

**“DROPPED  
INTO A CAVE”**



PHOTOGRAPHY: SANDY YOUNG

**HOW FAMILIES**

**WITH YOUNG CHILDREN**

**EXPERIENCED LOCKDOWN**



**Save the  
Children**

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# SUMMARY

The purpose of this report is to understand the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on families with young children living on low incomes in Scotland. By sharing their experiences, we hope to help inform how families can best be supported as we emerge from life in lockdown and begin our recovery.

## Key messages

The parents we spoke to all had unique and diverse experiences to share. However, we identified some common threads that ran through their stories. The ten key messages from the interviews with parents were:

1. The pandemic has had a profound and lasting impact on families. It has made everything harder. The combination of lack of money, worries about paying the bills and putting food on the table, coupled with anxieties about health, caring for their children, the sudden loss of face-to-face support and social networks left parents feeling like they were 'dropped into a cave.'
2. Families have been remarkably resilient. While every family is unique with their own experiences and set of circumstances, the greatest source of resilience has been the family unit.
3. The pandemic was a tipping point for those already in precarious financial circumstances. Family incomes were often uncertain in nature and vulnerable to even slight changes in circumstances. A crisis was often exacerbated by inadequate or gaps in support.
4. Parents used different strategies to cope with a lack of money and to try and make ends meet – cutting back on essentials, going without, or getting into debt.
5. Parents' wellbeing suffered due to increased anxiety around money worries, the sacrifices they made, combined with a loss of support networks.
6. Practical and emotional support was often considered to be as, if not more, important than financial support. They felt the 'loss' of this acutely. Their experiences of family support were varied and patchy.
7. The importance of family and social networks was a strong theme. Parents, especially new mums, felt isolated when social distancing restrictions and lockdowns were in place. Keeping in touch online became a lifeline for maintaining these networks, but also brought with it additional costs.

8. Most parents enjoyed spending more time with their children and felt their relationships with their children had been strengthened during lockdown. Some enjoyed learning more about how their children learn at school. However, many parents were overwhelmed by the pressures of 'home schooling' alongside the other challenges they were facing.
9. The support families received to help with their children's wellbeing at home varied greatly. While some parents felt well supported, others felt the support provided by schools and nurseries was not always sufficient or tailored to family circumstances.
10. Parents expressed concern about the impact of the pandemic on their children's development. They were worried that their children missed out on social interaction with extended family and friends and opportunities to play in the community. Providing varied activities for children was difficult with limited resources and options available and a lack of outside space.

## Looking ahead

Families with young children living on low incomes are amongst those most affected by the economic and social impact of the pandemic. The experiences shared by the parents we spoke to suggest the following priorities for supporting them as we consider life after lockdown:

- 1. Prioritise the needs of families with young children experiencing low income during the recovery.**
- 2. Protect family incomes to weather the current storm** and longer-term, ensure a minimum income standard that enables families with children to achieve a reliable and decent income to live a dignified life.
- 3. Guarantee holistic family support for all families needing help** that offers tailored practical, emotional and financial support.
- 4. Provide opportunities for children to play and build secure relationships in early childhood.**
- 5. Ensure families are part of decision making about how we 'recover' from the pandemic.**

# INTRODUCTION

## Purpose of the report

The coronavirus pandemic has had wide-ranging direct and indirect impacts on the lives and wellbeing of every family in Scotland. Throughout the pandemic a significant amount of evidence has been collected about the experiences and impact of the pandemic on the wellbeing of children and families. We know from this that families on low incomes were amongst those experiencing the most challenging circumstances.

A year on from the start of the pandemic, this report aims to add to our understanding by sharing, in their words, insights and experiences of parents of young children (0-6 years) living on low incomes in Scotland. Parents share their experiences of coping with a lack of money and financial pressures, the changes in their daily lives, access to support and services, the impact on their wellbeing and supporting their children's wellbeing through the pandemic. It is crucial we share and understand these insights to help inform the support families need as we continue to live through and recover from the pandemic. We hope that this report will help all those whose choices touch children's lives to understand more about the impact the pandemic has had on them and their families.

## Why focus on families with young children living on low incomes?

The COVID-19 crisis exacerbated the challenges of living on a low income for some, while others experienced significant shocks to their income for the first time. Many families lost some or part of their income and some experienced poverty for the first time as a result of job losses or underemployment. We know that even before the pandemic, families in Scotland with young children were at a higher risk of experiencing poverty - 1 in 4 children – and 1 in 3 babies one and under - were growing up in poverty.

For parents the impact of the pandemic has not just been financial. Families with young children faced additional pressures in supporting their children at home. New parents had to navigate early parenthood on their own without the support of extended family, community activities or family support. This has left many parents, particularly single parents, feeling isolated.

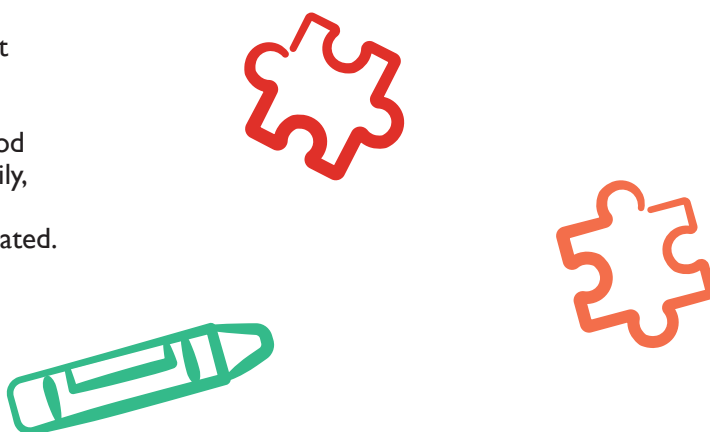
Repeated lockdowns, with nurseries and schools closed for long periods, meant parents of toddlers and young children had to find new ways to look after and play with their children. They had to support their wellbeing and development without the range of support and activities they would have accessed in normal times.

This can be particularly challenging for families who are also living with the stresses and strains of living on a low income. And this all took place while parents were working, looking for work, studying or coping with job losses, illnesses, an insecure future and the increased anxieties that the pandemic brought us all.

## Our approach

Since the start of the pandemic in March 2020, Save the Children has supported over 1500 families in Scotland by providing emergency early years grants. In early 2021 we interviewed 18 parents who had received a grant. We wanted to engage with families with young children living on a low income to hear their experiences and share their stories and reflections. We analysed these interviews to identify themes and key issues and have included quotes and case studies from parents. Names have been changed to protect identities unless parents explicitly gave permission to use their real name.

The key themes and messages from parents are structured into three sections. The first part of the report looks at issues around money, the second at the impact of the pandemic on parents' wellbeing and access to support and the third illustrates life with young children. The report starts with an overview of our emergency grants.



# SAVE THE CHILDREN'S EMERGENCY EARLY YEARS GRANTS

At the start of the pandemic, we adapted our Building Blocks programme to provide emergency early years grants to families to respond to immediate need and support families at this critical time. In this section we give a brief overview of the emergency grants programme. This is by no means an impact analysis but aims to provide background information on the nature and reach of the grants.

The grants are available to families on low incomes with young children aged six years and under across eight local authorities in Scotland. We work with community partners who make applications on behalf of families. The grants are worth up to £340 per family and are used to relieve immediate financial hardship and help meet the costs of essentials.

Parents choose how to spend the grant based on their priorities as a family. The emergency grants enable families to purchase food, household items like tables and chairs, and children's clothes. We also provide play packs to support play and wellbeing at home. Families can choose between bedtime and bath time packs that provide a range of age-appropriate books and toys along with tips for parents.



## The families we supported

Between the launch of the emergency grants in April 2020 and the end of March 2021, 1441 families received a grant, benefiting 3020 children. The characteristics of families who received grants mirror the characteristics of families we know are over-represented or more at risk of poverty or low income, including the six priority groups highlighted in the Scottish Government's Child Poverty Action Plan. Of the families who received grants:

- **More than two thirds (68%) were one parent families, 96% of which were headed by women**
- **Nearly half (48%) of all families had at least one family member with a health condition or disability. Over 1/3 (33%) of families included a parent/carer who suffered from a health condition or disability, while 1 in 4 families (26%) included children who had a health problem or disability**
- **Almost 6 out of 10 (56%) of families had a child aged 3 or under, the most critical stage for child development**
- **1 in 5 families (20%) came from a Black or Minority Ethnic background**
- **Over a third of families (30%) had 3 or more children**
- **One in six (16%) families where the parent is under 25 years of age**

In addition, of all the families who received a grant:

- **7 in 10 (70%) lived in social housing**
- **Almost two thirds (64%) were in receipt of Universal Credit**

## What was the Emergency Grant spent on?

The Emergency Grant allowed families to meet their most immediate needs. It was designed to give as much choice as possible, to be empowering and to give dignified support for families. The flexibility of use meant that parents had a wide choice of what the grant could be spent on, which also meant that one grant may be spent on a number of items

Most families chose to spend at least part of the grant on food:

- **Almost 9 in 10 families (88%) used the grant for food**
- **43% of families said that being able to buy food was the most important and valuable part of the grant.**

Families also bought a range of household items such as bunk beds, washing machines, prams and furniture to organise homes and clothes, school uniforms, chairs and tables to do activities or schoolwork on and highchairs.

With every emergency grant, families are also given age-appropriate early learning packs to support their children's wellbeing, play, learning and development at home. Some families also bought toys to keep their children active during lockdown.

