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Father–Toddler Bonding during the COVID-19 Lockdown: Qualitative Insights from 17 Families in Britain

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Abstract: The UK lockdowns brought about many domestic changes. One was that many families with young children found themselves in the largely unique situation where fathers who normally worked away and saw little of their children during the day were now at home full-time. This was coupled with the fact that grandparents were now unavailable as lockdown rules prohibited visits and travel and many elderly were especially vulnerable. This study aimed to explore how this novel family situation was regarded by parents of young children and how they thought it would affect their children's social development. Thematic analysis of interviews with 24 mothers and fathers of toddlers revealed that most parents did *not* think that the lockdown negatively impacted their child's development, although they worried about it nonetheless. Having fathers at home was overwhelmingly seen as a positive for both the dad's attachment to the toddler and the toddler's attachment to their dad. The narrative around grandparents was more divided; there was an almost even split between parents thinking grandparental absence had a negative impact on the grandparent–child relationship and those who thought it made no difference. This study provides qualitative insight into an unusual domestic situation suggesting that parents felt father–child bonds were strengthened by the lockdown, although it remains to be seen if father–child relationships are improved long-term.

Keywords: father presence; lockdown; attachment; child social development; grandparents



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1. Introduction

I can count the number of positives of this lockdown on one finger. That positive is the time that Charlie has been lucky enough to spend with his Dad . . . The bond you guys have is enviable and watching you bounce off of one another day after day makes my heart burst. Happy First Fathers Day . . . And of course, one of the massive heartbreaks of this lockdown is that Charlie isn't able to spend time with you, Dad. Your energy, your personality and your stories are all things I've excitedly imagined pouring into Charlie through you since I discovered I was pregnant. Happy Fathers Day . . . (Astrid, 32, Brighton)

On 23 March 2020, in response to the rapidly spreading coronavirus that causes the potentially deadly disease COVID-19, the British public was instructed to stay indoors and only leave their houses for medical or urgent unavoidable reasons, at most once per day. This initial lockdown period was extended and the rules were only relaxed late in June of that year, and only in some parts of the country. Right across the summer months, however, many people were reluctant to spend much time out of the home, and schools and other public spaces remained under restricted access; in effect the entire lockdown period lasted almost a year ([Institute for Government 2021](#)). The lockdown experience produced a constellation of consequences for families; children losing out on

education and developing social skills, parents working from home at reduced productivity, people's physical fitness and mental health deteriorated, grandparents were left alone, and houses were suddenly too small (Villadsen et al. 2020; Best Beginnings et al. 2020; Bayrakdar and Guveli 2020; Chandola et al. 2020; Dickerson et al. 2021). These lockdown fallouts were mostly seen as negative outcomes, although some were construed as positive. Some people reported increased productivity by not having to commute, others found having more and flexible family time was invaluable, although these benefits appear to be stronger for men (Ashencaen Crabtree et al. 2021; Chung et al. 2021). New fathers in France for whom the lockdown started while they were on paternal leave enjoyed this extended time of bonding with the new-born (Sponton 2022). The quote from which the excerpt above was taken inspired this study. For many families this unexpected, odd circumstance was suddenly thrust upon them: now dad was home much more—a positive—but grandparents were out of reach—a negative. This may have been particularly important or salient for young families with toddlers. A lot of research was being done on the impact of the pandemic on new parents, and the effects on new mothers giving birth and breastfeeding during this time (Dib et al. 2020; Vazquez-Vazquez et al. 2021; Myers and Emmott 2021; Gray and Barnett 2022), but much less focus was on toddlers who were at a most critical stage of social development (Song et al. 2022). Our qualitative study adds to this literature by providing a rich and detailed insight into the lives of 17 young families in the UK, emphasising the role of fathers who would normally be working away, now being full-time at home.

