

Udruženje za podršku i kreativni razvoj djece i mladih
Association for support and creative development of children and youth Tuzla

Edukacijsko-rehabilitacijski fakultet, Univerzitet u Tuzli
Faculty for Special Education and Rehabilitation, University of Tuzla

UNAPREĐENJE KVALITETE ŽIVOTA DJECE I MLADIH

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STUDENTS AND FAMILY FUNCTIONING DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

STUDENTI I FUNKCIONIRANJE PORODICE TOKOM PANDEMIJE COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

From March 2020, the Republic of North Macedonia started with the implementation of several restrictive measures to protect public health due to the fast and uncontrolled spreading of the coronavirus – COVID 19. As one of the restrictive measures all Macedonian universities were closed on March 11th, followed by quarantine measures which led to a general closure of almost all public businesses and work activities. In early 2021, the pandemic is ongoing and impacts are likely to be longstanding. One of the areas most affected by the pandemic is family functioning, family routines and rituals. Previous studies have confirmed that when students are not in school/university, they are less physically active, have poorer sleep hygiene, and spend more screen time. New family dynamic increased parents' demands on flexibility to new routines, rules, and limits. The aim of our research was to explore how students experienced their family functioning during the pandemic. The research lasted two months and it was conducted on a sample of 234 university students (197 females and 37 males) from North Macedonia. In the paper we will present the results of the research, focusing on family support, family communication and problems. Our general outcome showed that despite daily challenges, 42% of the respondents rated family communication as excellent, with only 8% of them facing significant problems. We conclude that students in general, during the first pandemic months, adequately deals with everyday family challenges.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, family functioning, students, North Macedonia

APSTRACT

Od marta 2020 godine, Republika Sjeverna Makedonija započela je s provođenjem nekoliko restriktivnih mjera za zaštitu javnog zdravlja zbog brzog i nekontrolisanog širenja koronavirusa - COVID 19. Kao jedna od najrestriktivnijih mjera je zatvaranje svih makedonski univerziteta od 11. marta, zajedno sa karantinskim mjerama koje su dovele do općeg zatvaranja gotovo svih javnih preduzeća i radnih aktivnosti. Početkom 2021 godine pandemija je u toku i utjecaji će vjerovatno biti dugotrajni. Jedno od područja koje je pandemija najviše pogodila je porodično funkcioniranje, porodične rutine i rituali. Prethodna istraživanja potvrdila su da studenti kada nisu u školi/na fakultetu, su manje fizički aktivni, imaju lošiju higijenu spavanja i troše više vremena na ekranu. Nova porodična dinamika povećala je zahtjeve roditelja za fleksibilnošću prema novim rutinama, pravilima i ograničenjima. Cilj našeg istraživanja bio je utvrditi kako su studenti doživljavali funkcioniranje svoje porodice tokom pandemije. Istraživanje je trajalo dva mjeseca i provedeno je na uzorku od 234 studenta (197 žena i 37 muškaraca) iz Sjeverne Makedonije. U radu ćemo predstaviti rezultate istraživanja, fokusirajući se na podršku porodice, porodičnu komunikaciju i probleme. Rezultati su pokazali da je, uprkos svakodnevnim izazovima, 42% ispitanika porodičnu komunikaciju ocijenilo odličnom, a samo 8% njih se

suočilo sa značajnim problemima. Zaključujemo da se studenti općenito, tijekom prvih mjeseci pandemije, adekvatno nose sa svakodnevnim porodičnim izazovima.

Ključne riječi: pandemija COVID-19, porodično funkcionisanje, studenti, Sjeverna Makedonija

INTRODUCTION

Officially from March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization declared the Covid 19 crisis a pandemic situation. The new reality, since then and for the next 14 months, until now, has changed the overall functioning of the world. Countries round the world have taken strict measures to control the spread of the virus, measures that have restricted social contacts to the minimum, even lockdown that lasted from couple of days to several weeks. The pandemic also has a strong impact on family functioning. Family members face a series of changes that affect their functioning as a whole; studying and working from home, economic challenges, social isolation, as well as fear for one's own health and the health of loved ones.

