



SURREY YOUTH FOCUS
Improving the lives of young people by supporting our members

COVID 19: Listening to parents with young children in Surrey

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This report has been compiled by Surrey Youth Focus, working in conjunction with Children and Family Health Surrey. We would like to give huge thanks to the Health Visiting Team who have taken the time to listen to parents to find out how they are coping during this difficult time. We would also obviously give a massive thank you to the parents who were willing to be open and talk about their experiences of this pandemic.

Summary

The Children and Family Health Surrey Health Visiting Team spoke to 119 parents of children under 5 years old about their experiences of life during lockdown. Parents were asked what they would like to keep from their experiences, what they are worried about as restrictions ease and who they feel able to talk to if they are worried or feeling down. There was some consistency in the responses of parents and the findings have been divided into three key themes:

- Relationships and connections
- Having time
- Who do families turn to for help?
- The future

Restrictions are easing significantly and as life returns to some sense of normality a new set of challenges will emerge. The findings here are a snap shot in time but let's consider how we can maintain, sustain or change our practice taking into account what parents have told us, particularly so that we can be prepared should there be a second spike or the need for local lockdowns. The emerging findings are outlined below:

- The importance of family time for parents, there is a strong theme that parents have valued this time to strengthen family relationships and spend time together. This was replicated in the report that listened to the voice of children and young people during the same period.
- Working at home and not commuting have provided a positive opportunity for partners to have more time to engage and bond with their children.
- Parents of new born babies have appreciated the opportunity to bond as a family unit without distractions of visitors. This is already encouraged by midwives and the Health Visiting Team but there is obviously social and peer pressure to share this special time with others outside the tight family unit
- Some parents have savoured the down time and slower pace of life
- Many parents rely on partners, family and friends for support – someone they know and trust.
- Professional relationships with the Health Visiting Team, midwives and GPs were important and were sources of help and advice for parents. These were also enhanced by being able to access support online.
- Lockdown has provided both opportunities and challenges for child development
- There was concern for some parents about the impact of COVID on financial and job security.
- Parents voiced fear about COVID and the impact on their own health and that of their families. This has caused anxiety for some parents about going out into public places with their children and for their children returning to early years settings or school.

Background

The existence of COVID 19 in our communities across Surrey has created unprecedented circumstances that the whole population has had to adapt to very quickly. Schools, nurseries and childcare partially closed their doors on 20th March to children except for those who were vulnerable or whose parents were key workers. Whilst for many under 5s finding themselves at home may have been no change, but having parents at home, trying to juggle work, childcare and running the house was a big change. Parents and their small children were also limited to exercise outside once a day and not allowed to interact with anyone face to face except those in their household. With lockdown now having eased, but with COVID-19 still around whilst families are able to get out and about and interact with others, the guidelines bring a new group of challenges.

Organisations working with families have rapidly reconfigured services to be able to continue to reach out and offer support – through virtual meetings, websites and having helplines in place to provide information and advice. However, how do we know that in the newly reconfigured landscape of our lives, that we understand what families with young children have faced and had to deal with during this time. What is going on for them - what is going well? What are they worried about? Who are they turning to when they need help?

- Imagine a single mum with small children trying to juggle childcare and work at the same time – who can she share her stresses with, how can she find time for herself so that she can be the best she can for her children?
- Imagine a family in a cramped flat with Dad working from home – tensions are high as there is no peace to concentrate and the children can't make a noise... but there's no garden for them to let off steam. What happens when tensions get too high? How are they managing?
- Imagine a family where they have no income due to redundancy, how can they feed their family? Who can they ask for help?
- Imagine a family with a new born baby who have no one to support them in the first few weeks as they aren't allowed visitors – are they relishing this precious family time or are they really not coping?

As we have all adapted to a new way of being, Surrey Youth Focus, together with colleagues from the public sector and third sector, have sought to understand how this is impacting and will continue to impact our children and young people. We have our own personal experiences, anecdotal comments and theories of what is going on in households across Surrey. Is it more difficult for families to reach out for help? They “don't want to bother anyone” – it's not as easy when you have to consciously pick up the phone or send an email. Issues may be magnified due to the intensity of all working and living under one roof. In the same way it is more difficult for those working with families to watch out and know when things may not be right.

