Parent health and wellbeing at home before and during COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

Environments of parenthood are changing with increasing rates of dual-working households, more single-parent and non-traditional families, increasing cost of childcare, and growing reliance on online communities for information and support. However, everyday parenthood activities are still primarily conducted at "home". In this paper, we draw on a study which initially aimed to explore parent health and wellbeing in everyday contexts before COVID-19, but the pandemic shaped the enquiry further. Our empirical research is based on an online survey with a sample of UK parents ($n = 274$). Findings presented here relate to qualitative data focused on descriptions of parenthood at home, analysed thematically. Our study reveals how everyday activities of parenthood, including intersections with work and socialisation, are experienced in and through the home in ways that impact health and wellbeing. Significantly, it connects home-life changes created during COVID-19 "lockdowns" with longer-term considerations of parent needs.

1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to explore everyday influences on parent health and wellbeing at home, before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this review we explore the "experience and meaning of home" (Blunt and Dowling, 2006, p.9) as a key environment of parenthood. We begin by reviewing parent needs generally and then at home specifically, before considering experiences during COVID-19, largely in the UK but introducing international literature where relevant. This study uses qualitative survey data, which typically attracts short comments from multiple perspectives (Marsh et al., 2021). For this paper, data pertaining to home was extracted and analysed thematically, using an iterative approach combining inductive and deductive analysis. Three themes were developed, relating to everyday parenthood at home (before and during COVID-19), intersections of work and home, and social connections at home. Finally, we consider how pandemic experiences relate to longer-term factors, exaggerated during COVID-19 but founded in pre-existing structures.

1.1. Why focus on parents?

There is growing awareness of the importance of home-life on the welfare and development of children, leading to increased focus on parents (Callaghan et al., 2017). Recognising child needs is critical but parents matter too, both in their own right and to empower them raising children (Bunting et al., 2017). Parents face scrutiny of their actions, described as the "professionalisation" of parenthood (Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson, 2014) but an individualistic approach neglects context (Bunting et al., 2017). This study contributes towards redressing that imbalance.

1.2. Why focus on home?

The idealised vision of home is of safety and comfort. The metaphor "feeling at home" (Blunt and Dowling, 2006, p.2) represents belonging. Intuitively, this appears positive but requires caution. At times, the safety of home represents a juxtaposition of outside spaces as unsafe or inaccessible. Davidson explores agoraphobia and pregnancy, describing women "quite literally house*bound*" by fear of leaving home (Davidson, 2001, p.286, italics original). Leaving the home can also be influenced by perceptions of neighbourhood safety (Robinette et al., 2021), experiences of stigma (Bunting et al., 2017), or challenges of journey-making with children (Boyer and Spinney, 2016). The relationship with home begins therefore, in how one feels about leaving it.

The appearance of home changes with the arrival of children, and "the amount of stuff" acquired and purchased (Laura, study participant,

Boyer and Spinney, 2016, p1119). Ideals of parenthood are conveyed through material trappings from romanticised images of parenthood (Kehily and Thomson, 2011) and linked with narratives that equate a well-kept home with adequate parenting, especially mothering (Doucet, 2011). Such perfect images poorly reflect the reality of many though, perhaps more realistically depicted with images of milk spilt over the couch (McKie et al., 2002).

Children alter not only the look of a home but also how it is used. Different areas facilitate different activities, such as playing, sleeping, or eating (Turner et al., 2012). This can strengthen relationships, through shared enjoyment and care exchanges (Kehily and Thomsan, 2011). However, home-spaces can become connected with challenging emotions, for example arguments in the hallway or kitchen (Gabb and Singh, 2015). Parents describe difficulty finding places to be quiet and alone at home (Turner et al., 2012). Indeed, home is typically a busy environment and the site from which parents navigate employment (McKie et al., 2002), child schedules (Dowling, 2000), household tasks (Blunt and Dowling, 2006), and broader caring responsibilities (Evans et al., 2017). These responsibilities impact time and space for parents' own needs (ibid) with disproportionate responsibilities often held by women (Blunt and Dowling, 2006).

