



www.ijpes.com

International Journal of Psychology and Educational  
Studies

ISSN: 2148-9378



## Beyond COVID-19 Pandemic: Changes in Interaction Pattern between Children and Caregivers

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article History

Received 17.06.2021

Received in revised form

18.08.2021

Accepted 25.08.2021

Article Type: Research  
Article

### ABSTRACT

We are going through hard times that remind us that good health is the most important thing in life. The COVID-19 pandemic has immensely affected everybody. Measures taken by all countries, including Turkey, to prevent the spread of the coronavirus have deprived students (from preschool to university) of face-to-face education. While the pandemic has had a profound impact on parents and educators, children's lives have been stuck between the "new normal" and the pandemic. This paper investigated how children and their parents experienced the pandemic, how they interacted, and managed educational activities at home. This was a case study, which is a qualitative research method. The sample consisted of 15 families with different sociocultural and socioeconomic status (SES) living in five cities in four regions of Turkey. Data were collected through video-audio recordings, observation notes, and e-interviews. Data were analyzed using second-cycle coding and inductive content analysis. The COVID-19 pandemic caused economic problems, especially in low- and middle-SES families. Economic problems and mental stress impeded the marital interaction patterns of couples, negatively affecting children the most. Upper-SES parents received support from teachers for homeschooling, but other parents faced numerous setbacks and made numerous errors during home-based education, causing parents despair and concern for their children's future. Of all participants, the children of the parents with COVID-19 related health problems were affected by outbreak measures the most. These results can help raise all stakeholders' awareness of the current situation. Given that the COVID-19 pandemic may continue for the foreseeable future, it is believed that the suggestions made to parents and educators for homeschooling can help mitigate the future impacts of the pandemic, especially on preschoolers.

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Keywords:

COVID-19 outbreak; impacts of pandemic; children; caregivers; interactions

### 1. Introduction

Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) is a global health problem that has dealt an unprecedented blow to social and educational life. All governments took preventive measures, such as lockdowns, travel restrictions, and closures (institutions and workplaces), to prevent the spread of the virus (The World Bank, 2020). However, those measures adversely affected individual and social life. The Turkish authorities announced its first confirmed case of COVID-19 on March 11, 2020, and a day later ordered the closure of schools until March 30. Parents were closely following the developments and expecting schools to reopen soon. However, the number of cases increased worldwide, and a cure was nowhere in sight; therefore, the authorities extended the school closures. The pandemic has had a severe impact on education, so much so that more than 90% of students worldwide have missed out on education due to school closures since 9 April 2020 (UNESCO, 2020a). The pandemic has replaced face-to-face education with an amalgam of distance education and homeschooling (Wrase, 2020). However, the Turkish authorities has forgotten to the fact that schools provide students not only with educational materials but also with the opportunity to interact with teachers and peers and receive psychological counseling. The authorities developed distance learning curricula for some grades and gave

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**Citation:** Karademir, A. (2021). Beyond COVID-19 Pandemic: Changes in interaction pattern between children and caregivers. *International Journal of Psychology and Educational Studies*, 8(Special Issue), 99-117.

<https://dx.doi.org/10.52380/ijpes.2021.8.4.632>

specific tasks and instructions to teachers and parents but did not design any distance learning curricula for preschoolers until October. Therefore, stakeholders (parents, children, and teachers) were in no way prepared for the challenges of the pandemic (OECD, 2020a). In particular, parents have been left to their own devices to overcome the adverse economic and social impacts of the pandemic (Wang et al., 2020). Lower and middle-SES families have suffered job and income losses more acutely due to the pandemic, and their children have been at a higher risk of experiencing educational inequality due to school closures (OECD, 2020b).

Children of parents with financial stress have increased odds of malnutrition, poor housing, sanitation problems, insufficient play, or educational opportunities (Brooks et al., 2020). Vulnerable children are more likely to be adversely affected by the pandemic because it increases the number of household stress factors (parental anxiety, lack of support, and reduced access to financial resources and healthy food) and reduces the number of protective factors (school facilities, and access to playgrounds, routine activities, and child protection systems, etc.) (Cluver et al., 2020). The widespread school closures have made countless children and adolescents homebound for months, creating a ripple effect into other aspects of life, such as family income, quality of the home environment, parent-child interaction, etc. Children and parents have gone through a rough patch during the school closures because most of them managed distance learning with little to no supervision and support from schools and teachers (UNESCO, 2020b; Courtney et al., 2020). In other words, during the lockdown education has been mostly dependent on parents' knowledge, experience, availability, and accessibility.

Parents with low academic self-efficacy have difficulty helping their children with their education, resulting in periodic learning loss (UNESCO, 2020c; Ghosh et al., 2020). While the children of affluent families usually do not experience this learning loss, they can even gain different learning outcomes depending on their relationships with their families and peer communities (Clark et al., 2020). Educational inequality is likely to increase during the current period of confinement unless disadvantaged children and their families are given additional support (Van Lancker & Parolin, 2020). Each day of confinement imbued with challenges further deepens stress and inequality in underprivileged children (OECD, 2020c). Returning to school after the pandemic will inevitably pose new challenges, such as adapting to school and concentrating on learning. It will take a deliberate social effort to get children back to school. Moreover, vulnerable children who already have difficulty participating in learning due to health problems or stress factors will need additional support (Griffith, 2020; Jiao et al., 2020).

Parents play a critical role in early childhood education (0-8 years of age) and even a more critical role in cases where children have no access to school or gain little to no benefit from online and TV learning. Therefore, parent-child activities at home can promote learning and development. Regardless of socioeconomic status (SES), spending quality time at home contributes to family relations and children's social-emotional (e.g., respect, empathy, collaboration) and cognitive (e.g., early literacy) development (Uscianowski et al., 2020; Isitan et al., 2018; Zippert & Rittle-Johnson, 2020). However, low-SES parents are likely to do fewer activities with their children because they are likely to experience more problems, helplessness, and lack of control in times of crisis.

