

The Long-Term Psychological Impact Of COVID-19 On Children: Addressing Mental Health Challenges In The Post-Pandemic Era.

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has had profound and lasting effects on children's mental health, with widespread reports of increased anxiety, depression, and feelings of isolation. This study explores the pandemic's long-term psychological impacts on children, analyzing how extended lockdowns, school closures, and social distancing measures have contributed to mental health challenges that persist as children reenter everyday social and academic environments. Articles reviewed highlight heightened levels of anxiety related to reintegration into school and peer settings, as well as the lingering fear of illness. Additionally, the study examines coping mechanisms and resilience-building strategies that educators and mental health professionals can implement to support children in this critical recovery phase. The findings describe the importance of proactive interventions, such as school-based mental health programs and accessible counseling services, to ensure psychological well-being as society moves forward.

Keywords: COVID-19, Children's Mental Health, Anxiety, Depression, Social Isolation, Psychological Resilience, Post-Pandemic Support, Mental Health Interventions, School Reintegration.

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I. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has been one of the most disruptive global events in recent history, altering daily life across age groups, including children. As countries implemented lockdowns, school closures, and social distancing measures, children experienced profound shifts in their routines, social interactions, and educational environments. During the peak of the pandemic, over 1.5 billion children worldwide were affected by school closures, with many confined to their homes for extended periods (UNESCO, 2023). These prolonged restrictions led to increased screen time, limited physical activity, and restricted social engagement, drastically altering childhood experiences and triggering various health challenges (Muppalla, 2023; Mulkey et al., 2023).

A marked increase in anxiety, depression, and behavioral issues among children and adolescents during the pandemic has been observed since the pandemic (Chavira et al, 2022). According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), emergency department visits for mental health concerns among children aged 5-11 increased by 24% in 2020 compared to previous years (Leeb et al., 2022). These mental health challenges were further influenced by factors such as parental stress, economic hardship, and the loss of normal social connections (Hart and Wen-Juihan, 2021). The psychological toll of these experiences on young minds has raised concerns about the potential long-term effects as we transition into the post-pandemic era.

This article seeks to explore the enduring psychological impact of the pandemic on children, emphasizing the importance of addressing these mental health challenges. It examines recent research and mental health trends, aiming to highlight strategies that educators, parents, and policymakers can adopt to support children's mental well-being in the years to come.

II. Literature Review

Impact of COVID-19 on Mental Health

The mental health consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on children have been a significant focus of research, with numerous studies documenting a surge in mental health challenges among young populations. A review by Racine et al. (2021) analyzed studies across various countries and found that symptoms of depression and anxiety among children and adolescents doubled compared to pre-pandemic levels, affecting roughly 20-25% of this age group globally. This rise in mental health issues can be attributed to multiple stressors, including the unpredictability of the pandemic, fear of infection, and the prolonged absence of regular social interactions. A study by Ma et al. (2022) found that anxiety, depression, and social isolation were the most prevalent mental health issues affecting children during this period. Ma's team observed that many children and adolescents

experienced disrupted routines, with exposure to irregular sleep schedules, extended screen time, and restricted access to outdoor activities and peer interactions. These factors likely contributed to the increase in reported sleep disorders among young people. In comparison, a study by Serafini et al. (2020) reported that the quarantine period appears to have significant and disruptive effects on individuals' mental health, impacting the short term and also extending into the long term the psychological strain imposed by social distancing and lockdowns.

Certain mental health conditions, notably anxiety and depression, were particularly affected by pandemic-related disruptions Leeb et al., (2022). Wang et al. (2022), in large-scale research, reported an increase in anxiety and depressive symptoms among children compared to the pre-pandemic era. Studies like Cori et al. (2021), LeDoux (2014), Baldassarre et al. (2020), and Mertens et al., (2020) noted that the unpredictability of COVID-19 transmission, fear for individual safety alongside concerns for family members' health, contributed significantly to anxiety. Social isolation led to a marked increase in anxiety and depressive symptoms, with some children experiencing mood changes, sleep disturbances, and a loss of interest in previously enjoyed activities (Meade, 2021).

