A Lasting Legacy – The impact of COVID-19 on children and parents

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Australian Childhood Foundation

Acknowledgements

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Executive Summary

The Australian Childhood Foundation, in partnership with Lewers Research, undertook an online survey of a nationally representative sample of parents in June 2020 just as the first version of lockdown was being eased and prior to the second round of restrictions being put in place in Victoria. It sought to understand more about the needs of parents and children during periods of such large scale disruption and transition.

There is no doubt that COVID-19 has led to an immediate and chronic fallout of negative effects on the mental health and wellbeing of children and parents across Australia. A quarter of parents felt that they were failing their children and more than a third stated that they had lost confidence about their parenting. These problems emerged at exactly the time when parents noticed that their children needed more re-assurance and were experiencing signs of heightened stress such as eating and sleeping disturbances.

A third of parents felt isolated and left without adequate support. Almost 40% were worried that their own stress and mental health was adversely affecting the wellbeing of their children.

Concerningly, almost a third of parents were frightened that the impact of COVID-19 will have lasting mental health impacts for their children such as ongoing heightened anxiety and stress. 1 in 5 parents were concerned about their children's future social development and self-confidence.

Social distancing restrictions and lockdown measures have resulted in an overwhelming number of children experiencing a range of losses in their daily lives. The absence of their ability to play with friends during lockdown was acutely experienced by 8 out of 10 children. More than two-thirds of children missed their grandparents and extended family. The loss of face to face school and sporting activities was also significant for many children.

Given that their children were spending more time on their own in their room and using technology more, a substantial portion of parents were concerned about the safety of children online. A quarter of the parents surveyed were worried about how to best protect their children from online bullying. A third of parents were worried about how to keep their children from being abused or exploited when they are using the internet. They feel ill equipped to know how to manage. Undoubtedly, there are many parents who are not even considering this area of vulnerability for their children, given the complexities of demands they are required to manage and balance as a result of COVID-19.

But it is not all doom and gloom. The majority of parents emerged from the first experience of lockdown with an increased appreciation for their family and time with their children. The results reveal families enjoying extra time together, facing unique challenges with love and using the comfort of each other to face adversity. Almost half of the parents (48%) believed that the experiences of COVID-19 will lead them to change their long term approach to parenting and family life. Indeed, almost 8 in 10 parents believed that COVID-19 would result in the experience of a stronger and more cohesive sense of family in the future.

Notwithstanding, these results point to the critical need for ongoing support of children, young people and parents. As the reality of the pandemic is fully being realised, optimistic notions of economic bounce backs are replaced by forecasts of economic hardship for years to come, suppression strategies require us all to live with ever present vigilance and uncertainty.

While additional government funding has brought relief, the research highlights that parents are not only concerned for their children's wellbeing now, but also their own. They also know that COVID-19 is actively eroding their children's development into the long term.

There is legacy of harm that will continue beyond the spread of the virus.

It is critical that the Commonwealth, State and Territory Governments appreciate that support needs to be offered to parents across the varied roles and functions they serve in their families.

Parents are individuals with their own unique histories and support needs. They have work and other commitment to maintain. They have the regular pressures of mortgages, rents, time management, shopping and other household duties. The pandemic has made every day experiences far more complicated.

Parents also have a role in caregiving. They are family and household leaders. In this pandemic, parents are also on the front-line of their children's daily experiences. They interpret the signs of danger that children and young people see around them. They help answer children's questions.

As COVID-19 crisis moves into different territory beyond the first imagined period of time, children will feel the legacy of their experiences linger. They will have been through a collective trauma – the likes of which had not been part of their life to date. They will have missed out on friends, anniversaries, birthdays, sport. They have lost a lot and found only a little in return. The additional time with their parents to play, sit and be has been positive and marked.

This research has highlighted the need for a renewed focus on addressing parental well-being and supporting families they navigate their way through the pandemic. It has long been understood that parental well-being factors are highly correlated with child well-being where parental well-being is comprised of a parent's coping strategies, satisfaction with role as a caregiver, perceived support by others, and general emotional stability (Piehler et al, 2014).

