


# Exploring the Impact of Home-Schooling on the Psychological Wellbeing of Irish Families During the Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) Pandemic: A Qualitative Study Protocol

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## Abstract

**Background:** The COVID-19 pandemic has placed severe restrictions on people's behavior worldwide with school closures in many countries. These closures have shifted education from the classroom to the home. This change is unprecedented, and home-schooling has placed substantial stress on families across the world. As of 9 April 2020, 1.57 billion children were being educated by families that had little or no experience of protracted home-schooling. An essential but neglected issue related to COVID-19 is the psychological impact of home-schooling on family wellbeing, especially considering the other stressors they are experiencing including social isolation, fears of infection, frustration, boredom, inadequate information, and financial stress. This study explores the impact of home-schooling on family psychological wellbeing during COVID-19. These findings will help develop supports and interventions for this population. **Methods:** An exploratory qualitative study will be conducted using semi-structured interviews with a convenience sample of families (at least one parent and one child). Participants will be recruited using social media outlets, contacts of academic members and snowball sampling. Interviews will take place using Microsoft Teams and via telephone and recorded for transcription purposes. These transcripts will be analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). Ethical approval has been granted by the Social Research Ethics Subcommittee (SRESC) Maynooth University (2407411). The Science Foundation Ireland (SFI) has funded the research with the COVID-19 rapid response grant. The dissemination of findings will be through open access journal publications, distribution of lay summaries, press release and policy papers. **Discussion:** The research findings will discuss the impact that home-schooling has had on family psychological wellbeing. It will examine how parents are managing their children's education and learning while handling the other stresses associated with COVID-19. A deeper understanding of the impact of school closures and home-schooling on family processes is essential if the psychological wellbeing of families is to be protected and supported during challenging times such as health-related disasters.

## Keywords

interpretive phenomenology, focus groups, interpretive description, case study, methods in qualitative inquiry

## Background

The COVID-19 pandemic has placed severe restrictions on people's behavior worldwide (Hale et al., 2020). Governments have taken unprecedented steps to respond to the public health crisis. Measures such as social distancing, restricted movements and reduced social interactions were introduced to suppress the transmission of COVID-19. One measure intended to promote social distancing is school closures (UNESCO, 2020). On 29 March, the Irish government announced the closure of all preschools, schools, and higher education institutions.

School closures have shifted education from the classroom to the home. This change is unprecedented, and home-schooling has added a considerable burden on families across the world.

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On 9 April 2020, United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) estimated that 1.57 billion children were being home-schooled and nearly 1 million of those in Ireland. These families often had little or no experience of protracted home-schooling (Central Statistics Office, 2020).

While the impact of the pandemic on the psychological wellbeing of families is presently unknown, one-third of families have reported anxiety and stress resulting from COVID-19 (Prime et al., 2020). These stresses include feeling threats to family health, reduced social support, changes in work roles, as well as the added burden to meet the social and educational needs of children due to the closure of schools (Prime et al., 2020). Research shows that when children are not in school, they are less physically active, have poorer sleep hygiene, and spend more time in front of screens (Brazendale et al., 2017). While families may experience added pressures due to restrictions, studies suggest there have also been positive outcomes. In a survey conducted in the United Kingdom (UK), 80% of parents reported stronger family bonds resulting from increased time spent together during the lockdown, despite the added challenges of remote work and home-schooling (Roshgadol, 2020). Similar results were observed in Turkey, where parents saw the restrictions as an opportunity to improve their marriages and family life (Alhas, 2020).

While there have been reports on the psychological impact of the pandemic on the general public, patients, medical staff, and older adults (Liu et al., 2020), there has been little examination of the impact of COVID-19 and home-schooling on family dynamics and the psychological functioning of families. This study explores how the shift to protracted home-schooling alongside other challenges arising from COVID-19 has affected the psychological wellbeing of families.

### *Home-Schooling and the Psychological Wellbeing of Families*

School closures resulted in families supporting their children's education by participating in online schooling. This type of engagement is dependent on access to the internet, computers, smartphones, alternative online solutions, and the ability to use technology. Other issues arise in terms of time constraints and physical space. For instance, there may be a lack of resources to support home learning, such as adequate workspace or caregivers may lack time to educate (Carneiro & Heckman, 2003; Guterman & Neuman, 2018; Jeong et al., 2017; McDowell, 2017). These problems may be more severe for those from disadvantaged backgrounds as these groups often experience more significant financial burdens (Carneiro & Heckman, 2003) and lack access to technology.

Despite these challenges, many countries introduced technological-based solutions, using television, online classes, and apps. In Ireland, the Department of Education and Skills (DES) provided necessary provisions and resources to teachers and parents (DES, 2020). Apps such as SeeSaw, Showbie, and

Aladdin were available to help manage communication between schools and families. These apps offered a platform for sending assignments, pre-recorded material, presentations, and voice memos alongside communication tools like emails and text message. At the same time, Irish national broadcaster, Raidió Teilifís Éireann (RTÉ), launched the "Home School Hub" to provide daily classes to primary school children. Meanwhile, in a bid to help the education system cope, Microsoft, Google, and Zoom gave specific access to some of their products. A premium version of Microsoft Teams was made available for free; Google offered open access to some of its video conferencing features and Zoom removed the time limits on calls (Molla, 2020).