The aim of our research was to determine how the pandemic affects young people - students and their functioning in the family system. The research was conducted in the Republic of North Macedonia during the first pandemic months. We assume that during this period the resilient strengths of the family were still on a high level. Given that more than a year has passed since we are in a pandemic situation, it is expected that over time these strengths gradually decrease and resulted with more serious dysfunctional family behaviours, especially in the absence of systematic family support, which in our country, even after a long time, failed to be organized properly. Due to the overall circumstances, we believe that if we repeat the same research after 14 months in pandemic, we will get different, more worrying results.

Mental health of young people during pandemic

From the very beginning of the Covid pandemic, the care for own health, physical and mental, has been intense. Along with pandemic Covid 19 we have also pandemic of mental health issues.

There are three main ways how covid situation can influence to the mental health: (Gruber et al., 2020)

1. It is long term and widespread, with an uncertain end date, the stakes are high, the disruption to daily routines is severe;
2. Is a multidimensional stressor, affecting individual, family, educational, occupational, and medical systems, with broader implications for the micro-, meso- and macro-system, as it exacerbates political rifts, cultural and economic disparities, and prejudicial beliefs.
3. Pandemic disrupts several protective factors for mental health under stress, such as supportive social interactions, access to mental health services etc.

Studies from many countries round the world, document mental health issues of a large part of the population in different age groups, including adolescents and young people. According to the WHO, fear, worry, and stress are normal responses to perceived or real threats, and at times when we are faced with uncertainty or the unknown, like in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Study in Italy, where the initial peak was very strong, found large negative effects on youth mental health: increase in anxiety/depression, withdrawal, somatic complaints, aggressive behavior, rule-breaking behavior, and internalizing and externalizing problems and a decrease in intrusive behavior and personal strengths (Parola et al., 2020). During the same period, research conducted in 194 cities in China document that more than half of the respondents rated the psychological impact as moderate-to-severe, and about one-third reported moderate-to-severe anxiety. Most respondents spent 20-24h per day at home (84.7%) and were worried about their family members contracting COVID-19 (75.2%) (Wang et al., 2020).

According to the WHO (2020b) report, there are increase in alcohol consumption. Statistics from Canada report that 20% of 15-49 year-olds have increased their alcohol consumption during the pandemic. UK study report that 32% of young people with a history of mental health, agreed that the pandemic had made their mental health much worse. Opposite of this, one study in Canada finds that substance use appears to have declined as a whole, perhaps due to social changes associated with physical distancing. Also, youth participants in the study refer some positive effects of the covid restrictive measurements, like spending more time with family, having more free time to exercise and sleep, spending less and saving more, and greater self-reflection. But despite that more than a third of the sample were likely to meet criteria for a mental health diagnosis (Hawke et al., 2020).

Family functioning during pandemic situation

Early pandemic months were filled with many uncertainties. Most of the time, due to the movement restriction, lockdowns that lasted for several days, as well as the need of reducing contacts to a minimum, contribute to spend more time with family members. This made family boundaries more closed than before, highlighting the need to define and adopt new home and family rules.

Prime et al. (2020), give an systemic models of human development and family functioning and links social disruption due to COVID-19 to child adjustment through a cascading process involving caregiver well-being and family processes. Social disruptions from the pandemic will infiltrate family processes across subsystems and the whole family, through their detrimental impact on caregiver well-being. Some of the families are more vulnerable due to the additional risk factors, and some families are in a position of maintain adaptive functioning (Figure 1).

Emerging adulthood is the term that describing the developmental stage between ages 18 to 25, period where according to the calendar age the person become an adult, but still have not achieved most of the major developmental milestones of adulthood (like completed education, a steady job, financial independence, marriage etc.) (Mastrotheodoros, 2000).

Individual need of emerging adults is forming independent person. According to the Erikson's theory, this stage is sixth stage of the individual development: intimacy versus isolation. During this stage, we begin to share ourselves more intimately with others. We explore relationships leading toward longer-term commitments with someone other than a family member (McLeod, 2018). In terms of family circle, youth people live in family stage named launching family. Usually during this period family borders are more open and dynamic, compared to the previous family stages. In regular

conditions, that enable constant entry and exit of the young person in the family system and thus provide a step-by-step separation from his parents and develop his autonomy.

