Mothers' Perceptions of the Impact of COVID-19 on Family Communication and Children's Play

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: The Coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19) epidemic, which has been effective worldwide, and the resulting 'social distance' and hygiene measures have led to changes in family communication behaviors and children's daily life activities. The current study aimed to reveal the impact of the COVID-19 epidemic on family communication and play behavior of young children.

Method: In this study, which was conducted as a qualitative study, phenomenology was used. The study examined mothers' perceptions of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on family communication and children's play in Türkiye. A focus group discussion was held with a group of five mothers who had young children between the ages of 30 and 40 months.

Results: As a result of the analysis of the data obtained, three main themes emerged. These themes are listed as follows: (i) children's perception of COVID-19, (ii) the impact of the COVID-19 epidemic on family communication (iii) and the impact of the epidemic on children's play and play materials. It has been determined that pandemic restrictions have positive and negative effects on family communication and children's play.

Conclusion: This research has revealed that the COVID-19 epidemic, which has affected the whole world, affects parents, children and their communication styles, as well as children's play behavior. Findings have shown that family life practices, children's behavior, and parents' mental health are both negatively and positively affected by periods of isolation due to the pandemic. It is thought that these research findings may help find effective ways to protect and improve the communication of children and families during the global epidemic and recovery processes.

Key words: mother, COVID-19, mother-child communication, child play, play behaviours

Annelerin COVID-19'un Aile İletişimi ve Çocukların Oyunları Üzerindeki Etkisine İlişkin Algıları

ÖZET

Amaç: Dünya çapında uzun süre boyunca etkili olan Koronavirus 2019 (COVID-19) salgını ve bunun sonucunda ortaya çıkan 'sosyal mesafe ve hijyen tedbirleri aile içi iletişim davranışlarında ve çocukların günlük yaşam faaliyetlerinde değişimlere yol açmıştır. Mevcut çalışmada COVID-19 salgınının aile içi iletişime ve küçük çocukların oyun davranışlarına etkisini ortaya çıkarmak amaçlanmıştır. Bu çalışma literatürdeki bazı boşluklara odaklanmaktadır. Bu boşluklar şu şekilde sıralanabilir: İlk olarak, COVID-19 pandemisinin psikolojik sonuçlarını araştırmak amacıyla yapılan çoğu çalışma, çocukların oyunu üzerindeki etkileri göz ardı etmiştir. Bu çalışma, annelerin algılarına göre çocukların aile iletişimi ve oyun davranışlarına odaklanmıştır. İkinci olarak bu çalışma, pandeminin erken dönemine ilişkin annelerin deneyimleri aracılığıyla aile iletişimini incelemiştir. Üçüncü olarak, COVID-19'un aile hayatı üzerindeki uzun vadeli etkilerini araştırmak için birçok çalışma yapılmıştır. Bu çalışma ise pandeminin küçük çocukların oynadıkları oyunlar üzerindeki etkisini araştıran ilk çalışmalardan biridir ve aynı zamanda Türkiye'deki COVID-19 pandemisinin erken dönemlerinde ebeveynler ve çocuklar arasındaki ilişkinin doğasını da sunmaktadır.

Yöntem: Nitel bir çalışma olarak yürütülmüş olan bu çalışmada fenomenolojiden yararlanılmıştır. Çalışmada, annelerin, Türkiye'de COVID-19 salgınının aile içi iletişim ve çocukların oyunları üzerindeki etkisine ilişkin algıları incelenmiştir. Yaşları 30 ila 40 ay arasında küçük çocukları olan beş anneden oluşan bir grupla odak grup görüşmesi yürütülmüştür. Çalışma kapsamında veri toplama aracı olarak araştırmacılar tarafından bir odak grup görüşme formu geliştirilmiştir.
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Bulgular: Elde edilen verilerin analizi sonucunda üç ana temaya ulaşılmıştır. Bu temalar şu şekilde sıralanmaktadır: (i) çocukların COVID-19'u algılayışı, (ii) COVID-19 salgınının aile iletişimi üzerindeki etkisi (iii) ve salgının çocukların oyun ve oyun materyalleri üzerindeki etkisi. Pandemi kısıtlamalarının aile iletişimi ve çocukların oyunları üzerinde olumlu ve olumsuz etkileri olduğu tespit edilmiştir. Bu bağlamda, katılımcıların doğrudan ifadeleriyle desteklenerek bulgular alt problemler ışığında sunulmuştur.

Sonuç: Yürütülmüş olan bu araştırma, tüm dünyayı etkisi altına alan COVID-19 salgınının çocukların oyun davranışlarının yanı sıra ebeveynleri, çocukları ve onların iletişim şekillerini de etkilediğini ortaya çıkarmıştır. Bulgular, aile yaşamı uygulamalarının, çocukların davranışlarının ve ebeveynlerin zihinsel sağlığının, pandemi nedeniyle yaşanan tecrit dönemlerinden hem olumsuz hem de olumlu şekilde etkilendiğini göstermiştir. Bu araştırma bulgularının küresel salgın ve iyileşme süreçleri sırasında çocukların ve ailelerin iletişimini korumak ve geliştirmek için etkili yolların bulunmasına yardımcı olabileceği düşünülmektedir. Bu çalışma, pandeminin çocukların oyunları üzerindeki etkisini sadece annelerin görüşleri aracılığıyla incelemiştir. Bu nedenle, gelecekteki çalışmalar babaları ve çocukları da içerebilir. Yapılacak olan boylamsal bir araştırma pandemi sonrası aile yaşamını daha iyi anlamaya yardımcı olabilir. Ayrıca, ebeveyn görüşmelerinin ötesinde ek veri toplama araçlarının kullanılması bulguların derinliğini artırabilir ve pandeminin çocukların iletişim ve oyun davranışları üzerindeki belirli yönlerine daha kapsamlı bir bakış sunabilir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Anne, COVID-19, anne-çocuk iletişimi, çocuk oyunları, oyun davranışları