The parents we interviewed for this report described the difference the grant made to them:

*"It helped me for money for food for my children. The help has been very very good for me because the coronavirus closed my shop and it was very very hard for us." (Mohammad)*

*"I got toys with the emergency grant, and books. I didn't have a high chair, when I'm cooking I like to see [my son], so I got a high chair which helped with that." (Heather)*

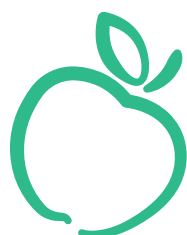
*"Now that she's back at nursery, I've got to buy a lot of clothes. She's just took this sprout and half of [her clothes] are too wee for her." (Laura)*

*"It was honestly the most handiest thing ever to know that was there if I needed anything, I knew I don't have to panic" (Shaunie)*

*"I can go out and get food like a normal person because you feel you've been stripped of that. ... When I got the grant, ... This was like somebody just going: Here's a helping hand, pick yourself back up and go." (Keira)*

*"We decided to get them things for them to play in the house ... to try and keep them exercising during lockdown because ... they tended to be sitting on the floor playing with their toys rather than moving around, whereas I would have taken them to soft play and things had they been open." (Laura)*

*"I got a kettle, a toaster, a microwave, a coffee machine, cutlery, so it's everything for the kitchen I need. ... it feels great knowing that that's one room sorted." (Claire)*



# MONEY AND FINANCIAL PRESSURES DURING THE PANDEMIC

This section explores the impact of the pandemic on family incomes. It looks at the reasons that family finances came under pressure - both from a reduction in income and an increase in some essential costs. It explores how parents coped on low incomes during this time and the impact of money worries on their wellbeing. While each of the parents we interviewed had their own set of unique circumstances that led to their finances coming under pressure, those experiences fell broadly into the following themes.

## A precarious baseline

Individual circumstances varied a lot. Many families were already in a situation where they struggled to meet their basic needs. For many families there were multiple reasons for immediate financial hardship, rather than one single trigger. Families with precarious, inadequate and/or insecure incomes explained how they did not have enough money to make ends meet before the pandemic. These existing financial pressures and hardships were exacerbated for many families when the pandemic hit.

Cathy explains, *“I get paid on the 7th every month, and by the time I get it, the next day, mostly all my money’s away ... Everything I get is for the house, I don’t get anything for myself or anything like that. Everything that I get goes on food, on the house and the wee man, it’s mental, you don’t realise how expensive it is.”*

For her, there is not a particular trigger or specific crisis situation, rather, *“the main challenge is just trying to keep afloat, and because we are in the house more, we’re going through more electricity and just more everything. It’s been a nightmare, to be honest.”*

Similarly, Shaunie told us, *“I struggle financially quite a lot anyway so to add the pandemic on top of that made it really hard. ... I feel like I am totally running in circles right now for money and everything has got to be for money because there is no other way for me to live.”*

*“Everything rolls into one and it’s all because of COVID: your financial struggle comes from this and this comes from that and so on and then down the line you realise actually it’s only been like this since COVID.”* (Shaunie)

Jane, an asylum-seeking parent of two, told us that everything is a struggle for her and that her family does not have enough for every aspect of their life in general. They were already on a very tight budget having to cut back on living expenses. This got even harder during the pandemic

From this precarious baseline many families we spoke to experienced a sudden, unforeseen change in circumstances caused by the economic impact of the pandemic. For parents who were working, some lost their jobs and incomes overnight, while others lost income through reduced hours or due to being ‘furloughed’ – where they received 80% of their take home pay. For many families a 20% reduction in an already low income was a significant loss, when their full pay was just keeping them afloat.

This income reduction was often aggravated further: non-contractual overtime that many employees used to top up their take home pay was not covered by the furlough scheme so that the income from such non-contractual hours was lost entirely. This meant that the total loss of income often significantly exceeded 20%.

*“My partner got furloughed, so he’s getting 80% of a two day a week wage but he did a lot of overtime before, so we lost out on quite a lot of money.”* (Laura)

**“The main challenge**

**is just trying**

**to keep afloat”**

**Cathy**

**Akshan, Renfrewshire**

Akshan is married with a 3-year-old daughter and lives in a mortgaged property. Before the pandemic, he had a managerial position in the hospitality sector. When the pandemic hit, he was initially furloughed and managing on his reduced income. However, as a hospitality sector worker his employer was particularly impacted by the pandemic which led to job losses. A few months into the pandemic, Akshan was made redundant from his well-paid, post, going from a financially secure position to a period of no income at all.

*“I had a mortgage to pay but no income, plus there is a family to support, and I don’t really know how long it will take to find another job because due to the pandemic,*

*there are no jobs. [...] You make a mortgage investment based on your present situation. The pandemic shattered that situation from going smooth to completely unstable and destroyed. It would have been good to have had some support for mortgage payments. You can’t just sell the house in that situation. I’ve always worked hard and paid my taxes without any trouble and it would have been good to have had some support when I lost my job but there was no help because we had a mortgage.”*

He eventually found a new job, but it was only a 15-hour/week contract on a much lower hourly rate. *“The salary I get for 15 hours is basically too low to manage. If there was a one-month holiday, I wouldn’t even have enough money to pay my bills.”*

### Gaps, loopholes and delays in financial support

Most of the families we interviewed explained how their circumstances were further impacted by the UK benefit system. Each situation was very specific but highlighted that there are many loopholes in the system that can have a severe impact on family finances and fall short of providing the support families need. This included gaps in entitlement to financial support, waiting times or delays in receiving social security payments, not being eligible to certain support, or finding themselves without expected financial support due to moving between different benefits.

Diana had just set up her tour agency business with her husband as a partner when lockdown hit. She had to stop all operations and has not had any income at all in the past year. *“We’re not even entitled as an agency to access the new tour operators grant that the government has finally issued because we’re too young as an agency,”* she explains. *“We had plans, then everything went on hold. We feel a bit lost.”*

**“We feel**

**a bit lost”**

**Diana**

*“I was originally on Universal Credit (UC) and Maternity Allowance because I didn’t have a job, so they used to deduct some of my UC and then all of a sudden without any letter to inform me that my maternity allowance was coming to an end I was left with like £200 for the whole month ... I had no idea of how I was supposed to live and how to provide for my child. For about three weeks, I didn’t eat, I had to make a choice between feeding my child and putting money into my gas and electric. ... It took about 2 1/2 to 3 months before they actually fixed it.” (Keira)*

Families were affected by outright job losses due to the pandemic. Where this was the case, the 5-week waiting time between applying for Universal Credit and receiving the first payment was particularly challenging and stressful:

*“It was just hard adjusting going from working to benefits and the difference. Not only the difference in the payments, but it was also when I was getting the payments. You went weeks without money. I had to borrow money to get over that time. ... I never received my last pay cheque ... so was pretty much left without money instantly.” (Anne)*



**Seona, Dundee**

Seona is a single parent of 1-year-old twins. She lives in privately rented accommodation. She was on maternity leave when the pandemic hit. When she was due to return to work from maternity leave, there was no childcare available for her twins. Even though she was left without access to childcare as a result of the pandemic and is a single parent, her employer initially argued that she could not access the furlough scheme. Instead, she had to take annual leave followed by unpaid leave. This left her in a difficult financial situation. It was only thanks to support from her local MP that she eventually managed to access the furlough scheme after a significant delay.

However, her difficulties continued. She was taken off furlough early and had to take unpaid parental leave instead because her paid annual leave was used up. When this was exhausted, she was given the option of an unpaid career break. She is now on reduced hours and in a bubble with her parents

who watch the children while she works two days a week, a significant drop in working hours that does not allow her to make ends meet. Looking back at the protracted situation she found herself in through no fault of her own and without her employers' support or understanding, she reflects:

*"There was this window where I had absolutely nothing. They only gave me a blanket reply that they didn't respond to my individual situation. I had to give up in the end - the next step would have been legal action. I couldn't spend the time looking into that and take care of [my twins], because every phone call [was a massive effort]." She also explains that in the past, she'd never struggled financially. Adapting to a reduced budget is particularly challenging due to the toll that caring for two demanding toddlers on her own takes: "I haven't had time to look into my detailed finances. I just work day by day, I've not had time to sit down and work it out."*

**"I had  
absolutely nothing"**

**Seona**



### Essential costs

A common theme that parents shared was the challenge of meeting essential costs and that many of their living costs increased during the pandemic. This extended to all areas of family life, including food, heating and electricity costs, data and devices and unexpected expenses.

### Food and essential items

All the parents we spoke to highlighted the increased need for, and cost of, food during the pandemic. School and nursery closures meant children spent more time at home and parents had to provide more meals and snacks. This increased food bills.

Stephanie's son started P1 in August and received the universal Free School Meals offer. During the second school closure, she felt the additional cost of having to provide lunches for her son. As her son had only just started school, she was not aware of any potential entitlement to a replacement while schools were closed. She explains: *"When your child is at school, you're getting provided their lunch. So, you're not needing to buy as much, just snacks and dinners. And then lunch stuff for at the weekend. But then obviously from being home 24/7, I don't know why, but I think every child just became so much hungrier while they've been at home."*

Consistently, parents explained how boredom and lack of routines at home led to everyone eating more which increased the cost of food. *"You see, because it's like the cupboards are there 24/7 for them, so they were just going to the kitchen all the time. So, it was more money for shopping. There's bits and bobs that we wouldn't have usually bought."* (Claire)

Families who received Free School Meals replacement support during school closures welcomed this: *"The cash coming into my bank was a lot easier because I was actually able to go to the supermarket and get what they needed with their fruit and veg. [With the vouchers], I had to go to a PayPoint with them and they don't sell proper food."* (Cathy)

It was clear that either cash or vouchers was the preferred option for Free School Meals, rather than food parcels which do not allow any choice or catering for family needs. One parent told us she preferred vouchers over cash payments; others preferred cash payments.

