

COVID-19 pandemic: Effects on the lives of Australian children and families



Poll report

Poll 18, July 2020

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Report highlights

- The majority (75%) of parents report their families have become closer and almost half (42%) say they are more connected to their child since the pandemic
- Many Australian children have spent more time on screens for entertainment (51%), almost half (42%) have done less exercise and a quarter of children (25%) have eaten more unhealthy food during the pandemic
- A third of children (31%) who were unwell or injured during the pandemic had health care delayed or avoided, largely due to concern among parents about themselves or their child catching COVID-19
- More than a quarter (28%) of families have experienced job loss or reduced household income during the pandemic
- Almost half (46%) of parents report the COVID-19 pandemic has had a negative impact on their own mental health and a third (36%) say it has negatively affected the mental health of their child

About the survey

In an online survey conducted from June 15 to June 23, 2020, we asked Australian parents about the health behaviours of their children and themselves in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic. The survey included questions about lifestyle, mental health, the use of health services and family finances.

The survey questions can be viewed at www.rchpoll.org.au

On 27 February 2020, the Commonwealth Government of Australia declared the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic. From March onwards various levels of restrictions occurred across Australia. When completing the survey, respondents were asked to think about life 'since COVID-19' as being since March 2020.

Of note, at the time the data was collected, schools, kindergartens and childcare centres in all states and territories had resumed face-to-face learning. Fieldwork was conducted just prior to the second period of Level 3 Stay at Home Directions in much of Victoria. Any interpretation of these findings requires consideration of the time sensitive nature of the COVID-19 pandemic and the different level of restrictions across Australia.

About the sample

A nationally representative sample of 2018 parents yielded data on a total of 3408 children aged between one month and 18 years, including 88 infants (<1 year), 250 toddlers (1–<3 years), 290 pre-schoolers (3–<5 years), 1565 primary school aged children (5–<13 years) and 1215 teenagers (13–<18 years). The data was subsequently weighted by state of residence, sex and socio-economic status based on postcode to reflect the distribution of the Australian population using figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

How has COVID-19 affected health-related behaviours and habits of children and families?

Exercise, physical activity and time outdoors

According to parent report, almost half of children have spent less time being physically active (42%) and less time outdoors (42%) since the COVID-19 pandemic began (see figure 1). More teenage children spent less time being physically active (44%) than primary school or pre-school aged children (37%).

A small minority of children (8%) were both more physically active and spent more time outdoors during the pandemic period.

Only one in ten (10%) children aged 5 to <18 years were reported to meet the national guidelines¹ of at least 60 minutes a day of moderate to vigorous physical activity during the two weeks preceding the survey.

The majority of parents (87%) felt that physical activity was important for their child's mental health during the pandemic, yet half (49%) found it hard to find ways for their child to be physically active. Most parents said their children had more time for physical activity (61%) but a third of parents (31%) said they were too busy themselves to encourage their children's physical activity. Thirty-six per cent of parents said their own or their child's concern about catching COVID-19 was a barrier to their child engaging in exercise or physical activity outdoors.

Diet and eating patterns

Parents reported that a quarter of children have eaten more food in general (26%) and more unhealthy food (25%) during the pandemic (see figure 1). The majority of parents (60%) said they tried harder than usual to feed their children healthy food during the pandemic, with 18 per cent reporting that their children had consumed more fruit and vegetables. Almost half (43%) of children were reported to have consumed sugary drinks or treat foods on most days of the week. The national dietary guidelines recommend these foods be consumed only sometimes and in small amounts.²

Of note, the majority of parents (78%) said their families ate more home cooked meals and ate together more often (75%) during the pandemic.

Almost two-thirds of parents (63%) said their children have been more involved in preparing meals at home.

Concerningly, more than one in four (28%) parents reported at times not having enough money to buy all the food their family needs since COVID-19.

