

Original Article

# The daily experience of the Covid-19 pandemic in children's perspective<sup>1</sup>

## *A vivência cotidiana das crianças durante a pandemia da Covid-19*

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### **Abstract**

**Introduction:** The Covid-19 pandemic has significantly impacted people's lives, with children being one of the most affected social groups. **Objective:** To understand how children experienced daily life during the Covid-19 pandemic from their own perspective. **Method:** Exploratory study, using a qualitative approach, conducted with 19 children aged 9 to 11 years old, linked to a public school. Graphic elucidation was used as a trigger for the theme's collection of data, followed by a semi-structured interview. Both the narratives derived from graphic elucidations and the data produced in interviews were analyzed using content analysis. **Results:** Some themes emerged, four of which will be presented - children's understanding of Covid-19 and the feelings generated; death and mourning as a result of the pandemic; family relationships; the social vulnerability experienced by families. The results showed how clear the children were about the origin of the virus and its spread, the risks arising from contamination such as the death of family members, and the importance of the vaccine. In some families it was possible to share more moments together and, in others, there was distancing, conflicts and reports of violence. In addition, the situation of social vulnerability stands out, in the face of unemployment and hunger. **Conclusion:** The results made it possible to identify how children experienced the pandemic in a scenario of greater social vulnerability, based on the voices and perspectives of the children themselves. It is understood that investing in studies of this nature enables better coping with future adverse situations, favoring their development and mental health, based on the proposition of public policies and care strategies for this population.

**Keywords:** Children, Activities of Daily Living, Mental Health, Occupational Therapy, Covid-19.

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### **Resumo**

**Introdução:** O cenário da pandemia da Covid-19 impactou significativamente a vida das pessoas, de forma que as crianças foram um dos grupos sociais mais afetados. **Objetivo:** Compreender como as crianças vivenciaram o cotidiano na pandemia da Covid-19, a partir de sua própria perspectiva. **Método:** Estudo exploratório, de abordagem qualitativa, realizado com 19 crianças de 9 a 11 anos, vinculadas a uma escola pública. Para a coleta de dados, foi utilizada a elucidação gráfica como disparador da temática e uma entrevista semiestruturada. Os dados produzidos foram analisados com base na análise temática. **Resultados:** Quatro temas emergiram: a compreensão das crianças sobre a Covid-19 e os sentimentos gerados; a morte e o luto em decorrência da pandemia; as relações familiares; e a vulnerabilidade social vivenciada pelas famílias. Os resultados evidenciaram a clareza das crianças sobre a origem do vírus e sua propagação, os riscos advindos da contaminação e a importância da vacina. Em algumas famílias foi possível compartilhar mais momentos juntos e, em outras, houve o distanciamento, conflitos e relatos de violência. O desemprego e a fome também se fizeram presentes. **Conclusão:** Os resultados permitiram identificar como as crianças vivenciaram a pandemia em um cenário de maior vulnerabilidade social, a partir das vozes e perspectivas das próprias crianças. Compreende-se que o investimento em estudos dessa natureza possibilita o melhor enfrentamento de situações futuras adversas, favorecendo o seu desenvolvimento e saúde mental, com base na proposição de políticas públicas e estratégias de cuidado a essa população.

**Palavras-chave:** Crianças, Atividades Cotidianas, Saúde Mental, Terapia Ocupacional, Covid-19.

## **Introduction**

On March 11, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared that Covid-19 was a public health emergency and was considered a pandemic (Organización Mundial de la Salud, 2020; Organização Pan-Americana de Saúde, 2022). In this scenario, it was necessary to reorganize space, time and the daily lives of families and children, since the negative impacts occurred at different levels: in international relations, in the development of the country, in the State, in the community, in the family system and in the individual system (Berbert et al., 2021).

The repercussions of the Covid-19 pandemic were not just biomedical and epidemiological. On a global scale, there were unprecedented social, economic, political, cultural and historical implications (Fundação Oswaldo Cruz, 2021; Brasil, 2022; Associação Médica Brasileira, 2021; Matta et al., 2021; Santos, 2021).

Thus, faced with one of the biggest health crises in the world, fears about the pandemic, the overload of domestic tasks, intense family life, unemployment, reduced income and the uncertainties generated, it is essential to focus on childhoods, as children were one of the social groups most impacted by the adverse effects of the pandemic, as well as adolescents, the elderly and people with disabilities (Lima, 2020; Fundação Oswaldo Cruz, 2020a; Organización Mundial de la Salud, 2020; Campbell et al., 2021).

Even though children are not the focus of greatest concern in the context of the pandemic because they were considered at “lower risk” of contagion and death due to

clinical consequences compared to adults and the elderly, authors signal the need for greater attention to the impacts of pandemic on their development and mental health, especially in situations of greater social inequality and vulnerability (Moreno et al., 2020; Polanczyk, 2020; Santos et al., 2022a; Gashaw et al., 2021; Fundação Oswaldo Cruz, 2021). In many cases, children are invisible victims of the indirect consequences of the pandemic, or even neglected in terms of continued access to health and protection against violence (Pastore, 2021; Cabral et al., 2021; Santos et al., 2022b).

