

Impact of Covid-19 on Adaptive Functioning of Special Need Children: A Qualitative Study

Misbah Waqar¹
Saleha Bibi²

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to global public health concerns, prompting governments to close schools and encourage home stays during emergencies to curb the spread of the virus. The COVID-19 pandemic may have negatively impacted sedentary behavior and physical activity in children and adolescents, raising concerns about their physical and mental well-being. The study aimed to investigate the effects of COVID-19 on the adaptive functioning of special children through qualitative data collection through established interview techniques. Parents of children with exceptional needs provided information about their children's adaptive functioning, using interview guidelines formulated with specialist assistance. The study established an inclusion and exclusion criterion, and parents of children with special needs were contacted individually. Interviews were conducted after informed consent, and themes emerged. The current study's sample size was 7. Results showed increased hyperactivity in children with severe needs and intellectual disabilities. Parents report that COVID-19 has negatively impacted their children with special needs, as they are unable to take them outside and the concept of lockdown and social distancing has not been instilled. Maladaptive behavior in these children is predicted by parents' own stress and routine changes. The research reveals that COVID-19 has negatively impacted the adaptive behaviors of children with special needs due to the lack of therapeutic services, social distancing, lockdowns, and parental stress.

Keywords: *COVID-19 stress, adaptive functioning, special need children, parents*

-
1. Principal Army Special Education Academy Rawalpindi, misbahwaqar333@gmail.com.
 2. Senior Lecturer Ripah University Gulberg Campus Islamabad, PhD scholar, Fatima Jinnah University, Rawalpindi.

Introduction

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) outbreak is a persistent worldwide hazard and public health issue. Governments have acted to stem the spread of illness by ordering people to stay at home during an emergency and closing schools. Concerns about one's physical and mental well-being are paramount in such situations. Sedentary behavior (SB) and physical activity (PA) in children and adolescents may have been significantly impacted negatively by the COVID-19 pandemic. This was particularly true during the protracted shutdown of the schools. It is often known that reduced PA and prolonged SB have a negative impact on both mental and physical health. These impacts can include weight gain, psychological problems, poor academic performance, and a loss of muscular and cardiorespiratory fitness (Jiménez, Carbonell, Lavie, 2020). Moreover, data indicates that the detrimental effects can persist until maturity (WHO, 2010). However, in 2016, more than 70% of the 1.6 million teenagers worldwide did not receive enough PA (Guthold, et al, 2020). This issue could get worse because of the ongoing COVID-19 outbreak. Thus, a deeper knowledge of how PA and SB are currently affecting kids and teens during this pandemic could aid educators, parents, and the Ministry of Education in quickly developing and putting into practice kid- and teen-focused policies and interventions. Nevertheless, no study has looked into this matter as of yet. As a result, throughout this crucial period, this aspect is thoroughly investigated.

Children are among the priority groups during the epidemic's peak since they have weakened immune systems and less awareness of self-prevention (Fang and Luo 2020). It's critical to concentrate on alterations in kids' psychosocial behavior throughout the pandemic. Previous research has demonstrated that the family and social environment have a direct impact on children's psychological behavior (Gao, Xing & Zhao, 2016). Children affected by the disease are unable to interact with peers face-to-face and cannot return to school on time. According to Buchanan (2017), children typically have negative reactions to long-term unfavorable occurrences such altered sleep patterns, less time spent learning and increasing usage of electronics. Furthermore, children's conduct will be impacted by the psychological strain parents experience throughout the pandemic (Li, Zhu & He, 2016). Children affected by the disease are unable to interact with peers face-to-face and cannot return to school on time. According to Buchanan (2017), children typically have negative reactions to long-term unfavorable occurrences such altered sleep patterns, less time spent learning and increasing usage of electronics. Furthermore, children's conduct will be impacted by the psychological strain parents

experience throughout the pandemic (Li, Zhu & He, 2016). Given that misbehavior in children can have an impact on their overall development (Frank, 2015), it is critical to look into how the epidemic is affecting children's conduct.

