

Family Time: Insights from the pandemic

by Mikhayl von Riebon

It's hard to believe that December will mark the second anniversary of both the Australian bushfires and the very first reports of Covid from Wuhan. Since that time Covid-19 and its subsequent response measures have wreaked havoc on our lives and had a particularly significant impact on children's education. It's worth considering the fact that as early as April 2020, 189 countries closed their schools in order to reduce the spread of Covid, affecting 89% of learners globally ¹. As a result, countless families of mainstream educated students suddenly found themselves having to adjust to their children learning from home. Recent research has now shone a light on many of these families' experiences and revealed some common themes that we as home educators may find interesting.

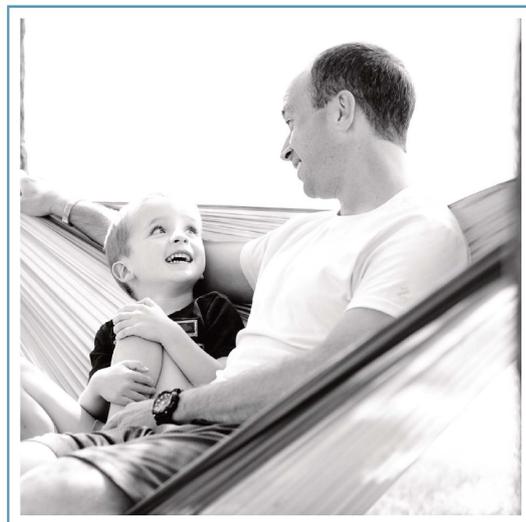
In one particular study for example, Ewing and Vu (2021) from Monash and Deakin University examined over 10,000 tweets by Australian parents in April 2020. These parents described how having their children at home allowed them to slow down as a family and appreciate the time they had together. Other parents commented on how seeing more of their children presented them with the time and opportunity to get to know them better and appreciate them as individuals. Many of the parents also reported being more engaged in their children's learning, with children having more fun and even thriving in their new learning environment. One parent tweeted:

“Extended family time. Normally my bad habit is being too busy for too much family time. Now I'm largely responsible for homeschooling the kids while my wife works days so I'm learning and enjoying the time. The kids are too.” 

For my partner and I, these words feel very familiar. In fact, our ability to spend quality time with our children and be a part of their learning journey was (and continues to be) the primary reason for why we committed to home education. When it comes to spending time with one another, previous studies ^{2, 3} have consistently shown significant, positive relationships between quality family time and greater psychological well-being, self-esteem and academic success amongst children and adolescents. Simply sharing a regular family meal together may even help to protect

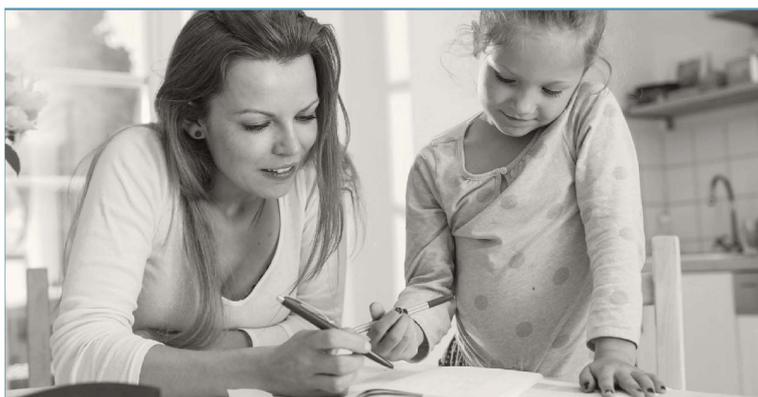
our children against disordered eating, violent behaviour, drug and alcohol abuse, depressive symptoms and suicidal thinking ^{2,4}. This quality time is also important for building strong bonds which in turn help us endure periods of great stress like the occasional pandemic ⁵. Emerging research ⁶ is also beginning to reveal how home education can offer similar benefits in part due to the additional time home educators spend with their children.

