

Report 1.1: Findings from parents/carers of 2-4 year olds living in North West England - Stress, child activities, child worries and need for support.

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***Report Authors: Adrienne Shum, Helen Dodd,
Pete Lawrence***

NIHR | Applied Research Collaboration
Oxford and Thames Valley
NIHR | Oxford Health Biomedical
Research Centre

 **University of
Reading**

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Southampton**

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 **Experimental
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Medical Sciences Division

 **Department of
Psychiatry**
Medical Sciences Division

The Co-SPYCE Study

Background

COVID-19 has caused major disruptions to families' lives, through social distancing, school closures and lock-down. This is also a rapidly changing situation where different pressures will arise for children, young people and their families over time. While research has provided valuable information about how parents can support their children's mental health in general, we know little about what is most effective in the current, changing context.

The Co-SPYCE project is tracking the mental health of pre-school aged children throughout the COVID-19 crisis. This is through an online survey completed monthly by parents/carers throughout the pandemic. The study has full ethical and data protection approval and is fully GDPR compliant.

The findings will help identify what protects pre-school children from deteriorating mental health over time, and at particular stress points. Findings will be shared directly with health and education services to inform the development of effective support for young children and families.

Recruitment

The study sample has been recruited through a variety of means, including through social media, distribution through partner organisations, networks, charities and the media. The self-selecting nature of recruitment means that this will not be a nationally representative sample. See Appendix A for a description of the participant characteristics.

For the long term, we are aiming to have good stratification across a wide range of socio-demographic factors (e.g., income, ethnicity, pre-existing mental/physical health difficulties) to investigate the experiences for different groups that may be particularly vulnerable during and after the pandemic.

We are keen to recruit as many families as possible to the study. Parents/carers can sign up and take part at any point: cospyce.org/survey

Further information

For further information or to request specific analyses, please contact the research team at cospyce@soton.ac.uk. The study is supported through UKRI Covid-19 funding and a UKRI Future Leaders Fellowship awarded to Helen Dodd.

Focus of this report

This report is based upon the data from 536 parents/carers who are living in North West England and completed the survey¹ between 17th April and 30th June.

In this report, we focus on the following outcomes:

1. Parent/Carer Stress
2. How children are spending their time
3. Parents feelings about child play and entertainment
4. Child worries
5. The need for parental support

Key findings

- ¾ of participating parents/carers felt that they were not sufficiently able to meet the needs of both work and their pre-school child.
- The top 3 stressors for participating parents/carers were (i) work, (ii) their child's wellbeing, and (iii) their own future.
- Over 85% of children are reported by participating parents/carers to be getting at least 30 minutes of exercise a day but only 18% are reported to be getting the recommended 3 hours.
- Almost half of the children (45%) are reported to be spending no time playing with another child in their household.
- Over half (56%) of the 2-4 year olds are reported by participating parents/carers as not communicating at all via phone, video call or message with friends outside their home.
- Not being able to see their friends and attend social and sporting activities is the most common worry reported by participating parents/carers for pre-school children.
- Participating parents/carers particularly want support around managing children's emotions, educational demands, coming out of social isolation and behaviour.

¹ 'Completion' of the survey is based on participants having completed items up to and including the pre-defined main outcome measure (the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire – parent reporting on child).

Findings

1. Parents/Carer stress

(a) Work

25% of respondents who are living in North West England reported that they were working full-time and 35% were working part-time. 39% respondents reported that they were not working. Of those who were working, 68% reported that they were working from home, and 31.7% were working out of the home.

(b) Combining work and child's needs

75% felt that they were either 'not' or only 'a bit' able to meet the needs of both their work and their child, compared to 25% who felt they were able to meet the needs 'a lot' or 'completely'.

(c) Main causes of stress

The top seven sources of stress (that were causing participating parents/carers either 'quite a lot' or 'a great deal' of stress) related to work, children, future plans, chores and a loss of support systems.