Introduction

More than a year ago, on 30 January 2020, a pandemic caused by coronavirus named SARS coV-2 was declared by the World Health Organization (WHO, 2020a) as being part of a family of viruses (coVs) that may cause life threatening conditions in humans like respiratory diseases and even more serious diseases such as the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) and the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS). On March 11, 2020 due to the rapid spread of the disease to a large number of people in a given population within a short period of time, it was characterized as the global COVID-19 pandemic (WHO, 2020b). Globally, as of 3 March, 2024, there have been **774,834,251** confirmed cases of COVID-19, including **774,834,251** deaths (WHO COVID-19 Dashboard, 2024).

As a precaution for rapid spread of COVID-19, serious interventions like lockdowns and quarantines have been implemented in numerous countries all around the world (Brooks et al., 2020). By April 2020, schools have been closed nationwide in many countries (Lee, 2020). Public health authorities recommended protective health behaviors such as hand washing, mask wearing and social distancing (Chiu et al., 2020). Because of governmental social distancing constraints, many parents who were requested or ordered to stay at home for a period of time began working from their homes (Prime, Wayde & Browne, 2020).

Lockdowns and quarantines brought about the closure of preschools in Turkey between March and June 2020 (Suna et al., 2022). They caused various problems not only in Turkey but all over the world. To illustrate, lockdowns and quarantines resulted in social isolation, separation from peers, and loneliness for young children, which had a detrimental effect on their mental health (Loades et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2017) since extended periods of social isolation might lead to behavioral problems and brain dysfunctions (Hall, 1998; Novick et al., 2018; Tomova et al., 2020).

Children during Pandemic

With social isolation, children faced changes in physical activity due to pandemic restrictions and spent less time outside after the beginning of the pandemic (Moore et al., 2020). Although WHO recommend that children should have physical activity at least for an average of 60 minutes per day and that the amount of time they spent being sedentary should be limited (WHO, 2020c), results of a study conducted with 2,426 children and adolescents in China during the pandemic revealed a decrease of time in physical activity per week (-435 min/week) and a sudden increase in screen time (+1,730 min/week) (Xiang et al., 2020).

Indeed, research indicates that there have been discernible alterations in children's play in comparison to the pre-pandemic period. The COVID-19 limits caused noticeable changes in both the play themes and play behaviors of children. Torres González et al. (2020) found that 49.5% of the parents observed an increase in fantasy games, 19.5% representing the current COVID situation, 18.6% representing games of solidarity and mutual help, 10.5% an increase in violent games, 1.1% challenge/skill games and 0.8% explorative games. Additionally, many parents of children aged 1 to 10 have recorded their children pretending to be the coronavirus in chase games, creating a model of the virus using construction toys, pretending to be a doctor, and pretending to wash their hands (Egan et al., 2021).

Parents during Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic affected not only children, but also their parents (Bai et al., 2020). Long work hours, difficulty in transitioning from work to non-work domains at home and role conflicts as a parent or a worker put more strain on parents (Dockery & Bawa, 2020). During the lockdown period, it was shown that there was a decrease in family life satisfaction, particularly among mothers who are more responsible for childcare tasks (Huebener et al., 2020). In the large study of Patrick et al. (2020), 27% of parents reported that their mental health had become worse since March

2020. Study from Indonesia (Susilowati & Azzasyofia, 2020) has produced consistent result indicating that almost 86% of parents with children had moderate to high levels of stress, and most of the parents with high stress were mothers. These parents declared that the stress they experienced was caused by difficulties in guiding their children's learning, as well as health and financial concerns.

Family Communication during Pandemic

Family communication is crucial to maintain the relationship between parents and children (Schrodt, 2005). Effective family communication is a protective factor to increase resilience to cope with the difficulties (Slezackova & Sobotkova, 2017). Research tells us that the pandemic had dynamic and complex effects on family communication (Marks et al., 2023). Pandemic days have had various positive and negative effects on family communication (Başaran & Aksoy, 2020; Marks et al., 2023; Özyürek & Çetinkaya, 2021). Researchers have reported some positive family–child relationship outcomes, such as spending more time together during lockdown, an increase in emotional closeness and more time spent in playful activities with children at home (Janssen et al., 2020). Marks et al. (2023) found that slowing down in pandemic makes family relationship more positive with increasing depth of communication. Parents with an endless parenting job needed to develop new skills to do various activities with their children during the time they spend with them, to integrate activities into their daily routines, and to maintain family values (Szabo et al., 2020). In a study conducted in Turkey, parents reported that they made more time for themselves and their children with COVID-19, and that their children were pleased for being with their family members (Özyürek & Çetinkaya, 2021). Başaran and Aksoy (2020) indicated that according to the former family members have more interactions when they did routine housework together, such as cooking and cleaning.

