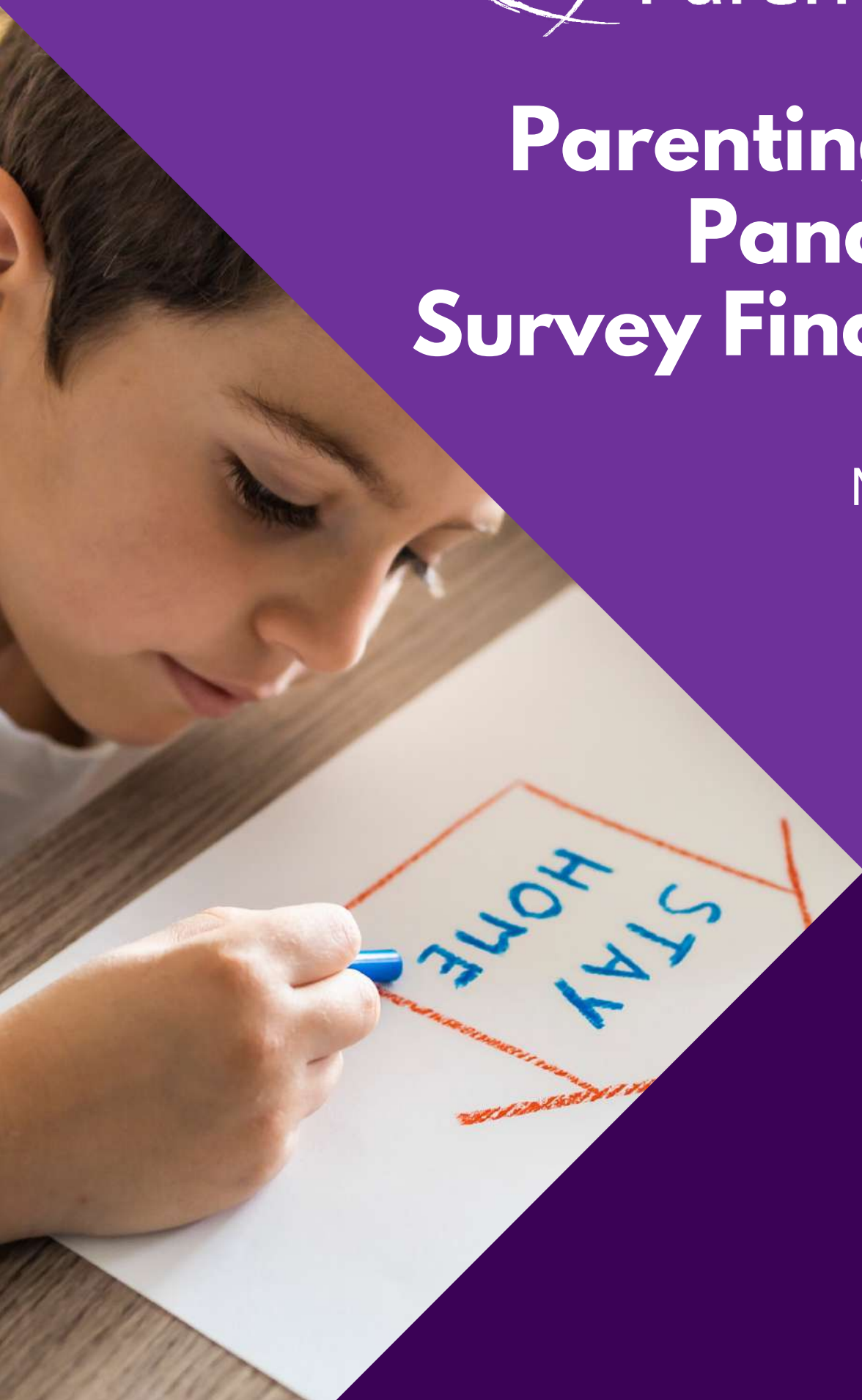




ParentingNI

Parenting in a Pandemic Survey Findings

May 2020



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The Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Parents in Northern Ireland

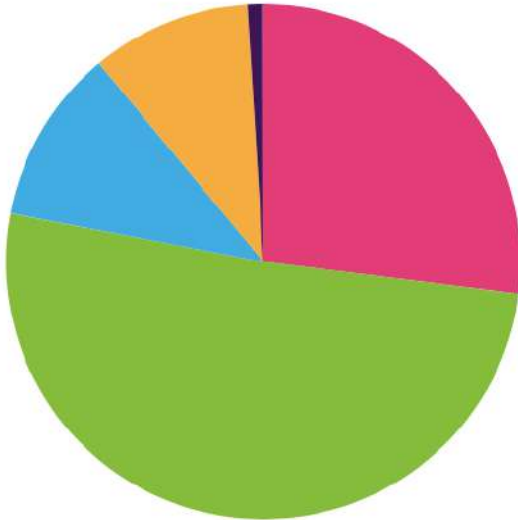
The experience of the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent lockdown has had a dramatic impact on the lives of everyone, not least parents and families who have faced significant changes. Parenting NI recognises the distinct challenges that local families and parents are experiencing. Even before the lockdown was officially implemented, the calls and contacts Parenting NI had with families suggested that some were struggling. In order to better understand the experiences and needs of parents during the crisis, we ran a survey for approximately two weeks from the 23rd of April until the 11th of May.

