

How did COVID-19 affect young children's language environment and language development? A scoping review.

A child's communication environment is a critical determinant of their language development, which in turn impacts their later educational, social, and economic outcomes. The ramifications of COVID-19 significantly impacted children's language environments, exacerbating pre-existing disparities in language learning opportunities.

A dense body of research has investigated the impacts of COVID-19 on children's environments and their language development. The research to date is diverse: it analyses a wide range of environmental factors and domains of language and literacy, across various populations, developmental stages, and research sites. It uses quantitative and qualitative data gleaned from direct measures, parent/practitioner observations, secondary data analyses, and interventions. Research continues to emerge as families are followed post-pandemic. Despite (or perhaps because of) this rapid proliferation of research since 2020, the extent and nature of pandemic-related influences on young children's language environments and language development has not yet been scoped.

Our scoping review addresses this gap. Using the Joanna Briggs Institute methodology and the PRISMA extension for scoping reviews (Tricco et al., 2018), we synthesised the findings of 95 studies identified from a search of five databases. Eligible studies included neurotypical (monolingual or multilingual) 0-6-year-old children, and research focusing on any area of language development, including sources describing literacy or educational practices that impact language development. We focus on research conducted in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, unrestricted in terms of geographical location or language used by participants.

We will present the results of our scoping review, showing relevant environmental factors introduced by the pandemic, highlighting areas of language development analysed in the corpus, considering the association between environment and language development, and identifying gaps in current knowledge. We examine known influences on language development (which may have been exacerbated during the pandemic) as well as the effects of new environmental factors such as mask-wearing. As the pandemic has not impacted everyone equitably, these factors will include demographic mediators.

We reflect on our findings to make recommendations for researchers, families, practitioners, and policymakers supporting children as they move through education, and as they plan mitigations for comparable large-scale sociohistoric events.

Reference

Tricco, A. C., Lillie, E., Zarin, W., O'Brien, K. K., Colquhoun, H., Levac, D., ... & Straus, S. E. (2018). PRISMA extension for scoping reviews (PRISMA-ScR): checklist and explanation. *Annals of internal medicine*, 169(7), 467-473. <https://www.acpjournals.org/doi/10.7326/M18-0850>