

How has the Covid-19 crisis impacted parents' relationships with their children?

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POLICY BRIEFING

JULY 2020

While the Covid-19 crisis may have created unprecedented challenges for parents and children, it appears to have strengthened relationships for many families.

This Policy Briefing discusses results from the May COVID-19 survey of Understanding Society, a longitudinal household study that has collected data since 2009. We analysed the answers of 5566 parents who answered the parent-child relationship questions.

About a quarter of parents reported that their relationship with their children had become better since the government's stay at home policy. Fewer than 5% reported it had become worse.

However, while for many it has proved a positive experience, it is important to take note of the difficulties faced by certain groups. This will help families face future challenges posed by the continuing pandemic crisis.

This study uses data from University of Essex, Institute for Social and Economic Research. (2020). Understanding Society: COVID-19 Study, 2020. [data collection]. UK Data Service. SN: 8644, <http://doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-8644-1>

Key Points:

- *26% of parents reported that their relationship with their children had become better since the government's stay at home policy. Only 4% reported it had become worse.*
- *Mothers were more likely to report an improvement in their relationships than fathers.*
- *More parents who work at home reported improvements in their relationships than those who do not.*
- *Disadvantaged parents, including lone and low-income parents, were slightly more likely to report their relationships had become worse, but about 1 in 4 reported it had become better.*
- *Keep in mind that 97% of parents in Britain say that they have a close or very close relationship with their children.*

Introduction

The Covid-19 crisis has produced an extraordinary situation for families. The lockdown policy introduced on 23 March 2020 closed schools and most workplaces, and families were required to stay indoors for an unprecedented amount of time. Overnight, the everyday rhythms of life came to a halt, and families were forced into closer proximity than usual. This unusual situation has raised questions about how families are coping and to what extent relationships have improved or deteriorated.

By the end of May, when this survey was conducted, 96% of children were still not attending school. All schooling had switched online with children expected to continue learning on their own and/or with the support of parents. According to the April COVID-19 Homeschooling briefing¹, 58% of boys and 70% of girls spent two hours or more a day doing schoolwork. Parents were often expected to help their children, but the amount of help depended on age, with 45% of parents home schooling primary school students for two or more hours a day. For secondary school students, however, only 14% of parents were home schooling for two or more hours a day, and 26% spent around 1-2 hours a day.

This new burden of care and housework has disproportionately impacted women. Women have been more likely to reduce their working hours due to childcare and the increase in housework. Mothers have been spending on average 21 hours per week on childcare and home schooling, while fathers have been spending 12 hours. Women have also suffered disproportionately in the labour market, as they are more likely to work in sectors which have been locked down². Some have claimed that the Covid-19 crisis will be a major setback for gender equality and impact women's careers and finances for decades³.

The toll of balancing work and family has also impacted mental wellbeing. An analysis of the April COVID-19 data⁴ found that mothers with children under the age of five experienced a significantly large increase in overall mental health problems. Lone parents and the most vulnerable have also experienced the largest shocks to their economic and mental wellbeing.

The majority of studies and articles reporting on the effects of lockdown have focused on the negative consequences, speculating that parents and children have suffered during lockdown. However, despite the challenges, the extra time together seems to have brought many families closer.

1 https://www.understandingsociety.ac.uk/sites/default/files/downloads/general/ukhls_briefingnote_covid_homeschool_final.pdf
 2 <https://www.nber.org/papers/w26947.pdf>
 3 <https://www.coronavirusandtheeconomy.com/question/how-will-response-coronavirus-affect-gender-equality>
 4 <https://www.ifs.org.uk/uploads/WP202016-Covid-and-mental-health.pdf>

The study

These results are based on parents surveyed in the May COVID-19 survey of Understanding Society, a longitudinal household study that has collected data since 2009, funded by the ESRC and the Health Foundation. The COVID-19 study is a monthly survey, first fielded in April, on the experiences and reactions of the UK population to the Covid-19 pandemic. The second wave was carried out online between 27 May and 2 June. All Understanding Society adult sample members aged 16+ were invited to participate, and 14,811 completed the survey in the second wave. In total, 5566 parents answered the parent-child relationship questions.

The parents were only asked questions about parent-child relationships if they had a child living in the house with them. The questions on time use include a question on hours spent per week on childcare and home schooling. All adults were asked the question if children were present in the household; below, we restrict this analysis to parents with children below the age of 18 living with them in the household.

Results were weighted to make the results more representative of the UK population. However, the survey may still have missed the most disadvantaged who have suffered the most from the pandemic. For example, we have insufficient data on men who have experienced hardship to be able to say whether their relationships have become better or worse.

Main findings

For the vast majority of parents, relationships with their children have stayed the same (70%) or improved (26%) since the government introduced the "Stay at Home" policy. Only 4% reported that their relationships had become worse than before. Overall, these percentages differ very little across demographic and socio-economic characteristics, but there are some significant differences.