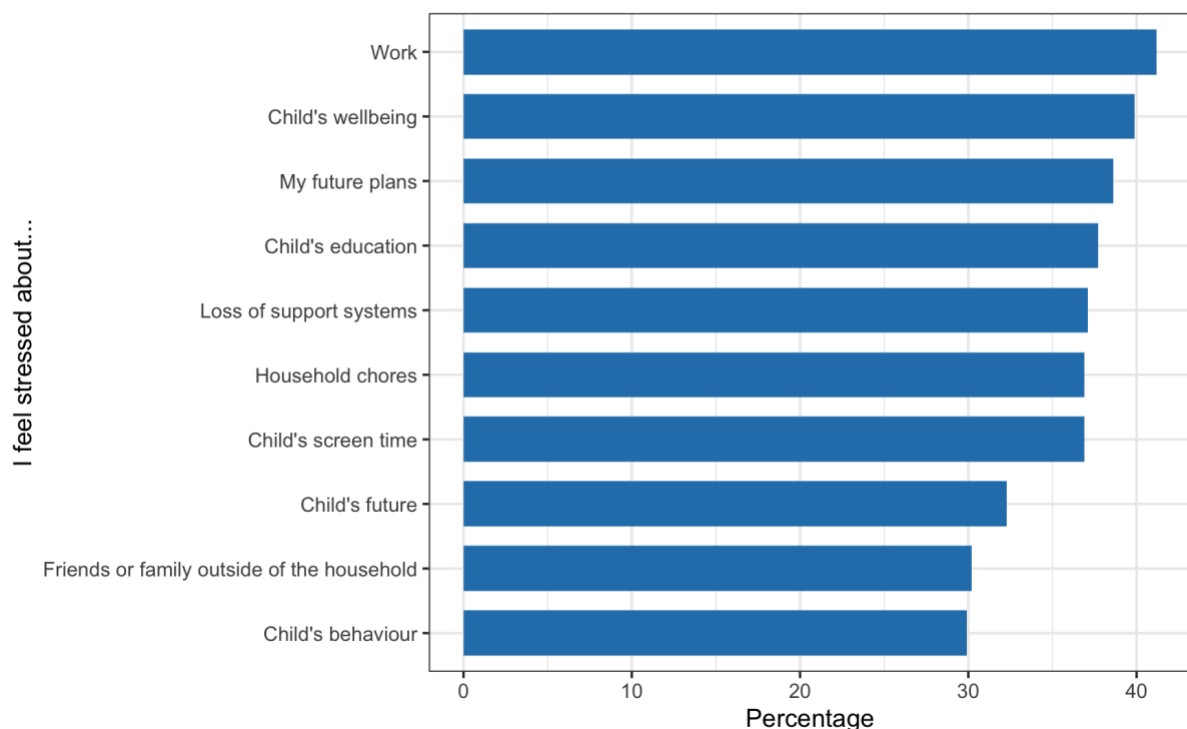


Figure 1. Parents/carers' main sources of stress

2. How children spend their time

(a) Inside Play

The activity children are reported to be doing the most is playing inside; 74% of children are spending 3+ hours playing inside daily.

(b) Outside Play

51% of children are reported to be spending 3+ hours outside daily and the majority of that time they are playing, with 43% of children reported to be playing outside for 3+ hours per day.

(c) Who are children playing with?

Play is typically with parents/carers; 57% are reported to be spending 3+ hours playing with a parent. In contrast, only 27% of children are spending 3+ hours playing with another child in the household each day. Almost half of the children (45%) are spending no time playing with another child in the household.

