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OPINION PAPER

COVID-19 pandemic: practical guide for promoting the mental health of children and adolescents

Pandemia de COVID-19: guia prático para promoção da saúde mental de crianças e adolescentes

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Abstract

Objectives: Provide pediatricians with useful recommendations to help families minimize the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and social isolation on the mental health of children and adolescents. **Methods:** This paper is based on a review of the recently published literature on the topic and the author's clinical experience. **Results:** Parents are being challenged by life changes required by the new situation, and need to favorably manage their children daily lives, minimizing the impact of current circumstances on their mental health. **Conclusions:** Every crisis period generates uncertainty and fear, but can also present an opportunity for self-knowledge and personal development. This difficult phase can favor the deepening of parent-child relationships.

Palavras-chave:
Saúde Mental,
Criança,
Adolescente,
Pandemias,
Infecções por Coronavírus.

Resumo

Objetivos: Fornecer ao pediatra recomendações úteis para ajudar as famílias a minimizar o impacto da pandemia de COVID-19 e do isolamento social na saúde mental de crianças e adolescentes. **Métodos:** Este artigo é baseado na revisão de literatura recente publicada sobre o tema e na experiência clínica dos autores. **Resultados:** Os pais estão sendo desafiados pelas mudanças de vida exigidas pela nova situação, e precisam gerenciar favoravelmente o dia a dia de seus filhos, minimizando o impacto das atuais circunstâncias na sua saúde mental. **Conclusões:** Todo período de crise gera incertezas e medo, mas também pode se apresentar como oportunidade para o autoconhecimento e o desenvolvimento pessoal. Esta fase difícil pode ser propícia para o aprofundamento da relação dos pais com seus filhos.

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INTRODUCTION

The new coronavirus pandemic has forced several countries to implement social isolation measures to prevent its rapid spread.[1-6] The closing down of schools, the need for physical distance, the prohibition of cultural activities in person, are generating academic, social, economic and psychological impacts. The parents of children and adolescents, overwhelmed by the life changes brought about by this new situation, also have to manage their children's daily lives, minimizing the impact of current circumstances on the mental health of children and adolescents.[5-11]

In times of COVID-19, in which the current scenario requires seclusion, we developed this guide with the goal of instructing pediatricians to promote mental well-being for their patients and families, offering preventive practical suggestions to deal with restructuring and adaptations, inevitable to this home confinement status.

METHODS AND RESULTS

Recommendations for patients and families

Crisis moments always represent a great challenge for parents, and pediatricians have the mission of supporting them in their afflictions and provide counseling to prevent mental health impacts.

Following are some general recommendations for patients and families, which pediatricians can use to counsel parents.

1- Creating a routine,[7,9] establishing hours for sleeping and waking up, for school activities, family meals, house chores and leisure. They must clearly establish the hygiene and safety measures for the family, which should be followed by everyone. A collaborative spirit is paramount, balancing the assignment of home chores.[12,13] These routines must be periodically reviewed, bringing about an excellent opportunity to promote good eating and sleeping habits,[14] harmonious coexistence, respect for limits and privacy, and creative use of time and home spaces.[15,16] In times of crisis, parents should take the lead, creating new ways of living and in assigning chores.[17]

2- Several schools are adapting to this new times, offering remote teaching through online classes and schooling activities.[9,11,18] Parents should try to abide to the school proposals, and avoid exaggerated demands over their children.[18] Parents are not teachers and do not have the role or the responsibility to ensure their children's formal learning. Pedagogical requirements must not compromise the family's mental health. These hard times, with multiple demands on all family members, make it essential to exercise tolerance and understanding. Stress makes learning difficult, thus the proposed school activities should be carried out in an atmosphere of peace, without greater demands, and without greater pressure on the parents, dealing with their jobs or in home offices, and with no help with their household chores.[13]

3- Establishing rules concerning the use of cell phones, tablets, PCs, etc., limiting the time for using them, in accordance with SBP recommendations, established according to age range.[19,20,21] It is essential that adults set an example, reserving free time, away from the screens, to dedicate time to spend with the family.[12] We know that, in addition to ample access to information and culture, the internet stores inappropriate and even criminal content. Parents should supervise their children's online activities.[9] Social isolation can be a great opportunity to propose participatory activities and free play between parents and their children (see item 6). Parents can take the time to encourage reading, or read good stories for their younger children.

