



Parenting in a Pandemic – Results Summary **By Mikaela Beijbom, Vivian Nelson, and Dr. Kieran O’Doherty**

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Summary of Study Design:

Phone interviews were conducted with forty-two parents who live in Ontario between April and September 2020. Interviews ranged in length from about twenty minutes to one hour. All participants were offered a \$20 e-gift card to thank them for their time.

What were some of the biggest challenges of school closures and remote learning for families?

Participants spoke to us about the various challenges of school closures and remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. In many of the interviews, parents discussed the challenge of social isolation for themselves and their children. Their concerns included: the impact of lockdowns and work-and-school-from-home on children’s mental health; social competencies (e.g., conversational habits, conduct in the classroom, being a good friend); and future happiness (e.g., success in school, having positive relationships, being unscathed long-term by the pandemic).

Many participants indicated that coping with uncertainty and collapsed or blurred boundaries was challenging for them. The many ambiguities introduced by the pandemic, and uncertainty and evolving information about COVID-19 issues, were described as causing tension and anxiety for several participants. Newly implemented space constraints (everything happening in the home) and the collapse of role boundaries (parents describing themselves as now both parent and teacher) were commonly cited as a challenge of virtual schooling.

Other concerns included increased screen-time for children, catching the virus, isolation from extended family and worries about their well-being, and children missing milestones (e.g., graduation, class trips, prom).

How did parents and families navigate decision-making around return-to-school during the pandemic?

All participants reported that decision-making around return-to-school was made with their child(ren)’s best interests at the center of the decision. When a child was old enough to be able to communicate their wishes, parents reported that these wishes were often the determining factor. For example, if a child expressed a desire to return-to-school, their parent(s) would enrol

them for in-person learning. Participants also reported using their observations and knowledge of their children as a guiding factor, noting changes in behaviour during remote learning that highlighted the importance of in-person learning. Concerns about social well-being and mental health were often reported as being high priority considerations when participants made decisions about return-to-school.

For many participants, concerns about their child(ren) catching the virus guided return-to-school decisions. When parents described feeling that the risk of catching the virus was low (due to low case numbers, low-risk area, precautions of the school, etc.), they often reported feeling comfortable with their children returning to in-person learning. When parents described feeling that the risk of catching the virus was high (due to high case numbers, high risk area, not enough precautions, etc.), and/or that the consequences of catching the virus were high (e.g., high-risk family member), they reported not feeling comfortable with their child(ren) returning to in-person learning and choosing remote learning.

How satisfied have parents been with their child's learning experiences during the pandemic?

Many participants felt that there is a distinction between academic and social learning experiences. Academically, many parents reported feeling that their child(ren) did not learn as much during virtual-schooling than they would have in-person. Reasons for this included distractions and lack of supervision at home, less access to teachers, and lack of access to speciality spaces and equipment (e.g., labs, gyms). Most participants reported that it was challenging for their children to remain focused; however, some participants noted their children's diligence while attending school virtually.

Many participants reported concerns that their children's learning of social skills has been or would be impacted by the pandemic and school closures. Parents reported concerns with their child(ren) learning things like (but not limited to) turn-taking, conducting themselves in the classroom, how to be a supportive friend, and general communication skills.

Conclusion

We interviewed forty-two Ontario parents to understand their experiences of and perspectives on remote learning and parenting during the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants shared their challenges with isolation, uncertainty, and blurred boundaries, and most prominently, their child(ren)'s well-being. Decision-making around return-to-school was guided by parents' understandings of their children's best interests and protection (or lack thereof) from the virus. Overall, participants expressed feeling that both academic and social learning during the pandemic have been marked by loss, and emphasize the importance of their child(ren) being able to safely remain in-school moving forward to prevent further losses.

A key finding from this study is that many parents found themselves in untenable positions during the pandemic lockdowns. The demands of activities such as caring for children, educating children, running a household, securing income through employment or business activities, and obligations to extended family and others are each significant in and of

themselves. During the pandemic many parents found themselves in a position where they had to take on multiple roles simultaneously with the added burden of less outside assistance because of COVID restrictions (e.g., extended family being prevented from visiting and helping out). Though schools in Ontario are currently open, further lockdowns remain a possibility. On the whole, parents have adapted to these challenges well, while prioritizing the well-being of their children. Moving forward, facing these and similar challenges with resilience will require explicit recognition of the trade-offs inherent in policy decisions relating to COVID containment measures, explicit recognition of the demands on parents and provision of adequate supports to meet those demands, and recognition of what personal skills and practices can be fostered to best meet those challenges.