Parenting NI were pleased to receive a wide range of insights from parents, with a total of 439 total responses. The detailed responses demonstrated that families face a wide range of challenges, and that the experience of the lockdown has been uneven. This report will lay out the main findings of the survey, and will contain useful insights for those seeking to support parents in both the statutory and voluntary/community sectors.

Main Findings

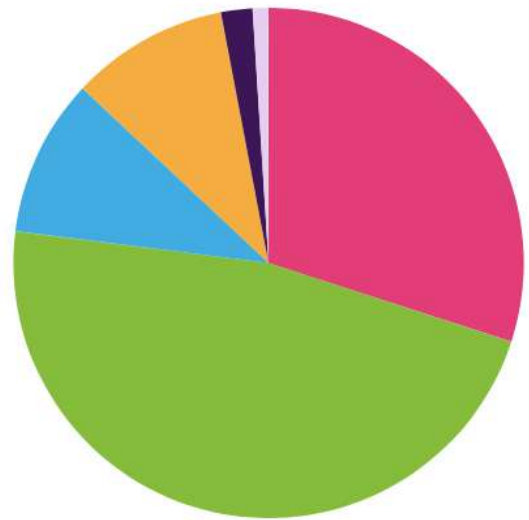
01 Difficulty for families

The pandemic has been difficult for my family



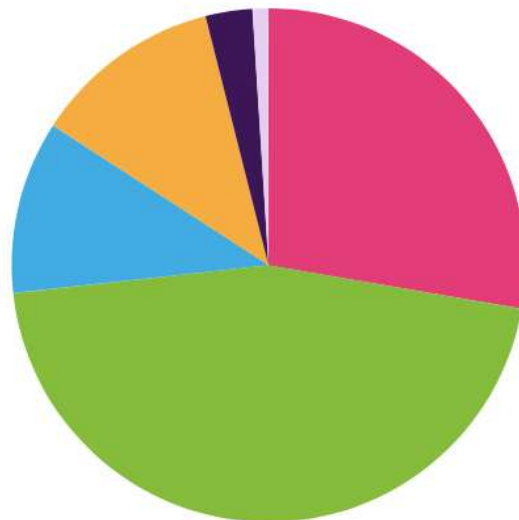
Strongly agree (27%) Agree (51%) Neither (11%)
Disagree (10%) Strongly disagree (1%)

The pandemic has been difficult for me as a parent



Strongly agree (30%) Agree (47%) Neither (10%)
Disagree (10%) Strongly disagree (2%) N/A (1%)

The pandemic has been difficult for my children



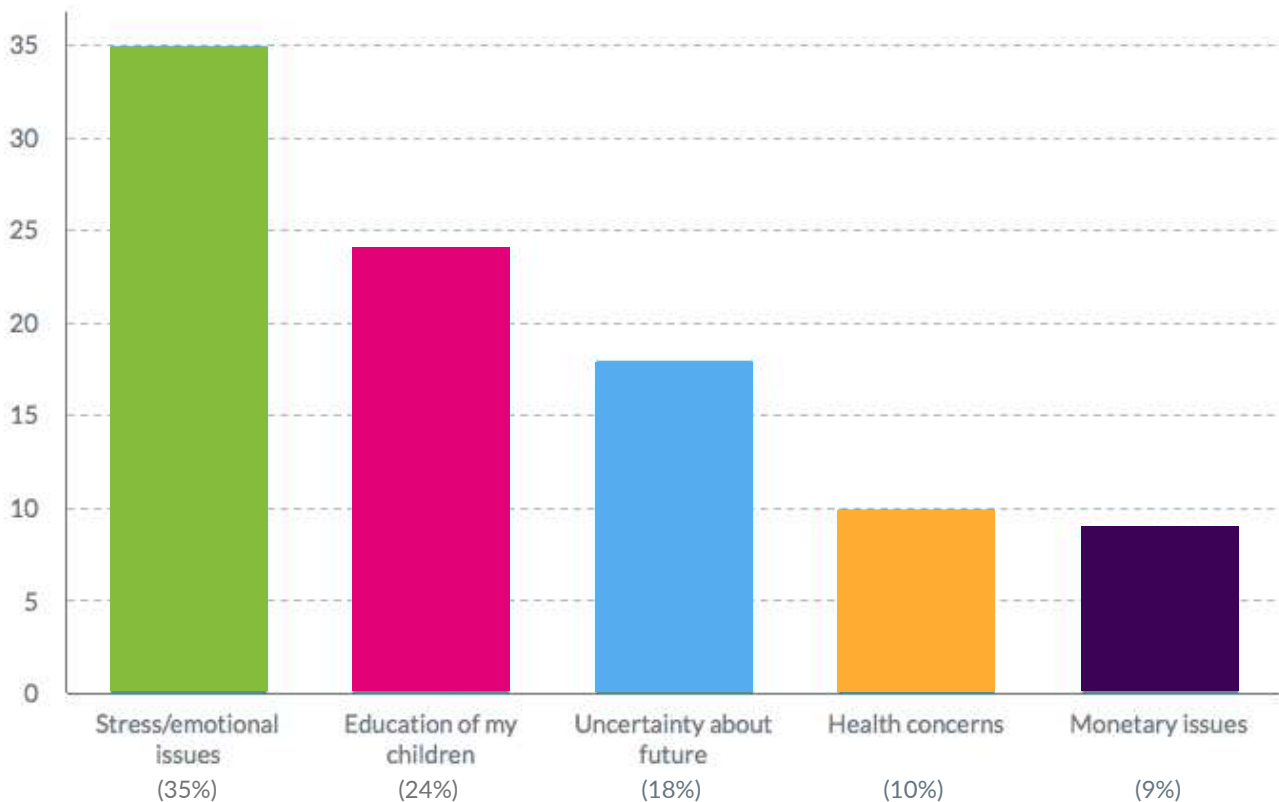
Strongly agree (28%)
Agree (46%)
Neither (11%)
Disagree (12%)
Strongly disagree (3%)
N/A (1%)

Overall, parents clearly indicated that this experience has been difficult for them. We asked them if it had been challenging for themselves, for their families and for their children. The responses to these questions was fairly uniform. An average of 73% across the three questions either agreed or strongly agreed that the pandemic was difficult. By contrast, around 12% of parents either disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement.

