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Parenting during the Covid-19 Pandemic: Family Changes, Challenges and Resilience

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic led to unprecedented measures and restrictions that disrupted families' lives, forcing them to reorganize their routines. This study investigated the parenting experiences in terms of changes and challenges, including positive effects and family resilience indicators. Unlike most studies which have limited their focus to the first period of lockdown or are based on questionnaires, this study covers the period from the first to the fifth wave of the pandemic in France (March 2020-November 2021) and relies on a large qualitative survey. 282 French parents living at home with at least one child under 18 years of age participated in the study. On an online platform, parents were asked to answer two open-ended questions. A thorough coding of the verbatim was carried out according to an empirical-inductive approach by two independent raters. The qualitative results were completed by quantitative analyses. Four major themes emerged from the responses to the first question (perceived improvement, perceived deterioration, no perceived change, and mixed feelings), and

five challenges were identified for the second question (organizational challenges, family challenges, psychological challenges, health challenges, and no challenge). Parents reported more improvements in their parenting experience than deteriorations. Organizational challenges were mentioned more than twice as often as health challenges. Nearly a quarter of participants declared no perceived change in their lives as parents. It appears that French parents were able to tap into their resources without reducing their parenting abilities, and for many of them, this also resulted in improved parenting. After the severe lockdowns, the pandemic's progression revealed ongoing challenges and opportunities to strengthen family resilience. Despite initial relief, the pandemic left lasting impacts on family dynamics, with studies noting improvements in organization and reduced stress, but also ongoing difficulties in readjusting routines and concerns about children's well-being.

Keywords: Pandemic, Parenting, Family, Resilience, COVID-19

Introduction

On March 16th, 2020, when France was the second most affected country in Europe by Covid-19, the French president announced a "total lockdown" on the television, while repeating several times that the world was "at war" with this unprecedented pandemic. For more than a month, the French population lived in quarantine: Schools, borders, and non-essential shops were closed, and companies had to opt for teleworking or closing. At the heart of this pandemic were families, confronted with an exceptional situation: Living together, in the same space, without any help from the outside.

Numerous studies (Audy, 2020^[2]; Bettinger-Lopez *et al.*, 2020; Cluver *et al.*; Günther-Bel, 2020^[19]) have since discussed the adverse effects of the lockdown on the experience of parenting, but less is known about the potential positive influences of the pandemic on parenting (Kimhi, 2020; Prime *et al.*, 2020)^[23, 31]. Furthermore, most available studies focused on the effects of the pandemic only during its first period of lockdown in the different countries (Brooks *et al.*, 2020; Castro *et al.* 2020)^[7, 8]. However, the pandemic is not far behind us, and only a few studies have explored its impact over the long term. This research aims therefore to qualitatively explore the experience of parenthood from the first wave of the COVID 19 pandemic to the 5th wave in France and to better understand the levers that can encourage more positive parenting in an exceptional context.

The previous studies (Kimhi *et al.*, 2020; Barzilay *et al.*, 2020; Cusinato *et al.*, 2020) ^[23, 4, 11] conducted on family adaptation and resilience during the first wave of the pandemic¹ agree on the major role played by parents in this process in times of adversity. Parent resilience skills have a particular impact on those of their children and adolescents (Luthar, Ebbert, Kumar, 2020 ^[27]; Giannotti *et al.*, 2020). Delage (2002) ^[12] defines family resilience as the way families adapt to challenges, overcome trauma, and cope with adversity, including hazards from the environment. Resilience is an interactive process that helps create meaning, regain a sense of balance, and reduce feelings of uncertainty and chaos experienced when families face difficulties (Turner, Ekachai, Slattery, 2022) ^[34]. If the Covid-19 pandemic can be considered as both an individual and a mass trauma (Horesh, 2020) ^[21], then it is conceivable that a new functioning or identity can emerge as a result, allowing for a "second birth" [17, p. 162], as a new life that begins. It has been shown that parents who perceived the quarantine as an opportunity to refocus on family life reported lower levels of parental stress (Cusinato *et al.*, 2020; Horesh, 2020) ^[11, 21]. However, there is a lack of research on the experience of parents in fostering the family resilience process [(Luthar, Ebbert, Kumar, 2020; Delage (2002); Kimhi *et al.*, 2020) ^[27, 12, 23]. Likewise, while the majority of studies focused on the shock of the first wave of the pandemic and its negative effects, few studies have

investigated its possible positive effects on the long term, including after the development of the vaccine.

Aim

The present study aims to better understand the experience of parenting during the Covid 19 pandemic, in terms of changes and challenges, including positive effects and family resilience indicators. Unlike most studies which have limited their focus to the first period of lockdown or are based on questionnaires, this study covers the period from the first to the fifth wave of the pandemic in France (March 2020-November 2021) and relies on a large qualitative survey, completed by quantitative analyses.

Methods

Participants

A total of 301 French parents participated in the study, and 282 met our inclusion criteria (Table 1). The final sample consisted of 271 women (96.1%) and 11 men (3.9%). Inclusion criteria were: (a) to be 18 years of age or older, (b) to live in Metropolitan France or in an overseas territory of the French Republic, (c) to have lived with at least one child under the age of 18 at home during the pandemic, (d) to understand, read, and write French, (e) to have read the information note, and (f) to have agreed to participate in the study. Participants who did not answer at least one of the two open-ended questions were excluded from the study.

* In France, the first wave of the pandemic was from March to July 2020, the second from December 2020 to January 2021, the third from January to March 2021, the fourth from August to September 2021 and the fifth from December 2021 to May 2022 (INSEE). The vaccination pass has been made obligatory since the end of 2021.

