



'A Better Start' - Small Steps Big Changes – The Impact of COVID-19 on Expectant Parents, Babies and Children.

Completed by: Donna Sherratt - SSBC Head of Programme

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Contact Information: Donna.sherratt@nhs.net

For Discussion

Tel: 07717720910

Introduction

The purpose of the report is to:-

- 1.1. To highlight the early research findings on the impact the pandemic has had on expectant parents, babies and children.
- 1.2 To discuss the opportunities the Health and Wellbeing Board has in responding to the findings.

Background

The COVID-19 pandemic has identified many inequalities. The impact on babies and children is under researched and the long term impact unknown.

In the recently launched Best Start for Life; The Early Years Healthy Development Review Report, the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care stated “During the past year, the coronavirus pandemic has tested not only our nation’s physical health, but also its mental health to the extreme. We have all been affected by the lockdown but **the effects on our youngest have been profound**”

It is recognised and well researched, the first 1001 days are critical in building blocks for lifelong emotional and physical health.

Expectant parents, babies and children who experienced their first 1001 days during the pandemic will have had a significantly different experience.

In Nottingham City 4246 expectant parents and 12436 under two’s will have lived a portion of their first 1001 days during the pandemic.

Whilst the impact of this has not always been wholly negative, many families will continue to experience the long term impact.

The purpose of this paper is to highlight local and national research into the experience of expectant parents, babies and children during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Nottingham Centre for Children, Young People and Families (NCCYPF) were commissioned by the Small Steps Big Changes (SSBC) Partnership in July 2020 to explore this. The paper also draws on other national research, local evaluation and qualitative feedback from the communities SSBC serve.

Local Research - Effects of Covid-19 on Families with Children Under Five in Nottingham

<http://www.smallstepsbigchanges.org.uk/file-manager/News-items/executive-summary-effects-of-covid-19-on-families-with-children-under-five-in-nottingham.pdf>

In July 2020 NCCYPF was commissioned by SSBC to carry out a study of the experiences of families with children under five in Nottingham during Covid-19.

Qualitative, semi structured interviews were conducted over the phone, all families had at least one child under five, families were predominantly residents within Nottingham City with priority given to SSBC wards. 29 interviews were conducted (27 families in total, 27 mothers and 2 fathers).

Key Findings:

- Concern from parents about children not seeing their friends and how important this was with knock on impacts of less confidence in social situations.
- Concern about the effects on their health and the health of their child, as well as of their extended families.
- For breastfeeding mothers a particular concern about the pause of health visiting services and not being able to have baby weighed.
- Worry about lack of stimulation for child.
- Lack of own time for parents and the impact this had on parental mental health.
- Some families suffered loss of income leading to financial pressures.
- The isolation of parents without extended family in the UK was of particular concern.
- Those who had SSBC peer support valued the contact they received. However, some parents felt that being supported only by phone was inadequate.
- Online story reading was valued, although noted as just in English, which for families missing out on heritage language via grandparents was a concern.
- Support via churches etc. also not available.
- Parents expressed hope and reflected on the importance of the future for their young children, but felt that children and their needs should be prioritised in future.

The report recommended that the SSBC Partnership:

- make strong representations to Government, Local Authority and other policy makers to put children's needs first when considering COVID-19 policy;
- resist the pause of children and family services in future emergencies, and restore any that are not restored to date;
- develop the parent peer mentoring scheme to include putting parents who have felt isolated during lockdown in touch with those of their own community especially where English is not their first language, in order to address social and cultural isolation;
- provide all-year supervised outdoor group activities (defined as 'for educational purposes' under the recent COVID-19 regulations effective in England from 14.09.2020) for children aged under five years with a focus on social interaction and contact with other children and families who do

not yet feel comfortable on attending indoor early years provision;

- evaluate the effectiveness of telephone or video, as opposed to face-to-face, contact in delivering support to families with children under five years of age during the lockdown period;
- develop working practices to assess family intervention needs early and prevent risk at home;
- develop services delivered face to face and virtually to young children that include the use of other languages than English, to allow the cultural inclusion of families where parents do not always have English as a first language;
- Increase efforts to involve young children in decision-making processes and promote their rights to be heard.

