



The Impact of COVID-19 Lockdown on Children, Young People and Families

**Perspectives from front line
workers, children, young people
and families including scope of
current surveys and research**

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Introduction

The World Health Organisation (WHO) declared the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) outbreak as a pandemic on 12 March 2020. Many countries responded in many different ways, Northern Ireland went into full lockdown on 23 March 2020, which included the closure of most non-essential services and schools. Many workers moved to working from home where possible, whilst others were placed on a furlough scheme. Many key workers in front line health provision were redeployed into hospitals. Many family support services embraced virtual platforms in order to continue to engage and support families. There have been many different and unique experiences for families, children and young people during this time. Jiao, WT et al, (2020) writes “Children are not indifferent to the dramatic impact of the COVID-19 epidemic. They experience fear, uncertainties, physical and social isolation and may miss school for a prolonged period.”

The closures of schools across many countries have been a major part of the response to the pandemic. In fact the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation estimated that national schools closures relating to COVID-19 has affected 862 million children and young people globally. (Viners et al, 2020). Here in Northern Ireland 406 schools remained open for limited numbers of vulnerable children and children of key workers while approximately 344,000 pupils remained at home. Viners et al (2020) highlights that whilst there are positives to school closures particularly in reducing the transmission of the virus, “reviews have also noted adverse effects of school closures, including economic harms to working parents, health-care workers, and other key workers being forced from work to childcare and to society due to loss of parental productivity, transmission from children to vulnerable grandparents, loss of education, harms to child welfare particularly among the most vulnerable pupils and nutritional problems especially to children for whom free school meals are an important source of nutrition. Social isolation also brings a range of psychological harms.”

According to Prime, Browne and Wade (2020) “The measured impact of the pandemic on family well-being is presently unknown. However, upward of one third of families have reported feeling very or extremely anxious about family stress resulting from COVID-19-related confinement (Statistics Canada, 2020).” Prime et al also goes on to state that “Thus, it is of the utmost importance for practitioners working with children and families to understand the consequences of COVID-19 on families” and to “address the suffering of children and families, helping them thrive in the face of this hardship, especially for those who

are traditionally underrepresented or marginalized in society.” (Vasquez, 2012).

This paper provides a review of the real-time experiences of children, young people and families during the Covid-19 pandemic. The information has been extracted from narrative accounts and case studies from the families themselves, from service providers and from scoping survey information that has been published so far. This paper will also build on a document produced by the Mental Health and Emotional Wellbeing sub-cell that was set up as part of the Department of Health’s Covid surge response structure. This paper along with emerging academic studies will help to inform planning for services going into the “new normal.” There are many emerging themes from the available information, some are emphasised below.

- Emotional Health and Well Being of Children and Parents, Including Changes In Behaviour
- Disability
- Financial Impact
- Education and home-learning
- Domestic Violence and Safeguarding
- Positive Outcomes

It is important to highlight that many of the above issues and many others are interlinked; the following is a full statement from one mother that demonstrates the multifaceted impact of covid-19 on her family.

*“The current changes in my own circumstances and the **level of anxiety** experienced by my three **children who all have ASD** have been huge.*

*I have **never felt so isolated in my life** and I would be quite an independent person. The **overwhelming feelings of not being enough for my own children**, the **bombardment of information and activities that we should/need to be doing at home**, to support their learning with no actual conversations from teachers just text and email. I have had an offer of literacy support from the EA, but through email and another online platform which requires further **access to screens, which are limited** within the home with no personal interaction however limited.*

*The **behaviour challenges** that I as mother would be dealing with anyway has **escalated** and the **respite I would have benefited from through school** has **gone**. The escalation has meant that education and fun activities are limited and I am **just managing to tread water**.*

For the past nine weeks we, as a family have continued this way with support being offered through information packs which requires time to work through and pick out what is most relevant to your children along with **not having access to printers and strong Wi-Fi. By the time I have them in bed I am too tired to even contemplate looking at screens and resources to work out strategies on my own.** So many women manage this daily that are in a lot more difficult positions than I am in, but if I, as a parent, am **feeling I am failing my children**, and they are feeling and understanding my issues that is only **having a knock on effect on them and their mental health.**

..... **families like mine will have a long road ahead to get over the impact of this isolation.** I do not lift a phone to helplines as I do not feel that we are a family in need. Families like mine are the ones that are at home dealing as best they can and not accessing services as they do not recognise themselves as in need or do not want to be a further burden on services that are already stretched before this pandemic even hit. Many families do not want anyone to "fix" their problems but just be a sounding board for them to process and work through and move on.

My husband goes to work every day and can be transferred to support in areas where the virus has hit. **This also adds to the level of anxiety within the house as the children see him come home and watch the rituals that have to be carried out in order to minimize the risk of spreading the virus** both within our home and within the community when we need to access shops etc.

I have lost my network from work which has also impacted on my children as many times I picked up some wonderful ideas from other families and had been able to debate and discuss the impact of many areas of normal life and how we can manage these changes and support one another.

I am not alone and I know that so many within our communities are experiencing all of these things and more but for me at this time I feel like if I do not do something to help or contribute to support while supporting myself and the children **I am afraid that we will lose the fight** to stay above it. I am not just talking about myself I mean the general population, our local communities and our families within it"

Emotional Health and Well Being of Children and Parents, including changes in behaviour, fear and anxiety

“Dr Alex Kwong of the university of Bristol (2020) proposes that ‘the likelihood of dealing with COVID is expected to have a profound affect on mental health, the knock on effects potentially far reaching and long term especially if not understood and managed, while Prof. Cherie Armour of Queens STARC department (2020), following on from the research of Kings College London (2020) ‘the heightened psychological distress (i.e. initial reports of confusion fear; anger; anxiety; irregular sleep and longer lasting behaviour changes such as vigilant hand washing) placed on the population through the need to self-isolate will continue to be a stressful life event for many cross the country’ and so the impact of self-isolation on health, behaviour and wellbeing must also be explored, with those in less supportive environments most at risk.” (Whearty, S and Barbour, R, 2020)

As referenced above the heightened psychological distress including fear and anxiety ranges from fear about own health and the health of loved ones, anxiety about safety measures such as social distancing, PPE etc; anxiety about changes to normal family life, and transference of parental anxiety to children:-

“A child would not go out the door and couldn’t sleep as he was too afraid he was going to die” (Health Visitor)

The second highest reason for referral to Family Support Hubs has been parent’s anxiety and worries ...not all required an outgoing referral but support and listening ear and regular calls from staff until they found a way to adapt to their own family’s new routine. (Family Support Hub Coordinator)

