

# Nottingham Centre for Children, Young People and Families

## Effects of Covid-19 on Families with Children Under Five in Nottingham

Executive Summary Report Prepared for  
Small Steps Big Changes

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## Executive Summary

### Introduction:

The Nottingham Centre for Children, Young People and Families (NCCYPF) and Small Steps Big Changes (SSBC) have been working in partnership since May 2018, when NCCYPF was commissioned to evaluate the SSBC Programme. In addition, in July 2020 NCCYPF was commissioned by SSBC to carry out a study of the experiences of families with children under five in Nottingham during Covid-19, with a focus on the four SSBC wards of Aspley, Bulwell, Hyson Green and Arboretum, and St. Ann's.

### Our research sought to understand:

1. How local families with young children under the age of five have found life under the Covid-19 lockdown, including how parents think their child under the age of five has found the lockdown experience;
2. What worked well, what the challenges have been, and what was unexpected during the Covid-19 lockdown;
3. Which services or service changes have been most helpful during the Covid-19 lockdown and how the local community has been part of these; and
4. After Covid-19, what would the 'ideal' new normal look like including any new services that were not needed before.

### Literature in the Area:

There is little published research literature to date on the experiences of people during Covid-19. We therefore also examined published submissions to the UK Parliament (House of Commons) Education Committee Inquiry *The impact of COVID-19 on education and*

*children's services* (2020), as well as media reports about studies taking place elsewhere, and where available, research reports of those studies.

Our literature review pointed to sociability as being key to the language development of young children, and to the importance of early intervention. There were concerns about family mental health, for both young children and adults, especially when families were living in restricted spaces without access to outside areas. It was feared that families having difficulties might not be picked up, especially as some will be reluctant to alert others to their problems. The pandemic experience was reported to have had a direct and negative impact on the ability of some parents to be effective caregivers. This included the ability to explain the pandemic to a small child, while remaining reassuring. There was increased pressure on working families due to the closure of childcare and early years' provision, and this was a particular strain on mothers. Some parents, particularly working fathers, were, however, reported to have benefitted from increased opportunities to bond with their young children. The closure of early years' provision was also cited as a cause of social isolation for both parents and children. Isolation was also discussed as a more general concern, particularly for parents whose first language is not English.

#### Methodology and methods:

Our research took a mainly qualitative approach using a semi-structured interview schedule. All but two households included in the study lived within Nottingham City (one was in Beeston, one in Long Eaton), and had at least one child under the age of five. In addition, priority was given to those families identified as being in designated local council wards of Aspley, Bulwell, Hyson Green & Arboretum, and St Ann's. We conducted 29 interviews of parents from 27 families: 27 women and 2 men, both husbands of women interviewed (see

appendix 1). All interviews were completed by phone and audio recorded, using either Skype or Microsoft Teams. All recordings were then transcribed verbatim before thematic analysis.

## Findings:

### Families, friends and neighbours:

All of the interviewees commented positively on how lockdown had meant spending more time together and bonding as a family. This was especially important for fathers, who got more involved with their children. Several interviewees commented on the benefits for their child's routine due to being at home during lockdown, though others found changes to established routines disrupted their child. Families with older children also spoke about the benefits for their very young child on spending so much time with older siblings, though there could also be problems where the needs of older and younger children conflicted. Working parents found it very hard to work at home with a young child to look after, and the children found it hard to understand that their parents had to work. Managers were reported to be unsupportive of the problems faced by working parents. Children missed seeing extended family, especially grandparents. This could be particularly difficult for people with families living abroad, some of whom had had to cancel long-awaited visits. Covid-19 restrictions were particularly upsetting in cases of family bereavement.

Friends were seen as enormously important to the interviewees, both in terms of their own friendships as adults and their young child's friendship groups. Parents spoke repeatedly about their young children missing their friends. Respondents were very conscious of the detrimental effect of not having under-fives seeing their peers. Several spoke about their young children losing confidence in social situations, and becoming clingy, even around

people they had been used to spending time with. Parents also talked about how they had started to get to know their neighbours during lockdown, and had experienced unexpected acts of kindness from previously unknown people.

### Worry and restrictions

All the interviewees expressed worry and concern about the Covid-19 virus. The main concern was about the effects on their health and the health of their child, as well as of their extended families. Single parents had to face the worry on their own, and some were confined to their homes for weeks. For those with babies, the anxiety about Covid-19 was exacerbated by the pause of face to face health visitor services, with breastfeeding mothers in particular being worried about their babies' weight. Other mothers found it difficult to buy formula milk due to widespread panic buying.

Parents worried about the lack of stimulation for children who were confined to home, with some reporting that their child continuously asked to go out. Lockdown was especially difficult for those who did not have a garden. Parents also worried about the resurgence of the virus, and how they would cope, some pointing to how the good weather had made things easier. Others were concerned about themselves or their child becoming unwell. Worry and concern about becoming ill with Covid-19 was significantly increased for parents of children with already existing illness and disabilities.

A lot of the parents also spoke about difficulties going out with their young children because of the restrictions imposed during lockdown. Parents spoke about their children wanting to go to the park or go swimming, and how hard it was to explain that they could not do this, especially if a play-park was open but they did not feel safe allowing their children to play there. Children missed parks and play areas particularly badly, and some were overjoyed

when allowed to play in them again. Parents also felt conflicted in preventing children from touching others, because they wanted to protect them from infection but were also aware that physical contact was vital to their child's wellbeing and personal growth. Some parents also reported that their children were distressed by seeing them wearing a mask.