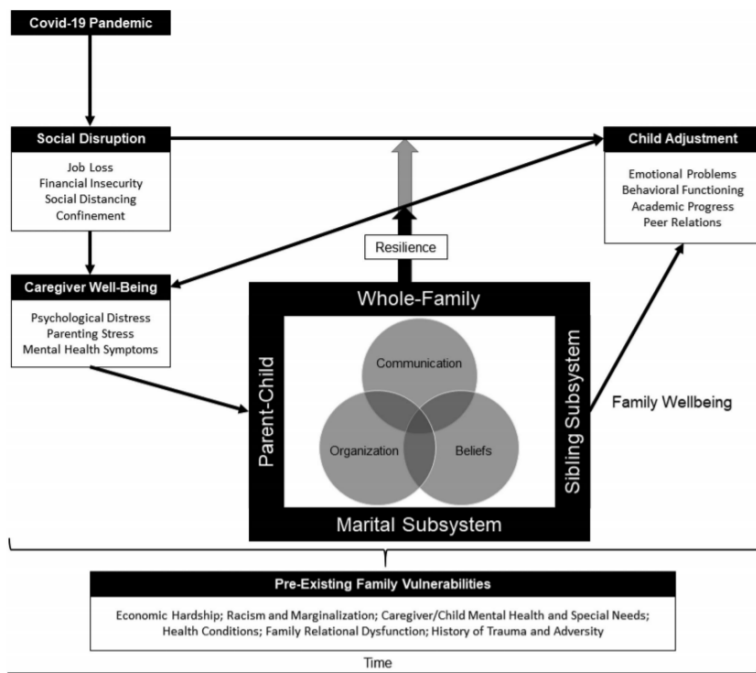


Figure 1. How social disruption due to COVID-19 may impact child adjustment
Slika 1. Kako socijalni prekid uslijed COVID-19 mogu utjecati na prilagođavanje djeteta

Hampers of the autonomy is one possible explanation why pandemic affects youth’s mental health (Bülow et al., 2020). The pandemic situation, and all recommendations for health protection, especially during the lockdown, emphasizes the need of care for collective family needs, and they are less sensitive to the individual needs of the young person. All development tasks aimed to individualization and autonomy of the person, need to be postponed for uncertain period or to adapt their implementation to the newly imposed conditions. There is no doubt that we set intense challenges to young people, which in long term can affect their mental health.

RESEARCH METHODS

An online cross-sectional survey was designed and conducted during the initial peak of the COVID-19 pandemic in the late Spring 2020. Participants were recruited from the student population. The survey was published using the online survey platform Google Form on April 26, 2020, and data collection remained open almost for two mounts, until June 18. We have response of 234 university students, age 18 and above (M=21.77, SD=3.73).

In aim to determinate the influence of the calendar age to the examine variables, we divided responders in two groups. The first group were the students for 18 to 21 years

(N.132 – 56% of the responders) and the second group were students older than 22 year (N.102 - 44%).

The Questionnaire contains seven questions with Likert type of answers, related to the family functioning, ability for effective communication and adaptation of new reality. Result analysis was conducted using frequency, percentage and chi square with level of significance $p < 0.05$.

RESULTS

Family organization and study during the covid situation

First part of the questionnaire examine the ability of families/parents to provides adequate conditions for the students to learn. Given that learning takes place online, we believe that this can be a very challenging problem, especially in families with more than one child. According to the obtain results (Figure 2), 78% of the students *strongly agree* or *agree* that their parents provide them good learning environment. Only 9% of the students reports that they do not have adequate conditions for learning. Students have greater difficulty in organizing time and common space for learning with their siblings. Results shows that 42% of the students found difficulties in mutual management of time and space, and 9% of them rated it as extremely difficult (*strongly disagree*).

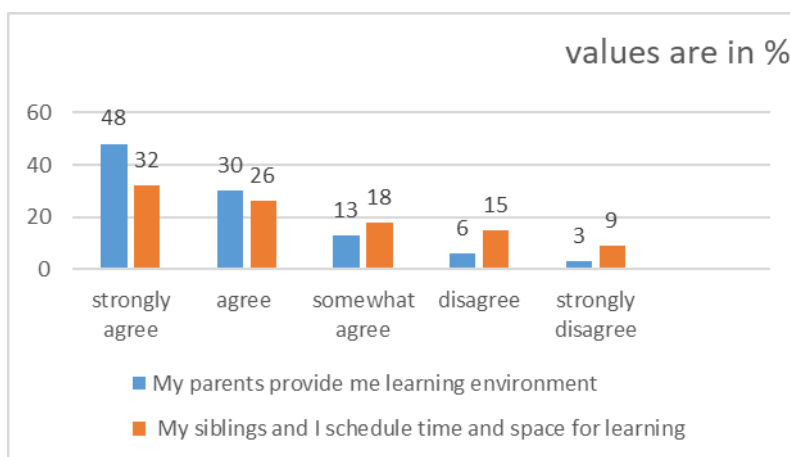


Figure 2. Family organization and studying during Covid
Slika 2. Organizacija porodice i studiranje tokom Covida

