

Young children's lives in East London through the pandemic: Relationships, activities and social worlds

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Abstract

Children's lives in the Covid-19 pandemic were subject to unparalleled restrictions on and disruption to their daily lives. This paper explores the day-to-day relational, social participation and activities of young children in one East London borough in early 2021, as told through qualitative interviews with their parents. We adopt a social-ecological model of children's development, a child rights focused understanding of well-being, underpinned by an agentic view of both parents and children. We find that for some children, parents had additional time to spend with them and new activities were possible. But for others, particularly those living 'compressed lives' in low-income households and over-crowded accommodation with no outside space of their own, all three aspects—relational, participatory and activities—were significantly diminished.

KEYWORDS

activities, compressed lives, Covid-19 pandemic, kin, relationships, young children

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the UK Data Service, subject to some restrictions for privacy or ethical restrictions. [further details to be inserted prior to publication]

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INTRODUCTION

Children's lives in the Covid-19 pandemic were subject to unparalleled restrictions on and disruption to their physical activity, social activity and participation in support services such as schools and early childhood education and care (ECEC). Monitoring and protective health services changed their mode of operation or became less available. In Britain, and across the world, the experience of confinement, and, for many, accompanying fear of ill-health or death, was unique and unprecedented. But the universality of experience was limited; it is now well-established that the impacts of the pandemic were unequally felt (Suleman et al., 2021). Parents of children at home were particularly likely to be adversely impacted through changes to or loss of income or work intensity combined with home educating children (Collard et al., 2021). Parental mental health worsened (Feinberg et al., 2022; Gadermann et al., 2021; Whitaker et al., 2021). Low-income and lone parent households were at especial risk of both deepening poverty and isolation (Suleman et al., 2021). Changes for parents are likely to have had additional impacts on their children, particularly those who are very young (Prime et al., 2020).

In East London, there were pre-existing social disadvantages. East London consists of eight boroughs of a total of 33 in London as a whole. The current study took place in one such borough, Tower Hamlets (population 310 300 [ONS, 2021]). Nestled along the river Thames and stretching east and north from the business district of Canary Wharf, the population density of Tower Hamlets is the second highest in the country, at 16, 237 persons per km. Tower Hamlets is distinctive for its wide and deep ethnic diversity, and, more recently, for economic regeneration and gentrification, with a rising incoming population particularly among younger people and from European nations. In 2017, based on mid-year census estimates, the school age population was 63% Bangladeshi origin and the remainder were from a wide range of ethnicities with over 130 languages spoken in schools (Tower Hamlets, 2017).

At the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, 57% of borough families were living in poverty (Trust for London, 2020). Employment rates for males were close to the average for London (79.7% in Tower Hamlets vs. 78.6% in London) and lower for females (67.6% vs. 71.8% across London; Nomis, 2021). Full-time salaries were above the London average (£759.40 pw for males and £670.80 pw for females) in Tower Hamlets at £862.40 (males) and £701.50 (females), in part due to the close proximity to London's wealthy business districts. However, unemployment figures were comparatively high (6.7% vs. 5.9% in London; Nomis, 2021). Unemployment in London began to rise at the start of pandemic, alongside extensive use of the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (otherwise known as furlough, introduced at 80% of usual wages and continued, with tapering government support, until September 2021; Volterra, 2021). Among the 21% of residents who were economically inactive in 2020, most were looking after home or family (50%), were a student (20%) or sick (18%), and virtually all (90%) were unavailable for employment (Nomis, 2021).

For preschool aged children in the borough, pre-pandemic attendance at ECEC such as children's centres and nurseries had been growing from a comparatively low base (PHE, 2021). While fewer children than the national average met the standard for being 'ready' for school at age 5, by age 16, school attainment was better than national average (PHE, 2021). Health indicators for children show higher than average rates of low birth weight babies, lower than average rates of vaccinations, high rates of obesity at ages 4 and 11, and higher than average rates of dental decay (PHE, 2021). On the other hand, many more babies than average were first fed breastmilk (ibid.). In a borough with a complex demographic profile, averages may conceal large within population differences. Taken together these indicators suggest that many Tower Hamlets' children were

and are living in conditions of material adversity, and in a culturally rich, high density, urban environment.

