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# How can early childhood education and care support families and prevent parental burnout during the COVID-19 crisis in Finland?

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## ABSTRACT

We examined how early childhood education and care (ECEC) centers supported families during the Covid-19 lockdown and whether the extent and type of support were associated with parental burnout. An online survey was filled out by 521 Finnish parents (88% mothers), and the data were analyzed using the Mann–Whitney U-test and analysis of covariance (ANCOVA). A total of 81% of the parents were contacted by ECEC personnel during lockdown, and 19% were not contacted at all, although 9% would have wished for contact. The support consisted mainly of guidance for the child's daily activities and communication via letters and greetings. Out of the parents, 33% found the support helpful, 36% sometimes helpful, and 31% nonhelpful. The more support the parents received, the less burned out they were. Particularly, food aid and advice to contact the ECEC centers, if needed, were negatively connected to parental burnout.

## ARTICLE HISTORY



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## KEYWORDS

COVID-19 pandemic; parental burnout; early childhood education; digital communication; analysis of covariance

Because of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Finnish government declared on March 16, 2020, that Finland was in a state of emergency (Finnish Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, 2020). To prevent the spread of the Covid-19 virus, families were asked to provide care for children under school age at home instead of sending them to early childhood education and care (ECEC) centers (Finnish Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, 2020). Although ECEC services remained available, most parents arranged for the child to be cared for at home (Kyllönen et al., 2020). Simultaneously, many parents needed to continue their own work remotely from home, and grandparents or other sources of social support were unavailable because of social distancing recommendations (Finnish Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, 2020). Combining work, childcare, and children's homeschooling during the pandemic may have significantly increased parental stress (Griffith, 2022), even lead to burn out in some families (Sorkkila & Aunola, 2020; Sorkkila et al., 2023). Indeed, it has been shown that severe parental burnout has increased worldwide (van Bakel et al., 2022), and the consequences of the pandemic on families' mental health may be long term or even persistent (De France et al., 2022; Samji et al., 2022; Skjerdingsstad et al., 2022).

Although ECEC in Finland provides childcare and early education for children 0–6 years of it also supports parents in raising the child and cooperates with them (Act on Early Childhood Education and Care 540/2018, 3 §). Municipalities are responsible for providing the services, but during the state of emergency, they were relieved of this responsibility if families were able to arrange for

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the child to be cared for in other ways (Valtioneuvoston asetus 191/2020). At the same time, no national recommendations or guidelines were issued regarding distance ECEC or support to children who stayed at home or to their parents. Therefore, the support received by children who stayed at home during the lockdown and their parents varied locally and between ECEC centers (Saranko et al., 2021). However, so far, the majority of the information regarding the support offered by ECEC centers to families has been collected from ECEC personnel (e.g., Diefenbacher et al., 2022; Saranko et al., 2021), and, to the best of our knowledge, little information has been collected from parents.

The present study will offer novel information about how the ECEC centers communicated with parents and children, as well as supported them, by collecting data from parents during the Covid-19 lockdown. To find ways to better respond to future social crises, we further investigated whether the parents perceived the support during this unexpected time as helpful or not and whether the extent and type of support was related to parental burnout symptoms. Thus, the present study will help in understanding the multifaceted role of ECEC centers in supporting families' well-being during the pandemic while generating guidelines for ECEC–family cooperation in future crises.

## Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) in Finland

In Finland, ECEC services are universally accessible to all children, 0–6 years of age, regardless of parental employment status. ECEC is primarily provided in public ECEC centers and in public family day care. In addition to public ECEC, private ECEC is also available in many municipalities (Kansallinen koulutuksen arviointikeskus, 2019). Because of the subsidy system (i.e., support is offered to families with lower incomes), private ECEC is usually affordable to most families (Ruutiainen et al., under review). Private ECEC also must follow the same legislation, quality standards and curricula as public services (Act on Early Childhood Education and Care 540/2018). Consequently, in the present study, we did not differentiate between parents whose child had attended private or public ECEC before the Covid-19 lockdown.

The educational approach of Finnish ECEC is based on the “educare” principle: thus, it provides care—including full meals—but also early education for children (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2018). In Finland, 6-year-old children must attend preprimary education before starting school at the age of 7 (Basic Education Act 628/1998). Preprimary education is commonly provided in ECEC centers, and in the current article, we consider preprimary education as a part of ECEC.

