Confronting childism and prioritizing a holistic approach during the COVID-19 crisis

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Abstract
This colloquium discusses the crucial need to reconcile the ironic dilemma of enforcing social-distancing measures and social relationships simultaneously during the COVID-19 crisis. Young children have been exposed to multifaceted challenges during this time. However, their well-being, education, and safety have often been overlooked, ignored, or compromised. It is argued that society should abandon childism, which is prejudice and/or discrimination against children, and implement a holistic approach to protect and prioritize children’s well-being, fundamental rights, and humanity.

Keywords
Childism, child’s right, COVID-19, play, social-emotional well-being

Here is a story. I was on a FaceTime call one day with my dearest five-year-old nephew, Jay. Due to the COVID-19 crisis, we had not been able to see each other in person for almost six months, and I was trying to end the call:

Me: Bye. I miss you.
Jay: I miss you.
Me: I love you.
Jay: I love you.
Me: Hope to see you soon, honey.
Jay: Yeah. I cannot see you because the virus.
Me: Be safe, OK? Love you so much. Bye.
Jay: Yeah. Wear mask [pause] and don’t die.

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The conversation shook me. I gasped. I was at a loss for words. Several aspects of children’s lives were altered during the COVID-19 pandemic for various reasons, including private and public school closures, social isolation, a lack of peer interaction, changes in routine, and increased domestic stress (Clemens et al., 2021; Fore, 2020; Wang et al., 2020). Young children have been living through this unknown, unimaginable, and unprecedented crisis, yet the multifaceted impact of and substantial challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic on their lives were not at the center of public conversations and concerns (Wasmuth, 2020). Even worse, young children have been dehumanized, facing discrimination and childism.

From the beginning of the pandemic, as children were not at high risk of becoming severely ill with COVID-19, the COVID-19-related risk to children has been largely unrecognized by the media in the USA (Pathak et al., 2020). Children were also described as “vectors of the disease” to the adult population (Adami and Dineen, 2021). This expression is particularly troubling and signals discrimination against children. “Childism” is a term that is used to describe discrimination, prejudice, and systemic injustice against children (Adami and Dineen, 2021). The fact that the phrase “vector of disease,” which is often used to describe an animal that transmits the germs that cause disease, is now being applied to children is demeaning (Adami and Dineen, 2021). Many discussions have evolved around and decisions have been made prioritizing adults’ needs and overlooking children’s rights. Early childhood education and care (ECEC) during the pandemic was deemed an essential and intricate part of the economy. The importance of the often undervalued work that early childhood professionals do was brought to light. Yet public discussions have ensued about the socio-economic effects of COVID-19 and the critical need for childcare services that will enable workers to return to work: “In fact, it is mainly in this context that the reopening of ECEC has been mooted (if not enacted): as a means to a capitalistic end and not as children’s right” (Wasmuth, 2020: 89). Childism, coupled with the prevalent adult-centric view, has resulted in social injustice, relegating children to an afterthought and putting them at risk of becoming hidden victims of the pandemic (Adami and Dineen, 2021; Fore, 2020). Young children’s well-being and fundamental rights have been seriously threatened, likely contributing to long-term inequalities.

All children have a right to education, which was severely disrupted during COVID-19. As of March 2020, schools and early childhood centers stood dark and remained empty during the world’s lockdowns, affecting 87% of the world’s learners in 165 countries (UNESCO, 2020). A recent report shows that “schools for more than 168 million children globally have been completely closed for almost an entire year” (UNICEF, 2021). Young children, consequently, may struggle with significant adjustments to changes in their daily routines, which may interfere with their sense of predictability and security (Wang et al., 2020). Social restrictions and school closures caused by the COVID-19 crisis can negatively affect young children’s mental health, causing feelings of anxiety, boredom, fear, loneliness, and isolation (Save the Children, 2020). In addition, children were exposed to critical nutrition and health consequences once they missed school meals amid school closures (UNICEF, 2020). Approximately 39 billion children worldwide have missed school meals since the beginning of the pandemic (World Food Programme, 2021). Furthermore, elevated pandemic-associated stressors among parents and families are a risk factor for child abuse, domestic violence, and child neglect (Clemens et al., 2021). Children of color, those with disabilities, and those who are from resource-limited communities are especially vulnerable, given that their recent experiences have amplified pre-existing inequalities and learning loss (Dorn et al., 2021; Mize and Glover, 2021; Poletti, 2020). Hence, society must recognize the vulnerable nature of children during the crisis and urgently prioritize their well-being moving forward.