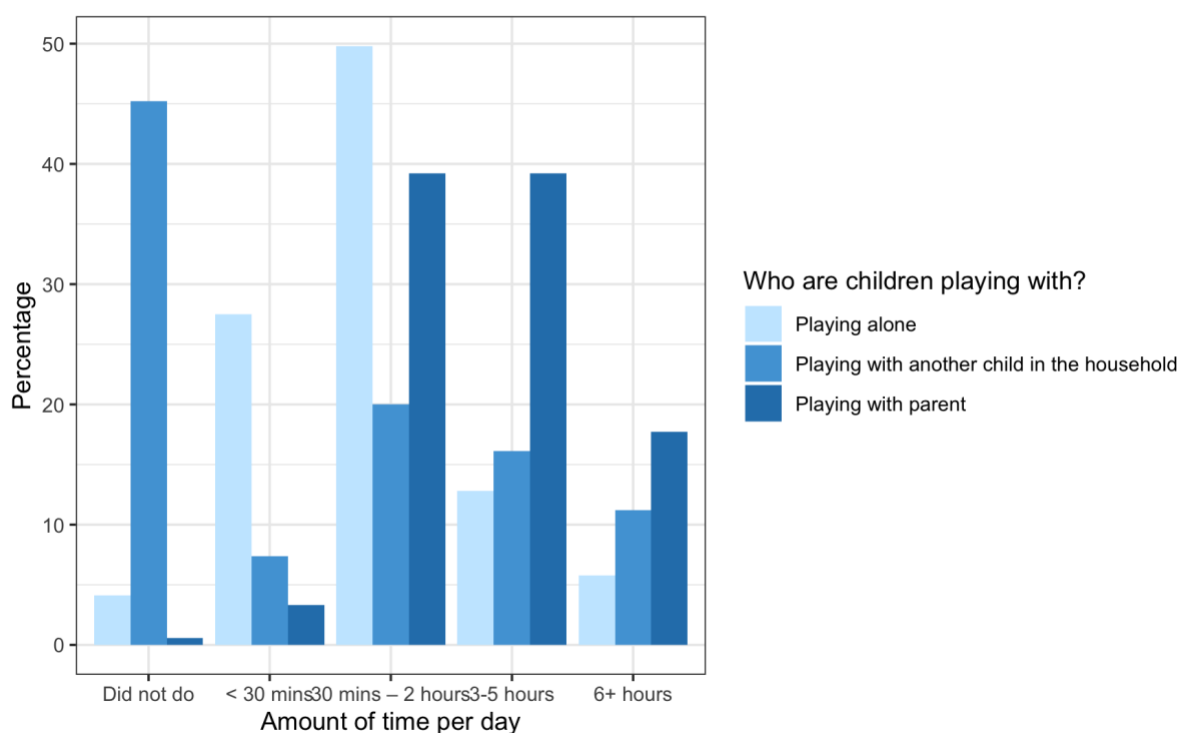


Figure 2. Who children playing are playing with everyday

(d) Types of activity

Participating parents/carers reported that the majority of children are spending more than 30 minutes a day in contact with nature (79%), doing arts and crafts (66%) and reading with a parent (56%).

(e) Screen time

Participating parents and carers, living in North West England, reported that 24% of 2-4 year olds are spending 3+ hours watching a screen but not interacting with it (Figure 4).

A total of 60% of 2-4 year olds were reported to spend up to 2 hours playing screen-based games, but playing for 3 or more hours each day was rare (<13%).

(f) Physical Activity

Participating parents/carers reported that 85% of 2-4 years olds are getting at least 30 minutes of daily exercise, and 18% of children are getting at least 3 hours. 14% of children are getting less than 30 minutes of physical exercise a day.

