

Nottingham Centre for Children, Young People and Families

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

Report Prepared for Small Steps, Big
Changes

Rachel Harding and Professor Carrie
Paechter

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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 of 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 the husbands of women interviewed. 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 withdrawal of 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 playpark 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 such as water play 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 can help 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 focussing 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 withdrawal of children and family services, including health visitors and baby clinics, 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.

Introduction and Research Aims

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.

SSBC is a citywide partnership, delivering a programme of evidence-based activities that are designed to promote children's development and wellbeing by empowering parents to support healthy and positive social and emotional development, effective and age-appropriate communication and language skills, and good nutrition. All the activities delivered are free of charge and universally available to all families living within the council ward areas of Aspley, Bulwell, Hyson Green and Arboretum, and St Ann's who are expecting a baby or who have a child under the age of four years of age.

Research Aims

There remains a substantial gap in understanding the impact of Covid-19 on families with children under the age of five years and the implications this has for the design of social policy as services adjust to the challenge of delivery during and after the pandemic.

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.

Review of available literature

The literature available

As there are very few peer reviewed publications regarding the lived experiences of families with children under the age of five during the Covid-19 lockdown, our review also looked at two main sources.

These were:

1. Published submissions to the UK Parliament (House of Commons) Education Committee Inquiry (referred to specifically as 'Parliamentary inquiry'), *The impact of COVID-19 on education and children's services* (2020) with the following aims: "This inquiry will look at how the outbreak of COVID-19 is affecting all aspects of the education sector and children's social care system and will scrutinise how the Department for Education is dealing with the situation. It will examine both short term impacts, such as the effects of school closures and exam cancellations, as well as longer-term implications particularly for the most vulnerable children"
2. News articles reporting research being completed by other academics in the UK in an area relevant to the aims of this project. We sourced these news articles from media outlets such as BBC News, *The Guardian* and other newspaper websites, and social media notifications such as those posted on Twitter. Wherever possible, the original research reports, including interim findings, were traced.

We prioritised literature which highlighted experiences of families with children under the age of five and their families during lockdown. We were careful to ensure that the focus of relevant literature remained that of families with babies and children aged 0-4 or under five years of age, sometimes also referred to as 'young children' or 'early years provision'.

Families facing disadvantage

The submission to the Parliamentary inquiry by SSBC highlighted key areas of concern including increased disadvantage during the lockdown period and increased vulnerability for young children under five and their families. The necessary closure of face-to-face contact with young children and their families because of lockdown was also thought to have a negative impact on addressing the attainment gap through early years provision. The socio-economic impact of the Covid-19 lockdown on families was also raised regarding increased family stress, and the pressure to maintain a positively nurturing home environment:

“Concern exists that the closure of early years settings, a pause on group based activity in response to the pandemic, including health, Early Help and SSBC groups alongside childcare facilities, is likely to have significant impacts upon efforts to close the attainment gap during the early years... As children’s language capabilities are strongly associated with cognitive abilities alongside children’s social, emotional and behavioural development, gaps in language development are highly important”

(SSBC, 2020, p.6).

The issue of young children’s sociability being key to language acquisition was also highlighted by the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists (RCSLT, 2020), and Save the Children (2020) Parliamentary inquiry submissions.

Similarly, the NCCYPF Parliamentary inquiry submission highlights:

“Early years providers are concerned about the identification of vulnerable babies and young children, given the closure of child health clinics and reduction in health visitor services. Young children’s social and emotional problems are also not being identified, and consequently children are not benefitting from early intervention.

Parental mental health is an increasing concern for schools and early years providers. The closure of early years providers will have had unavoidable consequences for children’s social skills”

(NCCYPF, 2020, p.2).

The Early Intervention Foundation (EIF, 2020) Parliamentary inquiry submission also emphasised how before the pandemic, early years services were already under significant pressure to deliver services to those most in need; pointing out that during lockdown provision was often online with no evaluation as to the effectiveness of telephone or video contact as a replacement for in-person visits. The EIF likewise argued that further pressure on these already stretched services would exacerbate the disadvantage faced by vulnerable families with young children. This was also echoed by the Institute of Health Visiting (iHV, 2020) and The Sutton Trust (2020) submissions to the Parliamentary inquiry.

Family mental health

In addition, there were Parliamentary inquiry submissions raising concerns about the mental health of both young children and their families during the lockdown period. Writing about families in Spain, Garcia Ron and Cuéllar-Flores (2020) emphasise the potentially negative psychological impact on young children of being confined at home. Similarly, Clemens et al (2020) argue that while some children might thrive at home, others will find social distancing measures and being locked down at home to be a significant loss of being with other children for play activities:

“Children and their families have to share a restricted space at home with limited resources and have to change their daily life and routines to cope with numerous new challenges”

(p.739).

The report 'Babies in Lockdown' (Saunders and Hogg, 2020) also highlighted the additional stress that the pandemic and lockdown brought to parents of babies who already face the challenges of new parenthood:

“These are worrying and difficult times for everyone, so it is therefore perhaps not surprising that the majority of parents felt anxious. In addition to the concerns affecting all of us, expectant and new parents had concerns about themselves and their babies, born and unborn, just as their usual support of family, friends, health professionals and community services were not available to support them to navigate the choppy waters of early parenthood”

(Saunders and Hogg, p.29)

The Triple P (2020) Parliamentary inquiry submission regarded improving family mental health as most conducive to helping maintain healthy home environments, and Toseeb and Asbury's Parliamentary inquiry submission (2020) acknowledged the increase in worry for all parents, but especially those whose children had Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND). Toseeb and Asbury also included in their submission concerns about the increased worry for young children who had been identified as having SEND, including changes in behaviour and mood, and this was also included in Parliamentary inquiry submissions by both the Rainbow Parents Carers Forum (2020), and the National Network of Parent Carer Forums (2020). The 'Co-SPACE' report (Pearcey et al, 2020) looked at changes in behaviour and attention of children and young people from the age of four years, arguing that statistically significant increases in difficulties were not coincidental to the pandemic and lockdown period. Vulnerable families where parents' mental health has warranted statutory

intervention before could put young children and babies at risk with the lack of face-to-face contact at early years services:

“Furthermore, during the crisis, existing challenges are likely to have escalated and new problems emerged in families who may have previously been coping. Many families will be struggling behind closed doors. Normally, these babies might have contact with nurseries, children’s centres, toddler groups or family and friends. Now, they, and their parents, may not be seen by any other adults. We can’t expect that families in trouble will ask for help: we know that parents often hide their struggles for fear of stigma and judgment. Babies can’t speak out”

(The First 1001 Days Movement, Parliamentary inquiry submission 2020, p.4).

Adult mental ill-health has also been of concern. Potter et al (2020) reported that rates of mental ill-health including anxiety, poor sleep, and lack of exercise doubled for an adult population over the age of 18 years. Falkingham et al (2020) also reported disproportionate disturbed sleep patterns and sleep loss for women and adults of BAME heritage during April 2020 in the UK. Banks and Xu (2020) found increased levels of mental ill-health among the UK population because of the pandemic, and when researching disinformation from social media, Lin et al (2020) found anxiety about Covid-19 appears to be commonplace for adults. This increased anxiety in both parents and their young children has therefore been very difficult for families to manage well during the pandemic and lockdown period. In particular, Rowland and Cook (2020) call for the voices of children to be heard in shaping policy and for their rights to be promoted because of the risk posed by the emergency situation cause by Covid-19.

Being a parent in lockdown, including working parents

All parents can find the pandemic experience to have a direct and negative impact on their ability to be effective caregivers:

“As parents, the effects of stress caused by the pandemic or its consequences...can be overwhelming and lead to a state of “fight or flight” response which makes it unusually difficult to plan or reflect, or to stay calm. These responses to stress can override a parent or caregiver’s ability to provide the supportive relationships babies need, or even to do things to help themselves to get back on track”

(Saunders and Hogg, 2020, p.32)

Writing about parents in Italy, Fontanesi et al (2020) show how the responsibility for explaining necessary changes because of Covid-19 to children fell to their parents, with some coping better at managing this than others. The authors call for multidisciplinary working practices to assess family intervention need early, describing Covid-19 as, “a chronic traumatic situation with potential negative consequences” (p.80). Similarly, Vijayarani (2020), writing about the increased pressures on families in India, calls for parents to be supported in providing explanations and reassurance to their young children. The British Association for Early Childhood Education Parliamentary inquiry submission (Early Education, 2020) drew attention to the impact of closing early years provision on working parents, their capacity to continue with their employment as required and to also meet the needs of their child or children under the age of five years. The pressure on working families to meet so many increased needs at once was seen as considerable, particularly when early years provision closure during lockdown would have also resulted in the halting of crucial social contact for parents with other parents as well as with professional providers. Biroli et

al (2020) found that while male partners increased their share of household tasks, especially grocery shopping, the challenges of being a working parent were particularly difficult for mothers. Clemens et al (2020) further noted that the role of extended family members in providing informal childcare for working parents also stopped due to social distancing measures, further isolating working parents, including those working from home. Saunders and Hogg (2020), Gambin et al (2020), and Craig and Churchill (2020) wrote that for working parents, especially fathers of young children, being at home rather than out at work brought positive opportunities for family bonding. However, Saunders and Hogg (2020) also gave examples of the conflicting experiences of parents working from home with their young children in that they also faced increased levels of clinginess and confusion from their children when they needed to give their attention to their work.