Table 1: Socio-demographic characteristics of the sample (n=282)

<i>Characteristics</i>		<i>Sample (n=282)</i>	<i>Characteristics</i>		<i>Sample (n=282)</i>
<i>Gender (n=282)</i>	Female Male	271 (96.1%) 11 (3.9%)	<i>Telework (n=65)</i>	Yes no Not informed	45 (69.2%) 20 (30.8%) 218
<i>Mean Age (n=282)</i>	Total Female Male	37.25 (\pm 6.31) 37.19 (\pm 6.19) 36.91 (\pm 7.05)	<i>annual income (n=279)</i>	Less than 10 000 € between 10 000 - 20 000 € between 20 000 - 30 000 € between 30 000 - 40 000 € between 40 000 - 50 000 € between 50 000 - 60 000 € between 60 000 - 70 000 € between 70 000 - 80 000 € between 80 000 - 90 000 € between 90 000 - 100 000 € More than 100 000 € Not informed Mean 46.871.13€ (\pm 58 886)	10 (3.5%) 8 (2.8%) 93 (33%) 14 (5%) 82 (29%) 7 (2.5%) 32 (11.3%) 3 (1%) 11 (3.9%) 3 (1%) 16 (5.7%) 3 (1%)
<i>Level of education (n=282)</i>	5 th Grade 9 th Grade Vocational Certificate High school diploma BSC degree Master PhD Other	8 (2.8%) 5 (1.8%) 10 (3.5%) 34 (11.8) 77 (27.3%) 120 (42.6%) 16 (5.7%) 12 (4.3%)		<i>Place of residence (n=30)</i>	Urban Rural Not informed
<i>Marital status (n=105)</i>	In a relationship Single Not informed	95 (90.4%) 10 (9.6%) 179	<i>Childbirth during the pandemic (n=63)</i>	Yes No Not informed	38 (60.3%) 25 (39.7%) 218
<i>Professional status (n=282)</i>	Full-time Part-time Unemployed Parental leave Student	159 (56.4%) 90 (31.9%) 15 (5.3%) 15 (5.3%) 3 (1.1%)	<i>Number of children at home (n=123)</i>	1 child 2 children 3 children 4 children 5 children or more Not informed	63 (51.2%) 40 (32.5%) 13 (10.6%) 6 (4.9%) 1 (0.8%) 159
<i>Professional category (n=282)</i>	Civil servant Employee Self-employed Head of a company Other	78 (29.3%) 120 (45.1%) 52 (19.5%) 16 (6%) 16 (6%)	<i>Child age range (n=133)</i>	0-3 years 4-10 years 11-18 years Not informed	70 (52.63%) 40 (30.07%) 23 (17.29%) 168

The mean age of the participants was 37.25 years. More than half the parents worked full-time (56.4%) and many were employees (45.1%) and had a BSc (27,3%) or a Master's degree (42.6%). Amongst those who reported their marital status, 90.4% were in a relationship. On average, the parents had an annual family income of 46,871.13 €. All parents lived with at least one child at home [min=1; max=6]. Children were grouped into three age ranges: 0-3 years (25%), 4-10 years (14%), and 11-18 years (8%); 159 parents did not report their children's age. Half of the participants had only one child (51.2%). Thirty-eight women in the sample had given birth during the pandemic.

Procedure and Measures

This study was conducted as part of an international exploratory study spanning several countries, including

France. Ethical approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of [masked for blind review]. This paper focuses on French data only. The study utilized an online platform for data collection during the French fifth wave of Covid-19, between October 24th and November 23rd, 2021. Participants were recruited through diverse channels such as social media platforms (e.g., Facebook groups like "Parents à Paris"), online forums (e.g., Doctissimo), and personal networks of researchers. The survey, requiring approximately 15 minutes for completion, ensured anonymity and informed consent. The measures included a socio-demographic questionnaire capturing the participants' age, gender, education, employment status, household composition, income and division of household tasks. Additionally, participants responded to two open-ended questions regarding their experiences as parents during the

pandemic, allowing for unrestricted expression of thoughts and experiences across the study period: **Q1:** *How has your life been since the pandemic began? And how do you view your family life today?* And **Q2:** *"What are the biggest challenges in dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic within your family context?"*

Data analysis

This study included both a thematic analysis of the responses to the two open-ended questions, and a quantitative statistical analysis to describe the sample and explore the relationships between the variables. A thorough coding of the verbatim was carried out according to an empirical-inductive approach by two independent raters (Aubin-Auger, 2021; Paillé, Mucchielli, 2012 [29]). This allowed us to identify the major themes and the subthemes that were representative of the parents' discourse. After an initial read-through to become familiar with the answers, a second read-through was used to code the items, and to group them into themes and subthemes. The final analysis was done in a consensual manner by the two raters to ensure the fidelity of our ratings, and in case of disagreement or uncertainty, a third rater was solicited. For each answer, different codes were assigned (positive, negative or neutral valence) according to the connotation of the sentence. Each participant was then assigned a theme according to the codes allocated. In this way, the answers retained a certain richness of interpretation, while at the same time making them more readable, with broad categories of belonging. We then performed complementary statistical analyses with the Jamovi software (version 2.2.5). We conducted a

descriptive analysis of our sample, followed by frequency distribution analyses performed with Fisher's exact test to identify associations between the socio-demographic variables and the different themes. Cramer's V statistic was used as an index of effect size. To assess the effect of the socio-demographic data on the themes, we used the nonparametric Kruskal-Wallis, Mann Whitney, and Welch tests, since the sample did not follow the conditions of a normal distribution and/or homoscedasticity. The significance level retained for all analyses was $p < 0.05$.

Results

Analyses of the first open-ended question: "How has your life been since the pandemic began? And how do you view your family life today?"

Qualitative analysis

Four major themes emerged from the qualitative analysis of the first open-ended question (perceived improvement, perceived deterioration, no perceived change, and mixed feelings) as the main changes in the parenting experience following the pandemic, with subthemes in each of them (Table 2). Perceived improvement included the subthemes of gratitude, feelings of family reconnection, and the opportunity for family resilience. Perceived deterioration in the parenting experience included the perception of a negative experience, a sense of imbalance between meeting personal needs and shared family needs, the experience of loneliness, and an impact on mental health. It is important to note that very few participants differentiated between the different waves, as if they were all part of a single, uninterrupted pandemic wave.

