

Children and the Pandemic: Anxiety, Hopes and Everyday Life

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ABSTRACT

The pandemic, quarantine and other consequences of COVID-19 affecting the world have inevitably impacted upon the lives of adults and children, causing lifestyle changes and, in some instances, negative psychological states. The article presents the results of an empirical study of children's everyday life and childhood experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. Data have been collected by structured interview with children aged 10-16. The informants live in a small town of Russia's Far East. The responses received have been analysed in terms of sources of information on the coronavirus, changes in the lives of children and their attitudes to these changes. Children's everyday life during the pandemic turns out to be embedded in the self-isolation regime. All worries and hopes of children are related to the end of this regime. Self-isolation has led many respondents to reassess live communication with their peers, offline studies at school and meaningful communication within the family.

Keywords: COVID-19, pandemic, quarantine, children's everyday life

1. INTRODUCTION

Both adults and children experience negative mental states, such as anxiety, mental deprivation, frustration and feeling of loneliness due to predisposing factors that include both traits of the nervous system (weakness, lability) and existence of a permanent psycho-traumatic background in social relations. Currently, such background is shaped by the COVID-19 pandemic. Extreme and crisis situations can impact both positively (when psychological modelling of the situation is used, and therefore the person will know how to act in an emergency situation) and negatively (developing depression and anxiety). Emergencies bring about changes in the cognitive, emotional and behavioural domains of the human psyche. Thus, the cognitive domain sees changes on the level of processes (disruption of senses, attention, thought, memory and, consequently, perception), as well as the disruption of processes of decision-making, control and regulation of states. Human condition changes. Emotional sphere is characterised by manifestations of anxiety; fear and horror as its extreme expression; panic state; unreasonable aggression; anger; feeling of guilt; longing, depression and apathy. As the feeling of security is disrupted, trust in people and in the world in general is lost.

The behavioural domain often sees disorganised behaviour manifested either in a loss of control and focus of behaviour, expressed in aimless activity, or in passivity (fading reaction). Where the nature of interaction and communication and relations in general is concerned, these spheres see aggressive behaviour (not always justified), conflicts, finger-pointing and alienation [1].

1.1 Overview

International research deals with the impact of the pandemic on children's education, their mental condition and physical health. A series of papers report negative consequences of mass closure of schools and transition to distance learning, such as decreased efficiency of educational process, increasing workload of teachers and students, as well as digital and social inequalities [2, 3, 4]. The latter is due to unequal access of children to digital resources (availability of PC and internet access), as well as children's losing various forms of social assistance from school, first and foremost prevention of ill-treatment of children in families and school feeding.

The purpose of the study conducted in Spain was to collect voices of children isolated during the COVID-19 pandemic. A survey of 250 children aged 3-12 in one region of Spain showed mixed emotions in isolation. On the one hand, children were happy and relaxed with their

families; on the other hand, they felt fear, nervousness, anxiety, loneliness, grief, boredom and anger [5].

A study by Brazilian authors allowed establishing a correlation between higher levels of anxiety of children and social distancing during the quarantine without parents; as well as higher number of people living together [6].

Chinese researchers studying frequency and correlates of depression among adolescent girls aged 11-18 during the COVID-19 outbreak in mainland China identified the effect of age, distance learning, attitude towards COVID-19, sleep duration and exercise duration on the beginning of depression [7, 8].

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The aim of the study is to analyse children's perceptions of the pandemic and peculiarities of its entry into children's everyday life. Research methods include structured individual interviews with children. A total of 17 interviews with children aged 10-16 were conducted.

3. RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Drawing on the analysis of structured interviews with children, we identify the following codes: reporting on the coronavirus, its image in the mass consciousness, changes in children's everyday life and attitude towards the present situation.

3.1 How did the kids learn about the virus?

Coronaviruses are a family of viruses affecting mammals, including humans, birds and amphibians. Their name refers to the structure of the virus, whose spinous processes resemble the solar corona. 7 coronaviruses affecting humans are known, among them SARS-CoV-2 – Betacoronavirus B, identified in the second half of 2019 in Wuhan (Hubei Province, China) and then spread to many countries of the world, causing the pandemic of a new type of pneumonia, COVID-19 [9].

