

## **Families in the Pandemic Between Challenges and Opportunities: An Empirical Study of Parents with Preschool and School-Age Children**

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# *Families in the Pandemic Between Challenges and Opportunities: An Empirical Study of Parents with Preschool and School-Age Children*

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## **Abstract**

The study explored the effects of social isolation from lockdown on Italian families in terms of work-family balance, family functioning and parenting. 104 parents (80.8% mothers) with at least one child aged from 2 to 14 years participated in the study. An ad-hoc scale explored work-family balance; *Family Environment Scale* and *Perceived collective family efficacy scale* examined respectively parents' perceived quality of family relationships and beliefs in family's efficacy; one single question and an ad-hoc scale measured respectively parenting stress and positive parenting. Our findings evidenced an increase of parenting stress due to the social isolation and the persistency of gender inequalities in not-paid work division causing a penalty for mothers. Nevertheless, during the lockdown, families rediscovered the values of being together inside the house, improving both their cohesion and expressiveness and their positive parenting. Overall, the study shows that Italian families have been resilient and not overwhelmed by family stress, being able to adjust to cope with lifestyle changes. However, the social changes caused by the emergency requires to plan adequate policies to support especially dual-earner families with younger children in these times, both to reduce parenting stress and to avoid that work-family balance difficulties and gender gap will be exacerbated, increasing the risk to relegating women to the domestic sphere during the next phases of this pandemic.

Keywords: COVID-19 challenges and chances, family relations, parenting.

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## 1. Theoretical framework

Pre-pandemic, the family was the central node of a dense network of social relationships: it was balanced more towards tasks and activities outside the home and always developing new strategies to respond to its multiple commitments in the professional, educational and social spheres. Thus, as in normal circumstances, the interplay between professional and childcare responsibilities produced, especially in dual-earner families, a condition of 'permanent stress', diminishing the wellbeing of parents, especially women, who bear the greatest burden of care (Schulz, 2020; Patterson, Margolis, 2019).

With the radical containment measures of the 'lockdown' taken by the Italian government to slow the spread of COVID-19 (L. D. 6/2020), citizens were forced to stay home and work remotely as much as possible, thereby spending many hours together under the same roof. All activities taking place outside the home suddenly fell back onto the family (Carrà, 2020), creating drastic changes in the routines and social lives of millions of families globally. As discrete life domains suddenly overlapped, the modern boundaries between home and work were erased, generating a significant reconfiguration of both family and work dynamics (Donati, 2020). Thus, the unexpected nature of the pandemic introduced new social scenarios: a crisis in family space (Bramanti, 2020), a net increase in home-working, involving around eight million workers (Pesenti, 2020), and unprecedented domestic isolation (Di Norcia, Cannoni, Szpunar, Mascaro, 2020), particularly affecting children and adolescents deprived of their educational, social and sporting activities (Cluver et al., 2020). Consequently, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the pre-existing problems of families and sometimes exacerbated work-family balance difficulties (see Eurofound, 2020) and the gender gap in employment and domestic commitments (Andrew et al, 2020; Eurostat, 2020), further reducing the female employment rate (Montenovo et al., 2020), which in Italy, particularly southern Italy, was already very low (35.9%) compared to European targets and other European countries.

While enforced social isolation damaged wellbeing, the associated lifestyle changes presented a real challenge for families, especially those with school-age children (Prime Wade, Browne 2020), as school closures left working parents to take care of their children around the clock, often in confined living spaces and without any help from their regular support systems (e.g., day-care facilities or grandparents). Parents trying to work from home have found it very difficult to balance professional responsibilities with childcare activities and domestic work; parents of preschool children in particular were less productive at work (Mazzucchelli, 2020; Pesenti, 2020), probably owing to the greater commitment needed by their younger children. Parents who continued to work outside the

home as essential workers, on the other hand, struggled to combine their professional responsibilities with the practical, emotional and educational needs of their isolating children. Overall, without support from educational services and the ‘parachute’ of grandparents, on whose help most families with children rely (Saraceno, 2003; Mencarini, Solera, 2015), Italian parents were at risk of being overwhelmed by their dual role as workers and caregivers; this upheaval of family dynamics produced by the pandemic created a further ‘stress test’, especially for dual-earner families with younger children, undermining the already precarious balance before the pandemic.

Consistently, as with previous studies highlighting increased parental stress and distress of children linked to quarantine due to the H1N1 virus (Sprang, Silman, 2013), recent studies examining the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic show parents being exposed to many sources of stress (Fontanesi et al., 2020; Spinelli, Lionetti, Pastore, Fasolo, 2020): a sense of uncertainty about the future; health concerns; social isolation; and new parental tasks. Furthermore, both family (Statistics Canada, 2020) and personal stress (Wang et al., 2020) experiences during the lockdown seem to have impacted on the quality of family relationships and children’s adjustment (Prime, Wade, Browne, 2020), as well as the wellbeing (Marazziti, Pozza, Di Giuseppe, Conversano, 2020; Pierce et al., 2020) and mental health of adults (Barari et al., 2020; Mazza et al., 2020; Moccia et al., 2020) and children (Brooks et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2020).