The literature has considered parent–ECEC cooperation and parental involvement in early education as important aspects of quality ECEC (e.g., OECD, 2012; Råde, 2020). Commonly, home–school cooperation in early education contexts is considered either from the viewpoint of supporting parenting and children's home learning environment or by examining the associations between cooperation or parental involvement and children's learning and academic attainment (Ma et al., 2016; OECD, 2012). The Finnish National Core Curriculum on ECEC also defines the aim of cooperation from the viewpoint of the child: the cooperation should promote joint commitment of guardians and personnel to children's healthy and safe growth, development, and learning (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2018). Moreover, parents are entitled to participate in the planning and development of early childhood education activities and goals of educational work. An important means to fulfill this goal is the individual ECEC plan, which the Finnish ECEC personnel must draft for each child in cooperation with the parent(s) (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2018). Furthermore, the curriculum guidelines state that information and communication technology should be used in cooperation with parents, which usually means informing parents about the weekly or monthly programs of the class and exchanging messages between home and the ECEC concerning practicalities (e.g., the child's schedule of being present at ECEC). The Core Curriculum guidelines also present supporting interactions between parents as an example of cooperation between homes and ECEC (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2018). However, the guidelines do not discuss how ECEC may support parenting or the child's home learning environment.

When the state of emergency was enforced in Finland in March 2020, over two-thirds of the children attending ECEC before the Covid-19 pandemic were moved to home care (Kyllönen et al., 2020). Based on a recent survey examining the ECEC directors' responses from two-thirds of Finnish municipalities, over 92% of the ECEC centers stayed open during the lockdown (Saranko et al., 2021). However, in 16% of the centers, staff and children were moved to another day care center, and in over half of the centers, some staff members were reassigned to other municipal services, such as elderly care, because the number of children in ECEC decreased.

Because a considerable proportion of children were moved to home care, ECEC providers and personnel were facing new questions regarding whether and how to support the children at home, on the one hand, and whether and how to continue cooperation with their parents and support them, on the other hand. The above-mentioned survey addressed to the ECEC directors suggests that, commonly, the ECEC centers had some contact with the children cared for at home and/or with their parents during the lockdown, even though distance ECEC was provided by less than half of the centers (Saranko et al., 2021). However, we do not know the perspective of the parents (i.e., whether they experienced they were offered support and, if so, what kind) or whether the parents perceived the support as helpful or not. Even if support was offered, if it was perceived as not helpful, it may have even increased parental stress (e.g., if ECEC personnel instructed tasks that parents needed to do with the child, even though they had no time to begin with; see Sorkkila et al., 2023). To educate ECEC centers to support families and their individual needs better during upcoming—potentially unexpected—social crises, it is essential to examine parents' point of view of the usefulness of given services early in the pandemic. Thus, the first aim of the present study was to assess how the ECEC centers contacted parents and what kind of support was offered to the parents during the 2020 lockdown. Moreover, we assessed whether the support was perceived as helpful or not by the parents.

## Parental burnout during COVID-19 pandemic

The Covid-19 pandemic may have been a particularly stressful time for parents, in some cases even leading to burnout (Griffith, 2022; Sorkkila & Aunola, 2020). Indeed, it has been shown that, worldwide, severe parental burnout increased during the pandemic (Skjerdingsstad et al., 2022; van Bakel et al., 2022; Wiemer & Clarkson, 2023). Parental burnout—consisting of emotional exhaustion, being fed up with one's parental role, and emotional distancing from one's children (Roskam et al., 2018)—is a serious condition that differs from job burnout, parental stress, and depressive symptoms (Mikolajczak et al., 2020). In particular, the context of parental burnout is the parent-child relationship, and this form of burnout develops from prolonged parenting-related stress (e.g., Roskam et al., 2018). During the Covid-19 lockdown, parents needed to work remotely and simultaneously take care of their children, which could have increased parental stress and demands significantly, while support from grandparents or other sources was unavailable (Sorkkila & Aunola, 2022). Indeed, one Finnish study (Närvi & Lammi-Taskula, 2021) showed that, in particular, mothers who worked from home and had a child in homecare during the lockdown experienced work-family reconciliation as challenging. Another recent study showed that the more parents spent time helping their children in their distance education, the more burned out they were as parents (Sorkkila et al., 2023). The chronic imbalance between demands and resources has been shown to be the central factor in the development of burnout (Mikolajczak & Roskam, 2018), and this imbalance may have increased during Covid-19 (i.e., parents experienced significantly more demands and less resources than normally) (see Griffith, 2022; Sorkkila & Aunola, 2022).