Studies that have focused on this topic reinforce the need for further investigation into the consequences of this historical moment (Cid et al., 2020; Narzisi, 2020; Rodrigues & Lins, 2020; Ghosh et al., 2020; Guinancio et al., 2020; Fernandes, 2020; Singh et al., 2020).

Folino et al. (2021) developed a study that aimed to understand the perception of Rio de Janeiro children about Covid-19. To this end, 20 interviews were carried out on digital platforms with children between 8 to 10 years old from different neighborhoods of residence and socioeconomic profiles. The results showed that the children were not unaware of the pandemic, with feelings such as concern and fear and understanding of the seriousness of the situation being identified. Furthermore, it was identified that their daily lives were affected in several ways, from the interruption of in-person school life, the restriction of contact with classmates, economic and health changes faced by family members. The authors suggest that new investigations should focus on children's perception of the pandemic, as they contribute to the development of health promotion strategies that are more appropriate for this public and consistent with their feelings, concerns, and perceptions of risk.

In this direction, Silva et al. (2021) also developed a study with 2,021 children aged 8 to 12 years, seeking to understand the ways in which children experienced the Covid-19 pandemic. The research was carried out with the mediation of those responsible, using an online questionnaire. The results revealed that the children showed resilience, awareness of their living conditions, their rights and their families and responsibilities. These indicated the negative impacts of the pandemic on physical and mental health.

Faced with a health crisis like the Covid-19 pandemic, of such magnitude and consequences, it is essential to understand this new and emerging daily life. Based on this panorama, it is possible not only to dimension and demarcate a historical and social context of great suffering, losses, and struggles, but, above all, to recognize the possibilities of creation and life, day after day.

Authors point out that, when seeking to understand how the pandemic affected the subjective well-being of children, being able to listen to them provides a place to speak for an invisible population, contributing to reflections, practices and propositions that are more consistent and consonant with the experiences of these subjects (Delgado & Müller, 2005; Hartmann, 2020; Linhares & Enumo, 2020).

Thus, it is expected that, by approaching the experience of everyday life, from the perspective of the child itself, it will be possible to contribute to greater knowledge of a new and emerging reality, which is being reinvented day after day, favoring new reflections and discussions about public policies and intervention strategies aimed at this population. In this way, the study aims to understand how children experienced daily life during the Covid-19 pandemic, based on their own perspective.

## **Objectives**

The objective of the present study was to understand how children experienced<sup>2</sup> daily life during the Covid-19 pandemic, based on their own perspective.

## **Method**

This research is<sup>3</sup> an exploratory study, with a qualitative approach. It is considered that exploratory research provides greater familiarity with the problem (Gil, 1946) and the qualitative approach seeks to understand the study phenomenon in its usual environment, that is, how people live, what they think, how they behave (Sampieri et al., 2006).

To this end, 19 children aged 9 to 11, students at a municipal public school, participated.

For the selection of these, the inclusion criteria were children aged 9 to 11 years, with the guardian authorizing their participation by signing the Informed Consent Form (ICF). As an exclusion criterion, there are those children who, even those responsible for authorizing them, did not show interest or desire to participate in the study, with the presentation of the Free and Informed Assent Form (FI AF).

It is noted that the age group was proposed since they would be children who were in the process of completing Elementary School. Furthermore, it is understood that children in this age group can have a better understanding of what the pandemic was and involved, as well as its temporal dimensions.

To identify and locate the participants, authorization was requested from the municipal Department of Education, and a visit was subsequently made to the selected school to present the research proposal to management. With management acceptance, the inclusion criteria were presented, and potential participants were invited. The invitation for the research was carried out in four rooms, so that the children took the ICF and a letter of introduction to their parents. Children who returned with a signed form, authorizing participation in the research, were invited to participate and sign the FI AF.

Thus, the study was carried out in a municipal public school in a region of great social vulnerability, in a medium-sized municipality, located in the interior of the state of São Paulo. According to data obtained from the city hall website, the region has approximately 16 thousand inhabitants, with high rates of violence and low access to housing, food, education, and health. As for the school, at the time of data collection it had approximately 600 students, divided between the 1st and 5th year of Elementary School. The choice of the municipality and selection of the school was intentional and for convenience, based on the researcher's prior knowledge about the particularities of the location and the ease of accessing the school (Flick, 2009).

To produce the data, some resources were used:

- a) Elucidative video in graphic animation format with the temporal narrative and evolution of the Covid-19 pandemic, aiming to contextualize and inform children about the

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<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that data collection was carried out during the Covid-19 pandemic, at a time when the pandemic was still in evidence, with a high number of contagion and deaths. On 12/01/21, during the collection period of this research, 1086 new cases were reported, with the seven-day average of 897 cases. The gradual return to in-person school activities had been approved approximately 30 days ago and students were still in the process of adapting to the new reality in the context. Thus, this is the contextual-temporal focus of this study.

