



Lockdown Fathers

the untold story

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

“After work I used to be knackered... Just wanted to get home and put the TV on. Now I can actually spend time with my son and feel awake.”

Our Full Report and a Condensed version, and other reports in the Contemporary Fathers in the UK series, are available in the Research section of the Fatherhood Institute website.

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1. Introduction

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.

This study adds vital detail to the picture emerging from other lockdown studies. These show that extraordinary, unprecedented changes occurred in British homes during this health crisis. We knew that, since the 1970s, fathers in couple families had gradually increased the hours that they were devoting to childcare. However, during the Spring 2020 lockdown, the Institute for Fiscal Studies found that 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 hours¹.

The *Lockdown Fathers* study sets out what this means in detail. During the Spring 2020 lockdown, a substantial majority of fathers in Britain reported spending more time with their children, more time on care and education, and more time on routine housework. The majority said they emerged from this experience more confident as parents, in better relationships with their children, understanding them better, and feeling closer to them. Fathers also said they had gained insights into their partners' caring roles, become more able to support their children's learning, and had grown more aware of the importance of dads spending time with their children.

This study did not measure the benefits of these specific shifts for child development. But it is well-established from many earlier studies that the close involvement of fathers in such daily activities benefit children in terms of their learning, socio-emotional development, life-long opportunities and long-term health outcomes². So, the shift that occurred in lockdown is of great value not only now but, if retained, for children's lives into adulthood.

The fathers in this study recognised the value of what they had done and appreciated what lay at the root of the change. They wanted more flexible working and the

¹ (Andrew et al., 2020a) p34 Figure 4.2 <https://ifs.org.uk/uploads/R178-Family-time-use-and-home-learning-during-the-COVID-19-lockdown-1.pdf> See also (Andrew et al., 2020b), p13 Figure 4 <https://www.ifs.org.uk/uploads/BN290-Mothers-and-fathers-balancing-work-and-life-under-lockdown.pdf>

² (Chung, 2020)

opportunity to work more from home once the pandemic is over. In short, they wanted to retain much of what had been achieved during lockdown in order to be better fathers.

This extraordinary, once-in-a-lifetime, shift sets employers and government an extraordinary challenge: to preserve the best of fatherhood from the lockdown by retaining fathers' better access to flexible working (in time and location) that many enjoyed during the crisis. This would support children in the long term, but it would also help them, right now, to recover from what has been lost or missed because of COVID-19.

2. Key findings

This report presents the findings of a nationally representative sample of 2,045 fathers³ of under-12 children, surveyed in June 2020 following the first UK lockdown. Sub-groups of the full survey sample have been analysed separately:

- Partnered Fathers in Father-Mother households with at least one under-12 child living with them full-time
- Involved Own Household Fathers (iOHFs) not living full-time with their child but seeing them regularly before lockdown (commonly called 'nonresident')
- Fathers of Colour (mainly Asian, Black and Mixed Heritage)
- Fathers in Two-Father households with at least one under-12 child living with them full-time.

2.1. Partnered Fathers

Partnered Fathers in all socio-economic groups 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.

³ The survey sample is a quota sample of fathers aged 16+ of at least one child (birth, adoptive or step/partner's child) aged under 12 years, who are on the PopulusLive online panel. Quotas and weighting delivered a nationally representative sample. Diary records (kept by 30 fathers) and follow-on interviews (15 fathers) supplemented the quantitative research.

Parenting improved: 65% reported a **better father-child relationship** after the Spring 2020 lockdown (73% of fathers full-time at home.) Forty-eight percent left lockdown **feeling more competent as a parent**, with only 8% feeling less competent. 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.

Home schooling had its up side. 57% 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 their own (and their partner's) wellbeing improved (20%) or unchanged (40%) during lockdown. Deterioration was reported by 40%. This has been strongly linked with jobs and earnings losses⁴.

Couple relationships were not harmed: 85% of Partnered Fathers reported a good pre-lockdown couple relationship (83% afterwards); and only 3% said it was 'poor' beforehand (5% afterwards). Half 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**.

