

## The repercussions on the mental health of vulnerable children and adolescents in the post-pandemic period: an integrative review

*As repercussões na saúde mental de crianças e adolescentes vulneráveis no período pós-pandêmico: revisão integrativa*

*Repercusiones en la salud mental de los niños y adolescentes vulnerables en el periodo pospandémico: una revisión integradora*

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### Abstract:

**Objective:** to understand how the pandemic influenced the mental health of children and adolescents and its repercussions in the post-pandemic period. **Methods:** integrative review carried out in the SciELO, PubMed, Web of Science and Embase databases, from 2020 to April of 2024, using the descriptors COVID-19, *saúde mental* (mental health), *equidade social* (social equity), *crianças* (children), *adolescentes* (adolescents) and *vulnerabilidade* (vulnerability). **Results:** six publications were considered (out of 22 initially selected), of which the findings showed as post-pandemic repercussions: anxiety, depression, stress, violence, family relationships, pre-existing mental health issues as factors or disorders that aggravate the psychosocial care of young people in the short, medium and long term. **Conclusion:** the COVID-19 pandemic caused or aggravated signs and symptoms of negative impact on the mental health of children and adolescents. A gap was observed in productions on the post-pandemic effects, highlighting the need for additional research. It is essential to develop strategies for identifying and treating mental disorders, promoting social readaptation and providing adequate emotional support.

**Keywords:** Mental health; COVID 19; Child health; Adolescent health.

### Resumo:

**Objetivo:** compreender como o período da pandemia influenciou a saúde mental de crianças e adolescentes e suas repercussões no período pós-pandêmico. **Método:** revisão integrativa realizada nas bases de dados SciELO, PubMed, Web of Science e Embase, de 2020 a abril de 2024, utilizando os descritores Covid-19, saúde mental, equidade social, crianças, adolescentes e vulnerabilidade. **Resultados:** de 22 artigos inicialmente levantados foram consideradas seis publicações, das quais os achados mostraram como repercussões pós-pandêmicas: ansiedade, depressão, estresse, violência, relacionamento familiar, problemas de saúde mental pré-existentes como fatores ou transtornos que agravam em curto, médio e longo prazo o cuidado psicossocial do jovem. **Conclusão:** a pandemia de COVID-19 provocou ou agravou sinais e sintomas de impacto negativo à saúde mental de crianças e adolescentes. Observou-se uma lacuna em produções sobre os efeitos pós pandemia, destacando a necessidade de pesquisas adicionais. É essencial desenvolver estratégias para a identificação e o tratamento de transtornos mentais, promover a readaptação social e fornecer suporte emocional adequado.

**Palavras-Chave:** Saúde mental; COVID-19; Saúde da criança; Saúde do adolescente.

### Resumen:

**Objetivo:** conocer cómo influyó el periodo pandémico en la salud mental de niños y adolescentes y sus repercusiones en el periodo pospandémico. **Método:** revisión integradora realizada en las bases de datos SciELO, PubMed, Web of Science e Embase, desde 2020 hasta abril de 2024, utilizando los descriptores en portugués *Covid-19*, *saúde mental* (salud mental), *equidade social* (equidad social), *crianças* (niños), *adolescentes* y *vulnerabilidade* (vulnerabilidad). **Resultados:** De los 22 artículos inicialmente pesquisados, fueron consideradas seis publicaciones, cuyos resultados mostraron las siguientes repercusiones pospandémicas: ansiedad, depresión, estrés, violencia, relaciones familiares, problemas de salud mental preexistentes como factores o trastornos que agravan la atención psicossocial de los jóvenes a corto, medio y largo plazo. **Conclusión:** La pandemia de COVID-19 ha causado o agravado signos y síntomas de impacto negativo en la salud mental de niños y adolescentes. Hubo un vacío en la investigación sobre los efectos de la pandemia, destacando la necesidad de investigación adicional. Es esencial desarrollar estrategias para identificar y tratar los trastornos mentales, promover la readaptación social y proporcionar un apoyo emocional adecuado.