Table 2: Thematic qualitative analysis of the question: How has your life been since the beginning of the pandemic and how do you view your family life today?

Major themes	Subthemes	N (%) (n=282)	% verbatims	extracts from the answers	
Perceived improvement n=92 (32.9%)	Gratitude	74/282 (26.2%)	Appreciate the time spent together	15.2%	"A pleasure to be together as a family, a break imposed to refocus on our immediate family"
			Opportunity for change	12.4%	"My life has been more restful during the pandemic. An opportunity to enjoy my family and reflect on my ambitions and expectations." "A rebirth, I changed my job during the lockdown"
			Slow down and take a break	6%	"The pandemic allowed me to settle down during the first lockdown, and then to reconsider my work pace."
			Appreciate what you have, what you are	5.3%	"I really appreciated the moments of sharing with my children and my spouse [...] Today, daily life is back to normal and we still spend good moments as a family".
			Improve family relationships	2.8%	"The pandemic, and especially the lockdown, has brought us closer as a family [...]. Our family life is better today, because even though I am back at work, we have been able to develop strategies to manage difficulties as a family."
	Family Reconnection	42/282 (14.9%)	Strengthening family ties	13.1%	"During the pandemic and especially during the lockdown, we were able to get together as a family, to spend time together, this allowed us to strengthen our ties and refocus on the main thing, to enjoy each other". "My partner was present before the birth and till 9 months after the birth of our first child. This was very beneficial because I did not experience any symptoms of postpartum depression and I felt supported. Our family ties are strong and we continue to move forward with our professional and family projects."
			Improvement of	3.17%	"Today everything is fine, I even think that my husband

			<i>the marital relationship</i>		<i>and I got closer, in this particular period."</i>
			<i>Enhanced communication dynamics</i>	1.8%	<i>"Our family life has improved, we take more time to communicate and share moments together."</i>
			<i>Creativity and adaptation</i>	1.76%	<i>"We have learned to adapt. We have been lucky enough to be locked down with each other without my spouse working. We also developed our creativity."</i>
			<i>(Re)discovery of personal and family resources</i>	1.41%	<i>"The lockdown strengthened the bonds of the family and reinforced the potential of each member, namely, a gain in autonomy for the children, respect for each other's time. The family is a resource today."</i>
			<i>Feeling of coming out of it stronger</i>	1.42%	<i>"It was complicated on many levels. But maybe it was a blessing in disguise, because the successive periods of lockdown and the reorganization that they implied allowed us to refocus on our family. On the essentials. We were able to give more time to the members of our family, who are now closer."</i>
	Family resilience	29/282 (10.3%)	<i>Development of family skills</i>	1.42%	<i>"Everyone had to get their hands dirty, the children were more involved in the simple tasks of everyday life".</i>
			<i>Fear of the pandemic and of contaminating loved ones</i>	5.67%	<i>"I was at high risk of developing a severe form of Covid because I was using immunosuppressants. I really felt like I wasn't living for a year, and that I was keeping my family from living as well [...]. Family relationships were very strained during the lockdowns and after as well. It's been better since I had my 3rd dose last May and my husband and 3 of my children are vaccinated, I'm less stressed but I'm still scared for my last daughter who is not old enough to be vaccinated."</i>
			<i>Feeling of restriction of freedom</i>	5.32%	<i>" During the first lockdown, we took advantage of being in our family cocoon with everyone at home, it was great. But more globally and over the whole pandemic, this restriction of freedoms weighs heavily." "I had the sensation of suffocating because of the lack of freedom, the feeling of injustice and incoherence".</i>
			<i>Economic uncertainties</i>	5.32%	<i>"[...] Financial difficulties that deepen and affect the family harmony, permanent uncertainty and the impossibility of organizing for the long term".</i>
			<i>Difficulties managing home schooling</i>	2.87%	<i>"The period of lockdown with school at home was complicated because we both work my husband (laboratory employee) and I (director of a nursery with mandatory minimum service). At the same time we had to juggle between work and the children's classes (both in primary school), a very intense and difficult period. The fear of this unknown virus made us not want to leave them with the family or put them in school, even though we were among the priority parents."</i>
	Perceived deterioration n=86 (30.7%)	64/282 (22.7%)	<i>Less time for the couple</i>	2.87%	<i>"Very complicated, my couple almost exploded".</i>
			<i>Overload of information</i>	2.13%	<i>"At the beginning of the pandemic there was some concern about the future because there was a general lack of transparency, especially regarding the various authorizations and rules that were constantly changing... It was not reassuring to listen to the information."</i>
			<i>Increased tension and reawakening of old problems</i>	4.96%	<i>"First lockdown, we were delighted and enjoyed some unprecedented moments. Today, my couple is in danger, there are tensions, I am easily stressed with the children and the tone rises at the slightest refusal. It is very difficult"</i>
			<i>Lack of personal space</i>	6.38%	<i>"Family life is hard because we are always on top of each other, it's hard to make time for the couple and individual time. "</i>
			<i>Feeling of imbalance between personal and family needs</i>	39/282 (13.8%)	

			No sharing of tasks	3.54%	"I had a very bad experience with the lockdowns. For the first one, I accumulated teleworking, childcare, management of major jealousy between the siblings that required a break stay with the grandparents, home schooling [...] and housekeeping for 2 months, with a spouse who continued to work (self-employed mechanic) and who always helped very little at home." "Today, I'm doing well but tired by the mental load and the poorly distributed household chores (75% in my hands)."
			Excessive attention to children	1.77%	"Children require a lot of attention when you're caught up in a work emergency..."
Experiencing loneliness	35/282 (12.45%)		Social isolation	8.86%	"The two other lockdowns were not so good: I was pregnant, we were working but we didn't have the opportunity to go out or to see family and friends who live in other departments. The third lockdown, I was really isolated: no interdepartmental travel, no trips further than 10km. "
			Lack of contact with extended family and friends	6.38%	"We isolated ourselves from our entourage and the pressure of teleworking and school work was very hard, for me and the children [...]". "My social life has been reduced and our family has turned inward. The ties with the extended family have become more tenuous."
Impact on mental health	15/282 (5.3%)		Stress and anxiety	3.19%	"We are in a state of anxiety, today it is still dominant".
			Parental fatigue and burnout	3.54%	"Very difficult to manage, the stress of work that demanded the same level of implication [...] Physical and psychological exhaustion at the end of the day because nobody is satisfied and multiple crises". "Today good, but tired from the mental load and the unequally distributed household tasks ".
Mixed feelings	25/282 (8.9%)				"The bond with the children has become closer, but each of them has the impression that they are sometimes suffocating in the family cocoon. We know each other better now [...]". " Teleworking and taking care of a child at the same time has been exhausting, but has allowed us to spend more time together ".
No perceived change	65/282 (23.2%)				"No change at the family level". "Life has gone pretty well. We have gone through this period quite serenely together. We have adapted quite well even if we missed the freedom for a while. Today my family life is back to normal. We are enjoying it like before."
Not relevant	12/282 (4.3%)				"Freelance". "Important family"