Stressors to family functioning and parent well-being generally appear in two forms: major life events, of which the COVID-19 pandemic is clearly one, and more chronic problems which are often related to role strain including parenting, partner and work strain and related stressors such as financial and time (Nomaguchi and Milkie, 2020). To effectively combat these stressors parents need to rely both on their self-confidence, coping skills and other personal resources and social supports. An absence of these resources and supports poses threats to family functioning and parental well-being.

Recommendations

To date Commonwealth, State and Territory Governments have had a focus on improved access to mental health support for the community to alleviate the impacts of COVID-19. Whilst this is important and welcomed support, the findings from this research point to the need for a continuum of support for children, parents and families with a range of needs beyond more mental health support.

According to the Victorian Government's Better Health Channel, well-being is defined as the experience of health, happiness, feeling socially connected and purposeful and is the complex combination of a person's physical, mental, emotional and social health factors. Thus well-being is more than good mental health. It is the ability to deal with stress and worry, self-confidence and feeling supported by and connected to others.

This research demonstrates the need for governments at all levels to have a stronger focus on parental well-being and family functioning as critical enablers of child well-being during COVID-19 and beyond. The results highlight that parents desire this support in different forms according to their need – ranging from online resources they can find and use for themselves, to connection to other parents through online communities, to professional advice at times when they need it.

About the Authors

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Lauren Thomas is a Manager of Service Development and Projects at the Australian Childhood Foundation. She was awarded a Fellowship with the Creswick Foundation researching International approaches to children's rights for vulnerable children. Over the past 18 years, she has worked with vulnerable and traumatised children, young people and their network of relationships. A counsellor, teacher and trainer, her roles have focussed on empowerment as the basis for achieving change in a wide variety of helping professions; from legal settings to volunteer workers, teaching staff to private practitioners. Lauren has worked in metropolitan cities and remote Aboriginal communities and is currently working on the development of a meaningful participation framework for children engaged with the work of the Foundation. She can be contacted by email at lthomas@childhood.org.au.

The Australian Childhood Foundation

The purpose of the Australian Childhood Foundation is to ensure that all children are loved, protected and prioritised, especially those who have been affected by the trauma of child abuse and family violence. We run a range of programs in the community.

- Specialist Trauma Counselling. We provide a range of specialist counselling services for children and young people affected by abuse and for their families.

- Therapeutic care programs. We provide a range of therapeutic care programs within residential and foster care settings.

- Advocacy for children. We speak out for effective protective and support services for children and young people. All our programs affirm the importance of children.

- Education. We provide community and professional education, consultancy and debriefing programs. These programs aim to improve responses to children and young people who have experienced or are at risk of abuse, family violence and neglect.

- Child abuse prevention programs. We run nationally recognised child abuse prevention programs that seek to decrease the incidence of child abuse and raise awareness about how to stop it even before it starts.

- Inspiring and supporting parents. We provide ongoing parenting education seminars and easily accessible resources to strengthen the ability of parents to raise happy and confident children.

COVID-19 Response and Resources

In response to COVID-19, the Australian Childhood Foundation has extended its delivery of specialist therapeutic support and intervention with children, young people, families and carer households using digital modalities, such as texting, emails, telephone, and video-calls. The Foundation has also created a range of parenting resources and tools to assist parents as they face the challenges of parenting in the time of coronavirus.

These resources are available for free here: https://professionals.childhood.org.au/covid-19/.

Contents

Introduction

The COVID-19 virus has caused significant disruption to the everyday lives of children, families and communities. It has changed, at least for now, the way we live, the way we learn and the way we work. Often used words such as 'unprecedented' have become commonplace in media and community conversations as we all grapple to make meaning of the scale of upheaval to all we considered 'normal' and taken-for-granted about our lives.

