

FAMILY RESEARCH JUST GOT HARDER... AND MORE IMPORTANT

Bonamy Oliver and Alison Pike on the need for study, how pandemic measures have affected it, and a possible solution.

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In the relative calm of 2019, children and young people's mental-health problems were already a global concern. Estimates of individuals meeting diagnostic criteria hovered around 5-15%, and subthreshold difficulties also have detrimental consequences for individuals, families, schools and services (Sadler et al., 2018; Tejerina-Arreal et al., 2020). Family relationships are key for the onset, maintenance and intervention for these difficulties (Maccoby, 2015; WHO, 2009).

Like many others, I had recently turned to thinking about how we might capitalise on what I saw as the most important shift in family influences in my life time – that of technological advance in the home. Now, of course, we have a new influence to consider.

It will not have escaped you that we are in the midst of a global crisis. Importantly, the Covid-19 pandemic is not only a crisis to physical health and services. That the virus and associated social measures will have an impact on mental health and wellbeing for many adults and children is in little doubt (World Health Organisation, 2020). The consequences for families will be wide-reaching, complex, and likely unequal. Investment in improving clinical reach for more families is crucial. But we also need research. We need research that seeks to capture a picture of family life in these unprecedented times so that we can improve our understanding of, and intervention for, mental health and wellbeing. The problem is that home- and lab-visits are out of the question.

In research that now seems prescient, we recently introduced a novel approach for observing parents with their children remotely using an online drawing task Etch-a-Sketch-Online (ESO; Oliver & Pike, 2019). ESO is an innovative, online direct-observation task,

grounded in well-established and widely-used methodology (the Etch-a-Sketch task), but administered and recorded through the Internet. Using any common means to video call, ESO allows researchers to observe and record parents and their children interacting using a game-like technological interface, affording the remote observation of parent-child interactions in the family home. The arising data is rich and the tool is flexible, allowing numerous approaches to stimuli, time of observation, and coding. All materials needed to use ESO are freely available (see Oliver & Pike, 2019).

Innovation and collaboration is needed more than ever. Let's join our heads and expertise together to provide not our own individual methodologies, but a suite of free and open source tools that enable robust understanding of the multiple aspects of contemporary family processes in these strangest of times.

(We are looking to convert ESO to tablet and smartphone use! Any technological experts willing to offer time for free, do get in touch).

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