Interestingly, a small number of parents have indicated that the pandemic has not been a difficult experience for them, their family or their children. However, more than three quarters of parents have unfortunately found this experience difficult, (either agreeing or strongly agreeing) is clearly demonstrating that more support is needed. In order to understand what support might be helpful it was important to define what parents found most difficult.

We asked parents what the most significant challenge faced by them was.

What do you think is the most significant difficulty faced by families as a result of the crisis?



Most common was “Stress/Emotional Issues”. Given that public health experts have expressed concern about the impact of lockdown and the pandemic on mental health, PNI feels it is particularly important to recognise the issues parents highlight in the answers they gave. The second most common answer related to the education of their children. This was explored in greater detail in later questions, but clearly represents a major concern for parents during lockdown.

This theme was further explored by asking parents what two practical issues were most common in their household. 48% of parents indicated issues relating to home-schooling were common in their families. 32% of parents described issues relating to routines and bedtimes and 29% mentioned struggling with social isolation and children’s challenging behaviour.

These problems cannot be separated entirely from each other. Many of the parents written comments clearly indicated that lack of routine was the primary reason that home schooling was a challenge. Equally, when asked why schools should re-open, parents specified that they worried about children losing opportunities to socialise and the resultant impact on their mental health and behaviours. The following quotes give examples of the views parents expressed:

“My son cant cope with lack of routine.”

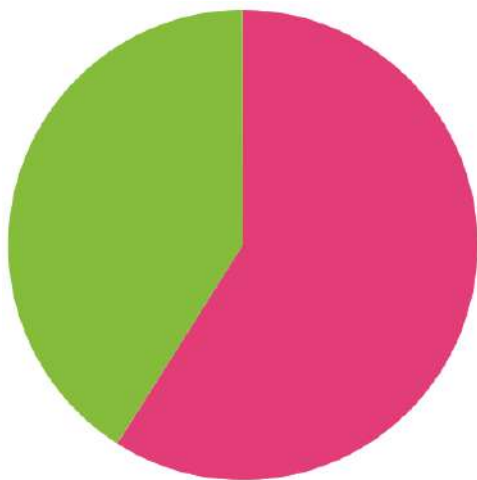
“Kids long to socialise with others, even if it needs to be at a distance. Children need the routine to learn effectively and although parent try their best, it can never be equal to school environment”

“Our biggest challenge is children’s behaviour (and they are great kids in school etc). Not sure of the exact reason or if it’s just more noticeable because we’re exposed to it 24/7 without respite but it’s very tough. Makes us feel a bit helpless at times.”

02 Governmental Support

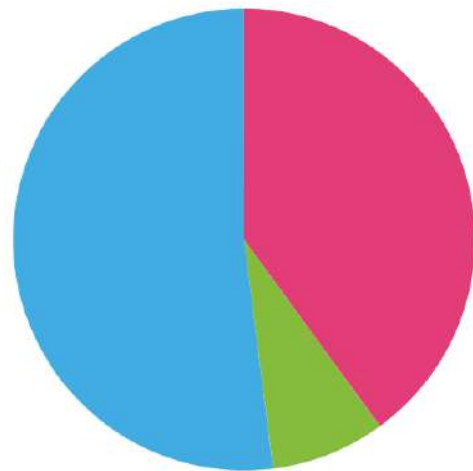
Parenting NI is aware that the government has made efforts to address and alleviate the issues faced by parents. Authorities have taken action at Westminster/UK, Stormont and local governmental level. While we welcome these actions, the results of our survey suggest a worryingly low level of knowledge and uptake by families.

Are you aware of any government actions to provide support for families?



■ No (59%) ■ Yes (41%)

If yes, have you accessed any of these supports?

