

## **“COVID-19: The Virus’s Impact on Children”**

By Irene Tyler

### **Introduction**

According to the Oxford English Dictionary (2021), Covid-19 is “an acute disease in humans caused by a coronavirus, which is characterized mainly by fever and cough and is capable of progressing to pneumonia, respiratory and renal failure, blood coagulation abnormalities, and death, especially in the elderly and people with underlying health conditions.” Since March of 2020, the world has been relatively “shut down” because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Schools switched to online learning, stores closed, and only essential establishments were permitted to continue servicing their community, while still following the recommended guidelines from the Center for Disease Control. The current pandemic has caused people and their families across the world to undergo many new stressors. This current scenario has impacted education, and specifically students, significantly. Researchers are currently concerned with the declining mental and physical health of school aged children because of the pandemic. Along with investigating the effects the pandemic has had on children, researchers have also provided suggestions to help improve student mental and physical health while school is closed; as Vijay Mittal, Joseph Firth, and David Kimhy state “This [diminishing the mental health effects from COVID-19] will involve working together with policy makers, as well as supporting, educating, and empowering teachers, parents, and of course the youths themselves.” There has been a lot of evidence that exemplifies that although Covid-19 has brought some positive aspects, it has had a more substantial negative impact on children. It is important to

focus on child development, mental health, and physical health through a psychological and health viewpoint right now so that children growing up in the pandemic have a better chance of not developing mental, physical, or developmental health issues in their future because of COVID-19.

## **Literature Review**

The pandemic's impact on mental health in children may come from several aspects of life. Tummala and Muhammad describe the effects that the pandemic has had on children by pointing out key details such as "family life, lack of support offered through schools, economic difficulties, and minority/marginalized groups" (2020). The authors give significant importance to the idea of a "second pandemic" because although children and young people have not, in most cases, become deathly sick from the pandemic, they have had key elements of their lives dissolved and have lost many of the things keeping them on track for healthy development (Tummala & Muhammad, 2020). Cuartas also focuses on impacts but through the lens of family and home life of children. Both authors focus on the possible increase of domestic violence and maltreatment because students are home more with stressed family members. The importance of these aspects of student life can be instrumental in ensuring child safety and development.

Mental health and physical health are directly connected. Mittal describes the importance of combating sedentary activity in youth during the COVID-19 pandemic. His article discusses the mental health decline of students since the pandemic. Although it is easy to say students should be staying active, when everything is closed it is hard for that to happen; the article addresses this issue by providing ample ideas and explanations on how to keep students healthy and active while still staying safe (2020, p. 1197-1198). The authors Tamala and Muhammad

also discuss the importance of physical activity in children during the pandemic. This source describes the importance of physical activity in children and how their behavior towards exercise is fundamentally important to a variety of health including mental, physical, and social. The authors stress that now, more than ever, it is important to understand and promote young children to engage in physical activity to help improve mental health and create healthy habits (Tummala and Muhammad, 2020). When good physical activity habits are being enforced at a young age, children are more likely to develop a healthy lifestyle in their adult lives. Youth sports programs benefit young children's physical, mental, and social health (Tummala and Muhammad, 2020). Since the pandemic, young children have been stuck at home out of schools and away from youth sports programs, and the authors stress the importance of the effect of the pandemic can have on school aged children. Tummala and Muhammad discuss the importance of obtaining an "understanding of environmental and psychological factors that impact children's motivation towards physical activity and the outcomes of physical fitness, cognition, quality of life, and well-being (2020).

