

THE IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC ON THE EDUCATIONAL PROCESS. COUNSELING STRATEGIES FOR ALL AGES

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Abstract

Life during the pandemic has strongly influenced education at all ages. Educational psychologists have observed the impact on the educational process by age level of all the challenges brought about by measures taken to limit as much as possible the risk of virus transmission and illness. Their individual and group interventions have brought an added quality of life for all direct and indirect beneficiaries in this unusual context of life. In Romania, as in other countries, the pandemic has determined havoc on the education of children, adolescents, adults and the elderly. Psychoeducational interventions have proven to be necessary and beneficial.

Keywords: pandemic; education; psychoeducational intervention; psychological counselling; children; adolescents; parents; adults; elderly; prevention; improvement; recovery; resilience

The pandemic and the problems raised in terms of personal, family, professional, community life had a strong negative impact on the quality of life. Michael B. Frisch, PhD, author of Quality of Life Inventory, defines quality of life as the focus on life satisfaction and well-being and refers to the subjective assessment of the degree to which a person has met his or her needs, achieved goals and fulfilled personal, family, professional and community desires in the 16 areas of life: health, self-esteem, goals and values, money, work, play, learning, creativity, support, love, friends, children, relatives, home, neighborhood, community (Frisch, 2013).

The pandemic raised three extremely important issues in Romania: the high risk of getting sick - health system problems, the risk of separation - hospitals with credibility problems and the risk of losing a significant person (concrete experiences, much publicized experiences). All these have activated separations anxieties, loss anxieties, death anxieties in children and adolescents. In the lives of parents / significant adults some critical

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variables appeared: the risk/specificity of losing their job, the risk of declined income, decreased purchasing power; all these situations caused stress, anxieties, depression, negatively affecting the well-being of their children.

All these issues also had a number of negative effects on the family system: decreased availability of parents for children / teenagers, increased family tensions and conflictual situations, the installing of anxiety and depression in adults. They have triggered anxiety and depression in children and teenagers, stress, feelings of inadequacy, helplessness and guilt, somatizations or illnesses due to decreased immunity, lack of concentration, apathy, isolation, lack of motivation for activities and for learning in general.

Formal education and informal education have had a strong negative impact on children and teenagers. For these reasons, the demands of parents to help their children have increased during this pandemic period.

Babies born in the pandemic period faced a number of obstacles in their development. Isolation, protection against coronavirus, lack of socialization, anxious, tense, stressful climate inside the family of origin seem to be the main difficulties that have contributed to a more or less harmonious development of babies.

Psychoeducational interventions for parents should focus on:

- Easier activation of resilience mechanisms to the pandemic context and to ever and rapidly changing life situations;
- Better management of personal, family, professional and community life;
- A competent involvement in the growth and development of the baby in cognitive, emotional, socio-relational terms;
- Better assumption and management of parental and marital roles;
- A more efficient relationship with the family of origin;
- A more competent relationship with the substitute caregivers and educators (nannies, nurses / educators from the nursery or the baby group in private kindergartens).

The psychoeducational intervention modalities are materialized in individual and group strategies.

The *individual strategies* should focus on:

- *Information* on the particularities of development, the particularities of the family system, the effective means for stimulating and developing the baby - what we buy, how we play, how we educate, substitute care;
- *Forming* - joint activities with babies and parents to learn psychoeducational methods that stimulate development through playing, or through role-playing for parents using puppet support for a better connection to emotions;
- *(Re)forming* where needed, working on parental-filial relationships, for three generations for a more adequate and easier parenting role

assumption or for optimizing the marital relationship in order to ensure an optimal climate for the baby's development.

The group strategies should aim at informing and forming effective parenting skills in thematic meeting groups dedicated to adult parents with their child in the first stage of development - the baby period.

The psychoeducational interventions intended for caregivers and educators in nurseries or kindergartens of the baby group should aim to:

- Providing information on psychoeducational age-specific characteristics of babies and on the impact of the pandemic situation on intra-family dynamics (psychological effects that affect the well-being and development of babies);
- Offer knowledge of psychoeducational methods for the development of babies, these years being essential for the neuronal development of children and their further psychic evolution.