Early childhood education helps reduce social inequality and negative experiences in the long-term. However, unsupervised parents may feel pressured to create a school-like environment at home (Cornelissen et al. 2018, Havnes & Mogstad, 2015). This pressure may lead to mental and emotional health problems in parents, who already try to cope with the stress, anxiety, uncertainty brought about by the lockdowns, social distancing, school closures, domestic problems, and work or income losses during the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, there is a strong correlation between socioeconomic deprivation and mental illness, even in early childhood (McDaid et al., 2017; OECD, 2018). The pandemic has increased the level of anxiety among family members (Karademir et al., 2020) and the severity of symptoms of mental illness among children under 25 years of age (Young Minds, 2020). The outbreaks in the past showed that preventive measures, especially long-term lockdowns and school closures, put children at risk for mental illness. For example, confinement during the 2002–2004 SARS outbreak in Canada and China resulted in increased anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (Hawryluck et al., 2004; Robertson et al., 2004; Sprang & Silman, 2013;). Despite limited data at this point, we can argue that the COVID-19 pandemic has significant impacts on the domestic life and mental health of individuals with different SES.

This paper investigated how families with different SES experienced the COVID-19 pandemic at home, what parent-child interaction was like, and what kind of educational activities they performed. This study evaluated the topic longitudinally to propose solutions to pandemic-related problems and close the gap between the ideal and the real family environment. The main research question was, "How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected families with different SES?" The study sought answers to the following subquestions:

1. How does the home environment affect parents and their children during the COVID-19?
2. How does the COVID-19 affect parents and their family relationships?
3. How does the COVID-19 affect children?

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Research Model

This paper focused on parent-child interaction during the COVID-19. The study adopted a multiple-case embedded design (a form of a case study) to analyze what each family experienced during the pandemic and present the results comparatively and holistically (Yin, 2017)..

### 2.2. Participants

The study was conducted between April and July 2020. The sample consisted of 27 parents (14 mothers and 13 fathers; mean 34.7 years of age) and 15 children (six girls and nine boys; mean 59.06 months of age) from five cities in four different regions of Turkey. Participants were recruited using maximum heterogeneity sampling, a purposive sampling method used to draw a sample from the population to explore different dimensions of a research problem or common phenomena of interest among diverse situations with specific dimensions (Yildirim & Simsek, 2008). The significance of data is its heterogeneity (Patton, 2002). The sample diversity was based on SES and environmental conditions (see Table 1).

**Table 1.** Characteristics of families

Families		Age	Gender	Number of children / in Household	Annual income	District / House type	Education	Profession	Employment status
Family 1 Married	Mother 1	26 yrs		2/4	\$ 5.845***	Town / Apartment	Associate's d.	Housewife	-
	Father 1	32 yrs					Bachelor's d.	Teacher	Part time
	Child 1	54 mns	Female				Pre-school ed.	-	-
Family 2 Married	Mother 2	30 yrs		3/6*	\$ 2.950***	City / Apartment	High sch d.	Housewife	-
	Father 2	36 yrs					High sch d.	Cook	Laid off
	Child 2	69 mns	Male				None	-	-
Family 3 Married	Mother 3	27 yrs		1/3	\$ 16.500	City / Detached house	Bachelor's d.	Pharmacist	Full time
	Father 3	31 yrs					Bachelor's d.	Lawyer	Part time
	Child 3	59 mns	Female				Pre-school ed.	-	-
Family 4 Married	Mother 4	38 yrs		4/8**	\$ 5.800***	Countryside / Detached house	Sec. school d.	Housewife	-
	Father 4	44 yrs					Associate's d.	Farmer	Full time
	Child 4	49 mns	Male				None	-	-
Family 5 Widowed	Mother 5	32 yrs		4/5	\$ 2.100***	City / Apartment	Sec. school d.	Worker	Laid off
	Child 5	55 mns	Male				None	-	-
Family 6 Married	Mother 6	30 yrs		2/4	\$ 12.800	City / Apartment	Bachelor's d.	Teacher	Part time
	Father 6	37 yrs					High sch d.	Nurse	Full time
	Child 6	58 mns	Female				Pre-school ed.	-	-
Family 7 Married	Mother 7	33 yrs		3/5	\$ 3.250***	City / Apartment	High sch d.	Cook	Laid off
	Father 7	40 yrs					High sch d.	Waiter	Laid off
	Child 7	70 mns	Male				Pre-school ed.	-	-
Family 8 Single	Father 8	38 yrs		1/4**	\$ 13.350	City / Apartment	Graduate d.	Lecturer	Part time
	Child 8	64 mns	Female				Pre-school ed.	-	-
Family 9 Married	Mother 9	28 yrs		2/5*	\$ 9.750***	City / Apartment	Associate's d.	Paramedic	Full time
	Father 9	29 yrs					Associate's d.	Paramedic	Full time
	Child 9	52 mns	Male				Pre-school ed.	-	-
Family 10 Married	Mother 10	31 yrs		2/5*	\$ 30.000	Town / Apartment	Bachelor's d.	Doctor	Full time
	Father 10	36 yrs					Bachelor's d.	Doctor	Full time
	Child 10	63 mns	Male				Pre-school ed.	-	-
Family 11 Married	Mother 11	40 yrs		6/10**	\$ 5.250***	Countryside / Detached house	Sec. school d.	Housewife	-
	Father 11	48 yrs					High sch d.	Farmer	Full time
	Child 11	57 mns	Female				None	-	-

Family 12 Married	Mother 12	34 yrs				Town / Apartment	Sec. sch d. High sch d. None	Worker Florist -	Laid off Part time -
	Father 12	39 yrs		3/5	\$3.750***				
	Child 12	48 mns	Male						
Family 13 Married	Mother 13	26 yrs				City / Detached house	Associate's d. Associate's d. Pre-school ed.	Worker Hairdresser -	Laid off Part time -
	Father 13	29 yrs		1/3	\$ 3.050***				
	Child 13	66 mns	Male						
Family 14 Single	Mother 14	31 yrs		1/3*	\$ 10.975	City / Apartment	Bachelor's d. Pre-school ed.	Air hostess -	Part time -
	Child 14	72 mns	Male						
Family 15 Married	Mother 15	35 yrs				City / Apartment	Associate's d. High sch d. None	Housewife Driver -	- Part time -
	Father 15	45 yrs		2/5*	\$ 6.100***				
	Child 15	50 mns	Female						

\* Living with a grandmother, grandfather, or caregiver, \*\* Living with grandparents, \*\*\* Less than the annual level of poverty for a family of four: \$ 10.500

Parents had a master's (n = 1) bachelor's (n=7), associate's (n=7), high-school (n=8), or elementary school (n=4) degree. Their annual income ranged from \$2.100 to \$30.000. Most families (n =11) were living in apartments. Nine children (60%) had had early childhood education before.

