

The Impact of Emergency Pandemic Home Schooling on Parental Mental Health:

Findings from The Do Try This at Home School and Fastuna

February -March 2021

*If you would like to use any of this data in publications please let us know, and cite Sarah Vaughan and Maria Soroka as the authors, thank you.

Abstract:

The purpose of this study was to raise awareness about the mental health issues that parents are experiencing during lockdowns, due to increased pressure as they juggle parenting, home schooling, work and non-stop chores - essentially doing the impossible over prolonged periods of time.

Our method was to collect data through a short online survey that would highlight key areas of concern, but also be simple and quick for parents to complete. From the responses, we can see that parents are in desperate need for help and support, and this will go on long after children return to school.

Key Findings:

These statistics are taken from the National Representative survey: (300 parents, we also interviewed 240 parents via our professional and social networks.)

- In total 81% of parents stated that they were experiencing at least one mental health issue such as anxiety, depression, high levels of stress and broken sleep.
- 65% of parents reported that their mental health had slightly or significantly worsened during lockdowns.
- 50% of parents reported feeling overwhelmed by the level of support that they were required to give their children in terms of home schooling.
- 43% stated that they could hardly cope with the level of support their children needed whilst learning online.
- Parents of children who had Special Educational Needs reported much more often that they were struggling to cope with the level of support needed for home schooling, and parents with children in Primary School also felt a higher level of overwhelm.

Definition of Emergency Pandemic Home Schooling:

Emergency Pandemic Home Schooling, in this study, is defined as the remote learning/ online learning that schools provided for families who would usually have their children in school.

It is "School at Home", rather than Elective Home Education, or Home Schooling in any other sense.

About the authors:

Sarah Vaughan is a mother of three school aged children and the Founder of The Do Try This at Home School and The Play Well Trust. She is a qualified teacher, experienced home educator and holistic therapist. She has over 20 years' experience of supporting children and families across a wide range of settings and roles.

Maria Soroka is a mother of one school aged child. She is a Psychologist and Managing Director of consumer survey platform www.fastuna.com.

Introduction:

The global pandemic has impacted deeply upon us all in many ways, and parents are no exception. From financial worries and health concerns to trying to work from home with no childcare and of course the added pressure of emergency pandemic home schooling, many parents have reached breaking point, and this is concerning.

Inevitably, there was always going to be an impact on the whole of society when a global pandemic struck, and our lives changed, but the extent to which this has impacted upon parents and also children, is devastating. The added pressure of having to home school children on top of everything else, seems to have produced a sense of failure and overwhelm amongst many parents who did their best to achieve the impossible.

After receiving messages and witnessing for herself, parents' mental health declining at an alarming rate during the pandemic lockdowns, Sarah Vaughan, founder of The Do Try This at Home School took it upon herself to investigate further.

As a mother of three, and a qualified teacher and an experienced home educator, Sarah was also finding these expectations unmanageable and unrealistic and so she teamed up with Psychologist and Managing Director of consumer survey platform www.fastuna.com, Maria Soroka, to create a survey for parents.

The initial survey was distributed amongst social and professional networks with an overwhelming response from 240 parents. A second survey was then created as a National Representative Survey to give statistically accurate data from families across the country. National representative quotas of age, gender and region of the UK were applied to get statistically correct data. This was distributed to 300 parents and the findings are published in this report.

The Data:

In this section the data collected in both surveys is presented side by side.

1. Percentage of parents agreeing with the following statements.

Question	Initial Survey	National Representative Survey
I am heavily involved in the home schooling of my children.	65%	60%
I feel confident that I can help my children with school work.	41%	60%
I am not happy for my children to study online because they lack social environment.	68%	56%
I am not happy for my children to study online because it impacts negatively on their well-being.	59%	50%
I feel overwhelmed by the level of input school expects from me in order to help my children	57%	50%
Having my children home all the time feels overwhelming.	68%	50%
I actually enjoy having my children at home.	31%	54%
Learning online is not ideal for my children.	74%	61%

I can hardly cope with the level of support that my children need to learn online.	53%	43%
My children are independent learners, and I am hardly ever involved.	11%	42%

2. Educational setting – where are your children? (People with more than one child could tick more than one box)

Type of setting	Initial Survey	National Representative Survey
Nursery	11%	9%
Primary School	83%	61%
Secondary School	36%	53%
6 th Form	4%	6%
Home Educated	1%	3%
College	2%	6%
University	0%	2%
Other	3%	3%

3. Do any of your children have Special Educational Needs?

	Initial Survey	National Representative Survey
Yes	21%	22%
No	79%	78%

4. How many children do you have?

	Initial Survey	National Representative Survey
1	16%	35%
2	59%	37%
3	23%	18%
4	2%	9%
5 or more	0%	2%

5. Do you work?

	Initial Survey	National Representative Survey
Yes – Full time employed	37%	58%
Yes – Part Time Employed	23%	22%
Yes – Full Time Self-Employed	10%	8%

