

## COVID-19: Giving the Gift of Family Time

Authors: Sally Staton, Laetitia Coles, Zhaoxi Zheng, Karen Thorpe  
Institute for Social Science Research, The University of Queensland

### Understanding the Social Impacts of COVID-19

*Understanding the Social Impacts of COVID-19* is an online survey being conducted by researchers at The Institute for Social Science Research at The University of Queensland. This on-going study is helping to understand some of the social impacts of COVID-19 on individuals, families, and communities. The aim is to provide evidence to help direct resources and policies to where they are needed the most. The study has a particular focus on the impacts of COVID-19 on families, including work and care situations, and how these situations have evolved and changed since the outbreak of the virus.

Approximately 750 individuals have participated in this study to date. Including those from across Australia (92%), Switzerland, Ireland, Indonesia, Canada, United Kingdom, Germany, China, India, Norway, Italy, Romania, Serbia, Sweden, Denmark, South Africa, Oman, and Singapore. The majority (60 per cent) of participants were working for pay at the time of the initial survey, nearly 12 per cent of respondents were students, and nearly 12 per cent were engaged primarily in household duties. The remaining participants were unemployed or looking for work, retired, or receiving a disability payment, or their work-status was unknown. Of those who were employed, nearly 63 per cent were employed full time at the time of the survey, 22 per cent were employed part time, 10.5 per cent were employed on a casual basis, and 4.5 per cent were contracted employees or participated in seasonal work. Nearly 80% of respondents had a university or college degree and 81 per cent of respondents were female.

This survey is on-going and can be accessed [here](#).

### The importance of understanding Children's experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic?

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic is unprecedented and brought about significant changes to children. In particular, children's education, care, and daily activities have been significantly disrupted because of the restrictions set by governments in an attempt to reduce the impact and stop the spread of COVID-19 within the community. The restrictions on attendance at school, early childhood education and care settings, and extra-curricular activities, together with parents' changed work arrangements, and the limitations on socialising with people outside households, impacted children's wellbeing, social connections, and learning in varying ways. In addition, there have been restrictions to gathering in community settings and the closure of places in which children would typically play, including playgrounds and parks.

How children have experienced the COVID-19 pandemic and the key challenges faced by children is not yet well understood. This initial analysis of the COVID-19 survey focused on understanding both the challenges, and potential positives for children emerging from COVID-19.

### Methods

Analysis of open-ended responses provided by 213 parents of children under the age of 18, who participated in the survey during the height of the COVID-19 restrictions in Australia, were undertaken. Of these, two-thirds had at least one school-aged child. We asked parents two open-ended questions about the ways in which COVID-19 has impacted their children. Firstly, we asked about the key challenges their children have faced during this time, and secondly, about any positives that emerged from their experiences. Responses were analysed using Nvivo to identify key themes.

## What have been the key challenges for children during COVID-19 restrictions?

Key challenges faced by children during the COVID-19 restrictions include those regarding their well-being, social connections, and learning (Figure 1).