### 2.3. Data Collection Tools and Procedures

Data triangulation (video-recordings, field notes, and semi-structured interviews on Skype) was used to ensure validity and reliability.

**Video recordings:** Parents videotaped their daily lives and interactions with their children at home during the COVID-19 for 45 minutes a week for 14 weeks (45 minutes\*14 weeks = 830 minutes) (April 20 - July 26, 2020).

**Parent-Child Interactions:** Five female teachers were recruited for the study. They made unannounced home visits and videotaped participants' daily lives and interactions for 14 weeks (except for the days of quarantine and video-recordings by parents) and then gave their video-recordings and field notes to the researcher. The data were used to monitor changes in parent-child interaction.

**Interviews:** Parents (N = 27) were interviewed at least twice to figure out the unobservable changes in their lives, relationships, and behaviors. The interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview form to triangulate, elaborate, and relate the data. The goal was to approach the subject of interest from different angles, understand the changes in parents' perspectives, and interpret how children were affected by changing conditions (Patton, 2002). Providing participants with the opportunity to express their feelings and thoughts allowed to the researcher better understand what families went through during the COVID-19. The interview form consisted of easy-to-understand, open-ended, unbiased, one-dimensional, and logical questions (Merriam, 2013).

### 2.4. Data Analysis

The data were coded and classified into themes, subthemes, and categories (Glaser & Strauss, 2009) and then analyzed using second-cycle coding and inductive content analysis.. In the first cycle, two research assistants and the researcher coded some of the data separately and then compared their codes. They discussed the codes and developed new themes and categories to make them conceptually dense and free from biases and assumptions. In the second cycle, they used constant comparison to code the remaining data (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). They used NVIVO 8 to develop themes and subthemes and then interpreted and expressed the findings. Lastly, they calculated interrater reliability using the formula [Reliability = (number of agreements) / (number of agreements + number of disagreements)\*100] suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994). The interrater reliability for all video-recordings and interviews was .85 and .88, respectively, indicating acceptable reliability.

## 3. Findings

Themes, subthemes, categories, and codes were presented in Tables for the research questions. Direct quotations were used to provide an accurate and coherent picture of participants' views and allow readers to analyze and interpret the findings. Table 2 presents the results concerning the effects of the home environment and family characteristics on participants during the COVID-19.

**Table 2: Effects of the Home Environment and Family Characteristics on Participants During COVID-19**

Theme	Subtheme	Category	Code	Inferences from video recordings and observations (14 Weeks)	
Home environment	Type of residence	Apartment	Inhibiting (N=6)	Most families living in apartments experience problems due to too little space, which inhibits their lives, and the problem gets even bigger as all family members are stuck at home during the pandemic.	
		Detached house	Useful (N=4)	Some families live in detached houses with front or back yards. Detached houses are more spacious, and so, family members can become more mobile, which helps mitigate the adverse effects of the pandemic.	
	Characteristics		Democratic (N=7)	Democratic parents understand and respect their children's needs. You can clearly see that. They do different activities to break the monotony of the lockdown and, they are consistent in their behaviors.	
			Warmth and kindness (N=5)	Parents who are teachers and those with a bachelor's or master's degree higher use pedagogical approaches more often in their relationships with their children. These are warm and kind households, where parents play collaborative games with their children.	
			Respect (N=4)	Parents and children in democratic households respect each other and bond more. They try to get over their negative experiences peacefully.	
			Conveniences (N=4)	Some houses have more conveniences (yard, space, toys, etc.) than others.	
	Positive home environment	Changes		Measures-Habits (N=7)	Families living in households with a positive atmosphere have changed their habits drastically to cope with stress, which has affected all family members. They have paid more attention to COVID-19 measures.
				Two-way horizontal communication (N=8)	Communication is the key to democratic households. They patiently listen to and empathize with each other to meet each other's needs.
		Communication		Constructive and understanding attitude (N=7)	Families living in households with a positive atmosphere during the pandemic have many constructive attitudes, such as appreciating being together, listening to one another, understanding what the other needs, adapting, and respecting each other.
				Praise-appreciation (N=6)	Parents who can maintain supportive communication say nice things to their kids to reward them for their desired behavior.
		Type of problem-solving		Tolerance and talking (N=7)	Most families living in households with a favorable climate talk to or just tolerate each other to solve problems. In that way, they solve their problems more quickly and effectively.
				Patience (N=6)	COVID-19 has brought with it a lot of problems. Parents with a positive household climate are more patient in the face of mental stress and negative experiences and behaviors outside or at home.
	Negative home environment	Characteristics		Strict (N=8)	Some parents with a traditional parenting style are too strict. They use different negative approaches, such as the second type of penalty, if their kids do not or do not want to obey the rules.
				Oppressive - authoritarian (N=7)	Some parents give in to the difficult living conditions and mental pressure caused by the pandemic and adopt an authoritarian attitude. Child-parent interaction is limited in those families. The kids have anti-social behavior and difficulty interacting with their parents.
			Indifference (N=6)	In some families with a negative home environment, kids have unmet needs, and communication between family members is poor. The kids are generally ignored, and so, they feel lonely.	
Changes			Measures-Habits (N=8)	All families had to take specific measures as they were afraid of contracting the virus. However, families with a negative home environment did not care much about the measures. They changed some of their habits about hygiene but did not do much about it.	

		Measures and habits were of secondary importance because of their basic needs, like food, housing, and money.
Communication	Poor communication (N=8)	Communication is extremely poor, and kids are mistreated in many families experiencing stress because of the pandemic.
	One-way vertical communication (N=7)	Some parents with stress due to the pandemic use a one-way, indirect, and authoritarian type of communication with their kids, making it difficult for them to express their feelings and thoughts.
Type of problem-solving	Constant warning-criticism (N=8)	Parents were easily irritated by their children, especially in households with confirmed or probable COVID-19 cases. They kept criticizing their kids, and so, some of those kids refused to participate in activities.
	Unconstructive attitude (N=6)	Some adults have developed negative attitudes because of the increasing number of cases, fear of contracting the virus, and economic problems. Family members with problems treated each other in an unconstructive and inflexible way.
	Blaming others (N=4)	Family members with a lot of problems blame others, although it does very little to help them solve their problems.
Peer interaction	Phone call (N=12)	During the COVID-19, children in almost all families mostly talk to their friends on the phone.
	Video call (N=9)	In households with Internet access, parents encourage their kids to video call their friends and relatives. The kids talk about things in detail and the things that they miss.
	Face-to-face communication (N=6)	Children living in detached homes or the countryside are they are less affected by the negative effects of peer interaction affected by the pandemic. They get to meet their friends and play outdoor games with them.

