

The Impacts of a Pandemic on Child Development

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Abstract

This literature review explored how the Covid-19 pandemic placed strains on relationships between young children, infancy through Kindergarten, and their parents, educators and peers. Throughout the pandemic, restrictions such as school closures, social distancing, and face masks, were put in place as a means to protect people and keep them healthy. However, these restrictions also prevented young children from interacting and learning appropriate social and emotional skills. It takes patience, practice and guidance from family, caregivers, teachers and peers in order for children to learn these skills. Children's ability to develop social and emotional skills, as well as other areas of growth, were stunted due to the various restrictions put in place during the Covid-19 pandemic. While there are early indicators of how the pandemic has impacted young children's social and emotional development, more extensive research is needed across various populations including minority groups and families that consisted of essential workers.

Introduction

The relationships children had between parents, educators and one another were impacted by the pandemic. School closures, social distancing, face masks and other restrictions prevented young children from interacting and learning appropriate social and emotional skills. Learning these skills takes patience, practice and guidance from family, caregivers, teachers and peers (Meuwissen, 2022). When the pandemic set in, most children had to stay home, thus significantly reducing their social interactions with others (Watts & Pattnaik, 2023). Due to various restrictions throughout the pandemic, children's ability to focus on developing social and emotional skills, as well as other areas of growth, were stunted. The intention of this literature review is to explore how the pandemic impacted the social development and mental health of young children ranging from infancy to Kindergarten. It will also explore how the pandemic impacted the relationships children had between parents, educators, and the existing communities in which they lived in during this event.

Young Children: Infancy through Kindergarten

Children's Social Development

Throughout the pandemic, restrictions were put in place preventing children from engaging in environments such as school, childcare, extracurricular activities and playdates. Their inability to interact with one another will impact future relationships and approaches towards others. Researchers suggest that young children need recurring interactions with one another as a way to help create and maintain positive friendships, as well as develop problem solving skills (Stanton-Chapman, 2015). From birth, social behavior develops quickly throughout childhood. While infants and young children develop relationships between adults and siblings, there is a presence of unequal power within these relationships (Pepler & Bierman, 2018). Peer relationships are crucial because it provides children the opportunity to learn how to

engage with others who are equal to them. Children are able to choose who they want to engage with, learn new skills and adapt to new experiences.

When children were allowed to come together once more, there were still restrictions put in place that made it difficult to interact with one another, and their caregivers. While research continues to be conducted, there are factors that became visible throughout the pandemic indicating how face masks hindered a child's social development. Meuwissen (2022) discussed how wearing face masks could have impacted an infant's ability to learn and develop reciprocal interactions due to a caregiver's face being less visible, as well as "less face-like" (p. 40). For preschool-aged children, interacting with peers while wearing face masks made learning and understanding speech more difficult, as well as learning and remembering each other's names. (Meuwissen, 2022).

Children's Emotional Development

Reducing children's social interactions and disrupting their routine activities unexpectedly has led to regression in emotional behavior (Watts & Pattnaik, 2023). Prior to the pandemic, many children were able to interact with peers and reliable staff on a regular basis by attending childcare, school and other activities (Hoffman & Poll, 2024). As social and health restrictions were enforced upon people across the globe, children developed feelings of worry, fear and stress to contracting the virus. Children also experienced feelings of isolation and loneliness during this time (Watts & Pattnaik, 2023). Consistent high levels of stress can have negative impacts on children. Meherali et al. (2021) discussed how young children and adolescents had an increased likelihood of displaying depression, social difficulties and anxiety during and after the pandemic.

Face masks were another factor that proved to impact children's ability to develop emotional skills, primarily with infants through age five. Erwin and Frey (2023) discussed how it is well known that infants watch human facial movements to help them learn how to recognize and express their own emotions. Throughout the development of social and emotional skills, children begin to form the ability to create a connection between verbal and nonverbal communication. The ability to recognize facial expressions presents the opportunity for children to express their feelings through language, and control their own emotions. By using face masks, children were prevented from learning and developing these skills, thus potentially damaging how they typically have developed these skills prior to the pandemic (Erwin & Frey, 2023; Gori et al., 2021; Ogden & Fisher, 2015). Masks also made it more challenging for children to detect changes in emotions during social interactions with peers (Meuwissen, 2022).