<sup>3</sup> It is noted that the research Project was submitted to the UFSCar Human Research Ethics Committee (CEP), following resolution 510/2016 and the regulations for carrying out research in the context of the pandemic (the use of masks, distance between the researcher and the child, cleaning of materials and furniture after use by each child). The submission was approved under opinion no. 5.121.003.

pandemic. The video was created using image software, by a professional who works with creative methodologies, with the script and narration carried out by the researcher.

- b) Production of a graphic explanation about the pandemic, such as a drawing, writing, collage, for example, or whatever they preferred, to elicit narratives using non-only verbal means, considering children's different forms of expression and communication. As it is an interactive, open, and unstructured technique, graphic elucidation gave freedom of expression to the children participating in the study (Cortés, 2017). Once the graphic elucidation was complete, the children narrated about the production carried out.
- c) Semi-structured interview script, which contained questions relating to the characterization of the child and their family (age, grade, family composition and parents' work), as well as about the children's daily lives in the context of the pandemic (home experiences, social relationships, playing, school activities, difficulties, strengths, challenges, future perspectives, and ways of coping with the pandemic).

It is noteworthy that the interview script was prepared by the researchers and, subsequently, its validation was carried out through external evaluation by three expert judges in the area, as suggested by Manzini (2003), in addition to the pilot application with three children.

Regarding data collection, this was carried out by the researcher herself, at the school, after authorization from the school management and the Ethics Committee, weekly, during the months of November and December 2021. The school made the library space available, being Only one meeting is required with each child, individually, lasting from 20 to 50 minutes.

To begin data collection, the explanatory video was presented using a tablet provided by the researcher. It was positioned in front of the children, giving them autonomy to explore the device's resources. After showing the video, the children were asked, through the trigger question "How was your daily life during the pandemic?", to perform a graphic explanation, such as a drawing, writing, a collage, for example, or whatever they preferred, using different resources made available by the researcher. Once the graphic elucidation was complete, the children narrated about the production carried out.

Regarding the interviews, these took place after the production of the graphic elucidation. Both the interviews and the narratives about the graphic elucidation were recorded only in audio, with the recorder remaining within the reach and field of vision of the children, after they were aware and approved its use. Subsequently, the data was stored on a local electronic device and transcribed by the researcher.

For the graphic elucidations, an interpretative analysis was not sought, but rather, understanding them based on the children's own verbalizations. Thus, both the narratives about the graphic elucidations and the data produced in the interviews were analyzed by the researcher based on Bardin's (2011) thematic analysis. The thematic analysis was carried out in three stages, namely pre-analysis, material exploration and data processing and interpretation (Bardin, 2011).

It is pointed out that, with the aim of highlighting the protagonism of children, the thematic categories identified and which will be presented in the results initially came from the thematic analysis of the children's narratives about the graphic elucidations (Figures 1, 2, 3, 4) that they produced. In this way, in light of what was produced and analyzed in the graphic elucidations, the results were complemented with the data obtained and analyzed in the interviews.

## Results and Discussion

In this section, the results from the present study will be presented and discussed, starting with the characterization of the participants and, subsequently, the themes that emerged from the data analysis process of the narratives about the graphic elucidations and interviews. It is noted that it will not be possible to present all the graphic elucidations produced by the children, with only one being selected for each thematic category.

### Characterization of participants

As previously presented, 19 children, elementary school students from a municipal public school in a medium-sized city in the interior of the state of São Paulo participated in this study.

Table 1 presents data relating to the characterization of the participants in terms of age, gender, grade they were studying at the time of data production and family composition. The code name "participant no" was used in order to preserve the identity of the participants.

**Table 1.** Characterization of participating children and their family composition.

Name	Age	Gender	Grade	Family composition
Participant 1	11	Female	5 <sup>th</sup>	Mother, Father, sister
Participant 2	10	Female	5 <sup>th</sup>	Mother, Stepfather and sister
Participant 3	11	Male	5 <sup>th</sup>	Mother, grandparents, Sisters, aunts and cousins
Participant 4	10	Female	5 <sup>th</sup>	Mother, stepfather and brothers
Participant 5	11	Male	5 <sup>th</sup>	Mother and stepfather
Participant 6	9	Female	4 <sup>th</sup>	Mother, Father and sister
Participant 7	10	Male	4 <sup>th</sup>	Mother, siblings and niece
Participant 8	11	Male	5 <sup>th</sup>	Mother, grandparents, Sisters, aunts and cousins
Participant 9	10	Female	4 <sup>th</sup>	Mother, stepfather and brother
Participant 10	10	Female	5 <sup>th</sup>	Mother and father
Participant 11	10	Male	5 <sup>th</sup>	Mother, sister and uncle
Participant 12	10	Male	4 <sup>th</sup>	Mother, stepfather, and siblings
Participant 13	10	Male	4 <sup>th</sup>	Mother, Father, sister
Participant 14	10	Female	4 <sup>th</sup>	Mother, Father, brother
Participant 15	10	Female	5 <sup>th</sup>	Mother, Father and sisters
Participant 16	10	Female	4 <sup>th</sup>	Mother, stepfather and siblings
Participant 17	10	Male	5 <sup>th</sup>	Mother and brother
Participant 18	10	Female	5 <sup>th</sup>	Mother, stepfather and siblings
Participant 19	11	Male	5 <sup>th</sup>	Mother and father

It is observed that, of the 19 participants, 10 identified themselves as female, while 9 identified as male. All students were enrolled in the same municipal public school, 7 of whom were in the 4<sup>th</sup> year of Elementary School and 12 were in the 5<sup>th</sup> year of Elementary School.