In order to better understand, so that we can ensure services and support that is in place is right, Surrey Youth Focus has worked with Children and Family Health Surrey to gather insight from parents with children under 5 years old.

We have asked our colleagues in the Health Visiting Team across Surrey who work with parents to seek their voices, to listen to how they feel about this situation. We asked them the following three questions:

- Is there anything good about Lockdown that you would like to keep?
- What are you most worried about when lockdown ends?
- If you were feeling down, worried about your child/family who or where would you seek help/advice?

This has not been a scientific exercise that has sought a specific representative sample using controlled conditions but rather a piece that seeks insight that can help enrich strategy and a way forward. Whilst we have asked what parents are worried about, we did not ask what they had found challenging or what had been bad about lockdown. Therefore, there may be negative aspects of the restrictions that parents have experienced that have not been raised during this piece of work. However, using known, trusted adults to ask open questions can sometimes provide enlightening and surprising responses that would not be achieved in a more structured environment.

Findings

The Health Visiting Team from Children and Family Health Surrey listened to 119 parents who had children under the age of 5 years across Surrey during June 2020. Conversations took place during routine appointments and health checks that The Health Visiting Team were undertaking. Parents were asked about their experiences of Lockdown. The tables below show the reasons for visit, age of child and borough or district where the interaction took place.

Table 1: Reason for the interaction with the health visitor

Reason for visit	Number of respondents	Percentage of respondents
Antenatal contact	0	0%
New Birth visit	23	19%
3-4 week review	5	4%
6-8 week review	20	17%
1 year review	1	1%
2 year review	35	30%
Follow up visit	13	11%
Other visit	12	10%
Not known	10	8%
TOTAL	119	101%

Table 2: Age of child being assessed by the health visitor

Age of child	Number of respondents	Percentage of respondents
Pregnant	0	0%
Under 1 year	49	41%
1 - 5 years	44	37%
More than one child under 5 years	17	14%
Not known	9	8%
TOTAL	119	100%

Table 3: Borough or district in which the interaction with the health visitor took place

Borough/District	Number of respondents	Percentage of respondents
Elmbridge	29	24%
Epsom & Ewell	10	8%
Guildford	6	5%
Mole Valley	1	1%
Reigate & Banstead	21	18%
Runnymede	5	4%
Spelthorne	15	13%
Surrey Heath	0	0%
Tandridge	10	8%
Waverley	12	10%
Woking	7	6%
Not known	3	3%
TOTAL	119	100%

Whilst the sample size is not extensive, we have provided some proportions in the findings but these aren't statistically significant and should be used with the caveat that sample size may be small and it is not representative of the whole of Surrey, it is simply a snapshot in time. However, they provide an indication of impact and the quotes add strength and a rich insight.

Everyone and every family are different and so it can be difficult to predict how lockdown has affected families in Surrey and what support and services may be beneficial. There is an overriding sense of positivity throughout the report, however it must be borne in mind that parents may have felt they were unable to share more negative experiences or they did not feel the questions enabled them to share any challenges they may have felt. However, there were some very distinct themes that have emerged from this listening exercise that have could have some interesting implications for strategies going forward. The key themes were:

- *Relationships and connections* – with family, friends, partners
- *Having time* – as a family
- *Who do families turn to for help?*
- *The future* – impact of COVID both positive and negative

The following sections provide more detailed insight into each of these themes.

Relationships and connections

Social interaction is so important for all of us, and families with children under the age of 5 years are no exception. There was an overwhelming positivity about the impact of lockdown on spending time with family. Two-thirds of parents would like to continue having more time with the family once lockdown eases. Parents felt that they have valued this time to strengthen family relationships. Families have appreciated being together and spending more time with each other. In addition, having partners at home due to the need to work at home is something that nearly a third of families would like to maintain. It has provided a positive opportunity for partners to engage more within the family and bond with their children. This was found across

parents with children of all ages under 5 years but particularly for those with new babies under 1 year old.