Parental burnout can have severe consequences for parents, such as substance abuse and suicidal thoughts, as well as for and couples, such as conflicts and estrangement (Mikolajczak et al., 2018, 2020). Most alarmingly, parental burnout is a strong predictor of violence and neglect toward children (Mikolajczak et al., 2018, 2020). During the Covid-19 lockdown, the risk of child violence and abuse increased because of families' isolation, heightened parental pressure, and lack of external

contacts (e.g., ECEC; see Griffith, 2022; van Bakel et al., 2022). Indeed, it has been shown that child neglect and violence increased worldwide during the pandemic (for a review, see Katz & Fallon, 2022), which makes it essential to discover better ways to support parents and protect children.

The role of ECEC in families' well-being during the Covid-19 pandemic may have been important because it is meant to offer not only childcare and education, but also support to parents (Act on Early Childhood Education and Care 540/2018, 3 §). Although traditional face-to-face cooperation between ECEC personnel and families was no longer possible, offering, for example, outdoor activities to children could have enabled parents to rest and recover for a while. Furthermore, because it has been shown that parents with financial concerns are at an elevated burnout risk (Sorkkila & Aunola, 2020, 2022), offering food aid during lockdown may have been particularly helpful for less-privileged families. Furthermore, simple contact over the phone or online could have increased parents' perceptions of social support and of not being alone with the children, which, in turn, could have decreased the risk of burning out as a parent (see Mikolajczak & Roskam, 2018). It is, however, possible that those parents who did not perceive support at all or who perceived support as nonhelpful could have been at an increased risk of burning out. So far, however, there is little information about how the actions of ECEC centers were associated with parents' well-being at the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. This information would help generate guidelines for ECEC centers to help families' welfare in unexpected future situations. The second aim of the study was, thus, to examine how the extent and type of support were related to parental burnout symptoms during the Covid-19 lockdown in 2020.

## The present study

- (1) The present study examined how ECEC centers communicated with parents and children, as well as supported them, during the lockdown in Finland in the spring of 2020. Furthermore, we investigated whether the parents perceived the support as helpful and whether the extent and type of support was related to parental burnout symptoms during the pandemic. Because it has been shown in separate Finnish samples that, for example, gender, age of the parent, financial situation of the family, and special needs of the children are associated with parental burnout (e.g., Sorkkila & Aunola, 2020, 2022), relevant background variables were controlled for in the analyses. The specific research questions were as follows:
- (2) What type of support did the ECEC centers provide for parents and children in homecare during the two-month period of the Covid-19 lockdown? To what extent did the parents experience the communication and support as helpful or not?
- (3) To what extent were the communication and support provided by the ECEC centers associated with parents' burnout symptoms during the pandemic (before and after controlling for the background variables that are significantly associated with parental burnout)?

## Methods

### Participants

The participants were 521 Finnish parents (88.3% mothers) who had at least one child who had previously attended ECEC but was at homecare because of the lockdown. Almost all (99.6%) of the participants were Finnish (two parents were Estonian, and four parents had dual nationalities). Out of the participants, 40% had both under-school-aged children and school-aged children, and 23% had a child or children with special needs. Almost all parents (97.3%) reported their family being isolated from their homes because of the COVID-19 crisis. A total of 64% of the employed parents reported working remotely from home during the COVID-19 crisis. The background characteristics of the sample are presented in Table 1. Although the sample was not representative

**Table 1.** Background Characteristics of the Sample (n = 521).

	%	Range	M (SD)
Parental gender (mothers)	88.3		
Nationality (Finnish)	99.6		
Have child/-ren with special needs	23.0		
Family Type			
Nuclear family	82.7		
Single parent household	6.3		
Blended family	6.9		
Other family type (e.g., rainbow families, joint custody families, multi-generational families)	4.1		
Education			
Higher university degree	45.5		
Lower university degree	6.7		
Higher technical college degree	4.8		
Lower technical college degree	21.3		
Vocational institution degree	6.9		
Vocational school degree	12.1		
No vocational qualification	2.7		
Employment Status			
Employed	64.3		
Paid job but not working at the moment of survey	17.9		
No paid professional activity	17.9		
Family Financial Situation			
Lower than average	17.3		
Average	42.2		
Better than average	29.4		
Clearly better than average (excellent)	8.1		
Age			
Mothers		22—52	36.20 (5.12)
Fathers		26—58	37.75 (6.21)
Number of children in the family		1—12	2.32 (1.51)

Note. M = Mean; SD = Standard Deviation.

of all Finnish parents, it represented Finnish parents relatively well regarding family type (80% nuclear families, Official Statistics of Finland, 2021a) and education (44% with higher education degree; Official Statistics of Finland, 2021a). The average number of children, however, was somewhat higher than in the Finnish population (1.85 children; Official Statistics of Finland, 2021b).