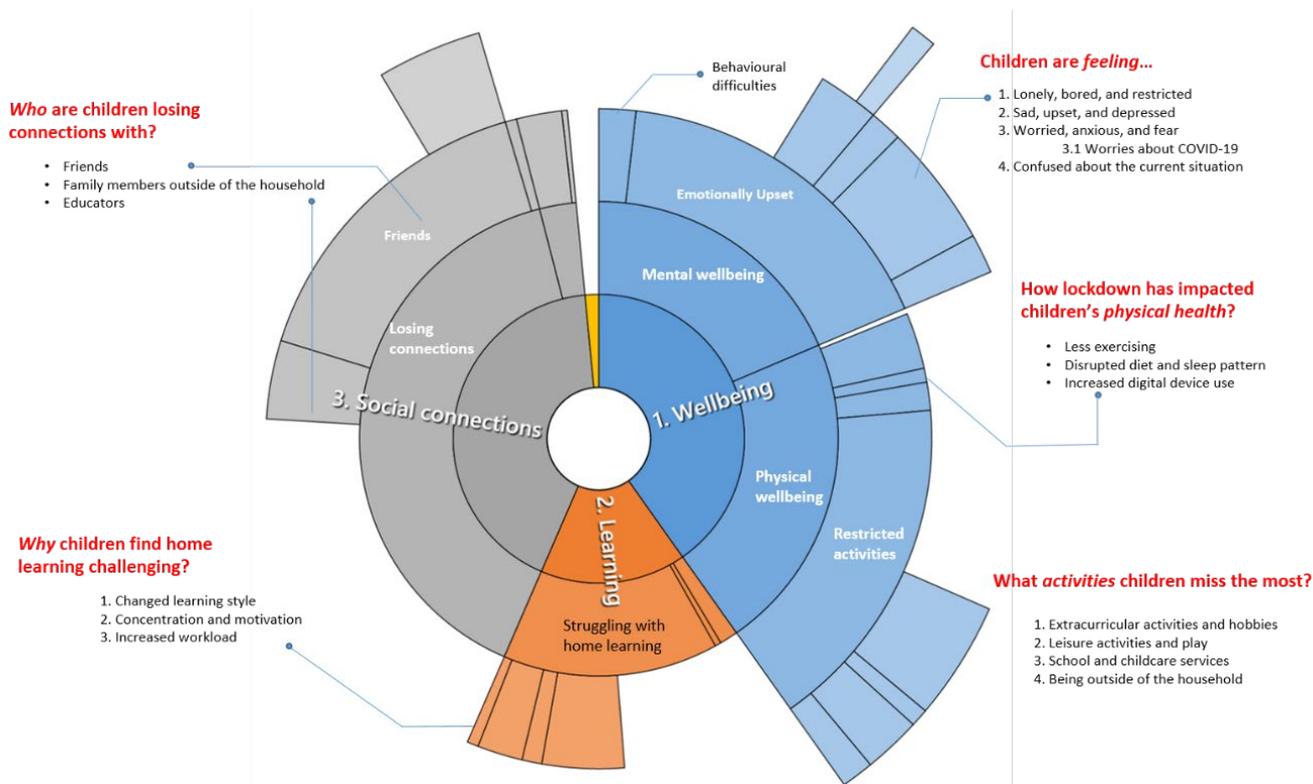


Figure 1. Key challenges faced by children during COVID-19

Regarding children’s physical wellbeing, many parents felt their children exercised less, used digital devices more, and experienced disruptions to their sleep routines and their diet as a result of primarily staying at home, missing out on their regular extra-curricular activities and leisure activities, and spending less time outside.

*[My child] has really missed gymnastics, and has probably put on some weight as a result of not being as active*

*Not being able to enjoy extra-curricular activities, particularly swim squad for the physical benefits as well as missing competition which helped her self-esteem*

*[My child] is really struggling – hair-trigger temper, bored, lonely, anxious about getting virus, anxious about parents still having work (father's work is precarious). Whole family is walking on eggshells as he has also been violent at times*

*Early on, she asked about the virus and if people would die. If we would die. If she would die - this combined with Elsa and Ana's parents dying in Frozen 2 sparked a whole lot of questions about death and surprisingly heaven*

Regarding children’s emotional and mental wellbeing, parents indicated that due to these changes to their lifestyle, some children exhibited behaviour difficulties, some felt bored and lonely, while others were worried, anxious, fearful and confused by the current situation. Some children were particularly concerned about the COVID-19 virus.

*Really miss grandparents; they are normally up here with us in the State we live in every 2 months, for 2 months, but currently stuck in the State they live in*

*For our daughter, catching up face to face with multiple friends. Technology is great but doesn't replace the physical closeness that she needs with her friends.*

Parents also reported that the restrictions imposed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic had impacted children's social connections. Children's key social challenges during this time were missing their regular social interactions with people outside of their households, especially their friends, grandparents and other extended family members, and teachers at school or childcare settings.

*[My child] has struggled to concentrate on online learning and with the challenge of having to read a lot more instructions about work which is different to the in classroom approach of the teacher talking them through work instructions first*

*[My child] works more efficiently with a friend next to him, to just chat while working*

*The pressure of year 12, learning online ... school system using so many diff modes of contacting him ..... It's been confusing and impossible, and he's also depressed because... well, we are in the middle of a global crisis that will affect his future*

Parents also identified a number of key challenges associated with learning from home for a broad age range of children across all stages of formal schooling. Without face-to-face learning at school with their teachers, and interactions with peers, many parents indicated that their children found studying from home stressful and less efficient. Often facing unclear instructions and increased workload, children sometimes found it difficult to concentrate on schoolwork.

### What have been the positives for children during COVID-19 restrictions?

Despite the aforementioned challenges, parents have also identified a number of positive experiences for their children that have emerged during the COVID-19 restrictions, including social connections within families, opportunities for personal growth, and improved well-being (Figure 2).