Along with the importance of the physical activity of children during the pandemic, development is an important aspect of child growth to focus on. Since the pandemic schools have been closed not allowing for students to interact with friends and classmates, and teachers and role models. For some children, school is the only place they can receive support and develop correctly so without it, a toll will be taken on child development. The article written by Cuartas explores the topic of exposure to threat in a child's home that can cause improper development and result in issues within that child's future (2020, p. S195-S196). The article states: "Threatening experiences like witnessing domestic violence or experiencing physical, psychological, or sexual abuse can trigger pervasive consequences for children's neural

development” (Cuartas, 2020, p. S195-S196). Along with Cuartas, Tummala and Muhammad also focus on development within children. The authors express the importance that school has for child development. The risk of child abuse and neglect becoming more prevalent due to parental stressors and lack of “teachers who are a large population of child abuse reporters” is also included. Without teachers to notice behaviors such as abuse child development will be impacted severely, due to the situations they will be stuck in without any help. With child development, and mental and physical health at risk this issue needs to be focused on and the work that needs to be done must start now.

### **Confirmation**

Throughout the pandemic mental health has been a concern for many. For many children, the pandemic has caused schools to close resulting in more time spent at home. While this consequence can have a multitude of positive effects on children, it can also have negative ones too. The mental, physical, and developmental health of children are important aspect of life, especially now with the dramatic shift in the world today. Without school, children are deprived of various aspects that affect their mental, physical, and developmental health. According to Tummala and Muhammad, “Over 188 countries suspended school and research to date has shown that children and adolescents are experiencing mental distress resulting from the closure of schools, lack of routine and activities while social distancing. Students no longer have access to many mental health services, food supplement programs, peer support, and the teachers who represent a significant portion of reports of alleged child abuse and neglect” (2020). The mental health of children could be suffering because of lack of counselors, socialization with peers, or circumstances at home. Their physical health could also be in danger, some children rely on

school lunches to keep them properly nourished, and activities such as recess, physical education class, and youth sports programs to keep them active. Teacher's not having the opportunity to report suspicion of child abuse can also be detrimental to student health. When exposed to abuse of any kind, children are more susceptible to mental health and developmental problems. Along with these factors, school closures also decreased social contacts and increased family time for children which has caused both positive and negative impacts on suicide. (Isumi et al., 2021, p. 5). In sixty-three studies conducted of 51,576 people, a connection between loneliness and mental health problems in children was found. It was observed that mental health problems from loneliness in childhood could have long term effects up to nine years. The most predominant mental health problem being depression. It has also been observed that in previous pandemics mental health problems in children were five times likely to occur if the children were isolated or quarantined (Loades et al., 2020, p. 1218-1239).

The mental health of children with special educational needs is also at risk. According to Ashbury, being away from school "creates a uniquely stressful situation for children with SENDs and their families" (2020). In many cases children with special educational needs or disabilities are on strict routines and have support through schools, and because of the school closing due to the pandemic many of these students have their entire lives disrupted and do not get the full support they need; not to mention that it is now the untrained parent's responsibility to now ensure their child is developing correctly. "These families were also asked what support they would like during COVID-19 and their responses are reported elsewhere. Frequently mentioned suggestions included specialist professional advice for parents focused on how to meet their child's educational and mental health needs; setting appropriate tasks and resources for home learning; and providing opportunities to see familiar faces, albeit remotely. The data presented

here, from the same group of families, indicates that support along these lines would be beneficial to many families with a child who has SENDs” (Asbury et al., 2020). By providing these parents and all parents with needed resources and focusing on the mental, physical, and developmental aspects of children now, issues can be avoided. All children can be affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and it is important to ensure that they can develop and grow in a healthy way without any adverse effects, their physical health is also an important issue that needs to be addressed.

Children are also at risk for increased sedentary behavior because of the pandemic. According to Mittal, the low activity children are getting because of the lack of school is problematic, especially for the children who rely on the ability to interact and play with peers to reach milestones in their development and children who need more exercise than others (2020, p. 1197-1198). This is especially important to focus on because the physical activity habits that children make when they are young can have a direct impact on motivation and exercise habits in their future, which can also help support a healthy development. Today there is a large problem with childhood obesity in the United States and now that Covid-19 has put restrictions on what children can and cannot do, it is important to focus on supporting children and encouraging physical activity and healthy habits safely (Zhang & Lee, 2020). Since the population of children is so heavily impacted and disrupted by the closures of schools and the children being confined are in “developmental periods that overlap with the emergence of serious mental illness” it is principal to give thought to the mental health consequences of children and create innovative ways to diminish sedentary activity within this age group (Mittal, 2020, p. 1197-1198). Zhang and Lee state that to encourage children to develop a healthy lifestyle during the pandemic there must be an understanding of environmental and psychological components that involve

