

Young children's lives during the pandemic: *Families in Tower Hamlets* survey and panel findings

The lives of children during the Covid-19 pandemic were subject to unparalleled restrictions on and disruption to their physical activity, social activity and participation in support services such as schools and early childhood education and care (ECEC) services. The 'stay at home' order on 23rd March 2020 and accompanying closures of ECEC settings to all children except those of critical workers or those classed as vulnerable led to only 5–10% of children who usually attended ECEC doing so (Department for Education [DfE], 2020). This was followed by an extended period of Covid-19 related safety measures, reduced attendance, and disruption to ECEC (Bowyer-Crane et al., 2022). Attendance at ECEC has still not returned to pre-pandemic levels. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds who did attend ECEC during this time made substantial gains in vocabulary so those who did not attend lost developmental gains associated with language skills (Davies et al. 2021). Only 59 percent of children completing reception classes in 2021 had a good level of development compared to 72 percent in 2019, meaning the pandemic restrictions had led to a loss of skills in early maths and literacy (Tracey et al. 2022).

For preschool aged children in Tower Hamlets, pre-pandemic attendance at ECEC services such as children's centres and nurseries had been growing from a comparatively low base (PHE 2021). While fewer children than the national average met the standard for being 'ready' for school at age 5, by age 16, school attainment was better than national average (PHE 2021). Pre-pandemic, 55% of families in Tower Hamlets were living in poverty (Trust for London 2020) and unemployment figures were comparatively high (6.7% vs 5.9% in London) (Nomis 2021). During the 2020 closure period, five of 12 Tower Hamlets' children's centres remained open, for health appointments for children considered vulnerable. Family support and play support were offered virtually, for all children. Children's centre staff supported registered families through keeping in contact, with a focus on those who were vulnerable and shielding. They also offered help with transition to school through 1-2-1 support and virtual group workshops. Almost all the independent sector nurseries and other early years settings were closed during the first lockdown. Those that were open (7/82) offered places to all the children of key workers and vulnerable children; 15 Childminders also cared for key worker and vulnerable children. Settings began to reopen from 1st June 2020 and by the end of June 2020, 37 settings were open providing for 788 children (personal communication). As with nationally, there was a prolonged period of intermittent closures over the year July 2020 – July 2021.

This briefing paper explores the experiences of children aged under five living in Tower Hamlets, as told from the perspective of their parents during the 2020-2021 Covid-19 pandemic lockdowns. As Prime et al. (2020) document, the extraordinary changes and disruptions to families' lives brought about by measures to control the pandemic may have elevated risks to children's wellbeing, particularly in families where there were already high levels of social disadvantage and where parental stress was common.

Study data sources

This paper is one a series of five thematically organised short reports presenting results from the UKRI-ESRC funded *Families in Tower Hamlets* study (2020-2022). In this paper, we focus on the impact of the Covid-19

pandemic on the lives of children under five. The study data drawn upon consists of a longitudinal community survey in two waves and a qualitative panel in two waves. The first survey wave (July – November 2020) had 992 respondents of whom 620 took part in the second wave (February – April 2021). The Wave 1 participants were recruited via general local authority communications channels and specifically targeting low-income families through postcards sent to all those on their database of housing benefit recipients. The sample broadly matched the borough in terms of the major ethnic groups, with just over a third White British/Irish, and a similar proportion were from a Bangladeshi background (full details in Appendix 1). By Wave 2, participants were more likely to be White British/Irish and there were fewer respondents from South Asian backgrounds. They were also more likely to be of higher income. To generate a longitudinal sample, participants in Wave 2 were ‘matched’ to their Wave 1 record.

The second data source is a qualitative household panel (QP) which consisted of interviews with 33 mothers and fathers in 22 households selected to represent a range of household structures, ethnicities and household income. Wave 1 QP interviews took place in January - March 2021; Wave 2 follow up interviews were conducted October-December 2021 with 27 mothers and fathers in 18 households.

Main findings

Survey and panel data from this study revealed significant disruption to, and compression of, the lives and usual day to day activities of children during the pandemic. Parents of young children across all income bands reported a wholesale curtailing of the rich and varied daily lives of their children as a result of the closure of early education and care provisions as well as play and leisure settings. Key areas of change and disruption for young children were in nursery/childcare usage, home learning, activities and play and their behaviour and development. In the Wave 2 QP, interviews were conducted when many of the Covid-19 restrictions had begun to be lifted, and parents discussed their child’s life in terms of ‘recovery’ of routines, service use and leisure activities, and contact with extended family, friends and peers.