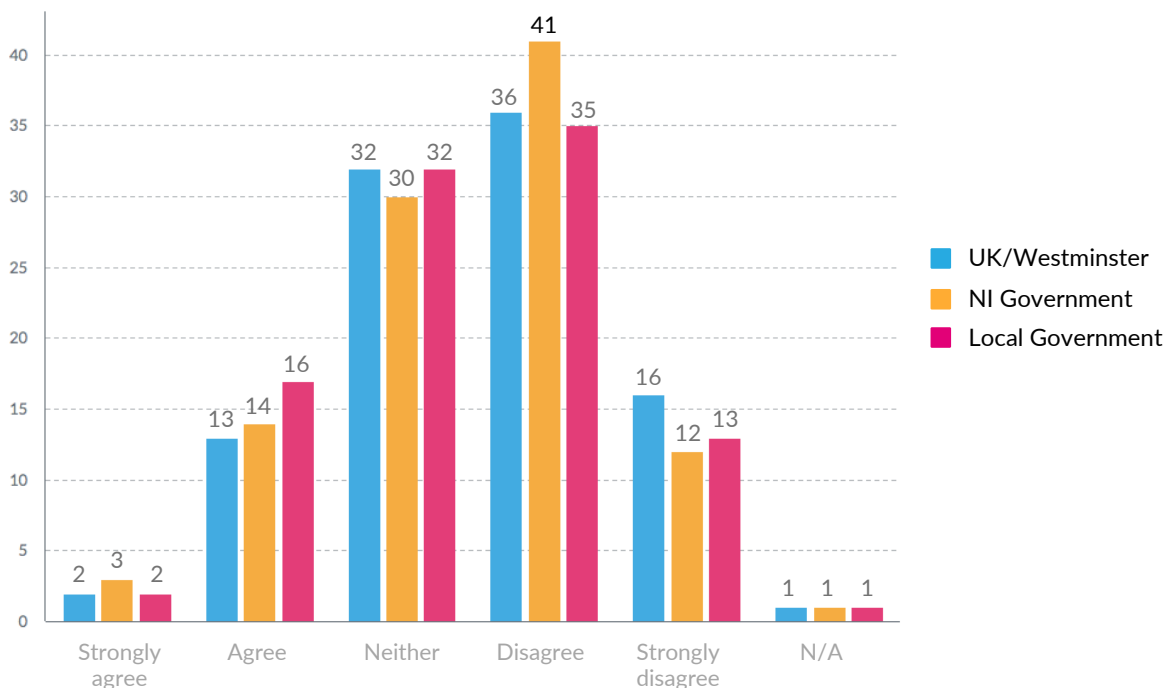


■ No (40%) ■ Yes (8%) ■ Not aware of any supports (52%)

Only 41% of parents told us that they were aware of governmental supports, and only 9% told us that they had accessed these.

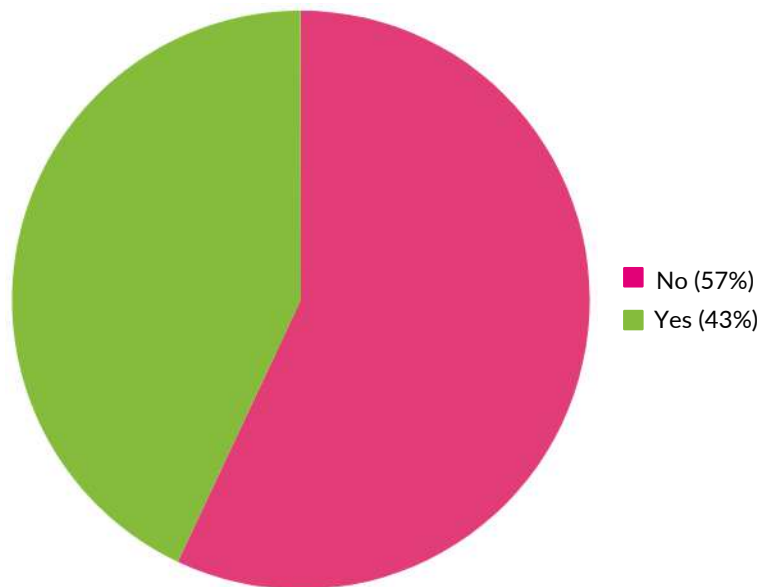
We also asked parents if they felt that governments at all levels (UK, NI and Local Councils) had done enough to support or inform parents. The most common response across all levels was that parents disagreed, though they did not strongly disagree. An average of 37% disagreed that enough had been done but only an average of 14% strongly disagreed. Nearly a third of parents were unsure, and the remainder agreed that enough had been done.

There were not significant differences in the way that parents viewed the efficacy of particular levels of government, though local councils had the best overall results.



03 Schools and Education

Do you think schools/educational settings should be one of the first settings to reopen after a period of lockdown?



We asked parents if they thought that schools should be among the first places to re-open following the relaxation of lockdown. What we found was that parents were deeply split on this issue. A slight majority did feel that schools should be reopened in the first stages of lockdown easing. However, further examination of parent comments shows that many only felt this was the case if it was done in a controlled manner.

The responses to this question were reflected in the views of parents regarding the adequacy of online-learning tools they had been provided for. The response was evenly split with 50% feeling it was sufficient, and 50% feeling it was not. These findings reflect the fact that every family's experience of home-schooling has been different. For some parents, schools have been highly communicative and supportive:

"It is great that the teachers have provided a flexible workplan. They are understanding if the work does not get done on that particular day. Teachers reply to messages quickly."

"Our schools have been brilliant supporting us at home. This is not the same as school but this is not a holiday either."

"We have had superb support from our children's school, excellent resources, guidance, reassurance, work set and links to mental health support also. In addition, a school community food bank has been set up for those in need"

However, many parents told us they had the opposite experience:

"It's pretty much impossible for it to be adequate. We're not home schooling, we're 'emergency schooling'. It will never be as adequate as their day to day education through school. And as a key worker and a coparent, it's very difficult to keep up with schoolwork"

“No interaction with children from School. Only a few photocopies for us to work off”

“The work is not enough and is not focused on the areas in which my son struggles”

Parents also explained a number of other factors that influenced their answers to both of these issues. Many parents, particularly in rural areas noted that the technology and broadband access was too poor to facilitate learning. Some families do not have access to sufficient devices, or find it difficult to navigate online or app-based learning materials. A common issue was printing – particularly for younger children. Parents told us they did not have access to printers, meaning worksheets were difficult to make use of.

