

# The Covid-19 pandemic and its possible consequences to language/speech development and delay in children: an urgent issue.

## A pandemia de Covid-19 e suas possíveis consequências para o desenvolvimento e atraso da linguagem e da fala em crianças: uma questão urgente

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### ABSTRACT

Children have been one of the most disrupted social groups during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their daily routines, including social, scholar, and family environments have been profoundly disturbed and may have unintentional consequences on children development and well-being. While schools are currently returning to semi/hybrid “in person” activities in our country, there are several concerns regarding how the covid-19 pandemic may impact children development in the short and long term. Language and speech development usually occurs during early childhood in a gradual acquisition of receptive and expressive skills. Therefore, even though school closures, social distancing, and the widespread use of masks may adversely impact language development, their specific effect has not yet been widely accessed. Just a few days ago, a preprint of a longitudinal study of children born during the pandemic period have showed preliminary evidence of reduced verbal performance compared to pre pandemic born children. Thus, there is an urgent need for more studies addressing this issue to better understand the potential impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in childhood language and speech development. In this context, speech therapists will most certainly play a central role in the prevention and therapeutic approach of language delay. Along with parents and teachers, they must be attentive for this possibility specially in toddlers.

**Keywords:** Covid-19; Pandemic; Language; Speech; Development

### RESUMO

As crianças foram um dos grupos sociais mais impactados durante a pandemia de COVID-19. Suas rotinas diárias, incluindo ambientes sociais, escolares e familiares foram profundamente modificadas e podem ter consequências inadvertidas no desenvolvimento e bem-estar das crianças. Embora as escolas estejam atualmente retornando às atividades semipresenciais/híbridas em nosso país, há várias preocupações sobre como a pandemia de covid-19 pode impactar o desenvolvimento infantil a curto e longo prazo. O desenvolvimento da linguagem e da fala geralmente ocorre durante a primeira infância em uma aquisição gradual de habilidades receptivas e expressivas. Assim, embora o fechamento de escolas, o distanciamento social e o uso generalizado de máscaras possam impactar negativamente o desenvolvimento da linguagem, seu efeito específico ainda não foi amplamente acessado. Há poucos dias, um estudo longitudinal de crianças nascidas durante o período pandêmico mostrou evidências preliminares de desempenho verbal reduzido em comparação com crianças nascidas antes da pandemia. Logo, há uma necessidade urgente de mais estudos abordando esse assunto para melhor compreender o impacto potencial da pandemia COVID-19 no desenvolvimento da linguagem e da fala na infância. Nesse contexto, o fonoaudiólogo certamente terá um papel central na prevenção e abordagem terapêutica do atraso de linguagem. Junto com pais e professores, eles devem estar atentos a essa possibilidade, principalmente em crianças pequenas.

**Palavras-chave:** Covid-19; Pandemia; Linguagem; Fala; Desenvolvimento

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The COVID-19 pandemic has imposed enormous and challenging circumstances to the whole world, with major attention to the millions of deaths and the severe socioeconomic consequences. As this paper is written, the WHO's Coronavirus Dashboard accounts for a total of 4.439.843 deaths worldwide<sup>(1)</sup>. Additionally, the pandemic is producing a significant decrease in financial growth for the global economy<sup>(2,3)</sup>. As an effort to reduce its impacts, the global scientific community, including this scientific journal<sup>(4)</sup>, has published an uncountable number of papers regarding the most different facets of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Along with those large-scale major implications, children have been one of the most disrupted social groups during the COVID-19 pandemic<sup>(5)</sup>. Their daily routines, including social, scholar, and family environments have been profoundly disturbed and may have unintentional consequences on children's development and well-being. For instance, since the beginning of the current pandemic, opening evidence showed increased depressive/anxiety symptoms, decreased life satisfaction, and physical activity in children<sup>(5,6)</sup>. Thus, while schools are currently returning to semi/hybrid "in person" activities in our country, there are still several concerns regarding how the covid-19 pandemic may impact children's development in the short and long term.

Language and speech development usually occurs during early childhood in a gradual acquisition of receptive and expressive skills. A recent systematic review regarding the potential impact of the pandemic on child development found several evidence of negative mental health outcomes<sup>(6)</sup>. Nevertheless, this review did not find studies that addressed the impacts of the pandemic specifically on language development. Therefore, while school closures, social distancing, and the widespread use of masks may adversely impact language development, their specific effect has not yet been widely accessed. Simultaneously, throughout the current pandemic, several mainstream press news<sup>(7,8)</sup> and scientific publications<sup>(9)</sup> continue reporting concerns of parents, education, and health professionals with language acquisition during the critical initial development years. In one of the few studies providing strategies for the provision of speech therapies services during the pandemic, the authors discuss the possible use of telepractice as many patients will need uninterrupted sessions<sup>(10)</sup>. Just a few days ago, a preprint of a longitudinal study of children born during the pandemic period have shown preliminary evidence of reduced verbal performance compared to pre-pandemic born children<sup>(11)</sup>.

Thus, there is an urgent need for more studies addressing this issue to better understand the potential impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in childhood language and speech development. In this context, speech therapists will most certainly play a central role in the prevention and therapeutic approach of language delay. Along with parents and teachers, they must be attentive to this possibility especially in toddlers. Moreover, prompt detection must be prioritized since it is largely recognized that early interventions are critical for adequate childhood language development<sup>(12)</sup>. Finally, professional societies and the scientific community should foster the discussion and implementation of clinical guidelines and mitigation approaches to guide speech

therapists and other professionals dealing with childhood language and speech problems during the current pandemic.

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