Social isolation

The closure of early years provision including nurseries and playgroups had an immediate and potentially negative impact on the babies and children who usually attend as part of their weekly routines. Before the pandemic, it was shown that in addition to supportive and nurturing home environments, effective pre-school provision was critical in achieving positive outcomes in later life. For example, the Effective Provision of Pre-School Education Project report stated:

“There was a significant relationship between the quality of a pre-school centre and improved child outcomes...linked specifically with better outcomes in pre-reading and social development at age 5”

(EPPE, 2004).

Similarly, in an earlier report about school attainment, The Department for Education states:

“When children entered school around the age of 5 the benefits of having attended any pre-school became apparent...better attainment in language, pre-reading and early number concepts after controlling for the influence of background characteristics. With higher scores for independence, concentration, co-operation, conformity and peer sociability, the pre-school group appeared to be better socially adjusted”

(DfE, 2015).

To remove this provision therefore risked reduced positive outcomes for young children, particularly with a long-term impact on their development and wellbeing. This increased a risk of further pressure on parents to provide an enhanced learning environment at home during lockdown.

Parents who would otherwise be able to utilise the adult contact early years provision offered themselves were also at risk of social isolation. Writing about families in Poland, Gambin et al (2020) found that parents who had the most positive family experiences at home during lockdown also had effective social support especially from other parents, friends and family. The risk of isolation for families who did not speak English as a first language, however, was considered to be significant by The Bell Foundation Parliamentary inquiry submission (2020) and Cathays High School (2020).

Study design and research methodology

Our research took a mainly qualitative approach using a semi-structured interview schedule. The qualitative design helped capture the lived experiences of families in Nottingham with children under the age of five in their own words. The quantitative questions captured the demographics of the families. We used thematic analysis to find common themes across the interviews and look for where the data confirmed or challenged the literature available. All but two households included in the study lived within Nottingham City, and all 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 either Aspley, Bulwell, Hyson Green & Arboretum, and St Ann's. Other families in contact with SSBC but living outside of these priority ward areas were also included, and lived in other areas of Aspley, Basford, Beeston, Clifton, Lenton, Long Eaton, The Meadows, Radford, Sandiacre, Sherwood, Toton, Wollaton and Woodthorpe. Most families were contacted through SSBC; in addition, one contact had a child who was already over the age of five but ran a group for other mothers who spoke the same language, and had English as an additional language; she kindly provided the contact details of a further three families, two of whom were found to be within designated SSBC ward areas.

Two interviewees requested the use of an interpreter, and this was successfully undertaken on one occasion; the other completed the interview in English. Some of the interviewees who had English as an additional language completed the interview with help from either their husband or their teenage children. Where English was an additional language, some of the suggested follow-up questions were omitted and only the main questions were used. With some interviewees who spoke English as their first language, these suggested follow-up questions were also unanswered as they caused some confusion, particularly where participants were asked to answer on behalf of their young child or baby. We also interviewed

two fathers who were married partners of mothers interviewed. In total, 29 interviews were undertaken with 27 different families. We provided respondents with written information about the research, including a debrief sheet with contact details of local family support groups, and gained written consent from all interviewees. All the interviews were conducted by telephone and audio recorded. A £20 shopping voucher was offered to all interviewees as a thank you for taking the time to be interviewed. The research design was approved by the Nottingham Trent University College of Business, Law and Social Sciences Ethics Committee.

Our interviewees

The parent interviewees were recruited by SSBC through a range of methods including an advert on their website and Facebook page, leaflets, and word of mouth. With their permission, contact details were passed to us as researchers and we phoned to have an initial chat, then emailed the information and consent forms, which were returned completed. Dates and times for the interview were agreed with each participant, and it was noticeable that many requested the same 'nap time' slot, indicating that they had little time available away from their young children. All interviews were completed by phone and audio recorded, using either Skype or Microsoft Teams. All recordings were then transcribed verbatim before being analysed. Some of the parents got quite emotional during their interview, especially when describing how difficult they had found the lockdown period. All were very articulate about their experiences and that of their children. We are grateful for the effort they made in describing their experiences including those which were emotionally challenging.

The table below gives demographic information on the 29 participants from 27 families and their children aged under five years (total 36).

Summary:

SSBC areas - 13 families were identified as living in a priority 'in ward' area of either Aspley, Bulwell, Hyson Green and Arboretum, or St Ann's; 14 families were identified as living 'out of ward'

- **Age** – the majority of the parent interviewees (20) were aged between 35 and 54 years old; their children under the age of five (a total of 36) were aged between 5 months and 4 years of age, with 16 aged under two years
- **Household** – all but one household were single families, the exception being one household of an extended family across three generations with seven members. Six were single parents; 23 were in a partnership as a couple or married and two were lesbian couple families (one married and one in a partnership as a couple). None reported that their children regularly lived at another household e.g. with another parent or grandparent. There were five families who had one child under the age of five years with a disability or severe health needs, two reported an older child with a disability or severe health needs, and one had both an older and a younger child aged under five years with a disability or severe health needs.
- **Ethnicity** – twelve different ethnic category groups were represented with 13 adult interviewees identifying as White British/White; their children under the age of five years were reported as being of the same ethnicity, with the only difference being 'British born Pakistani' (to Pakistani parents), 'Black born British' (to Black African Parents) or simply 'British', or 'Mixed' to mixed Indian and English parents or Polish and English parents.
- **Gender** – 27 of our parent interviewees were female; 2 were male.

Demographic characteristics of interviewees and their children aged under five years

SSBC ward	Aspley	Bulwell	Hyson Green	St Ann's	out of ward
	4	2	4	3	14
Interviewee age	<30	30-35	36-40	41-50	>50
	3	7	11	7	1
Child U5 age (up to 59 months)	<12 months (under 1 year old)	13-23 months (1 year old)	24-35 months (2 years old)	36-47 months (3 years old)	48-59 months (4 years old)
	7	11	9	5	4
Household	single parent	two parents	extended family	two parents foster child	child/children elsewhere
	6	21	1	1	0
Interviewee ethnicity	White/White British	Asian Indian/ Indian/ Pakistani/ Middle Eastern	African, White/ Black African	Black British, Other White/Polish	Mixed British Pakistani/ Mixed European
	13	6	5	3	2
Child U5 Ethnicity (1 not stated)	White/White British	British/ British born Pakistani/ Indian/ Middle Eastern	Mixed British Pakistani/ Indian/ European/ Polish	Black British/ White/ Black African	White Other
	16	9	5	4	1
Interviewee gender	female	male			
	27	2			

All interviews are listed in Appendix 2, showing age of parent, age of child under five years, and whether they are in or out of SSBC ward.

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. As Maria¹ commented:

“...extra bonding time... just spending lots of quality time with me at home”

(female age 32, child age 7 months, in ward²).

Meghan (female age 39, child age 18 months, in ward) also made a comment echoed by others about how having good weather helped with the demands of having young children in lockdown because it was easier to spend time outdoors instead of in the house all the time. Inga also spoke for other parents when she commented on the advantages of having to be at home rather than out at work and adhering to the usual demands of routines on a young family with working parents:

“I think we’ve become closer, because we’ve spent so much time together. I can’t remember us being together you know, for so much time...And our pace of life has changed, because there was no rush, no traffic, you know, no morning running around to get ready. So definitely, we had time to sort of breathe and appreciate the time together” (female age 30, child age 3 years, out of ward).