**Palabras-Clave:** Salud mental; COVID 19; Salud infantil; Salud del adolescente.

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## INTRODUCTION

**T**he repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic on human life went beyond the physical consequences caused by the disease. The pandemic was marked by uncertainty, fear and insecurity, caused by global tension and social isolation, which contributed to the increase in problems related to mental health. Adolescents and children were the age group most affected by the pandemic, with a higher prevalence of mental disorders<sup>1</sup>. In the first year of the pandemic, the World Health Organization (WHO) reported a 25% increase in the prevalence of depression and anxiety<sup>2</sup>.

As a result of social distancing and isolation, children's mental health during the pandemic was greatly affected due to their inherent emotional vulnerability. This decline was attributed to several stressors, such as the long duration of isolation, feelings of frustration and boredom, fear of contamination, lack of social interaction with peers, friends and teachers, misinformation, restricted personal space at home and financial difficulties within the family<sup>3</sup>.

Adolescence is a period of intense development, characterized by biopsychosocial changes that mark the transition from childhood to adulthood. It is a stage of high sensitivity to stimuli and an intense need for social interaction. Social distancing during this phase can trigger psychiatric problems, worsen agitation and anxiety, and increase the propensity for mental disorders. The vulnerability of adolescents to mental health issues becomes evident, considering that most cases of psychological disorders begin before the age of 24<sup>4-5</sup>.

Although social distancing is an effective measure against the spread of COVID-19, it brings challenges, such as the interruption of school routines and other activities, besides generating feelings of fear and insecurity, especially in children who did not understand the situation they were experiencing. Prolonged family coexistence and confinement can result in conflicts and violence against children and adolescents, while individual issues, such as pre-existing mental illnesses, can be aggravated, hindering the ability to deal with conflicts and the need to adapt the physical space to deal with demands. Other consequences include increased domestic work, financial issues, lack of access to health and social services, and family separation<sup>5-6</sup>.

This study aims to understand how the pandemic context influenced the mental health of children and adolescents and its repercussions in the post-pandemic period.

## METHODS

This is an integrative review (IR) that addresses the mental health of adolescents in the post-pandemic context. The IR consists of identifying and analyzing data with a view to producing a scientific basis based on studies through the definition of concepts, theory and

evidence review, identification of gaps in the areas of knowledge, and theoretical analysis on a specific guiding question<sup>7</sup>. Thus, this work has as its guiding question: "*What is the impact or effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of children and adolescents?*".