One parent described how her partner caught COVID-19 and the family had to isolate on many occasions. This had a knock-on effect in that the family was housebound and relied on limited shopping options which increased their costs: *"The middle child had been sent home from school to isolate and the bills just went through the roof because we were having to do online shopping and put more in for our gas and electricity."* (Paula)

At points throughout the pandemic the shortage and unreliability of access to essential items in supermarket, such as nappies, also contributed to buying larger quantities when these were available, thus posing budgeting difficulties. Shaunie explained that her usual shop became more expensive because of essential items being in short supply in her usual supermarket. She therefore had to buy online, larger quantities and from more expensive brands which made budgeting difficult. *"I was having to almost double what I was spending to be able to order stuff online from places that weren't even real supermarkets so that we could be having them because there was literally no other way."* (Shaunie)

**"An extra £10 a week  
could like totally  
change the world."**

**Shaunie**



*"I needed nappies and I'm going to have to buy 3 packets in case I come back next week and there's none like I did last week. Then I'm having to travel miles and miles to get something that I actually desperately need because other people are buying 10 or 11 packets at a time. So something that I would usually spend £6 on would have cost me closer to £20."* (Shaunie)

Melissa noticed that the cost of nappies went up: *"They used to be 89p. They're now two pound."*

Many parents struggled to afford new clothes for their children: *"Just at the start of the pandemic [my baby] had grown out of her clothes and needed new clothes, I remember feeling like a complete failure as a mum because I don't have enough money to do both [buy food and clothes]. So I'm cutting the feet off her sleepsuits so she'd have a romper."* (Keira) Parents adjusted their shopping habits to keep their children safe during the pandemic. Many families reported that they were worried for their children's safety and avoided going out for fear of catching COVID-19. In some cases this led to an increase in costs: *"Having a newborn I didn't really want to take her out and risk catching it."* (Laura)

Parents were worried about travelling on public transport to supermarkets where they knew they could get items cheaper. Instead they often opted to shop in more expensive local shops to reduce the risk of infection. *"Because I'm at a high risk, and I can't wear a mask either, I try and not go out as much."* (Lorna) This meant that she went for quick, local and frequent food shopping trips. She had limited time available to look for cheaper options or go to multiple shops to compare prices.

Parents continue to have safety worries about their child catching COVID-19 or the infection rates spiking again which indicates that this contributor to increased living costs may have a lasting impact.

### Household bills

During the winter, parents described the increased costs associated with having to heat the house more and using more electricity. With children at home all day due to school and nursery closures on the one hand and the absence of activities outside of the home on the other, *"you're spending so much time in the house and you don't realise how much gas and electricity that you burn through and then you have to double what you put into your meter."* (Shaunie)

Claire, who stays with her mother with three of her children due to being homeless, found that electricity has also gone up. *"My mum's going through £25 a week electricity. But there's so many computers on it's like 24/7 and the boys will put the Xbox in. She's doing more washing, that would be the tumble-dryer and more dishwashing. So, it's gone up a lot. I think she was only putting £3 in, it's went up £25 since they've been off [school]."*

While some parents were able to cope with increased food costs by accessing food banks, there was no help available for the much increased expenditure on gas and electric: As one parent explains: *"There is no voucher say for the electricity or gas. But the vouchers for food really helped us save money so that we could keep up with our bills."*

### Jane, Glasgow

Jane is an asylum seeker and lives with her husband and two children aged 9 and 4. They have been in the country for 7 years and are still awaiting the decision on their asylum claim. They are not allowed to work because their claim is still being processed.

Her older son is autistic and has food allergies, so the family has to cook from scratch to adapt to his allergies. Buying fresh food has been a struggle and a big cost for the family. They were able to access the local food bank which helped a little, and they've been very good accommodating the allergies of the family.

They were issued with Free School Meal vouchers but Jane feels bad for needing help like this. They

are glad though that it does not come as a food parcel as this may not be usable considering their son's allergies. Vouchers or cash give her the opportunity to buy things that her son is able to eat.

For Christmas they had to decide whether to buy things that the children need or that they want, but the children themselves said they would rather get clothes than toys. Jane had considered cutting some of her own clothes to make pyjamas for the children out of them.

Jane told us that normally she would have bought second-hand clothes from charity shops but this was now not possible due to charity shops being closed.

**Alice, Dundee**

Alice is a single parent with two children aged 8 months and 5 years and lives in rented accommodation. Alice was made redundant in early 2020. She did not realise she was five months pregnant with her son Jack when she lost her job. Then came Covid-19 and lockdown. In the space of a few short weeks she had gone from being a full-time working mum, to being at home 24/7 with two young children. *“I’ve gone from working full-time to being made redundant and in the house with the kids. My financial situation has changed drastically, it’s really weird to be in this situation. I mean I was never like rich, but I could save up and have a holiday once a year instead of being on Universal Credit now, and I just can’t make ends meet.”*

Alice is a resourceful mum and has joined facebook groups such as *“Feed your Family for £1 a Day”* and she has also accessed the community fridges locally. *“You pay £2 and you get two bags of shopping. That’s*

*kind of my food budget,”* she explains. She is also thrifty with her cooking, and bulk cooks to save on costs.

Yet with the cold winter, and living in a single glazed flat, it has been a struggle to both feed her children and keep the house warm. *“I am just burning through my gas so badly. I’m at the point where it is ‘get another jumper, get a hot water bottle, get a blanket’, because I can’t afford to keep having the heating on. Sometimes I feel really bad especially because my son is eight months old, and I have him in little dressing gowns and stuff to make sure he’s warm enough in the house.”*

*“I’ve got big draft excluder curtains, I’ve got draft excluders on all the windows, it’s just an old house that’s not insulated very well and I didn’t expect to find myself in this situation. Before when I was working, it’s not something I ever worried about, you just pay the bills.”*

**“I didn't expect  
to find myself in  
this situation”**

**Alice**



### Internet costs

The WiFi or internet bill was identified as an essential cost during the pandemic. It was another cost adding to financial stress yet also a priority for many parents as it provided a 'lifeline' for keeping in touch with family and friends, access to online classes or support and providing entertainment and access to learning for their children. For these reasons this cost was prioritised.

*"I have internet access and I've made it a priority – a bill that I pay before I pay heating or council tax. I couldn't do without it especially on my own. It's my only way to stay in touch with people so just have to have that."* (Seona)

Many families did not have WiFi in the home but work from their phone data allowance. *"I used to have a pay as you go phone, so I didn't get much internet and I didn't have internet in the house. I was having to borrow my neighbour's WiFi password so I could do [my college] classes."* (Shaunie)

Cathy only has a pay as you go phone and had to pay extra for data. *"I've got the internet in, but it's just sometimes I need to borrow just to make sure that I've got enough to pay it. When you top up your phone, it just runs out quicker."*

Pressures on data increased because families were not able to use WiFi hotspots or their relatives' or public WiFi while staying at home due to lockdown restrictions. Not having the budget to increase data allowance, families had to budget their existing data allowance: *"I get three gig of data, so I had to watch for that."* (Lorna)

Melissa had to cut down on her phone and internet bill to save money: *"I had to phone Virgin up and cut it down. I managed to cut it down to sixty pound but it's still quite a lot of money."*

*"If I didn't have my mobile phone with me on contract, then I wouldn't be able to contact anybody. My mum pays that for me. Aye, it really is a lifeline."* (Cathy)



### Unexpected expenses

Many families struggled to cope with unexpected expenses, like household items breaking or needing replaced. This contributed to their struggle to make ends meet and in some cases increased financial hardship.

Unexpected expenses were further contributing to financial hardship. Diana explains, *"we were struggling a lot, definitely in September when the fridge broke. The car didn't pass the MOT. We freaked out a bit."*

Kelsey describes how her son's meltdowns have led to significant damage to the walls of their rented accommodation, which the family, who is already in debt, have to get repaired before the next landlord's inspection *"The repairs I'm going to have to do in the house is going to be the most expensive. He's actually trashed my house through having meltdowns"* (Kelsey)

Similarly, being in the house more has occasionally led to household items needing replaced. Cathy told us that she really needs to replace her carpet but cannot afford to do this at the moment. Her vacuum cleaner has broken too:

*"My Hoover's broke and I'm having to go down on my hands and knees with the wee sweeping brush, but I've been having to do that, and can't just go to somebody and borrow one."*

## How parents coped with and adapted to financial pressures

With family finances being squeezed from both sides due to a reduction in income and an increase in essential living expenses, parents struggled to cover even essential costs. The way that parents coped fell broadly into three themes. They told us that they had to go without in order to provide for their children, and that they had to cut back even on essential items and delay necessary expenses. Many families told us how debt was the only way to keep afloat and how they had to take out loans or increase the money they borrowed to make ends meet.

### Parents going without to provide for their children

All the parents we spoke to put their children first, trying their utmost to ensure that their child was not going without, even if they themselves had to. Several parents spoke of making sacrifices to ensure their children did not miss out.

Shaunie told us that she has not been able to spend on herself in a long time: *“Apart from college supplies I can’t actually remember the last time I bought anything that was for me, that wasn’t food.”*

Similarly, Cathy described how she had to cut back to make sure her child did not go without: *“I’ve had to cut back on a load of things, just to make sure the wee man’s got, and it’s just a nightmare. Then cutting out on meals, just to make sure he’s got meals.”*

### Keira, Edinburgh

Keira is a single parent to a baby who was born 6 months before lockdown. She stays in social housing. She was receiving maternity allowance following the birth of her baby. When this came to an end, she transferred to Universal Credit. However, this transfer was anything but smooth: Keira was caught out by a glitch in the benefit system and was left with only £200 for a whole month. It took 3 months to rectify the issue. She even had to go without food:

*“I had no idea of how I was supposed to live and how to provide for my child. For about three weeks, I didn’t eat, I had to make a choice between feeding my child and putting money into my gas and electric. You can’t go to the supermarket and buy essentials even for yourself, everything has to be what does my child need first and foremost. I didn’t want her to feel like she was missing, so anything and everything that needed to be sacrificed on my part was sacrificed, and that was things like food, basic things. It all went to her, making sure that she was okay and felt like it was still a normal home environment.”*

### Cutting back on essentials

Because food and essentials had to be prioritised, families had to cut back on other items, such as clothes and non-urgent items.

