

5-10-2023

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Counselor Education Capstones. 173.

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Social and Emotional Development of Toddlers Post-COVID-19 Pandemic

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A Capstone Project submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the Master of Science Degree
in Counselor Education at
Winona State University

Fall 2022

Winona State University

College of Education

Counselor Education Department

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

CAPSTONE PROJECT

Social and Emotional Development of Toddlers Post-COVID-19 Pandemic

This is to certify that the Capstone Project of

Alice M. Bygd

Has been approved by the faculty advisor and the CE695 – Capstone Project

Course Instructor in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Master of Science Degree in Counselor Education

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Approval Date: 10 May 2023

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic created a significantly different world for infants and very young children to grow and develop their social and emotional skills. These infants are now today's toddlers. They were born or spent the earliest months of their lives in a society that was lacking the naturally occurring social and emotional experiences that children have had in the past. Research on the social and emotional development of young children since the COVID-19 pandemic is lacking greatly. This is due to how close the lived experiences of a pandemic for society are to the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic created unique situations and it will take time to fully understand its repercussions. However, research is starting to put the pieces together of the big picture of development.

Keywords: early childhood, COVID-19, child development, social and emotional development

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Social and Emotional Development of Toddlers Post-COVID-19 Pandemic

A key element in the development of health and wellness for young children is their social and emotional development (Zeanah, 2019). It is one of the categories assessed and evaluated at all well-child pediatrician visits during the first few years of life (Turner, 2018). Milestones are focused on multiple aspects of children's development such as physical, cognitive, social, and emotional development (Zeanah, 2019). These milestones are important in the development of the rest of childhood and have an impact that extends through adulthood. Poor development leads to poorer long-term outcomes without intervention (Zeanah, 2019). Infants born just before or during the COVID-19 pandemic are currently in the toddler stage (18 months – three years of age). Infancy through toddlerhood is a critical time for many elements of development, particularly social and emotional development (Zeanah, 2019). The global COVID-19 pandemic created a pause for many people all over the world including very young children (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2022). While lives were on pause with lockdowns and stay-at-home orders these children were still growing and their social and emotional domains were still developing. The social and emotional development of children born during or just before the COVID-19 pandemic was negatively impacted due to social isolation and a lack of support for their caregivers. These factors all impacted the ability of these very young children to develop their social and emotional skills.

Luckily, children are known to be resilient as shown by countless studies (Zeanah, 2019). Having problems early in life with social and emotional development, or even other areas, does not mean there has to be an issue for the rest of their lives (Zeanah, 2019). Because infants and toddlers have a lot of plasticity in their brains it is possible to support an area where a child has fallen behind and assist them in catching up to their peers and/or what is considered the norms

for their age range (Zeanah, 2019). Neuroplasticity of the brain has been extensively researched for many decades. With such a large amount of knowledge and research to pull from counselors and other mental health practitioners can support children who are developmentally behind (Zeanah, 2019). In counseling, this can be considered by remembering that people (particularly young children) are capable of rewiring their brains, especially when they are given a very different situation. For example, isolation versus socialization and the vast amount of stress that comes from living through a pandemic (Zeanah, 2019; CDC, 2022).

Review of Literature

Currently, research appears to be unsure about whether the COVID-19 pandemic affected the social and emotional development of toddlers. This is possibly due to the relatively short amount of time since the COVID-19 pandemic began. Cross-sectional research such as Ferrari et al. (2022) was able to show the difference between the results they were seeing from before the pandemic and what they saw during and after the pandemic. Other approaches look at this phenomenon using theories such as the life course model to infer the potential issues that will arise (Benner & Mistry, 2020). Some reports, such as Prime et al. (2020), used results from studies that looked at acute crises, natural disasters, war, and terrorism to compare with the COVID-19 pandemic.

General Social and Emotional Development of Toddlers before the COVID-19 Pandemic

The social and emotional development of young children before the COVID-19 pandemic was widely studied for decades as evidenced by the large number of published books, studies, journal articles, and other materials (e.g., Berk and Meyers, 2016; Davies, 2011; Zeanah, 2019; & Zero to Three, 2016). These studies help to provide a baseline for what social and emotional development looked like in toddlers prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. General developmental milestones have also been extensively researched and show whether or not a child is on track with where they are expected to be in general and in comparison to their peers (Zeanah, 2019).