There is a vast multi-disciplinary literature on the importance of fathers across practically all cultural and economic settings (Gray and Anderson 2010; Lamb 2010; Hewlett 2017). In high-income settings such as the UK, there has been a lot of empirical work done on the impact of father absence on many child and adolescent outcomes, both physiological and psychological (Sheppard and Sear 2012; Flouri et al. 2015; Culpin et al. 2021). Some quantitative research reveals that there are indeed causal effects on a range of child developmental markers from having absent fathers during the early years (McLanahan et al. 2013). Those effects were seen for many different aspects of child development such as school performance and test scores, mental health and emotional problems during adolescence, and long-term impacts when the child goes on to form their own family. Qualitative work tells a similar story, supporting the causal claims. Australian men who had grown up without a father present reported numerous mental health difficulties such as bouts of depression and sadness, anger, and low self-esteem which followed them right through life. They especially spoke of finding it difficult to form friendships as adults, especially with other men (East et al. 2014). Young Dutch and Curaçaoan adults who had grown up with absent fathers reported an emotional loss and lack of paternal bonds which was only partly mitigated by strong maternal bonds (Osinga et al. 2021).

In a study conducted in Pakistan, fathers expressed their paternal roles as important for child's mental development, especially with regard to memory building and by providing intellectual learning and new vocabulary (Jeong et al. 2018). Father-child play was also very important in this context. In Pakistan, fathers' roles are more segregated from those of mothers than they are in the UK, but the roles of fathers for children's early development remains an important theme. Swedish fathers who took longer parental leave (than the minimum entitlement) after the birth of a new child spent more one-on-one time with their children and were more engaged in physical and emotional care-giving (Haas and Hwang 2008). This was seen too in the US, the UK, Denmark, and Australia where fathers who stayed home with new-borns were more likely to continue being more hands-on as the child grew older (Huerta et al. 2014). In the present study, we add to this literature by examining the father-child relationships that emerged from the unexpected and sudden increase of father-child contact time that was brought about by the lockdown. The aim of this research is to scrutinise the father-child relationship under these special and unusual conditions, and use this data to speculate about how father-child relations might

be enhanced by a changing work-from-home post-lockdown landscape coupled with an uncertain pandemic-prone future.

2. Theory: Attachment and Bonding

In the 1960s John Bowlby theorised that infants need to develop strong relationships with their closest caregivers, usually parents, to ensure healthy and stable social and emotional development (Bowlby 1969). This is primarily achieved by spending time close to the caregivers, allowing children to feel safe and secure when close to the parent, and distressed or anxious if separated for some time. Bowlby conceptualised this as the child needing a safe haven, a home base, that was trusted and could be relied on for safety and care. The mother has most often been seen as the main attachment figure but more and more research indicates that fathers play a strong role, especially in cases where the maternal-child bond is weak or missing (Goodsell and Meldrum 2010). Father attachment is partly a function of a father's direct involvement in their child's life and can be moderated by co-parenting dynamics during childhood. Both parents influence each other's parenting styles and behaviours towards the child (Frank et al. 2015; Brown et al. 2010). Father-infant attachment has been shown to differ from the attachment relationship the infant has with the mother and paternal attachment may be motivated by the father's own attachment value and motivation for fathering (Grossmann et al. 2002). Longitudinal research from Germany has also shown that infant-father 'Strange Situation Procedure' (SSP), score during early childhood was positively associated with the child's Separation Anxiety Test (SAT) score at age 6, but not at age 10 or 16 (Grossmann et al. 2002). The SSP is a measure of attachment quality that assesses a child's understanding of the parent or care-giver as being either a protector or a danger. This study also found however, that father's play sensitivity with the infant strongly and positively predicted the child's attachment representation at older ages. This suggests there are long-term benefits to close father-child bonding in early life.

Although there is a lot more research investigating mother-child attachment, it is clear that father-child attachment relationships are also very important for many aspects of child social behaviour and it is theoretically possible that the UK lockdown periods, with many now having dads at home, afforded more opportunity for father-child relations to prosper. While we recognise that not all child psychologists, in particular, educational psychologists, find Bowlby's theory useful in clinical applications (Slater 2007), we think it is a helpful framework and a fair starting point for thinking about the importance of father-child bonds. Bowlby named four stages of attachment with what he called 'clear cut' attachment occurring from around 6–8 months old to around 18–24 months. Our study focusses on this age group as particularly important for developing father-Toddler attachment and socialisation. We aimed to explore the father-child relations that we thought would be intensified with fathers now working from home. We recognise that there are also difficulties with balancing work-at-home life and so we aimed to be as exploratory as possible and not assume positive or negative outcomes, especially given the potentially distressing situation that fathers being at home was contextualised during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Nevertheless, the pandemic offers a unique opportunity to examine father *presence* within the context of families that have not undergone the hugely disruptive events of divorce or death, as many studies that focus on father absence do (Amato and Cheadle 2005; Cas et al. 2014; Shenk et al. 2013; Sheppard and Sear 2012). Some work done in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and its lockdowns, has shown increases in father's involvement in childcare duties during 2019 and 2020 in Germany (Kreyenfeld and Zinn 2021). In Spain, while many traditional gender roles were maintained in dividing household duties during lockdown, Spanish fathers were found to play with children more than they would have, although mothers still spent a third more time than fathers playing with the children (Seiz 2021).