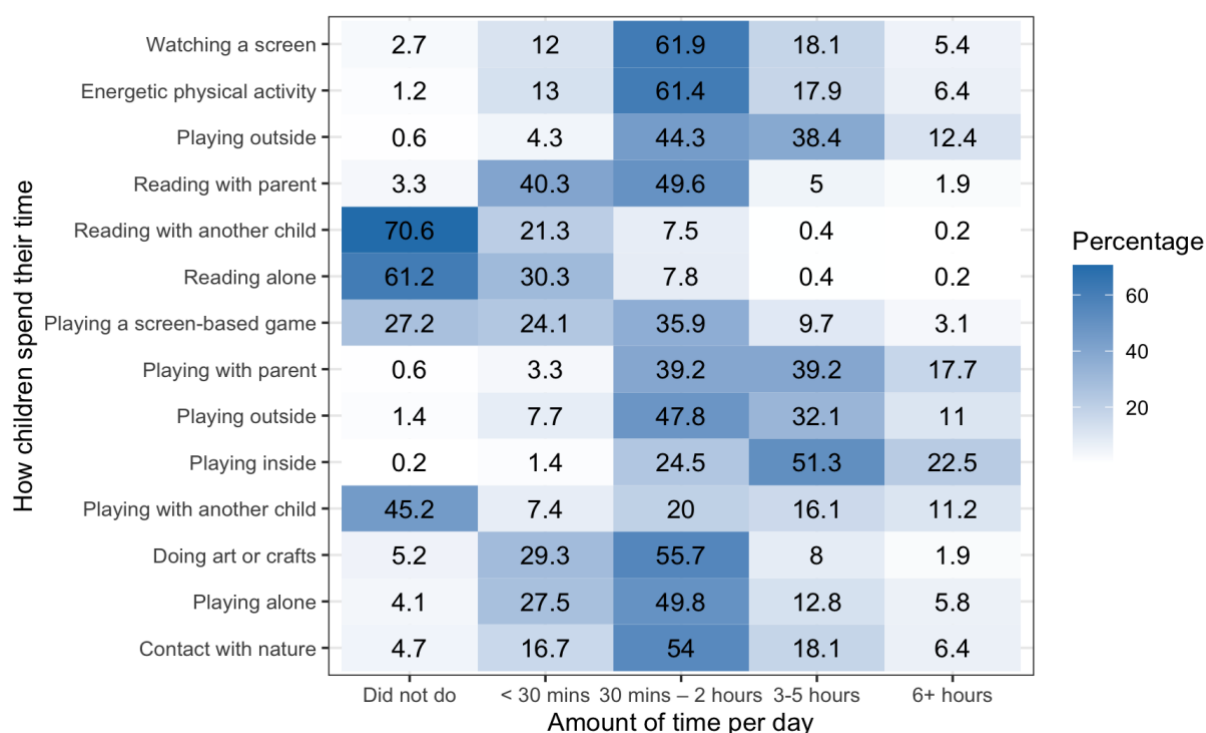


Figure 3. How children are spending their time everyday

3. Parents'/carers' feelings about child play and entertaining their child(ren)

(a) Worry and stress

38% of participating parents/carers reported that keeping their child occupied was stressful (a lot or completely/all the time). 54% of participating parents/carers are worried (a lot or completely) that they are not doing enough with their child.

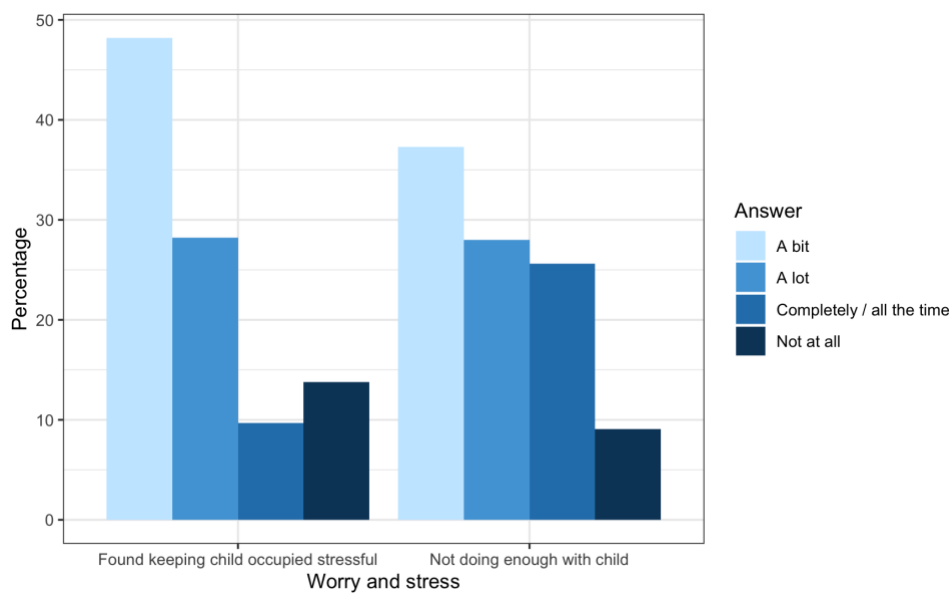


Figure 5. Parent/Carers' worries about child play

(b) Confidence

Only 54% of participating parents/carers reported they were confident they had ideas about ways to play with their child. 45% of participating parents/carers felt only a little bit confident or less about entertaining their child.

