

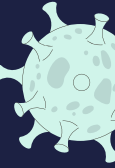
COVID-19 Immediate Household Bubbles and Social Support in Nova Scotia for Parents of Young Children

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Goal of the Study



We interviewed **18** mothers of young children about their experiences with the "immediate household bubble" to understand if and how the bubble helped them.

Bubbles were implemented to help increase social connections while also minimizing the risk of spreading the COVID-19 virus, but little is known whether bubbles helped relieve the stress of mandated social isolation.



Context/Background



- Parents with young children were concerned about their children during the first wave's strict isolation measures.
- Approximately one third of Canadian parents reported higher levels of depression and anxiety during this first wave.
- Negative psychological well-being can increase negative parental behaviors, which is further impacted by lack of informal (e.g., interactions with friends, families, communities) and formal support (e.g., childcare, schools).

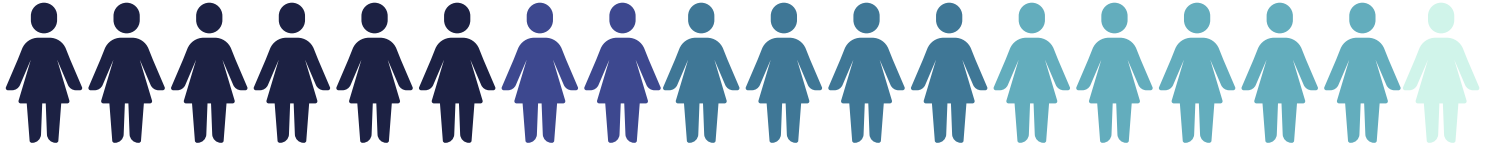
The "immediate household bubble" was implemented by the Nova Scotia government on May 15, 2020, after approximately 2 months of shutdown during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. Each household could "bubble" with another household.



Who We Interviewed



We interviewed **18** mothers of young children.



6 were employed full-time

2 worked part-time

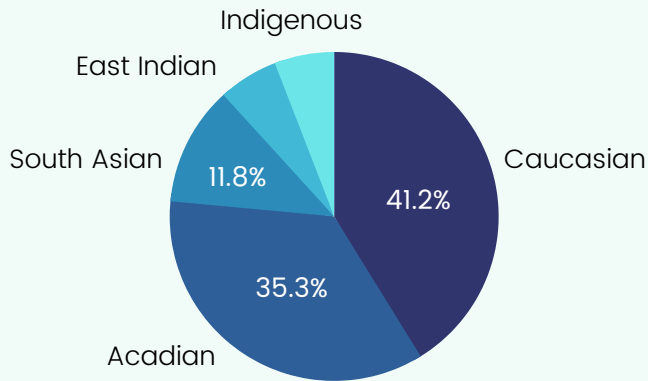
4 were on maternity leave

5 were stay-at-home mothers

1 was in school full-time

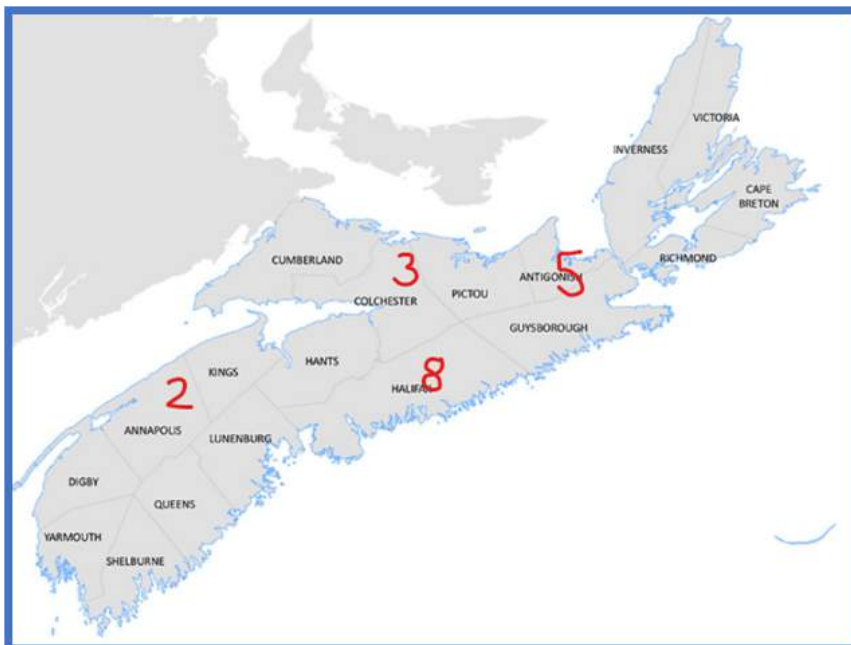
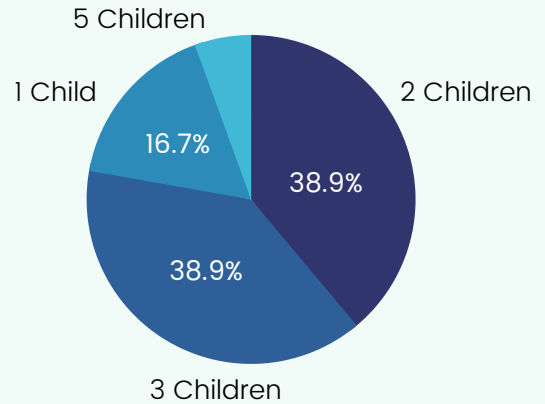
*All participants had a spouse or partner who worked full-time.