Two groups of parents were highlighted to us as facing specific challenges. The first were parents of children in preschool/nursery ages. Those parents told us that they did not feel they had gotten enough information or support:

“Child is not in education yet but I don’t know what’s going on with nursery”

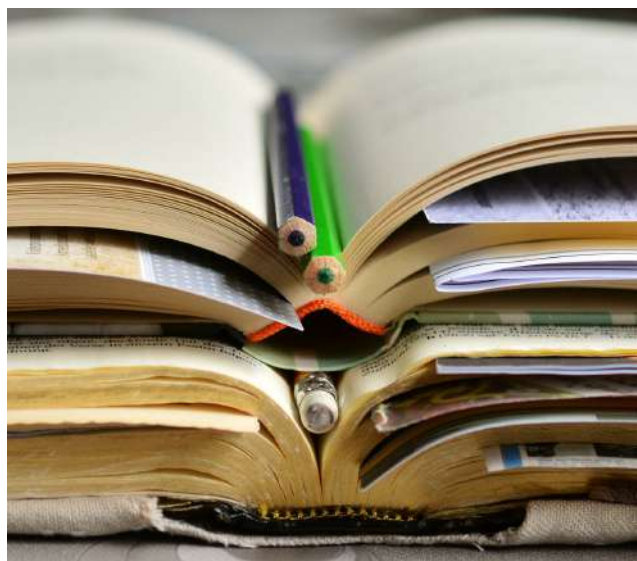
“Nursery school extremely minimal interaction” “My only daughter is in nursery but we’ve have very limited support in the form of 3 email communications.”

The second group of parents who we identified as facing particular challenges were those whose children have SEN. Those parents said that the online, hands-off learning was insufficient for their children and that they were in need of more help:

“My child has special educational needs and is really struggling with school work”

“Online work to do which is extremely difficult with a special needs child...I am not a teacher”

“He goes to a special needs school and they have classroom on line, but there’s no interaction and mostly songs on it”



Parents also differed on the idea of schools being reopened based on their own working status. Many parents who self-identified as key workers said that they were struggling with home-schooling. Other parents said that if schools did not reopen, they would not be able to return to work as before. Parents noted that grandparents and family members who previously provided a significant amount of support could no longer be an option. This reduced their flexibility and meant they would need schools reopened – or other settings – to be able to return to work.

“I have a wife as a key worker and 2 children, 1 in p4 and a 2 yr old. The most difficult part for me is trying to home school while keeping the 2 yr old occupied!”

“Very hard as a single parent and being a key worker and trying to be a teacher to a P6. Its very stressful without extra support”

“The support group as in other family members such as aunties and uncles, grandparents etc has now collapsed”