“Enjoyed being able to spend more time together as a family, and being able to slow down. Feel like we know each other better.”
(family with baby under 1 year)

“Spending more time with my children.”
(family with child 1 – 5 years)

“The extra time spent with my child.”
(family with child 1 – 5 years)

“time as a family. Husband supporting at home whilst on furlough.”
(family with more than one child under 5 years)

An interesting response from just over a quarter of parents (n=49) with children under a year, and in particular those with new born babies, was that they liked being able to spend time alone to bond with their new baby and not have to juggle this special time with receiving visitors. Fathers being at home for longer than the usual 2 week paternity leave meant that they were able to bond with their babies more strongly and provide support.

“Family time, just us, able to learn what baby wants and needs, people not popping in unexpectedly”
(family with baby under 1 year)

“Having dad around for 2 month paternity leave instead of 2 weeks. Not being bombarded with family and friends straight after the birth.”
(family with baby under 1 year)

“Nice not to be bombarded after baby was born. Gave us time to settle and adjust as parents.”
(family with baby under 1 year)

“Husband able to spend time with family”
(family with child 1 – 5 years)

“All the family being together more and having more help”
(family with baby under 1 year)

A minority of parents have felt isolated and others are worried about spending less time with their family as lockdown eases. This is something that they will miss. A small proportion were also worried about socialising as lockdown eased, both from their perspective as parents but they were also worried about their children being able to socialize and having the opportunity to learn these skills. This is an aspect of child development that parents are worried they have lost.

“not being able to get a babysitter as everyone will be going out!”
(family with child 1-5 years)

“not met with wider family, not mixing with other new parents, socially isolated”
(health visitor on behalf of family with child under 1 year)

Having time

For many parents of children under the age of 5 years old restrictions and being housebound has provided opportunities to slow down and have time to spend with their families and do things that at a slower pace. Having more time and a slower pace were all highlighted as aspects of the Lockdown restrictions that parents would like to sustain. A proportion of parents (10%) would like to continue the peace and quiet that lockdown brought and a minority are worried about the fast pace of life returning as we emerge from the restrictions that have been put in place.

“slower pace of life, family time”
(family with child 1-5 years)

“Life is calmer, spending more quality time as a family, more time to do fun things with children at home”
(family with more than 1 child)

Parents commented on having a more relaxed atmosphere, being able to have more time to do different things with their children and being able to eat together as a family. A few were relieved they did *“not have to do school run”* (family with child 1-5 years)! One mum commented on being able to catch up with old friends as there was more time.

"eating together as a family. Realising we can have a whole day at home and it's ok"
(family with child 1-5 years)

"relaxed mornings and not having to wake the children"
(family with more than one child 1-5 years)

"had lots of time to be together and to do old fashioned things like cooking together"
(family with child 1-5 years)

"Prompted to get in touch and talk to friends who have not been in touch for a long time."
(family with child under 1 year)

Lockdown and the associated restrictions meant that many parents were able to work from home. This enabled families to be together and as there was no commuting or travelling to work it meant there was more time to be spent with the family. This brought flexibility and the ability to share childcare between parents as there was often an extra pair of hands.

"home with my family and less commuting"
(family with child 1-5 years)

"working from home, had lots of 1:1 time with kids"
(family with child 1-5 years)

"Flexibility, better work life balance"
(family with child 1-5 years)

"I have enjoyed working from home and would like to do this in the future"
(family with more than one child under 5)

Some parents with very young children felt that having more time at home together and a slower pace of life has been beneficial in their child's development. Some parents have noticed that their children increased independence, their speech and language has developed significantly and they have been toilet trained.

"Time with my children 2 year speech come on miles, now toilet trained, and more independent"
(family with more than one child under 5 years)

"seeing expressive speech improve."
(family with child 1-5 years)

"been able to focus on breastfeeding my baby... more relaxed as not inundated with visitors"
(family with child under 1 year)

However, as would be expected a few families have been worried about the impact of COVID on their child's development and have felt that there has been nothing positive about the restrictions. Parents did not particularly comment on difficulties in juggling work and family life. This may be because of the way in which the questions were posed or to family circumstances due to the age range of the children – some parents were on maternity leave or may not work and so did not have these issues to contend with.

