

Children's Play Behaviour a Buffer to Mitigate the Impact of Covid-19

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Abstract

Pandemics or disasters often put young children at risk. Covid-19 was also one pandemic that impacted young minds in ways that will unfold with time. There was a complete shutdown of schools and cancellation of classes leading to learning loss although learning was switched over to online medium but its accessibility for all needs to be evaluated. No source of recreation and/or restricted mobility, social isolation, a constant fear of the unknown may have had an impact on their socio-emotional well-being. This article has tried to highlight such key domains impacted by the pandemic. It also highlights the role of play as a salvation for children in these tough times although the nature of play was also impacted due to strict restrictions and lock down. Role of parents and family in initiating and sustaining play activities to mitigate the impact of pandemic has also been deliberated.

Keywords: Play, Socio-emotional well-being, parent, pandemic

Introduction

On March 11, 2020, the WHO characterized the COVID-19 virus outbreak as a global pandemic. COVID-19 is caused by a coronavirus, which can result in acute respiratory distress in humans and is transmitted through respiratory droplets and contact routes. The year 2020 brought the world face to face with a pandemic which is playing havoc even today in 2022. A pandemic where mankind was challenged with the most unprecedented circumstances, never seen or experienced before. It affected the day to day lives of people and slowed down the global economy in a way that affected the lives of thousands and thousands of people. The coronavirus undoubtedly changed the way we live. It led to disruptions of celebration of cultural, religious and festive events, social distancing with our peers and family members, closure of the hotels, restaurants and religious places, closure of places for entertainment such as movie and play theatres, sports clubs, gymnasiums, swimming pools, parks and playgrounds and so on. Closure of schools and postponement of examinations was one of the biggest interferences in the daily lives of children. It caused major disruptions and interruptions to the lives of the population at large. These intrusions in perfectly stable lives, coupled with the threat of contracting the potentially deadly virus, lead many people to experience stress, anxiety and depression. The pandemic led to a series of losses, from our sense of safety to our social connections to our financial security.

(<https://www.apa.org/practice/programs/dmhi/research-information/pandemics>, 26th January, 2022)

Epidemics or pandemics, such as COVID-19, produce potential risks to child development due to the risk of illness, protective confinement, social isolation, and the increased stress level of parents and caregivers. This situation becomes an adverse childhood experience and may generate toxic

stress, with consequent potential losses for brain development, individual and collective health, and the long-term impairment of cognition, mental and physical health, and working capacity of future adults. (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7510529/>) (29th January, 2022)

In particular, measures to curb the virus have included the cancellation of classes, widespread school closures with education delivery switched at short notice to home-based and on-line learning and efforts to embed social distancing in educational environments (Shah *et al.*, 2020) [10]. Moreover, leisure activities have been extremely limited or prohibited entirely in most countries, children have not been permitted to access playgrounds, or social group activities and sports clubs have been closed (Fegert *et al.*, 2020) [9]. The mental health of children has been particularly affected, as this disruption has impacted upon the way children learn, grow, play, behave, interact and manage emotions (Shah *et al.*, 2020) [10]. Such that Danese and Smith (2020) [11] described it as the 'perfect storm' for the mental health of children and young people. Research has suggested that quarantine measures induce isolation, stigma and fear among children, with the most common diagnosis being acute stress disorder, adjustment disorder. ((PDF) *A Scoping Review of the Psychological and Emotional Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Children and Young People*. Available from: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/356510903_A_Scoping_Review_of_the_Psychological_and_Emotional_Impact_of_the_COVID-19_Pandemic_on_Children_and_Young_People and Young People (accessed Jan 29 2022).

Children are not the face of this pandemic. But they risk being among its biggest victims, as children's lives are nonetheless being changed in profound ways. All children, of all ages, and

in all countries, are being affected. This is a universal crisis and for some children it will be lifelong. (<https://data.unicef.org/covid-19-and-children/>) (29th January, 2022)

Play is the universal language of childhood and it is through play that children understand each other and make sense of the world around them. Playing is a process, not an activity and takes many forms. Play is a concept that fills our minds with contradictions and paradoxes. Play is serious and yet it's not serious. Play is imaginative and spontaneous, yet play involves rules, which children learn to abide by. Play is 'not real' but takes place in the real world and plays a significant role in how children learn to cope with the real world. Play is childish but underlies the greatest achievement of adults. From a biological perspective, play is the means by which nature has assured that young children will practice all the kinds of skills they need to practice to grow into competent adults.

