# Managing the work-life balance when working from home: the experience of Flemish parents.

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## Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic forced many people to work from home. Even after pandemic restrictions have been lifted, many parents continue to work from home. This poses several challenges and has led to a number of issues related to sharing rooms and equipment, dealing with distractions, and dealing with feelings. This paper examines the issues that arose for parents working from home in Flanders within these three categories, and recommends potential solutions. Data were collected through a survey. The target population of the survey was a group of Flemish parents with children under the age of 18 and working from home during the lockdown. The main findings of the research are summarized as follows. Most respondents did not have a separate workspace at home. This means that parents experienced different distractions at home than while working from the office. Children were the number one distraction for parents working from home. The care of children and the lack of work-life balance were also the main sources of conflict. However, the feelings when working from home are not only negative. Parents felt frustration and powerlessness, as well as motivation and happiness. Based on the analysis of the responses, recommendations are formulated from parents to parents on how to organise working from home with children.

**Keywords:** Work-life balance, working from home (WFH), parents.

## 1 Introduction

On March 11, 2020, millions of people's lives changed as the corona virus officially got characterized as a pandemic (World Health Organization, 2020). Italy was the first EU nation to impose a lockdown, with other countries following right after. During these lockdowns, rules and regulations differed from country to country (Hirsch, 2020). What countries did have in common

during the initial outbreak of this pandemic, was the rise of workers having to work from their private home instead of where they usually undertake work.

This paper focuses on home-based workspaces during the Covid-19 pandemic in Flanders. At the start of the pandemic, during the first lockdown of March-April 2020, working from home was not obligated in Flanders, but got strongly recommended (Info Coronavirus, 2020). This changed from the 20th of November 2020 until the 28th of January 2022, when teleworking became mandatory (Pagano, 2021). Due to these recommendations and obligations, the number of teleworkers and the intensity of the telework has changed since the pandemic. Where the number of workers from home was a mere 13,6% in 2010, it rose to 35,1% in the last quarter of 2020 (De Smet et al., 2021, p. 13). Subsequent to the number of teleworkers, the intensity also changed. Where before teleworking became obligatory, only 4,6% worked from home for more than half of the working days, this changed to 23,2 % after the obligation of working from home (De Smet et al., 2021, p. 14).

Therefore, this paper delves deeper into the following research question: "*What are the issues that arose for Flemish parents with children of 18 years and below while working from home during the Covid-19 Pandemic?*" The focus is on practical challenges such as work-life balance and motivation, rather than the economic consequences such as the impact on working hours, the unemployment rate, and the labor force participation, as discussed in Béland et al. (2020).

More in particular, the focus is on three topics: sharing, distractions, and feelings. The research examined the current situation, the reported issues, and the proposed solutions for each of these three topics. A first source of issues is the sharing of materialistic things between family members at home. Different family members often had to share a room, a computer, internet, etc. In addition, the research looks at the possible consequences that this brings, such as conflicts that arise and/or rules that were created (proactive or reactive). A second identified source are distractions, such as children, social media, or noise. Distractions at home were compared with those at the workplace. As a third and final source in this research, we focused on the feelings that emerged during the time that the parents had to work from home. These feelings at home were also compared with those when working at the office.

The rest of the paper conducts a review of relevant literature, followed by a methodology section, after which findings and data analysis of the 207 survey responses are discussed. The paper ends with a section on conclusions.

# 2  Literature review

## 2.1  History of working from home

The working from home (WFH) practice otherwise also known as teleworking (Di Martino & Wirth, 1990), telecommuting (Mokhtarian, 1991), or remote working (Akanji et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2021), originated in the 1980's with advancements in the enabling information technologies (Gibbs et al., 2021). Since then, perceptions of WFH have shifted greatly. In the past, only relatively few individuals in a relatively small number of organizations had the option to apply for this model and it was usually not available on a full-time basis (Bailey & Kurland, 2002). It was historically implemented at a needs level, where employees would request permission on a discretionary basis (Wang et al., 2021). Often, it was reserved for self-employed, upper management, or higher income earners (Kossek and Lautsch, 2018). Less senior employees often did not enjoy the same privileges. There was also a perception that staff who worked from home were less productive, less collaborative, offered few advancement opportunities, and were not as much part of the team as those in an onsite office environment (Faulds & Raju, 2021). Further evidence indicates that the reluctance in the past can be attributed to the perception that employees generally lack discipline and neglect

their responsibilities when they are unsupervised and left to manage their time and tasks (Bloom et al., 2015). As such, lower level and low-income earners were restricted to the strict office hours in an environment that their employers provided. In essence, WFH was perceived as a model for the elite employees.

