



Impacts of lockdown on early thinking and emotion-regulation skills

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Background

- School readiness, and mental and physical health build on foundations laid during a child's first years.¹
- This study investigated how variation in the home environment during the 2020 lockdowns relate to children's emerging executive functions (thinking and emotion-regulation skills).

Methodology

575 UK parents of 8- to 36-month-olds completed online questionnaires during the Spring and Winter 2020 lockdowns.

Parents told us about their child's behaviours, their activities, their parenting attitudes, and their socioeconomic background (neighbourhood, education, income, and occupational status).



Key findings

- Socio-economic disadvantage impacts on children's development within the first 3 years of life.
- Infants and toddlers with more-limited access to **enriching activities** show weaker executive functions than their peers.
- Infants and toddlers who spend more time using **screens** daily show weaker executive functions than their peers.

Recommendations

- Increase the resources and support offered to parents of children under 3 years.
 - Address practical barriers to parents engaging in enriching activities with their children (e.g., by **funding community groups**, and by **increasing paid parental leave**).
 - Provide extra support to disadvantaged families to support the *Levelling up* agenda.
 - Ensure that access to communal resources such as **libraries and playgrounds** is restricted only as a last resort in the event of future lockdowns
- Increase awareness of the risks associated with high screen use in early childhood, and fund initiatives to help parents limit screen use.
 - **Health visitors** should recommend moderating access to television and touchscreens in the under 3s.
 - Increase funding for **early childcare and education**, and support **community groups** who offer affordable parent-child activities to address some of the barriers that parents face to limiting screen use.

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Detailed findings

- Infants and toddlers from less-advantaged backgrounds showed weaker Cognitive Executive Functions (thinking skills such as inhibitory control, working memory and cognitive flexibility) and weaker emotion-regulation skills than their peers across the 2020 lockdown period.
- Parental attitudes towards early learning and emotional attachment predicted their child's thinking skills in Spring 2020, but less so in Winter 2020.



- The more **enriching activities** (e.g., reading, singing, playing games, exercise) children did with parents across the pandemic, the stronger their thinking skills in Winter 2020.

- High use of **TV and touchscreen devices** by children during lockdown was associated with weaker thinking and emotion-regulation skills.
- Much of the association between socioeconomic status and thinking skills can be accounted for by screen use.
- The association between socioeconomic status and emotion-regulation is partly accounted for by screen use.
- Closure of **communal resources** such as playgrounds and libraries during the UK Spring 2020 lockdown disproportionately impacted lower-income families:



In Spring 2020 – *but not before lockdown, or during Winter 2020* – socio-economically disadvantaged parents were less likely to engage in enriching activities with their children, compared with more-advantaged families.

References

¹ <https://parentinfantfoundation.org.uk/1001-days>, <https://www.zerotothree.org>

Related policy note

[Early Childhood Education and Care \(ECEC\) during COVID-19 boosts growth in language and executive function](#)

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Full scientific report

Hendry, A., Gibson, S.P., Davies, C., Gliga, T., McGillon, M., Gonzalez-Gomez, N. (2021). *Not all babies are in the same boat: Exploring how socioeconomic status, parental attitudes, and activities during UK COVID-19 Lockdown affect early Executive Functions*. Preprint June 2021 <https://osf.io/XXXX/>.