### Procedure

The data were gathered during the time of a state of emergency in Finland (from April 22 to May 13, 2020) because of the coronavirus outbreak (declared by the Government on March 16; Finnish Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, 2020). Public gatherings were limited to no more than 10 people, and all cultural venues, libraries, theaters, national museums, sports facilities, and hobby and leisure activities were closed down, and religious communities were advised to do the same. The schools and education institutions were similarly closed down, and contact teaching was suspended. Although it was possible for the parents to take under-school-aged children to ECEC centers, the parents were encouraged to keep their children at home because of contamination risk. People over 70 years were instructed to refrain from contact with other people, and visits to housing services of risk groups and the elderly were prohibited. Finnish citizens were instructed not to travel abroad, and the Finnish borders were closed (Finnish Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, 2020).

The study received ethical approval from the ethics committee of the University of Jyväskylä. The online questionnaire was part of the International Investigation of Parental Burnout (IIPB) Consortium (Roskam & Mikolajczak, 2018–2023). The IIPB questionnaire included several parenting and pandemic-related measures (e.g., parental burnout, coparenting, and stress during the

pandemic) that were similarly assessed in over 20 participating countries. We included some additional measures (e.g., contact and support from ECEC) in the Finnish questionnaire. The measures of the IIPB consortium, which were originally in English, were translated into Finnish using official translators. The full questionnaire was pilot tested for readability in a small sample of colleagues and acquaintances. A Webropol link for the study was advertised on university websites and different sites of social media (e.g., Facebook), through which the participants filled out the online questionnaire. The link was open from April 22, 2020, until May 13, 2020. The only criterion for participation was that the participant had at least one child living at home. Prior to participation, all participants filled out an informed consent form to confirm their voluntary participation in the study. A total of 1,105 parents with children still living at home participated in the study and filled out the questionnaire. The subsample of these (i.e., the sample of the present study) included 521 parents who had children who attended ECEC before the pandemic period but stayed at home care during the partial lockdown of ECEC. The answers were input into the IBM SPSS Statistical program (Version 28).

## Measures

**Contact and support from the ECEC centers.** To assess contact and given support from the ECEC centers, the parents were first asked, “*Has your child/ren’s daycare, family daycare, or preschool contacted your family during the pandemic?*” to which the parents replied, selecting one of the three options of “Yes,” “No, but it has suited me well,” or “No, but I would have wished for contact.” If the parents replied “Yes,” they were further asked, “*Have you received support or guidance in the following matters from your child’s daycare, family daycare, or preschool?*” The parents were then presented 11 alternatives to which they replied each either “Yes” or “No”: “Daycare has offered outdoor activities to the children”; “Families have been offered food aid from daycare or preprimary education”; “Daycare has given advice, instructions, or ideas for children’s daily activities (e.g., tasks, video links)”; “Daycare has provided a video-mediated guided activities (e.g., music, reading, morning circle)”; “Daycare has supported children’s interactions by organizing video-mediated informal meetings for child groups”; “During the pandemic, the child’s early education plan has been drafted or updated electronically (e.g., through Wilma, Helmi, Daisy etc.)” “During the pandemic, a discussion/evaluation of the child’s early education plan has been held with the parents through phone or online”; “Daycare has helped with planning the child’s daily schedule”; “Daycare supported in creating parents’ networks (e.g., communication through WhatsApp)”; “Daycare has advised the parents to contact them if they need support with their child/ren”; “Daycare has sent parents and children several greetings and letters through Wilma, Helmi, Daisy or a similar system.” Finally, the parents were asked, “In some other ways, how?” To answer this, the parents could reply in their own words.

**Usefulness of support.** To assess how useful the parents found the support provided by the ECEC centers, they were asked: “*Have you experienced the contact from your child’s daycare or preprimary education to be useful or supportive for your child or yourself during the pandemic?*” To answer this, the parents replied by selecting the four response options: “Yes, very much,” “Yes, somewhat,” “Only seldomly,” and “Not at all.”