Our sense of normality is most often associated with predictability, routine and a rhythm to how we live our lives. From this comes a sense of safety, security and comfort. COVID-19 has turned our sense of normality on its head. It has brought uncertainty and insecurity into our everyday lives, tinged at times with fear and blame. These changed circumstances bring inevitable stressors, concerns and threats to our health and well-being. Family life has been impacted significantly. Many families, already vulnerable, have faced compounding needs and risks. Many families have been thrust into financial and employment uncertainty. Many have had to navigate working from home whilst supporting their children to learn from home. Many have not been able to access the usual supports of family and friends. Others have faced increased responsibilities for vulnerable family members.

Children thrive when their lives are characterised by certainty, routines and predictability. So what then has COVID-19 meant for them? How have they made sense of the disruption to their lives? What needs do they have as a result? As the media reports on the growing evidence about the mental health impacts of COVID-19, many referring to it as the 'third wave' there is a critical need to focus on the impacts of COVID-19 on the emotional and psychological well-being of children and young people.

In June 2020, as Australia was coming out of its period of lockdown and enjoying an easing of restrictions we undertook a survey of parents and carers from around the country to better understand the impacts on children and families of living and adapting in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The survey occurred before Victoria went into its second period of lockdown.

In the face of the pandemic, we are all having to find our way to a 'new normal' within which we have to live with the ever-present risk of outbreaks and further disruption as currently evidenced in Victoria, NSW and elsewhere. This 'new normal' requires vigilance and preparedness, in recognition that the certainty, safety and comfort of our 'old normal' will be elusive for some time to come.

This survey provides important insights and lessons to assist us in meeting the now better-understood needs of parents and children during these periods of disruption and transition.

Survey Method

The research was conducted on behalf of the Australian Childhood Foundation by Lewers Research. A nationally representative sample of 375 adults aged 18 years and over in Australia responded to an online survey in June 2020. All survey respondents were parents of children under the age of 18 who were living with them. The family units that were subject of this survey crossed ages and composition, with dual and single-parent household represented. The average number of children per household was two.

Survey Sample

Total Sample	N=375
Gender of Parent/Carer	
Male	31%
Female	69%
Non-Binary	0%
Age of Parent/Carer	
18-24 years	1%
25-34 years	17%
35-44 years	40%
45-54 years	28%
55-64 years	10%
65+ years	3%
Marital Status of Parent/Carer	
Married	69%
De facto	13%
Single	11%
Widowed	2%
Average number of children per household	1.9
Age of children per household	
0-2 years	8%
3-5 years	16%
6-9 years	25%
10-13 years	25%
14-17 years	26%
State	
Victoria	34%
New South Wales	33%
Queensland	12%
Western Australia	10%
South Australia	10%
Tasmania	2%
ACT and NT	1%
Location	
Metropolitan	76%
Regional	24%

Key Findings

During the COVID-19 lockdown, children have relied more on the care and support of parents who themselves have struggled to cope.

My children needed more reassurance	**48%**
My children needed me more as a parent	**63%**
During COVID19 lockdown, I felt I was failing as a parent	**26%**
During COVID19 lockdown, I felt less confident as a parent	**36%**
During COVID19 lockdown, I was worried that my own mental health was negatively affecting my children	**41%**
During COVID19 lockdown, I felt isolated as a parent	**35%**

Whilst many parents identified themselves as positively navigating the impact of COVID-19 on their children, a significant proportion experienced negative effects of the lockdown for themselves and their children.

1 in 4 parents believed that they were failing their children and unable to meet their needs. A third of parents surveyed had suffered a drop in their confidence. Almost 40% were worried that their own stress and mental health was adversely affecting the wellbeing of their children. 1 in 3 parents felt isolated and unable to access adequate supports, leaving them to deal with the stressors in their family on their own.

This is all in the context of the majority of parents feeling that their children need them more (63%) and needed more reassurance than they had before the lockdown (48%).

Parents are more likely to access family and friends for support.