Milestones for typical development in all domains of child development have been studied and categorized by many groups for different situations such as pediatrician well-child check-ups, educator assessments, and measurements by clinical mental health professionals. One reliable recording of these milestones for social and emotional domains is the Diagnostic

Classification of Mental Health and Developmental Disorders of Infancy and Early Childhood- otherwise known as the DC: 0-5 Manual (Zero to Three, 2016).

Milestones Expected of Toddlers ages 18-36 months of age.

Typical milestones expected by 18 months of age include the following: demonstrating some self-soothing/regulating strategies, sharing in humor with peers and adults (funny noises or making different faces), handing things to others in play, engaging in reciprocal displays of affection and showing emotion, and willingness to leave a familiar adult's side to explore new settings and situations and engage in teasing behavior with adults. This teasing might look like an adult telling the child not to do something and the child smiles and looks at the adult while doing what they were told not to do (Zero to Three, 2016).

By 24 months (two years) of age, toddlers should have grown and expanded the skills in the previous list as well as adding more. At this age, they now can often exhibit more emotions such as shame, guilt, embarrassment, and pride. By this time, they should be able to name or recognize the names of a few basic emotions (e.g., happy, sad, mad), exhibit empathy, and attempt to assert some independence out of the emotional aspect. In social development they often imitate other's complex actions such as-daily tasks, caring for younger siblings with a doll, posture, or even gestures. This is usually when they enjoy being with other children close in age to themselves. They will take pride when they do an independent task or accomplishment. They will also react to and respond to being praised or redirected and corrected. They now also begin to play on their own but prefer the proximity of other children and might start to imitate them as well, especially if they are older. (Zero to Three, 2016). This is referred to as parallel play, a term coined by Mildred Parten (Berk & Meyers, 2015). Parallel play involves two children playing next to each other but not in a way that has them participating in each other's play or engaging

together (Parten, 1932). They are simply doing their own activities next to each other in a way that feels social to them.

By the time they are leaving the toddlerhood stage at 36 months (three years of age), most have developed all these social and emotional skills and have continued to develop them to the range of a typical three-year-old. At this time, they should be able to express a full range of emotions and be able to put words to some of them such as distress or anger, express feeling in and through pretend play, take pride in new learning, and displays affection both verbally and physically (hugs, kisses, says 'I love you'). In the social domain, they should be able to share without being prompted, wait their turn in a game, show concern for others, and take action with a crying peer, play with others instead of simply next to other children, share accomplishments with others, and help with simple household tasks like picking up their toys (Zero to Three, 2016).

According to Briggs et al. (2012), the Ages and Stages Questionnaire: Social-Emotional (ASQ: SE) is one common assessment tool used in pediatric well-child visits as well as in psychological and clinical mental health diagnostics. The ASQ: SE is a well-studied assessment that provides screening for children in many age groups, including toddlers, on many critical areas of development with a specialization in social and emotional development (Briggs et al., 2012). The ASQ: SE assesses all areas the ASQ (Ages and Stages Questionnaire) does with the addition of a social and emotional section. Other influential assessments and screenings can include the Children's Behavioral Check List (CBCL), Infant-Toddler Social and Emotional Assessment (including a brief screening version), Conners Early Childhood Check List, and a full diagnostic interview (Zeanah, 2019). These tend to be more helpful than screenings as they

are more in-depth. However, screenings are a good place to start and are very helpful in many situations such as well-child visits (Zeanah, 2019).

