

## What happened to fathers during lockdown – and how can we keep the ‘best bits’ of their experience?

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<http://www.fatherhoodinstitute.org/2021/contemporary-fathers-in-the-uk/>

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We’ve heard a lot in the news about the negative impact of the pandemic on women, and more specifically mothers

<https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2021/feb/28/mums-women-coronavirus-covid-home-schooling-inequality>. But behind the headlines, the changes brought about by Covid19 have not been all bad. In fact, there are good reasons to be hopeful that the lockdowns may have resulted in some beneficial side-effects in terms of challenges to gender norms.

Our study *Lockdown Fathers: the untold story*, shows that during the first Covid-19 lockdown (in spring 2020), Britain’s fathers spent more time than ever with their children – looking after them, doing more housework and supporting their learning and development through play, home schooling and other activities. We found that overall, dads grew in confidence, learned new skills and built stronger relationships with their children. They were also clear that they wanted to stay more involved in future.

### Background to the study

The Lockdown Fathers study grew out of the realisation that, as Britain locked down to cope with the first wave of the Coronavirus pandemic (23 March 2020), a significant social experiment was underway. More than 150 years after the Industrial Revolution had removed most fathers from their homes for the working day, fathers – in their millions – were coming home.

Data from other studies also suggest that extraordinary, unprecedented changes have occurred in British homes during this health crisis. For example, we already knew that, since the 1970s, fathers in couple families have been gradually increasing the hours that they devote to childcare. The Institute for Fiscal Studies found that during the Spring 2020 lockdown, this process accelerated massively: fathers *almost doubled* the number of hours during which they did some childcare from just over four to eight hours per day. Meanwhile, mothers’ equivalent input increased from almost seven to 10.3 hours.

### Our key findings

In our study, partnered fathers in all socio-economic groups said that during the first lockdown they provided a broad mixture of active childcare: 78% reported spending more time with their children overall; 68% more time on home schooling and helping with homework; and 59% more time on cleaning, laundry and cooking. This is even though 27% continued working full-time out-of-home, and 86% of those still working during lockdown worked 30+ hours per week (compared with 51% of equivalent mothers).

Among partnered fathers full-time at home during lockdown, 85% spent more time with their children, 73% more time on home schooling and helping with homework; and 72% more time on cleaning, laundry and cooking.

The dads said their parenting improved: 65% reported a better father-child relationship after the Spring 2020 lockdown (73% of fathers full-time at home.) Almost half (48%) left lockdown feeling more competent as a parent, with only 8% feeling less so. Forty-two percent found themselves better able to keep calm and manage their tempers with their children. A small but significant minority (14%) were less able to achieve this. Fifty-one percent reported understanding their children better and 64% felt closer to them after lockdown. Almost all the rest (likely including some who had felt very close beforehand) reported no change. Only 2-3% reported deterioration.

We also found that home schooling had its upside: 57% of partnered fathers said that, following lockdown, they felt better equipped to support their children's learning and education (50% of the most disadvantaged fathers also said this). However, around 10% felt less confident. Fathers who reported a better father-child relationship were more likely to report better mental wellbeing. Most reported that their own (and their partner's) wellbeing had improved (20%) or was unchanged (40%) during lockdown. Deterioration was reported by 40%. This has been strongly linked with jobs and earnings losses.

Half of dads said they had developed a better understanding of what is involved in running a household and looking after children; three-fifths reported increased awareness of the importance of fathers spending time with their children.

Long working hours and commutes, lack of direct contact with schools and gendered assumptions around caregiving usually get in the way of paternal involvement. The fathers we surveyed – a nationally representative sample of fathers – were clear that they want this to change: 76% of those full-time at home during lockdown said they'd like more flexible working, and 63% more home-working in future, for example.

### **Now for the bad news**

The story was not the same for everyone, of course: during the Spring 2020 lockdown, 40% of involved separated fathers saw more of their children than before lockdown, but 46% saw them less. 'Less time' was associated with a poor father-mother relationship, another adult controlling father-child time and socio-economic disadvantage: 73% of disadvantaged (v. 25% of advantaged) dads had less time with their children during lockdown, and those fathers who had less time with their children were more likely to report deterioration in mental wellbeing. Only 37% left

lockdown feeling more confident in their ability to support their children's schoolwork, compared to 57% of the partnered fathers.

## Fathering the future

So what can we learn from the study? The biggest take-home message is this: that *time* is the essential ingredient in parent-child relationships. Under 'normal' circumstances, mothers spend much more time with our children than we fathers do – while we spend much more outside the home, on paid work (and travelling to it).

Lockdown was an opportunity to reset the balance, allowing fathers and children, on a national scale, to spend substantially more time together. The impact of this 'natural experiment' were (setting aside the physical, emotional, financial and other hardships experienced by some families) broadly positive in terms of fatherhood, and most dads want a 'new normal' to develop.

So the stage is set for increased father-care. This is not just up to the fathers, though. Gendered economic and social institutions drive polarisation in mother-father and caregiver/breadwinner roles, penalising families financially when the higher earner (usually the father) works less. These are not set to change and some 'slippage' back into traditionalism is inevitable.

We already know that much of the shift towards more equitable sharing of caregiving in lockdown 1 (spring 2020) was lost in lockdown 2 (September 2020), with fathers' childcare time falling back from 64% to 50% of mothers'. This is still better than pre-pandemic levels (the figure was 39% in 2015, for example), but is also a sign of how easily gains can be lost without concerted action to redesign both men's and women's work-life balance.

Through our new campaign, Time with Dad, we hope to find ways of 'building back' from the pandemic so that the 'best bits' of lockdown fatherhood can be retained. We hope you feel inspired to join us. Find out more and sign up to #timewithdad here

<http://www.fatherhoodinstitute.org/2021/fathers-after-lockdown-sign-up-to-our-time-with-dad-campaign/>.

## Time with Dad



Read the *Lockdown Fathers* report and watch our 3-minute video here <http://www.fatherhoodinstitute.org/2021/what-was-lockdown-like-for-dads-and-how-can-we-keep-the-best-bits/>.

*The Fatherhood Institute is one of the most respected fatherhood organisations in the world. A UK charity, it works - through research, policy change and father-inclusion training – to create a society that:*

- *gives all children a strong and positive relationship with their father and any father-figures*
- *supports both mothers and fathers as earners and carers, and prepares boys and girls for a future shared role in caring for children.*