	Never	**Sometimes**	**Often**
A partner (if there is one)	**15%**	**24%**	**56%**
Friends who are also parents	**30%**	**42%**	**23%**
Grandparents	**33%**	**35%**	**28%**
Extended family	**29%**	**48%**	**19%**
GP	**46%**	**35%**	**11%**
School	**25%**	**42%**	**27%**
Health Professional	**49%**	**29%**	**14%**
Telephone Helpline	**67%**	**13%**	**7%**
Psychologist/Counsellor	**61%**	**21%**	**9%**
Online parenting group	**56%**	**21%**	**11%**

Consistent with previous parenting research undertaken by the Australian Childhood Foundation (Tucci, Mitchell, and Goddard, 2004, 2005), parents are more likely to access support when they need it from known and trusted sources such as family and friends, followed by their GP and child's school. Reflecting increasing comfort with the online environment, nearly 1 in 3 parents indicated they access support through online parenting support groups and services.

Contracting COVID-19 was understandably on the minds of many parents.

Feeling worried about my children contracting COVID-19	**47%**
Feeling worried about my children if I contracted COVID-19	**53%**
Being concerned that I cannot explain risks about COVID-19 to my children	**23%**
Finding it difficult to ensure that my children understand and follow social distancing guidelines	**31%**

Whilst many parents were concerned about the risk to themselves or their children of contracting COVID-19, there are almost as many who were not so worried about it. This could in part be explained by the fact that at the time of being surveyed (June 2020) there was limited community transmission, many states were recording no new cases and restrictions were easing. The new outbreaks of community transmission in Victoria and an upward trend in New South Wales since the time of the survey may yield different results to this question were it to be asked now.

These findings also point to the need for more support for parents in talking to their children about COVID-19. Nearly a quarter of parents lack confidence in being able to talk to their children about the risks of COVID-19. Nearly a third of parents indicated that they were finding it difficult to help their children understand and maintain social distancing requirements.

Parents were worried about the immediate impacts of COVID-19 on their children's well-being.

My children were more anxious	**38%**
My children were more stressed	**37%**
My children had problems sleeping	**30%**
My children's behaviour was more difficult to manage	**38%**
My children's eating patterns and diet changed for the worse	**31%**

The disruption to children's daily lives is evident with more than a third of children perceived by their parents as more stressed and anxious as a result of COVID-19 than normal.

Significant numbers of children showed their distress through behaviours that parents deemed difficult to manage.

According to their parents, almost a third of children experienced problems with sleeping, eating and diet – all three major indicators of increased stress and worry and decreased well-being.

These findings are likely contributors to findings that show children are requiring more reassurance from their parents and parents as a result feeling less confident, isolated and concerned for their own and their children's well-being.

Parents were also worried about the long term consequences of COVID-19 on the mental health and well-being of their children.

Concerningly, the results below highlight the fears of parents that the impact of COVID-19 will have lasting mental health impacts for their children with heightened anxiety and stress an ongoing worry for nearly a third of parents. Parents were also worried about a range of other developmental impacts on their children as a result of COVID-19 as evidenced by more than 1 in 5 parents concerned about their children's future social development and self-confidence.

In the long term, the experiences of COVID-19 will negatively affect the mental health of my children	**25%**
In the long term, the experiences of COVID-19 will affect my children's level of anxiety	**31%**
In the long term, the experiences of COVID-19 will affect my children's level of stress	**29%**
In the long term, the experiences of COVID-19 will negatively affect my children's ability to make and keep friends	**21%**
In the long term, the experiences of COVID-19 will negatively affect their sense of confidence	**22%**

This is a significant source of potential problems that have been identified by parents at this point of the COVID-19 story. There is substantial evidence that suggests the long term developmental consequences for children of trauma related to natural disasters, as an example, are often overlooked during the disaster recovery phase. This has led to increased social and emotional problems in young people as they grow, including serious mental health and suicide concerns. This generation of children and young people must be carefully tracked over their development to ensure that appropriate support arising from the impacts of COVID-19 is offered if and when required.

Overwhelming numbers of children felt the loss of friends, family and usual activities.