Here, we set out to explore the lived experiences of mothers and fathers during the lockdown, while they had each other at home. We aimed to better understand the concerns parents had for their socially developing young children and how they thought having fathers at home may influence their children's lives later on. We also wanted to explore the connected issue of having grandparents out of reach, as was the case for many families during the UK lockdown periods. It is connected in that grandparent-grandchild bonding also impacts children's social development, albeit not as strongly as father-child relations are expected to do.

Grandparents are of course also important in children's lives although much less is written about this intergenerational relationship in the context of attachment theory, at least for non-custodial grandparents. With the nuclear family being the child's central care nexus in contemporary Western custom, grandparents are usually relegated to secondary relationships (Sear 2021). Merz et al. (2007) have nevertheless proposed attachment as a good candidate for understanding Durkheimian solidarity between the generations and specifically the role of grandparents. They argue that intergenerational attachment bonds positively impact family members' health and wellbeing. Grandparents too benefit from strong relationships with grandchildren (Sheppard 2021) and in the context of the pandemic and lockdown conditions where many elderly were seen as vulnerable and at higher risk of severe consequences from COVID-19, the impact on grandparents losing out on seeing family is known to be severe (Cantillon et al. 2021; Gulland 2020). In this study we did not interview grandparents but we did ask parents about how they viewed the changes in the grandparent-child relationship.

This study is part of a larger research project that also seeks to examine the nature of the parental dyads in the home and how balancing childcare and working-from-home might produce either positive or negative perceived family dynamics. The primary aim of this article is to examine father-child attachment and to some degree explore its implications for child social development. The specific research questions we seek to explore are:

- (a) How did families perceive the father-child relationship where fathers were working from home during the UK lockdown?
- (b) How might parents' think their children's social development was affected by having dads at home but grandparents and others being away?

This study does not propose to go beyond the immediate insights of the families during their lived lockdown experience, however it adds new depth to the predominantly retrospectively studied, quantitative body of research. We believe this study offers one of the first insights into the previously rare phenomenon of dads in the UK being home every day. It should be noted however that this novel situation was only true for non-essential workers in the UK; fathers who worked on the front lines were *not* now at home and so this study can only provide insight into family dynamics where dads work in more middle-class professions.

3. Data and Methods

We recruited 10 fathers and 14 mothers with ages ranging from 31 to 49 years, who had at least one infant in the home aged from six to 18 months. We excluded single parents, and families had to be currently residing in the UK, so that they were all experiencing the same pandemic lockdown regulations. We used convenience sampling by advertising on social media outlets and asking people to get in touch if they fit the inclusion criteria and would like to share their stories. Participants were not compensated for their participation in this study.

We conducted 18 semi-structured interviews with fathers and mothers lasting from 26 to 59 min (average 33 min). There were a total of 24 participants in this study. Interviews were conducted in Summer 2020, about six months into the first lockdown. The goal of the interviews was to evoke a conversational discussion about father-Toddler relationships and infant socialisation during lockdown. Questions were open-ended (e.g., tell me about how your relationship to your baby has been affected by lockdown? How are the

baby's grandparents?). The interviews were semi-structured with general questions that focused on family relationships and fathers being at home. Interviews were sometimes conducted with both parents together, sometimes only one, and in one family the mother and father were interviewed on separate occasions. This decision was made to accommodate participant preference and scheduling. Despite the non-representative nature of this study, we recruited a diverse array of participants. Four interviewees lived in Scotland, six lived in London, and 14 lived in Southeast England. Sixteen interviewees identified as being of white British ethnicity, while the other eight would be considered of other white background (e.g., German). Eleven interviewees reported having more than one child whereas the other 13 had one child in total. All interviewees reported that the father was at home during the lockdown, although some fathers worked from home while others were furloughed. The same was true for mothers; some worked from home, some were stay-at-home mothers, and others were still on maternity leave. Table 1 summarises the participants' household situations.

