

**An investigation into the social development implications of national lockdown as a result of the Coronavirus pandemic on children in the Early Years from the parents' perspective.**

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## **Abstract:**

### **Introduction and aims**

Due to the widespread prevalence of COVID-19 and subsequent social implications, questions have emerged regarding the impact on children's development (United Nations, 2020). This paper seeks to understand this with greater depth, with specific consideration for children's social development in the Early Years, as to fill this gap in current research.

### **Methodology**

Three semi-structured interviews were undertaken with mothers with children in the Early Years who experienced the COVID-19 pandemic in the UK. Thematic analysis was used to establish themes and interpret the data, indicating five main overarching themes to the discussion of: family unit, peer relationships, technology, siblings and age.

### **Results**

The results indicated that parents were concerned for slow social development progression during this time with peer relationships and age being the most salient factors for this.

### **Conclusion**

Conclusions drawn recommended that positive socialisation is priorities when and where possible, with emphasis on peer interactions. Considerations should also be made for children who are around the age of one and below, making sure to appropriately support them in this area, as the results suggested they would be the most vulnerable as we transition out of the pandemic.

## **Introduction**

In response to various societal changes and restrictions imposed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, pertinent literature and contemporary research illustrated considerable effects which were expected to be omnipresent across children in the UK (United Nations, 2020). While initial research into the expected implications for childhood development was beneficial (Pascal et al., 2020) there had been limited understanding with specific focus on children's social development, which arguably will be one of the main drawbacks from this period due to the type of restrictions imposed such as social distancing, educational facilities closing and a 'stay at home' policy (GOV.UK, 2020). The present study aims to address these concerns and provide greater clarity in regards to children's social development.

## **Literature review**

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory was used to form the framework of points considered and to capture what is known about the topic. This theory suggests the developmental process 'occurs through reciprocal interface between a human and their immediate environment' (Powell and Leytham, 2014, p. 287), meaning a child's development will be impacted by every facet of their life. Consequently, a range of factors were explored to contextualise the existing information in relation to the theory.

Bronfenbrenner (1979) outlines how the social model is dependent upon the child's society and from corresponding changes which will alter the suggested blueprint. This is evident throughout the pandemic, with constant alterations to legislation affecting children's environments (Cheng, Moon and Artman, 2020). Figure 1. offers a potential visual illustration of children's Ecological System before the pandemic in comparison to during the Spring 2020 lockdown in Figure 2. However, the model inadequately demonstrates the abruptness of the changes and how difficult

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this would have been for children to hypothesise. Furthermore, the model offers a broad perspective which is important as the challenges from this period are not homogeneous throughout society (Idoiaga et al., 2020). As a result, conclusions drawn should not be merely accepted as conclusive when further scrutiny is required. Extensive literature was examined to identify existing themes but due to the emerging nature of this topic, pertinent sources from other fields were also be used congruently. As per Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979), the literature explored a child's microsystem, mesosystem and exosystem and additionally technology in relation to social development during the pandemic and national lockdown.

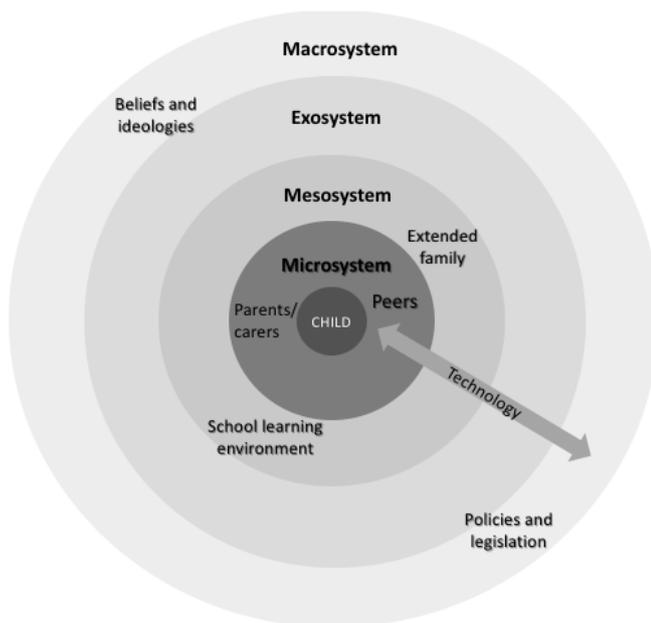


Figure 1. Example of Ecological Systems Model for a child in the Early Years before the pandemic.