This paper explores the experiences of children aged under 5, as told through a parental lens, during the Covid-19 pandemic. As Prime et al. (2020) document, the extraordinary disruptions to families' lives brought about by measures to control the pandemic may have elevated risks to children's well-being, particularly in families where there were already high levels of social disadvantage and where parental stress was common. Preschool aged children's well-being is intimately connected to whole family well-being, in terms of material resources, family communication, organisation and belief systems (Walsh, 2015). Given the interconnectedness of parental and child well-being, and the young age of the children, the reports of parents¹ about their children are an important (and in the circumstances the only practical) means to explore the range and depth of changes to children's lives during the Covid-19 pandemic. Few studies of the pandemic's impact on children have focused on the day-to-day experience of young children (0–5) (Chamberlain et al., 2021 is a rare exception; it reported on survey findings from 48 3–6 year olds from four countries), and few have used qualitative methods. This paper addresses both, documenting the daily lives of children and parents during the third national 'stay at home' lockdown, that began on 5 January 2021, when going outdoors was highly restricted, schools and ECEC were open to some children and for others remote learning was in place, and a working from home mandate existed.²

OUR APPROACH

We focus on three aspects of young children's lives: intra-household relationships with parents and siblings; participation in the social worlds of extended family and neighbourhood; and activities and routines. We adopt a social-ecological model of children's development drawing on Bronfenbrenner's (1979) framework and a rights-based view of child well-being. In Bronfenbrenner's early work he theorised the role of context in interaction with a person, whose characteristics, motivations and resources vary. He represented the multiple influences on the nurturance and development of children, in terms of distal proximity from the child, starting with immediate family members and moving outwards to take in education, health and care services, wider kin, community and national policies. In his later work, Bronfenbrenner elaborated that to effectively influence human development, reciprocal interactions in the immediate environment need to be frequent, regular and enduring, known as proximal processes (Bronfenbrenner, 1995) in which the agency of the individual is given greater prominence.

In our findings, we are primarily focused on the micro (family)-level,— meso (the ways in which the microsystem elements interact)—and exo (extended family and neighbourhood) systems around a child, while acknowledging that macro (cultural norms, framing policies and resources such as the pandemic shock) and chronosystem (changes over time) also play a role in shaping parents' reports of children's experiences. We include consideration of environmental assets, such as housing and outdoor space, as well as outdoor leisure facilities, as factors that support family life in a densely populated city, as well as formal education, care and health services.

Our rights-based view of well-being is guided by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child which emphasises young children's right to a home, education and play, and affection (UNICEF, 1989). Child-focused investigations of well-being have found, across all ages, that well-being 'centres on time with a happy family whose interactions are consistent and secure;

having good friends; and having plenty of things to do, especially outdoors' (Unicef, 2011). Similarly, Manning Morton's (2014) analysis of factors that support the well-being of preschool aged children was: being outdoors; responsive, supportive relationships; being in the 'here and now' so every moment counts; and being listened to. These indicators of well-being, which can be categorised as broadly relational, participatory and activities, clearly draw on the familial and social contexts of children's lives, inhabiting what Bronfenbrenner would refer to as micro-, meso- and exosystems, as well as the macro- and chrono-climates in any given society and at any moment in time.

Young children are also persons in their own right (James & Prout, 1997) and 'actors in and for society' (Qvortrup, 1993, p. 122): they are agentic beings, albeit clearly positioned as 'belonging' to family (*ibid.*). Apart from extreme cases, parents are structurally, and culturally, responsible for provisioning, care and upbringing of young children. Beyond this immediate environment, children warrant familial, civic and societal 'recognition' (Honneth, 1995). Recognition is a means to realising self-identity through the social and family relations children (or adults) engage in, and validation by wider society through the presence of organised means of supporting them (e.g. services and other community provision designed with their needs in mind). Positioning children in this way meant we sought evidence of how young children were able to exercise their rights to supportive relationships, to participate in the social world around them and to learn and be active during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Well-being: Parent–child and sibling relationships

At the micro-level, attachment theorists argue that parent–child interactions and responsive relationships offer emotional support as the primary foundation of children's development and well-being (Cassidy & Shaver, 2008). Sibling relationships are similarly important, and, where they share a household, marked by deep familiarity and intimacy; they are members of the same family system (Prime et al., 2020).

