

# ULRR

## Co-SPACE Ireland Report 02: COVID-19 worries, parent/carer stress and support needs, by child special educational needs and parent/carer work status

Item Type	Report
Authors	O'Connor, Cliódhna;Gallagher, Elaine;Walsh, Eibhlín;Mc Mahon, Jennifer
Publisher	University of Limerick
Download date	2026-03-14 22:37:10
Item License	<a href="https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/1.0/">https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/1.0/</a>
Link to Item	<a href="https://hdl.handle.net/10344/10951">https://hdl.handle.net/10344/10951</a>

# C -SPACE study

COVID-19: Supporting Parents, Adolescents and Children during Epidemics

## Report 02: COVID-19 worries, parent/carer stress and support needs, by child special educational needs and parent/carer work status

*Findings from the first 1000 participants*

Date: 30th June 2020

Report Authors: Clíodhna O' Connor, Elaine  
Gallagher, Eibhlín Walsh & Jennifer McMahon  
Co-SPACE Ireland Reports ISSN737-7752



i-TEACH Ap  
Oxford and Thames Valley



atio



UNIVERSITY OF  
LEICESTER

NIHR | Oxford Health Biomedical  
Research Centre



Medical Sciences Division



Medical Sciences Division



The Oxford Psychological Interventions for Children  
and adolescents Research Group



# The Co-SPACE Study

## *Background*

COVID-19 has caused major disruptions to families' lives, through social distancing, school closures and lock-down. This is also a rapidly changing situation where different pressures will arise for children, young people and their families over time. While research has provided valuable information about how parents can support their children's mental health in general, we know little about what is most effective in the current, changing context.

The Co-SPACE project is tracking the mental health of school-aged children and young people aged 4-18 years throughout the COVID-19 crisis. An online survey is sent out and completed on a monthly basis by parents/carers and young people (if aged 11-18 years) throughout the pandemic. The study has full ethical and data protection approval (ethical approval ref: 2020\_04\_22\_EHS) and is fully GDPR compliant. The findings will help identify what protects children and young people from deteriorating mental health over time, and at particular stress points. Findings will be shared directly with health and education services to inform the development and provision of effective support for children and families.

Co-SPACE Ireland is led by Dr Jennifer McMahon, Lecturer at the University of Limerick. The study is linked to research of the same name led by Professor Cathy Creswell and Dr Polly Waite in the UK. The Irish research team includes Dr Jennifer McMahon, Prof Orla Muldoon, Dr Elaine Gallagher, Dr Clíodhna O Connor, Dr Sharon Houghton, Megan Ryan, and Eibhlín Walsh.

## *Recruitment & Sample*

The study sample has been recruited through a variety of means, including social media, distribution through partner organisations, networks and charities, the media and targeted online advertising. The self-selecting nature of recruitment means that this will not be a nationally representative sample. For the long-term, we are aiming to have good representation across a wide range of socio-demographic and health factors (e.g., income, ethnicity, pre-existing mental/physical health difficulties) to investigate the experiences for different groups that may be particularly vulnerable during and after the pandemic.

We are keen to recruit as many families as possible to the study. Parents/carers can sign up and take part at any point:

<https://www.i-teach.ie/co-space-study> or <https://cospaceoxford.com/survey>

## *Further information*

For further information or to request specific analyses, please contact the research team at [cospace@ul.ie](mailto:cospace@ul.ie)



# ***Focus of this report***

This report provides cross-sectional data from the approximately 1,000 parents/carers who have taken part and completed<sup>1</sup> the survey between 10/04/20 and 15/05/20. During this time in Ireland, strict government guidelines were in place which allowed citizens to leave their home for essential work (if applicable), for essential items such as groceries and for exercise within 2km of their home (and 5km of their home from 05/05/2020 onwards). This was enforced with a major policing operation to ensure restrictions were being complied with. Primary and post-primary school buildings remained closed and education was delivered online where possible.

In this report, we focus on the following outcomes:

1. Parent/carer reported child worries related to COVID-19
2. Parent/carer sources of stress
3. Support and disruptions
4. Parent/carer need for support
5. Parent/carer preference for the medium of delivery of support

For questions related to sources of stress and support, we have also looked at responses for:

- a. Parents/carers whose child has special educational needs
- b. Parents/carers by different, current working status

---

<sup>1</sup> 'Completion' of the survey is based on participants having completed items up to and including the pre-defined main outcome measure (the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire – parent reporting on child).