ECEC – Nursery and childcare usage

The Covid-19 pandemic had an impact on parents’ use of ECEC. Almost half (49%) of survey parents reported using nursery or childcare pre-Covid-19. By the time of the Wave 1 (July-November 2020) survey attendance had dropped to 38% and this decrease was more substantial amongst South Asian families (a 16% drop) than White British/Irish families (5% drop).

By Feb-May 2021 (Wave 2 survey), childcare usage overall had increased to almost pre-Covid-19 levels (45%), but among South Asian families, it had continued to decline, with a decrease of a further 11.9% to 20.3% compared to a rise between survey waves amongst White British/Irish families of 19.0%, up to 56.1%. By May 2021, White British/Irish families’ childcare usage exceeded their pre-Covid-19 rates.

There was a differential impact on childcare usage according to income band (Table 1). Childcare usage pre-Covid-19 was highest amongst low-income families (59.9%) but this showed a steady decline over time and by May 2021 was the lowest of all the income bands (38.7%). Mid-income and high-income households had lower pre-Covid-19 childcare usage (38.0% and 48.6%) but after a dip at the time of the Wave 1 survey, usage of childcare increased to above pre-Covid-19 levels. There were concerns amongst survey respondents about potential risks associated with children returning to nursery/childcare of contracting Covid-19 and passing it on to other more vulnerable family members.

Nursery/childcare usage	White British/Irish	South Asian	Low income	Mid income	High income
Pre-Covid-19 (asked in Wave 1 survey)	41.9%	48.0%	59.9%	38.0%	48.6%
At time of Wave 1 survey (July-Nov 2020)	37.1% ↓	32.2% ↓	47.0 ↓	28.2 ↓	40.4 ↓
At time of Wave 2 survey (Feb - May 2021)	56.1% ↑	20.3% ↓	38.7 ↓	41.8 ↑	62.2 ↑

Table 1: Nursery/childcare usage Pre-Covid-19 and at Wave 1 and 2 by ethnicity and income

In the qualitative panel interviews at Wave 1, half of households (11/22) said that their youngest child had been attending some form of ECEC prior to the onset of the pandemic and/or between periods of lockdown. At Wave 1 these parents expressed concern about how the closure of nursery/childcare services along with other learning and play settings such as Children’s Centres might have impacted their children; they were conscious of the potential consequences of their child missing out on nursery and other day-to-day activities and stimulation that promote the development of young children:

“you know he had a routine in place, and as soon as lockdown hit he was just completely confined at home literally – for the last year of his life, I don’t think he even remembers what kind of things we accessed – we accessed a lot of play opportunities, he had access to you know a lot more children his age. So developmentally he was a lot more ... if it wasn’t lockdown I think he would have developed.”

By Wave 2, most QP parents reported that their youngest child was attending ECEC part- or full-time (13/19 households). In six of the 19 households the youngest child was not in any form of ECEC at Wave 2; all six of these households were in low- or mid-income. Parents in four of these six households said that their child was not in ECEC because they could not afford the cost of childcare and they were not eligible for free hours:

“here [England] you have to anyway pay for education before 1 year, before 2 years, so it’s a lot of money...and yeah sometimes you end up giving your whole salary to the childminder or the school.”

“the 2 year grant which is available generally for people who are on benefit ... people like myself could also benefit from that, but I can’t because I don’t meet the criteria. So if I was to be able to access that then I could have put my child in for half a day....he probably would have really benefited from it in terms of his development, meeting his developmental milestones and things like that. It would have helped me out as well.”

In five households the hours or number of days their child was in ECEC had increased between Wave 1 and Wave 2, linked to changes in circumstances which included mothers returning to work after maternity leave, the youngest child reaching an age where they were eligible for free hours of childcare and parents’ employment becoming more demanding in terms of workload or a requirement to return to the office.