For both parent–child and sibling relationships, external adversity such as economic or health threats can negatively impact the way relationships are enacted and so child well-being. Covid-19 presents multiple potential threats to a child's experience of family relationships. In Prime et al.'s (2020) model, parent–child relationships characterised by providing nurturance, guidance and protection, is at risk during times of crisis. For example, economic pressures can lead to harsher parental styles or poorer parental mental health. Furthermore, prolonged confinement may lead to escalating negativity in parenting and weakened relationships (Prime et al., 2020). In these circumstances, the quality of the parental couple relationship is a critical mediator—the ways in which parents negotiate their jointly held responsibilities for the domestic sphere, as well as work, and home schooling, and young children's needs, can have positive or negative impacts on the quality of life for children. In the Covid-19 pandemic, 'good enough' couple relationships and material resources also mitigated the impact of mental health difficulties for parents (Cameron, O'Brien, et al., 2021).

Well-being: Social participation

Moving to the exo-level, babies and young children are inherently social beings (Liddle et al., 2015) and the role of wider networks of kin relations and community- or locality-based environments is important for neighbourhood effects on children's development (Goldfeld et al., 2015).

Grandparents are an important resource for children's well-being in offering practical and emotional support as well as meaningful relationships (Griggs et al., 2010). Grandparents, particularly grandmothers, are also a significant childcare support for working (and non-working) parents, and one mandated to stop when Covid-19 restrictions came into effect (Cantillon et al., 2021). Furthermore, the extended family is an important educational resource for children (Jaeger, 2012).

Neighbourhoods provide a further context for young children's social lives and development. Goldfeld et al. (2015) argue that locality domains in the meso- and exo-systems such as physical environments, social resources, socioeconomic factors, access to family support services and public governance or leadership potentially interact to influence early childhood development. All these domains, along with membership of extended families, are relevant to young children growing up in urban East London. Goldfeld et al. (2015, p. 208) conclude that 'the neighbourhoods in which children live and grow are key determinants of wellbeing and psychosocial outcomes'. Rights to participate in the social fabric of a wider family and community express recognition of and respect for people as capable and morally responsible.

Well-being: Activities

The home is often idealised as a safe or appropriate 'haven' for children (Harden, 2000). The ways parents interact with children at home are crucial for their developmental competences (Sylva et al., 2004). Young children privilege the 'here and now' (Manning Morton, 2014), when, given the opportunity, they exercise intense focus and agency in organising their play, often drawing others in (Hancock & Gillen, 2007). But play is not just fundamental to children's development, or a way to pass the time or to learn new skills; it is also building and expressing familial solidarity. The marking of home as a requirement during Covid-19 lockdowns gave a new intensity to home-based activities. As Prime et al. (2020, p. 633) point out, in the context of Covid-19, 'stressors that impede the functioning of one family member may lead to changes in the functioning of all family members'. Young children's choices and activities, and so their well-being, may have been changed or curtailed by the experience of living in confinement, with new and multiple uses of family spaces to accommodate home working, home schooling and restrictions on going outdoors, as well as potentially increasing mental health difficulties for parents, especially for those facing financial challenges (Cameron, O'Brien, et al., 2021).

METHODOLOGY

The data presented here were drawn from phase (ii) of the three phase *Families in Tower Hamlets* study examining the impact of Covid-19 on families' lives.³ This was a qualitative panel (QP) of 22 families, carried out via two Waves of in-depth interviews using telephone and video calling (e.g. zoom/teams). The first Wave, reported here, took place during January–March 2021, when in-person fieldwork was not possible. With informed consent, interviews used an open-ended style, encouraging participants to give their account of their and their families' lives, in the here and now. Interviews were carried out at times convenient to study participants which included evenings and weekends. They lasted from 45 to 90 min and were transcribed in full. A £20 shopping voucher was given to each interviewed participant. The interview guide was designed to explore the lifeworlds of children through addressing the micro-, meso- and exosystems around

families' lives, and included: daily family life for adults and children, such as money and provisioning, relationships and responsibilities, development and activities; neighbourhood and community interactions, and wider networks.

Analytic approach

Nvivo Collaborate was used to code the transcripts employing a thematic coding frame drawing on the interview schedule. Thematic analysis was conducted on the individual Nvivo 'coding reports' to identify and map emergent findings (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Transcript IDs were tagged against each finding to distinguish those that were idiosyncratic to the experiences of just one or two households from findings that were pertinent to the experience of multiple QP households (three or more). As well as the primary qualitative thematic analytic approach, quantification of some themes was also adopted through Miro board visualisation. In this paper, we have used the convention of 'few' to refer to three or fewer household reports, 'some' to refer to 4–7, "half" to refer to 11 reports and 'most' to refer to more than half the 22 households.