(https://www.researchgate.net/publication/342788476_Report_on_the_Impact_of_COVID-19_on_children's_play_and_friendships_in_the_Dublin_City_Council_area) (Accessed Jan 29 2022).

Play is a constitutional right for children, in accordance with the Convention on the Rights of the Child (Article 31), which highlights the "right to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts." In fact, play is considered a universal, intrinsic activity in children, present in every civilization, despite cultural differences. Many specialists have argued the importance of play in children's social, emotional, and mental health. (<https://www.mdpi.com/2227-9067/8/8/706/htm>).

The pandemic disrupted the play world, friendships and potentially the wellbeing of children across the world. Play and friends are of absolute significance to children's physical, mental, social and emotional health. For young children, play provides an important context to explore the world, gain new knowledge, and develop language and social abilities. They learn about different roles and the discourse associated with these roles. They also negotiate rules, communicate with one another, and practice their social skills. (<https://childandfamilyblog.com/childrens-play-during-pandemic/>) (29th January, 2022)

Play is a key factor for children's healthy psychological, emotional, social, and cognitive development. During the COVID-19 pandemic, it can be assumed that children's play was affected, not only regarding the time children spent playing but also in terms of the qualitative characteristics of play. In general, it can be presumed that outdoor play was reduced during the pandemic; on the other hand, there was an increase in indoor play and in videogames-screen time.

Along with the changes in children's everyday life during the COVID-19 outbreak, it can be presumed that play has also changed. Concerns about the fewer opportunities for learning and play for children due to school closures, home confinement, social distancing, and lack of or limited access to outdoor activities have been reported (<https://www.mdpi.com/2227-9067/8/8/706/htm>).

What was the impact of the pandemic on children's well-being after such a challenging and disordered year?

Studies found that the repercussions went way beyond learning loss, causing a much deeper impact on their psychological and emotional health. A Global Report '*WHAT'S NEXT? Lessons on Education Recovery*', launched recently by UNICEF, UNESCO, the World Bank, and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

(OECD)- highlighted the fact that it may be easier for school systems to recover from academic setbacks than repair the harm caused to the emotional well-being of students. <https://www.unicef.org/rwanda/stories/learning-playing-powerful-approach-help-children-deal-uncertain-times-covid-19> (26th Jan, 2022)

Play is a powerful tool during this time when many families are homebound. Parents can use play to build deeper connections with their children and allow the child to express emotions and work through internal conflicts. Play can be a space of safety, bonding and communication. Helping the parents of children see the usefulness of play can also help parents feel as though they are helping their children during this dark time. One of the most important parts of playing for children is simply "creating space" for the play to happen. Usually, children take it from there. While this time of crisis is certainly taking a toll on all of us, for children, play never stops being a bridge to better coping and making sense of a chaotic world.

(<https://www.psychotherapy.net/blog/title/play-therapy-and-the-pandemic-we-can-still-have-fun>) (26th January, 2022).

Children often are faced with a gap in communication with adults. They may not have the verbal capacities to explain their inner thoughts and feelings and sometimes may not know who the trusted person is with whom they can share their feelings. At times, adults may just not be able to understand them or even misinterpret or miss their verbal and non verbal cues since children don't always have the words to express what they're feeling or experiencing. (<https://www.fatherly.com/parenting/what-is-play-therapy-parents-kids-stress-anxiety/>) (accessed 26th January, 2022). Playtime can be used to observe and gain insights into a child's problems. It can then help the child explore emotions and deal with day to day issues. Through play, children can learn new coping mechanisms and how to redirect inappropriate behaviors.

While playing, children are not pressured and gradually become less guarded and the process of non verbal communication streams effortlessly. "Through play, we can get to know the way kids naturally behave and experience the world from their point of view," says Taylor. "Then we use that information to help them digest, process, and cope with the things that are overwhelming them." Through play, we can get a glimpse of a child's inner world, expressed in their own language. (<https://www.fatherly.com/parenting/what-is-play-therapy-parents-kids-stress-anxiety/>) (accessed 26th January, 2022).