Of course, many families during this period also struggled to adjust to the change. In one study ⁷ that included 6720 parents recruited from seven European countries, many parents found it difficult to balance work commitments with their children's education. Others reported having limited contact with teachers, leaving parents to arrange work material and set their child's daily activities. Similarly, the parents in Ewing and Vu's study also reported feeling frustrated with the lack of support from schools and noticed an increase in family conflict. These factors contributed to parents feeling stressed, isolated and worried, resulting in a small number turning to alcohol and substance use in order to cope.



Whilst home education isn't without its struggles, the researchers were careful to note that many of these parents were not actually engaged in 'home schooling' but remote learning, as one parent put it:

“Australian parents are supporting students as they learn at home. Teachers have designed the curriculum, planned lessons, decided on assessment and will mark student work. Parents are definitely working hard to support learning, but they are not homeschooling their children.”



This observation suggests there is something qualitatively different between home education families and those facilitating remote learning. That is, home educators appear to be more engaged in their children's educational development compared to those families whose children typically attend school. Given many of the issues these parents raised related to their engagement with the school system, one might argue that their problems could be remedied by simply making a full commitment to home education. However, keep in mind that there were also different outcomes between those families engaged in remote learning; that is to say, some families thrived whilst others dived. The question then is, why the disparity? A tentative answer might be that, whether families facilitated remote learning or engaged directly in home education, what was most important was the amount of quality time they provided to their children during this period. Of course, those of us advocating parents to do this anyway might well ask 'can Australian parents spend more time with their children?'



Whilst there has been growing sentiment over the past several decades for more family time, the cost of modern living has encouraged, if not compelled, both parents to work⁸, leaving little prospect for any additional time with their families let alone engaging in home education. Polls across various Western countries seem to support this view⁹. In one poll that examined 2000 British families¹⁰, only 28% reported having regular meals together with work being cited as a major obstacle. Sadly, almost three quarters of those polled (73%) also believed children and parents eating separately made life easier all round. As such, many parents who struggle with remote learning might simply not be able to afford to take the time off work to engage in their children's education or to spend more time with their families. However, many families also found themselves either working from home, having their hours reduced or placed on job keeper throughout this period, thus leaving them with more time to invest in their families. Additionally, this perspective fails to consider the fact that many home educators choose to forego two incomes, opting instead for the additional time to spend with their children.

Another view might be that for some families, having their children at home from school may have added an additional stress that they hadn't previously accommodated for. It's interesting to note that whilst many parents were concerned about their kids being glued to their devices, one study found that higher levels of parental-stress predicted more screen-time ¹¹. The authors suggested that the extra screen-time may have been used by parents to help them cope with the additional stress caused by things such as their kids being home from school. The additional screen-time also helped parents to reduce conflicts between family members. Whilst all of us have daily stressors we need to balance, home educators have the benefit of having already accommodated the needs of their children within the finely tuned and highly complex tapestry of competing demands. However, parents of mainstream educated kids may have come to depend on their children being at school in order to address their children's needs, allowing them to focus on other matters. Sudden and extended school closures then, like those induced by the pandemic, may have been enough to throw this balance out the window ¹².

Whilst this might provide some insight into the differences between home educated and mainstream families, it still fails to address the disparity between mainstream families. An alternative view is that many families have become uncomfortable spending so much time together.

In Ewing and Vu's study, one mum captured this best when she tweeted:

"I honestly could not do homeschooling for a term. My son would suffer academically and our relationship would suffer".

Such sentiments weren't exactly uncommon prior to the pandemic either. How often have we heard parents exclaim "Oh I couldn't possibly home educate my kids, they'd drive me bonkers". My personal favourite are those parents who lament the school holidays, crying "I can't wait for them to go back. I need a break!" This isn't to say that these parents don't like their children or don't want to spend time with them. Instead, it may reflect the particular ways in which families value their independence and individuality over more communal and interdependent living. In this way, those families who thrived during lockdown may have already been more communally-minded, valuing the additional family time members were able to spend with one another. Consequently, those who 'dived' valued their independence which became sorely tested once families were thrust together for extended periods of time. As home educators then, we might like to consider whether we are more communally-minded than other families. Whatever the case may be, it appears that home-educated families are well-set for post-pandemic life compared to mainstream families and may even offer some insight for those struggling to adjust to remote learning.

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