



## Implications of social isolation for children due to the new coronavirus (COVID-19)

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### ABSTRACT

Social isolation, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, is a situation of adversity in the development of the child. Social withdrawal, deprivation of interacting with other people and changes in habits significantly increase children's daily stress. As a consequence of such measures, stress, anxiety, depression, emotional overload and worsening mental health have affected, especially children, as they still do not have the cognitive tools necessary to deal with this new reality. The objective of this work is to identify and discuss the implications of social isolation for children in times of a pandemic, in order to present its difficulties, consequences and recommendations. The present study consists of a systematic literature review, carried out from the selection of articles. The databases were taken from selected scientific articles from 2009 to 2020 through a search in the Scielo database. The bibliographic search was carried out using the following descriptors: child, isolation, covid-19 and coronavirus.

When considering the pandemic as a prolonged stressful event and with a measure of social distancing, it is relevant to note that the current situation has no precedent with similar characteristics. In this sense, it is still difficult to assess the psychological impacts and how much the development of children will be affected. In view of the current scenario, it is a fundamental role of those responsible to make the environment less stressful for children and to carry out conversations about the situation with language and an appropriate approach for the child's age.

**Keywords:** Covid-19, social isolation in childhood, pandemic.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

For centuries man has been living in society. The feeling of belonging, relating and establishing bonds is inherent to human beings and necessary for their well-being and for human evolution.

The interaction, relationship and socialization with others occurs from intrauterine life and shapes the period of childhood, since it is in this period that the active development of identity occurs. It is through experiences with the other, frustrating or satisfying, in a dichotomous process of socialization and individuation, that the child progressively develops an image of himself and the other (Holper, 1982).

Thus, conviviality promotes a space for learning roles, cognitive and moral development, control of impulses and acquisition of global social skills (KENDAL & MORISON, 1983). Being in social isolation, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, is a situation of adversity in the child's development and in his interaction with society.

Social withdrawal, deprivation of interacting with other people and changes in habits significantly increase children's daily stress, leading to the case of toxic stress (LOUREIRO et al., 2020).

Toxic stress occurs due to the high level of stress generated in the child, which may be a repeated or prolonged situation that exceeds the child's ability to deal with this adversity, and may cause neurobiological and psychological damage (BRANCO & LINHARES, 2018).

Stressful situations affect homeostasis, causing physiological stimuli to increase childhood hormones such as adrenaline and cortisol.

These alterations can have short-term consequences for the child, such as sleep disorders, irritability, weakened immunity, fears; and medium/long-term consequences such as developmental delay, anxiety and depression disorders, drop in school development, among others (LOUREIRO et al., 2020).

In addition, the longer the isolation time, the greater the risk of developing psychiatric illnesses (AFONSO & FIGUEIRA, 2020).

Thus, it is important to discuss the impacts of social isolation on children, in order to preserve their mental health and good psychological development.

The present study aims to identify and discuss the implications of social isolation for children in times of a pandemic due to COVID-19, in order to present its difficulties and consequences.

This study consists of a systematic literature review, carried out from the selection of articles.

The sample is composed of infants who experienced social isolation during the pandemic period. The databases were taken from selected scientific articles from 2009 to 2020 through a search in the Scielo database, scholar google and a study by the European Pediatrics Association.

This content was produced in Brazil and abroad. The bibliographic search term was performed using the following descriptors: COVID-19, children and social isolation.

It was noticed that there is a growing recognition of the importance of social interaction for the development of children, who, from birth, have potential that is developed in the context of social interactions. In this way, a communication and metacommunication circuit are established between the child and those who live and interact with him or her (Branco & Valsiner, 2004; Branco & Madureira, in press), which is characterized by a continuous creation and negotiation of meanings that introduce the child into the cultural universe of their social group (PINTO & BRANCO, 2009).

The pandemic scenario due to COVID-19 required a policy of social distancing that is justified as the main way to control the contamination of the population by the virus. Although doctors believe that children who contract the new coronavirus often are not as affected as adults, they can still carry the virus and thus can infect others.