It has also been argued that contagion containment policies could increase social inequalities, further penalising the most disadvantaged families. Research has confirmed higher levels of stress in families with pre-existing personal and relational vulnerabilities (James Riegler et al., 2020) and a higher risk of maladjustment in families with low socio-economic status (SES, van Lancker, Parolin, 2020). The latter, without adequate resources to cope with the pandemic, experience greater stress with new family routines, distance learning, fear of contagion, work changes, and overall uncertainty linked to COVID-19 (Mastromatteo, Hovnanyan, Zagni, Pozzoli, Scrimin, 2020). Thus, both the lack of material conditions (e.g., confined living space, poor Web-access and insufficient technological equipment) and the absence of adequate skills to benefit from additional resources available during the emergency have become additional factors penalising families with lower socio-economic and cultural capital. Finally, due to limited access to external support networks (van Gelder et al., 2020), social isolation seems to have also increased the risk of domestic violence (Taub, 2020) and child maltreatment (UNICEF, 2020).

As often happens, however, critical events and drastic changes not only produce difficulties but also opportunities to experiment with new coping strategies and roles (Rossi, 2020) to better adjust to the new social reality. In the

current emergency, despite higher levels of stress, people tend to ‘reinvent’ strategies to cope with uncertainty and change (Levante, Petrocchi, Castelli, Bianco, Lecciso, 2020). In some cases, having more time at home offers a creative opportunity to rediscover new models of family life, for example, sharing in activities and changing both family relationships (Cluver et al., 2020) and parental roles (Cuddeback, 2020; Nielsen, 2020).

In line with previous studies emphasising the positive role of family support in managing change (van Harmelen et al., 2016), scholars show how family relationships are a protective factor in pandemics, acting as a buffer both against loneliness and insufficient financial resources (Peyton, Wilcox 2020). In the Italian context, research by the Catholic Family Studies and Research University Centre (2020) showed: (a) greater difficulties in work-family balance especially for families with younger children, probably due to the lack of networks and resources accessible in the pre-pandemic period, and; (b) greater stress for families with children or adolescents, compared to those with older children or without children. Nevertheless, the internal resources of Italian families were not overwhelmed by difficulties caused by the pandemic. In many cases, these resources brought about positive changes: many families, for example, used the ‘suspended’ time at home as an opportunity to transform conflicts into new family adjustments.

However, while the potential impacts of the pandemic on individuals and society have been fully explored in literature, the effects of the social changes to families merit further examination. Thus, this study analyses work-family balance, the quality of relationships, beliefs in the collective efficacy of families and parenting during the pandemic to understand how Italian families have renegotiated their roles and coped with the changes caused by this global challenge.

## **2. The current study**

The current study explores the effects of social isolation experienced during lockdown (from 9 March to 3 May) on Italian families with preschool and school-age children. Based on the examined literature, this research aims to:

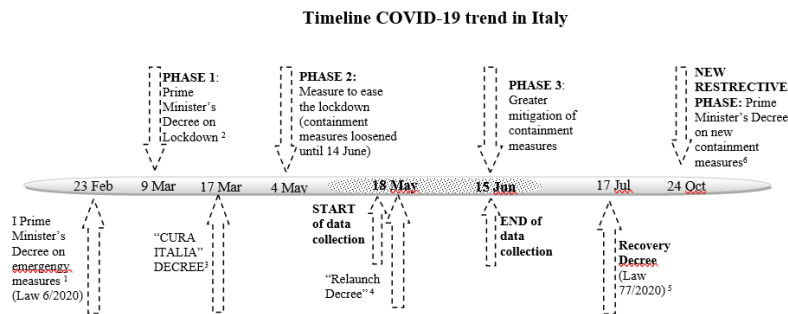
1. Investigate possible family changes between the pre-pandemic period and lockdown, both to work-family balance and to family functioning, in terms of quality of family relationships and collective family efficacy, as perceived by the respondent parent.
2. Examine the impact of the pandemic on parenting, exploring both the possible impact of social isolation on perceived parenting stress and the

potentially beneficial effects of the time ‘suspended’ during lockdown on parenting.

The authors made no specific hypothesis, as the study was explorative. However, increasing parenting stress and worsening work-family balance were expected. Moreover, possible gender differences in work-family balance and parenting stress were examined, as many disparities were found in literature between mothers’ and fathers’ burden of care (Schulz, 2020). Finally, family SES was measured, as a higher risk of maladjustment was found in families with low SES (van Lancker, Parolin, 2020). Families with at least one preschool or school-age child were considered for the study, but those with only adolescent offspring (over 14 years old) were not included, as it was assumed that the effects of social isolation observed would be different in this type of family; adolescents, generally, have higher levels of everyday and educational autonomy, while younger children require more parental input.

Data collection started 18 May, when Italian families had been in household quarantine for over two months and ended 15 June 2020, when the phase 3 started (Fig. 1).

FIGURE 1. Timeline COVID-19 trend in Italy.



<sup>1</sup> DECREE OF THE PRESIDENT OF THE ITALIAN COUNCIL OF MINISTERS  
 Further implementing provisions of Decree-Law No. 6 of 23 February 2020 on emergency measures for the containment and management of the COVID-19 epidemiological emergency applicable throughout the national territory. 20A01807. Italian Official Gazette - General Series No. 76 of 22 March 2020.

<sup>2</sup> DECREE OF THE PRESIDENT OF THE ITALIAN COUNCIL OF MINISTERS  
 Further implementing provisions of Decree-Law No. 6 of 23 February 2020 on emergency measures for the containment and management of the COVID-19 epidemiological emergency applicable throughout the national territory. 20A01558. Italian Official Gazette - General Series No. 62 of 9 March 2020.

<sup>3</sup> DECREE-LAW No. 18 of 17 March 2020 Measures to strengthen the National Health Service and economic support for families, workers and businesses related to the COVID-19 epidemiological emergency. "CURA ITALIA" DECREE. 20G00034. Italian Official Gazette - General Series No. 70 of 17 March 2020.