Most participants lived in apartments. Detached houses with yards were better than apartments during the pandemic because the latter were suffocating and inhibiting, which even affected the peer-interaction among children. In democratic, constructive, and warm households, family members were more tolerant of one another. However, some parents lost their jobs or moved to part-time or full-time employment, getting them into a situation where they had a hard time meeting even their most basic needs. Economic problems led to mental stress, which negatively affected the home environment. The following are some quotes from participants about the situation:

*“Before COVID-19, my wife and I were working very hard for our kids. We didn’t make much, but we were making ends meet. But then we got laid off, which has been devastating to our family. All businesses are shut down; there is just no job available...” (Father 7)*

*“My husband got killed in the Syrian civil war. Five of us just fled Syria...I had hardly got a job, and my 12-year-old daughter was taking care of her younger siblings. I don’t have a job now, I got laid off because of the pandemic. We have no food to eat, I just don’t know what to do.”(Mother 5).*

*“I live with my mom and kid. With the pandemic, my working hours and income have changed. We’re going through a tough time... I’m at a high risk of contracting covid-19 at work, so I don’t feel safe at all, and that’s why I go home only once a month, which makes me so sad” (Mother 14)*

As the quotes above illustrate, the pandemic significantly affected people's mental health and home life in different ways (communication, problem-solving styles, attitudes, behaviors, etc.). The COVID-19 pandemic greatly affected parents trying to strike a balance between protecting their children and providing for them (see Table 3).

**Table 3: Parents during the COVID-19**

Theme	Subtheme	Category	Code	Inferences from video recordings and observations (14 Weeks)		
Parents	Emotional Characteristics	Positive	Cautious (N=7)	As expected, most parents stick to the measures during the COVID-19. Most of them understand the seriousness of the situation and change their habits, and their behavior suggests that they care most about health.		
			Diligent (N=6)	Despite all challenges, some parents hold on to life and do their best for their children. They put aside worry and turn challenges into opportunities and focus on their kids' needs and try to spend as much time with them as possible.		
			Participatory-Collaborative (N=5)	Some parents communicate with their children horizontally and play games with them and treat them like peers. While doing that, they exhibit cooperative behavior and try to be part of the games.		
			Hopeful (N=5)	Most families no longer have their old lives. But some are hopeful, despite all the odds. Those parents try to create a happy home environment and play games with their kids that appeal to them.		
			Eager (N=5)	Some parents are more eager to take some time off from daily chores and spend quality time with their kids. They come up with different materials to do some exploration-based activities with their kids.		
			Responsible-Conscious (N=5)	Educated parents with pedagogical knowledge learn more about their approach to their children and get along better with their children. They try to keep negativity away from children.		
			Vigorous (N=4)	Despite the pandemic, few parents still have energy under their belts for their kids. They are more cheerful and enthusiastic and spend quality time with their kids and prefer to play active games with them.		
		Negative	Nervous-worried (N=15)	All parents are worried. Educated parents do different activities with their kids to reduce anxiety, whereas parents with high anxiety levels have trouble communicating with their kids. This creates a negative emotional atmosphere. Those parents spend little time with their kids and have a hard time getting along with them.		
			Bored (N=12)	Many of the parents who have been entirely cut off from social life are bored with the pandemic. Most parents fed up with the pandemic are intolerant and stressed out, so they go to work or just go out despite the risks.		
			Reluctant (N=10)	Fed up with the pandemic, most parents participate in their kids' games only half-heartedly and have a hard time meeting their needs.		
			Fear (N=8)	Many parents are scared of getting infected with COVID-19 or infecting other family members, like grandparents living with them. That fear is more prevalent in parents who work in crowded places.		
			Tense (N=7)	Parents affected more by the pandemic have a hard time containing their agitation, affecting their family relations. They mostly have detached and one-way communication with their kids.		
			Everyday life	Household chores	Cleaning and nutrition (N=11)	All parents but those with a full-time job can do house chores, like cleaning and feeding. Few conscious parents turn these challenging times into opportunities and help their kids adopt and practice health-promoting behavior.
				Change	New normal-Habits (N=15)	Everybody has had to get used to the "new normal." Some parents (healthcare professionals) have been very much affected by it, whereas others have adjusted more quickly. Some cautious parents have changed their habits about hygiene measures and put them to use at home together with their kids.
					Working life (N=13)	Most parents' working life has changed because of the pandemic. While healthcare professionals work full-time, civil servants have moved to flexible shifts. Most blue-collar parents have either moved from full time to part-time shifts due to preventive measures or have been laid off on the pretext of economic downturn because of COVID-19.
Needs	Parents	Educational information - counseling (N=9)	Many parents caught off guard by the pandemic seemed to face numerous problems during the study period. Some parents need counseling, information, and support for the educational activities they do with their kids at home. Some parents feel lonely and helpless during homeschooling because they have difficulty communicating with teachers.			
		Socioemotional (N=8)	Most parents are bored at home during the lockdown, but others play games with family members to have fun. However, those who can't cope with mental stress have a hard time getting along with their family members during the lockdowns.			

The pandemic significantly affected the financial and everyday lives of parents. Most parents who were civil servants managed to avoid financial problems and adjust to the “new normal” more quickly than blue-collar ones. Civil servant parents strictly followed the safety measures to protect their families against COVID-19, spent more quality time with their children, provided more emotional support to them, and attended to their physical needs more. They were also more hopeful about the future than those with emotional stress.

On top of the pandemic, all parents faced financial challenges (bills, credit card debts, installments, shopping, and housing). Therefore, some parents, especially blue-collar ones, focused on their own needs and were more judgmental and authoritarian at home, resulting in communication issues (vertical and closed communication). The more unresolved financial problems they had, the more pessimistic, tired, weary, and helpless they were. Some parents, especially healthcare professionals, tested positive for COVID-19, and therefore, they were mentally, emotionally, and physically exhausted. Some couples were on the brink of divorce due to emotional and psychological stressors (neglect, alienation, and unfulfillment). Parents who could not meet their socioemotional needs succumbed to the adverse effects of the pandemic and ended up treating their children poorly and failed to meet their needs. Many parents were unable to meet their children's educational needs and receive support from teachers in that regard. Therefore, their children failed to take advantage of their time at home during the lockdown. The following are some quotes from participants about the situation:

“... I just can't spend as much time with my kids as I used to. I have a lot of debt to pay. Sometimes I just go out and wander the streets to find a job, but there is just none; the pandemic has affected everybody...Back at home, I take my anger out of my wife and kids, it's just very hard” (Father 2).

