

Status of the Children's Socio-Emotional Well-being Before and During the Pandemic: A Scoping Review

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ABSTRACT

Positive mental health thrives on strong social and emotional connections. Cultivating a child's ability to forge close, secure, and meaningful relationships is the cornerstone of well-being. Yet, pandemic-induced isolation has created barriers to face-to-face interaction with friends, posing a significant challenge to this critical developmental task. This scoping review delves into previous research concerning children's socio-emotional well-being before and during the pandemic. We screened studies, focusing solely on those directly addressing the core issues impacting children's emotional landscape. Our findings reveal disturbing trends: the pandemic has amplified anxieties, particularly among vulnerable children. The evidence speaks for itself – this global health crisis has inflicted a negative impact on children's socio-emotional health. In response, researchers have proposed a range of policy recommendations to equip teachers and parents with the tools to recognize and mitigate the pandemic's consequences on children. Among these, ongoing debriefing sessions for teachers can foster understanding and gradually alleviate anxieties that ripple through classrooms. Simultaneously, parents – as children's primary caregivers – must remain informed and offer unwavering support, actively monitoring and addressing anxieties within their homes.

Keywords:

Socio-emotional well-being, children, scoping review, pandemic, before pandemic period

INTRODUCTION

Positive mental health isn't just about the absence of illness; it's about thriving. At its core, it's the ability to navigate life's challenges with resilience, forge meaningful connections, and contribute positively to society. For children, this essential foundation rests on developing a strong social and emotional toolkit. This encompasses not only understanding and managing their own emotions but also building secure and rewarding relationships with others (Cohen et al., 2005).

For infants and toddlers, this journey unfolds within the embrace of nurturing bonds with familiar adults, demonstrating the profound influence of positive early relationships on social-emotional well-being (Johnson et al., 1991). Recognizing this vital link, nurturing these skills shouldn't be left to chance. Schools hold the potential to actively cultivate and reinforce social and emotional learning, equipping young minds with the tools to navigate life's ups and downs and blossom into well-rounded individuals. Therefore, prioritizing children's social and emotional well-being isn't simply a good idea; it's an investment in the future.

The Covid-19 pandemic has unleashed a unique challenge for children's well-being. School closures and social distancing mandates have erected formidable barriers to face-to-face interaction, a cornerstone of friendship development, especially for younger children who thrive on shared activities and playful exploration.

While older children may navigate virtual connections with some ease, the younger ones often struggle to find the same solace in digital exchanges.

Christner et al. (2021) aptly highlight the importance of direct interaction for fostering friendships, particularly among younger children. This resonates deeply with the current predicament, where isolation has become a stark reality for many. Studies like Sancho et al. (2021) and Egan et al. (2021) paint a concerning picture, emphasizing the dramatic impact of social restrictions on children's socio-emotional well-being. As Araújo et al. (2020) caution, pandemics introduce distinct risks to child development through enforced isolation and curtailed social interaction, raising urgent concerns for navigating this unprecedented landscape.

The Covid-19 pandemic reshaped education and childhoods in an instant. Across the globe, schools shuttered their doors, silencing the usual symphony of laughter and learning (UNESCO, 2020). Children, particularly vulnerable to the restrictions, faced lockdowns with unparalleled severity. Confined to their homes, they were often barred from outdoor play and free interaction (Grechyna, 2020). This unprecedented isolation prompted immediate alarm among psychologists and educators, who warned of the potential social and emotional risks for children's developing minds (Jiloha, 2020).

The shadow of the pandemic has lengthened considerably over children's social and emotional well-being (Patrick et al., 2020). Recognizing this stark reality, our research delves into the empirical evidence surrounding children's well-being before and during the pandemic. We aim to illuminate this critical landscape and, ultimately, craft concrete policy recommendations for programs and activities that can nurture and fortify children's socio-emotional well-being. This review holds the potential to significantly benefit the field of early childhood development, equipping practitioners and policymakers with the tools to navigate this challenging terrain and safeguard the emotional health of our youngest citizens.

METHOD

To map the existing landscape of research on children's socio-emotional well-being before and during the pandemic, this paper employed a scoping review method. As Arksey and O'Malley (2005) describe, scoping reviews identify relevant documentation to gain a broad in-depth understanding, encompassing all pertinent studies regardless of design. This iterative process fosters reflexivity, encouraging researchers to continuously consider and adapt their search strategies throughout the steps outlined in a scoping assessment.