Most QP children who had gone back to ECEC or had newly started had adapted well. Parents commented on the benefits for their child of going back to, or starting ECEC, this included having a much more active and varied daily life; regular socialisation with children and adults outside the household and

improvements in discipline, stability and routine. In some cases parents reported improved child behaviour and accelerating cognitive, language and social development:

"[name of child] started nursery, he's going there each morning which has been a real change for us but great for him. He's really come on leaps and bounds since he started."

Being able to access and/or afford ECEC was also very important for mothers' employment in several Wave 2 panel households (7/19), enabling them to return to work after maternity leave or a period of unemployment, to stay in work or to increase their working hours. Conversely, not being able to afford childcare or not being eligible for any free hours or sufficient free hours was a hindrance for four low- and mid-income panel mothers who wanted to return to employment or increase their working hours:

"Even part time would be fine because anyway I do have two kids and sometimes to pay for childcare at this stage is very expensive.... next year maybe so we can get off universal credit and start to organise better our finances if we both work... then my second child will be 2 years old, so more opportunity even for childcare. Easier to find a place and at least get some free hours as well."

Home learning

Most survey parents were helping their 2-5 year old child(ren) to learn the ABC/alphabet at home (81.4% Wave 1; 88.2% Wave 2) and teaching them to learn numbers or counting (85.7% Wave 1; 94.1% Wave 2). Similar percentages of parents across ethnic backgrounds were doing these forms of home learning with their children. Around a third of parents reported reading to their 2-5 year old child most days (Wave 1: 29.9%, Wave 2: 34.2%) with similar percentages for both White British/Irish and South Asian ethnic groups. However, many more White British/Irish parents at both Wave 1 and 2 (55.0% and 63.2%) were reading to their child every day than South Asian parents (30.3% and 31.3%); this was also lower than the whole sample percentage figures (45.0% and 51.6%).

Almost half of all respondents whose youngest child was 0-2 years old reported reading to their baby once a day or more than once a day (45.9%), a proportion significantly higher amongst White British/Irish parents (54.1%) compared to South Asian parents (28.2%). There were also differences by household income band with over 70.3% of high-income respondents saying they read to their baby once a day or more than once a day compared with 35.0% of mid-income and 30.4% of low-income respondents.

Parental confidence in their ability to support their children's learning at home was generally high amongst survey parents (72.6%), with greater confidence expressed by White British/Irish parents (81.9%) compared to South Asian parents (65.0%).

At Wave 1, in early 2021, QP parents spoke about the difficulties they had experienced with home learning and attending to the competing needs of their children, especially during the school closure periods. Parents in five panel households said that supporting their school-age children with home learning had impacted their ability to give the kind of one-to-one time and attention they would have normally given to their youngest child's learning and development:

"I wasn't able to give him that time either – although we were at home I couldn't give him that time because of constantly thinking about home education for the other children. You know because I didn't want the other ones to lose out"

Children’s activity and play

Parents were asked in both waves of the survey to indicate how often their children did any kind of physical activity outside (Figure 1). Most parents reported ‘every day’ or ‘most days’ at both time points with the percentage increasing between Wave 1 and 2 (61.0%; 71.1%). Many more White British/Irish families reported that their children did physical activity outside every day or most days than South Asian families; and the proportion increased over time amongst White British/Irish families (73.5% to 89.5% in Wave 2) but remained relatively low in South Asian families (44.8% to 47.8%).

A higher percentage of parents whose youngest child had a physical or learning disability reported at both survey Waves that their child did physical activity outside ‘every day’ or ‘most days’ (80.4% at Wave 1; 88.4% at Wave 2) than was the case for the whole survey sample.

There were also notable differences in rates of children’s physical activity outside according to income band. The percentage of parents reporting at Wave 1 that their children did physical activity outside every day or most days was lower amongst low-income families (50.3%) than for mid- and high-income families (68.7%; 75.0%). Children’s physical activity outdoors increased at Wave 2 amongst mid- and high-income families (84.3%; 86.7%) but remained lower for low-income households (56.0%).