Social distancing restrictions and lockdown measures have resulted in substantial numbers of children experiencing a range of losses in their daily lives. Reflective of this upheaval, the absence of their ability to play with friends during lockdown was acutely experienced by 8 out of 10 children. More than two-thirds of children missed their grandparents and extended family. The loss of face to face school and sporting activities was also significant for many children.

My children missed their friends	**83%**
My children missed seeing their extended family	**68%**
My children missed going to school	**65%**
My children missed seeing their grandparents	**64%**
My children missed playing sport	**62%**

Social relationships can recover as restrictions ease and contact is allowed. Children and young people will return to school. They will see their friends and participate in sport and other recreational activities where their social groups will be affirmed. Their families will be happy to be able to share birthdays and celebrations.

However, for some children, the anticipation of loss will remain with them for some time to come and may be prolonged. It is as if the very intimacy that accompanies the experience of close relationships has been coloured by the possibility of disruption outside of the control of themselves and others in their family. This introduces a sense of vulnerability into children's lives that is not helpful and may lead to an internalised ongoing anticipation of the fear of loss. This will need to be a focus of the continued attention of the important networks of relationships around children for some time even after COVID-19 is over.

For children and young people who have limited social networks and friendships, COVID-19 may have served to further isolate them. Young people need peers with whom to share experiences and develop a sense of belonging that helps to shape their identity. Children and young people need important opportunities to learn about cooperation, collaboration and negotiation with peers. In the absence of these important experiences, children and young people can develop more isolated and less interdependent orientations leaving them vulnerable when they are in need of support and care.

Many parents are worried about the impact of COVID-19 on their child's education.

During the pandemic, states and territories have taken varying approaches to schooling, with some states continuing with face to face learning whilst others closed schools resulting in remote learning from home. Many states who continued with face to face learning have seen changes to term dates and intermittent disruptions to individual schools due to members of their school community testing positive to the virus. As a result, nearly 3 in 10 parents were concerned about the long term impacts of COVID-19 on their child's education.

In the long term, the experiences of COVID-19 will negatively affect my children's education	29%

Where parents were faced with supporting remote learning, significant numbers of parents (41%) were concerned about teaching their children at home. The reality of this was also a concern for more than a third of parents trying to balance working from home with the need to attend to the needs of their children.

Teaching children at home	41%
Balancing working from home and looking after my children	34%

This set of experiences appear to be playing out again in Melbourne which has seen the recent return to remote learning from home. The longer these periods of lockdown the greater the likelihood that the competing demands on parents will become an even more significant source of stress and difficulty. Lowering expectations on parents to create the perfect learning environment for children may help in easing the pressure that parents and some children and young people will experience. In addition, given the isolation that some children and young people experience in lockdown, schools and parents should consider how to create unstructured and structured opportunities for social engagement as part of the schooling process.

COVID-19 increased children's screen time.

My children spent more time by themselves in their room.	46%
My children had more screen time than usual during COVID-19 lockdown	71%

Periods in isolation in response to COVID-19, have meant that parents have been forced to reconsider their ideas around screen time for their children. Almost three-quarter of parents surveyed had noted that their children had increased their screen time during COVID-19 lockdown. For the most part, it is understandable that schooling online has necessitated most students connecting to their devices at levels higher than the previously recommended limit of two hours per day. Lockdown also increased the use of technology as a primary means for children and young people to feel connected to their friends.

However, when an increase in technology is also coupled with more time spent by children and young people on their own in their room, there is an escalation in the risk of concerns related to online bullying, exploitation and possibly inadvertent viewing of harmful online content, such as pornography and violence. In the context of lockdown, it may be wise for parents to encourage children and young people to use shared household spaces to engage in technology where possible.

Parents worried about their children's safety online.

Protecting my child from being bullied online	24%
Regulating what my child is exposed to on the internet	35%
Ensuring that my children not abused or exploited when they use the internet	33%

In the context of many children were spending more time on their own in their room and using technology more to engage with schools and friends, a substantial portion of parents were concerned about the safety of their children online. A quarter of the parents surveyed were worried about how to best protect their children from online bullying. A third of parents were worried about how to keep their children from being abused or exploited when they are using the internet.