Table 1. Participant summary.

Parent	Age Range	Total Number	Number Performing Childcare	Number Working Full-Time from Home	Number Newly at Home during Days
Mothers	31–43	14	14	6	8
Fathers	31–49	10	7	7	10

We define a participant as 'performing childcare' if they self-define as a primary daily caregiver for their child. We classed participants who claimed that they contribute majorly to daily childcare tasks, such as changing diapers, feeding the baby, being a main caregiver, and getting up during the night (Tanaka and Waldfogel 2007), as 'performing childcare'. In determining the percent of mothers who were newly at home, we excluded mothers on maternity leave. Mothers and fathers on furlough were excluded from the percent working full-time from home. The marital statuses of participants are unknown. Fathers interviewed in this study worked in education, construction, computing, business, media, and financial services. Mothers worked in business, education, healthcare, and financial services. Two mothers were full-time stay-at-home mothers.

Due to the lockdown restrictions all interviews were conducted virtually using Zoom software. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim using Otter software and the transcriptions were verified and edited by the authors. Ethics approval was granted by the University of Oxford. All the names in this article have been changed to retain anonymity of our respondents and their babies.

The interview text was thematically analysed using a general inductive approach described by David Thomas (2006). The primary goal of this method is to allow research the dominant themes in the raw data. Since this method is useful in establishing clear links between study findings and research questions, it is the most common approach deployed in health and social science research (Thomas 2006). Since lockdown experiences are emotional, wide-ranging, and dually positive and negative, this inductive data-driven method of analysis was an appropriate choice to capture participants' personal perceptions of their situation. A rigorous and systematic reading of the transcripts allowed the initial identification of 35 open descriptive codes. These codes were applied to passages that conveyed the same literal meaning or attribute. A first-round descriptive approach was chosen because it is particularly useful when dealing with transcripts where speakers express their thoughts in lengthy, complex, and thematically complicated ways, as in the case of this study. Diagrams were then used to focus on what was emerging through the first descriptive coding round, and the first-round codes were then rearranged axially into 13 categories. These 13 categories were then roughly categorised into three themes and used to inform the main results of this study.

With the coding being performed by Author 2, several verification procedures described by Michael Belotto (2018) were followed to ensure congruence and internal validity. Transcripts were constantly re-read to ensure the applicability of codes across all participant contributions. In addition, retrospective re-coding was performed several times to confirm the applicability of codes across transcripts. In addition, codes and categories that did not have enough data to support them were collapsed into each other. In ‘striving to meet the trustworthiness criteria’ (Nowell et al. 2017) of credibility, transferability, confirmability, and reflexivity—the coding in this study was consistently scrutinised and reformulated accordingly. The potential biases of the coder (a childless middle-class woman) were consistently considered when coding. The full coding schemes can be found in the Appendix A.

4. Results

Parents were very forthcoming and needed little prompting to talk about their children’s development and family life in general under lockdown conditions. While there was a lot of variation in answers, the overall finding was that for most people the UK lockdown period was difficult and while there were positives such as having dad at home, there were often many negatives such as negotiating co-parenting duties. While parents did *not* think the lockdown was affecting their children’s social development, it was something that was on their minds and was a source of worry.

Partly due to study eligibility (dads being at home) and partly due to our sampling method (convenience, word-of-mouth), our sample is heavily biased towards the British middle classes. We only have one family that might be considered British ‘working class’. This meant that nobody mentioned financial issues with the lockdown, although we did not directly ask this question. Therefore, when exploring the narratives in this study it should be borne in mind that there is a whole other part of the UK public who had very different experiences (Holt 2021; Patel et al. 2020) and this study depicts something of the luxury that is having dads at home without loss of earnings.

We discuss the ways in which father-child bonds were enhanced and then we turn to parents’ views on child social development in light of child bonding with others, specifically siblings and grandparents. All quotes are by parents and we have specified which one in cases where it is unclear.