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On the other hand, the pandemic caused major disruptions in family relations (Le et al, 2021). Walsh (2020) stated that the COVID-19 pandemic has caused enormous stress for families due to the loss of familiar people, a lack of social and physical contact with other people, and changes in routines. Parents have reported heightened levels of stress (Spinelli et al., 2020) and burnout (Marchetti et al., 2020) due to changes in routines and prolonged intimate relationships with family members. Cassinat et al. (2021) found that when shutdowns continued, the quality of family relationships declined in response to higher levels of family chaos. Feinberg et al. (2022) discovered a decline in parental warmth and coparenting quality from pre-pandemic to the beginning of the pandemic. They emphasized that women, in particular, were vulnerable to risks with regard to their well-being.

The Current Study

This study addressed the impact of COVID-19 on parents, parent-child communication and young children's play. The findings of the study may reveal and interpret the effects of the pandemic on child development and learning and the measures taken to support these. This study is addressing some gaps in the literature: First, with few exceptions, the majority of studies conducted to investigate the psychological outcomes of the COVID-19 pandemic have overlooked the effects on children's play. This study focused on patterns of family communication and play behaviors of children according to mothers' perceptions. Second, mothers more severely affected than fathers from COVID-19 lockdown (Marchetti et al., 2020). That's why this study scrutinized family communication via mothers' experiences about the early time of pandemic. Third, many studies conducted to investigate the long term effects of COVID-19 on family life. However, this study focused on the early times of COVID-19 by gathering data in a few months after lockdowns. It is one of the first studies to investigate the impact of the pandemic on the structure of young children's play,

and it also presents the nature of the relationship between parents and children at the early times of COVID-19 pandemic from Turkey.

Given the body of knowledge of the changing life conditions and daily routines after the pandemic, a detailed representation of the effects of the pandemic on the family communication and children's play is needed by depending on mothers' perceptions. The main purpose of the study was to understand the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on family communication and children's play behaviours by conducting a focus group with mothers of 30–40-month-old children. The research questions sought to be answered in this study are given below:

What do children understand with regard to COVID-19?

How has the COVID-19 outbreak affected parent-child communication?

How has the COVID-19 outbreak affected children's play?

Method

Research Design

This qualitative study utilized phenomenology as a research approach to explore the perspectives of mothers regarding the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on family relationships and children's play in Türkiye. Phenomenology was chosen due to its frequent application in investigating the complexities of everyday phenomena that we encounter regularly but find difficult to fully understand (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2016). The aim was to use phenomenological research to understand the significance of the experiences that various people have had (Creswell, 2013; Husserl, 2012). In this study, the mothers' perspectives about the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on family relationships and children's play in Türkiye and their experience related to the pandemic were examined. Hereby, the personal experiences of mothers will be captured to understand the COVID-19 in their experiences. In phenomenological research, data are obtained from individuals or groups who experience the phenomenon on which the research focuses and can express or reflect this

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phenomenon (Baş & Akturan, 2008). With the help of this pattern, the researcher begins to understand individuals while revealing their perceptions and to see the realities of their lives through their eyes. This reflects the nature of qualitative research (Ekiz, 2009). A focus group discussion was done to get thoughts and experiences from mothers regarding the impact of the pandemic on their life.

The Role of the Researchers

The researchers shared similar demographic backgrounds with the participants. They resided in metropolitan areas, were married or living with their partners, and held white-collar professional positions. Additionally, they had recently shifted to remote work arrangements as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. All possessed a background in early childhood education, with one individual additionally specializing in speech and language therapy. In addition, one of the authors had a daughter who was similar in age to the children involved in the study. This allowed them to draw on their personal experience when designing the research. During the study planning phase, researchers engaged in extensive discussions regarding the impact of COVID-19 on family dynamics and children's play. Furthermore, the researcher's role during the interview was solely that of an observer, ensuring no direct impact on the data collection process.

Participants

For the study, a group of five mothers with young children aged between 30 and 40 months were selected. The participants were selected based on five inclusion criteria: being a mother, having a child between 30 and 40 months old, residing in a metropolitan region of Türkiye with a core family, and having a steady internet connection. The participants were recruited by the researchers through direct communication, where they shared information about the study and obtained informed consent. The demographic characteristics of mothers and children are displayed in Table 1.