“...We are in the ambulance 24/7, we don't have any time to eat and rest. On top of that, we are treated as outcasts; people don't get near us...The kids stay with their grandmother, and we can't visit them; everything's just turned upside down. The schools are closed, and we don't have any time for our kids; they fall behind on their education.” (Mother 9)

“My husband's job is at stake, and I got fired. We've just been surrounded by anger, stress, and fear...I have a lot of debt to pay, but we almost have no income. You see, the living conditions here are not too good, and our relationship has taken a turn for the worse, my husband doesn't want to come home anymore...He's depressed, and now he doesn't care about us as much as he used to, we're on the brink of divorce.” (Mother 12)

The interviews showed that parents put up a psychological fight under challenging circumstances. On the other hand, the pandemic affected children's mental health, everyday-life activities, relationships, and education and reshaped their needs (see Table 4).

**Table 4: Children During the COVID-19**

Theme	Subtheme	Category	Code	Inferences from video recordings and observations (14 Weeks)
Children	Emotional state	Positive	Curiosity (N=8)	Most kids are curious about the situation they are in and the activities they are to do with their parents. They especially look forward to the activity of “unusual culinary,” or science activities.
			Satisfaction (N=7)	All kids, but those treated poorly by their authoritarian parents, are happy to spend more time with their parents. They seem to be happy to be spending time with their parents, whether quality time or not.
			Inquiry (N=7)	Democratic, patient, and kind parents spend quality time with their kids and do engaging activities with them. This gets the kids to ask questions about things. They make conversations with their parents to learn more about things.
			Self-confidence (N=7)	In households with a positive vibe, parents are more supportive of their kids, and the kids are more confident. They are actively engaged in both everyday life and other activities and are not afraid of making mistakes.
		Negative	Responsibility (N=6)	The children of conscious parents have a higher sense of responsibility. Those kids can complete their tasks, help with household chores, and understand their family's situation.
			Fear (N=9)	Lonely children with unmet needs are afraid of their parents. Besides, parents who are healthcare professionals are at higher risk of contracting COVID-19, so their kids are more afraid of contracting COVID-19 than other kids.
			Irresponsibility (N=9)	Children of negligent, judgmental, and authoritarian parents sometimes avoid cooperating and display problematic behaviors. They do not complete their

		tasks, do not listen to their parents, do not want to do chores, and they react improperly.
	Getting bored (N=8)	Children living in apartments with too few toys and materials and those living in houses with no interesting and high-quality activities are more bored than others.
	Short temper-aggression (N=7)	Children of oppressive and judgmental parents with poor communication skills have developed behavioral problems. Besides, children stuck at home for a long time because of the pandemic are irritable and aggressive.
	Loneliness (N=7)	Children of negligent parents have difficulty interacting, and so, they do educational activities on their own. And some of them ignored by their parents mostly play alone. They don't want to share their toys with their parents and just want to continue playing alone.
	Spoilt (N=3)	Some parents have very little time for their kids because of work, but they try to do whatever they want, and so, they end up spoiling them. Those parents find it difficult to get their kids to complete tasks and activities.
	Psychophysiological disorders (N=2)	In households with low interaction due to the pandemic, children display inappropriate behaviors. The unconstructive, negative, and tense domestic atmosphere affects those children adversely, and they display such unhealthy behaviors as sucking fingers, wetting themselves, tics, etc.
Everyday life	Play	
	Digital games (N=9)	Parents have difficulty communicating with their kids in households affected by the pandemic. Family members use technological devices, almost as if addicted to them. Parents have a hard time coming up with games and so let their kids play video games on their computers, tablets, or smartphones. The kids end up having too much screen time.
	Unstructured-free-games (N=9)	During the day, most children play games that appeal to their interests. Especially the children of authoritarian, reluctant, or negligent parents often play that kind of game.
	Structured games (N=8)	Most only children with play dough, blocks, puzzles, or miniature toys play structured games.
	Structured-Rule-based games (N=7)	In households with board games, family members (siblings and parents) play rule-based games. Those who can afford, buy such games. Besides, some parents play traditional rule-based games with their kids (sitting down and standing up, warm-cold, red hands, etc.)
	Action-based games (N=6)	Most children living in homes with conveniences (front-or back-yard, spacious rooms, etc.) played action-based games with or without materials. However, those living in houses with few facilities and conveniences do not play action-based games. Besides, when they want to play such games at home, their parents just tell them not to.
	Playing together-Collaborative games (N=6)	Parents who can communicate with their children are more likely to participate in their games. They talk a lot during the games, and the kids display social skills and help their parents with collaborative games.
	Exploration-based games (N=5)	Children living in houses with conveniences play exploration-based games, mostly in the front- or back-yard, and those with eager parents play exploration-based games, mostly in the kitchen.
	Solo games (N=5)	Children of negligent parents prefer to play alone. They do not play any other games.
	Role-based games (N=4)	Children of teacher parents or kids with at least one sibling play role-based games. They role-play and make impressions and try to involve their parents and siblings in their games.
	Puppetry (N=3)	There are puppets or miniature human-animal toys in some households. Those parents enjoy doing puppetry with their children. Some of the kids use those puppets for interactive reading activities.
	Creative game (N=2)	Some parents encourage their kids to turn materials into toys, like magnets, magnifiers, mirrors, balloons, cardboard boxes, straws, fruit and vegetables, aluminum foil, waste bins, packaging, etc. This makes the kids more curious and interested.
	Routines and habits	
	Using mass media (N=11)	Most kids cannot meet and play games with their friends during the COVID-19, and so, they end up spending most of their time on tablets and smartphones.
	Nutrition (N=10)	Parents who are at home during the lockdown feed their kids regularly, But children with working parents and those who are being taken care of by close relatives or caregivers don't have a regular diet.
	Cleaning (N=9)	Like their parents, most children have changed their cleaning habits. They wash their faces and hands more often, avoid contact, and use wet wipes and masks to protect against the virus.