At times, the home is not suitable for children. Some properties that were sufficient prior to parenthood may present childcare challenges (Luzia, 2010). Other housing may be generally unsafe, for example, from dampness (Sergeant et al., 2021). Housing deemed unsuitable may restrict child custody/ visitation (Ortega-Alcázar, and Wilkinson, 2017). Parents with a health condition or disability may experience challenges to negotiating parenting activities within the home environment (Turner et al., 2012; Wint et al., 2016). These examples show how the home can create barriers to parenting.

1.3. Changing landscapes of parenthood

Social and political structures influence activities at home (Blunt and Dowling, 2006). Therefore, we consider the changing landscape of parenthood. In many countries, such as the UK, more mothers are employed than in previous generations which challenges (but not eradicates) narratives of mothers placed at home, separated from political and economic activity (ibid). Working parents confront new geographies from workplace demands and childcare arrangements (McKie et al., 2002) but may have reduced opportunities for engagement with other parents (Drentea and Moren-Cross, 2005). More men take active child-raising roles, including stay-at-home fathers, but parenthood is dominated by female-focused spaces (online and in-person) where men can feel excluded (Doucet, 2011; Pedersen, 2015). There is a rise in "non-traditional" family structures, including single-parents and LGBTQ+ parents, but families may feel hidden or problematised (Dermott and Pomati, 2016; Luzia, 2010). Factors such as this influence who is at home, performing what roles, and with what resources.

1.4. Parenthood at home during COVID-19

Social changes evolve in response to "longer term secular changes in society" (Bowlby, 2012, p.2106), but also, in response to "sudden shocks, such as wars or epidemics" (ibid). The COVID-19 pandemic presented a worldwide shock (O'Reilly and Green, 2021). The UK government directed periods of home-working where possible and school closures for most children (IfG, 2021). Home-schooling created "unprecedented demands on the time of parents" (Blundell et al., 2020, p.306) and parents experienced heighted stress (Hiraoka and Tomoda, 2020) and increased depression, particularly those in single-parent households, low-income households, and parents with child(ren) with special education needs and/or neurodevelopmental differences (Shum et al., 2020; Aznar and colleagues (2021. p304-305) concluded "inadequate living space" was associated with increased parental stress during home-schooling, whereas "adequate" indoor space was associated

with higher parental self-efficacy (mediated by parent creativity). Outdoor home space mattered too, with many describing solace in private gardens (Marsh et al., 2021) but in the UK, one in eight households do not have a garden and Black people are almost four times as likely to not have a garden as White people (Office for National Statistics, 2020). It was often said that although we were in the same storm during COVID-19, we were not in the same boat (Blundell et al., 2020; O'Reilly and Green, 2021).

1.5. The current study

In this paper, we explore parent experiences at home and the impact on health and wellbeing during COVID-19, alongside broader issues. In doing so, we add to geographic understandings of impacts from COVID-19 on personal geographies of home but also, on how dramatic experiences develop appreciation for longer-standing complexities.

2. Method

An anonymous mixed-methods survey was used for data collection as it allowed researchers to reach respondents when in-person contacts were restricted (IfG, 2021) and was relatively quick and unobtrusive for time-pressured parents. No questions (except giving consent to participate) were compulsory. The survey was anonymous to foster a safe space for reflections (Jaworska, 2018). Eight parents (within and beyond the authorship team) gave feedback to develop the survey. The final survey consisted of 25 Likert-scale questions, nine core free-text questions, and 12 multiple-choice demographic questions. Following approval by [removed for anonymous review] ethics board the survey was constructed in SurveyMonkey and disseminated to a volunteer sample via the website Mumsnet and research team Facebook and Twitter accounts/ groups (February-May 2021). Some COVID-19 restrictions, such as guidance to work from home, were ongoing throughout this period (Ferguson, 2021). School-closures were in place when the survey opened but began to be removed from March 2021 (IfG, 2021). In this paper, we explore qualitative data pertaining to the home, analysed thematically in NVivo 12 Pro.