Table 1

Demographic characteristics of mothers and children

	Frequency	%
Maternal Age		
32-35	5	100
Total	5	100
Education level		
Graduate degree	5	100
Total	5	100
Working status		
Working (remote working)	5	100
Total	5	100
Child's gender		
Female	2	40
Male	3	60
Total	5	100
Child Age		
30-40 months	5	100
Total	5	100
Support in childcare		
Babysitter	2	40
Grandparents	1	20
Early Childhood Education	2	40
Total	5	100
Social isolation		
Full isolation	3	60
Except basic needs	2	40
Total	5	100
COVID-19 symptoms		
Yes	2	40
No	3	60
Total	5	100

Based on the data presented in Table 1, it can be observed that the participants in the study fell within the age range of 32-35, possessed higher education, and engaged in working from home. Three of the mothers had sons while two of them had daughters, and all the children were between 30 and 40 months old. All mothers were using part-time childcare assistance, such as babysitters and grandparents, while two children were enrolled in early childhood education. In addition, three

mothers expressed that they experienced complete isolation during the pandemic, while the remaining mothers mentioned that they only left their homes for essential purposes. Two mothers reported experiencing symptoms associated with COVID-19, whereas three mothers reported being asymptomatic.

The study received approval from both the Hacettepe University Research Ethics Commission and the Ministry of Health. The researchers explained the objective of the study and obtained an informed consent form from the participants to ensure compliance with ethical standards. All participants consented to the anonymous use of their data for additional investigation and subsequent publication. The participants were asked to provide their confirmation for the purpose of sound recording to reduce the risk of potential data loss.

Research Instrument

Researchers developed questions for a focus group interview that explored topics related to family relationships and children's play. Questions were formulated based on relevant literature, and feedback was requested from experts in the field of Early Childhood Education and Speech and Language Therapy. The questions were tested with mothers who possessed similar characteristics to those who would be included in the study. After two revisions, interview form was prepared for use. The interview form contained a total of 14 open-ended questions. Below are some example questions under each subheading: general information, family communication, children's play, and changes in child's play following the COVID-19 pandemic.

General information about COVID-19

- How did you explain COVID-19 to your child?

- How do you believe COVID-19 has impacted your child?

Family communication

- What impact has COVID-19 had on you as a parent?

- Have you experienced social isolation during the Covid-19 pandemic? How did you manage the balance between your professional and personal life at this period?

Children's play

- Have you seen any changes in your child's play during the COVID-19 pandemic? Could you provide specific information on this topic?

Data Collection

A consent form was prepared for the participants to conduct the study in accordance with ethical guidelines. The mothers willingly provided written consent after being fully informed about the objective of the study. A live conversation was conducted with a group of five mothers, in an online platform. Participants with comparable backgrounds had the opportunity to engage in meaningful discussions and share their experiences. The purpose behind this was to foster an environment for meaningful discussions. In April 2021, an online discussion took place with the individuals who had filled out the required consent form. The focus group discussion was recorded with the participants' consent and lasted for a duration of 125 minutes. During the focus group, an inclusive atmosphere was established to ensure that all mothers felt at ease sharing their opinions openly. Given the participants' shared social backgrounds with the researchers, the interviewer efficiently established a comfortable group interview setting. The research process was thoroughly explained to ensure that the participants felt at ease.

During the focus group, participants were first questioned about their overall understanding of COVID-19. Subsequently, they were asked about their family dynamics and, finally, their children's play activities and domains, specifically in relation to their personal experiences. Additional information was occasionally requested through semi-structured questions, such as asking for more detail or an example. To maintain a consistent and smooth interview process, the focus group interview was conducted by the second author using a pre-determined interview form. The

interviewer had extensive experience in facilitating focus groups and actively encouraged the mothers to openly share their opinions regarding the questions. Therefore, in order to maintain the interview's coherence, a single individual conducted the interview, providing follow-up questions, feedback, and guidance to the participants as needed. In order to effectively engage the participants, it is suggested by Neuman (2007) to offer non-directive feedback and utilize drills to keep their attention focused. The interviewer is responsible for managing the discussion, ensuring that all participants have an equal opportunity to speak, and guiding the conversation back on track if it veers off topic (Seidman, 2006). The interviewer skillfully established an interview setting that kept the conversation focused. They adeptly managed the questioning process, ensuring equal participation and guiding the discussion back on track whenever it veered off topic.

Existing research suggests that a sufficient number of participants in focus group studies to achieve data saturation is typically between four to eight (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). For this study, a total of five participants were included to ensure thorough coverage. In addition, as the participants began to reiterate their responses for the third time, the researcher inquired if they had any further contributions to these answers. When participants had no further contributions to the question, it was concluded by the researcher that data saturation had been achieved and the data collection process was finished.

Data Analysis

The focus group discussion was recorded and later transcribed. After carefully reviewing the audio recording and thoroughly analyzing the written transcripts, the researchers carefully analyzed the data to uncover the overall viewpoint of the focus group. This process ensures a comprehensive understanding of the participants' experiences by identifying the problems and patterns in the data (Westman & Bergmark, 2014). In this study, the researchers conducted content analysis by following a series of steps. These steps included preliminary preparation, coding the qualitative data, identifying

themes, interpreting the findings, and reporting the results (Creswell, 2002). Researchers relied on existing literature and transcribed data to establish a foundation for their analysis.

Throughout the process of data coding, three researchers independently analyzed the data and assigned descriptive labels to the themes they coded, individually. When analyzing themes, the data coded by each researcher is consolidated, compared, and examined for common codes to identify the underlying themes. All coding disagreements were resolved through discussion. When faced with differing opinions, the coders provided a thorough explanation of their reasoning. The other coders also shared their own perspectives; after resolving any disagreements, common codes were formed. Finally, the subcategories were merged together, taking into account their connection to the broader categories. The calculation of inter-coder reliability was determined by using the formula Reliability = Consensus / (Consensus + Disagreement) (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The resulting percentage after completing the process was found to be 92%. During the last phase of the data analysis, a collaborative effort was made by all researchers to analyze and present the results.