# *Key findings*

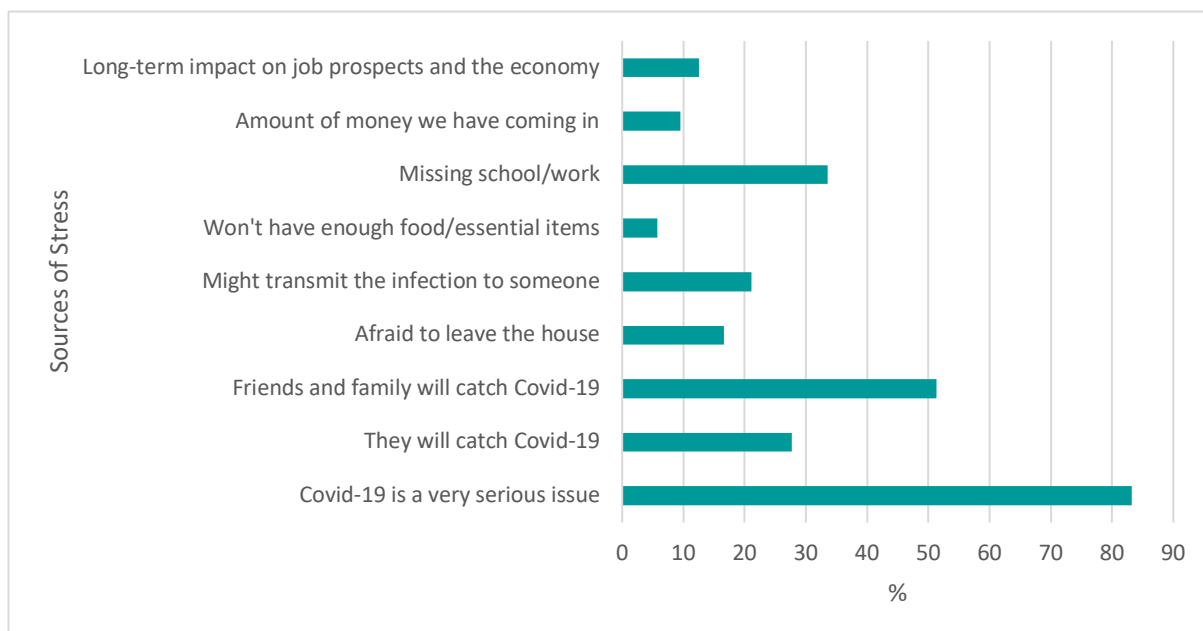
- The majority of parents (83%) reported that their child thought that COVID-19 was a very serious issue.
- Child's wellbeing was the main stressor (46.8%) for parents, followed by work (42.9%), the child's education (42%), screen-time (40.5%) and friends and family outside the home (37.7%).
- Parents of a child with SEN/ND reported feeling more stressed about all potential stressors compared to those without a child with SEN/ND.
- Overall, 72.3% of parents/carers felt they would benefit from advice, support, or help in relation to their child's response to COVID-19.
- Managing their child's emotions and managing their child's educational demands were the two most popular responses for areas parents felt they would like help with.
- While parents with SEN/ND expressed they would benefit from help with their child's emotions and educational demands, they also reported that they would like advice on managing their child's behaviours.
- The majority of parents with a child with SEN who had been receiving support prior to COVID-19 reported that this support had been impacted by the pandemic (94.7%). Most parents (97.5%) reported that support for mental health, emotional or behavioural difficulties was impacted (61% stopped/postponed; 13.4% reduced; 23.2% moved to online support.)



# Findings

## 1. Child worries related to COVID-19

Figure 1. Parents/carers' reports of their children's worries related to COVID-19



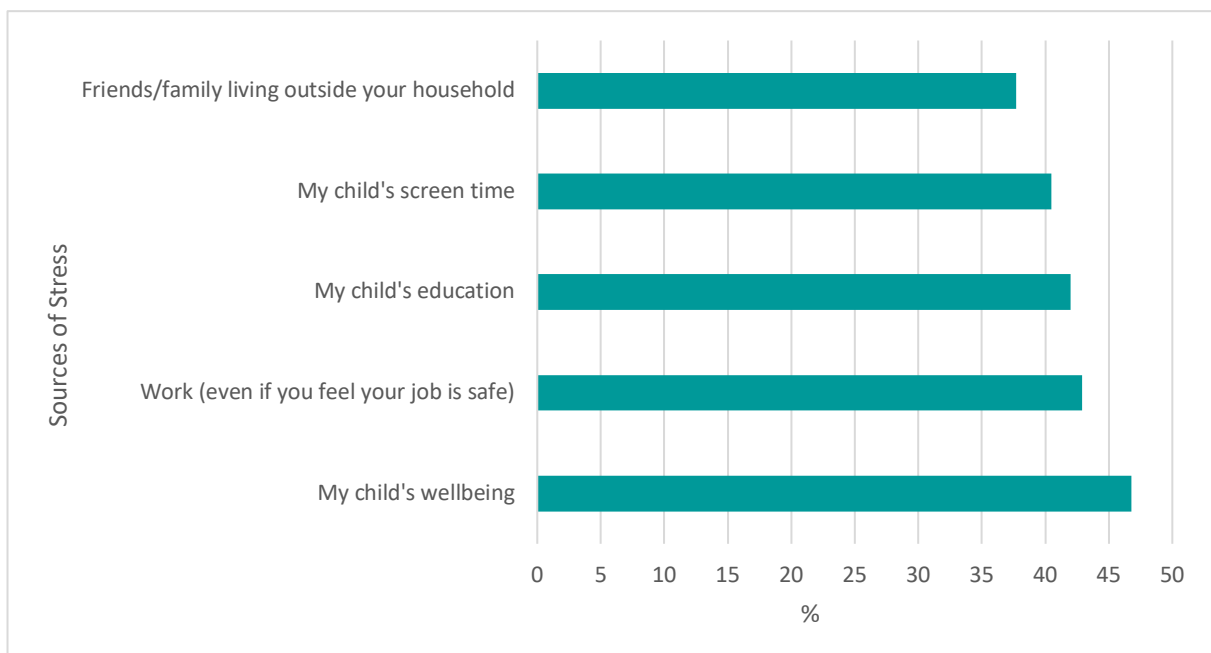
As shown in Figure 1, 83% of parents reported that their child thought that COVID-19 was a very serious issue. Just over half of the parents (51.3%) thought that their child was concerned about family and friends catching the virus, around a third (33.6%) thought that their child was worried about missing school/work and 27.7% believed their child was worried about catching the virus themselves. One in five (21.1%) parents thought that their child was worried that they might transmit the infection to someone else, 16.6% thought that their child was afraid to leave the house, 5.7% that their child was worried that they wouldn't have enough food or other essential items, 9.5% about the amount of money coming in, and 12.5% about the long-term impact on job prospects and the economy.



