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POINT OF VIEW

Who is looking after brazilian children's mental health during the pandemic?

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Abstract

A new coronavirus has emerged and in a short time it has totally changed social dynamics worldwide. The suffering resulting from social isolation imposed the need for adaptation on all. But what about children, how are they inserted in this scenario? Away from school, confined within the home without living with other children, they are suffering the consequences as much as adults. However, in most cases, children do not have severe symptoms of COVID-19. For this reason, health looks at risk groups, which causes children to be forgotten. However, the impact of isolation on mental health can be devastating in childhood, and almost not talked about it. The family routine has changed, classes are now online, there is no leisure, physical activities as before, nor contact with friends, directly impacting the childrens emotional state. It is certain that isolation will cause both physical and mental reflexes in our future generations, but who is watching over them now? How can we avoid greater consequences? There is an urgent need to think about this and to seek answers to these questions.

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Little is said about children during the coronavirus pandemic. They are not part of the COVID-19 (Coronavirus Disease) risk group, and they rarely develop severe symptoms of the disease. Until June 22, 2020, data from the Health Department indicated that 2,717 (2.11%) children and adolescents between zero and 19 years of age were hospitalized due to the Acute Respiratory Syndrome caused by the new coronavirus (Sars-CoV- 2)[1]. This approach, and these numbers, stress the damage upon physical health. Lost amid the sudden change of routine imposed by social distancing, children suffer in silence. In the few publications that deal with the subject, children are said to be better at adapting to the crisis. Are they really more resilient?

Stress took over families, and parents had to rethink their way of living. Work, leisure and household chores are now mixed throughout the day. Time and space took on a new meaning. Work meetings and online classes take place simultaneously where it used to be a refuge. In the middle of chaos, children seek their space. They are deprived of physical interactions with friends, family and teachers. They perceive in the distressed looks of adults the severity of the situation we are living. Are they being heard?

At first, they were relieved that they did not need to wake up early to go to school. Over time, they became distressed by boredom and the isolation that prevents them from practicing sports, riding a bicycle and jumping hopscotch. They are deprived of their right to be children. What will be the consequences of this in the future?

The school environment, that used to be a place for socializing and exchanging real experiences, has become virtual. Being away from the classroom imposes another need to adapt on children. These kids stay hours in front of a computer screen, sometimes passively, only as spectators. The increase in the daily screen time children are exposed to when attending online classes is not sufficiently discussed. This time clearly goes against the recommendations of the Brazilian Pediatrics Society (BPS)[2], as stated in the alert published in March this year. The public organizations responsible for education are the ones defining the actual rules. School, teachers and parents discuss among themselves how to adjust to this new reality. There is no question that everyone feels pressured[3]. Adults are having trouble concentrating, focusing on daily activities and being productive at work. Aren't we demanding from children something that not even adults are able to do?

On April 17, 2020, the United Nations issued an alert calling for the preservation of children's well-being[4]. Countries that are ahead of Brazil in the pandemic are already discussing the emotional impact on children caused by social distancing. Italy and Spain, nations that had many deaths caused by COVID-19, are starting to realize the consequences that the pandemic had on the young population, forgotten during most part of the crisis. They noticed some immediate consequences, such as changes in sleep and mood. The long-term effects are being discussed by teachers, doctors and parents: hyperactivity, agitation, apathy and depression. In Spain, five weeks after the beginning of isolation, was already possible to see the damage, which triggered the government to instruct that children should leave their homes for a daily period. A research released in April by the non-governmental organization Save the Children found that 1 in 6 Spanish children felt frequently depressed during isolation[5]. Unfortunately, talking about childhood depression is still taboo. Do children get depressed?

It is a fact that children are suffering the consequences of this pandemic as much as adults, yet their mental health is often neglected. Many do not understand the need for social distancing and even those who understand its importance, suffer from the physical distance they are submitted to. They are afraid of dying and of losing loved ones. Few are invited to speak and give an opinion on matters that concern their routine, which is currently changing a lot. Their safety is at risk, since isolation can increase family stress levels, which can make children both victims and witnesses of domestic violence and abuse. The vast majority of research on the impact of social distancing or loneliness on health is based on international studies. Still, most of these studies are carried out with focus on the elderly.

How can we draw an action plan for children's emotional health if we don't know what the current scenario is? Do parents and teachers know how to identify early signs of change in a child's mental health? The only way to answer these questions is through thinking. It is urgent to remove children from the invisibility in which they were placed. There is no doubt that we will suffer physical and emotional consequences due to this social distancing, which most current generations never went through before. However, if we are not cautious, our children will suffer harsh consequences in the near future. Who is looking after Brazilian children's mental health?

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