2.1. Findings

291 parents consented to begin the survey but 17 answered no more questions. Up to 274 answered Likert-scale questions, 218 provided demographic data and there was a median response of 188 (range 174–202) for core qualitative questions (with the exception of "any other comments"). A limitation was under-representation of some demographic groups (see Table 1). Men were under-represented and it is possible that using Mumsnet for recruitment may have contributed to the gender balance, as Mumsnet has more female users (Pedersen, 2015). However, the survey was also distributed through Facebook and Twitter where gender differences are less defined and Twitter has slightly more male users (Mellon and Prosser, 2017). Black participants were significantly under-represented compared to 2011 Census data (Statista, 2022).

Participation by socioeconomic status is unknown as household income data was not collected. However, a Likert-scale question addressed financial concerns and this data is shared below in Table 2, for additional contextual information. Interestingly, many of those employed full-time worried about money most days or every day.

A summary of Likert-scale responses (condensed to a 3-point scale) is available in an online supplement.

2.2. Findings from thematic analysis

Three themes were developed through an iterative process of blended deductive and inductive thematic analysis. There was deductive interest in data related to space, time, inequality, confinement, and

Table 1

Demographic data.

Question	Total = 218	
Number of Children	Number	Percent
One	82	37.6%
Two	108	49.5%
Three	21	9.6%
Four	6	2.8%
Prefer not to say	1	0.5%
Ages of Children		
0–5yrs	93	42.7%
6–11yrs	109	50%
12–17yrs	88	40.4%
Prefer not to say	1	0.5%
Residency of Children		
Live with you all of the time	195	89.5%
Live with you some of the time	13	6%
A mixture (at least one child lives with you all of the time and at least one child lives with you some of the time).	7	3.2%
Prefer not to say	3	1.4%
Gender (self-described)		
Female	180	82.6%
Male	38	17.4%
Other	0	0
Age		
20–29yrs	7	3.2%
30–39yrs	71	32.6%
40–49yrs	120	55.1%
50–59yrs	19	8.7%
Ethnicity		
Asian/ Asian British	9	4.1%
Black/ Black British	2	0.9%
Mixed	6	2.8%
White/ White British	195	89.6%
Other	1	0.5%
Prefer not to say	5	2.3%
Relationship Status		
Heterosexual Partner	179	82.1%
Same-sex Partner	6	2.8%
Single	28	12.9%
Other	3	1.4%
Prefer not to say	2	0.9%
Location		
England	192	88.1%
Northern Ireland	1	0.5%
Scotland	19	8.7%
Wales	6	2.78%
Urbanicity/ Rurality		
Rural; countryside or village	47	21.6%
Urban: town or city	171	78.4%
Longevity to the area		
Grew up within roughly 10 miles of where currently living	87	39.9%
Did not grow up within 10miles of where currently living	123	56.4%
Moved a lot as a child/ grew up in no fixed area	7	3.2%
Not sure	1	0.5%
Disability or Long-Term Health Condition		
Yes	41	18.8%
No	175	80.3%
Prefer not to say	2	1%
Vocational Status (tick all that apply)		
Stay at home Parent	27	12.4%
Carer	13	6%
Part time Worker	72	33%
Full time Worker	111	50.9%
Student	38	17.4%
Volunteer	5	2.3%
Other	3	1.4%

Table 2

Selected Likert-question response–Financial concern.

Question	Total = 273	
I have worried about money	Number	Percentage
Every or Most Days	74	27.1%
Occasionally	115	42.1%
Rarely or Never	83	30.4%
N/A	1	0.4%

of Work and Home" and "Access to social connection at home") integrate pre-COVID-19 and lockdown experiences. Substantive quotes are labelled with basic demographic data. Shorter quotes are embedded into the flow of writing without demographic details.

2.2.1. Everyday parenthood tasks and time at home, and the impact on health and wellbeing

2.2.1.1. Pre-COVID-19. Some parents wrote "home" as a favourite place. It was a central location for meaningful relationships. One parent noted they "enjoyed time at home with my husband and children" whilst another said that they liked to be "home with my wife [as it is] always secure". Home was the location for "everyday simple things" to be enjoyed between parents and children. For example, "art & craft activities…, bedtime stories", "eating dinner together whilst watching tv and chatting, "story time, bath time, cuddles, movies snuggled up", "baking and cooking with the children", "family dinners, film nights" and having "laid back days in playing with toys or games".

