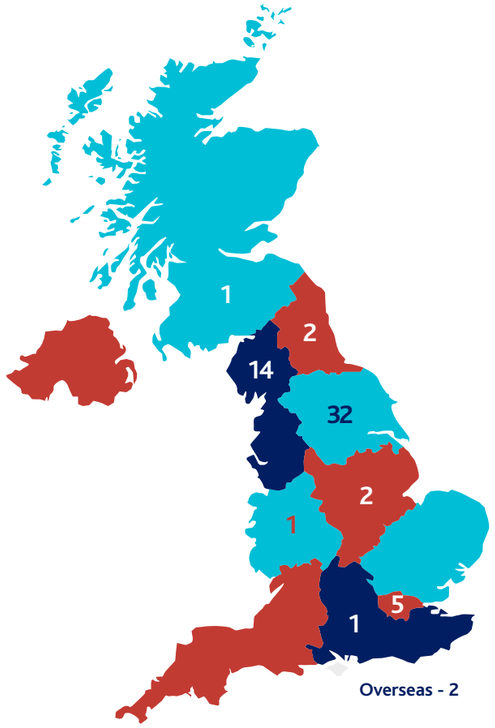
Introduction

Covid-19 is an infectious disease caused by a newly discovered coronavirus, which was first reported in Wuhan (China) and it has spread across the globe since. Subsequently on the 30th of January 2020, the outbreak was declared as a Public Health Emergency of International Concern.

To help prevent the spread of Covid-19 and to protect the growing pressure on the NHS, Boris Johnson announced on the 23rd March that UK residents must stay at home indefinitely. The only exceptions to this would be leaving the house to purchase essential items, exercising once a day, travelling to work (if working from home was not possible) and for medical reasons. At the same time, many businesses were shut, and large gatherings prohibited. Schools were advised to close on the 20th March with exception of children whose parents are critical workers or children who are classified as 'vulnerable'.

'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. Sixty parents from a diverse set of socio-economic backgrounds, geographies, religions and cultures participated in 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 evidence is overwhelmingly quantitative based, scientific, clinical, anecdotal or journalistic, as such, these qualitative insights 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.





""My girls haven't been able to see their dad because their dad is also in another blended family and they have teenage children, and we can't one hundred percent say what they're doing"

Andrea, aged 42

Methods

Given the Covid-19 government advice at the time, individuals could not leave home unless it was deemed essential (i.e. essential items, medical reasons, exercise, or work if working from home was not possible). As such, face to face interviews were not permitted and the research team turned to telephone and video interviews as an alternative. Parents were free to choose which format they preferred, and only two parents choose video interviewing.

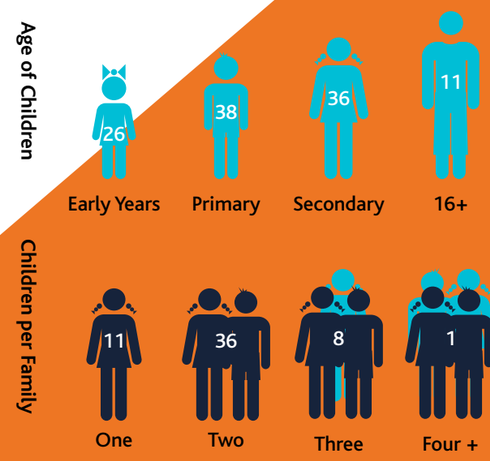
We spoke to 60 parents in total across the UK from diverse backgrounds by utilising qualitative, semi-structured telephone or video interviews.