In public opinion, this event became the basis for novel societal fears, related, inter alia, to the emergence of contradictory information due to poor knowledge of this phenomenon. Such situation actualises fear for the health of loved ones, fear of getting ill, staying in self-isolation for long, without possibilities of communication and movement. The situation of uncertainty and instability further exacerbated the feeling of fear [10].

Virtually all segments of the population, including children and adolescents, became bearers of new societal fears. But age features impacted significantly on the attitude to resolving the situation in the world: adolescents are more optimistic than the adult population. In this period, they are actively interested in news about the

coronavirus and follow the situation in their country and in the world. Children and adolescents use search engines and social media as the main information channel: "I learned from social media, and now I keep getting information from the same sources (Instagram and VKontakte)" (Dasha, 16). Respondents mention such resources as the website стопкоронавирус.РФ [stopkoronavirus.rf], local news and YouTube videos. Children also mentioned watching TV news, conversations with parents and other adults.

Public interest in the issue contributed to shaping the image of the new threat at a rational level. All adolescents were able to describe and explain their perception of the coronavirus. Their definitions include virus transmission mechanism, its origins (according to an official version, from animals), severe consequences for patients, need for prevention and compliance with security measures: "the virus, best known as COVID-19, enters a human organism and can cause a severe form of pneumonia" (Milena, 16); "this crown-shaped virus has appeared in China and is spreading rapidly throughout the Earth" (Vika, 16); "the virus is the most dangerous for the elderly" (Nikita, 10), "the virus is transmitted through airborne droplets and is highly contagious" (Alexander, 17).

Influenced by ideological discourse, a number of schoolchildren relate the virus to a global conspiracy theory. Thus, Alina (17) writes that "the virus is a manipulation aimed at carrying out operations and actions by the World Government". The question arises as to the artificial or natural nature of the virus and, accordingly, as to the reasons of its creation.

The central question all students would like to get an answer to is related to the date for the end of the pandemic and return to the usual lifestyle, which reflects the basic need for security and usual order of things: "The only question is: when will the pandemic end?" (Semyon, 11). The schoolchildren would also like to get answers to the questions concerning the safety of their loved ones and the ways of countering the threat: "I would like to know how to protect my loved ones, how to avoid the infection myself, and whether there exist a cure for this virus" (Masha, 10)

3.2 Children's everyday life during the pandemic

A number of interview questions concerned the changes that had occurred in the children's lives. First and foremost, they talked about restrictions related to the self-isolation regime: use of personal protective equipment (masks, gloves): "my life really has changed, even at traffic lights I stand as clear as possible of other people" (Vika, 16); "I can't go out or go shopping, and now I need to wear a mask and gloves when I leave my home" (Semyon, 11); "when we leave our homes, we put our masks on and wash our hands very often" (Dasha, 10).

The self-isolation regime naturally impacted on learning activities: schools went online. Accordingly, the

respondents referred extensively to changes in the educational process that even harmed the children's health. Thus, Alexander (11) noted he hadn't learned anything new; instead, he had just ruined his eyes because of distance learning.

Despite immersion in virtual reality, many schoolchildren missed offline communication with their peers. As Andrey (15) puts it in his interview, "my life has become more monotonous, I spend less time communicating with my friends and going out".

Another important sphere of children's everyday life is leisure that encompasses both recreation and entertainment dimension and supplementary education dimension. It is also affected by substantial changes. This period was especially hard for those who are active in sports and other additional activities. Here are typical statements by our interviewees: "no special sporting events are taking place, and in general, life seems to have stopped" (Artyom, 11); "I've stopped practicing sports, I only do home workouts, not every day, though; all competitions have been cancelled, and I am losing my physical form" (Alexander, 16).

In the sphere of family relations, the respondents have also noted a number of both negative and positive changes. Older children had to care for younger siblings, and this took up all their time: "I am babysitting my younger brother, and I hardly have any spare time" (Anna, 16). There has been a lack of privacy, but at the same time it has been noted that conversations with parents, shared family affairs and even board games have become more frequent. Adolescents have come to better understand family ties and the value of family: "I have gained a better understanding of the people closest to me and my family" (Kristina, 16). In extended families, conversations about care and increased attention to older relatives actualised: "We discuss the importance of taking care of our relatives and grandparents at this point, they are 65+" (Dasha, 12). Many families had to change their summer plans, and this caused anxiety and worries about ticket refunds, cancellation of holiday vouchers, etc.: "the pandemic has changed all our plans for this year; we are not going to the sea, and we need to come up with another idea" (Dasha, 10); "I was about to fly to my grandma, but when the pandemic started, flights were cancelled. We are constantly monitoring the situation; we are afraid we won't be able to fly away anymore" (Semyon, 11).