Changes in health-related behaviours of children aged 3 to <18 years since COVID-19

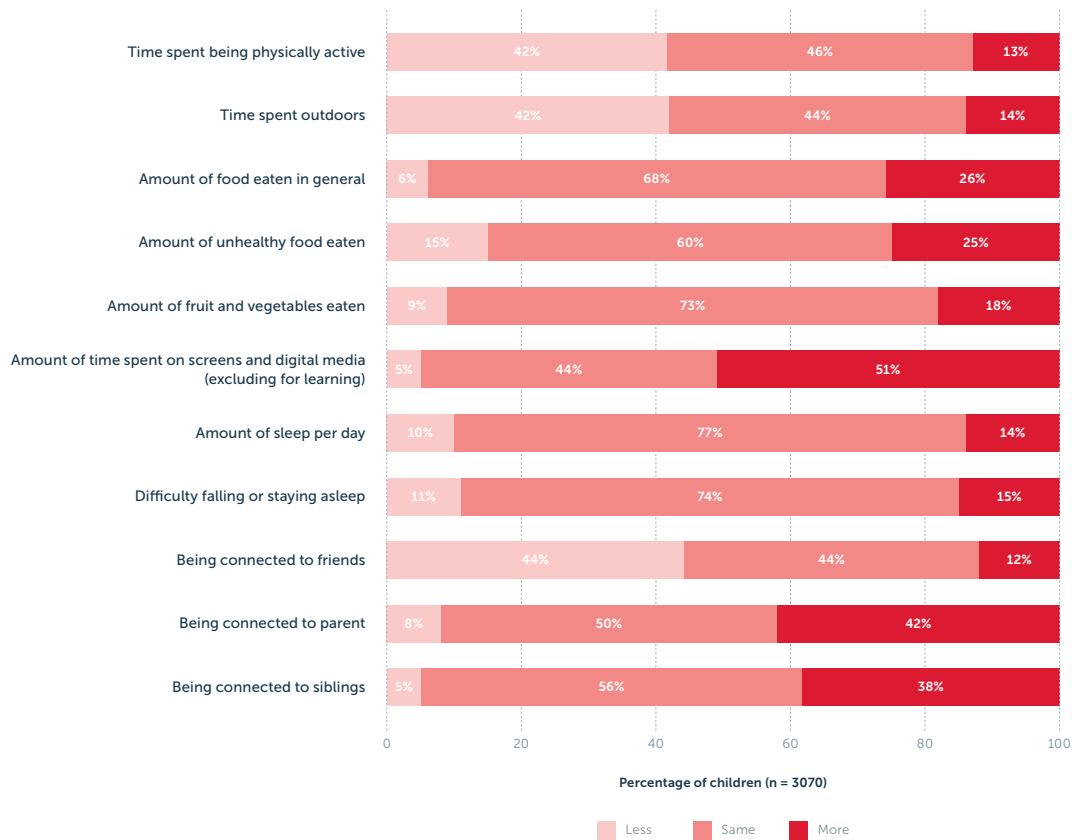


Figure 1.

Screen time

The most frequently reported change in children’s lifestyle during the pandemic relates to time spent on screens and digital media.

According to parents, the majority (51%) of children have spent more time on screens for entertainment (excluding time spent for learning and remote education activities) during the pandemic (see figure 1).

The majority of school aged children (77%) were reported to spend more than three hours per day on screens and digital media for entertainment, including online gaming, social media and viewing video content, which is in excess of the national recommendations of no more than two hours per day¹. Children who were reported to be less physically active during the pandemic were also more likely to be spending more time on screens (69%) than those who were reported to have no change or an increase in physical activity (38%).

Most parents (76%) felt that overall their child’s digital media use has been a positive experience during the pandemic. Three in four parents of school aged children (75%) reported that their child was able to learn well remotely using digital devices, and also used digital media to connect with friends and extended family more often (78%).

Half of parents (50%) said they have developed new skills in digital technology during the pandemic and two-thirds (67%) said their child has developed new digital technology skills.

Most parents (66%) said they had relaxed the rules at home on screen and media use since COVID-19 and almost half (46%) were concerned that their children have developed unhealthy screen habits. Four in 10 parents (39%) said there have been more arguments in the family about screen use and most (69%) plan on reducing the amount of time their children spend on screens once they return to regular face-to-face learning.

Sleep

One in three (35%) children have had changes in their sleeping habits during the pandemic. One in 10 (10%) children had less sleep on average, and 14 per cent had more sleep. Fifteen per cent were reported to have more difficulty falling asleep. (see figure 1). Adequate sleep is important for mental and physical health. Those children who experienced a change in sleep habit during the pandemic (either more or less amount of sleep, or more or less difficulty falling asleep) were more likely to be reported to have a negative impact on mental health than those with no change in sleep habits.

