VMC ANALYTIKS

Social Isolation of Children during Pandemic: Some Stories to Tell

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic greatly affected the psychological, emotional, and social well-being of children due to prolonged social isolation. This study explored the lived experiences of children aged 15 to 17 in Davao City, Philippines. Using a qualitative, phenomenological approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with the help of a guided questionnaire. Thematic analysis was used to identify common patterns in their experiences, coping mechanisms, and lessons learned. Results showed that many children felt mental exhaustion and a lack of motivation, especially due to challenges in distance learning, changes in their daily routines, and a persistent fear of death caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. They also felt lonely, afraid, and anxious because of the uncertainty and lack of social interaction. Socially, the loss of friendships made it difficult for them to return to normal life. Economic struggles, such as food shortages, further worsened their situation. To cope, children turned to hobbies, digital communication, family support, and relied on faith as a source of strength. They also gained important lessons in resilience, emotional regulation, and valuing relationships. The study highlights the need for programs that support children's mental health, education, and social development.

Keywords: social isolation, Covid-19 pandemic, psychological, emotional, social well-being, phenomenological approach

INTRODUCTION

Children's personalities, emotions, and values develop largely through their interactions with family and the wider social environment. Because of this, it is important to support their psychological, emotional, and social health especially during key stages of growth. However, the COVID-19 pandemic brought unexpected challenges. Extended periods of isolation disrupted their daily routines, peer relationships, and learning experiences. Restrictions such as lockdowns, school closures, and limited mobility reduced children's access to education, play, and contact with relatives, significantly affecting their social development (UNICEF, 2021; Cluver et al., 2020). These changes were particularly difficult for children aged 15 to 17, a stage of forming identity and building emotional and social skills (Erikson, 1968; Smith & Johnson, 2022).

Social isolation happens when individuals lack regular, meaningful interactions and emotional support. For children, this can have serious effects on mental health. Research has shown that isolation can lead to increased anxiety, depression, emotional withdrawal, and behavioral challenges (Loades et al., 2020; Xie et al., 2020; Jiao et al., 2020). A global review in Frontiers in Psychiatry (2023) found that the isolation brought on by the pandemic made symptoms of stress and depression worse among children.

Recognizing its impact, the World Health Organization (WHO) named loneliness a global health issue in 2023 because of its connection to mental health risks. More recent findings in 2024 also reported that children who spent long periods learning online often developed social anxiety and had trouble adjusting to in-person classes (New York Post, 2024).

Despite the difficulties, many children showed resilience and found ways to cope. Some stayed connected with friends through social media or online games, while others turned to hobbies, family time, or their faith in God for comfort and strength (Guessoum et al., 2020; Francisco et al., 2020). However, not all children had equal access to these coping options. Those from low-income families often faced more serious challenges, such as lack of internet or gadgets, stressful living conditions, and financial strain (Singh et al., 2020). These differences made the effects of isolation worse for some and highlighted how the pandemic widened existing social inequalities.

While many studies have explored the effects of the pandemic on children, most focus on numbers and statistics. What is still missing is a deeper, more personal understanding of how children actually experienced social isolation. Their voices are often overlooked in academic discussions, even though their stories can offer valuable insights for creating better support systems (Smith & Johnson, 2022; O'Sullivan et al., 2021). This study aims to fill that gap by examining how children lived through the pandemic, how they coped, and what they learned from the experience.

This research is based on several key theories. Erikson's Psychosocial Theory highlights how important identity and relationships are during this stage, a stage that was disrupted by the pandemic (Erikson, 1968). Bowlby's Attachment Theory adds that when close relationships are weakened during stressful times, emotional problems can follow (Bowlby, 1969; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). To explore children's real-life stories and the meaning behind them, the study uses phenomenology and hermeneutic phenomenology (Van Manen, 2014; Gadamer, 2013). It also draws on social constructionism, which explains how children's understanding of isolation is shaped by their family, culture, and environment (Berger & Luckmann, 2011; Gergen, 2015).

This study focuses on children aged 15 to 17 and explores how social isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic influenced their psychological, emotional, and social well-being. It is guided by three main research questions: (1) How did children experience social isolation, and how did it affect their psychosocial, emotional, and social lives? (2) What mechanisms did they use to cope with these challenges? (3) What lessons and insights did they gain from this period of isolation?

In line with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the study supports SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being) by highlighting mental health concerns among children, SDG 4 (Quality Education) by examining the effects of isolation on learning, and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) by shedding light on the greater burdens faced by disadvantaged children. By centering children's voices, the research offers in-depth perspectives that can help shape more responsive and child-friendly policies during future crises.