## 2. Parent/carer sources of stress

Participants were asked about how stressed they had felt over the past week regarding a number of potential stressors, from 'not at all', 'a little', 'quite a lot' to 'a great deal'. Figures in this section present the five most highly rated stressors for each group and show the percentage of parents/carers who indicated that the stressor had caused them significant stress (i.e., they had responded 'quite a lot' or 'a great deal'). Figure 2 presents data on how parents responded to these questions.

Figure 2. Parents/carers' main sources of stress



Within the total sample, child's wellbeing was the main stressor (46.8%) for parents, followed by work (42.9%), the child's education (42%), screen-time (40.5%) and friends and family outside the home (37.7%).

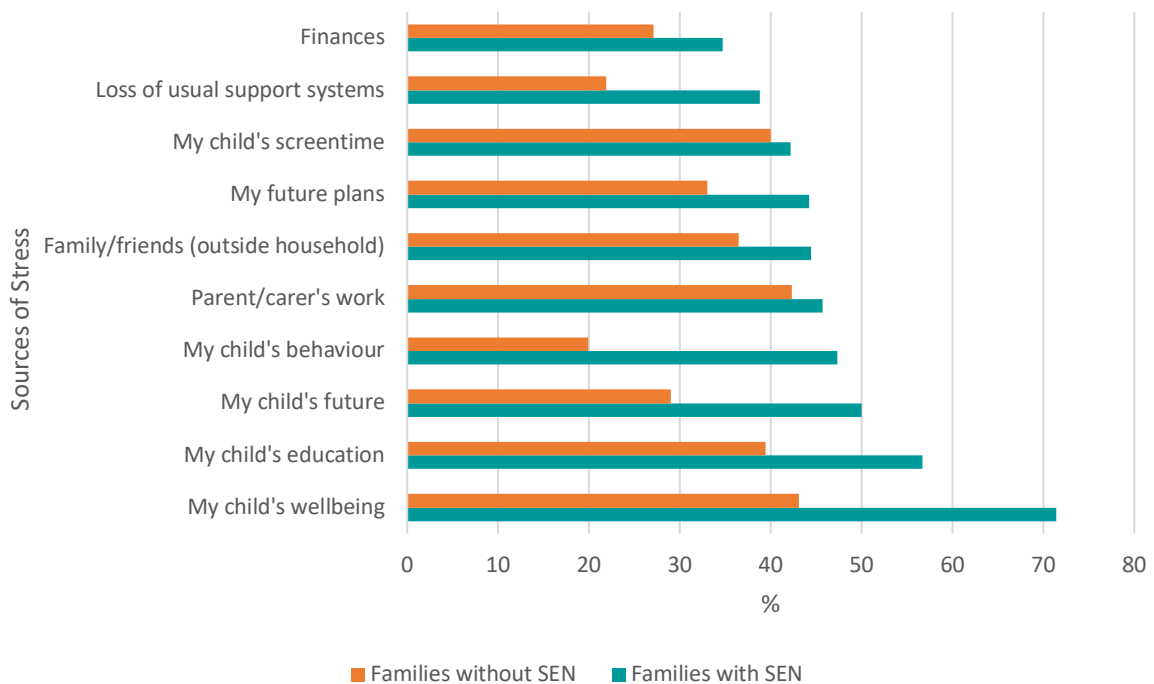


### (a) *Child special educational needs*

Within the sample, 152 (15.2%) of the parents/carers reported on a child with special educational needs or a neurodevelopmental disorder, such as autism or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (SEN/ND).

Parents of a child with SEN/ND reported feeling more stressed about all potential stressors compared to those without a child with SEN/ND. For parents of a child with SEN/ND, almost three quarters (71.4%) rated their child's wellbeing as being the most significant stressor, followed by their child's education (56.7%), their child's future (50%), their child's behaviour (47.3%) and then work (45.7%). See Figure 3 for comparisons between parents/carers with and without a child with SEN/ND.

Figure 3. Main sources of stress for parents/carers with and without a child with SEN/ND



