

Parenting and home schooling in diverse family settings with young children during the first COVID-19 lockdown in France

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ABSTRACT

During the COVID-19 sanitary crisis, the particular constraints faced by French single-parent families and households with children in shared residence can be analysed as additional burdens whilst parenting young children and dealing with home schooling during lockdown. Elements for implementing targeted measures are suggested.

1. INTRODUCTION

The COV-JEUNENFANT^{<^1>} (COVID-Young Child) interdisciplinary project aims to better understand the lived experiences of families with young children (0-6) during the first lockdown in France. Particular attention was paid to the unequal constraints in diverse family settings and their effects on parenting and home schooling. In 2018, single-parent families accounted for 21% of the French [households](#). One third was living below the poverty line ([de la Famille, 2014](#)). 3.4% of French children are formally living in dual [residence](#). Assuming that socio-economic insecurity for the former and circulation between homes for the latter were factors potentially amplifying the negative effects of the COVID-19 health crisis restrictions, we intended to look into the daily lives of these particular family configurations coping with educating and caring for young children during the pandemic.

2. METHODOLOGY

An online questionnaire ² collected data from a population of 490 families residing in France with at least one child up to six years old. Analyses on two sub-populations are presented here: 36 single-parent families ³ (SPF) (32 mothers and 4 fathers, 7% of our study population) and 19 families with children in shared residence (SR) (13 mothers and 6 fathers, 4%). Compared to the French national rate, the smaller proportion of SPF in our population may be due to the time lag between the birth of a child and marital separations. Our SR sample is close to, if not above, the national rate of children living in dual residence. Bivariate analyses (chi² and Fisher's exact test*, significance threshold of 0.05) and qualitative analysis (continuous thematisation of three free-expression items) were performed.

3. FACING LOCKDOWN FROM A VULNERABLE STANDPOINT

3.1 Socio-economic disparities

SPF were mainly headed by respondents with lower socio-professional profiles ($p = 0.046$): mainly employed, blue-collar workers and domestic aids (31% vs. 20%) and twice as likely unemployed (19% vs. 9%). Education ($p = 0.012^*$) and incomes ($p < 0.0001$) were also lower: 78% vs. 13% earned less than 2,500 Euro net per month during the lockdown. Thus, most of them felt "not at all comfortable" financially (53% vs. 17%, $p < 0.0001$). SPF mainly lodged in mixed-dwelling settings (64% vs. 35%, $p = 0.001$), flats (58% vs. 33%, $p = 0.011^*$) and smaller homes (53% vs. 19%, $p < 0.0001$). Families in the SR sample also more often lived in apartments (11 out of 19, $p = 0.038$). They were more likely to be headed by a single parent (3 out of 19, $p < 0.0001$), confined alone (6 out of 19, $p = 0.001$) and working during lockdown (16 out of 19, $p = 0.052$). All working parents in the SR sample were telecommuting.

3.2 Confined parenting

Twice as much respondents in the SPF sample felt pressure about how to look after children during the lockdown (22% vs. 10%, $p = 0.006$) and single parents expressed a greater need for information on their children's education (namely rules and bans) (31% vs. 17%, $p = 0.041$). Among the 17 families reporting children's media consumption, more than half (9) related increased screen-time, deviations from pre-lockdown regulations reflecting "greater flexibility".

During the lockdown, organising family life was the first concern in SPF's verbatims. Work-life balance was "difficult", "complicated" or even "impossible" for 14 respondents out of 36. Slightly more than half (53% vs. 33%, $p = 0.015$) often found it hard to control the important things in their lives and manage personal problems. Maintaining, adapting or finding a new "rhythm" was beneficial to family life for 10 respondents.

Tribulations caused by hampered circulation between homes were pointed out by 3 respondents in the SR sample: "intensified multiple requirements" strained relationships between ex-partners, differences in educational attitudes were highlighted, family balance was disrupted.

3.3 Lack of external support

In 10 SPF, adult verbatims depicted lacking relationships beyond the confined household mainly for children, who reportedly missed friends first (5 syntagms). The lack of social ties is the most mentioned sub-theme in the children's own verbatims (9 out of 17).

In the SR sample, 2 respondents pointed to the sharp reduction in relations usually necessary for the smooth functioning of shared residence. The period without the child(ren) did not always compensate for the "24 hours a day without relay".

3.1.1 *Coping strategies for some*

Parent-child relationships in the SPF sample more frequently altered during lockdown, mainly strengthening ties, and significantly more than in two-parent households (53% vs. 28%, $p = 0.002$).

4. HOME SCHOOLING WITH YOUNG CHILDREN

In the SPF sample, home schooling was more often mentioned as “complicated” and a source of “conflicts” and “pressure” (11 respondents out of 18). Compared to other family settings, time allocated by partners for home schooling in the SR sample revealed a distinctive pattern ($p = 0.014$): partners (cohabiting or not) spent more often two to four hours daily (in 5 out of 19 families) and less likely went below two hours (6 partners). At the same time, the share of missing data on this item was greater (6 respondents omitted information).

5. RISK FACTORS AND PREVENTIVE MESURES

SPF experienced the greatest reduction in exchange of community services during the first French lockdown (Lambert et al., 2020). Reinforced parent-child relationships may have been a resource to counter the deficit in support from social and family networks SPF usually rely on, also for childcare. Nevertheless, greater perceived pressure and need for guidance in setting rules should be taken into account for future supportive actions, since single parenthood, motherhood and care for young children predicted greater parental burnout during the first lockdown ([Marchetti et al., 2020](#)). Higher risks of psychological distress among children in SPF were also described ([Monnier et al., 2021](#)).

Reduced living space concerned both SPF and SR samples, the latter having to cope with their share of child care whilst more often working (and telecommuting), and less often living with a confined partner.

Partners of respondents with children in SR seemed to be more supportive with homeschooling, even if the gender ratio could be a bias (6 male SR respondents, $p = 0.007$), and missing data possibly shows no involvement from some partners, or a lack of communication on school issues between ex-partners.

Measures supporting parenting as well as homeschooling during sanitary crises should be tailored for other family settings with young children than the “average household” too often referred to ([Bessière et al., 2020](#)). Further research on larger samples would be helpful to get deeper insight of the tendencies sketched out here.

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<^2>: 69 items, on a dedicated website from April 28 to May 29, 2020. A few questionnaires were completed after the end of the lockdown in France (official dates: March 17 to May 11, 2020).

<^3>: This specific sub-population is the subject of a publication within the COV-JEUNENFANT project ([Moscaritolo et al., 2021](#)).

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