Similarly, another study by Jackson et al. (2021) highlighted the role of environmental factors, such as restricted outdoor activities and limited social interactions, in intensifying feelings of social isolation as reported that 76.4% of adolescents found that spending time outdoors in nature helped them cope with the stress brought on by COVID-19. Their findings align with those from the study by Hazlehurst et al. (2022), suggesting that children with access to parks showed better mental health and lower levels of depressive symptoms than children without access to outdoor environments.

The adverse effects of prolonged lockdowns and remote learning on children's social and emotional development underscore the urgent need for targeted interventions and support services. Research by Rodriguez-Monge (2023) and Almeida (2021) emphasized that extended isolation during lockdowns impaired the development of social skills, especially in younger children, who rely on peer interaction to build emotional intelligence. According to their study, children exhibit delays in social skills and become more vulnerable to depression and anxiety.

Comparatively, a study by Richardson et al. (2023) explored the Impacts of Remote Learning and In-Person Instruction Transitions on the Mental Health of Children and their Caregivers. Richardson's team found that during remote learning, children exhibited heightened mental health challenges. Upon resuming in-person learning, some children experienced a reduction in these difficulties, while others saw their mental health issues intensify. The return to a school environment may have ensured a stronger sense of belonging for some, as the increased physical presence with peers and teachers allowed for more frequent interactions. These positive interactions with peers and teachers have been associated with reductions in anxiety and depression. These findings, when juxtaposed with those of the American Psychological Association (2021), describe the compounded impact of lockdowns and remote learning on the mental health of children, both social and emotional facets of childhood development.

Vulnerable Populations: Children with ADHD and Anxiety Disorders

Children with pre-existing mental health conditions, such as ADHD and anxiety disorders, faced unique challenges during the pandemic which worsened their condition (Lewis et al 2022). Studies by Santosh et al. (2023) and He et al., (2021) found that children with ADHD experienced heightened symptoms during periods of remote learning, as the lack of structured, in-person support made it challenging for them to stay focused and engaged. Research by Galvin et al. (2022) discussed the difficulties mental health professionals faced in providing adequate support to these children. Many clinicians shifted to telehealth, which presented challenges, as young children with ADHD often struggled to engage effectively in online therapy sessions and lacked hands-on care from the therapist. The rapid shift to virtual consultations limited the ability to provide comprehensive care for children with complex mental health needs and proper diagnosis (Tully et al. (2021). This limitation contrasts with the findings of Damian et al (2022) which indicated that older children and teenagers with anxiety benefited from telehealth services, showing fewer barriers to accessing online care. Together, these studies highlight the varied experiences of children with pre-existing mental health issues during the pandemic, emphasizing the importance of tailored, adaptable mental health support in crisis scenarios.

III. Long-Term Psychological Effects Of Covid-19 On Children

Research by Racine et al. (2021) found 25.2% and 20.5% elevated increases respectively in children and adolescents' clinical diagnosis of anxiety and depressive symptoms during the pandemic compared to pre-pandemic levels. For some, the uncertainty and disruption of daily life became traumatic, especially for those who experienced illness or loss within their families.

An early study by Ryan (2021) examines COVID-19's impact on mental health in an educational setting through a mixed-methods approach. The study engaged children and parents via questionnaires and semi-structured interviews to assess mental health challenges. Results indicated that 55.37% of children and 22.48% of

adults participated, with findings showing coping skills as both a positive and negative factor. Participants commonly reported isolation and disrupted routines as stressors. Conclusions suggest COVID-19 has both positively and negatively impacted mental health, though findings are not easily generalizable due to high variability. Subsequently, a clearer study with more direct results from Aljaberi et al. (2023) using a mixed-method approach examined these effects among 999 participants across 20 countries, employing both qualitative themes and quantitative measures to analyze mental health outcomes. Participants completed validated scales like the Impact of Event Scale-Revised (IES-R) for trauma, Patient Health Questionnaire-9 (PHQ-9) for depression, Generalized Anxiety Disorder Scale (GAD-7) for anxiety, and the Insomnia Severity Index (ISI). Results indicated high levels of trauma-related symptoms, which were correlated with anxiety, depression, and sleep disorders. Qualitatively, themes such as threats to life, lack of support, and disruptions to family and professional life emerged, illustrating the broad spectrum of COVID-19's impact. This study describes the need for trauma-informed mental health interventions, particularly those targeting anxiety and depression, as well as public health initiatives to promote healthy sleep and mental well-being. The strong associations between pandemic-induced stress and psychological disorders highlight the importance of comprehensive, accessible mental health support systems as populations continue to cope with the pandemic's long-term effects.