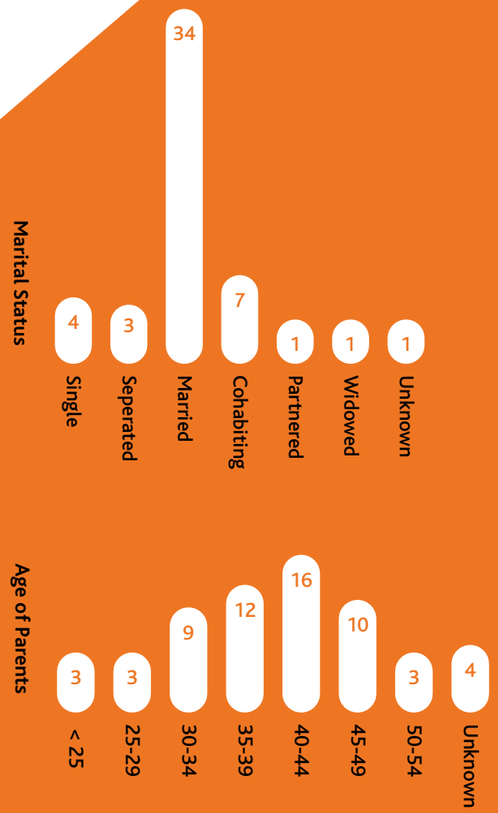
Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) mediated technologies (e.g., Skype, FaceTime, Microsoft Teams) allowed for real-time interactions between the research team and the participants. Telephone interviews, like face to face interviews, allowed for the ability to collect meaningful data and were advantageous in terms of their efficiency, cost-effectiveness, and flexibility. We found telephone and online video interviews also helped the research team to connect easily with participants from across the nation and in two instances, whilst the parents were abroad.



24
Fathers
(7 BAME)

36
Mothers
(17 BAME)







> **“ My children are spending a lot of time together that they wouldn’t ordinarily do, and you can definitely see they’re beginning to have a very strong bond between them”**
>
> Martin, aged 30

Family Dynamics

Some families appeared to be more resilient to lockdown than others, meaning that their health, well-being, work-life and education were impacted little by the government restrictions. Indeed, some families thrived and prospered by enjoying more family time together as work demands decreased. For those families who appeared less resilient, there were usually additional pressures for these households such as support needs, or significant work demands placed upon the parents. For families that appeared more resilient, their pre-lockdown lifestyles and routines were more flexible in terms of parental work demands and they were able to adapt.

- Most parents enjoyed the opportunity offered by lockdown to work from home and build stronger bonds with their children. Family time together was usually seen by these parents as being positive with family bonds becoming stronger and perceptions of well-being improving for the whole family.

- For those parents who were having to work harder as a result of lockdown, 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.

- The pressures of working from home and looking after children were significant for some parents and led to negative outcomes in terms of work productivity and some tense family interactions.

- Other parents found that working from home was easier and allowed them to have more time. The experience of lockdown for these parents was more positive. They were more productive in their work and the increased time with their family improved their well-being and feelings of connectedness.

- Gendered divisions of roles between the mother and father were rare and there were a number of families in which domestic roles were flexible between either the mother or the father. The general exception to this was in regards to home-schooling. Interestingly, mothers appeared to take more responsibility for the organisation and management of home-learning, whilst fathers were sometimes utilised in helping children with the more demanding or difficult learning tasks.

- Most parents were very attentive to their children’s happiness and well-being. Some expressed regret and sometimes guilt that their children were spending increased amounts of time immersed in screen technologies and video games. Other parents were enjoying creating new and fun activities for the children to engage in. Some children enjoyed helping out with the everyday tasks of the parents and sibling relationships were generally considered to have improved.

- Whilst the majority of families adhered to the government guidelines fully, some teenagers were encouraged to ignore social distancing rules so that they could see their friends. This was 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. Parents generally felt that children of all ages missed physical contact with their peers and socialising opportunities.

Work and Employment

Within our sample, there were parents from different business backgrounds whose employment roles ranged from business owners and senior executives, through to those on minimum wages, temporary workers, furloughed workers and unpaid volunteers. The majority of the participants experienced significant changes to their work-life during the initial stages of lockdown. Many workers faced uncertainty regarding their job security, and this led to financial worries.

- Many companies were very supportive of their employees concerning the expectations of home-working and productivity, particularly for those who had childcare responsibilities. However, despite not being critical workers, some parents were still under pressure to work full time hours, sometimes to the same or increased workloads as before lockdown. These families would have benefitted from being given the choice of school spaces. Especially those who had additional care needs within the home.

- As a result of lockdown, virtual, online video meetings have become an accepted norm in most work environments and in many instances, they are considered preferable to face-to-face meetings.

- Positive home-working experiences were often connected to those workers whose employers who were perceived as supportive and adaptable. Whereas negative home-working experiences were often associated with employers who were perceived as unsympathetic and did not reduce their expectations of employee productivity.

- For those who were critical workers, little had changed in terms of their expectations at work. Few of the critical-workers in our sample had taken up the option of a school place for their child due to fears of coronavirus infection. Some critical workers had additional coronavirus concerns at work and felt that social distancing in their workplace was not always possible or was not adhered to.