Special children have limited access to play, socialization, and even physical touch in the environment of lock down and movement restrictions, which is detrimental to their psychosocial development and well-being. Closing schools' limits students' access to education and their social relationships with classmates. With the current situation, children may feel lost and confused, which can exacerbate their dissatisfaction and anxiety. This will only become worse as they get overexposed to mass and social media, especially among teenagers. Frustration and unease will increase if certain adults find it difficult to express and explain the current situation to children in a way that is age appropriate. Parents and caregivers are facing additional difficulties because of COVID-19. This may make it more difficult for them to care for and interact with their kids. Children are extremely perceptive about people and their surroundings, so they will undoubtedly notice, take in, and respond to stress in their community members and caregivers, which will negatively impact their wellbeing.

Conceptual Definitions

COVID-19

"CO" stands for corona, "VI" for a virus, and "D" for disease. Prior to 2019, this illness was referred to as "2019 novel coronavirus," or "2019-nCoV." A novel virus known as COVID-19 is linked to both severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) and some types of the common cold (WHO, 2020).

Adaptive Functioning

Adaptive functioning is the ability of a person to carry out age-appropriate activities of daily living, like dressing, eating, following rules, avoiding accidents, and making friends (Chen, 2018).

Special Need Children

Although the phrase can have a wide definition, it is typically used to refer to kids who have developmental or communication difficulties. It can indicate anything from mild cognitive impairments to severe retardation (APA, 2013).

Objectives of the study

Followings were the objectives of the study

- 1) To explore the negative impacts of COVID-19 on adaptive functioning special need children.
- 2) To find out positive impacts of COVID-19 on functioning special need children.
- 3) To investigate the management strategies of parents in COVID-19 period.
- 4) To find out impact of lockdown on the adaptive functioning special need children.
- 5) To explore the impact of social distancing on the adaptive functioning special need children.

Methodology

Population of the study

The study population comprised children who had intellectual deficit. Data was collected from their parents. Age range for the children was 5-12 years. Parents of children from mild to moderate intellectual disabilities were interviewed individually.

Sample of the study

Sample of the study was designated from semi-government special school for intellectually delayed children. Sample was selected by using purposive sampling technique. The current study's sample size was 7. The study comprised three parents of children diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder, three parents of children diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and one parent of a kid with Down syndrome. There were 4 boys and 3 girls in our sample of the study. After reaching the saturation point, further data collection was stopped.

Instruments

Following instruments were used in the study.

- Consent form
- Demographic sheet
- Self-Developed Structured Interview Guidelines.

i. Consent form

Parents were assured that the information gathered about them would be kept private and utilized exclusively for research.

ii. Demographic sheet

Demographic data sheet was devised to gather the basic information about the children including their name, age, gender, diagnosis and level of diagnosis.

iii. Self-Developed Structured Interview Guidelines

With the assistance of specialists, the authors created structured interview procedures in order to look into how COVID-19 affects children with special needs in terms of adaptive behaviour. The authors developed these interview criteria since there was a dearth of a valid and reliable method to assess the influence of COVID-19 on the adaptive behaviour of children with exceptional needs. Interview guideline was developed according to our cultural context and was validated through pilot study on the parents of 3 special need children. Face validity and content validity of the Interview guideline were developed by expert opinions/views. Inter rator reliability of our Interview guideline was also established through views of different experts of the field.

Inclusion Criteria

- Only intellectually disabled children were included in the present study.
- Only children within the age range of 5-12 were included in the study.
- Only fathers or mothers were interviewed.
- Sample was selected from ASEA.
- Only those parents were interviewed who took interest in the study.

Exclusion criteria

- Children with physical disabilities were not the part of our study
- Children below age 5 and above age 12 were not included in the present study.
- Caregivers other than mothers and fathers were not interviewed
- Parents not willing to cooperate were not included in the present study.