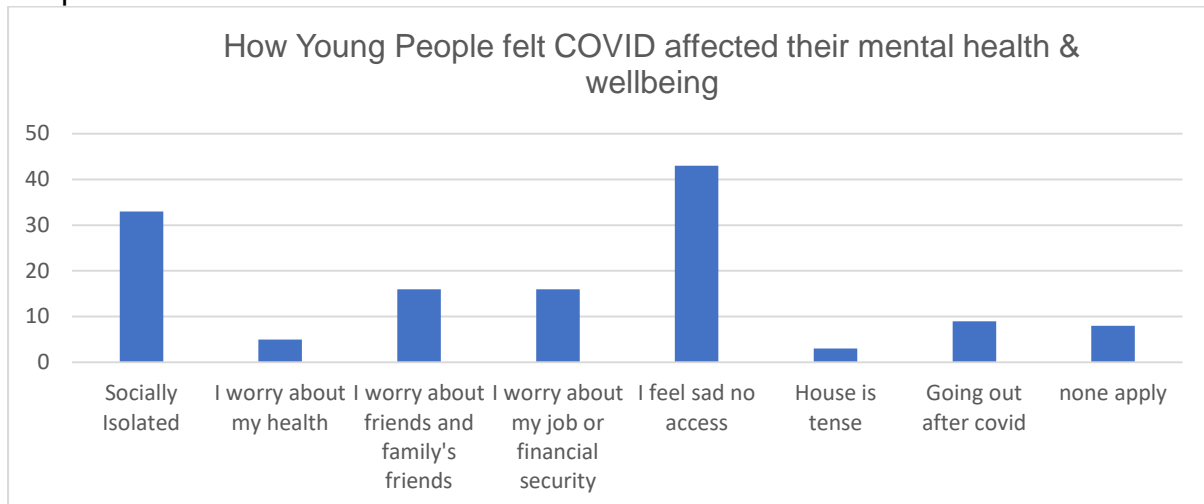
*As the lockdown has progressed the young peoples’ sense of not having to deal with life has begun to dissipate and young people are beginning to absorb their parent’s anxieties. The lack of structure and routine is beginning to affect them. These were young people who found it difficult to emotionally regulate and were to a degree coping with the erratic nature of the lockdown. This has moved on now, and many of the young people are beginning to **experience real stress from the lack of routine and certainty in their lives.** (Service provider)*

Several mothers have told us that their children have the fear of going outside and meeting other children. This may have an impact later on when the lockdown is lifted. (Service provider)

Many service users and providers have reported concerns about children and young people's behaviour and have linked this to concerns about mental health and emotional wellbeing. These include:

- concerns about children being quiet and withdrawn,
- spending long periods of time in their room alone,
- regressive behaviour
- Self-harm.

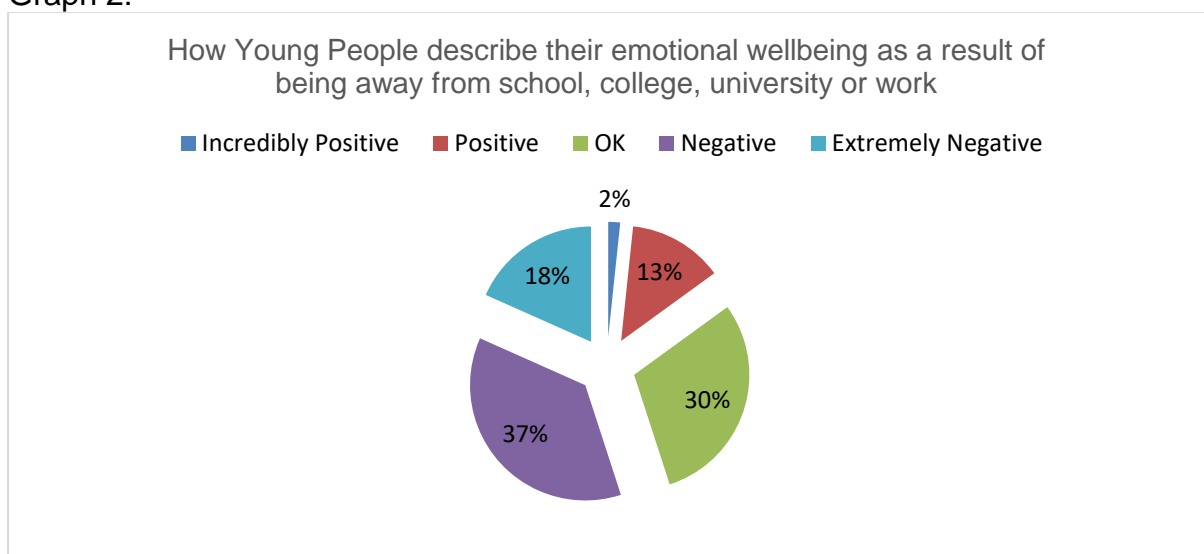
Graph 1:



Source: Third Space

The above graph demonstrates how young people aged 14-24 using Third Space Services felt that Covid-19 has affected their mental health and wellbeing, and below shows how they describe their emotional wellbeing as a result of being away from school/college/university/work. **With 55% describing this as being negative or extremely negative.**

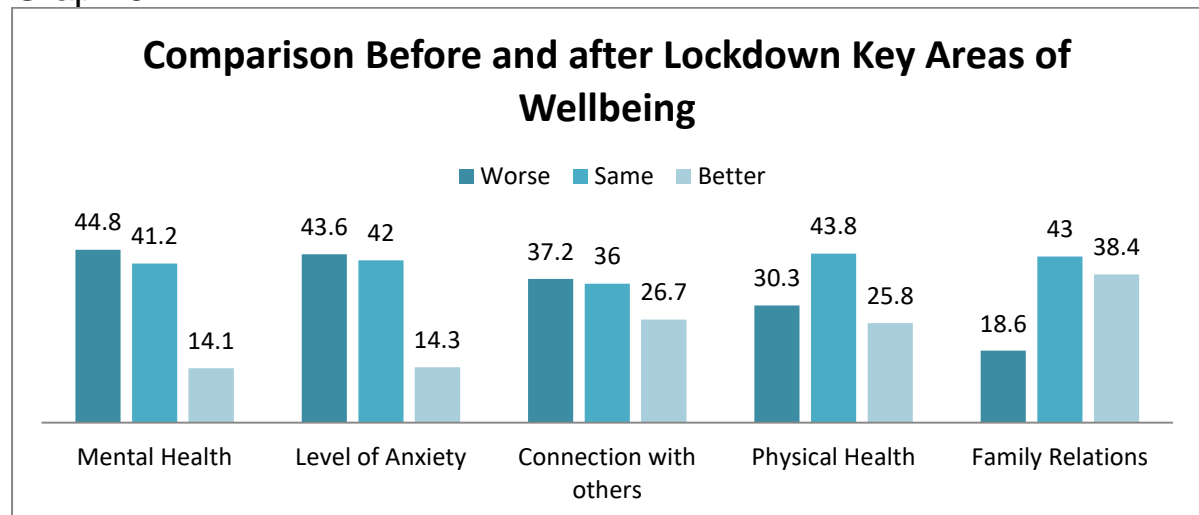
Graph 2:



Source: Third Space

Graph 3 also shows similar patterns to the responses to a survey carried out by Streetbeat, with young people saying that their mental health and levels of anxiety and connections with others have worsened.

Graph 3:



Source: Streetbeat Lockdown Survey (May 2020)

The Shankill Family Survey also highlighted that:

61% said this situation has negatively impacted **their child's mental health**.