This was particularly noticed by mothers where fathers are usually absent with work commitments, as Ella commented about her husband and son:

“...it’s allowed him to bond with my son...So that’s been really, really nice. And we can see how you know; he’s different with my husband. He’s...there’s more trust

¹ All interviewees have been given pseudonyms in this report. We have attempted for the pseudonyms to match the ethnicity of the parents interviewed.

² SSBC ‘in ward’ families with children under the age of five years live within the council ward areas of Aspley, Bulwell, Hyson Green and Arboretum, and St Ann’s, and those ‘out of ward’ live in other areas of Nottingham.

there, there's more relationship there...playing football outside with his daddy and things like that, he wouldn't have been able to do that as much otherwise" (Ella, female age 30, child age 18 months, out of ward).

Saleem also commented on having more time to be involved at home as a father to his young children:

"...just sitting down with him, giving him a cuddle, reading books, colouring, that's something which...I would say it's created more of a bond between us, if anything" (male age 39, children ages 4 years, 2 years, 6 months, in ward).

Several interviewees commented on the benefits for their child's routine due to being at home during lockdown. As a working parent, Sophie spoke about having the time to establish better routines with her child and get involved with her learning:

"...it just gave me that chance to do sort of things like that and get like, you know, proper routines in place...And obviously, just spending quality time with her, which actually I felt like she came on lots. Like her speech, you know...sort of like talking all the time. And, and I just found that I had so much more time to sit down and learn, teach her things" (female age 40, child age 2 years, in ward).

However, for Helen the lockdown was detrimental to her child's behaviour because of the changes in the normal family routine:

"We have had some negative behaviour from her. I think because obviously with the changes and everything. She had a routine before everything happened. Like she would go to nursery two afternoons a week, she'd see her grandparents a lot more; she would have been going out a lot more as well. But obviously with restrictions, and just wanting to keep her safe really, she's had a few negative

impacts on her behaviour. And gone backwards on some of her learning” (Helen, female age 31, child age 2 years, in ward).

For Chadia, responsibility for her youngest was shared by all the family including her four older children:

“...teach my children the times table, reading, and help me, actually help me and my husband, and my daughter and my son, because my daughter now, she's 17, and my son 14, and help me with the other children, and other kids” (female age 45, child age 3 years, out of ward).

Other families with older children also spoke about the benefits for their very young child on spending so much time with older siblings. However, Meghan (female age 39, child age 18 months, in ward) commented on how the needs of her older children were so different, especially with home learning schoolwork, that during lockdown her 18-month-old learned to play by himself.

Experiencing lockdown with young children proved particularly difficult for parents working at home. Inga described the disruption from her 3-year-old as constant and distressing:

“And he'd get up in the morning, and ask me every five minutes whether I'd finished working...even if I like...go to the toilet, or to make a cup of coffee, he'd be asking, have you finished working yet? And I'd have to say, no, about 1000 times a day to him. And he was quite upset” (female age 30, child age 3 years, out of ward).

Similarly, David spoke about struggling to find the space to work productively away from his children:

“...because I was trying to work from home with a toddler, because I never got furloughed...You turn your back on the laptop and the toddler's turned it off. I

don't really have a home office...literally hotdesking at home, yeah. It's a bizarre...work/life balance" (male age 47, children ages 2 years, 6 months, out of ward).

As with David, Eleanor also commented on what she felt was a lack of support from their managers at appreciating the difficulties of working at home for families with young children:

"And there are still expectations from my manager to do my 30 hours a week, even though I'm working at the kitchen table. And until nursery's open, with a 2½ year old to look after as well, and entertain, and engage, that was very difficult to do both" (female age 46, child age 2 years, out of ward).

Sophie (female age 40, child age 2 years, in ward), who usually had her parents caring for her child when she was at work, spoke about the difficulties of not being able to see her extended family during lockdown. As Helen explained, young children don't understand the restrictions on seeing grandparents:

"But yeah, they [grandparents] live next door, but we're... in the first like I say, month or so, when they said, try to avoid going to other people's houses, we unfortunately had to do that. So, and then, but she [child] was still able to see them through the fence. But it wasn't the same...She used to want to go round and see them. Which was hard to explain, especially to a 2½ year old" (female age 31, child age 2 years, in ward).

For others, family bereavements including deaths from Covid-19, made the restrictions very hard. As Anna described:

"I think the only think I have struggled with was, I felt it hard that I wasn't... because I've still got my dad, I wasn't able to give my dad a hug, when it was kind of like, everybody was passing away, that kind of thing... the weblink [live funeral

video feed] did help; it helped a lot to be fair...I've watched those two on a webcam" (female age 37, child age 2 years, in ward).

Those who had family abroad found it very difficult that they were unable to visit or to welcome their parents over due to restricted international travel. For example, Safiya (female age 27, child age 2 years, out of ward), wanted to return home to her family abroad but was unable to because of the restrictions. Similarly, Grace (female age 37, child age 20 months, out of ward) cancelled her trip for her parents abroad to see her baby for the first time. Gulsan, who lives with her extended family, found the restrictions caused her to be separated from her mother and brother for weeks:

"...my mum and my brother, just before the pandemic, in February, they went abroad...It was going to be a visit where one of my sisters was going to join them, and then have like a family trip. But then obviously then lockdown happened over there...quicker than here. So basically flights got cancelled, so they actually got stuck" (female age 54, child age 9 months, in ward).

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. Amal spoke for many when she said how much she missed seeing her friends:

"I don't want to stay distant for like all the time. I need my friends coming to visit me and also I can visit my friend" (female age 41, child age 3 years, out of ward).

For Sophie when she was feeling particularly low during the lockdown period, she waited to see if her friends remembered her:

"I had some really bad days where I felt like, so alone. I felt like, I felt for somebody who has got so many friends, and is so sociable, some days like, I know this sounds silly, but some days I literally, I was just a bit like...one day in particular I just

thought, do you know what, I'm not going to text anybody, I'm going to see if anybody checks in on me. There was one particular day, you know, and not one person contacted me. And that really upset me" (female age 40, child age 2 years, in ward).

Friendship groups of the young children were particularly disrupted during the lockdown. Celia captured this when she commented on how much her youngest would love to play with his friends again:

"It's being unable to go out and being unable to see their friends...Well just play with his friends I think. Going out playing with his friends, I think he would love that" (female age 39, child age 20 months, in ward).

Gillian commented on the negative impact of her young children not being able to see friends or extended family during lockdown:

"But just having them home and having to entertain them, especially when we were at the point where they couldn't see friends, and they couldn't see family, so they literally just saw us all day every day. You know, that was very different. Cabin fever definitely set in" (female age 38, children ages 2 years, 5 months, out of ward).

While the interviewees spoke at length about the activities they provided at home for their young children, they were also 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, such as Wendy who described what happened when her child met strangers on a family outing:

"And what we've noticed is that actually, she's become quite afraid of people. So we were at the beach, the last week we were on holiday and we went to the

beach...And a group of people walked, you know, two or three meters away...but as they approached, she run back in a sprint shouting People! People! And I was like, oh my goodness, we really are at the point where sort of small children think strangers are so scary, and they have to be far away from them? And so I think, you know, actually that's the biggest challenge in a sense, is that she's forgotten going to [play]groups. That will be a huge thing to her when we go back to them...one of the things I'm conscious of is how do we break her back into the world, and into society, without breaking her?" (female age 35, child age 2 years, in ward).

Similarly, Sophie described her daughter's shyness which became apparent on lockdown being lifted and meeting extended family again for the first time in weeks:

"She's become quite shy around people...she didn't see my brother from like February until literally a few weeks ago...And we saw him at my mums, he came to my mums, and she literally ran a mile and just hid behind me the whole time, with her head basically under my armpit, just like there. Like she wouldn't look at him and he's done nothing. And my brother was quite upset about it. And he's not the only person she's like it with. When we first started seeing friends again, like meeting up on parks and whatever, friends, she was like; she wouldn't interact with the children...So she's gone from being a very sociable child, to being very anti-social, like where she just wanted me...because she's just used to being with me all the time, and she's not used, she wasn't used to mixing with children" (female age 40, child age 2 years, in ward).

Gillian (female age 38, children ages 2 years, 5 months, out of ward) also spoke about her baby daughter crying when meeting with her grandparents again, having only known her

parents and brothers during lockdown, and how her 2-year-old now cries when he's dropped off at nursery whereas before he was always very happy to attend. However, Jenny considered that young children were remarkably adaptable even if they do miss their friends:

"I think she's you know, not kind of having seen the people...like seeing people, getting close to people, and then not seeing them, and that kind of thing, I think has been a bit of a difficult thing in a way. But she's just carried on, and kids get used to whatever they, you know they get adjusted don't they?" (female age 39, child age 17 months, out of ward).

