


## Impact of extended social isolation on spontaneous play in childhood

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### ABSTRACT

The coronavirus pandemic led to the interruption of school's routine and the social isolation and confinement of thousands of children revealing different childhoods in different contexts and cultures, bringing out vulnerabilities and impacting the child's cognitive, social and emotional development. In view of this scenario, the objective

was to understand the influence of extended social isolation on the frequency of children's participation in active play. Research with a cross-sectional quantitative approach, carried out in six municipal public schools of Alegrete with 164 children, 76 girls and 188 boys with twelve years of age. Data were collected via electronic form, and the descriptive analysis of qualitative variables was organized in tables of specific frequencies. The project was approved by the ethics committee with registration CAAEE44380221.8.0000.8091. The results showed that 46.3% of the children played computer games every day, 45.7% practiced some sport or dance, and 40% played outdoors. It is concluded that isolation brought profound changes in children's routine, affecting not only studies, but practically all aspects of their lives.

**Keywords:** Child, Pandemics, Social Isolation, Plays.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

When we think of children, most often come to mind, a group of boys and girls playing, running, jumping, cheerful, smiling, whether in the school space, in one in the square, or in the courtyard of the house.

Children seem to combine with the words movement, play, dance, play, fun, school and we would never imagine that from one day to the next, about 860 millions of these children from all over the world would stop going to school, move away from friends and be without the possibility of playing outdoors; all stemming from the extended social isolation imposed in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic. In the blink of an eye, these children were left without routine, without time to do chores, feed, bathe, play with friends, and it is known that routine is fundamental in the process of growth and development of the child. Families, very quickly, had to organize, or rather reorganize. In some families, isolation also confined fathers and mothers, in others, fathers and mothers had to continue working to maintain sustenance. Many children stayed at home alone, others stayed with brothers and or sisters, others with grandparents, uncles. The increase in conviviality in some families was salutary for some children who had the opportunity to spend more time with their mothers, however, in other families it exacerbated the violence against the child. The whole point of it all is that the COVID-19 pandemic has opened social inequality in our country.

According to the Scientific Committee of the Science for Childhood Center (2020), the rupture in the social fabric, school, friends, grandparents, which welcomes the child and gives him the symbolic bases of thought and instrumentation for action has given rise to some functional and behavioral difficulties such as fear, anger, sadness; That is, it impacted both the emotional system and the health of the child's own body. In this sense, parental figures are central to child development, especially in early childhood (zero to six years) (ROOS, TRUCCOLO, 2021; LINHARES; ENUMO, 2020).

In the search for a way to alleviate the tense, uncertain moment that children have gone through and, in a certain way, continue to pass, playing, performing outdoor activities, dancing and playing, can be useful strategies for children. Through the game the child internalizes rules and finds solutions to the conflicts that are imposed on him in real life.

Thus, considering that childhood is the result of a long historical and anthropological construction, not being equal for all children; considering that there are different children living different realities, wealth, poverty, ethnic, cultural, social, affective differences, that is, considering that childhood is plural (BARBOSA, 2000), that we set out to investigate these childhoods and, considering that most of the studies that investigate children in the context of the pandemic are not directed at children, that is, research on children is not conducted with the children we set out to do so and the following research question arises: What is the impact of the expanded social distancing imposed by the coronavirus pandemic on children's participation in spontaneous play?

Thus, the general objective of this study was to understand the impact of extended social isolation on spontaneous play in childhood.

To achieve the general objective, the following specific objectives were outlined: to ask the child about the frequency with which he played outdoors; - investigate the frequency with which the child accessed the computer, tablet or mobile phone; question how often the child played freely, danced, or did physical activity.

## **2 METHODOLOGY**

This is a cross-sectional quantitative approach, descriptive in relation to the objectives, and field as to its technical procedures carried out in six schools of the municipal public school system of Alegrete with 164 children, 76 girls and 188 boys with twelve years of age.

Data were collected via electronic form, and the descriptive analysis of qualitative variables was organized in tables of point frequencies. The project was approved by the ethics committee with registration CAAEE44380221.8.0000.8091. The criterion for selecting the schools was their location, that is, schools located in neighborhoods on the outskirts of the city because they have a greater number

of students with families benefiting from the "Bolsa Família Program", inserted in a territory of social and economic vulnerability. The research was conducted between the months of August 2021 to July 2022, that is, during the implementation of sanitary measures of social isolation and the use of remote teaching methodologies by the schools of the municipality and when the children return to the face-to-face form of teaching.

Both the researcher and the scientific initiation scholarship holder did not have, at any point in the research, direct contact with the children, ensuring that a vertical relationship was not established where the child felt pressured to answer the electronic form/questionnaire. The children received the invitation and the link to participate through their teachers, who are already accustomed and have established confidence. The teachers were instructed to explain that participation in the research did not constitute a school task, nor should it be considered an evaluation.

The electronic questionnaire was adapted from the instrument "Childhood Research in Times of Pandemic. 2020", which is part of a research conducted in Belo Horizonte, called "Childhood in Times of Pandemic – experiences of children from the great BH" and was provided by Dr. Isabel de Oliveira e Silva, Dr. Iza Rodrigues da Luz and Dr. Levindo Diniz Carvalho of the Center for Studies and Research on Childhood and Early Childhood Education (NUPEI), of the Federal University of Minas Gerais. An advantage that the person participating in the research has in answering an electronic questionnaire is that he chooses the time and time he wants to do it.

