

The parenting myth revealed by lockdown

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On Thursday, March 26 this year, working parents faced a dilemma—how were they going to work and care for their children during lockdown? The restrictions meant schools, early childcare centres, and kindergartens were closed. Grandma and her newfound medical vulnerability status made her off-limits.

While some [parents](#) were gearing up for an extended and very different-looking school holiday period, others were figuring out how they were going to re-organise [work schedules](#) around their tolerance for endless screentime, ensure their kids were clothed when Zoom-bombing their meetings, and speed type legible emails in those brief intervals without interruption.

During week three of the period New Zealand spent under Level 4, the Roy McKenzie Centre for the Study of Families and Children and the Institute for Governance and Policy Studies ran a 'life under lockdown' survey to find out how families were coping. We asked more than 2000 people about their work situation, their [time](#) demands, the crossover between their work and home lives, and their wellbeing.

Overall, 72 percent of working parents with [children](#) 18 years and younger were able to continue to work during lockdown, either as essential workers (37 percent) or from home (35 percent). Mothers were more likely to report being able to work from home (37 percent of those employed during lockdown), and fathers were more likely to be essential workers—presumably being asked to go into the workplace (44 percent). Unsurprisingly, a majority of parents who could keep working said their [family](#) time demands increased during lockdown.

If we want [mothers](#) to be part of the workforce and our [economic recovery](#), we must ensure all families have access to high quality and affordable childcare.

Although more working mothers than fathers reported increases in family time, this was especially true for mothers of pre-schoolers and infants, with 70 percent reporting increases in the time they devoted to childcare.

Despite the often-reported rhetoric from workplaces that employers

recognised parents were now doing double-duty, there was no reported change in the time demands from work to compensate for this new world without childcare support. Working mothers of young children took on a disproportionate share of this burden.

The result was that half of all working mothers and 42 percent of working fathers reported their family time demands impacted their ability to meet job responsibilities, and vice versa. This [work-family conflict](#) impacted their wellbeing and relationship. Parents who reported work-family conflict were more likely to have [negative feelings](#) (worry, stress, anger, sadness) throughout the day, and less likely to report positive feelings (happiness, enjoyment).

This work-family conflict seemed to have an outsized impact on working mothers, and also affected other elements of wellbeing for both mothers and fathers. Working parents were more likely to report declines in satisfaction with their role as a parent and the supportiveness they felt from their partner (among those with partners) when experiencing this conflict.

In short, if lockdown was an unintended test of what would happen to work-family balance if you gave people the freedom to work from home and unlimited time with their children, our survey shows it tends to be generally harder on mothers, particularly for those with young children.

But was there anything that helped? Our study points to three key factors.

In two-parent families, lockdown allowed more time at home for both parents. When fathers could work from home, this appeared to be a wellbeing 'buffer' for all [working mothers](#), including those experiencing work-life conflict. Working mothers with partners working from home reported increased satisfaction in the division of household labour, such

as childcare and housework, and were less likely to report declines in their wellbeing. Families' wellbeing benefitted when fathers were able to be around to help, potentially without the workplace stigma reported by men in pre-pandemic times of having to ask their boss for a flexible schedule to share childcare duties.

Working parents (particularly mothers) who didn't record work-family conflict reported increases in their parental role satisfaction—an indicator of how they felt they were doing as a parent and their relationship with their children. Being able to work from home without this conflict afforded parents more time to spend with their children and to manage family responsibilities.

Access to and affordability of childcare appears key to any semblance of work-life balance for parents of young children, as shown by the larger impact on mothers with pre-schoolers. If we want mothers to be part of the workforce and our economic recovery, we must ensure all families have access to high quality and affordable childcare.

While lockdown was difficult for everyone, this period highlights how much we rely on schools and early childhood education to enable work in the paid economy. It also highlights how work flexibility, when coupled with affordable and high quality childcare, could promote more gender equality in parenting.

COVID-19 has given us an opportunity to rethink the role of [childcare](#) and the workplace, and identify how we might improve the wellbeing of our families.

More information: Life in Lockdown: The economic and social effect of lockdown during Alert Level 4 in New Zealand.

[www.wgtn.ac.nz/ data/assets/p ... life-in-lockdown.pdf](http://www.wgtn.ac.nz/data/assets/p...life-in-lockdown.pdf)

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