This is a realistic fear given that the Truth Project in the UK has recently estimated that the proportion of adults holding sexualised conversations in an online environment with a child is unlikely to be below the lowest estimate of 1 in 10 adults, and could be higher (Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse, UK, 2020).

Also cited by the Truth Project was research published in 2018 by the Internet Watch Foundation (IWF), assisted by funding from Microsoft, examining the distribution of captures of live-streamed child sexual abuse. The IWF found that 96 per cent of the children depicted were on their own, typically in a home setting such as a bedroom or bathroom and that most typically the images involved "white girls, apparently from relatively affluent Western backgrounds" (Internet Watch Foundation, 2018).

The Australian Centre to Counter Child Exploitation (ACCCE) reported a jump of 123 per cent in 12 months, especially over the lockdown associated with COVID-19. The ACCCE's Child Protection Triage Unit highlighted that the average number of child exploitation reports it receives has increased from 776 per month to 1,731 per month (Dillan, 2020).

Positive strategies were the most important for parents to manage their behaviour during COVID-19 lockdown.

Spending time with children	**90%**
Making children feel loved	**89%**
Parents setting a good example	**87%**
Rewarding good behaviour	**76%**
Reasoning with children	**70%**
Creating a diversion	**44%**
Time out	**39%**
Grounding children	**29%**
Smacking a child	**13%**

Despite the increased stressors facing parents, the findings show that the time in lockdown produced improvements in the connection between parents and children. And, when asked to rate the strategies they had relied on to help teach their children right from wrong, the overwhelming majority responded saying that they used positive, relationship-based strategies rather than the harsher, more traditional disciplinarian approaches such as time out, smacking, or even distraction. Smacking was rated the least important and effective strategy for managing children's behaviour, with only 13% identifying it.

COVID-19 has made many parents rethink their approach to parenting and family life.

In the long term, the experiences of COVID-19 will lead to permanent changes in my approach to parenting	**48%**
In the long term, the experiences of COVID-19 will make us stronger as a family	**78%**
In the long term, the experiences of COVID-19 will make me change my priorities about parenting	**56%**
In the long term, the experiences of COVID-19 have made me appreciate my time with my children more	**81%**
In the long term, the experiences of COVID-19 have made me value the importance of family more	**79%**
I have enjoyed the extra time with my children at home during lockdown	**79%**
Relationships between my children and me have become closer during COVID-19	**73%**
In the long term, the experiences of COVID-19 will build their resilience	**68%**

The longer-term legacy of COVID-19 is likely to be a renewed appreciation of family time. More than three-quarters of the families surveyed indicated that they had done more together as a family than usual and that this time together was a significant factor in their ability to support their children. Almost half of the parents (48%) believed that the experiences of COVID-19 will lead them to change their long term approach to parenting and family life. Indeed, almost 8 in 10 parents believed that COVID-19 would result in the experience of a stronger and more cohesive sense of family in the future.

When asked about the possible long-term impacts of COVID-19 on parents, children and families, the strongest answers, across all states and territories regardless of metro or regional location were statements reflecting a new or renewed appreciation of family time.

Supporting parents to have fun and connect with their children has emerged as a key opportunity for future periods of lockdown and isolation. In contrast to the stress and challenges faced by many families during COVID-19, the survey showed that more than 3 in every 4 parents felt they had been able to have more time spent having fun with their family.

Many families planned to keep doing things together even after the lockdown ended.

More time to just hang out together	**85%**
More chances to play together as a family	**81%**
Sharing moments of laughter with my children	**87%**
More opportunities to learn about the things that my children are interested in	**79%**
More time to go for walks with my children	**77%**
More chances to cook together	**74%**
Being creative with my children	**71%**
More chances to watch shows on TV together	**70%**
Noticing things about my children that I did not know before COVID-19	**65%**
Reading together with my children	**65%**
Video-calling with friends and family	**65%**
Joining my children to play videogames together	**44%**

Parents and children plan to continue to spend time together and engage in activities that keep them close. The majority of parents were committed to creating opportunities to hang out, play, share moments of laughter, walk, cook, read and be creative with their children.