The main goal of this research is to gain a deeper understanding of how pandemic-related isolation impacted children's lives. It also aims to support families, educators, mental health professionals, social workers, and policymakers in building better systems of care. This study is based on the belief that children can meaningfully express their thoughts and feelings, and that their stories are essential in creating stronger, more inclusive, and compassionate communities during times of adversity.

LITERATURES

Existing studies have clearly shown that social isolation can negatively affect children's psychological well-being. Extended periods of separation from peers and normal routines have been linked to higher levels of anxiety, depression, emotional withdrawal, and behavioral concerns (Loades et al., 2020; Jiao et al., 2020; Xie et al., 2021). For example, Loades et al. (2020) conducted a systematic review and found that children who experienced isolation during the pandemic faced increased risks of emotional distress and symptoms related to

post-traumatic stress. Likewise, Xie et al. (2021) noted that school closures during COVID-19 heightened children's feelings of loneliness and stress, both of which are known to contribute to depression.

Social interaction is vital to children's emotional growth and development. Unfortunately, lockdowns and school closures limited opportunities for peer contact and normal socialization. According to Lee (2020), the lack of peer interaction during the pandemic had a negative impact on children's social development and their sense of belonging. While online classes helped continue education, they often did not provide the same emotional connection and interaction that in-person learning offers (Ellis et al., 2020). This disruption in social experiences during key developmental years may have lasting effects on how children build and maintain relationships (Golberstein et al., 2020).

Research has also explored the different ways children coped with the emotional toll of isolation. Many relied on family support, structured daily routines, and digital tools to stay connected and entertained (Orgilés et al., 2020; Dalton et al., 2020). Orgilés et al. (2020) observed that when parents maintained daily routines and stayed involved, children were better able to manage anxiety during lockdown. Dalton et al. (2020) also highlighted the role of technology while it helped children stay in touch with friends and access entertainment, it also led to challenges like increased screen time and less physical activity.

Theoretical approaches such as attachment theory and psychosocial development shed light on the deeper effects of social isolation. Bowlby's (1969) attachment theory stresses how secure relationships support healthy emotional development. Disruptions to these bonds during isolation may increase emotional strain. Similarly, Erikson's (1950) theory of psychosocial development points out that adolescence is a crucial time for forming identity and building social skills. Interruptions during this period may affect how children handle life transitions and form relationships.

Phenomenological and social constructionist views also help explain how children make sense of their experiences. Scholars like Gadamer (2013) and Van Manen (2014) emphasize that children's understanding of isolation is influenced not only by their emotions but also by their family life, cultural background, and surroundings.

Together, these studies and theories offer a solid foundation for understanding the psychological, emotional, and social impact of isolation on children. They also highlight the need for in-depth, qualitative research that gives children the opportunity to share their stories, helping adults better support them in times of crisis.

METHODS

Research Design. This study used a qualitative research design based on a phenomenological-hermeneutic approach. Phenomenology focuses on understanding the meaning of lived experiences by exploring how individuals perceive and make sense of their realities (Neubauer et al., 2019). Hermeneutics adds an interpretive layer, helping to uncover deeper meanings behind those experiences (Oddman, 1988, as cited in Ramsook, 2018). By combining both approaches, the study was able to closely examine how children personally experienced social isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic. This design was appropriate for giving voice to the participants while drawing out shared patterns from their individual narratives.

Population and Sampling. The study involved ten (10) children, aged 15 to 17, who had lived through social isolation during the pandemic. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, which helped ensure that those chosen could offer detailed and meaningful reflections on their experiences (Denieffe, 2020). With help from Childhope Mindanao Inc., a trusted child welfare organization, participants were identified based on the study's inclusion criteria.

Instrumentation. Semi-structured interviews served as the main tool for data collection. The

interview guide included open-ended questions aimed at exploring children's psychological, emotional, social, and academic experiences during isolation. This method was chosen for its flexibility, allowing participants to share openly while giving the researcher space to ask follow-up questions (Berler & Magaldi, 2020). The interview guide was reviewed by two experts, one in child psychology and one in qualitative methods, to ensure that questions were age-appropriate and aligned with the study's objectives.

Data Analysis. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed word for word within 48 hours. The data were then analyzed using thematic analysis following the process described by Warren (2023). This involved repeated readings of the transcripts, highlighting key statements, and grouping similar responses to identify recurring themes. Through this method, the study was able to highlight children's challenges, coping strategies, emotional reactions, and the personal lessons they gained from the experience of isolation.