Regarding the family constitution, it was attended by father, mother and siblings, but also stepfathers, grandparents, uncles, cousins and nephews. It is noted that, of the 19 families, 12 are not characterized as traditional families, consisting of mother, father and children. In Figure 1, those whose constitution is mostly made up of women

(mother, grandmother, aunt), without the male figure of the father or stepfather stand out, which the literature points out as a contemporary trend, especially with regard to the outskirts and regions of greater social vulnerability (Cúnico & Arpini, 2014).

Cúnico & Arpini (2014) discusses how, in any family configuration, there are numerous challenges that women who are heads of their families. Double working hours, the difficulty in obtaining better paid jobs and the lack of support from their ex-partner to share responsibilities can make mothers feel overwhelmed due to the accumulation of roles, generating feelings of fragility and dissatisfaction.

In the research developed by Muniz & Carrilho (2021), during the period of social isolation, the authors sought to analyze the risks to income and the challenges in the daily lives of women heads of families. Based on interviews with two groups (3 women in formal and stable jobs and 3 women informal workers), the results found showed that women, especially black and peripheral women, are the most vulnerable to the consequences of economic and social crises, and in this case, sanitary.

It is understood that this reality worsened due to the pandemic, as many women lost their jobs or became unstable in them, at the same time that they had to deal with an increase in domestic responsibilities during this period. In other words, Covid-19 has revealed female structural vulnerability and the gap between the poverty of men and women (Muniz & Carrilho, 2021; Nassif-Pires et al., 2021).

Subsequently, the themes that emerged based on the graphic clarifications and interviews will be presented.

### **Theme 1. Children's understanding of Covid-19 and the feelings generated**



**Figure 1.** Graphic elucidation produced by participant 7, after the triggering question and, subsequently, the narrative about the production carried out.

### Narrative about graphic elucidation:

*This was before, this was the part that has the most on earth. After a while, everything became more difficult. First, before Covid, fires started all over the world, but then the firefighters arrived and poured water. It's not possible to survive properly, then Covid arrived, the fire, everything mixed up. And it started. And the two came together to end the planet. Then the vaccine... was invented, then Covid became weak, it's dormant, that's going to be the vaccine thing, okay?! Then there was this Covid thing. Then the planet went back to looking a little more or less like this, but there are some continents... this symbolizes... that still dominating, Covid is dominating the continent and some states, because they don't want it (P7).*

One of the thematic categories that emerged was children's understanding of Covid-19, the pandemic scenario and how this was happening in their daily lives. The reports highlighted aspects relating to the origin of the virus and its spread, safety and protection measures, risks, future expectations, among others.

Furthermore, children assimilated the pandemic moment abruptly into their daily lives, mainly based on reports and explanations from family members, who were able to inform them about the first emergency safety and protection measures adopted by the government, such as the suspension of school activities, social isolation, use of masks, hand hygiene, for example, and also on how the virus manifests itself in the body.

*When my mother talked about Covid, she wanted us to wash our hands, with soap, use alcohol gel and, when we go out on the street, use alcohol gel, then wash our hands and then, when it's time to eat, wash the hands too (P3).*

*I just know that it catches people, they get sick, and there are times when people die, but there are people who don't die (P6).*

*There was a normal day, I woke up to go to school. My mother said "If you don't want to go to school, you don't have to, because now the disease, the coronavirus is here, if you don't want to go to school, you won't go. Covid-19 is a disease, very small, and if it gets into us, we become short of breath, we start coughing, sneezing, we get a headache" (P14).*

In addition to the losses and the risk of imminent death, the results identify the fear of contaminating themselves and their family and loved ones.

*I was really afraid of going out and taking it to some people I liked... (P1).*

*[...] Of catching this disease and getting sick. Then I won't be able to go to school (P9).*

*I wore a mask when I went out, everywhere... Very difficult, I thought they (family) were going to die, because they are a little old (P18).*

Vaccination also emerged in children's reports, given the expectation of resolving the problem, in addition to their own desire to be vaccinated, together with their families and the whole of society.

*[...] there are people taking the vaccine, and when I reach 12 years old, I will have to take it, because if I don't, I won't be able to attend school (P4).*

*[...] it is a very serious disease, which is spreading around the world, but it is no longer there because of the vaccine... the vaccine was invented, then Covid became weak, it is dormant... (P7).*

Regarding future expectations regarding the pandemic, the desire for its end is unanimous among the children interviewed, also permeating the desire to suspend some safety and protection measures, mainly the use of masks, in addition to the return of daily activities, such as play, among others.