According to a study done in partnership between the WHO and the Chinese government, although younger people are less susceptible to the new coronavirus, they can contaminate themselves and transmit the virus to other people.

These clearly necessary measures, on the other hand, have negative effects, especially on children, because they still do not have the necessary cognitive resources to understand something abstract like the Coronavirus (CARVALHO, 2020).

In this context, children and family members will have to deal with highly stressful situations that are likely to threaten adaptive coping capacity.

Children start to deal with a reality of stress that they are not prepared for, which results in physiological changes such as a high level of cortisol (stress regulating hormone) compared to children who do not live in this context (SLOPEN, MCLAUGHLIN, & SHONKOFF, 2014).

The result of this alteration is closely related to the immune system and nervous system, which is related to emotion, memory and learning (SHONKOFF, RICHTER, VAN DER GAAG, & BHUTTA, 2012).

A preliminary study carried out in February 2020 in the province of Shaanxi (China) identified that the most common psychological and behavioral problems among 320 children and adolescents aged between 3 and 18 years were: distraction, irritability and fear of asking questions about the pandemic. Furthermore, in the subsample of children aged three to six years, excessive attachment to parents and fear of family members getting sick prevailed (Wen Yan Jiao et al., 2020).

When considering the pandemic as a prolonged stressful event and with a measure of social distancing, it is relevant to note that the lived reality has no precedent with similar characteristics. In this sense, it is still difficult to assess the psychological impacts and especially how much the development of children will be affected (LINHARES et al., 2020).

Furthermore, studies considering toxic stressful events that widely affected people such as natural disasters, terrorist attacks or wars had a high impact on people's lives and can serve as a comparison (LINHARES et al., 2020).

As an example, we can cite a study carried out in the United States that aimed to evaluate the psychological impact on children after the terrorist attack of September 11, 2001 in New York.

The study was carried out in a focus group with parents of children up to five years old. The results showed that, after this extremely stressful event, the children had dysfunctional problems such as: anxiety, new fears, signs of depression, irritability, excessive attachment and problems with sleep and food regulation (KLEIN, DEVOE AND MIRANDA-JULIAN, 2009).

It becomes evident, therefore, that those responsible for these children create a welcoming environment and that they provide adequate support so that the damage caused is minimized.

According to the Science Center for childhood, there are some recommendations that can be made to minimize the damage caused, such as:

- a) Trying to understand reactions of tantrums, deceit, neediness or others as responses to a tense situation, and not as a challenge to adults;
- b) Help her understand this relationship and reassure her;
- c) Stimulate the performance of physical activities (as possible in the confinement space), preferably at certain times;
- d) Preserve the child's sleep schedule in a way similar to that of their normal routine; dedicate time to strengthening the bonds of the family group, with games and activities that strengthen unity;
- e) Enable the maintenance of the child's bonds of friendship; delegate tasks at home, as far as the child's possibilities;
- f) Praise the child for well-done acts (from keeping silent when asked, to playing or communicating correctly), accepting any setbacks in stages that had already been overcome (such as sucking a finger or being naughty) as signs of insecurity that they should be treated with affection, not scolding (scientific committee of the science for childhood nucleus, 2020).

With the collected data, the importance of social interaction for the social and cognitive development of the child is reaffirmed.

This process allows them to form an image of themselves and the other. In addition, these data also demonstrate how this conviviality enables the learning of roles, the development of cognitive and moral skills, control of impulses and the acquisition of global social skills.

In this sense, social isolation as a measure to contain the spread of the new coronavirus has several implications for the development of children and adolescents, as a result, for example, of the role of day care centers and schools in social development at these ages.

In addition, the situation experienced may result in an increase in the child's stress level, both due to the difficulty in understanding the situation, as well as changes in their routines, family dynamics and distance from close people.

Therefore, the social isolation to which they were exposed can cause neurobiological damage, due to the generation of toxic stress and hormonal changes. In this way, it is a fundamental role of those responsible to make the environment as healthy as possible, by promoting physical activities, time outdoors and encouraging dialogue.

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