How are families coping with self-isolation? Preliminary results from interviews with families and professionals

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Introduction

A crucial way of reducing infection in the community is to reduce social contact, hence the closure of schools and nurseries across the world during the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet these measures have risks as well as benefits[1][2]. There could be more child deaths arising from these infection-control strategies than from the virus itself unless measures are put in place to mitigate parental (di)-stress-associated child-abuse deaths. In addition, if parents feel the need – for reasons of economic or family stress – to contravene the new self-isolation rules, then efforts to suppress the pandemic in the UK are unlikely to be successful. In addition, the worldwide economic impact could be enormous[3].

The current *suppression* strategy, recommended by infectious diseases experts, has been necessary in order to avert large numbers of deaths from COVID-19 and may need to be maintained for several months – at least to some degree[4]. In the 2009/10 influenza pandemic, the first UK cases occurred just as schools were closing for the summer holidays but as soon as schools returned in late August/early September, there was a second peak of infections which did not abate until vaccination began in October (see Figure[5]). UK governments have difficult decisions to make about when, and how, to relax these suppression strategies, in order to reduce family stress and kick-start the economy.

In the UK, full "lockdown" began on March 24th 2020, including school closures and guidance that families must stay within single households. Here, we summarise the data from the first 42 interviews – conducted between the 26th March and 14th April 2020. Interviews are ongoing, with a wider range of families, and a second report will follow.

Figure - Hine D. The 2009 influenza pandemic – Cabinet Office © Crown copyright 2010[5]
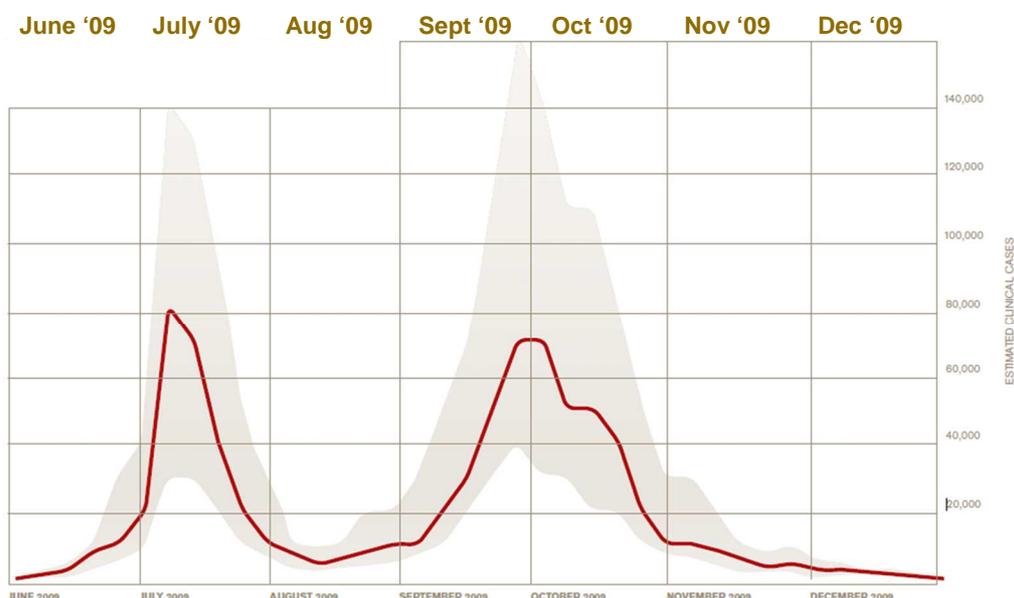
Methods

We conducted 42 qualitative interviews investigating how families are coping with the government measures around COVID-19.

We use established qualitative research methods aiming, through families' responses, to understand their experiences and perspectives and to record potential problems/solutions[6]. Our team has a wide multi-agency network across the UK that spans health, social care, education and the voluntary sector and we asked these multi-agency partners to help us contact families, and professionals working with families, who might be interested in taking part in the study. We used purposive sampling aiming to access families, or information about families, with pre-school, primary school-age and teenage children, a wide range of socio-economic circumstances, urban and rural and a range of cultural and religious backgrounds. We wanted to include the kinds of families who may not access the large UK surveys including families:

- Where children or parents have developmental disabilities
- Where children or parents have pre-existing mental or physical illness
- Experience of care or long term social work involvement
- Living in high-rise accommodation
- Little space at home, little access to green space or living in a high rise flat
- Money or employment worries or digital poverty

Phase 1: We aimed to interview families and professionals in the first month to five weeks after lockdown.

