

Left behind in lockdown

How financial and digital divides are affecting family life during COVID-19 restrictions

A Parent Zone Report
17 November 2020





Helping parents has never been more important

Shops can close and offices can empty but the one thing that can never take a break is family life. Parents don't get days off and families can't decide that they'll leave the childcare to another week when life is less pressured.

As parents are once again asked to pick up the social slack, we looked at the impact this was having during the first lockdown. Were parents coping or struggling? Was help available when they needed it and what more could be done?

This report outlines our findings. It highlights significant gaps between parents with the resources to access help, and the ones without. It shows that parents have been coping admirably well – but at a cost. Sometimes to their own mental health. And sometimes to their work and career.

As the pandemic continues to cause chaos, this report should act as a wake-up call to politicians to take the needs of parents seriously. A startling 25%

of parents simply want some acknowledgement of how difficult it has been.

Parental needs shouldn't be left to the bottom of the pile when the planning gets done. On the contrary, helping parents to effectively juggle work and family life has never been more important.

Giving parents the recognition they deserve and the support they need is vital if – as the government claims – we want to minimise the negative impact for children and young people growing up during Covid.



Vicki Shotbolt
Founder and CEO
Parent Zone

Back into lockdown – but how are we coping?

As Britain slips into lockdown 2.0 this November, some of the rules and regulations may have changed, but for families the challenges will be all too familiar.

Of course, the lockdown experience has been different for every family. For some, it has been at worst monotonous. For others, it has provided more quality time together.

For a great many, though, it has been a period of strain and stress – driving wedges between relationships, placing extraordinary demands on parents and forcing children to adapt to a life cut off from a world they want to explore.

Children have had particular personal worries – including disrupted education, limited social opportunities, and uncertainty about the future. And then there is the future in a broader sense, which seems in some ways more threatening than ever before.

Parents have managed increased demands – investing hours on their children’s emotional health

and developmental wellbeing, while balancing their own relationships and social lives. All this, while balancing personal worries about their careers and financial futures while managing the challenges and difficulties of the child’s home-learning and education.

In October 2020, Parent Zone carried out research with Ipsos MORI to understand better how families have been coping during COVID-19. We surveyed more than 1,000 UK parents of children aged 17 and under, to find out how lockdown restrictions had impacted them.

The results found that not only has the mental health of many children been affected by restrictions, but a clear link exists between a family’s wellbeing and its financial situation.



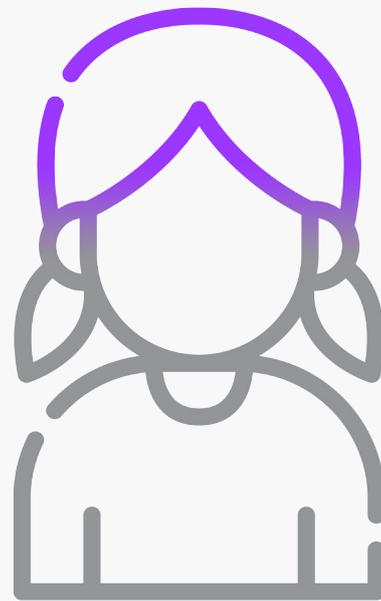
Children suffering more than adults

From our survey, perhaps the starkest finding was that one in three parents (32%) said their child's mental health and wellbeing had worsened since lockdown started on 23 March 2020.

This may not be surprising, given the many changes children have had to accept to their way of life, but it is a sharp reminder of the pressures COVID-19 have placed on young people.

One in three
parents
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say that their child's mental health and wellbeing has got worse since lockdown began on the **23rd of March**.



Parents themselves have perhaps managed better with their overall wellbeing. A majority reported that they had generally been coping both personally and with parental duties.

Supporting their children has still had an effect in other areas – with many feeling stretched to their limits. Nearly a third (30%) of working parents said the demands of lockdown had impacted negatively their ability to do their job.

More than half of parents (55%) said they had also put in extra shifts managing the education of their children following the closure of schools, and almost half (48%) also reported that they had been doing more to help their children's health and wellbeing.

Many have also had to deal with the loss of additional support, with only around a third (30%) of those who had been paying for childcare before lockdown getting the same services subsequently.

So, parents are having to do a lot more parenting – which in itself is not a bad thing. Many parents have reported positive benefits to an enforced time at home with their children – with over half (55%) saying they had spent more quality time together.

But if lockdown has been a variable experience for children and families, the reasons for this also become clearer when considering the factors that appear to directly affect wellbeing and relationships during lockdown.