**(b) Parent/carer working status**

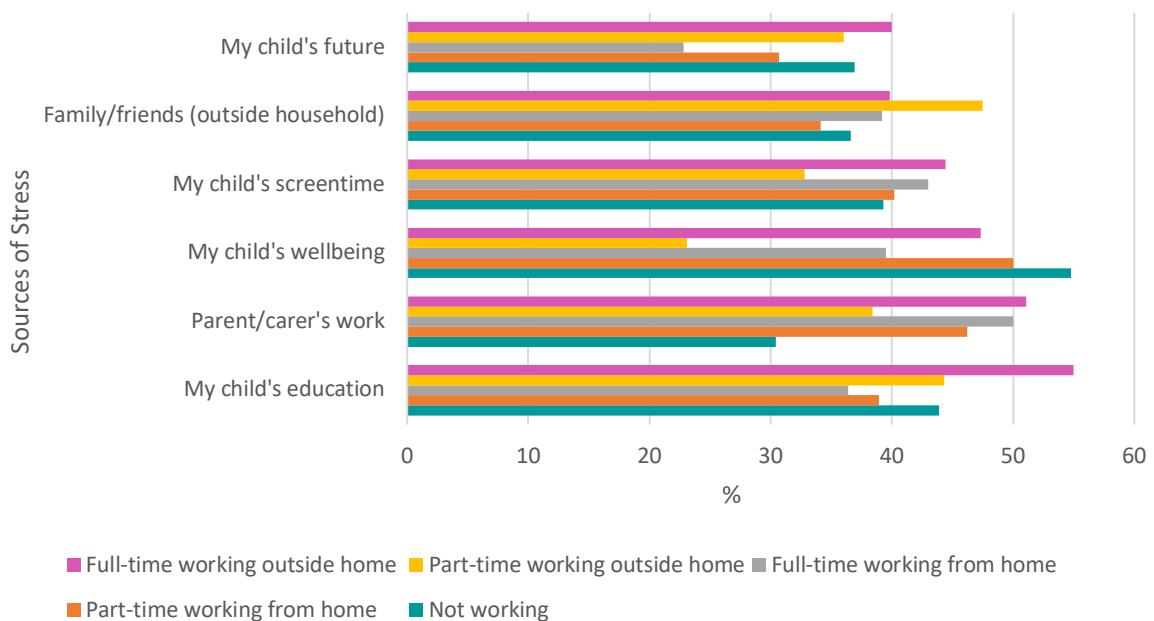
Over the previous week, 375 (38.0%) of participants reported that they had not worked, 202 (20.5%) had worked part-time at home and 254 (25.8%) had worked full-time at home, 62 (6.3%) had worked part-time outside the home and 92 (9.3%) had worked full-time outside the home. The main sources of stress were different in rank order for parents/carers not working; working full-time and part-time *inside* the home; and working full-time and part-time *outside* the home (presented in Figure 4).

Specifically, the main stressors for those working outside the home *full-time* were their child’s education (55%), their work (51.1%), their child’s wellbeing (47.3%), their child’s screentime (44.4%) and their child’s future (44.4%). The main stressors for those working outside the home *part-time* were family/friends outside the home (47.5%), their child’s education (44.3%), work (38.4%), their child’s future (36%), and their future plans (36%).

For those working *in* the home, work, their child’s well-being and screentime were among the top three stressors for both groups. Specifically, the main stressors for those working in the home full-time were work (50%), their child’s screen-time (43%) and their child’s wellbeing (39.5%), family and friends outside the household (39.2%) and their child’s education (36.4%). For those working in the home part-time, top stressors were their child’s wellbeing (50%), work (46.2%), their child’s screentime (40.2%), their child’s education (38.9%) and family and friends outside the household (34.1%).

The main sources of stress for parents/carers who were *not working* over the past week were their child’s wellbeing (54.8%), their child’s education (43.9%), their child’s screen-time (39.3%), finances (37.3) and their child’s future (36.9%).

**Figure 4. Main sources of stress for parents/carers by work status over the past week**

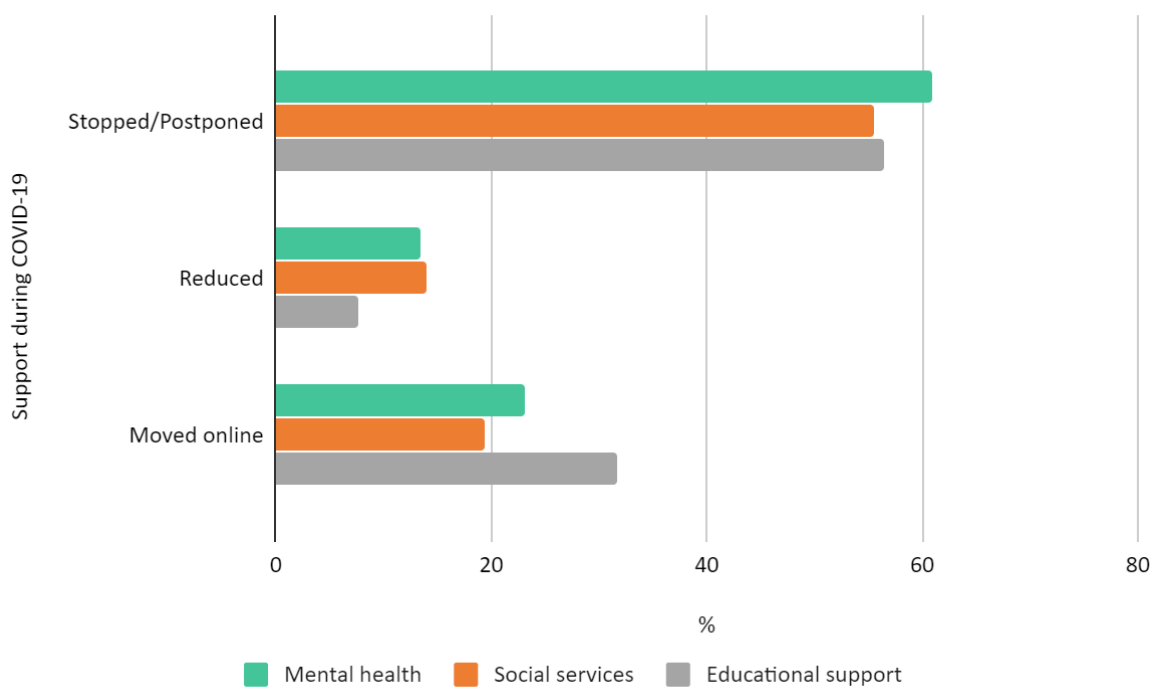


### 3. Current support

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, 88.8% of the children with a SEN/ND were receiving support. Of those, 43% received support for mental health, emotional or behavioural difficulties; 17% were getting support from social services; and 94.8% were receiving educational support (with some children receiving a combination of supports).

