

“The romantic idea of working from home evaporated very quickly”

A QUALITATIVE STUDY ON FAMILY LIFE IN THE CORONAVIRUS CRISIS

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50 parents in 11 countries were surveyed for an IZI study. The aim was to find out how they were organising family and working life in times of coronavirus, and what problems and positives they were experiencing.

“Our children are learning that there are situations which are new for adults too, and which adults have to adjust to,” says a mother from Germany, describing how the lockdown, the restrictions on going out and school closures due to COVID-19 overtook her without warning and confronted her with new challenges.

A few German and international studies and assessments (e.g. Anders et al., 2020; OECD 2020; forsa 2020; see also vom Orde in this issue) are already exploring how parents and children are faring in the coronavirus crisis, and how the closure of schools and day-care centres is affecting family routines, especially when the parents are working from home. At the time of writing (last update 13 May 2020), some of these are still at the fieldwork stage (e.g. Goethe-Universität Frankfurt a.M., LMU München, DJI) Anders et al. at the University of Bamberg surveyed 3,191 parents in Germany with children in day-care centres, and found, for example, that 80% of parents see it as positive that the closures allow them to devote more time to their family. Nonetheless, according to the study, many parents are at the end of their tether (66%), are frequently stressed (73%), and see balancing work and family as a major challenge (85%).

Besides important quantitative surveys such as these, however, there are practical questions that require a qualitative method. Firstly, what do families with small children do all day at home? With a view to resilience, it is vital to consider in what respects parents feel that a positive development is taking place in their family, or that the crisis is presenting an opportunity. At the same time, however, it is also important to see the problems and identify the things that are really difficult at the moment. In the last of our 4 qualitative questions, we asked parents to tell us their 3 top tips for balancing working from home and children. N=50 parents from 11 countries¹ agreed to participate in this study, 39 mothers and 11 fathers. They were mainly recruited via closed (parenting) groups on social networks² or existing contacts of IZI, and they responded by email or Facebook private message.

The study participants were therefore mainly parents who take an active interest in the family and are involved in family-related social networks. This exploratory study cannot claim to be representative. It merely captures a small section of the reality of family life in the different countries. The study was carried out from 1 April to 10 May 2020, and in many countries it covers the beginning of the school and day-care closures and several weeks when this measure was in place, before the first steps were taken to relax the rules. The answers to the open questions were clustered according to typical characteristics, and prototypical statements were selected from them.

KEY FINDINGS

What do parents do all day with their children?

Most of the families surveyed do a variety of activities during the day, including puzzles, arts and crafts, reading, media (TV, iPad, games), and outdoor activities. A mother in Germany with children aged 4 and 5 sums it up as follows:

“In the morning the 2 of them are allowed to watch TV, then they play alone or do some drawing or painting, then we play together. Usually board games. We usually spend the afternoon outside in the garden, go for a walk or build a hut in the woods.”

Children are also being included much more in household activities, partly because there is normally not enough time for this:

“In Catalonia children go to school from 9 a.m. to 4.30 p.m. and this is followed by activities such as piano lessons. (...) The children [now help] to cook, bake bread, do the gardening and work in the household, something we don't have time for during our 'normal' life.”

For most of the respondents it is important to make sure the day follows a certain structure: “We try to stick to the daily structure: breakfast, lunch and dinner together. The rest (...) is flexible.” (mother from Mexico) For older children the daily routine is sometimes predetermined, as “the children have their online lessons all day, and after that we go for a walk or cook the dinner.” (father from Bulgaria)

On the other hand, a mother from Germany reports how the daily rhythm

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is displaced “if you don’t have any tasks or fixed times, [because then] you just potter about. Sometimes we’re even in pyjamas until the afternoon. Not great, I know.”

Homework takes up a considerable amount of space in the daily routine. For some parents this is a great strain (see below), while others support their children with great enthusiasm:

“We look for letters of the alphabet in nature, at the beach, on the street, in the living room, in the bathroom, everywhere.” (mother from Denmark)

What positive aspects does the crisis offer, or where does it present opportunities?

