

Mental Health in Children and Adolescents: Rising Trends in Anxiety and Depression During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted the lives of individuals globally, with profound impacts on various aspects of mental health. Among the most vulnerable populations are children and adolescents, who have experienced significant increases in anxiety and depression during the pandemic. This paper explores the rising trends in mental health concerns among young people, examining the factors contributing to these trends, such as social isolation, disruptions in education, and changes in family dynamics. The study synthesizes existing literature on the effects of the pandemic on children's mental health and highlights the long-term implications of these trends. Strategies for addressing and mitigating the impact of these mental health challenges are also discussed.

Keywords: Mental health, children, adolescents, anxiety, depression, COVID-19, pandemic, psychological distress

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused widespread disruption across the globe, bringing significant changes to daily life and affecting the mental health of individuals of all ages. Children and adolescents, in particular, have been especially vulnerable to these changes. The closure of schools, cancellation of social activities, and general uncertainty about the future have contributed to an increase in mental health challenges, particularly anxiety and depression. Understanding the impact of the pandemic on the mental health of young people is critical to developing effective interventions to support their well-being.

Recent studies have shown that anxiety and depression rates among children and adolescents have surged since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic (Loades et al., 2020; Zhou et al., 2020). These trends have been attributed to several factors, including the disruptions to education, social isolation, and increased stress within households. This paper reviews

existing literature on the mental health impact of the pandemic on children and adolescents and provides an overview of the contributing factors, as well as potential interventions.

2. Literature Review

The literature review aims to synthesize existing research on the mental health impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on children and adolescents, particularly focusing on the rising trends in anxiety and depression. Several key areas have been identified through various studies, which help to understand the underlying causes and consequences of the mental health challenges faced by young people during the pandemic.

2.1 The Impact of COVID-19 on Child and Adolescent Mental Health

Since the onset of the pandemic, numerous studies have reported significant increases in mental health difficulties among children and adolescents, with a marked rise in symptoms of anxiety, depression, and stress (Loades et al., 2020; Racine et al., 2021). These difficulties are largely due to the major disruptions to everyday life, which have altered the routines, social dynamics, and support systems that are integral to young people's well-being (Pfefferbaum & North, 2020). For example, a meta-analysis by Racine et al. (2021) found that symptoms of anxiety and depression in young people doubled compared to pre-pandemic levels, highlighting the severity of the issue.

2.2 Social Isolation and School Closures

A major contributing factor to the mental health crisis among children and adolescents has been the social isolation resulting from school closures and the suspension of social activities. Studies show that the loss of in-person schooling has significantly affected not only academic achievement but also social development and emotional well-being (Viner et al., 2020). Schools provide a vital environment for social interactions, peer support, and extracurricular engagement, all of which contribute to emotional resilience. The disruption of these activities, coupled with the limited social interactions outside of school, has led to feelings of loneliness, frustration, and emotional distress (Loades et al., 2020).

Moreover, remote learning has proven to be especially challenging for some students, particularly those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds or those who have access to

limited educational resources at home. The resulting academic struggles and sense of disconnection from their peers can exacerbate feelings of anxiety and depression (Masten, 2020). This disruption is compounded by a lack of face-to-face interactions with teachers and counselors who typically provide guidance and emotional support.

2.3 Family Dynamics and Stress

The pandemic has also reshaped family dynamics, leading to an increase in household stress. Economic uncertainty, changes in parental work schedules, and caregiving responsibilities have created an environment where children and adolescents experience increased anxiety. Several studies have shown that heightened parental stress is correlated with a rise in mental health symptoms in young people (Fegert et al., 2020). For instance, families dealing with financial difficulties or increased household conflict due to lockdowns are likely to experience greater emotional strain, which in turn affects children's emotional health.

Moreover, parents who are overwhelmed by their own emotional or financial burdens may be less able to provide the nurturing and guidance that children typically rely on to manage stress and emotional challenges (Masten, 2020).