The most common impacts being:

- Difficulty concentrating (64%)
- Anxiety / Fear (62%)
- Sleep disturbances (54%)₁

66% of the parents taking part in the Shankill Family Survey also highlighted that they felt **their own mental health** had also been negatively impacted by the current situation. The most common impacts were:

- Anxiety/Fear (77%)₂
- Sleep disturbances (68%)
- Low Mood (53%)

₁ Respondents could select more than one answer, and are based on the 61% who said their child's mental health had been impacted

₂ Respondents could select more than one answer, based on 66% who said their own mental health had been impacted

Service providers have also highlighted:

Some post-natal parents are also experiencing difficulties and due to COVID 1, they cannot access the same level of services in some cases, for example, where mum may be suffering from PND; this can impact on the mental health and wellbeing of the baby with bonding and attachment and with early communication.

(SureStart Manager)

*Unfortunately there also have also been many negative impacts on children's mental health and wellbeing. We have experienced **increased demand for support around behaviour management** as **routines have been disrupted**, **parents are under stress in the home** which impacts on the children and this **displays itself in a change in behaviour** (SureStart Manager)*

- *Becoming aggressive towards parents*
- *Physically abusive - kicking and pulling hair*
- *Verbally Abusive*
- *Manipulative - if they are not getting their own way throwing tantrums screaming etc.*
- *Regressive Behaviours*
- *Returning to baby talk*
- *Toileting issues - bed wetting , lack of /no self-control due to fear and heightened anxiety*
- *Heightened anxiety*
- *Children are pulling their own hair*
- *picking at their skin*
- *night time terrors*
- *Children are worried and fearful of going outside*
- *Fearful of themselves/parents/grandparents dying*
- *Fearful of meeting others outside*
- *Children have become withdrawn and quiet*
- *Lack of motivation - wanting increased time on screen time - xbox, tablet, phone etc.*
- *Separation anxiety" (Family Support Service Provider)*

- the impact of the **lack of routine** in some homes and how this will impact the mental health of young people around motivation and health in general
- Impact of **isolation on their social skills** and ability to socialise with peers/ professionals during transitions back to schools
- **How will we get children/young people back to schools who were previously non-attending**
- **Noticed a lot of fear with both children/young people and parents about the actual virus and the spread of this from person to person. I think we will see a lot of anxiety during the transition back to school"**
(NIACRO Practitioner)

Parenting NI's Parenting in a Pandemic Survey of 439 parents found that:

78% agreed or strongly agreed that it has been difficult for their family

The biggest challenges for parents were:

35% Stress/Emotional issues

24% Education of children

18% Uncertainty about future

10% Health concerns

9% Money issues

Many people are finding lockdown is having a mental health impact - 32% said their children were struggling to cope with their emotions. 23% of parents said they had always struggled but lockdown was making it worse, while 15% said they were having problems with mental health for the first time
(Belfast Live Great Big Parenting Survey, 2020)

- Lack of connection – feeling isolated and cut-off
- No routine – everyday feels like the same day
- Sleep patterns are all over the place – up all night, sleeping all day
- Fear of going back to normality – Social anxiousness
- Decrease in confidence and self-esteem
- Not happy with predicated grades
- Is Uni going to happen in September?
- Family members sick – fear of loss
- Grief
- Lack of support around me
- Will we be going back to normality?
- Just want to see my friends
- Bored
- Depressed
- Lonely
- Just want to take a break from family/siblings
- Want to see my boyfriend/girlfriend
- Parents have lost jobs – what impact will this have
- not being able to see family
(EA FLARE)

More than half of parents (56%) are worried about their child's mental health at a time when schools are closed and contact with friends and family is restricted as a result of social distancing (Save the Children Survey)

"The impact of the lockdown on the children's mental and emotional health hasn't been fully taken into account and I worry what this means for their development."

(Ulster University Experiences of Supporting Children's Home Learning during COVID-19)

85% of young people said they are going to bed later than usual, 80% said they are getting out of bed later than usual (Shankill Survey)

Children and Young People with Disability

Many parents of children with disabilities are finding the lockdown has been especially difficult for them and their children. The loss of routine, respite and school have had a negative impact on home life.

'Lockdown' has impacted these individuals disproportionately due to their disability. Contact through the Autism NI Helpline has found many families are struggling to explain the current abstract situation, especially in relation to routine change and school closures. **They are reporting that their child's anxiety has spiked, causing significant challenges in sleep, routine, behaviour and regression of skills due to processing challenges.**

Due to the pandemic and associated school/childcare closures, additional pressure has been placed on parents and carers to provide home schooling and ongoing educational support to their child. The majority of autistic children have additional educational needs and 86% autistic children in NI are classified as SEN (stages 1-5). These parents and carers are facing additional strain and stress trying to provide educational support for their child at home. (Autism NI)

"since lockdown my 7 year old with Autism has been very tearful and anxious the only wee routine we have is our bedtime routine, his limited diet has become even more limited he attends a special needs school and always loved school but when you mention school to him now he shuts down and says no." (Parent)

I am a parent of 3, one of whom is an adult with learning disability and a rare genetic disorder, who is very vocal and shouts constantly as **he is unable to understand what is going on and why his usual routine is changed.**

The impact of listening to this all day and the frustration of not knowing if my son is in pain or distress is mentally draining. (Parent)

My 14year old has an ADHD/SPD diagnosis. As long as he can stay on a laptop or phone he copes. If he doesn't get one or the other the stress he seems to be exhibiting is extreme and the stimming is back in force. He's gone from disruptive sleep to no sleep. I've kept as close to a routine as possible in regards to bed times (they are all in bed slightly later) ...Home schooling is non-existent. We tried at the start and it was going okay but with one laptop between 3 children if he didn't get on when he wanted to do the work it was full scale meltdown and then nothing got done. He's more anxious, he's not sleeping, he's agitated and even when on the computer he's loud, banging or tapping table and generally disruptive and fidgeting.
(Parent)

Angel Eyes NI surveyed parents within the Vision Impairment community, in response to their consistent concerns regarding home-learning and educational support. 116 parents of children & young people (CYP) responded:-

59% of respondents received learning resources electronically, 16% in paper format and a mere 19% both. However, 60% report the resources are inaccessible and therefore unusable. 62% of respondents have had to adapt the resources for their children themselves. Only 16% reported the help of the Classroom Assistant (CA) to adapt resources. This is an essential task for the CA. 57% reported the CA was not used to help and 27% do not know. Only 27% of respondents' children have access to specialist printed books others have purchased online during lockdown (Angel Eyes NI, 2020)

Financial Impact

“This pandemic is having a profound impact on all of us, but families who were already struggling to stay afloat, and those who have seen their incomes reduced, are being pulled under by a rising tide of financial pressures. While families are reeling from the effects of lockdown, it is simply not right that children should have to face the additional worry of feeling hungry or being evicted”. (JRF, 2020).