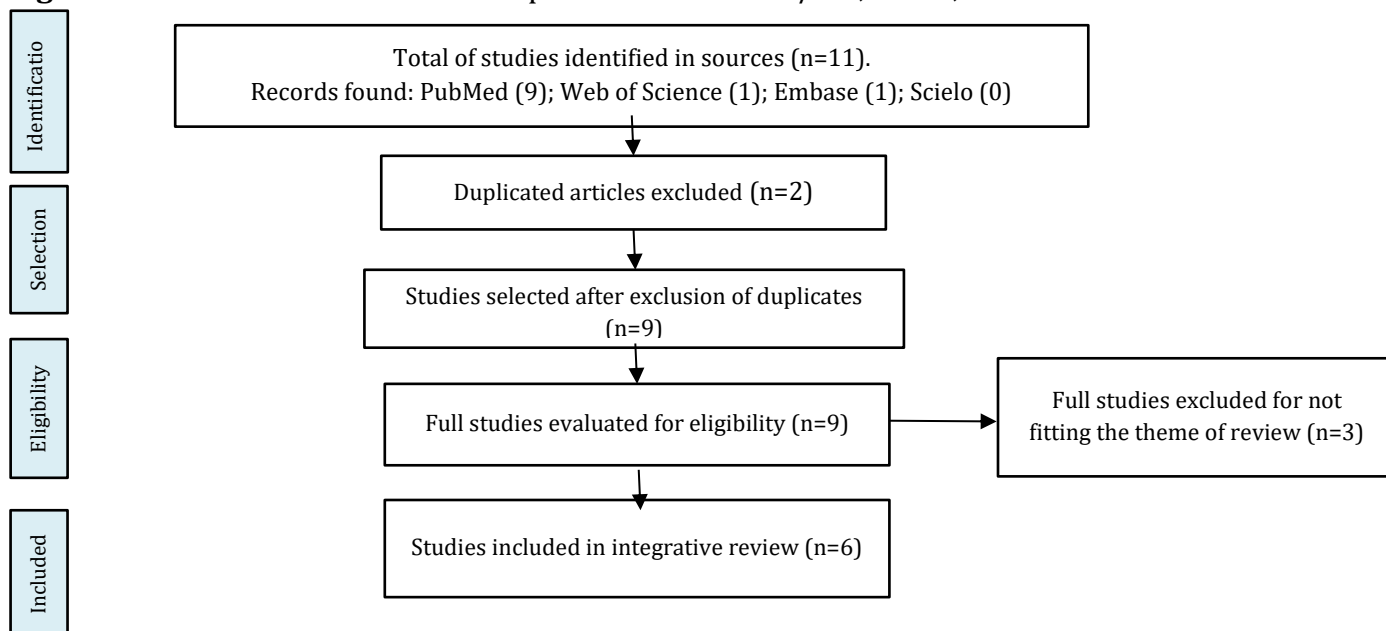
The IR is divided into the following six stages: identification of the topic and selection of research material; search on existing literature; data extraction and categorization; critical analysis of the included articles with the aid of the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) evaluation protocol; interpretation of the data collected; and careful synthesis<sup>8</sup>. The inclusion criteria were: original and non-original studies published in full from 2020 to April of 2024, in Portuguese and English, available in the electronic databases SciELO, PubMed, Web of Science, and Embase. Data collection took place from January of 2024 to April of 2024, with articles categorized in May of 2024.

The descriptors used were "COVID-19", "*Saúde Mental*" (Mental Health), "*Equidade Social*" (Social Equity), "*Crianças*" (Children), "*Adolescentes*" (Adolescents), and "*Vulnerabilidade*" (Vulnerabilidade).

The exclusion criteria were: articles that, for some reason, focused on other aspects in their research, that did not present considerations on main object of the review, letters addressed to editors, case reports, and duplicate studies in the databases. Then, the following data of the selected articles were analyzed: year of publication, abstract, objective, methods, results, discussions, and conclusions.

## RESULTS

Of the 22 articles initially selected, six studies were included, presented in the PRISMA guidelines, as shown in Figure 1.

**Figure 1.** Flow of the article selection process. Uberlândia/MG, Brazil, 2024.

The articles chosen after analysis and selection are presented in Chart 1, presented in chronological order of publications, authors, titles and scientific journals in which each text was published.

**Chart 1.** Selected articles on mental health of children and adolescents after the COVID-19 pandemic. Uberlândia/MG, Brazil, 2020 to April 2024.

Authors and year	Title of article	Journal
Oliveira <i>et al.</i> (2020)	Adolescents' health in times of COVID-19: a scoping review	Reports in public Health
Singh <i>et al.</i> (2020)	Impact of COVID-19 and lockdown on mental health of children and adolescents: A narrative review with recommendations	Psychiatry Research
Tang <i>et al.</i> (2020)	Mental health and its correlates among children and adolescents during COVID-19 school closure: The importance of parent-child discussion	Journal of Affective Disorders
Hossain <i>et al.</i> (2022)	Global burden of mental health problems among children and adolescents during COVID-19 pandemic: An umbrella review	Psychiatry Research
Ashraf; Yaqoob. (2022)	Impact of COVID-19 and lockdown on mental health of children and adolescents: A narrative review	Journal of Clinical and Diagnostic Research
Lorthe <i>et al.</i> (2023)	Socioeconomic conditions and children's mental health and quality of life during the COVID-19 pandemic: An intersectional analysis	SMM - Populations Health

The correlation between the emergence of mental health problems in children and adolescents is a relevant topic, especially in the post-pandemic global context in which we live

in. When analyzing the methods of the selected articles, it is possible to observe the diversity of approaches used to investigate the issue. Of the six articles analyzed, two were systematic reviews and two were narrative reviews, one was a cross-sectional study and one was a retrospective cohort study.