Lifting lockdown did prove positive when it came to the social opportunities for some families. For example Gulsan spoke about how much her 9-month-old enjoyed his extended family visiting from another city:

"I think it [lockdown] probably wasn't good for him, he probably would have benefitted from the interaction. And like he's got his cousins now, they play with him, and you know, having the different things that the different cousins bring, and the different ways of talking with him, and interacting with him" (female age 54, child age 9 months, in ward).

Some lovely comments came when the interviewees spoke about their neighbours. Meghan expressed surprise at how kind her neighbours were and how much she got to know them during the lockdown:

"One thing that has surprised these, like my local community as such. So our next door neighbours, we haven't...they moved in about two years ago. And they've never even said hello to us. And then during the pandemic, she put some Easter eggs over the fence at Easter time, and we started to talk. Now we're really friendly with each other...And there's a lady that lives down the road, she's a

florist, she just popped a potted rose on our door one day, and we didn't really talk to her. So I think other people surprised me during the pandemic. And how kind people were" (female age 39, child age 18 months, in ward).

Similarly, Gillian commented on the community spirit, not just remarking on the 'Clap for Workers' routine of applause on a Thursday evening to show appreciation for NHS and key workers across the country, but also how individuals took on their own charitable initiatives:

"And there's one guy in [Place] that was selling eggs...So he's selling them. And again, giving like 50p or something from the sale of each to the NHS. That's, the sense of community, I think is really positive. And I hope that will carry on" (female age 38, children ages 2 years, 5 months, out of ward).

Even where there had been disagreements with neighbours, gestures of kindness were very much appreciated, such as described by Olivia:

"But you know, they [neighbours] were off work, and they were doing up their house like half ten at night...so it can be quite irritating...We have moments with them, they've got horses, and they brought their horses out not long ago. And we let our children go out and see the horses, which was nice...Yeah, yeah, and they enjoyed it. It's a bit therapeutic as well I think, seeing horses" (female age 29, child age 3 years, in ward).

These acts of kindness during the lockdown were particularly welcomed because it indicated how much of an effort people were making for others in their neighbourhood, especially for those with young children.

Worry and Restrictions

All of 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 their extended families. As Nora said:

“Well I think it’s been frightening, and the beginning, I was very frightened. There were times I was laying here in wonder you know. When I hear about people dying, I worry about my parents, I worry about my sister...And so I had worry, worry for my family, for myself. Fear of death, fear of that you can’t... it was not a good time”
(female age 46, child age 3 years, in ward).

The circumstances of lockdown also added to worry about the Covid-19 virus. As Hinna described, not having access to her personal contacts meant facing the worry on her own:

“So basically, it’s been very, very difficult obviously. Mentally as well, draining, feeling the anxiety and not having friends to talk to...Because even if you do want to go outside, you still, you don’t feel normal. You feel scared you know, in case someone comes and infects you. And therefore you do feel very depressed”
(female age 32, children ages 4 years, 2 years, 6 months, in ward).

For Cathy lockdown was about literally staying in the house with her four children:

“No, we’ve done, me and the kids done ten weeks in...All of us, yeah, we was only going to the front garden...Because I was scared about going out with the children...Because my youngest was only still baby” (female age 32, child age 11 months, in ward).

For those with babies, the anxiety about Covid-19 appeared to be exacerbated by the withdrawal of health visitor services. As Maria explained, a health visitor baby weigh group

for breastfeeding mothers was basic but provided vital reassurance, especially for new parents on their own:

“...each week I would go to breast feeding group, we’d talk about anything, challenges, how the babies are feeding. And then I’d get her weighed every single week...And that just stopped. So like a month into the lockdown, I had the health visitor...she said, we can’t weigh the baby, it’s non-essential...and I’m like, how can it be non-essential when no-one’s seen my child in over a month, and I’m in sole care of feeding her from myself? So I don’t even know how much she’s getting. I need to know if she’s okay” (female age 32, child age 7 months, in ward).

Similarly, Gulsan wanted to know she was doing well as a new mother breastfeeding her baby, and found the removal of health visitor baby weigh services difficult:

“I tried to weigh him myself last week, you know stand on the scales and then pick him up...and weigh him that way...I don’t know if he’s actually put any weight on...And you don’t know if you’ve, if he’s going on track or not. But we can’t go there and check...I wouldn’t mind having that extra reassurance of things...Have a proper weigh in, have the length, or check their length and everything as well...I mean I’m sure it’s not nothing wrong, but it’s just sometimes, having that reassurance is nice to be able to go there” (female age 54, child age 9 months, in ward).

The lockdown brought shortages of some essential items in shops, and Grace explained compromising her young child’s access to formula milk:

“And then my one drinks [formula milk] like at night...it was so difficult, and he was crying and yeah. I think the milk, that part of when things were being distributed it was the most difficult part we found. Because we had to drive everywhere, like

every Tesco, Co-op...it was hard, it was very hard...Yes, it was very stressful, it was. And you started, they [shops] started limiting the amount [available to buy] as well...minimise his drinking of milk to just water” (female age 37, child age 20 months, out of ward).

Parents of young children also worried about the impact of the lockdown confinement and restricted freedom. Meghan described her son confused about staying in and not seeing other young children:

“...he very much likes being outdoors. He’ll stand at the door quite often and be like, out, out...he’s missed just being able to go to his sing-song groups and see other children you know...And before lockdown, he wasn’t at the real stage where he wanted to interact. He would sit, and he’d listen to sing-songs. Or he might interact with me, but in the groups, he’d sit on your lap, and he would listen and watch...But he’s at an age now where he does want to, but he doesn’t really know how to” (female age 39, child age 18 months, in ward).

Parents also had worries that their child’s time at home was not stimulating enough. Ella spoke about her worry that her child became bored when confined at home during lockdown, even with a garden, when visiting other children used to be so normal:

“...it’s nice for me, it’s nice for him you know, change of scenery, he can play with you know, someone else’s garden, with someone else’s child. Something as natural as that is... and we haven’t done it for months and months...Yeah, and I’m sure he’s bored of you know playing in his own garden all the time” (female age 30, child age 18 months, out of ward).

However, lockdown was especially difficult for interviewees who did not have a garden, as in the case of Jenny who considered letting her daughter run about in a churchyard:

“...because we don’t have a garden, so it was you know, and that kind of thing where being able to get out...But I think having a space where she could have been able to just...where we could just use a garden space or something. I have thought a couple of times, I’ve went past the church and I thought, nobody goes through in the back...I wanted to be able to ask them you know, can I use this space? Because, just for her to be able to run around. Because at this age, she doesn’t want much” (female age 39, child age 17 months, out of ward).

For others, there was significant worry about the Covid-19 virus given people’s inevitable behaviour after the easing of lockdown rules. As Inga commented:

“Just having this hot weather, I think people tend to forget the virus is still here. And I think in the new normal, we should all remember that you know, it’s invisible, but it’s there. And I’m just getting very worried when I see images of beaches crowded with people. So I think people are...because we’ve been in lockdown for so long, obviously everyone is desperate to get out, do things. But I think we still need to be sensible” (female age 30, child age 3 years, out of ward).

Worry about a ‘second wave’ of Covid-19 infections where the number of confirmed cases rise to a critical level were also expressed, with Fiona concerned it would be more difficult than the first time:

“I am sort of you know, worried if we get a second hit come autumn. Because that is you know, the speculation goes that possibly we’re going to have another hit of it sort of thing. And you then think you know, a second time round, if it does happen, is it going to be twice as bad sort of thing, you know?” (female age 37, child age 15 months, out of ward).

Similarly, Sally was worried about the impact of a second lockdown on her family, having reflected on the amount of effort it took to manage the first lockdown:

“...my one biggest concern is that we’re going to have to do it all again... Oh I would cry, I would cry, I would really cry. I think we’d all be sobbing...Yeah, this household would not be a happy household, I’m sure other people will be the same...Yeah, I feel like we’ve done it, we’ve got through it, and if we had to do it again, that would be really hard. You can jolly yourself along a first-time round, but if we had to do it again, that’d be rough” (female age 45, child age 4 years, out of ward).