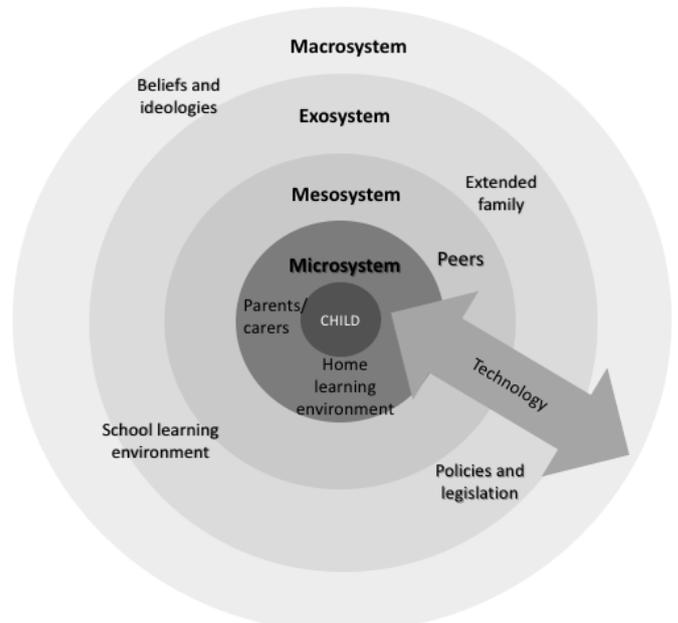


Figure 2. Example of Ecological Systems Model for a child in the Early Years during Spring 2020 lockdown.

## Microsystem: The Parent-child relationship

The microsystem encompasses the child's immediate environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979); parents, siblings, friends and school, and is often considered the most important system, as it is the primary source of influence (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). During the national lockdown, the most salient influence for many became just their immediate family members (Cheng, Moon and Artman, 2020). Speculatively, the extent to which children's social development was impacted correlates to these relationships.

## Attachment:

Attachment to caregivers is essential for early childhood development (Novak and Pelaez, 2020), with specific mention to early social development as children use interactions between the parent-child dyad to form attachments (Posada and Waters, 2018). During lockdown, close confinement potentially enabled the opportunity for an abundance of interactions, often resulting in secure attachments (Novak and Pelaez, 2020). However, as Coppola, Senatore and Masullo (2020) propose, whilst the relationship would begin positively, this could lead to insecure attachments where children become too dependent, potentially causing separation distress (Giménez-Dasí et

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al., 2020), which Coppola, Senatore and Masullo (2020) assert is highly likely. Suggestively, for many children, the increased attachment will potentially lead to more damaging effects on their social development than gained over this period (Novak and Pelaez, 2020).

## **Mesosystem: Relationships outside the family**

Under 'typical' developmental circumstances a child's mesosystem would normally include interactions between the home, school, neighbourhood and religious settings (Smidt, 2009). The mesosystem is important for social development as it acts as the linkage between a child's most influential environments (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). During lockdown, many of these links would have been disconnected or limited due to restrictions (e.g. school closures) (Cabinet Office, 2020), potentially impeding children's social development and straining relationships.

## **Peer relationships:**

A survey from Idoiaga et al. (2020) depicts the importance of peer relations for children in relation to the pandemic, with respondents expressing concerns of feeling overwhelmed because of insufficient intimacy, support and social relationships. Whilst the report from Idoiaga et al. (2020) focuses on children in Spain, where lockdown restrictions were considerably more stringent than the UK, and is not specific to the Early Years, the findings are corroborated by Rahma, Lestari and Nugroho's (2018) discussion on the impact of home-schooling on social development and peer relations. They strongly infer that children in home learning environments often lack the social capacity of others (Rahma, Lestari and Nugroho, 2018). In contrast, Ellis, Forbes and Dumas (2020) proposed that children who were able to be physically distant but remain socially connected through different means, maintained some level of social and cognitive development throughout the lockdown, including peer discourse which is fundamental for social development (Grøver et al., 2014).

## **Combination of the Ecological Systems: Technology**

In the context of the pandemic, technology has been used as a mechanism to replace the intrinsic links that Bronfenbrenner (1979) discusses and arguably has had a greater impact on the social development than before, as outlined in Figure 2.