The scoping review process involved a series of critical steps. First, we formulated two research questions to guide our investigation. Next, we embarked on a comprehensive search using Google and Google Scholar, focusing on journal articles published before the pandemic until 2022. Originally, it was planned to cover only studies between 2019 and 2022. However, only ten articles have passed the inclusion criterion. This was the very research why studies before the pandemic were covered in the review. Employing the key terms "children's socio-emotional well-being during the pandemic," we sifted through the vast landscape of available literature. Stage 3 meticulously evaluated each potential study, delving into summaries, methodologies, findings, and discussions to ensure their direct relevance to our research objectives. This rigorous selection process, driven by accessibility limitations within the field, yielded a final trove of 20 pertinent articles from hundreds of literature

sources from Google Scholar. Finally, Stage 4 applied the content analysis to meticulously gather, synthesize, and present briefly the most critical information gleaned from these studies.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Our scoping review revealed a concerning trend: the pandemic amplified anxieties, particularly among vulnerable children (Masi et al., 2021). Beyond fear, a majority of children yearned for the normality of their ECEC routines, the joyful interactions with their friends and playmates, and the familiar hum of the school environment (Egan et al., 2021). Drawing insights from these current findings, we categorize the identified themes into emotional and social domains to offer a clearer picture of children's socio-emotional well-being during the pandemic. This framework aims to inform and guide parents, teachers, and schools in their crucial roles of supporting and safeguarding the emotional and social development of children amidst this unprecedented landscape.

With the original coverage, only 10 articles passed the inclusion criteria 1 (Saddik et al., 2021; Masi et al., 2021; Jiao et al., 2020; Egan et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2021; Scarpellini et al., 2021; Wells et al., 2020; Lourenço et al., 2021; Lewandowska, 2020; Wijaya et al., 2022). We extended the coverage to enrich the discussion on the topics (Russell et al., 2016; Howard et al., 2013; Singer et al., 2006; Fantuzzo et al., 1998; Keane & Loades, 2017; Leary et al., 1995; Rosenberg, 1989; Fergusson & Horwood, 2002; Sprott & Doob, 2000; Taylor et al., 2010).

1. Worry and Fear

The shadow of the pandemic has cast a long, unsettling shadow over children's emotional well-being. Research suggests alarming trends: pervasive worry about COVID-19 (Saddik et al., 2021), heightened fear in already vulnerable youngsters (Masi et al., 2021), and anxieties amplified by community lockdowns (Jiao et al., 2020). Children grapple with the terrifying possibility of contracting the virus themselves, and worse, the fear of unwittingly infecting their loved ones. This cocktail of anxieties and uncertainties manifests in a range of conflicting emotions, leading many to fear long-term emotional distress even after the pandemic subsides.

2. Problem with Peers

Research paints a mixed picture of the impact of childcare settings on children's socio-emotional development. While a national study by Russell et al. (2016) suggests that children in centre care may experience peer difficulties, Egan et al. (2021) found a slightly positive association between non-parental child care (regardless of type) at nine months and improved socio-emotional outcomes at five years old. However, Liu et al. (2021) highlight a potentially higher risk of peer problems and diminished prosocial behavior in school settings. These complex findings underscore the need for further research to unpack the nuanced factors influencing children's social and emotional well-being within different care environments.

3. Missing their Friends

A pervasive theme emerged from parents: their children deeply missed their friends. While parents admirably attempted to fill the void by providing paints, playdough, and engaging in crafts together, children yearned for the shared joy of creating with their peers (Egan et al., 2021). The pandemic's enforced isolation severed crucial peer connections, leaving children feeling lonelier and more anxious than before (Howard et al., 2013; Singer et al., 2006). The ability to express

themselves and learn from diverse perspectives, fostered by peer interaction, was critically hampered (Fantuzzo et al., 1998). This research starkly highlights how pandemic restrictions impede essential interactions that underpin children's socio-emotional development (Egan et al., 2021).

4. Aggressiveness

The spectrum of emotional responses to the pandemic appears age-related. Younger children tend to express their distress through outward aggression, while anxiety reigns supreme among older kids (Scarpellini et al., 2021). This trend is echoed in caregiver observations. Many (a strong or somewhat majority) report increased irritability, anger, and easily triggered annoyances in their children since the COVID-19 outbreak, compared to pre-pandemic times (Masi et al., 2021). Additionally, they note difficulties with maintaining relationships and the general stressfulness of pandemic restrictions for their children.