For the vast majority (94.7%), this support had been impacted by the pandemic. As shown in Figure 5, most parents (97.5%) reported that support for mental health, emotional or behavioural difficulties was impacted (61% stopped/postponed; 13.4% reduced; 23.2% moved to online support.) Almost 90% of support from social services was impacted (55.6% stopped/postponed; 13.9% reduced; 19.4% moved to online support.) Finally, 95.7% of educational support was impacted by the pandemic (56.4% stopped/postponed; 7.7% reduced; 31.6% moved to online support).

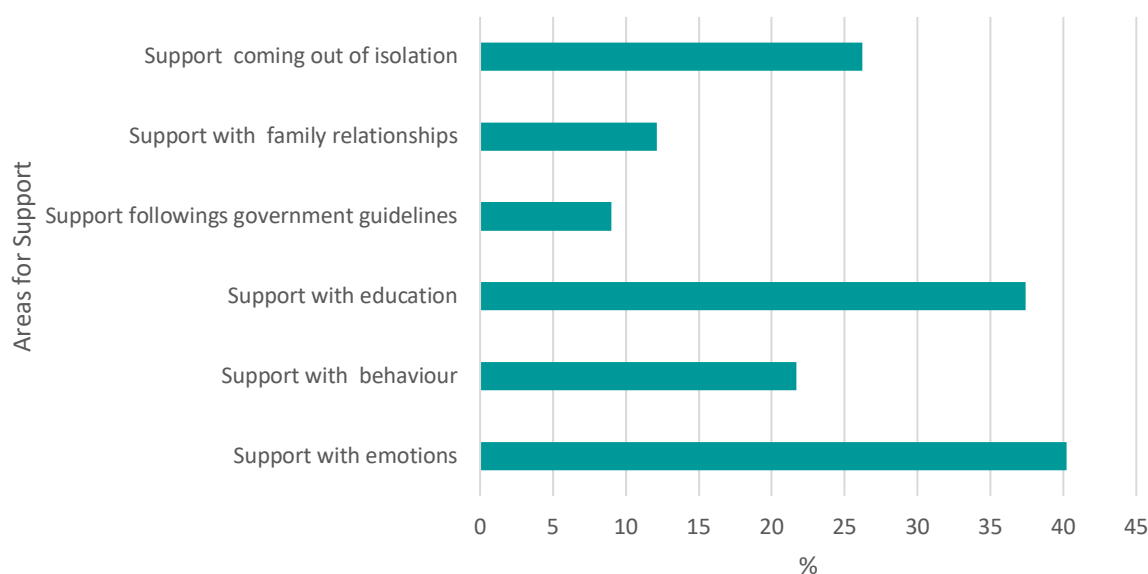
Figure 5. Interruptions to support for children with SEN/ND during COVID-19 pandemic



## 4. Parent/carer need for support

Participants were asked if they felt they would benefit from advice, support, or help in relation to their child's response to COVID-19 and/or isolation. Possible responses were 'not at all', 'yes – a bit', 'yes – a lot' and 'yes completely'. Overall, 72.3% of parents/carers felt they would benefit from advice, support or help (i.e., responded 'yes' at bit, a lot or completely). Figure 6 presents the data on parent responses for these questions.

Figure 6. Parents/carers' reported need for support around specific areas



Parents/carers were asked what areas they would like help with. Approximately 40% felt they would benefit from support around managing their child's emotions, 37.4% from support around managing their child's educational demands, 26.2% from support around their child coming out of self-isolation, 21.7% from support around managing their child's behaviour, 12.1% from support around managing family relationships and 9% from support around ensuring that their child followed government guidelines (e.g., handwashing, staying at home).