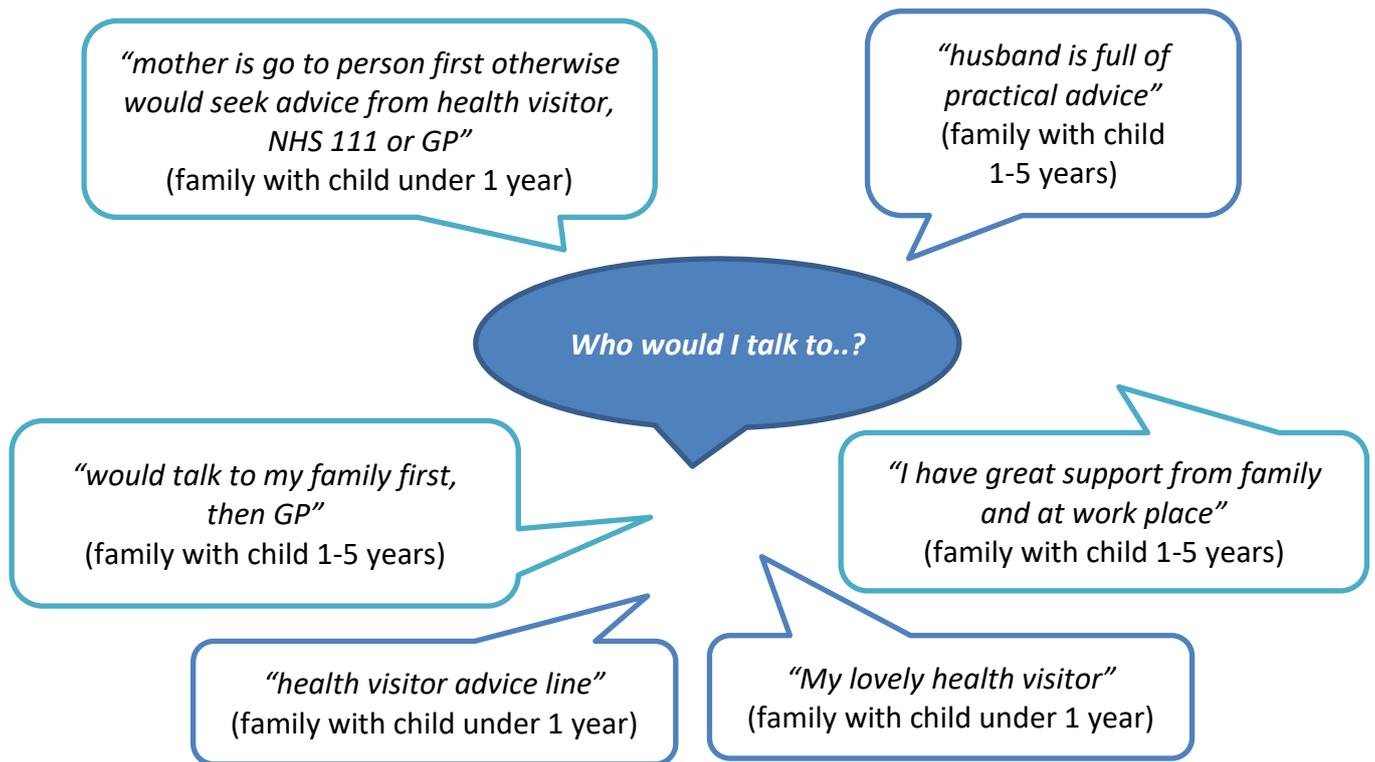
"No, its been awful, kids are driving me nuts"
(family with child 1-5 years)

"Baby not having had as much opportunity to socialise as older sibling had. Different experience, worried he may have missed out.."
(family with baby under 1 year)

"Nothing, my husband has been out of the house for work, so I've been on my own a lot"
(family with child under 1 year)

Who do families turn to for help?