Perceived improvement

Perceived improvement (51,4% of the verbatim) was marked mostly by a sense of gratitude for the benefits and gains that the pandemic generated in the family functioning for 74 parents (26.2%), by a family reconnection for 42 of them (14.9%), and by an opportunity for family resilience for 29 parents (10.3%).

The feeling of gratitude seems to have been fostered by enjoyment of time spent together (15.2%), to the point that some regretted having to return to an ordinary rhythm of life: "After the confinement, the children returned to school. We only really enjoy them on weekends, it's a pity". The time of the pandemic was also experienced by many parents as an opportunity for change (12.4%), whether it was their job, their lifestyle, or their family values.

For 42 parents (14.9%), the feeling of family reconnection

was expressed by family ties strengthening (13.1%). In these cases, the lockdown was a trigger for getting closer to each other, getting to know each other, and communicating: "The lockdown strengthened the family ties and reinforced each person's potential, i.e., more autonomy for the children. Respect for each other's time. The family is a resource today."

The feeling of experiencing family resilience was reported by 29 parents (10.3%). Creativity and adaptation were the two most important notions mentioned in this process. Effectively, the parents had to adapt their schedules to home schooling and show a certain family flexibility. Other parents mentioned that they had to develop their creative potential to keep the children entertained and make the lockdown period a pleasant memory for the family. In addition, the lack of outside help and support, as well as

having to work from home, forced parents to reorganize their life habits: *"Everything has changed, we want now to take more time for ourselves and the children, we have reviewed our priorities"*.

Perceived deterioration

One third of parents reported a deterioration in their parenting experience during the Covid-19 outbreak (n= 86, 30.7%). Sixty-four parents indicated that they had had a negative experience (22.7%), 39 felt that there was an imbalance between the satisfaction of their personal needs and their shared family needs (13.8%), 35 experienced loneliness (12.4%), but surprisingly only 15 of them mentioned an impact on their mental health (5.3%).

Negative experiences (n=64, 22.7%) were mostly characterized by the fear of the disease, and more particularly the fear of infecting their loved ones (5.67%). For many parents, the first quarantine was sudden and terrifying, leaving them feeling frightened about the deadly effects of the virus: *"At the beginning of the pandemic, I was very afraid, afraid of becoming seriously ill. I took care of my family, I didn't want anyone to go out, I went under the shower as soon as I came back from shopping."*

In addition to the fear of the disease, many parents were confronted with an insecure economic situation (5.32%). It was difficult to imagine the long term in the face of this exceptional and unstable situation: *"Since April there's been a lot of uncertainty, with a period of unemployment for my partner and a big drop in income for me. Financial difficulties are deepening and affecting family harmony. Permanent uncertainty and inability to plan for the long term."* Negative experiences were also related to a strong feeling of freedom restriction (5.32%). During the lockdown, not being able to go out, being restricted geographically or, later on, the obligation to show a health pass caused a feeling of "suffocation" in some parents.

Mainly related to marital adjustment, the feeling of having an inequitable balance between personal and shared needs (n=39, 13.8%) and the lack of personal space (6.34%) were also mentioned. The lack of both physical and psychological boundaries between family members was particularly difficult to manage during the first lockdown: *"Family life is hard because we are always on top of each other, it's hard to make time for the couple and for individual time."*

Loneliness was mentioned by 35 parents (12.45%). The parents stressed that social isolation (8.86%) was particularly difficult to bear. Living in a "closed shell" without any external support, without being able to see their family and/or friends, was exhausting. They mentioned not only the fear of infecting their loved ones, but also the prescription of social distancing which greatly "weighed on morale" and which disrupted family routines usually structured by family events.

Ranked last as a factor in the deterioration of the parenting experience, the impact of the pandemic on parents' mental health was mentioned by 15 parents only (5.3%). These parents mentioned parental fatigue and exhaustion (3.54%), as well as stress and anxiety (3.19%). Some of them mentioned the absence of boundaries between private, professional and family life, while others reported psychological exhaustion due to the absence of reference points, a death anxiety present for several months, and material and emotional insecurity concerning the future: *"When the second confinement was announced, I started having anxiety attacks, and I began taking anti-anxiety medication. I had the feeling of suffocating because of the lack of freedom, the feeling of injustice and inconsistency. I was very afraid for my daughter of the world she was living in. At the same time, I was under a lot of stress, I couldn't stand anything and I had no patience with her. I'd lose my temper very quickly"*.

No perceived change

Slightly less than a quarter of the parents (n=65, 23.2%) did not perceive any change in their parenting experience. For them, the pandemic did not seem to have had any impact on their family life; it was a minor change with which they had to cope and which did not bring any particular upheaval, and had no lasting impact on their parenting, *"everything went back to normal"*. Finally, some parents simply said that they had "learned to live with it" without mentioning any positive or negative changes in their parenting experience.