<sup>4</sup> DECREE OF THE PRESIDENT OF THE ITALIAN COUNCIL OF MINISTERS  
 Further implementing provisions of Decree-Law No. 19 of 25 March 2020 on emergency measures for the containment and management of the COVID-19 epidemiological emergency and of Decree-Law No. 33 of 16 May 2020 on further urgent measures to cope with the COVID-19 epidemiological emergency. 20A03194. Italian Official Gazette - General Series No. 147 of 11 June 2020.

<sup>5</sup> DECREE OF THE PRESIDENT OF THE ITALIAN COUNCIL OF MINISTERS  
 Urgent measures to support healthcare, employment and the economy, and social policies related to COVID-19 epidemiological emergency (released 19 May 2020 and converted into Law. No 77/2020). 20G00052. Italian Official Gazette - General Series No. 180 of 17 July 2020.

<sup>6</sup> DECREE OF THE PRESIDENT OF THE ITALIAN COUNCIL OF MINISTERS  
 Further implementing provisions of Decree-Law No. 19 of 25 March 2020 converted into Law No. 35 of 25 May 2020 on "Urgent measures to cope COVID-19 epidemiological emergency", and of the Decree Law No. 33 of 16 May 2020, converted into Law. No 74/2020 of 14 July 2020 on "Further urgent measures to cope with COVID-19 epidemiological emergency". 20A05861. Italian Official Gazette - General Series No. 265 of 25 October 2020.

### **3. Method**

#### ***3.1 Participants***

The study was based on 104 intact families and included data from 84 mothers (80.8%) and 20 fathers (19.2%) with at least one child aged from two to fourteen years living in the Apulian Region (80.8%) and other Italian regions (19.2%: Lombardy, Abruzzo, Piedmont, Campania, Calabria, Emilia Romagna and Lazio). The parents were aged 25 to 59; the mean ages were 40.14 and 42.5 for mothers (SD= 5.81) and fathers (SD=7.5) respectively; these age differences are not significant. Regarding family structure, 54.8% of families had two children, 32.7% had one child and 12.5% had three or more children. On average, family units had 3.38 components (SD= 0.94; range: 2-6): roughly half the families had four members; about a third had three. Family SES, assessed by the Barratt Simplified Measure of Social Status (BSMSS) including both the educational and occupational status of both parents, was on average upper middle ( $M_{can}$ : 50.26; SD=12.73; sample range: 17-66; measure range: 8-66).

As to parental employment: before the pandemic, 71.2% of respondent parents and 74.3% of their partners were in full-time employment, 8.7% and 6.9% part-time, 8.7% and 8.9% worked without a regular contract, while 11.5% and 9.9% were unemployed or houseworkers, respectively. During the COVID-19 pandemic, 71.2% of respondent parents and 43.3% of their partners started smart-working; 5.8% and 14.4% took advantage of social safety nets (e.g., leave, permits, layoffs, etc.); 2.9% and 2.9% took special leave for public and health sector workers; 10.6% and 24% continued to work without any change as essential workers, respectively. A very small proportion of parents lost or temporarily interrupted their job or temporarily reduced their working hours.

#### ***3.2 Procedure***

The research project was approved by the University Ethics Committee. Participants were not paid for their participation and data collection was conducted according to the general principles and ethical standards outlined by The Code of Ethics of the American Sociological Association (<http://www.asanet.org/about/ethics.cfm>).

A snowball sampling strategy was used to reach the target population. Families were recruited through direct informal contacts of the research group, the major national and regional family associations (by mail), school groups of parents, and the most common social networking channels<sup>1</sup>. In all these cases,

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<sup>1</sup> A The survey was digitally shared in specific Facebook and WhatsApp groups of parents.



a link to the study containing a general description of its aims and the invitation to participate voluntarily and anonymously was shared digitally.

Only parents who digitally provided their informed written consent took part in the study and completed the on-line questionnaire from their homes. Only one parent from the same family could participate in the study, to avoid overlapping data. Participants were also informed that they had to complete some scales in the questionnaire twice: the first time referring to their everyday life before the lockdown, and the second time considering the period immediately following government's COVID-19 restrictions. No time limit was set, but the survey took approximately 20 minutes to complete.

To be included in this study, families had to meet some *a priori* criteria: (a) the family had to reside and live in Italy; (b) the family had to be intact, and; (c) the children had to be aged at least 2 and at most 14 at the time of the survey. Following these criteria, the final sample consisted of 104 mothers and fathers (95.4% of the initial sample).

#### **4. Instruments and measures**

An ad hoc survey was designed to collect relevant information about family demographic characteristics and the constructs of the study: work-family balance, perceived quality of family relationships and collective family efficacy both before and after the COVID-19 emergency, parenting stress and positive parenting during lockdown.

##### ***4.1 Family demographics***

Parents were asked to indicate their sex, age and city of residence, how many children they had with their gender and age. Furthermore, they were asked to detail their own and their partner's level of school and occupation according to the Barratt Simplified Measure of Social Status (BSMSS, Barratt, 2006). Combining the data of both parents, we obtained an objective indicator of family social status, as a proxy for family socio-economic status (FSES).

