

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.36489/saudecoletiva.2021v11i65p6270-6279>

Children and adolescents in the context of the pandemic: the interface with intrafamily violence

Niños y adolescentes en el contexto de la pandemia: la interfaz con la violencia intrafamiliar

Crianças e adolescentes no contexto da pandemia: a interface com a violência intrafamiliar

ABSTRACT

Objective: to reflect on the interface between the context of the Covid-19 pandemic and the experience of intrafamily violence by children and adolescents. **Method:** theoretical reflection article based on the current and relevant literature on the subject with regard to intrafamily violence and the context of the pandemic. **Result:** The study brings reflections on the pandemic by Covid-19 and the consequent increase in the number of cases of violence against children and adolescents, a situation that already had high rates. In addition, factors that have contributed to this increase are exposed, such as social isolation, suspension of classes, home office system and high levels of stress due to the context, which may be related to situations of violence. **Conclusion:** the study contributes towards unveiling aspects that alert to the vulnerability of children and adolescents to experience abuse, offering subsidies to think about strategies and public policies aimed at the protection and care of this public in the pandemic scenario.

DESCRIPTORS: Domestic violence; Kid; Teenager; Pandemic; Covid-19.

RESUMEN

Objetivo: reflexionar sobre la interfaz entre el contexto de la pandemia Covid-19 y la vivencia de violencia intrafamiliar por parte de niños y adolescentes. **Método:** artículo de reflexión teórica a partir de la literatura actual y relevante sobre el tema sobre la violencia intrafamiliar y el contexto de la pandemia. **Resultado:** El estudio trae reflexiones sobre la pandemia por Covid-19 y el consecuente incremento en el número de casos de violencia contra niños, niñas y adolescentes, situación que ya tenía altos índices. Además, se exponen factores que han contribuido a este incremento, como el aislamiento social, suspensión de clases, sistema de home office y altos niveles de estrés por el contexto, que pueden estar relacionados con situaciones de violencia. **Conclusión:** el estudio contribuye a desvelar aspectos que alertan sobre la vulnerabilidad de niños, niñas y adolescentes a sufrir abusos, ofreciendo subsidios para pensar estrategias y políticas públicas orientadas a la protección y atención de este público en el escenario pandémico.

DESCRIPTORES: Violencia intrafamiliar; Niño; Adolescente; Pandemia; COVID-19..

RESUMO

Objetivo: refletir acerca da interface entre o contexto da pandemia pela Covid-19 e a vivência de violência intrafamiliar por crianças e adolescentes. **Método:** artigo de reflexão teórica tendo como fundamentação a literatura atual e relevante acerca da temática no que tange a violência intrafamiliar e o contexto da pandemia. **Resultado:** O estudo traz reflexões sobre a pandemia pela Covid-19 e o consequente aumento no número de casos de violência contra crianças e adolescentes, situação que já apresentava elevados índices. Além disso, se expõe fatores que têm contribuído para esse aumento, tais como o isolamento social, suspensão das aulas, sistema home office e níveis elevados de estresse devido ao contexto, o que pode guardar relação com as situações de violência. **Conclusão:** o estudo contribui no sentido de desvelar aspectos que alertam para a vulnerabilidade do público infanto-juvenil para experienciar abusos, oferecendo subsídios para se pensar estratégias e políticas públicas direcionadas a proteção e cuidado desse público no cenário de pandemia.

DESCRIPTORES: Violência doméstica; Criança; Adolescente; Pandemia; Covid-19.

RECEBIDO EM: 01/22/2021 APROVADO EM: 02/16/2021

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INTRODUCTION

Faced with the adoption of social distance as a preventive measure to face the pandemic by Covid-19, society has been experiencing an increase in the number of cases of violence against children and adolescents. In this scenario, where girls and boys are deprived of the right to a life free from violence, spaces for reflections on the susceptibility of children and adolescents to intrafamily violence in times of pandemic are essential in order to provide ways for actions to prevent and cope with the problem.⁽¹⁾

The Covid-19 pandemic dates from the beginning of March 2020, when the World Health Organization (WHO) instituted measures for the prevention and control of the disease. Among them, social distancing stands out, the effectiveness of which has been recognized worldwide, as in the case of a study carried out by the University of London, which reduces the number of cases of the disease after the adoption of social

isolation in the country.⁽²⁾ A national study, carried out in Ceará, corroborates the effectiveness of this measure by demonstrating a decrease in the number of hospitalizations and emergency care after the distancing was established.⁽³⁾

Before the pandemic period, the power of adults in relation to children and adolescents was already exercised in a violent manner, given the naturalization of acts. Associated with this, stressful factors have always been related to the lack of control of mothers and fathers, causing violence.