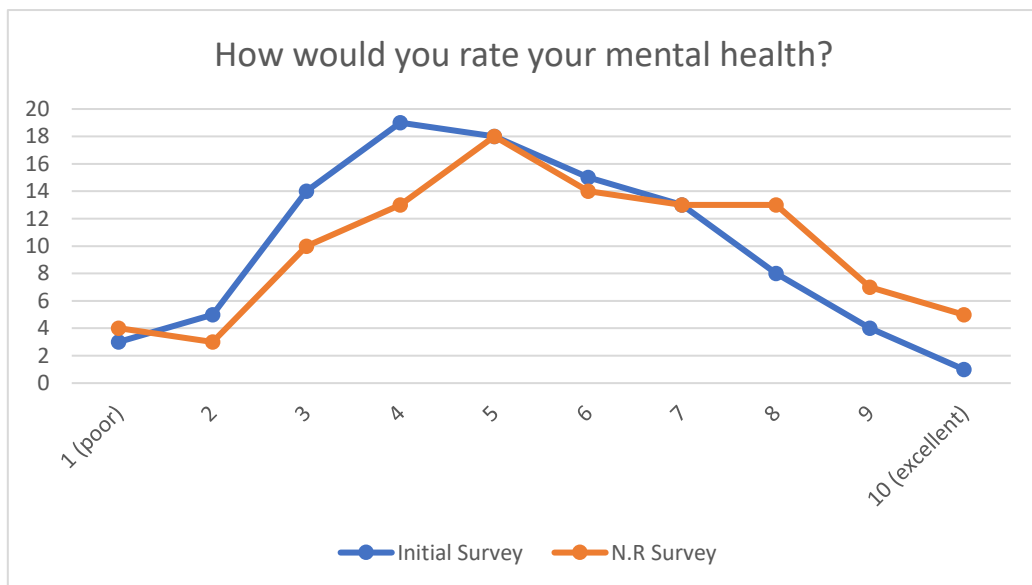
Yes – Part-Time Self Employed	12%	2%
Not currently working	17%	11%

6. Which of the following have you experienced recently?

Issue	Initial Survey	National Representative Survey
High levels of stress	74%	43%
Anxiety	66%	49%
Depression	36%	29%
Feeling overwhelmed and unable to cope	73%	32%
Difficulty Sleeping/ Broken Sleep/ insomnia	67%	36%
Digestive problems	23%	13%
Eating disorder	5%	7%
Panic attacks	11%	11%
Other mental health issues	8%	10%
None of the above	7%	19%

7. How would you rate your mental health? (1 being poor – 10 being excellent)

	Initial Survey	National Representative Survey
1 (poor)	3%	4%
2	5%	3%
3	14%	10%
4	19%	13%
5	18%	18%
6	15%	14%
7	13%	13%
8	8%	13%
9	4%	7%
10 (excellent)	1%	5%



8. Would you say that your mental health has worsened, improved or stayed about the same during lockdowns?

	Initial Survey	National Representative Survey
Significantly worsened	44%	22%
Slightly worsened	36%	43%
Stayed about the same	14%	22%
Slightly improved	5%	10%
Significantly improved	2%	13%

At the end of both surveys there were two open ended questions relating to mental health and home schooling. Some of the responses were emotionally difficult to read. I have not included all comments in this report.

9. Do you feel supported with your mental health? Do you know where to find more support if you need it?

There were mixed responses to this question on both surveys. Many people found support within their own families, especially with their partner, but there were also many who did not feel that they had the mental health support that they needed.

Reasons for not accessing mental health support included:

- Not wanting to put additional pressure on the NHS.
- There are insufficient NHS mental health services and long waiting lists for limited support.
- “Other people are worse than me and need it more.”
- “My child’s mental health is so bad I don’t have the capacity to look after my own.” (This was a common theme in many responses.)
- Feeling totally overwhelmed and anxious with no time to seek support.
- Feeling ashamed and embarrassed to admit to people that I am not coping.
- Some did not know where to get support.

There were some positives in the responses as well, and it seems that many people are employing self-help techniques including:

- Employing strategies that they had learned in previous therapy.
- Getting outside
- Herbal remedies
- Meditation
- Self-help apps
- Reading articles on mental health
- Gratitude
- Mindfulness
- Religion/ faith

Lots of people said that they would contact their GP or mental health charities if they felt they needed extra support and there was praise for understanding and supportive schools.

10. Tell us about your experience of pandemic home schooling.

This question elicited some of the most emotional responses on both surveys, especially when parents were also under pressure to work. Parents of children who had Special Educational Needs or who had children in primary school were disproportionately impacted.

These are some of the hundreds of comments we received:

“Trying to work and home school doesn’t work.”

“I cannot meet the expectations of my employer and home school two kids.”

“My employer is inflexible – The juggling of work, home schooling and supporting my children’s well-being has had a significantly negative impact on all of us.”

