

**C-SPYCE** study

COVID-19: Supporting Parents and Young Children during Epidemics

# ***Report One: Findings from 1728 parents/carers of 2-4 year olds on stress, child activities, child worries and need for support.***

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**Emerging  
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# 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. In the current report, almost all respondents (N = 1728) were biological parents (>99%), over 94% were female and 92% of the sample identified as white. The majority of parents were from the North West of England (25%), the South East (22%) and London (16%). The majority of parents and carers who completed the survey were working (63%), either part-time (60%) or full-time (40%), and had an average income of >£30,000 (81%).

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](https://cospyce.org/survey)**

## Further information

For further information or to request specific analyses, please contact the research team at [cospyce@soton.ac.uk](mailto: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 the first 1728 parents/carers completed the survey<sup>1</sup> between Friday 17<sup>th</sup> April and Wednesday 20<sup>th</sup> May.

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

- Nearly  $\frac{3}{4}$  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) child's screen time, (iii) their child's wellbeing.
- Over 80% of children are reported by participating parents/carers to be getting at least 30 minutes of exercise a day but only 22% are reported to be getting the recommended 3 hours.
- Almost half of the children (47%) are reported to be spending no time playing with another child in their household.
- At least half (51%) 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, behaviours and coming out of social isolation.

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<sup>1</sup> '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

63% of respondents in the survey reported that they were working. Of these, 60% were working part-time and 40% full-time; 80% reported that they were working from home, and 20% were working out of the home.

### (b) Combining work and child's needs

73% felt that they were either 'not' or only 'a bit' able to meet the needs of both their work and their child, compared to 27% 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.