4- Enable the child's contact with grandparents or friends through remote means.[6,13,16] Parents can contact other parents and organize virtual meetings for their children, in groups or in pairs.

5- Adults should have time for themselves, in addition to home office activities. Parents should talk to their children so that they understand such need and help out.[12] At a time when, due to intensive coexistence and stress, feelings of impatience and intolerance may arise between the couple, it is essential that each one has time available and space to devote to their own interests.

6- Children should have time to play freely.[12] Examples of free play are: drawing, modeling, reading, writing or telling stories, dressing up, playing with dolls, plays, cards or board games, dancing, singing, listening to and playing music, cooking and others. Often adults need to take the lead and participate in the beginning of the activity,[12,13] so that a little later they can dedicate themselves to their tasks, allowing their children to continue playing alone or with siblings. For those who live in a house, it is possible to use the outdoor area to explore contact with nature.[13,22] Parents should be attentive concerning the safety of their children, adapting the home environment to prevent accidents.[23]

7- Parents should manage this close coexistence, especially between brothers, to avoid the escalation of conflicts or competition. Disputes over the use of television, video games, and other resources can be resolved by setting timetables for each child or adolescent.[12]

8- Parents must respect their adolescents' idiosyncrasies, but at the same time invite them to contribute to the solidarity division of chores. Their oppositional behavior, the need for isolation and the eagerness to live with peers can make social isolation and pandemic safety behaviors particularly difficult at their age. It is worth listening to them without criticizing,

and asking them to actively contribute with ideas and actions to the collective effort to fight the disease and to manage life at home. At a time when young people have often isolated themselves in their rooms, dedicating excessive time to screens, alienated from family life, the occasion can favor the learning of empathy, solidarity and collaboration.[12]

9- Physical contact must observe the hygiene and safety rules recommended by qualified institutions,[1,2,3,16] but such rules must be adapted to specific cases. Babies and young children need physical contact from their caregivers for healthy emotional development. The risks of affection and warmth deprivation outweigh the risks of the virus. The Breastfeeding Scientific Department has a favorable opinion on breastfeeding in the case of mothers with COVID-19, respecting the necessary preventive measures.[24]

10- Parents should restrict their children's access to news about the pandemic in the media. Parents should update themselves only through official and reliable sources,[7,15] and provide the necessary information, in simple, objective and positive terms, respecting the child's ability to understand, avoiding alarmist tone.[25] It is crucial that parents listen to their children and understand their anxieties.[1,11,13,16] We do not recommend that children be subjected to the exaggerations and panic unfortunately propagated by some news programs and weekly variety shows. One has to be careful with YouTube videos. Parents should be their children's cultural programmers and closely monitor their activities. There is a wide range of free content on the internet that can help parents transmit information about the pandemic to their children, or entertain them, including booklets, books and explanatory videos on coronavirus and quarantine for children, in addition to several links to e-books, films, plays, ballets, concerts, concerts, musicals, virtual visits to museums, etc.[15]

11- Parents should look for opportunities to give their children examples of solidarity, by helping relatives, friends and neighbors (especially the elderly), and by dedicating themselves to solidarity activities to help people in need. They must be aware of their role as references and role models.[11] Their actions are the basis for their children to learn and develop a series of values such as generosity, compassion, honesty and empathy. It may be a good idea to encourage children and adolescents to gather their belongings and separate those that are no longer used for donation, providing openness to solidarity and self-renewal gestures.[12]

The above recommendations are for families in general, but need to be adapted for families living in densely populated environments, with economic vulnerability and inadequate sanitary conditions, such as those living in poor communities and slums. In these contexts, it is equally important that family members engage and receive health education from a good source, whether from the public health care system (SUS), from community activities or by printed, electronic or digital means, if available.

FINAL REMARKS

Every crisis period generates uncertainty and fear of the unknown,[6,9] but it can also present itself as an opportunity for self-knowledge and the development of resilience and creative wisdom.[15] It is worth remembering that the pandemic will pass. The challenges of these hard times can be opportunities for parents to deepen their relationships with their children, based on respect and affection and permeated by good examples.

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