2.4 Media Exposure and Fear

Another critical factor contributing to the rise in mental health issues among children and adolescents is the increased exposure to media, particularly news related to the pandemic. In a time of uncertainty, children and adolescents may struggle to process information regarding the virus and its widespread consequences, leading to heightened fears and anxiety (Shen et al., 2021). Many young people report feeling overwhelmed by the constant stream of media updates and social media discussions about COVID-19, which can fuel negative emotions, including fear and worry (Pérez-Sánchez et al., 2021).

Social media, in particular, has been shown to have both direct and indirect impacts on mental health. Beyond increasing exposure to alarming news, social media can also foster feelings of social comparison and inadequacy. Adolescents, in particular, may be more vulnerable to these negative effects, as they are in a critical stage of developing their self-concept (Pérez-Sánchez et al., 2021).

3. Factors Contributing to Anxiety and Depression

Several key factors have been identified in the literature as contributing to the rising levels of anxiety and depression among children and adolescents during the COVID-19 pandemic. These factors can be broadly categorized into environmental stressors, personal vulnerabilities, and broader societal influences. Below, we discuss the major contributors to mental health issues in young people during this period.

3.1. Uncertainty and Fear of the Unknown

One of the primary drivers of anxiety and depression in children and adolescents during the pandemic is the uncertainty and fear associated with the virus and its consequences. The pandemic brought about a high level of unpredictability, affecting not only daily routines but also the perceived safety and well-being of individuals and families. Young people, who are still developing their coping mechanisms and understanding of risk, often feel overwhelmed by the unpredictability of the situation (Shen et al., 2021).

This sense of uncertainty is particularly stressful for children and adolescents because they lack control over their environment. The constant stream of evolving information about COVID-19, changing government policies, and the unclear timelines for school reopenings has left many feeling anxious and fearful about their future. These feelings of helplessness and vulnerability can easily manifest as anxiety or depressive symptoms, particularly in young people who are already predisposed to mental health challenges (Pfefferbaum & North, 2020).

3.2. Disruption of Educational Routines

School closures and the shift to remote learning have significantly disrupted the daily routines of children and adolescents, further exacerbating mental health issues. Education plays a critical role in children's development, not only academically but also socially and emotionally. The closure of schools deprived students of in-person interactions with their peers and teachers, who are key sources of support and guidance.

Remote learning, while necessary, introduced new stressors for students. These included difficulties with technology, lack of access to adequate learning resources, and a sense of

disconnection from their peers and teachers (Viner et al., 2020). For many, the loss of structured routines and the challenge of adjusting to online education led to feelings of frustration, helplessness, and a decline in self-esteem. These factors are known to contribute to anxiety and depression in children and adolescents (Masten, 2020).

Additionally, for those students who rely on school-based support services—such as counseling or social programs—the closure of schools meant the loss of vital resources that helped manage mental health concerns. This created a compounding effect on young people's emotional well-being.

3.3. Social Isolation

Social isolation is another significant contributor to the rise in anxiety and depression during the pandemic. The closure of schools, limitations on extracurricular activities, and social distancing protocols severely restricted children's and adolescents' ability to engage in the social interactions that are essential for emotional development (Loades et al., 2020). Adolescence is a time when social relationships are critical for developing a sense of self-worth and emotional resilience, and the loss of these connections has left many young people feeling isolated and lonely.

Furthermore, the lack of face-to-face interactions has limited the ability of peers to provide emotional support, which is especially important during challenging times (Viner et al., 2020). While some young people may have used virtual platforms to stay connected, the quality of online interactions is often not sufficient to replace in-person connections, particularly for those struggling with mental health issues. As a result, feelings of loneliness, frustration, and sadness have increased, contributing to heightened anxiety and depressive symptoms.

3.4. Family Dynamics and Increased Stress at Home

The pandemic has caused significant shifts in family dynamics, many of which have led to increased stress at home. Economic hardship, job insecurity, changes in family routines, and increased caregiving responsibilities have created a more stressful home environment, which in turn affects children and adolescents (Fegert et al., 2020). Young people often internalize

the stress they observe in their parents or caregivers, leading to feelings of anxiety or depression.