All this changed in 2020, when WFH became a compulsory requirement for a high number of employees globally, when the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the 2019 coronavirus (Covid-19) a global pandemic (Cucinotta & Vanelli, 2020). If prior to the pandemic, WFH was perceived as a perk for senior employees and executives, these dynamics changed when a majority of employers were immediately compelled by the Covid-19 lockdown regulations to adopt the WFH model (Kossek & Lautsch, 2018).

## 2.2  Work-life balance of parents working from home

Work-life balance for parents working from home can be viewed in at least two ways, especially given the events that unprecedentedly unfolded from the Covid-19 outbreak. For one, the work-life balance phenomenon was initially viewed through the lens of the family unit, a development that, at the time, had little to nothing per se to do with working from home (Googins & Burden, 1987). Googins and Burden claim that women, especially those of color generally had a hard time balancing work and family roles in the light of traditional work and family divisions of labor. The number of female employees entering the labor force and who were parents to minors was increasing notably (Daipuria & Kakar, 2013), forcing the re-evaluation of household roles for affected families. Second, the phenomenon can be examined in the context of parents who face this work-life balance issue because of the work from home practice. While issues emanating from the first view are highlighted, which are the family unit issues even for those working in the office, this study examined the latter (WFH) in more detail to understand parents' experiences.

In the literature about work-life balance it is noted how women in general grew into spending more hours on work and home activities combined than men (Googins & Burden, 1987), highlighting the need to guard the balance between work and life. Other studies revealed that while the labor force (gender) composition changed extensively, organizations still had no policies nor created legislative provisions to cater for the problematic space of the work-life balance issue (Daipuria & Kakar, 2013; Googins & Burden, 1987; Kelliher et al., 2019; Wiens et al., 2022). One study did not only examine the concept in organizations but also problematized the lack of further development in academic theory to deal with work-life balance (Kelliher et al., 2019).

While many organizations were still struggling with the implementation details of WFH, also the employees faced several WFH challenges. For instance, employees who were also parents of school students had to share their workspaces with them. The availability of space and connectivity to the internet became a major problem for a lot of households with multiple residents using the space and internet simultaneously for different activities (Torres & Orhan, 2022). Thus, the work-life balance of parents presented a heightened set of challenges compared to employees who do not have children.

## 2.3  Gender differences in work-life balance

While the literature review was not specifically targeting gender dynamics in the work-life balance management when working from home, it was found in various studies that gender especially with regards to parenting employees is an important differentiator for work-life balance concerns. Gender dynamics were often tied to the context. For instance, the gender disadvantage problem in Canada, namely bureaucracy and stigma against maternity leave (Wiens et al., 2022), was not experienced at all by female parents in Sweden (Kurowska, 2020). Both countries are developed countries but had different challenges because of their different cultural contexts. Meanwhile, women in a developing

country context such as Nigeria suffered worse experiences compared to the male parent employees, in a context of patriarchal culture and increased male chauvinism (Akanji et al., 2022).

## 2.4  Summary of issues in WFH: sharing, distractions and feelings

With a particular focus on the themes of sharing [of space and equipment], distractions [to parents by their children], and feelings related to such developments, the review of literature established that most of the studies around the WFH and WLB had not explicitly addressed those areas with parents in mind. As is seen in the preceding gendered discussion and various other WFH studies across disciplines, inter-alia, social sciences, health and medicine, policy formulation studies, and economics, the focus is mainly on the impacts on gender equality, health well-being, and economic productivity. Among papers reviewed, none explicitly focused on the experiences of parents [both male and female] to suggest some coping strategies in relation to dealing with sudden changes; in the sharing of equipment, not just space (Vyas & Butakhieo, 2020); in managing distractions specifically coming from having children at home, not just any other family members (Guler et al., 2021); and in managing both positive and negative feelings that come with. Graham and others (2021) focused on gender and parental responsibility issues to demonstrate the impact of WFH but did not offer interventions. Another related research investigated the WFH impact on general employee physical health and productivity (Guler et al., 2021). Abdellatif (2021) further reiterated the gender perspective by examining the WFH effects on female employees' productivity. While all related, this study argues that impacts and experiences have nuanced distinctions hence contribute differently to the existing body of literature. So this paper addressed the gap by examining the WFH phenomenon in three themes of sharing, distractions, and feelings with a focus on the experiences of parenting employees.