Shaunie was not able to buy clothes for her son or herself. She told us that: *“I would never have been able to go out and afford to buy us new outfits”.*

Before her business had to shut down for lockdown, Diana was never too worried about expenses and bills. Now left without any income due to the pandemic, she realised her family was spending too much on electricity. She changed provider to save money. Other families told us of plans to switch providers, but everyday pressures due to lack of childcare means that this can be difficult to carry through: *“I’ve got to reassess my phone bill, I’ve got to reassess my home contents insurance, there’s a few things where I could save £10 a month on if only I get the hour or half hour to sit and do it.”* (Seona)

Even though food was prioritised, some families also cut back on it, switching to the cheapest supermarkets, own brand options or changing the way they eat: *“I’m not buying any convenience foods, or ready snacks for the twins,”* explains Seona. Instead, she now cooks everything from scratch to keep costs down.

**“I just felt so alone”**

**Keira**

In spite of putting her child first at all times, she recalls *“feeling like a complete failure as a mum because I don’t have enough money to do both [feed and clothe my child].”* She felt that there was no information out there to help her in her specific situation: *“You watch the news and everyone is saying about hardship funds and people who’ve lost their jobs, but there was nothing to say there’s other support out there. I just felt so alone.”*

She borrowed money from her mother but because her sister had to support six children, she did not want to be an additional burden to her mum. *“I just kept saying, everything’s fine, everything’s fine. I felt kind of ashamed that I wasn’t able to provide.”*

*“It literally felt like you were dropped into a cave and it felt like, that’s it. No support, no help. There’s nothing out there.”*

She still suffers from anxiety that her Universal Credit will not appear in full in her bank account.

## Borrowing money and debt

Many parents explained how increased living essential costs and reduced income led to a situation where they were unable to manage with the money available to them. Families explored ways to spread cost, by paying some bills in instalments, but this was not always an option, leading to debt and postponing further financial pressures to the future: *“I’ve managed to pay my heating bill in instalments but I haven’t been able to pay my council tax for months and months and months. So there’s hundreds of pounds in council tax waiting that are overdue. That’s a big scary thing that’s sitting below the surface there.”* (Seona)

Some families had a supportive family who paid some bills such as the phone bill or helped out here and there. Often, this was not enough and families had to take out loans: *“I don’t spend a lot but during this pandemic I have spent over the means. I’ve had to go and get loans,”* explains Lorna.

At times, debt may have been a temporary situation, but coupled with the rising costs due to the effects of the pandemic, it became a greater worry. For Shaunie, a single parent who had moved from temporary to rented accommodation, the pandemic coincided with a challenging time in her life, making necessary adjustments more difficult. She had just started a college course when the pandemic hit. This meant that she had moved from Universal Credit to a college bursary and was now responsible for paying her own rent for the first time: *“My money changed how I would get paid right in the middle of the pandemic. It messed about with my rent. So I ended up in arrears for a little while. ... I feel like I am totally running in circles right now for money.”*

Being in debt was a new experience for Anne too: *“When I was working I was always in credit with my rent and things. Because I got made redundant and waiting to go on Universal Credit it was a big massive long delay. Then there was an overlap in the rent and I ended up being in debt with tax credits because if I never kept that money I would never of had nothing to live off of.”*

Where debt was already an issue the pandemic, exacerbated it. Several parents told us about their struggle with the burden of debt which increased during the pandemic. They shared their worries at not having any way of managing the debt or any prospect of clearing it, leaving families in desperate financial situations without any outlook of better times ahead as they continue to struggle to cover essential living costs. Cathy has accumulated £4,000 in electricity and gas bill debt. She had hoped that during the pandemic interest payments would be suspended, but this did not happen:

*“I had to take out a budgeting loan to pay off debt I had well before Christmas. And well, aye, they’ve been taking that back at least £140 a fortnight off me. During lockdown, they said they wouldn’t be actually taking anything, paying back loans and that, but they’ve been taking it full time from me. I had to take out a loan to pay off debt. So, they’re saying one thing and then doing another.”*

Laura told us how she needs to borrow an additional £50-£60 every month to make ends meet, and that this would be even more if the temporary £20 per week uplift to Universal Credit were to be revoked. This was echoed by Keira: *“For some people £20 doesn’t seem like a lot, but that’s milk, that’s bread, that’s £10 maybe on the electric or the gas. So that would be a big deal, to lose that. We just survive as it is.”*

Lorna agreed, *“I’d need to cut back on quite a lot of things. But I didn’t even know they’d done an extra £20 a week on it.”* Even with the current temporary uplift to Universal Credit, it is not sufficient to meet basic living costs: *“At the end of the month when I got my Universal Credit money there was never as much as even a pound or two spare. By the time my bills were paid, my shopping was done and everything like that. For them to take that £20 away again from me, that’s going to be my gas for the week or my electric for the week. Every penny of what I get is accounted for. It would be really hard to be able to jiggle myself into not having that £20 because it was never really extra in the first place as it went straight into bills along with everything else.”* (Shaunie)

Many parents we spoke to knew about the new Scottish Child Payment and [at the time of the interviews] were awaiting a decision. Seona noted she had not managed to apply for it as she struggled just managing her twins on her own and never got the time to complete the form. Even though her debt was accumulating, she struggled to access this additional financial support due to the pressures on her.

Shaunie reflects that: *“Many people think £10 is not a lot of money but an extra £10 a week could like totally change the world. That £10 a week could be your bus fare and your child’s entry into the soft play, and you’ve done something with your child, you’ve had a day out with your child.”*

Debt was a consistent theme in our interviews with families. Many families shared how they were struggling to pay off debt, or were accumulating further debt. They spoke about how unplanned essential costs knock them back and how financial support and benefits disappear as soon as they are received to pay for the most essential household bills. It is clear that the financial support they received is not generous enough to keep families afloat in times of crisis.

### Financial insecurity and its impact on parents' mental health

Parents reported how the financial insecurity, caused in part by lockdown increased their anxiety and affected their mental health.

*"I would have an anxiety attack nearly every time a [Universal Credit] payment was due, because I was always worried that there wasn't the full amount in my bank account. It took a very long time for me to calm down and be okay that it wasn't going to happen. I still have a little bit of anxiety every time I get paid Universal Credit."* (Keira)

For many families, such financial worries are very new and the adjustment to having to budget tightly is stressful and difficult. Seona explains that in the past, she had never struggled financially. Adapting to a reduced budget was particularly challenging due to the toll that caring for two demanding toddlers on her own takes: *"I haven't had time to look into my detailed finances I just work day by day, I've not had time to sit down and work it out."*

Christmas time added additional stress and anxiety: *"At Christmas I was absolutely terrified. I had no idea what I was going to do for Christmas. We were having to make sure that before we went out and bought Christmas presents that there was going to be enough food in the fridge and freezer."*

Kelsey's is in a situation where her financial difficulties are bound to continue for a long time and she's fought for years to get the right support for her children with additional support needs, without success. She is disillusioned: *"How I'm getting out of the situation I'm in. How is everything getting paid. [With the government] it's all about money money money. If you've got money, we're interested, but if you're poor, we don't care, just stay where you are. But you cannot go out and work, we'll force you to work. I can't go and work when I've got three disabled kids at home. My job's going to ask me to leave every time something happens, do you know what I mean? ... I really don't know."*

**"It's all about**

**money**

**money**

**money"**

**Kelsey**





# THE IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC ON PARENTS' WELLBEING

In the previous chapter we looked at how the pandemic had impacted on family finances and making ends meet. Parents' experiences highlighted that financial pressures and hardship were closely linked with anxiety, their wellbeing and health.

In this chapter we share parents' experiences of the pandemic on their wellbeing more generally and how they experienced practical and emotional support during this time. It was striking how much stress, anxiety and isolation parents experienced and how different families experiences of accessing support were.

## Physical and mental health, stress and isolation

Many parents shared how lockdown and the lack of support from family and friends impacted on their mental health. At times this was a general feeling of being overwhelmed or stress.

A few parents reported increased stress levels by having to fulfil multiple roles. This occasionally impacted on the parent-child relationship. Paula had to home school, look after her ill partner, and keep the family afloat: *"There was more shouting in the house, raised voices and more stress on me. I've had to be mum, nurse, ken, and still have the house work and school work, it's been an absolute nightmare."*

Seona puts it succinctly how stress impacts on the ability to offer positive attention to her children: *"They've lost out on positive attention at home because I'm more stressed and have less energy to give to them at home than I did before, less patience and attention at home too."*

Other parents suffered from depression: *"It's just up, breakfast and find something to do in the house now. When you're doing the same thing every day, it's soul-destroying. I'm a bit depressed now, but it's just been not being able to do anything, and being stuck in."* (Cathy)



"We had plans,  
then everything went on hold.

We feel a bit lost."

Diana

Some parents were reluctant to seek help from family members because they were ashamed of their situation. *"I just kept saying [to my mum], everything's fine, everything's fine. Because it's a shame thing as well, I guess. I felt kind of ashamed that I wasn't able to provide."* (Keira) She would rather go hungry herself than ask her mother for money.

Cathy accessed her local food bank and found that it helped her a lot. However it also caused her additional worries that services may find out and that this would make her more vulnerable or impact on her negatively: *"If we didn't get that, then I don't know what me and the wean would have done that time there. You feel bad that you need to rely on that, and then you sit and you think, are you going to get into trouble for getting this? Are you going to have a health visitor or somebody at the door, because you've not been able to get food, you've had to get that? And everything all goes through your mind."* Families have been pushed to the brink, and unable to provide for their family, worry about suffering consequences for a situation that is not of their making.

