

Effect of COVID-19 lock down on development of infants and toddlers

Muhammad Qaisar Jamal Khattak¹, Bilal Hasan Chaudhry¹

(1) Consultant Family Medicine, Primary Healthcare Corporation, Doha Qatar

Corresponding author:

Dr. Bilal Hasan Chaudhry

Consultant Family Medicine, Primary Healthcare Corporation,
Doha Qatar

Email: bhc234@gmail.com

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Abstract

The COVID-19 lockdowns played a major role in restricting growth of disease(1) and that saved many lives(2). However, COVID-19 lockdowns had some major drawbacks too. There was a significant impact on the economy (2) and it undoubtedly affected the development of infants and toddlers in multiple ways. This paper looks at the impact of the COVID-19 lockdown on infants and toddlers.

Key words: Covid-19, lockdowns, early childhood development, infants, toddlers

Introduction

Social development is a critical component of toddlers' development, as it lays the foundation for healthy relationships and interactions with others throughout life (3). Toddlers who have formed secure attachments with their caregivers tend to be more socially and emotionally competent. This is because attachment provides a foundation of trust, security, and emotional regulation that allows toddlers to explore the world around them with confidence (4). It is important to note that toddlers learn social skills by watching and imitating the behaviour of others, particularly their caregivers. Caregivers who model positive social behaviours, such as empathy, kindness, and respect, provide a foundation for toddlers to develop these same behaviours (5). These social behaviours cannot be present or learnt with no social interactions.

Play is another crucial aspect of social development for toddlers, as it provides opportunities for social interaction, problem-solving, and exploration. Through play, toddlers learn how to cooperate, take turns, and negotiate with others (6). 'Play' also plays a major role in emotional regulation. Toddlers who are able to regulate their emotions tend to be more socially competent, as they are better able to handle frustration, disappointment, and conflict without becoming overwhelmed or engaging in aggressive behaviour (7).

Language is the foundation of communication, and toddlers who have strong language skills tend to be more socially adept. As toddlers develop their language skills, they become better able to express their feelings and needs, understand the feelings and needs of others, and engage in conversation and social interaction(8).

Incorporating models, play and language, it is important to note the influence of cultural and contextual factors, such as the social norms and values of a particular community. Toddlers who grow up in environments that value social connection and community tend to be more socially adept than those who do not (9).

It is important to note that social development is a complex process, and these factors interact with each other in complex ways. However, by providing a nurturing and supportive environment that emphasizes social connection, caregivers can help toddlers develop the social skills they need to thrive.

Discussion

The COVID-19 lockdowns have undoubtedly affected the development of infants and toddlers in various ways. Foremost, infants and toddlers need social interaction and stimulation to develop their cognitive and language skills. The lockdowns and social distancing measures may have limited the opportunities for babies to interact with people outside their immediate family, potentially hindering their development. Lockdowns also disrupted routine healthcare services, such as regular check-ups and vaccinations, which may have delayed the detection of developmental delays or other health issues.

The pandemic forced many parents to work from home, resulting in increased screen time for both parents and their children. While this may have helped with entertainment and education, excessive screen time can have negative impacts on cognitive and social-emotional development. Studies have found a link between screen time and delayed language development in infants and toddlers. This may be because screen time reduces the amount of time infants and toddlers spend interacting with people and engaging in language-rich activities(10). Screen time can be highly stimulating and overstimulation can lead to a reduced attention span. This can impact infants and toddlers' ability to focus and concentrate in the long-term (11). Screen time can interfere with the sleep patterns of infants and toddlers. The blue light emitted from screens can suppress melatonin, a hormone that helps regulate sleep, making it difficult for infants and toddlers to fall and stay asleep (12). Screen time can also lead to sedentary behaviour, which can contribute to obesity and other health problems(13). It's important to note that not all screen time is equal, and some types of digital media, such as educational apps and interactive books, may have a positive impact on infant and toddler development. Additionally, parental involvement and supervision can also play a role in mitigating the negative effects of screen time on child development. The American Academy of Paediatrics recommends that infants and toddlers under two years old avoid all screen time, while children aged two to five should have no more than one hour of screen time per day (14).

The pandemic may have resulted in a more stressful home environment, with parents dealing with financial, emotional, and social stressors. This can impact children's

cognitive and emotional development, leading to anxiety and other mental health issues. Socioeconomic factors play a crucial role in infant and toddler development. Low-income families may struggle to provide their infants and toddlers with proper nutrition due to financial constraints. Inadequate nutrition can impact brain development and lead to health problems in children (15). Low-income families may have limited access to healthcare, which can result in missed vaccinations, delayed detection of developmental delays, and untreated health conditions that can impact child development (16). Parental education can impact the home environment, with parents who have higher levels of education typically providing more cognitive stimulation and language-rich environments for their children (17). Low-income families may not have access to quality early education programs, which can impact school readiness and academic achievement later in life.

Conclusion

It is important to note that the impact of the COVID-19 lockdowns on infant and toddler development may vary depending on factors such as socio-economic status, family support, and access to resources. Additionally, early intervention services and support can help mitigate any negative impacts of the lockdowns on infant and toddler development.

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