4.1. Positive Father-Child Relations

It’s been ideal for me. You know, because I get to see the kids a lot more. I get to see them in the morning and you know throughout the day as well. So it’s been, it’s been great!
(Craig, 49, London)

Almost all parents agreed that having fathers at home created a stronger sense of bond with the toddler, and both mothers and fathers agreed that there would likely be a long-term positive impact. This positivity was expressed in strong emotive terms with emphasis on the increased attachment both from and towards the child. The main reason this was felt was not only by having dad working from home but also by him not having to commute. This meant extra time for breakfast, dinner, bath time, etc. that they would not normally have had, so the extra bonding was coming from one-on-one childcare that dad was now able to provide. A recurring theme that emerged was the baby’s improved attachment to dad. So, while the mother was previously the ‘number one’ in the child’s eyes, the dad was now held in higher esteem which fathers enjoyed. Some parents compared the toddler’s closeness to dad compared with the older siblings’ paternal relationship. Some also claimed that their toddlers seek out the father more now because of his increased presence in their upbringing.

She’s definitely now completely fine being with me all day. And at the beginning, she definitely needed mum more, she was definitely going to going up to the door and banging on the door and she’s sort of stopped that now. She’s just like, okay, I’m with dad, that’s fine. He’s going to do this. And so I think, yeah, I think she’s more satisfied just being with me than she was. (Adrian, 39, London)

I think it's nice for Ray because I do think Ray has like a slightly like closer relationship with Olivier [dad] now because they see that even if he is busy doing his work, he can like just play with him for like five minutes or something. And that is quite nice. And so I think Ray is more used to Olivier's presence . . . (Kerry, 33, London)

I think especially with the little one because he sees me a lot more. He's, you know, he's not wondering who's this strange person that's just appeared at the end of the day kind of thing. (Craig, 49, London)

There was also a sense of nostalgia and trepidation about how things would be once things went back to normal and dads went back to work. Some dads expressed hope that they would not have to go back to work in the way that they had before. Some parents were already back at work at the time of the interview so they had had some insight as to how things might change again.

. . . I think going back to work in September full time is going to be difficult at first because it gets to one o'clock and I'm waiting till three o'clock so I can go and pick her up from nursery because we go to do the same thing every day; we go to a park, she gets out, she points at trees and plays with leaves walks around and smiles at dogs. And then we go home, we have some food and then we play. And then mum comes out and we have a bath and like, this is my favourite part of the day from three o'clock till six o'clock and then it's gonna be pick her up, feed her, and then it's bath time again. So that will be I mean, that's just it's what everyone has to do, isn't it? (Adrian, 39, London)

Yeah, I think I learned a lot about myself as a dad as well as Caleb's needs as well. That was a, I think it was a great time to bond and I tried to not think about work too much and when I'd be going back and I had all that going on in my head, but you know, I really enjoyed the time I had, with Caleb, it was just, it was a great time. And probably a time, we'll never get again, to be honest, you know, it's one of those so that was, erm, it was really good. No, I enjoyed it. (Danny, 33, Scotland)

These observations are in line with other research on paternal leave after becoming a new father in the UK. Findings from the Millennium Cohort Study show that fathers who took parental leave were actively more involved with their children, not only during the leave period (by contributing to various childcare duties) but that this endured later in the child's life (Tanaka and Waldfogel 2007). There were expressions from both mums and dads that they thought their child's behaviour towards the dad had changed, or was different to how it was compared with an older sibling who had not gone through this stage of development with dad around so much. Parents noticed that the child seemed more attached to dad.

Yeah, I mean, I think definitely, I feel like our bond is really, really amazing. Yeah. And I don't you know, that it's like when I went back to work it was it was really strange. I've really missed him and it's just an amazing thing to come home and he will come to me straight away and . . . (Bennet, 33, Brighton)

[mum picks up the sentence]

. . . Bennet will go for a shower and he'll just sit on my lap like that, waiting for Bennet to come out of the shower. (Astrid, 32, Brighton)

So he has got to spend this gift of time with his son that he would not normally have had. And they have bonded in an incredible way. Like, you know that we don't really it's almost it's very equal. It's bizarre, actually. And so, it's been amazing. (Sandra, 42, Essex)

There are many ways that father-child bonds benefit child development. Children with highly involved fathers show increased empathy to others, enhanced cognitive abilities more generally, and tend to have more gender-equal values (Lamb 2010). Our study cannot say if or how these children were affected by increased paternal bonds, or even if the bonds

were increased (these are parents' perceptions of attachment), but the parents do seem to think so.