Disadvantaged hit hardest

Our research focused on many areas: a child's mental health and wellbeing; how parents have personally been coping; the quality of family and marital relationships; even how much of a benefit connected tech has been.

A common theme throughout was that a family's financial situation was often directly related to how well, or badly, they felt they had managed. While some families have been relatively well insulated, the lower down the income scale, the worse the impact has been.

A quarter (25%) of parents with family incomes below £20,000 said they have personally not been coping well with lockdown restrictions. Over a third (36%) of this same demographic said that their child's mental health had suffered.

As incomes rise, the figures steadily improve. The percentage of parents who said they weren't coping personally drops to 21% for those earning between £20,000 and £34,999, to 16% for those

earning between £35,000 and £54,999, and to 14% for those over £55K.

This pattern is generally matched for a child's mental health and wellbeing. The percentage of parents who reported a negative impact drops to 31% for those earning between £20,000 and £34,999, to 30% for those earning between £35,000 and £54,999, but up to 34% for over £55K.

Even among those parents who reported a positive impact on their family's lockdown wellbeing, those in the lowest income bracket are the least represented.

Half of parents earning over £55K reported a positive impact on their ability to educate their child (50%) or spend quality time together (59%). By comparison, of parents earning under £20K, just over a third saw positive impacts around education (36%) and little over half for quality time together (51%).

25%
of parents
on the *lowest*
incomes

said they were not personally coping at all well or not very well as a result of **Covid-19** restrictions.





Children in secondary schools have suffered most

The research also showed that a negative impact on a child's mental health and wellbeing fluctuated between age groups.

Children aged 12-15 have suffered most according to parents – with 15% saying their child's mental health and wellbeing had improved against 32% highlighting a negative impact.

Those aged 16+ were similarly affected, with 17% of parents reporting that their child's mental health and wellbeing had got better against 30% that it had got worse.

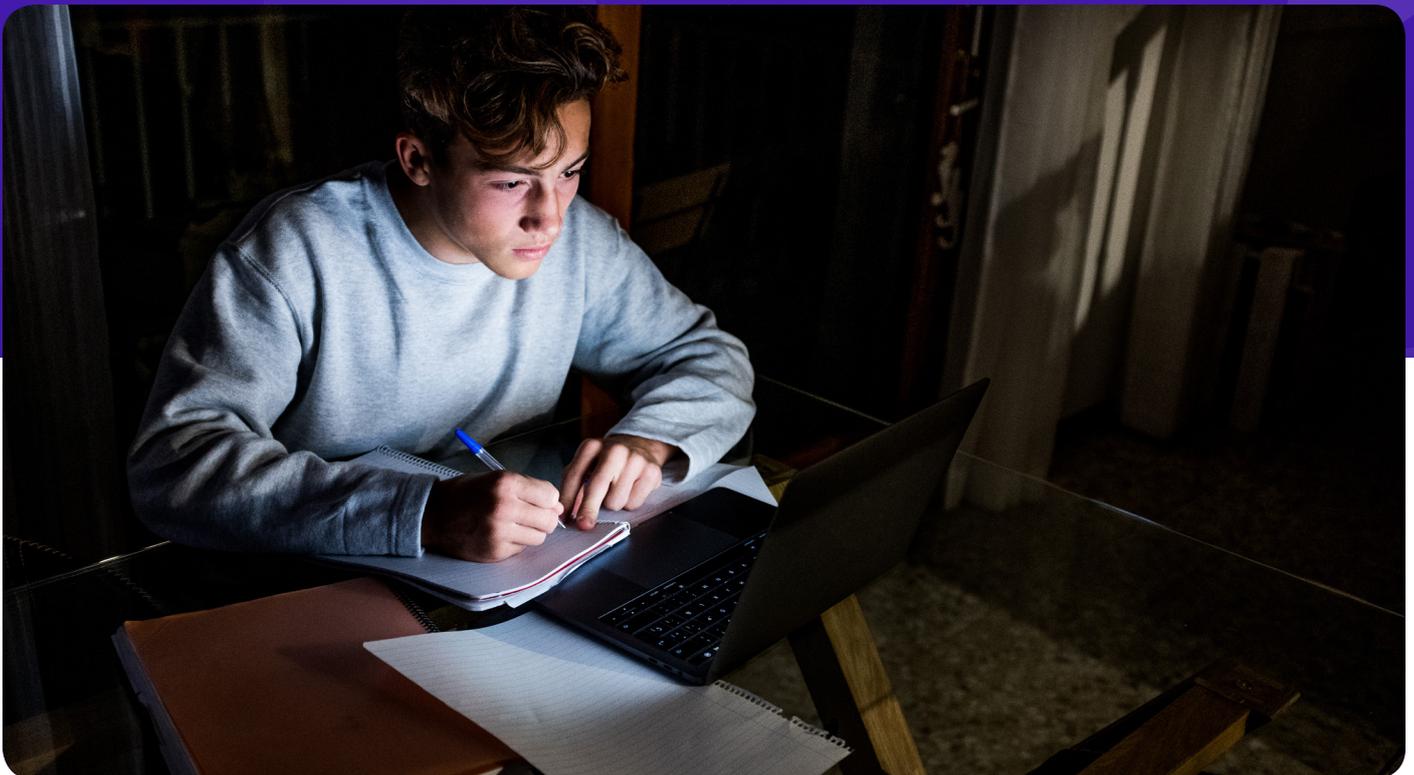
The difference was far less pronounced among younger children: 23% better and 22% worse for 0-5s and 24% better and 30% worse for 6-11s.