Additionally, some families have faced heightened conflict or tensions as a result of the pandemic's pressures. In households where there is already a history of stress or mental health issues, the pandemic has served to amplify these concerns. For children, especially those in homes with limited emotional support, this stress can result in heightened feelings of helplessness and anxiety (Masten, 2020). Increased screen time or the lack of a structured environment at home can also contribute to emotional difficulties, as children and adolescents may struggle with establishing boundaries or finding healthy coping mechanisms.

3.5. Media Exposure and Increased Fear

The continuous exposure to alarming media reports about the COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on children's mental health. Children and adolescents are often more vulnerable to the psychological effects of media consumption, as they may lack the skills to critically evaluate the information they receive. Constant exposure to news about the virus, public health restrictions, and economic challenges can lead to heightened fear, anxiety, and a distorted sense of danger (Shen et al., 2021).

Moreover, the rise of social media as a primary form of communication during lockdowns has introduced additional stressors. Adolescents are particularly vulnerable to the negative impacts of social media, including social comparison and feelings of inadequacy. The pressure to conform to unrealistic standards, coupled with the inability to engage in face-to-face socializing, has contributed to an increase in depression and anxiety in young people (Pérez-Sánchez et al., 2021). Social media also amplifies the fear surrounding the pandemic, as people tend to share and spread information quickly, sometimes without verifying its accuracy.

3.6. Loss of Routine and Sense of Control

The loss of routine during the pandemic is another significant contributor to anxiety and depression in children and adolescents. Structure and routine provide a sense of stability and predictability, which is vital for mental health. The sudden disruption of everyday life, including the closure of schools, recreational activities, and the general halt of normalcy, has

left many young people struggling with a lack of control over their lives (Pfefferbaum & North, 2020).

For adolescents, the ability to make plans, participate in extracurricular activities, and engage in social events is central to their sense of identity and well-being. With the pandemic causing the cancellation of many of these activities, many adolescents have expressed feelings of boredom, frustration, and a sense of loss, which can develop into depressive symptoms. The inability to engage in familiar coping strategies, such as sports or hanging out with friends, has exacerbated existing mental health challenges (Racine et al., 2021).

The factors contributing to anxiety and depression in children and adolescents during the COVID-19 pandemic are multifaceted and interconnected. From uncertainty and fear of the unknown to social isolation, disruptions in education, and family stress, the pandemic has created a complex web of stressors that impact young people's mental health. These factors, when combined, have led to a significant rise in mental health difficulties among children and adolescents, with long-lasting implications for their emotional and psychological development. Addressing these issues requires a comprehensive, multi-faceted approach, involving interventions that target both the individual and the broader environment.

4. Long-Term Implications

The mental health challenges experienced by children and adolescents during the COVID-19 pandemic are likely to have long-term implications. Research suggests that anxiety and depression in young people can have lasting effects on their development, academic performance, and overall well-being (Ginsburg et al., 2021). Without timely intervention, these mental health concerns may persist into adulthood, potentially contributing to long-term social, academic, and emotional difficulties.

The mental health challenges faced by children and adolescents during the COVID-19 pandemic are not only immediate but also have the potential for long-term consequences. The prolonged exposure to stressors such as anxiety, depression, social isolation, and disruptions in routine could shape the trajectory of young people's emotional, psychological, and social development. The following discusses the potential long-term implications of the rising

trends in anxiety and depression during the pandemic on various aspects of children's and adolescents' lives.

4.1. Academic Impact

One of the most immediate long-term implications of the mental health crisis among children and adolescents is its potential impact on academic performance. Research indicates that mental health difficulties, such as anxiety and depression, can severely impair cognitive function, concentration, and memory, making it more challenging for students to succeed academically (Cost et al., 2021). With the disruptions caused by remote learning, lack of in-person instruction, and the difficulties of adapting to a new learning environment, many students have fallen behind in their education.

For students with pre-existing learning difficulties, the shift to online learning has been particularly detrimental, as they have had limited access to the specialized support they typically receive in schools (Masten, 2020). Moreover, the stress and mental health struggles many young people have faced during the pandemic may further hinder their motivation and ability to engage with academic work. As a result, the educational gap between students from different socioeconomic backgrounds may widen, leading to long-term disparities in educational achievement and future opportunities.