Though there are many resources to help the education system and families manage during the pandemic, this new arrangement may consequently impact the psychological wellbeing of families. As home-schooling is taking place in the broader context of the pandemic, there are many other factors to consider that might compound the challenges of educating at home. Some of these considerations include social isolation, fear of infection, frustration, boredom, and financial stress (Prime et al., 2020).

Recent studies suggest that health-related disasters impact the psychological wellbeing of parents and youth (Spinelli & Pellino, 2020; Sprang & Silman, 2013). Children and adolescents, in particular, are at risk. In a study carried out by the University of California at Los Angeles, posttraumatic stress scores were four times higher in children who experienced quarantine compared to those who did not (Sprang & Silman, 2013). Another study reported diminished behavioral and emotional wellbeing resulting from COVID-19 related stressors, especially among parents who had difficulty home-schooling (Spinelli & Pellino, 2020).

The requirement to educate at home may also exacerbate pre-existing inequalities related to socioeconomic status and gender. Though digitalization helps the continuation of education during the pandemic, the most impoverished children are less likely to in a domestic setting that fosters online learning or has an internet connection (OECD, 2020). Moreover, early evidence suggests that school closures will likely negatively affect women's participation in the paid economy (Carneiro & Heckman, 2003; Lewis, 2020). These closures remove the childcare offered by school attendance, and for dual-earner families, couples will need to decide which one of them will take a career hit to home-school their children. Lewis (2020) finds that women are more likely to undertake this responsibility; "...many fathers will undoubtedly step up, but that won't be universal...and single parents face even harder decisions." Powers argues that the dual responsibility of educating and working is the "fourth shift" in inequity for working mothers, with many bearing the burden of unpaid care work on top of unpaid home-schooling (Lewis, 2020).

Understanding the impact of school closures and home-schooling on families is imperative to ensure adequate support to promote psychological wellbeing (Guan et al., 2020; Spinelli

& Pellino, 2020). Furthermore, understanding the role of technology-related solutions in the management of at-home learning is essential for future school closures. This study will explore these topics by accessing the experiences of families, identifying critical solutions, and making recommendations for future education interventions.

The qualitative research approach that will be used offers an opportunity to study a subjective experience extensively with consideration to broader contextual factors. Previous qualitative studies show that the experiences of families can provide essential considerations for practice and policy (Ferguson et al., 2020; Scheerder et al., 2019). For instance, a study of older adults and families living with COVID-19 or research about the psychological impact of families providing care to older adults can potentially provide data with which to make recommendations for health policies around family wellbeing (Lane et al., 2003; Robinson et al., 2020).

Gaining a comprehensive understanding of the experiences of home-schooling during the COVID-19 pandemic is vital as stress poses a unique threat to the psychological wellbeing of families. In this study, we will explore the in-depth experiences families home-schooling during the pandemic through qualitative methods. Findings will have implications for health and education services as well as public policy.

## Method

### Design

A qualitative approach and interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) method of analysis will be used (Smith & Shinebourne, 2012). Researchers will use open-ended interviews to explore individuals' experiences of COVID-19 and home-schooling. This approach allows for the generation of rich information about the experiences of interest. The study will be conducted and reported in line with the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ).

The authors created a set of questions based on academic expertise and methodological literature on the development of IPA interview schedules. The semi-structured interview schedule (see Supplemental Appendix A) was developed for this study. A "funneling technique" informed the interview schedule. This method moves from general topics to more specific themes (Smith & Shinebourne, 2012). This type of schedule provides structure but also allows for the emergence of rich data while maintains consistency across participants.

### Participants and Recruitment

Families, defined as caregivers and children, will be recruited to participate in this study. Members of each family will be interviewed together. Recruitment will be conducted via a convenience sampling procedure, and snowballing technique. Recruitment activities will take place through social media and the research team networks. Participants will be contacted to schedule an informal conversation. They will receive further

information on the study via email and video or voice calls. To prevent transmission of COVID-19 via printed consent forms, participants will receive consent information verbally both during the recruitment phone call and during the interview. Interviews will take place and be recorded using Microsoft Teams. This method was chosen as the research team has a professional account with Microsoft Office, which ensures data protection and ownership. Information and consent forms will additionally be sent to participants with email accounts. The participants will give consent verbally at the start of each interview and be informed of their right to withdraw. Verbal consent is used due to the challenges posed by COVID-19 in sending and receiving letters and the potential for spreading the virus. Information on the study will also be circulated via email to academic researcher members of the university for distribution to family and friends. Participants will be asked to share information about the study as well. It is anticipated that 100 families will be recruited.

### Research Team Roles and Prior Experience

Interviews will be conducted, transcribed, and analyzed by Serena Clark (SC), Amy McGrane (AM) and Katriona O'Sullivan (KOS).