Mixed feelings

Finally, 25 parents (8.9%) oscillated between perceived improvement and deterioration. They were split about the perceived change, mentioning both positive and negative aspects in their parenting experience: *"Teleworking and caring for a child at the same time has been exhausting, but has allowed for more time with the family."* This topic refers to experiencing conflicting or diverse emotions simultaneously. These parents highlight as positive aspects the possibility of spending more time with the family, the opportunity for exchanges/interaction in the teaching-learning process of their children, appreciation of "little simple things" such as playing, cooking, among others. As for the negative aspects, parents highlighted stress and anxiety, the overload of responsibilities, the lack of social interaction and the challenges in education with the transition to remote or blended teaching.

Quantitative analysis

When these four themes were compared with each other, frequency analysis showed that there is globally no effect of socio-demographic variables on perceived changes ($p > .05$). However, some differences appeared in the analysis of the subthemes (Table 3).

Table 3: Links between major themes and subthemes

	Family reconnection		Gratitude		Imbalance personal/family needs		Negative experience		Experience of loneliness	
	V	p*	V	p*	V	p*	V	p*	V	p*
Perceived improvement										
Family reconnection										
Gratitude	0.36	<.001								
Family resilience	0.22	.000	0.116	0.07						
Perceived deterioration										
Imbalance personal/family needs										
Negative experience					0.396	<.000				
Experience of loneliness					0.098	0.115	0.233	<.000		
Impact on mental health					0.088	0.137	0.136	0.049	0.006	0.911

The results revealed a trend effect of parent’s age on family reconnection ($t(50,249) = -1.898, p = .06$), meaning that parents who experienced family reconnection ($M=39.17 \pm 7$) tended to be younger than those who did not ($M=40 \pm 5.5$). Parents working full-time experienced significantly ($V = .193$) more feelings of family reconnection ($f = 32, f_e=23,7$) compared to parents working part-time ($f = 7, f_e=13,4; \chi^2(5)=10.488, p <.05$). Similarly, the level of education was related ($V = 0.228$) to the feeling of family reconnection ($\chi^2(7)=14.707, p <.05$). For parents with a Master's degree the feeling of family reconnection was experienced less significantly ($f = 11, f_e=17,9$) than for those with a High school diploma ($f = 8, f_e=5,1$), a Vocational certificate ($f = 4, f_e=1,5$), or a BSc degree ($f = 14, f_e=11,5$).

A relationship also existed between the average income and the feeling of an imbalance between personal and shared needs ($U= 3725, p <.05$). Parents with higher incomes ($M=48,051 \text{ €} \pm 22,335$) reported this feeling more frequently than did those with lower incomes ($M= 46,679 \text{ €} \pm 62,879$). Similarly, employment status appeared to be related ($V = 0.183$) to the impact of the pandemic on parental mental health ($\chi^2(4)=9.471, p <.05$). Those working part-time ($f = 87, f_e = 85, 96.7\%$) and full-time ($f = 152, f_e = 150, 95.6\%$) were more likely to experience no impact on their mental health than those who were unemployed, stay-at-home parents, or students.

Analysis of the second open-ended question: "What are the biggest challenges in dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic within your family context?"

Qualitative analysis

Based on the responses of the 277 parents who answered this question, five categories emerged from the qualitative analysis: Organizational challenges, family challenges, psychological challenges, health challenges, and no challenge. Several subthemes emerged within each of these themes. Organizational challenges related to reconciling work and family life, a painful reorganization and adaptation, or managing and maintaining financial balance. The family challenges were characterized by family distancing and isolation, and difficulty finding and maintaining family balance. The main subthemes related to psychological challenges were maintaining mental health during the pandemic and dealing with fear. The subthemes emerging from the health challenges were mainly compliance with hygiene and safety measures and difficulty protecting family and children from the virus. As for the first question, participants did not differentiate between the different waves of Covid-19 in their answers, and considered the period as a whole. Table 4 describes the main challenges identified for this question with excerpts of verbatim for each theme.

Table 4: Thematic qualitative analysis of the question: What are the biggest challenges in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic within your family context?

Major themes	Subthemes	N (%) (n=282)	% verbatims	extracts from the answers
Organizational challenges	150/277 (54.7%)	Reconciling work and family life	40/277 (14%)	"Balancing working from home and caring for two small children at home"; "Teleworking and taking care of my son simultaneously was awful, it's impossible to do both"
		Painful reorganization and adaptation	30/277 (11%)	"Adaptation skills were necessary"; "Adapting one's work and habits"
		Managing and maintaining financial balance	19/277 (7%)	"Managing the budget for 6 people"; "The significant drop in income".
		Keeping kids busy: Being creative	18/277 (6%)	"Being creative with indoor children's activities during lockdowns."; "Keeping kids busy at home."
		Maintaining children's schooling	16/277 (5.8%)	"Carrying out homeschooling." "Schooling, as one of my daughters has special needs."
		Limiting outings and leisure activities	14/277 (5%)	"Limited access to culture and sports"; "No longer going out in places where the health pass is required".
		Managing the lack of childcare relays	12/277 (4%)	"Being alone with my newborn [...]. It's not easy not having any relay even for just a few minutes"; "The lack of relay from grandparents"