The preschool activities during the pandemic were also full of challenges. The living environment created by the coronavirus has raised multiple developmental issues for preschoolers. Isolation, instability of the educational act (at home, in kindergarten, online or physically), lack of socialization and comparison with congeners had a negative impact on the development of self-image and self-esteem in children. The availability of play and learning for significant people or nannies and educators has also been affected by the consequences of the educational disorder and the specific nature of the pandemic context. The high emotional contagion at this age has allowed the taking over and sometimes amplifying of the anxiety, depression, stress from close people (parents, grandparents, relatives, nannies). Therefore, cognitive, emotional, and socio-relational stimulation in the pandemic was less achieved.

The psychoeducational interventions for parents should focus on:

- Offering knowledge of the psychological particularities of age and developmental needs;
- Managing the difficult situations brought about by the pandemic in terms of personal, family, professional and community life;
- Stress management and well-being in the family;
- The contribution to the most appropriate educational act for the developmental needs of each preschooler in terms of cognitive, emotional and socio-relational - at home or in kindergarten;
- Managing of "meditations" during kindergarten.

The psychoeducational interventions for preschoolers should be performed for:

- Increasing well-being and activating resilience mechanisms;
- Cognitive, socio-relational, emotional acquisitions;
- Developing curiosity and motivation to know, find out, learn;

- Forming of learning skills.

The psychoeducational interventions for teachers should focus on:

- A good understanding of age particularities;
- The acquisition of psychoeducational methods and techniques adequate to the developmental needs of preschoolers and corresponding to the creation of a productive partnership with the parents of preschoolers;
- Understanding and knowing the psychological impact that different pandemic contexts have had on preschoolers and their families;
- Treatment adapted to the problematic situations specific to the pandemic context of children and parents.

The school and school activities in the context of the pandemic have been very challenging for children / teenagers, parents and teachers at every level of schooling.

The years of early schooling

All lower school classes have been and still are hard hit, but especially the preparatory and first classes, which have raised a series of problems for children, parents and teachers. Putting the pencil in the children's hands for calligraphic writing of uppercase and lowercase letters or short words and sentences online has been extremely difficult to accomplish. Isolation, the challenges of learning sometimes at school, sometimes at home, the weak interactions with colleagues or friends, the constant care for maintaining health have shaken children quite a bit and their relationships with parents and school in general.

The psychoeducational interventions for parents should be carried out for:

- Knowing the psychological particularities of the developmental stage;
- Understanding the effect of the pandemic context on the mental health of children (anxieties, depressions, somatizations), and also on their relationship with school (lack of motivation for school activities, greater need for play, or tendency to isolation, to hide in the house, apathy or that state of "too good");
- Managing the difficult situations brought about by the pandemic in terms of personal, family, professional and community life;
- Stress management and well-being in the family;
- A productive collaboration with the teacher and the school unit in accordance with the particularities created by the pandemic context.

The psychoeducational interventions for young school children should focus on:

- Increasing well-being;
- Developing and maintaining curiosity and motivation for the school;
- The formation of learning and communication skills and effective networking;

- Managing particular situations caused by the pandemic on a personal, family level.

The psychoeducational interventions for teachers should aim for:

- A good activation of resilience mechanisms in order to manage one's life properly;
- A good understanding of the particularities of age;
- A fine understanding and knowledge of the psychological impact that the different contexts of the pandemic have had on young schoolchildren and their families;
- Learning psychoeducational methods and techniques to manage the relationship with young schoolchildren and learning activities so as to develop motivation for learning in students and to form good learning skills in them;
- A good relationship management with parents and colleagues;
- A good management of well-being, stress and personal / family situations in this pandemic context.

The middle school years

Grades V-VIII have been deeply affected by the pandemic due to the longest period of time spent online, because of extremely busy school schedules and because of the absence of practical means of studying subjects such as chemistry, physics, history, geography, etc.

Many of the contents submitted to the attention of the learning activity hardly find their applicability in the daily lives of the students, and the volume of homework and projects is enormous also because of the hourly schedule of 6/7 hours a day. The poor pedagogical training of many teachers has unfortunately been another important factor in deepening the school crisis that children and their parents have experienced in the COVID-19 pandemic.