# 3  Research methodology

Because of the interest to not only reveal the experiences and arisen issues when working from home, but also to quantify the impact, a positivist and mainly quantitative data collection approach was preferred in the form of an online questionnaire. It was decided to make the target group for this survey very specific, narrowing it down to *parents with children under the age of 18 who worked from home at least once a week, in Flanders during the first Covid-19 lockdown period*. Considering the language of the survey, the decision was made to use Dutch, as the focus was on Flanders only. The goal was to collect a minimum of 200 respondents. To collect the data for the research, this survey was sent out via LinkedIn and Facebook, as well as via flyers with QR codes that were handed out to parents at schools.

The survey was split into four different sections. Each section consisted of around 5 questions to avoid overburdening the respondent with too many problems all at once. The first questions were to get an indication of the situation for the single individual, followed by questions that gauge the kind of issues our different categories brought up. Lastly the survey asked questions about what possible solutions the parents came up with to deal with those issues. The survey consisted of a total of twenty-four questions. These were split into six open ended questions, eight Likert scale questions, eight multiple-choice questions, and two yes-no questions. The Likert scale questions on the survey used different kinds of scales, depending on whether frequency, intensity or agreement was measured.

# 4   Data analysis and findings

A total of 207 people in the target group answered the survey. The majority of respondents was in the age categories '26-35' (19%), '36-45' (37%), or '46-55' (31%). The number of women who responded to the survey is 58 percent, 42 percent of respondents are men. The percentage of respondents who had two children is 55%, whereas 21% had one child, and the remaining 24% had between three and five children. A notable 66% had a partner who also had to work from home. This means that most of the respondents had a second parent to take care of their children while working from home. Almost half of the respondents were white-collar workers (46%), the other half divided almost equally into four parts. These were civil servants (19%), supervisors (12%), blue-collar workers (14%) and the least represented group of self-employed people (10%).

## 4.1   Sharing

This section is dedicated to the sharing of equipment. It will delve deeper into what is being shared, whether conflicts arise due to the sharing, whether there were certain rules attached to the matter, and if spatial arrangements were made to adhere to these rules or to resolve issues.

Flemish parents had troubles finding a suitable place to work from home. This did not go unnoticed by their employers. Flemish organizations said the employees' homes are not always suitable for work (Jacobs & Cornelis, 2020). Sixty-five percent of respondents had to share a space, whether this space was a separate workspace, or a common room.

**What is shared and with whom?**

Working from home requires certain office supplies, such as a computer or internet access. Some parents did not get to bring office equipment home and had to improvise at home. These parents often had to share their computer accessories and other equipment. Starting with what had to be shared most, the internet was reported to be shared in the household in 95% of the cases. In Belgium, if an employee must work from home, the employer is obliged by law to compensate for the internet connection of the employee (Agentschap Innoveren & Ondernemen, 2021). The second most shared aspect was the workspace. As mentioned earlier, about 65% of people shared a room with at least one person. The rooms the respondents had to work from were mostly shared with their partners. However, children come in as a close second.

What was shared less were computer accessories, these included a computer mouse, a mousepad, a monitor, a keyboard, headphones, and other items related to the computer. Only 41% of the respondents did share computer accessories: 19% shared them with everyone in the household, 11% with their partner, 5% with their children and 6% let their children share among themselves. The computer the parents had to work on was shared least out of all the equipment listed. A majority of 74% did not share their computer, 6% share it with all the people in their household, 8% with their partner only, 7% with their children and 5% let their children share the computer between each other.
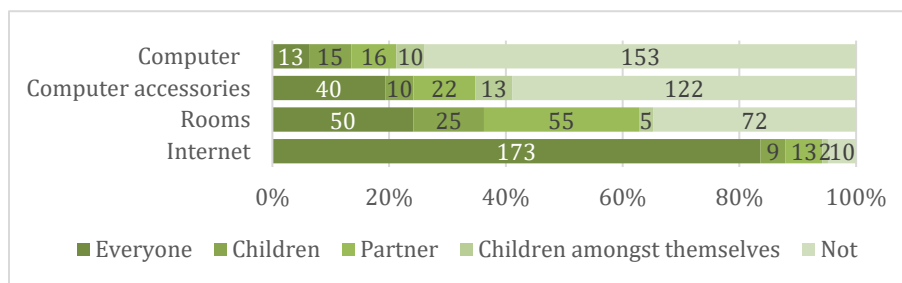