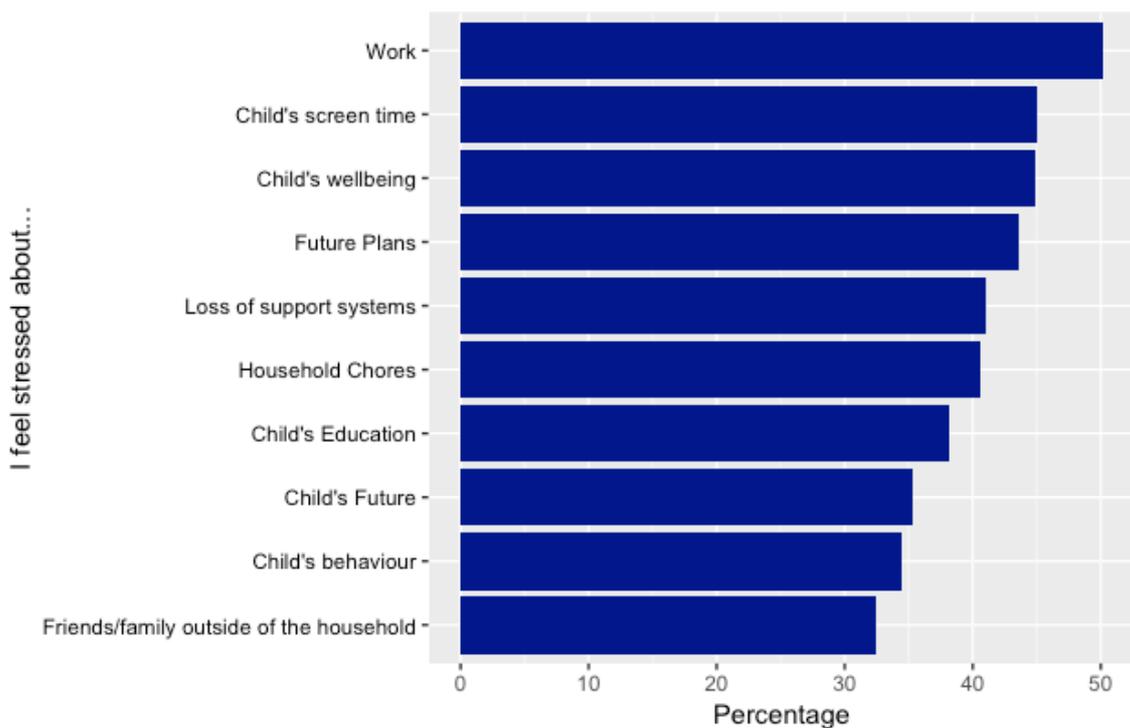


Figure 1. Parents/carers' main sources of stress

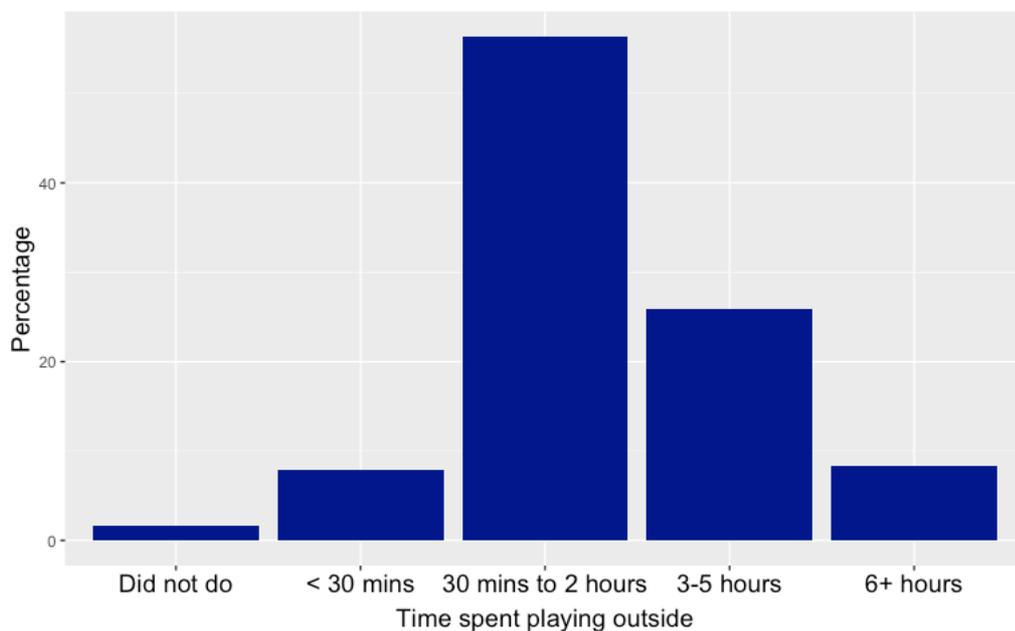
## 2. How children spend their time

### (a) Inside Play

The activity children are reported to be doing the most is playing inside; 79% of children are spending 3+ hours playing inside daily.

### (b) Outside Play

41% of children are reported to be spending 3+ hours outside daily and the majority of that time they are playing, with 34% of children reported to be playing outside for 3+ hours per day. See Figure 2.



*Figure 2. Time that children spend playing outside*

### (c) Who are children playing with?

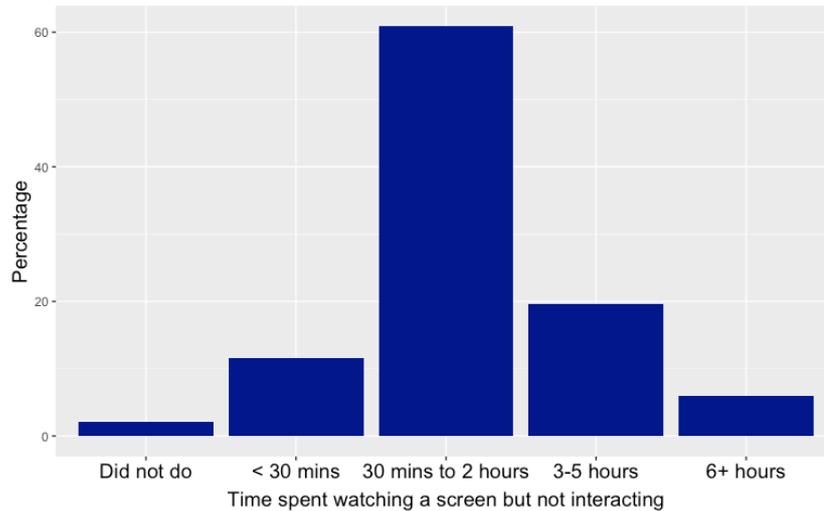
Play is typically with parents/carers; 55% are reported to be spending 3+ hours playing with a parent. In contrast, only 27% of children are spending 3+ hours playing with another child in the household each day. Almost half of the children (47%) are spending no time playing with another child in the household.