The psychoeducational interventions for students in the middle school years should focus on:

- Increasing well-being;
- Activating the necessary resilience mechanisms in the context of the multiple personal, family, professional, community changes caused by the pandemic;
- A good management of the relationships with family members, friends and colleagues, with the school in general;
- Developing and maintaining motivation for school, forming new learning skills;
- Management of stress, time and learning activities.

The psychoeducational interventions intended for the parents of the secondary school students should aim for:

- A better knowledge of the psychological particularities of the developmental stage;
- A better understanding the effects of the pandemic context on the mental health of children (anxieties, depressions, somatizations), and also on their relationship with school (lack of motivation for school activities, greater need for socialization, or the tendency to isolation or escape to the online space);
- A good activation of children's resilience mechanisms;
- Managing the difficult situations brought by the pandemic in terms of personal, family, professional and community life (e.g., managing the situations caused by the restrictions imposed on the unvaccinated who broke up the children's groups and created countless tensions especially in the case of parents who did not want to vaccinate their children over 12 years and who thus restricted their access to the Malls, theaters or other cultural institutions, etc.);
- Stress and well-being management in the family;
- A productive collaboration with teachers, with decision-makers in schools.

The psychoeducational interventions for secondary school teachers should focus on:

- Activating resilience mechanisms for the proper management of one's life;
- Understanding the particularities of age;
- Understanding and knowing the psychological impact that different pandemic contexts have had on secondary school students and their families (the effects of excessive online schooling - the tendency to isolate / virtual environment, lack of motivation and decreased concentration due to lack of appropriate facilities and instability of the learning context and the division of students according to the vaccinated / unvaccinated criteria, loss or illness anxiety, significant human losses, low and selective socialization, increased number of meditations / lessons in particular that loaded excessive children's schedule and severely restricted moments of relaxation, sleep and "recharging the batteries", etc.);
- Mastering psychoeducational methods and techniques for managing the relationship with secondary school students and learning activities in order to develop their motivation for learning and keep their attention focused;
- Creating / maintaining good relationship management with parents and colleagues;
- Management of well-being, stress and personal / family situations in this pandemic context.

The high school years

Psychoeducational interventions for high school teenagers, parents and teachers do not differ much from the problem of secondary school years. Practice shows that high school students have managed a little better the step context of the pandemic, having more clearly defined individual interests and values and a greater ability to independently manage their own person. The possibility of parental control decreased greatly during the pandemic years and due to the many restrictions imposed by the authorities, which were more difficult to bear in adolescence. The emotional distancing of high school teenagers from their parents occurred quite abruptly and not always with positive effects on the lives of children and adults alike. Experiencing the first couple relationships also suffered, and the negative impact on well-being was fully felt by adolescents and parents (conflicts, quarrels, estrangements, depression, etc.).

The modalities of psycho-educational intervention for children / adolescents and parents should take place in individual / family or group meetings.

The individual strategies allow family counseling based on the psychodiagnosis of the child and the family system of origin, on personalized psychoeducational interventions that provided both information, forming and (Re)-forming of parents for a harmonious development of children cognitively, emotionally, socio-relational in the pandemic. The objectives should focus on the child, on the parents or on the marital, parental and parent-filial relationship.

The group strategies are psycho-educational information and skills training interventions to activate the mechanisms of resilience in children / adolescents and parents and ensure a beautiful development of the child / adolescent even during the pandemic.

The modalities of psychoeducational intervention for teachers can also be carried out individually or in groups.

The individual strategies should focus on the individual management of issues related to children / parents / colleagues or particular / personal situations.

The group strategies are the most common ways of psychoeducational intervention focused on information and training of skills/ abilities to manage the educational act during the pandemic and relationships with children, parents, colleagues.

Unfortunately, the pandemic has raised the issue of copyright for all psychoeducational courses and interventions for parents and teachers supported online.