##### ***4.2 Work-family balance***

A short scale was built to explore how families with children managed informal work before and after the COVID-19 emergency. Specifically, two related queries asked parents to what extent domestic tasks and childcare responsibilities were equally distributed between partners, both before the COVID-19 emergency restrictions and during the lockdown. Furthermore, two questions asked parents to rate their actual degree of satisfaction, both for the

division of domestic tasks and the distribution of childcare responsibilities. For all six ad hoc questions, a 4-point Likert rating scale (from 0= not at all to 3= very much) was used. In addition, parents were asked to indicate who primarily took care of young children during phase two, during the closure of schools and educational services.

#### ***4.3 Perceived quality of family relationships***

The Family Environment Scale – Real Form (FES; Moos, Moos, 1994; see also Lanz, Maino, 2014 for the Italian version) was used to explore each participant's perceived quality of family relationships; that is, the parents' perception of how each member's behaviour affects the family unit, both in normal circumstances and during a period of crisis or transition. FES is a valid and reliable instrument (Moos, 1990) consisting of 90 items rated on a four Likert scale (true, quite true, quite false, false) organised into 10 subscales designed to measure three dimensions of the family environment: relationship; personal growth; and system maintenance. Only the three subscales belonging to the Relationship dimension – cohesion, expressiveness, and conflict – were used in this study. Cohesion is defined as the degree of commitment and support family members provide for one another; expressiveness is the extent to which family members are encouraged to express their feelings directly; conflict is the amount of openly expressed anger and conflict among family members. Higher cohesion and emotional expressiveness and lower levels of family conflict indicate a higher quality of adoptive family relationships. Although strong correlations between the subscales were expected, in this study cohesion, expressiveness and conflict scores were used as independent measures of the quality of family relationships and were not aggregated into a single factor score.

#### ***4.4 Collective family efficacy***

Participant belief in their family's efficacy to operate as a whole system in coping with tasks necessary for good family functioning was measured by the Perceived Collective Family Efficacy Scale (PCFES, Caprara, 2001). The scale has psychometric properties (Bandura, Caprara, Barbaranelli, Regalia, Scabini, 2011) and measures, with 20 items rated on a 7-point Likert scale (from 1= not well at all to 7= very well), the holistic efficacy appraisal from a parental perspective, focusing on the perceived capabilities of the family system operating collectively (Bandura, 2000). It specifically examines the perceived capability of the family working together to manage daily routines; achieve consensus in decision-making and planning; promote reciprocal commitments; agree to decisions that require some sacrifice of personal interests; provide

emotional support for each other in difficult times and in stressful situations; create family leisure time activities despite other pressures; bounce back quickly from adverse experiences; and maintain good relations with the school systems and community at large. Examples of items are: 'Support each other in times of stress' and 'Help each other to achieve their personal goals.'

#### ***4.5 Parenting during lockdown***

Both single items measuring parenting stress and a global index of positive parenting were constructed and used for the purposes of this study. Specifically, parents were asked how much, in their perception, emergency restrictions and the resulting social isolation had increased their parenting stress, according to a 4-point Likert scale (from 0= not at all to 3= very much). Furthermore, responding to a 10-item ad hoc scale (from 0= not at all to 3= very much), they reported how they spent their 'suspended' time due to the lockdown, as well as how the social isolation due to COVID-19 positively impacted their parenting.

This scale was constructed from results from two focus group discussions (FGDs) with parents involved in parenting support projects, implemented digitally during the lockdown. Firstly, FGDs transcripts were examined by conventional qualitative content analysis (QCA, Hsieh, Shannon, 2005) to identify semantic categories emerging about positive parenting during lockdown. Secondly, these categories were translated into multiple items describing different positive ways of spending the more available time with children. Finally, the scale was tested on a small group of parents to verify the items' clarity and comprehensibility. Item examples are: 'Take back time to play with my children or share in fun activities together'; 'Improve my approach to relating to my children.' To determine the latent structure of the items of this scale, an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) using principal axis factoring as the extraction method was run preliminarily on 10 items' scores. Results evidenced one factor solution with only one factor explaining 64% of the total variance; all the items have high factor loadings ranging from 0.65 to 0.86, clearly suggesting that the examined scale is one-dimensional. We named this factor the 'positive parenting index' and used the factor scores deriving from EFA as a continuous variable in further analysis.

### **5. Data analysis**

Statistical analyses were conducted using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS, Version 24.0) software. Initially, descriptive statistics for the main study variables were calculated. Then, the link between family SES, age of children and family variables were examined.

As main analyses, the  $\chi^2$  test was applied to the twin items on the division of domestic work and childcare responsibilities both before the restrictions and during lockdown, in order to examine possible changes in work-family balance. Possible gender differences between fathers' and mothers' perceptions were explored by Analysis of Variance (ANOVA). In addition, parental satisfaction with domestic work and the division of parenting task was examined by frequency analysis; both the differences between the two satisfaction areas of work-family balance and the possible gap between mothers' and fathers' satisfaction were explored respectively by the  $\chi^2$  test and ANOVA. A frequency analysis was also carried out on the item asking who would mainly take care of young children during phase 2 and possible gender differences in this division were explored by the  $\chi^2$  test. Furthermore, to investigate possible changes to family functioning, different t-tests for paired samples with an  $\alpha = 0.05$  were run to compare both family cohesion, expressiveness and conflict and perceived collective family efficacy, before and during social isolation. Finally, to examine the impact of the pandemic on parenting, descriptive statistics on parenting stress items and positive parenting items were computed to explore the negative effects and hidden blessings of the emergency on contemporary families. For both the parenting stress and positive parenting indices, possible gender differences were considered by ANOVA.

## 6. Results

### 6.1 Preliminary results

Table 1 summarizes the descriptive statistics for the main study variables.

TABLE 1. Descriptive statistics for the main study variables.