“It’s been truly awful. Trying to work, while home schooling two children who have online lessons at the same time has been near on impossible. Stress levels are at an all time high.”

“I think that the juggling of school and work is insane. It’s a trade off with earning money to feed my children or get them educated. Both impossible tasks.”

“I work nights and my partner works days. I’m struggling to find time to sleep and also work around doing my son’s school work.”

“Trying to home school children with SEN is so difficult. There are sensory issues with online learning and meltdowns – stressful.”

“I hate it...it’s a battle every day, three times a day, just to get her online and then she won’t actually do the work.” (Parent of three ASD children)

“No thought has been given to these families by the government. Disabilities and SEN have not been considered as often as they should be during this pandemic.”

“We have a son who is CEV and medically complex. I am his full-time carer. Our other children are home, supposedly learning... I don’t feel like I am teaching my children anything, and they are just ticking boxes to get through the week. I worry about the future for them.”

There were also some positive responses from parents about their experiences of pandemic home schooling.

“It’s quite fun! Makes me very relaxed and not tense.”

“(My) children are much happier at home. The hard part will be going back to “normal.”

“School has been amazing, and the live lessons really help.”

Again, there was praise for schools and teachers who have been providing lessons and support during the pandemic home schooling.

“The primary school have been amazing since day 1 of lockdown.”

“I have been lucky in this lockdown as my children’s school has been fantastic.”

Within the responses to these open questions there were several key issues that were highlighted. These were:

- Home schooling children with SEN was very difficult.
- Working and pandemic home schooling were not compatible.
- Having no personal space was hard.
- Being a single parent and home schooling (and working) was hard.
- Many parents didn’t feel qualified to teach their children.
- Trying to home school across a range of ages was difficult.
- Children, as well as their parents, were suffering with considerable mental health issues with limited support.
- The expectations of both schools and employers was high.
- There were also technology and internet issues.

“Lockdown three is the hardest yet. We are all drained and feeling confined at home... I’m feeling exhausted.”

The impact of the pandemic on elective home educating families:

The global pandemic has impacted hugely across all types of education and elective home education is no exception. Many home educating families have stated that although they “educate at home,” their lives and ways of educating have been completely disrupted too.

For almost a year now, it’s been very difficult for any type of group meet up and most of the facilities that home educating families would usually access have also been closed.

“My children have mostly embraced online learning and Zoom lessons but miss their friends. When schools re-opened, their groups were still unable to run, so it’s been almost a year of no groups or meet ups. It would be helpful for us, if when schools are allowed to re-open, home ed groups could re-start too.”

Conclusions and recommendations:

These surveys have highlighted just how devastating the impact of the global pandemic has been on parents - the ones who have been doing their best to hold everything together, the ones who have felt overwhelmed. Parents have been hit hard and as an indirect, or perhaps direct result of this, children’s mental health and well-being is suffering too.

Maria Soroka, co-author of this study, writes:

As a psychologist and sociologist and being a mum myself, I find these figures really shocking. Think about it: 6 out of 10 adults in this country are parents of at least one school-aged child. And 80% of those parents have experienced some mental health issues recently. That means that we’ve got at least 50% of the total adult population between 25 to 55 y.o. that somehow are psychologically unstable and need help and support. So the mental health of the nation should be an absolute priority for our health system and the government.

The pressure of emergency pandemic home schooling has been a step too far for many parents and children and has possibly caused more damage than good in some cases.

One conclusion that we can draw from this data, is that parents are going to need support for mental health and well-being going forward. Although schools re-open on March 8th, this will not ‘cure’ the deep emotional damage that the past year has caused. We have been forced to confront suppressed emotions and deal with an intense level of stress for a long period of time. We will all need to take some time to process what has happened, and so will our children.

Recommendations:

- For the UK government to read this report and consider ways that they can support parental mental health going forward.
- Significant additional funding needs to be made available to the NHS to provide in person mental health support, as well as online support.
- Significant additional funding needs to be made available to CAMHS to support children **and families**, long term, with mental health issues. And waiting times should be less than 6 weeks, rather than months and months.
- For Elective Home Education families to be allowed to have access to Covid safe groups/ activities and meet ups at the same time as schools re-open.

- For employers to support parents, as they return to work in their full capacity. Many parents will need time to process all the difficult emotions that they have just experienced for the past year and will continue to experience as they send their children into school in a global pandemic.
- For parents. Take some time to check in with yourself. How are you feeling? If you are not feeling well, if you are anxious, not sleeping, struggling with depressive episodes or just not feeling well, please seek professional help. You are so important.
- For the government and schools to consider more holistic ways to reintroduce children and families back into school. We saw in the report that being outside, meditation and mindfulness all had a positive impact upon mental health.
- For the government to be aware that if there was another lockdown, parents are already at breaking point. Enforced pandemic home schooling will not be the best option for most families.