However, social detachment has favored the occurrence of domestic violence in Brazil as well as in other countries. According to the Ministry of Women, Family and Human Rights (MMFDH - Ministério da Mulher, da Família e dos Direitos Humanos), in Brazil, considering only the month of March, there was an 18% increase in complaints related to violence registered by Dial 100 and Call 180, both telephone services who provide guidance to society and make anonymous complaints, the first about human rights violations and the last about vio-

lence against women.⁽⁴⁾ The United States and United Kingdom, which adopted social distance, also reported an increase in cases of domestic violence, with women, children and adolescents as the main victims.^(5,6) Such data reiterate the importance of being aware of vulnerability at home.

With regard specifically to violence against children and adolescents, the international public defense agency signals a global estimate of growth of 32% during the pandemic.⁽⁷⁾ This reality can be perceived nationally from 1.133 reports of abuse against children and adolescents recorded between March 14th to 24th, 2020, the beginning of social isolation in Brazil.⁽⁸⁾ This increase, especially with regard to children and adolescents, can therefore be related to the new configuration in social routines that has intensified the coexistence between family members, and consequently exposes children and adolescents to be confined at home with mothers, fathers or guardians. This concern is consis-

tent with the fact that, according to the United Nations Children's Fund, three out of four children suffer violence from their fathers and mothers around the world. ⁽⁹⁾ Given the reality of the confinement of children and/or adolescents, the study aims to reflect on the interface between the context of the pandemic by Covid-19 and the experience of intrafamily violence by children and adolescents.

METHOD

This is a study based on reflections on the interface between two themes: the Covid-19 pandemic and domestic violence against children and adolescents. For that, we searched for current and relevant articles, of national and international nature that supported the writing. After an exhaustive reading of these materials, it was possible to discuss the themes that dealt with: Social distance as a strategy to face the pandemic; Social distancing and increased rates of child violence; Intensifying factors of child violence in Covid-19 times; Precipitating factors of child violence; and Coping strategies.

RESULTS

In the context of social detachment, there are several factors that are associated, such as the idleness of children and adolescents who are irritated and the absence or overload of work on the part of those responsible. These stressful elements converge in a scenario where all members stay in the same space. One of the situations that has contributed to the constant presence of children and adolescents in homes is the interruption of school activities. According to the United Nations, about 1,5 billion children and adolescents worldwide are out of school due to the closure of educational institutions as an initiative to contain cases of Covid-19⁽¹⁰⁾, which has represented greater mobility restriction, distancing from colleagues and lack of entertainment options.

Social distance, in addition to intensifying the stay in homes, limited participation in leisure activities. Since the beginning of the pandemic, there has been a determination to close non-essential trade, as São Paulo decrees. ⁽¹¹⁾ This reality is also reported at the international level, like Portugal, which reduced people's mobility in leisure spaces by 80%, such as parks, beaches and squares, places that are widely used by children. ⁽¹²⁾ Immersed in this context, many children do not understand the reasons why they cannot leave the house, a situation that can cause wear and tear in the process of dialogue and negotiation, culminating in intrafamily violence. Teenagers, on the other hand, in search of fun, may fail to comply with the protective measure when going out to meet friends and other places, which generates concern of mothers/fathers about contagion. That said, the absence of leisure is also an element that can elevate or favor family conflicts and, consequently, violence.

In the pandemic period, as an alternative to the absence of leisure, many guardians have resorted to the use of technology in order to entertain their daughters and sons, which has led to long hours in front of the screens. However, research carried out in India, using questionnaires sent electronically to the heads of 203 children, reveals that 65% are addicted to electronics, and the condition is aggravated by the pandemic ⁽¹³⁾, in addition to compromising child development, as indicated by the Brazilian Society of Pediatrics. ⁽¹⁴⁾ However, it is noteworthy that, by limiting contact with screens to children and adolescents, mothers/fathers may experience stressful situations and end up using violence in an attempt to control the use of technology.

With regard to the school activities of children/adolescents, it is important to note that the Homeschooling system itself demands that mothers and fathers monitor the progress of activities. This system can generate overload and stress

for them, since many mothers and fathers do not feel able to carry out the teaching-learning process and have difficulties in handling the digital technologies necessary for conducting online classes.

In this scenario, in addition to the demands related to the child's education, parents still have to deal with the demands of the home office. Due to the social distance, a survey carried out with 662 companies in order to understand their actions in relation to Covid-19, points out that 98% of these adopted the teleworking modality, which generates demands not only internal to the institutions, but also to the employees. ⁽¹⁶⁾ In this way, the work, which was formerly carried out with the company's technological input, becomes the responsibility of the employee who needs to share the work material with his children so that they can carry out school activities. This new configuration of needing to organize the rotation of materials is added to the stress generated by the possible interruptions that children and adolescents can cause with the constant presence in the home, situations that can precipitate episodes of violence.

Faced with these changes, there are more people in the house, children/adolescents and mothers and fathers, which results in increased domestic activities and the consequent work overload, considering a scenario where domestic workers are away. These tasks concern the greater need to clean the house, increase in food demands and, with regard to children and adolescents, greater frequency in monitoring, actions that are mostly attributed to women. According to a study that discusses domestic divisions, women are still primarily responsible for the demands of the home and care for children, even with the approach of men in carrying out tasks. ⁽¹⁷⁾ This reality, especially for women who add working hours to domestic activities, can raise family conflicts during the pandemic in the search for more equitable divisions of household chores, which include children and adolescents. Thus,

in the face of the stress of overload and/or non-performance of activities by the other members of the household, children/adolescents may be more exposed to witnessing discussions or even being victims of aggression.