5. Low Self-Esteem

The seeds of happiness and healthy relationships often blossom from the fertile soil of high self-esteem. Conversely, low self-esteem casts a long shadow, linked to a multitude of mental health concerns and serving as a major risk factor for emotional and behavioral struggles (Keane & Loades, 2017; Leary et al., 1995). Rosenberg (1989) beautifully defined self-esteem as the mosaic of an individual's positive and negative self-perceptions. While some researchers argue that low self-esteem manifests in externalizing problems like delinquency and antisocial behaviour (Fergusson & Horwood, 2002; Rosenberg et al., 1989; Spratt & Doob, 2000), others highlight the internal struggles it breeds, such as difficulty recognizing and understanding one's own emotions (Wells et al., 2020).

6. Emotional Resilience

Resilience, aptly described by Masten (2001) as "good outcomes despite severe threats," emerges as a powerful force in the face of adversity. Often understood as the ability to bounce back from hardship, resilience shines brightest when individuals successfully adapt and adjust amidst challenges. For adolescents, forging strong emotional and practical support networks with teachers, family, friends, and other trusted adults serves as a crucial springboard for developing this vital quality (Taylor et al., 2010). Such connections were demonstrably evident in families studied by Egan et al. (2021), who displayed both resilience and adaptability in navigating family stress and life changes.

7. Lack of Adequate Social Interaction

Healthy social connection is not just a source of joy for children; it's a crucial learning ground where they master emotional navigation and self-regulation (Egan et al., 2021). This echoes earlier research by Lourenço et al. (2021), who found that most children naturally gravitate towards social play. Disrupting these vital interactions, as Lewandowska (2020) warns, can ripple through their daily lives. The COVID-19 pandemic, as Wijaya et al. (2022) highlight, has unfortunately imposed harsh social restrictions. Confined to their homes and immediate family circles to curb the spread of the virus, children have faced profound limitations on play experiences and peer interaction (Lourenço et al., 2021).

CONCLUSION

This scoping review paints a picture of the pandemic's impact on children's socio-emotional well-being despite the limited literature sources. Studies converge on

a troubling commonality: the pandemic has significantly disrupted children's emotional and social landscapes. Anxiety and fear, particularly among vulnerable children, have become pervasive (Masi et al., 2021). Peer relationships have been strained, often leading to isolation and loneliness (Egan et al., 2021). Outward expressions of distress, such as aggression, are frequently observed (Scarpellini et al., 2021). Moreover, the crucial developmental task of building healthy self-esteem can be hampered by pandemic restrictions (Wells et al., 2020). Fortunately, research also highlights the importance of social support (Taylor et al., 2010) and the essential role of emotional resilience in navigating these challenges (Masten, 2001). Recognizing the significant toll the pandemic has taken on children's socio-emotional well-being, further research is crucial to understand the long-term implications and develop effective interventions to support their recovery and growth.

This policy recommendation serves as a guiding light for teachers and parents navigating the aftermath of the pandemic's impact on children's socio-emotional well-being. Prioritizing a safe return to school with increased social support stands as a crucial first step. Implementing programs and activities tailored to nurture their emotional and social development will further bolster their progress. Teachers, in their pivotal role, can spearhead ongoing debriefing sessions within classrooms, gradually easing anxieties that cloud children's well-being. Parents, as primary caregivers, must remain vigilant, monitoring their children's anxieties at home and providing unwavering support. Ultimately, the success of this policy hinges on the collaborative efforts of teachers and parents, diligently monitoring their children's progress and celebrating every step toward recovery.

This review sheds light on the pivotal role institutions can play in shaping a child's social and emotional landscape. By focusing on adaptable processes, such as empathy development and relationship-building skills, we can empower children, particularly those vulnerable to the pandemic's hardships, to emerge with greater resilience and well-being. Instead of broad, one-size-fits-all approaches, targeted interventions hold more promise. Imagine a scenario where children identified by schools receive tailored instruction to enhance their emotional literacy, equipping them to better understand and navigate their feelings and those of others. Such achievable steps lay the groundwork for improved mental and physical health. While further research is necessary to track the long-term effectiveness of these interventions for high-risk youngsters, this study paves the way by providing valuable data on the pandemic's socio-emotional impact on children. A similar, multi-dimensional approach spanning various areas of development could hold the key to unlocking even greater potential.

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