The activities parents enjoyed sharing with children changed over time. For example, one respondent noted:

[I] loved seeing her grow and develop into the little girl she is now. She loves books and being read to which is a lovely activity to do together (P25, female, 30–39yrs).

Whilst some parents reflected on "younger years", "when the [children] were small" with fondest memories, others enjoyed opportunities to "do more grown-up things" and "interact more", as children grew older, such as in this quote:

My children are … lovely ages - old enough to be a bit independent but still want to do things with me. … They are old enough for more challenging board games (P40, female, 40–49yrs).

Parents valued opportunities to help children learn at home, both through homework and teaching new skills, as exemplified below:

Bonding with the children as they get older. Teaching them to cook and getting them to help out around the house more. Real life experience (P145, female, 40–49yrs).

In these regards, the home could enhance wellbeing with enjoyable shared activities.

Home could though, accommodate difficult emotions, experiences, and relationships. Some concerns were generic, such as worry about "financial constraint". Other issues changed over time. With babies and toddlers, concerns were dominated by breastfeeding/ weaning, teething, "sleepless nights", tantrums, toilet-training, and noise, such as in this quote:

Interrupted sleep with baby and toddler - it really impacts my mental health (P263, female, 30–39yrs).

With older children, parents struggled with, "pre-teen attitude", "teenage hormones", and noted that children became "more combative" as adolescents. One of the most frequent points of tension at home related to use of "screens":

My son wants to be on his computer all day, you try to be a good parent and limit it but it is mentally draining having battles all day every day - battle to do schoolwork, battle to stop him snacking, battle to turn off the PC and do something non-electronic - everyday it is just draining (P270, female, 40–49yrs).

This changing dynamic at home, when parents felt they became "bad cop", could damage enjoyment of that space.

access to resources (Bowlby, 2012). However, this provided a framework rather than rigid structure and inductive thematic analysis, whereby data were coded and organised into themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006), allowed for emergent themes relating to the study aim. The first theme "Everyday parenthood tasks and time at home, and the impact on health and wellbeing" is the largest and divided into sub-themes of pre-COVID-19 and during lockdown. Two further themes ("Intersections

Concepts of time were significant on a day-to-day basis. In one regard, parents described "long days" and feeling bored, such as in this quote:

I find the daily grind very difficult. The boredom and the repetitive nature (P36, female, 30–39yrs).

Boredom was not related to lack of activity *per se*, but insufficient time for free-choice activities. As this parent described, home could be associated with demanding activities:

When at home always feel like I should be achieving something - cooking, cleaning, garden, clearing out, work emails or other work. Makes it hard to enjoy being with kids at home (P43, female, 40–49yrs).

The pressures of combining activities required at home, with other aspects of daily life was challenging:

Fitting in all the different activities and keeping a house running at the same time [is difficult] (P94, male, 30–39yrs).

As a result, parents described having insufficient time "to do the things I need to, let alone the things I want to", such as time for self-care, hobbies, socialising and "time alone with partner". There were references about the need to "prioritise everyone else" and that a parent's (often a mother's) own needs "come bottom of the heap", as described below:

Not having a minute to think about my own needs, pressure as a mum to be "in control" of all aspects of children's lives… e.g. remembering all school events and things that are needed, dealing with emails from school, arranging school shoes and uniform- feels like this all falls to me. (P41, female, 30–39yrs).

2.2.1.2. During lockdown. During lockdowns, everyday activities at home changed dramatically as work, school, socialisation, and leisure were brought into the home. Sometimes features of the home/local environment could provide comfort, as expressed here:

More stress re money [since lockdown] but live in open area and have garden (P249, male, 50–59yrs).

Indeed, many commented about the value of home gardens, with another describing this space as "hugely beneficial". However, in-home activities and entertainment were also important to those who had access to such resources:

Since [lockdown], our own home [has been a helpful place] including entertainment - tv/on demand tv, internet - games and zoom (P237, female, 40–49ys).

For some parents, increased time at home allowed "opportunity to spend more time together with the kids" without school pick-ups, "playdates" or "clubs". This was summarised by one parent as "less activities for kids means more time together" whilst another spoke about doing more enjoyable activities at home:

Fun activities, having time at home because nowhere to go so making things and being creative (P18, female, 30–39yrs).