The Programme has responded to these findings in a number of ways. These include; sharing the report through a shared learning event, secured an evaluation of the benefits of virtual vs. face to face group delivery, funded the bid to UNICEF to become a Child Friendly City's to support children's voices and increasing opportunities for communications in different languages.

SSBC Parent Champions Conversations:

Parent Champions held 403 conversations with families between April 2020 and June 2020;

These conversations highlighted the most common issues families were facing; fear, isolation, development regression and challenges in managing children's behaviour. Parents also reported the benefit of enjoying spending time with their families - especially dads.

Fathers Consultation:

Coram Family and Childcare were commissioned by SSBC in March 2020. The focus was to develop and deliver a consultation with fathers living in Nottingham City to increase understanding of their wants and needs of universal services. 100 Fathers were surveyed on a broad range of their experiences of fatherhood. One of the comments relating to COVID-19 was;

'Some had also not been able to attend appointments because of COVID 19 risks. While they understood the reasons for this, they had found it difficult to miss out on these important opportunities.'

National Research

Babies in Lockdown Report Best Beginnings

<https://www.bestbeginnings.org.uk/news/the-babies-in-lockdown-report> Online Survey -29th April and 3rd June 2020 and completed by 5474 responses.

Key Findings:

- COVID-19 has affected parents, babies and the services that support them in diverse ways
- Families already at risk of poorer outcomes have suffered the most - Many families with lower incomes, from Black, Asian and minority ethnic communities and young parents have been hit harder by the COVID-19 pandemic. This is likely to have widened the already deep inequalities in the early experiences and life chances of children across the UK.
- Almost 7 in 10 (68%) parents felt the changes brought about by COVID-19 were affecting their unborn baby, baby or young child
- A third (34%) of respondents believed that their baby's interaction with them had changed during the lockdown period.
- One quarter (25%) of parents reported concern about their relationship with their baby, and one third (35%) of these would like to get help with this.
- Almost half (47%) of parents reported that their baby had become more clingy. One quarter (26%) reported their baby crying more than usual.
- 6 in 10 (61%) parents shared significant concerns about their mental health.
- Only around 3 in 10 (32%) were confident that they could find help for their mental health if they needed it.
- A quarter (24%) of pregnant respondents citing mental health as a main concern said they would like help with this, rising to almost a third (32%) of those with a baby.
- People in the lowest income bracket felt less equipped with the information they needed during and after their pregnancy compared with those in highest income bracket (23% with an income
- Over half of respondents are breastfeeding (55%), but over half of those using formula had not planned to do so (53%).

Open Discussion

The first 1001 days are critical; the pandemic will have had a negative impact on 16682 expectant parents and children under two, who will have lived a portion of their first 1001 days during the pandemic.

58.5% of children lived in workless or low income families before the pandemic; there is a likelihood this figure has increased due to the impact of the pandemic. It is therefore a valid assumption these children will be adversely affected, resulting in an impact on child development outcomes.

The impact and costs of not supporting these babies and children now will resonate through the system and into education, youth justice, housing, employment, mental health, primary care and specialist services for the next 20+ years.

How can the Health and Wellbeing Board support this important agenda?



Recommendations

1. Note the early findings regarding the impact the pandemic has had on expectant parents, babies and children.
2. Discuss the opportunities the Board has in responding to the findings, including:
 - 2.1 Consider ensuring investment in early years and prevention remains strong.
 - 2.2 Consider the SSBC investment into the Child Friendly City initiative and the learning from the SSBC Programme to date as a catalyst to focus on all children, with a spotlight on pregnancy and early years as a system
 - 2.3 Continue to work with SSBC and the ICP locally to utilise the remaining four years of SSBC investment to ensure a legacy for the babies and children of Nottingham.