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard deviation
<i>Work-family balance variables</i>					
Equal division of domestic work during emergency period	104	0	3	1.72	0.82
Equal division of domestic work in pre-pandemic period	104	0	3	1.57	0.80
Equal distribution of parenting tasks during emergency period	104	0	3	1.63	0.86
Equal distribution of parenting tasks in pre-pandemic period	104	0	3	1.62	0.87
<i>How satisfied are you with the division of domestic work in your family?</i>	104	0	3	1.6	0.86
<i>How satisfied are you with the distribution of parenting tasks within your family?</i>	104	0	3	1.7	0.87

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	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard deviation
<i>Family functioning variables</i>					
FES - Family cohesion during emergency period	104	11	44	39.4	5.8
FES - Family cohesion in pre-pandemic period	104	11	38	15.7	5.3
FES Conflict during emergency period	104	11	44	20.9	7.55
FES Conflict in pre-pandemic period	104	15	44	34.4	6.35
FES Expressiveness during emergency period	104	11	44	37.8	6.7
FES Expressiveness in pre-pandemic period	104	11	34	17.3	5.76
Perceived Collective Family Self-Efficacy during emergency period	104	36	140	86.4	23.9
Perceived Collective Family Self-Efficacy in pre-pandemic period	104	37	140	89.3	24.5
<i>Parenting variables</i>					
Overall, how much do you think that emergency restrictions and isolation have increased your level of parenting stress?	104	0	3	1.5	0.9
Positive parenting index (factor score)	104	-2.49	1.17	0	0.97

Bivariate correlations showed no significance between offspring age and family variables: work-family balance items, quality of family relationships subscales, collective family efficacy, parenting stress and positive parenting index. The associations between such family variables and family SES were also not significant.

## 6.2 Main Results

a) The impact of social isolation on work family balance and family functioning (goal 1).

Results of the  $\chi^2$  test highlighted significant differences in work-family balance before and during the restrictions, regarding both the division of domestic work ( $\chi=77.64$ ;  $p\leq.001$ ) and the distribution of childcare responsibilities ( $\chi=77.64$ ;  $p\leq.001$ ). Specifically, as showed in Figure 2, the management of family domestic work seems to have become more equal during social isolation, compared to pre-pandemic, more parents (66.3%) perceived almost equally distributed housekeeping tasks (56.7%). On the other hand, the frequency of parents reporting a less equal division of domestic work decreases with time (little or not at all: from 43.3% to 33.7%).

A similar change was highlighted for the distribution of childcare responsibilities (Fig. 3): while the number of parents perceiving an unbalanced share of parenting responsibilities and tasks stays constant (10.6%), the number of parents for whom childcare responsibilities are shared a little slightly decreases and, consistently, parents perceiving moderate sharing of caregiving

tasks increase. However, a slight decrease in the frequency ‘very much’ was observed.

FIGURE 2. Division of domestic work before and after the emergency.

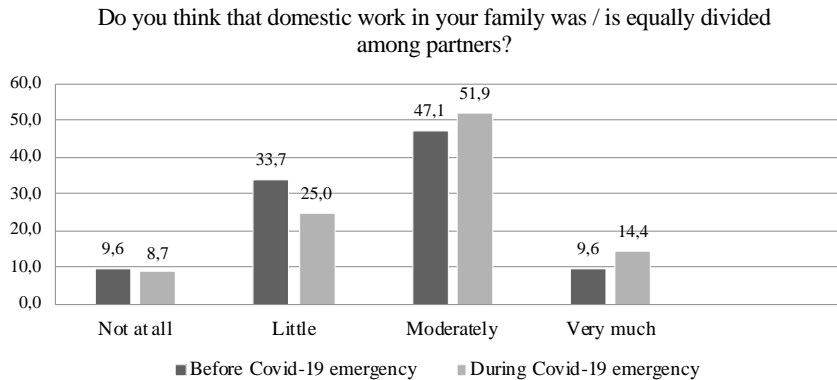
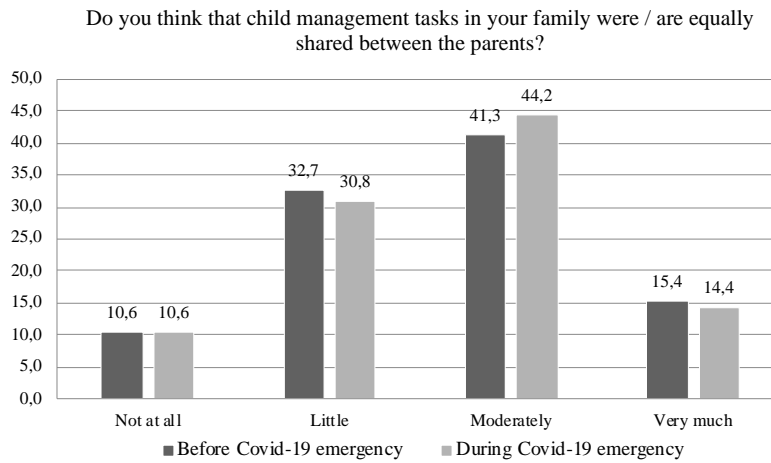


FIGURE 3. The division of childcare responsibilities before and after the COVID-19 emergency.

