

Family diversity and COVID-19: The voices of the families

The COVID-19 pandemic is a challenge and a mirror that reflects the strengths and weaknesses of the system of family support in its triple role of prevention, promotion and protection. The voices of families, in their diversity, provide an excellent perspective to analyze how the pandemic has impacted family lives and how they have perceived the support of some of the most relevant services: education, health, social and community services. Here we reflect the voices of families around different issues, from their main concerns during this crisis to what they have learned from it, providing a positive and constructive look into the future. This work was possible thanks to the participation of member families of four Spanish associations, all of whom are faithful representatives of the family diversity that we wanted to highlight: [Federación de Asociaciones de Madres Solteras \(FAMS\)](#), [Federación Española de Familias Numerosas](#), [Organización Plena Inclusión Familias con Discapacidad Intelectual](#), and [Unión de Asociaciones Familiares \(UNAF\)](#).

“What will happen to my child if I get sick?” has been one of the main concerns that arose in different types of families during the alarm status, especially in families with only mothers caring for children. This concern, together with the need to assume an excess of chores and roles at home, has generated an intense set of negative and positive emotions in families. During absolute lockdown, families have been immersed in an emotional roller coaster characterized by intense and highly fluctuating mood swings in a short space of time. Families highlighted that they felt *negative emotions*, such as fear, burden, worry and anguish, due to the continued uncertainty experienced during the pandemic. This picture of emotions may be found in many homes due to a diversity of family realities. For example, some people with intellectual disabilities did not understand the situation and experienced anxiety or behavioral problems due to the fact that going outside was not



allowed. These families had to face many encounters due to these therapeutic outings with neighbors and police officers. Teleworking has also been a protagonist in family life, combining the working day with caring for children at home. On the other hand, families also experienced positive emotional states such as the importance of a healthy

family unit and social relationships, the consideration of new aspects in their lives, the discovery of new hobbies, the sense of humanity and the possibility of contributing to slowing down the pandemic with a responsible behavior, as well as an increase of awareness and solidarity towards the most vulnerable people.

With the evolution of the pandemic, the emotions experienced have varied. The 'new normal' and the reopening of schools have been accompanied by a decrease in stress and anxiety. Even so, worries about the economic situation have continued to particularly concern families with only a mother in charge, large families, or families with children with intellectual disabilities. At the same time, many of these families highlighted, as a favorable aspect, that they had experienced greater closeness and bonding in the 'household' due to mutual support in the face of day-to-day difficulties.

The impact of COVID-19 on family dynamics has led to changes in relationships that vary according to the type of family. Sharing more time at home has allowed family members to know each other in a deeper and different way, thanks to the collaboration of everyone in tasks and



activities. However, while for some large families this occasion has been an opportunity to strengthen family ties, for others it has not been the same. For their part, single-mother families have highlighted the role played by the FAMS association providing resources and strategies to manage relationships with children during lockdown: *"Before COVID-19, I barely had time to help her with homework and suddenly all day together."* This alteration in family dynamics, which, at the beginning, was full of complications, has subsequently led to a positive change in family self-perception. In other cases, economic problems and the need for conciliation have posed the loss of autonomy in the decision making of these mothers, regarding the education of their children or the established routines, due to the need to go to live with other people from their support network.

According to UNAF, in families with good family dynamics, the bond between family members has been strengthened, giving importance to aspects of relationships that previously used to go unnoticed in the whirlwind of everyday life. However, in families with substantial relationship problems, the confinement and the pandemic have intensified the difficulties of coexistence and latent conflicts between their members. The problems have arisen mainly in couple relationships, which has sometimes led to break up situations with a

substantial negative emotional load. Similarly, UNAF mentions that, with the return to the 'new normal', conflicts between parents and their children have increased. As a result of these encounters, there has been an increase of new situations such as “*you can or cannot go out*”, “*we go to school and work some days and not others*”, “*why do you have to control whether or not I connect to classes?*”.