As a result of additional time together, some relationships strengthened and parents felt "quite bonded with [the children] by the experience". Furthermore, some parents felt that more time at home improved their health and wellbeing:

[My health and wellbeing] has improved not having the pressures to fit into a certain world or keep up with anything or anyone. I personally have enjoyed shutting the door on the world for a bit and just enjoying being me and being with my family (P251, female, 30–39yrs).

Others used the increased time at home to "eat better", do "more exercise" and "put the brakes on". In these examples, more time together at home during lockdown was not only tolerable but viewed positively. However, capacity to enjoy time at home was impacted by access to varying resources. As we see next, many parents found lockdown challenging.

During lockdown, parents felt "suffocated", "trapped", and "stuck indoors". Restrictions affected all parents but some had health conditions that meant they were especially hesitant to go out:

We're shielding, so basically anything outside has been much more difficult to access. It's been difficult to get out and feel safe (P100, male, 40–49yrs).

Another restriction was created by the weather. Although, outside exercise was permitted (with limitations) during lockdowns, the UK third lockdown was in winter and created another driver to remain at home:

Being indoors a lot over winter was difficult (P75, male, 30–39yrs).

As a result, many parents were restricted to activities at home and could become bored:

The days at home felt long. Hard to think of new activities after several months (P62, female, 40–49yrs).

In these examples, parents were confined at home and unable to "get away from it all". Although home offered protection, it was not necessarily enjoyed.

Many parents commented about the difficulties of having "all of the family… under one roof all day", as elaborated below:

It's almost completely eliminated my alone/quiet time as my family are always in the house with me. Not having a break from each other has been hard (P293, female, 30–39yrs).

Parts of the house and times of day that could have afforded personal space, were eroded:

I find it hard to have proper alone time as the kids are with me 24/7, my son… wants to sleep with me every night, which I don't mind but it gives me very little "me time" (P178, female, 40–49yrs).

The lack of space and time away from one another could cause tension:

Very difficult in the second lockdown (Jan-March) with [children] at home. Lots of stress, less sleep and losing temper more at everyone in the house (P105, male, 40–49yrs).

Furthermore, disagreements could damage family relationships, as described here:

I haven't had more than a couple of hours away from my son since the first lockdown - there's pretty much a behaviour argument everyday and I think it's not only detrimental to my wellbeing but also the amazing relationship I have with my son. I have had three episodes where I felt like I just wanted to cry and be on my own to sort my head out, but you can't be (P270, female, 40–49yrs).

Lack of personal time and space created negative impact on psychological wellbeing. Parents felt "irritable and short tempered… worthless and demotivated", saying the pandemic created "a lot of anxiety and uncertainty" and that they "mentally struggled some days". One parent wrote, "feel a bit crazy some days…". A number of parents described mental health conditions as having developed or deteriorated during lockdowns, including depression, anxiety, PTSD and eating disorders. In addition, parents described worse physical health from "too much snacking" whilst working from home, drinking more alcohol, and doing less exercise.

2.2.2. Intersections of work and home
For many parents, a significant allocation of time beyond activities of home-life, was in paid employment and/ or study. Even before COVID-

19, intersections of work and home could impact health and wellbeing. Sometimes caring for children, especially younger children, heralded more time at home and could be remembered fondly:

I loved being at home 2–3 days [per week] when they were pre-school age (P80, female, 40–49yrs).

However, it could also be remembered as challenging. One parent described "finding days very long on maternity leave" whilst another said they felt "lonely for quite some time" after leaving work to care for children.

A frequently expressed concern was that time at work detracted from time available for other tasks. For example, one parent said that the house was "a mess because of working long hours". However, time pressures are not experienced equally by different social groups. As in the quote below, some respondents believed domestic responsibilities fell disproportionately to women:

Society still seems to accept mums often do bulk of childcare and home chores even if professional career/equivalent working hours (P43, female, 40–49ys).

Single parents in work and or study, also identified particular challenges:

Being a single parent means just me relying on me to get to pick-ups in time from work, days when I don't get to have any time to myself! (P233, female, 40–49yrs).