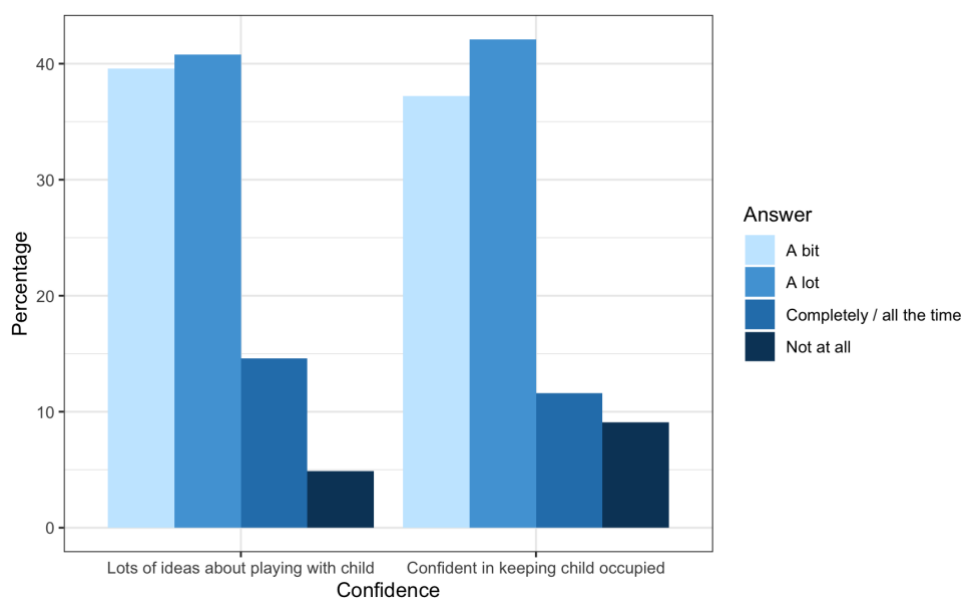


Figure 6. Parent/Carers' confidence in keeping child entertained and occupied

4. Child worries

(a) Not being able to see their friends

Not being able to see their friends and attend social and sporting activities is the most common worry reported for pre-school children living in North West England, with half of participating parents and carers reporting that their child is worried about not being able to see their friends and/or attend social/sporting activities.