children's motivation which becomes an important issue contributing to health outcomes such as: "health-related physical fitness, cognition, quality of life, and well-being" (2020). Physical health directly impacts the mental and developmental status of children so by focusing on it now, the mental, physical, and development health of these children can be supported and prepare the children for their futures.

The lack of school has affected children in a multitude of ways, specifically mentally, physically, and developmentally. When focusing on social interaction, healthy habits, mental health practices, and everything discussed previously, it is important to consider the urgency of this viable population of young people and what they are experiencing and how that will affect their futures. Taking everything into consideration in the present can help diminish these effects that children are experiencing right now to help them develop healthily. Without in person school, they miss out on a lot and although many schools have switched to online learning many problems from that have arisen. "Increased virtual activities like online school comes at a price: we are already seeing increases in cyberbullying, substance abuse, and online pornography. Children with special needs receiving school-based assistance are at higher risk from domestic violence, suffer from a lack of access to skilled therapy which is stalling their developmental progress" (Tummala & Muhammad, 2020). Not only have these children been impacted because of the change in the dynamics of school, they may have experiences at home that can impact them too.

The homelife of a child is critical to healthy development and mental and physical health. If children are within homes that cannot be fully supportive of their developing minds and bodies many issues may arise. Especially with the new stress of the pandemic there is a higher

probability of mistreatment of children. Cuartas states that: stressors that are situational in family settings such as trust, anxiety about the future, and economic worries created from COVID-19 can have negative psychological effects on children and their family; these effects include PTSD, fear, and aggression issues which can burnout parents and cause them to not appropriately react to and care for their children (2020, p. S195-S196). This can cause violence in the home and expose children to stressors that may cause developmental, and mental health problems. Along with at home violence comes the risk of physical, sexual, mental abuse issues that can impede the cognitive development of children. According to Cuartas, “experiences involving harm or threat of harm alter social and emotional processing to facilitate the detection of and response to environmental threats” and that “heightened reactivity to and vigilance toward contextual threats can impair children’s emotion regulation and promote a hostile attribution bias” (2020, p.S195-S196). This can cause children to have problems such as depression and anxiety and will create a generation of people who are more likely to have these psychological issues if not focused on right now. “During infancy, early-childhood, or even adolescence, the central nervous system (CNS) is in a vulnerable developmental window, in which the occurrence of any stressful challenges at the time of critical periods can trigger short- and long-term physiological, cognitive, and behavioral damage” (Saggiaro et al., 2021). So, it is of utmost importance to focus on these children and their health so that these issues can be avoided; mental and developmental health can be tremendously impacted by violence and issues revolving around the home, which inevitably effects their future.

An important group of children to focus on during this period of time is children that come from resource constrained countries, and communities. Tummala and Muhammad discuss the importance of this and how the largest factors that indirectly effect children during this

pandemic are the following: “the socioeconomic fallout and at times the measures being taken to mitigate the impact of the pandemic” (2020). The authors state that children from these groups could be affected by extreme poverty, getting behind in learning from school closures and little to no option of online learning, the higher risk of exploitation, and malnourishment and lack of healthcare (Tummala & Muhammad, 2020). Along with children from low resource and low socioeconomic status, children with special educational learning needs and disabilities are impacted also. Ashbury discusses how most families that have children with these needs report that their lives have been heavily impacted from the pandemic. These families and their children have experienced mental health issues causing anxiety and fear within their lives. Other families have attested to feelings of distress, low mood, and stress because of the pandemic (Asbury et al., 2020). Children and their families that are a part of the SENDs (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities) community are more likely to experience these mental health crises and in turn cause for stressed parents who may react to their children’s needs in a way that is less than adequate. Although all children must be focused on during this unpredictable time, it is crucial that the children and families of low socioeconomic status and special educational needs and disabilities be focused on also.

