

Generación Covid: riesgos psicosociales para los niños que crecen durante la pandemia

(artículo en inglés)

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› Resumen

La pandemia provocada por el nuevo coronavirus trajo una realidad caótica al mundo entero. Las rutinas de los niños también han cambiado desde que surgió el nuevo coronavirus. El objetivo del artículo es reflexionar sobre los riesgos psicosociales a los que está expuesta la generación que crece durante la pandemia. La pandemia y factores relacionados como estar lejos de la escuela, de los padres, de los abuelos y de los amigos, pueden causar un impacto negativo en el bienestar de los niños. El trauma infantil puede tener consecuencias a largo plazo. Es necesario proteger no solo la salud física de los niños, sino también su salud psicosocial, que está gravemente amenazada. El cuidado de enfermería se basa en una visión holística del ser humano, teniendo un papel importante durante y también después de las crisis. Para que las enfermeras puedan apoyar especialmente a la población infantil durante y después del período pandémico, es importante conocer los diversos traumas que los niños pueden estar enfrentando durante el período pandémico, ya que pueden provocar problemas psicosociales como obesidad, consumo de alcohol y drogas, autolesiones, violencia interpersonal y diversos tipos de enfermedades mentales en la edad adulta.

› **Palabras claves:** Niño, Infecciones por Coronavirus, Enfermería, Salud Psicosocial (MeSH).

COVID generation: psychosocial risks for children growing up during the pandemic

› Abstract

The pandemic caused by the new coronavirus brought a chaotic reality to the entire world. Children's routines also have been changing since the new coronavirus emerged. The purpose of the article was to reflect on the psychosocial risks to which the generation that grows up during the pandemic is exposed. The pandemic and related factors as being far from school, parents, grandparents and friends, can cause negative impact in children's well-being. Childhood trauma can have long-term consequences. It is necessary to protect not only children's physical health, but also their psychosocial health which is under great threat. Nursing care is based on a holistic view of the human being, having an important role during and also after crises. In order for nurses to be able to support specially children population during and after the pandemic period, it is important to know about the various traumas that children may be experiencing during the pandemic period as they can lead to psychosocial problems such as obesity, alcohol and drug use, self-harm, interpersonal violence, and varied types of mental illness in adulthood.

› **Keywords:** Child, Coronavirus Infections, Nursing, Psychosocial Health (MeSH).

› Introduction

The COVID-19 emerged in China in late December 2019 and in March 2020 it was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) (1). The disease caused by the new coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) brought a chaotic reality for the world population (2,3). Everyone had routines changed. What was normal became prohibited, what was an exception became a rule. While new cases of COVID-19 continue to emerge, the priority is to take care of the physical health of the population, but psychosocial health should not be neglected, it is necessary to create measures to protect the integral health of the post-pandemic society (4).

Today the world tries to get adapted to the “new normal” because the “old normal” has become, for now, and maybe forever, unreachable. While adults try to find themselves within the new world, children also suffer from changes in their routines (3,5). What will be of this generation growing far from schools, friends, and grandparents? The generation prevented from hugging and interacting? What will be of the children with masks? The population of children between 0 and 14 years old is approximately 2,2 billion in the world; about 2 billion of children live in developing countries, where a large part of them hardly had access to social rights such as education, security and medical assistance, even before the pandemic (6). With the need to do social isolation, schools were closed and online classes started. However, according to UNICEF report about two-thirds of children and young people in the world do not have access to the internet at home (7).

On the other hand, children in the western world and therefore more privileged, already had a strong interest in the virtual world and with the preventive measures against COVID-19 they have got even further away from relationships with the

real world. Media literacy and e-learning are essential for education, but the online world also has some risks, especially for children; among the biggest risks are grooming and cyberbullying that can directly affect children's deepest feelings (8). If even before the pandemic caused by SARS-CoV-2 there was already a concern with regard to highly technological children, the so-called alpha generation who is influenced by virtual social interactions and technology, living in a world of touching screens (9,10), with the emerging of COVID-19 and the factors related to it, those concerns got even greater proportions. It is also important to take into account that news about the pandemic can be reached on the internet, what can negatively affect children who are already frightened and concerned about the health of family and friends, so the use of technological devices by children needs to be monitored and limited (11).