Parents called for improved flexible working, childcare provision, and understanding to improve home/ work balance.

Intersections of work and home changed dramatically during lockdown. Some parents were furloughed, allowing greater focus at home:

I've… been furloughed so home-schooling has not presented stress for me (P90, female, 40–49yrs).

Most parents though, continued to work, which was predominately from home and often challenging. Many spoke of difficulty "juggling", "balancing" and being "pulled in a number of directions", but despite best efforts, still felt that they were "doing badly at work and parenting at the same time" and "worried about not doing enough for work, kids and … my other half".

Feeling extremely overwhelmed and I feel that I have no time to myself as all my time is taken up by either work or childcare (often both at the same time) (P101 female, 30–39yrs).

Many described the "stress of home-schooling", as "a cause for significant and persistent challenges and arguments" or quite simply, "home-schooling and working was horrible". As in the quote below, many felt that home-schooling whilst working had a detrimental impact on their own health and wellbeing:

It has negatively impacted on my own mental and physical health hugely due to the stress of working from home whilst home schooling (P56, female, 30–39yrs).

Some parents faced particular difficulties, such as single parents, parents raising children with additional health or educational needs, and parents with their own health needs:

Home-schooling was the most stressful experience. Being a single parent and studying full time is a challenge and not having many people round and about (P18, female, 30–39yrs).

This respondent felt that childcare responsibilities fell disproportionately to her, because of her partner's employment:

My partner's employer hasn't provided him with any additional time/flexibility and therefore all responsibility for childcare has passed to me …. as I am the primary carer by default (P292, female, 30–39yrs).

It is important to recognise though, that some parents with differing resources of time, support, and workplace structures, described health and wellbeing benefits from home-working:

[My health and wellbeing is] better as I have more free time due to working from home (P81, male, 30–39yrs).

Furthermore, working from home allowed some parents to be more involved with children:

I work full time but now that's from home I can be around more and keep an eye on schoolwork etc. which I found hard to do before (P31, female, 40–49yrs).

Mentioned repeatedly by parents who valued homeworking, was an appreciation for not commuting, which previously took "time out of the day". Many did not want to return to previous working arrangements and welcomed the opportunity to integrate employment activities into home spaces. However, access to flexible home-working arrangements differ across employment types and are unavailable to many, including most keyworkers who we consider next.

Keyworkers often maintained employment outside of the home and as such, had a different pandemic experience. In the following quote, a parent describes their work as reducing disruption:

It [COVID] hasn't [affected my health and wellbeing] - I have continued to work as a keyworker and kids have been going to school (P283, female, 40–49yrs).

However, many keyworkers described additional challenges to manage work and home:

I have had to balance work and childcare/ home schooling without my usual support system for childcare. It has been a very stressful balancing act, not least because me and my husband are both key workers and my workplace were unsupportive with flexible working (P45, female, 30–39yrs).

Some keyworker parents described feelings of guilt and being "disheartened" that they could not home-school their children. One keyworker parent lived separately from their child during lockdown and described this as "very difficult". It can be seen therefore, that separations between home and work not only remained in place for keyworkers during the pandemic but could even be exaggerated. The stresses of working at home in lockdown were difficult for many parents but working outside the home could be problematic too, particularly for parents with limited support and/ or inflexible workplace demands.

2.2.3. Access to social connection at home

Prior to COVID-19, parents valued seeing family and friends in each other's homes for childcare, connection, and support. As in the quote below, this was often an intimate social experience:

[I have enjoyed] having a cup of tea with a mum friend in their kitchen or mine (P63, female, 40–49yrs).

It could be though, that homes opened up to receive slightly larger gatherings:

[I have enjoyed] meeting in small groups with other parents and their similarly aged children in people's homes (P124, female, 40–49yrs).

However, it can be challenging to share one's home socially. At different stages of parenthood, the home could be altered in ways which made receiving visitors uncomfortable, such as in this quote:

Weaning and toilet training [is] difficult as all that mess is quite antisocial! (P28, female, 40–49yrs).

There may also be experiences of unwelcome comparison. One parent spoke of how difficult it was to have "children's friends over

when we couldn't afford the things they have". Furthermore, home could be a lonely space, especially during the "early years". One parent described "being alone in the house with a baby and toddler all day" as particularly difficult.