Phase 2: We are now following up each family or professional a month after their first interview.

In *Phase 1*, we were able to speak to families from virtually all of these groups except we had been unable to reach families from a sufficient range of cultural backgrounds. We are including these families in our *Phase 2*.

Sample: The sample in this report consisted of 26 parents and 16 professionals. All parents were resident in Scotland, but professionals were working and resident various areas in Scotland and England. The professionals were: 11 social workers, 2 community nurses and 1 paramedic and 2 police officers. The participants were both women and men; essential workers, re-mote workers and furloughed employees, living on both rural and urban areas, of UK and non-UK ethnicity.

Analysis: The semi-structured nature of the interview schedule meant that there were predefined open questions, but participants were encouraged to talk freely about any issues or topics that may not have been explicitly asked about. The overall topic was "how are you and your family coping with lockdown?". We asked if families are able to follow the Government's self-isolation guidelines and how the new living conditions are affecting family life. Two researchers independently conducted the thematic analysis. First, we developed and applied codes based on the content of the interviews with the open coding method, in which two researchers independently coded two interviews and agreed an initial coding frame. Then we grouped the initial codes to develop a wider range of more detailed themes. Five additional interviews were independently coded by two researcher and we reviewed the themes, in two further review meetings, to ensure our final themes are an accurate representation of the data.

Summary of preliminary findings

The UK government's guidelines to limit the spread of COVID-19, such as closing of schools and some business and to encourage employees to work from home have brought important changes to families' daily lives.

The analysis of these first 42 interviews shows that there are families who have followed the measures and adapted well and those who have not. Both parents and children may face difficulties in following the measures, adapting to self-isolation and developing alternative ways of working and socialising. The majority of parents find that technology helps them and their children to work, do homework and entertain themselves. The self- isolation and social distancing has increased stress in parents, children and grandparents. There are mentions of symptoms of anxiety and other mental health problems in both parents and children. Moreover, many families are worried about the future, but at the same time there are families who believe things will be better.

Factors that correlate with good adjustment: knowledge of technology, ability to work from home, connectedness to their social network, having good mental health, positive emotions and thoughts for the future and having one or multiple extra rooms or having a garden. People with these factors usually perceive the lockdown as an opportunity to spend more time with their household family.

Factors that correlate with poor adjustment: complex family structures, receiving social work support for a long period; families with adolescents at high risk for maladaptive behaviours (e.g. at risk of going missing, exploitation, drugs, alcohol, bullying, aggressive behaviour), foster families with limited alternatives for support and parents or children with a learning, developmental or physical disability or with mental health issues.

Findings based on each theme

1. Family structure and functioning

The structure of families have changed, since lockdown, and in most cases households have been reduced to the nuclear family. Social distancing has resulted in a missing support network for parents. Childcare that would have usually been delivered by grandparents, separated parents or partners living at different addresses is now not being delivered. Parents who relied on help with childcare are under particular stress. Furthermore, it is difficult for families to manage home-school, childcare and working from home. Parents, carers and children who lack adaptation skills are have particular difficulties to deal with the lockdown.

[social worker] the stress for people, they don't even have that kind of community backup like a neighbour or a friend or somebody (3.2-ID11b)

[parent] they are missing their grandparents a lot because they are quite a support network for me for working. (ID6m)

[parent] I think we are all feeling it because the boys' dad can't see them and that's really tough for him, well he can see them but he can't have them, as he would normally have them overnight (ID6k)

Some families say that they have spent more quality time together, citing the lockdown as an opportunity to spend more time together than before. However, others have struggled with boredom, or are overwhelmed being the only care provider.

[parent] It is nice to all wake up together, so mornings are a bit more relaxed you could say (1.2, ID4b)

[parent] there is only so much baking, cooking, pasta pictures, you know there is only so much of that you can do and then you think 'what else do I do with them?' (ID18g)

2. Work for parents & school for children

Government guidelines to encourage working from home have caused many changes. Parents working at home benefit from a supportive employer and clear communication with their partner about division of labour. For some people working from home has resulted in more stress, in others less.

[social worker] a lot more time spent on the phone, case-notes I think you are slightly more paranoid about case-notes because you have had to make a decision that a family

don't need a visit so you have to be really clear and getting your case-notes on as quick as, so I think the pressure has changed. (2.1-ID11a)

[social worker] Parents trying to work from home say they are very stressed (2.1-ID13b)

[parent] I don't feel a massive pressure because my boss is so supportive and understanding so (ID6ee)

Parents have stress and anxiety to complete their work efficiently. They have to learn how to transfer all the face-to-face work to a virtual work using new means of the technology. This caused difficulties to people who are not "tech-savvy" and people who don't have efficient technological equipment because of financial difficulties. Parents are struggling to balance work from home and children. Key workers are stressed because they feel they put their family at risk of getting sick.

