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Population & Societies

Children's experience of the first lockdown in France

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How were French children affected by the first COVID-19 lockdown in the spring of 2020? Using data from the SAPRIS survey, Xavier Thierry and his colleagues examine the daily lives of children aged 8–9 unable to go out or attend school for several months. Did they spend their time in front of a screen? Did they help their parents with the housework? Did they experience more anxiety or sleep disturbances?

The COVID-19 lockdown in France during the spring of 2020 brutally disrupted people's daily lives and working habits. Its effects on the adult population, notably the widening of social inequalities, are now coming to light [1, 2, 3]. For children, this first lockdown was a radical upheaval. Unable to go to school and confined to their homes for over 2 months, they were deprived of social interaction and outside activities. The national SAPRIS ELFE–Epipage2 survey conducted in April–May 2020 sheds light on the daily experience of children aged 8–9 during this exceptional period and how it was diversely affected by the family context, the parents' occupational status and income, and the characteristics of their home (see Box).

Most hours on schoolwork clocked up by working-class families

How did children learn to 'pass the time'? They played or read, a lot; did their homework, often; helped their parents, sometimes; went out for some fresh air, occasionally.

Although schools were closed, teachers and families maintained contact. Practically all the parents interviewed reported that the child's teacher sent out schoolwork either by email (83%) or via the school's digital workspace (33%), and in 95% of cases they encountered no particular technical difficulties. Only 1 child in 5 used the home classroom system set up by the French national distance-learning centre (Centre national d'enseignement à distance), and in most cases only occasionally.

Parents also reported that their child adapted well to home learning. Two-thirds of children (65%) had a quiet place to work; 95% received help from a family member, more often the mother than the father (92% and 60%, respectively) and sometimes a brother or sister (17%). Some aspects were less positive, however, as the children's learning conditions were unusual to say the least. Two-thirds worked for less than 3 hours a day; only 13% were helped for more than 3 hours per day (Figure 1); and in one-fifth of cases, family members found it difficult to offer help. 'Teaching continuity' was relative, therefore, and relied largely on the children's capacity to adapt to these new learning conditions.

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It was among families with low socio-economic status (SES) that the most time was spent on schoolwork by the child and his or her helper. This points to strong motivation among their parents and doubtless some difficulty in organizing the children's home schooling. All other things being equal, the likelihood of being helped with schoolwork was 80% higher when the parents were mainly manual or clerical employees or self-employed than when they were in higher-level occupations.

An increase in screen time

Not counting schoolwork, the children spent 2¾ hours per day on average in front of a screen (TV, video games, social media); 1¾ hours reading, doing arts and crafts, and playing board games; and more than 2 hours doing sports and physical activity [5].

For 13% of children, screen time accounted for more than two-thirds of their total leisure time; the lockdown increased the appeal of display devices (TVs, computers, smartphones, tablets, etc.). For an equivalent family situation and parental socio-economic status, among urban children living in an apartment, the probability of being a heavy screen user (spending more than two-thirds of leisure time in front of a screen) was more

than double that of urban children living in a house. This situation is the consequence of a well-known gender effect—boys are 1.7 times more likely than girls to be heavy screen users. Being a heavy screen user is also linked to sibship size: only children, with no playmates during the lockdown, spent more time on screens than those with siblings. Children living in mainly manual or clerical worker households were also more likely to be heavy screen users than children whose parents are in higher-level occupations (2.7 and 2.0 times more, respectively).

Children did more housework

Children were asked to help with extra housework resulting from the closure of school canteens and the family's day-long presence in the home; 44% of parents reported that their children did more domestic tasks during the lockdown, girls more often than boys, especially those with siblings. As girls already help out more when life is normal, the lockdown reinforced the gender inequalities in children's contributions to housework. It was in high-income households and those where the parents are in higher-level occupations that children's contributions increased the most.

Children also helped out more when both parents were working, either at home or elsewhere.

A better family climate for a quarter of families

This disruption of daily activities had the potential to create anxiety, with the risk that family relationships, quality of sleep, and children's psychological well-being would be adversely affected (Figure 2). But being confined in close quarters had little impact on the family climate. Most parents reported that relations with their children did not change (61%) or even improved (23%), although a small proportion (16%) felt them to be more strained than usual. The same pattern is found for relations between siblings. Children living with just one parent more often had strained relations with him or her (26%) than those living with both parents

(15%), especially those with at least one sibling, while parents with children in alternating residence more often reported improved relations.

The way relations within the family changed is linked to socio-economic status and income. Relations more often improved in families where the parents were in higher-level occupations or working from home, whatever the socio-economic category. Overall, despite the disappearing boundary between parents' work and family lives, their increased presence in the home and their freedom to reorganize their working day had a generally positive impact on family relations. Relations became more strained, however, in households mainly comprised of manual workers, clerical workers, or intermediate occupations; in those where the parents were not working; and in those that reported low and decreasing income. The dwelling type was also decisive, with relations becoming more strained when the child's home has no balcony or garden.