During lockdown, social visits between homes were restricted and many parents described this as particularly challenging. Some formed a support or childcare "bubble" to allow contact between homes, but many spoke of being separated from those they "would usually see for support" and struggled with this considerably.

Physically seeing family and friends could be difficult even before the pandemic, so parents used technology to support social connections, often accessed from home. Technology allowed connection with "real-life" friends when meeting was problematic:

Online. That's where my friends are. We all work and have children. It's the one place we can share and talk (P289, female, 40–49yrs).

It also allowed connection with others with shared characteristics:

Online support has been a lifesaver, single parent groups where people share similar experiences, they help cheer you up or just listen when you need to rant… (P18, female, 30–39yrs).

However, many avoided social media "where people put posts of their perfect families", as there was a tendency for "constant comparisons and rose-tinted lenses", or pressure to be "doing more", including more elaborate activities at home with children. Sometimes, online environments could be hostile, with "polarised opinions and name calling".

3. Discussion

Parents in this survey shared how experiences at home influenced health and wellbeing before and during the pandemic. Parenthood was a role embedded with meaning which could create joy, pride, and motivation (van der Ende et al., 2016) as well as challenges (Bunting et al., 2017). The home was a common touchstone underpinning these experiences. In this discussion we reflect on the findings with consideration of how participants' experiences of health and wellbeing within the home was shaped by variable access to resources. A common theme in participants' accounts was feelings of confinement, which we turn to first.

Confinement can be experienced negatively, as "unwanted restraint" or positively, as "the feeling of safety within the confines of one's own home" (Bowlby, 2012, p.2108). Findings presented here offer an opportunity to build on this dual meaning. Parents described feeling confined at home before the pandemic because of difficulties going out with children for varying reasons and during the pandemic due to government restrictions. In both examples, time at home is imposed rather than chosen. In contrast, when home offered a place to "[shut] the door on the world" (P251) and retreat from pressures and dangers beyond, it *could* be welcomed (Blunt and Dowling, 2006). Lockdown provided an extreme example of confinement but a parent's capacity to make choices about time at home, connect with wider personal, social, cultural, and financial factors, often experienced unequally (Bowlby, 2012). Concepts of home-confinement though, are not always separated between those for whom it is unwelcome and those who embrace it. For example, one parent who struggled with being "stuck indoors" during the pandemic, also referred to improved health and wellbeing from home working (P81). Another found time together in lockdown "too intense at times" but also felt bonded with the children by the experience (P80). In nuances such as this, we see experiences of confinement are not absolute. A significant factor influencing experiences of feeling confined at home is access to resources (Bowlby, 2012). Resources include many factors but four that we look at here relate to time, space, finances, and social support.

Parents often lacked time to meet caring and other productive tasks,

and time for themself, leaving their own needs "last on the list" (Evans et al., 2017, p375). The paid and unpaid work to be done at home, eroded it as somewhere to rest and relax (Blunt and Dowling, 2006). Critically, this could be both day and night with many parents describing the challenges of disrupted sleep (either currently or remembering past difficulties) (Bowlby, 2012), as well as lack of opportunities to rest at home more broadly (Turner et al., 2012). In this survey, single parents, working parents, parents caring for children with additional needs and parents with other caring responsibilities identified feeling particularly time-poor (Dermott and Pomati, 2016, Evans et al., 2017, McAuliffe et al., 2019). Some women referred to disproportionate responsibilities at home for mothers which connects with wider literature (McKie et al., 2002), exacerbated during the pandemic (Blundell et al., 2020; O'Reilly, and Green 2021).

Surveyed parents lacked space as well as time. Respondents shared their home (at least part of the week) with at least one child and many lived with a partner. Whilst the importance of being together was described often (Kehil and Thomsan, 2011), sufficient space to accommodate time apart was critical too. During lockdowns, parents with a private garden commented on the importance of this area (Marsh et al., 2021) but many lamented that they could not be alone at home. For some, issues of personal space would have resolved after lockdown restrictions were removed. However, inadequate home space can be a longer-term concern (Sergeant et al., 2021; Ortega-Alcázar and Wilkinson, 2017). The difficulties of inadequate living space experienced widely during lockdown draws attention to those experiencing persistent social inequalities.