## **Access to technology:**

For those who could obtain resources available, the evidence suggests that this could have helped strengthen their social development, potentially promoting cognitive functioning and enriching their learning environment (OCED, 2020). However, as Ellis, Forbes and Dumas (2020) remark, while having access to devices has enabled children to remain socially active and had an increased positive impact on lockdown implications, this is often not possible for disadvantaged, vulnerable or young children. Statistics from a survey support this, showing middle class families were more likely to have received online support from their providers than working class families (31% versus 23%) (Pascal et al., 2020).

With figures showing Early Years professionals estimating '53% of children had regressed' against predicted expectations due to the national lockdown in terms of their personal, social and emotional development (Ofsted, 2020, p.6) and increased economic exacerbation and social disruption apparent, speculation on the continued ramifications and consequences for social development clearly required further scrutiny.

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## **Methodology**

In order to address the research aims and provide greater clarity a qualitative design was established (Ayiro, 2012), allowing greater exploration into the implications of lockdown on children's social development and providing increasing opportunities of further scrutiny (Silverman, 2021). This is further reflected by the subjectivist paradigm, presenting the opportunity of acquiring multiple perspectives through which experiences and interpretations are gained and assessed (Tai and Ajjawi, 2016). Whilst a positivist approach would have allowed for systematic and transparent data collection (Guest, Namey and Mitchell, 2013), through gathering specific and precise data, acquiring a large sample size, an interpretivist position remained the prevailing epistemology due to the nature of the investigation requiring in depth understanding (Jamshed, 2014). This interpretivist approach led to increased detailed and comprehensive accounts of the social implications of lockdown for children in the Early Years during the pandemic, helping to achieve greater conceptualisation (Park, Konge and Artino, 2020). This was considered paramount to the investigation due to the emergent nature of the topic (Kabir, 2016), helping to ascertain indirect implications caused by the pandemic. Furthermore, while this investigation does not use implicit presuppositions, it has been guided by Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979) and from this a range of themes for exploration emerged, denoting a deductive approach, indicating a top-down perspective. However, as the study of COVID-19 is a relatively new field of study which, as of yet, lacks established and pre-existing knowledge, this suggests an inductive, bottom-up inquiry (Reichertz, 2014), uncovering unidentified implications from the process (Morse and Mitcham, 2002). The above justifications implied a combination of both inductive and deductive approaches (Xu and Zammit, 2020), however as the researcher expected to construct further theory on the basis of the results, this suggested a larger association towards an inductive approach (Reichertz, 2014), further elucidating the research as firmly interpretivist, subjectivist and qualitative.

The research was primary sourced ensuring authenticity and objectivity (Kabir, 2016), using a semi-structured interview approach allowing for a flexible probing and probing process, resulting in detailed responses and unexpected discussion (Denscombe, 2010). While there was a concern for interviewer bias (Chenail, 2011), questions were pre-prepared with open-ended enquiries, ensuring the interviewee was not intentionally lead (Alby and Fatigante, 2014). Despite mitigation attempts, due to the small-scale qualitative research the data lacks generalisability (Ellis, 2020a), as it is less representative and target focused (Tai and Ajjawi, 2016). However, when conducting small-scale qualitative research - which this is - the aim is not to find statistical significance directly proportional to the sample size (Britto, Engle and Super, 2013), but to establish a deeper understanding of specific and focused lived experiences (Ellis, 2020b), notwithstanding the reliability implications (Tai and Ajjawi, 2016).

The findings from the semi-structured interviews were analysed using thematic analysis, allowing for common themes and anomalies to be established easily (Braun and Clark, 2006). These will be discussed below.

## **Results and discussion**

Transcriptions of the interviews and early data interpretation, following thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006), established five main overarching themes; family unit, peer relationships, technology, siblings and age. These themes were organised into two sections, titled; previously identified and newly identified themes. This was tantamount to the expectations of the methodology due to the emergent nature of the investigation topic.

