

#WEARETOGETHER: LOCKDOWN BENEFICIAL TO YOUNG CHILDREN DESPITE CHILDCARE CHALLENGES, STUDY FINDS

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Young children of employed parents or carers improved their concentration and had fewer tantrums during the COVID-19 lockdown, despite the pressures placed on families.

Psychologists working on the Co-Spyce study, a collaboration between the University of Reading, Oxford and Southampton asked nearly 1,000 parents and carers with pre-school children to monitor changes in their children's emotions, disobedience, attention spans and other behaviours over a one-month period during the lockdown measures imposed in the UK this year.

The researchers found that the children showed on average a small reduction in restlessness and attention problems. For children of employed parents or carers, there has been a small but significant improvement in their behaviour and attention.

Professor Helen Dodd, a child psychologist at the University of Reading, said: "We might have expected to see increases in behaviour and attention problems in young children during lockdown because of changes in routine and missing friends and family.

"These results suggest that this hasn't been the case, at least for the families taking part in the co-spyce study. It is reassuring as well to see that, overall, emotional problems have not increased in young children during the one month follow-up period."

"Our first report revealed that many families were finding it difficult to keep their children entertained, particularly while having to juggle family time and home schooling with the challenges of working from home."

"It is therefore surprising, perhaps, that the children who showed the biggest reduction in attention and behaviour problems were those with working parents or carers. We hear a lot about the potential negative impact the lockdown may have had on young children while they could not go to school or nursery, but this study shows that, at least in some respects, things may not have been as bad as expected."

A total of 972 parents and carers with children aged 2-5 filled out two questionnaires between April and July 2020: one assessing their children's general behaviour as a starting point, and then another a month later reporting any changes witnessed to this behaviour.

The behavioural changes surveyed were split into three categories: Emotional (worried, afraid, clingy), Behavioural (disobedience, tantrums, fighting, lying), and Restless/Attentional (lack of attention, low attention span, hyperactivity, fidgeting).

Each child surveyed was given a score out of 10 for each scale, based on the responses – a higher score indicating greater difficulties.

The study also found:

- On average, children showed improvements in their attention, but very little change in their emotions or behaviour.
- Boys showed significant improvements in their behaviour and attention, while girls did not. Both recorded no change in their emotions.
- There was very little difference between children in households with higher and lower incomes, and between those in families of different ethnicities.

Professor Dodd said: “The results suggest children are more resilient and able to cope during times of raised anxiety than sometimes we give them credit for. The small improvements we see in the co-spyce children may have happened for a number of reasons. One possible explanation is that children benefited from having more time at home with their parents and carers. Even when it doesn't feel like 'quality time' to the parents, it may benefit their children.”

“An alternative explanation is that many of the daily pressures put on young children to conform to adult-led schedules were removed during lockdown, leading to fewer perceived behavioural and attentional problems. Any parent who has tried to get a young child into their shoes and out of the door on time in the morning will know this is a challenging point in the day!”

“This is a reminder of the many educational, health and economic benefits for the UK that could flow from having improved policies around shared parental leave, flexible working and childcare.”