### **3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

The primary objective of this study was to understand the impact of extended social isolation on spontaneous play in childhood. For this, the following secondary objectives were outlined: to ask the child about the frequency with which he played outdoors; to investigate the frequency with which the child accessed the computer, tablet or cell phone; to question the frequency with which the child played freely, danced or did some physical activity.

A total of 164 children, 76 girls and 88 twelve-year-old boys participated in the study. The results showed that the most cited activities performed at home during isolation were helping the mother to tidy the house (38.46%), followed by playing (30.77%), doing school tasks (19.78%) and "fiddling" with the cell phone (11%). When asked how often they used the computer, tablet or cell phone for games or simply surfing the internet, that is, not using it for schoolwork, 46% (76) of the sample answered that every day and only 14% answered no day, suggesting not having any of the devices or not having internet. (TABLE 1). Many families, even before the pandemic, could no longer afford the costs of internet, tablets, computers to be used to attend classes remotely, a consequence of the inequality between social classes in Brazil. With the pandemic, this inequality was totally exposed,

and those who survived by working as self-employed and did not receive income from the government were left without work due to social isolation, and lockdown (SILVA, 2022). On the other hand, a study conducted by the Lemann & Itaú Social Foundation (2020) showed that 96% of households have at least one mobile device, and 77% have two or more devices; 42% have at least one computer or notebook and 46% have at least one TV with internet access. In the same study, only 58% of family members consider that the internet and equipment they have at home are enough for their children to perform the activities. There are practically no differences between the stages of teaching in this regard. Just over 4 in 10 students (42%) would not have, according to their families, adequate equipment and access conditions for the context of non-face-to-face education.

It is also added that recreational screen time has become the most frequent indicator of sedentary behavior in children and adolescents and according to the first Canadian Sedentary Behavior Guidelines for Children and Youth, it is characterized by recreational screen time above 2 hours per day (TREMBLAY et al., 2011). In the report on physical activity in Brazilian children and adolescents (2018), 26.9% of children had sedentary behavior in the pre-pandemic period (SILVA et al., 2018).

Table 1 Absolute and Relative Frequency with which 12-year-old girls and boys play on their computer, tablet or mobile phone during the week

Days of the week	Absolute Frequency	Relative Frequency
No day	23	14,02%
A few days	65	39,63%
Every day	76	46,34%
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>164</b>	<b>100,00%</b>

When asked about the practice of sports, dance or physical activity, the highest percentage, 45.7% (75) answered that they practice a few days a week (TABLE 2). A systematic review of the literature, conducted by Kharel et al. (2022) showed that the countries where children suffered the most from the impact of the pandemic in terms of reducing habitual physical activity were Brazil and Spain, and the countries where children maintained or even increased physical activity levels were Australia and Germany. One explanation for this may be the fact that both Brazil and Spain are among the countries hardest hit by the COVID-19 pandemic, with many infections and deaths. Lockdown restriction in Spain was strict and children could not go outdoors. Most Brazilian children live in apartments and have limited access to outdoor space for physical activity and sports. Also, the availability of a larger outdoor space near the place of residence can positively influence the child's physical activity. In another study, conducted by Dallolio et al. (2022) with 77 Italian children, showed that time spent in daily and weekly activity decreased significantly from the pre-pandemic period to the pandemic. With regard to regular physical activity, studies show that prior to the COVID-19

pandemic for every four school-age youth, three did not meet the recommended minimum of physical activity for health, sixty minutes daily, on every day of the week (WHO, 2018).

Table 2 Absolute and Relative Frequency with which 12-year-old girls and boys practice sports, dances or plays

Days of the Week	Absolute Frequency	Relative Frequency
No day	25	15,24%
A few days	75	45,73%
Every day	64	39,02%
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>164</b>	<b>100,00%</b>

The results showed that playing outdoors was no longer part of the routine of 34% of the sample, but it was no longer part of the routine of 18% of twelve-year-old girls and boys (TABLE 3). Living collectively, together with nature, is important at any time of life, especially in times of stress such as the coronavirus pandemic. The Brazilian Society of Pediatrics (2019) advises that children should have the daily opportunity to, at least for an hour, play, learn and live with nature. In this way they will be able to develop with full physical, mental, emotional and social health. Play is one of the main ways for children to develop sociability, experience their bodies, discover their abilities, be challenged to learn and overcome themselves.

Table 3 Absolute and Relative Frequency with which children played outdoors

<b>Play outdoors</b>	<b>Absolute Frequency</b>	<b>Relative Frequency</b>
From time to time	51	31,10%
No	29	17,68%
Yes, with my friends	56	34,15%
Yes, alone	26	15,85%
(empty)	2	1,22%
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>164</b>	<b>100,00%</b>

## 5 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The results showed that the period of social isolation influenced the frequency with which the children participated in active, that is, free, games of their own choosing. The daily use of electronic equipment, performing activities with movement a few times during the week and the reduction to outdoor coexistence with other children was perceived in the research. These are results that concern and suggest the need for continuity of research in order to outline strategies that can help children resume their routines.

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