The cross-sectional study, conducted online, included the participation of 4,342 elementary and high school students in Shanghai, China, during a specific period in March of 2020, and provided valuable insights into the impact of the pandemic on young people's mental health<sup>9</sup>. On the other hand, the retrospective cohort study conducted in Geneva, Switzerland, with questionnaires targeted at children and adolescents, allowed a longitudinal analysis of the effects of the social and economic context on mental health<sup>10</sup>.

All articles established correlations between factors such as social distancing, distance from the school environment, family support, economic and social vulnerability, and the emergence of mental health problems, such as anxiety and depression, during the pandemic. The articles generally consistently point to economic and social vulnerability as a crucial factor in predisposing individuals to these problems<sup>1-10-11-12</sup>.

The relevance of the family environment in promoting mental health is also highlighted. Three articles, Tang *et al.* (2021), Lorthe *et al.* (2023) and Oliveira *et al.* (2020), pointed out that a healthy and supportive family environment can reduce conflicts and mental health problems, while exposure to family violence increases the risk of mental distress.

In Chart 2, the articles were summarized according to their objectives, methods, and evidence produced.

**Chart 2.** Summary of the main aspects addressed in the selected articles on the topic of mental health of children and adolescents after the COVID-19 pandemic. Uberlândia/MG, Brazil, 2020 to April of 2024.

Author/ year	Title	Design	Objective	Main results
Oliveira <i>et al.</i> (2020)	Adolescents' health in times of COVID-19: a scoping review	Systematic literature review, scoping review type	Identify the impact or effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on adolescent health.	Evidence of the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on adolescents' mental health is still poorly explored in studies, leaving several gaps in knowledge. Problems such as post-traumatic stress, depression, anxiety and stress have been associated with social distancing and the pandemic context, increasing vulnerability and exposure to situations of violence, especially in family life.
Singh <i>et al.</i> (2020)	Impact of COVID-19 and lockdown	Narrative review	Identify mental health aspects of children and adolescents	The impact of the pandemic and lockdown varies according to factors such as age, educational level, pre-existing mental health and economic conditions. Children and

	on mental health of children and adolescents: a narrative review with recommendations		affected by the pandemic and the applications of national lockdowns to prevent the spread of the disease.	adolescents are more emotionally and socially affected than adults. Inequality and vulnerability put children at greater risk, increasing abuse and mental health problems.
Tang <i>et al.</i> (2020)	Mental health and its correlates among children and adolescents during COVID-19 school closure: The importance of parent-child discussion	Cross-sectional research	Identify life satisfaction and the perceived impact of the effects of COVID-19 on the home environment and the relationship between parents and children	The three most prevalent symptoms in adolescents were: anxiety, depression and stress. Dialogue between parents and children was identified as a protective factor for mental health. Good family relationships were related to a lower incidence of symptoms.
Hossain <i>et al.</i> (2022)	Global burden of mental health problems among children and adolescents during COVID-19 pandemic: An umbrella review	Systematic review - Umbrella review	To synthesize global evidence on the epidemiological situation and correlates of mental health problems in children and adolescents during the COVID-19 pandemic.	The psychosocial stressors caused by the COVID-19 pandemic have generated a series of mental health problems in children and adolescents. The problems identified were: anxiety, depression, PTSD, sleep disorders and suicidal behavior. It is necessary to create measures to solve mental health problems. Failure to solve these problems can lead to a new mental health crisis. The importance of a multidisciplinary approach for the comprehensive care of children and adolescents is highlighted.
Ashraf; Yaqoob. (2022)	Impact of COVID-19 and lockdown on mental health of children and adolescents: A narrative review	Narrative literature review	The impact on the mental health of children and adolescents with/without previous mental health problems due to COVID-19.	The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the mental health of children and adolescents all over the world. Social distancing and lockdown measures have contributed to increased stress and emotional distress in these age groups. Younger children have been most affected, especially those with characteristics such as low socioeconomic status and pre-existing mental health problems.
Lorthe <i>et al.</i> (2023)	Socioeconomic conditions and children's mental health and quality of life during the COVID-19	Retrospective cohort study	To investigate how demographic characteristics are linked to socioeconomic dimensions and shape the social pattern and quality of life and mental	Adolescents presented more negative results for quality of life and mental health when compared to adults and children. A precarious financial situation was negatively associated with quality of life related to mental health. Intersectorality was pointed out as an important point in maintaining individual and collective well-being, which results in health.