Most parents, regardless of whether they are working from home or not, see it as a positive aspect of the situation that they have more “quality time” with their family, and are living “without a clock” and “without any rush”:

“I’m spending more time with my child than I have in the last 3 years. We have to deal with each other even in difficult situations, we’re getting to know each other well, and I think this is giving us even greater trust in each other.” (mother from Germany)

Fathers are also engaging more with their children, and are developing a closer relationship, as a mother from the UK observes:

“My daughter has definitely become more attached to her Daddy, now asking for him when she is tired/sad, when she would have previously asked for me.”

Most parents with more than one child see it as a major positive that the sibling bond is being strengthened.

“My daughter is now at home and has time to play and learn with her brothers and to read to them. Yes, they fight, but their relationship has grown a lot stronger. They’ve become a unit.” (mother from the USA)

Many parents report that living in close quarters with their children has enabled them to be much more aware of “the children’s de-

velopmental possibilities and sensitive phases,” be it cognitive, linguistic or physical developments.

Some respondents see it as positive that a “deceleration of everyday life” is occurring, especially if they are not working from home and do not have to fit everything in around work.

Some parents see the crisis as an opportunity for children to appreciate their circumstances more: “Children see that their everyday life/wealth/health cannot be taken for granted.” A mother from Denmark suggests using the situation to practise serenity:

“Every crisis brings opportunities (...). Here in the north we face things calmly – we’ve weathered plenty of storm surges. We know the water will come, and we know it will go again. It’s important to keep calm.”

Depending on the individual situation of the respondents and the management of the crisis in their home region, some parents give an emphatic negative response when asked whether they can find anything positive in the situation. For example, a single father from the USA says: “I can’t see anything positive at the moment. We’re trying to cope with everything as well as we can.” A mother from Ecuador, a country severely affected by COVID-19, finds the question almost a little cynical:

“We have been living under lockdown for 8 weeks now and in Guayaquil, for example, dead bodies are abandoned in the streets. How can I tell you anything positive?”

What are the really difficult things?

Helping children to understand a situation which has never existed to this extent, and which adults themselves have not yet experienced, is very stressful for these parents, as described by a mother from Spain:

“Some of the people we know have had to be treated in hospital, and unfortunately some have died of the virus. You have to somehow explain that to your children.”

A large number of the parents surveyed mention the lack of social contact as exacerbating the situation: “What’s missing is the equilibrium; playing, laughing and running around with children of the same age.” Many children also very much miss their grandparents and other family members.

Parents from Spain, where the whole country was in total lockdown at the time of the study, perceive the isolation and the need to live in close quarters as the greatest difficulty, and report “sleep disorders in children and parents, aggression and desperation as a result of the constant extensions [to the lockdown] and the fact that no end is in sight.” One mother describes it as almost unbearable “when my [2-year-old] daughter wakes up crying in the night and says ‘out’. That breaks my heart.”

“The uncertainty about what will happen next, and the sense of hopelessness that sometimes comes over you and threatens to swamp you” – this is

what a mother from the USA describes as particularly stressful. If existential fears are added to the mix, then the strain is sometimes offloaded onto the children, as some parents report. This German mother, for example, says:

“I’ve already lost my job as a waitress. For a single parent with 2 children, of course that’s very scary. And if the children then start to whine, unfortunately I lose my cool very quickly and shout at them.”