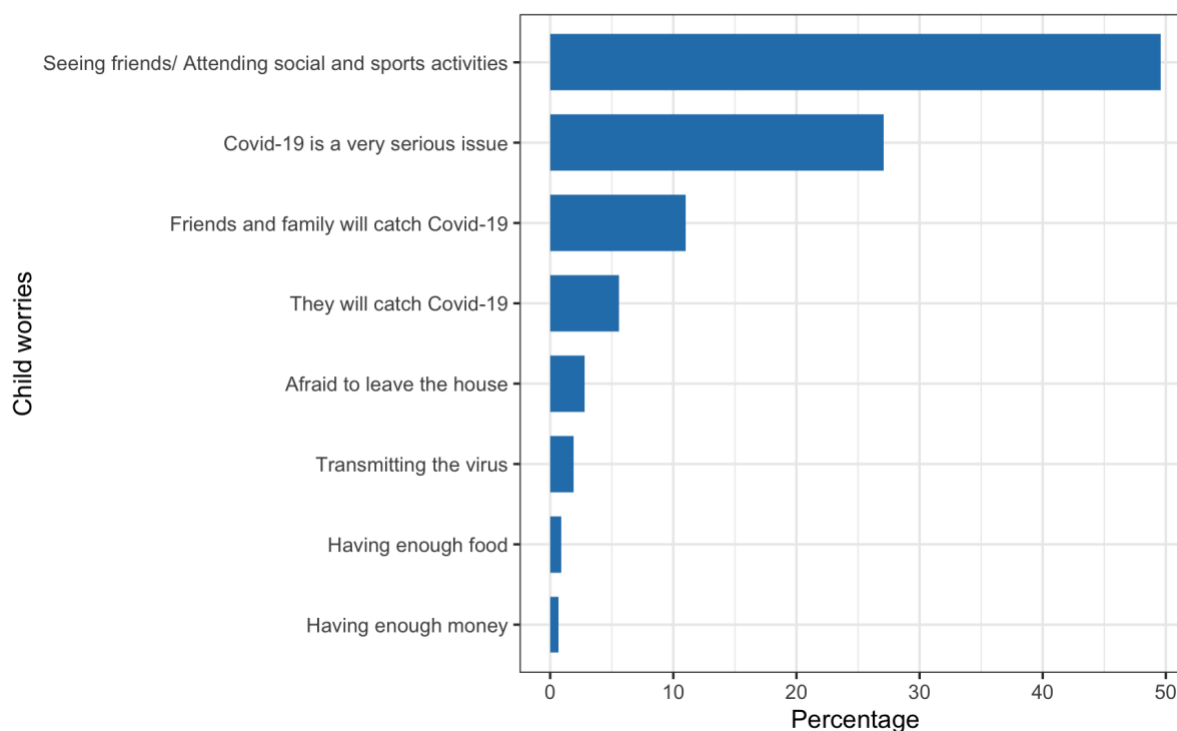


Figure 7. Child worries in relation to Covid-19

(b) Other worries

Based on the report of participating parents and carers it is rare for 2-4 year old children to be worried about Covid-19 and associated consequences (food/money etc) at least in this relatively affluent group. See Figure 6.

5. Communication

The survey results suggest that young children are not doing much communication with people outside of the home.

(a) With friends

Participating parents and carers reported that more than half (56%) of 2-4 year olds are not communicating at all, however infrequent, via phone, video call or message with any friends outside their home.

(b) With family outside of the home

Most children are reported to be communicating with family outside of the home but this is infrequent, most commonly less than once a day. Video calls are more common than phone or messaging, with only 8% of children reported to have not communicated with family via video call.