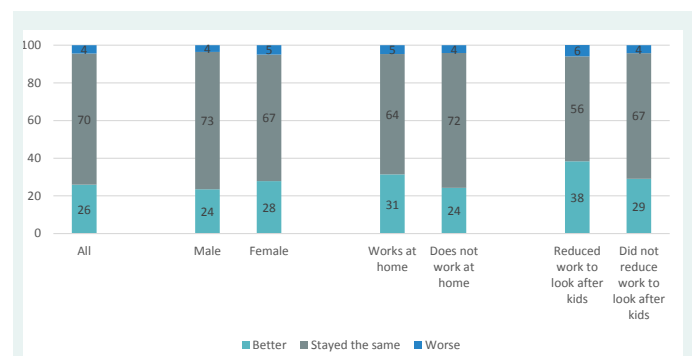


Figure 1: Percentage of parents who reported their relationships had become better, worse, or stayed the same by gender, working at home, and reduced paid work hours to look after children

More mothers than fathers reported an improvement in their relationships. Over a quarter of women appear to be benefiting from the lockdown as a time to become closer to their children, and only 5% reported their relationships had become worse. Thus, despite the increase in responsibilities and extra work, mothers seem to be appreciating this dedicated time with their children.

Working from home may not be as bad for parent-child relationships as some have predicted. More parents who work at home reported improvements in their relationships than those who do not. Likewise more parents who reduced their paid work hours to look after their children reported their relationships had become better (38% compared to the 29% who did not reduce), although slightly more also said their relationships had become worse (6% versus 4%). Note, however, that those who can work from home most likely have higher incomes and education.

In addition, investing in home schooling and caring seems to be related to closer relationships. Those who spend more time home schooling their children have a better relationship than those who spend no time schooling their children. However, this may not be the case for parents with secondary school students who spend over 30 hours caring for their children.

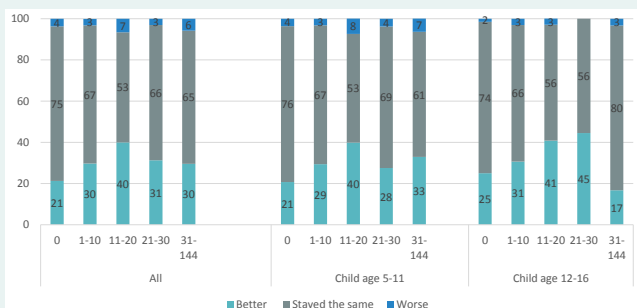


Figure 2: Percentage of parents who reported their relationship with their children became better, stayed the same, or became worse, by the time spent on care or home schooling

Some groups did appear to suffer more due to the lockdown. In comparison to married parents, fewer lone parents reported an improvement in their relationships (23% versus 27% of married parents), and slightly more said their relationships had become worse (7% versus 4%). Further analyses have shown that fewer lone parents said they talk to their children about important matters (73% versus 79% of married parents) but, on the other hand, they are also less likely to quarrel with their children (23% versus 34%), possibly because they have fewer interactions with them. The April COVID-19 survey indicated that lone parents have experienced particularly severe declines

in household earnings and are more likely to have fallen behind on bills, and these stressors may be impacting relationships.

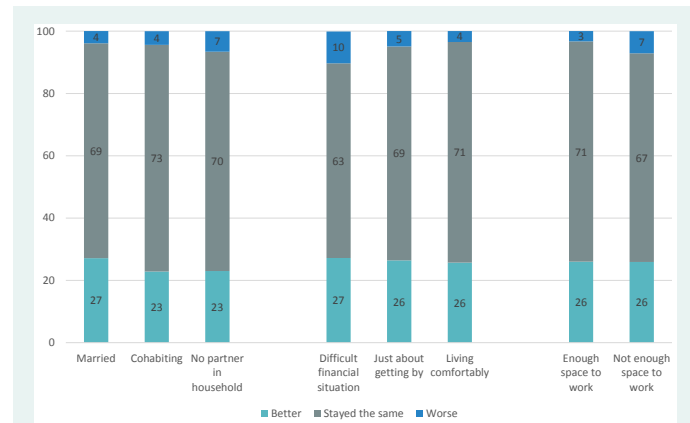


Figure 3: Percentage of parents who reported their relationship with their children became better, stayed the same, or became worse, by partnership type, perceptions of financial situation, and enough quiet work space

The April COVID-19 survey also found that low-income parents were more likely to have suffered from the lockdown, which might impact parent-child relationships to some degree. It showed that 10% of parents who said they were finding their financial situation difficult said their relationships had deteriorated. Lack of other resources were also associated with a worsening of relationships; for example, a greater proportion of those without access to their own workspace said relationships with their children became worse.

On the other hand, over a quarter of those in deprived circumstances still reported that their relationships had improved recently, so overall the differences by socio-economic status are minor. And keep in mind that about 97% of parents in Britain say that they have a close or very close relationship with their children and very few say that they are not at all close to their children.

Policy implications

While lockdown seems to have strengthened relationships in most families, it is worth taking note of the difficulties faced by certain groups. If lockdown measures are to be reintroduced, for example, in further waves of the pandemic, then the government should be considering ways to provide extra support for those suffering the worst effects of the crisis.

School closures and re-openings are still uncertain and a cause for concern. There needs to be recognition of the new roles that many parents find themselves in as home

schoolers, and that this new parent-child dynamic can have both immediate and lasting effects on employment prospects and mental health, particularly for women. In addition, many families have not suffered much financially due to the furlough scheme; however, as the scheme

comes to an end and unemployment rises, economic conditions may become worse. It will be vital, then, for the government to ensure that parent-child relationships continue to thrive, and aren't another casualty of the Covid-19 pandemic.

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