The Effect of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Toddlers

The COVID-19 pandemic created a situation that those working with, and frequently around, very young children were not prepared for. Teachers, mental health providers, and families had expected to be able to see young children in person. Many daycare centers closed down for non-essential workers, parents worked from home, and extended families did not get to see or even meet their youngest family members. Due to this, many parents were also in charge of helping their child develop social and emotional skills without additional support. According to records from the CDC, a national emergency in the United States was declared on March 13, 2020, and by March 15 many states within the U.S. were setting their own lockdown and stay-at-home orders and guidelines (CDC, 2022). The stay-at-home orders and guidelines varied by each state; however, they all involved some level of staying at home, such as jobs converting to virtual or at home and schools going virtual. There were some workers whose jobs did require them to still be in the community which was a stressor as they were at high risk of contracting COVID-19. These stay-at-home or shelter-in-place orders lasted many weeks and even when lifted there were still requirements about social distancing and pressure on people to not gather in very large groups or indoors (Jacobsen & Jacobsen, 2020). This was especially encouraged for older adults, very young children, and other immunocompromised individuals (CDC, 2022).

Preliminary research on the cognitive development of children born during the pandemic as compared to data that has previously been collected in this area concluded that there is a significant deficit. A study by Deoni et al. (2022) used neurocognitive data collected from 2011-2021 from 700 neurotypically developing infants. The original timeline of this study allowed for

a unique insight into trends of development and how they changed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. During the applicable period, none of the children reported positive tests for SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19). The Mullen Scales of Early Learning was used to collect the neurocognitive data of each child. The Mullen Scales of Early Learning measures general cognition and verbal and non-verbal development, socioeconomic status, birth outcome history, and maternal history (Deoni et al., 2022). Infants born during the pandemic scored significantly lower in all areas of the Mullen Scales of Early Learning. According to the fourteenth edition of the Mental Measurements Yearbook (2001), the Mullen Scales of Early Learning have a high validity and reliability rate and have been used for many years with accurate results. Another notable point is that maternal stress typically was a major indicator of the infant's score; yet during the COVID-19 pandemic this was not the case (Deoni et al., 2022). This differs from what is generally known about infant and early childhood development. Typically, maternal mental health is seen to play a part in development from prenatal on through early and later childhood (Berk & Meyers, 2016). Having a higher socioeconomic status was seen to be a possible protective factor in this study (Deoni et al., 2022).

A cross-sectional study conducted in Italy by Ferrari et al. (2022) looked at a different topic related to neurocognitive development in the first three years of life. The study began in 2019 but was only able to test 34 infants before the lockdown took place and halted the research. During this time Ferrari et al. (2022) took this as an opportunity to continue studying the infants in the same way but to also factor in the effects of the lockdown among other negative impacts due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Ferrari et al. (2022) were already conducting a study using the Griffiths Scale of Child Development and gathering information on the subscales of general development, which included social and emotional when the COVID-19 pandemic began. This

study compared the 34 six-month-old infants check-ins of those that completed all the tests before the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown in Italy and those that did so during the pandemic, which was 70 infants. This was a combined number of 104 infants (61 males and 43 females) with almost all of them being Italian. Extensive questions on family involvement, age, nationality, education level, and type of employment were asked about both parents of the child (Ferrari et al., 2022).

One potential issue with this study is the use of the Griffiths scale (Ferrari et al., 2022). According to Cronje et al. (2022), the Griffiths III scale has a reliable test-retest score; however, the vast amount of research done on this scale has been on children from the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland. This includes where both the original study was performed as well as the retest (Cronje et al., 2022). There have not been extensive studies on this particular assessment outside of children in the United Kingdom or the Republic of Ireland, but it is used throughout the world which suggests that it has both reliability and validity with populations other than those from the original research studies. This is in part due to the extensive revision the Griffiths scale went through from versions two to three (Cronje et al., 2022). While it is offered in Italian there is no mention of any cultural considerations for the differences between The United Kingdom, The Republic of Ireland, or Italy (Ferrari et al., 2022). However, this study did have a high test-retest and reliability score when tested in the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland and has only grown in favoritism and research (Cronje et al., 2022). This scale has subcategories that make it easy to see where there are deficits for children and within which groups (Cronje et al., 2022).