2.2. Involved Own Household Fathers (iOHFs)

During the Spring 2020 lockdown, 40% of involved separated fathers (iOHFs) **saw more of their children than before lockdown, and 46% less**. 'Less time' was associated with a poor father-mother relationship, another adult controlling father-child time and socio-economic disadvantage: 73% of the disadvantaged (v. 25% of advantaged) dads had less time with their children during lockdown. The iOHFs 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** v. 57% of the Partnered Fathers. However, half of the iOHFs reported **a co-operative relationship with their child's other parent**, and one-in-four said **that relationship 'makes me happy'**.

⁴ (Andrew et al., 2020a)

2.3. Fathers of Colour

Fathers of Colour were more likely (29%) than White Fathers (19%) to report a positive impact of lockdown on their **mental wellbeing**, to report increased **closeness with their children** (79% v. 61%) and to report **improvement in their couple relationship** from before to after lockdown.

2.4. Two-Father households

Fathers in Two-Father households were less likely (69%) than fathers in Father-Mother households (78%) to report **more time with children** during lockdown or an **improved father-child relationship** afterwards (58% v. 65%). They more often reported a **poor couple relationship** (8% v. 3%). Many more (43% v. 18%) were 'main' rather than 'secondary' caregivers. This may have affected their perspective⁵.

2.5. Fathering the future

Other pandemic studies report that fathers want change⁶: to **avoid lengthy commutes** and **reduce their working hours** to spend more time with their family⁷. Half of mothers hope their partner will be able to work from home and two-thirds that he will work flexibly⁸.

Lockdown Fathers supports this: 76% of the Partnered Fathers who had been full-time at home during lockdown hoped to work more flexibly in the future, with 63% hoping to work more from home.

The stage is set for increased fathercare, but this is not just up to the fathers. 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.

Some 'slippage' back into traditionalism is inevitable. Fathers whose childcare time had risen from 39% to 64% of mothers' during the Spring 2020 lockdown⁹ slipped back to

⁵ Before lockdown main caregivers may have already been spending more time with children and experiencing a close relationship with them.

⁶ (Chung et al., 2020; Clayton et al., 2020; Fathers Network Scotland, 2020, 2021; Kelland et al., 2020)

⁷ (Chung et al., 2020) The mothers in this sample had mainly worked from home, as had their partner

⁸ (Chung et al., 2020)

⁹ (ONS, 2020a) See Figure 2 for graph – then scroll down to Data download for exact time use figures <https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/nationalaccounts/satelliteaccounts/bulletins/coronavirusandhowpeople>

50% by September¹⁰. While this was still well above their pre- lockdown low of 39%, that is not how it was reported¹¹. Mothers ‘doing more’ was emphasised and any narrowing of the care gap dismissed – a narrative that reinforces traditionalism because, along with the (erroneous) belief that nothing changed comes the belief that nothing will ever change.

The changes most likely to be retained are in flexible and remote working. High uptake by fathers will support family wellbeing and gender equality. But uptake mainly by mothers will damage this, further stigmatising flexible working and increasing mothers’ childcare and housework shares. Women will suffer ever more negative career outcomes, while the fathers’ increased breadwinning responsibilities will push them further out of their children’s lives.

3. Recommendations

Employers should:

- acknowledge fathers’ aspirations to work more flexibly and/or work from home
- take account of men’s caregiving commitments and longer average commuting times, when designing and communicating about work rotas
- make explicit in HR policies and internal communications, that flexible working options are available to men as well as women – and normalise men’s uptake
- appoint diversity staff to both support women to advance at work and men to combine paid work with caring responsibilities
- include in job advertisements the nature and extent of flexibility on offer for that post
- report annually by gender, ethnicity and seniority on staff working flexibly (time and location).

Trade unions, professional bodies and others should:

- support fathers (including in low-paid work and the ‘gig economy’) to negotiate family-friendly work patterns.

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¹⁰ (ONS, 2020b)

¹¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/inequality/2020/dec/09/lockdown-fuelled-novelty-of-domestic-chores-wanes-for-men>

Schools and early years education providers should:

- in the design and delivery of post-pandemic ‘catch-up’ activities, build explicitly on fathers’ involvement in their children’s learning and education during lockdown
- communicate routinely with both parents across, as well as within, households.

Government should:

- legislate for employers to detail flexibility options in job advertisements
- require employers annually to report by gender, ethnicity and seniority on the numbers of jobs advertised flexibly and staff working flexibly (time and location).

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