Previously straightforward activities such as shopping were harder for parents, partly out of fear of infection and partly due to the problems of queuing with young children. Some of the parents spoke about the importance of having time to themselves, and how this had now been eliminated, giving them no breaks at all from parenting. Others had missed out on the anticipated experiences of maternity leave.

#### Support and resources:

The parents spoke about both formal and informal support for themselves and their families during the lockdown period. Those with formal support, including social workers and ongoing paediatric consultant contact, had pre-existing disabilities or complex health needs before the lockdown period. Their comments were largely positive in terms of the availability of continued contact with medical specialists, some of whom went out of their way to support families. However, many of the local services offering support, such as physiotherapy, were significantly altered, or even completely stopped. The impact of limited support delivery left many with few options other than to use emergency services in addressing health needs which would otherwise be attended to by routine GP or health visitor contact. However, the move to telephone and online appointments was welcomed by some parents, as it meant they could obtain advice without having to find childcare or take several children to the GP with them.

Online provision such as story reading was appreciated, though some parents pointed out that it was only in English. This was a problem when a child was already losing out on heritage language input due to not seeing grandparents. Family routines such as church attendance were disrupted and very much missed.

Some families had suffered a loss of income as a result of lockdown, leading to financial pressures. Parents had received a range of support, including food bank vouchers and charitable food deliveries. For those who had established support networks among family and friends, this meant looking out for each other, for example by buying groceries or nappies for those confined to home. Some parents received significant and regular support from their family abroad, but also worried about them. The isolation of parents without extended family in the UK was of particular concern.

All of the parents described a huge range of resources they used with their young children at home during lockdown. They showed considerable personal inventiveness in creating important playtime for their children. Some said that they had become more relaxed about messy play, and some described activities that allowed their child to play more independently as giving them time to themselves.

Those who had SSBC peer support valued the contact they received. This included phone contact, group activities on Zoom and deliveries of toys and activity packs. However, some parents felt that being supported only by phone was inadequate. Parents also only spoke about support for their child's development, not for themselves. Support for parents helped them to meet their young child's needs as far as possible in lockdown and in a society with continued restrictions.

### Hopes and positive changes:

There were many hopes for the future, in terms of both change and living with Covid-19 in the coming months. Most of the hopes and wishes expressed countered many of the worries and restrictions raised in this report. For example, parents hoped that their young children could play with their friends, visit and hug their grandparents, go to playgroups, the library and soft play. Many of the parents wanted some return to normality including being able to go out and explore places, eat out together as a household, see friends and family, go on holiday, and a return to school and nursery. Above all, there was the strong desire for Covid-19 to be eliminated, for those infected to be cured, and for an end to the worry and restrictions that came with lockdown.

There was recognition of long-term mental health impact from experiencing a pandemic and lockdown. However, some had also enjoyed being sheltered from the outside world and focussed on building nurturing relationships with their young children. Some parents hoped that some of the increased hygiene practices would continue in the longer term, and others wanted online classes to continue to be available. Parents spoke with hope about the greater appreciation of interpersonal support and the contribution of medical and care workers. Some parents also saw lockdown as a time when they and their children had been able to grow and become more resilient. Despite living through some extremely difficult family experiences, parents still expressed hope and reflected on the importance of the future for their young children, but felt that children and their needs should be prioritised in future.

## Recommendations

We recommend that SSBC and others:

- make strong representations to Government, Local Authority and other policy makers to put children's needs first when considering Covid-19 policy;
- resist the pause of children and family services in future emergencies, and restore any that are not restored to date;
- develop the parent peer mentoring scheme to include putting parents who have felt isolated during lockdown in touch with those of their own community especially where English is not their first language, in order to address social and cultural isolation;
- provide all-year supervised outdoor group activities (defined as 'for educational purposes' under the recent C19 regulations effective in England from 14.09.2020) for children aged under five years with a focus on social interaction and contact with other children and families who do not yet feel comfortable on attending indoor early years provision;
- evaluate the effectiveness of telephone or video, as opposed to face-to-face, contact in delivering support to families with children under five years of age during the lockdown period;
- develop working practices to assess family intervention needs early and prevent risk at home;
- develop services delivered face to face and virtually to young children that include the use of other languages than English, to allow the cultural inclusion of families where parents do not always have English as a first language;

- increase efforts to involve young children in decision-making processes and promote their rights to be heard.

## Appendix 1

Table of pseudonyms with age and ward characteristics (in order of being interviewed)

<b>pseudonym</b>	<b>gender</b>	<b>age years</b>	<b>age of U5 child months/years</b>	<b>in/out of SSBC ward</b>
Celia	female	39	20m	in
Meghan	female	39	18m	in
Maria	female	32	7m	in
Olivia	female	29	3y	in
Hinna	female	32	4y; 2y; 6m	in
Anna	female	37	2y	in
Nora	female	46	3y	in
Ella	female	30	18m	out
Helen	female	31	2y	in
Cathy	female	32	11m	in
Gillian	female	38	2y; 5m	out
Inga	female	30	3y	out
Amal	female	41	3y	out
Grace	female	37	20m	out
Priti	female	38	2y	out
David	male	47	2y; 6m	out
Saleem	male	39	4y; 2y; 6m	in
Jenny	female	39	17m	out
Sally	female	45	4y	out
Fiona	female	37	15m	out
Lena	female	38	23m	out
Gulsan	female	54	9m	in
Eleanor	female	46	2y	out
Carolyn	female	25	4y; 18m	out
Wendy	female	35	2y	in
Mariam	female	37	2y	out
Sophie	female	40	2y	in
Safiya	female	27	2y	out
Chadia	female	45	3y	out