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Effects of COVID-19 on Early Childhood Mental Health Development
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Abstract

A child's development is of the highest importance to any person that has the opportunity to teach them. Due to the impact of COVID-19, many people, especially developing children have struggled with their mental health development. With the lack of resources and outreach opportunities, some of them had to be left alone for a good portion of their time during their stay-at-home orders due to not being allowed to attend school. This senior capstone is to bring awareness of the toll COVID-19 has taken on children's development in terms of their emotional, physiological, and physical well-being. The findings offer some insight from both the students and teachers on how they overcome the challenges during the pandemic years. Their mental health showed sign of slow development rate when compared to their previous years of COVID-19.

Introduction and Background

The idea of COVID-19 has become something of a nightmare because of the endless effects it had on people's lives the last three years. I have found a keen interest in this topic as I have come to realize that during COVID-19, there has been a change in children's mental health development during their early childhood. The change has come from the way that the current population has been managing their own mental health due to the circumstances of our society. There has been a development of finding ways for intervention and prevention for individuals struggling with their well-being. Many have taken to therapy to help through the unknown times of COVID-19 and its impact on their mental health and well-being.

To promote early mental health awareness is to help parents understand what their children are feeling, but also allowing the child to understand their own emotions. "The potential mental health disparities resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic should be explored to support public health efforts among those who are particularly vulnerable" (Gazmarmarian, 2021, p.357). It is found that young children are to be found more vulnerable in such a time of development. There are many things that have been and still need to be restructured due to the pandemic in the form of assistance for those who are struggling due to the circumstances. Although there have been multiple resources created and been moved to online the numbers have increased tremendously for support. While the numbers have increased for support, the workers in that field have decreased due to their not being enough of them from either losing their job, businesses shutting down, or being overbooked with appointments.

There have been many cases where a child's wellbeing has been affected to either their emotional, psychological, and physical well-being. Steps for intervention and prevention have been transformed tremendously within the last three years of COVID-19. With many of the cases

being similar, this had been a first-time experience for everyone going through it. It was vital for families to start prevention processes for their children who had been exposed to such an abnormal living. With there being lack of interactions to develop their social skills, lack of teaching to develop their knowledge, along with their lack of exercise that takes part in the development of their motor skills.

My curiosity sparked as a future educator when it became prevailing that this topic became something of value to each person that was being affected by the virus. During the pandemic, each person had endured difficulties with their mental health in one way or another. It was prevalent to me that as adults were struggling with their well-being the development of each child had been impacted as well, because of their lack of social interaction or limited contact with others in such early stages of their development. Later into the reading, there will be discussion of how the prolonged pandemic puts more children at risk of developing mental and behavioral problems. Along with the many problems that families have faced one being child obesity in their home due to the stay-at-home orders from the pandemic.

As a current developing educator, it's important to be prepared for all matters of mental health awareness. When attending a school there should be many resources offered to assist a teacher who is aiding a child's needs for their well-being. As schools progress after COVID-19, there are more resources available for teachers to learn from to help them in the classroom. Students now have been impacted with their development and show cases of being below the average mark for some areas in school. To enhance their development, it is important that teachers know how to assist those who have been affected and increase their chances of being successful in their educational career.

There are many questions unanswered about the after effects of COVID-19 that individuals have experienced after being exposed to the difficulties of the new way of life. A collection of all information regarding the effects of the pandemic will be provided throughout this paper. According to Roos (2021), “The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in closures of daycares, schools, and recreational facilities across the world, affecting an estimated 1.38 billion children.” (Roos, 2021, p. 2) The result of these circumstances is lack of development for each child who has had to grow up during this pandemic. The primary question for the capstone project is: *How does COVID 19 affect early childhood mental health development?* Related and secondary questions that will be asked are: *How has COVID-19 impacted your students' development in the classroom? Do you feel that your students struggle with their mental health? How did COVID-19 affect children's emotional, psychological and physical well-being according to their parents? What are the methods of managing current students' mental health due to COVID-19? What methods could teachers do to prevent students from being overwhelmed by COVID-19 and its variants? How has COVID-19 impacted your life? Were there any difficulties with your academics during stay-at-home orders*

Literature Review

From the introduction and background I had discussed how COVID-19 halted normal day to day routines around the world. During the pandemic's peak months of severe illness and death, the main focus remained on subgroups of middle-aged individuals and the elderly who were at greatest risk physically. Childhood is a small fraction of time in an individual's life. As a society, we cannot rewind a childhood to address the identified trauma or staggered development.