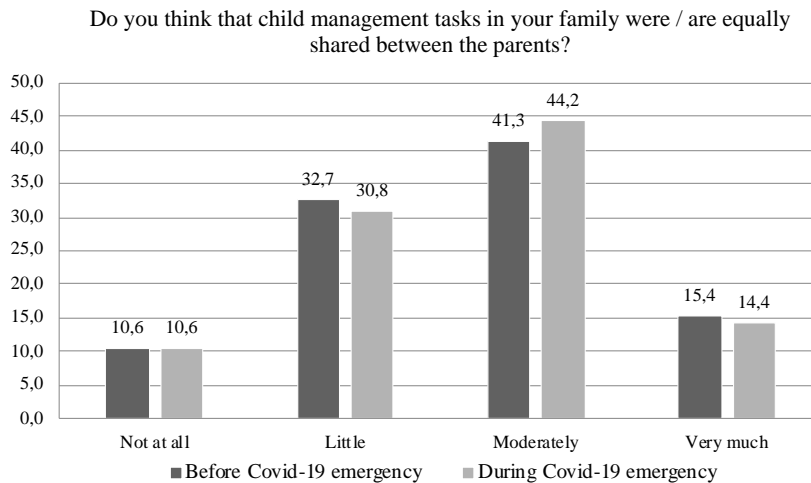


Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) for respondent gender helps us to better understand such results. Significant differences between mothers and fathers were found in domestic work division before the emergency ( $F_{(1)} = 3.83$ ;  $p \leq .05$ ; Mothers: Mean = 1.47; SD= .75 *vs.* Fathers' Mean = 1.85; SD= .81) and childcare responsibilities, both before ( $F_{(1)} = 15.92$ ;  $p \leq .001$ ; Mothers: Mean = 1.43; SD= .82 *vs.* Fathers' Mean = 2.25; SD= .79) and after it ( $F_{(1)} = 7.85$ ;  $p \leq .01$ ;

Mothers: Mean =1.86; SD= .82 *vs.* Fathers' Mean =2.05; SD= .89), with mothers' having a lower perception of equal division.

However, respondents show good overall levels of satisfaction concerning both domestic work division and the distribution of childcare responsibilities, as just over 60% of parents consider themselves sufficiently satisfied with respect to such dimensions. The differences between such distributions, however, are significant ( $\chi^2=70.56$ ;  $p\leq.001$ ), with higher levels of satisfaction with division of childcare responsibilities' and lower levels of satisfaction with work division (cfr. Fig. 4).

FIGURE 4. Differences between parents' satisfaction with domestic work and childcare responsibilities' division.



Also concerning such levels of satisfaction, gender differences were found by ANOVA both for division of domestic work ( $F_{(1)} = 5.62$ ;  $p\leq.05$ ; Mothers: Mean = 1.46; SD= .88 *vs.* Fathers' Mean = 2; SD= .79) and childcare responsibilities ( $F_{(1)} = 10.17$ ;  $p\leq.001$ ; Mothers: Mean = 1.54; SD= .76 *vs.* Fathers' Mean = 2.20; SD=.83), with mothers giving lower scores for both.

Furthermore, with the start of phase 2, when schools and educational services remained closed while most parents returned to standard work activities, participants report that the burden of care of younger children fell on one of the parents in 65.2% of cases and on both in 37.5%, while only 10.6% of parents entrusted children to grandparents. The differences between responses from male and female respondents about primary responsibility for childcare tasks in phase 2 were significant ( $\chi^2_{(6)} = 15.85$ ;  $p \leq .05$ ); as Tab. 2

shows, the greater differences between mothers and fathers concern their own and their partner's role, with a higher percentage of females (41.7 *vs.* 10) expected to be primarily responsible for childcare tasks in phase 2 and a higher percentage of males (25 *vs.* 4.2) expecting their partners to do so.

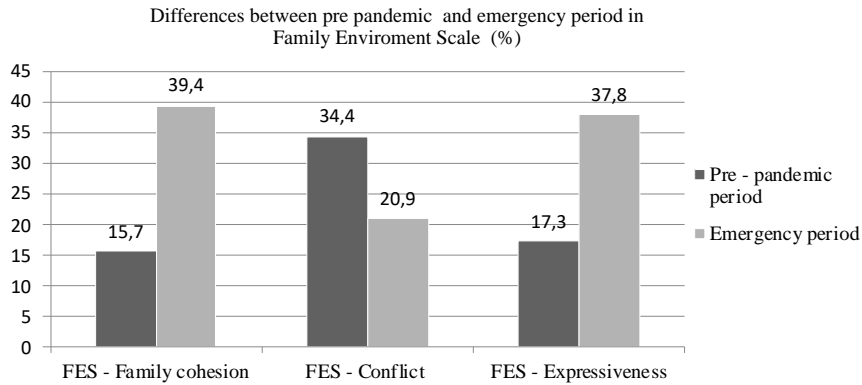
Concerning family functioning, the results of the t-test for paired samples comparing the pre-pandemic and emergency periods evidenced significant differences for variables related to the quality of family relationships but not for the perceived collective family efficacy (Fig. 5). Specifically, parents report a significant improvement in family cohesion ( $t=22.39$ ;  $df= 103$ ;  $p\leq .001$ ) and expressiveness ( $t=-10.19$ ;  $df= 103$ ;  $p\leq .001$ ) and a significant reduction of family conflict ( $t=17.31$ ;  $df= 103$ ;  $p\leq .001$ ). No gender differences were found with respect to FES scores.