Trustworthiness

Given the nature of qualitative studies, the goal of this research was not to establish a single result that could be applied to the general population. However, it was important to take certain precautions to ensure the reliability and validity of the research (Cope, 2014). In this study, literature is regarded as an essential resource for planning, conducting, and analyzing the research. The research team relied on their collective opinions throughout the entire process. This approach was crucial for a qualitative study, as constant discussion ensured the effective execution of the research. When the findings are accurate, it ensures that the research is valid (LeCompte & Goetz, 1982). Expert opinions were sought from two academics with PhDs in the Department of Early Childhood Education and the Department of Speech and Language Therapy to assist in formulating the included questions for reliable findings.

Additional measures were implemented in place to carefully outline the research process, compare the findings with existing literature, and present the participants' responses using direct quotations. The transcriptions of the focus group and the results were shared with all mothers for member checking. Transcriptions of the mothers' responses were submitted for their confirmation, ensuring that the statements accurately represented their own thoughts and opinions. The analyses were compared using a formula to measure the reliability between coders. In addition, the records and transcripts were archived. The reliability of the research was enhanced by providing a detailed explanation of the analysis process and ensuring effective management of the entire research process (Leung, 2015).

Ethics Commission Approval

The study received approval from Hacettepe University Research Ethics Commission, Number: E-68552689-000-00001515335, Date: March 26, 2021

Results

Data analysis revealed three main themes: (a) children's comprehension of COVID-19, (b) the impact of the COVID-19 outbreak on family communication and (c) the effects of the COVID-19 outbreak on the children's play. These main themes are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Main Themes

Main Themes
Children's understanding of COVID-19
The impact of the COVID-19 outbreak on family communication
The effects of the COVID-19 outbreak on the children's play

Children's Understanding of COVID-19

The first main theme of the findings revolves around children's comprehension of COVID-19. Within this theme, there were two distinct categories: the explanation of COVID-19 and the various methods of learning about COVID-19. The categories are displayed in Table 3.

Table 3

Children's Understanding of COVID-19

Categories of Children's Understanding of COVID-19
Explanation COVID-19
Yes (n=3)
No (n=2)
Learning ways of COVID-19
Exposure to news and new home routines related to COVID-19
Explanations from family members

During the course of group, three mothers shared that they had discussed COVID-19 with their children in response to their requests, while two mothers mentioned that they didn't feel the need to explain it as their children showed no interest in the topic. Through careful examination of the data, it was discovered that the children acquired knowledge about COVID-19 through two distinct channels, which are: through being exposed to news and experiencing changes in their home routines due to the pandemic, and through explanations from their family members. Initially, the children were informed about the COVID-19 and conditions related to COVID-19 through television broadcasts.

The mothers reported that their children were exposed to terms associated with COVID-19, such as 'illness', 'mortality rate', or 'mask', through television. Furthermore, they noted that their children were able to observe the newly established home routines in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. It is worth noting that children have observed their parents adopting precautionary measures during the pandemic, such as not allowing grocery bags into the house and keeping them outside before bringing them inside. Mothers who took the time to educate their children about COVID-19 were mindful of maintaining their daily routines and consistently emphasized the

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importance of wearing masks during playtime. However, based on a statement from the mother, it was reported that one of the children showed reluctance to engage with a family member who was wearing a mask.

Instead of using terms like "coronavirus" or "COVID," the parents used terms like "illness" or "germ" to describe COVID-19 to the children. They also sang songs related to germ and showed cartoons related to illness. One mother used an analogy technique to explain the spread of the infection to her child as follows:

> Mother O: *We told him that there are microbes outside, but we cannot see them. We used paint to show where the microbes could be in the house. We rubbed paint on his hands, and we said that if you touch anything with your hands, paint will be smeared on it. See, a microbe is something like that. We tried to explain it by demonstrating it through experience.*

The Effect of the COVID-19 Outbreak on Family Communication

The second part of the findings focuses on the effects of the COVID-19 outbreak on family communication. Two categories were identified: (1) positive effects and (2) negative effects. Each category had three subcategories: (a) parents, (b) relationships between parents and children, and (c) children. The categories and codes are displayed in Table 4.