When going through my literature review and finding the information that I have used to conduct my research there are many topics that have been covered. Finding topics that had

discussed the resources that had been available to people and the development of telehealth.

Which in time became an amazing safety net due to the struggles of COVID-19 and many not wanting to leave the safety of their homes. Speaking of the many different ways that people had suffered from the pandemic and their own experiences from it. Finding more ways of addressing the needs of people during the pandemic while following all health codes and regulations. With the discussion of traumatic experiences which some children may have experienced during their time at home.

Despite an uneven public health response to COVID-19, hospitals and Emergency Departments have proven they will respond aggressively. We need to think similarly for the mental health crisis and develop a time-tiered response for the short- and long-term. We must do a better job with the surveillance and tracking of our youth's mental health needs. For many years, schools have functioned as the eyes and ears of our pediatric mental health system. Without them, suffering is 'locked down' and weakly broadcast through suicide hotlines that, in some regions, have seen 1000% increases in call volumes. We must identify ways of tracking youth's mental health struggles; this requires acknowledging the problem and targeting messaging (including through social media) about prevention, staying safe, and seeking care (Cloutier, 2021, p.1).

Yet, with the many identified areas children silently suffered through the pandemic, there is still much work to do to not only provide resources but to be proactive when depression and suicide rates increase within the healthcare system. Mental health systems and Emergency Departments braced for increased pediatric mental health emergencies, speculating that the loss of educational routine, peer groups, and supports within schools would increase isolation, depression, substance use and suicidality (Cloutier, 2021, p.1). The following paragraphs discuss the need for mental health access, and childhood traumatic experiences.

Addressing the Need for Mental Health Access

The good news for many children and their parents living in America is that our healthcare system does have an effective process to address pediatric services that treat childhood mental issues. However, with COVID-19 rounding into a second year of lockdowns, access to mental health providers for children was challenging and limited. Benton (2022) indicated that:

Accessing mental health treatment for children and adolescents was challenging before the COVID-19 pandemic. In response to the alarming mental health crisis within the US, leading pediatric and mental health professional organizations have declared “a national state of emergency in child and adolescent mental health,”^{14(p1)} urging a national response to address these needs (p.176).

The first line of access while navigating through COVID-19 was telehealth. Telehealth allowed the physician to meet and assess a patient virtually to ensure safety precautions initiated by the CDC. Telehealth allows physicians to meet with children and parents in need residing in urban and remote areas. This intervention is bridging the gap of access while our society continues to search for new ways to meet a child's mental health needs. Unfortunately, in-person treatment, through physical assessment and treatment is the hallmark of patient care to build trust and a relationship that is needed with children. By addressing the emergent need of childhood and adolescent mental health issues, other intervention will be initiated at the federal level (Benton, 2020, p.176)

Childhood Traumatic Experiences

The novel coronavirus pandemic that began in 2019 has had significant unprecedented social restrictions that have produced serious mental health implications, especially in individuals who have experienced childhood traumatic experiences (CTEs). Isolation, depression, and neglect can all be identified as poor outcomes related to traumatic experience. The United States reacted

swiftly as information was disseminated to the public and lockdowns were mandatory for non-emergency events. A school-age child's daily routine came to an immediate halt, with weeks and months of no contact with other children becoming their new normal. Unwinding the effects and providing interventions for the children of the pandemic to grow within a healthy environment will continue to challenge society as a whole (Hammer et al, 2000; Heim et al 2019; and Seitez et al, 2021). Furthermore, several researchers, including (Hammer et al, 2000; Heim et al 2019; and Seitez et al, 2021) indicated that,

Individuals who have been exposed to childhood traumatic experiences (CTEs) might be a particularly vulnerable group. According to the stress sensitization hypothesis (Hammen et al., 2000), exposure to CTEs, such as abuse and neglect, decreases stress tolerance, which, in turn, increases vulnerability to psychopathology in the face of subsequent stressful life events. On the biological level, potential mechanisms underlying stress sensitization effects involve dysregulation of stress response systems, metabolic dysregulation, and inflammation, which may increase both vulnerabilities to stress and the risk for psychiatric disorders (Heim et al., 2019 & Seitez et al., 2021).

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Methods and Procedures

After the start of COVID-19, I had become intrigued with the idea of knowing what has been happening to current elementary students. Finding more information of how they had been impacted and the ways they are receiving their education now because of the pandemic. Due to many schools being closed and moving their lessons to on screen teaching there had been an instant impact. Children had become less physically active and had a lack of development of

their motor skills. From having no interaction with children their age and being at home with family only. Children between the grades of K-3 in elementary school had been held back from multiple development opportunities that are offered in schools and cannot be received in a home environment.