		<i>Simultaneous management of work and home school</i>	12/277 (4%)	"Teaching your child while working"; "The hardest part was managing teleworking with the kids at home and managing the kids' school work"
		<i>Preparation for childbirth</i>	5/277 (2%)	"I was to give birth in June, after the big lockdown. All my preparation was cancelled and I had to take care of my 2 year old son"; "The fear of giving birth alone"
		<i>Refamiliarizing with the outside world</i>	2/277 (1%)	"Forcing myself to go back to an outside life"; "Letting my children go out and mingle with the world".
Family challenges	95/277 (34.2%)	<i>Family distancing/isolation</i>	41/277 (15%)	"The hardest part was the forced distance from grandparents and the rest of the family", "Not being able to host family events due to a large number of vulnerable people"; "Not allowing my daughter to be passed from arm to arm and kissed by the family"
		<i>Maintaining/finding a family balance</i>	25/277 (9%)	"Keeping our family balance"; "Finding a balance between work, my daughter, couple life and daily life"; "Taking care of everything alone as a single mother of 3 boys".
		<i>Transmitting/explaining the information to the children</i>	15/277 (5%)	"Explaining the situation to a young child"; "The biggest challenge is to make our son understand with his children's eyes that everything is fine in spite of the obligations at school to wear the mask, to not be able to share, to play with his friends because of the restrictions".
		<i>Living together daily</i>	11/277 (4%)	"Multi-generational living (grandparents, mom, baby)"; "Cohabiting in a small space"
		<i>Maintaining the children's social links</i>	9/277 (3%)	"For our son, the lack of social life and the difficulties of keeping in touch with his friends"; "That my children keep in touch"
		<i>Respecting the space/intimacy of each person</i>	6/277 (2%)	"Respecting the needs of each family member"; "Being able to find another dynamic and sharing the space differently due to the presence of the family in the same place all day".
		<i>Communicating</i>	2/277 (1%)	"Non-violent communication in the couple"
		Psychological challenges	92/277 (33.2%)	<i>Preserving mental health</i>
<i>Management of fear</i>	18/277 (6%)			"Dealing with fear and changing guidelines"; "Fear that our daughter would get sick was the biggest challenge for us, swinging between fears and reason"
<i>Maintaining social ties</i>	15/277 (5%)			"Continuing to see everyone with as minimal risk as possible"; "Not seeing your loved ones as often as you would like was also difficult. Thankfully video chats exist to keep in touch."
<i>Social isolation</i>	13/277 (5%)			"Lack of relationships outside of the family unit and being all 5 all the time without being able to recharge elsewhere: the lack of relationships with our loved ones was the most difficult "
<i>Maintaining a non-anxiogenic climate</i>	9/277 (3%)			"Protect my children from the distressing climate that the pandemic may generate"; "Be sure to protect my daughter from ambient anxiety during this pandemic."
<i>Reassuring the children</i>	8/277 (3%)			"Reassuring my children, remaining optimistic, staying positive"; "Reassuring children at the beginning of the pandemic that it was not lethal for their parents or even their grandparents"
<i>Not transmitting fear to children</i>	8/277 (3%)			"It was difficult not to transmit my own fears of catching and transmitting the disease to my children"; "The biggest challenge was not to transmit our fears to our children".
<i>Management of stress</i>	8/277 (3%)			" Managing stress is the hardest part of continuing to provide a serene environment for our son "
<i>Taking time for yourself</i>	7/277 (3%)			"Finding time for myself"; "The mental load is very high. Goal: focus on my family and friends, take time for myself, don't listen to the media. "
<i>Managing children's anxiety</i>	3/277 (1%)			"Managing the children's anxiety"
Health challenges	64/277 (23%)	<i>Compliance with hygiene and safety measures</i>	20/277 (7%)	"Keep the mask on at all times"; "Respect the protective measures as much as possible, but above all do not be afraid of this virus".
		<i>Protecting</i>	20/277	"The hardest part for me was being directly confronted with the

		<i>family/children from the virus</i>	(7%)	<i>virus every day in my workplace with the fear of infecting my children and my spouse."</i>
		<i>Getting vaccinated / having children vaccinated</i>	14/277 (5%)	<i>"Fighting not to vaccinate our young children with experimental vaccines"</i>
		<i>Protecting the elderly</i>	12/277 (4%)	<i>"Limiting visits to my parents and parents-in-law who have one person on each side who is ill with cancer"; "Protecting our elders by agreeing not to visit them as often as before"</i>
		<i>Teaching the children the protective measures</i>	5/277 (2%)	<i>"That the children respect the protective measures and keep wearing the mask"</i>
No challenge	17/277 (6%)			<i>"For us, there were no difficulties"; "No challenges, everything continued naturally".</i>
Not relevant	8/277 (3%)			<i>" Having multiple roles"; "I don't know, I don't understand the question"</i>

Organizational challenges

Organizational challenges were the most reported challenges among the participants (n=150, 54% of the verbatim). The major organizational challenge (14%) was balancing work and family life. This mainly concerned taking care of one's children -independently of the management of school at home- while maintaining a certain professional efficiency: *"Managing work, chores, homework, children's activities... at the same time. Difficulty also to not always reject the children because one must concentrate on one's work... "*. Some parents explicitly mentioned the difficulty of managing work and school at home simultaneously (4%), and of reorganizing and adapting to the new schedule (11%): *"The greatest difficulty was obviously to manage everything simultaneously and without any external support (the famous mental load, multiplied by 100), to know how to adapt, not to make any long-term leisure plans, to learn to live and appreciate the present moment, to manage work and childcare, at each school closure."*

This new life also had an impact on managing and maintaining financial balance (7%). It should be noted, however, that parents often associated this challenge with what they could no longer offer their children (such as gifts), or with the obligation to restrict purchases for them: *"We used to be able to treat our daughter whenever we wanted, now it's more difficult."* Thus, protecting children's well-being seemed to be at the heart of parents' concerns.

Family challenges

For 95 parents (34%), the second most significant challenge to parenting during the pandemic was family-related challenges. Distance from family and isolation was the most significant family-related challenge (15%). This was especially evident because family habits and rituals were disrupted due to the mandatory separation from extended family: *"Stopping social life, cutting out family meals, cancelling vacations, planned excursions, birthday meals..."*. Maintaining and finding a family balance was mentioned in 9% of the verbatims: *"Finding a balance between work, my daughter, marital life and daily life"*. For some of them, the challenge was to transmit and to explain information about the pandemic to their children (5%).

Psychological challenges

For nearly a third of parents (n=92, 33%), psychological challenges were particularly important during this period. Parents highlighted the difficulty of preserving their mental health during the pandemic (7%). This difficulty was expressed as an increase in conflicts due to living in isolation, financial difficulties, the loss of loved ones, and the restriction of daily activities: *"Getting help from health*

professionals to deal with the children's crises/difficulties because with their increased presence at home, it is more difficult to manage".