Many families had to deal with health issues, either because a family member had contracted COVID-19 or because of other health issues. Diana told us about her mother (who was in another country) suffering with serious and deteriorating health and how much she worried while being unable to help and visit. She tried to hide the poor health of the grandparent from her 4-year-old daughter: *"We made everything about Mia. We've done so much with her that she didn't really notice any problem."* While this protected her daughter's wellbeing, it took its toll on her as a parent: *"I've been very tired I must say. Very tired. Mia's daddy doesn't really handle well situations of stress and I'm dealing with a lot of things."* She has decided to access a counsellor to support her through her grief for her mother's declining health and the financial worry due to her business being shut down during the pandemic.

### Lack of support from families and friends

Being socially distanced and cut off from even the closest family during lockdown meant that informal family support networks were suspended or changed dramatically. This led to parents feeling isolated and not being able to access support from family, friends and social networks.

Keira had just had a baby and she had started getting to know other mums when the pandemic hit. She felt that these networks were just taken away, and she had not yet developed deep enough friendships to feel she could reach out: *"How do you say you're struggling?"* she wonders as she explained that she did not know who to reach out to.

**"How do you say  
you're struggling?"**

**Keira**

Anne lost her job at the start of the pandemic. She reflects that as a working parent, she had never built up a network of support that she could have drawn upon: *"I was working before and spending times with the kids and taking them out, so there wasn't really a big support network before. My mum passed away and she was a massive support for me especially helping out with the girls, so obviously losing that and then going into lockdown and then losing my job right at the start it was quite difficult. The only support that I had was the support that the health visitor provided me with."*

Some parents were able to access some support from their extended family, especially as time progressed and bubbles could be formed. Shaunie explains how sometimes it is the emotional support which is most needed in times of stress, and that this is what was taken away:

*"There's been times I've been financially struggling and my family have been able to send me like the odd tenner or £20 here and there. But when I just feel really stressed, the need to cuddle, it's not possible and sometimes you need that more than you need the money."*

Melissa is in a supported mother and baby unit that does not allow visitors. While she feels supported as a parent in the unit, she has not been able to see her older child or her mother who cares for her older child. *"He's not seen his gran since the 23rd December, (2020) so he won't even recognise her. So that's obviously a big impact,"* she explains.

**Heather, Edinburgh**

Heather is a single parent with a one-year-old son. She lived in a small studio flat which was not appropriate for her and her newborn baby. She had arranged to move house when the pandemic struck. This meant that she had to move with a newborn baby, on her own, to a new area where she did not know anybody. The pandemic effectively locked her and her baby into her new home. She was not able to socialise with other new mothers and did not have any social support nearby. She had to navigate early motherhood by herself and without access to normal opportunities that would make the transition to motherhood easier.

Heather suffered postnatal depression and was not able to return to her profession as a carer after her maternity leave ended. She applied for Universal Credit but there was a 5 week wait before getting the first payment.

*"Buying food was tricky, I was stranded at that point, I had to feed my baby."* she explains.

*"With a new baby, it took me months before I could put things into place. I'm not used to having a baby crying and often I don't know how to stop him crying".* It was also difficult to provide varied activities for her son because of lockdown: *"I don't know how to entertain my son, he gets bored by the same activities. I feel bad as a mother. I'm not happy because I know that he's not getting the happiness that he deserves as a kid. If he could interact with people more, he would develop quicker. I try to play with him but he gets bored easily,*

*he wants to have different things and see people. He's not enjoying being at home all the time, it makes me feel bad but I hope it's going to get better. I'm also scared so I don't want to go out too much in case we catch COVID."*

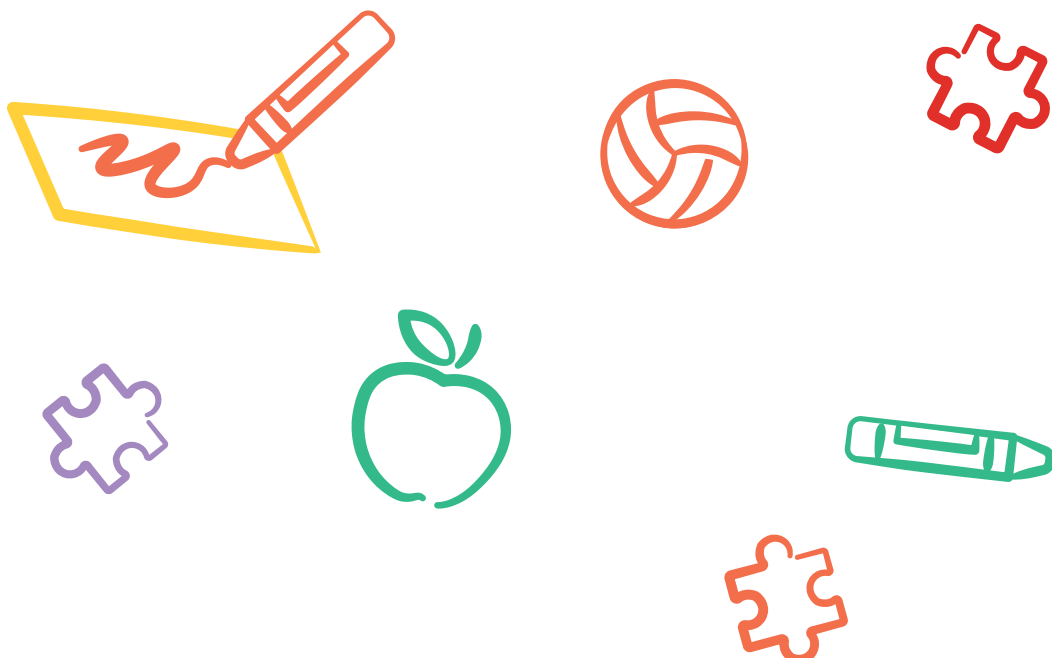
Her family nurse referred her for support. She was able to access weekly zoom meetings to support her in her early parenting journey, as well as walk and talk meetings when restrictions were eased: *"I don't like talking about my issues to people but I realised I had to talk and that sharing it helped me get better. Sometimes we would go for a walk. Those little things helped. When I first moved to my new place, I felt things would never get any better, I'd end up taking my own life. I don't feel like this anymore now thanks to the support."*

**"I feel bad as a mother. I'm not happy because I know that he's not getting the happiness that he deserves as a kid."**

**Heather**

*"I now feel I always have someone to talk to, it's just the COVID that's holding us back. I have support for the moment but at the beginning it was very difficult. I always have questions about my son as a first time mum, and google a lot. The group helps because I get answers to any questions that I have. I feel supported."*

*"You still have to deal with pain on your own but at least I know where to go with it."*



## Availability and access to services and support

Lockdown changed the way services and professionals supported families overnight. Some services adapted quickly and continued to provide practical and emotional support through home visits or online, while other services and support were suspended or became less frequent. Parents' experiences of accessing practical and emotional support varied considerably.

Several parents reported that specialist services that they had been accessing were no longer available to them. Some services experienced a delay or were not available: *"My little boy is supposed to be going through an autism assessment and that was affected."* (Laura) Assessments, diagnostics and paediatrician appointments were delayed or did not take place which meant that much needed support for children was not available at a time when it was most needed: *"I haven't been able to get him a diagnosis, or a paediatrician, anything. The fact that all services, they've been basically threw out of all services and been left to deal with it."* (Cathy)

This did not only apply to specialist services. Many parents reported not seeing their health visitor or other universal services, or not having a wellbeing check in with the health visitor at routine appointments:

*"I didn't hear from my health visitor for the whole of the pandemic other than for her injections. It didn't feel like anyone checked in."* (Keira)

Practical and emotional support was often considered to be as important as financial support: *"It's practical support I needed because I was on my own. All the practical and external support I found on my own was suddenly cut, it was awful."* (Seona) The single mum of one-year-old twins goes on to explain that the relationship-based practical and emotional support she had been receiving was her lifeline and enabler which was now no longer available: *"Before, I had a volunteer twice a week. I used one of these sessions to do essential household chores. ... The other session I used for swimming lessons for them because you need one adult per child. And those swimming lessons were the best thing we did, it made them happy, it got them active and me out of the house and it became my weekly shower because at the pool after the lesson, the volunteer would stay with the twins and we'd have a coffee and I'd get my shower. So those visits were survival for me. ... I was overwhelmed all the time, I was on the verge of tears constantly, the whole time. With all this suddenly cut that was very difficult."*

Melissa gave birth to her baby during lockdown. She was placed in a supported mother and baby unit just before Christmas. She explained that her hospital stay after a c-section was shorter than it would normally be. She had to get used to support meetings being through video call: *"A'm thinkin', 'Oh we're havin' a meeting. They're coming out.' But it's not, it's all through video call. Like this video call, it's all new to me. So a found that and tryin' to get people together for a meeting that's quite hard as well. That's the only thing a've found really hard."*

Some family support transitioned to offering sessions by video call. Many parents appreciated this but found that it did not work particularly well if it was intended to engage their young child. Even when it turned into a parent support group, it often petered out: *"It was really hard to get Rehaan to engage in it, he just wasn't really interested. So after a couple of weeks it more turned into somewhere the mums could go to speak. Within weeks, people seemed to lose interest and didn't join the meetings any more."* (Shaunie)

Support from local voluntary organisations was a lifeline for many: *"The group helps because I get answers to any questions that I have. I feel supported,"* explains Heather. Jane also told us that local organisations supported her family by providing a laptop but also provided social and emotional support as well as signposting. She is part of a church and missed the support of worship and the church community.

Families felt that where personal support was offered, which took their specific circumstances into account, was particularly helpful: *"Thankfully I've got amazing workers with me being a care leaver."* (Shaunie)

Akshan described that: *"there was financial support for food and clothing but also moral support knowing that if we were in real big trouble at least there is someone we can ask for help."*

This helped him and his family feel supported and keep a positive outlook.