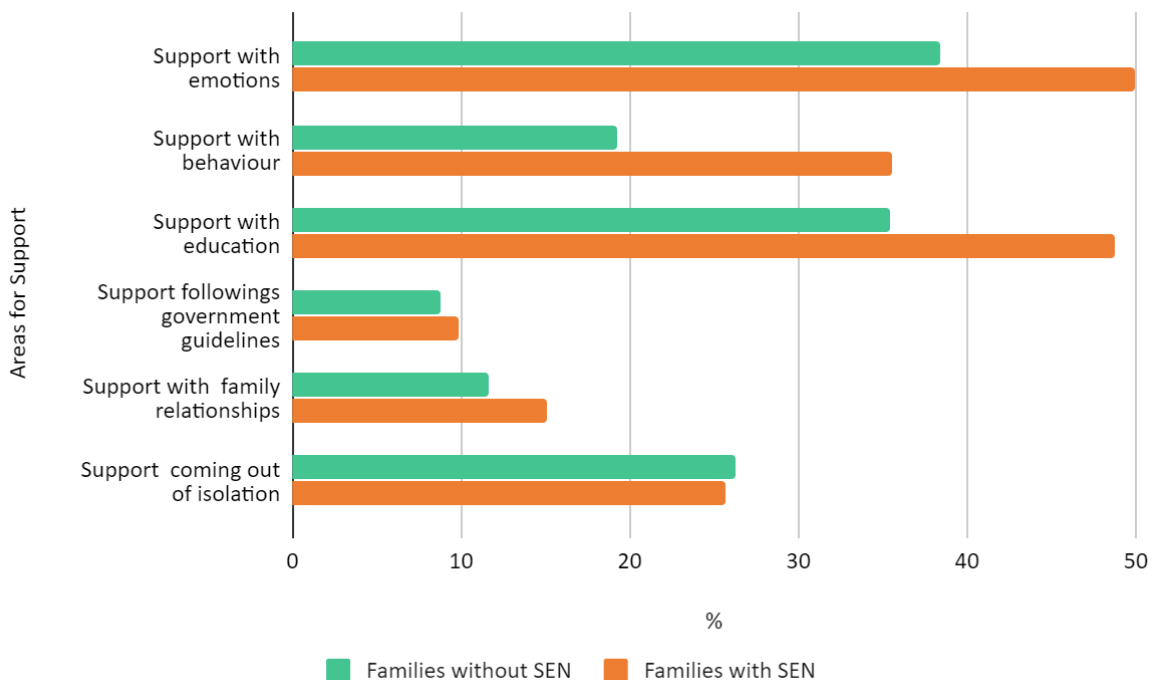


### (a) *Child special educational needs*

Over ¾ (79.9%) of parents/carers of children with SEN/ND felt they would benefit from support.

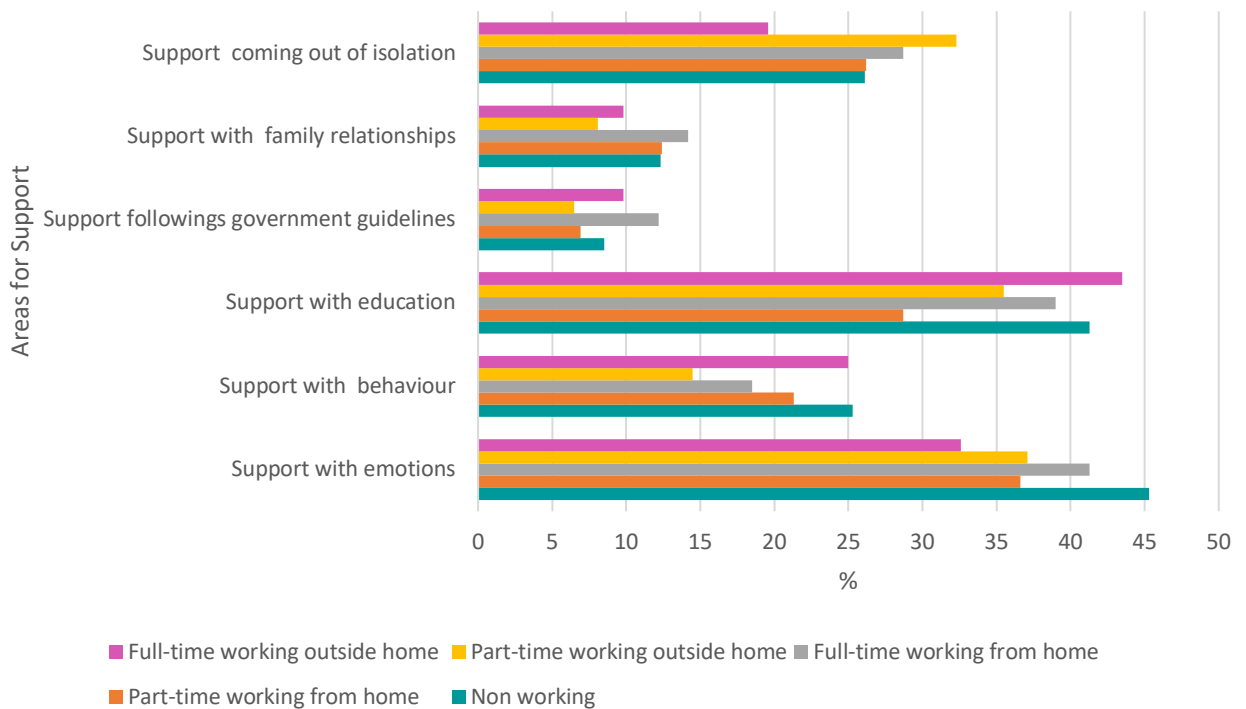
Of the parents/carers of children with SEN/ND, 50% felt they would benefit from support around managing their child's emotions, 48.7% from support around managing their child's educational demands, 35.5% from support around managing their child's behaviour, 25.7% from support around their child coming out of self-isolation, 15% from support around managing family relationships and 9.9% from support around ensuring that their child followed government guidelines (e.g., handwashing, staying at home). See Figure 7 for comparisons in responses between parents with and without a child with SEN/ND.