The paper addresses the question: what were the child well-being impacts of living in Tower Hamlets during the 2021 lockdown? It focuses on three main thematic areas which emerged from the analysis of parents' accounts about their children's lives: (i) relationships in the household; (ii) social worlds; and (iii) activities and daily routines. Analysis of the interview data also paid attention to the age of the youngest child in the household and a categorisation of babies (0–24 months) and pre-schoolers (2–5 years) was used to provide specificity, where possible, in the exploration of the impact of the pandemic on the lives of young children.

Sample characteristics

To create the QP, a purposive sample of households was recruited. Phase (i) survey respondents were stratified by household structure, and ethnic and income diversity to reflect the diversity of the borough. Households were randomly selected within these stratifications and invited to participate via email/phone. Of the 22 QP households, 19 were two parent households and three lone parent households. Of the 19 two parent households, in 12 we were able to interview both mother and father. In total, 32 parents were interviewed. In 14 households the youngest child was aged 0–24 months, while in the other eight the youngest child was aged 2–5 years. Six households had only one child; the remainder had two or more children. Tables 1 and 2 show the ethnicity and income band of QP participants.

On socioeconomic and environmental criteria, the QP included nine low-income households (annual income of less than £20 799) and seven of these households were living in seriously overcrowded conditions (defined as parent(s) sharing their bedroom with at least one child or parent(s) sleeping in the living room). In total, 11/22 families lived in overcrowded conditions. The majority (14 households) lived in rented accommodation; four households owned or had a mortgage on their home, two were living in a shared ownership property and one household was in temporary accommodation. Thirteen households had no private or shared outside space sufficiently safe for children to play in. Of these 13, eight were families who were overcrowded and had no safe private or shared outside space. Fifteen of the 22 households had at least one parent in employment. On the basis of available evidence, these living circumstances would indicate a range, including those at risk of substantial and adverse impacts of the pandemic on family life.

TABLE 1 Ethnic background of parents in the qualitative panel

Ethnic category of QP participants	N
Any other white background	6
Asian–Asian British: Bangladeshi	6
Asian–Asian British: Indian	4
White British	3
Mixed: White and Black Caribbean	2
Black/Black British: Caribbean	2
Chinese	2
Black/Black British: Somali	1
Black/Black British: Other African	1
Other ethnic group: Arab	1
Other ethnic group: African	1
Ethnicity unknown	3
Total	32

TABLE 2 Annual household income of qualitative panel participants

Income band of QP households	N
Less than £20, 799 (low)	9
£20, 800 - £51, 999 (mid)	8
£52, 000 or more (high)	5
Total	22

RELATIONSHIPS IN THE HOUSEHOLD

In 12/22 households, parents reported a significant increase in the amount of time that household members spent together compared to pre-pandemic. In many cases parents reported a strengthening or deepening of relationships between parents and children. This change was viewed as a positive outcome of lockdowns, with more playing, eating and talking together and generally more time spent in each other's company: "it's just been the four of us, what that's meant is the four of us have got now a really close nice bond that I don't know if we would have had otherwise" (mother). Being together was particularly significant for fathers' time with newborns: "Especially with [youngest child] and [husband] – he would have gone back to work quickly, he wouldn't have seen him as much, other than at the weekend. ... it has been nice that he's been able to be at home and we've all been able to just be together" (mother).

Eight/14 QP fathers said they were more available and involved in their child's daily life than they had been prior to the onset of the pandemic due to the work from home mandate, the furlough scheme and unemployment. As a result, some fathers said their understanding of their children and their needs had grown. One father, described this in terms of 'bonding': "I think the bonding is stronger than before actually, or comparing to if I was working, I can feel it" and another referred to better understanding of the details of children's lives: "I think I understand them more, like that's a positive thing. ... before ... when I used to come home that time either they've finished their homework, going to sleep and like we talk a little bit – now I can see more

detail, like what's happening through the whole day, that's the thing. So that's become a little bit bonding with the kids”.

This was not the case in all families. Other employed fathers reported little or no increase in the time available for their children either because they were a key worker who had to continue working or because their job had become more demanding even while working from home (WfH). One WfH father said that his pre-pandemic routine of evenings spent with children had vanished and replaced with long working hours which meant he was “literally at my desk from morning until after dinner. And sometimes it was literally I would start in the morning and I would be working until sometimes even 10:30, 11:00, 11:30pm. So, I would barely see them”.