Social distancing became the new normal during the pandemic, and the resulting lockdowns and school closures curtailed many peer interactions. Children missed their friends (see Figure 1).
Schools were charged with implementing a series of new guidelines that heavily modified children’s daily routines to mitigate the spread of the virus, including maintaining social distancing, wearing a mask, not sharing materials, limiting group sizes, limiting the number of visitors to the school, disinfecting surfaces often, and scheduling more hand-washing (Atiles et al., 2021; O’Keeffe and McNally, 2021; Pramling Samuelsson et al., 2020). Children were also instructed to stay within their “pod”—a small cohort (Pascal and Bertram, 2021). Therefore, it is not surprising that teachers voiced concerns regarding limited play opportunities and the impact of a limited cohort model on children’s social development (O’Keeffe and McNally, 2021; Pramling Samuelsson et al., 2020).

In crisis situations, play opportunities are paramount for young children. Play can help young children deal with adverse situations; manage their emotions; cope with stress, anxiety, and trauma; and build resilience. It can also provide a sense of normality (Chatterjee, 2018). Play is a child’s right. This very right, which was often overlooked even before the pandemic, has been seriously threatened during COVID-19 as we fall into a “learning loss trap” (Zhao, 2021).

The term “learning loss” is problematic. It is true that students’ learning was interrupted during the pandemic, but the term implies a deficit lens, and the way we measure and conceptualize learning loss can be concerning. Reports of learning loss oftentimes focus on a narrow subject matter, such as reading and mathematics, and are based on assessment data or testing (Zhao, 2021). Researchers and a number of organizations have reported quantifiable estimates of what students have lost. For example, based on assessment data, students in the USA, on average, could be 9 months behind in mathematics, and students of color could be as much as 12 months behind (Dorn et al., 2021). Similarly, Amplify Education analysed reading assessment data and found...
lagging in reading achievement, especially among the younger grades (Mader, 2021). Another critical issue is how this learning loss trap could lead us in the wrong direction and prompt investments in the wrong things (Zhao, 2021). For instance, schools are rushing to catch up with the learning loss by extending their instructional time, providing accelerated programs, and offering high doses of tutoring (Mader, 2021). The heavy focus on academic learning might worsen the “learnification of education,” which is a reductive redefinition of education as learning (Biesta, 2019; Wasmuth, 2020). When learning—and especially academic learning—becomes the sole concern of education, social-emotional gaps can be widened. The situation urges society to think about the actual losses during the pandemic.

Ironically, both social distancing and social relationships and interactions should be prioritized during the pandemic (Shonkoff, 2020). Social isolation might be crucial and necessary to mitigate the spread of the virus from a public-health perspective. What is even more crucial and essential is to focus on children’s social and emotional development, as it will have a profound and long-lasting impact on their lives. Children have experienced the loss of learning opportunities during the crisis; however, what is worse is that COVID-19 led to a collective loss of normalcy. Young children have been deprived of peer interactions. Play opportunities have been minimized. Some young children experienced losses of loved ones in their families. They have faced mental health challenges, dehumanization, and discrimination. Schools are more than places to learn. To tackle the repercussions of the pandemic on children, society must acknowledge the interconnectedness between education and the overall well-being of young children, and promote a holistic approach by prioritizing young children’s socio-emotional well-being. Children should be the epicenter, not the hidden victims of the pandemic. As the pandemic persists and the variants are scrambling children’s lives again, it is time to acknowledge our youngest human beings’ vulnerability caused by the pandemic, center our focus on their emotional healing, and protect children’s fundamental rights and humanity.

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