Next, we consider finances. Raising children holds material costs centred around the home but parents have differing financial resources (Marmot et al., 2020) and sometimes, significant economic challenges (Hall, 2019). Low-income families may experience stigmatising "class assumptions" about parenting practices (Kehily and Thomsan, 2011, p.49) but with limited finances, parents often forego their own needs to provide for children (Dermott and Pomati, 2016). Although household income data was not gathered in this survey, many parents indicated that they were worried about money in both the Likert-scale question (see Table Two) and through qualitative comments. In this survey, as in other studies, parents with financial concerns were not necessarily unemployed or under-employed (Hall, 2019). Sometimes referred to as "the squeezed middle" (Stenning, 2020), numerous working parents face financial pressure with wages that do not meet expenses. Pay has traditionally been low for many keyworkers, and women and people from ethnic minorities are over-represented in keyworker positions (Blundell et al., 2020). Furthermore, single parents and parents with additional caring responsibilities can face particular financial challenges (Loopstra and Lalor, 2017; O'Reilly, 2021). Against this backdrop, a new cost of living crisis is impacting UK families, leading to real-term losses to household income for many(Resolution Foundation, 2022). Therefore, we see that widespread pressure on family finances is a concern not resolved by the ending of pandemic restrictions.

Finally, we consider social support at home. Many parents valued visiting homes of family members and friends and having others visit them. Social support shared through homes can contribute towards wellbeing and connection (Kehily and Thomsan, 2011) and provide practical assistance (Hall, 2019). The loss of this support was difficult during lockdown and as a result, the home could feel isolating (O'Reilly and Green, 2021). Many surveyed parents felt lonely and although comments included pandemic references, there were also examples unrelated to COVID-19. For example, parents reflected about loneliness in the perinatal period and when their children were young. Furthermore, parents of children with additional needs described this situation as isolating because of limitations in being able to go out (McAuliffe et al., 2019). The literature further identifies risk of isolation for those from ethnic minority groups (Bunting et al., 2017), male primary-carers (Bouratani, 2018), low-income lone parents (Attree, 2005), migrant parents (Eastwood et al., 2013), and those with mental health

conditions, such as postnatal depression (Jaworska, 2018). Home can be a lonely place (Bessaha et al., 2020) and not just during lockdowns.

Even before COVID-19, parents used technology to develop social relationships from home (Drentea and Moren-Cross, 2005). During the pandemic, online socialisation became more prominent and offered unimpeded peer support (O'Reilly, 2021 and Green) but concern exists for parents without internet access and therefore, lower access to online information and support (Rocca, 2020). However, survey respondents also highlighted dangers of social media, particularly when negatively comparing parenting practices (Archer and Kao, 2018). Technology-mediated social connections could bring social discord and judgement into the home, as well as support.

4. Conclusion

This study adds to geographic explorations of the influence of home spaces on health and wellbeing at a time of upheaval, using this unusual situation to juxtapose dramatic and everyday experiences. From this study we have seen confinement at home can be harmful when resented but also welcomed, to escape the wider world, and these positions are not mutually exclusive. We have considered unequal access to resources, influencing not only life at home but also intersections of home and wider spaces, such as employment.

As we consider the future, we recognise that new ways of working, learning, and socialising developed during the pandemic, with greater emphasis on the home. We are yet to see which changes will persist but what is clear is that home-based activities have great capacity to influence health and wellbeing and experiences at home are influenced by unequal experiences of challenge and opportunity. We need to recognise and respond to varying contexts of home-life in order to promote parent health and wellbeing as we move beyond the pandemic and into new ways of living, working, and caring at home.

Ethics

This study was approved by The University of Southampton ethics committee in February 2021 (ethics number 62,637).

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Rachel Houweling: Writing – original draft. **Andrew Power:** Supervision, Writing – review & editing. **Dianna Smith:** Supervision, Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Supplementary materials

Supplementary material associated with this article can be found, in the online version, at doi:10.1016/j.wss.2022.100082.

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