*May Covid end, may everything be cooler... (P7).*

*It's just that when I went to my sister's house one day, I felt that the pandemic was over, that I was free, without shrinking in life (P8).*

*Let this Covid pass, so that playing can be more enjoyable (P19).*

It is observed that much of what children understand and explain about Covid-19 permeates the observations and transformations experienced in their daily lives, considering the experiences and situations that occurred, relationships established in this time and space, and which made this period a field of representations and interpretations about the thoughts, actions and languages experienced in everyday life, such as the research by Idoiaga et al. (2020).

Carried out through a systematic review, Idoiaga et al. (2020) aimed to understand the effects of lockdown measures instituted in response to the Covid-19 pandemic on the mental health of children and adolescents. The results showed that older children (aged 6 to 12 years) showed greater concern about the situation, as they knew that Covid-19 was highly contagious, expressing fear, concern, sadness, nervousness, and fright when they were asked about the coronavirus. However, they seemed to understand the situation well and most of them were also more worried about infecting their grandparents than about being infected themselves. Furthermore, some of them expressed that they would feel guilty if someone close to them became infected.

Given the scenario and situations experienced, it was identified in the reports that fear, as already mentioned, as well as loneliness, anger, insecurity, and anxiety were present in the children's daily lives.

In general, when asking children about how they felt during the pandemic, they reported that:

*[...] I developed anxiety, but the anxiety was very low (P1).*

*I continue to feel very scared because of it, it seems that the pandemic didn't make people weaker, it made them angrier, more willing to hit, it's not true. I felt very angry, like, I wanted to, anyone who walked in front of me, throw a punch, I wanted to throw a punch, but I kept it (P7).*

[...] I felt almost very alone (P12).

*[...] when the pandemic started, I felt a little, like, a little sad. I was sad, I was angry, because this damn coronavirus was killing us, because [...] it's not just us, we don't have to think about ourselves, we have to think about people, especially the people we love. Then I got a little angry, because people were dying, then I got angry, then the damn coronavirus, why do you have to exist? I was angry (P13).*

It was predicted that the pandemic would have significant impacts on children's mental health, since the ruptures, situations of uncertainty and losses caused by Covid-19 could mobilize countless feelings, and it was expected that these reactions would be even more aggravated by the fact that the changes were abrupt and lasting, covering different areas of daily life. Furthermore, it is known that access to and reception of health, education and assistance equipment that could contribute to their mental health were also limited and a lot of time passed before the implementation of alternative care and protection measures for this population.

Although studies on this topic are still in full development, especially considering the post-pandemic impacts on children's mental health, existing literature warns that children have presented greater socio-emotional and behavioral difficulties in the face of so many changes that have occurred. Some studies even suggest that there will be an even greater pandemic, when it comes to the psychological suffering experienced by the population (Mukherjee et al., 2020).

Among the losses most experienced by children during this period are those that come from loneliness, in the face of social isolation, since the measures adopted prevented children from attending schools and social and recreational spaces, whether in the community or other family contexts, as well as relating to their peers. Authors emphasize that long-term loneliness and feelings resulting from isolation significantly increase the risk of these children developing mental health problems, such as anxiety, depression, and stress (Cluver et al., 2020; Twenge & Campbell, 2018; Orgilés et al., 2021).

The lack of interaction with peers was also a factor in the study for Golberstein et al. (2020). The study was carried out through an internet survey with 1290 parents or guardians of children and adolescents between 5 to 18 years old in the United States and the results showed that the lack of social interactions and isolation were significant factors associated with symptoms of anxiety and depression in children and adolescents. Just like the study by Golberstein et al. (2020), the systematic review carried out by Loades et al. (2020) reinforces that the lack of social interaction and isolation can increase the risk of mental health problems in children and adolescents, especially for those with pre-existing disorders.

Based on the results found in the present study, it is identified that several factors may have impacted children's mental health. Among them, we highlight the abrupt interruption of daily and school activities, lack of knowledge about the magnitude of the virus, risk of death, including for members of the family, social isolation, new family dynamics, inequalities, and greater social vulnerability, depending on whether you will see below. It is hypothesized that such factors generated significant changes in the children's routine and that without predictability of resumption, with so many future uncertainties and few mechanisms for sustaining and maintaining a severely interrupted

daily life, it will certainly bring harm not only to the children's mental health, but also to the entire population.

It is important to highlight that better understanding these factors is essential to assess the impacts of the pandemic on children and their mental health, as well as to develop appropriate interventions to mitigate the negative effects.

## **Death and mourning as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic**



**Figure 2.** Graphic elucidation produced by participant 1, after the triggering question and, subsequently, the narrative about the production carried out.

Narrative about graphic elucidation: *As I lost all my grandmothers and my grandfather, half of my time I spent going to the cemetery to visit them or take some things* (P1).