Research Design

The current study's research design was qualitative. Using an open-ended, self-developed questionnaire, data was gathered. The current study's data were qualitatively analyzed.

Qualitative Data Analysis

The lack of a validated scale or interview schedule to measure the study's constructs necessitated the creation of standardized interview protocols. The researchers utilized all available resources to get comprehensive and relevant data regarding the impact of COVID-19 on the adaptive functioning of adolescents with special needs. The researchers consulted experts in the field to develop and validate structured interview criteria for assessing the impact of COVID-19 on the adaptive functioning of children with exceptional needs.

The following questions were added to the interview guideline with the authors' consent after receiving clearance from subject-matter experts:

What is adaptive functioning of special need children according to your opinion?

1. How COVID-19 has impacted our special need children?
2. What changes lockdown has brought in the behaviour of our special need children?
3. How do you see social distancing with reference to your special need child?
4. Has COVID-19 brought some positive effects in the behaviour of our special need children? Discuss with reference to your special child.
5. How COVID-19 has influence our special need children behaviour negatively?
6. How do you manage behavioural issues in your special need child caused by COVID-19?

It was requested of **respondents** to answer these questions honestly. The interview guidelines were designed to collect an increasing amount of objective data without providing guidance, with the exception of two questions specifically designed to examine the positive and negative effects of COVID-19 on the adaptive functioning of children with special needs.

For data analysis Braun and Clarke (2019) was used in the current study. The six stages of reflexive thematic analysis that were used in this study are as follows:

I. Familiarizing yourself with data: Researchers began to truly engage with the qualitative content, such as interviews, at this level. To become comfortable with the data, researchers read and reread the data set and listened to the audio tape recording.

II. Generating Codes: The process of reflecting on the data in a way that helps the researcher focus on its unique features and reduce the amount of data is known as coding (Nowell et al., 2017). Researchers begin

highlighting concepts or things that strike me as significant or intriguing as Researchers go through the interviews in order to achieve this.

III. Generating initial themes: In this step, the previously coded data extracts are analyzed to identify themes meaningful patterns that can be found. As researchers collect additional codes in this step, researchers begin to recognize patterns within them and organize them into more comprehensive themes that represent the primary concept.

IV. Developing and reviewing themes: In order to do this, the researcher must determine whether the themes are consistent over the entire dataset and the coded extracts. It resembles enlarging out an image to check if the content still makes sense.

V. Defining and Naming Themes: After my themes are clear, researchers give them names that summarize their main ideas and provide a clear definition. This stage conveys results and aids in interpretation of the data.

VI. Producing a report: After the themes have been completely established, the analysis proceeds to its conclusion (Nowell et al., 2017). Writing a story about the analysis's outcome is required. Finally, researcher compiled results into a report in this stage.

Theme # 1

Theme: Parents' perceptions of adaptive performance of their special needs children		
Condensation	Codes	Categories
It is important for children to behave appropriately based on the circumstances. Special child should sit properly and work with little concentration. In presence of guests, they should not make us embarrassed. They should not act become hyper all the time. They should play with sibling in group activities with keen interest.	Socially acceptable behavior. Least demanding behavior. Calm behavior.	Socially approved behaviors

Theme # 2

Theme: How Corona Virus has influenced the adaptive behavior of their child.		
Condensation	Codes	Categories
Special children have become more hyperactive. They don't listen to us at all. They are lacking healthy routine in their lives. They tease us all time by demanding our attention. Lack of schooling and therapeutic services has impacted our special need children badly. Their hyperactivity is at the peak they can't do anything with focus and concentration.	Hyperactivity Change in routine Lack of attention while working Attention seeking behaviors	Influence of COVID-19 on special need children.

Theme # 3

Theme: Influence of lockdown on special need children.		
Condensation	Codes	Categories
Children cannot be taken by their parents outside of their homes. Most of the demands of special need children are not being fulfilled due to closure of shops. All this has resulted in increase of frustration, physical and verbal aggression. Parents found it very difficult to keep their hyperactive children inside the house all the time.	Frustration and aggression in children due to lockdown. Stress for parents.	Lock down and special need children.