Perhaps this trend is reflective of the 12+ age group's stage of education – especially those facing disruption ahead of crucial 2021 GCSE or A level exams¹. Perhaps it is indicative of a swift loss of a newfound social independence at this age – or the direct impact of lockdown in other ways. For example, UNICEF reported that 79% of 12-15 year-olds had potentially harmful experiences online in the last year², perhaps heightened by the increased time spent in digital spaces.

In our research, parents generally highlighted that missing friends (66%) was the predominant reason why their child's mental health and wellbeing had deteriorated – while over half also pointed to boredom (58%), missing school (57%) and loss of family interaction (51%). Nearly half (48%) suggested too much time on connected devices.

1 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-54620408>

2 <https://downloads.unicef.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Unicef-UK-Children-In-Lockdown-Coronavirus-Impacts-Snapshot.pdf>



Family wellbeing also linked to income

Many families did experience benefits of an enforced period at home. For some parents, it was an opportunity to spend more quality time with their children – and increasingly engage in positive activities like education (55%), play (43%) or simply preparing meals (46%).

But even something that seems on the face of it not to be about money – how close you feel to your family – is still related to poverty. It appears much harder to feel a sense of wellbeing on the lowest incomes, especially during pressurised time such as lockdown.

For example, 43% of parents with the highest incomes felt closer as a family during COVID – whereas less than one in 10 (9%) felt more distant. At the other end of the spectrum, a third (32%)

of families with the lowest incomes felt closer as family – but nearly one in five (17%) felt more distant.

Likewise, over a third (35%) of the top-earning parents said their relationship with their children has improved – but less than a quarter (23%) of lowest-earning parents said the same.



40%
of families
felt closer during
lockdown



Technology helping some more than others

Connected technology has been a large part of lockdown life – and a benefit for many families. Its role cannot be understated, whether for staying in touch with friends, opportunities to work from home, accessing home learning, or simply finding entertainment while trapped indoors.

Our research found that 77% of parents experienced benefits of connected tech during lockdown. Of those parents who saw a positive impact on their ability to educate or spend quality time with their children, around 85% also said that connected tech had helped them.

Technology has been a lifeline for many parents:

77%
say **connected technology**

has helped them get through the period of restrictions.



Technology was not the preserve of younger generations either, with all ages going online to help with parental duties. For example, 73% of parents in the 55-75 age range said connected technology had helped, only slightly lower than the 24-34 age group (76%).

But tech clearly helped the better off more. Our research found the same pattern of disparity between the richer and poorer.

In fact, 85% of families in the top earnings bracket saw a benefit to connected tech – but this dropped to 71% for those in the lowest.

It is again perhaps no great shock that there is an inequality of access to tech, with 9% of UK families reportedly having no access to a home laptop, desktop or tablet³. At a time when technology has done so much to support so many, those lacking access may be the ones that suffer most.

3 <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/2020/08/18/children-without-internet-access-during-lockdown/>



What needs to happen?

Even though lockdown is countrywide and the same rules apply to all, it is simply not the same for everyone. Future lockdowns should be planned with a better understanding of the impacts on families generally and less affluent families specifically.

So what needs to happen for this next lockdown – and a potential third wave?