Effects on Social and Emotional Development

Social skills development, in particular, suffered due to long-term limited in-person interactions with peers. Studies by Junge et al., (2020) and Rodriguez-Monge et al. (2023) highlight how reduced social interaction during formative years impaired children's ability to develop essential skills like empathy, social competence, communication, and conflict resolution. Children, especially younger ones, missed out on playground interactions and group activities, which are foundational for building social competence as statistics show that 90% of children admitted missing their friends, and 87% missed playing with children entirely (Kourti et al., 2021). Increased screen time and limited face-to-face contact with educators and friends have impacted emotional growth. The long-term effect of higher screen time during the pandemic was associated with decreased attention spans and an increase in behavioral problems (Wu et al., 2024). Children who spent excessive time in virtual classrooms or on digital devices for entertainment may have had reduced opportunities for meaningful interpersonal connections, affecting their emotional resilience and self-regulation skills.

Mental Health Challenges in the Post-Pandemic Era

Anxiety levels among children remain elevated, with many experiencing apprehensions about returning to in-person classes, socializing with peers, and managing health-related fears (Singh et al., 2020). Mental health symptoms, including anxiety and depression, which increased during the pandemic, persist even as children return to normal routines. Park et al., (2024) studied nearly 1,400 children and reported sustained high levels of anxiety, inattention, and depressive symptoms, suggesting that these challenges may not easily resolve on their own as life returns to pre-pandemic patterns. Factors such as prior mental health issues, family stress, and social isolation were linked to ongoing struggles in managing post-pandemic anxiety (park et al., 2024).

The prolonged nature of these symptoms highlights the need for targeted mental health support for children as they adjust to the return to traditional classroom and social environments. Some experts recommend longitudinal tracking of mental health symptoms in children to better understand the full impact of the pandemic on their developmental and psychological health. This would allow educators, parents, and health professionals to implement effective interventions and support as children continue to navigate this complex transition (Moulin et al., 2023)

Support Strategies for Mental Health Educators and Psychologists

Trauma-informed care has become essential in supporting children's mental health in the post-pandemic era allowing discussion with parents to manage mental health (Chokshi et al., 2021). Trauma-informed approaches emphasize safety, trust, and empowerment, which can be crucial for children affected by pandemic-related stressors (Macedo et al., 2022). Schools and mental health professionals can benefit from implementing policies and interventions that specifically address these unique challenges. Therapeutic practices such as mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) and cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) have shown promise in helping children manage anxiety and depressive symptoms (Kriakous et al., 2020).

Educators can sustain long-term emotional literacy by incorporating mental health education into the curriculum, teaching students about emotions, coping strategies, and resilience, including creating safe spaces in classrooms where children can express their feelings openly has proven effective in reducing anxiety and fostering peer support (Semchuk et al., 2022). Integrating mental health support within educational settings ensures that students receive continuous support from trusted adults throughout their recovery.

Role of Parents and Caregivers

Establishing healthy routines, such as regular sleep patterns, balanced screen time, and daily outdoor activities, provides children with a sense of stability and security (Krupa-Kotara., 2023). Research by Mocho et al. (2025) highlights that parental involvement and supportive communication significantly contribute to children's emotional resilience during stressful times.

Reducing screen time is another effective strategy. By prioritizing physical activities and family interactions over digital entertainment, parents can help children reconnect with their environment and improve their mental well-being. With consistent support from both families and educational institutions, children are better positioned to navigate the long-term psychological effects of the pandemic and rebuild their social and emotional health.

