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HEIGHTEN CHILDREN'S ANXIETY FROM THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Heighten Children's Anxiety From the COVID-19 Pandemic

On the last day of 2019, a form of pneumonia was reported in the Chinese province of Wuhan. Days later, on January 9, 2020, the Chinese Centre for Disease Control and Prevention reported a new coronavirus, COVID-19 (Pisano et al., 2020). Soon, COVID-19 would spread worldwide. On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization declared that the spread of COVID-19 had become a pandemic (CDC, 2023).

In an attempt to slow the progress of the pandemic, many countries and U.S. states instituted isolation measures by ordering the closing of many public places, including restaurants, stores, parks, libraries, and schools. This situation made people homebound and were bereft of social contact. A lack of social factors can be harmful, especially for younger developing children. The lack of social interaction had mental health consequences and developmental problems once the pandemic was over. Social isolation and school closures significantly negatively impacted children's anxiety (Kauhanen et al., 2022). Many social factors brought on by social isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic would significantly heighten children's anxiety with harmful effects.

Heightened Anxiety

Research supports that children suffer an increase in anxiety during the social isolation of the pandemic. One study of German children ages six to 18 years suggested an increase of more than 20% in all mental illnesses in children during the pandemic (Śniadach et al., 2021). Researchers from the Screen for Child Anxiety-Related Emotional Disorders (SCARED) found a significant increase in generalized anxiety and school anxiety among children during the pandemic (Adegboye et al., 2021).

Research also reveals that certain groups of children experienced higher anxiety levels during the pandemic than others. One study revealed a higher anxiety level in girls (21%) than in boys (17.4%) (Garcia de Avila et al., 2020). In a study of 54 children aged 2-5 years, 17 children (31%) had worsened emotional problems, and out of 392 children aged 6-9 years, 175 children (45%) had worsened anxiety (Cost et al., 2022). That younger children did not experience as much anxiety as children a few years older could be due to the six to nine-year-old group starting school and developing an attachment to the school milieu and their classmates. The higher anxiety levels in girls compared to boys may be attributed to earlier emotional development.

Changes in the children's daily lives were a critical factor in heightened anxiety among school-aged children during the pandemic. These children missed their pre-pandemic activities, including attending school and being with friends (Egan et al., 2021). They also wanted to be able to return to school or catch up on schoolwork and stay caught up (Adegboye et al., 2021).

Researchers have indicated many other factors that increase anxiety among children other than changes in lives after the pandemic started. Pisano et al. (2022) suggest that the duration of the quarantine measures, the fear of being infected, frustration, and boredom were key causes of heightened anxiety among children during social isolation. Ghanamah and Eghbaria-Ghanamah

(2021) suggest that reduced interactions, exploration, and physical activities also contributed to heightened anxiety. Children who enjoyed going outside and interacting may have experienced greater stress during the isolation. Changes in daily life and routine during the pandemic's social isolation also seemed to heighten children's anxiety. In addition, children may have had difficulty understanding the circumstances necessitating social isolation during the pandemic, which may have caused higher stress than usual (Alvarenga et al., 2023).

Another factor heightening children's anxiety during the pandemic's social isolation is their parents' situation. Parents may have unintentionally passed on negative feelings to their children. Moreover, parental stress contributed to undetected child abuse and had significant negative impacts on children's anxiety (Kauhanen et al., 2022). In addition to experiencing negative emotions, children may become more cautious in their environment to avoid unnecessary and harmful actions from their parents. Children with parents in essential jobs also experienced higher anxiety levels, as their parents were busier than before the pandemic and may have reduced the time spent with their children (Garcia de Avila et al., 2020). Garcia de Avila et al. (2020) also mentioned that children kept in social distancing without their parents experienced higher levels of anxiety. Social distancing between parents might be caused by various reasons, including parents' well-being, health, and job demands.