Primary Ethnic/Racial Background of Participants' Families*



*One person declined to answer this question.

Number of Children Each Woman Had



Participants lived in various parts of the province, representing both urban and rural areas.



Prior to the shutdown

13 of the 18 mothers said they often turned to other family members (i.e., parents or parent-in-law) for support. Some of these supports included:

- Caring for children
- Managing the home
- Providing emotional support

Other mothers said they received support from neighbours and friends. However, the two South Asian mothers said there was nobody in Canada that they had turned to for practical support.



The shutdown

The first two months of the shutdown felt like a type of “Groundhog Day-ness” for many mothers, with activities becoming repetitive and tedious. Some stay-at-home mothers reported very high workloads as a result of their spouses working long hours. Several mothers felt they had reached their limits by the time the bubble arrangement was allowed. They missed the emotional and tangible support they needed, particularly for those with babies or children with mental health issues.

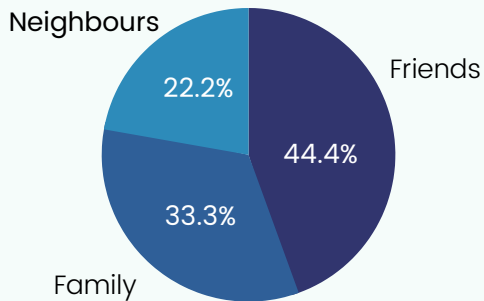


“When [the support worker] is actually in my home, you know, she'd hold one [child] or she'd play with one while we were talking. [But] now it had to be me watching all three kids and trying to manage a fourth thing,” said one participant, talking about having a phone call with a support worker.

During this time, the Portapique mass murder event and two military-related plane crashes further impacted families' well-being. Emotional support via technology (e.g., Zoom) helped to some extent, but could not replace in-person interactions.

Making the decision to pair up with another household

Who Participants "Bubbled" With



Half of the participants knew who they were going to "bubble" with by the time the bubble policy was announced. They were hoping for the policy to be announced, as New Brunswick had just implemented a similar policy.

Common reasons for choosing another household to bubble with:

- The chosen household would provide parenting support.
- The chosen household would provide support for their child(ren) in terms of having other playmates.

Mothers with young children (i.e., babies and toddlers) were more likely to state that they wanted help with parenting. Those with older children noted their children's needs for interactions with others.

"My son gets pulled out of daycare, misses his friends like crazy— breaks my heart. Like, oh my gosh, did he ever feel it. He definitely didn't understand when the weeks started to go by. 'I can't see any of my friends? How come I can't see [my friend] up the street? How come I can't see him?' It was just awful! So bad."



The bubble experience

Being able to pair up with another household took the pressure off these parents. It helped them directly by having others to help with childcare or to play with children. They were able to talk to other adults instead of only having their spouse or partner as the person they vented to. Children were less stressed when around others, in particular when playing with other children, and this, in turn, reduced the stress of parents.



“Suddenly we can tolerate the yelling and the screaming and the giggles and whatnot because they’re playing. They’re not directing it at us.”

Bubbles also reduced parents’ stress levels through the perception that extra support was available if it was needed, such as if one parent had to travel for work or if someone had to go to the hospital. Some parents expressed frustration with the revised mandate of groups of 10 or less people, which meant they could no longer pair up in full with their bubble family. Eight to 10 months after the shutdown, the level of involvement between most pairings had dropped. This is not surprising, as individuals were now able to interact in person with more people and some activities had restarted.

Families from a distance play an important role

Family support is not just received from family members who live nearby. Half of the participants described how occasional visits with family members who live far away are vital to their parental coping and household management. Quarantine mandates made these kind of connections challenging. The two South Asian mothers, both of whom had infants, were missing important social support from their families in other countries. Quarantine restrictions were also frustrating for those whose families lived in nearby Atlantic provinces, yet could not easily visit (the Atlantic bubble had been dismantled just prior to our interviews).



“We couldn’t get together with any of our family over Christmas so it’s still quite disrupted. . . it’s kind of interesting because I never thought of a provincial border as any kind of boundary.”



Household bubbles—regardless of whether families paired up with family, friends, or neighbours—provide support to parents of young children during a pandemic shutdown in several ways. Bubbles help parents directly through in-person support with childcare from another adult, and in some cases they help by providing children with other playmates and other focuses (e.g., a new play environment and novel toys). These resources give parents a much needed reprieve from their parenting role. Bubbles also help parents indirectly through the perception of available support should it be needed. However, support from grandparents is still vital to many families, even when it occurs irregularly, and quarantine restrictions continue to challenge parents' needs for familial support.

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to evolve—possibly moving into an endemic stage—interventions can work on strengthening parents' social ties under “regular circumstances.” Public health policies can also consider flexible arrangements in bubble and small group configurations, should they be required again.



For More Information



For more information, please contact Dr. Áine Humble at aine.humble@msvu.ca

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