IV. Discussion

Research on the psychological impact of COVID-19 on children highlights an urgent need to translate these findings into tangible support systems. The prolonged effects of social isolation, increased screen time, and routine disruptions have had a profound impact on children's mental health, with many experiencing elevated levels of anxiety, depression, and social withdrawal (Almeida et al., 2021). However, the practical application of these research insights into effective mental health interventions is complex. Variability in symptoms across age groups, individual circumstances, and unique responses to trauma make standardized solutions challenging to implement.

As an immediate response, schools and mental health organizations can adopt trauma-informed approaches, which involve recognizing and addressing the effects of trauma with sensitivity and care. Integrating social-emotional learning (SEL) programs into school curricula presents a promising strategy, as these programs foster resilience, teach coping mechanisms, and help children better manage emotional challenges. Additionally, establishing structured routines within the school setting and providing safe spaces for emotional expression can promote a sense of stability and psychological safety.

Complementary programs, such as mindfulness exercises, regular counseling sessions, and peer support groups, offer children practical tools to address their mental health struggles. These interventions can collectively foster a more supportive and empathetic school environment, equipping children with the skills and confidence needed to navigate the lingering psychological effects of the pandemic.

Addressing Gaps in the Current Literature on Long-Term Mental Health Support for Children

While existing research has made significant progress in identifying mental health challenges stemming from the pandemic, there remain critical gaps in understanding the long-term needs of children as they mature. Much of the current literature focuses on immediate effects, yet the potential for these early-life stressors to evolve into chronic issues remains under-explored. For example, while we know that social isolation during formative years can impede social skills, further research is needed to assess whether this developmental delay could translate into lasting social or emotional difficulties in adulthood. Few studies examine culturally specific responses and support mechanisms for children from diverse backgrounds, including those from underserved communities. These children often have limited access to mental health services and pandemic-related disruptions may have exacerbated disparities in care. Future studies should address these discrepancies by focusing on how socioeconomic and cultural factors influence the recovery process. Understanding these positions is essential to developing inclusive interventions that are accessible to all children.

Future Considerations for Ongoing Support and Research into Child Mental Health Post-COVID-19

Moving forward, the importance of continued support for children's mental health cannot be overstated. One significant consideration for future research is the long-term tracking of children affected by the pandemic, with a focus on understanding how early pandemic experiences impact their mental health as they grow. Longitudinal studies will be essential in identifying patterns that can inform preventative interventions, helping to reduce the risk of these children experiencing chronic mental health issues as adults.

Furthermore, as schools and communities recover, it is important to consider sustainable models for integrating mental health resources into education systems. Policymakers should explore options for funding school-based mental health services, ensuring that support is consistently available. In addition, mental health professionals need ongoing training to address the unique, pandemic-related challenges children face, equipping them with the knowledge and skills to respond effectively.

Incorporating mental health assessments into routine pediatric care could also provide earlier detection of emerging issues, facilitating timely intervention. By embracing a multi-faceted approach, combining research, policy, and practical application, the healthcare and education systems can work together to build a robust framework of mental health support for children in the post-pandemic era.

V. Conclusion

This study explores the lasting mental health challenges children face as they transition back to normal routines post-pandemic. Key findings reveal that a significant proportion of children report sustained anxiety, depression, and social stress, with many struggling to reintegrate into classroom settings and social environments. These issues are compounded by factors such as prolonged isolation during lockdowns, increased family stress, and disruptions to daily routines (Singh et al., 2020; Park et al., 2024). The evidence emphasizes that these mental health issues are not transient; instead, they highlight a critical, ongoing need for long-term support structures that address these challenges.

The importance of proactively supporting children's mental health is very important as unresolved psychological difficulties can have far-reaching implications on their academic, social, and personal development. Addressing these issues is crucial to ensure resilience and help children build healthy coping mechanisms in a post-pandemic.

Given these findings, it is essential for mental health professionals, educators, and policymakers to work collaboratively in prioritizing children's psychological well-being. This can include implementing more school-based mental health programs, promoting access to counseling services, and creating supportive policies that address these unique post-pandemic needs. By committing to these actions, society can ensure that children receive the comprehensive support they need.

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