1. Tech for all – and education to use it

If 77% of parents saw a benefit to connected technology during lockdown, can we not get that average figure closer to the 85% as represented by the top-earning families? It is imperative that this digital divide should be closing, to ensure more equal opportunities.

Post-COVID school life may never return to the way it was before and many schools, open or closed, will continue to use digital platforms for education. All families need to be connected in their homes.

In April 2020, the Department for Education presented a '[get help with technology](https://get-help-with-tech.education.gov.uk/start)' scheme⁴, with [250,000 more computers](https://schoolsweek.co.uk/no-free-laptops-for-schools-with-fewer-than-15-self-isolating-pupils/)

[promised](https://schoolsweek.co.uk/no-free-laptops-for-schools-with-fewer-than-15-self-isolating-pupils/)⁵. But despite over 500,000 eligible children, it was announced that laptop and router allocations for some areas [would be cut by 80%](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/education/education-news/laptop-schools-coronavirus-department-education-disadvantaged-pupils-b1293170.html)⁶, where fewer pupils were self-isolating.

Removing limitations on access – such as for [those schools with fewer than 15 children self-isolating with covid symptoms](https://schoolsweek.co.uk/no-free-laptops-for-schools-with-fewer-than-15-self-isolating-pupils/)⁷ – would make it easier to reach more disadvantaged families.

It still needs to go further. Since lockdown, teachers have told Parent Zone that the amount of time children spent online during school closures has proven a problem.

We cannot simply supply laptops and expect children to get on with it. We must make sure they're safe as well. By supporting children's digital resilience and educating around better online behaviours, kindness and communication, we can ensure they thrive when accessing tech.

2. More support for parents

As our research proves, parents are having to juggle many new roles. They are now teachers, support workers, chefs, and friends for their children. Some, while also

struggling to manage their actual jobs. Over a quarter (27%) of parents we spoke to want the government to provide financial help for childcare costs.

Focus must be on policies to support parents under the most stress. [£500 million in local council funding](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-confirms-allocations-of-500-million-additional-funding-for-councils)⁸ has been ring-fenced by the government to cover COVID-related issues, but more support for [stretched health staff and social workers is needed](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-54827702)⁹.

There are also three simple steps that Parent Zone believes might benefit those struggling most. First, a family grant to enable disadvantaged parents to improve digital access and ensure all families have the same opportunities.

Second, this grant should also support those facing unexpected childcare costs – to relieve the pressure and allow parents to better juggle the many demands they face.

The third is the simplest. Parents should be listened to – and acknowledged – for the increased demands they face. A quarter (25%) of parents just want public recognition for the role they are playing during coronavirus.

4 <https://get-help-with-tech.education.gov.uk/start>

5 <https://schoolsweek.co.uk/no-free-laptops-for-schools-with-fewer-than-15-self-isolating-pupils/>

6 <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/education/education-news/laptop-schools-coronavirus-department-education-disadvantaged-pupils-b1293170.html>

7 <https://schoolsweek.co.uk/no-free-laptops-for-schools-with-fewer-than-15-self-isolating-pupils/>

8 <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-confirms-allocations-of-500-million-additional-funding-for-councils>

9 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-54827702>

What needs to happen?

A quarter of
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3. Publish educational plans for 2021

With so much uncertainty around the future, parents are having to work harder to support their children's ongoing mental wellbeing. Parent Zone believes clarity and confidence around education would help ease this burden.

A clear plan for what lies ahead in 2021 would reduce anxiety for English schoolchildren. This may be particularly important in the 12-15 age group, after 2020's exam controversy and the flawed algorithm¹⁰ that punished many in disadvantaged areas.

In some parts of the UK this has happened, with Wales following Scotland's lead¹¹ in cancelling 2021 exams, in favour of teacher judgement supported by assessment.

Lessons should be learned from this year's exams controversy and, perhaps, from best educational practices across Europe and beyond. Parent Zone calls for the government to publish its 2021 plans for English schools as soon as possible. Whether this involves exams, a robustly-tested algorithm or something else, the plans should also be independently reviewed.

¹⁰ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-53810655>

¹¹ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-54423265>



Technical note

Research was carried out by Ipsos MORI on behalf of Parent Zone.

It surveyed a nationally representative quota sample of 4,459 adults in the United Kingdom aged 16-75 of which 1,056 were identified as parents.

Interviews were carried out using its online i:Omnibus between the 16th and 19th October 2020.

Data has been weighted to the known offline population proportions for age within gender, government office region, working status and social grade in the UK.

Get in touch

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