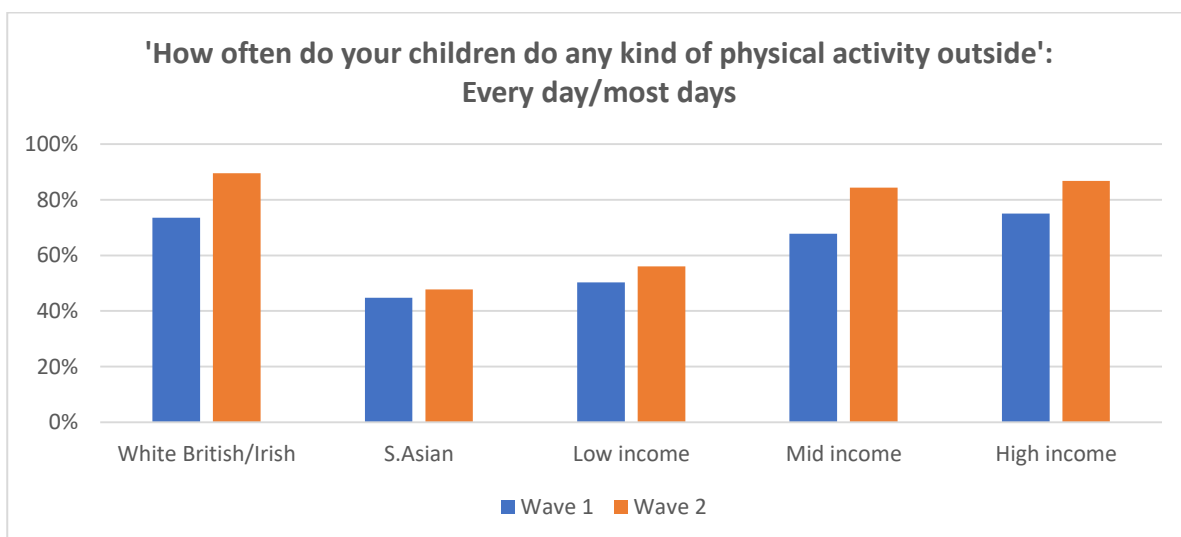


Figure 1: Children’s physical activity at Wave 1 and 2 by ethnicity and income

Similar ethnic and income band patterning was found in relation to use of parks and green spaces. Over half of parents (56.6%) reported that their family visited parks and green spaces twice or more each week but this was much more likely amongst White British/Irish families (64.1%) compared to South Asian families (38.2%), and amongst high income families (80.0%) compared to mid- (56.5%) and low-income families (42.3%).

Panel parents recognised the importance of getting outside as much as possible during the Covid-19 lockdown periods when restrictions were in place, with local parks and green spaces playing an important role in facilitating this:

“Whenever I have chance I take them in parks or nearby playground where the other children are, and she loves it you know, she doesn’t want to come back home.”

However, parents spoke about the barriers that existed to getting outside with their children. Parents from 11 panel households commented on how the amount of time their children could spend outside was significantly curtailed during the winter months; this had made the second and third lockdown periods particularly hard for some children and especially for those living in more overcrowded conditions. Other parents said that their fears around the severity and transmissibility of the coronavirus and wanting to protect household members was a key reason why their children had not spent as much time outside and especially during the early stages of the pandemic:

“We used to like being outside a lot and she used to enjoy that a lot – and that has to stop...we don’t like to want to touch stuff and that, because as I say we’re learning about the virus.”

Parents in five panel households reported significant increases at Wave 1 in their children’s ‘screen time’ on iPad type devices and/or in front of the TV, saying they had ‘resorted’ to allowing this to try and keep children occupied when they were stuck inside the home for long periods of time and when parents were busy with work or supporting older children with home schooling. However, there were positive accounts amongst panel parents of them introducing new activities in the home with their children to stimulate and keep them entertained. This included baking, arts and crafts as well as activities described as ‘old fashioned’ such as board games and hide and seek. Parents in 13 panel households reported that they and their children had been spending more time together engaged in play and leisure activities in the home during the pandemic:

“What I done is started to go back to the old fashioned board games, hide and seek in the home, and charades, and the old fashioned things. And I was like ‘Okay come in the kitchen with me now’ so I’m the kitchen ‘Let’s do this, what are we going to make?’ - look for things that you want to make, get the recipes, we’ll make this.”

In the Wave 1 survey, 61.5% of respondents with a 0-2 year old child reported playing with toys with their baby once a day or more than once a day; there was little difference between ethnic groups (55.3% of White British/Irish and 60.0% of South Asian respondents) but more significant differences between income bands, with 71.6% of high-income, 55.0% of mid-income and 53.6% of low-income respondents saying that they played with toys with their baby once or more than once a day.