Education	Face-to-face education at home	Reading hour (N=5)	Kids with caring and conscious parents regularly read every day. Parents buy them stories and children's books.	
		Tidying the room and sorting out the toys (N=5)	Some parents help their kids develop a sense of responsibility. Those children tidy up their rooms and sort out their toys without their parents telling them to do so.	
		Reminders (N=3)	Conscious and careful parents hang up reminders (images, posters, cards, etc.) to teach their kids the right habits and remind them of the hygiene and dietary measures.	
	Distance education	Art (N=10)	Most kids do art activities with different materials. They interact more with their parents when they also take part in the activities. Authoritarian parents choose the type and materials of art activities. Democratic parents encourage their kids to express themselves in more creative ways.	
		Preparation for reading and writing (N=7)	In households with a positive climate, most children do activities (listening-speaking, puzzle, holding the pen correctly, drawing, painting, cutting, folding, kneading, pasting, cleaning, etc.) that help them develop hand-eye coordination and spatial, attention-estimation, and self-care skills.	
		Turkish (N=6)	In households fostering family interaction, most children do reading activities, impressions, storytelling, or story-completion.	
		Math (N=5)	Kids use basic math skills (matching, classification, comparison, counting, ranking) in many games and activities during the day. While parents in households with a negative climate do not realize this, only the enthusiastic and conscious ones are involved in their kids' math activities.	
		Music (N=5)	Some cheerful and energetic parents sing and dance with their kids and do music activities to have a good time and make them feel less stressed.	
	Needs	Child	Science (N=3)	Kids do science activities in exploration-based games. Those living in detached houses learn new science concepts and develop new skills in their houses' yards. The eager and interested parents who can't get out do science activities in the kitchen with their kids.
			Smartphone (N=14)	Parents sometimes give their smartphones to their children. Conscious parents and those whose children go to private schools make sure that they involve their kids in educational activities. But the less educated and negligent parents give their kids their smartphones to keep them busy and get some time to rest.
Computer -Internet (N=7)			In households with Internet access, parents search for online educational content and make sure that their kids get used to distance education. Indifferent parents neither limit nor monitor their kids' Internet use. Kids in households with no Internet or computer mostly watch TV.	
Parent		Tablet (N=6)	Some parents upload educational materials recommended by Ministry of National Educaiton (MoNE) into their tablets for their kids. Negligent parents let their kids play games and watch videos on their tablets for extended periods of time.	
		Game (N=13)	Almost all kids end up playing a few games over and over again. But most kids need engaging games in which they can express their thoughts and feelings, do research and observation to quench their curiosity, learn new things, and interact with objects and people. The pandemic has drastically changed how parents and children look at games. The children have become more addicted to digital games and got more used to playing alone.	
		Physiological (N=10)	During the lockdown, some parents got to spend time at home with their kids and meet their physiological needs (balanced nutrition, sleep, etc.) as much as they could. However, healthcare professionals working full-time, caregivers, negligent parents, and parents facing financial problems could not fully meet their children's physiological needs.	
Child	Educational (N=10)	Aside from kids with conscious parents (N = 5), those who have to spend time at home with their parents or caregivers during the lockdown face educational problems. Their parents can't meet their academic needs and can't help them develop cognitive skills.		
	Psychomotor (N=9)	Only six families have conveniences at home. The remaining don't have enough space at home. Therefore, their kids are deprived of physical activities that could help them get their energy and stress out of their system and develop basic motor skills.		
	Socioemotional (N=7)	Most kids in households with a negative climate can't develop socioemotional skills. Problematic interaction causes agitation, fear, sadness, and anger in some of them. Kids who have been away from their parents and loved ones for a long time are deprived of warmth, affection, and a sense of safety and so feel guilty and lonely.		

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Developing positive behavior (N=6)	During the quarantine, most families can't meet their needs, resulting in anxiety, agitation, and emotional and behavioral problems both in parents and children. Especially, the quarantine has caused irritability, selfishness, fear, boredom, pessimism, and even psychophysiological disorders, and so kids need help to change their misbehaviors into more appropriate and constructive ones.
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Democratic parents had satisfied, curious, self-confident, and responsible children. The positive home environment provided children with the opportunity to play exciting games with their parents, carry out everyday activities, and adopt the right habits. Caring and educated parents paid more attention to their children's needs and participated in their math or science activities. In households with a negative atmosphere, parents were not very supportive of their children, making them fearful, bored, aggressive, selfish, and irresponsible. Children in households with high levels of anxiety and stress experienced adaptation and behavioral problems. Some parents observed psychophysiological disorders in their children, such as eating disorders, tics, wetting themselves, and thumb-sucking. Parents who had to work full time during the pandemic hired caregivers to meet their children's physiological, socioemotional, and educational needs. However, those children experienced emotional and behavioral problems because caregivers failed to meet their needs. Lastly, informed parents received support from teachers to meet their children's educational needs. With the guidance of teachers, they chose effective activities for their children. On the other hand, negligent parents did not seek any support from teachers and just allowed their children to have excessive screen time. The following are some quotes from parents about the situation:

*"...My husband and I are always in the hospital; we haven't seen our kids for months...We're completely burnt out. The kids have a caregiver, but we just don't know what they do, what they eat, and whatnot. We sometimes facetime, and they always look tired, I don't think they've been eating well. They have different routines now. We know that they spend too much time watching TV or have too much screen time...but we can't go home to see them because we don't want to infect them with the virus..., they are already too scared of it anyway, the pandemic has been a blow to our life, we would like to be with our kids, but we just had to hire a caregiver...The kids are on distance education, and we're in constant contact with their teachers, who recommend different activities." (Mother 10)*

*"...We have a large family, and so, we have too many expenses, which is a huge pressure. I didn't know what to do after I got laid off. I know I'm more stressed out and have a hard time managing my anger. My wife and I are always arguing,... my younger kid is sometimes very scared, he's wetting himself again,...we talked to his teachers, but she wasn't of much help." (Father 2)*

These all statements showed that the COVID-19 pandemic affected families much more significantly than previously thought.

#### 4. Discussion

The COVID-19 pandemic has severely deteriorated the health systems of countries and the expectations, lifestyles, and economic conditions of people. Almost all governments have taken drastic measures to prevent the spread of the virus. Millions of people stayed home for weeks, and all schools and non-essential workplaces were shut down. Despite all preventive measures, the virus caused the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people [79,232,555 confirmed cases and 1,754,493 deaths as of 27 December 2020 (WHO)] and an unprecedented global socioeconomic crisis. This paper focused on 15 families with different SES during the COVID-19 pandemic in Turkey. The goal was to shed light on their fight against the pandemic and its impact on their children aged 48-72 months. The longitudinal observations, video recordings, and interviews at the onset of the pandemic allowed us to look into the impact of the pandemic on the parent-child relationship.