Table 4

The Effect of the COVID-19 Outbreak on Family Communication

Categories of The Effect of the COVID-19 Outbreak on Family Communication	
Positive effects	Codes
Parents	changes in emotional condition, own parental self-efficacy, fulfilling parenting role better, spending more time with their children, satisfaction with parenting issues, witnessing their children reaching developmental milestones
Parent-child relationships	the unity of their family, spend more quality time with their children, change in daily routines, positive effect on their family interactions
Children	spend more time with their parents and receive more language input

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Negative effects	Codes
Parents	psychologically overwhelmed with time, a source of stress, pressure on her family members to be careful about issues of hygiene, restricted by staying at home due to the pandemic, negative feelings about themselves and their family members, anxious about their own parents and their health, their professional life, their children's educational and social life, uncomfortable about working at home, changed their daily routines, take some extra measures.
Parent-child relationships	awareness of the harm that her obsessive behaviours related to hygiene issues, not allocate time to her children equally
Children	not enjoy their childhood due to the break in their normal routine and increased screen time, sleeping problems and language development issues due to the isolation

According to the mothers' reports, the COVID-19 pandemic had some positive effects on family communication, parent-child relationships, and the well-being of the children. They mentioned that they and their spouses experienced changes in their emotional states due to the outbreak. Many mothers reported that the pandemic had a significant impact on their confidence as parents. They expressed a sense of accomplishment in their role as parents, attributing it to increased quality time spent with their children. They also expressed contentment with how they handled parenting challenges during the outbreak. Two mothers who worked from home attributed this to witnessing their children reaching developmental milestones, such as hearing their child's first words. A mother shared her contentment with her parenting style in the following way:

Mother O: *My son started to say his first words before the pandemic, but I could not be with him at that time. Being at home with him in this one year was good for me as a mother who lived outside of our home in two of these three years due to my work... So we were able to spend more time together. We had the chance to spend time closer to each other.*

Second, whole mothers said that the outbreak had a positive effect on parent–child relationships. Most of them stated that it actually contributed to the unity of their family. All parents, especially those who spend most of the day outside the home due to work, have started to spend more

time at home by working from home. Throughout the process of dealing with the lock-down, the parents were able to spend more quality time with their children. Parents described quality time as reading book together, playing board games, and cooking in the kitchen. In addition, the mothers experienced a change in daily routines. For example, the routine of having breakfast and then leaving home for school and work has been replaced by schooling and working at home after breakfast. They stated that eating at home together had a positive effect on their family interactions. They expressed that being at home with the children and spending more time eating together had a positive impact on their relationship. In addition, they highlighted the joy they experienced when their children were present at home during work hours, such as when their children entered the room during a meeting.

Although the mothers acknowledged some positive outcomes resulting from the COVID-19 outbreak, they also pointed out the detrimental impact it had on three specific areas: parents, parent-child relationships, and children. The first of these subcategories focused on parents. The first codes utilized for the parent subcategory focused on the psychological well-being of the parents, who expressed feeling overwhelmed with time.

Two mothers stated that people who violated the rules regarding COVID-19 were a source of stress, personally. Mothers agreed that the outbreak changed their daily routines, and they had to take some extra measures. They declared that they limited their outside activities, leaving shopping bags outside, requiring family members to wear masks outdoors, and constantly washing their hands. A mother experienced heart palpitations as a result of anxiety, leading her to emphasize the importance of hygiene to her family members. The mothers noticed that the rules imposed on her family members both inside and outside the house due to this pressure also negatively affected family communication. A mother expressed her recognition of the potential harm that her compulsive behaviors regarding hygiene could inflict upon her children. Furthermore, she observed that her children were similarly affected and also made efforts to enhance their adherence to hygiene protocols. This awareness

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prompted her to make changes in her obsessive hygiene habits, as she became more aware of the detrimental impact of the pandemic.

Furthermore, several mothers expressed feeling restricted by the necessity of staying at home as a result of the epidemic. Indeed, two mothers reported the necessity of hiding in an another room within their homes in order to avoid distractions from their children while working. They further mentioned the need to lock the door in order to create an ideal setting for their work. The majority of the participants indicated a rise in negative feelings towards themselves and their family members. There was a feeling that the pandemic had negatively impacted their professional life. A mother expressed feeling uncomfortable with the necessity of working remotely from her home. Two participants expressed concern about a setback in their professional growth, while one emphasized the challenges of working from home.

Mother S: *I had to finish my doctoral dissertation during this time. I had a hard time separating my work from my household duties because I wasn't used to working from home.*

The second negative impact of the COVID-19 outbreak was on parent–child relationships. One mother who has two children stated that she was not able to allocate time to her children equally, she had to spend more time on her older child's school homework and support online classes, and this also affected parent-child communication negatively. Especially since education is carried out remotely at all levels because of pandemic, supporting children's distance education processes has been added to the responsibilities of parents at home. One mother stated *"Home turned into school. Sometimes I had to be a teacher. It was very difficult to distinguish between mother role and teacher role".*

The third negative reflection of the COVID-19 outbreak was on children. All mothers reported that children were not able to enjoy their childhood. Mothers noticed that children had to spend more time at home, and they could not get rid of their surplus energy. Two mothers shared their children's

sleeping problems. One mother had suffered from her child's regression on toilet training due to the discontinuity of the normalization process after lockdown. Similarly, two mothers shared that their children had language delays because of the social isolation they were having. In addition, all mothers stated an increase in the screen time of their children. One mother highlighted "*My daughter met with TV and phone screen during the pandemic."*

The Effect of the COVID-19 Outbreak on the Children's Play

The findings in this section are divided into two categories in line with the results of the analysis. These categories are called play and peer relations, and are presented in Table 5.