By Wave 2, panel parents reported that overall, their children’s lives were much more active, varied and stimulating than had been the case at Wave 1; one parent described life as “*more colourful*”. The picture at Wave 2 was largely one of getting back towards ‘normal’, with many children doing most of the activities outside the home that they did pre-pandemic and very young children starting to do the activities that parents had planned for them but which they had been unable to engage in due to the onset of the pandemic:

“We’re back into the routine... the kids are at clubs and things like that. It’s more or less back to normal.”

“Over the summer we’ve been to several different farm parks and to the zoo a few times ... so yeah, we’re doing loads of different things. Yeah, so I think the next plan will be to take her to a trampoline park, that’s coming up soon. Yeah, so just exposing her to things that she hasn’t really had a chance to do over the last year. So yeah she’s loving it.”

In some panel households at Wave 2 (5/19), children were not doing all the organised activities that they had been doing pre-pandemic despite the lifting of restrictions. Reasons given for this included the family

being used to spending more time at home and being unaccustomed to the hectic timetable they had pre-pandemic. Other parents commented on the expense of the activities that their children used to do, especially in the context of the increased cost of living, whilst others were still being cautious about where the family went and who they mixed with amidst ongoing fears of contracting Covid-19:

“We’re doing things, but we’re not doing things that is not ... like if we would do something it would have to be an outdoor thing or like ... we won’t go the local funfair, because we don’t think that they would probably pay much attention to government guidelines and do the thing properly.”

Child wellbeing, development and socialisation

Survey parents with a child aged 2-5 were asked ‘Over the past 6 months has your child seemed nervous, clingy in new situations, easily loses confidence?’. Over half of parents reported these behavioural issues (60.8%). The incidence was lower in South Asian families (54.5%) than White British families (62.0%) and higher amongst low-income (71.6%) than mid (55.0%) and high-income families (60.0%). Over 90% (90.7%) of parents of physically disabled or learning-disabled children, and over three-quarters (79%) of parents in receipt of Universal Credit, reported that their children experienced these issues.

Parents in most panel households (18/22) expressed concerns at Wave 1 around the potential impact of the restrictions, the closure of nurseries, children’s centres and other early childhood provision, play and leisure activities, and the contraction of children’s social worlds outside the home on their child’s wellbeing, cognitive/language development and socialisation:

“She was academically really forward, socially really forward. For a whole year and half you might as well say she’s going to be kept in... I think that’s going to have a dramatic effect on her and her character and her personality.”

Some parents reported signs of social anxiety in their children:

“Well I went to the health visitor the other day for his one year check-up and he’s got what they call stranger anxiety... I know that this is a big impact of coronavirus which is what’s caused it, because obviously self-isolating at home...I mean his dad comes into the house, and sometimes he’s brought like maybe his brother with him and the baby literally screams every time someone walks into my house that he’s not familiar with. Even down to his nan”.

Surveyed parents of children aged 2-5 years were asked if their child had ‘difficulties in one or more of the following areas: emotions, concentration, behaviour or being able to get on with other people?’. It should be noted that there was a relatively low response rate to this question (62%) so the data should be read with caution, however over half of parents (55.9) who answered this question reported that their child had difficulties in one or more of these areas. The incidence of these difficulties was higher amongst White British/Irish families (67.3%) than South Asian families (47.0%) and higher amongst mid-income (65.7%) than low or high-income families (55.3% and 43.3%).

Parents in seven panel households spoke at Wave 1 about how restrictions and confinement at home had led to problematic behaviours manifesting or escalating in their child, these included tantrums, mood swings, heightened emotional outbursts and bad language:

“Behaviourally she’s had some very challenging periods of lashing out at us and just being really whingy and moaning and crying and being very sensitive to things and getting very upset over very

little things at home. And it's been like an on and off switch, which is why I think it's not necessarily normal."

Interviews with panel parents at Wave 2 revealed a mixed picture with regards to children's growth, development and socialisation. Overall, there were fewer concerns about child growth and development and more about children's socialisation. Parents in six households who had had worries at Wave 1 about their child's growth and development felt that these worries had been resolved and that their child had 'recovered' by Wave 2; only one family expressed continuing concerns around their child's growth and development at Wave 2:

"I was a little worried about his language [development]. But I think he's actually picked up quite a bit fairly recently.... I think he's kind of caught up with a lot, he's not that behind, he's able to ... you know his language is there ... when he sees things he's able to communicate and things like that."