In the long run, the disruption to education during the pandemic may also affect students' career aspirations. Students who experience prolonged periods of academic disengagement and emotional distress are less likely to pursue higher education or vocational training, which can limit their career options and economic mobility in the future.

4.2. Social and Emotional Development

Adolescence is a critical period for the development of social and emotional skills, and the disruptions caused by the pandemic may have lasting effects on this developmental process. Social interactions with peers, teachers, and other adults are crucial during this time, as they help adolescents build self-esteem, manage emotions, and develop coping strategies. The social isolation imposed by the pandemic has deprived many young people of these vital interactions, potentially stunting their social and emotional growth.

As a result, adolescents may struggle with forming and maintaining healthy relationships in the future. The lack of in-person socialization could lead to difficulties in developing communication skills, empathy, and emotional regulation. Furthermore, the increased use of social media during the pandemic has raised concerns about the negative effects of digital communication on emotional well-being. Adolescents may develop maladaptive coping mechanisms, such as excessive reliance on social media for validation or engagement in harmful online behaviors, which could carry over into adulthood (Pérez-Sánchez et al., 2021).

Additionally, the emotional and psychological effects of the pandemic may lead to an increased risk of social withdrawal or the development of social anxiety. For young people who have already struggled with mental health issues, the pandemic may have intensified their feelings of alienation or fear of social interaction, making it harder for them to engage meaningfully with others as they grow older.

4.3. Increased Risk of Long-Term Mental Health Issues

The mental health challenges that children and adolescents are experiencing during the COVID-19 pandemic are not likely to resolve immediately after the pandemic ends. If left unaddressed, the symptoms of anxiety, depression, and stress can persist into adulthood, leading to long-term mental health conditions. Studies have shown that childhood anxiety and depression are predictive of similar issues in adulthood, as well as a range of other psychological difficulties, including substance abuse and poor emotional regulation (Ginsburg et al., 2021).

The prolonged nature of the pandemic has created an environment where young people have had limited opportunities to access mental health care or engage in coping strategies that could help mitigate the negative effects. In the long term, untreated mental health issues in childhood can result in chronic anxiety disorders, depression, and other mood disorders, which may require lifelong management. Early intervention is crucial to preventing these long-term effects, but many children and adolescents may continue to experience barriers to accessing care, such as stigma or limited resources in their communities.

Additionally, the societal focus on immediate pandemic-related issues may have diverted attention away from addressing the long-term mental health needs of children and

adolescents. This lack of sustained attention could exacerbate the risk of mental health problems persisting into adulthood.

4.4. Impact on Family and Caregiver Relationships

The long-term impact of the pandemic on children's mental health also extends to family and caregiver dynamics. Families who have been under stress due to economic instability, changes in caregiving roles, or the emotional toll of the pandemic may experience strained relationships with their children as a result of the challenges in managing their mental health. Children and adolescents may also become increasingly reliant on family members for emotional support, which may put additional pressure on parents or caregivers who themselves may be struggling with mental health issues or stress (Masten, 2020).

Furthermore, the increased mental health needs of children can lead to tensions within families, as parents may feel unequipped to address their children's emotional struggles. In the long run, this dynamic can lead to dysfunctional family relationships, where the mental health challenges of one family member affect the overall well-being of the household. For families experiencing economic hardship or trauma, these effects can be particularly profound.

4.5. Increased Socioeconomic Disparities

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing socioeconomic inequalities, and this has had a significant impact on the mental health of children and adolescents. Students from low-income backgrounds have been disproportionately affected by the disruptions to education, social isolation, and lack of access to mental health resources (Viner et al., 2020). In the long term, these disparities may widen the achievement gap between children from different socioeconomic backgrounds, limiting opportunities for academic success and upward social mobility.

Moreover, children from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to experience the compounded effects of family stress, economic instability, and limited access to support services, which could have long-term consequences for their mental and physical health. Without intervention, these children may experience a cycle of disadvantage that continues into adulthood, impacting their educational, career, and health outcomes.