	pandemic: An intersection al analysis		health in children and adolescents, two years after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.	
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## DISCUSSION

Adolescence represents a crucial and significant stage in human development, characterized by intense transformation and learning. The experiences during this period have the potential to leave deep scars and traumas that can reverberate throughout adulthood, influencing the formation of certain behaviors.

The social and psychological implications resulting from the pandemic have considerable potential to influence neuropsychic development. Due to their neurodevelopmental phase, children and adolescents are particularly susceptible to stress, due to their limited understanding of the situation, inability or difficulty in developing coping mechanisms, and complexity of expressing their feelings and anxieties<sup>14</sup>.

Bianchini *et al.* (2023) report a significant increase in the rates of psychiatric disorders, such as anxiety, depression, stress, and post-traumatic stress, in children and adolescents during the pandemic. In this context, a worsening of symptoms was observed for those individuals who already had a history of these pathological conditions. Santos *et al.* (2023) highlight striking differences in the mental health of adolescents before and during the pandemic. Furthermore, the World Health Organization (WHO) highlights that anxiety and depression have emerged as the main post-pandemic morbidities, especially among young people<sup>15-2-16</sup>. The repercussions raised in the productions considered were: anxiety, depression, stress, social vulnerability - low socioeconomic status, violence, family relationships and pre-existing mental health problems.

### **Anxiety**

Anxiety disorder is one of the most prevalent psychiatric conditions, affecting individuals of all ages around the world. A study<sup>17</sup> indicates that one in fourteen people is affected by it, and that one in nine individuals will experience some type of anxiety disorder during their lifetime.

Anxiety is characterized by an emotional state of apprehension, fear, and tension. When this state becomes chronic and prolonged, it can manifest itself through somatic symptoms such as sweating, tachycardia, abdominal discomfort, and nausea, thus configuring a generalized anxiety disorder<sup>18</sup>.

After the pandemic, a notable increase in cases of mental disorders has been observed, especially depression and anxiety. The post-pandemic psychological impacts indicate an increase in anxiety levels associated with social isolation, interruption of school activities, increased substance use, sleep disorders, and eating disorders<sup>19</sup>.

Loneliness is a strong predictor of depression, which, associated with anxiety, sadness, and guilt, can be direct consequences of the state of confinement. School closures have been identified as one of the main factors generating the impact of COVID-19 on the lives of children and adolescents, not only interrupting the educational process, but also negatively affecting practices related to mental health care<sup>15</sup>.

### ***Depression***

Depression is a disorder that can have a significant impact on the quality of life of individuals, affecting their daily activities, such as sleep, education, eating habits and ability to enjoy life. This condition is generally influenced by a combination of genetic, biological, environmental and psychological factors. In adolescence, symptoms of depression can manifest themselves through somatic complaints, low self-esteem, hopelessness, inhibition, irritability and conflicts<sup>20-21</sup>.