Conversely, whilst concerns around child socialisation had waned in three panel households by Wave 2, they had persisted in five other households. Some children were still not feeling comfortable with extended family members such as grandparents, were overly clingy with parents and not wanting to be left in the care of others, had not made friends in their ECEC settings and were either aggressive or acutely introverted around other children:

"we have a couple of options for babysitting, but again [name of daughter] is so clingy at the moment that it's difficult whenever we mention you know you're staying with so and so and we're going out, even if it's just ... you know we did it a couple of weeks ago, in the morning just to go out for a coffee - and she lost it, she was so upset."

Varied reasons were given for resolved concerns around children's growth, development and socialisation. These included children being able to get back to, or to start going to, ECEC, the re-establishment of routine and stability in daily life, resuming a range of experiences and activities outside the home and having more regular exposure to family, friends and peers:

"it really change for her I think. I think she's getting used to people, she stay with people to socialise more, and I feel really blessed for her honestly. You know I remember when I spoke to you last time I was a bit complaining and concerned for her not being able to socialise because of the pandemic, so many restrictions. But for this year specially she just get started at pre-school, it's really different for her and I'm so happy with that."

Physical wellbeing

In terms of children's physical wellbeing, a third of all Wave 2 survey parents (33.3%) said there had been an increase in the amount of sugary food eaten by their child(ren) compared to pre-pandemic, with 39.8% of South Asian and 27.5% of White British/Irish respondents reporting an increase in their child's consumption of sugary foods. This was much more likely to be the case among low-income households, where parents reported a very high incidence of sugary food consumption by their children (6 or more times a day or 3 or more times a day) compared with mid- and high-income respondents (30.7%, 22.1% and 15.0% respectively).

Complaints about headaches, stomach-aches or sickness over the previous six months were much more prevalent in White British/Irish households (18.7% saying 'yes-often') than South Asian (3.7%) or the whole sample (9.4%) at Wave 2. Such complaints were more common among low-income households (15.1%) than mid- (10.0%) or high-income households (3.3%). Combining 'often' and 'sometimes' responses produced a more pronounced social gradient: 52.5% of low-income parents compared to 35.7% of mid-and 26.7% of high

income parents. Conversely, ethnic group differences were less significant when both ‘Yes’ responses were considered (White British/Irish: 45.6%; South Asian: 41.8%; Whole sample: 41.7%). The reported incidence of these symptoms was strikingly high amongst parents whose child had a physical or learning disability with 53.5% stating ‘Yes, often’ and 25.6% ‘Yes sometimes’.

Relationships and social world

At Wave 1 more than half of QP households (12/22) reported a significant increase in the amount of quality time that family members in the household spent together during the pandemic, and in many cases, the strengthening or deepening of relationships, particularly between parents and children of all ages. This was viewed as one of the few positive outcomes of the pandemic restrictions with more playing, eating and talking together, which some parents said had resulted in family members getting to know each other better and bonding in new ways:

“it’s just been the four of us, what that’s meant is the four of us have got now a really close nice bond that I don’t know if we would have had otherwise. Especially with [youngest child] and [husband] – he would have gone back to work quickly, he wouldn’t have seen him as much, other than at the weekend. So I just think it’s ... it has been nice that he’s been able to be at home and we’ve all been able to just be together.”

At Wave 2, some panel households reported that these positive outcomes had lasted, citing continued close intra-household family relationships, more time spent together despite the lifting of restrictions and doing more activities together as a family unit:

“There’s quite a few things that we were doing in the lockdown as a family which we tried to sort of continue going because things like family time in the evenings – those things, we tried to keep it going as much as we can.”

The impact of the pandemic restrictions on children’s relationships in the household were particularly significant for father-child relationships. The instruction to employed parents to work from home wherever possible as well as the introduction of the furlough scheme and cases of unemployment meant that almost half (8/18) of all Wave 1 QP fathers talked about how they had been more available and involved in their child’s daily life than prior to the onset of the pandemic. For some fathers, this presence had improved father-child bonding:

“I think the bonding is stronger than before actually, or comparing to if I was working I can feel it. If I was working or as I am now, I think when I’m at home the bonding is actually stronger than if I was working.”