4.6. Impact on Future Generations

The mental health challenges faced by children and adolescents during the pandemic are likely to have ripple effects that extend beyond the immediate generation. As children who experience anxiety, depression, and social isolation grow into adulthood, they may struggle with the emotional challenges of parenting and may be more likely to transmit these challenges to their own children (Cost et al., 2021). The cycle of mental health issues could thus extend across generations, particularly in families where there are pre-existing vulnerabilities or a lack of access to mental health care.

The long-term implications of the mental health challenges faced by children and adolescents during the COVID-19 pandemic are profound and far-reaching. These challenges have the potential to affect academic achievement, social and emotional development, mental health in adulthood, family relationships, and socioeconomic disparities. As a result, it is crucial that interventions are put in place now to address these issues and mitigate their long-term effects. Early intervention, increased access to mental health care, and efforts to address the underlying social and economic factors contributing to these challenges will be essential in supporting the well-being of children and adolescents, both now and in the future.

5. Interventions and Strategies

Given the widespread impact of anxiety and depression on children and adolescents during the COVID-19 pandemic, targeted interventions and strategies are crucial to mitigating these mental health challenges. Effective interventions should aim not only to alleviate symptoms but also to address the underlying causes, prevent long-term mental health problems, and provide ongoing support. The following describes various interventions and strategies that have been proposed or implemented to support young people's mental health during and after the pandemic.

5.1. School-Based Mental Health Programs

Schools are critical environments for providing mental health support to children and adolescents. They offer an accessible setting where young people can receive emotional support, build coping skills, and learn about mental health. Given the disruptions caused by

school closures during the pandemic, it is essential that schools prioritize mental health services moving forward.

School counselors and psychologists play a key role in supporting students by providing individual or group counseling sessions to address anxiety, depression, and other emotional difficulties. Programs designed to promote **social-emotional learning (SEL)** can help students develop resilience, emotional regulation, and healthy coping mechanisms. SEL curricula teach skills such as self-awareness, relationship-building, and stress management, which are particularly relevant for children and adolescents facing mental health challenges (Durlak et al., 2011).

In addition, schools should integrate **mental health education** into the curriculum to reduce stigma and increase awareness about mental health. Training for teachers and staff on identifying signs of mental health issues and referring students to appropriate support services is also essential. Schools can create **peer support programs**, where students are trained to support each other, thus building a network of emotional support among peers.

5.2. Telehealth and Online Therapy

During the pandemic, telehealth and online therapy have become crucial alternatives to in-person therapy, particularly for children and adolescents who may not have access to traditional mental health services due to geographic, financial, or social barriers. **Telehealth interventions** have shown promise in reaching children and adolescents who need mental health support but may not have easy access to face-to-face counseling (Pfefferbaum & North, 2020).

Online therapy platforms can provide various services, such as individual counseling, family therapy, and group therapy, in a flexible and accessible manner. Programs that use **cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT)** techniques, adapted for the digital environment, have been particularly effective in treating anxiety and depression. These therapies help children and adolescents recognize and reframe negative thought patterns, learn coping skills, and develop healthier ways to manage stress and anxiety (March et al., 2021).

In addition to professional therapy, many online platforms offer **mental health resources** and educational materials to help children and adolescents better understand mental health

and provide self-help strategies. These resources can also help alleviate feelings of isolation, as they enable young people to connect with others experiencing similar challenges.

5.3. Parental Support and Family-Based Interventions

Family support plays a crucial role in the mental health of children and adolescents. The COVID-19 pandemic has added significant stress to family dynamics, which in turn impacts children's emotional well-being. Interventions that engage and support parents and caregivers are vital in addressing these challenges.

Parenting programs can provide caregivers with the skills and knowledge they need to create a supportive home environment that fosters emotional well-being. These programs often teach parents how to recognize signs of anxiety and depression in their children, manage their own stress, and establish consistent routines that promote stability and security (Fegert et al., 2020). Additionally, parents can learn how to model positive coping strategies and communicate more effectively with their children.