[parent] Juggling childcare and having to work those hours is so hard. (2.1 -ID4a)

[social worker] [people] trying to work from home say they are very stressed (2.1-ID13b)

[parent] I usually work at home a couple of days of week if I can. It is fairly straightforward for me to do, but I think actually doing it with other family members in the house and other responsibilities it is a different thing. (ID12a)

Home-schooling does not work well for all families equally. The school lessons have been replaced with online classes, homework, tutors, courses and/or activities. Some families desire more support from the school, for example sending more schoolwork. Others recognise that the schoolwork sent does not work for their children. Others still simply state that they cannot fulfil the role of a teacher. The ability to home-school depends on whether the parent has to work from home and the needs of the child.

[parent] that's proving to be a bit of a challenge, to do anything other than sit on a screen, and it is trying to get him off the screen that is really difficult (ID6e)

[parent] I am his mum, I am not his teacher, you know so there is that element of it is as well, and there are points during the day that he says 'I don't want to be here, I want to be back at school' (ID18e)

[parent] my kids have kind of adapted and I think they this this is fun, no school, no nursery, and they don't have homework, so they are both under 5, you know there is a little more flexibility I suppose. (ID9p)

Some children welcome virtual school as a great online resource to help with boredom and maintain contact with friends. Other children find it quite stressful to do online homework. There are some supportive online groups to help with schoolwork.

[social worker] … some of them (children) are connected to schools, and schools have been really good at trying to prompt them to keep some sort of routine (2.2- ID13a)

Parents frequently voice a need and desire for 'structure and routine', the implementation of which is successful to varying degrees.

[parent] The last two weeks have been a lot about kind of making arrangements for that I guess and just setting up systems and routines and trying to think of the way forward really for the next few months. (ID6f)

[parent] they need routine and kind of structure to their day. (ID18f)

3. Consequences of social distancing

Families struggle with the loss of physical contact with friends and relatives. Social distancing has, for some, created a rift in communities due to disagreements of what 'correct behaviour' is. Some people report lack of community support.

[social worker] …loss of contact with vulnerable people, not being able to see them, not being able to offer that support face-to-face (3.1-ID3a)

[social worker] My daughter is struggling or has struggled with the lack of contact with her friends (3.1-ID3b)

However, in some instances there have been gains in communities, for example, family members moving in to assist with childcare during isolation. Communities have also stepped in to help members in quarantine, for example volunteering to help elderly citizens in their community. Some participants have used the lockdown to reconnect with friends.

[parent] I am on a sort of volunteers' group within the village, you know to sort of help out if anybody needs…it is things like our little pharmacy was struggling to get prescriptions out to people so there is a sort of group of volunteers that have offered to help out if and when needed (3.3-ID8a)

4. Technology

New ways to conduct remote work & school have emerged, including different working hours, places of work and using apps instead of face-to-face. There have been positive and negative aspects to increased use of technology.

[parent] As long as you have got Wifi you are not missing much, it is not so much about how close you are living to somebody, but if you are able to connect (4- ID15a)

Technology has been essential to communicate with family and friends, to work, and for online support.

[social worker] Schools send them lots of links to, like, videos on youtube or different spreadsheets or different like child-friendly sheets explaining what Coronavirus is, explaining it to children, to younger children (4-ID10b)

For some it has been a way to stay connected and find activities to do. However, for some children it is not an appropriate way to stay in touch, for example for children with communication difficulties. It can also be difficult for older adults, for instance for grandparents to stay in touch with their grandchildren. Some adults have problems adapting to new technology for work.

[parent] I've turned off the notifications on a lot of the groups that I am in on my phone as I found that a constant distraction (3.4. ID8b)

[social worker] When I first joined the borough we weren't able to WhatsApp because of GDPR [General Data Protection Regulation] (4-ID14A)

[parent] we have done video calling and stuff with his friends, though that is a challenge because he is not used to it and it is a form of communication, and he has already got communication problems, so he is faced with a face on the screen and he doesn't know what to say, and I have to sort of talk to him and support him with it quite a bit (ID6d)

There is a problem around digital poverty. Some families do not have access to WiFi or mobile data, or they do not have the needed technology.