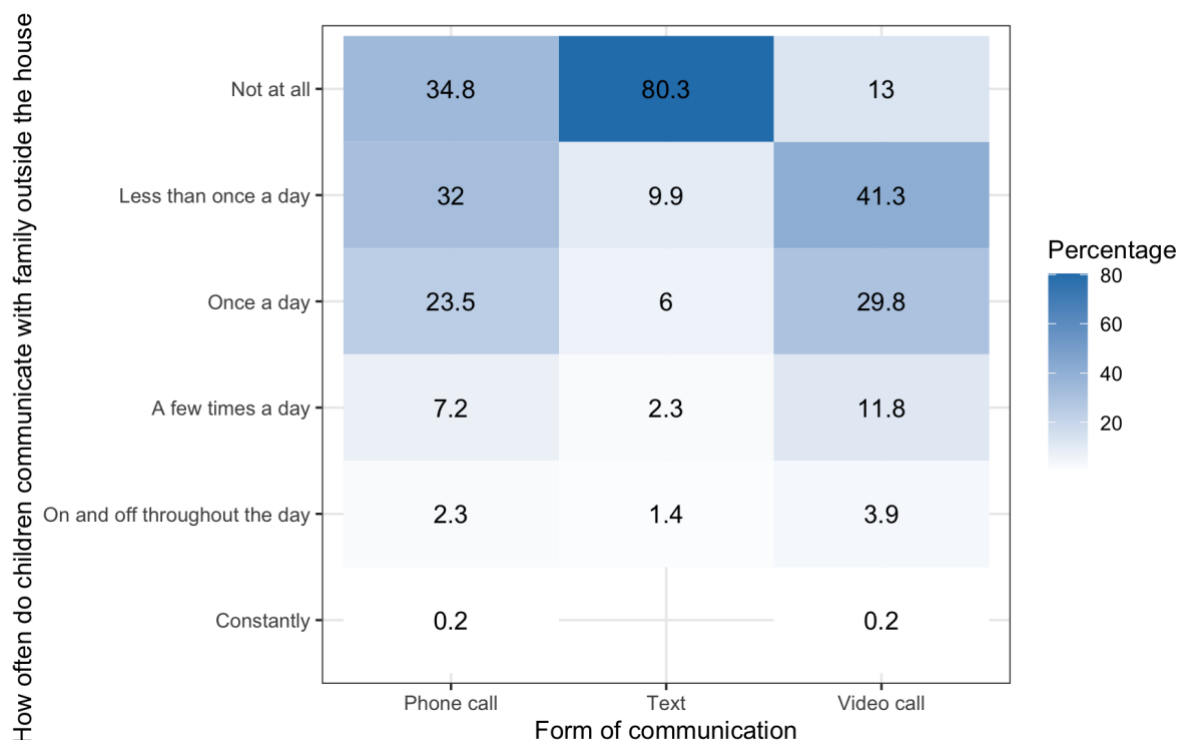


Figure 8. Communication with family outside of the household last week

6. Parent/Carer need for support

(a) Pre-crisis

4% of participating parents/carers indicated that they were receiving support from services (including mental health services, educational support and social services) prior to lockdown. Of these, 71% reported that this support has stopped or been postponed due to Covid-19.

(b) Percentage of parents wanting support

68% of participating parents/carers indicated that they would like at least a bit of help with their child's response to Covid-19 and isolation. 19% said they would like a lot of help or more.

(c) Type of support required

Of the 68% who indicated that they would like help, participating parents/carers indicated they would like help managing their child's emotions (63%), help with their child(ren) coming out of isolation (51%), managing children or young people's educational demands (52%) and managing children or young people's behaviours (49%).

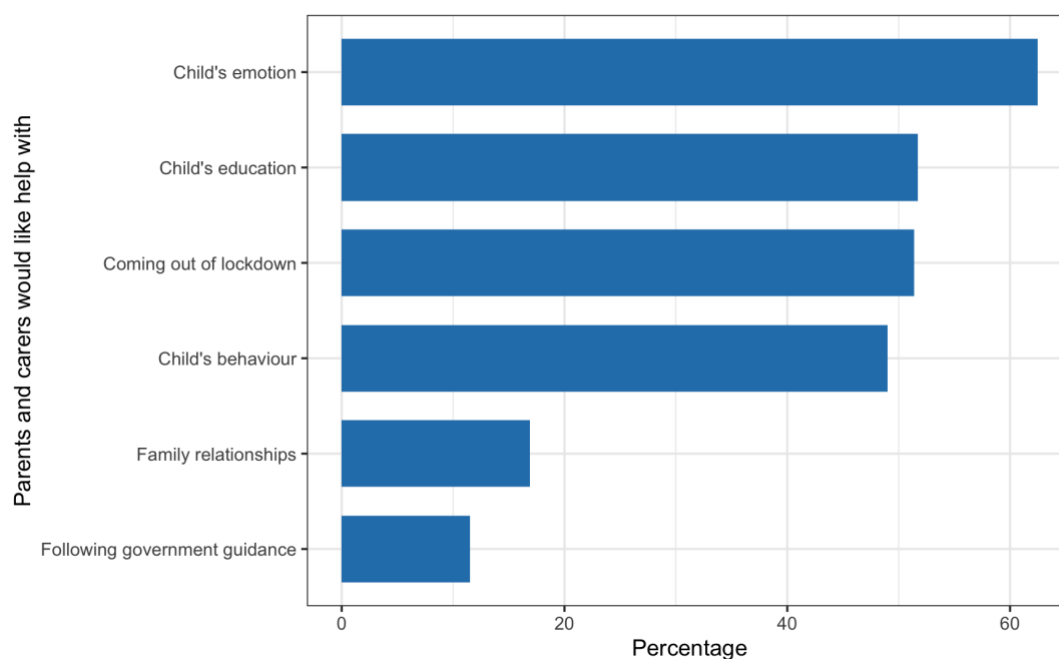


Figure 9. Parents'/Carers' reported need for support around specific areas

(d) Preference for delivery of support

Participating parents/carers indicated that they would like to receive this support primarily via online written materials (69%) or online videos (48%).