It is recommended that children aged 5 to <13 years get a minimum of nine hours sleep a night¹. This survey found that 10% of children had seven or less hours of sleep per night, 46% had eight to nine hours and 43% had 10 or more hours. It is recommended that teens have a minimum of eight hours sleep a night and a quarter (24%) of teens in our survey did not meet this recommendation¹.

Social connection

Family

Many parents reported a benefit in family connectedness since COVID-19. The majority of parents reported that their family has spent more time together (87%) and become closer (75%). Three-quarters of families have had meals together more often (75%) and more than half (58%) have spent more time exercising together. Eighty per cent of parents said the pandemic has given them a chance to think about what is important for their family and sixty-six per cent have developed new positive family habits (see figure 2).

A third of parents (30%) reported their family had more disagreements during the pandemic, yet the majority of these parents also report becoming closer as a family (73%). Almost half of parents (42%) said they are more connected to their child with most having spent more time reading (51%) and playing games (68%) with their children since the pandemic.

75% of families
have become closer
since COVID-19



Family connectedness since COVID-19 as reported by parents of children aged 3 to <18 years

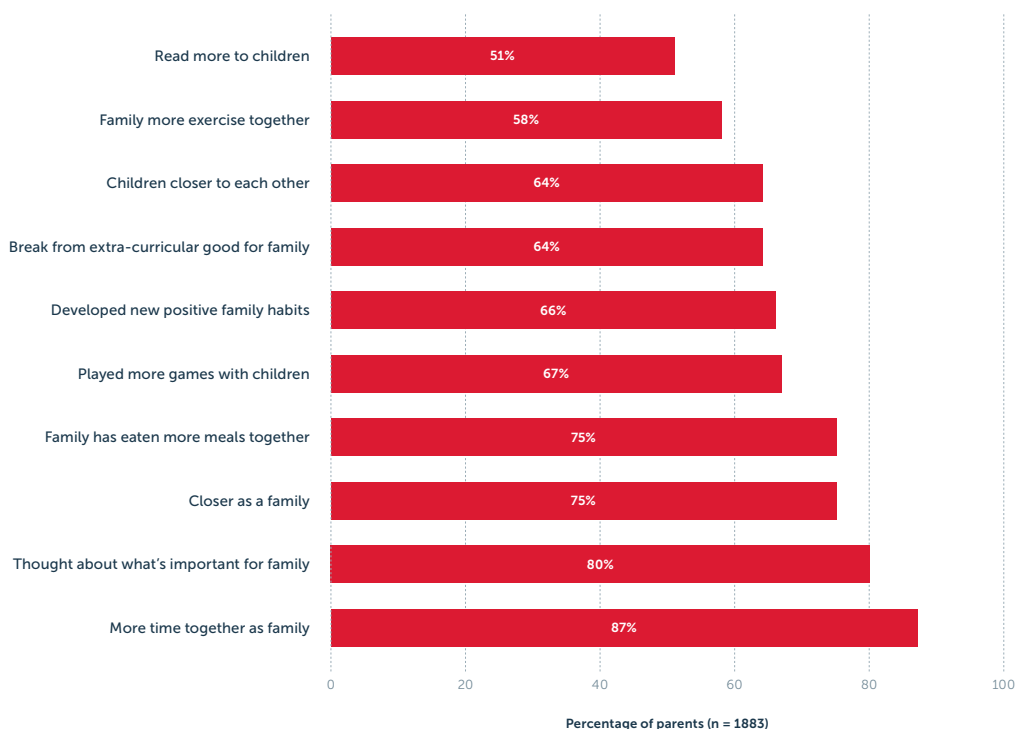


Figure 2.

Friends

Most children have missed their friends (85%) and extended family (71%) during the pandemic. Around half of parents report their children have found it hard to connect with friends (55%) and experienced loneliness (46%) since COVID-19. More than one-third of parents (39%) report feeling lonely themselves during the pandemic. Those parents who report feeling lonely were more likely to report that the pandemic had a negative impact on their mental health (62%) than those who did not report feeling lonely (36%).

How has COVID-19 affected use of healthcare services by unwell children?

Accessing healthcare when needed is extremely important. Parents reported that one in five (20%) children became unwell or injured during the pandemic. Of these children (n=667) one third (31%) had health care delayed or avoided by parents or carers.

The main reason for delaying or avoiding care was a concern among parents that they or their child might catch COVID-19 at the health care facility (59%).

