Ties didn’t worsen for most families amid Covid-19

41% in study say pandemic improved how family members got along, 71% spent more time together

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The protracted Covid-19 pandemic did not worsen family ties as feared, despite anecdotal reports of rising tensions among people who had to work and study from home.

In fact, family relations improved or at least stayed the same for most of the more than 3,000 families interviewed in a nationally representative study on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on families with young children here.

The Singapore Longitudinal Early Development Study found that:

- 41% of families said the pandemic improved how family members got along, while 40% said there was no change. The remaining 18% felt the pandemic made things worse.
- 47% of households said the quality of communication between family members during the pandemic improved, while 43% said it stayed the same. The remaining 9% said it became worse.
- 71% of households said they spent more time together as a family, versus 23% per cent who reported no change. The rest spent the same amount of time together.

Professor Jean Yeung, principal investigator of the study, said the finding that family relations remained the same or improved for most of the families interviewed was surprising.

There have been media reports, albeit citing anecdotal examples, of how more families are facing increased friction at home during the pandemic, she said. Family violence cases have also risen.

She said: "Of course, we have some families who said things got worse, but the proportion who reported that Covid-19 made things better is significantly larger than those who said things got worse, across all housing types.

"It is valuable that we have a national empirical picture to look at what is really happening with Singaporean families with young children." The study involved 4,305 children, aged between two and nine, in 3,638 families. Their primary caregivers were interviewed between February and November for the study on the pandemic’s impact.

The researchers have been following these families since 2018 as part of the longitudinal study, interviewing them on a range of issues relating to early childhood development.

The study’s first wave involved about 3,000 children up to age six, and their primary caregivers were interviewed between November 2018 and September 2019.

The study is supported by the Social Science Research Council, which was set up by the Government in January 2016 to provide concerted direction for social science and humanities research.

Yeung, who is founding director of the Centre for Family and Population Research at the National University of Singapore, noted that the pandemic has disrupted family routines and provided an opportunity for the redistribution of housework and childcare responsibilities, even if it blurred the boundaries between work, school and family.

"This is a good opportunity for fathers to be more involved in their children’s development and share in housework," the study found that slightly more than a third of the primary caregivers said the pandemic had

SURPRISING OUTCOME

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made them more anxious. Some 95% per cent of the primary caregivers are mothers.

Yeung cautioned: "We need to be very careful to avoid having all the responsibilities fall on the mothers, of whom more than 70% per cent are also working, which may increase anxiety and conflicts in the family."

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