Others expressed more defiance, with Anna finding herself adjusting to manage as best as possible:

“I think it was kind of yeah, it was very much a worrying time. But now, you just think, well you know what you've got to do... I think it's because I've realised that it's not going away, it's not going anywhere. We've just got to literally adapt, and that's what it's been like” (female age 37, child age 2 years, in ward).

However, Amal was the most direct in her challenge to the Covid-19 virus, addressing it on behalf of herself and her family as a way of reassuring her young daughter:

“I said Covid, we are, we, come knock my doors, I’m waiting for you! I’m not scaring for you!...I’m scared, but not I’m not scared for you. I do well, I do good for my family, I protect them, you can go...I stand for him [Covid], I stand for him, I tell him, not coming again for...I said to her [U5 child], I love you my daughter, I am not get anything to come to you, I can stay with your forever, I’ll never give up for anything. I tell her like that” (female age 41, child age 3 years, out of ward).

For Lena, returning to work after being furloughed at home with her daughter felt daunting and she had increased worries about the uncertainty caused by Covid-19 with nursery costs if the place couldn't be used due to illness:

“But yeah, and then worries, I think the worries...I was worried they would ring me and say like, next week you're going to go, or something like that...I was really worried, and I was worried she would get ill, or what do we do, what do we do if she gets ill, what do we do if she doesn't even have Covid, but we needed to stay home for two weeks? We're still paying for the nursery, because we need to, and we can't send her. What do we do like in situations like that?...The unknown I think...I was anxious” (female age 38, child age 23 months, out of ward).

Worry and concern about becoming ill with Covid-19 was significantly increased for parents of children with already existing illness and/or disabilities. Hinna spoke about her worry for her daughter with severe health needs and needing to restrict herself to staying indoors:

“If my daughter becomes ill, and therefore she would have to go back into hospital. And therefore, we were very cautious, and taking every precaution as possible... it has been very, very difficult, because we're not able to go out because of the pandemic” (female age 32, children ages 4 years, 2 years, 6 months, in ward).

The parents spoke about how much their young children were losing out because of the restrictions, especially during lockdown. These included restricted social interaction with other babies and children their own age as would have normally been encouraged through playgroups, visits, outings and nursery. As Nora described, her daughter was frustrated and confused about the issue of Covid-19 and its impact on her usual activities:

“she longs for company, children company. So she was getting very frustrated towards the end, especially in the last three weeks, she's been very

frustrated...every time we mention Coronavirus, she says, stop it, stop it, you shouldn't mention that word again. She thought the word was invented to prevent her from going to play with her friends, her cousins, and to go into shops...so that's been heart-breaking really, because the frustration has manifested in tantrums. And she's coming out with you know, strong opinions like, you just don't want me to play, you're making me unhappy mummy. I want to go outside and play with my friends, why can't I play with my friends?" (female age 46, child age 3 years, in ward).

A lot of the parents also spoke about difficulties going out with their young children because of the restrictions imposed during lockdown. Going for a walk became a chore rather than an outing, unless parents were able to create an adventure such as looking for 'bears' in local woods which took considerable energy to think of making routine exercise interesting. Some parents disliked the responsibility of curtailing their children's activities. For example, Saleem spoke about how much his son missed swimming:

"I used to take him swimming a lot; we used to go every Saturday. And once this lockdown started, that was all he was interested in. He was like, dada when can we go... can we go swimming on Saturday dada? And I'm like, yeah we'll go swimming on Saturday yes, it's closed at the moment, but we will go when it opens back up. And then literally, dada can we go swimming on Saturday, can we go swimming?" (male age 39, children ages 4 years, 2 years, 6 months, in ward).

Closing parks and playgrounds was commented on a lot, given how much these facilities were normally used by young children to explore their physical environment and interact with other children, and utilised by parents to encourage play on the equipment or in an open space. Sally commented on how much her 2-year-old missed being able to go to the park:

“...there’s a park round the corner from our house...which we went to a lot, but obviously, we couldn’t go on the play part because it was closed. So obviously he’s noticed that like, oh, no, no, you can’t go on the park, you can’t go on the park” (female age 45, child age 4 years, out of ward).

However, this limiting of a child’s activities was reversed when lockdown was eased, and Meghan’s young son had become old enough to enjoy the park as a completely new play experience:

“So when the parks opened, it was the sweetest thing, I took him on a swing, and you’d think that all his Christmases had come at once, he couldn’t stop laughing. It was absolutely hysterical...all of a sudden he's experiencing this world that he did never know that was about. Because he was too young before lockdown, to enjoy those things, so yeah...It’s almost like that, it’s more special than if lockdown hadn’t have happened” (female age 39, child age 18 months, in ward).

However, other parents were very cautious about letting their children play in parks with other children. As Ella explained, worry about the Covid-19 virus meant limiting her young child’s access to playgrounds even though the lockdown restrictions had been lifted:

“And with the virus obviously still out there, we don’t feel comfortable him having contact, that physical contact with other children just yet...So we didn’t take him into the play area, but he walked past, and he could see that the kids were playing with each other. So I think, I mean maybe we were just being a little bit over the top, but we’re still a little bit wary. And the numbers going up and things like that; we’re still being a little bit sort of resilient and keeping him away from other children” (female age 30, child age 18 months, out of ward).

Even though physical contact was seen as vital to their child's wellbeing and individual personal growth, and social distancing was difficult to enforce, parents felt conflicted that they also wanted to protect their children from infection. Priti said:

“An invisible war type, kind of, you know, they're growing up with that, so I'm concerned about that. And I, I think primarily it's just the social interaction with other children. The...you can't go too close to them. Oh yeah, you can play over there, but you can't touch her dress, even though she's got unicorns on it. That kind of, you know, contradictory changing the, changing things all the time is, is, you know, I'm worried about that as well” (female age 38, child age 2 years, out of ward).

Many parents complained about the confusing messages given by the government, feeling that the guidelines did not always make sense, especially when they were needing to then explain them to their young children or to implement them within their own families. Some of the rules caused distress for their child, as Meghan commented when she first wore a mask at the shops with her son:

“I think again, wearing a mask...And we were going in the shops, this was at the weekend. I was putting it on and he kept pulling it off all the time, because he didn't really understand...But it must be really weird for him, because he's not so vocal in understanding of changes...But for him, he's seeing changes without being able, without them being explained it him...to see me in the house not wearing it, and then all of a sudden, I'm going out into the shop and I have to wear this funny think on my face” (female age 39, child age 18 months, in ward).

Priti went further, being concerned about the implications for childhood interactions and communication learning with mask wearing:

“I think, you know because we have to wear, masks are mandatory now. So I think that scares, that scares my daughter, she does not like her parents wearing masks or her grandparents wearing masks. And I think, you know, the eye contact, you can’t see people’s faces and things, I think, I think, you know, it’s going to increase anxiety and things because you just can’t read people’s faces and their expressions. So I think that’s, that’s something that’s, that’s a worry of mine, for her and other children” (female age 38, child age 2 years, out of ward).

Young children’s ability to learn alongside their parents felt restricted, for example with shopping. A quick shopping trip, which would have been a fun interactive opportunity for communication skills, choices and activities about for example shapes, colours, and counting, became a planned, long and often tiring undertaking. As Olivia commented:

“You became very, you become very limited. I mean things like, just the normal shopping trip you know, taking her shopping and things like that, she would love...and she can’t go out and do that. And I guess it’s just missing those type of things. You never really understand how much a simple task like going shopping is for them...You know, you don’t understand how much they get out of it...because they’re not only just learning about the things that you buy at the shop, they’re learning about money and the way things work, and things like that...So it’s the interactive process of going shopping together, it’s not the shop itself, and the things from the shop, it’s you, watching you, you know, having a chat with you whatever you did when you went shopping together. It sounds as if again, it’s an adventure with you as a parent, if you see what I mean, that helps their development” (female age 29, child age 3 years, in ward).

Many parents also spoke about their fear of shopping, and the precautions they took about the virus such as wiping down packaging on arriving back home. Some were even too afraid to shop any more, and relied on their partners to do the family shop.

The restrictions of baby and toddler playgroups also had an impact on parents who might otherwise find social contact with the other mums and dads to be important to them. As Ella commented, both young children and their parents become socially limited with restrictions placed on libraries, for example:

“...the baby classes have been closed, library’s still closed. So it’s definitely been difficult on him... But I really feel like he’s missed out on opportunity. Well you know, the last few months to socially interact, and to grow with children. You know, he doesn’t have any siblings or any cousins that he can play with. So it’s quite sad really... I feel like if we did go to a baby class, he’d interact more. So we just feel like he’s missing out on opportunity. But yeah, I mean I used to speak to parents there as well. So it was like a social thing for me” (female age 30, child age 18 months, out of ward).

