

Parents' Voices through the Covid-19 Pandemic

Family wellbeing and home education



Dr Josephine Bleach
Director, Early Learning Initiative, National College of Ireland

Homeschooling, along with remote working, was a defining feature of our lives under Covid-19. This article highlights the family wellbeing and experience of 151 parents with children aged 4–13 years who were interviewed by the Early Learning Initiative, National College of Ireland, between March 2020 and September 2021 as part of its Covid-19 supports.

Homeschooling, along with remote working, was a defining feature of our lives under Covid-19. Never in the history of the State did the role of educator fall so directly on parents. For most parents, this was extremely challenging. The Early Learning Initiative (ELI), National College of Ireland, has collaborated with parents on children's education for over 15 years. This article outlines the family wellbeing and experience of parents in the ParentChild+ programme who were contacted as part of ELI's Covid-19 supports.

Between March and June 2020, ELI contacted 120 parents (with children aged 4–13 years), 40 of whom engaged in interviews. This was cohort 1. A further 225 families were contacted over the school year 2020–21, with 84 interviewed (cohort 2). Another 111 families were contacted in July–September 2021, with 27 interviewed (cohort 3).

Family wellbeing

With the pandemic just beginning, the wellbeing of cohort 1 families was lower than that of cohorts 2 and 3. Only 44% (n = 17) of cohort 1 said they were doing well, compared with 63% (n = 53) of cohort 2 and 77% (n = 21) of cohort 3. No one in cohort 3 rated their family's wellbeing as low, compared with 13% (n = 5) of cohort 1 and 11% (n = 9) of cohort 2. Here are some of the parents' comments:

It was really tough during Covid, but all the family are keeping well.

We are doing quite well – we try and go outdoors as much as possible, find this is better for the children.

We are doing fine, but the pandemic has affected everybody in some way. Our child has a great love of reading, and this is down to the Home Visiting programme. We got lots of books from the programme, and we have continued this and kept our child busy.

I feel very stressed, as my son is crying and finding it hard and not confident since and during lockdown. Two months without school has been difficult. We cannot do all the study. He cannot communicate, but improving. Speaking Spanish in crèche so try English completely. Delayed language, as speaking two languages.

I am anxious about whether my youngest child, who is 2 years and 3 months, will get a place in crèche next month. I find it hard to bring the two kids out, as I am by myself. I would like them to get interaction with other children.

It was difficult for Dad in lockdown, looking after 3 children, because I (Mam) was working. The teenager did not want to engage in online learning, and Dad would get frustrated.

We really struggled during the first lockdown. Our child could not understand the concept of homeschooling and found it hard to separate home and school. Child had temper tantrums. We sought advice from a child psychologist. The whole family were very stressed.

We are coping well but had a problem with addiction which only came to light during lockdown.

Prisoners in our own home. Neighbours causing hassle. Left to live with older parents as children scared. Much better now. Children had cabin fever but can play in grandparents' garden.

Found lockdown very hard, as we live in an apartment and the children found it hard for somewhere to play.

There is a fear around drugs, as they are escalating in the area.

We are working from home and enjoying having more family time.

We are doing well because the children are back in school. I found it tough in lockdown.

School closures

Questions on school closures were asked of cohorts 1 and 2. With schools closed from March to June 2020, only 38% (n = 14) of cohort 1 were managing well with their children home from school, compared with 61% (n = 51) of cohort 2.

Satisfaction with their children's schools was similar, with 63% of both cohorts happy with the support received. However, 18% of cohort 1 were dissatisfied, compared with only 7% of cohort 2. Of those that were interviewed after children had returned to school (n = 53), only four said that their children missed much school due to Covid-19.

School is doing check-in phone calls to the family. Schoolwork put up on Zoom.

Also paper copies of work given to family.

The school is fantastic, they gave great support. You could not fault them in any way.

School checked in with families to see how they were coping. Children doing schoolwork on the Seesaw app.

We were comfortable using technology. The school was very helpful to parents, encouraging them to engage with new technologies.

Technology-supported learning in the home because the school provided so many platforms for learning.

Having a lot of devices was helpful for schoolwork and working from home.

School had Zoom class for a half hour 1 day a week, then went up to twice a week. Would have liked more support from school.

Better for son to be in school, better for his English. More school, more homework.

Home learning support

Lockdowns and school closures impacted on parents' perceptions of the quality of the home learning environment that they provided to their children: only 34% of cohort 1 were happy with it, compared with 50% of cohort 2.

This was reflected in the requests for support, with 34% of cohort 1 requesting educational activity packs, compared with 24% of cohort 2. As society and schools opened up, there were more requests for the links to ELI's social media and online group sessions.

Thank you so much for the pack. These packs are amazing. They just have opened the world of arts and crafts to my son. We are just so grateful for them.

My daughter received an activity pack and was delighted that ELI remembered her. It kept her going, and now I use it with smaller children.

It was a very good programme, and my child is continuing what she learnt by having a weekend card game with her cousins, who are 12 and 9. It is great fun for them and a great way of learning. Crazy 8s is now her favourite game.

Activity packs and learning material like counting 1–10 and colours to help with my child's memory. My child is very young, but anything to help her retain knowledge would be great.

I would be interested in an activity pack and a parenting course, as I would love some tips and ideas. It would be a great benefit to me.

Just stuff for kids to do – confined to the home and they were killing one another.

Would like to connect with online groups. Missing library and outdoor activities. Like link to ELI FB [Facebook] page.

Would like info on coding and link to webpage to see what's on offer and make contact if I feel I want.

Getting enough support from the school but would be interested in the Restorative Parenting Programme.

No need for any additional support at this time, but there would be a real need for support if there was another lockdown and the children had to access classes online again.

My child is busy enough with playschool 5 days a week, but I will keep an eye on the Facebook group as I may want to engage again in the future.

I have two kids at home. Please send link to webpage, as most of sessions online. Please email me.

We were delighted to receive the ParentChild+ programme and also the STEM programme over the summer. Would like to be involved in more summer programmes. Both home visitors were fantastic help to the family.

Conclusion

Covid-19 lockdowns and school closures were tough on families. With home learning more critical than ever to children's future success in education, there is a need for more direct parental engagement and home-based programmes to support children's learning.

Over the past year, in collaboration with parents, the Early Learning Initiative (ELI) has trialled a variety of differentiated hybrid home-based learning activities. We believe that a blended, flexible, e-learning approach using regular phone or video contact, home learning packs, and access to online learning resources and services is required to support child, parent, and family wellbeing and education.



Sam's Business Bus is a free entrepreneurial programme, aimed at sowing the seeds of entrepreneurship in school children aged ten to twelve and inspiring them to become the entrepreneurs of the future.

Sam's Business Bus is funded by Enterprise Ireland, and is delivered on a national basis by EDelia Group. The programme is written by educators for educators and provides a range of classroom-ready resources for teachers to use as they wish.