Overall, parents reported that support that was tailored to their needs and addressed these in a relationship-based way was welcome, working well, or - if lacking - missed. While financial crisis is alleviated with appropriate financial support, the emotional toll it takes on families requires to be addressed and supported equally. Many families even prioritised this emotional and practical support over financial support. However, the two really go hand in hand. For families experiencing poverty, both financial and practical and emotional support need to be made available to enable them to escape the grip of poverty.

# THE IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC ON YOUNG CHILDREN

We were keen to also explore parents' views on the impact of the pandemic and lockdown on their children and the home life. In this section, we look at how parent-child relationships were affected, how routines and behaviours changed for children and the impact of school and nursery closures. We also explored what children's play, learning and development looked like during lockdown, activities that were most missed by children, how the lack of social interaction impacted on families and how parents coped and supported their children's play, learning and development at home.

While overall, the challenges for families were great, many parents also noted some positives. Many parents fed back that they felt closer to their child: *"It's actually done my little girl well because she's had time to sit and learn ... it's one on one attention for them. I've been able to do more activities that I'd like to do with them. I'm not worried about them getting messy because I have to take them out in half an hour. ... I've really got to know them better, I really do, I've been interacting better, communicating better."* (Laura)

Stephanie explains how lockdown has had a positive impact on her relationship with her son and has helped her understand her son's learning and progress. She feels more engaged in his school learning now: *"I feel the lockdown has helped me to sort of become a better mum. I'm just more motivated, and I just want to do the best that I can. We became really close and, me and Caleb, we became really close in terms of when we're learning. It's actually been really nice to sit down and see his progression, and his school work and see him learning how to read."*

**"I feel the lockdown has helped me to sort of become a better mum"**

**Stephanie**

Stephanie, Glasgow



Shaunie too is keen to share her successes: *“Although I was in the middle of a pandemic, I did start a college course, continued a college course and I’m now almost half-way through the college course, which I hoped would be a totally normal experience but it turned out not to be. I suppose the fact that I managed to stick at it while it was so stressful and straining. For Rehaan, he’s learned quite a lot of new things, he’s totally toilet trained since the start of coronavirus because we’ve had the time. He could learn at his own pace. As much as it’s been a hard time and we’ve struggled, we’ve both had some goals that we’ve achieved.”*

Akshan felt that in spite of the financial worries, he took lots of positives from the pandemic too: *“I was able to spend more time with my daughter and with my wife. Before the pandemic, I was working always and I was always very busy. ... I never had so much time to spend with my daughter before. We got into a routine of playing more and speaking more. She also helped me with cooking. She was involved in all that I was doing and we were both enjoying it and making a stronger bond. ... My daughter gained more from lockdown than what she missed.”*

The appreciation of time spent with their child and developing a stronger bond was shared with the parents of the youngest children too, even when parents had experienced a crisis: *“I feel that I have a strong relationship with my son, I developed a strong bond with him. I spend so much time with him and we bonded so much.”* (Heather) It seems that the bond between parents and child was a source of resilience for both.



Seona echoes this and in spite of the emotionally difficult and intense time, a feeling of isolation coupled with previously unknown financial difficulties, she also recognises that lockdown has given her a gift: *“The main gift [lockdown] given me is the chance to breastfeed my twins for longer which I really value so that’s really special to me, the bond and time alone with them for an extended time at this young age I’ve really felt has been a gift as well and I just hope that that’s a strength that will affect them positively as they grow. You just have to trust that that’s true.”*

Claire who was in rehab during the early months of lockdown and is now staying with her parents who looked after her children is proud to have just celebrated her 1st anniversary of staying dry and clean, in spite of lockdown and a very stressful situation of being homeless and sleeping in a room with three of her children. While before she was consumed by feelings of shame and guilt, she feels that lockdown has helped her back on her feet and be a parent again: *“I think, the lockdown, for me, has been good to build that relationship back up with the kids and to show them that I’m in charge.”*

However, distressingly, some families noted that there was nothing positive at all about the experience of the pandemic. They felt overwhelmed by the multiple challenges and hardly able to cope. One parent expressed a feeling of wanting to run away: *“Things have gotten that bad that I’m at the stage where I could actually just walk away, that’s how bad it is.”* (Kelsey)

**“We got into a routine  
of playing more  
and speaking more”**

**Akshan**

## Routines and behaviour

With no external demands on routines for children in place, it was harder to maintain routines at home for some families. This affected bedtime as well as activity levels, and occasionally led to behavioural issues: *“She wasn’t going to bed until way on, or she didn’t sleep because she wasn’t burning off that much energy either. She went through a stage of biting.”* (Lorna)

Quite a few parents reported their child being more demanding or clingier, which is not surprising given the lack of other people in the child’s life. However it also occasionally affected children’s trust of adults or children they did not regularly see: *“I feel like she’s missed out on a lot. ... She’s very clingy to me, it has affected her social interaction. She gets very nervous, almost shocked when she sees another child. She would cry when we saw my mum, and I know that broke my mum’s heart because she’d been so close.”* (Keira) This presents a strain on family relationships and adds to parental stress and worry.

Jane also noticed that the lack of a clear structure to the day has impacted in particular on her autistic child who likes to follow set routines.

While parents tried hard to keep their children busy, they found that they still couldn’t prevent boredom: *“She gets bored if you keep trying to do the same things over and over again with her and I was like, there’s only so much I could do.”* (Lorna) This negatively impacted on parental self-efficacy.

Parents are acutely aware that their children’s experiences during the pandemic are neither normal or always good for them: *“I don’t know how to entertain my son, he gets bored by the same activities. I feel bad as a mother. I’m not happy because I know that he’s not getting the happiness that he deserves as a kid. If he could interact with people more, he would develop quicker. I try to play with him but he gets bored easily, he wants to have different things and see people. He’s not enjoying being at home all the time, it makes me feel bad.”* (Heather)



## Play, learning and development

We were interested in hearing parents’ experiences in supporting their children’s play, learning and development. We asked what they found challenging and what worked well. We were also keen to hear what activities children and parents missed most, what families were still able to engage in, and what support nurseries and schools provided to families during lockdown.

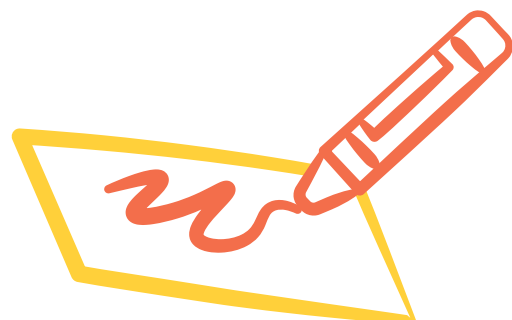
### School/nursery closures

It is not surprising that the closure of nurseries and schools was experienced as the biggest challenge for all families. This was particularly pronounced where children were not able to start nursery or school as expected or had their early experience of formal learning interrupted: *“He was supposed to [start nursery in] January, I think that would have helped him a lot socially, he doesn’t interact with anyone his own age.”* (Laura)

Other children had their nursery attendance interrupted. Two-year-old Keira loves nursery and not being able to go made her unhappy as her mother explains: *“The hardest thing for her really was not going to nursery.”* (Lorna)

Some families felt that their child has regressed due to nursery and school closures: *“I feel that lockdown has actually taken Jacob further back than where he should have been. He never got a proper transition into school or nothing.”* (Cathy)

Diana’s daughter is due to start school in 2021. She explains that she would have liked to have seen the school and met the staff before enrolling her daughter, especially because she feels vulnerable as a foreign parent and how she and her daughter may be seen by the school. She feels that she missed out on the opportunity to meet school staff and develop relationships with them.



**Alice, Dundee**

Home learning was difficult for Alice's daughter, because the only device she had available was her small broken cracked iPhone: "It was really, really difficult to do her school-work." Thankfully, she mentioned it to the school who was able to provide her with the loan of a laptop.

Lilly had missed out on her nursery graduation which Alice feels has impacted on her daughter: "I mostly feel sorry for the kids, especially my daughter. She was at nursery when lockdown started, so missed the end of nursery, which I feel so bad about because she still talks about her friends from nursery."

"I'm hoping that one day all her clubs and stuff will open, cos it's been hard for her going from school or nursery fulltime, and she usually has quite a few clubs that she goes to, like her dancing and things like that. And then there's singing classes and acting

classes, but that's all closed now. I would love to go back swimming. My daughter was swimming last time we went to the swimming pool but it's been that long that I don't think she could swim anymore!"

Alice loves sewing and took up Blackwork embroidery during lockdown. She used to run a sewing group for young parents with children where she taught sewing so that the parents could have a skill for the home. She raised £35,000 to "give the people who came to the group a qualification because [having] children shouldn't be a boundary to education. So it was to allow them to do a sewing course alongside their children and then to come out with a certificate. Sewing is what I like to do. I don't drink or anything, I'm like an old lady at heart, I like to sit at home and sew."

Looking ahead she is hoping to go back to college to study to get a qualification to teach sewing.



**"Having children  
shouldn't be a boundary  
to education"**

**Alice**



### Claire, West Lothian

Claire is a single parent with four children, three of whom are staying with her. Her children are aged between 4 and 12 years. She is currently homeless and stays with her mother and her mother's partners in a small two-bedroom house. She shares a bedroom with her three children while she awaits being rehoused. Claire was particularly impacted by school and nursery closures. Home schooling is a struggle: *"It's like a jigsaw puzzle that the pieces are not all there to put together. You need a password to work on the computer. And then when you're going in, you look for the work, then you need to download, put it in your phone and upload it to your computer to show the teacher. And it's just far too hard. Having so many kids in the house, all of a sudden, and everybody's on different bits of learning, it was just hard to keep up with."* While she received a laptop from the school, she didn't have a printer and relied on printouts provided by the school.