**Figure 1:** What is shared and with who in the household?

**Conflicts from sharing**

When investigating whether sharing led to conflict, it is clear that least amount of conflict arose because of the sharing of a computer (Fig.2). Only 20 people (10%) had – often or sometimes - conflicts about sharing computers, but this can be attributed to the fact that computers were, in fact, usually *not* shared between working partners (Fig.2). Conflicts regarding the use of shared rooms were a bit more frequent, with 13% indicating they *often* or *always* had a conflict regarding the issue. The option '*sometimes'* was chosen 30 times showing this was a more frequent issue than the sharing of the computers. Twenty-six percent of parents answered they *rarely* had any conflict regarding this issue, while 31% answered they *never* had any conflicts regarding the matter. But, again, most (64%) of people who *never* had issues regarding sharing a room, have a separate working space available.
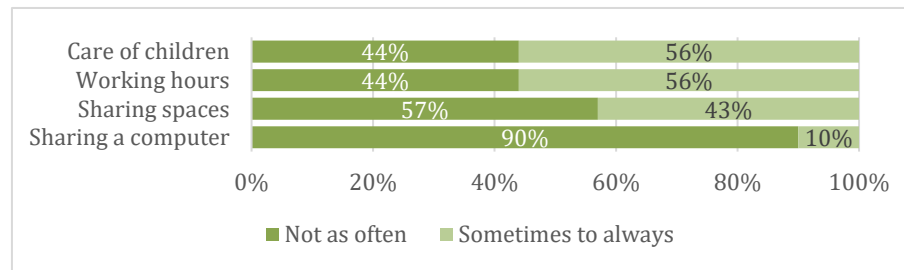


**Figure 2:** Conflicts

Some issues also arose when talking about working hours. While working from home, working hours became more flexible. Contrary to the flexibility, parents are tempted to work longer hours when they find themselves working from home. In an open question, 6 parents said they were more tempted to work longer hours while working from home than working at the office because they feel more comfortable in their own space. The parents calculate the time they can work longer due to less traveling time and think of what they still want to finish after their working hours.

Conflicts also arose regarding their children and who had to take care of them while working from home. Nineteen percent said they always or *often* had such challenges, 37% *sometimes* had such conflicts, while 20% *rarely* did, and 24% *never* did. A reason given was that parents working from home often must devote their attention to their children during the workday if both the parents and children are home. This leads to parents admitting they sometimes could not clock in a full day's worth of work while working remotely (Lahousse, 2019).

**Solutions to the conflicts**

After parents indicated that certain conflicts were created due to the new situation at home, they had the chance to reply with solutions they found or agreements they made following said conflicts. Of the 207 respondents, 116 replied that they did not or hardly make any agreements. Some of the parents who responded they did not make any agreements, replied that it was because they found it rather hard to do so. They found it difficult to make agreements that would work.

The other 91 respondents (44%) did make agreements with their household. The response the survey received the most is that of communication. Communication is key during such times. Although communication is not necessarily an arrangement, it is something the parents constantly had to remind themselves when conflicts arose. The parents, rather than resorting to leaving the conflicts or issues be, made the effort of communicating with their partner or children to resolve issues. Furthermore, another popular way of resolving issues, was to inform the entire household that the parent was not to be disturbed during work hours. This included what, at first sight, seem to be even the most insignificant arrangements such as "the children open the door when someone rings the bell". During breakfast or lunch, the children or their partner were informed of when meetings would

take place during the day. In some cases, the children would then have to stay in their room. In other cases, the parents themselves went to another room where they would not be disturbed.

Part of not being disturbed, is diminishing the surrounding noise. Noise cancellation was a crucial part of the arrangements made to reduce conflict. Children and partners learnt not to put on the tv, to listen to music with headphones on, to have classes and meetings in separate rooms. Anything that helped the working parent to focus on their work. Though parents admitted that they could never fully cancel out noise, they said it was a great help and crucial point to consider, nonetheless.