### (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 (78%), doing arts and crafts (64%) and reading with a parent (59%).

### (e) Screen time

Participating parents and carers reported that 26% of 2-4 year olds are spending 3+ hours watching a screen but not interacting with it (Figure 4).

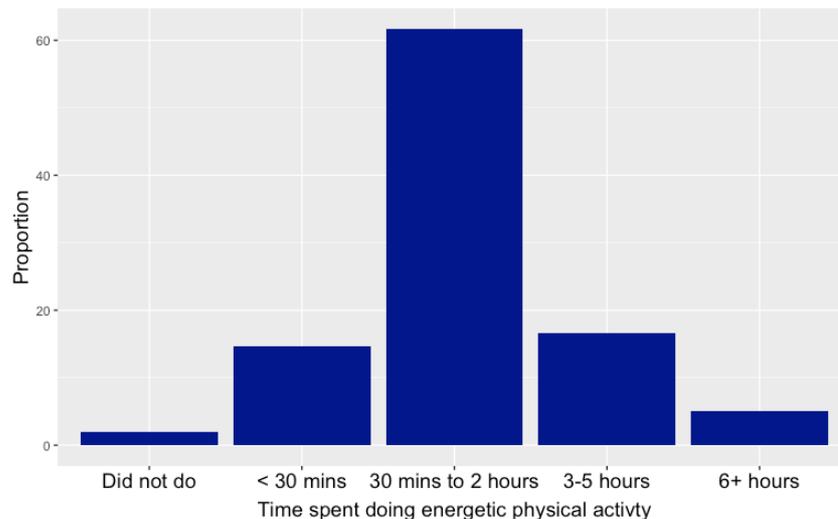


**Figure 4. Time children spend watching but not interacting with a screen**

A total of 61% 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 (<10%).

### (f) Physical Activity

Participating parents/carers reported that 83% of 2-4 years olds are getting at least 30 minutes of daily exercise, and 22% of children are getting at least 3 hours. 17% of children are getting less than 30 minutes of physical exercise a day.



**Figure 5. Time that children spend engaging in physical activity**

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

#### (a) **Worry and stress**

37% of participating parents/carers reported that keeping their child occupied was stressful (a lot of completely/all the time).

55% of participating parents/carers are worried (a lot or completely) that they are not doing enough with their child.

#### (b) **Confidence**

Only 53% of participating parents/carers reported they were confident they had ideas about ways to play with their child.

47% of participating parents/carers felt only a little bit confident or less about entertaining their child.

### 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, with 56% 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.