Another important aspect to focus on is the physical activity of children at home. Mittal states that low physical activity can increase the chance of mental health illnesses and that by participating in individual and group exercises, children can develop “social support structures and resiliency factors, as well as in engaging mechanisms driving the onset and persistence of serious mental illness” (2020, p. 1197-1198). A good attitude about physical activity can help create healthy habits in young children, and some children do not have the promotion of healthy activity at home, so it is important to focus on providing children with the necessary knowledge

and opportunity to promote physical health during the pandemic. When a child is in a stressful environment, there can be a reaction that children can rely on comfort through food that may not be healthy for them and could be one of the reasons for obesity in children. Many children have access to “high-fat diets during development and social isolation can lead to structural synaptic changes” within the child’s neural system which can have effects on cognition later in life (Saggiaro et al., 2021). There is also the aspect of technology in physical activity. Since it is hard for children to go outside and play most children are stuck inside all day long staring at a screen, so it is especially important that children are encouraged to limit their screen time and their caregivers help them to do other activities while still staying safe.

Not all children have a healthy and supportive homelife and the pandemic can cause these situations to be few and far between. This is important when considering the urgency that is needed to pull focus onto the developmental, physical, and mental health of children. By acting now these problems have a high chance of being diminished. The number of possibilities and action that can be taken now to help ensure these children a healthy future is limitless.

### **Counter Argument**

It is important to understand that because the pandemic is happening right now, in the present that many of the studies and information provided is limited. There has not been years’ worth of research done on the effects that COVID-19 can have on the development and mental and physical health of children. That being said, the information provided should not be taken lightly, some of the research is based off previous pandemics and known facts about the psychology and health of child development and the connection between environment and development. When it comes to children’s health, it is more important to take preventative

precautions now so that if there is even a small chance of tremendous impacts from the pandemic it is already taken care of, whereas if it is put off there will not be an option to go back in time to provide children with the help they need because the damage will already be done.

## **Conclusion**

The focus on children's mental, physical, and developmental health and how the pandemic has affected it is significant because it is happening right now and the opportunity to make a change is in the present. By taking needed action now during the crisis, problems regarding mental, physical, and developmental health caused by the pandemic can be prevented in children, ensuring they have an opportunity to a healthy lifestyle in their future. Lack of school and the changing homelife of children can have effects that could be detrimental so providing them with information, and necessary activities can help students to understand and practice mental health practices, physical activities, and meet developmental milestones. It is important to understand the connection between and importance of the focus on young children during this unsettling time, while providing measurable actions to help children and keep them safe. Not only can information help children, but the information provided can be helpful to parents, teachers, law makers, and major leaders in education so that decision that most benefit student mental, physical, and developmental health can be made.

Some suggestions to take into consideration to help ease the impact that COVID-19 has had on children are as follows: offering weekly and consistently available check-ins with students who may be at high risk for psychological issues or any students who feels the need for a sense of normalcy with someone supportive like a guidance counselor or professional, offer school lunch drives so that children who rely on school lunches for nutrition do not have to worry about

when or where they will get their next meal from, help teach children about the importance of mental health and mental health practices (i.e. meditation, positive affirmations, and taking a break to relax), allowing for students to interact with peers even on an online platform like zoom, most children get a break while doing online school so allowing students to stay on zoom and “hangout with friends” or have lunch together during their break can be a great way to provide students with healthy interaction, and lastly teaching students about how mental and physical health are connected and allowing them to have knowledge on the subjects so that they can take care of themselves is important. While these suggestions are limited and not every possible option, they are a good start and can help focus on children’s developmental, physical, and mental health while they grow up during the pandemic and ensure that they can have the best opportunity at a healthy future.

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