For other fathers, pressure of work increased during the pandemic, and a consequent reduction of family time occurred, either because they were a key worker who had to continue going out to work or because their job had become far busier and more demanding even though they were working from home.

Many families lacked sufficient space for separate areas for work play and living. Difficulties and tensions arose as a result:

“so sometimes I might easily lose my temper and shout at them and ask them to leave me alone, let me concentrate and do the job. Then I feel guilty because it’s not their fault, because there’s no place they can go. If they can go to school this thing won’t happen, now this thing won’t happen at all”.

Some (4/22) Wave 1 parents reported an increase in conflict between siblings, especially where there were both pre-school age and older children:

“they’re constantly in each other’s faces, they’re constantly quarrelling, and I feel like me and my partner are constantly ...we constantly trying to mediate.”

In other QP families, older siblings were seen as beneficial for the youngest child to play with and to learn from when pandemic restrictions had otherwise severely curtailed learning, development and socialisation experiences outside the household. The tensions and conflicts experienced by some panel families at Wave 1 had reduced significantly by Wave 2 as restrictions had lifted and families were able to spend more time outside the home.

Young children’s social relationships with people outside the household were severely curtailed during the lockdowns. Wave 1 QP parents painted a stark picture of the impact of this contraction of social worlds on relations with wider kin, friends and peers. Even children’s general interactions with people in outdoor and public spaces, e.g. in parks and shops, were hugely restricted. Not having the opportunity to introduce a new baby to grandparents and other significant family members and friends gave rise to concerns among some parents about how their children would react once visits could resume:

“we were wondering when we would be able to meet her [close family friend] again. Of course there’s no long term memory at this stage, so probably he won’t recognise her, so if she has to start everything from the beginning probably he will not be very happy to go play with her straight away, you know.”

Despite this, parents in ten (of 22) households reported using phone and video-calling to keep in touch with extended family and friends, with this playing a vital role in the maintenance of their child’s social world. Whilst many children were reported to have engaged well with this ‘virtual’ contact throughout the period of social restrictions, other children became ‘bored’ and gradually disengaged with this form of social contact (4/22 households).

By Wave 2 QP, parents in nearly all households were back to seeing extended family and friends again in-person and in many cases children had re-established the relationship and level of comfort that they had with these people pre-pandemic. Some children were still not comfortable with such visits and relationships; and travel restrictions meant that in three households whose extended family lived abroad, visits had not been possible and so their children had not yet had the opportunity to develop or re-establish their relationship with these people:

“when I talk to my family that I realise, ‘Yes, you have never seen my daughter. We haven’t seen each other for so long’. So, this is when I realise that it was so long.”

Conclusion

The study found ethnic and household income patterning in ECEC usage, child's physical activity and visiting parks/green spaces, with lower rates amongst South Asian and low-income families. There was a notable level of child behavioural issues reported by survey parents, with a higher incidence amongst White British/Irish, low and mid-income families. Panel parents expressed concerns about the impact of the closure of nursery/childcare services and other learning, leisure and play settings on their children's development and socialisation; by Wave 2 most parents' concerns regarding growth and development had reduced but, for some, worries about socialisation had persisted. Parents across ethnic groups had done well in supporting their children's home learning during the pandemic despite competing demands on their time. However, significantly more White British/Irish parents reported reading to their child every day than South Asian parents and there was also greater confidence amongst White British/Irish parents in their ability to support home learning than amongst South Asian parents. Where families had been able to spend more time together, this had led to a reported strengthening and deepening of intra-household relationships which in many households had persisted over time. Whilst the daily routines and activities of children in this study were starting to return to 'normal' at Wave 2, and parental concerns around children's growth, development and socialisation were largely abating, the potential mid to long-term effects of the pandemic on the lives and wellbeing of the children in this study are unknown. There is emerging evidence around the possible longer-term negative effects of the pandemic on young children and in particular their communication, language, social and emotional development (Ofsted, 2022; Tracey et al. 2022). Further research is needed to establish a clear picture of how the pandemic may have impacted the wellbeing and development of young children in Tower Hamlets, particularly those living in conditions of material precarity.