Some mothers report that they have found it nearly impossible



Ill. 1: Balancing working from home and simultaneously looking after children is a particularly difficult challenge for many parents

to resist the retraditionalization of the division of roles in the family, which is a source of great stress:

“All I’m doing is tidying up after them (...), doing the laundry, cleaning, cooking. And regardless of whether they’re thirsty, hungry, arguing with their sister, bored or have had a fall, it’s Mum they call for, not Dad.” (mother from Germany)

Often existing relationship conflicts are intensified by living in close quarters, as a mother from Mexico relates: “My husband has always been a lazy guy, but now (...) he behaves like living in an all-inclusive hotel. (...) We argue a lot more now.” For many respondents, especially mothers, the desire to do everything right and meet everyone’s needs stresses their energy to the limit. Some describe themselves as “tired and stressed out,” which frequently leads to increased irritability:

“Achieving the balance between working from home, cooking, child care, household is so exhausting. Sometimes simple sentences (...) like ‘the spaghetti are overcooked’ drive me up the wall and I start to scream and cry.” (mother from France)

Another challenge which many parents describe as a source of great stress and conflict is home schooling, which often requires parental supervision, as a mother from the USA reports:

“Online learning is really difficult because my son is 6 and he does not know how to use a computer. (...) There are way too many distractions at home. A 6-year-old does not want to sit quietly in front of a screen for an extended period of time. He actually doesn’t want to sit quietly anywhere, with his mother.”

Many parents are largely accepting media use in general, especially in the context of home schooling and if it facilitates working from home. For some parents, however, especially those with small children, there is also an element of anxiety about the negative consequences:

“Sometimes [we] give him the phone, and he watches YouTube Kids on it. We know it’s bad, but we don’t have a choice, because otherwise he doesn’t leave us alone and we can’t work.” (father from Bulgaria with 2-year-old child)

Things that are mentioned as particularly difficult here are “getting through your workload,” “being able to concentrate and work uninterrupted,” (Ill. 1) or having enough peace and quiet for phone conferences, as a mother from Germany reports: “Then the 5-year-old doesn’t know what to do with himself and gets up to mischief (cutting his own hair) (...). That leads to huge clashes.” Another exacerbating factor for a father from Germany is “that we’re always worrying that we’ll lose our jobs if we don’t perform as well as usual. That frays your nerves.”

Tips for combining working from home with children

The final question asked parents to share their tips on how to balance working from home and simultaneously looking after children.

Most parents swear by “clear structures and times,” e.g. for meals. Some see spatial separation during working hours as essential, as well as dividing the childcare between partners, even if this sometimes leads to “family shift work.” Often the television, tablet or smartphone serves as a “babysitter,” as do the grandparents, who may, for example, “read a book aloud in a video conference.” Several respondents recommend “taking time for yourself” in order to “have enough energy for the family” again. Some suggest lowering one’s expectations of oneself, “staying realistic,” and “becoming calmer” – this applies both to work and e.g. to tidiness at home. One tip mentioned by most of the parents surveyed is a strict separation of children’s time and work time, i.e. “planning longer breaks now and then which [are] completely dedicated to the children.”

CONCLUSION

Although most of the parents surveyed very much appreciate being able to spend more time with their children

as a result of the lockdown, they do not see the mass quarantine as an extra holiday. Depending on the strictness of the lockdown, the management of the crisis in their country, and their personal circumstances (e.g. working from home, existential fears), the situation places high demands on families, which often leads to heightened irritability. To relieve the pressure, media are often used willingly, but this is frequently accompanied by anxiety about the negative consequences of excessive media consumption. Mothers in particular complain that working from home and caring for children is placing a considerable additional burden on them, and that they are strained to the limit. The longer the quarantine lasted, the more the stress level rose and the dissatisfaction described by the respondents grew. This is further intensified by the fact that, at the time of the study, many respondents could see no sign of any easing of the protective measures, any decrease in case numbers, or any improvement in the crisis management in their countries. So we can only concur with the wish expressed by a mother from Spain – that there will soon be “light at the end of the tunnel.” ■

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NOTES

¹ Spain, Denmark, United Kingdom, USA, Germany, Mexico, Brazil, Ecuador, Austria, France, Bulgaria.

² For example North Leeds Mumbler Chat Group, *Fröhlicher Austausch für Münchner Familien, or Deutsche Mütter in Barcelona*

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