*“In April the number of emergency food parcels given out by The Trussell Trust locally rose 142 percent compared to the same time last year. **The data, shows the number of children seeking support from their 22 food banks in Northern Ireland also jumped by 128 percent**”* (Belfast Telegraph)

Research carried out by Carers UK found **that parents caring for disabled children are twice as likely as the general public to have used a food bank since lockdown.**

Feedback from Family Support Hub coordinators has noted that the highest numbers of referrals to the Hubs during lockdown has been for financial help. Families are struggling with food, fuel and digital poverty during the pandemic. Many families have highlighted that one of the biggest struggles with home schooling is access to devices and resources. Demand for food parcels have massively increased

*Family Support Hub coordinators have indicated from their direct contact with families and service providers that they are very **concerned about rising levels of poverty**. There are examples of a family **not having a cot for a child who was sleeping in a playpen and another about a baby who had no shoes and the parent was putting 3 pairs of socks on.***

*This polling has shown that around **7 in 10 families with children claiming Universal Credit or Child Tax Credit are having to cut back on essentials including food, utilities, nappies and activities for children** such as books and toys, with around **50% cutting back on food**. Families on low incomes have to manage extremely tight budgets with careful planning and resourcefulness, but **this seismic shock to daily life has meant many parents are struggling to put food on the table, let alone find the resources to support play and learning at home.** (JRF, 2020)*

...a rising number of families without food and a significant increase in the number of families being referred to foodbanks, as well as an increase in referrals from families who would not previously have needed the support of family support hubs or other agencies (Family Support Hub Coordinator)

Another issue that we have become aware of is that mums of new-borns aren't able to register the births of their babies which mean they're having difficulty accessing benefits and baby milk vouchers. They are eventually getting the milk vouchers but there are significant delays, up to 2 months, which means mums are trying to feed their babies for 8 weeks with no vouchers (FSH Coordinator)

Parents of children entitled to Free School Meals are more likely to experience difficulty in managing both their mental and physical well-being and are more likely to experience difficulty in managing household budgets (Ulster University Experiences of Supporting Children's Home Learning during COVID-19)

"Prices in the food shops are increasing and with the lockdown restrictions it's not possible for families to shop around, or travel to cheaper shops to reduce their household food costs. In rural areas particularly, people might be restricted to their local shop which can be more expensive... Previously families may have used free wi-fi whilst out and about or at school/college or work, but this isn't an option now." (JRF, 2020)

The Belfast Live Great Big Parenting Survey (2020) found:

44% of families have seen their income impacted by the coronavirus outbreak. Of those whose income has fallen,

14% have seen a drop of more than 50%,

9% by 40 to 50%,

10% by 30 to 40%,

21% by 20 to 30%,

34% by 10 to 20%,

12% by less than 10%.

*"School closures mean parents have found themselves balancing caring for their children, working from home and being a teacher. A quarter (25%) is juggling working from home with childcare duties, while 17% have reduced their working hours to take care of their children. **A further 12% of parents have been forced to take unpaid leave to look after their kids, while 1 in 10 has had to leave their jobs completely**".*
(Save the Children)

This statement again highlights the cross cutting nature of the issues created by the lockdown and the impact on families incomes.

Education, Home Schooling and Restart

From the scope of surveys carried out, home schooling and education would appear to be the most common topic examined, this is understandable as for many parents this is such an unprecedented experience for them, to assume a greater role than ever before in their child/ren's education. A significant number of parents have reported concerns about the impact of stress of home schooling, and their struggles to get children to study, juggling home learning and their own work. Many families have struggled with access to resources such as internet, laptops etc. Parents have expressed concern about the longer term impact of school closures on their child's education, family life and the lack of socialisation. Parents of children with additional needs in particular conveyed concerns about the impact of changes to routine and the resultant effects on their children's behaviours and emotional wellbeing. Since the Department of Education has released plans for restart and return to school from August 2020, service providers and parents have started looking at what this will be like, and what will be needed to support children and young people.

"I think it is too much. My son is expected to sit at his desk/computer for over 6 hours a day to follow his school timetable. This isn't good for his mental health"
(Parent from Parenting NI
Parenting in a Pandemic Survey)

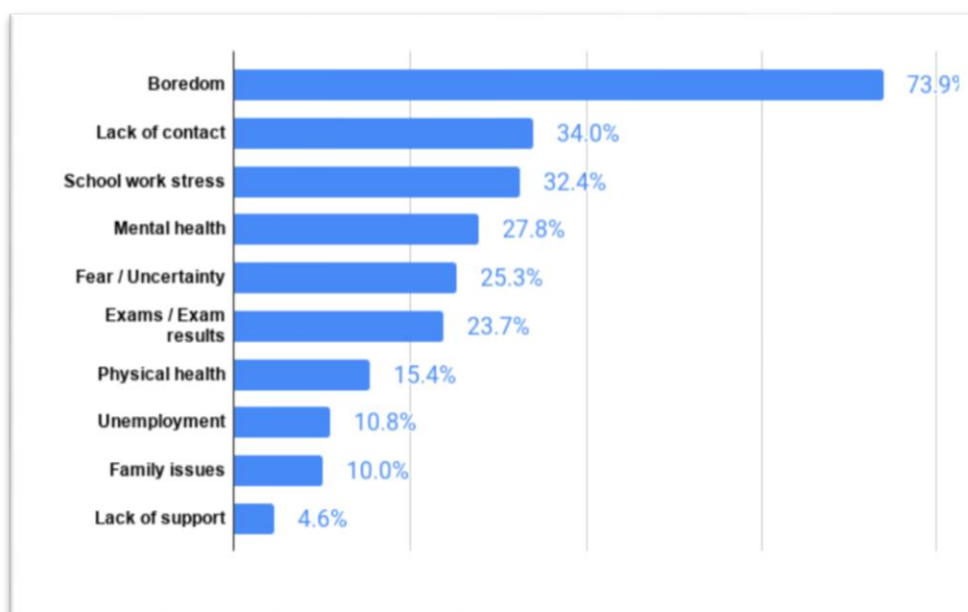
"The third highest reason for referral to Family Support Hubs is parents requiring support for their post primary children; this was mostly around accessing online learning or navigating a new system and issues with online learning resources."(Family Support Hub Coordinator)

The parents of older young people are concerned about their schooling. They struggle to get this age group to do school work and feel in some cases there has been little support from schools to help young people to engage; school has just been setting work and if the young person struggles (and so does the parent) the young person refuses to do the work and there are little alternatives to assist." (Family Support Hub Coordinator)

The Shankill Family Survey found that the biggest challenges reported were keeping children on track with school work (79% said this was an issue). Similarly findings in the Stranmillis Survey, highlighting that 3 in 5 claim that their child/ren's level of motivation to learn has become worse since home-schooling began.

