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Editorial Coverage

CHILDREN'S RELATIONSHIP WITH OUTDOORS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC PERIOD

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On March 11, The World Health Organization (WHO) announced that, the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is a global pandemic. Since then, this disease continues to effect people throughout the World from many aspects such as economic, physical and psychological. The first case in Turkey was confirmed by the Ministry of Health on the March 11, 2020. On 13th of March it is announced that schools that are giving primary and secondary level education have been stopped for one week and higher level education institutions for three weeks. However, later it was decided not to open any of the education institutions until the following academic year.

Following the rapid increase in the COVID-19 cases, a strict curfew period involving children, adolescents and elderly were taken. Starting from the 5th of April, children, and youth younger than 20 years and elderly people that are older than 65 were not allowed to go outside. Considering that there are 25.5 million children and youth younger than 20 years live in Turkey, this means that 31% of the total population in addition to the elderly population has been locked down. Not only psychological but also physical effects of being lockdown affected these populations.

Especially children who need to spend time outdoors and play as their physical, psychological, social, and cognitive development were affected the most. Because of the closure of kindergartens, primary and secondary schools, children continued their education with distant education methods. Additionally, certain limitations on the use of open green spaces were also announced that led children to lose their outdoor leisure time in schools and in parks. After being lockdown for three months, on the 3rd of June, restrictions were eased and people aged under 18 were allowed to spend time outside with their parents with time and location limitations. After three months children got their freedom although it is limited. Ministry of Home affairs announced certain new limitations and rules on the 18th of November and since then, children and youth under age of 18 still have limited access to outdoors. All of these limitations caused a serious impact on their level of independent mobility that led to crucial psychological and physical health issues along with developmental concerns.

As it has been mentioned in the literature repeatedly, spending time outdoors especially for playing [1, 2] provide opportunities for healthy physical, mental and cognitive development, socializing with others, higher levels of independent mobility, activity level and independence [3, 4, 5, 6]. Today, there is also a debate about whether 21st century children spend enough time outside compared to previous generations. Depending on the academic studies, while some contemporary children spend time outside by playing, exploring, and interacting with nature, majority of them are

categorized as having indoor childhoods. Nevertheless, because of this pandemic all children became addicted to indoors. Spending time outdoors provide many benefits for children such as increasing their physical, mental, and cognitive development, providing higher levels of physical activity, independence, socialization and more self-confidence related with independent mobility [5, 6, 7]. Considering all these, research it is possible to say that when children loose connection with outdoors they lose their abilities on independent mobility, self-confidence and chances for development through socialization.

In addition to governmental restrictions, fear, uncertainty and concerns related to the spread of COVID-19 made it really hard for families to keep a sense of calm. Parental concerns on the wellbeing, education, safety, keeping healthy routines and manage the emotions of their children led to problems that affected not only the children but all members of the families.

As an initial response to the COVID-19 outbreak and rules on physical distancing and behaviours in outdoors, along with overall instructions to ‘stay home’ and lack of access to open play opportunities, families started to develop solutions and guidance to preserve healthy routines, including healthy movement behaviours and methods to entertain and educate their children at home environments [8, 9].

The studies focusing on the outcomes of COVID-19 Pandemic on children and their families highlight the importance of developing right solutions as this generation of young children may likely spend much of their critical early childhood period influenced by the Pandemic. So it is both a challenge and also a need for, a balance of disease prevention and active healthy life in outdoors. Accordingly, parents and health care providers may guide efforts to preserve and promote child health during the COVID-19 outbreak and crisis recovery period, and inform strategies to mitigate potential harm during future pandemics.

We almost completed a year with strict limitations regarding the use of outdoors in Turkey and we start to witness the results of a year that has passed with limited freedom on mobility. We think that as Lawson Foundation highlights, access and being able to actively use of the outdoors is undervalued and disregarded as an important tool to fight with the negative aspects of COVID-19 especially in children's settings [10]. Creating and easing the possibilities for kids to play outside will most likely result with significant and immediate positive results for both public health COVID-19 control methods and critical child development and learning.

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