Based on the graphic elucidations, it is clear that death and mourning were present. Of the 19 participating children, nine cited experiences of death and mourning.

*Having lost my grandmothers, my three grandmothers, and my grandfather, I was very sad after losing one of my grandmothers* (P1).

*When my grandfather died, I cried, more or less, and I became normal, then I started crying a lot* (P3).

[...] *I lost an uncle in the pandemic, and that scared me a little* (P10).

[...] *my godmother, you know, died, my father died, and that's all, I found it sad* (P12).

Given the high number of deaths in the country, it is expected that children have experienced situations of loss of family members or people close to them, with some losing more than one family member. Furthermore, it is observed that even though the number of new cases and deaths was significantly lower at the time of data collection compared to other moments of the pandemic, it was still a present reality. In other words, the Covid-19 pandemic has emphasized death and made it a constant threat, in which everyone is subject to contamination, illness and the most severe consequences of the disease. According to Penariol (2021), death in contemporary times still constitutes a true taboo and the Covid-19 pandemic has brought visibility to this fragility, angst, and fear of its proximity (Zambeli et al., 2016).

Even with the relevance of the theme, it is observed that only two studies found in the literature involved death and mourning in the pandemic and the relationship with children (Silva, 2021; Silva et al., 2020). These indicate that the children went through the same grieving process as their families, requiring clarification and acceptance of their feelings.

However, when it comes to the children participating in the present study, it was identified that coping with this situation, access and reception in care network equipment was not a possibility, since not even what should be urgent, such as mass vaccination of children, was adopted as a priority conduct by government bodies and public policies. In other words, children had to deal with countless losses, which resulted in a variety of feelings and reactions, as presented in the results, in addition to changes in family relationships and dynamics, without the necessary care.

In a society where talking about the dying process is considered taboo, living with death on a large scale, as happened during the period of greatest spread of the virus, has numerous implications, as it is no longer an event that is expected in the future. end of life, becoming an everyday and “natural” event of this pandemic experience, and no longer an exception, such as when it happens early. Having to talk about it and deal with reality is extremely difficult, especially for children (Casellato, 2015), even more so in the alarming context of such a global health crisis.

According to Bromberg (1998), a child's interpretation of death is influenced by several factors, such as age, relationship established with the deceased, stage of psychological development and the way in which the adults they live with deal with the loss. Grief in childhood is often underestimated and socially disregarded, due to the mistaken perception that children are incapable of dealing with this process. In view of this, it is suggested that this mistaken conception of children's experiences and their forms of expression be revised.

Sengik & Ramos (2013) state that talking about the subject is fundamental and will not increase the pain, on the contrary, it tends to alleviate it. Furthermore, it helps the child work through their grief, allowing them the space to listen, and it is essential that the adult always tells the truth. The authors suggest that the child will feel the loss and, therefore, they must be given a space for the pain to exist, even if the child does not know exactly the process of death. Language, in this case, plays a fundamental role, because as there is an opportunity to talk about the loss of a loved one, the child begins to better understand their loss and, consequently, the feelings that involve grief.

In this sense, during the pandemic, some materials were created, aiming to communicate difficult news for children, such as the death of a family member, contributing to greater understanding among children about the challenges encountered

in this context. It is noted that these materials, for the most part, were created as a form of informational support for health teams and families (Fernandes, 2020).

According to the authors, difficult news is “any information transmitted that leads, directly or indirectly, to some negative change in the life of those who receive it, be it a bad feeling or a drastic unwanted change”. Thus, based on guidelines on how to communicate this news – death, need for hospitalization, isolation measures – the authors help adults not only transmit the information to children, but also how to welcome them at that time (Fernandes et al., 2021).

Given the context, it is considered essential that the different actors involved with children understand the particularities of this experience for children, as well as their need for listening and acceptance. It is recommended that more studies continue to investigate this topic during the pandemic, since, in addition to being scarce, they point out that witnessing death so early, so abruptly and frequently, has generated significant impacts on the lives and mental health of these children, being essential to create measures and policies that meet this emerging demand.

### Family relationships during the Covid-19 pandemic



**Figure 3.** Graphic elucidation produced by participant 5, after the triggering question and, subsequently, the narrative constructed about the production carried out.

Narrative about graphic elucidation: *Well, during the pandemic, I lived with my mother, me, my mother and my brothers, then my mother started dating my stepfather, and he started living with us, then in the house we I lived there for a long time, my brother didn't get along with my stepfather, so we left that house to go live downstairs...* (P5).

It is observed, based on the children's reports, that family dynamics and relationships changed significantly during the pandemic, so that conflicts and distance between members were present.

*They didn't even care much about me, apart from my mother or my sister, they only called me when they had to ask for something. My brothers got nicer, they started working, they don't hit me as much (P7).*

*[...] my mother was, like, she didn't care about me, she was going to rest a little, you know, and my brothers were there in the room, all of them, and I was walking around the house, I had nothing to do, so I stayed in the room... (P18).*

In addition to conflicts and relationship difficulties, situations of violence are also identified, which children have experienced directly or indirectly in their family daily lives during the pandemic.