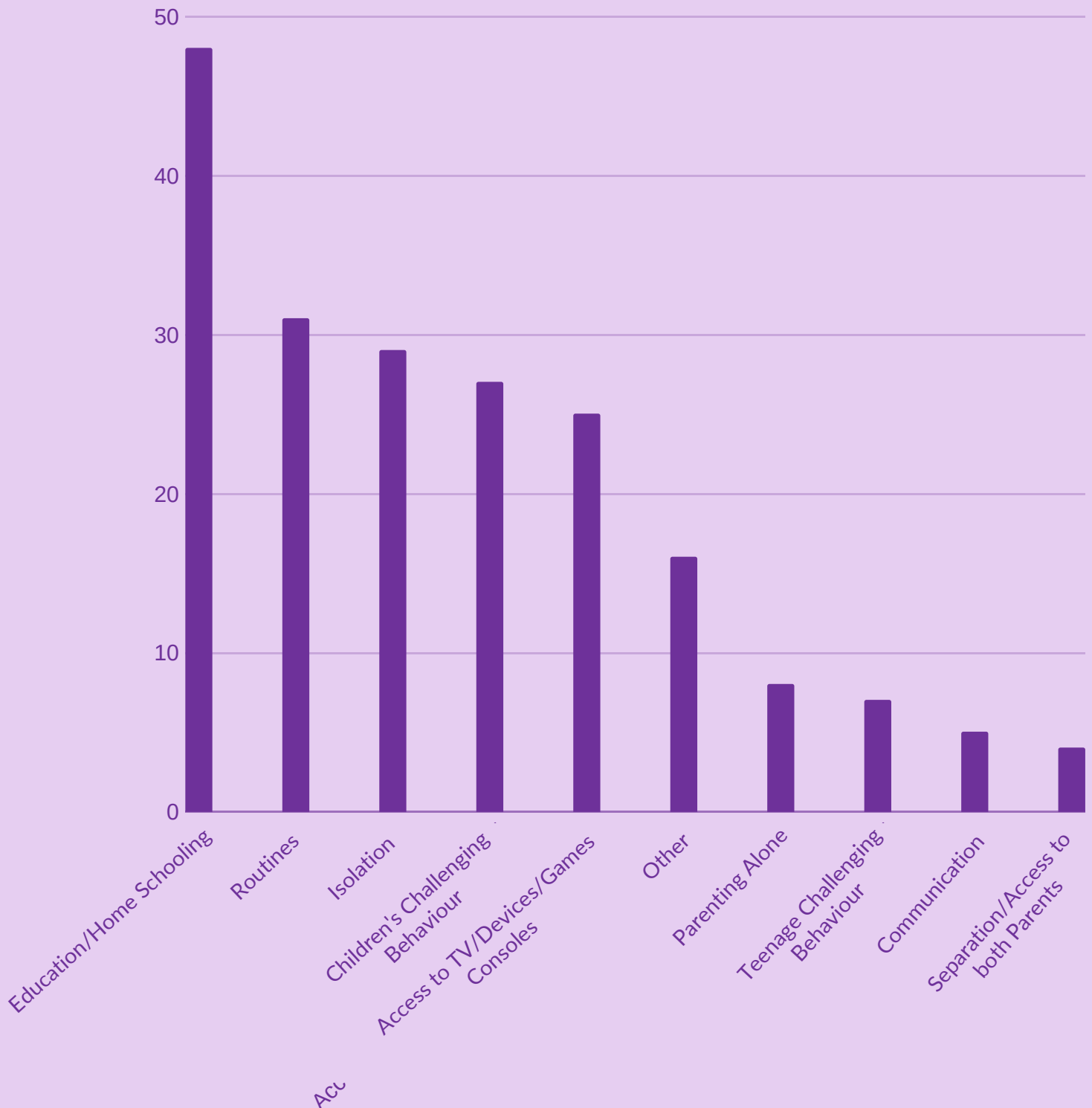


Homeworking was an area of practical concern for a large number of parents. We asked them to identify what the two areas of challenge were most common for them. Education/home schooling and routines/bedtimes were the most common. Many families wanted a return to school for the value they saw in routines. They were also concerned with social isolation, and while some indicated that technology was filling a gap it was not seen by all as sufficient.

“Children really need the routine, normality and interactions with peers for their mental health.”

“Children are losing interest, missing friends and the social side of school.”

What are the two most common practical challenges faced by your family?



Many parents described feelings of guilt or anxiety regarding balancing home working and home schooling. Parents also suggested they were concerned about children falling behind as a result of lack of formal education.

04 Support

Parenting NI understand that parents need support, so we asked about what type of support they would like to receive. While in different circumstances in-person supports are a key feature of parenting support, the current situation has limited options. As a result, the options presented to parents were primarily digital/telephony based. Parents were encouraged to select multiple answers.

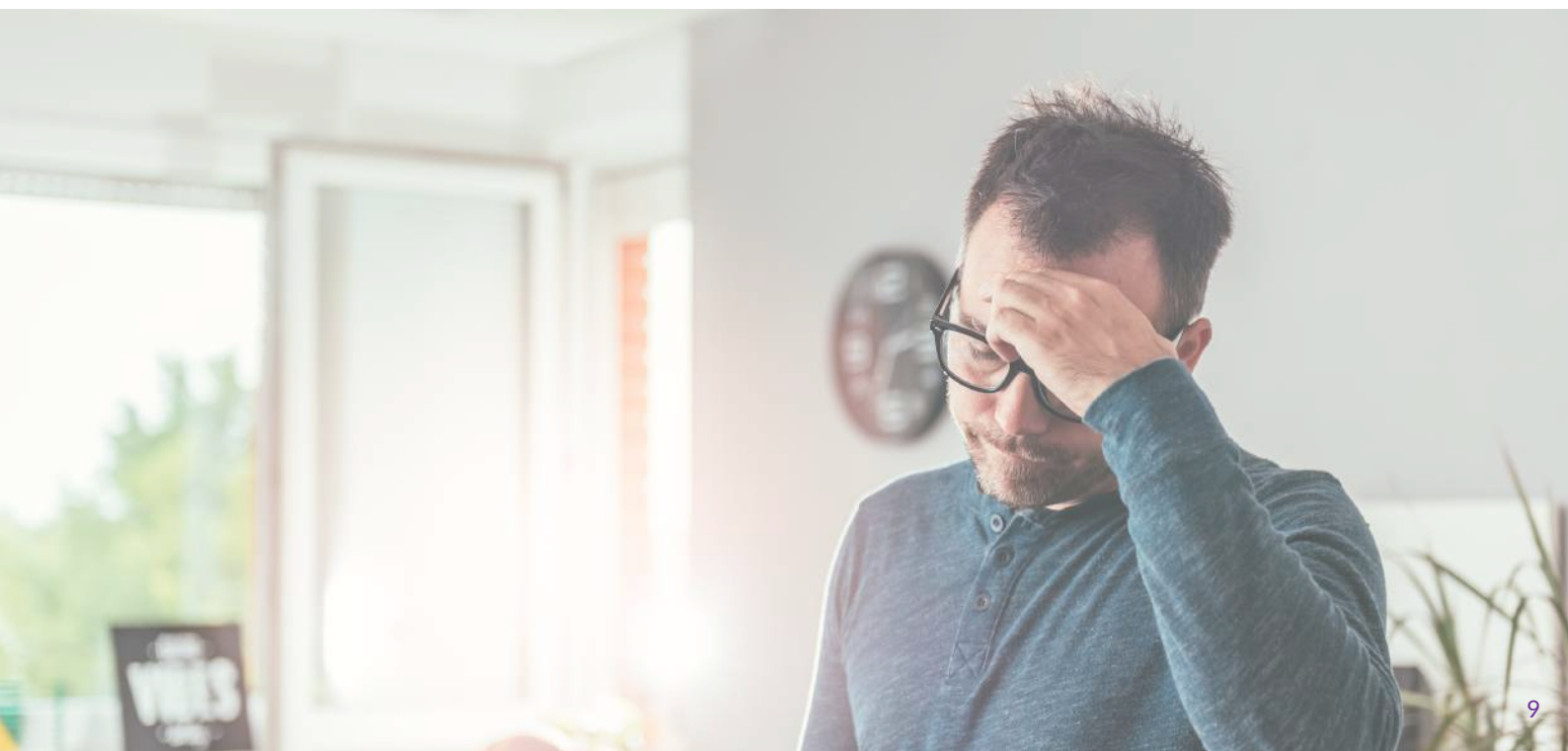
The most popular option was online programmes or workshops. It may be the case that parents want a more interactive form of support. This is mirrored in many parent's comments regarding schooling – several parents suggested that they feel children would benefit from video-based interaction with teachers. It is possible they feel the same for the support they want themselves. Some parents have found that online resources have worked well for their children:

“Online learning. Working well so far. As best as can be done in the circumstances - short notice etc.”

“A really brilliant tool for my 7 yr. old daughter is that he has video calls 3-4 times a week with her friends. She sets up my phone and gets out her toys and they 'play' and talk nonsense for nearly an hour. It's lovely and she's benefited massively from this remote socialisation”

The second most popular option was online materials, guides and information. Under any circumstances this type of support is popular as it allows parents to seek help at their own pace and regarding issues they are struggling with in particular. This is important, but one parent did note a potential issue:

“I actually find the amount of advice, guidance, support, online classes/videos/resources etc flagged up to me by other parents (via WhatsApp and social media), by workplaces (via email), by helping organisations (via social media and news articles etc) as really overwhelming.”



Additionally, several parents suggested that the volume of work being sent home for their children was causing issues:

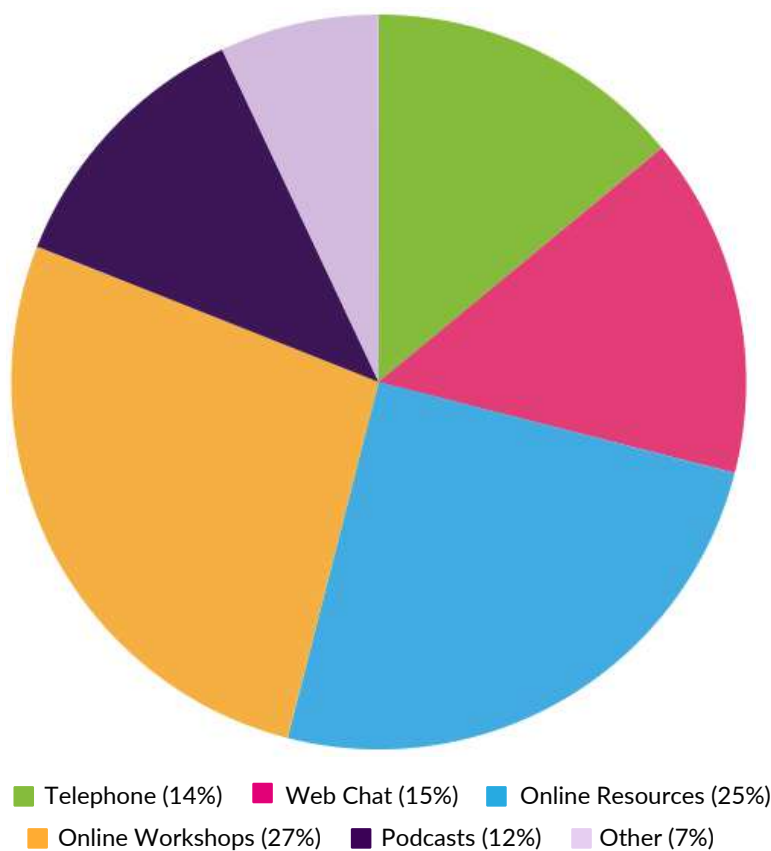
“I think it is too much. My son is expected to sit at his desk/computer for over 6 hours a day to follow his school timetable. This isn't good for his mental health”

“Sometimes there is just too much work. It is very overwhelming for the kids. It's causes a lot of emotional stress for the children and parents. Especially those that are still working full time.”

“Not enough support and too much work, currently awaiting an ASD diagnosis for my child and getting no support from his school regarding his education”

Therefore, while it is important to offer online support, some parents are struggling with the volume of information. This is an issue that parents highlight to us with parenting support in general, but may be enhanced during the crisis.

What types of support would you like to see for families during the crisis?



Finally, 7% of parents suggested “other” forms of support were desired. However, many of these responses were parents suggesting that they either did not think any further support would help or that they did not know what type of support they needed. This crisis presents unique circumstances for families and may require creative solutions from the statutory and voluntary/community sectors in order to meet parental need.

05 Other Challenges

As previously stated, the majority of parents told us this was a challenging period for them and their families. In our final question, we provided an open space for parents to tell us anything they felt was relevant about their experiences.

The most common response, around 25% of all answers mentioned struggling with working from home. This was often linked with issues related to balancing home schooling and full-time work, the second most common theme. Many answers mention the challenge parents experienced trying to simultaneously work full time and parent their children:

“Working from home full time, caring for children and home schooling all in the same 8 hours of the day creates great stress.”

“Difficult to separate ‘work’ environment, ‘school’ environment and ‘leisure’ environment all being within the same building 24 hours a day.”