A third (38%) of parents reported that they delayed taking their child to the doctor because they wanted to follow government advice to stay home and a quarter (28%) didn't want to burden the hospital or GP during the pandemic.

Other reasons for delaying or avoiding care included being unable to get an appointment with their regular doctor (23%), having too much else to worry about (14%), being concerned about catching COVID-19 on public transport (13%) and not having enough money to pay (12%).

Research has shown that most children with COVID-19 experience only mild illness³, yet almost two-thirds (61%) of parents held the belief that their child might get very sick if they catch COVID-19.

How has COVID-19 affected work patterns, employment and finances for families?

More than a quarter (28%) of households have experienced job loss or reduced income during the pandemic. A significant proportion of families have had to delay payments for essential household costs, such as mortgage, rent or utility bills (22%), as well as health care and prescription medicines (16%). More than a quarter of families (28%) have had difficulties at times paying for all the food their family needs (see figure 3).

Most families have experienced one or more parents working from home, with three quarters of male working parents (73%) and two-thirds of female working parents (63%) working from home some or all of the time during the pandemic.

28% of families have experienced job loss or reduced income



Effect of COVID-19 on income and finances for families

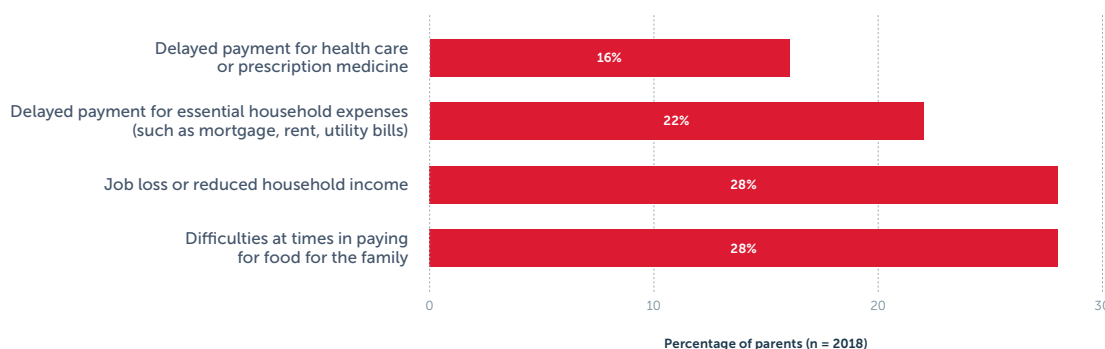


Figure 3.

1 in 3 parents
say COVID-19
has negatively
affected their child's
mental health



How has COVID-19 affected the mental health and wellbeing of children and their parents?

According to parents, the pandemic has negatively impacted on the mental health of more than one in three Australian children (36%). And almost half (46%) of parents report feeling that COVID-19 has had a negative impact on their own mental health (see figure 4).

One in 10 (9%) children and one in 10 (11%) parents were reported to be either struggling or unable to cope with life at the time of data collection. In contrast, 31 per cent of children and 18 per cent of parents were reported to be thriving.

Those parents who had experienced a negative financial impact from the pandemic were more likely to report experiencing a negative mental health impact and/or report struggling or being unable to cope with life at the moment. Experiencing loneliness during the pandemic was also associated with an experience of a negative mental health impact for both parents and children.

Of note, those children who were reported to be doing more exercise since the pandemic were more likely to experience either no change or a positive impact on their mental health than those who did the same amount or less exercise.