**Parental burnout.** Parental burnout was measured using the Parental Burnout Assessment (PBA) (Roskam et al., 2018). The PBA has been translated from English into Finnish by a professional Finnish translator, back-translated into English by a different professional translator, and, finally, validated in Finland by the authors (Aunola et al., 2020). The Finnish version of the PBA has been shown to have good construct, convergent and divergent validity, excellent internal consistency, and strict factorial invariance across genders and educational status groups (Aunola et al., 2020). The scale consists of 23 items: nine measure exhaustion in the parental role (e.g., *I feel completely run down by my role as a parent*), six measures that contrast in the parental self (e.g., *I don’t think I’m the good father/mother that I used to be to my children*), five that measure feelings of being fed up as a parent (e.g., *I can’t stand my role as father/mother anymore*), and



three that measure emotional distancing from one's children (e.g., *I do what I'm supposed to do for my children but nothing more*). All items were rated on a 7-point Likert scale indicating how often the parent felt a certain way (0 = never; 6 = every day). The Cronbach alpha reliability for the total score of parental burnout in the present sample was .97.

**Background variables.** In the questionnaire, various questions were included concerning parents' background. In the present study, variables concerning respondent's gender, age, level of education, employment status, number of children in the family, special needs of the child, single parenthood, financial situation of the family, remote work during pandemic period, and population of residential area were used in the statistical analyses. Parents' level of education was rated using a 7-point scale: 1 = no vocational education, 2 = vocational school degree, 3 = vocational institution degree; 4 = lower technical college degree, 5 = higher technical college degree, 6 = lower university degree, and 7 = higher university degree. For statistical analyses, level of education was recoded into a 4-point scale (1 = no vocational degree, 2 = vocational institution or school degree, 3 = technical college degree or lower university degree, 4 = higher university degree). The financial situation of the family was rated as perceived family income on a 5-point scale: 1 = excellent, 2 = higher than average, 3 = average, 4 = poorer than average, 5 = poor. For statistical analyses, the variable was recoded so that the higher score represented a higher financial situation. The population of the living area was rated using a 3-point scale: 1 = below 20,000; 2 = 20,000–100,000; 3 = over 100,000. Parents' gender (male vs. female), employment status (unemployed / employed), special need of the child/children (no/yes), single parenthood (single parenthood household vs. other family types), and remote work during pandemic period (no/yes) were treated as dichotomous variables in the analyses.

## Results

### Type of support provided by ECEC (Research question 1)

All analyses were carried out using the IBM SPSS Statistics Program (Version 28).

Our first research question aimed at answering what type of support ECEC provided for parents and children during the two-month period of the Covid-19 lockdown and to what extent the parents experienced the communication and support helpful or not. The frequencies presenting the different forms of support provided by the ECEC centers during the lockdown period are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Frequencies of Different Forms of Support Provided by the ECEC Centers According to Parents' Responses (Depending on the Variable n = 506-513; Valid % in Parentheses).

Form of support	Yes (%)	No (%)
Var1: Daycare has offered outdoor activities.	35 (6.9)	475 (93.0)
Var2: Families have been offered food aid from daycare or pre-primary education.	73 (14.3)	439 (85.7)
<b>Var3: Day care has given advice, instructions, or ideas for children's daily activities (e.g., tasks, videogames)</b>	<b>303 (59.5)</b>	206 (40.5)
Var4: Daycare has provided a video-mediated guided activities for children (e.g. music, reading, morning circle).	77 (15.0)	436 (85.0)
Var5: Daycare has supported children's interaction by organizing video-mediated informal meetings for child groups.	50 (9.8)	461 (90.2)
Var6: During the pandemic, the child's early education plan has been drafted or updated electronically (e.g., through Wilma, Helmi, Daisy etc.).	78 (15.4)	430 (84.6)
<b>Var7: During the pandemic, a discussion/evaluation of the child's early education plan has been held with the parents through phone or online.</b>	<b>178 (34.9)</b>	332 (65.1)
Var8: Daycare has helped with planning the child's daily schedule.	25 (4.9)	487 (95.0)
Var9: Daycare supported in creating a parents' network (e.g. a WhatsApp group).	26 (5.1)	485 (94.9)
<b>Var10: Daycare has advised the parents to contact them, if they need support with their child/ren.</b>	<b>178 (35.2)</b>	328 (64.8)
<b>Var11: Daycare has sent parents and children several greetings and letters through Wilma, Helmi, Daisy or similar system.</b>	<b>226 (44.4)</b>	283 (55.6)

Note. The most typical forms of support are bolded.