Parents reported tensions and difficulties arising from the WfH mandate, such as losing one's temper while trying to work: “sometimes I might easy lose my temper and shout at [the children] and ask them to leave me alone, let me concentrate and do the job”. Such difficulties were compounded by a lack of separate spaces in the home for work, play and living. This father continued: “Then I feel guilty because it's not their fault, because there's no place they can go. If they can go to school this thing won't happen, now this thing won't happen at all”.

Further difficulties arose from managing the competing needs of children of different ages. Parents in five households reported that supporting school-age children with home learning had an impact on their ability to give the kind of attention that they would have normally given, with youngest children missing out. In one example, a father said it had “become a lot harder, because obviously we've got ... four kids, but that means that you can't give time to just one kid anymore. ...so three of the kids would have gone to school, nursery etc – that would have gave me time to ... focus on the younger one. Now that doesn't happen obviously because all of them want your attention all the time. So ... it's hard on the youngest ones especially because they're not getting the time that they're used to”.

Parents in four households (two low-income, two mid-income) reported that being confined together much more intensively over long periods, and sometimes in homes that did not provide sufficient space to allow time away from one another, led to an increase in sibling conflict: one mother reported that the children were “constantly in each other's faces, they're constantly quarrelling, and I feel like me and my partner are constantly ...we constantly trying to mediate” while another said “they're getting underneath each other's skin. ... they're not playing nice no more, they're getting fed up with one another, so for them it's really difficult”.

But parents in six households reported that better sibling relationships had developed during lockdown, with positive play and learning benefits for their youngest children: “[older child]'s quite good, she plays with her [youngest child]. She follows [older child] like anything – most of her speech and learning is from [older child]” (mother).

The aspects of child well-being to do with a happy family life and reliable interactions within households were contingent on deploying parental resources in the face of competing demands, what was called in Clery and Dewar's (2022) study ‘an impossible balancing act’ of working and caring simultaneously and an absence of opportunities to focus on the youngest child in the family.

SOCIAL WORLDS

Parents' accounts of daily life during the pandemic restrictions paint a stark picture of a significant contraction of children's social worlds outside of the household. Babies and young children were not able to meet, see or interact with their usual familial relations such as grandparents,

aunts, uncles and cousins, nor with friends and peers with whom they would spend time in ECEC, leisure settings or in each other's homes. Children's general interactions with people in outdoor and public spaces such as parks and shops were highly restricted. Children missed these social opportunities: one mother reported "they are missing their friends, they're missing family, they're missing extended family, their cousins", and another said: "for the little one...she was the most affected and she keep asking every day when am I going to see my friends, can I go out. And then when you go out it's not like where people are, so she wants like social life".

In seven households, parents of children under two raised concerns about their babies' relationships with members of their extended family or close family friends during the prolonged isolation. They worried about how their baby would respond to these important members of the family's social world once visits could resume, whether their child would feel uncomfortable, or have 'forgotten' close family or friends, or there might be an extended period before their child was familiar and at ease with people outside of the household: "we were wondering when we would be able to meet her [close family friend] again. Of course there's no long term memory at this stage, so probably he won't recognise her, so if she has to start everything from the beginning probably he will not be very happy to go play with her straight away" (mother).

Parents in five households reported that their child(ren) had found the restrictions on seeing extended family very hard, describing how children had struggled to understand why they could not see their family or friends for such long periods of time and how they missed their love and care: "I'd say mostly like the love and the care they used to receive from them, ... they will chat and laugh with their grandparents, and like their uncles and their aunties. Now it's not there" (mother).

Use of telephone and video calling to create or sustain contacts with extended family and friends, and in some cases with children's peers from ECEC was common (10/22 households). Initial enthusiasm for virtual contact had given way to boredom and sometimes gradual disengagement, as one father explained: "she's actually gone off video calls, I remember before she couldn't wait to get to them ... but now if they're 'Hi' from the other side of the room, she might not even come and look at the phone or the screen to see them. ... she's a bit bored of them, a bit disinterested with engaging that way".

Once 'bubbles' could be formed with another household,⁴ several parents (5/22 households) saw this as highly beneficial as it allowed for physical contact and enjoyment after a long period of deprivation: "They're very close to their grandparents. Even though they're far, we went to see them over the Easter because I could form a bubble. That really does help in terms of their... it's something that they look forward to and they enjoy" (mother).

