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Three in four parents of pre-school children unable to balance work and childcare during lockdown

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A new study has highlighted the impact of COVID-19 lockdown on the wellbeing of families with preschool children. Of the 1728 parents and carers surveyed by researchers at the Universities of Oxford, Reading and Southampton, nearly three quarters felt that they are not sufficiently able to meet the needs of both work and their pre-school children.

Key causes of stress for families in this situation were:

- Their Work (54% of participants reported that this was causing considerable stress)
- Their child's screen time (45%)
- Their child's wellbeing (45%)

COVID19 has led to major disruptions to families' lives, through social distancing, closure of childcare settings and lockdown. The Co-SPYCE (COVID-19 Supporting Parents and Young Children in Epidemics) survey is tracking pre-school children's mental health throughout the COVID-19 crisis to identify what advice, support and help families need to protect young children's mental health.

Although participating parents and carers reported that the majority of their pre-school children are spending over 3 hours playing each day, and getting regular exercise, almost half of participating parents and carers reported that their pre-schooler was spending no time playing with another child in their household. Over half are worried that they are not doing enough with their child.

Dr Pete Lawrence, School of Psychology, University of Southampton, said,

'This report captures daily life during lockdown, when childcare settings were closed. Without childcare for pre-schoolers, parents are supporting them much more with indoor and outdoor play and getting enough regular physical activity during the lockdown. The majority are trying to juggle this with work, which, in many cases, has become more demanding because of the pandemic. This appears to be taking its toll on parents - with them feeling unable to do a good job as a parent or at work.'

Professor Helen Dodd, Professor of Child Psychology, University of Reading, said:

'Our survey findings demonstrate the challenges that families with young children are facing as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. Parents are stressed about their work and their child's screen time more than anything else. This paints a picture of parents who are trying their best but who feel that they aren't able to successfully meet the demands of their work whilst entertaining and caring for their child.'

The findings from the Co-SPYCE survey will help researchers identify what protects pre-school children from deteriorating mental health, over time, and at particular stress points, and how this may vary according to child and family characteristics. It also aims to identify what advice, support and help parents would find most useful.

Parents and carers are being invited to complete an online questionnaire each month during lockdown, and then a month after schools reopen. The first survey takes about 15-20 minutes, and subsequent surveys about 10 minutes. Participants are asked to answer questions about family life and relationships, overall health and well-being, parenting, psychological symptoms and how they and their pre-school child are coping during the COVID-19 pandemic. The survey is still open to new families.

Regular summaries of key findings will be made available via the UKRI www.emergingminds.org.uk research network website throughout the study and will be shared directly with partner organisations in health and education services and the community and voluntary sector, to inform the development of effective support for children, young people and families.

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