The pandemic deprived children and families not only of their educational, work, and sport activities, but also from all their friendship and relational contacts. Suddenly parents had to manage their children at home from school 24 hours a day and, at the same time, most of them had to start smart-working from home, still carrying out their children's school commitments. Many parents also had to manage difficulties and pain related to having sick or dead relatives, having had wages reductions, or in some cases, having lost their work. (<https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.584645/full>) (Accessed 5th February, 2022)

The emotional state of children was affected by the lack of social play during COVID-19 lockdown; the majority missed their friends (90%) or playing with other children in general (87%), while approximately one third of them (34%) included COVID-19 as part of their play (Egan S.M, 2021) ^[14]. Playing with family members was associated with stronger bonds within the family and improvement in children's mood

(Gambin M 2020) ^[15]. In fact, according to Martinez *et al.*, ^[12] playing (both video gaming and conventional play) was the second most important factor that contributed to children's happiness (right after family). (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8393419/>) (Accessed 5th February, 2022).

Teachers' role in enhancing play among children was important as well (O'Keeffe C 2020) ^[13]. The majority of teachers encouraged parents to engage in playful activities during lockdown. During online learning, 68.8% of them used educational games and other activities, while 87% were eager to use play as a mediator in face-to-face learning after returning to the classroom. (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8393419/>) (Accessed 5th February, 2022).

Involvement in play activities is an important and integral part of children's everyday life. Play activities integrating physical, mental, and psychosocial accomplishments can prove to be very beneficial for children. The COVID-19 pandemic however, disrupted this reality that would get taken care of so effortlessly as children had a play routine both in school and at home, both indoors and outdoors, with same age peer mates as well as with adults at home. The onus to try to provide opportunities for play during the isolation and quarantine that the pandemic brought about, now lies with the parents and other significant adults in the life of the child/ren. The challenge lies with parents to boost children's opportunities to engage in both outdoor and indoor activities, both during and after the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought about these trials and challenges, as working parents shifted to working from home while simultaneously caring for children and managing their school commitments and managing household responsibilities as well. Many parents found the whole working from home concept very positive and adapted to the new opportunities very well. These included flexible working hours, learning new technology for developing of new digital skillsets, and a bonus of increased involvement in the education and leisure time spent with their children.

While parents were stressed about over exposure to screen time for their children, not only for their online classes but also for any kind of entertainment and fun activities; they needed to find ways to occupy them during the lockdown in activities that were engaging, productive and simultaneously fun as well.

In the current situation, home was made the place where the fun was. This was absolutely crucial to ensure both physical and socio-emotional wellbeing in children. Maintaining a positive environment and healthy, happy atmosphere at home is amongst the most beneficial things that parents can do for the holistic development of the children.

There are also so many different types of play and play activities that can be both fun and educational. With parents trying to initiate and sustain these activities, opportunities for children to explore and express themselves in a safe and fun way can be developed. Play can also be used to teach children about the pandemic, what it means and the concept and requirement of social distancing, washing hands frequently and wearing a mask. Learning about these notions through play may be reassuring for the child, especially through stories, games and fun activities in a calm and supportive way.

The kitchen can be a fun place to spend quality time together and at the same time learn fun facts about kitchen utensils, good, balanced nutrition and cooking simple delicious recipes

that encourage healthy habits among children. The modest kitchen utensils can become a tools for play- piling them up as blocks, doing seriation and classification activities, creating music, etc., fun and learning while kneading the dough can lead to the development of fine motor skills while also nurturing creativity and learning names of utensils, cutlery, pulses, cereals vegetables, fruits can be a by product for the child.

While parents are working at their newly created work stations at home, children too can be kept occupied with work/fun activities giving them the same kind of importance that one would give to school assignments or school related activities. This way the child is monitored, gainfully occupied and away from the screen as well for longer periods of time.

Conclusion

Creating a work-life balance would be an absolute essential too. With flexible working hours or because of being in the online mode a lot of work requirements seemed to be carrying on throughout the day. The trials and challenges that the pandemic created could be turned around to convert them into absolutely positive reminiscences for the children. They could be used to describe the child that any kind of uncertainty in life can always be dealt with when the family is together and supporting each other. Lessons that they learn at the early stages of life will carry on for their lifetime and if ever they are faced with any kind of insecurity or ambiguity they will be able to pull their lives together.

These play activities and close interaction can also be therapeutic for children's play is any activity which is pursued without any specific goal in mind it provides an opportunity for free expression in an informal setting. Hence if due to any reason if children have bottled up any experience or emotions they may find an outlet without feeling threatened. This would further help in building their mental and emotional well-being.

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