In addition to parental situations, children in families with fewer economic resources had greater anxiety than other children. Lower-income families faced more challenges in supporting their children. Kauhanen et al. (2022) reported that their research revealed that decreases in children's mental health were most severe in families with low socioeconomic status and limited living space. Families with lower socioeconomic status struggle more to keep their families fed while caring for their children, as the number of jobs decreased during social isolation. Similarly,

Śniadach et al. (2021) report that their study revealed that children in families with financial stress experienced higher symptoms of anxiety during the pandemic.

Due to anxiety, children's behavior changed due to the pandemic's social isolation. Although many children adapted to the new pandemic situation, half of the children studied by Pisano et al. (2022) exhibited changes in their behavior, such as odd mood swings and expressing new and unusual fears. According to Pisano et al. (2022), young children's behavior became more erratic during the pandemic. The behavior may be attributed to their age, as they are naturally curious and eager to explore the outside world, which was more challenging during the pandemic.

Not only do children with anxiety behave differently mentally, but they also experience changes in physical activities. Children with anxiety tend not to spend time on physical activity (55.6%), experience sleep changes (67.5%), or changes in appetite during social isolation (Pavia et al., 2021). From their research, Pavia et al. (2021) postulated that children who do not engage in physical activities have a 1.37 times greater chance of developing anxiety than those who do, and children with anxiety are 3.12 times more likely to experience changes in appetite.

Long-Term Consequences

Anxiety from the pandemic may persist in children, causing long-term developmental problems. Untreated anxiety may lead to adverse social outcomes that can hinder children from socializing correctly, especially in critical situations and when communication is needed (Śniadach et al., 2021). Besides social outcomes, it can also have consequences on children's development, including sleep disorders, fears, and unhealthy contributions such as anxiety disorders and the prevalence of developmental delays (Paiva et al., 2021). These disorders can impede growth, such as lack of sleep and difficulty regulating emotions when necessary.

Anxiety in children can also result in adverse health consequences such as overloading the cardiovascular system, risking brain development (Paiva et al., 2021), and contributing to long-term impacts on brain development (de Figueiredo et al., 2021). These negative health contributions can later affect their growth, triggering heart diseases or untreatable brain damage. Moreover, anxiety can negatively impact the child's self-esteem and self-efficacy, weakening the immune system as a result (Urbina-Garcia, 2020). Since the immune system protects our body from infections, weakened immune systems can have a more challenging time protecting children from infections that cause health problems. Children with anxiety can be identified with physical symptoms, including stomach aches, headaches, nausea, vomiting, shortness of breath, or sleep issues (Cleveland Clinic, 2023). Children may exhibit changes in behavior if they are dealing with a stressful situation (Urbina-Garcia, 2020).

Anxiety accumulated during the pandemic not only negatively impacts children's growth but may also affect much of their adult lives. High anxiety may result in poor development and abilities that can interfere with their lives, causing conflict in adulthood (Biomedicinska et al., 2022) and an unhealthy adult lifestyle (Paiva et al., 2021). Faravelli et al. (2012) found that anxiety "may provoke dysfunctions in the central nervous system and alterations of the stress response that can endure during adulthood." It can trigger more anxiety and stress in adulthood, reducing the ability to make appropriate decisions. Regulating and controlling necessary emotions in essential situations and making unintended mistakes can be more challenging.

Conclusion

Because of increased anxiety levels in children during COVID-19, children can face potential future consequences that may affect them as adults. Some factors contributing to high anxiety include family status, parental situations, or changes in their daily lives. If this anxiety is

left untreated, it may lead to several consequences for children's health, development, and future adulthood. These consequences can hinder their prospects and impact their overall well-being. It is important to note that anxiety in children can be severe and should be addressed.

Future research is crucial to examine the long-term effects of social distancing in children. This examination can help gain a deeper understanding of anxiety and its impact, leading to the identification and development of more effective psychological and psychiatric interventions.

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