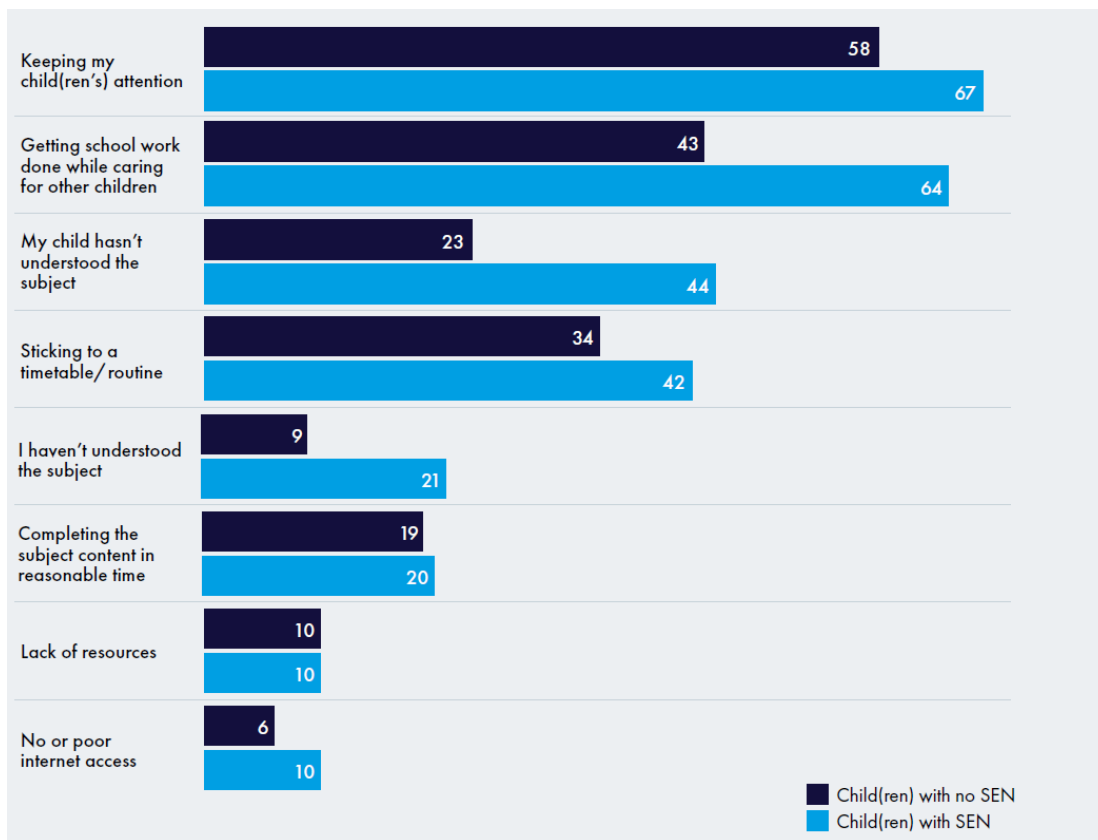
83% of participants said they are concerned about the impact of this situation on their child's / children's education.
43% said they don't have the necessary resources at home to complete school work.
69% said they can support their child with their school work, but it is a challenge.
(Shankill Family Survey, 2020)

Graph 4: Shankill Survey



Graph 4 shows 32% of the young people taking part in the Shankill survey said that school work stress was the main issue they were facing during lockdown, but it could be argued that boredom (73.9%) and lack of contact (34%) may also be associated with school closures too. In the same survey young people also stated that the activities that they are doing **less of** most commonly are school work/education (58% said less often), reading (55% said less often) and 19% of respondents also stated that one of the things they missed most during lockdown was school.

Graph 5: UU NI Parents Survey, again highlights the difficulties the parents taking part in their survey face in relation to home schooling

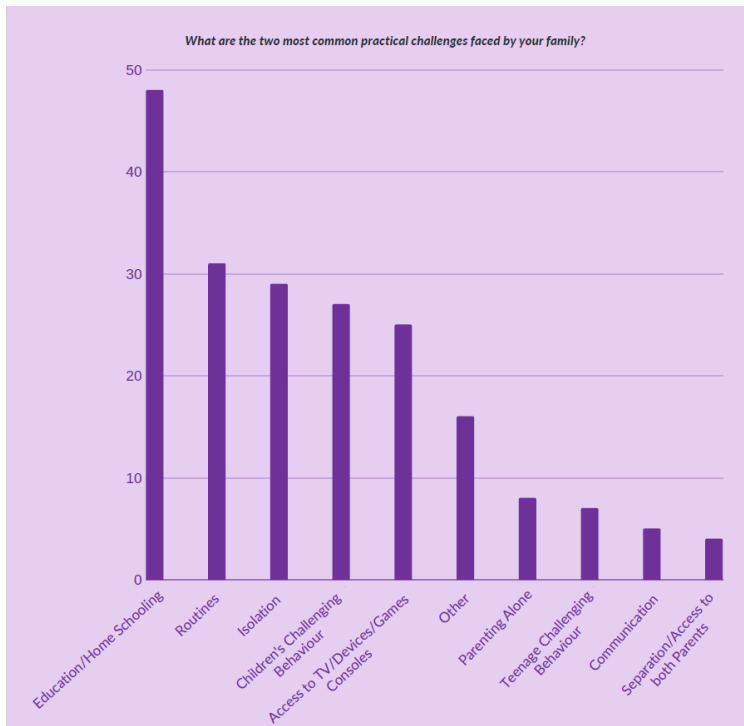


To expect parents who are also key workers to be able to work from home and provide a timetable for school work is impossible. This is adding to more stress and anxiety that us parents do not need. I am worried that my son will now be behind by the time he goes back to school. We are not lucky enough to be able to be furloughed and able to focus on the school work.” (Parent UU Survey)

Some children are really struggling to adjust to home schooling and the major changes in their routine that this creates. At times, children are arguing for hours with their parents, only to complete 10-20 minutes of schoolwork (Family Support Practitioner)

The Street Beat Survey also noted that issues with home schooling included understanding new work and adapting to online learning, being motivated to complete school work at home with limited teacher support and challenges with completing school work in a family environment.

Graph 6: Parenting NI: Parenting in a Pandemic Survey



Graph 6 shows that for almost 50% of parents Education/Home schooling was the most common practical challenge for their families, followed by routine that they associated with school.

“Sometimes there is just too much work. It is very overwhelming for the kids. It causes a lot of emotional stress for the children and parents. Especially those that are still working full time.”

(Parent from PNI survey)

Socio-economic disparity has been magnified by the lockdown including cost and access to resources.