Some of the parents spoke about the importance of having time to themselves, and how this had now been eliminated. With all their time being spent with their children, they found it impossible to have time to themselves. As Safia commented:

“Before lockdown, on Sunday...this is day is for me only. I can go shopping, I can to meeting with my friends...do sport...I would have English courses, and Health Care courses, and meeting with all friends...So after the lockdown, I cancelled all of them, I cancelled the Sunday day which is for me...And my time has become for only my daughter” (female age 27, child age 2 years, out of ward).

Some parents found the lockdown particularly harsh because they missed out on significant celebrations: a honeymoon abroad for one, a fortieth birthday holiday for another, and for others with babies, severely compromising the leave planned with their baby. As Maria described, the deprivation for a young child because of the social and play restrictions seemed cruel:

“I wanted her to be very social...And she had that for three months of her life, and then suddenly, it’s complete polar opposite...I think it’s kind of what you expected your maternity to be, is completely not that... I haven’t let anybody touch my daughter. So four months, she hasn’t been held or touched by anybody else... I think how it’s affected me emotionally. I think, I mean I’m just so grateful that I had three months of normality” (female age 32, child age 7 months, in ward).

While a honeymoon or a birthday celebration can be re-arranged, it is clearly not possible to re-organise maternity leave at a later date or to re-capture those crucial early months with a new baby.

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 support from medical specialists. As Hinna said:

“But if needs be, and we wanted some support, we would ring the specialist of consultants at the hospital, or get in contact with the community nurse as well”
(female age 32, children ages 4 years, 2 years, 6 months, in ward).

Similarly, Anna’s daughter required careful adjustments to her medication during lockdown, and the support was excellent:

“And then with my two-year-old, her paediatrician has been absolutely outstanding, 100%; he's one of the best...I'd email him; he gave me his personal email. I'd email him, he'd email me back, right let's try this, let's do this, I'll get it ready for you. Even his own secretary met me outside [the hospital] with some medication...Yeah, I cannot fault them at all, whatsoever...They literally went above and beyond” (female age 37, child age 2 years, in ward).

However, many of the local services offering support were significantly altered, or even completely stopped. Olivia commented on the withdrawal of physiotherapy services for her daughter, and the negative impact this had on her development:

“So the majority of her appointments got cancelled, which meant she couldn't see the dermatologist, she couldn't see the physiotherapist, and she couldn't see the paediatrician...I would usually get advice from the physiotherapist, but I wasn't even aware whether she was working or not, or anything...With physio you know,

she actually has to do exercises and things like that. And they wasn't able to assess like, to tell me if she needed new exercises, or if I could stop an exercise because she's reached that goal or...You know, she has paediatric shoes and things like that, and we wasn't able to see whether she needed like new shoes of things like that. So she spent the majority of the time with no shoes, because her feet had grown...It was quite stressful, because obviously you know, you want to just, you know when you're allowed to go for a walk in the woods and things like that, she has to sit in her pushchair because she's got no shoes...I think it's kind of set her back. With although she's doing great with learning things at home you know, her development was already behind before the pandemic...She already needed to catch up. So now she's missed all of this nursery, and all of these appointments with the paediatrician, and the physiotherapist, and stuff like that, I feel like it's pushed her back even more" (female age 29, child age 3 years, in ward).

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. Celia (female age 39, child age 20 months, in ward) spoke about having to contact a crisis team for a member of her household because she was unable to make basic arrangements for early intervention support, and Maria also spoke about using emergency hospital care rather than community health services, which she found stressful:

"...normally, you'd visit a GP for that, or the health visitor would come to your house and you know...But yeah, we had to go to the paediatrician at the hospital. Which was horrible, like me in a mask, gloves, careful. You know, it was yeah, not nice, not a nice day" (female age 32, child age 7 months, in ward).

Several of the parents spoke about telephone and online support being preferable because it saved a lot of time with young children, especially those with severe health needs or disabilities. Saleem preferred this for his daughter's multi-agency meetings:

“And in the past, before lockdown, we were, I was having to go physically to the children's development centre at the...hospital...But this time we just did it on the Team, Microsoft Teams app...That made it a lot easier, everyone was present, we were able to you know, it saved a lot of time, a lot of stress. I mean just getting ready and going...leaving the house is very stressful. So that was very, very helpful”
(male age 39, children ages 4 years, 2 years, 6 months, in ward).

Similarly, Carolyn found the support she needed to be more easily accessible:

“Do you know, I actually found the fact that people couldn't have face to face meetings made it a lot easier. Because then the meetings became more frequent. Because they could only have them over the phone, it was much easier for someone to pick up the phone and have a quick chat with me, than organise a, a big meeting” (female age 25, children ages 4 years, 18 months, out of ward).

Even those who did not require specialist support found routine GP appointments easier by phone, especially when also caring for young children. As Gillian commented:

“But anything else was done on the phone, and actually, that was quite convenient...because at the time, sometimes if hubby was at work and I was on my own, I'd have to get somebody else to look after the other kids...so doing things over the phone was actually better, you know. If you just had a question or, you know, if it didn't involve a doctor having to physically examine you or baby, or whoever it was, you know, it was quite good just to do a phone appointment”

(female age 38, children ages 2 years, 5 months, out of ward).

A lot of the parents found some provision for young children adapted to being online, such as storytelling from a library. However, this was not always attentive to individual cultural needs. Without access to grandparents, Priti found her daughter was missing out on hearing languages which would normally be spoken at family gatherings:

“I think, I think the resources in terms of storytelling is an improvement, and so what’s available online to do with your children...And that’s been really nice because my little girl loves stories, and she’s got lots of stories, and she’s reading lots of stories, and that was really nice to see somebody else read some of her favourite stories. Especially when she wasn’t allowed to go to the library...What would be, no, what would be great is to have more sort of bilingual resources available, because she’s missed her stories being read by her grandparents and stuff...So, so that would be amazing if there were storytelling or singing sessions in Hindi or Punjabi or Urdu or, you know, lots of different languages, and we’ve got children from all over the world, haven’t we, in Nottingham?” (female age 38, child age 2 years, out of ward).

Family routines such as church attendance were disrupted and very much missed. Faith was an important cultural identity for some families, with prayer both as protection against Covid-19 and as time for reflection mentioned by several parents.

Some parents mentioned facing financial difficulties because of changes in income due to the impact of the lockdown. For some, there was a significant impact on their lifestyle as a result of the lockdown and other restrictions needing to be maintained for months. Ella described how it affected her family:

“...so my husband has two jobs, he's also self-employed on the side, where he does weekend work...so he had a loss of income. And that really affected us. So now I’m

being more careful about my spending. When I go to the supermarket, I can't just buy everything I want" (female age 30, child age 18 months, out of ward).

Carolyn (female, age 25, children ages 4 years, 18 months, out of ward) spoke about the strain on her family when she was recovering at home from being in hospital during lockdown and the support she received including food bank vouchers, while Chadia (female age 45, child age 3 years, out of ward) spoke about charitable food deliveries. For those who had established support networks among family and friends, this meant looking out for each other, as mentioned by Fiona:

"And I said, obviously grandparents, my parents, they only live on the next road to us, so you know, we're very, very close...my dad literally drove me to like four or five different Tesco's, just to get the nappies you know...But that emotional communication support has still been very much there...So you know I even sort of said you know, anybody sort of self-isolating you know, I'd say you know on the Saturday, I'm nipping to the shops on Monday you know, does anybody need anything? Do you need milk or bread sort of thing? So you know, or where we've been able to help out people you know, we have done sort of thing you know" (female age 37, child age 15 months, out of ward).

However, some of the parents received significant and regular support from their family abroad, as described by Amal:

"Sometimes I get support from my mum. I call my mum in my country, and she give me more support...always I get support from my mum. I call my mum many times...by phone, because she live in my country [name of other country]. But we calling by WhatsApp call, I can see here, and my kids can see my mum. We

can't...she talk to me, and she give me support here...Yes, she's not live here. I don't have any family here" (female age 41, child age 3 years, out of ward).

The isolation of parents without extended family in the UK was of concern. For Safiya, she was worried about her family abroad, but also depended on them for support during lockdown:

"I don't have anyone in the UK, also my husband, only my husband was here, and me and my daughter. I don't have any family here...And no-one helping me without...only my husband helping me. And my family in [name of other country], they were calling me all the day. They try to make it easy, but...And because I am afraid about my family there, and that travelling is very dangerous now" (female age 27, child age 2 years, out of ward).