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## ***Previously established themes***

### *Family unit*

Participating parents articulated the importance of the family unit in regards to children's social development, stating:

*Participant B: "It was lovely to have that more intimate and special time as a family."*

*Participant A: "Kids get the most from their family unit... I think if they are secure in their family relationships then they will excel in their social relationships as well.."*

The above quotations can be explained by Bronfenbrenner (1979), who suggests that the child's microsystem is the most important influence for children's social development, which includes their family unit, suggesting that the increased time together was a positive factor for children's social development. This aligns with the findings from Idoiaga et al. (2020) whose study found an overwhelming demand for more family time together during the pandemic. Contrastingly, one parent expressed:

*Participant B: "He became very attached to me... he was a lot shyer and more timid compared to what he used to be like in social situations. I guess you could say it was a massive regression socially."*

Here, the suggestion is that the increased time together was perhaps too much, increasing insecure resistant or ambivalent attachment (Bowlby, 1988) and subsequently impacting the child's social development. The findings here are congruent with those of Evans et al. (2020) who found despite perceived benefits, this time together often exacerbated family challenges, such as conflict, and had subsequent repercussions. The current study adds to this discussion, indicating how the family unit and its implications can have forward effects for children's social development in the Early Years, with both positive and negative connotations.

### *Peer relationships*

The interviews highlighted the impact of the pandemic on peers as one of the most salient influences to children's social development, with each participant involved conceding the impact on peer relationships as vast. The following quotations encompass this general notion:

*Participant B: "not being able to see and play with his friends like a normal child is just heart breaking."*

*Participant C: "... he definitely missed the interaction with peers..."*

The suggestion is the lockdown prohibited children from establishing and maintaining relationships outside of the home environment, limiting opportunities of socialisation which in turn has impeded their social development, such as a lack of peer social skills. This concept is supported by the findings from Idoiaga et al. (2020) who present a variety of implications to which the lack of age appropriate socialisation with peers caused, including loneliness. The closure of settings were outlined as key detriments to peer relationships, consistent with the findings from Idoiaga et al. (2020) who attests that educational institutions are invaluable in providing socialisation opportunities, suggesting settings play a crucial role in children's social development, facilitating natural opportunities to build and maintain friendships. Further compounding implications on peer relationships was limited opportunities of playdates.

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*Participant B: "... I have no doubt that his relationships with his peers could have been stronger if we could have playdates outside of school also."*

The findings here outline the importance of playdates and socialisation outside of educational settings for children in the Early Years. Interestingly, the findings are tantamount to the discussion presented by Harvey (2020), suggesting children may regress in terms of their social development without contact with others through opportunities such as playdates. The present study extended these findings, providing commentary specific to the UK for children in the Early Years and established an undisputed negative implication as highlighted above.

## *Technology*

All participants discussed the prominence of technology during the pandemic. Participants describe a variety of different uses for devices with connectivity to others remaining salient. This is outlined in the following quotations:

*Participant B: "My eldest also has some Facetime dates with his friends to keep in contact."*

*Participant A: "...in terms of keeping in touch with people, 100% Facetime is invaluable..."*

Technology was identified as a mechanism to enhance relationships and although not explicitly stated, this subsequently provided a level of support for children's social development as children were able to connect with one another. The findings here are congruent to those from Ellis, Forbes and Dumas (2020) who found children who were able to stay connected through different means during the pandemic, such as technology use, were more likely to obtain peer discourse and social interactions, fundamental in sustaining a degree of appropriate social development. Furthermore, the present findings concluded with the hypothesis drawn from Coppola, Senatore and Masullo (2020) who assert it is highly likely technology use post-pandemic would decline due to the preference of face-to-face socialisation and a lack of effectiveness for children in the Early Years.

## ***Newly identified themes***

### *Siblings*

During the analysis process it became apparent that having a sibling relationship during the pandemic had an impact on children's experience of lockdown and consequently their social development. Parents predominately advocated a positive impact and suggest that if their children had been an only child it would have been a very different experience.

*Participant A: "I think because he had a sibling and wasn't an only child then I don't think that was as impactful as it might have been if he was an only child."*

*Participant C: "O and M were relatively protected because they had each other..."*

Karos, Howe and Aquan-Asee (2007) acknowledges the importance of sibling relationships for children's social development, suggesting it helps to facilitate and scaffold social understanding and awareness. With the lockdown prohibiting external socialisation, it can be inferred from the above quotations that this relationship became increasingly important and perhaps protected children from spill over effects of the pandemic, including opportunities of age appropriate socialisation and discourse as well as support during this time. Interestingly, the findings from the present study contradicts previous literature from Prime, Brown and Wade (2020) who suggesting

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that lockdown could perhaps cause negative consequences for sibling relationships due to increased confinement and pandemic related conflict. In contrast, the data is congruent with the findings from Zang (2020) who noted an increase in positive relationships between siblings during this time. Adding to the discussion, the results from this study provided comparisons to Early Years children within the UK and proposes the importance of sibling relationships for children's social development during the pandemic with positive connotations.