Ethical Consideration. Before conducting the study, approval was obtained from the appropriate ethics committee, and permission was granted by Childhope Mindanao Inc. Informed consent was collected from both the participants and their parents or guardians. The consent process explained the study's purpose, assured participants that joining was voluntary, and confirmed their right to withdraw at any point. Pseudonyms were used in all reports and transcripts to maintain confidentiality (Baez, 2002). All digital files were secured with passwords, and any identifying information was removed. Interviews were held in private, safe spaces to protect participants' comfort and privacy.

RESULTS

Through in-depth interviews with ten children, followed by a validating focus group discussion, this study revealed a deeper understanding of how social isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic shaped children's lives. Five major themes emerged: (1) Fear, Anxiety, and Mental Distress, (2) Family Bonding and Support, (3) Social Isolation and Disrupted Routines, (4) Financial Struggles and Resource Scarcity, and (5) Academic Struggles and Educational Disruption.

Table 1

Summary and Interpretive Synthesis of Children's Experiences During COVID-19 Social Isolation

Theme	Core Ideas
Fear, Anxiety, and Mental Distress	Experiences of deep worry, fear of dying, withdrawal, and emotional numbness. Felt isolated even when surrounded by family.
Family Bonding and Support	Despite isolation, children found joy and strength in spending time with family and building closer relationships.
Social Isolation and Disrupted Routines	Children felt bored, lonely, and disconnected due to being confined at home without social interaction or celebrations.
Financial Struggles and Resource Scarcity	Families had no income, relied on community/barangay help, couldn't afford food or supplies, and shared resources with neighbors to survive.
Academic Struggles and Educational Disruption	Students struggled to comprehend lessons, missed classroom interaction, and felt demotivated with repetitive routines.

Fear, Anxiety, and Mental Distress. Many children shared that social isolation intensified feelings of fear and anxiety. The sudden changes brought about by school closures, limited movement, and constant exposure to news about the virus made them feel emotionally unsettled. Some experienced sadness, withdrawal, or a lack of motivation, especially those who had little emotional support at home. These reflections align with findings from Madigan et al. (2023), who reported an increase in internalizing symptoms among children during the pandemic. Farrell et al. (2023) also pointed out that reduced social interactions and prolonged uncertainty played a key role in rising emotional problems, highlighting the need for mental health support.

Family Bonding and Support. Despite the difficulties, many children said they grew closer to their families during the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown. Being together at home gave them a sense of comfort and stability. They described how shared meals, conversations, and moments of care helped ease their worries. This kind of family support acted as a buffer against stress and loneliness. Prime et al. (2020) emphasized how strong family ties are crucial during crises, while Tang et al. (2022) and Ribeiro et al. (2023) found that active and

responsive parenting nurtures emotional strength in children.

Social Isolation and Disrupted Routines. Lockdowns disrupted children's daily routines and cut off their usual social interactions. Without the structure of school and outdoor play, many felt lonely, bored, and emotionally detached. Their social development suffered, and even family celebrations lost their excitement. These findings mirror those of Tang et al. (2023), who reported that extended periods of isolation contribute to emotional instability. Similarly, Penner et al. (2023) and Orgilés et al. (2022) found that reduced peer interaction affected children's mood and sense of connection.

Financial Struggles and Resource Scarcity. Economic hardship was a common thread in many children's stories. Some families struggled to afford food and basic hygiene needs. While parents often tried to shield their children from financial stress, many still sensed the strain and uncertainty. Assistance from local leaders and neighbors helped temporarily, but many gaps remained. Cardozo et al. (2023) found that children in poverty during the pandemic were more likely to show signs of anxiety. Other studies, like those by Martínez-García and López-Serrano (2022) and Leung et al. (2023), support the idea that financial insecurity contributes to emotional distress and feelings of unsafety in children.

Academic Struggles and Educational Disruption. Learning from home proved to be a major challenge, especially for those without access to teachers or learning support. Many children described how modular learning was confusing and discouraging, particularly when parents were unable to help. The lack of peer interaction also made learning feel isolating. Soriano and Mendoza (2023) reported that repetitive, unclear modules led to student disengagement. Lozano and Ramiro (2022) found that students from underprivileged households struggled more, and Villanueva (2023) highlighted that limited access to resources caused frustration and weakened academic performance.

The second research question investigated how children managed the challenges brought about by pandemic-related social isolation. Through analysis of their narratives, six key coping strategies emerged: (1) Faith and Spirituality, (2) Support from Family and Loved Ones, (3) Establishing Daily Routines and Purposeful Distractions, (4) Leveraging Technology and Entertainment, (5) Maintaining Healthy Lifestyle Practices, and (6) Cultivating Positivity and Forward-Thinking Mindsets.