Emergence of sleep problems

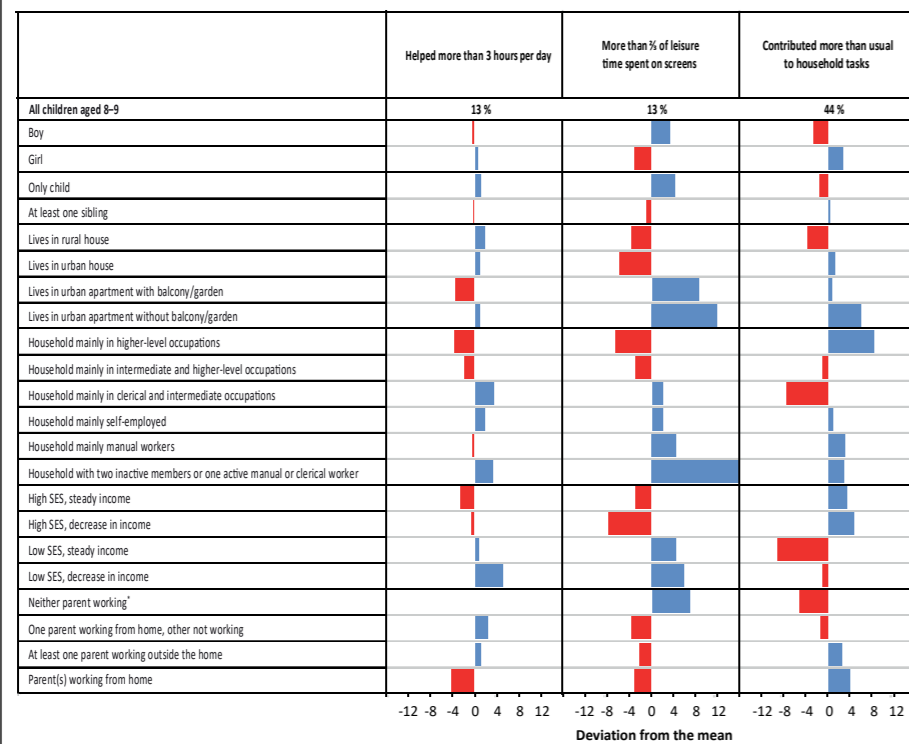
With no obligation to get up early for school, almost 40% of children had more hours of sleep, although 14% had fewer. For 22% of children, the lockdown had an adverse effect on their sleep (difficulty getting to sleep or waking up in the night). Half of these children already had problems that worsened during the lockdown, while for the other half the problems were new. About 40% of the children with sleep problems had fewer hours of sleep. All other things being equal, girls were more affected by lockdown sleep problems than boys, children in low SES households with decreasing income more than those in high SES households with steady income, and children living in an apartment more than those living in an urban house. A small share of children (13%) experienced social-emotional problems, such as loneliness, anxiety, difficulty concentrating, or impulsivity (2). These problems are strongly linked to family structure and dwelling type. The proportion

of children with these problems was high among those in lone-parent families (27%) and those living in an apartment, especially without a balcony (23%). It was lower among children in alternating residence (8%) and those living in an urban house (11%). Despite having fewer contacts with other children during lockdown, only children did not experience more social-emotional difficulties. Boys had more difficulties than girls, as is the case in normal times. Children with these difficulties are also over-represented in low SES households, especially those whose income fell during lockdown (19%) compared to high SES households with a steady income (10%).