Those who had SSBC peer support valued the contact they received. This included phone contact, group activities on Zoom and deliveries of toys. For some the regular and Zoom contact was important, as Celia said:

"The SSBC they, you know the SSBC; they're somebody who calls us every week...Yeah, so our...we have a lady here called [Name], she calls us every week to check on us, to ask how the kids are, how everything is...And they even put together a playgroup on the Zoom. They put together a group on Zoom. So we re-join it every other week...oh yeah, it's interesting; it's the kids...Yeah, because they see other kids on the video, they'll be like...you know they see other kids on the video. And there is one of the staff doing activities, so they're trying to copy what she's doing" (female age 39, child age 20 months, in ward).

Sophie found the delivery of toys and the adaptation of groups to a Covid-19 environment very welcome:

“SSBC dropped off a sensory play pack last week...And it was a bag of all goodies. And I was like, who has given me that? Because I didn’t know. And it was SSBC, and it’s really good because they’ve given it us. So the group in, obviously for the children to play with, but also if you attend a group in future, obviously because of Covid...for hygiene reasons you take your own pack with you. So the children aren’t sharing their toys, which I think is a fantastic idea” (female age 40, child age 2 years, in ward).

SSBC contact appears to have had a specific young child focus, as with Nora:

“it’s just been a very unprecedented time. Emotions you know, have been up and down, not knowing, the uncertainty. But I’m glad that you know, I have a Family Support Worker from Small Steps [SSBC], who calls me once a month. And she's available if I need anything. I do text her or call her about raising my daughter” (female age 46, child age 3 years, in ward).

For others, the support available was not welcome by phone, as with Cathy:

“Small Steps Big Changes...But it was only over the phone...But I didn’t accept that, because it’s not the same as doing it in your house, and going out meeting people, if that makes sense...Yeah it [the support] just stopped out of the blue” (female age 32, child age 11 months, in ward).

However, there was no mention of wellbeing support for the parents by the SSBC mentors, other than or in addition to the child-rearing and child play advice. Some of the ‘in ward’ parents described how they felt quite isolated and worried, especially if they did not have English as a first language or were single parents with a new baby.

All of the parents described a huge range of resources used with their young children at home during lockdown. They showed considerable personal inventiveness in creating important playtime for their children. Some got ideas from the internet, such as Maria:

“a mum, and she created this YouTube channel, and that has saved my mental health definitely. Just by looking forward to something, planning something for [Name]. She was making you know, toys and games out of like toilet rolls and ribbons, and things that you have already in your house” (female age 32, child age 7 months, in ward).

Others bought equipment and had materials delivered and had a natural talent for interactive, educational toy making and playtime activities, such as Lena:

“Right, so we were, I, well we just, obviously we also bought some things from [online company]. So we had like loads of cardboard boxes. One of them was really long, like sort of a tube, but square shape. So cut them into smaller pieces, and made like boxes, like open boxes really. And there I put colours on, well I just put some like coloured paper around, so it looks really nice, and decorated it. And put numbers of every box. So the tallest box is number five, and then it goes down to number one. So we’re like putting balls in, like five balls in the box with five, and four balls in the box with four you know...Yeah, thank you yeah; I just like homemade stuff that we could really think of. And I made shapes, and I put some shapes, some different...we had some paper sheets, like different colours, and different like feel. They have this different feel like sandpaper almost, some of them. And I cut different shapes, and I put them on the wall, so for her to learn shapes. And coloured paper, so also were matching colours, and so we were doing all different things” (female age 38, child age 23 months, out of ward).

Sophie found the experience of allowing her young child to play and create mess was a valuable learning experience for her as a parent in not worrying about having to clean up afterwards:

“I have relaxed more, and I’ve actually realised, do you know what, it doesn’t matter, you know, as long as, as long as, you know, she’s happy, she’s got food in her belly and somewhere to sleep and what have you, you know, that’s what matters in life. That, so that has changed me, yes. I’d say lock-down’s changed me in that way, definitely...If you’d have asked me that about a year ago, I’d have said oh, no, I wouldn’t let her get paint, because we’ve been painting and stuff like that, I’d be like oh, no. But I’ll tell you what, I went to Pound Shop and got a painting mat, so that goes on the table. So I just think if she’s not damaging my table at all, my dinner table at all, she just paints on that. Or now she’s got her own little table she does a lot of it on that. But yeah, I’m happy with that change because I know it makes her happy. And obviously, you know, a happy child means happy mummy really, because it makes my life a lot easier in, in a day” (female age 40, child age 2 years, in ward).

Priti also indulged in a more relaxed routine, setting up play activities to allow precious time for self-care and contact with friends which was very important:

“And, and I think for us it, the, the reason why I sort of facilitated so many of these activities was that it kept her [daughter] busy. So if I set up her waterplay, I could have a bit of time for myself, to speak to somebody on the phone and, and basically we would counsel each other, my friends and I, through what’s going on...Because it’s a really scary time. So we would, you know... so our children would be playing with whatever we’d set up, and we would speak on the phone.

It wasn't just for her, it was for me as well, so she'd be busy and keep occupied, and that kind of thing" (female age 38, child age 2 years, out of ward).

However, other parents noticed that even when playing at home, their children were clearly missing interaction with their peers, as with Eleanor:

"I mean he's been watching too much TV during lockdown. He's hooked on a YouTube channel. He just watches other children playing with toys, and it's heart-breaking. Because he really wants to be playing with those children, doesn't matter about the toys, he just wants to play with those children "(female age 46, child age 2 years, out of ward).

Eleanor also worried about how the necessary changes her son faced when starting school, assuming that Covid-19 was not going to be eliminated any time soon, and how his experiences would be compromised because of restrictions due to the virus. However, Sally's account as to how her daughter's nursery provided not only a video tour, but also privileged access was a huge positive for the parent of a young child with disabilities:

"preschool...started doing little videos of some of the work, of some of the ladies that work there, reading stories and things. Which is a great way of you know, entertaining [Name] for five minutes, but also her seeing the faces of people that she's very familiar with...Which I thought that was really helpful. I was a bit concerned, because of her extra needs, we were able to go in and have a visit when no children were there...so I could walk over the premises, because I'm a bit concerned about just dropping her off at the door...So we went in and walked around it all with her key worker...which was really helpful, which is great" (female age 45, child age 4 years, out of ward).

It is clear that support in meeting a young child's needs can also be reassuring to parents who are understandably worried about Covid-19 and the impact of new regulations. Support for parents can also help enable them to meet their young child's needs as far as possible in lockdown and in a society with continued restrictions. Parents seem to seek out their own support networks where these might be lacking, even if this involves phone calls abroad.

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 already raised in this report. For example, that their young children could play with their friends, visit and hug their grandparents, go to playgroups, the library and soft play again were all mentioned as important to the under-fives. 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. However, all these activities came with the caveat of safety. 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. Amal spoke for many parents in saying:

“I want Covid to go...Also... Sometimes she [child] can see her friends, and she is like, also like, no, no hug, no something like that. Before she can hug together, because she like hugging, my daughter. And now she can't. And say, oh mummy, I need to hug her my friend. I say, not now, not now, maybe soon you can hug her, you can kiss, and you can shake your hand or something like that” (female age 41, child age 3 years, out of ward).

Similarly, Meghan wished

“...to get rid of Covid... I would say for him [child] to be able to go out whenever he wants, which I suppose is a little bit similar to freedom really.... But as an 18 month year old, he should learn to walk, he wants to explore...He wants to be able to walk around, and he doesn't know when he gets close to another person that maybe that could be a danger for him, or for the other person” (female age 39, child age 18 months, in ward).

Gillian also spoke about the needs of her baby as well as her toddler:

“I think he [child] would like soft play to reopen...Because, as I said before, it’s a safe environment for him, to be able to play and relax and see other children his age. And interact with them and, you know, he’s at that age now where he is interacting more...So I think he would, he would like to be more social again, like we were before...So things like soft play and playgroups and, you know, because it’s exciting, new toys are exciting for them, so yeah, I think that’s what he’d want. And unlimited chocolate and stuff... And probably the same with the baby. You know, she’s only seen our four faces the majority of the time, so although she’s seeing, kind of my friends and the grandparents now, you know, she’s still, she looks round for me and dad” (female age 38, children ages 2 years, 5 months, out of ward).