[social worker] Some foster carers either don't, they don't have much technology themselves, they don't use WhatsApp or you know they are not very tech-savvy. So some of them have been able to use laptops to join meetings, like MS Teams, they are able to video call on their phone or their laptop and they feel confident doing that, but some carers don't. (4-ID14B)

5. Challenges understanding social distancing measures

Social distancing can cause tension due to variation in how measures are understood. This friction can exist within couples, within families (e.g. children and parents or parents and grandparents), or within the community.

[social worker] There was this kind of debate that was taking place because they were lacking the understanding and the awareness of how serious this, you know how it needed to be treated. So it was quite amazing how some families were really on board, whereas other families were completely disconnected. (5-ID10b)

[parent] even then we were getting people saying 'you shouldn't be cross the doorstep', and we have children with additional needs, and we need that…X needs to run, he just cannot sit in the house for two weeks, it is impossible. (ID6x)

[parent] he is really struggling with me coming into work in terms of 'why do you need to go into work?', and even though I say that I am not doing face-to-face and that I am protecting myself, but he said 'staff are coming in and out could infect you', so I think from his prospective, his mindset is 'if I get this I won't survive it'. That is not my mindset. He is really struggling with it. (ID17n)

The understanding of measure is influenced by the source of information. Furthermore, people with learning difficulties and mental health problems might have difficulties understanding the guidelines. Language barriers also influence understanding.

[social worker] I work with a lot of people who struggle to follow the rules of society. They don't mean to flout it, you know they have got reasons, so we have got parents with mild learning disability, mental health, you know they just…or they don't have the language skills, so I am slightly worried how far these can go (5-ID13d)

[parent] I think the grey area meant that people had a different interpretation of them, and that was causing friction for us (ID9v)

[parent] I am thinking that it is actually terrifying, as a parent - children don't understand the two metre distance (ID18bb)

6. Mental health

There is increased anxiety and perceived stress in both parents and children. Parents/carers feel stress trying to balance work and home-life with children, especially those with long time stress symptoms. Children struggle to adapt, with boredom and with fears about

their parents' health. Young people feel socially isolated and perceive that their mental and physical wellbeing is suffering.

[social worker] …stress of having the children at home and being at home, everybody at home all the time. (6.3– ID10a)

[social worker] Children who are so scared that they think if their parents go shopping that they will die, so they are trying to prevent their parents from leaving the house and getting very anxious and may be even violent. (6.2-ID13C)

[parent] That's a little bit scary actually to think that I am kind of feeling a bit isolated with that (ID6o)

[parent] It would be very, very easy to delve into alcoholism as a way to relax (ID18u)

[parent] Where I found the stress is my son is having daily meltdowns and they can be quite explosive and he can cause quite a lot of destruction in the house (ID6n)

[parent] He [the son] cried every day, so the enormity of what has happened obviously really, really hit him and he was really upset about not going back to school, not seeing his friends (ID18e)

Families with high adaptability and those with an optimistic outlook are coping well. People compare themselves with others and feel fortunate.

[parent] I said to him (my husband) 'this is fantastic, 'we have got to look at the positives, this is going to be such a good thing', but he is a little bit more sceptical. (6.3-ID8c)

7.   Future

Thoughts about the future focus on getting ill, or family members getting ill. Of note is the additional worry for parents of what would happen to their children if they fell ill. Many people express the fear that things will worsen over the next few weeks/months and how they will cope with the kids in the house.

Further, participants do not expect to see their extended family for months and the start of school to be delayed.

Many parents also think about the transition out of lockdown and the associated difficulties.

Social workers are worried about their work, the lack of PPE equipment and delays to legal proceedings (including asylum seeking).

[social worker] I think that it will get a lot worse very, very soon, within a matter of weeks we will really be looking at a completely different landscape. (7- ID3b)

[social worker] I think after this week we are going to see a dramatic decline in how parents are coping with having kids in the house 24/7 and I think a lot of the reality will start to bite in, and that's my big worry. (7-ID11a)

[parent] I have a real worry about if this goes on for another month or two months or whatever, or even close to four, like Wuhan, I am going to be in a difficult situation because I am going to have a child that is so used to me always being there, and when I go back to work or I go into school what's that's transition going to be like? (ID18j)

Some participants view this period as an opportunity for personal growth and reflection on working culture and work/life balance.

[parent] Once everything goes back to normal you know it will all go back to the way it was… So lovely to see how nature just keeps working and it will be good for the environment definitely. (7- ID8a).

[parent] now I just wonder if our perspectives and our attitudes might semi-permanently change because of what's happened, (…) there has been some new discoveries that trust can be established and home working is actually possible (7-ID15d).