Children's Behavioral and Academic Development

When navigating through social and emotional changes, there are other changes that can take place as well that impact a child's behavior and overall academic achievement. After being home for quite some time, teachers and childcare providers possibly saw an increase in children with separation anxiety (Meuwissen, 2022). Social distancing rules created a drastic change for children as well (Hoffman & Poll, 2024). Once deemed acceptable, children wanting or needing to be close to their teachers and peers turned into something that could no longer be allowed. Beyond social distancing was the struggle with adhering to quarantine rules. Due to the inconsistent schedules revolving around required quarantining and attendance, children were not receiving the same amount of in-person instruction when compared to pre-pandemic instruction. This information is reflective of actual attendance, and does not include virtual learning opportunities.

Parents of Young Children: Infancy through Kindergarten

Parent Observations

Parent observations will play a large role as research continues to explore the various ways the Covid-19 pandemic impacted young children. While children would have been attending school or childcare, restrictions forced many of them to stay at home (Meuwissen, 2022). Though the pandemic has ended, understanding the effects it had on children's social and emotional skills will take years to dissect. By interviewing parents about their experiences and observations made regarding their children's social and emotional development during the pandemic is a good starting point.

Watts and Pattnaik (2023) presented a study that included parent perspective in regards to the impact the pandemic had on children's social, emotional and practical skills. Parents felt that their children were deprived of social interactions during the pandemic. When asked about social distancing, parents felt that their child's activity levels were impacted negatively. Before the pandemic, children were able to play with friends, go places and "[burn] energy," (Watts & Pattnaik, 2023, p. 1545). When discussing their children's emotional challenges, parents included sadness, stress, attention-seeking behavior and the inability to self-regulate (Watts & Pattnaik, 2023). It was reported that parents felt their children were happy prior to the pandemic, and noticed depression and trauma set in once the pandemic took place. Parents also reported that due to their children's emotional challenges, behavioral changes occurred such as hitting, biting and spitting.

Parent Stress

When the pandemic began, people were faced with various challenges that no one had ever experienced before. This was particularly true for parents with young children. Parents were

placed under a great deal of stress due to having to work from home, as well as care for and teach their children full time (Erwin & Frey. 2023). When parents and children experience stress, interactions between them can become negative. High levels of parental stress can affect children greatly through the use of corporal punishment, abuse and neglect (Rodriguez et al., 2021).

There is also a correlation between parents who suffer from depression and anxiety, and child maltreatment and neglect (Todorovic et al., 2022). When parents are abusive or neglect their child, it is natural for the child to turn to others for support, care and protection (Graginic-Philippe et al., 2014; Ogden & Fisher, 2015). Teachers have typically been able to identify grief, depression, and trauma in children (Erwin & Frey, 2023). However, the pandemic prevented children from having someone else to turn to such as a teacher or caregiver in these types of situations.

Parent Approaches and Roles

Before the pandemic, parents were used to relying on others to care for and teach their children (Thibodeau-Nielsen et al., 2021). In an effort to help children continue developing their social and emotional skills, as well as display positive mental health, there are approaches parents can take to support their children beyond the pandemic experience. Throughout the pandemic years, children grew discouraged due to their relationships with parents and caregivers being damaged from stress, trauma and restrictions (Erwin & Frey. 2023). One of the best ways a parent can support their children moving forward is by providing encouragement. It is recommended that this can be done through teacher-student-parent relationships, as well as family therapy.

Another way a parent can provide support to their child post pandemic is through empathy (Erwin & Frey. 2023). Our children learn how to identify feelings when they are

modeled by adults. When showing empathy, parents create a connection that supports their child's emotional growth and development. By acknowledging their child's feelings regarding the result of the pandemic, parents are providing supports to their children in learning how to control their emotions that might not have been developed during isolation. This can help their children as they navigate how to engage with others in social settings.

Teachers, Schools and Childcare Centers for Young Children: Infancy through Kindergarten

Teacher and Caregiver Observations

Similar to parents, teachers and caregivers are noticing differences in children's social, emotional and behavioral development when comparing where children were at before the pandemic versus where they are now after the pandemic. The study presented by Watts and Pattnaik (2023) also featured observations made by teachers who work with Preschool and Kindergarten children. By having insight to what teachers are observing gives us a better understanding of how the pandemic impacted children, and allows professionals in various fields to determine what next steps are in helping these children catch up to where we feel they should be in terms of social, emotional and behavioral development.