3.3 Children's attitude to the situation and plans for the future

In the era of pandemic, adults state: the world will never be the same again. Children's perspective on the situation is more optimistic. Many children believe that life will get better soon, and this will all be over soon.

Basic emotional states of our respondents are related to fear of the unknown, sadness because of changes in their usual way of life and regret that people are enduring a severe illness and dying all over the world: "emotions

evoked by these words [pandemic, coronavirus] are anything but positive, they instill fear" (respondent, 16), "most emotions are fear, horror and sorrow, because so many people have died of infection" (Masha, 17), "I feel sorry for those people who fell ill and for their relatives, and I want to see it finished soon" (Vika, 10), "the pandemic gives me a very unpleasant feeling, I don't want to get sick" (Dasha, 16). These are typical statements that emphasise a stable negative modality of the phenomenon under study.

Still, many interviewees highlight positive consequences of the pandemic, not only negative ones. Positive effects can be categorised by fields of activity. The first group is related to self-education and emerging opportunities for new educational trajectories. Having more free time and a wide choice of remote resources, many schoolchildren are able to study foreign languages, prepare for the United State Exam, read more different literature, including fiction, take virtual tours of museums and other cultural institutions: "I have more free time to prepare for the United State Exam and for self-education. During this period, I have been attending quite a number of courses, including website design" (Alina, 17). "I have learned to embroider on cloth and read many books" (Dasha, 10), "I can paint, read, play board games and participate in online contests" (Kristina, 16), "many online schools give free useful lessons (Polina, 16 лет)

The second group of effects is related to personal growth, self-organisation, manifestations of self-reliance and responsibility: "I have learned to manage my time better and to do everything on time" (Polina, 16); "I am happy with free time I can spend for something useful, for instance, for self-education" (Vika, 16), "during self-isolation, I learned self-discipline, and this will help me in the future" (Anna, 16).

The third group is related to recognition of greater value of previous daily practices, the possibility of attending school in particular. This changes motivation for learning when getting out of forced self-restraint. Liza (12) notes "a very strong desire to come back to the classroom". Maxim (10) claims to "appreciate time spent in the fresh air more".

Many children and adolescents have not changed their attitude towards the world because of the pandemic. Nevertheless, they compare measures taken to combat the pandemic in different countries. They stress both positive and negative experience of Russia ("the country spends little money on its citizens, and it failed to help those ended up in other countries", Alina, 17). Perceptions of China have changed: "I didn't think that people in that country can be so disciplined and responsible" (Maria, 16). "The Chinese took the disease very seriously, while the Italians did not" (Semyon, 12). Namely, the events in Italy caused a social shock: «I never thought it could be like this. Italy seemed to be able to cope with all problems, but it turned out to be very vulnerable" (Marina, 16).

In the face of a global threat, the schoolchildren believe the world will be able to put aside many contradictions, and the common problem will bring people together. As an interviewee puts it, «it is nice to know that people from all over the world stick together in the present situation"

(Anastasia, 16). “Yes, all the people on earth are the same, no matter where they live, regardless of their ethnicity and religion; everybody can fall ill with the disease, rich and poor alike” (Kirill, 17).

4. CONCLUSIONS

The pandemic has once again highlighted instability and “fluidity” of the contemporary world, changing the everyday life of children and adults alike dramatically and radically. Such a rearrangement of reality stirred up a lot of negative emotions, increased the level of anxiety of both children and adults and demanded organisation of new resources: educational and recreational online platforms, family leisure practices, etc. The children participating in the study have demonstrated considerable adaptive capacity and a high level of optimism about the prospects for changing the situation in the near future.

The situation of forced self-isolation made the children to take a fresh look at their daily routine. They re-assessed offline communication with their peers, traditional (offline) school learning, a more intense communication with their parents and other family members. At the same time, availability and diversity of Internet resources contributed to expanding children’s horizons, self-education, whereas quarantine promoted children’s self-organisation and responsible time management.

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