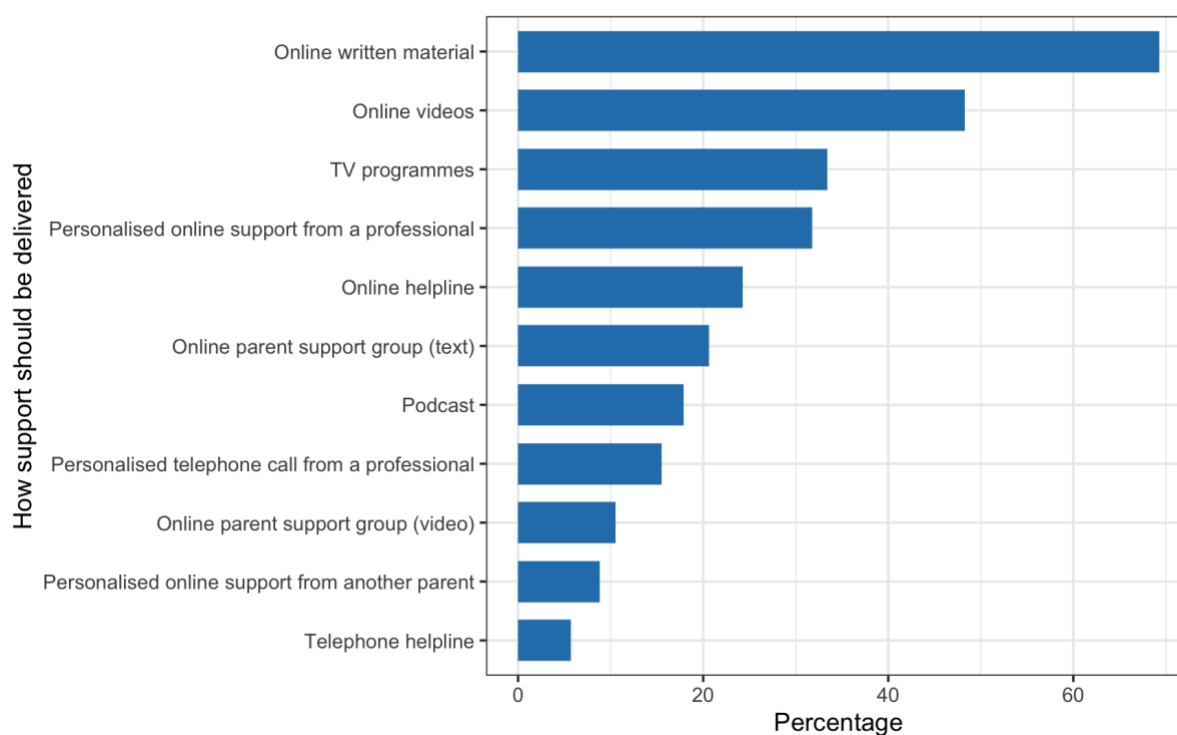


Figure 10. Parents'/carers' preference for how support should be delivered

Appendix A

Participants' demographics

		Number of observations	%
Parent/carer	Parents	535	99.8
	Carers	1	.2
Gender	Female	510	95
	Male	26	5
Work	Working full time	121	25
	Working part-time	170	35
	Not working	189	39
Annual household income	< £30,000	108	21
	> £30,000	361	71
Child age	2	208	39
	3	207	39
	4	117	22
Child gender	Female	255	48
	Male	281	52