When asked about the impact the pandemic has had on children's social development, Kindergarten teachers noticed signs that incoming Kindergarteners were lacking socialization experiences when compared to students in past years (Watts & Pattnaik, 2023). Children are having difficulty sharing, and not interacting as a group. This could be from children being at home, and having the flexibility of doing what they want without any challenges. Due to social distancing and quarantining, children did not have as many opportunities to work on developing the skills needed for interactions such as conflict-resolution, problem-solving, creative thinking, and having reciprocal conversations. Of all these situations, the greatest thing children missed

out on was play. Through play, children continue developing their language, as well as social-emotional skills. This component was put on hold during the pandemic.

A delay in emotional development was also observed by preschool and Kindergarten teachers (Watts & Pattnaik, 2023). Children displayed emotional issues such as being scared, anxious, sad, lost, stressed, cautious and having the inability to regulate their emotions. Emotional immaturity is also being displayed by an increase with pouting, and refusing to continue when struggling with a given task. Throughout the pandemic, there was a sense of insecurity and sadness in children, including separation anxiety from their parents. Associated with the inability to manage their emotions, teachers are reporting that children are exhibiting an increase in behavioral issues such as tantrums, looking for negative attention, poor listening skills, lying, and displaying aggression and disrespect.

Erwin and Frey discussed observations made by early childhood teachers regarding behavioral changes in young children. A study conducted at Harvard University was referenced within their analysis, finding that “53% of educators observed increased tantrums, sadness, crying, and difficulty separating from parents – even among children who expressed excitement about returning to their classrooms” (Erwin & Frey, 2023, p. 127). Observations made amongst educators raised concerns regarding children being ready for Kindergarten (Hanno et al, 2021). Due to restrictions placed throughout the pandemic, young children’s educational foundation was missing essential social, emotional and academic skills. If educators focus on academic gaps prior to addressing social and emotional needs, there could be possible increases of behavioral disruptions among young children.

Teacher and Caregiver Stress

Prior to the pandemic, preschool teachers were already reporting poorer mental health in comparison to other professions despite that their well-being is crucial for improving the quality of education and student success (Souto-Manning & Melvin, 2022). There is a significant relationship between teacher health and well-being in regards to practice including “classroom climate, teacher-child interactions, instruction, and communication with families, as well as young children’s learning and development,” (Souto-Manning & Melvin, 2022, p. 35). Throughout the pandemic, regulations were put in place as an effort to keep people safe and healthy (Porter et al., 2020). Many of these regulations fell on teachers including maintaining social distancing rules, keeping the room and school clean, and ensuring proper hand washing techniques were being followed.

Preschool teachers also faced the challenge of following staff to child ratios and licensing requirements throughout the pandemic (Hoffman & Poll, 2024). Teachers had to work longer days with few breaks due to not having enough staff. These stresses had a negative impact on children and families. Prior to the pandemic, parents and visitors were allowed in the classroom. There was also more communication between teachers and parents. Limiting the interactions between teachers and parents added to the stress teachers were feeling. All of these barriers ultimately impacted the children, and their social and emotional development.

Teacher and Caregiver Approaches and Roles

As a society, adults tend to rely heavily on their children’s teachers and caregivers to provide the proper guidance and support needed to ensure successful social and emotional development. Continuing to keep children enrolled in preschools and childcare centers proved to be beneficial because children were able to utilize resources teachers and schools/centers

provided (Hoffman & Poll, 2024). The pandemic required teachers to find new ways to communicate with families, creating more authentic relationships with parents. Due to many families being home-bound during the pandemic, teachers provided age-appropriate activities virtually as a way for parents to cope with stress. This created a sense of engagement and purpose in their work because parents appreciated their contributions. Essentially, these approaches to effective communication helped to elevate some of the stress the pandemic caused.