This idea for a capstone project had come to me over time with the thoughts of knowing how much my own personal and educational experiences had been impacted by COVID-19. To seek the answers to many of my own research questions posed in the Introduction and Background section, I had to look into peer-reviewed articles and journals that had provided such information that were related to my research topic. While experiencing some difficulties along the way of finding my research I had found more information about the different impacts that had been experienced. Aside from the constant research and readings, I had been doing to find more information. I was able to witness my own family members and their struggles in their elementary classroom. Witnessing the impact that had been brought upon them as a young child and where their development had been below the known average in the classroom and their fine motor skills with being able to handle their emotions and psychological well-being.

To answer these research questions, I will dive into five peer-reviewed readings with similar information regarding the impact of COVID-19 to early childhood development. I will start my research by reaching out to two educators and asking them five questions regarding their students in the classroom. The teacher questionnaire can be found under Appendix A. There will be an anonymous questionnaire that will be given to the whole classroom of students which will be provided to the teachers (See Appendix B - Student Survey). With prior approval from the teacher, the students will then answer questions about their current well-being and when COVID-19 first came about. From this research, I plan on looking into the impact COVID-19

had on these current students and what resources they do or do not have access to for help. Along with asking about how long they have felt a certain way and how often they feel stressed due to the impact of COVID-19. To finish off my research, I will look into one peer reviewed journal of how children across the nations have been affected, because of COVID-19. By the end of this research, I should be able to express many difficulties that students and teachers have both experienced during their time back at school.

Results, Findings, and Discussion

From using the methods and procedures from above the aggregated information received are from two surveyed educators and their students. Both groups had produced well rounded responses from the proposed questions to allow a development of cumulative responses. Outlined below will be questions from both educators and students surveys and summarized responses from each group. Discussing the questions in depth of the impact students had faced and where teachers are evaluating them in the day to day classroom.

Survey Response- The Educators

How has COVID-19 impacted your students' development in the classroom? (Appendix A)

The most identified assessment of the students' development in the classroom by both instructor's was a decline in their social skills, interpersonal relationships with peers and the inability to focus during a learning exercise. One of the educators responded that there was a huge difference on how they interacted with one another with masks on their faces throughout the day. They often did not understand what one another was saying and could not conclude the context with limited facial expressions (Educator respondent 1, Personal communication, 7 April, 2022). The second educator identified other areas that also produced challenges for the

children (Educator respondent 2, Personal communication, 7 April, 2022). In a detailed assessment, educator #2 discussed the challenges that arose at the beginning of the school year in 2021. Instructing their 1st-grade class, more than three-quarters of the students were far below grade level. The students came into the academic year hardly knowing any of their letter or letter sounds. When assessing them at the beginning of the year they scored very low on their BPST and High-Frequency Words. In a traditional year, students come into the classroom reading at an average of a C level, knowing most if not all of their letters and sounds, and being exposed to a handful of high-frequency words. In addition, gross and fine motor skills were deficit due to missing the instruction received in Kindergarten.

Do you feel that your students struggle with their mental health? (Appendix A)

Educator # 1 identified many children who were comfortable engaging alone during their “free time” play. Individual activities can be positive where thought processes are focused. However, at the elementary level, isolation can be a significant sign of an onset of mental health issues. They had reservations about identifying mental health issues but concluded that students come from various backgrounds and as much as she creates a positive and safe environment students are hesitant to share (Educator respondent 2, Personal communication, 7 April, 2022). We focus on SEL (Social Emotional Learning) to foster students' mental health, but at such a young age they tend to focus on surface-level topics.

Do you feel that your students express their emotions well? (Appendix A)

“We assessed that there were no identified developmental deficits when expressing emotions with their peers or educators”(Educator respondent 1, Personal communication, 7 April, 2022).

Educator #2, responded similarly to Educator #1. However, the second educator discussed

proactive learning cues that promote healthy expression by revisiting topics of the day and how the students felt during the learning exercise (Educator respondent 2, Personal communication, 7 April, 2022). In addition, the school provides a daily scheduled visit with a full-time therapist that provides students the opportunity to talk to someone besides the educators.

How can parents best support their children in development? (Appendix A)

According to the first educator, parents are the best to support their children in development by reading, conversing, showing warmth and sensitivity, giving them a secure environment at home, and being good role models (Educator respondent 1, Personal communication, 7 April, 2022).