## 4.2  Distractions

In research done by Manutan (2020) in collaboration with NovioData, 10% of the respondents indicated they were often distracted while working from home and one out of four employees would not work from home if they were not mandated. In the Glassdoor research (Walters, 2022), 32% of employees thought watching TV is the biggest distraction while working from home. Next to that, 27% said that childcare is a big distraction (Walters, 2022). The following results were extracted from the survey results of Flemish parents who worked from home during Covid-19.
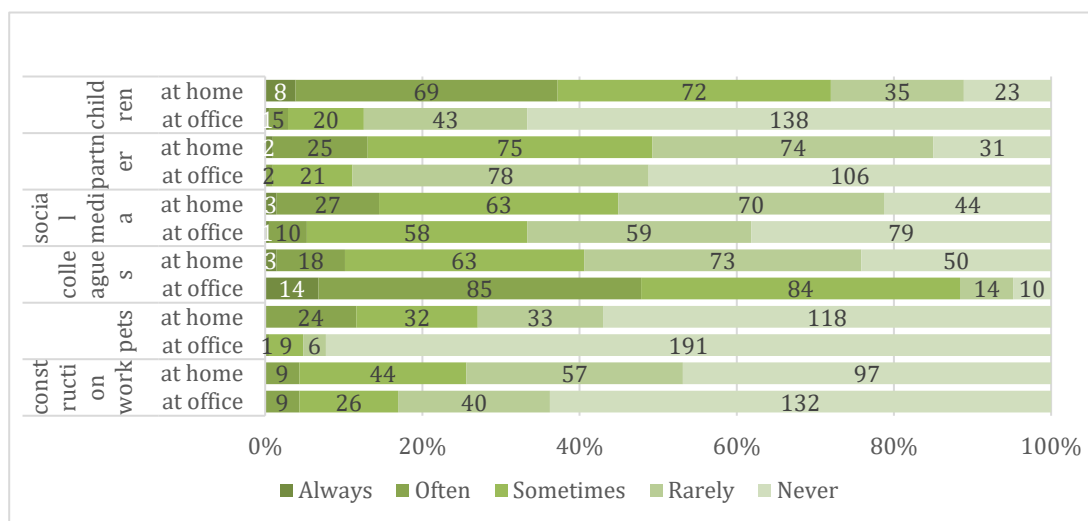


**Figure 3:** Distractions at home versus at the office

### Distractions at home versus distractions at the office

The survey conducted for this research paper reveals the differences between how often distractions happen at home compared to the office for Flemish parents with children. Figure 4 shows an overview of the different distractions and how often they occurred while parents worked from home versus when they worked from the office.

Children are the biggest distraction while working from home, with 37% of parents answering they are *always* or *often* distracted by their children. However, when we look at children as distraction while working from the office, one sees that only 3% of parents is *always* or *often* distracted. The biggest distraction at work is colleagues, where 48% of parents report to *always* or *often* be distracted by colleagues at work. The top-3 WFH distractions are discussed in more detail.

### Children

The distraction that occurred most while working from home were the children. Four percent of the parents answered they were *always* distracted by their children. 68% of the parents answered they

were *often* to *sometimes* distracted by the children. Lastly, the parents who answered '*rarely*' or '*never*' were a minority in this case, with 17% and 11%. An interesting note to consider is that out of those parents  who said to *never* or *rarely* be distracted by children (28%), the biggest part has a separate workspace (41%). Out of those people that had a separate workspace, none had to share it with their children and only 17% had to share it with a partner. To compare, from the 4% that answered to *always* be distracted by their children, only 25% had a separate workspace, while 75% did not have a separate workspace. This suggests that having a separate workspace does help a parent from being distracted by their child(ren).
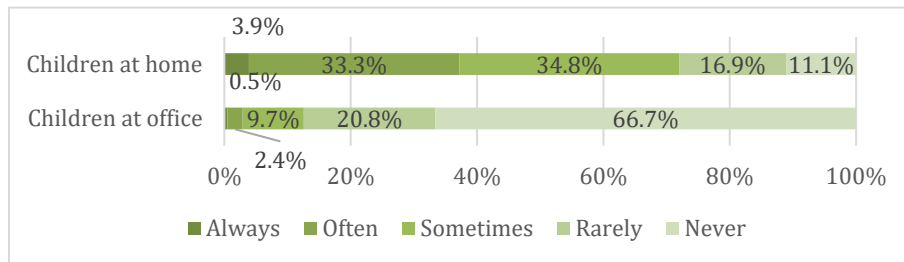


**Figure 4:** Distraction 1 - children

In terms of the distractions of children while working from the office, less than 1% of the respondents answered '*always*', while 12% reported to be *often* or *sometimes* distracted by their children. 21% answered '*rarely*', and 67% answered that the children were *never* a distraction at their work. This is a logical but stark difference. The children are in most cases not present at work so rarely form a distraction, while at home the children are often in the same space.