- Some of the participants had already been home-working prior to lockdown and they felt well placed to cope with the changes. Some enjoyed being outside of the office environment and felt it benefitted them.

- Many individuals expressed significant benefits to working from home. It meant they were commuting less and having more time in the day. For those able to work from home, some expressed increased productivity levels. This was not only based on their personal judgements but had been confirmed by their company’s performance indicators. For businesses with an existing working from home culture they were able to transition and continue operating during the lockdown in a more efficient manner.

> **“Both me and my husband are key workers but because our nursery closed, we’ve kind of had to work a new plan. So, my husband works some weekends now instead, he didn’t used to, and I’m doing a lot of work from home in the evenings and during naps”**
>
> Harper, aged 31



Children's Learning and Education

There was little consistency between schools and nurseries concerning how much contact was made between them and the lockdown families. Some schools had regular contact with the pupils including daily video conferencing. Others were in contact as little as once a week via email.

- Privately run schools seemed to offer much better support for pupils including regular video conferencing and more teacher to pupil time. Some private schools also encouraged peer to peer learning online. Conversely many pupils at state-run schools had no personal contact or direct dialogue with their teachers.

- Many parents of children attending state school were critical of the work that was sent home, either the lack of it, or the perception that it was too difficult. Some of the learning that was sent home was on subjects that the children had not yet been taught and no online teaching was provided. These parents were often disappointed that their children had little or no contact with teachers.

- 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. Several parents identified the schools and early years settings as a cause of negative mental health outcomes for their children and felt that lockdown and the home-learning environment was beneficial for them. In particular, some children who had been victims of bullying or who experienced regular anxiety at school were benefitting from being at home.

- Some parents worried about their children returning to school/nursery again after lockdown. For some this was due to the threat of coronavirus, whilst for others they felt their child's well-being may suffer. Several parents considered that the prospect of their children attending school/nursery part-time in the future may be beneficial for their child, both academically and in terms of mental well-being.

- Children were generally reported to be missing their school friends, but not missing the school itself. Most children appeared to be positive and engaged with their home-learning, and it was noticeable that some children were willing to complete their studying either independently or under parental guidance without conflict. Some parents did experience resistance from their children, particularly if they dictated lengthy and fixed hours of studying or attempted to force study time. According to the parents, children were generally only able to effectively engage with learning for a few hours each day.



"My daughter has something called dyspraxia and we think possibly a bit of ADHD, and she's actually found that working at home is producing better results because she can work at her own pace. She's probably quite slow and needs to redo a lot of work and also she's quite easily distracted. So, without all the noise in the classroom, when she does work, she's able to work better. So it's weird. She kind of needs more support but actually she's kind of doing better at home than she was at school"

Theresa, aged 50



"My daughter gets all the education that she would get at school at this age, so we're not too worried about that, it's just socialising and things that she was getting on with at school"

Kandis, aged 33

Health and Well-Being

People's health, fitness and general well-being reportedly improved during the early period of lockdown. Most people were exercising more (although some were exercising less) and it was considered positive that the weather during lockdown was generally good. As such, most people enjoyed spending short periods of time outdoors each day, following government guidance.

- Diets improved for many people. There was more home cooking with fresh ingredients, and less take-aways and meals out. However, some were eating more junk food, drinking more alcohol and exercising less.

- Awareness of personal hygiene and preventative Covid-19 measures increased, and this was predicted to continue after lockdown. The importance of handwashing was something that people became much more aware of and were implementing regularly inside and outside of the home.

- Quality of sleep was mixed during the initial stage of lockdown. Some enjoyed better quality sleep, others lost sleep over perceived health risks of going into work (currently or imminently).

- Some people chose not to leave their house, even for exercise. This was in part due to fears and precautions regarding the coronavirus, but also for other reasons such as social anxiety or worries about harassment and intimidation for various reasons.

- A significant number of parents thought that the experience of being at home was positive for the whole family's mental health. Children were spending more time with their parents and siblings and this contributed to strengthening family bonds. Some parents of young children, 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.

- Many parents felt that a lack of contact with friends and peers was potentially detrimental to their well-being and the same applied for their children. It was noted that it was particularly difficult for teenagers who were separated from their romantic partners.

- For some parents and children who were receiving mental health support prior to lockdown, some of these services ceased at the start of lockdown which caused concern. Access to other support services for some families also discontinued and there was limited, or no further contact made during the initial period of lockdown. Children with SEN (special educational needs) or disabilities received little or no additional support.