Children's social worlds were sharply contracted during this time. They were no longer located in a wider family and neighbourhood context and their rights to participate were denied, not for their own health benefit, since they were not at any great risk, but to protect others.

ACTIVITIES AND DAILY ROUTINES

Disruption to everyday life

Parent interviews unequivocally reveal the scale of disruption to, and compression of, the lives and usual day-to-day activities of children. Parents of babies and pre-school age children across all income bands reported a wholesale curtailing of the rich and varied daily lives of their children, as a result of the closure of ECEC provision, as well as the closure of leisure settings (e.g.

playgrounds and parks, city farms, swimming pools, cafes/restaurants, museums and zoos). The sense of closing up of everyday social life was conveyed by these two mothers: “Daily activities, we can’t go swimming, we can’t go to the cafes, we can’t go to the children’s centres, everything’s changed”; and “all the extracurricular things we did were all put on kind of hold, all the children’s centres were closed so they couldn’t access anything. The libraries were closed...The farm was closed ... so we literally couldn’t go anywhere, the parks were shut.”

In five households, the youngest child had only just started ECEC before the pandemic restrictions began. Parents of these children discussed the impact of this sudden change, of having to effectively ‘start over’ and re-settle into this environment and routine once again: “she’s had so much change in the past year because at the beginning of the pandemic she’d only just started at a new nursery, and then that nursery shut [and] ... did not open again until June, July ... so she had to re-settle all over again” (mother).

Establishing a routine can be a cornerstone of children’s and parents’ lives and the pandemic restrictions meant disrupting these rhythms of life and some parents rescinding control over daily activities for their children. “[he] has no routine. Whereas ... before the pandemic he would get up, have breakfast, go to pre-school, come home, have lunch, and then in the afternoon I’d go and meet the little girl off her school bus and we’d walk to the park, and he would have structure ... now he has no routine” (mother).

The impact of a lack of routine was discussed by parents in five households in terms of a disintegrating distinction between days of the week and a temporal dislocation that confused children and parents: “it just seems like every day is the same day, even the weekend is the same... so you can’t differentiate what’s going on, and the kids find it difficult. So it’s like ‘oh when can we do this, when can we do that’, and it’s like ‘when things change, when the lockdown finishes’” (father). Repeated lockdowns and phases of closing and re-opening of services and activities was a further source of disruption and uncertainty for parents in five households.

Disruption to daily routines was particularly difficult for those on low incomes and living in overcrowded accommodation. Three such households drew attention to disruption to their youngest child’s normal sleeping patterns as a consequence of changes to routine activities for older children in the household or because the adults were not at work: “she’s had the ... evening nap, which has ... totally gone out the window because ... all the other kids are home too...so her routine’s changed drastically” (father). In another example, “her sleeping pattern, because the whole Covid thing, the night and day kind of mix up with her, because we aren’t working, we ain’t doing nothing, so you just get up ... we go to bed very late, and wake up very late” (father). The youngest children’s potential for active learning was effectively stunted.

Impacts on development

Most parents (18/22 households) expressed concern about the impact of pandemic lockdowns on their youngest child’s cognitive, speech/language and/or social development. Missing out on nursery or school, and stimulation from day-to-day activities, was seen as impeding development by parents of both babies and pre-school age children and by parents of all income bands. Some parents were concerned about possible social anxiety developing as a result of not seeing anyone outside the household: as one mother said, ‘the baby literally screams every time someone walks into the house ... even down to his nan’. Parents predicted that the prolonged isolation would herald difficulties for their children. For one, about to start nursery, her mother thought that “for a whole year and half ... she’s kept in, ... I think that’s going to have a dramatic effect

on her and her character and her personality”. For another mother, her son's being “completely confined at home literally – for the last year of his life ... if it wasn't lockdown I think he would have developed”.

For some parents of babies (0–24 months), while their infants had had a less varied exposure to the social world than their older children, such as not travelling on trains to see relatives, others thought distraction was key: “I think as long as we entertain him he isn't going to notice much difference, he isn't going to remember”(father).