The late adolescence, the student years

The student years were also deeply affected by the same pandemic contexts. Lack of socialization, working online and especially presenting

seminars without physical presence have strongly affected the well-being of students and their motivation for learning. The university libraries were also closed, especially those within the various universities, instead the large libraries, such as the National Library and the University Library of Bucharest, although they functioned, were difficult to access by students located in various other cities, at parents at home. This has happened in almost all major university centers in the country. Therefore, the access of students to a high-performance education was also denied. Isolation did not allow interpersonal knowledge, teamwork or research in the field, activities that usually increase students' motivation to deepen their knowledge in their chosen field of interest. The experience of the internship or a job in the chosen professional field, as well as the specialized practice were also blocked. The negative effects in terms of financial and personal independence, in terms of thorough experiential learning and student well-being were fully observed.

The psychoeducational intervention modalities accessed by the students were the individual ones online or face to face, the last ones being the most desired. Group optimization programs, harder to access online, were almost non-existent. Therefore, psychoeducational interventions have focused on activating resilience mechanisms, managing relationships with parents at an age when the need to detach from the nest is quite strong, maintaining well-being and productive management of learning. Also, working with personal anxiety, stress or depression caused by the pandemic was other important topics addressed in psychoeducational interventions. Managing one's own couple relationships or facilitating the knowledge of a partner that is difficult to achieve in the context of pandemic isolation and distancing has also sometimes left a strong mark on the learning-development process of students.

Lifelong learning - education and personal training - access to courses according to interests / postgraduate training / learning-development departments in companies

The need for lifelong learning and development also existed in the pandemic despite all the problems raised by the crisis of the virus outbreak and the increase in the number of illnesses and deaths. Perhaps this is the first time that the need to integrate more information related to the proper functioning and adaptation of humans to environmental conditions is more clearly highlighted. Professional courses have often been intertwined with seminars that have made it easier to understand disease prevention situations for children and adults, activate resilience mechanisms, manage stress, time and a healthy diet. Parenting courses focused on the efficient organization of the family system, personal, parental and marital life, school and extracurricular educational activities were also followed with interest especially by adults very connected to their children, who noticed a lot early on of the challenges they had to managed in the face of the pandemic. So

online courses have been in high demand despite all the challenges of life raised in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. Perhaps anxiety and the need to gain more control over one's life in such an uncertain external context has been an important driver for adults training and development.

Unfortunately, even in the context of adult courses, the issue of copyright has not been resolved.

Psychoeducation for the third age or what do we do with the elderly?

Clinical studies have shown that staying at home, isolation, lack of joyful activities, the absence of the rituals with which they were used to have led to a marked deterioration of cognitive functions in the elderly and a higher prevalence of depressive and anxious states with a negative impact on health. The lack of access to medical and cultural-educational services contributed to the faster physical and mental deterioration during this period.

The psychoeducational interventions for adults caring for their elderly at home should focus on:

- Transmission of information about the characteristics of the developmental stage;
- Information on how to stimulate and maintain well-being in order to improve quality of life;
- Training of skills for dealing with the elderly.

Psychoeducational interventions for the elderly should aim to provide information on what they can do to protect themselves and better maintain their health. Cultural workshops, communication workshops on various topics to maintain well-being, valuing on life experiences and sharing lessons learned were also interesting activities for the elderly.

Psychoeducational modalities have been successfully developed, especially in the community centers where the elderly are housed. The community in the center, protected from outside visits by loved ones, allowed workshops to increase well-being and slow down cognitive deterioration and depressive states as much as possible (absence of visits from loved ones, stopping trips and cultural visits, etc.). Unfortunately, the lives of the elderly who lived alone, away from grandchildren, children or were forced to stay locked up in the home were deeply affected, with cognitive deterioration accelerating. Personal management of life in loneliness has also been profoundly affected by poor functioning working memory or short-term memory. Medications not taken on time, going out without serious protection for shopping or simply for walking or socializing have often exposed the elderly to possible infection and illness. Psychoeducational interventions for the elderly have often been requested and honored by adults who have had to step up their protective and supportive actions for them. The solutions have always required a

personalized assessment of all resources and vulnerable elements in both the elderly and their families.

Conclusions

The educational process was severely affected by the pandemic, psychoeducational interventions for children, adolescents, adult parents and the elderly being in high demand during this period. Unfortunately, the contextual situations created by the pandemic are so varied and profound that they require personalized psychoeducational interventions. Individual / family interventions can be accompanied by group interventions to facilitate the access of as many people as possible to information and training for an efficient management of learning activities - development in pandemic and post-pandemic.

References

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