

From one upheaval to the next :
The impact of social crises on the well-being of Quebec families

The pandemic has been trying. At the same time, several social crises have brought their own challenges, including inflation and the recent education and health strikes. The English Parents' Committee Association (EPCA) and the Fédération des comités de parents du Québec (FCPQ) joined forces to find out how Quebec families are doing in such a context. In collaboration with Dr. Mélissa Généreux, a public health physician and professor at the Université de Sherbrooke, and Dr. Clara Morin, a public health resident, the EPCA and FCPQ have launched a large-scale Quebec survey aimed at providing a summary portrait of the well-being of children and their parents.

Survey objectives

- 1) Assess the current level of well-being of children and their parents, and its most recent evolution
- 2) Explore what they experienced during the fall 2023 education strike
- 3) Examine the concerns of parents in relation to their child's well-being on returning to school

Methodology

The survey was conducted from January 16 to February 2, 2024, using a 10-minute online questionnaire (in French and English). All parents in Quebec with a child in primary or secondary school were eligible to respond. Recruitment was carried out in a variety of ways, including the media, social networks, newsletters and e-mails sent by parents' committees or schools. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. Only one parent in the household could respond. The parent was asked to complete the survey for the next birthday child. They could also complete a separate survey for each of their eligible children.

Sample description

A total of 14,148 parents (8741 primary and 5407 secondary) responded to the survey, with 85% completing the entire questionnaire. One child in 10 attends a private school (4% primary and 21% secondary). The five regions with the most respondents were : Montreal (n=3753), Outaouais (n=2513), Montérégie (n=2277), Chaudière-Appalaches (n=1328) and Estrie (n=1192). No fewer than 4,445 children (31%) were classified as "Special Needs¹ " by their parents (girls: 22% in primary school and 30% in secondary school; boys: 34% in primary school and 42% in secondary school). Only 11% of children did not experience a strike in the fall of 2023, compared to 53% who experienced the Common Front strike and 36% who experienced the strike of the Fédération autonome de l'enseignement (FAE). Among parent respondents, 82% are women and 16% are English-speaking.

¹ Children with disabilities (e.g. ID, PD, ASD), learning difficulties (e.g. dyslexia, dysphasia) or adjustment difficulties (e.g. ADHD, behavioral disorder)

Key findings

- The strong participation of parents testifies to their interest in sharing their experiences.
- Measuring quality of life provided a comprehensive picture of children's well-being. The key challenges reported by parents related to relationships with friends and relatives, as well as energy and attention levels.
- A score ranging from 0 to 100 was calculated, where 100 equals excellent quality of life. The average score for participating children was 64. Children were considered to have a low quality of life when their score was < 50. In secondary school, children were more likely to have a low quality of life than in primary school (20% vs. 14%).
- Quality of life scores vary according to gender and school level. In primary school, boys are at a disadvantage compared to girls (15% vs. 12%). However, quality of life deteriorates for girls from grade 1 to secondary 5 (low quality of life rises from 10% to 27%). It is more stable for boys.
- Children classified as having special needs are 2-3 times more likely than others to have a low quality of life, both in primary school (25% vs. 9%) and secondary school (31% vs. 14%). Their parents are almost twice as likely to report fair to poor mental health (24% vs. 14%). These families were also harder hit by the strike.
- For many parents surveyed, financial issues also represent a challenge. One in 5 fears food insecurity, and one in 3 is concerned about their financial situation.
- The use of screen time is another major issue. Heavy screen use (at least 4 hours a day) during free time on weekends becomes more frequent from the end of primary school onwards (30% at this age). Weekday screen use becomes more frequent from the 2nd cycle of secondary school onwards (25% at this age). Heavy screen users during the week are twice as likely to have a low quality of life. Levels of energy and fun with friends are the two spheres most affected.
- At both primary and secondary level, screen time is parents' #1 concern, followed by learning loss, motivation and psychological well-being.
- Strikes seem to be associated with a deterioration children's and parents' well-being, but the cause-and-effect relationship remains uncertain. Increased screen time appears to be most associated with the duration of the strike, being 3-4 times more frequent in children who experienced the FAE strike vs. those who did not.

Possible solutions

1. Maintaining an open dialogue with parents
2. Allow for quality family time (without screens)
3. Place greater emphasis on social connection
4. List existing resources and enhance them
5. Consult with partners to find out what's already being done
6. Facilitate networking between parents of children with special needs
7. Provide opportunities for children to get involved from primary school onwards
8. Reinforce the mission of family and youth centers
9. Working together on the causes, not just the problems
10. Go beyond the catch-up plan to include a plan for the responsible use of screens.