Family functioning

Statements related to the family functioning were aimed to examine whether family members have understanding and respective attitude to the everyday needs and work obligations of other family members. Furthermore, considering that pandemic situation emphasis the need of mutual care, we assume that young people during this period will strengthen their family relations, developing deeper emotional ties among family members.

According to the results, 51% of the students *strongly agree*, and 25% *agree* with the claim that family support them. Very few of them feels lack of support from their families (3% disagree and 2% strongly disagree).

Self-perception of young people regarding their flexibility to the needs of other people is very high. Even 89% of the students *strongly agree* or *agree* with the claim that they have understanding for work obligation of other family members.

In terms of expectations that pandemic situation will bring the family member closer, students achieved lower scores. 60% of them feels better connection between family members (34% strongly agree and 26% agree), but 22% of them - *somewhat agree with the claim*. Higher 18% of the students did not feel improvement in emotional connection with other family members (Figure 3).

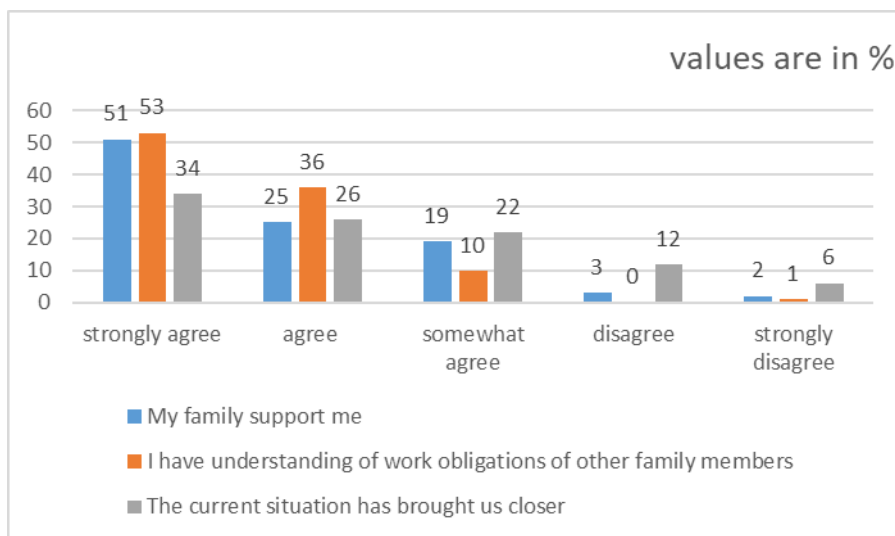


Figure 3. Family functioning during Covid
Slika 3. Porodično funkcionisanje tokom Covida

Communication in family

Every functional family is based on a good communication skills. Last section of the questionnaire examines how young people experience communication in their family, as well as whether they use methods and techniques to improve communication effectiveness. In terms of communication in the family 74% of the representatives report good communication among family members, 42% *strongly agree* and 32% *agree* with that claim. Further, 19% of the young people sometimes experience problems in family communication (19% - *somewhat agree*), and 7% of them more often are facing problems in communications with family members (5% - *disagree*, 2% *strongly disagree*). Given to that they do not experience communication problems, we got lower results in terms of using innovative techniques and methods for better communication. Namely, 25% of the students sometimes (*somewhat agree*) use techniques and methods, and 23% use them very rare or not use them at all (15% - *disagree* and 7% *strongly disagree*).