She worries about her housing situation, money and the children going back to school. She is acutely aware that the current situation of sharing a bedroom with her 3 boys is not sustainable, especially as the oldest one is getting older. However, she is worried that she may be offered a house away from her mother and her children's schools which may lead to another change of school for her children which she is keen to avoid. She is also worried about increasing access to her daughter who currently stays with her dad but is not happy there. With the overcrowding situation at her mum's, she feels that the court will not grant her more access. She is faced with the difficult decision whether to get a house and have to move all her children out of their current school, or stay in an overcrowded house with her mum's support which would keep her children in their known environment.

Some childcare settings continued to operate and parents reflected that this was beneficial for them and their child even if it was only for a couple of days as for Shaunie: *"It was the one tiny bit of socialisation he was getting"*. While her son's nursery had closed, he was able to attend two days at a childminder.

Parents appreciated any support they received from nursery and schools. However, this support varied a lot. In some settings, online journals for activities were offered for nursery children, but parents also noted that more contact and interaction from nursery or school would have been appreciated and helpful. Shaunie's experience was that her *"friend's little girl got dropped off an activity pack every week and we weren't getting anything like that"*.

Diana found that her daughter's nursery put in a lot of effort: *"Every week we got an email. Every day a daily check-in, which I think it was great because Mia has enjoyed it. They were sending videos of them reading stories. Every week a new story. And then ideas for activities."*

Where schools provided individual feedback to children, this motivated even the youngest school children to engage with remote schooling: Stephanie noted how her son *"really loves the feedback of what he's done and I think that helps him to do more work, want to do more work."* Her son also enjoyed being able to do work independently on an easy-to-use app that provided choices. Having their own device also motivated them: *"At first everything was on my phone. And then I thought maybe I should try and get it on his own tablet. Since I've done that, it changed. He was always wanting to do it himself on his own tablet."*

Looking ahead, parents both look forward to, and worry about, the return to school. Some children are now reluctant about their return to school: *"Because he's been off that long it's made him say 'No, I don't want to go back to school.' Trying to get them back into a routine [is difficult]."* (Laura)

Others found that their children were glad to go back to settings: Lorna found that *"she went in on Monday all happy and she went 'bye' to me and I was like, that's a first!"* Cathy told us how her son *"absolutely loves the nursery. He's been asking for weeks to go back."* It was hard for her to explain that he could not go during lockdown and they are both excited for his return.

Similarly, Jane described that her younger child could not understand why he had to wear a mask, could not go to nursery or could not play with the children in his street who were literally next door to him. He is now back at nursery and much happier – he tells his mum all about the day and what he played and is thriving playing with his friends. He is also looking forward to starting school in August.

Children seem to have coped with the interruption in different ways, with some keen to return to school while others are now overwhelmed by the prospect. Another potential school closure is a worry that was expressed by many of the parents we spoke to.

## Isolation and social interaction

Parents shared with us their concerns about their children missing out on interacting with other children and the extended family. Diana's almost four-year-old daughter misses her Italian family that she cannot visit just now: *"She misses company."* However, her daughter was able to continue going to nursery which made a big difference.

Seona observed a marked change in her toddler's wellbeing when they were able to interact with other children. They had been very demanding at home but *"when the playgrounds reopened, it struck me when I saw them interacting with other children they were immediately happier and more active and laughing more and running more."* She also noticed how they were unsure of other adults they would see such as the postman: *"They were frightened of other adults and that was sad to see because the first year I'd been really proactive about socialising them."*

Heather is worried for her one-year-old son but also misses the interaction with other new mothers, especially as she moved to a new area where she has not yet had a chance to build relationships: *"I feel bad for my son. I would like to just take him out, make friends, let him play. I wish to go out more to meet other mums. I haven't made any friends here either yet, and I hope this can happen soon. I want my son to know there's other babies like him."*

### Cathy, South Lanarkshire

Cathy is married with four children aged between 4 and 13 years. She lives in privately rented accommodation. Her husband worked for a valeting service. Two of her children have ASN, one being autistic and one being diagnosed with ADHD. When schools and nurseries closed, she found herself at home supporting the home schooling of three of her children as well as looking after a pre-school child. They were unable to access a paediatrician, review medication or get much needed support put into place. Her youngest son, who had just started school, refused to engage in any schoolwork. With two children with ASN and associated behavioural issues in the house, she told us that the situation was not manageable for one parent due to the demands on her to support the different levels of home schooling, looking after the nursery aged child, and coping with the challenging behaviour of her two children with additional support needs. She herself also suffers from post traumatic stress disorder.

As she was unable to manage and keep her children safe and learning, her husband had to give up his job to ensure the safety and wellbeing of all their children. This meant a drop of income for the family in order to meet the needs of their children:

For new mothers, especially single parents, the isolation and loneliness experienced during lockdown was particularly difficult. For any new parent, the challenges presented with a life event that changes every aspect of one's life and routine require peer support, a way to share the load and find out that the experience of early motherhood is shared. This was denied to many parents during lockdown:

**"I just felt so alone. It literally felt like you were dropped into a cave and it felt like, that's it."**  
**Keira**

This isolation and loneliness translated into a lack of emotional support for parents which was acutely felt: *"Normally you'd go out and you'd meet someone, and you'd say, oh, I've had a really bad night, she was up all night, and somebody'd be like, yes, I understand. Okay, so this is normal. And there's none of that. And then, you're like, okay, what am I doing? It's very easy for those thoughts of 'what am I doing wrong' to just creep in."* (Keira) Keira's story shows how parents are doubting their own parenting ability, and worrying about doing it all wrong; parental self-efficacy is reduced and replaced by feelings of guilt and worry.

*"He stopped working in the very first lockdown we had, he had to give up his job because I've got four kids, three of them doing schoolwork and it just doesn't happen. I have to keep my eyes on them 24/7, do you know what I mean. My youngest boy, I can't even put him in the car, I need another adult. Somebody to drive and somebody to make sure he's sitting safely."*

Her son also punched through walls during meltdowns which she feels is due to being in the house so much. Her older son with ASD was not offered a place in school as part of the vulnerable children scheme, and the family only received one laptop for school work that has to be shared between the 3 school-aged children:

*"Angry isn't the word, and then you get into trouble for seeming angry. You have to stay calm 100% of the time. No matter what's happening, you have to have to stay calm, but it's hard to stay calm when you've got all that going on. ... Things have gotten that bad that I'm at the stage where I could actually just walk away, that's how bad it is. I feel that I've got to be on everybody's backs 24/7 for anything to be done."*

## Outdoor and active play

Many families found that their children missed out on outdoor and active play. Families without a garden were particularly impacted and the adverse winter weather added even more barriers: *“I’m in a wee flat, so we don’t even have a garden that we could even go out and play in. So, it’s just trying to find out what to do in the house, like hide and seek, just anything to try and keep him occupied. I take him out for exercise and that, but it’s just been too cold, and wet, and windy to take him out.”* (Cathy)

Jane told us that her younger child misses going to play areas. While the family has access to good outdoor spaces and made an effort to take the children out regularly, it was boring as there was no purpose to it like going to a new place or having variety in activities.

Diana’s family loves the outdoors. Due to the rural location where they live, she was able to continue this to some degree: *“We do a lot outdoors. That’s actually something we’ve been doing more and more with Mia as well. She climbed up to the top of Tinto Hill in the snow. So it feels like K2.”* Yet they still feel that they are *“sitting still for ages and we’re really not a family who is used to it.”*

Seona also feels that her twins missed out on going outdoors despite living in a rural location. Her main barrier was that taking her demanding toddler twins out on her own was significant effort with little gain: *“There were a lot of things that I wanted to do with them outdoors like going to the beach or walking them down the sand dunes that I’m not able to do easily by myself – I would do it but there were lots of tears for the little joy it brought and it was kind of too hard to do without knowing I would meet someone there, so they missed out on outdoor activities.”*

Other families noted that their children generally move much less, are bored of the same walks and end up eating out of boredom thus putting on more weight. Cathy explains that *“with being in lockdown, you’re eating out of boredom, so [my son] gained a wee bit of weight. The more we’re in the house, the more he’s eating.”* Claire’s children used to attend lots of youth clubs, sports activities and her younger children used to go to swimming lessons and are missing out on this at the moment. In fact, swimming lessons or going swimming was an activity that a lot of families mentioned their children missed out on and would be one of the first things they wanted to pick up again: *“Just before the pandemic, I started taking her swimming, and she was a complete water baby, she took to it so well. And I would love her to experience the pool again.”* (Keira)

Another activity that was consistently missed for younger children was soft play. What may at other times be a parents’ nightmare has become an activity that parents cannot wait to take their children too.

Parents of older children reflected that going for walks was less attractive and that their children missed youth clubs and places where they can socialise: *“All the places that the older ones would rather go to are closed. There’s only so many times you can go for a walk or go to the park or feed the ducks.”* (Anne) Similarly, Claire, who has 4 children of different ages noted how her older son *“used to go to youth clubs and had multiple things on. I think the biggest thing is socialisation with other kids. Kyle hardly comes out of his room, he hates going outside.”*

Parents continue to be worried about their children or themselves catching COVID-19 which further curbs the range of activities available to their children. Heather explains: *“I’m also scared so I don’t want to go out too much in case we catch COVID.”* So she stays in with her baby even though she struggles to keep him entertained.

Similarly, Keira stayed indoors at the start of the pandemic, but has since reassessed that her child needs to spend time outside of the house and this is worth taking the risk: *“I don’t think I actually took her out of the house for a month and a bit, because I was just too scared. And then, I was like, I have to take her out because she’s going a bit stir crazy, stuck in the house.”*

Melissa would be reluctant to even see family members in case her baby catches COVID-19: *“It’s not safe [to see family members]. I don’t know if babies can get COVID but I’m just not taking the risk.”*

**“It’s not safe”**

**Melissa**

### Supporting learning at home

Parents shared their experiences of supporting their children's development and learning at home when schools and nurseries were closed and the practical support and advice they received. The support parents received varied. Generally, devices and activity packs provided by schools and nurseries were valued, especially if these were physical packs.