Theme # 4

Theme: Manipulation of social distancing on special need children.		
Condensation	Codes	Categories
Social distance has very negatively affected the social skills of special need children. Parents are not able to generalize the learning of social skills for their children at different settings. Fear of getting virus scared parents when they think to work upon social skills of their children. Social distancing has strengthened isolated activities of their special need children.	Social skills of special need children are in danger.	Social distancing has impacted negatively special need children.

Theme #5

Theme: Negative effects of COVID-19 on the behavior and personality of special need children.		
Condensation	Codes	Categories
Parents reported emotional and behaviour dysregulation in their special need children. Sleep disturbances. Regressive behavior (e.g., toileting problems, co-sleeping). Anxiety/increased repetitive behaviors. Clingy behavior. Social withdrawal. Negative affect. Aggressive behavior. Increased hyperactivity/impulsivity.	Psychological and physical issues. Psychopathy. Emotional instability.	Negative influence of COVID-19 on psychical and psychological health of special need children.

Theme # 6

Theme: Positive impacts of COVID-19 on special need children.		
Condensation	Codes	Categories
Parents are better able to understand their children as they spent most of their time with them. Special need children are being strongly paired with their parents. There has developed a strong emotional attachment bond between special need children and their parents.	Strong bounding and deeper understanding between parents and special need children.	Good effects of pandemic (Covid-19) on special need children.

Theme #7

Theme: Management of special need children by their parents in COVID-19 time where is lack of schooling and therapeutic services.		
Condensation	Codes	Categories
Parents make best use of social stories related to COVID-19 that includes concepts such as hand washing, social distancing and shelter in place. Parents Create a visual schedule of daily tasks. They praise their children regularly to reinforce and strengthened desirable behaviors. They work upon psychotherapeutic work plan provided by psychological of school.	Parental control over the bad behavior of children with special needs	Techniques used by parents of children with special needs to address the behavioral effects of COVID-19 frustration in their children.

Discussion

The current study aims to determine the impact of COVID-19 on the ability of children with special needs to adapt. Seven intellectually disabled children made up the study sample; three had been diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder, three with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, and one with Down syndrome. Children who had already received a diagnosis of these diseases were chosen for the current study rather than having their diagnoses made by researchers.

Parents of children with special needs provided information. Prior to the actual investigation, inclusion and exclusion criteria were defined. The study was carried out with complete adherence to the ethical principles set forth by the American Psychological Association (APA), which included obtaining agreement from participants, ensuring that they would not suffer bodily or psychological harm, and guaranteeing participant anonymity. The authors created criteria for structured interviews to collect data on the subject of our study. The current study only included interviews that were done entirely; interviews that were conducted partially or in which the respondents expressed no interest were not included.

Themes, codes, and categories were developed with the help of experts. Parents were asked how they understood adaptive functioning in children with exceptional needs. They responded by saying that adaptive behavior is any activity that conforms to social norms. They went on to say that these behaviors are adaptive in relation to their special needs children if their special child behaves calmly, has a strong attention span, and can play in a group setting. In discussing how COVID-19 has affected their special needs children's adaptive functioning, parents disclosed that their children have become more hyperactive, frustrated, and aggressive as a result of the virus.

When parents of special needs children were asked to discuss the impact of social distancing and lockdown on their children, they disclosed that while these are preventative measures, they have a negative impact on their children's personalities and behaviors because they have both undermined their social skills. They went on to say that their children's physical and mental health had gotten worse due to school closures, their inability to take them, and the lack of therapy assistance. Along with discussing behavior management techniques they are doing to control their children's behavior during the epidemic, parents also talked about the benefits of COVID-19 for their special needs children.