Of the parents, 81% reported that their child/ren's daycare, family daycare, or preschool had contacted them during the pandemic, whereas 19% reported that they had not been contacted during the lockdown (10% reported that no contact was provided, but it suited them well, and 9% reported that no contact was provided, even though they would have wished for contact). The results further demonstrated that the most typical form of support (reported by 59.5% of the parents) provided by the ECEC personnel was support and guidance for the child's daily activities ("Day care has given advice, instructions, or ideas for children's daily activities, e.g., tasks, video links"). Also, letters and greetings ("Daycare has sent parents and children several greetings and letters through Wilma, Helmi, Daisy, or a similar system") were typical forms of support (reported by 44.4% of parents), whereas outdoor activities ("Daycare has offered outdoor activities to the children"), support to create parental network ("Daycare supported in creating a parents' network (e.g., a WhatsApp group)") and help for planning the child's daily schedule ("Daycare has helped with planning the child's daily schedule") were rarely provided. Overall, 33% of the parents reported that the support provided by the ECEC centers had been helpful, 36% reported it be helpful only occasionally, and 31% saw it as nonhelpful. There were no gender differences in the percentages ( $\chi^2(2) = 1.841, p = .398$ ; Cramér's  $V = 0.068, p = .398$ ).

### Provided support and parental burnout (Research question 2)

Our second research question aimed at answering the extent to which the support provided by the ECEC centers was associated with the symptoms of parental burnout. To examine this, we first examined the associations between ECEC variables and parental burnout without taking into account the background variables. The results showed that the total amount of received support from the ECEC centers correlated slightly negatively with parental burnout ( $r = -.112, p = 0.01$ ; 95%CI[-.198, -.027]): The higher the total amount of support received from the ECEC centers, the lower the level of parental burnout the parents reported. The perceived usefulness of the support was not statistically significantly associated with parental burnout at the level of  $p < .01$  with parental burnout. The results concerning specific forms of support demonstrated statistically significant differences between parents receiving support and those who did not receive support (Mann-Whitney U-test) in the case of three support variables: parents who were provided food aid ( $Z = -3.745, p < .001$ ; Spearman's  $r = -.166, p < .001, 95\%CI[-.251, -.078]$ ), those who had help with planning the child's daily schedule ( $z = -2.889, p = 0.004$ ; Spearman's  $r = -.128, p = .004, 95\%CI[-.215, -.039]$ ), or those who were advised to contact ECEC if they needed support with child/ren ( $z = -4.236, p < .001$ ; Spearman's  $r = -.189, p < .001, 95\%CI[-.274, -.101]$ ) all reported lower levels of parental burnout than those who were not provided that kind of support.

Second, we applied ANCOVAs with bootstrapping estimation where the mean score of parental burnout was a dependent variable and those forms of support provided by the ECEC centers that were found to be statistically significantly associated with parental burnout (i.e., food aid; help with planning the child's daily schedule; advice to contact the ECEC center if they needed support with child/ren) were independent variables. By using linear regression analysis, we first examined the influence of background variables on parental burnout and then included in the ANCOVA model those four background variables that were statistically significantly associated with parental burnout, that is, gender and age of the parent, financial situation of the family, and the special needs of the children, as control variables (i.e., covariates). The results are shown in [Table 3](#).

The results demonstrated that, after controlling for the impact of background variables, those parents receiving support from the ECEC centers in terms of food aid or advice to contact the ECEC centers if they needed support with child/ren showed statistically significantly lower levels of parental burnout than those who did not receive these forms of support. After controlling for the background variables, help with planning the child's daily schedule was no longer statistically significantly associated with parental burnout.

**Table 3.** Differences in the Levels of Parental Burnout Depending on the Received Support from the ECEC Centers: The Results of ANCOVA (Bootstrapping Estimation).

	Parental Burnout				<i>F</i> (1, 95)	<i>p</i>	$\eta_p^2$
	No support		Support received				
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
VAR 2: Families have been offered food aid from daycare or pre-primary education	2.583	1.344	1.965	0.891	7.455	.007**	.015
VAR 8: Daycare has helped with planning the child's daily schedule	2.525	1.316	1.922	0.966	0.949	.330	.002
VAR 10: Daycare has advised the parents to contact them, if they need support with their child/ren	2.667	1.371	2.178	1.114	9.215	.003**	.018
Gender					5.926	.015*	.012
Age					2.598	.108	.005
Financial situation of the family					1.588	.208	.003

Note.  $p^* < .05$ ,  $p^{**} < .01$ ,  $p^{***} < .001$ ;  $\eta_p^2$  = Partial Eta Squared.

## Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to assess how ECEC centers communicated with parents and children, as well as supported them, during the Covid-19 pandemic in Finland. Furthermore, we investigated whether the parents perceived the support as helpful and whether the extent and type of support was related to parental burnout symptoms during the pandemic. The results showed that most parents were contacted by the ECEC personnel during the lockdown, and only a fifth of the parents had not been contacted at all. This finding is in line with the responses of ECEC directors concerning distance ECEC services during the lockdown (Saranko et al., 2021). Parents were mainly supported by the ECEC personnel by offering guidance to the daily activities of the child (ren) or sending letters and greetings. A third of the parents found the support helpful, a third sometimes helpful, and a third not helpful at all. Finally, it was shown that the more support was offered to the parents, the less burned out they were. Particularly, parents who received support from the ECEC centers in terms of food aid or direct advice to contact the ECEC personnel if they needed support were less burned out than those parents who did not receive this kind of support. The importance of food aid for families' coping was also demonstrated when analyzing respondents' open-ended responses to the present survey (Sorkkila et al., 2023).

The first research question aimed at answering what type of support ECEC centers provided for parents and children during the two-month period of Covid-19 lockdown and to what extent the parents experienced the communication and support helpful or nonhelpful. The results showed, first, that 81% of the parents had been contacted by ECEC personnel during the partial lockdown of ECEC. These findings are in line with the findings of Saranko et al. (2021), in which the heads of ECEC reported that most of the ECEC centers were in contact with children who stayed at home and their parents during the lockdown. This is somewhat surprising because, on the national level, no recommendations or guidelines were issued to organize activities or provide remote ECEC services for children and families that stayed at home. Thus, the ECEC centers have independently viewed it as important to contact families during exceptional times and develop ways to support families and provide remote ECEC services. One-fifth of the parents reported, however, that they had not been contacted by the ECEC centers, and half of them reported that they would have wished for contact. It seems that families were not in an equal position regarding contact and support from ECEC.

The type of support that was most often offered was guidance for the child's daily activities (e.g., tasks, video links), as well as letters and greetings. These activities are somewhat similar to those reported in Saranko et al.'s study (2021; e.g., offering the children task bags and video-mediated activities). Outdoor activities, support for creating a parental network, and help for planning the child's daily schedule were also sometimes offered but less frequently. Around one-third of the parents reported that the support had been useful, one-third that the support was sometimes useful,

and one-third that the support was not useful at all. In the future, it would be important to ask particularly those parents who did not find the support as useful what kind of support they would have needed from the ECEC services. It is possible that those forms of support that were less frequently offered, such as taking the children to outdoor activities, would have been perceived as more useful than, for example, letters and greetings. Previous studies have shown that parents' need for practical support and time for themselves may be greater than their need for social support if they are at risk of burnout (Sorkkila et al., 2021). Once the parent is completely worn down, being able to rest and have someone else looking after the children may be more urgent than being socially noticed (e.g., by receiving letters and greetings; see also Mikolajczak et al., 2018, 2022).

The second research question investigated the extent to which the support provided by the ECEC centers was associated with the symptoms of parental burnout. First, it was shown that the more support from the ECEC centers the parents received, the less burned out they were. This finding is in line with previous studies that have demonstrated that social and practical support can be a strong buffer against parental burnout (e.g., Mikolajczak et al., 2022; Mikolajczak & Roskam, 2018; Roskam et al., 2018). Once the influence of background variables was taken into consideration, it was shown that those parents who were offered food aid or advice to contact the ECEC personnel if they needed support with child/ren showed a lower level of parental burnout than those who did not receive these forms of support.

There might be several reasons why offering food was one of the most important ways of supporting families. Families who were offered food aid could have avoided going to the grocery store, thus lowering the stress of being contaminated by the Covid-19 virus. Furthermore, parents with food aid could have skipped preparing a meal, which could have offered them, on the one hand, more free time and, on the other hand, an opportunity to save money. It has been previously shown that Finnish families with financial concerns are at elevated risk of burning out; thus, food aid may have particularly benefited these kinds of families (Sorkkila & Aunola, 2020, 2022). However, the results of the present study remained significant, even after controlling for families' financial situation, which indicates that, during a social crisis, food aid may be beneficial for all kinds of families. It needs to be noted, though, that although food aid was seen as a very helpful way to support families, only a relatively small number of families were offered food. In the future, this could be used as a more common method to support families.