The pandemic and its prevention measures is limiting children's access to learning and interacting with people, so children can get anxious, frustrated and confused (12). In addition, parents and caregivers can also be affected by uncertainties and changes brought by the pandemic. It can be stressful for parents to deal with personal and professional lives, when they have to take care of children during closure of schools. Some children are even left alone at home, so parents can get more and more stressed which also poses a risk to children's psychosocial health (13). Episodes of child maltreatment are present all over the world and studies show that domestic violence increased during the pandemic period (14-16). Some children have to deal with the illness and sometimes death of family members or friends due to the SARS-CoV-2 (17,18). Children emotional well-being will impact their behaviors and quality of life for the rest of their lives (19). Thus, government, health facilities authorities, healthcare workers

and parents have important roles in this context. Nurses should be able to identify children's emotional and behavioral problems and help to create measures to protect them (14).

The purpose of this article was to reflect on the psychosocial risks to which the generation that grows up during the pandemic caused by the new coronavirus is exposed.

› **Pandemic and risks for the psychosocial health of the alpha generation**

The first phase of childhood extends to the first year of life, during this period children feel safe when their basic needs are met. In the second phase, which lasts up to 2-3 years old, children acquire knowledge and skills, thus gaining autonomy. In the period up to 5-6 years old children advance more and more in physical and social spaces. Then, until 11-12 years old, children start to search for their own space between individuals of the same age, going through several new experiences; after this phase they gain a sense of identity (20). Attention-deficit/hyperactivity, conduct disorder, anxiety, mood alteration, and difficulties in interpersonal relations are some of the psychosocial problems that can emerge in childhood and the symptoms usually appear before preschool years (21).

The alpha generation is the one composed by children born after 2010 and who will be born until 2025, they are now between 0 and 10-11 years old and were born in a highly technological world. Even before learn to speak; they know how to handle computers and smartphones, showing a great interest in virtual interactions to the detriment to real-world media and entertainment. They are part of a generation with more opportunities and

challenges, whose interpersonal interaction could be damaged by the easiness and quickness that technology offers. Alpha generation can also get dissatisfied if they do not have access to technology in an uncomplicated and unlimited way. Therefore, parents and educators were already concerned with those children's psychosocial health (9,10). Parents tried to limit children's time on the internet, reducing interactions with the virtual world, encouraging outdoor activities and real interactions, but these same parents are working more and more to provide better living conditions for the family, thus becoming increasingly distant from home and their children (22).

Children should be close to their grandparents, heeding to their advice, in a reality where the hug was the purest gesture of affection and also of security. Children should go to school, where they exercised physically and mentally. Today what we see are closed schools, children increasingly attached to smartphones and the internet during social isolation, children prevented from approaching risk groups such as the elderly, confined at home and wearing masks when out. Lack of outdoor activities is also observed with closure of schools and other measures that prevent children from going to playgrounds and having contact with friends (23). It is also necessary to emphasize that many children do not have access to the Internet or enough space at home for physical activities. Studies show that children are more bored, sad, irritable, restless, worried, angry, frustrated, anxious and lonely due to the lockdown (24,25).

Social distancing and isolation are important and necessary to reduce the spread of SARS-CoV-2, but how will the psychosocial health of this generation be affected? How will the pandemic impact them? How will these children be in the post-pandemic period?

In some countries children are slowly returning to classroom, this process will not be easy. Going back to school will be a little different from what children were used to before. Classes can be moved to temporary spaces or outdoors and class hours can be shortened to separate students by shift thus avoiding crowding. Besides that precautions regarding social distance and hygiene will be maintained. Children will be dealing with this stressing situation in different ways (26). Even after returning to school, children will not be able to communicate and play with friends as before, having to maintain social distancing.