From the Griffiths III scale, Ferrari et al. (2022) broke down the multiple subcategories. When looking at the results from Ferrari et al.'s (2022) study, it becomes clear that the general

developmental score each child was given, the children who were in the COVID-19 group (those whose testing was not finished before the onset of the initial lockdown) showed a significant difference. The children from the COVID-19 group scored significantly lower overall on their general development score, especially in language and social-emotional domains compared to those that had completed the tests prior to lockdowns (Ferrari et al., 2022).

Among the places that closed during the stay-at-home and shelter-in-place orders were schools, including early childhood schools, education centers, and even some childcare centers (CDC, 2022). Egan et al. (2021) noticed a gap in literature at the time around the effects of school closures and moving to virtual classrooms. Research literature was lacking for children aged ten and under. Children learn a large amount of their social and emotional development skills in schools and childcare centers, especially in relation to their peers (Davies, 2011; Egan et al., 2021; Zeanah, 2019). Social interactions are one of the main ways children develop socio-emotional skills and further this domain of development. Without social interactions, especially with peers, they miss out on valuable learning skills such as problem-solving or getting along with others (Brom et al., 2020; Zeanah, 2019). Egan et al. (2021) gathered data by sending out a survey to parents with a set of questions inquiring about their child's experience with the school and early childhood education center closures. With this, they found that 90% of parents reported negative effects including the children missing their friends, and that many were missing school. In children under the age of six years old, the vast majority reported that they missed their school setting. Egan et al. (2021) also noted parental stress which they found to be high during this time. Parental and primary caregiver stress can be a risk factor for many aspects of a child's life which includes their social and emotional development (Davies, 2011; Zeanah, 2019).

Another study that looked at the impact of missing early education found that children in the 2020 cohort of their study scored significantly lower on all aspects, including social and emotional development than those in the 2017 cohort (Abufhele et al., 2022). The study by Abufhele et al. (2022) out of Chile and by Egan et al. (2021) out of Ireland found similar results in their studies. This suggests that these effects have potentially happened worldwide and across many cultures. With further research, the multicultural and multinational differences and similarities will be easier to detect. Prime et al. (2020) also suggest that school closures have had a negative impact on children, and they predict that this will be the case long term as well. A limitation of all the studies is what the long-term effect will be once the children can be back in school and with their friends and a sense of normalcy returns.

Interventions and Applications for Counseling to Support Social and Emotional Development

All is not lost though for any developmental delays that could have happened due to COVID-19. There is much that can be done in the field of counseling to help these toddlers catch up to where their peers would be had they not been born during or just before the COVID-19 pandemic. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, research was already being done on how to help promote social and emotional development and learning in typically developing and atypically developing toddlers. This was also done along with research being conducted on how to help the toddlers who were already behind catch up to their peers. This is evidenced by the vast amount of literature that is available. Increasing all these measures of advancing and catching up on existing social and emotional development is extremely important.

According to an article from *What About the Baby?* an argument is brought up that the need for interventions for toddlers, infants, and young children, along with their caregivers, is

extremely urgent (Ribaudo, 2021). Reducing stress for parents is a great protective factor for their child from any number of things and is a strengthening factor for others. This could include social and emotional development. Ribaudo (2021), along with many others who are a part of the *What About the Baby?* journal, suggests that supporting the relationship of the child and primary caregivers should come first and that fostering healthy attachment is at the front of the interventions being used. Supporting a healthy attachment is extremely important and can be a major protective factor for long-term social and emotional development and overall health and wellness (Ribaudo, 2021; Zeanah, 2019). Creating a secure relationship between a child and their caregiver is important for social and emotional development. It seems to be even more important in a world where relationships, in general, were being tested by distance, isolation, and being virtual. The caregiver and child bond is significant for their entire life and development (Ribaudo, 2021).

Using different developmental theories to map out the potential impact that the COVID-19 pandemic will have on the lives of these children can make it easier to break it down and see how to move forward. While no specific theory is stated frequently in the existing literature about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the social and emotional development of toddlers, examining and applying a variety of theories is a good place to start. Counseling, in general, is a theory-based delivery of treatment with research behind it (Sharf, 2016). Benner and Mistry (2020) looked on a large scale at the developmental impacts the COVID-19 pandemic had by applying the life course theory specifically. With this theory, the researchers explored multiple areas of children's lives that can impact their social and emotional development. Benner and Mistry (2020) mention the environment the child is living in, how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted that, as well as how Bronfenbrenner's ecological model theory can also be brought in

for a distinct perspective. Looking at all aspects of the child's life is important in best supporting them from a holistic point of view.