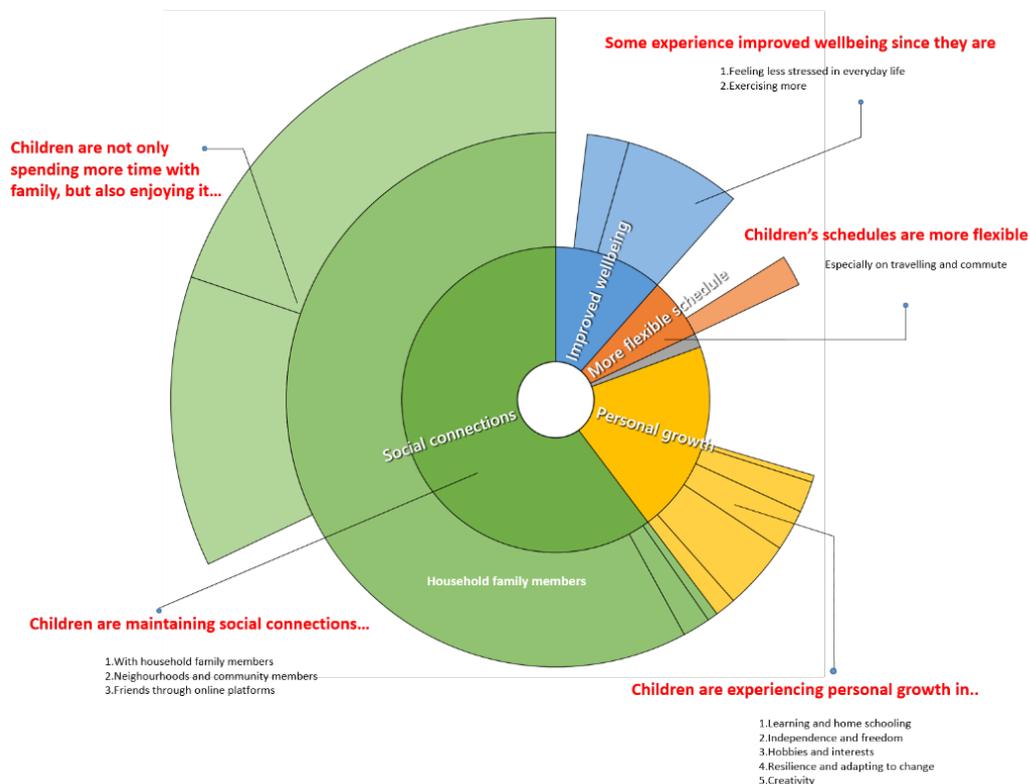


Figure 2 Children's positive experiences during COVID-19

Regarding social connections, parents overwhelming indicated that the opportunity to spend more time together as a family was a key positive experience for them and their children. Many parents noted that both they and their children had enjoyed playing games as a family, spending time with their siblings, exercising together as a family, and cooking and doing crafts together. Some parents indicated that the opportunity to eat meals together was also a valuable experience for them.

*She has spent almost every day playing with a new friend across the street..... which has been great*

*Contacting friends and relatives more through technology..... Motivated to keep connected to friends as doesn't see them at school*

Free from the stress of attending school and extracurricular routines, many parents reported that their children demonstrated personal growth during this time as they had more time to focus on school work, hobbies and interests, and to express their creativity. Furthermore, some parents identified the capacity for children's resilience, adaptability, and independence during COVID-19.

Finally, in contrast with the reports of a decline in children's wellbeing identified by many, some parents indicated that this time had given children freedom from the regular stressors of everyday life.

*... There is less stress to be anywhere by a particular time because we are not going anywhere. Not the usual stress of having to attend meetings, social gatherings or sports.*

*Less stress in having to get up and get to school on time and be ready and on time for after school activities. We've been able to have earlier dinners so our bed routine has been less hectic and rushed.*

## Conclusion

Social distancing restrictions imposed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic have had a significant impact on our everyday lives, including those of our children. While children have missed their regular activities, missed their friends and extended family, found learning at home challenging, and found concentrating more difficult, there have, nevertheless, been significant gains experienced; such as a decrease in the stressors associated with intensive school routines, commutes, and parents trying to manage children's activities with their own work schedules.

Free from the stress of the school routines and stressful work life, children were reported to experience personal growth, increased independence, development of hobbies and interests, learning resilience and adaptation to change, and an increased opportunity for expressing their creativity. Parents overwhelmingly identified the quality and the time families spent together as a positive outcome of the COVID-19 lockdown.

The findings present positive outcomes, yet also identify some challenges in being able to maintain these gains that families experienced as children return to the classroom and their extra-curricular activities, parents return to their workplaces, and life resumes its usual pace.

*We are spending more time together doing things we wouldn't normally do, like scooter riding, playing bored games, craft, cooking, learning. They enjoy having me at home all the time doing things with them. They also play with each other more, building cubby houses etc.*

*Our daughter is ready to be involved with anything we do, she is so much more present because usually she'd be out with her friends*

In addition, some parents indicated that children had developed stronger connections with their neighbours, and some children had been able to use the opportunity to stay connected and develop friendships through online platforms.

*Becoming a more independent learner & more organised with his time.*

*[My children] have learned how to navigate stressful situations together. They have learned other skills at home.*