Children born or raised during lockdown are developing language skills at a slower rate

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Social interactions in the first months of life are fundamental for babies to learn how to communicate and develop their language skills. Physical

contact, touch, smiling and our first face-to-face "conversations" are the pillars on which we build our understanding of the social world.

The limits placed on social interaction during the COVID-19 pandemic profoundly affected these early interactions. We interacted less and with fewer people and had to go without some basic aspects of communication, such as physical touch or sharing objects.

For children born during the pandemic, it is easy to conclude that their first interactions were so different that it impacted their development.

Our team conducted research into the development of language in Spanish children born during or just before the pandemic. We found that they developed more slowly than children born before.

Vocabulary

In the study, we analyzed the development of both vocabulary and morphosyntax, which means the ability to produce complex sentences. A total of 153 children aged between 18 and 31 months participated. We compared data from two groups that were matched for age, parental educational levels and who attended similar nursery schools.

The two groups were "pre-pandemic" (PRE) and "post-pandemic" (POST). The PRE group was made up of children who were born and assessed before the pandemic. The POST group was made up of children born either a few months before or during the pandemic, between October 2019 and December 2020.

Our results showed that children born during the pandemic used fewer distinct words, meaning they had a smaller vocabulary that those born before it. Children born before the pandemic, on the other hand, were able to use more complex phrases, with more words and a wider range of

structures.

As expected, the average level of the children in the PRE group was around the 50th percentile. That of the POST group, however, barely reached the 40th percentile in both vocabulary and sentence complexity.

Limited language stimulus

Restrictions during the pandemic meant that children in the POST group experienced limited social relationships, as well as interaction contexts that may have impacted their language development.

In addition, linguistic stimuli were affected both in the variety and frequency of social interactions and by the use of masks. Masks hinder comprehension, and make it difficult to receive visual information when learning language. In combination, these circumstances may have led to slower language development in this group.

These findings highlight the enormous importance of early social interactions and the clear effect of context on infants' development.

In typical development, children first learn a few words, and then progressively increase their vocabulary. Then they begin to put two words together, learning how words can be combined to express increasingly complex meanings. This process takes place through varied and meaningful interactions with others: we learn to speak because people speak to us, and because we can see that what we say has an effect on them.

Risks for the most vulnerable

In a normal context, the effects of the pandemic on language

development are expected to be offset over time. However, this situation has posed an added risk factor for the most vulnerable children, meaning those who are at greater risk of developmental difficulties, either for biological or social reasons.

Studies have shown that, in general, the COVID-19 crisis has hit vulnerable groups especially hard. Since there is evidence that those born during the pandemic are slower to develop overall, we must not leave behind children who are more likely to develop atypically. We have an obligation to detect at-risk situations as early as possible. This is the only way to avoid "cascading effects" in later development.

If early detection was already crucial, it is now essential in the wake of the pandemic. Although the COVID-19 crisis may seem like a thing of the past, its effects on the mental health of the population in general, and on children's development in particular, are still a reality that we cannot, and must not, ignore.

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