Another theme that emerged was dads being at home to witness baby developmental milestones such as first steps and new words. One family's child started walking during lockdown and although they did not witness the actual first steps, they suddenly noticed baby was walking, they did appreciate that she was at home with them:

I think she must have been walking for ages and just not ever shown us. You know? She didn't do it on demand, she was just quite happily pottering around. Oh, you can walk, clearly. But although we didn't see the first steps whenever they might have been, we would have missed that, you know, if she'd been at nursery all of that would have happened while she was at nursery, and I think for both of them, it's just been really nice to see them develop. (Beth, 39, Oxfordshire)

When I was having problems of breastfeeding, I started expressing a lot more. So Jens started giving more of the bottles. And I noticed, I think felt that brought them closer. And then when he started smiling and reacting to us, that improved their bond as well. (Mandy, 37, Colchester)

In some families in this study, mothers were working from home and dads were furloughed, so instead of working, they were solely responsible for childcare. Across cultures, it has been documented that fathers play with children more than providing other forms of childcare (Fucsková et al. 2022; Hewlett and Macfarlan 2010; Lamb 2010). In families where fathers were furloughed during the UK lockdowns, it forced fathers into taking on the burden of all forms of childcare, not just play. One of the fathers in our study expressed his frustration at his situation:

... all of a sudden I've gone into a situation where I've been looking after Zea all day and Carrie's been in the next room. The dining room, adjoined to the living room where Zea plays ... so she can hear mum in the next room, but can't go and see mum. She finds that frustrating, sometimes crawls over to the door and sort of wants to get in but she can't go in because mum's on business calls with ... fairly important people. (Adrian, 39, London)

4.2. Parent's Views on Child Social Development

Despite the overall sentiment among parents that having dads at home was positive and even that it may have long-lasting effects on father-child relations, there was also the general consensus among parents that the lockdown had no observable effect on child development. This was especially true for parents of younger toddlers that might not have been exposed to much socialising beyond the family by this age anyway.

I think my concern is, in the short and medium term, I think he's going to take a little bit longer to pick up things that he would have picked up faster in the nursery or when he gets to interact with other kids. Things like speech and his vocabulary and like sharing, sharing things. Stuff like that ... we can't teach him how to share with another child if there is no other child; like that's an impossible task. And so I think there's going to be some short-term impact when he goes back to the nursery we'll need to like quickly learn new things, and it might be exhausting for him. (Bonnie, 37, Edinburgh)

Some parents expressed more general positive sentiments including thinking that the child had in fact gained by spending more time with parents and siblings rather than at nursery, especially for parents of younger toddlers. Proponents of attachment theory would agree that the parent, or primary care-giver-child relationship is the most important and only after that do siblings and peers emerge as important for child socialisation (Cassidy 2008) and so we might expect parents in our study to be less worried about long-term issues. Parents did however express concern for child development in the short-term. This was largely framed in relation to a lack of interaction with others beyond the family. Sima (38, London) says: "Well, she's a bit feral. Yeah, we suspect she's gone feral because of the lack of interaction with other humans other than her family." And Astrid (32, Brighton)

was worried that “he’s getting literally all of his experience of people from us two and not from other people. And, yes, I think we’re concerned about that.” Many parents also gave examples of their direct observations of the negative impact on child development.

So he is he is still wary of other adults which he never was ever before lockdown he would have, if anything was a bit concerned he would’ve just wandered off with anyone. But now he’s all about mummy, and not very happy with anyone else. (Lucy, 35, Surrey)

... with Imogen, sometimes it seems like she is more shy around other grown-ups now. So it takes quite a while to warm up. I’m not sure if it’s the age or if it’s lockdown but sometimes I think it might be because she basically hasn’t really seen any other grown up people since March. Than us and her childminder. (Iris, 31, Southampton)

Despite these concerns, most parents thought their children would bounce back eventually from short-term changes in social behaviour and were not overly concerned about the long-term repercussions. It was also felt that those with older siblings in the home lost little in terms of socialisation or cognitive development.