##### *The impact of physical conditions*

The adverse psychological and social consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic depend on the living conditions. Low-SES families live in apartments with too little space to play, exercise, or just move around. On the other hand, middle- and higher-SES families live in detached houses with yards, where they can grow things, play outdoor games, and do exploration-based activities (Lambert et al., 2019; Moore et al., 2020). The prolonged home confinement has drastically changed the routines, interaction styles, and everyday life

activities of families living in urban areas (Brooks et al., 2020). Most of our participants could not adapt to the “new normal,” which negatively affected their children. Especially those living in apartments developed sedentary behaviors, such as increases in sitting, screen time, and unhealthy eating (Moore et al., 2020). On the other hand, children living with their parents in the countryside were mentally and physically healthier because they were more active and spent more time with their friends/relatives than their counterparts living in apartments in cities who could only audio- or video-called their friends/relatives (Yeasmin et al., 2020; Anwar et al., 2020; Ranscombe, 2020).

### ***Unhealthy home environments: parents and children***

The interviews pointed to more severe problems. During the COVID-19 pandemic, parents faced numerous stress factors (safety, financial hardship, emotional problems, and children’s educational and physical needs) and had difficulty interacting with their children. The lockdown disrupted children’s daily activities, interaction styles, eating habits, and sleep patterns. Recent studies have shown that quarantine causes mental stress in children, such as anxiety, depression, lethargy, impaired social interaction, and loss of appetite (Jiao et al., 2020). Children are more sedentary, have more screen time on digital devices, and experience more eating and sleeping problems than before the COVID-19 pandemic (Moore et al., 2020; Ghosh et al., 2020; Graell, 2020; Guan et al., 2020). In households with a negative atmosphere, children were more likely to be scared, bored, lonely, aggressive, and spoiled, exhibit negative psychophysiological behaviors, and play digital, unstructured, or structured games alone. Although there are some differences in prevalence rates, these results are consistent with recent studies of Chinese children who showed higher levels of anxiety and depressive symptoms during quarantine (Xie et al., 2020). Mental and behavioral problems have been more prevalent among parents and children, respectively, since the beginning of the pandemic (Fisher et al., 2020). According to the video-recordings and observations, fathers of households with financial problems did not have the opportunity to be involved in their children’s lives, whereas mothers with a high school and associate degree were involved in educational activities as much as they could. Gassman-Pines et al. (2020) and Romero et al. (2020) also show that setting “to do” lists for children, talking to them about the pandemic, limiting their media exposure, and engaging them in family activities are effective strategies. Children living in a positive household climate and receiving mental and educational support from teachers are less likely to be affected by the negative consequences of crisis (Larsen et al., 2020). However, the interviews showed that low-SES parents had too little knowledge and experience to guide their children, and therefore, felt lonely. On 12 October 2020, the Turkish authorities launched a campaign for early childhood education and introduced a television- and computer-based project called “The World’s Greatest Kindergarten without Walls.” (Ministry of National Education [MoNE], 2020). However, the decline in math and literacy skills in lower-SES students (may not be the case for higher-SES students) even during mid-term breaks is estimated to be equivalent to several months’ worth of academic achievement (Alexander et al., 2007). Therefore, seven months (from March to October) of poverty, malnutrition, depression, and trauma with no education will definitely have significant consequences on children (Cantillon et al., 2017). What is more, the existing learning gap between low- and high-SES students is likely to widen further (Clark et al., 2020) because, as our results also indicate, low-SES families have less access to resources (playgrounds, electronic devices, Internet, etc.) (TEDMEM, 2020; Van Lancker & Parolin, 2020).

Low-SES families face some other problems. Increased fear of COVID-19, frustration, boredom, social isolation, financial losses, and the lack of knowledge, education, and personal space negatively affect family relationships (Brooks et al., 2020). Most participants had difficulty adjusting to the “new normal” and taking preventive measures despite the risk of infection. This shows that the debilitating economic effects of the coronavirus are likely to make families more vulnerable to external risks regarding healthcare, nutrition, and education. Moreover, the combination of the public health crisis, social isolation, and economic recession is likely to make mental problems more prevalent and worse in the entire population (Wang et al., 2020). All these factors prevent parents from providing adequate care to their children (Lundberg & Wuermli, 2012). Health professionals cannot spend time with their children because they have been working under adverse conditions and staying in quarantine for a long time (Courtney et al., 2020). Like a few parents, health professionals felt lonely, tense, sad, and helpless because they had to work during the pandemic and, therefore, were at risk of contracting or transmitting COVID-19. Most of them already tested positive for COVID-19. Some parents (almost all healthcare professionals, teachers, taxi drivers, and waiters) who tested

positive for COVID-19 during the study experienced anxiety and depression during their time away from their children and families (Dubey et al., 2020). This had such a dramatic effect that few parents who had survived previous crises succumbed to the pandemic and found themselves on the brink of divorce. Research shows that people facing adverse living conditions combined with economic and parenting stress are more likely to experience mental problems and disruption in social relationships (Kim & Moon, 2005; Waddoups et al., 2019). The pandemic was nerve-wracking and stressful for all participants. Some parents faced a period of destitution because they lost their jobs. Such parents became unconstructive, oppressive, judgmental, and authoritarian because they had difficulty maintaining democratic family relationships. They adopted a one-way communication style and blamed others. On the other hand, tolerant and easy-going parents formed constructive and warm relationships with other family members and talked to them to solve problems. Children living in stress-inducing households with oppressive, authoritarian, nervous, and overprotective parents are more likely to develop maladaptive behaviors (Gewirtz et al., 2008; Cobham et al., 2016). This shows that the sociological and economic situation directly affects parental attitude (Han & Lee, 2018). Some parents faced new stress factors and experienced economic, emotional, and social losses as with the disruption of education due to the pandemic. Blue-collar parents, especially immigrants, living in large cities in other countries also face financial problems shortly after moving from full-time to part-time employment or being laid off. They find themselves in a situation where they cannot even meet their basic needs (Gassman-Pines et al., 2020). It was the same for the immigrant family in this study, living in an overcrowded house with awful conditions. Those parents had four children, the oldest of whom was 12 years old. They had a hard time meeting their children's nutrition, health, and education needs since they were laid off due to the pandemic (WHO, 2020a). The more stressors parents experience (unemployment, physical and mental problems, death of loved ones, etc.), the more vulnerable their children are to emotional problems (Courtney et al., 2020). It seems that the dramatic rise in unemployment and poverty due to the pandemic, as in previous economic crises, will significantly affect early childhood nutrition, care, and development.