Recent studies indicate that depression is one of the main causes of death among young people aged between 15 and 19 years, with suicide rates being higher in higher-income countries. Depression and anxiety are common disorders observed in children and adolescents, with approximately 85% of patients diagnosed with depression also presenting significant symptoms of anxiety. On the other hand, 90% of patients diagnosed with anxiety may develop depression. These data show the vulnerability of adolescents to the emotional and social changes they experience, making them prone to anxiety disorders and depressive symptoms that can negatively impact their social and emotional relationships<sup>17</sup>.

The relationship between loneliness and depressive symptoms suggests that the social isolation experienced during the pandemic can trigger other psychological problems, such as anxiety. Furthermore, it points out that social isolation during childhood and adolescence can have lasting effects on mental health throughout life, establishing a possible link between the degree of social isolation and the predisposition to developing depression in adulthood<sup>22</sup>.

### ***Stress***

The change in routine caused by the period of confinement can trigger an increase in the level of daily stress, leading to potential risks due to the physiological reaction associated with the increase in cortisol and adrenaline in children. Cortisol, as the main hormone secreted in response to stressful events of a psychosocial nature, manifests itself more obviously in



children subjected to isolation. As a result, short-term implications may emerge, such as: sleep pattern disorders, irritability, emotional instability, decline in the performance of cognitive functions, in addition to impaired visual perspicuity, as well as, in the medium term, the emergence of anxiety disorders and depressive conditions.<sup>15</sup>

### ***Social vulnerability - low socioeconomic status***

Vulnerability, which includes exposure to poverty, abuse and violence, can make adolescents susceptible to mental health problems. The economic crisis triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on many families, leading young people to face substantial concerns about potential parental job losses and fears of future shortages of basic necessities such as food and water. Socioeconomic status and the consequences of financial losses have been identified in research as stressors during the quarantine period<sup>20-23</sup>.

The current situation tends to exacerbate the already existing disparity, impacting marginalized social strata more sharply. Leaving school to work is a finding that children and adolescents from economically disadvantaged families have entered informal activities, aiming to contribute to the family's livelihood<sup>23</sup>.

The economic impact of the pandemic has resulted in millions of unemployed people and an increase in the population living below the poverty line, with financial difficulties expected to worsen after the acute phase of the pandemic is over. Such socioeconomic vulnerability can trigger feelings of guilt, frustration, depression, and mental anguish, resulting in an increase in suicide rates and substance abuse among family caregivers<sup>13</sup>.

Therefore, the economic recession is directly related to the decrease in the emotional well-being of caregivers, children, and adolescents, resulting in the deterioration of the bond of trust between them and increasing vulnerability to psychological and psychiatric disorders and situations of violence in this population. Therefore, socioeconomic disparities create obstacles to access to the rights to health, education, and safety, making it urgent for government intervention through the implementation of public policies aimed at mitigating the economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences on the lives of this population segment<sup>23</sup>.

### ***Violence***

During the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a significant impact on the daily lives of families, resulting in a substantial increase in violations of the rights of children and adolescents, who were exposed to the domestic environment as a setting prone to various types of abuse, including psychological, physical, sexual, among others<sup>24</sup>.

According to the WHO definition, violence is characterized by the deliberate use of physical force or power, real or threatened, directed at oneself, another, or a group or community, resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, developmental disabilities or deprivation. According to the Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, pandemics weaken the context in which these children are inserted, making them more vulnerable to situations of abuse, neglect, violence, exploitation and psychological suffering<sup>15-25</sup>.

Social distancing as a preventive measure in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic has been associated with an increase in cases of violence against children and adolescents. Several factors, such as boredom resulting from a lack of activities and the overburdening of caregivers, can contribute to this scenario of increased violence in this population group<sup>26</sup>.

The physical and cognitive vulnerability of children and adolescents compared to aggressors makes it difficult to recognize situations of violence and seek help. During quarantine, the stress caused by overburdening and/or the lack of activities by family members can expose children and adolescents to witnessing harmful discussions or being victims of aggression<sup>26</sup>.