And he doesn’t seem to be developmentally slow in any, not in the way that I’m worried about. I’ve just noticed he’s like babbling at the right time, sociable, smiling at the right time, all those kind of things ... And because he does have an older brother, actually, maybe that is the difference. (Kerry, 33, London)

4.3. Missing Grandparents

Lack of interactions with other people was a cause for concern for some parents, in particular, losing out on seeing grandparents. Besides having lost grandparental help with childcare, during the lockdown, some parents were worried about the intergenerational relationship.

In the summer, we went and camped near my mom and dad to see like, see them outside and stuff. And he, it took him a couple of days to warm up. He didn’t know them. (Isabel, 38, Oxfordshire)

Although there was more variety in the themes that emerged here, parents in the study generally missed having grandparents around and worried for their parents’ sake as well as their children’s. Other studies have highlighted the importance of grandparental support and how this was compromised during the pandemic (Cantillon et al. 2021). Responses were quite divided on the impact of not seeing grandparents on children. About half thought there would be little impact on the grandparent–child relationship but half did. The most dominant worry was that children might not recognise them after all these months apart. Lucy also said about her son’s first in-person meeting.

I mean, we had grandma over just this weekend. And Sydney, when she first arrived, literally screamed the house down! (Lucy, 35, Surrey)

Even those parents whose children did recognise their grandparents showed some concern that they might not have. The use of communications technology such as Skype or Zoom (ICTs) for regular chats also emerged as a dominant theme and these were seen as playing a structural role in how the grandparent absence was experienced.

We’ve spoke every night on FaceTime ... and it was really it was quite amazing to see that that connection was still there, and that he really did recognise her and he knew his nana. So that was nice. (Sandra, 42, Essex)

This observation echoes what others have found in that “doing digital family intimacy means to defy specific distances of intimacy” (Sadowski and Eklund 2021). This Swedish study argues that increased use of ICT in distanced families has not substantially lessened family intimacy or made it less ‘real’. This notion of ‘doing family’ entails all the things that families do to maintain cohesion. In the context of global lockdown, ICTs became, for many, the only way to communicate with family members and to ‘do family’. For some families, however, the experience of having to rely on technology was mostly negative, and some respondents felt that it did not adequately connect their babies to loved ones. Some grandparents suffered from technological ineptitude which was frustrating for both parties.

He saw my mom on Zoom. Unfortunately, my mother-in-law doesn't understand technology. But he did see my mom on Zoom. So we were doing like, you know, voice with video chats with grandma sort of every day to every other day, hoping that that would you know, keep up the familiarity, but obviously it didn't work. (Lucy, 35, Surrey)

... we now have video calls with family members. I mean, for some reason, we didn't do that before. But now we do that more often. So they actually see each other I mean the girls are not really good with staying in front of computer for long, but I think they still enjoy it and say things so yeah, I think that has been nice. (Iris, 31, Southampton)

Research from before the pandemic among Irish and Polish transnational families showed that although the use of ICTs to maintain family ties was becoming more prevalent, doing it was difficult and took an emotional toll ([Share et al. 2018](#)). Perhaps the pandemic has made this less burdensome by its growing ubiquity in daily work and family lives.

Not having grandparents within easy access was not as relevant as for about a third of families where grandparents were living abroad or far away anyway and so the grandparent–child relationships were largely unchanged. These long-distance relationships were even enhanced as communications technology became steadily cheaper, more available, and more commonly used than ever.

... me mam really made a conscious effort, you know, to always see James at least sort of once every month to six weeks. And so that kind of wasn't nothing when they're so young. And it's our only grandchild. (Sandra, 42, Essex)

Sydney is both grandparents' only grandchild. And so they love him very much. And they're very close to him. And I do think that they struggled and especially with his health issues. They always want to make sure that you know they are seeing a lot of him. Just in case his health did ever take a turn for the worse. (Lucy, 35, Surrey)

5. Conclusions

This study investigated first-hand how the UK lockdown was experienced by those families who were living in new domestic situations. We sought especially to uncover people's thoughts, joys and concerns on having fathers at home full-time and having grandparents mostly out of reach or only accessible electronically. Our findings reveal that despite negative emotions towards the burden of lockdown on much of family life, parents felt that having fathers around was a happy boon that would have a long-term positive influence on father-child relationships. Parents did not see the lockdown as having adverse effects on child development or socialisation as babies would soon bounce back and any unseen issues would be short-lived. The conversation around grandparents was ambivalent and if anything more concern was placed on the welfare and well-being of the grandparents rather than the effect on the child.