Table 5

The Effect of the COVID-19 Outbreak on the Children's Play

Categories of The Effect of the COVID-19 Outbreak on the Children's Play
Play
Play types
Play structures
Play materials and play areas
Peer relationships
Peer deprivation
Peer interactions

The first category of the effect of the COVID-19 outbreak on the children's play includes play types, play structures, play materials and play area codes. It should be noted that COVID-19 may not have directly affected the play behaviour of children who were probably uninformed of its existence. Therefore, the influence on these children was indirect.

The parents in the focus group were asked whether the effects of the pandemic were seen in their children's play. They said that their children's paintings and pretend play involved doctors, vaccinations, treatments, a stethoscope, sickness and masks. This was applicable for children who knew about COVID-19 in some detail. The children who did not know about COVID-19 generally

took part in symbolic play, traditional games and physical activities such as home dancing, sports, running and jumping.

The second part of this category focuses on play structures, the impact of COVID-19 on children's play structures. Lockdowns and restrictions caused by COVID-19 have also affected children's plays and the places where children play. These measures included taking extra precautions when it comes to children's interactions, such as wearing masks, limiting their time spent in playgrounds, decreased frequency of visiting playgrounds, decreased physical play due to inability to play outdoors, refusal to go out and the use of a set of playground hygiene items consisting of napkins, disinfectants and masks. A mother defined the collection of playground hygiene products:

Mother S: *We took a lot of equipment as we visited the park more often than usual. These included napkins and disinfectants. When our child was going to get on the play equipment, we cleaned the whole place and then let our child sit down.*

Mothers also emphasized the positive aspects of staying at home, particularly in relation to play structures. The children experienced an increased sense of freedom. They enjoyed many chances to bond with their parents, engaging in activities like reading books, playing board games, and cooking in the kitchen. The parents found joy in the play and explored various ways to engage their children, drawing inspiration from social media platforms like art activities, parkour games, and cooking activities.

The third aspect of COVID-19's impact on children's play focuses on the play materials and play areas. During their discussion on the impact of COVID-19 on children's toys, the mothers noted that they started bringing outdoor toys indoors. They also observed a rise in their child's screen time and an increase in the number of toys in their homes. Toys typically enjoyed outdoors, such as scooters, bicycles, balls, and battery-powered cars, were brought indoors. Two mothers provided their perspectives on introducing these toys into their homes:

Mother F: *Creating a track and jumping up and down from the seats. There is a constant rush around the house. There is a space in the apartment, using a scooter in that space, using a scooter at home, making a barrier from cushions and seats. To play hopscotch, I created a track on the ground from duct tape. There is always something happening inside the house. Sometimes it's hard.*

Mother O: *In general, everything is allowed as long as it is not dangerous.*

The last section of this first category looks at play areas. During COVID-19 lockdowns and curfews the children's play areas were completely moved into the home and the mothers identified their homes as their children's play areas. A mother mentioned to this as follows:

Mother O: *The whole house is his playground; he has more freedom in the house. When I looked around in the morning, there's a helicopter with my files on it.*

The second category, under the title of the impact on children's play, was peer relationships. Peer relationships were examined using two different codes: peer deprivation and peer interactions. The scarcity of peers, which forms the first part of this category, categorized as not spending time with peers, refusing to play with peers and being socially cut off from peers. The mothers in the focus group described "peer deprivation" as their children playing with adults at home all the time, decreasing the number of visits to public parks, which is a place where the children can socialise with their peers, insufficient time spent with other children during the limited visits to the park and learning not to touch. The mothers explained that all these factors had left their children playing alone and unable to experience sharing with each other. The mother's explanation as follows:

Mother G: *He lost the playing field. Having to stay at home prevented him from getting together with friends. There are always adults around him now. That's why he always wants to play games with us adults. We became the new playmates.*

The second and the final part of this category is defined as peer interactions. The interactions with peers are listed as follows: Contactless play, zero contact, social distancing, lack of sharing, warning peers about masks. The mothers explained that throughout the COVID-19 epidemic, children had to acquire the skills of engaging in contactless play, maintaining a physical distance from other kids when playing, avoiding from sharing food and toys with others, and reminding their peers to wear masks.

When asked whether COVID-19 had brought about a change in children's play, one of the mothers responded as follows:

Mother G: *There exists a substantial mismatch. They had participated in extensive physical interaction. They previously held hands. They were walking while holding hands. They grasp each other tightly as they down the slide. However, throughout this period, children engage in play activities that do not include any form of physical contact. They are waiting for each other. There was a different style present here. They developed a completely different social framework.*

Most of the mothers stated that they were not worried about their children playing with other children in the play area. One mother commented about this:

Mother F: *I could not prevent him from socialising too much if he has friends in the park. I told my husband yesterday that there was nothing we could do, even if we wanted to.*

Discussion

This study aims to investigate if COVID-19 impacted parents, parent-child communication, and children's play in a negative or positive way. This study is significant since it was the first investigation in Türkiye that seeks to see the impact of COVID-19 on communication between young children with typical development and their mothers. The results of this research study confirmed that the recent COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on various aspects of families' lives,

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family communication, and play activities. The results provided evidence demonstrating that most mothers tend to have negative feelings about the COVID-19 outbreak: describing themselves as stressed, apprehensive and psychologically burdened, as well as being confined to their homes. During the pandemic, mothers saw an increase in their responsibilities as they had to manage their children's schooling, adapt to changes in daily routines, and face a slowdown in their professional advancement, which posed a threat to their jobs. Throughout the epidemic, they were compelled to assume the roles of a dedicated mother and a diligent office worker concurrently.