Parent reported effect of COVID-19 on their own and their child's mental health

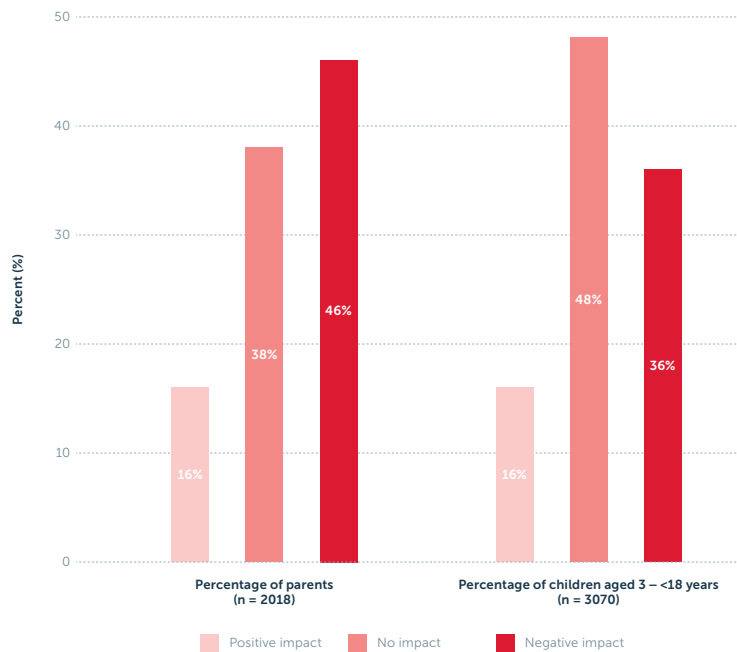


Figure 4.

Implications

The COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically changed the daily lives of most Australian families in an unprecedented way. Fortunately, children without underlying chronic conditions do not appear to be at high risk for serious illness from COVID-19. But while most children are unlikely to have adverse health effects from the illness³, the impact of restrictions on the lives of children and their families has been substantial and this poll reveals wide ranging effects.

This study shows that COVID-19 has affected families in different ways. Many children have experienced negative changes in lifestyle and health-related behaviours, such as excessive screen time, reduced exercise and more unhealthy eating.

But the majority of families have also revealed positive relationship changes—including an appreciation of what is important and an increased closeness in the family. Families have spent more time reading, playing games and eating meals together than before.

Moving forward, families need to be supported to re-establish healthy behaviours and routines, as well as find ways to maintain the positive changes they have developed as a result of the pandemic.

A concerning proportion of children had health care delayed or avoided during the pandemic, largely due to concern among parents about catching COVID-19. As we continue to ride the waves of the pandemic, it is vital that parents are reassured and educated regarding how to safely access health care services and the importance of seeking care when a child is unwell.

COVID-19 has upended children's daily lives, resulting in added stress and uncertainty. Studies show that adversity during childhood can have lasting impacts on children's social, emotional and physical health⁴.

Parents reported that more than a third of children have experienced a negative health impact from the pandemic.

Although sizeable, this may well be an underestimate of the true impact, as we know from other research that parents can find it hard to recognise the signs of mental health changes in their children⁵.

Like children, parents' mental health has also been affected during the pandemic. Lost jobs or reduced income, working from home while simultaneously caring for children, social isolation and anxiety about the possibility of contracting COVID-19 are among the stressors many parents have experienced. As parents' mental health affects the health and wellbeing of their children, more children than ever are at risk of adverse health and social outcomes now and into the future.

Our findings suggest a high level of need for mental health prevention and intervention strategies supporting parents and children at risk.

Health professionals can help by talking to parents about the importance of self-care and healthy coping mechanisms for themselves and their children, like regular exercise, adequate sleep, and ways to stay socially connected.

For individuals with pre-existing mental health conditions, adequate access to continued treatment is vital. Governments have a responsibility to adequately resource prevention programs promoting resilience and tailored mental health support to families who are affected.

With more than a quarter of families experiencing job or income loss during the pandemic, government initiatives to support employment and maintain financial security are also an essential factor in maintaining family health and wellbeing.

The results of this study highlight the wide-ranging effects of the pandemic on children and families. By understanding how the pandemic has impacted children, we can work to better support children and families during this extremely challenging time.

42% of children
have been less physically active
during the pandemic



Data Source

This report presents findings from a nationally representative household survey conducted by the Online Research Unit for The Royal Children's Hospital, Melbourne.

The survey was administered from June 15 to June 23 2020, to a randomly selected, stratified group of adults aged 18 and older (n=2018).

All respondents were parents or caregivers to children aged between one month and less than 18 years.

Collectively respondents provided data on 3408 children and the average number of children per family was 1.7.

The survey data were subsequently weighted to reflect the distribution of Australian population by state, sex, and socio-economic status (SES) by postcode using figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

The survey completion rate was 75 per cent among eligible Online Research Unit panel members who were contacted to participate.

Suggested citation

The Royal Children's Hospital National Child Health Poll (2020). COVID-19 pandemic: Effects on the lives of Australian children and families. Poll Number 18. The Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne, Parkville, Victoria.

References

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