Table 2
Coping Mechanisms Children Employed to Manage the Effects of Social Isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic

Theme	Core Ideas
Faith and Spirituality	Faith in God provided emotional comfort, reduced fear, and helped children cope with uncertainty.
Support from Family and Loved Ones	Family members became emotional anchors and sources of strength during times of distress.
Establishing Daily Routines and Purposeful Distractions	Keeping busy through housework or self-reflection helped manage boredom and stress.
Leveraging Technology and Entertainment	Technology served as both a distraction and a tool for emotional regulation.
Maintaining Healthy Lifestyle Practices	Physical care routines helped improve mood, health, and reduce fear of illness.
Cultivating Positivity and Forward Thinking	Maintaining a hopeful mindset helped sustain motivation and reduce mental exhaustion.

Faith and Spirituality. Faith played a central role for many children as they faced emotional and psychological challenges during isolation. Practices such as prayer, reading the Bible, and listening to worship music provided comfort and a sense of hope. These spiritual activities helped children feel supported emotionally, especially when physical social connections were limited. Prayer offered a way to alleviate fear and anxiety, while music and scripture fostered calmness and inner strength. This reliance on spirituality aligns with findings by Lopez and Santos (2024), De Guzman (2022), and Alon and Rivera (2023), who highlight faith's positive influence on mental health during crises.

Support from Family and Loved Ones. With peer interactions greatly reduced, children turned to family members for emotional support. Parents and siblings have become key sources of comfort, creating safe spaces for children to express their feelings and reduce anxiety. Simple family moments such as shared meals, humor, or bonding activities helped ease emotional stress. This reinforces the

conclusions of Cruz et al. (2024), Dizon (2022), Valdez (2023), and Reyes and Santos (2023), who emphasize the crucial role of family in fostering children's emotional resilience during difficult times.

Establishing Daily Routines and Purposeful Distractions. Maintaining daily routines and engaging in purposeful activities helped children stay grounded. Tasks like cooking, cleaning, and organizing brought a sense of purpose and connection to family life. Leisure activities such as journaling, crafting, and watching movies served as healthy outlets for emotional expression and distraction from worries. These structured habits created normalcy amid uncertainty and supported emotional balance. Similar findings were reported by Lopez (2023), Garcia (2023), and Patel et al. (2024), who link routines and creative outlets to improved emotional resilience in children.

Leveraging Technology and Entertainment. Technology emerged as an important coping tool, enabling children to connect with friends, find entertainment, and escape boredom. Online games, social media, music, and videos provided comfort during stressful moments and allowed expression when direct emotional support was unavailable. Some children used digital platforms to temporarily avoid difficult feelings. These observations correspond with Santos (2023), Nguyen (2024), and Delgado (2023), who recognize both the benefits and risks of technology use for children's emotional well-being during the pandemic.

Maintaining Healthy Lifestyle Practices. Children also coped by adopting healthy habits such as eating nutritious meals and practicing good hygiene. They also do some routine exercises and simple work outs while getting enough rest made their mind and body in good shape. These routines promoted physical health and emotional stability, offering a sense of control and calm. Activities like morning walks and stretching were cited as helpful ways to reduce stress. Nguyen et al. (2023), Lee and Park (2024), and Torres et al. (2023) similarly found that healthy lifestyle choices support

resilience and mental well-being in children facing adversity.

Cultivating Positivity and Forward Thinking. Many children emphasized the importance of staying positive and hopeful despite the difficulties of isolation. Focusing on future goals and using encouraging self-talk helps protect their mental health and foster emotional strength. This optimistic outlook contributed to building resilience and a sense of purpose during challenging times. These findings align with Garcia et al. (2023), Sharma and Lee (2024), and Chen et al. (2023), who highlight positivity and goal setting as vital factors in children's emotional recovery during crises.

The third research question sought to understand the enduring insights and lessons children drew from their lived experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. The analysis revealed five key themes that encapsulate the lasting values and realizations they developed: (1) Mental and Emotional Well-being Awareness, (2) Family and Community as Pillars of Support, (3) Adaptation, Connection, and Educational Realizations, (4) Faith and Inner Resilience, and (5) Growth Through Challenges and Life Skills.

Table 3

Insights and Lessons Learned by Children from their Experiences during the Covid-19 Pandemic

Theme	Core Ideas
Mental and Emotional Well-being Awareness	Children became more aware of emotional needs and the importance of mental well-being.
Family and Community as Pillars of Support	Family and community were essential sources of emotional and practical support.
Adaptation, Connection, and Educational Realizations	Children learned adaptability and recognized the value of schooling and social connection.
Faith and Inner Resilience	Faith in God and inner strength helped children cope and build confidence in their resilience.
Growth Through Challenges and Life Skills	Children gained life skills, emotional maturity, and a sense of capability.