We hoped that this study would produce informative data about father-child relations in this unusual time and so that we might speculate about how father-child relations could be enhanced more long-term. Now that we are coming out of the other side of the pandemic and looking towards the future, some things are becoming clearer. One is a changing work-from-home landscape, especially for many of the men in this study who are in professional and similar middle-class occupations. Many companies are now allowing hybrid working more flexible hours, and fewer days in the office ([Babapour Chafi et al. 2022](#); [Barrero et al. 2021](#)) which might see father-child home life changing in the longer term too. Prolonged father–Toddler interactions might produce enduring attachment relationships with positive outcomes for both child and fathers.

Our study revealed that fathers were spending more time with their children especially with play but also with childcare. As we have said, these fathers come from rather higher educated groups which is interesting in light of other studies that found that lower educated men in Germany benefitted most from enhanced father-child interactions and time spent together ([Kreyenfeld and Zinn 2021](#)). Of course we have nothing to compare our families to, but it may be that for lower-educated men, the experience of close fathering during the

lockdown, at least for those who were able to stay home, enabled them to become more involved fathers over the long term. This is in contrast to what is observed in Germany where paternal involvement is stronger for the highly educated (Geisler and Kreyenfeld 2019).

This study is one of the only to examine father-child relations under lockdown conditions highlighting father presence rather than father absence (although see Shafer et al. 2021 for some recent research from North America). It is important however to remember that our study is heavily biased towards middle-class professional families because front-line workers, and many others who were not covered by furlough schemes, did not find themselves in this domestic position and were therefore not included in the study. In addition, by using snowball and convenience sampling, some of our participants may have had social network attributes in common. By interviewing some parents apart and some together, it is also important to note that participants may have been influenced by whether their partner was present. Nevertheless, for families who did find themselves in this novel situation, our findings suggest that parents felt that father-child relations were strengthened and that this may have long-lasting benefits for families of the lockdown generation.

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Appendix A

Father–Toddler bonding during lockdown: Qualitative insights from 17 families in Britain.

Table A1. Coding scheme used in the thematic analysis.

Theme	Category	Code
Impact on father-child relationship (Fathers)	Father presence has had a positive impact on the relationship between the baby and father	The baby attached to dad
		Improved bond
		Dad is attached to baby
	The father has participated in more childcare responsibility	Dad has learned about baby
		Dad doing childcare
	The structure of WFH has had a positive impact on the father's relationship with child	Dad has a different parenting style than mom
		No commute
		More time for baby being home
	Father presence has not impacted the relationship between father and child	Dad able to witness milestones
		No change

Table A1. Cont.

Theme	Category	Code
Impact on toddler's social development (Socialisation)	Parents are concerned about a lack of socialisation	Uncertainty
		Not able to balance WFH with baby
		Concerns about the baby not seeing other children
		Concerns about the baby not seeing other adults
		Concerns about the baby's development
	Lack of socialisation has had negative effects on infant development	Concerns about the baby's attachment
		Impact on mom's social interaction
		The baby has become more shy
		Zoom not useful/detrimental
		Lockdown has not impacted the baby
Impact on grandparental relationships (Grandparents)	Parents have a positive outlook in terms of infant development	The impact of bubbling
		Too young to impact
		The baby is recovering/returning to normal
		Optimistic outlook
		Grandparents not able to do childcare
	Grandparental absence had an undesirable impact on how baby perceives grandparents	The baby does not recognize grandparents
		The baby missed grandparents
		Concerns about the baby's future interactions with grandparents
		Long distance grandparents
		No impact on relationship
The varied role of ICTS	Grandparental absence had a negative impact on the wellbeing of grandparents	The baby recognizes grandparents
		Zoom (positive response)
		Zoom (neutral response)
		Zoom (negative response)
		Grandparents are sad/upset

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