TABLE 2. *Childcare responsibilities during phase 2: gender differences.*

Who would mainly take care of young children during phase 2		Respondent's gender		Total
		Male	Female	
Respondent parent	N	2	30	32
	% for respondent's gender	10.0%	41.7%	34.8%
	stand. residuals	-1.9	1.0	
Partner	N	5	3	8
	% for respondent's gender	25.0%	4.2%	8.7%
	stand. residuals	2.5	-1.3	
Grandparents	N	1	9	10
	% for respondent's gender	5.0%	12.5%	10.9%
	stand. residuals	-0.8	0.4	
Both parents and grandparents	N	0	2	2
	% for respondent's gender	0.0%	2.8%	2.2%
	stand. residuals	-0.7	0.3	
Babysitter	N	0	1	1
	% for respondent's gender	0.0%	1.4%	1.1%
	stand. residuals	-0.5	0.2	
Both parents, alternatively	N	11	25	36
	% for respondent's gender	55.0%	34.7%	39.1%
	stand. residuals	1.1	-0.6	
Others	N	1	2	3
	% for respondent's gender	5.0%	2.8%	3.3%
	stand. residuals	0.4	-0.2	



FIGURE 5. Differences between of FES mean scores in the pre-pandemic and emergency period.

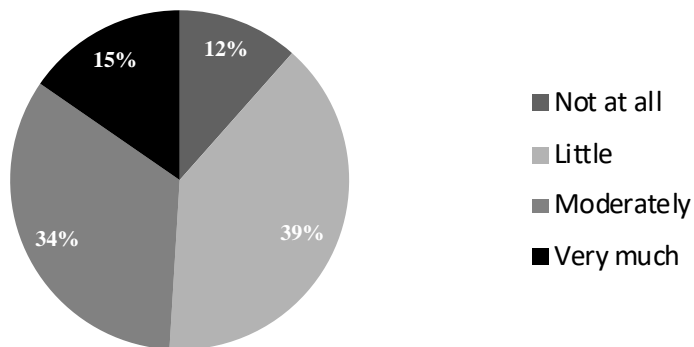


b) The impact of social isolation on parenting stress and positive parenting (goal 2).

As Figure 6 shows, for about 50% of respondents, government restrictions and social isolation seem to have increased their level of parenting stress moderately or very much, over one third perceived a little increase, while only 11.5% reported no impact.

FIGURE 6. The influence of restrictions and social isolation on parental stress levels.

Overall, how much do you think the emergency restrictions and isolation have increased your level of parental stress?



Nevertheless, the study shows many positive effects of the longer ‘suspended’ time at home during the lockdown. More than two thirds of respondents stated that social isolation had some positive effects on their parenting practices, improving – almost moderately – their listening, relational and educational abilities, dialogue in the family and the quality of time shared with children, for example, by keeping track of their schoolwork and entertainment activities (Tab. 3).

TABLE 3. *Positive parenting scale (% value).*

	Not at all	Little	Moderately	Very much	Total
<i>Improving my ability to listen my children’s difficulties, inviting them to express their moods</i>	1.0	14.9	<b>44.6</b>	<b>39.6</b>	100
<i>Paying more attention to the emotional needs of my kids</i>	4	9	<b>39</b>	<b>48</b>	100
<i>Experiencing the home as a place for relationships rather than ‘returning’</i>	5	7.9	<b>38.6</b>	<b>48.5</b>	100
<i>Following my children in carrying out their school homework, looking more closely at their difficulties and abilities</i>	5.1	13	3	<b>48</b>	100
<i>Regaining time to play with my children or do fun activities together</i>	3	16.8	<b>39.6</b>	<b>40.6</b>	100
<i>Taking, in this situation, new opportunities to improve family dialogue</i>	4.9	14.7	<b>43.1</b>	<b>37.3</b>	100
<i>Rediscovering the pleasure of doing something positive with my children, at home</i>	4	11.9	<b>48.5</b>	<b>35.6</b>	100
<i>Improving how I relate to my children</i>	5	12.9	<b>43.6</b>	<b>38.6</b>	100
<i>Reflecting on my parenting role and on the educational potential that I can put into action in this situation</i>	3	19.8	<b>37.6</b>	<b>39.6</b>	100
<i>Rediscovering a new way of being in the family, with more relaxed times than before</i>	3	16.8	<b>39.6</b>	<b>40.6</b>	100

Even if the correlation between the positive parenting and parenting stress indices was not significant, the association is negative and tends to significance. No gender differences were found.

## 7. Discussion and perspectives

The main aim of this study was to explore the effects of social isolation from lockdown on Italian families with preschool and school-age children, in terms of work-family balance, family functioning and parenting. Using a convenience sample, parents’ perceptions of study variables were examined and provided interesting results about the impact of the pandemic on families.

Firstly, the data on work-family balance in the overall sample highlighted that social isolation due to the pandemic generally seems not to have worsened gender inequalities in domestic work and childcare responsibilities; on the

contrary, probably due to both parents' additional time spent at home, a more equal division of domestic and childcare tasks between partners was found during the emergency compared to pre-pandemic. Consistently, parents showed good overall levels of satisfaction with the work-family balance, especially with the division of childcare responsibilities. Nevertheless, gender differences were found in parents' perceptions, with mothers' perception of a more unequal distribution of both domestic work before the emergency and of childcare responsibilities before and after the emergency. Furthermore, levels of satisfaction were gender differenced, with mothers reporting lower satisfaction with both the division of domestic work and childcare responsibilities. Additionally, with the start of phase 2, the burden of care for younger children was expected to fall on mothers in 41.7% of cases and fathers in 25%. Overall, these findings show significant gender differences between mothers and fathers, both regarding division of domestic work and childcare responsibilities and their satisfaction and expected roles as main caregiver with the start of phase 2.