Mental and Emotional Well-being Awareness. Children became more attuned to their mental and emotional states as they navigated prolonged isolation, uncertainty, and fear. Many reported learning to recognize and process their emotions through strategies such as positive thinking, quiet reflection, and self-care routines. This increased awareness enabled them to articulate their feelings and acknowledge the importance of mental health support. These findings resonate with Miller et

al. (2023), Alvarez and Kim (2024), and Singh et al. (2023), who emphasize the crucial role of emotional awareness in maintaining psychological well-being during crises.

Family and Community as Pillars of Support. The pandemic highlighted the importance of family and community as sources of both emotional and material support. With schools closed and peer interaction limited, children relied heavily on their families for reassurance, stability, and encouragement. Distant and nearby relatives extended supports while community figures, such as barangay officials and volunteers, also played key roles in providing assistance, reinforcing a sense of collective care. These experiences are consistent with studies by Garcia et al. (2023), Santos and Reyes (2024), and Mendoza (2023), who note the protective function of familial and communal ties during emergencies.

Adaptation, Connection, and Educational Realizations. Children learned to adapt to change, maintain social ties despite distance, and re-evaluate the value of education. They became more flexible in handling disruptions to daily life and used virtual platforms to stay connected with friends and classmates. Although remote learning posed challenges, many expressed a newfound appreciation for education and recognized its role in shaping their future. These realizations support findings by Diaz et al. (2023), Fernandez and Kim (2024), and Martinez and Lopez (2024), who highlight adaptability, digital connectivity, and educational motivation as key developmental gains during the pandemic.

Faith and Inner Resilience. Spirituality emerged as a powerful source of comfort and resilience. Children frequently turned to prayer, scripture, and worship music to cope with fear and uncertainty. These spiritual practices provided emotional grounding and strengthened their hope and endurance. The power of faith helped them cultivate inner peace and emotional control. These insights align with Garcia and Martinez (2023), Lopez et al. (2024), Nguyen and Reyes (2023), and Chen and Lim (2024), who emphasize the role of spirituality in fostering emotional strength among children during times of crisis.

Growth Through Challenges and Life Skills. The pandemic became a catalyst for personal growth, teaching children practical life skills and promoting emotional maturity. Many assumed greater responsibilities at home such as caring for siblings, assisting with chores which enhanced their sense of accountability and self-efficacy. The slower pace of life also allowed for self-reflection, time management, and the cultivation of patience. These formative experiences are echoed in the work of Rodriguez and Santos (2023), Tan and Villanueva (2024), Kwon et al. (2023), and Delos Reyes and Kim (2024), who highlight how adversity contributes to life skill development and psychological resilience in children.

Overall, the data indicate that children transformed the challenges of social isolation into meaningful psychological insight, stronger relational values, practical life skills, and a deeper sense of purpose which are foundational lessons likely to guide their development well beyond the pandemic period.

DISCUSSION

This section presents the discussion, conclusion, and recommendations based on the results of the study.

This study shows that social isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic deeply affected children's psychological, emotional, social, and academic well-being. Many experienced increased anxiety, loneliness, and distress, which supports earlier research on the pandemic's impact on child mental health (Seçer & Ulaş, 2020; Orgilés et al., 2021). Family support played a crucial protective role, consistent with Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, as caring parenting and open communication helped ease negative effects (Fegert et al., 2022; Gibbons et al., 2023). Economic hardship worsened these challenges, highlighting the importance of strong social safety nets (Ravens-Sieberer et al., 2021).

Academically, the shift to remote learning particularly affected children without stable internet access, reflecting ongoing digital inequalities (Varga-Atkins et al., 2021; Veselá & Dvořáková, 2023). Spirituality and cultural practices also offered key emotional support during uncertain times (Guzmán et al., 2022). Despite difficulties, many children showed resilience and growth, emphasizing the need to support their mental health and overall well-being during crisis (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). The study recommends holistic, child-centered approaches that combine mental health services, family support, educational access, and cultural sensitivity. Suggested actions include expanding trauma-informed care in schools and communities, enhancing family programs, ensuring universal technology access, and integrating spiritual and cultural elements in psychosocial support. Economic aid and flexible learning models can better address diverse needs. Future research should focus on long-term effects, the role of intersecting factors in coping, intervention impact, and including children's perspectives through participatory methods. These steps aim to protect and empower children's well-being and development in challenging times.

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