“Moreover, concerns have been widely expressed about a possible widening of the educational gap between rich and poor incurred by closing schools. According to Prof Becky Francis as reported by the BBC (Richardson, 2020) ‘poor children tend to be most affected academically by being out of school’. Francis said that it is quite likely that ‘any gaps in achievement between richer pupils will be widened as a result of the school shut down’. In particular, the issue of digital poverty has been highlighted as a potential cause of such a gap” (Purdy, 2020). Stranmillis, 2020)

43% said they don’t have the necessary resources at home to complete school work. (Shankill Survey)

“Families have been asking for work to be sent home on paper, because they don’t have internet access or computers at home. Parents and carers really want to support their children to keep learning, but many just don’t have the resources to do that, and IT literacy can be a barrier too.”
(Teacher, JRF Report)

Almost a quarter of respondents do not have a printer, and many expressed a desire for more printed packs of work to be provided and complained of the costs incurred in providing printer ink and paper. We also found that only half of children have their own device to access online resources for schoolwork
(Stranmillis and CREU, Survey 2020)

While most surveys have focused on the impact on primary and post primary school children one practitioner has pointed out:

“One could argue that the more concerning impact will be on 3-4 year olds who have lost nearly 5 months of play based curricula during a crucial developmental period. That impact of lost time will be greatest on the most disadvantaged families. Unlike making up academic time, that can’t be crammed, and we probably need to think about how the needs of those children continue to be met, and treated as likely to be additional well into the their primary school years. The danger is that the health and social gradient that existed pre-COVID and was amplified very publicly over the last 5 months, will be wider and sharper in 5 and 10 years’ time for today’s 3 year olds.” (Practitioner)

Parents from the Shankill Survey also highlighted this concern:

“Very worried about the transition from nursery to P1 with not having this time to adjust to new friends and teachers as well the school.”

As highlighted in previous sections parents with children with SEN in particular have conveyed concerns about the impact of loss of routine due to school closures and the effects this has on their children.

I know times are trying enough but for all us ASD parents just that little bit tougher. Moods are changing, days that extra bit challenging so any extra help or resources will prove most helpful.’
(Parent)

Overwhelmingly the feelings parents are reporting to me are **frustration and desperation** due to the uncertainty of how long we will be in this position, parents are surviving on little sleep with no respite and often are witnessing **deterioration in their child/ren’s behaviour as their children struggle to cope mentally** too.
(Disability Service provider)

“I’m worried about the impact of not having school especially as I have a child with special needs who struggles socially as it is.” (Parent, Shankill Survey)

Domestic Violence and Safeguarding

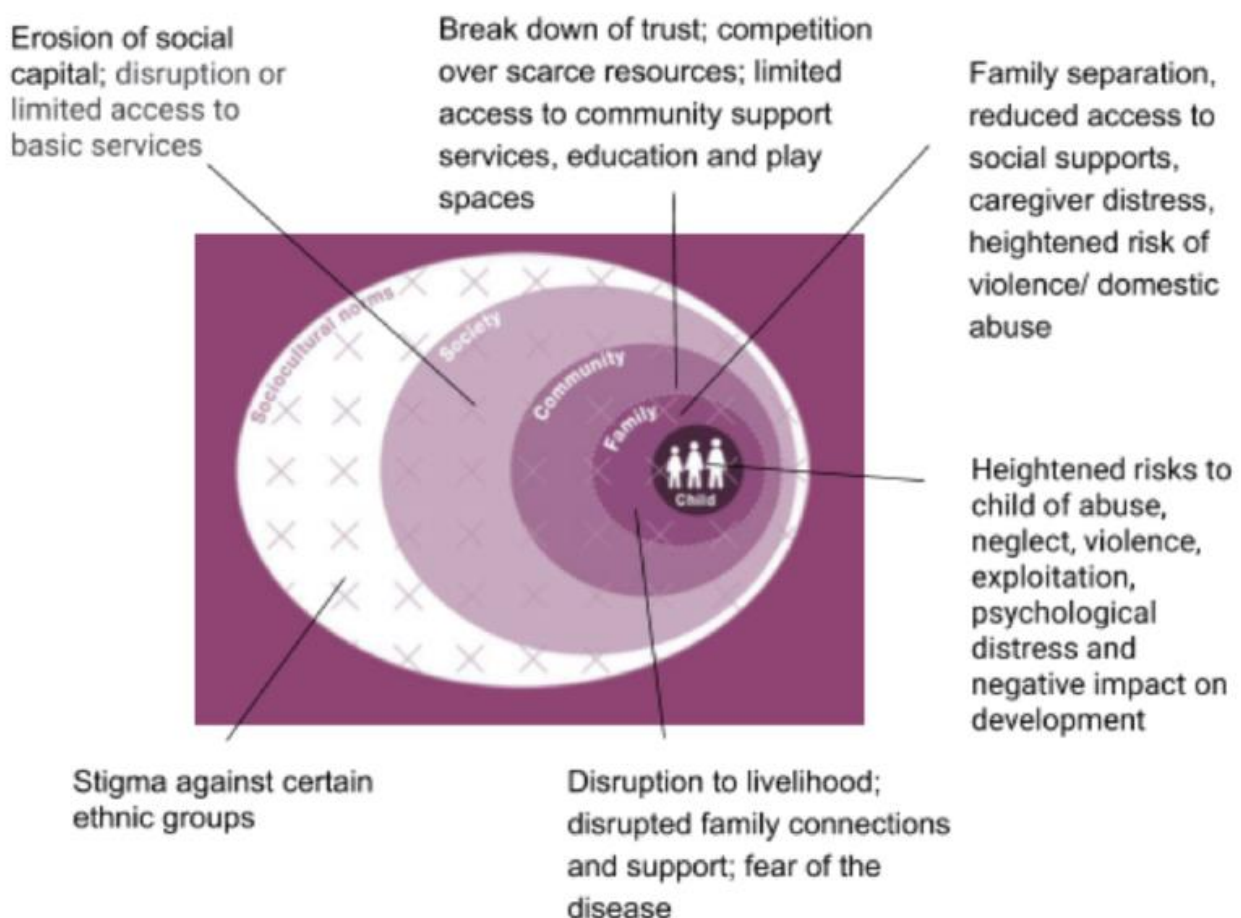
Stringent restrictions on movement shut off avenues of escape, help-seeking and ways of coping for victim-survivors. Restrictive measures are also likely to play into the hands of people who abuse through tactics of control, surveillance and coercion. This is partly because what goes on within people's homes—and, critically, within their family and intimate relationships—take place “behind closed doors” and out of the view, in a literal sense, of other people. Unintentionally, lockdown measures may therefore grant people who abuse greater freedom to act without scrutiny or consequence. Social norms and attitudes that suggest there is a “sanctity” to family life—to home, in a social rather than physical sense—can also make it difficult for people to speak out about, let alone leave, abusive situations as a result of feelings of shame and embarrassment. (Bradbury-Jones, C and Isham, L 2020)

These views are shared by local relationship counselling and domestic abuse support services in Northern Ireland. *Relate Chief Executive, Duane Farrell, has said that conflict between parents was already leading to “huge distress and mental illness among children.”* (BBC News NI July 2020). In the same report Dr Good, a counsellor with Accord has expressed concern at a spike in calls as restrictions have eased. **“34% of Accords’ helpline calls mentioned abusive behaviour in various forms”**. Also in this report MAP (Men’s Advisory Project) have **“reported a 300% increase in calls over the last three months.”** Women’s Aid Chief Executive has highlighted that **“when you’re locked down at home with your perpetrator, you can’t reach out for help, and that’s what made it so worrying – home isn’t a safe place for domestic abuse victims”** Women’s Aid have seen a decrease in referral and attribute this to a fear of being caught reaching out for help. The following comments also highlight these concerns