Figure 7. Need for support around specific areas for parents/carers reporting on a child with SEN/ND



## (b) Parent/carer working status

Figure 8. Need for support around specific areas for parents/carers by work status over the past week



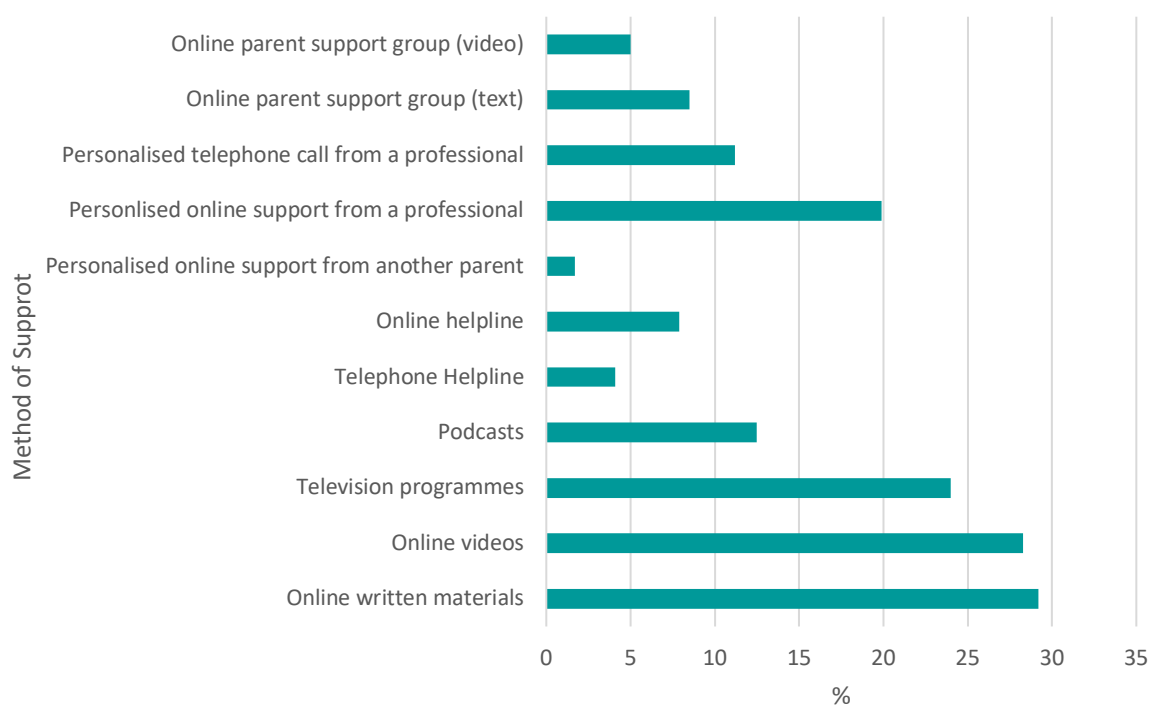
All groups felt that the area that they wanted most support/advice around was managing their child's emotions, followed by support around managing their child's education. As shown in Figure 8, most groups then wanted support around coming out of self-isolation (except for those working full-time outside the home), support around managing their child's behaviour, support around managing family relationships and then support around ensuring that their child followed government guidelines. The parents/carers working part-time outside the home reported the lowest need for support in 3 of the 6 areas.



## 5. Parent/carer preference for delivery of support

If participants indicated they would benefit from advice, support or help in relation to their child's response to COVID-19 and/or isolation, they were then asked how they would like to receive this help. Participants were asked to select from the following options: online written materials, online videos, television programmes, podcasts, telephone helpline, online helpline, personalised online support from another parent, personalised online support from a professional, personalised telephone call from a professional, online parent support group (text) or online parent support group (video).

Figure 9. Parents/carers' preference for how support should be delivered

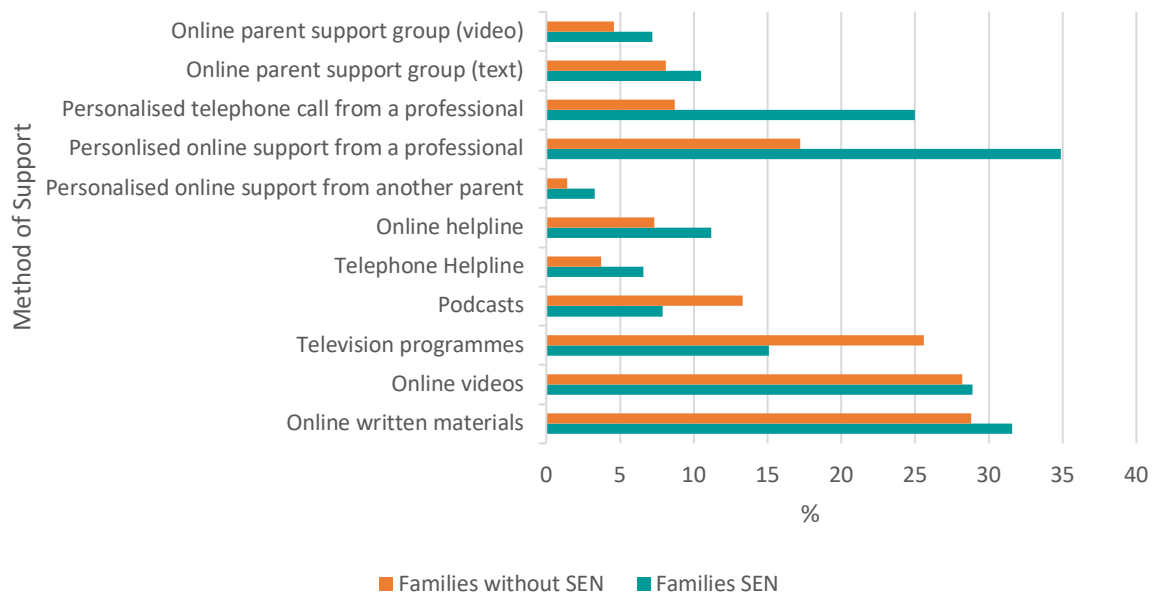


As presented in Figure 9, the most popular ways to receive this advice/support were through online written materials (29.2%), online videos (28.3%), TV programmes (24%), personalised online support from a professional (19.9%) and personalised telephone call from a professional (11.2%).