Unpredictability is perhaps one of the main things that affects kids. Routines provide children with structure and a reliable framework, which is crucial. Examples of these include waking up at 6:30 am, attending kindergarten or school from 8 am to 3 pm, visiting friends, having dinner, and going to bed at 8 pm. They feel safe and at ease with routine and order. The primary factor attributed by parents to their unique child's maladaptive functioning was a change in routine.

The loss of social interaction is another significant issue. Children with special needs miss their peers, playmates, and grandparents. Younger youngsters aren't even able to call their grandparents or friends on their own. It's hard for us grownups to accept the required and advised barriers, and it's probably more harder for our children. According to the parents in our survey, social isolation and lockdown pose a serious risk to their kids' socializing abilities.

Children find it difficult to accept and comprehend that many parents work from home these days, particularly those with special needs. Although they appear to be with them, their parents are not. Children with special needs find it extremely difficult to comprehend this, which is why they behave negatively more often.

Lastly, children may suffer as a result of media exposure. Children may experience worry and terror due to the constant barrage of images and stories on TV, radio, and social media about sick and even dead people.

In addition to highlighting the detrimental effects of COVID-19, our study also revealed that parents struggle to comprehend their kids. They have looked into a lot of positive aspects of their personalities because, according to some parents, they have realized how compassionate their special needs children really are.

Findings

The study's conclusions indicated that COVID-19 has an impact on special needs children's adaptive functioning in both positive and negative ways, with the latter being more detrimental and warranting consideration when trying to help the children's behavior and personality develop in a positive way. The researchers would like to thank parents for their efforts in keeping an eye on their children at home throughout this pandemic. While this is a difficult period for everyone, children with intellectual disabilities are particularly affected because of the lack of therapy services and the end of schooling; as a result, their growth has all but ceased, but there is hope that this too will pass.

Limitations and Future Recommendations

The present study is limited by its small sample size, reliance on data from a single special needs institute, and qualitative research design, which all contribute to a greater degree of restriction on the generalizability of research findings. We were unable to locate any prior research with which to compare the results of our investigation because, regrettably, no published articles on this or similar topics have been found. By drawing the scientific community's attention to this area of study, our research is opening doors for them. Data was collected from parents only. Future level studies can consider the perspectives of therapist, teachers and peers as well. Parents of special need children were also included. Next level studies can include parents of adolescents as well.

References

- Buchanan, H. (2017). Coping Styles in Children. Dental Fear and Anxiety in Pediatric Patients. *Advances in Psychological Science*, 6(4).
- Fang, F., & Luo, X. (2020). Facing a major epidemic of 2019 novel coronavirus infection: pediatricians' thoughts. *Chinese Journal of Pediatrics*, 58(2), 81-85.
- Gao, X., Xing, S., & Zhao, J. (2016). Parental psychological control and the relationship with children's psychosocial functioning. *Advances in Psychological Science*, 4(1).
- Guthold, R., Stevens, G.A., Riley, L.M., & Bull, F.C. (2020). Global trends in insufficient physical activity among adolescents: a pooled analysis of 298 population-based surveys with 1.6 million participants. *Lancet Child Adolesc Health*. 4(1):23–35. doi: 10.1016/S2352-4642(19)30323-2.
- Jiménez, D., Carbonell, A., & Lavie, C.J. (2020). Physical exercise as therapy to fight against the mental and physical consequences of COVID-19 quarantine special focus in older people. *Prog Cardiovasc Dis*. 3(4), doi: 10.1016/j.pcad.2020.03.009.
- Li, Y., Zhu, J., & He, T. (2016) The relation between mother's emotion regulation and children's emotion understanding competence: the mediating role of maternal reactions to children's negative emotions. *Journal of Psychological Science*, 3(1).
- World Health Organization Global recommendations on physical activity for health. (2010)

Citation of the Article:

Waqar, M., & Bibi, S. (2024). Impact of covid-19 on adaptive functioning of special need children: A Qualitative Study. *Journal of Inclusive Education*, 8(1), 81–92.

Received on: August 16, 2024

Revised on: February 4, 2025

Accepted on: February 12, 2025