There is growing evidence that the **COVID – 19 precautions of social distancing and self-isolation have reduced the visibility of children and young people and has limited many of the social support structures for children and families.** During the lockdown period, similar to other areas both nationally and internationally, **NI has seen a dramatic rise in the number of domestic abuse referrals alongside a significant reduction in safeguarding children referrals and Emergency Department attendances across all age groups.** This means that **neglect, abuse and escalating needs and challenges may have gone undetected and children and families may not be receiving the support they need.** (Designated Nurse for Safeguarding (PHA))

According to an Alliance of Child Protection in Humanitarian Action report, **Protection of Children during the Coronavirus Pandemic** “COVID-19 can quickly change the context in which children live. Quarantine measures such as school closures and restrictions on movements disrupt children's routine and social support while also placing new stressors on parents and caregivers who may have to find new childcare options or forgo work. Stigma and discrimination related to COVID-19 may make children more vulnerable to violence and psychosocial distress. Disease control measures that do not consider the gender-specific needs and vulnerabilities of women and girls may also increase their protection risks and lead to negative coping mechanisms. Children and families who are already vulnerable due to socio-economic exclusion or those who live in overcrowded settings are particularly at risk.”

The below diagram demonstrates the socio-ecological impact of Covid-19 on vulnerable children included in the above report.



It is noted in April 2020 editorial of the British Medical Journal **Risks to children and young people during covid-19 pandemic**

“Behind the public discussion lies an altogether different conversation. Lockdown is the key word in this conversation, but subjecting vulnerable children to nothing other than family contact for an extended period sets up perfect conditions for a safeguarding failure.

Firstly, there is an increased opportunity for harm to befall children. The pressure cooker of family life is a standing joke, but it hangs on the truth that for some families staying at home together increases the chances of child abuse and neglect. Then there is the absence of any outside oversight. Without regular access to professionals such as teachers, general practitioners, health visitors, and social and youth workers, routine opportunities to spot signs or narratives of safeguarding concern are lost. Some social work staff have had to self-isolate, stretching safeguarding teams and straining service delivery.

At the same time, the message to stay at home and fears of infection have led to a nationwide decline in attendance at emergency departments (25%) and general practice and a consequent reduction of face-to-face consultations. Lastly, a 22% increase in supermarket alcohol sales in March, which can only be for domestic consumption at this time, underscores the risk to children that the current regime represents.

Evidence that these concerns are not misplaced includes increased calls to child support lines and increased police attendance at domestic abuse incidents. Although imperfect, these signals suggest that child safeguarding activity can be expected to increase once the lockdown is removed and imply a workload that must be planned for and funded”.

The above concerns are highlighted in the below statements from a local Public Health Nurse and a social worker engaging with community groups.

We have had a rise in UNOCINI referrals during this Covid period, in respect to **Domestic Violence and Substance abuse** - so definitely will impact the emotional health in these young children, **also with the schools being off, for some children school is a safe place and a place where they have an available adult and a hot meal** (Public Health Nurse)

parents becoming more stressed as they are constantly being at home – some groups have noted a spike in child protection issues, also safeguarding issues - people moving out of family homes due to relationship breakdowns – some families have been made homeless (Social Worker)

The concerns about child protection and safeguarding is also reiterated in The Institute of Health Visiting April 2020 Paper **“Is a second pandemic on its way?”** which highlights the potential impact of the redeployment of health visiting staff into nursing roles in hospitals on vulnerable families:-

“Health visitor staff redeployments, if not very carefully risk assessed, may be leaving behind unseen vulnerable families without enough capacity left in the service to identify them. Evidence from China and Italy would confirm that this could be the case, with each country reporting increased levels of domestic abuse during the pandemic. Here too, there is already reported to be a 25% increase in the number of calls to domestic abuse helplines. If this is the case across the UK, it will be seriously impacting on the wellbeing of any children present in the homes affected.”

Positive Outcomes

The responses from children young people, families and front line workers and surveys have illustrated some positive implications of the lockdown; this could provide useful learning for services future planning. Young people are reporting enjoying spending more time with their parents and siblings, have found ways to connect to friends and family members outside their immediate family group and learned new skills. Some young people who have experienced different stressors whilst at school are enjoying a break from these at this time, whilst this is a positive there should also be a note of caution as these children and young people may experience an increase in anxiety when they have to return to school.

These experiences do not apply to all the young people, but having had challenging experiences in life does to degree equip some of the young people with skills to deal with the lack of routine and structure (Family Support Hub Co-ordinator)

“Many young people have been compliant with lockdown rules. Some, who were really struggling in school, are delighted to have a new found freedom.

Some have embraced the advice on exercise by taking a daily walk and social media has helped young people to stay connected. (Social Worker)

“There are glimmers of positive interactions with foster placement families in lockdown; as young people are not as torn between their family of origin and their foster family.” LAC Education Support Officer

‘I feel different and don’t have confidence and don’t fit in so I am enjoying not having to fit in. It’s great having time on my own’. (Young person)

53 people said that they have experienced unexpected positive outcomes from this situation. These are grouped into the following categories in Figure 5 below. As can be seen in Figure 5, of the 53 people who said something positive has come out of this, 61% said it was improved family relationships, 34% said it was less stress due to being at home more and 23% said it was an increased connected to community and resources. The 8% that said ‘other’ all said it was due to less stress from kids not being at school. (Some gave more than one answer, hence total % amounting to over 100). (Shankill Family Survey)

However feedback from a few of my families has been that their **child has progressed in some areas, particularly those children who struggled with some of the demands school placed on them.** One parent whose child is non-verbal and has a learning disability reports he is now having fewer behavioural episodes and his sleep which is usually very limited (as few as 3 hours per night) has improved quite dramatically, he is now sleeping up to 6/7 hours per night. **She believes this is due to the reduction in anxiety he experienced in the school environment as he usually spends 1hr 40 mins on the bus before he gets to school.** (Disability Project Worker)

"We have many positive stories like this and also reports that children are enjoying spending lots of time with their parents who under normal circumstances would be working. We have seen such creativity and imagination flowing from children and their families. A lot of the children have enjoyed and responded so well to interacting with the staff teams over Zoom/Facebook/WhatsApp and have also enjoyed seeing their friends in Stay and Play sessions online".
(Sure Start Manager)

We are also seeing great peer support online between young people which is helping in some way with the isolation.
(Star 360 Manager)

Some children seem to be faring more favourably since the lockdown. For example, children who were experiencing problems at school such as bullying. Being away from bullies and other school-related problems is having a positive impact on some children's mental health. These children are happier and displaying more positive behaviour. Spending more quality time at home with parents is also providing invaluable bonding opportunities for some young people (NIACRO Practitioner)

10 foster carers reporting those children's behaviours have really settled since face to face contact has stopped with birth parents (LAC Education Support Officer)

"This has made me bond with my child more than I ever have." (Parent UU Survey)