Going outdoors

Study parents recognised the importance of outdoor play: “Whenever I have chance I take them in parks or nearby playground where the other children are, and she loves it you know, she doesn't want to come back home” (father). But for parents who were overcrowded at home and without private outdoor space (8/22 families), coupled with incessant risk assessments and managing exuberant children, going outdoors was difficult, as this mother explained:

“I have three children now and we're in a two-bedroom flat...it would make life a bit easier and better if we had a bigger property..... we only have a balcony...If we had a garden, I think it would've helped especially with a boy who, you know, they have a lot of energy to burn, just even to have some safe space in the garden for them to run around and not have to wait for, “Is the weather okay to go for a walk or...?” You know, “How many cases were there today, is it safe or not?”

Furthermore, the cold winter weather during the second (5 November– 2 December 2020) and third (6 January–12 April 2021) lockdowns was cited by parents in 11 households as a barrier to going outside, and made this period particularly hard, especially for those living in overcrowded conditions, and as this mother said “we are most of the time indoors in our tiny flat and then we doesn't see many people ...Now we go very little out” .

Adverse impacts

Unsurprisingly, parents reported children's feelings of boredom (9/22 households), with “the TV, they're bored with the DVD, they're bored with their games – you know it's literally just ‘We're bored’” (mother). Disruptions, confinement and boredom sometimes resulted in difficult behaviours (mentioned by 7/22 households) such as tantrums, mood swings, ‘sudden outbursts’ and ‘bad’ language. One mother talked about ‘challenging periods’ when her daughter was “lashing out at us and just being really whiny and moaning and crying and being very sensitive to things, and getting very upset over very little things at home. And it's been like an on and off switch, which is why I think it's not necessarily normal” while another mother had noticed her daughter “having these sudden outbursts, like she doesn't know how to control her emotions, and she'll just snap, and she'll use language that I've not really heard her use”.

Also unsurprising was an increase in use of ‘screen time’ among older babies and pre-school age children (mentioned by 5/22 households). Aware this was not ideal, parents reported allowing it in order to keep children occupied, and particularly when parents were trying to do paid work or supporting older children: “I have resorted to use the TV a lot of the time just to keep him ... away from me while I'm trying to do things with the other children” (mother).

New activities and flexibilities

Despite the considerable difficulties, some parents described introducing new activities, including baking, arts and crafts as well as games described as ‘old fashioned’: “what I done is started to go back to the old fashioned board games, hide and seek in the home, and charades ... And I was like ‘Okay come in the kitchen with me now’ so I’m the kitchen ‘Let’s do this, what are we going to make?’ - Look for things that you want to make, get the recipes, we’ll make this” (mother).

In most (13/22) households, parents reported that they themselves were more actively engaged in play and leisure activities than previously; “I become the playmate now” (mother). There were accounts of more flexibility in use of space being afforded to young children. Parents were more relaxed about their children playing with toys in different areas of the home than was usually allowed and more understanding about having a ‘messy’ home. A few (4/22 households) discussed the transformation of household spaces into ‘multi-use’ spaces in order to accommodate everyone’s needs and to cope with family members spending a lot more time at home: “she got a fairy doll castle with a pop up tent, they’ve got a wooden castle...and they’re all portable, so I’ve taken them all down in the front room. Which normally before Covid would not be allowed, but now that is allowed, because they need to change their scenery don’t they, I can’t keep them trapped up in the room” (mother).

Familial solidarity, as expressed through shared doings with and by young children was severely tested during the pandemic lockdowns. Urban parents rely on the provisions of facilities and services to complement home life but these were cut away. Going outdoors was highly restricted both through official mandates and parents’ assessment of risk. Home life was a competition for space and parental attention. Familial rhythms of life often fell away although in some cases were reinvented and more play with parents was introduced. Children were the site of much parental worry about their development.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The lockdowns associated with Covid-19 represented a sudden and complete break in the daily lives of young children living in this diverse inner city area, for which the impacts will unfold over time. This study found that young children’s well-being, largely invisible in the wider discourse, was in fact reshaped by the experience of lockdown in family homes.