Difficulties that grew as the lockdown continued

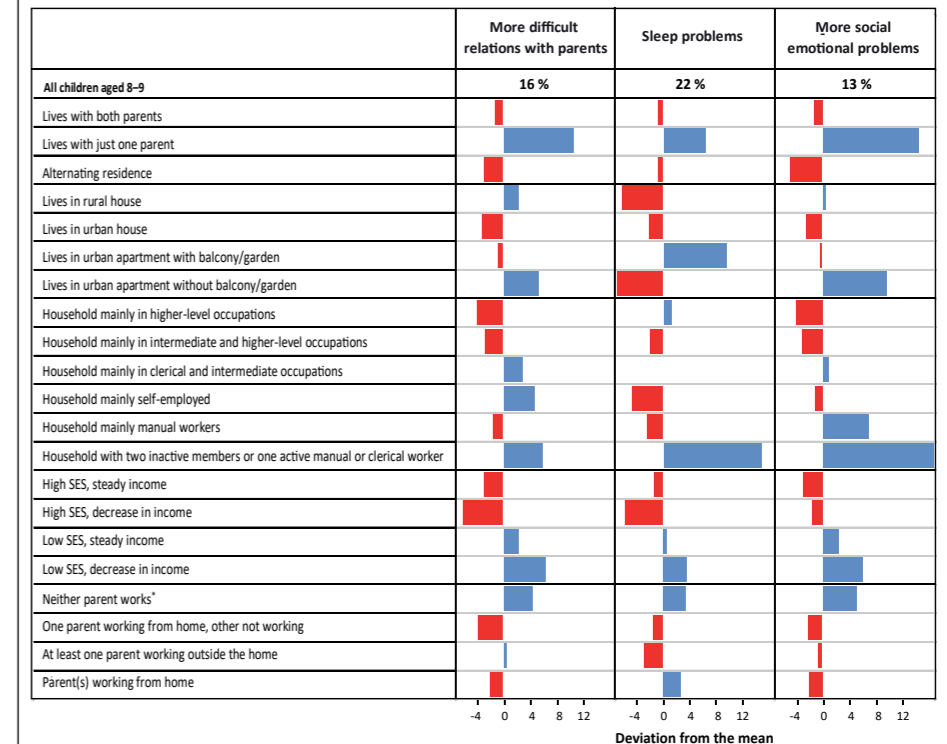
Summing the difficulties experienced by children into a composite score (3), we observed that 55% had no particular problems, 30% had one problem, 10% two problems, and 5% three or more. The most frequent difficulties were excessive screen time and sleeping problems. Overall, the risk of being affected by more than one of these problems increased by 25% between the middle and end of the lockdown. All the initial

Figure 1. Children's activities during the spring 2020 lockdown in France



* Child's parents living together, lone parent, or parent with new partner in the case of separated parents. Interpretation: 13% of children were helped with schoolwork for more than 3 hours per day by a household member. With respect to this average, children living in a low SES household with a decrease in income received more help (+4 points, right-hand bar), while those in a high SES household with a steady income received less help (-2 points, left-hand bar). Coverage: Children aged 8-9 living in metropolitan France who did not attend school during the first lockdown. Source: SAPRIS ELFE-Epipage2 survey, INED-INSERM, 2020.

Figure 2. Children's well-being during the spring 2020 lockdown in France



* Child's parents living together, lone parent, or parent with partner in the case of separated parents. Interpretation: 16% of children have difficult relations with their parents. With respect to this average, children living with a lone parent had more difficult relations (+10 points, right-hand bar), and those in alternating residence had less difficult relations (-3 points, left-hand bar). Coverage: Children aged 8-9 living in metropolitan France who did not attend school during the first lockdown. Source: SAPRIS ELFE-Epipage2 survey, INED-INSERM, 2020.

Box. The SAPRIS survey

The SAPRIS survey on health, perceptions, practices, relationships, and social inequalities during the COVID-19 crisis (funded by ANR-20-COVI-0009-01) was conducted on a sample of adult participants in the Constances, E3N-E4N, and Nutrinet surveys, and on a subsample of children born in 2011. These children were selected among participants in the ELFE child cohort study (INED-INSERM) and the Epipage2 cohort study of low birthweight infants (INSERM) [4]. The online questionnaire was sent to 16,385 parents living in metropolitan France between 16 April and 4 May 2020. It included questions on COVID-related health issues, the household's socio-economic characteristics, the child's activities, family relations during lockdown, and their impact on quality of life. A total of 4,989 questionnaires were validated and 4,877 were analysed for this study. The data were adjusted to be representative of all children born in France in 2011.

indices of difficulty increased, apart from that of screen time, which remained stable. Parental help with schoolwork also remained stable.

Despite the sudden disruption of their daily routine, children aged 8–9 appear to have adapted quite well to life during the first lockdown. The protective family environment dampened the shock of the health and economic crisis. For some, however, those in households with low SES and/or decreasing income, the experience was more stressful. These were generally children with specific pre-existing problems that the lockdown aggravated. Over the medium term, in addition to the psychological impact of this unprecedented experience, it will be important to gauge its effect on academic performance [6].

(2) The parents answered a series of questions on their child's behaviour (Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire). On a scale of 10 to 30, children are considered to have social-emotional difficulties if the score is above 20.

(3) The score was obtained by summing the indicators of sleeping difficulties (increased or new), social-emotional difficulties, excessive screen time, and worsening of relations with parents.

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Abstract

During the first COVID-19 lockdown in France in the spring of 2020, schools were closed and all activities outside the home were suspended. Primary school children who found themselves confined to their homes adapted quite well to the change. They continued with their schoolwork and took advantage of their freedom to spend more time on daily activities. But for parents with low socio-economic status, the lockdown placed strain on family relationships, increased the children's screen time, disrupted their sleep and their psychological well-being, and made schoolwork more problematic. For children and adults alike, the lockdown produced an increase in inequalities likely to worsen over the medium term.

Keywords

lockdown, child, well-being, COVID-19 pandemic, SAPRIS survey, France