8.   Discipline

Parents and carers have difficulties maintaining the old discipline methods. Other carers are creating new rules or they are more lenient with existing routines and structures.

[parent of a child with an Autism Spectrum Disorder] I am having to just put him in the garden or put him outside and shut the door because I really don't know how else to do it to be honest, I am at a bit of a loss for strategies for that. The alternative is I let him get his own way….sorry (ID6p)

[social worker] A young boy has been told by his [care] provider that he can't socialise with any of the other young people in the property so they need to use the kitchen and the bathroom at different times and remain in their rooms, which means (...),that for those young people they are more isolated (8-ID14a)

[parent] We have gone a little bit less strict on screen times and things and I know that they keep their curtains closed during the day and they seem to be on their devices and I think at bedtime they are not really going to sleep(….)but we do have home school at 10 am and the rule is that they need to come down and have breakfast and then have

home school, then we have some sports time. Yeah so there is a bit of a lack of structure and them sort of getting into sleep habit problems a bit (8-ID15a)

9. Child protection

Some families are struggling to manage their child's behaviour and are losing patience. Others are trying to establish new 'reward' systems to manage behaviour.

Social work has been impacted by the lockdown, leading to most support being delivered remotely and face-to-face visits being limited. This leads to concern among professionals, as they worry about how families are coping. This is particularly the case in families where the parents might lack the skills to manage the children's behaviours or parents have limited self-regulation or other emotional difficulties.

There is a perceived increased risk that vulnerable children can be approached by drug dealers.

A major concern is about the safety of children if parents fall ill with COVID-19 and how childcare will be provided. There is also concern about how courts will deal with children who are at risk at home and whether removal will still take place. Chiefly, social work is worried about school closures and the subsequent loss of contact with teachers and nurses who would usually be first referrers.

[social worker] I am not setting eyes on them anymore, and that feels REALLY risky right now and that's my biggest worry as this thing progresses when we get more and more children. (9- ID3).

[social worker] We are going to have problems containing especially adolescents, some of them you know they smoke, they are drug users, they have safe-guarding issues, they are known to gangs, so whether the pull of that will start to get them doing sort of unsafe things and going outside, I expect so in the future. (9-ID13a)

[social worker] We totally rely on schools often to be the first point of contact to go 'I don't think things are going well at home'. If even if they can't pinpoint it and there is nothing obvious or the child reporting it, it is now all out of sight, we can't see it. (9-ID13c)

10. Cultural variations

People from different cultural backgrounds have different difficulties and approaches to the measures. There are examples of young people who faced racism in relation to the virus

with people accusing them of bringing Corona to the UK, because they are from Asia. Others have had to cancel important religious events.

There are also variations in the kinds of supportive networks across communities.

[social worker] If their English is limited they can't understand the news in English and then they can read news on-line but it is what's happening in their home country. So I am having to, in my initial visit, the actual visit, I spent a long time with interpreters going through the guidelines with them (10-ID14B).

[social worker] Asian, like Indian or Pakistani heritage, their network it seems to be kind of different to other foster carers and some foster carers may have more limited social networks (...) (10-ID14c)

[social worker] In the [a particular Middle Eastern] community there is a lot of mis-information going around, so I was talking to a parent yesterday who it has gone round in their group app that if you go into hospital, an NHS hospital, you are not coming out, you will die. (10-ID13a).

11. Financial

Families with low income face financial difficulties buying all the necessary supplies. Many parents will receive financial benefits from the government, yet parents worry about the future of their work.

[social worker] Families who haven't got high wages but they have said that they are self-employed and at home and they don't know what to do (11-ID13a)

12. Home structure- rooms

Families with bigger houses with extra rooms feel fortunate, because parents have extra space so everyone can concentrate on their work and both parents and children have more things to do.

[social worker] we are fortunate that we have space, that we have got two separate rooms that we can work in (12-ID14a).

13. Environment

Parents mentioned the positive impact that the lockdown has on the environment.

[parent] I keep thinking of the effects on global-warming. (13-ID8a).

Conclusions

In this first month of lockdown, a starkly divergent impact on families is already evident. Those with strong personal and economic resources, as well as access to indoor and outdoor space, are generally coping well. In contrast, families in which parents and/or children have pre-existing mental health or developmental problems, where there is little space, where the usual family and childcare support structures are unavailable (e.g. from grandparents), where finances are strained or where there is anxiety about future employment prospects, are already finding self-isolation within nuclear family households challenging.

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