Family therapy can help address relational issues that may arise as a result of the pandemic, such as increased conflict or strain due to economic stress, caregiving responsibilities, or changes in family dynamics. These interventions can improve communication, enhance family support systems, and provide parents with tools to manage difficult emotions and stress.

In some cases, interventions like **parent-child interaction therapy (PCIT)** can be used to address behavioral issues that arise in children due to stress and anxiety. PCIT focuses on improving the quality of the parent-child relationship and promoting positive behaviors in children through structured interaction (Eyberg et al., 2001).

5.4. Community-Based Support Programs

Community-based interventions provide a broad network of support that helps young people manage their mental health outside of school and home settings. These programs can be particularly effective in reaching those who may not have access to school-based or clinical services.

Youth mental health services in community centers or through non-profit organizations can provide a range of resources, including peer support groups, counseling, and psychoeducation. These community programs can also help reduce the stigma around mental health by normalizing conversations about mental health and making resources more accessible.

Community-based programs often focus on providing **safe spaces** for young people to interact and engage in healthy activities, such as sports, arts, or social clubs. These programs promote positive socialization, reduce isolation, and provide an outlet for emotional expression, all of which are important for mental well-being.

Another key aspect of community-based interventions is the integration of **mental health awareness campaigns** that aim to educate the public about the importance of mental health and the services available in the community. These campaigns can help reduce stigma and increase help-seeking behavior, making it more likely that children and adolescents will access the care they need (Fegert et al., 2020).

5.5. Digital and Virtual Well-Being Tools

With the rise of technology and digital platforms, **virtual well-being tools** can serve as a supplementary strategy for addressing anxiety and depression in children and adolescents. These tools include apps, websites, and online games designed to improve mental health by teaching coping skills, offering mindfulness exercises, and promoting self-reflection.

For example, mindfulness and meditation apps like **Headspace** and **Calm** can be tailored to children and adolescents, helping them develop relaxation techniques to manage stress and anxiety. Additionally, apps that provide **CBT-based exercises** or **mood-tracking tools** can empower young people to take charge of their mental health, track their emotional well-being, and engage in self-help strategies (March et al., 2021).

The use of **gamification** in mental health interventions, where young people can engage in therapeutic exercises through games, has also proven effective in increasing engagement and motivation to practice coping skills (McGonigal, 2011). These digital tools can complement other forms of therapy, making mental health support more engaging and accessible.

5.6. Strengthening Social Support Systems

Finally, fostering strong **social support systems** is critical to improving mental health outcomes for children and adolescents. In addition to family and school-based support, it is important to create opportunities for young people to build social connections with peers and mentors outside of traditional educational settings.

Peer support groups are a valuable resource, as they provide adolescents with the opportunity to share their experiences and learn from one another in a safe and supportive environment. Peer-led groups can also reduce feelings of isolation by helping young people realize that they are not alone in their struggles.

Mentorship programs can also play a significant role in providing adolescents with guidance, support, and positive role models. Mentors who provide emotional support, career advice, and personal guidance can help young people build resilience and confidence, which are key factors in maintaining mental well-being.

The interventions and strategies described above aim to provide a multi-faceted approach to addressing the rising trends of anxiety and depression in children and adolescents during the COVID-19 pandemic. School-based programs, telehealth services, parental support, community resources, and digital well-being tools all play a role in mitigating the long-term effects of the pandemic on mental health. It is essential to implement these interventions in a comprehensive and coordinated manner to provide the necessary support for young people, ensure access to resources, and create an environment that fosters mental well-being both during and after the pandemic. By addressing mental health early and effectively, these strategies can help reduce the long-term impact of the pandemic and promote resilience in the next generation.

6. Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on the mental health of children and adolescents, with rising trends in anxiety and depression being of particular concern. Factors such as social isolation, family stress, and disruptions in education have contributed to this increase. The long-term effects of these mental health challenges underscore the need for targeted interventions that address both the immediate and lasting impacts on young people.

By providing adequate mental health resources, supporting families, and promoting healthy coping strategies, we can help mitigate the adverse effects of the pandemic and improve the well-being of children and adolescents in the post-pandemic world.

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