### New Methods of Data Collection in COVID-19

This pandemic has created a challenging environment in which to conduct qualitative research, making it imperative to adapt. This research will use an online interview technique to decrease the risk of COVID-19 transmission through in-person contact. Each participating family will engage in a semi-structured recorded interview or a recorded telephone one, depending on accessibility. Though the researchers will use a developed set of research questions, the interviews will be semi-structured, allowing for flexibility. Informed consent will be collected verbally at the beginning of each interview by both the adult and child participants.

Like other methodological approaches, the online interview technique has both potential benefits and limitations. Recent research shows some benefits to include, participants, being more comfortable during an interview, making the interview environment feel non-intrusive and safe, and the perception that the research process is engaging and convenient (Dodds & Hess, 2020). In order to further enhance the comfortability of participants in the interview process, researchers will build rapport by an informal conversation at the start of each interview (Moisses, 2020).

This research also acknowledges the complexity of using an online interview method. Some limitations include the diminished ability to access non-verbal communication. This issue inhibits that ability to read silences and other physical responses during the interview process, especially when interviewing families who have existing dynamics. To help mitigate any issues arising from this limitation, the study will use Freeman et al. (2020) as a guide. This study provides insight into

intergenerational family interviewing. Additionally, the research team has substantial interview experience, which Freeman et al. (2020) argues is a crucial factor in carrying out a successful study.

Another potential limitation is the failure of researchers to engage participants in the research process during online interviews (Eckert, 2020). Eckert (2020) offers a useful guide to assist researchers with issues of engagement. Considering the recommendations of Eckert (2020), the researchers in this study are engaging in ongoing discussions about managing issues of engagement. Practice interviews between the research team, including their children and siblings, will also be carried out to become more familiar with the remote interview technique, helping to increase understanding around engagement.

Issues of privacy and access also need to be given consideration. Researchers must protect the rights of participants; this includes privacy. Data must remain anonymous and confidential unless consent is otherwise given (Eisenhauer et al., 2001; Vannini, 2008). In this research, recorded interviews and transcripts will be stored on a secure server. Additionally, any identifying information will be redacted if used in publications. Further to this, participants will be asked to find a safe and suitable location to be interviewed where they can access Microsoft Teams (Dodds & Hess, 2020). In cases where families do not have access to Teams, alternative arrangements will be made, such as via telephone.

### Data Analysis

A thematic approach to IPA will be used, and the analysis will be situated within a realist theoretical framework. Data analysis will be guided by the six steps proposed by Smith and Shinebourne (2012):

1. Reading/re-reading: The research team will become familiar with the recorded interviews and immerse themselves in the transcripts.
2. Coding: The research team will begin to identify themes and code data into initial themes
3. Clustering: Codes will be grouped into common themes and subthemes.
4. Iteration: There is an iterative process that often has several revisions, and there is a process of checking themes, subthemes, and quotes.
5. Narration: The research team will begin to tell the story from the findings in narrative form. This step involves the description of themes, using quotes to support each one.
6. Contextualization: The research team will interpret the findings in relation to the existing literature on the topic.

This research approach recognizes that knowledge is subjective (Love et al., 2020). As a result, the researchers must use reflexivity throughout the study (Corlett & Mavin, 2018). Reflexivity enables the research team to consider how subjective elements of their worldview can influence the research

process (Corlett & Mavin, 2018). This process is especially crucial because researchers cannot entirely disconnect their personal experiences and biases from the research (Johnson-Bailey & Ray, 2008).

In this study, SC, AM, and KOS will use reflexivity and consider their experiences and relationship with the topic. These considerations informed the interview schedule in Appendix A, ensuring a comprehensive design that allows the researchers to respond to the families' experiences. Researchers will use reflexivity during data collection and analysis to understand how their biases may influence the research outcomes or impact the credibility of the study (Lambert et al., 2010).

### Ethical Approval and Consent to Participate

The study has received ethical approval from The Social Research Ethics Subcommittee, Maynooth University (2407411).

### Discussion

The findings of this study have practical implications and will be used to inform policymakers and the education sector about online learning and family wellbeing. The dissemination of findings will occur through several different mediums such as publication in open access journals, press releases and policy papers. Further to this, lay summaries will be distributed to education organizations and support service associations in Ireland such as One Family, Barnardos. In order to support the rapid dissemination of the research, an article will be submitted to RTÉ Brainstorm, which is a unique partnership between RTÉ and Irish third-level institutions. This platform allows Irish academics to present opinions, analyses and features edited by RTÉ.

### Availability of Data and Materials

The datasets generated and analyzed during the study will not be publicly available due to the personable nature of the data; however, datasets are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

### Acknowledgments

This study would like to acknowledge all the participants and families taking part in the study.

### Consent and Publication

Participants will consent to the study during the interview, this includes their consent for publication. Participants are briefed before the call and debriefed after each interview. Information and consent forms will additionally be emailed to participants with email access. Participants have the right to remove their data from the study up until publication.

### Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.


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## Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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