Interestingly, the experience of COVID-19 has led to the realisation for almost 8 in 10 parents that they wanted to keep learning more about what interests their children with many (65%) noticing things about their children for the first time. This sense of curiosity seemingly stems from the opportunity to experience relationships without time pressures or demands of work and or other general busy elements of modern life. The slower pace of life in lockdown was remarked upon by many parents in their commentary, highlighting the importance of unplanned and unstructured interactions to the quality of relationships and the experience of harmony.

Analysis

There is no doubt that COVID-19 has led to an immediate and potentially chronic fallout of negative effects on the mental health and wellbeing of children and parents across Australia. Whilst many parents have seized the lockdown opportunity to improve time with their children, a quarter of parents felt that they were failing their children, More than a third stated that they had lost confidence about their parenting with significant numbers believing they need to review their parenting approach. These problems emerged at exactly the time when parents noticed that their children needed more re-assurance and were experiencing signs of heightened stress such as eating and sleeping disturbances.

Many parents felt isolated and left without adequate support. And in turn, they were worried that deterioration in their own mental health and well-being would adversely impact on their children.

These issues have been reflected in similar survey results in the United Kingdom with an Action for Children (2020) study finding that

> *"….After months of lockdown over a third of parents (36%) say that their children are feeling isolated and lonely, with millions also reported as anxious, or unable to sleep. This has left parents themselves reeling with four in ten (43%) feeling anxious and more than one in three (33%) admitting to being out of their depth when it came to supporting their children during the lockdown. Many are also experiencing the same loneliness and sleep problems they say their children are. Even with restrictions easing, parents are fearful about the weeks and months of uncertainty ahead…."*

Many of these concerns have also been referenced in a recent report by The Children's Society (UK) about the impact of COVID-19 on the wellbeing of children.

Parents are also bracing themselves for what they believe are dormant socio-emotional problems in their children which will surface over an extended period of time. More than a quarter believe that COVID-19 will have long term detrimental consequences on the well-being health of their children, including increases in anxiety, reduction in self-confidence, a sense of isolation and poorer capacity to make and keep friends. Added to the isolation that many children and young people experience during a lockdown, these are trip wire issues that will need ongoing attention from families, mental health, support services and governments.

Parents too are worried about keeping their children safe in an environment in which more screen time is occurring, and young people are spending more time on their own in their room alone. The risks of online exploitation, online bullying and exposure to harmful content weigh heavily on the mind of a significant portion of parents. They feel ill equipped to know how to manage. Undoubtedly, there are many parents who are not even considering this area of vulnerability for their children, given the complexities of demands they are required to manage and balance as a result of COVID-19.

But it is not all doom and gloom. The majority of parents emerged from the first experience of lockdown with an increased appreciation for their family and time with their children. The results reveal families enjoying extra time together, facing unique challenges with love and using the comfort of each other to face adversity.

Notwithstanding, these results point to the critical need for ongoing support of children, young people and parents to ensure their health and well-being. As the reality of the pandemic is fully being realised, optimistic notions of economic bounce backs are replaced by forecasts of economic hardship for years to come, suppression strategies require us all to live with ever

present vigilance and uncertainty, and with news of vaccines being some time off, if ever, we need to adjust to the 'new normal'.

The 'new normal' will see continued, and for many, prolonged upheaval and uncertainty creating the environment for sustained levels of stress, anxiety and worry. As Victoria has moved into even deeper restrictions and other parts of the country focus on fighting spot-fires of virus outbreak, we cannot lose sight of the risks to the mental health and well-being of significant numbers of children, young people and families.

While additional government funding has brought relief, the research highlights that parents are not only concerned for their children's well-being now, but also their own. They also know that COVID-19 risks actively eroding their children's social and emotional development into the long term.