Also, those parents who were advised to contact the ECEC personnel if they needed support with child/ren may have felt more socially supported than those not given such advice. It was not specified whether the families had actually contacted the ECEC personnel and received support that they needed, but it is also possible that only the awareness of having a support network buffered the parents from burning out (see, e.g., Mikolajczak & Roskam, 2018; Mikolajczak et al., 2022). This may have been particularly relieving during the lockdown because most other family services (e.g., child health centers) were closed down. Consequently, in the potential lockdowns, it would be important for ECEC services to personally inform all parents that help is available if they need any, which could reduce parents' risk of feeling alone and cornered during times of crisis (see Griffith, 2022).

### ***Limitations of the study***

The present study has several limitations that need to be taken into account when interpreting the findings. First, the study was cross-sectional and provided information only about the relationship between variables at one specific time point. Consequently, implications for directionality cannot be drawn. Furthermore, the sample was collected early in the pandemic. Therefore, the results may be indicative of a fairly immediate response to an unexpected crisis, and no information can be provided about the long-term persistent effects of the pandemic on families. However, in developing guidelines for future unexpected crises, it is beneficial to gain information from the very beginning of the pandemic, which was the most unexpected time for both the parents and ECEC centers (i.e., instead of retrospective data collection). Furthermore, recent international findings have shown

that the effects of the pandemic on families' mental health may be long term (De France et al., 2022; Samji et al., 2022; Skjerdingsstad et al., 2022), indicating that the stress experienced by families as a result of the pandemic may still be persistent and require action.

Second, the sample was not randomly selected or representative of all Finnish parents, even though the investigation of the socio-demographic background variables revealed that it represented Finnish parents relatively well in terms of family type and parental education (Official Statistics of Finland, 2021a, 2021b). Furthermore, the data were collected using an online survey; thus, the respondents may have been selective in some ways (e.g., they may have been particularly content or discontent to the services of the ECEC). Furthermore, the mothers were highly over-represented (88%) in the sample, so the answers cannot be generalized to fathers. Third, no information was collected from the ECEC centers, only from the parents. However, it needs to be noted that the findings from another Finnish study conducted with the heads of ECEC centers showed very similar results (Saranko et al., 2021). In the future, it would be important to conduct a multi-informant study (i.e., collect data from several agents, such as parents, ECEC personnel, and children) with a randomized sample. It would be also beneficial to assess how different types of families could be best supported during crises. For example, it is known that parents of children with special needs are more burned out than other parents (e.g., Sorkkila & Aunola, 2020, p. 2021) and ECEC may have an important role in helping their everyday life (see Sorkkila et al., 2021). Finally, the results are applicable only to Finland, which has a unique ECEC system. Thus, the results may not be directly transferrable to other countries, so the results should be replicated in other cultural contexts.

## Conclusion

The present study has shown that ECEC centers were important agents in supporting Finnish families during the coronavirus lockdown. Although the majority of the parents were contacted and supported by the ECEC personnel during the coronavirus lockdown, one-fifth of the parents were not contacted at all, even though half of them would have wished for contact. To avoid leaving any parents behind in the future, it might be important to consider developing national guidelines for ECEC centers to cooperate with parents during social crisis. This is particularly important because the less parents received support from ECEC centers, the more burned out they were as parents. National guidelines should address, first, what is *meant* by parental involvement and cooperation more carefully, because this clearly varied among ECEC centers. Second, they should address how reciprocal the cooperation is (i.e., are parents expected to contact the ECEC personnel or are the ECEC personnel expected to contact the parents). Third, they should give explicit guidance on what kinds of actions—and how often—should be taken by ECEC personnel during a crisis to support families. Our study showed that food aid or direct advice to contact the ECEC center if support was needed buffered parents against burning out. Food aid is a simple and practical way of helping families, and this should be taken more broadly in use in future crises. The parents also found it helpful knowing that help was available, if they needed it, which may have made parents feel less alone during an unexpected situation. Thus, the results can be used in educating ECEC personnel and preschool teachers to respond not only to practical needs, but also to the socio-emotional needs of the families during crises.

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