

Loneliness among parents of young children

Understanding how parents with children under five experience loneliness, and what would help them to overcome it – a Coram Family and Childcare briefing

Introduction

Coram Family and Childcare are running a project, funded by the National Lottery Community Reaching Communities programme, which will support eight groups of local parents to work together to combat loneliness while their children are young. To guide their work, we conducted research on how parents with children under five experience loneliness, and what would help them to overcome it.

No one should have to feel lonely when they become a parent, but our research shows that many do. We believe that every parent should have access to family activities locally which help them to build connections in their community and overcome feelings of loneliness.

Our findings are based on an opinion poll of 529 parents with children under five, and focus groups with parents of young children in five English towns and cities.

Who feels lonely?

Feeling lonely when you have young children is very common: over half of parents (56%) feel lonely at least some of the time. 21% of parents of children under five often feel a lack of companionship, and 23% often feel isolated from others. 76% feel left out at least some of the time.

Some groups of parents are particularly likely to feel lonely:

- Twice as many mothers as fathers say they often feel left out (30% vs 16%)
- One and a half times as many young parents (aged 18 to 24) often feel a lack of companionship as parents aged 25 to 34 (37% vs 21%)
- Twice as many parents in households with the lowest incomes say they often feel isolated from others as parents in households with the highest incomes (33% vs 16%)

One mum in her early twenties told us: “I lost a lot of friends because they’re not in the same place as me. The other night I had a friend call up who said, “I haven’t seen you in ages, do you want to go out and grab a drink?” but I was like “Well, no. I’ve got a baby, I can’t just go out.” There’s no just doing anything anymore. I have to make plans four weeks in advance, and because my husband’s a chef he does unsociable hours so there’s no chance in hell I’m going out in the evenings.”

Other parents talked about emotional as well as practical challenges: “It affects your self-esteem quite a bit - I think you lose a sense of who you are as a person because you’re spending so much time on the kids, giving them so much of yourself that you forget about yourself completely.”

When are the difficult times?

Parents talked about two distinct times when things are particularly difficult: around the birth of a baby, particularly if the mother or baby have health problems or a difficult birth and can't get out easily, and when children are a bit older but haven't yet started school.

Our polling evidence shows that loneliness can get worse before it gets better, but does improve when children reach school age. 18% of parents whose youngest child is under one often feel left out, rising to 41% of parents whose youngest is two, and falling to 8% of parents whose youngest is eight.

What can help?

Parents in all our focus groups felt that the best way to combat loneliness and isolation is to take part in local activities where there are other parents with children. In general, activities which were 'about' children were considered more attractive than those which were 'about' support for parents: in our poll, almost half of parents said they would be interested in day trips with other local families, but less than a quarter would be interested in family support services. Some of the parents we spoke to described preferring activities which benefited their children to those that would benefit themselves, with some describing feeling guilty about doing activities purely for themselves. According to some parents, bringing one's child along to an activity made it easier to speak to other parents as children provide something in common to talk about and, when mobile, sometimes go around introducing themselves to new families. But despite the priority placed on benefits to their children, many parents said it was important to them that they got time to speak to other adults, to have 'adult talk' and to take a break from being alone with their children.

Interestingly, more men than women said they were looking for "a safe space where I can discuss personal matters", while more women than men wanted "activities where I do not have to admit I am lonely or isolated". For nearly half of parents, a relaxed atmosphere was one of the most important aspects of activities they might use to meet new parents, and this preference was higher among parents who experience loneliness more often.

Parents told us that although there are family activities available in most areas, using them isn't always easy. Sometimes the issue is practical – expensive buses which don't neatly match the times that activities are offered. Families with disabled children face particular problems with accessing activities which are safe and suitable for their child – one parent told us that their local library had recently installed automatic doors, which meant her autistic child could run onto the street without being stopped. This wasn't safe so she stopped using the library.

A lot of parents told us that where there are activities available, they can feel cliquy or unwelcoming to newcomers – they described "being left to fend for themselves" in a new group, not knowing what the unwritten rules were, or feeling that staff at stay and play activities had favourites among the children. Some parents said that finding one good friend who was also a parent made it much easier to go to other groups, meaning that the effect of positive engagement was magnified, in part because it gave parents a defence against unwelcoming groups. Nearly a third of parents we surveyed said that one of the most important features of an activity to them is knowing someone else attending.

However, when parents did find a group they felt supported and welcome in, the effect was transformative. One mother described feeling the lowest she ever had, having tried several

groups that didn't work for her, until she found the right one: "everyone was non-judgemental, it wasn't cliquey, everyone was just very open and friendly and you were able to talk about what had happened, all the problems you'd been dealing with in the week with your kids. They'd give you some tips on what they've done to help and you could give them some tips on what you've found helpful".

Acknowledgements and methodology

This research was made possible by funding from the National Lottery Community Reaching Communities programme. Coram Family and Childcare are very grateful to the parents who spoke to us as part of this research and shared with us their stories of experiencing loneliness and their suggestions for how best to support parents to build connections with others in their communities.

The National Lottery Community Fund's Reaching Communities England awards grants to charities, voluntary and community groups and social enterprises who want to take action on the issues that matter to people and communities.

This research is based on a survey of 529 parents of children aged 0-5 living in the UK and aged 18+ and focus groups with parents of young children in five English towns and cities (Camden, Doncaster, Plymouth, Slough, and Wirral), conducted in July 2019.

For more information on this research and how we think parents of young children can be supported to build connections in their communities please email us:

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