*[...] it was kind of difficult, you know, because I was talking to my mother to let me go out on the street for a bit. She wouldn't let me, so I said "Come on, mom, please, just for a little while". Then she spoke, then she cursed me, then I was grounded, then it was like... almost every day like that (P13).*

*[...] my aunt said that my stepfather did something wrong to my 5-year-old sister, my stepfather said it was a lie, my mother said it was a lie (P17).*

On the other hand, despite the situations faced, the imposed restrictions and confinement favored, in some situations, an increase in the time spent together between children and their families, making it possible to verify positive aspects generated by this situation in their speeches.

*[...] it was a good coexistence, because no one could leave, no one could do anything, so we ended up getting closer (P1).*

*[...] we spent more time together, then we watched a movie, my mom ordered pizza, it was cool (P14).*

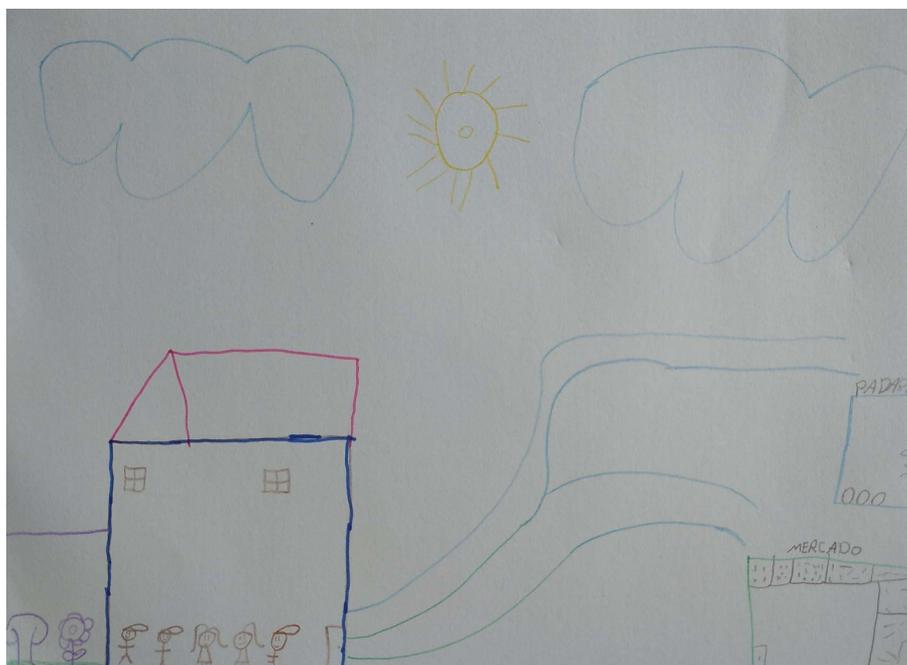
*[...] when I always played with my sister, my brother, my mother. I didn't spend much time with my mother. So, now, I just stay at home and play, and I'm always closer to my mother (P17).*

The reinvention of everyday life, as mentioned by Guizzo et al. (2020), resulted in entire families staying in the same physical space, with the family environment being the only place in which it was possible to be, given the isolation measures adopted. Thus, some children stated that during the pandemic period, isolation provided closeness to their parents and guardians and, although in a context of so many losses and stressful events, family members could be a source of support, as cited by Linhares & Enumo (2020), where family confinement would be the only prescription available to face the adversity caused by Covid-19.

On the other hand, according to some authors, the increase in the length of stay and contact within the home, which does not always offer the best conditions of well-being, can favor tensions and conflicts, which, combined with stressful events characteristic of the pandemic period, can increase the chance of violence and negative outcomes for children's physical and mental health. Worry about work, the possibility of losing it or even its absence associated with the family's need for subsistence can result in anxiety, irritability, and less patience to deal with the daily difficulties and needs of children (Fundação Oswaldo Cruz, 2020b; Marques et al., 2020; Matta et al., 2021).

The Organização das Nações Unidas (2018) points out that the suspension of school activities increased the risk of children being exposed to neglect and mistreatment, as well as abuse and different forms of violence. In line with the above, studies have warned that violence suffered by children increased significantly during the pandemic, as well as when it comes to adolescents and women (Marques et al., 2020; Magalhães et al., 2023).

### The social vulnerability experienced by families during the Covid-19 pandemic



**Figure 4.** Graphic elicitation produced by participant 18, after the triggering question and, subsequently, the narrative about the production carried out.

Narrative about the graphic elicitation: *Yes, me and my family were at home, we didn't go out for anything, and we stayed at home for more or less five months. So, we went slowly, like this, buying things and such, doing things. Then my stepfather was working, you know, my mother was unemployed, so now she's working, and then we gradually came back (P18).*

It is identified that an aspect present in the children's reports refers to the situation of greater social vulnerability faced by the family during the pandemic period, given the socioeconomic weaknesses arising mainly from the loss of family members' jobs.