Liu and Fisher (2022) proposed using Adverse Childhood Experiences and other aspects of adversity with a translational neuroscience framework to study long-term effects. Liu and Fisher (2022) state that the main risk of adversity, especially for young children, is unpredictability. Many other researchers and theorists agree that unpredictability is a major risk factor (Zeanah, 2019). During the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a lot of unpredictability and uncertainty. Liu and Fisher (2022) used a translational neuroscience model to show not only psychological effects but also biological and neurological effects. Based on their findings prevention and intervention strategies are extremely important not only in terms of COVID-19 pandemic impacts directly, but for all the potential long-term effects that are not yet known. Prevention and intervention, in general, are not new and can be done by targeting children, or by targeting parents and other primary caregivers and giving them the tools they need (Zeanah, 2019). So, counselors can continue to promote social and emotional development in a post-COVID-19 pandemic world using the same prevention and intervention tools they have been. As research continues it will become clear which tools work best and are most appropriate.

Gaps in Current Research

As this is a new area of study. In new research areas there are often gaps. This is only the early stages a growing research area that may reveal the scope of the pandemic's impact on social and emotional development of children. So much of this gap will be resolved as more time is dedicated to both new and current studies that have yet to be published. It will also greatly increase our understanding of the theoretically based approaches to conceptualizing the situation. Journal articles such as Brenner and Mistry (2020) who approach the potential lag in social and

emotional development through a life course theory lens, and Liu and Fisher (2022) who use a neuroscience perspective that focuses on unpredictability in childhood as an overlap with what the COVID-19 pandemic has done. Each application takes what is currently known about early child development and applies established theories. Neither are creating new theories or ideas of child development but are showing a way to predict the potential effects that may be seen eventually with young children.

Another area that is lacking is knowing what will be the most helpful in terms of support, interventions, further thoughts, and questions to keep in mind, as well as where the research gaps are. At this time, a lot is known about ways to support the social and emotional development of toddlers around the world, including when there is a crisis such as a war zone or natural disaster. However, very little is known about supporting toddlers, or anyone, in a global pandemic situation. This is such a novel situation that it will take patience and observation for the answers to be revealed. Eventually, we will put enough time between the COVID-19 pandemic and the studies being conducted. More studies focused on the social and emotional development of toddlers born during this period will allow practitioners, counselors, and educators to create guides, manuals, handbooks, and trainings to teach others how to best support young children going through similar experiences.

Further, the opposite is also missing from the current literature. Were there ways that these periods of social isolation benefited the social and emotional development of these children? Ribaldo (2021) states that supporting caregiver and child attachments is very important. An area that needs further research is how attachment for at least some children may have been impacted positively. With so many parents working from home, the amount of time they spent with their child increased. Depending on the types of interactions that occurred

between the child and caregiver there could have been an increase in the strength of the attachment that was formed. Secure attachment serves as a protective factor (Ribaud, 2021) for children, which could have an impact on their social and emotional development. More research in this area is needed to have a more accurate picture of social and emotional development for the children.

Conclusion and Discussion

Taking in all of this data we can conclude that more research must be done in to understand deeper issues and long-term effects. At this time long-term effects are not able to be understood as we are too close to the event of COVID-19 and not yet out of the endemic stage (CDC, 2022). Time will help to gain more of an understanding of how this pause in traditional social and emotional development will affect this group of children in the future. What can be done at this time is to continue to put copious amounts of effort into supporting the social and emotional development of young children. Continuing to do this during a time that is more familiar than during the COVID-19 pandemic and relying on what is proven to be helpful is the first place to start. Research continues to be done on the social and emotional development of children, including those in this age range, some of which are not overtly focused on development related to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. When more research is completed on the impact of COVID-19 on social and emotional development we will have an understanding of how to best support toddlers and their exploration of the world.

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