**Partner**

With 16% of parents responding that they *always* or *often* get distracted by their partner, this was the second most distracting challenge at home. 36% said their partner *sometimes* distracts them and 51% said their partner was *never* or *rarely* a distraction at home. For these 106 respondents who are *rarely* or *never* distracted by their partner at home, it emerged that 45 (42%) did not have a partner who worked from home, which explains why they did not get distracted. Furthermore, out of the 61 people (58%) that did have a partner work from home, only 33 people (54%) had to share their workspace with someone else. So out of the 106 respondents (51%) who are *rarely* or *never* distracted by their partner at home, 70 respondents (66%) do not have to share their workspace with a partner, meaning their partner cannot distract them as much.

**Social media**

Next in the list of the top 3 of highest distractions while working from home is social media. 14% of the parents said they are *always* or *often* distracted by social media at home. 30% reported to *sometimes* be distracted by social media. A slight majority of 55% said to *never* or *rarely* be distracted by social media while working from home. When making a comparison to when parents work from the office, we can see that there is a difference, but this difference is the smallest overall. 5% of parents state they are *always* or *often* distracted by social media at the office. Very similar to parents working from home, 28% reported they *sometimes* get distracted by social media and 67% of parents working at the office reported they *never* or *rarely* get distracted by social media.

**Solutions to distractions**

As discussed, there are quite a lot of distractions at home. While it is interesting and important to see what the biggest distractions and differences are, solutions were also discussed. In the survey conducted, employees were asked to share their ultimate solutions against these distractions.

The most common solution was the use of headphones or noise cancelling earplugs, 18% of the respondents gave this as their ultimate solution against the different distractions. Other common solutions to curb the distraction of social media was to put the phone in flight mode or focus mode. Another option was to place it out of reach and sight altogether, and only use the business phone. On flight mode, all the Bluetooth, Wi-fi, and data connections are blocked, while in focus mode users can customise which alerts and notifications they need going through. In the latter, users do not disconnect from everyone, but will not get distracted by social media applications (Apple, 2021).

Another widespread solution is a good and clear schedule and very clear agreements. 17% of respondents said that a great planning and good rules and communication were their ultimate solution to the different distractions. An example of what respondents mean by planning is working in focus blocks that are planned in the agenda or short focus sprints: "*Concentrated sprints per day, work really hard for half an hour, then do something more administrative for the other half an hour.*" Another parent said: "*I like to plan in focus blocks, and I make it clear to all the people in my house that I cannot be interrupted during those hours.*" Five respondents gave a tip to take a break every now and then, get some fresh air by walking the dog or just taking a break to concentrate on the children so one can get back to work without any distractions afterwards.

Another big distraction during working from home was housework. While working from home, respondents indicated that they are surrounded by all the little tasks they still needed to do. Those ranged from vacuuming to putting a new load in the laundry and others. One great idea from one of the respondents is the following: "*I made sure the timer of my washing machine, dishwasher and dryer were set to go off when I took my break.*"

However, not all respondents found a good solution to stop distractions. 37% answered that they had not found a solution, or they did not answer the question.