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Appendix 1
Research Design and Methodology

The study consisted of two waves of a **community survey** of parents of children under five or expecting a baby and two waves of a qualitative household panel. **Survey Wave 1** with 992 valid responses took place July-November 2020 and **Survey Wave 2** took place February – May 2021. Wave 2 respondents were matched to Wave 1 and there were 620 valid responses making a longitudinal sample with a response rate of 62.5 percent. See Tables 1 and 2 (below) for sample characteristics. Non responders to Wave 2 were more likely to be low income and non-White British/Irish. The community Survey used Qualtrics, an online and phone based multi-language survey tool, and was promoted through borough communications channels with support from specialist voluntary organisations to recruit members of under-represented groups. Data items were drawn from parallel studies (e.g, Born in Bradford, Dickerson et al., 2020; International Network of Leave Policies and Research, Yerkes et al., 2020; Understanding Society). After data cleaning, ‘prefer not to say’ and ‘don’t know’ responses were excluded from analyses. In instances of multiple answers ‘yes most of the time’, ‘yes all the time’ data were collapsed. Using SPSS, descriptive tables, were used to inform this briefing for 1) the Wave 1 sample and 2) the Wave 1 and Wave 2 longitudinal samples. Ethnicity is described in terms of ‘White British/Irish’, ‘South Asian’ (including Bangladeshi, India, Pakistani), and ‘All’ (total sample including all ethnic groups). We use ‘N’ to denote the number of responses to any one item; there is missing data in relation to some variables, particularly in relation to service use and access.

The **qualitative Household Panel** members were drawn from the survey and selected to represent ethnic diversity, household structure and income diversity. Wave 1 Panel interviews with 1-3 adult household members in 22 households took place February-April 2021 and Wave 2 interviews with 19 of the 22 original panel households in October-November 2021. Panel interviews were fully transcribed and coded using Nvivo by team members with cross-referencing to moderate interpretation. The steps of thematic analysis were used to establish analytic themes. Miro boards were used to display coded data and create relationships between dimensions of the themes. In this report, ‘few’ refers to three or under cases, ‘some’ refers to four-seven cases, half refers to 11 cases and ‘most’ refers to more than half the cases.

In this briefing paper we refer to **survey** findings and **panel** findings to refer to the community survey and the qualitative household panel.

HH Income	Parental status	WB/I		SA		All	
		N	%	N	%	N	%

Low (<£20,799)	Parent U5	60	84.5	169	91.4	304	91.3
	Pregnant	3	4.2	2	1.1	5	1.5
	Both	8	11.2	14	7.6	24	7.2
	Total	71	100	185	100	333	100
Mid (£20,800-£51,999)	Parent U5	124	86.7	63	85.1	234	87.6
	Pregnant	11	7.7	6	8.1	18	6.7
	Both	8	5.6	5	6.8	15	5.6
	Total	143	100	74	100	267	100
High (>£52,000)	Parent U5	76	72.4	20	80.0	142	76.3
	Pregnant	24	22.9	3	12.0	31	16.7
	Both	5	4.8	2	8.0	13	7.0
	Total	105	100	25	100	186	100
Total					786	79.2	
Missing (ethnicity or income not stated)					206	20.8	

Appendix Table 1 Wave 1 survey sample (n = 992) parental status, income bracket and ethnic group

HH Income	Parental status	WB/I		SA		All	
		N	%	N	%	N	%
Low (<£20,799)	Parent U5	45	86.5	96	90.6	175	90.2
	Pregnant	1	1.9	1	0.9	2	1.0
	Both	6	11.5	9	8.5	17	8.8
	Total	52	100	106	100	194	100
Mid (£20,800-£51,999)	Parent U5	104	87.4	44	86.3	179	88.2
	Pregnant	10	8.4	4	7.8	14	6.9
	Both	5	4.2	3	5.9	10	4.9
	Total	119	100	51	100	203	100
High (>£52,000)	Parent U5	56	68.3	11	78.6	102	75.0
	Pregnant	23	28.0	1	7.1	25	18.4
	Both	3	3.7	2	14.3	9	6.6
	Total	82	100	14	100	136	100
Total					533	86.0	
Missing (ethnicity or income not stated)					87	14.0	

Appendix Table 2 Longitudinal Sample Wave 2 (n=620), parental status, income bracket and ethnic group

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