While some parents enjoyed being more involved in their child's learning and enjoyed aspects of remote learning, others felt that they were not supported with their child's play, learning and development. Lorna mentioned that her friend was given activity packs that she would have found helpful too: *"I do wish that I knew about how to try to learn her, how to do things."* She then had to go out and buy activity packs which set her back by £25: *"Even though she did love it and made things, it's still quite a lot of money just for a wee activity pack where it was meant to be the nursery helping you with activity packs."*

Claire feels that it would have helped her children with their engagement with learning at home if they had had doorstep check in visits from a teacher: *"I think the teachers coming to see them once a week, that would have been ideal, just like a check in and check out. Stand at your door for ten minutes and talk to the kids. ... Just give them a wee bit of a boost. They're doing their work and getting praise from the teachers for doing their work."*

For school aged children internet and data of course were necessary for remote schooling. Support with digital access was mixed. Cathy explained how she was given just one laptop from school that had to be shared between three school-aged children: *"So it's sitting and spending three hours a day with each kid, meaning nine hours a day sitting in front of a screen."* This was very stressful for her as a parent but also meant that the study time for each of her children was necessarily limited and that her children lost out on learning.

Claire did not like remote learning at all. The mum to four children is not used to digital platforms and found online learning very difficult to navigate: *"The computers did not work for me. Oh, that was so stressful trying to do things on the computer for the kids for school. I didn't like it."*

Where parents had devices, these helped to keep in touch but also to provide learning activities, even for younger children: *"As much as I used to really really hate the thought of him having a tablet, and spending lots of time on it, it seems to be doing him not so much harm, he seems to be actually learning from it, I can relax a little bit."* (Shaunie)

We asked whether parents were aware of the Parent Club resources [www.parentclub.scot](http://www.parentclub.scot) that were heavily promoted during the pandemic to support play and early learning at home. Most families we spoke to were not aware of these resources. The two parents who were aware of Parent Club had seen adverts on social media.

**"I do wish  
I knew how to try to learn her,  
how to do things."**

**Lorna**

# CONCLUSION

**In this report we've explored the impact the pandemic has had on families with young children living on low incomes on Scotland. Drawing on the experiences of eighteen parents – sixteen mothers and two fathers – we've highlighted their voices on some broad themes that emerged from our conversations. We hope by sharing their stories we can add to the collective understanding of the impact of the pandemic and help inform a consensus around the support families need now and as we renew from the pandemic.**

Parents provide the key ingredients that support early childhood – loving, responsive and caring relationships, nurturing environments at home and in the community, helping children play and explore the world around them and fulfill their potential. In the main the parents we spoke to enjoyed spending more time with their families and found strength in bonding more closely with their young children. However, they also struggled as lots of factors combined during the pandemic that made providing some or all of these experiences harder.

It is often quoted that it takes a village to raise a child. That village was snatched from parents when they were 'dropped into a cave' as a result of the pandemic. They experienced a genuine shock, which left them trapped and unable to get themselves out of their situation, isolated and unable to get help, or for their voices to be heard.

We heard from parents about the challenges of not having enough money to provide the basics for their families, the increased stress and anxiety this caused along with very significant changes or the loss of social networks and services and practical and emotional support as well as challenges around supporting play and learning at home. These issues existed before the pandemic, but over the last year the crisis has highlighted and exacerbated the precarious situation many families live through day to day. We hope that this report contributes to ensuring parents' voices are heard and pulling them back out of the cave.

## General reflections

We found that the stories of the families we spoke to were unique and diverse. However, some common threads ran through the experiences of parents:

Overall, the impact of the pandemic has been profound and lasting. It has made many aspects of life with young children harder. One parent summed up this impact as being like she'd been 'dropped into a cave'. This describes how the pandemic was experienced as a sudden and unexpected shock with a sense of loss of direction and support. It speaks to a loss of control and self-efficacy at not being able to get out of a crisis situation, a sense of being dependent on help, isolation, loneliness and a loss of control over your own circumstances.

There is no doubt that lack of money and financial insecurity make life difficult for families. The pandemic worsened these pressures on the families we spoke to. But what was most striking was the need to consider families experiences in the round - recognising that financial challenges cannot be separated from families' practical and emotion needs. Lots of factors combined to put additional pressures on families - not being able to afford the basics, worries about paying the bills and putting food on the table, sudden changes in jobs, hours and income, coupled with difficulties in accessing support, anxieties about health, caring for their children, the sudden loss of face-to-face support and social networks.

Yet, alongside these challenges, parents demonstrated an incredible resilience. The greatest source of that resilience was the family unit. Parents treasured the opportunity to bond with their children and some reported that they took a more active role in their children's learning. Families were also determined to find solutions to their challenges and demonstrated innovative ideas and plans for the future to improve their current situation.

The stories that parents told us showed that some families were more vulnerable to hardship and experienced additional challenges, for example in juggling childcare arrangements and paid work. These families were single parent families, families with three or more children, families with a disabled child or parent, families with a very young child or baby, and parents from black or minority ethnic communities experienced particular challenges.

### Key messages

The pandemic was a tipping point for those families already in precarious financial circumstances, pushing them further into crisis situations. It also tipped those families who were just about managing before the pandemic over the edge into difficult financial circumstances. We heard that family incomes were often vulnerable to a change in circumstances and already stretched so that they are unable to absorb a sudden shock.

The pandemic resulted in significant changes to everyday life, which led to a significant increase in living costs across many areas of life such as gas and electricity bill, food and other essentials. These additional costs exacerbated the impact of families' losses to income.

Often, the crisis situation a family found themselves in was exacerbated by systemic failures or shortcomings in the financial support that was available. This included delays in UK benefit payments, a lack of communication when benefit payments changed or not being eligible for key financial support.

Families coped in different ways with the situation they found themselves in. While always putting the needs of their children first, families told us how they had to cut back on essentials, how parents went without, or how they got into debt. Many families had to borrow money to pay for essentials and cope with a debt burden with at least medium-term consequences for their finances.

Families have been remarkably resilient but money worries have impacted negatively on parents wellbeing and health. Practical and emotional support was often considered to be as, if not more, important than financial support. Parents' experiences of support from services were varied and patchy. Parents particularly valued support from local community and voluntary organisations.

Parents noted that isolation and 'loss' of family and social support networks was felt acutely and often the biggest challenge for them. This was particularly the case for single parents, parents with babies and parents of children with additional support needs. Being connected digitally was a real lifeline for parents but many parents experienced financial barriers to being fully connected due to the cost of broadband and data. Families with younger children relied on devices and internet to keep connected to extended family and family support services.

Most parents noted that they grew closer to their children during the pandemic and enjoyed bonding with them. It was striking how much parents enjoyed spending more time with their children and how they felt this had strengthened their bond. This has been a real positive for families and we must consider how to capitalise on the joy that parents and children have experienced by having more time together.

Many parents also enjoyed learning more about how their children are taught at school and how they learn. They feel that this will help them support their children better in the future. However, for some parents, school and nursery closures brought additional stress and anxiety, especially for single parents, parents of three or more children or where a child had additional support needs. Parents in these situations found home schooling difficult if not impossible, with some giving up on it entirely.

Parents expressed concern about the impact of the pandemic on their children's development. They were worried that their children had missed out on social interaction with extended family, friends and opportunities to play in the community. Many parents worried that this will set their child back or that they may struggle now that they have returned to nursery or school.

Many parents found it difficult to keep their children busy and entertained with limited resources and options available. The closure of soft plays, play areas, swimming pools and community-based activities for the youngest children, as well as support groups for new parents, was particularly missed.

Parents experiences of support from nurseries and schools varied considerably. Parents welcomed practical support and resources to support play and learning at home. Some found that schools or nurseries went 'above and beyond' to support them. However, for others support was not always sufficient or tailored to family circumstances.

## Looking ahead

The pandemic has affected families with young children in wide-ranging, diverse and challenging ways. It has brought into focus the additional needs that families living on low and insecure incomes face. Many of these challenges are not new. We need to do more and think differently about how best to provide

nurturing and compassionate support to parents that helps address their financial, practical and emotional needs now and in the future. Parents' experiences and voices must be heard and part of that response. The experiences shared by the parents we spoke to point to a number of priority areas for action:

1. **Prioritise the needs of families with young children living on low incomes during the recovery.**
2. **Protect family incomes to weather the current storm and work towards a minimum income guarantee** (through a combination of work and social security) **that enables families with children to achieve a reliable and decent income to live a dignified life.** Immediate steps should help families meet essential costs, address delays in getting financial support to families and explore how to support families with debt. Action should also support parents who can work through family-friendly pay and hours that helps protect family time.
3. **Guarantee holistic family support for all families needing help that offers tailored practical, emotional and financial support.** Parents made a compelling argument that beyond financial support and having an adequate income, practical and emotional support is much needed and was not always available during the pandemic. Holistic family support wrapped around the individual needs of families would enable families to access support based on their unique circumstances.
4. **Provide opportunities for children to play and build secure relationships in early childhood.** Children's play, activities and hobbies need to be enabled in the recovery, as well as support for families that removes barriers to children's play, learning and development. This means more help for parents to play and learn with their children at home and looking at ways to support outdoor play. Children's play, learning and development needs to be supported more consistently. Valuing children's holistic learning and development experience that includes all spheres of their life, including and particularly the home is key.
5. **Ensure families are part of decision making about how we 'recover' and 'renew' from the pandemic.** We must challenge ourselves to ensure parents and children have the opportunity to share their experiences and are part of the conversation, by bringing them into decision making in communities and at national level.

# “DROPPED INTO A CAVE”

## HOW FAMILIES WITH YOUNG CHILDREN EXPERIENCED LOCKDOWN



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