## 4.3   Feelings experienced while working from home

Sharing homebased workspaces came coupled with some positive and negative feelings (Fig.5). Only 13% of parents *never* felt frustrated while working from home. The majority is *sometimes* (57%) or *often* (29%) frustrated; 31% *never* felt powerless. The majority 50% *sometimes* felt powerless, 17% *often* felt powerless, and a small 1% *always* felt powerless. Despite such relatively high percentages of negative feelings, parents also felt happy and motivated while working from home during those times. The big majority of people said that they *sometimes* (31%) or *often* (58%) felt motivated. Only 4% said they *never* feel motivated and 7% stated to *always* feel motivated. Switching to happiness, the big majority feels *sometimes* (31%) or *often* (61%) happy while working from home. Again, only 4% said to *never* be happy while working from home and another 4% responded that they *always* feel happy while working from home.
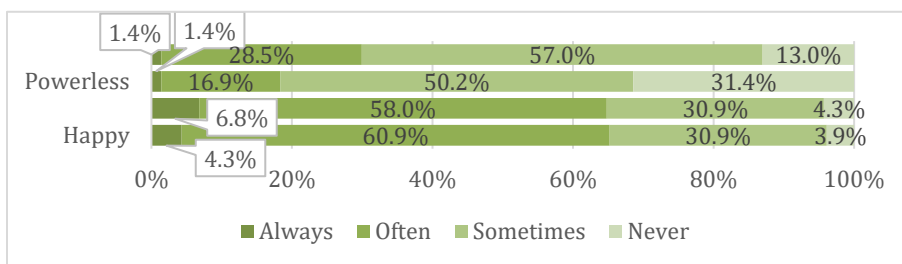


**Figure 5**: Emotions experienced while working from home

A difference can be observed between the number of parents with and without a partner who also worked from home with them. 3% of people who said they *never* felt happy did not have a partner working with them from home. While not even one percent of parents who said they *never* felt happy

did have a partner with them working from home. Respondents had both negative and positive feelings towards working at home, which makes sense as there are both advantages and disadvantages when working from home.

**Solutions to emotional distress**

The respondents got asked if they had any tips for other parents on how to handle these feelings. 6% said that maintaining social contact (online or not) with colleagues and friends was essential to their mental health. One of those parents said "*Try to occasionally contact colleagues who are in the same situation and unload what you are feeling. If you hear that they are experiencing the same problems, you will feel less alone.*" 11% said that outside activities such as walking, or any type of sport had been a great help when they were processing any type of emotions during the first lockdown period. Just taking in some fresh air or put all one's frustrations in a sport. Another 9% stated that taking it day-by-day helped them. Positivity and relativity were key to dealing with their feelings.

# 5  Conclusions

The purpose of this research paper was to investigate what issues Flemish parents with children under 18 had to deal with, based on a survey that was created. There was a focus on three topics: sharing, distractions, and feelings; where the situation, the issue, and the solution were examined for each of these three topics.

Almost every household had to share things. First, regarding spaces that were shared, the most common one is the living room. However, the majority of parents working from home did not have a separate workspace. Second, working hours and caring for the children were the main reason for conflicts. Nearly half of the respondents was able to resolve these conflicts by making agreements such as planning and communicating with everyone in the household.

In respect of distractions, children, more specifically, children between the ages 2 and 6, are the biggest distraction while working from home. One's partner is the second biggest distraction while working from home. The thired-biggest distraction while working from home is social media. Everyone has their individual habits and gets distracted by different things at home or at the office, for which there can be no ultimate solution. However, parents have mentioned that creating a separate workplace, using a social media blocker, and making a planning, help with minimizing these distractions.

For the third and last topic, feelings, it can be concluded that certain feelings arise when having to share things with one's household and getting distracted by people around the homebased workspaces. Both positive and negative feelings apply. Respondents reported high levels of frustration and slightly lower levels of feeling powerless. Perhaps surprisingly, most people reported being quite motivated at home. But the most positive feeling that the parents related to working at home, was happiness.

After analysis, the conclusion can be drawn that one of the main causes for the stress levels of the parents, were children. Another main cause would be the sharing of spaces. Sharing materials, however, was not really a significant cause of stress. The work-life balance was also an issue, as there was no clear separation between household work and their everyday job. Household chores were performed in between the working hours. Another contributing factor to the increasing stress levels of the parents, was having no or limited social contact with colleagues. On the contrary, the biggest stress reducing factor for the parents was not having to travel from home to the office.

This paper intended to provide useful insights on a topic that is still very relevant today. The effects which the pandemic and working from home have had, did not go unnoticed. This research has a number of limitations including the geographic focus on Flanders (with its specific laws and

culture), a possible sampling bias and the specific point in time when the survey was conducted, i.e. less than one year after the last Covid-19 lockdowns. The working from home situation is dynamic, and future research may well come to slightly different conclusions environment changes as well as parents become more experienced at the dynamics of balancing work requirements at home.

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