In addition, parents mentioned having to manage fear (6%), in terms of health, the future, and financial resources. For many, this challenge was particularly linked to the first wave of Covid-19. In addition, many parents mentioned the difficulty maintaining social ties (5%). Social isolation was experienced as a social, physical, and mental challenge: *"Not seeing anyone, not seeing family or friends and not going out. Staying together and not feeling too guilty."*

Health challenges

Based on parents' responses, health challenges were the second most common challenge they faced in dealing with the pandemic (n=64, 23%). Compliance with hygiene and safety measures was identified as a challenge in 7% of the responses. For a large majority of them, the difficulty consisted in keeping the mask on when they were in the presence of their children, but also in making their loved ones respect these measures when they were finally able to get together. In the same way, parents reported great difficulty in protecting their family and children from the virus (7%). This could be both a difficulty to protect their loved ones physically and psychologically. In addition, the choice to be vaccinated and/or to have their children vaccinated was mentioned in 5% of the verbatim. Among these parents, many mentioned family conflicts on this subject, difficulties in assuming and making their choices heard by their relatives: *"It is not easy to deal with the difference of opinion regarding vaccination."*

No challenges

Finally, 17 parents (6%) did not perceive any family or personal challenges during the Covid-19 pandemic. For some, this was due to access to vaccination, which eased difficulties, while for others the pandemic did not represent a major challenge compared to other natural disasters. It appears here that individual reactions to the pandemic vary according to a large array of factors, including personal and family health situation, social conditions, access to resources and information, being in an area with low rates of Covid-19 cases, having a stable job or favorable financial conditions, among others.

Quantitative analysis

Overall, socio-demographic variables had little influence on parents' perceived challenges during the Covid-19 pandemic. The analyses did not show significant relationships between socio-demographic variables and organizational challenges. Interestingly, the number of children (U=908, $p = .367$) and being a teleworker

($\chi^2(1)=0.017$, $p =.772$) were not related to parents' perception of organizational challenges.

However, there was a significant association ($V = 0.298$) between having experienced childbirth during the pandemic and perceived family challenges ($\chi^2(1)=3.746$, $p<.05$). Women who experienced childbirth perceived family challenges more frequently than those who did not ($f =16$, $f_e=12$). On the other hand, family-related challenges were perceived more frequently ($V = 0.367$) among teleworkers ($\chi^2(1)=6.165$, $p <.05$), with a prevalence in our sample of 45.2% versus 6.3% ($f =19$, $f_e=14,5$).

There was also a significant effect of children's age range on perceived psychological challenges ($\chi^2(1) = 9.994$, $p <.05$). Parents of adolescents aged 11 to 18 years perceived this type of challenge less frequently (64.7%) than parents with children of other age ranges. The average income of parents was also related to this type of challenge ($U= 6 109$, $p <.05$): The greater the income, the more psychological challenges were perceived ($M=60.258 \text{ €} \pm 98.651$) compared to parents who did not report this challenge ($M=40.406 \text{ €} \pm 21.231$).

Regarding health challenges, two results close to the significance level caught our attention. Parents of children aged 0 to 3 years seemed to experience these challenges less frequently (72.7% versus 27.3%) than those of older children ($p<.05$). Similarly, it appears that parents with this challenge had lower annual incomes ($M=38.635 \text{ €} \pm 21.651$) compared to those who did not ($M= 49.437 \text{ €} \pm 66.914$).

Results also indicate that parental age had a significant effect on the lack of perceived challenge ($U= 1522$, $p<.05$). The older the parents were ($M=40.12 \pm 5.9$), the less challenges they perceived during the pandemic in contrast to younger parents ($M=37.1 \pm 5.8$). We also found a strong relationship ($V = 0.789$) between the children's age range and the absence of challenges. Parents of children aged 11 to 18 years more frequently reported no challenges in their parenting experience compared to parents of younger children ($\chi^2(1) = 10.578$, $p <.05$).

Discussion

This study aimed to explore parenting experiences during the Covid-19 pandemic in France, based on a large qualitative survey. In line with previous studies (Prime, Wade, 2020; Moscaritolo *et al.*, 2021) [31, 28], results revealed both positive and negative experiences, but more than 50% of verbatim reported improvements overall. Organizational challenges were mentioned more than twice as often as health challenges. Although one third of parents perceived deterioration in their parental experience, surprisingly nearly a quarter of participants declared no perceived change in their lives as parents during the pandemic. In fact, a number of results point to a less negative parental experience than expected and to French parents' good ability to adapt to the pandemic situation.

Parents who worked full-time reported more family reconnection than those who worked part-time. Working parents, and those with a higher income, also reported a reduced impact of the pandemic on their mental health. In fact, work seemed to serve as a protective factor against parental distress, since it was a potential source of satisfaction and kept the parents in a social network. Teleworking at home didn't worsen parenting experiences, although it could be seen as a challenge. Contrary to another French study (Lambert, 2021), our study showed that (tele)working actually engendered a more fulfilling

parenting experience. Also, in contrast with Vertsberger *et al.*'s (2021) [35] results, the number of children at home had no influence on the perception of family and organizational challenges.

We expected that social isolation and lack of support would have a negative impact on mental health, as found in other studies (Fontanesi *et al.*, 2020; Griffith, 2022) [13, 18]. However, the impact of the pandemic on mental health was not related to the unprecedented experience of loneliness felt by parents during this period. There was also no relationship between the experience of loneliness and the feeling of having perceived an imbalance between the satisfaction of personal and family needs. So, in contrast to the study by Prime *et al.* (2020) [31], it appears that French parents were able to tap into their resources without reducing their parenting abilities, and for many of them this actually resulted in improved parenting.

In the same direction, low-income families in France didn't face the most significant parenting difficulties, in contrast to other studies (Prime *et al.*, 2020; Coyne *et al.*, 2021) [31, 10]. Taken together, these findings seem to point out a French specificity in this regard (Le Vigouroux *et al.*, 2022; Pinel-Jacquemin, Martinasso, Martinez, Moscaritolo, 2022) [26, 30], since most international studies indicate that home schooling or financial hardship were major sources of parental distress (Giannotti *et al.*, 2022; Fraenkel, Cho, 2020; Thorell *et al.*, 2022) [17, 14, 32]. French citizens benefited from financial aids, such as "partial unemployment" (instead of job loss) and tax deferral, and were not as affected as in other countries. Similarly, the fact that home schooling was maintained in France throughout the lockdowns may have helped parents keep their children busy when they were forced to live in isolation (Le Vigouroux *et al.*, 2022) [26].