The data from this survey are in line with those collected in different countries (e.g., Andrew et al., 2020), highlighting that lockdown has had an unfair impact on the management of working time and care between men and women, penalising mothers even in dual-income families. They confirm that also in Italy, in a period characterised by an unprecedented intergenerational distance and the total lack of services and networks supporting families, it is mostly mothers who are taking charge of children and the home. Indeed, although smart working is a factor in organisational flexibility, the concentration of activities of all family members at home during lockdown seems to have impacted above all females, due to the influence of culturally based gender norms for caregiving roles (Knudson-Martin, 2012) responsible for the tendency to expect women to absorb the bulk of house and child care. This scenario seems not to be linked to lower family socio-economic and cultural capital, as no relationship between family SES and work-family balance variables was found in the current study. On the other hand, family SES was middle-upper in our sample, yet gender differences in informal unpaid work were found to be significant.

Furthermore, in line with expectations, the study highlights that parents' commitment to facing the new challenges from the pandemic increased both mothers' and fathers' parenting stress, as the lockdown prevented parents from accessing support outside the nuclear family, thereby crushing them between work and family tasks. Probably for this reason, parents' perceived family efficacy decreased, albeit not significantly, in this period.

Concerning family functioning, however, our results highlight an overall improvement in quality of family relationships (higher cohesion and expressiveness and lower conflict) both in mothers' and fathers' perceptions,

suggesting that spending more time together during the lockdown may bring family members closer together and foster a sense of family wellbeing. Consistent with these findings, both mothers and fathers experimented with many positive ways of spending time at home with their children, improving both their listening, relational and educational abilities, and the dialogue and quality of time with the family. In line with studies highlighting parents' skill in 'reinventing' their educational strategies to cope with pandemic uncertainty and change (e.g., Levante, Petrocchi, Castelli, Bianco, Lecciso, 2020), our results confirm that in lockdown parents have been able to adjust their parenting role to the new social reality (Nielsen, 2020; Cuddeback, 2020), using the greater availability of time at home as an opportunity to rediscover new ways of conducting family relationships (Cluver et al., 2020) and parenting. Taken together, these findings suggest that, during this time, family members rediscovered the values of being together in the home and facing the challenges of the emergency, in line with the wider research conducted by the Catholic Family Studies and Research University Centre (2020), highlighting that Italian families have been resilient and not overwhelmed by family stress due to social isolation, being able to adjust to cope with lifestyle changes.

In terms of perspective, since new national and regional restrictions linked to pandemic containment are being implemented, these results could be useful in planning family programmes. Specifically, the study shows that encouraging flexibility in parental work during lockdowns is not sufficient, and it necessary to plan adequate policies to support families in these times, both to reduce parenting stress and to avoid penalisation of mothers' due to gender gap persistency. With the spread of distance learning, childcare responsibilities including support for school activities could fall mainly on mothers, thus risking further reduction in the rates of participation in paid work among women, in line with Italy's notorious culture of the male-breadwinner model. The reconfiguration of lifestyles and family dynamics caused by the emergency instead requires the development of new family-friendly instruments and strategies aimed at increasing the resources available, above all, to dual-earner families with younger children. The risk otherwise is a deterioration of female work-family balance, especially for mothers with children under twelve, who showed more severe signs of tension and depression than fathers during the first lockdown (Eurofound, 2020).

## **8. Strengths, limitations, and conclusions**

Firstly, to our knowledge, no published Italian sociological study has examined the topic of this study, as no results were found by SocIndex search,

using the following combined keywords: ‘pandemic or covid-19 or coronavirus’, ‘work-life balance/conflict’ and/or ‘work-family balance/conflict’, ‘quality of family relationships’, ‘family efficacy’, ‘parenting stress’ and ‘positive parenting’. Secondly, this study has the merit of considering the effects of the pandemic on the family as a whole, rather than on individual members.

However, we should acknowledge that this research has several limitations. Firstly, our small sample size has limited the impact of the findings. Secondly, because of selection bias, it is possible that the parents who participated were significantly more motivated and/or satisfied in their roles as parents than those who did not. Furthermore, the sample consisted mostly of mothers; although the lower participation of fathers is in line with the peripheral role of fathers in family issues, future studies should try to balance the number of mothers and fathers in the sampling procedure. Additionally, from a methodological perspective, the use of only on-line self-reporting suggests caution is needed in interpreting the findings. Moreover, the limitations of retrospective measures used to examine areas of study before the emergency should also be considered; a longitudinal approach could be used in future studies to overcome this. Finally, future multicentric studies could use a large population-based sample of Italian families and involve families with different SES to better examine the link between contagion containment policies and social inequalities.

Despite these limitations, the results of this explorative study suggest some significant considerations on the effects of social changes linked to COVID-19 containment policies and underline the importance of analysing both their negative impacts on contemporary families and the unexpected opportunities offered. This study highlights that the drastic upheaval in family life linked to the pandemic (Luttik et al., 2020) seems to have increased family interactions, thus increasing the opportunities for better family relationships. Beyond the higher levels of parenting stress and the persistency of gender inequality in the division of housework and carework, family resilience was confirmed (Walsh, 2016). However, the pandemic has not influenced mothers’ and fathers’ roles, which are more linked to gender norms and social values representing parts of the cultural structure of social systems (Parsons, 1972). In terms of research, future studies could better understand how gender roles can be questioned and redesigned if the emergency continues, while in terms of perspectives, these results encourage policy makers to plan targeted policies to cope with the risk of relegating women to the domestic sphere during the next phases of this long pandemic.

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