

# Preschoolers' eating, activity and sleep behaviours were impacted during first COVID-19 lockdown, study suggests

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Preschool children's eating, activity, and sleep routines were disrupted during the spring COVID-19 lockdown, which may be detrimental to

child health and development a study suggests. Parents of children (aged three- to five-year-old) due to start school in September 2020 shared their children's experiences of the spring lockdown with academics from the Universities of Bristol, Birmingham and Glasgow.

The study, funded by the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) and published on the preprint server MedRxiv, provides important insights into the impact of lockdown restrictions on [health](#) behaviors of [preschool children](#) in the UK.

Twenty parents in the South West and West Midlands took part in the interviews. Half the sample were from Black, Asian or Minority Ethnic (BAME) backgrounds and half lived in the most deprived quintile.

The researchers explored how 'lockdown' and its subsequent easing changed young [children](#)'s everyday activities, eating and sleep habits to gain insight into the impact for health and wellbeing.

The study found the spring COVID-19 lockdown negatively impacted on pre-[school children](#)'s eating, activity and sleep routines. While some [positive changes](#) were reported, there were wide-spread reports of lack of routines, habits and boundaries which, at least in the short-term, were likely to have been detrimental for child health and development.

Dr. Beki Langford, research fellow at the Bristol Medical School: Population Health Sciences, said: "With on-going restrictions likely, families need support to establish revised routines which maintain healthy behaviors without increasing parental burden or guilt. Rates of overweight and obesity in children starting school are high, so the longer-term impacts of these restrictions on younger children must be monitored."

Dr. Jo Clarke, research fellow from the University of Birmingham,

added: "Parents reported children ate more snacks during lockdown, but also spent more time preparing meals and eating as a family. Most parents reported a reduction in their children's physical activity and an increase in screen time, which some linked to difficulties in getting their child to sleep."

The researchers suggest guidance and support for families during times of COVID-19 restrictions could be valuable to help them maintain healthy activity, eating, screen-time and sleeping routines to protect [child health](#) and ensure unhealthy habits are not adopted.

The research compliments the recent Ipsos Mori report from the Royal Foundation of The Duke and Duchess of Cambridge, which included an [online survey](#) of 1,000 parents of zero- to five-year-olds in October 2020. The survey focused on parents' experiences of the preceding six months during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Most surveys exploring COVID-19 impacts on children and young people have focused on mental health and wellbeing, and on older children and young people. Less attention has been paid to younger (preschool) children or how COVID restrictions might impact health behaviors such as physical activity, sedentary behaviour, dietary intake and sleep.

**More information:** JL Clarke et al. Impact of COVID-19 restrictions on pre-school children's eating, activity and sleep behaviours: a qualitative study, (2020). [DOI: 10.1101/2020.12.01.20241612](https://doi.org/10.1101/2020.12.01.20241612)

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