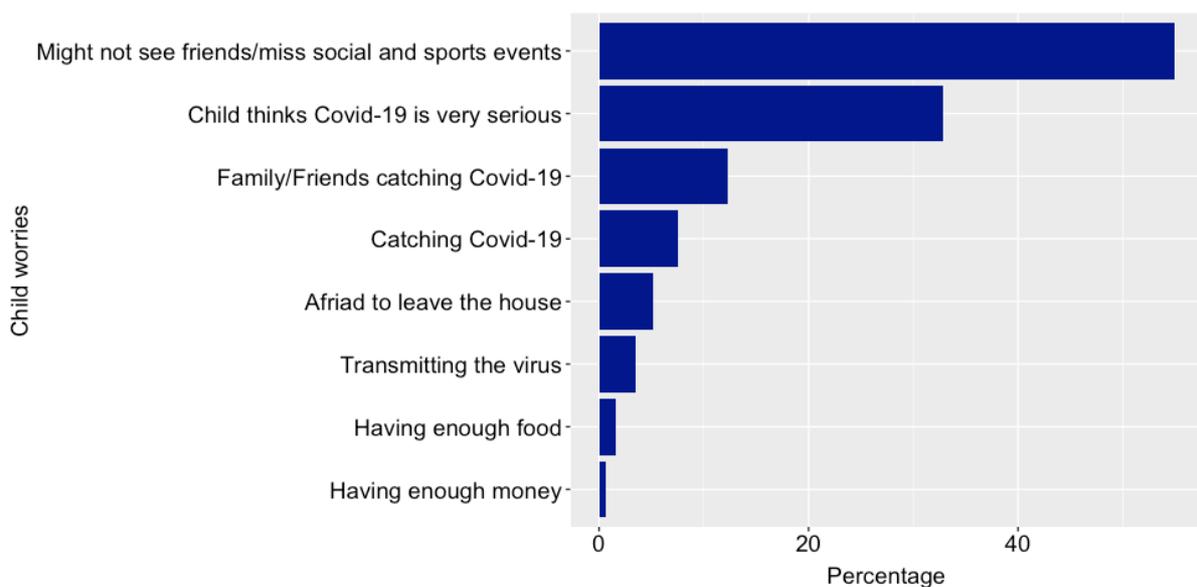


Figure 6. Time that children spend engaging in physical activity

### **(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 at least half (51%) 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.

## **6. Parent/Carer need for support**

### **(a) Pre-crisis**

3% 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, 89% reported that this support has stopped or been postponed due to Covid-19.

### **(b) Percentage of parents wanting support**

69% 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. 21% said they would like a lot of help or more.

### (c) Type of support required

Of the 69% who indicated that they would like help, participating parents/carers indicated they would like help managing their child's emotions (62%), help with their child(ren) coming out of isolation (54%), managing children or young people's educational demands (53%) and managing children or young people's behaviours (53%).