Parents were asked who or where they would seek advice or help if they feeling down or worried about their child or family. More than a third rely on their family for advice and support and 11% specifically mentioned talking to their mother. A fifth also mentioned that they would talk to their partner. A quarter would talk to their friends. For some parents they mentioned more than one person that they would talk to if they were worried, it may be that this is dependent on the issue that was concerning them. Parents would also turn to professionals for help – the person most frequently mentioned was the GP with 45% of parents stating that they would talk to them if they were worried or feeling down. A quarter would also talk to their health visitor. It is apparent that relationships with GPs, Health Visiting Team and midwives were important.



A small number of parents were able to access support through their workplace – either counselling, mental health training or support from HR. The table below outlines who parents would turn to.

There was good awareness of helplines and websites that are available to them and would seek advice from these as appropriate. These included the CFHS 0-19 advice line and website, NHS choices and 111. However, given the proportions it is apparent that contact with a person they knew and trusted was the preferred route for support rather than using technology.

Table 4: Who or where would parents seek help/advice if they were feeling down, worried about your child/family who or where would you seek help/advice?

Who/where would you seek advice/help?	Total	Percentage
111	6	5%
CFHS Advice Line	15	13%
CFHS Website	3	3%
Family	44	37%
Friends	32	27%
GP	53	45%
Health visitor	28	24%
Midwives	3	3%
Mother	13	11%
NHS/Choices	5	4%
Online	5	4%
Other (Church, charities)	8	7%
Partner	24	20%
Other helplines	2	2%
Work (counselling, HR, MH training)	6	5%
Grand Total	247	

(n=119, total is greater than 119 as respondents gave more than one answer)

The future

Looking forward as restrictions ease and we find ourselves in a ‘new normal’ parents shared their thoughts for the future. We have already outlined some of the positive aspects of the restrictions that parents would love to sustain:

- Time spent together as a family
- A slower pace of life
- Working from home allowing the whole family to be together more
- The positive impact that restrictions have had on their child(ren)’s development.

Conversely parents raised a number of concerns and anxieties about the future including:

- coming out of lockdown too soon
- illness or death affecting themselves or their family
- anxiety about their children going back to childcare, nursery or school
- impact of restrictions on their child’s development
- a second wave of COVID and the associated implications of a second lockdown.

An overriding concern for almost half of parents (46%) was the impact of COVID itself. It is apparent that parents are very protective of their family unit and are keen to keep them safe.

"...second wave. I worry for my children especially my newborn baby."
(family with more than one child)

"Worried about what others are doing – not being careful and keeping clean and worried about baby as feel he is vulnerable."
(family with child under 1 year)

"Keeping the children safe especially if there is a second wave."
(family with more than one child)

"Worried about catching covid"
(family with more than one child)

"When will it be safe - is it too early to ease lockdown."
(family with child under 1 year)

Parents were worried about the impact of restrictions of their child’s development as well as being anxious about their children returning to childcare, nursery or school. One reason was that they are sad about not being able to spend as much time together. For those families with children in school they were worried about how they would adjust after the time off and whether they would manage. Parents with children in nursery or childcare were also worried about them returning – about spread of infection, being able to cope and how they would settle.

"will my child have difficulty socialising"
(family with child 1-5 years)

"how my older children will cope going back to school- we haven't been able to do anything with them due to babies being born."
(family with more than one child)

"Kids going back to nursery and spreading the infection."
(family with child 1-5 years)

"baby going to nursery as it will be different experience."
(family with child 1-5 years)

A small number of parents, particularly those with children under 1 year, voiced concerns about going out to public places. There appears to be an anxiety in light of COVID and whether it is safe.

“Anxious about going to shops and cafes etc “
(family with more than one child)

“Going to shops and public places with baby - will she be safe? “
(family with child under 1 year)

“worries about ... going out with newborn baby“
(family with child under 1 year)

“Worried about a second wave and going to public places, returning to nursery “
(family with child 1-5 years)

“How or what the new normal will be like, what capacity to see friends, go to soft plays, farms...”
(unknown age of child)

Several parents were worried about returning to work, commuting as well as financial and job security and the impact that COVID has had on the wider economy. Some parents have been furloughed during the restrictions which has enabled them to spend more time together as a family.