#### ***Healthy home environments: parents and children***

Some families turned the pandemic into an opportunity and worked hard to keep family relationships strong and connected. Those parents were diligent, hopeful, and eager and had no financial problems during the pandemic. On the other hand, millions of families worldwide face economic and family problems due to the pandemic (Brooks et al., 2020). Families who can go through the pandemic without financial concerns are definitely more likely to use this period to improve their relationships with family members (Prime et al., 2020). Democratic parents spent more quality time with their children during the pandemic. They were more constructive and open to their children, communicated with them horizontally (two-way), used praise and encouragement to motivate them, and treated them like peers. Positive parent-child interaction makes children more resilient in times of crises (Gewirtz et al., 2008). Parents with a pedagogical formation or bachelor's or master's degree responded in a calmer way to their children's misbehavior and diverted their attention to engaging games and activities. Some families were living in spacious houses with conveniences. They used those conveniences to mitigate the adverse effects of the lockdown (Moore et al., 2020). Some parents, who were aware of the seriousness of the pandemic, made minor modifications to their houses to teach or remind their children of preventive measures and help them adopt the new dietary and hygiene habits. Using short and clear messages to teach children rules is an effective method (Jiao et al., 2020; Chinnappan et al., 2020).

The pandemic causes undesirable behavior in nearly four in ten children (Wang, Pan et al., 2020). One in seven parents (n = 1011) reported behavioral problems in their children since the pandemic (Patrick et al., 2020). Some parents are more sensitive, supportive, kind, and understanding of their children during the quarantine. They empathize with their children and talk to them and play reading and interactive games to replace their undesired behavior with the desired one (Gassman-Pines et al., 2020). They do not allow their children to have excessive screen time (up to 2.5 hours per day), as recommended by the MoNE and WHO, and instead divert their attention to exploration-based creative activities. Positive parental attitude under challenging circumstances is a significant predictor of children's wellbeing (Gassman-Pines et al., 2020; Patrick et al., 2020; Romero et al., 2020).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, children in many households were left to their own devices to do, mostly ineffective, arts and reading-writing activities, despite the fact that different types of activities help children

make decisions and act independently (Szabo et al., 2020). In households with a positive atmosphere, parents played collaboration-based games and performed drama-based activities with their children. Some parents even sang songs, danced, and made music with their children. Such simple activities help family members break the monotony and bond under challenging circumstances (Ghosh et al., 2020). Some parents regularly video called friends and relatives and encouraged their children to play outdoors (yard, picnic areas, etc.) (WHO, 2019). Children with young and vigorous parents living in detached houses did exploration-based science and math activities in their yards during the quarantine. There is a positive correlation between parental involvement in activities and children's wellbeing (Moore et al., 2020). Therefore, children who perform outdoor activities with their parents are likely to be less affected by the pandemic and develop more healthy behaviors (Wang et al., 2020).

In households where children used smart devices and the Internet in moderation, parents reached out to teachers for psychological support and guidance and helped their children develop coping mechanisms to deal with stress and make sense of their own experiences. Households with a positive climate are more conducive to developing socioemotional, physiological, educational, and psychomotor skills.

## **5. Limitations and Future Directions**

The results of our study should be interpreted in the context of certain limitations. The study had some limitations. First, it collected longitudinal data but focused only on how 15 families with different SES experienced the COVID-19 pandemic in Turkey. Therefore, the results provide no insight into what policies authorities should implement to mitigate the adverse effects of the pandemic on the general population. Persons and institutions of power should take research on unemployment, uncertainty, and negative health conditions into account to take precautions against the adverse consequences of the pandemic. However, an essential contribution of this study is that it sheds light on the private worlds of families who have faced and are still facing the challenges of the pandemic. The results agree with qualitative and quantitative studies showing that children's mental wellbeing during a crisis is affected by parents' practices and family environment. Last, the sample was not large enough to perform subgroup analyses; however, given the current situation, it was impossible to collect large-scale data.

The results and limitations provide hints for future research. According to World Bank forecasts (2020), the global economic recession will continue throughout 2021, even if the pandemic is taken under control, suggesting that new crises are to come. Future studies should design intervention programs/activities for families facing crises. The sample consisted of families with different SES, which manifested itself in the results. Future studies should focus on large samples of subpopulations that are most and least vulnerable to crises.

## **6. Conclusions**

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought expectations, relationships, and dreams to a halt and affected families with different SES unusually. The pandemic has profound emotional and financial effects on low- and middle-SES families, whereas it provides higher-SES families with an opportunity to improve themselves. The results show that pressure directly affects parental attitude, which affects the quality of the home environment. The risks and trauma to which children are exposed for an extended period of time during the quarantine test their resilience. Emotional stress and other problems children face are closely related to parents and the home environment. In other words, positive parent-child interaction has protective effects. The following are recommendations based on the results:

- a. Parents should communicate openly and effectively with their children to help them manage their fear and anxiety.
- b. Parents should play collaboration-based games to help their children cope with loneliness.
- c. Parents should design creative activities to meet their children's physical and social needs.
- d. Parents should use democratic communication patterns and respect their children's needs and interests to help them cope with anxiety, fear, and stress.
- e. Parents should focus more on their children's socioemotional concerns than their academic performance.

- f. Routine life (eating, sleeping, cleaning, etc.) is of paramount importance for children's development.
- g. Parents should collaborate with psychological counselors and early childhood educators to design creative activities to help family members cope with stress.
- h. Parents should help their children look beyond the current impasse and focus on the future.
- i. Teachers should recognize families' needs and help them access educational resources as quickly as possible in times of crisis.

Despite all its devastating effects, the COVID-19 pandemic has provided some families with the opportunity to restore their self-belief and confidence. Parents who use this opportunity can help their children look beyond the current impasse and focus on the future. We are all responsible for teaching children how to manage their emotions and cope with fear and anxiety in the face of the ups and downs of life.

## 7. Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the volunteer teachers who believed in the significance of this study and, despite health risks, gave their valuable time and effort to help me collect data. I would also like to thank the families and children who shared their insightful reflections and welcomed me warmly into their homes.

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