There is legacy of harm that will continue beyond the spread of the virus.

In this pandemic, parents are on the front-line of their children's daily experiences. They interpret the signs of danger that children and young people see around them. They help answer children's questions, provide reassurance in the face of fears and worries and comfort them when they are feeling lost and alone – away from other friends and family. Parents are a touchstone for their children during these hard times, helping the uncertainty to feel a little more predictable and manageable. In this research, parents knew they needed support to be able to fulfill this role, especially in light of how complicated life has become in lockdown restrictions.

Parents have their own unique histories and support needs. They have work and other commitment to maintain. They have the regular pressures of mortgages, rents, time management, shopping and other household duties. The pandemic has made every day experiences far more complicated. Parents need support to manage their own mental health, well-being and sense of isolation and stress that has accompanied this crisis. The government response of increasing access for psychological support provides a partial response to this area of concern for parents.

As COVID-19 crisis moves into different territory beyond the first imagined period of time, children will feel the legacy of COVID-19 on their well-being. For many the experience will be akin to going through a collective trauma – the likes of which had they had never experienced. They will have missed out on friends, anniversaries, birthdays, sport. They have lost a lot and found only a little in return. The additional time with their parents to play, sit and be has been positive and marked. It is these small whispers of the story of this year that needs to be introduced into the community narrative so that children can make more sense of what has changed their world and forever made it less familiar to what they had been used to.

This research has highlighted the need for a renewed focus on addressing parental well-being and supporting families they navigate their way through the pandemic. As the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) (2015) pointed out

> *"Research has long recognised that families are a child's single most important environment in terms of influence on development (Garbarino 1992), with family relationships and interactions being critically important (Bowes et al. 2009). Consequently, family functioning, quality parenting, and access to social and family supports all contribute strongly to optimal health and wellbeing."*

It has long been understood that parental well-being factors are highly correlated with child well-being where parental well-being is comprised of a parent's coping strategies, satisfaction with role as a caregiver, perceived support by others, and general emotional stability (Piehler et al, 2014).

In determining the elements of positive family functioning AIHW (2015) referred to the outcomes of the Positive Family Functioning (PFF) project undertaken by Access Economics (2010) which identified the elements of family functioning to include: emotional – parent-child relationships, perceived parental and family support; governance - rules, expectations and consistency; engagement and cognitive development - reading and verbal engagement, quality time fostering the development of educational language and interaction skills; physical health - healthy/unhealthy physical activities or environments; intra-familial relationships - quality of relationships among all members of the family; and social connectivity - involvement of parents and children in activities outside of the family unit.

Stressors to family functioning and parent well-being generally appear in two forms: major life events, of which the COVID-19 pandemic is clearly one, and more chronic problems which are often related to role strain including parenting, partner and work strain and related stressors such as financial and time (Nomaguchi and Milkie, 2020). To effectively combat these stressors parents need to rely both on their self-confidence, coping skills and other personal resources and social supports. An absence of these resources and supports poses threats to family functioning and parental well-being.

Recommendations

To date Commonwealth, State and Territory Governments have had a focus on improved access to mental health support for the community to alleviate the impacts of COVID-19. Whilst this is important and welcomed support, the findings from this research point to the need for a continuum of support for children, parents and families with a range of needs beyond mental health support, with more of a focus on well-being.

According to the Victorian Government's Better Health Channel, well-being is defined as the experience of health, happiness, feeling socially connected and purposeful and is the complex combination of a person's physical, mental, emotional and social health factors (https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/HealthyLiving/wellbeing). Thus well-being is more than good mental health. It is the ability to deal with stress and worry, self-confidence and feeling supported by and connected to others.

This research demonstrates the need for governments at all levels to have a stronger focus on parental well-being and family functioning as critical enablers of child well-being during COVID-19 and beyond. The results highlight that parents desire this support in different forms according to their need – ranging from online resources they can find and use for themselves, to connection to other parents through online communities, to professional advice at times when they need it.

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