Children's School Adjustment Problems in the Days of the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Mini Review

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Abstract

The measures taken in many areas such as health, the economy, and social areas within the scope of the COVID-19 pandemic have also been effective in the field of education, and have caused billions of students around the world to switch from formal education to the digital education system. Children at pre-school and primary school education levels have been greatly affected by this process because their cognitive, social, physical, and language development is interrupted, they cannot continue their dialogues with their peers, and especially because they move away from the daily routine they are accustomed to. In older children and adolescents, there is a decrease in social relations due to compulsory isolation, feelings of loneliness, not being able to go to school, weakening of friendships, anxiety caused by uncertainty, unhappiness, decreased interest in lessons, and obsession with cleanliness. The pandemic has developed common emotional and behavioral reactions at the global level in parallel with the measures taken and the nature of the new regulations. Behavior and adaptation problems in children can be prevented or eliminated by developing crisis-focused psychosocial support services.

Keywords: Covıd-19 Pandemic; Children's; School Adjustment Problems; Psychosocial Support

Introduction

COVID-19 (2019 novel coronavirus disease) is an infectious disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus [1]. It first appeared on December 31, 2019, in Wuhan, Hubei Province of China, and was later declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) [2]. Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, several measures have been taken in health, economic, and social areas and have been especially effective in education. As of March 27, 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has forced more than 1.5 billion students in 188 countries to switch from traditional face-to-face education to a digital one. The closure of schools during the COVID-19 pandemic aimed to reduce the number of new cases by preventing transmission. During this process, children could not attend school for more than a year. During the COVID-19 pandemic, digital transformation, meaning education is carried out through electronic systems in developed and developing countries, enabled individuals with formal education to switch to distance education. However, such studies could not be carried out widely in underdeveloped countries, thus disrupting education services [3].

School, Children and the Pandemic

School adjustment, is defined as ensuring the highest level of harmony between the child and many factors in the educational environment, including concepts such as academic success, social skills, and emotional competence [4]. Face-to-face education, which expresses the realization of education in a formal classroom environment, represents an active process in which students and teachers practice educational materials within the school environment [5]. Distance education, on the other hand, is a type of education that combines distance learning and teaching; the teaching is not face-to-face in a physical environment, and the education takes place under the guidance of a teacher or by student effort in the light of written sources [6]. Many studies in the educational sciences have revealed that face-to-face education is much more advantageous than distance education [7] and say face-to-face education increases attention and accelerates the focus of the student on the class subject. With the physical connection, the student is engaged with the classroom and can ask questions when they get stuck. Along with many other aspects, it is more beneficial to the student in comparison to distance education.

School-age children are among the most at-risk groups to be affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Children at preschool and primary school education levels have been affected by this process. Consequently, their cognitive, social, physical, and language development are interrupted. They are unable to continue their

conversations with their peers and have become estranged from the daily life routine that they were once accustomed to. The fact that children of this age group continued their roles at home with online education without seeing any orientation in the education system meant they could not practice their student roles and struggled with adaptation. Children who have just begun to distinguish between school and home in the preschool period and are fed from two different places to understand their role tend to lose their harmony with school by being confined to the home during the COVID-19 pandemic. Quarantine education, which harms children's cognitive processes, has also created an anxiety problem for those whose abstract thinking skills have not yet been developed [8]. In the study [9] they inquired of preschool teachers about their opinion on the matter. Most of the teachers (n = 119; 62.6%) thought that the COVID-19 process would negatively affect the adaptation process of children to school, and 66 participants (34.7%) stated that this process would affect the adaptation process of children to school. They thought that there were not only negative but also positive effects.

According to the research, unlike in previous years, teachers conducted special activities such as cleaning and personal care with children every day during the adjustment week, meeting with families one-on-one. Teachers plan to shorten the length of time children spend at school and have them play games continuously in the schoolyard. In addition, factors such as the parenting attitude of the families, the education level of the mother, whether they went to the same school before, and having a sibling who went to school have importance in the adaptation process of children to school. Researching the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on older children and adolescents shows that the decrease in social relations, feelings of loneliness due to compulsory isolation, and not being able to go to school weaken their friendships [10]. There are findings such as confronting the fear of death, anxiety, unhappiness, decreased interest in lessons, and obsession with cleanliness arising from uncertainty [11]. Children felt insecure, scared, and lonely during this period. Additionally, children experienced sleep disturbances, nightmares, loss of appetite, agitation, inattention, and separation anxiety [12]. According [13] in his study, found that 76% of the children had difficulty concentrating, 52% had intense boredom, 39% had aggressive behaviors, 38.8% had restlessness, 31.3% had loneliness, and 30.1% had anxiety. Several behavioral problems can make it hard to adapt to school in digital education systems. These include peer relations problems, disobeying the rules, constantly talking about COVID-19 or any other disease, shortening their attention spans, forgetting the information taught in the previous years, and excessive cleaning behaviors. Young people use social media, online games, and messaging applications more frequently in order to reduce the stress and anxiety they experience and to meet their socialization needs in the virtual environment.

This behavior can turn into a permanent internet addiction. It is necessary to identify the factors that increase technology addiction in secondary school students during the pandemic period and to make risk analysis and suggestions according to the findings to be obtained. In a study, it was found that 76.2% of the students during the COVID-19 pandemic period increased the duration of phone or tablet use compared to the pre-pandemic period [14]. In the study we conducted among school-age children during the COVID-19 pandemic period, we found the rate of internet addiction at a very high rate of 17.1% [15]. The increase in the in the time spent using phones, computers, and tablets, using instant messaging and social networking platforms, and playing online and console games during the COVID-19 pandemic period will cause a decrease in academic success along with the problem of school adjustment. Spending quality time with family members, who are the people with whom adolescents spend most of their time during the COVID-19 pandemic, will enable adolescents to form real relationships and bonds rather than virtual relationships [16]. Unfortunately, especially in developing countries, the economic concerns of families, which increased during the pandemic period, can interrupt this process. The impact on the quality of education and the academic and professional success of future generations will emerge in the long term during the pandemic process.

Studies have shown several important factors in the gender gap between children during the school adjustment process. It has been determined that the mean score of school adjustment for girls is higher than that of boys [17]. It is thought that the situation is that, in general, parents and society expect more adaptive behaviors from their daughters. As a result, girls are more adaptable than boys, have stronger communication with their teachers, and are more likely to cope by using strategies that do not involve aggression and require communication skills. In addition, studies on preschool children have also found that there is no relationship between school adjustment and school maturity and gender [18]. To further clarify the literature, there is a need for further studies examining all these factors during the COVID-19 pandemic process.

Conclusion

The pandemic has led to the development of common emotional and behavioral reactions globally. These are in parallel with the measures taken and the nature of the new regulations. The SARS-CoV-2 virus is not the first virus to threaten humanity, nor will it be the last. Unlike other pandemics, the COVID 19 pandemic has shown experience of difficult and unusual problems in the era of digital transformation. Improvement studies that will help to avoid possible future pandemics will help to reduce the intensity and frequency of psychosomatic, behavioral, cognitive, and emotional reactions that may occur in children. These can be reduced by prevention measures taken by families, teachers, and mental health workers. Finally, behavior and adaptation problems in children can be prevented or eliminated by developing crisis-focused psychosocial support services.

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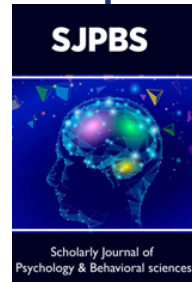
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