Moving forward, early childhood educators are going to be welcoming children who have had less experience in social settings. These children will not be used to the expectations and demands of a social environment when compared to children from pre-pandemic years (Meuwissen, 2022). Our teachers will be the ones parents rely on to catch their children up on social and emotional skills, as well as acceptable behaviors. By placing these types of responsibilities on teachers requires extensive support from parents, administrators, and health and government entities. The education and workforce sectors need policies that focus on providing an adequate number of staff, training and professional development focusing on social and emotional development, and referral services to provide families in need of greater support. It is crucial that society acknowledges the role educators play in the development of children. Without resources, children are ultimately the ones who will suffer.

Social Injustice and Inequality towards Young Children: Infancy through Kindergarten Minority Communities

While society was trying to find the best ways to navigate through the pandemic, there were other barriers minority populations and cultures were facing that were impacting children. Many Black and Hispanic children were significantly impacted due to the challenges of the pandemic, more so than White children (Grills et al., 2022; Holder et al., 2021). When

combining centuries of ongoing racism with the pandemic, there were more negative effects on minority populations (Henning-Smith, et al., 2021). Communities of color are often exposed to unsafe and unhealthy environments, leading to higher levels of depression and lack of parent-competency in parents (Moore & McDowell, 2014). Combine these challenges, and there is an increased probability of more parental and caregiver stress, creating additional negative interactions between parents or caregivers and the children in their care (Grills, et al., 2022; Thibodeau-Nielsen et al., 2021).

Erwin and Frey (2023) also discussed the barriers rural communities faced throughout the pandemic. Black and Indigenous residents faced higher mortality rates, while Hispanic residents had poorer access to health care. Many of these minority communities lacked health insurance, as well as financial resources (Grills, et al., 2022; Holder et al., 2021; Thibodeau-Nielsen et al., 2021). While minority communities were facing enough challenges already, there was another critical piece that came into play. Remote education became a necessity during the pandemic (Erwin & Frey, 2023). There was a lack of technological resources including computers and internet which caused many minority children to not be able to participate in school.

Teachers in Minority Communities

During the pandemic, minority communities located in urban settings had early childhood teachers facing more challenges when compared to other teachers who worked in communities located in suburban towns with higher income (Souto-Manning & Melvin, 2022). These challenges included worsened stress, depression, food insecurity, physical illness, poor quality of life including exhaustion, and staff turnover. Early childhood teachers within minority communities were more likely to experience the inability to properly function emotionally, nor

did they have a sense of control over their classroom environment. Stresses such as these have negatively impacted teacher absences and teacher-student relationships.

Souto-Manning and Melvin (2022) conducted a study that combined stress theory with race-based traumatic stress among Latinx and Black early childhood educators amidst the pandemic within the city of New York (Souto-Manning & Melvin, 2022). Their study found that early childhood teachers experienced severe challenges impacting their stress levels, health and well-being, sleep and quality of life during the pandemic. Various factors played into these findings including race, environment, experience, and if teachers had children of their own. When teachers were faced with these challenges, children within these communities were negatively impacted. Placing responsibility on teachers to further navigate these student traumas increased their stress even more.

Conclusion

If the pandemic taught us one thing, it is that children can adapt quickly and become resilient in times of hardship when given the proper tools and support. Children have ambition to explore and develop in a positive manner (Meuwissen, 2022). Even though children tend to have the ability to attain successful results when faced with negative experiences, they are not resistant to the effects of the pandemic. They rely on adults to provide them with the tools necessary to successfully develop social and emotional skills required to participate in various environments. Developing these skills takes time, practice and patience. While some communities have more resources to address the aftermath of the pandemic, more research needs to be done as a means to provide adequate resources to communities in need, especially minority communities.

While it will take years to know how children's social and emotional development were impacted by the pandemic, interviews and observations are a good place to start. One thing is clear, and that is the roles parents and educators play are essential in children's development. By implementing encouragement and empathy, parents and teachers will be supporting children's development in social and emotional skills, as well as promoting positive mental health. While this literature review had a heavier focus on parents and children who had to stay home throughout the pandemic, more research needs to be done on essential workers, and the impacts the pandemic had on their children and family unit as a whole.

Beyond strong relationships with adults, children need to build relationships with one another. "Early friendships also build lifelong skills of collaboration and provide experiences with meaningful relationships with others, which are key to resilience across the lifespan" (Meuwissen, 2022, p. 39). By engaging with peers, children are able to interact with others who hold equal power. Through play, children learn how to express their emotions and engage in socially acceptable behavior.

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