There was an acknowledgement that some things had to change. Sophie thought the emphasis on hygiene would help promote good health generally, and not just prevent the spread of Covid-19:

“Because my daughter’s picked up so many sickness bugs and colds, just from going to soft play in the past. So I’m kind of thinking actually, this new norm, what it’s going to be, if you look after your own toys, bring your own bag each week, and you, you’re responsible for that bag, and your, only your child plays with that bag. I’m actually thinking that’s quite a good change, because it might cut down on passing, because often bugs are passed, aren’t they, by a child singing and then touching the toy, and then another child comes and puts that toy in their mouth. Maybe that’s a good thing, what’s going to change” (female age 40, child age 2 years, in ward).

There was recognition of long-term mental health impact from experiencing a pandemic and lockdown. As Celia commented:

“...it’s not good for mental health really. I think most people, they should be, they will be affected for a very, very long time...And at the moment, it hasn’t affected me that much...But with mental health, you never know. This month, I’ll say a few months, after a few years” (female age 39, child age 20 months, in ward).

For Carolyn, the lockdown had been a positive experience, feeling sheltered from the outside world and focussing on building nurturing relationships with her young children:

“I think that I see it as a positive, I don’t see it, I don’t see the lockdown as being a negative thing. Like when everyone was actually properly social distancing, and everyone was kind of staying in, that was the best time for me. Like it’s harder now because it’s kind of a bit more of a wavy line of what can you do, what can’t you do. But I’ve, I’ve definitely been a lot kind of happier...Like, I’ve just focussed on my own journey...and getting myself to a more stable place” (female age 25, children ages 4 years, 18 months, out of ward).

Some of the parents had recommendations for others looking after young children in terms of mutual support and not expecting too much of yourself, such as Olivia, who advised:

“You know, just supporting each other and understanding that you’re not alone, and there are parents going through the same thing. Feeling the same thing as you are, and you know, you’re not the only one that's having a bad day...So it’s nice just to know some...you know, sometimes you just need that reassurance you know. You’re doing a great job. And even if you haven’t coped, and you’ve just got through the day, you sat in your pyjamas all day, it doesn’t matter. And it’s okay you know, you've got to accept you've got limits, you can only do so much. And

it's nice to have people there that reassure you when you are feeling like that, that you're fine. You know, everything's going to be okay you know, you are not a teacher, you are the parent, but you are doing the best you can" (female age 29, child age 3 years, in ward).

Utilising available support, including virtual help groups, as recommended by Ella:

"I was doing quite lot of mindfulness classes...And I hope that continues, because for mothers, there isn't this scope of you know, you can't attend a workshop sometimes...Everyone really made an effort to - if they couldn't do the face to face workshop, they would then do it online. And people were charging money, and people were happy to pay for these courses. So we took advantage of them and did some courses online, my husband did the same. And I hope that continues as well in the future" (female age 30, child age 18 months, out of ward).

Saleem also recommended self-care especially through exercise:

"I mean you know, and being locked down, in the same space with family members, and it can play with your mind you know, but it just has like I say, being positive, exercising. I mean keeping active, you know it's very important to look after your health as well... is very, very important. So that's the thing which I would definitely advise other people to do as well, just to stay active, think about not only your children and your loved ones, but think about yourself as well. That you know, you have to you know, get out and freshen your mind...And you know, that will help to, you know, if you feel good, and you're happy, and you're confident, that's going to rub off on everyone else around you" (male age 39, children ages 4 years, 2 years, 6 months, in ward).

Other parents spoke about an adaptation process and living with Covid-19 for the short or even medium term. This included prioritising young children and protecting them, as Safiya explained:

“Yeah, we are a lot of things, we do a lot of craft this year, make basketball from curtain paper, and playing with her all the day...Because she's my first born, she must be happy, she mustn't be scared from this lifestyle which is very difficult. So we have a lot of things in this period really” (female age 27, child age 2 years, out of ward).

Prioritising the needs of children was echoed by Gulsan:

“And I think the government needs to take the schools aspect, make that the most serious priority you know, more than whether airlines lose out, or pubs. I know pubs and restaurants and everything, everything's going to lose out, but I think the schools have to be the thing that has to be at the expense of everything else” (female age 54, child age 9 months, in ward).

David also emphasised the need for prioritising children, and for the whole of society to adapt better to crises with a community focus:

“To get it right for the children...To make the right decisions for them. Because I feel that you know, look at some of the [exam] results coming through from schools now in Scotland. I feel that they're the ones hidden; children are the ones that I think will, you starting to see how much they've lost out on. And I think it's that they need to be the priority...Looking forward to the future, hopefully everybody has learned a good lesson, and that a lot of the sort of manmade constructs are just manmade constructs, and very vulnerable. And that we actually build up good community and better resilience...Well it's just like this sort of, the

education system...I think that just sort of fell apart. And I think from this, I think they've got to have better resilience in case it happens...because it [Covid-19] hasn't gone away" (male age 47, children ages 2 years, 6 months, out of ward).

Priti also focussed on the community, recognising the contribution made by key workers:

"I just, I think, I think the people that are supporting the country essentially, you know, everything from people that haven't, front-line workers, the key workers and the NHS staff, all the people that have to just carry on and despite, you know, not really earning very much just, you know, I just think it's amazing that people have, have just, have just done what they needed to do. I think, I mean I'm very, very grateful for that, you know. People have just carried on because they need to, and don't want to make things worse" (female age 38, child age 2 years, out of ward).

Jenny called for more support to be available, especially regarding social contact for both her and her daughter with a reliable Covid-19 testing system to enable groups to be held again safely:

"Yeah, so antibody testing, maybe things like that would be more readily available if that happened, or I don't know what. Generally services, yeah, just to have more like things available for the kids and things. And some sort of support group that way could help...Testing or something, yeah, just to maybe have some sort of support groups, like available in case, when you get like going for example playgroup session or something. Even though it's not a massive support system, it's still something like where you can interact with people one to one. You know what I mean? And then we have a, some sort of a normal feeling, sort of yeah, I

don't know, it's so confusing trying to figure out what's the safest and best thing now" (female age 39, child age 17 months, out of ward).

Mariam saw the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdown experiences as opportunities to learn and grow:

"But you take life for any time for anything. I know, I know this now is the time is different for anyone. For me, for kids, for everyone, but it's good for everyone to see a new experience. No new things you can got it, this is your life, you want is different time, not lives every time the same. Is the routine sometimes the change...But you know, the routine is different, it's change. But what we do, it's life?...It's emergency things is happen with my life" (female age 37, child age 2 years, out of ward).

Helen also considered ways in which the Covid-19 and lockdown experiences could be seen as valuable life lessons, especially when her daughter was old enough to understand in more detail:

"She's still at an age where she doesn't fully understand what's going off, which I'm thankful for...But I think, I mean I'm not going to keep anything, hold anything back from her as she gets older. If she's got questions, I'll happily answer them to the best of my knowledge. And just say, look well, this is what we went through when you were younger...if anything was to happen again when she's older. So she knows that she's been through it before, and she can possibly go through it again. So it's, and as long as we can support her with that, that's just the main thing really" (female age 31, child age 2 years, in ward).

The positivity of the parents interviewed was striking. Despite living through some extremely difficult family experiences, they still expressed hope and reflected on the importance of the

future for their young children. The parents were critical of policies and practices which exacerbated difficulties for their families. They called for children to be prioritised in any further policy decisions regarding change because of Covid-19. This way, it was hoped the support needed would be available to provide safe and happy childhoods.

Conclusion

There is evidence of how much some families have struggled during the Covid-19 lockdown. This has implications for the development and delivery of services, as well as the design of social policy. We have highlighted in this report the social isolation, including financial and health insecurity, described by many families, and the impact this has on being at home for weeks with young children, and on child and parental mental wellbeing. This was exacerbated by changes to and the cessation of some service delivery, although several individuals such as health visitors and hospital staff went out of their way to support parents. We suggest a range of policy and practice recommendations, including: parent-focused support; cultural and ethnically specific services for both parents and young children; early intervention for families who are socially isolated; and involving young children in decisions about changes to the services they receive. We suggest that addressing these issues for families with young children will promote well-being and access to support provided by services as they adapt to the new environment of ongoing and changing Covid-19 regulations.

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 withdrawal of children and family services, including health visitors and baby clinics, 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.

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Appendix 1

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

pseudonym	gender	age years	age of U5 child months/years	in/out of SSBC ward
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

<<Back cover>> say who NCCYPF and SSBC are