"In my experience during the crisis the families that would have normally been in most need of support with their mental health have been doing much better. They have reported having less outside things impacting on their house that the whole tone and mood has changed the pace. They have no school, friends, extended family members 'sticking their nose in' and any contact with family has been online or in a garden outdoors and very rewarding and "the kids appreciated it more for what it was – just seeing family, no need to do anything – just talk (Family Support Hub Coordinator)

When the lockdown initially came into place a lot of the young people were coping quite well being with being removed from certain requirements of going to school or having to deal with stressors in their lives. As one young person put it to me (Youth Support Worker)

"I feel that time has stopped. There is less pressure to do this and that and go places. I can just be me." (Young person)

"Getting to spend more time with my sisters and mum like cooking, watching movies and playing games"
(Young person Street beat Survey)

"Some young people have shown a level of maturity and respect towards family members and carers who are in the vulnerable category". (Service provider)

- *Child with selective mutism talked for first time with non-family member using zoom*
- *Post-primary child who would not engage in clinic, completed assessment on zoom*
- *A parent has reported progress with SLC development as parents are at home all day and are spending more time with their child. (AHP)*

In some cases remote delivery has helped EHWB, e.g. some ASD children for whom attending clinic is distressing are engaging better with remote services, and remote services have been requested by some parents. Remote working also reduces travel and makes input more flexible for families, especially those living in more isolated areas which may increase accessibility of services. Within SLT school services it can be difficult to get parental engagement in therapy and the zoom platform has increased engagement in some cases as it is home based. In Surestart, parents are responding well to online content (AHP)

Conclusions and Recommendations

As noted in the introduction and highlighted throughout the paper, families have had a wide spectrum of experiences throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown, there have been various positive and negative short-term and long-term outcomes, particularly as the pandemic is ongoing and the government responses are fluid.

Prime et al's research draws on experiences of families in other acute crises, such as natural disasters, war and terrorism and economic upheavals to examine the impact of COVID-19 on families. In their research they present the below diagram. This could be useful to inform thinking about how to support families through the continuing situation.

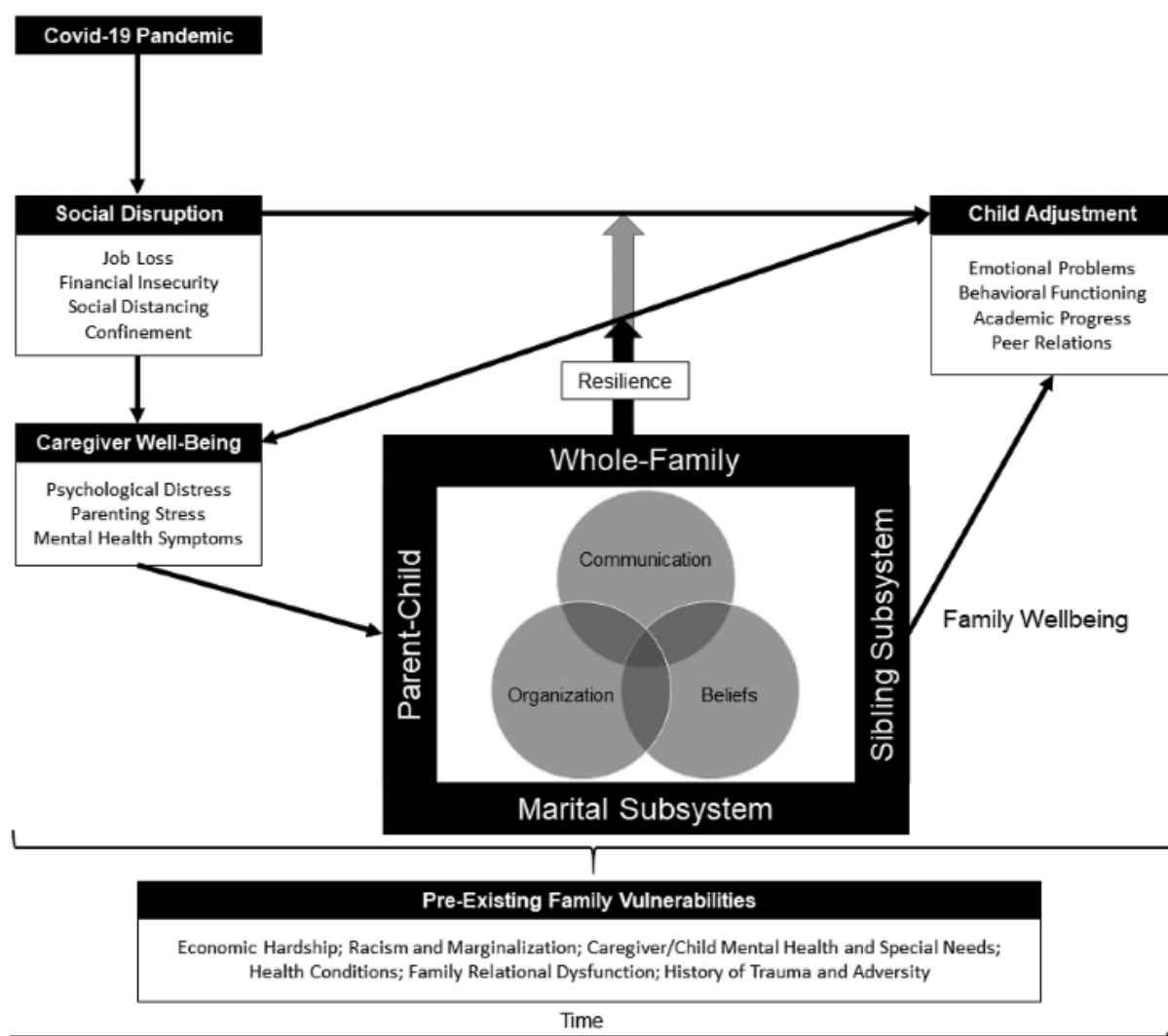


Figure 1. How social disruption due to COVID-19 may impact child adjustment. The conceptual framework purports that the COVID-19 pandemic will influence children's adjustment in a cascading fashion. Social disruptions from the pandemic will infiltrate family processes across subsystems and the whole family, through their detrimental impact on caregiver well-being. In turn, children's adjustment across several domains will be compromised, given the extent to which children's well-being is contingent on the health and well-being of the family. Processes of moderation will also be at play, with some families and individuals at heightened risk for poor outcomes and others in a position to maintain adaptive functioning and/or thrive, thus signaling resilience in the face of adversity.

Recommendations for this paper to support families impacted by the negative outcomes for families should include; firstly, as suggested by Prime et al (2020) work to build family resilience as a way to mitigate the negative outcomes of the pandemic is very important. They point to supporting parental-child relationships as essential to this.

Secondly from the narrative and existing research, work with families with pre-existing vulnerabilities, such as children with disabilities, families facing economic hardships, or with a history of trauma will be significant to helping families recover.

Thirdly, again from existing research and local narrative and surveys, supporting children's emotional wellbeing will be key to recovery from the impacts of the pandemic.

Further unpicking of the positive experiences of children, young people and families might also help to identify useful learning for services working with children, young people and families.

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Belfast Live – Big Parents Survey (Sheena McStravick)

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