## (a) *Child special educational needs*

**Figure 10. Preferences for how support should be delivered for parents/carers reporting on a child with SEN/ND**



For parents/carers of a child with SEN/ND, the most popular ways to receive this advice/support were through personalised online support from a professional (34.9%), online written materials (31.6%), online videos (28.9%), TV programmes (15.1%), and online helpline (11.2%). See Figure 10 for comparisons in responses between parents with and without a child with SEN/ND.



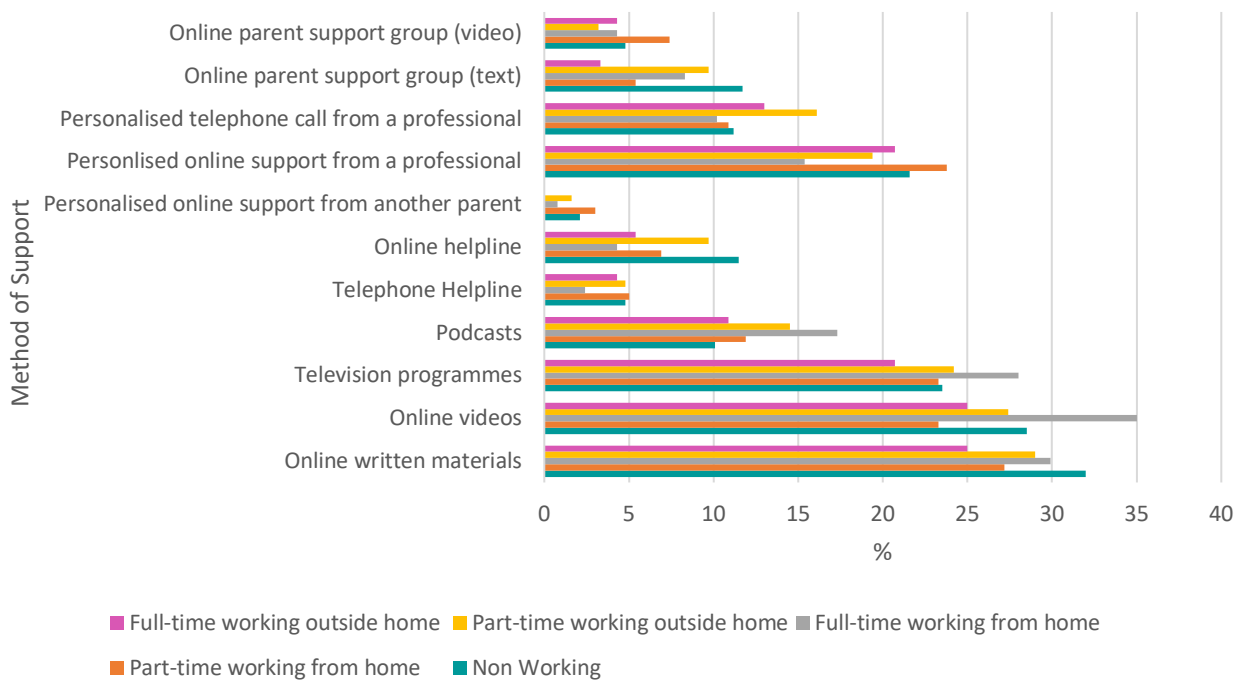
**(b) Parent/carer working status**

As presented in Figure 11, the pattern of findings by parent/carer working status did not differ from the pattern in the overall sample in terms of the top three preferred ways of receiving support (online written materials, online videos and then TV programmes) except for parents working part-time from home (online written materials, personalised online support from a professional and then online videos).

For parents/carers working part-time or full-time outside the home, this was then followed by personalised online support from a professional and personalised telephone call from a professional. For parents working part-time from home it was television programmes followed by podcasts whereas for parents working full-time from home it was podcasts followed by personalised online support from a professional.

For parents not working it was personalised online support from a professional followed by online parent support group (text).

**Figure 11. Preferences for how support should be delivered for parents/carers by work status over the past week**



# Appendix

## Participant Demographics

		Observations	
	Percentage		
<i>Parent/carer</i>	Parents	987	98.7
	Carers	13	1.3
<i>Gender</i>	Female	919	91.9
	Male	76	7.6
	Other	2	0.2
<i>Work</i>	Working full time	346	34.6
	Working part-time	266	26.6
	Not working	375	37.5
<i>Annual household income</i>	< €34,000	189	18.9
	> €34,000	722	72.2
	Prefer not to say	89	8.9
<i>Child age</i>	Child (aged 4-10 years)	447	44.7
	Adolescent (aged 11-16 years)	553	55.3

*Child gender*

---

Female	452	45.2
Male	541	54.1
Other	3	0.3

---

## Further information

To learn more about this research, visit <https://www.i-teach.ie/co-space-study> or <https://cospaceoxford.com/survey> or contact the research team at [cospace@ul.ie](mailto:cospace@ul.ie)