- When there were additional needs in the house (such as children with SEN, disabilities, one or more parents in need of care/support), home-working and home-learning became more difficult.

“Today was the first day my twelve-year-old had a little bit of a meltdown purely because he’s got a lot of assignments today”

Miranda, aged 48

Conclusions

From this study it has become clear that people experienced early lockdown in different ways and some families were more resilient to the challenges and changes than others. For some families, the experience of home-working and home-learning resulted in more family time and strengthened family bonds during lockdown, which led to a number of benefits, not least in terms of the perceived mental well-being of the whole family. As such, some parents were considering reducing their work commitments in the future in order to spend more time with the family. Some parents also expressed a positive and productive home-working experience, and it was suggested that a supportive employer, access to appropriate resources (e.g. internet, laptops and computers), lack of travel and less office distractions were key to successful home-working. Those who continued to go into work seemed to be largely unaffected overall by the lockdown but enjoyed faster commute times and quieter workplaces; although some critical workers were concerned that social distancing was not possible in their workplace, or that guidelines were being ignored. With fears of contracting coronavirus running high, this led to some workers losing sleep through worry about going into work.

Single parent families, or those families in which both parents had to work full time (either from home or at their workplace), found home-schooling and childcare more difficult, particularly if their employers were not supportive and expected the same or higher productivity levels than before lockdown. Families with younger children, adult caring responsibilities, children with disabilities or SEN also struggled and problems were further compounded by a reduction in professional support during lockdown. Many of those who were finding the balance of work and childcare commitments difficult also recognised the benefits of more family time together.

There has been a technological revolution in working practices with online, video meetings becoming the new norm. These have proven to be effective for many workers and it was generally felt that online working culture will replace face to face meetings after lockdown, saving considerable costs and improving efficiencies. Whilst private and commercial businesses were quick to utilise online working and video meetings to ensure some continuity, other workplaces did not. In the first seven weeks of lockdown, care services and state-run schools were seemingly not widely using video conferencing technology to engage with the families at home.

Our study identified little in the way of discernible gender inequalities for the families we interviewed. The families we spoke to reported significant harmony, cooperation and equality between the mothers and fathers. Both men and women worked and both men and women took on responsibility for childcare and the home at different times and to differing degrees in different families. Those in a working role were not seen as superior or more important than those in a domestic role. The arrangements made between parents concerning which parent took on which roles and at what times, was rarely if ever based upon the gender. Instead these decisions were based upon individual suitability, circumstance and competence.

There were clear inequalities present for parents and families who were living with physical or mental impairments within the home compared to those who were not. For these families and particularly for those who were used to significant levels of support, the lack of continued support alongside increased and compounding pressures associated with work, childcare, coronavirus threat and additional needs made home life more difficult.

BAME parents and families were also sometimes having different experiences to non BAME parents, particularly in terms of actual and perceived racial tensions resulting from the reported international origins of coronavirus. There were also concerns for BAME parents over home-schooling when English was not their first language. British-East-Asian parents with international experiences of epidemics felt that the UK government was slow to respond to the threat and so, as individuals they took additional precautions themselves.



Perceptions of slow government responses to the threat of coronavirus were common amongst parents of different backgrounds and there was a general feeling that other countries were managing the threat better than the UK during the first seven weeks of lockdown. Government guidance was reported to be inconsistent and the majority of the participants had regularly witnessed or experienced other members of the public ignoring social distancing guidelines. In particular teenagers and young people were considered to not be adhering to government restrictions. 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 meet up with their friends. These meet-ups were encouraged for social and mental health reasons but not necessarily for educational purposes.

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. 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 that the expectations of teachers were unrealistic considering the low levels of support received. An exception to this was made in terms of private fee-paying schools, who had higher levels of pupil contact and offered regular online classes and guidance.

“Just getting to grips with what we’re supposed to be doing for their home learning. My eldest daughter sorts herself out actually because she gets emails from school, but it’s our middle child who’s in year four who every night we’ve got to write a timetable out for him”

Ruth, aged 43

Concerns about returning to normality in terms of schooling and work were common. Parents only wanted to do so when the threats had significantly diminished. Parents also saw advantages of spending more family time together in the home, as such, some parents considered that a reduction in the number of hours spent in work and at school and an increase in family bonding experiences may have positive impacts upon well-being.

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