*[...] I think they faced a lot of things, because my mother didn't work anymore, we never got hungry or anything, but we started to lose a lot of money, because she lost her job... (P1).*

*[...] because work hasn't returned, and they are unemployed, you know, that's when it becomes more difficult (P2).*

*[...] a lot of difficulties, my brother was looking for a job, my mother was fired from a job there, because of Covid (P7).*

*[...] when there is nothing to eat at home, my mother goes running, looking for money to buy bread for us. I was sad when my mother couldn't get a job (P8).*

*[...] my mother stopped working [...] my mother could only live on assistance (P16).*

*[...] she had to leave work, she had to look for another one, even looking for another one, it took a while, so now she found it, so she said she had a lot of difficulty (P17).*

In April 2020, in a Declaration, the executive director of UNICEF, Henrietta Fore, signals that children are not the face of the Covid-19 pandemic, even though they are at risk of being among its biggest victims, as their lives would change in profound ways, in particular through socioeconomic impacts and mitigation measures that could inadvertently do more harm than good (Fundo das Nações Unidas para a Infância, 2020).

The two most intense years of the pandemic and the studies carried out during this period reveal what the literature points out about the vulnerability of some social groups. According to Santos (2021, p. 16), “any quarantine is always discriminatory” and, despite the attempt to establish a “new normal”, the actions imposed to reduce the spread of the virus were marked by health losses, in coexistence, in economy, leisure, among many others.

It is considered that Brazil's negative stance towards the pandemic and the measures presented by the UN and WHO meant that Brazil, in July 2020, was considered one of the most lethal in relation to Covid-19 in South America, further demarcating plus poverty, insufficiency and absence of public policies aimed at children, in which poor families became even more vulnerable (Katz, 2022; CNN Brasil, 2022).

In this way, children's daily lives were severely impacted by the insufficiency of public health and assistance policies (Katz, 2022) such as slowness in the vaccination process, for example (CNN Brasil, 2022), and difficulties in accessing emergency aid (Caixa Econômica Federal, 2022).

Created as a strategy to cope with the situation, economic stimulus measures and emergency income transfers (emergency aid) were crucial for the most economically vulnerable populations during the Covid-19 pandemic. However, some problems in the operationalization of this policy stand out, which resulted in difficulty in accessing this right in a scenario of many emergencies, significantly harming Brazilian families, becoming obstacles to guaranteeing citizenship and access to the right to assistance at a time of health, economic and social crisis (Muniz & Carrilho, 2021; Nassif-Pires et al., 2021). In other words, children were affected not only by the virus, but also by hunger,

the family's economic precariousness and the lack of access to school and technological resources (Fundação Oswaldo Cruz, 2020c).

In summary, based on the results and discussions presented, it was possible to identify what children understand and think about Covid-19, as well as the feelings generated during this period. In general, the children brought their lived experience, considering the changes that occurred in their daily lives, in their everyday actions. On the theme of death and mourning, experiences of the losses suffered, mainly those of grandparents, uncles and parents, were shared. Furthermore, the children reported that in some families the relationship and closeness between members was more positive during the pandemic period, as they were able to share pleasant moments and, in others, there was distance between members, many family conflicts and situations of violence. Finally, in the last theme, the social vulnerability experienced by families is highlighted, given the socioeconomic weaknesses arising mainly from the loss of employment by family members.

## **Conclusion**

This study aimed to identify and understand how children experienced daily life during the Covid-19 pandemic, based on their perspective.

The results were presented in four themes and respond to the proposed objectives in that they deal with the daily experiences of children during the period, highlighting how much they were and have been affected by the pandemic. By way of example, the children clearly shared what they understood about Covid-19, what they felt during the period, the presence of death and the mourning of the loss of family members, the transformations in family dynamics and the challenges present in the face of social vulnerability experienced by families.

Furthermore, it is highlighted how generous they were in sharing their own daily lives with the researcher, even with so many marks left by one of the world's biggest health crises. The findings reinforce the urgency of increasingly being able to listen to them, enabling a place of speech in different scenarios and contexts of insertion.

In this sense, it is expected that the results can contribute to expanding knowledge of one of the biggest health crises ever experienced, encouraging new reflections and discussions about public policies and intervention strategies aimed at this population.

As a limit of the study, considering the beginning of the pandemic in Brazil in 2020 and the moment of data production in the second half of 2021, it was a long period to be measured and processed by the children, therefore, some temporal difficulties of the children were identified when talking about their daily lives.

Considering the impacts of the pandemic and its implications on children's daily lives, it is essential to develop other studies with children and not about them, in different socioeconomic contexts and realities, that can continue to investigate this reality, aiming to favor everyday life, the development and mental health of this social group that was significantly impacted.

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#### **Author's Contributions**

Ana Paula Camargo: text conception, collection, organization and analysis of data, discussion and final writing. Amanda Dourado Souza Akahosi Fernandes: text conception, discussion, review and final writing. All authors approved the final version of the text.

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