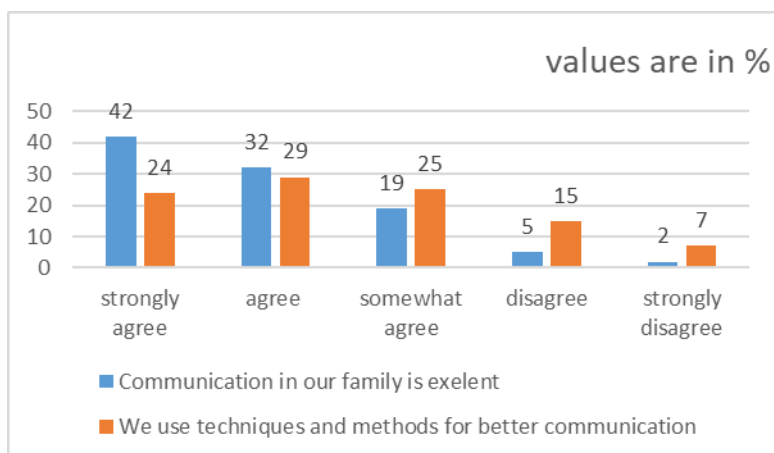


Figure 4. Communication in family
Slika 4. Komunikacija u porodici

Influence of the calendar age to the examine variables

To examine the effect of calendar age on the variables: (1) Family organization and study, (2) Family functioning and (3) Communication in family, we divided the sample into two parts. Students aged 18 to 21, who we assume are in the early years of their studies, and a second group of students older than 22 years, who we assume are in the final year/s of their studies or are studying in the second or third cycle of studies.

As we can see in Table 1, Q₁ and Q₂ refer to the first variable - family organization and study, Q₃ Q₄ and Q₅ are part of the second variable – family functioning, while Q₆ and Q₇ refer to family communication – third variable. We used chi-square to test the variables, at a significance level of $p < 0.05$. According to the obtain results we did not find a correlation with the calendar age in any of the variables.

Table1. Influence of the calendar age to the examine variables

Tabela1. Uticaj starosti na ispitivane varijable

Statements	df	chi-square	P value	Sig.at $p < 0.05$
Q ₁ My parents provide me learning environment	3	2.4	0.193654	not
Q ₂ My siblings and I schedule time and space for learning	4	5.7	0.223282	not
Q ₃ My family support me	3	2.24	0.52331	not
Q ₄ I have understanding of work obligation of other members	2	2.23	0.328358	not
Q ₅ The current situation has brought us closer	4	8.6	0.07193	not
Q ₆ Communication in our family is excellent	3	2.51	0.473415	not
Q ₇ We use techniques and methods for better communication	4	4.35	0.36051	not

DISCUSSION

Results of our research showed that according to the self-report of the students, most of the families have functional patterns, ie they managed to use the family strengths to adapt to the challenges of pandemic situation. Regarding the first variable, ability of family/parents to provides adequate conditions for the students to learn, we found that most of the students have good learning environment (78%). But still, almost one quarter of the students are facing difficulties to provide quality learning environment. Furthermore 42% of the students have difficulties in mutual management of time and space with their siblings, and 9% of them found it extremely difficult. Results of the analysis of the second variable, family functioning, document that 75% of the students feels that family supports them. Similar research was conducted in Republic of North Macedonia by News agency – Meta (2021), where 57% of young people reported increasing of psychological pressure and deterioration of family relationships during this period. As for the self-perception of their role in family functioning, high percent of the students (89%) believe that they have understanding for work obligation of other family members. Hawke et al. (2020) in their Canadian research, document that one of the positive impacts of the pandemic situation is spending more time with family, but our research shows that only 60% of students feel better connection between family members. Regarding the third variable, communications in family, results were very similar with the previous two variables. 73% of the students report good communication environment among family members, we can assume that those are the same families with good family functioning (75%) and good learning environment (78%). Further, 53% of the students use innovative techniques and methods to improve family communication. In general, we can conclude that near 25% of the students are facing problems in family functioning during the covid situation. All of the exanimated variables are not connected with the calendar age of the student. The present study is not free from limitations. To assess the family functioning of young people during the first pandemic months, only a self-report measure was used. While participants may not be representative of North Macedonia students, this represents a substantial sample for a rapid, time-sensitive survey. For better understanding of the family functioning during pandemic situation longitudinal study is more recommended, considering all other factors that affect family functioning.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The pandemic brought to the surface all the weaknesses of society, hence the lack of family support become more visible to all of us. It is important to urgently increase investment in services for family support. Social protection Law (2019. article 73) provides family counselling, but even after two years, no such institution is functioning. Systematically organized support, with an appropriate professional team will have a particularly important role in preventing mental health of all family members, including students, as well as maintaining functional family systems.

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