“worried about finances as [husband] works at a café, has been furloughed and income has been significantly less. “
(family with child under 1 year)

“work load was too much, intend to ask work for more flexible working“
(family with child 1-5 years)

“recovering financially from not being able to work. “
(family with child under 1 year)

“[worried about...] commuting on London Tube. “
(family with child 1-5 years)

General state of the economy and impact on husbands job. “
(family with child under 1 year)

“if I still have a job and if my partner can get a job. “
(family with child 1-5 years)

Conversely, 14% of parents who were listened said that nothing was worrying them about emerging from the restrictions.

Emerging Themes and recommendations for exploration

There is depth and richness to the information and insight provided by these 119 parents of children under 5 years. Whilst we don't have a complete set of demographic information, we can surmise that they cover a broad spectrum of the community in Surrey, those who may be vulnerable and others who have more stable lives. What is apparent is that the experiences of families have been diverse. There are however, distinct themes that have emerged and below are some suggestions that as a partnership and system we could consider.

- The importance of family time for parents, there is a strong theme that parents have valued this time to strengthen family relationships and spend time together. This was replicated in the report that listened to the voice of children and young people during the same period.
- Working at home and not commuting have provided a positive opportunity for partners to have more time to engage and bond with their children.
 - For exploration:
 - *Is there anything we can do to enable this to continue?*
 - *How can we encourage the importance of family interaction?*
 - *Can we explore further what hinders parents and family to spend more quality time together?*
- Parents of new born babies have appreciated the opportunity to bond as a family unit without distractions of visitors. This is already encouraged by midwives and The Health Visiting Team but there is obviously social and peer pressure to share this special time with others outside the tight family unit.
 - For exploration:
 - *How can we encourage families to take time to bond after the birth of their baby?*
 - *Are there messages that could be communicated more widely to families and friends of the importance of time together as a family unit after birth?*
- Some parents have savoured the down time and slower pace of life.
 - For exploration:
 - *How can we encourage the slower pace to continue and not revert to lots of organised activities for children?*
 - *What can we do to encourage families to seek out opportunities to “do more activities at home rather than out and about all the time” and “keep things simple”?*
- Many parents rely on partners, family and friends for support – someone they know and trust.
 - For exploration:
 - *How can we enable wider networks to be able to support families more effectively?*
 - *What more can be done to communicate where to find help?*
 - *What communication tools can we use to facilitate sharing helpful information between professionals and families but also using a peer led approach?*

- Professional relationships with The Health Visiting Team, midwives and GPs were important and were sources of help and advice for parents. These were also enhanced by being able to access support online.
 - For exploration:
 - *How can we maintain the good level of awareness of the CFHS advice line and website alongside NHS 111 and NHS Choices as sources of information and help?*
- It is apparent that technology has a place but does not replace contact with another person to talk issues through.
 - For exploration:
 - *How can commissioners ensure that person to person contact continues to be built into service development and delivery?*
 - *Can we explore how parents would like technology to enhance but not replace personal contact?*
- Lockdown has provided both opportunities and challenges for child development.
 - For exploration:
 - *What can we do to reassure parents that their child will not be left behind due to the restrictions?*
 - *How can we encourage and share the opportunities to enhance children's development by spending quality time with them?*
 - *Can we use a peer led approach to support parents in helping their children develop their full potential?*
- There was concern for some parents about the impact of COVID on financial and job security.
 - For exploration:
 - *Are there opportunities to signpost families who are concerned about finances and security to relevant organisations e.g. Citizen's Advice Bureaux*
- Parents voiced fear about COVID and the impact on their own health and that of their families. This has caused anxiety for some parents about going out into public places with their children and for their children returning to early years settings or school.
 - For exploration:
 - *Are there things we can do to reassure families about COVID and reinforce the safety measures they can take to reduce the risk to themselves?*
 - *What can be done to ease the return to early years settings and school for parents and children who may be anxious about friendships, social distancing and coronavirus?*

The voice of these parents is a snap shot of a unique time. It helps us to understand their perspective so that they can be at the heart of our planning and decision making. The landscape is ever changing but these findings can be considered to identify any learning that can be taken forward as new or revised practice but also to be prepared should we face a second wave or a local lockdown. Let's put ourselves in the shoes of others so that we might, as a partnership and a system, use this insight to guide our practice.