In times of SARS-CoV-2 many parents continue to work, while children without access to school are left alone at home. Long periods are spent in front of the computer at risk of cyber victimization. Communication is done through smartphones' apps (3,5,10,27). Hugging, visiting and playing with friends are prohibited. Wearing a mask is routine. Children are missing school, friends, parents, teachers, grandparents; children are missing their old routines. There are many changes and risks for children's psychosocial health due to the pandemic.

Through newspapers, internet and social media it is possible to reach news related to violence against children during the pandemic of COVID-19 (28-30). Studies show increase in child abuse during school holidays and natural disasters (31). Domestic violence increased during the pandemic, as did sexual exploitation and cyber aggression. Children are increasingly exposed to various risks within the home, where they should feel themselves protected (15,17,27,32).

The literature yet appoints to another factor that will have a negative impact on children's psychosocial health. Children of healthcare workers, in addition to facing the distance from their pa-

rents and the fear of parents being contaminated, are still witnesses of aggressions and prejudices, which an ill-informed population has been practicing against their parents. As a result, these children may develop feelings of revolt against society (5,33).

The pandemic moment is stressful for the general population, the fear of contagion and the death of loved ones due to a disease that arose and spread quickly without people being able to be psychologically prepared can be extremely traumatic. Some children are far from parents because themselves or their parents are ill at hospitals, others lost their loved ones due to SARS-CoV-2, without the opportunity of an adequate farewell and compliance with the rites to which they were accustomed, go through a period of very painful and traumatic mourning (17,18,34,35).

As exposed, there are several reasons that can threaten children's psychosocial health during the pandemic. With the extinction of the virus or the efficient vaccination of the world population, the physical health of the population will be protected against the COVID-19, but the consequences left by the pandemic on the population's psychosocial health will be many. Children react differently to stress and changes in their routines (26). Childhood trauma can have long-term consequences and trigger problems such as obesity, alcohol and drug use, self-harm, interpersonal violence, and varied types of mental illness, which will only emerge in adulthood (36).

In our society, adultcentrism prevails, the adult is the complete being while the child is still in formation, so the adult is at the center and makes all decisions, there is an inferiority of what is childish. It is as if every adult knows what is best for children, without even knowing them, giving them attention or talking to them. It is necessary to break

with children's silence, giving them opportunities to express themselves (37). It is important to monitor and talk appropriately with children, so they can better understand the current moment and its changes, and they will be able to share their feelings, just as parents and caregivers must be guided on how to best deal with children during the pandemic. Healthcare workers should also share information on the subject with policymakers (14,38). Children need to feel safe and comfortable to communicate, so playful strategies, like creating and telling stories can be useful (18).

› Final considerations

Traumas negatively impact children's emotions and behaviors, interfering in psychosocial development throughout their lives. Pandemic and social distancing have changed the children's routines, making them more sad, lonely, irritable, worried and anxious; these changes in mood pose risks to children's psychosocial health and should therefore be prevented, identified and treated.

Protecting children's psychological health during the pandemic is a challenge for government, hospital authorities, healthcare workers, caregivers and parents. When children or parents are hospitalized or quarantined authorities should provide measures so that children can communicate with parents. Government needs to create strategies to protect children's well-being during the social distancing. It is imperative to find solutions so that children, whose parents continue to work, are not left alone without the presence of an adult. It is also necessary to support those whose parents died during the pandemic.

Furthermore, it is important to ensure the promotion of quality and safe care for children. Healthcare workers as educators should encourage friendly communication between parents and children,

providing information about the disease and the need for preventive measures which may mitigate the effects of the pandemic. Children should be encouraged to share their feelings and emotions.

Nursing care is based on a holistic view of the human being, paying attention not only to patients' physical health but also to their psychosocial health. Currently, nurses play a fundamental role in the treatment and prevention of COVID-19. Nurses are also important to monitor children and identify possible changes in their behaviors due to the pandemic and the social isolation. It is essential to share information with authorities to create measures to protect children's psychological health. Nurses will also be too important in the post-pandemic period for supporting children that may develop pathologies due to traumas they can have faced during the pandemic period.

It is necessary to take care of children now and also think about measures to meet possible demands of the post-pandemic child population, protecting this group which is not being seen as a risk group for COVID-19, but whose psychosocial health is under great threat.

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