

One in 10 parents experienced severe burnout in lockdown, study finds

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Credit: University of Canterbury

Parenting can be a demanding and stressful job at any time, however parenting through a pandemic can pile additional pressure on parents, according to new research.

Dr. Cara Swit from the University of Canterbury (UC) surveyed parents in Aotearoa New Zealand as part of a global study conducted in 15 countries to assess levels of parental burnout during COVID-19 lockdowns.

She found that 10.5% of parents in this country experienced high levels of parental burnout, which is defined as a combination of chronic stress, exhaustion, feeling like their parenting is not as good as it was, loss of pleasure or fulfilment in parenting, and emotional distancing from their children.

"Any levels of parental burnout are concerning, so we need to understand the influences behind these figures and what can be done to support parents who are struggling," Dr. Swit says.

Interestingly, [lockdown](#) itself was not a strong predictor of parental burnout. "For some parents, lockdown was a positive experience that gave them more quality time with their children. Forced restrictions allowed time for family, creativity, and exercise and some parents valued this time. For others, they missed the natural break that regular childcare arrangements and social activities provided. Parenting during lockdown was constant, parents didn't get a break. Lockdown seemed to exacerbate existing challenges for some whānau."

The study results show that 83.7 % of parents said COVID-19 had a [positive impact](#) on their parenting, compared to 26.8% of parents who said COVID-19 had a [negative impact](#).

"Those who had a negative experience were typically already challenged before lockdown. Parents who used violent parenting behaviours, parents who had difficulty shifting focus from themselves to their child, parents who were not working or in paid employment, and those parents living in a relatively disadvantaged neighbourhoods were at highest risk for parental burnout during the lockdown period."

There were also protective factors that helped parents to weather lockdown. These included the independence of children and parents' ability to regulate their own emotions. For Christchurch parents there was some benefit of having developed resilience through the tragic events of the earthquakes and the mosque attacks.

The study sample was small, and would have benefitted from more Māori and Pasifika representation, however it offers valuable starting points for further investigation.

"What is great about these findings is that it shows that there are strategies parents can learn to protect them from burnout. We can teach parents ways to promote independence in their children and

to also develop skills and strategies to regulate their thinking and emotions, particularly during times of uncertainty and heightened stress.

"To prevent parental burnout, parents can address potential stressors before a pandemic hits, or other major changes land. If they are pre-prepared with strategies to manage their own emotions and behaviours and they have helped their children to become more independent, they have already protected themselves from the possible negative effects that can come with chronic stress or burnout during a pandemic. In fact, parents' [emotional regulation](#) and children's independence can be preventive factors of parents experiencing burnout, not just in a pandemic but at any time."

The study signals a shift from focusing on child behaviour to upskilling parents. "Often we focus on the behaviour of the child and how this impacts on parental wellbeing. We usually give parents strategies to support the child, but these results suggest that it is beneficial for us to shift the focus onto parents. We can build the skills of parents, their emotional regulation skills, their skills in seeing the positives in negative situations. These can protect parents from [burnout](#) and will in turn promote the wellbeing of tamariki."

The study is part of The International Investigation of Parental Burnout (IIPB). It was conducted from the end of April 2020 to the beginning of July 2020, corresponding with the COVID-19 lockdown in Aotearoa New Zealand. There were 132 participants, of which 87 fully completed the questionnaire.

The international results will be available in the coming months.

How to avoid parental burnout in lockdown

We hope it doesn't happen, however [parents](#) can prepare now to be more resilient during any future lockdowns:

1. Teach your children to be more independent—even younger children can learn to make a simple lunch or a snack. Older children can be more self-directed.

That way children are not relying on you, the parent, for everything.

2. Self-regulation—if you tend to be overwhelmed by your emotions, it may be [time](#) to take charge and learn how to calm yourself. This will help [children](#) to keep calmer and will model positive behaviour to them as well.
3. Shifting your perspective through challenging situations can be difficult but a little bit of optimism can go a long way to getting you through the tough times. Use positive self-talk and focus on the positive aspects of the situation.

Provided by University of Canterbury

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