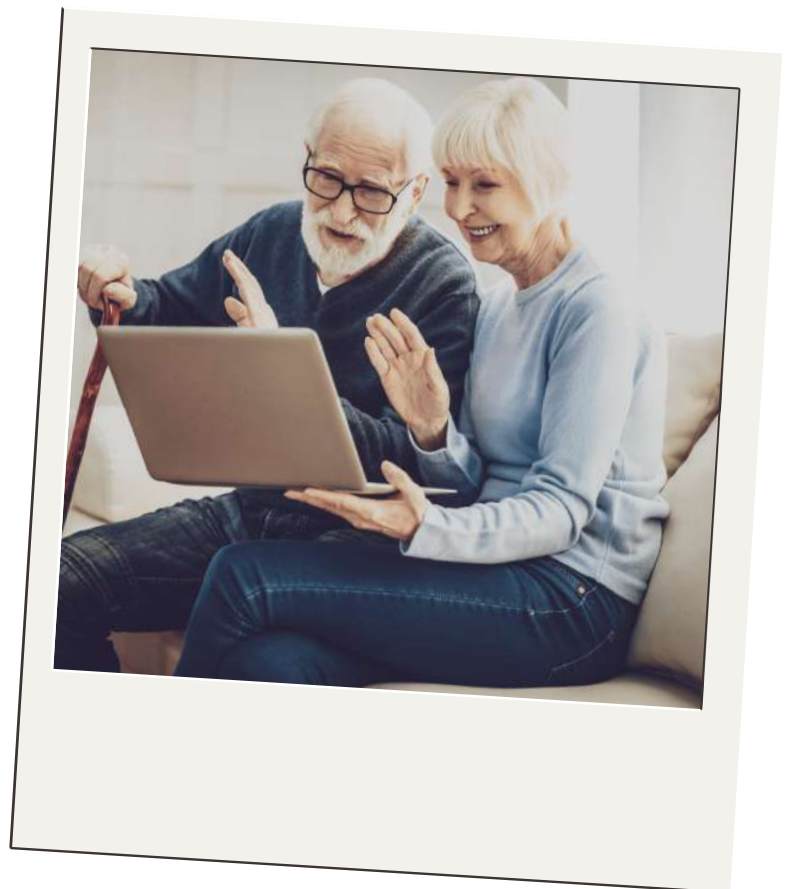
“It is so hard to work from home, provide education and most importantly give your children the time and support they deserve and need at the moment to make sure they are emotionally ok.”

Parents also said that both they and their children were finding the lack of social activities and family contact challenging. On occasion, this was linked to concerns about mental health. Parents told us that children were finding it hard to not be in contact with grandparents:

“Our daughter is missing grandparents and friends very much. This is main difficulty she is facing.”

“The impact on grandparents being in isolation has really affected kids”

“Trying to explain why he can’t see his grandparents who were my only support network for looking after my child has been difficult.”



One theme mentioned by just under 20% of parents is perhaps more positive. Many parents specifically suggested that the crisis and associated lockdown had been, on the whole, a positive experience for their families. Many of these families recognised difficulties still existed, and sympathised with families who were struggling. Nonetheless, they were clear that this unique experience had provided an unexpected chance to spend more time together:

“On a positive note it is lovely to have all the children at home, our family has a wide range of ages from young adults/teenagers & primary school age.”

“I think it has been a positive time to relax as a family and reflect.”

“It’s been only positive and I wish life could be like this all the time slow and meaningful”

While this is a minority opinion, it may be still useful looking at family policy after the lifting of the lockdown. If there are positives of the current situation that can be maintained when the crisis has passed, it may be a good idea to explore this.



Conclusions

This crisis has presented a range of unique and challenging problems for families and parents. It has fundamentally altered society, and forced many parents to adapt. It is clear from the evidence in this survey that many families are finding this difficult. Of particular concern is the lack of routine, and the uneven experience of home schooling. While some parents have found the process manageable, others, particularly those who are in full-time employment have not.

One obvious improvement for families would be a uniform curriculum for e-learning. Whilst many recognised that teachers and schools were doing their best in this very difficult situation Many parents expressed concerns that their children would fall behind, or that schools were providing inadequate or inaccessible resources. If there was a minimum standard, as well as a central resource that parents could easily access and compare against it would allow them to understand how their child was progressing. Other options, such as video-classrooms or more one-to-one support should also be explored. However, Parenting NI is conscious of resource challenges.

Governmental support has not reached saturation point in the public at large. A worryingly high number of parents suggested they were unaware of any support. Parenting NI would suggest that more can and should be done to make parents aware of existing help, such as the coronavirus support line. The voluntary sector has a role in informing families and service users as well and should consider actively highlighting support families even if they do not specifically ask for it. This should be done in an appropriate manner but could help improve public awareness.

Non-governmental support should be aware of the desire among families for interactive help. Parents clearly indicated that online workshops and classes were of interest to them, and where possible these should be implemented. It is important that the volume of information or work for children and families is enough to keep them informed, without overwhelming them.

When the time comes to re-open school settings, parents have made clear that it should be done so in a controlled manner. A large number of responses indicated fears that schools would not be able to implement proper social distancing. Before the formal closures of schools, many families voluntarily removed their children due to safety concerns. These concerns must be alleviated if schools expect parents to send their children.

Finally, and arguably most importantly, while parents are struggling, there are positives to spending more time as a family. When the time comes to return to normal, efforts should be made to facilitate this closer family experience. This will involve changes to working and educational patterns, but will also have social benefits.

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