Due to its sneaky nature and because it occurs in closed environments, domestic violence is difficult to identify and can result in thousands of deaths at all ages worldwide. The increase in violence against children and adolescents during the pandemic was a result of their greater exposure to situations of vulnerability at home, with family members being responsible for various forms of oppression and impatience, in addition to underreporting of cases, resulting from the deprivation of children from contact with other people. <sup>27</sup>.

### ***Family relationships***

A worrying factor arising from the pandemic is the impact on the family environment, which has a direct impact on children's behavior and mental health. Significant changes in parents can trigger sleep disorders, feelings of helplessness, and increased stress levels in children. Parents, overwhelmed by new demands, such as constant supervision of children at home, adaptation to working from home, or coping with unemployment, may become more irritable and nervous, which has a negative impact on the family context<sup>18</sup>.

It is extremely important that parents and guardians offer support to adolescents during this challenging period, helping them understand both cognitively and emotionally the relevance of the health measures taken to combat the spread of COVID-19. The lack of adequate family support and the failure to implement effective strategies to promote mental health and well-being have also proven to be challenges faced during this time<sup>4-13</sup>.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the mental health of children and adolescents, which is reflected in symptoms such as impulsivity, hyperactivity, aggression, lack of attention, and difficulties in socializing. A recent survey found that more than half of participants reported feeling lonely, while approximately one-third admitted to experiencing feelings of loneliness. In addition, challenges in interpersonal bonds, decreased connectivity with peers, worsening family ties, and a substantial increase in family stress levels were observed.

Open communication between parents and children brings perceived benefits and is a protective factor against symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress. Interpersonal communication within the family can be instrumental in mitigating the severity of psychological symptoms.<sup>9</sup>

### ***Pre-existing mental health issues***

A significant risk factor during the COVID-19 pandemic is the situation of children and adolescents with previous chronic psychiatric disorders. Many of these conditions require regular psychotherapeutic treatment, which has been interrupted by social distancing. The lack of access to health services has also contributed to these disorders going unnoticed. In addition, individuals with cognitive impairment, low risk perception, and difficulties with personal hygiene may be more vulnerable to SARS-CoV-2 infection. For these vulnerable populations, isolation measures and the stress caused by the pandemic may have an even more adverse impact<sup>23</sup>.

Children with mental disorders diagnosed prior to the pandemic have get support on the school environment. With the suspension of in-person classes and social isolation, treatment regression and difficulties in post-pandemic readaptation are concerns that need to be addressed<sup>5</sup>.

## **CONCLUSION**

The pandemic caused by the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus, recognized by the WHO in March of 2020, has caused several consequences for individuals and groups all over the world. Considering that mental health encompasses the ability to cope with stressful situations and that the consequences of the lack of early diagnosis and treatment of mental disorders produce negative repercussions in the short, medium and long term, it is essential to reflect on the impact of a global public health emergency on the psychosocial perspective of children and adolescents. The selected articles present negative implications regarding anxiety, depression, stress, social vulnerability, violence, family relationships and pre-existing health problems that

characterize an excessive worsening in these sectors and increase the demand for mental health care for children and adolescents, who faced the pandemic period without psychological and social support. The main limitation of this study lies in the difficulty in finding articles that specifically addressed the topic related to vulnerable children and adolescents in the post-pandemic period. In general, the available studies have focused on reporting the immediate impacts of COVID-19 and the initial phases of social isolation, resulting in a gap in the literature on the long-term consequences. This limitation highlights the urgent need for more targeted and longitudinal research that can fill the existing gaps.

It is also essential to encourage the creation of new strategies to cope with the post-pandemic period. Identifying symptoms and disorders related to stress caused by the pandemic, treating anxiety disorders and depression, as well as measures that allow children and young people to readapt to schools and other social environments are important.

It is also necessary to provide support for the protection and prevention of harm caused by violence, and to promote family dialogue to reestablish bonds through trust and psycho-emotional support for children and adolescents in the post-pandemic context.

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