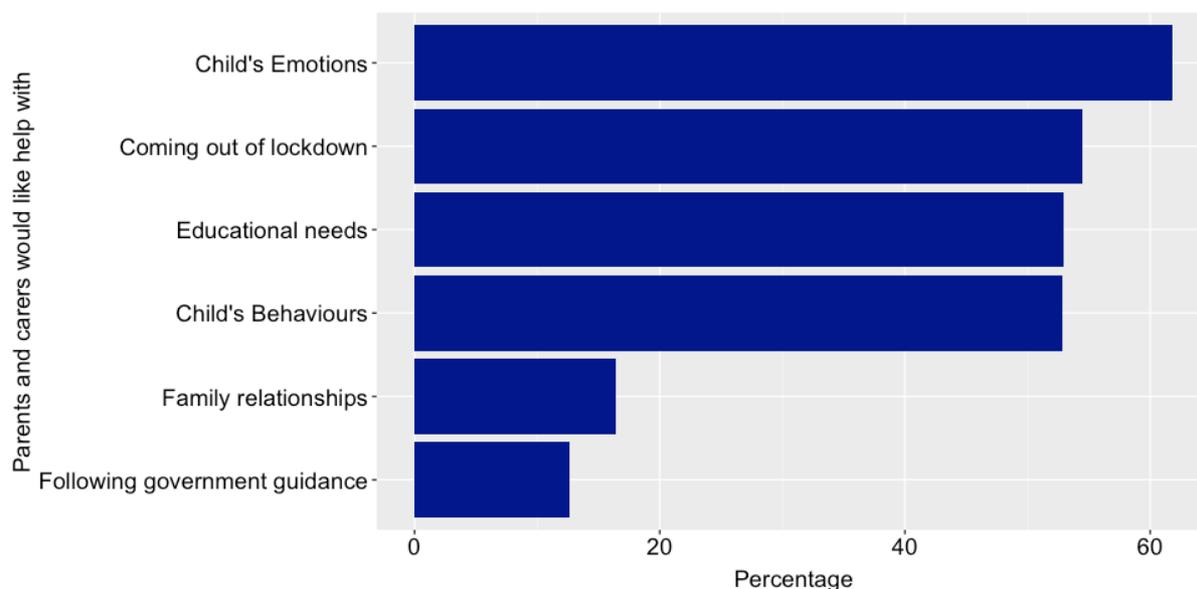


Figure 7. Parents'/Carers' reported need for support around specific areas

### (d) Preference for delivery of support

Participating parents/carers indicated that they would like to receive this support primarily via online written materials (72%) or online videos (50%).

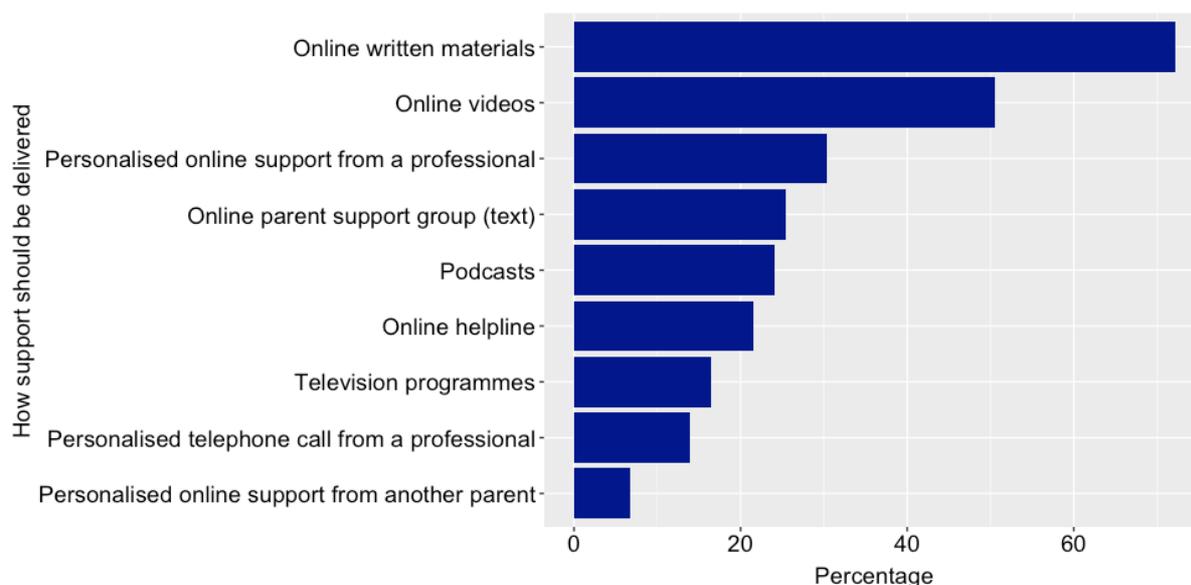


Figure 8. Parents'/carers' preference for how support should be delivered

# Appendix A

## Participants' demographics

		Number of observations	%
<i>Parent/carer</i>	Parents	1721	99.59
	Carers	7	.04
<i>Gender</i>	Female	1670	94
	Male	97	5
<i>Work</i>	Working full time	635	37
	Working part-time	435	25
	Not working	639	37
<i>Annual household income</i>	< £30,000	328	19
	> £30,000	1400	81
<i>Child age</i>	2	639	37
	3	674	39
	4	414	24
<i>Child gender</i>	Female	847	49
	Male	881	51