Organizational challenges were the most reported challenges, affecting more than half of the participants, while nearly a third of parents mentioned family and psychological challenges. In fact, the impact of the pandemic on mental health was mostly mentioned as a challenge rather than a perceived change. In line with Horesh and Brown's study (Horesh & Brown, 2020) [21], parents expressed regret over their pre-pandemic lives due to information overload, which created a distressing climate, social isolation, and the restriction of daily activities (Castro *et al.*, 2020) [8]. Our study confirms that many young mothers felt overwhelmed by loneliness, fear of infecting their loved ones, and uncertainty about the conditions of their future child's birth and the postpartum (Castro *et al.*, 2020 [8]; Viaux Savelon, 2020). This was specially the case of pregnant women who experienced childbirth during this period, who perceived more family challenges. Isolation was truly experienced by these new parents in France, since fathers and family members were denied visits to their spouse and newborn in maternity wards during the first months of the pandemic.

So, it appears that parents exhibited proactive resilience-building efforts, transforming negative emotions into constructive actions. Parents' verbatim showed that it was not just about adapting and appreciating the moment, but also about making sense of the events experienced (Walsh, 2016) [37]. Consistent with the study by Turner *et al.* (2022) [34], the feelings of sadness, despair, anger or fear caused by the Covid-19 were not ignored but were seemingly "transformed" for about a third of respondents. Beyond simply adapting, parents were proactively building

resilience, in line with other French studies (Le Vigouroux *et al.*, 2022; Pinel-Jacquemin *et al.*, 2022) [26, 30]. For many it was a question of improving family communication and becoming aware of one's resources in order to develop new ways of family functioning.

Partially in line with Fraenkel and Cho's study (Fraenkel & Cho, 2020) [14], our results also showed that parents of children aged between 11 and 18 years old perceived fewer psychological challenges, and that, overall, they did not perceive major challenges for their parenting. In contrast, parents of young children had many educational and psychological fears for their children. They felt particularly responsible for the physical and psychological health of their children, and tried to maintain positive parenting despite the insecure context. This may have been particularly true for mothers who were often more responsible for childcare, especially for the youngest children (Hipp & Bünning, 2021). Knowing that one's children were happy and secure contributed greatly to strengthening within-family relationships (Pinel-Jacquemin *et al.*, 2022) [30]. Interestingly, this worry about the security of young children (0-3 years) was about their emotional and developmental security more than about their health. This feeling was probably moderated by the age of the parents and their parenting experience, as we found that the older the parents were, the fewer parental challenges they perceived.

This study has limitations such as some missing socio-demographic data and the reliance on retrospective cross-sectional data. The online survey skewed toward female participants and higher socioeconomic backgrounds, potentially impacting the generalizability of the findings. Future research could look at the perspectives of different family members (fathers, children, grandparents), given that the vast majority of studies have been carried out with mothers. It would also be interesting to include measures of resilience and interviews to go further in the qualitative analysis of parents' experiences in these exceptional circumstances.

Post-Pandemic and Long-Term Impacts

After the end of the most severe lockdown measures and with the progression of subsequent waves of the COVID-19 pandemic, the effects on parenting continued to evolve. Families' adaptation to new norms and the gradual return to everyday activities brought to light both ongoing challenges and opportunities to strengthen family resilience. Recent studies indicate that, despite the initial relief with the end of strict restrictions, the pandemic left lasting marks on family dynamics and parenting practices (Barreto, 2023) [3].

According to Tupinambá (2023) [33] and Jesser (2022) [22], with the reopening of schools and the resumption of economic activities, many parents reported an improvement in family organization and a reduction in the stress associated with social isolation and homeschooling. However, the transition back to "normal" also presented its difficulties, such as the need to readjust routines and deal with ongoing concerns about the health and well-being of children.

Psychological Impact and Resilience

The psychological effects of the pandemic were particularly pronounced, with many parents facing continuous anxiety and stress. Even so, the ability to adapt and resilience

emerged as crucial factors. Parents who managed to maintain self-care practices and find a balance between professional and family responsibilities reported a more positive experience.

Government and community support played a significant role in mitigating negative impacts. Financial support programs, mental health services, and community initiatives helped alleviate some of the pressures faced by families. The continuation of support policies is essential to sustain the well-being of families in the long term (Lange, 2024) [25].

The pandemic also promoted changes in family dynamics, with many parents reporting greater closeness with their children and a renewed appreciation for family time. The experience of facing a global crisis brought many families together, strengthening bonds and fostering a sense of community and mutual support (Gayatri, 2023) [16].

The COVID-19 pandemic brought unprecedented challenges to families worldwide. However, it also offered a unique opportunity to explore and understand parenting dynamics in times of crisis. The resilience demonstrated by French families, supported by public policies and effective coping strategies, highlights the human capacity for adaptation and growth even under the most adverse circumstances. Continuing to study and support these dynamics will be essential to promoting family well-being in the future.

Conclusion

This study aimed to explore the experience of parenting from the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic until its fifth wave in France. The study's focus on parental strengths amid a pandemic suggests the need for supportive actions to mitigate negative effects and promote family resilience. Our study also highlights the importance of taking into account country specificities and the government measures adopted to help families cope with the pandemic. Understanding the experience of parenting during this particular period, as well as the levers that made it easier to cope with it, can help tailor measures to address the impact of other worldwide crises on families.

The pandemic experience offers valuable lessons for the future of parenting and family resilience. Promoting supportive environments, effective public policies, and self-care practices can help families face future crises more effectively. Additionally, the importance of a robust and accessible mental health system was highlighted, proving crucial for collective well-being.

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