Study evidence from mothers and fathers in 22 households shows a dramatic contraction of the breadth of children’s social worlds and an intensification of the familial world amounting to compressed lives. At the micro-level, intra-household relationships were intensified, and some parents reported strengthening emotional bonds (well-being aspect of “a happy family”, time, reliable interactions) with their children during lockdowns, especially through spending more time together, and through fathers being more available. However, more time, competing work demands and the demands of multiple children, economic pressures and, particularly, compressed living in overcrowded spaces, could compromise this aspect of well-being. The second aspect of well-being was participation in the exosystem of social worlds. Here there was a significant contraction in terms of both being out and about in neighbourhoods and contact with wider kin. Video calling was a poor substitute for hugging grandparents. The severe curtailment in relation to friends, family and ECEC prompted considerable parental concern about children’s acquisition or sustenance of basic communicative and relational competences that digital modes of contact with nurseries, relatives or friends could not compensate for, limiting societal partic-

ipation. This constraint was clearly applicable to children and adults of all ages, but very young children were perceived to be at particular risk of missing out at a crucial time in their development. Parents' worry is supported by emerging evidence from the USA suggesting a decline in young children's cognitive and physical competence during the pandemic (Moyer, 2022) and, in England, the findings of a survey of ECEC providers (Early Years Alliance, 2021) and a separate survey of parents of babies (Saunders & Hogg, 2020).

The third well-being aspect was having 'plenty to do'. The city offering of multiple activities vanished during lockdown and parents reported a sense of losing control of routines, children missing out on learning opportunities, boredom and conflict with some child behaviour that was difficult to manage as well as parental worries about health risks. Parents' abilities to maintain or install routines, and their reaction to restrictions was critical to managing lockdown in Mantovani et al. (2021) survey of parents in Italy. We similarly found that some children's well-being was more fulfilled than others—for example, parents making sure to go outside whenever possible to mitigate the impact of crowded homes, structuring time and competing demands through inventing new or restoring old games and activities at home, or having the option to minimise the impact of work demands on children's time.

What is very striking from the data is the significance of the built and urban environment in shaping children's lives. Being housed in small flats with no gardens, unable to access city provisioning of places to go, feel safe and have 'plenty to do', meant children's well-being, and their exercise of agency, was severely limited. High levels of parental effort went into navigating the pandemic associated restrictions on behalf of their children and structural reasons for difficulties (e.g. income precarity, overcrowding). The sample studied was highly ethnically diverse; these differences were important in terms of restrictions on travel and accessibility of wider kin, and the risk of serious adversity from contraction of Covid-19 (Office for National Statistics (ONS), 2020), but did not appear to structure reports of child well-being. More important was family income (Cameron, O'Brien, et al., 2021).

Parental resourcefulness was all the more important given the stripping away of the social contexts of child well-being, such as neighbourhood (Goldfeld et al., 2015) and grandparental relationships (Cantillon et al., 2021). The longer term impact of this loss of social time, indeed of pandemic impacts overall, on children, is unknown (Unicef, 2021), and compounded by elevated risk to parents' mental health and financial security (Cameron, O'Brien, et al., 2021).

This paper has explored the experiences of children aged under 5 living in the East London borough of Tower Hamlets, as told through qualitative interviews with their parents. Despite the richness of parental accounts and the importance of the parental lens for understanding family life under the pandemic, the study is limited by lack of direct accounts from children themselves. However, careful theoretical sampling has ensured a diverse range of household types to capture the diversity in children's living arrangements and efforts were made during fieldwork to evoke the child's experience from both fathers' and mothers' perspectives. The strength of locating the study in one inner London borough has meant that all the study families were experiencing the pandemic in a similar urban environment but of course generalisation to other settings for instance rural towns is not possible.

Using a socioecological approach incorporating a child rights informed understanding of well-being has enabled us to view young children as inherently social beings and rights holders whose development is shaped by multiple influences and their own interactions and interpretations. Parents in our study were very aware of the social contexts of their children's lives and mediated the impact of compressed lives during the pandemic but this was less possible for chil-

dren from low-income and over-crowded homes, and those where parental working demands were very intense.

For the future, policy and practice during a pandemic needs to pay far more attention to the family and social contexts of young children's lives and development particularly to the living conditions in highly urbanised environments.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

Having reviewed the journal policy with the authors there are no known conflicts of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in UK Data Service at <https://ukdataservice.ac.uk/find-data/>, reference number SN 855477.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ The nomenclature of 'parents' is used to describe parents and carers; the only participants were parents.
- ² The 'stay at home' order was replaced by 'stay local' on 29 March 2021 and non-essential retail reopened on 12 April 2021.
- ³ Phase (i) was a community survey of parents and parents to be ($n = 992$); phase (iii) was a community assets map (cf Cameron et al., 2021b).
- ⁴ Permitted from 9 September 2020 (Department of Health and Social Care 2020)

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