This context causes a scenario of stressful circumstances for both children/adolescents and their guardians, who also experience difficult times. In addition to the domestic and work activities required for adults, the context of family confinement, required as a preventive measure for Covid-19, permeates several social markers, such as financial situation, number of members, household structure, possibilities of recreation. Thus, family nuclei with a large number of members, with low income, who live in precarious places and with few leisure opportunities may find greater challenges to survive in the current scenario than families of high social class.⁽¹⁸⁾ An example of this is a study in Mato Grosso do Sul with rural families that points out the scarcity of financial resources for the purchase of equipment at home, such as computers and internet facilities, even before the pandemic, a need that has been even more demanded by schools in this period.⁽¹⁴⁾ Added to the situation of mothers and fathers who lost their jobs or had their wages reduced, situations that, in themselves, are already elements that trigger or intensify violence.

All of these factors can predispose children and adolescents to become more irritated, resulting in aggressive or disobedient behaviors and requiring greater effort from parents, mothers and/or guardians, as indicated by a study that reflects on the motivations for violence against children and adolescents in the pandemic period.⁽¹⁸⁾ Corroborating, a study in the United States about parental exhaustion in the pandemic signals the existence of a chronic condition called burnout, which consists of elevating the levels of stress due to having to deal with the demands of work and offspring, an event associated with what can genera-

te mistreatment situations.⁽¹⁹⁾ Thus, the occurrence of stress, anguish and anxiety are feelings that can be channeled to children and adolescents in the form of violence, since many fathers and mothers discharge their frustrations, tensions and anger on their children.

Given this situation, if children and adolescents who live in homes with healthy and respectful relationships between family members are, in times of pandemic, vulnerable to domestic violence, this situation is extremely worrying when we think of children and adolescents already inserted in the context of vulnerability, such as previous stories of abandonment, physical, psychological, sexual aggression, among other forms of abuse that victimize children and adolescents. An internationally published study reflects on social detachment and the conditions related to it, which leave victims of violence helpless, due to the fragility of care networks that are of paramount importance, especially in the pandemic.⁽²⁰⁾ Therefore, it is important to reflect on the degree of vulnerability for children to suffer violence during quarantine and the relationship pattern previously established with adults.

It is also worth considering that the greatest predisposition for children to experience violence is linked to the physical and cognitive disadvantage of children and adolescents in relation to aggressors, factors that limit the recognition of the situation of violence and the search for help, especially during the quarantine period. A Fiocruz report⁽²¹⁾ that addresses the Covid-19 interface and the health of children and adolescents emphasize that the same social distance that serves as a barrier to disease also limits and/or prevents the access of children and adolescents to the support network, whether they are neighbors, family members, school, church, health service. The lack of assistance to which these groups are exposed during this pandemic period is evident, which requires actions that protect them from intrafamily violence and

ensure harmonious and healthy family life during the pandemic.

Considering the social distance, absence from school and leisure that led children and adolescents to be idle in their homes, strategies are needed to entertain them, in order to reduce stressful elements. To this end, families should look for activities that can be carried out at home, in order to exercise creativity and practice learning that has been compromised with the various absences.

It is noteworthy that the activities should promote well-being and maintain, whenever possible, the habits prior to the pandemic, since a study points out that the routine helps child development by providing security.⁽²¹⁾ In this sense, schedules should be organized to handle online classes, housework, physical activity, but also to have fun times (movies, readings, games, music). In the meantime, the family can still make virtual contact with distant people (friends and family), celebrate festive dates such as birthdays and regional parties; maintain and strengthen spirituality and encourage children and adolescents to talk about their feelings, fears and desires with a view to reducing the anxiety caused by the pandemic that can lead to stressful situations and consequently situations of violence.

CONCLUSION

The context of social distance, adopted in order to mitigate the effects of the pandemic by Covid-19, makes children and adolescents vulnerable to the experience of intrafamily violence. This interface is related to domestic confinement, resulting from the closure of teaching and leisure spaces, changing the daily life of the whole family, especially mothers and fathers who need to deal with economic-financial issues and the abrupt need to learn and teach the handling digital technologies to develop their work activities in the domestic scenario, as well as, simultaneously, taking on roles before others, such as school and domestic servants.

This new reality that alters family dynamics and generates tension and stress, precipitates and/or intensifies abusive relationships. In view of this, this study

contributes towards unveiling aspects that alert to the vulnerability of children and adolescents to experience abuse, offering subsidies to think about strategies and pu-

blic policies aimed at the protection and care of this public in the pandemic scenario where, confined at home, it is more difficult to seek and/or receive help. ■

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