Educator #2, responded similarly, but added that parents are provided with resources and tools to support their students in their learning. Singing songs, and watching educational videos will also support them in their development.

What development are you most concerned with for your students' success in your classroom? Is it their emotional, psychological, or physical well-being? (Appendix A)

Educator #1, during a phase of catch-up, the educator was most concerned with her students' psychological and physical well-being development the most. Educator #2, pointed out that emotional well-being was the greatest concern. If a child's emotional well-being is not intact it will interfere with their ability to learn the content (Educator respondent 2, Personal communication, 7 April, 2022).

Survey Responses- A Child's Perspective

Aggregated responses were compiled from multiple responses during open discussion at the first and fifth grade level. The questions were asked by the individual instructors.

How has COVID-19 impacted your life? (Appendix B)

The majority of first grade students responded by missing their friends and having to stay at home a lot. The fifth grade students responded with more detailed responses that allowed the writer to understand the magnitude of what the students were experiencing. The students were frustrated with staying home and wearing masks. Many of the students described watching television and playing video games as a form of entertainment. At first it was fun but then it was horrible. No birthday parties or just hanging out with friends was the worst part of the pandemic.

Did you struggle with your mental health during stay-at-home orders? (Appendix B)

The educators delivered these questions in a manner how they *felt* during the pandemic. The first grade students described times of sadness, boredom and loneliness. Some described fighting with their siblings a lot and getting into trouble. The fifth grade students offered answers that really described the mental wellness challenges. They used vocabulary that describes anger, frustration, sadness, isolation and depression.

Were there any difficulties with your academics during stay-at-home orders? (Appendix B)

The first-grade class stated overwhelmingly they did not have difficulties. A few children noted that they received computers from the school and that helped them with their homework. The fifth-grade students did not like using Zoom. Paying attention was the hardest part of learning. Parents were unable to provide assistance with computer programs and class work. Bored and disengaged was the agreed response.

My findings showed in detail the pandemic undeniably was extremely challenging for both educators and students. Teachers were disconnected from their students for many months before virtual learning was evoked. Making sure children had the necessary technology at home to be successful was their prime focus. Educators were not only concerned with getting the children reengaged in their academics, they had many children feeling the effects of illness by their family members becoming ill, isolated and even death. Mental health quickly became the priority of discussion with all educators. The second year of the pandemic was the most challenging because as a nation many states were not on the “same page” relating to safety protocols of Covid-19. Mental health within the acute setting of a hospital was also being challenged with an increase of behavioral health issues. With all the challenges that have presented themselves in schools, educators are now finding the benefit of having on site mental health staff members and social workers when needed.

Children are often resilient in times of crisis and extreme change. However, due to the worldwide effects of COVID-19 on their daily lives as they understood “their” life. Things had clearly changed for many households. Both grades of all students surveyed described times of isolation, sadness and depression. Enjoying time off from school and being in their home everyday was exciting in the beginning but as time passed with no end in sight, it quickly became extremely difficult for many. Returning to the classroom has helped the majority of students to find a new balance and clarity with their overall mental-health.

Problems and Limitations

Throughout my research process of trying to find more information on the impact of COVID-19 on early childhood mental health development there had been problems and

limitations during the search. Due to COVID-19 some teachers that I had been working with through email were not willing to do in person interviews. From the restrictions of not being able to meet in person I was unable to attend an in class session to see the development of their current students. Another problem that I had faced was the time frame in which I had sent out the surveys for the educators and students, which had been during spring break. With being limited with in person contact, working through email had left my assessment of the students with limited results due to not receiving many surveys back. From having to working through email with the teachers I had selected I received limited responses back.

There were many limitations in this research process due to many schools just starting to go back to in person classes and having many restrictions for their school. I had found it best to try an interview through zoom, but found complications with the teachers schedule and not having available times to do check ups of their students' development in the classroom. Through email I was able to connect with a teacher enough to find out where their students' development had been whether or not they were on track or behind by a grade level of development and knowledge. With no in person interaction or evaluation of the students it left me without the opportunity to witness small moments of success during their development of confidence within the classroom.

The second problem I had continuously faced was the lack of responses or delay of completing the surveys when needed. Due to not receiving as many responses from students and educators it became difficult to find a common trait that was experienced. Along with that came a limitation to know what was happening in the classroom and where the struggles still lie for those in the schooling system. There were multiple situations in which I had to depend on peer-

reviewed journals or books regarding the topic of COVID-19 rather than only depending on the responses from my surveys to answer certain questions.