These findings were strikingly comparable to the findings of most recent studies and reports, which found that the COVID-19 deeply affected women (Kotlar et al., 2021; McKinsey Global Institute, 2020; United Nations, 2020), and that their mental well-being suffered significantly (Davenport et al., 2020; Sáenz-Herrero et al., 2020; Sriharan et al., 2020).

This study discovered that the COVID-19 break has severe consequences not just for mothers but also for the well-being of their children. Mothers stated that their children lose access to their outdoor areas and the socialization with their peers. They had to undergo social isolation from their friends and be confined within their houses for prolonged durations, resulting in a highly detrimental experience for this particular age group. As defined by Fromm-Reichmann (1959), loneliness is a distressing and alarming sensation and the social isolation experienced by children during the pandemic might be described as "loneliness for children." This finding was similar to the study of Larsen, Helland and Holt (2021) suggesting that social isolation during the pandemic was associated with loneliness.

In addition to social isolation, recent evidence suggests that children may have substantial indirect consequences on their physical, social, and emotional well-being due to the stringent control measures implemented during the epidemic (Chanchlani et al., 2020; Singh et al., 2020; Xie et al., 2020). Sleep issues appear to have been frequent during COVID-19 pandemic and these sleep

disturbances were linked to higher levels of psychological distress (Alimoradi et al., 2021) In our study, the mothers also stated that their children had sleep problems and regression in toilet training. Furthermore, their children's language development was delayed during the lockdown period, which concurs with the findings of Charney, Camarata and Chern (2020), who claimed that the COVID-19 had a potentially negative impact on children's communication and language skills.

The study's findings reveal notable changes in children's play and play behaviors during the pandemic. Specifically, their outdoor playtime was limited, leading to increased indoor time and more watching television. These observations align with previous studies conducted by Moore, Faulkner, and Rhodes (2020) as well as Rodríguez et al. (2021), which reported a decrease in children's physical activity and an increase in screen time during the pandemic. In addition, our research results align with the study conducted by Zhang and Yuan (2023), which revealed that prior to the implementation of social distancing measures, children on average spent 7.98 hours per week (SD = 8.50) participating in extracurricular activities. Due to the closure of schools, the amount of time children dedicated to extracurricular activities experienced a slight decrease to 7.87 hours (SD = 9.97).

However; according to the statements of the mothers, children found other ways to deal with the pandemic. As Barnett (2013) states, children used play to cope with negative experiences. Play is one of the ways that gives children the opportunity to reflect their experiences and feelings in real life (Scarlett, Naudeau, Salonius-Pasternak, & Ponte, 2004) and in this study there was evidence of COVID-19 in children's symbolic play and their dramatic performances began to include doctors, immunization, stethoscopes, sickness and masks. This finding was also seen in another countries and shown that these children were trying to 'practice real life events' in their play. Their daily lives were thought to have altered dramatically, and they may have needed to manage their own emotions through pretend play while attempting to make sense of these unexpected, distressing changes (Cray, 2020). This condition can be explained by Elias and Berk's (2002) belief that sociodramatic play is

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so important for young children, especially for their self-regulation and also well being (Kourti et al., 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic did not only have negatively impactful consequences on parents and children, but it also had good impacts on the behaviors that families engage in. The majority of the mothers who took part in our study claimed that they were able to closely observe their children's development, they spent more time with their children, they played more than they had previously, they had more meal times together and that all of these factors contributed to feeling of parental self-efficacy, which is defined as a parent's belief in their ability to positively influence their children's development (Jones & Prinz, 2005). This finding was in line with the findings of recent studies, such as the one conducted by Huang and Tsai (2023), in which the majority of parents reported spending more quality time with their children during the COVID outbreak. Similarly, Öngören's study (2021) came to the conclusion that the pandemic period had a positive impact on the relationships between parents and children in four subthemes, particularly spending time together, sharing, engaging in activities, and communicating with one another.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the purpose of this study was investigate the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on family dynamics and children's play activities. Overall, our findings showed that the COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on parents, children, their relationships and children's play behaviours. The findings imply that pandemic lockdown periods have had a wide range of negative and positive consequences on family life practices, children's behaviour and parents' emotional well-being. It is crucial for parents and caregivers to navigate these changes carefully to ensure the wellbeing of their children.

Limitations and Future Studies

This study added to a growing body of literature that COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on children's understanding of the world, family communication, and play activities. It is crucial for parents and caregivers to be aware of these changes and adapt their strategies accordingly to support their children's development during these global pandemics.

This study addressed the impact on children's play via their mothers' perceptions, and future studies may include fathers, as well as the children themselves. A longitudinal research design may help to gain a better understanding of post-pandemic family life. Furthermote, utilizing additional assessment tools beyond parental interviews would enhance the applicability of the results and offer more comprehensive insights into the specific aspects of the impact of pandemics on children's communication and play behaviours.

Acknowledgements

Data Availability Statement

Data is available from the first author upon request.

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Conflict of Interest: The authors have declared that no conflict of interest existed with any parties at the time of publication.