Finally, concerning family relationships beyond the family nucleus, in some families with a single mother in charge, new concerns arose about the health status of relatives such as grandparents, generating a perception of very high risk in children that, at the same time, allowed them to understand why they could not go to see them. Faced with this reality, the member families of Plena Inclusión reported an increase of telephone contacts and video calls with relatives and friends, with these contacts being a fundamental support for the well-being of the families.



Family diversity is also reflected in the support needs that families have experienced during the pandemic. By listening to the families, it is possible to highlight the following needs: (1) the need to have the necessary *computer equipment* to face the demands of distance

education for their children and establish virtual contacts with the support network; (2) the need for *emotional support* to cope with anxiety, stress, burden or grief over the loss of a loved one; (3) the need for *the conciliation* of personal, family and work life; and, (4) the need for *specific support for families with intellectual disabilities* through measures adapted to the new situation that would prevent losing the acquired skills and competences. Member families of Plena Inclusión noted that these four measures are highly needed, while families of FAMS mentioned none of the first three measures. Families of UNAF highlighted the need for emotional support, while large families highlighted the need for specific support for family conciliation measures.

The conciliation capacity has been possible on many occasions thanks to the assistance of employees at home, which consequently implied a higher cost for the family economy. Thus, large families emphasize the need for viable formulas that facilitate the balance between work and family life, such as the reduction of the personal income tax that corresponds to the hiring of a caregiver or home employees or, for instance, establishing a benefit for people who do housework exclusively dedicated to caring for children.



The degree of satisfaction with the support received differs among the member families. For example, some families of FAMS and the Spanish Federation of Large Families have described the support received from educational centers as exceptional, valuing very positively the ability to adapt to the distance education format or the return to routine with protocols that adapted school schedules.

However, other member families of FAMS and UNAF have been less satisfied, especially during lockdown, as they have had to take a much more active and specialized role to meet the academic demands of their children. In addition, the pandemic has also made the digital divide visible and has intensified concerns in several respects. On the one hand, digital resources are not always easy to use and understand for students with intellectual disabilities. Some of the distance education that has been provided is not cognitively accessible, neither in content nor in navigation. On the other hand, many families did not know about how to use educational platforms. Both factors have caused families to feel helpless to overcome this challenge, and many students with disabilities have had great difficulty following the academic year during the pandemic.

As for the support of health services, in general, families of UNAF and FAMS rate them as *'reasonable'*. They even note that the overcoming of this crisis has been possible due to the excellent disposition of the health personnel. In connection to this, families highlight the support of associations with whom they have connections, emphasizing that they have given voice and shown interest to cover their needs during this time. About the support of social services, several families of FAMS value the quality of the services obtained as *'poor'* in adapting to their special needs, and they demand greater attention.

The families that participated have also shared some key ideas to improve the support received in the future. In general, families emphasize the need for universal, accessible, and quality services to provide the best possible assistance to all families regardless of their economic capacity or place of residence. Specifically, families with a member with an intellectual disability demand: (1) more individualized and flexible supports, closer to the environment where the families live; (2) lower teacher/pupil ratio in schools to serve a diversity of students; and (3) the adaptation of resources to the reality of each family, as an appropriate technological transformation for people with intellectual disabilities. On the other hand, large families require additional measures that allow them to work and to enjoy family conciliation, while single-mother families emphasize the need of increasing their

visibility when demanding public services, such as the assistance to children in camps or any other care and conciliation services.

Finally, the pandemic has forced us to contemplate and rethink the multiple scenarios of family life to receive the appropriate differential support if necessary. As a result of this exercise of facing challenges and difficulties, positive learning has also been derived. The families that have participated shared the importance of the following values and strengths identified by them during the pandemic:

- The value of family, the importance of maintaining a healthy family relationship and their ability to overcome challenges together.
- The relevance of resilience in order to face adversity and the ability of families to learn and adapt to new changing demands.
- The existence of a public health system has allowed us to have a protective belt in these difficult times.
- The arrival of teleworking as a new tool to improve personal, family and work conciliation.
- The value of communication and collaboration between families and professionals and the support they provide.
- The value of the social and community support network, which allows participating to both receive and offer help and resources in society.

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