## **Age**

During analysis of the interviews, there was a clear depiction that the scale of impact for the aforementioned themes were mutually responsive with the age of the child(ren). This is demonstrated below:

*Participant B: "...for my youngest it is a different situation because he was born into the pandemic situation, so he doesn't know any different..."*

When analysing the results there was a clear perception of age impacting children's social development in a negative way:

*Participant B: "...now he is older, I think he would now benefit from going to some baby classes..."*

*Participant C: "... for the first seven months of her life she hasn't seen anybody...so she was kind of relatively poorly integrated..."*

The above quotations demonstrate a unanimous understanding that parents perceived younger children (all below the age of one) to have been impacted by missing out on key social development opportunities in comparison to typical times. Notwithstanding this, participating parents also believed that their age was a positive factor. This is shown below:

*Participant A: "I think if they were older and had had different experiences, wanted to go to play with friends but they don't know any different..."*

Here, the findings show a sense of relief that their children were too young to properly feel the effects of lockdown (below the age of one), instead suggesting if they had been older it could have been very different, with a more negative outcome. This corresponds to the findings from Coppola, Senatore and Masullo (2020) with their study indicating that older children were more likely to be analytical towards the pandemic, understanding the reasoning behind the restrictions and having the ability to use alternative methods of socialisation, again emphasising the importance of technology as previously discussed. The present study supports this notion and exemplifies age as a salient interdependent factor in affecting children's social development and highlights that children below the age of one are likely to require additional support moving forward to limit social development regression and delays.

## **Conclusion**

The research attempted to understand the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on children's social development. Interviews with parents helped to gather valuable insights and delineate a comprehensive overview showing, trends and anomalies in the literature provided and previous assumptions. Collating the findings highlighted a concern for slow social development progression throughout this time, suggesting children had potentially been marginally impacted or depending on their circumstances had greater impacts on their social development.

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Positive time with the family unit was associated with a positive trend for social development, however it remained dependent upon the family and circumstances whether this was experienced. Furthermore, for certain participants, the family unit helped to mitigate the effects of some of the other factors, if appropriate support was provided. Whilst technology was discussed, its impact on social development for children in the Early Years remained limited and instead suggested limited face-to-face socialisation with external influences was a larger contributor to negative social development. The findings here highlighted key relationships such as peers having the most significant impacts for children's social development over this time. Furthermore, sibling relationships was established as a mitigating factor for social development, highlighting key opportunities to develop social skills, through play, suggesting this could have been the difference for many children as to how they experienced the pandemic. Furthermore, age was recognised as a salient interdependent factor, affecting children's social development in both positive and negative ways. The results demonstrated that if children were younger at the start of the pandemic (below the age of one) than it was easier in comparison to older children, as they do not know any different and for most they only need parental support, signifying the importance of the family unit. However, it also suggests for these children that they are likely to have larger implications on their social development in the future as they missed out on key social development opportunities, such as socialisation with a range of influences. Therefore, these children will require a larger amount of support to ensure social development delays and regression is limited as much as possible.

Finally, the findings concluded, extended and challenged the assumptions on the impact on social development. Models of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological System's (inserted below) help to provide direct comparisons and highlight which factors have been the most significant throughout this time. It is interesting to note the comparisons between the Exosystems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) within each of the figures, highlighting how limited interactions with those in the Exosystem has had a large impact on their social development. In essence, these factors have had some of the largest negative contributions to children's social development over this period.

Figures showing possible Ecological Systems Model throughout the different stages of the pandemic.



Figure 1. Example of Ecological Systems Model for a child in the Early Years before the pandemic.

Figure 2. Example of Ecological Systems Model for a child in the Early Years during Spring 2020 lockdown.

Figure 3. Example of Ecological Systems Model for a child in the Early Years as per the results from this study.

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To conclude, the research provided a synthesised overview of the COVID-19 pandemic with specific and focused attention on social development in the Early Years, which to the knowledge of the researcher was yet to be addressed.

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