The last problem that I had faced was sending my surveys out the week prior to spring break, which had left me with a shorter time span to receive responses. Due to sending them my surveys before break, there was no way for one of my teachers to have their students fill out the survey in enough time to use the results. From the lack of time that I had given myself it had cut the results I was planning to use to understand the effect of COVID-19 in a school classroom in half. Not being able to have as many responses from educators and students about the current situations going on within the classroom I had to rely on the papers and readings I had used for my resources.

Recommendations

After looking into the different effects of COVID-19 towards the early childhood mental health development there were many recommendations I was able to find. Following all my research, I have found resources that will help educators and parents with the development of their children. Due to the stay-at-home orders many children had not fully developed their motor skills that would have been learned in the classroom. Many resources have been created or advertised to help the development of children while at home like; online resources, outdoor activities, and even activities with other children.

From the start of COVID-19 the first thoughts had been about everyone's safety, but not about the impact on their development. Throughout the time of COVID-19 there had been a development of resources directed towards the growth of children. For those who were old enough to attend school they moved classes online to be sure they received an education in some

way. While the younger group of children take advantage of new technological resources. Using websites that were created to increase the fine motor skills of children to keep them on track for development.

Aside from the technological resources there were always other ways of helping a child's development. When staying at home it is recommended that parents or guardians develop skills by hands-on activities for the children. By letting children finger paint, create silly putty, or even creating slime there is a form of development happening there. Developing the child's sense of touch, their muscles, and understanding of the activities that they are partaking in. Exposure to these activities allows a child to develop their gross motor skills and fine motor skills while at home ensuring success for their future in the classroom.

The final recommendation, I would say for children moving forward from the COVID-19 pandemic is to take advantage of the opportunities to play outdoors and the items it has to offer. Although technology has many benefits for developing children, being physically active and outdoors has always been more beneficial. By playing in the dirt, climbing trees, and doing jump rope children create a connection with the world around them. Investigating different species of life, feeling the leaves on plants, and even smelling the fresh air all combine together to develop a child. The outdoors has always been reliable to develop the gross and fine motor skills of children, especially with the opportunity to meet new people at playgrounds or at school.

Conclusion

With my main question for this research assignment being: *How does COVID-19 affect early childhood mental health development?* It had taken multiple different resources to find information regarding that question. The impact affected early childhood mental health

development in multiple ways. From the lack of development of their gross motor skills and fine motor skills children have been seen to below average in their grade level. Experiencing difficulties with their physical, mental and emotional development with their time at home and away from others.

The results from the research had provided a lot of information from both students and educators of how they're lives were impacted by COVID-19. For educators their purpose is to support the development of their students, but from their perspective it has been difficult with so many children. Most not being exposed to a classroom environment, school curriculum, or class activities. Going from the students' responses it is known that many had started to experience emotions that they had not understood or even knew the name of. Many had struggled from being home alone and not having extra support with their school work. Not having the right resources or support many students had fallen behind in their academics.

Due to the pandemic there had been multiple increases in different types of resources for those who had been struggling. The most important resource I had found that had come about during the pandemic was telehealth. Telehealth has given people the opportunity to reach support or go through doctor appointments through zoom meetings. Along with providing different technological resources there has been a development of websites that help with the development of fine and gross motor skills. Using websites to get children moving and help their development slowly to increase their mental health development. While researching ways to increase their development there are many websites that provide instructions from at home activities to create items that will increase the child's knowledge and curiosity.

Children are vital to our nation's present and future. They are the most important resource to a country's stability and future economic growth. This population has endured childhood

traumatic experiences through the novel coronavirus pandemic that may have changed the outlook for the future generations due to the emotional and psychological trauma and lack of treatment received during the pandemic. Fortunately, investigating the viewpoint of the educator and the student during the novel virus of two years, there is now a measurable awareness needed for mental health issues that plagued school aged children. In collaboration with the healthcare industry and the educational system, more access, treatment, prevention is the priority while we all re-enter the classroom as the “new normal”. As a society, we have endured a biological war that tested a nation and we have survived. The Covid-19 virus has brought much attention to specific areas and vulnerable populations that must always be the priority to receive resources. Protecting the children and adolescents to ensure their mental health remains intact and their overall well-being thrives.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions for Teachers

- 1) How has COVID-19 impacted your students' development in the classroom?

- 2) Do you feel that your students struggle with their mental health?

- 3) Do you feel that your students express their emotions well?

- 4) How can parents best support their children in development?

- 5) What development are you most concerned with for your students' success in your classroom? Is it their emotional, psychological, or physical well-being?

