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**Original article** 

## **Emotional implications for Early Childhood Education** teachers and families during the pandemic in Spain

Implicaciones emocionales en maestros de Educación Infantil y las familias en pandemia en España

Implicações emocionais em professores e famílias da Educação Infantil em uma pandemia na Espanha

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### ABSTRACT

Due to the pandemic suffered by COVID-19, a unique situation of confinement has been experienced so far, with the consequent closure of schools and businesses worldwide. The objective of this study has been to analyze the emotional implications of this confinement on children in Early Childhood Education, their parents and in their teachers. For this purpose, an exploratory study has been developed, through two online questionnaires, applied to a sample of 1235 teachers of public, private and concerted schools of Children's Education of all the Autonomous Communities of Spain and 1266 families with sons and daughters who attend these centers (aged between 0 and 6 years). This questionnaire has been answered during the most restrictive confinement in Spain, during the months of April and May 2020. The results show that confinement has produced changes at the emotional level in both parents and their sons and daughters, with statistically significant differences, depending on various variables analyzed. This situation has also generated differences in the perception of stress on the part of teachers has not felt to have the necessary training to be able to face this new reality.

**Keywords:** well-being; Early Childhood family involvement; Education; teacher training.

### RESUMEN

Debido a la pandemia sufrida por el COVID-19, se ha vivido una situación única hasta el momento, confinamiento, el con el consiguiente cierre de colegios y negocios a nivel mundial. El objetivo de este estudio ha sido analizar qué implicaciones emocionales

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ha conllevado este confinamiento en niños y de educación infantil, niñas en sus progenitores y en sus maestros y maestras. Es por ello por lo que se ha desarrollado un estudio exploratorio a través de dos cuestionarios en línea aplicados a una muestra de 1 235 docentes de escuelas públicas, privadas y concertadas de Educación Infantil de todas las Comunidades Autónomas de España y de 1 266 familias con hijos e hijas que asisten a dichos centros (con edades comprendidas entre los 0 v 6 años). Este cuestionario se ha respondido durante el confinamiento más restrictivo en España, en los meses de abril y mayo de 2020. Los resultados muestran que el aislamiento ha producido cambios a nivel emocional tanto en progenitores como en sus e hijas, existiendo diferencias hijos estadísticamente significativas en función de las diversas variables analizadas, como el número de hijos o su año de nacimiento. Esta situación de confinamiento también ha generado, a su vez, diferencias en la percepción del estrés por parte de los docentes, que no han tenido la formación necesaria para poder afrontar esta nueva realidad.

**Palabras clave:** bienestar; Educación Infantil; formación del profesorado; participación familiar.

### RESUMO

Devido à pandemia sofrida pelo COVID-19, vive-se até ao momento uma situação única, o confinamento, com o consequente encerramento de escolas e empresas em todo o mundo. O objetivo deste estudo foi analisar quais as implicações emocionais que esse confinamento trouxe em meninos e meninas na educação infantil, em seus pais e em seus professores. É por isso que um estudo exploratório foi desenvolvido através de dois questionários online aplicados a uma amostra de 1.235 professores de escolas

públicas, privadas e de educação infantil em todas as Comunidades Autônomas da Espanha e 1.266 famílias com filhos e filhas que frequentam esses centros ( idade entre 0 e 6 años). Este questionário foi respondido durante o confinamento mais restritivo da Espanha, nos meses de abril e maio de 2020. Os resultados mostram que o isolamento produziu mudanças a nível emocional tanto nos pais como nos filhos e filhas, com diferenças estatisticamente significativas em função as diversas variáveis analisadas, como o número de filhos ou o ano de nascimento. Essa situação de confinamento também gerou, por sua vez, diferenças na percepção do estresse por parte dos professores, que não tiveram a formação necessária para poder enfrentar essa nova realidade.

**Palavras-chave:** bem-estar; Educação infantil; treinamento de professor; envolvimento da família.

## INTRODUCTION

The World Health Organization (WHO) in January 2020 declared that an international public health emergency was taking place due to the health crisis derived from the respiratory disease called COVID-19, which began at the end of 2019, after a global transmission (Cortegianiet al., 2020). The seriousness is reflected in the fact that in two years almost 90,000 people have died from COVID-19 in Spain (John Hopkins University, 2021). Faced with this situation, society has had to face complex challenges in all areas, which has had a strong impact on the emotional health of citizens (Hernández, 2020). From this perspective, emotions and social problems have an intimate interconnection and, therefore, with a health emergency such as the one

experienced, citizens have seen the normal functioning of the community threatened (Núñez *et al.*, 2020).

One of the measures adopted globally to contain the pandemic was social isolation confinement or *lock-out* - in a preventive and mandatory way, involving the restriction of movement and the suspension of activities, which included the closure of schools and universities. Although initially this fact is a relief for a part of the student body, after months of lack of socialization and interaction with their peers, in addition to the absence of spaces to develop activities or carry out the usual leisure, it could lead to a great problem to long term, affecting them psychologically (Cifuentes-Faura, 2020).

Similarly, in this unprecedented scenario of social distancing, families and teachers have had to face a challenge of enormous dimensions that has put into play the cognitive, emotional and social skills of all the actors involved (Román et al., 2020), having to combine work and family life in the same space, suddenly and unexpectedly. Likewise, they have faced a new situation of stress, being immersed in an uncertain context due to the uncontrolled expansion of the virus. From one day to the next, all the children had to stay at home, stopping going to school, doing sports or having contact with their friends and, in turn, the parents had to take care of their children24 hours a day, in addition to having to work from home in most cases.

According to UNESCO (2020), the suppression of face-to-face activity in educational centers entails high costs, exacerbating the differences between all people, especially for the most vulnerable boys and girls. They also place teachers as a significant agent affected by stress and confusion in this context, in which they have been put under a lot of pressure unexpectedly and for uncertain periods of time, due to a lack of previous experience on how to deal with their obligations and how to establish the connection with the students to support their curricular learning, suddenly transforming the teaching methodology. These same feelings have occurred in parents, having to collaborate in distance education from home and often finding it difficult to carry out this task.

With all this, there is no doubt that confinement has caused, as one of its most relevant consequences, different emotional implications in families, minors and teachers. This means that there have been important changes in the emotional experience, understood as the behavioral reaction of the organism to stimuli that can cause us pleasure, pain, reward or punishment (Mora, 2012), having an adaptive, social and motivational function (Reeve, 1994). In this sense, emotional well-being, constituted mainly by elements such as affectivity and personal satisfaction with life (Pelechanoet al., 2005), becomes a fundamental aspect to guarantee that people have resources to analyze, face and mitigate the effects of adverse conditions that may have arisen (García, 2017).

According to Dueñas (2002): "all people need to feel emotionally secure, that is, to have feelings of well-being and emotional stability" (p. 86). However, it should be noted that the general vision of the educational community focuses on two ideas that can alter emotional health. On the one hand, the "concern" about the uncertain future in terms of security conditions, as well as the development of the Teaching-Learning Processes and the emotional state of the students. This is due, among other associated factors, to the fact that the initial training in emotional competence of teachers may be insufficient (Mattern and Bauer, 2014; Pérez-Escoda et al., 2013; Pena & Extremera, 2012; Pena &Repetto, 2008);

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Pertegal- Felices *et al.*, 2009; Van Uden, Ritzen &Pieters, 2013; Vesely, Saklofske & Nordstokke, 2014) On the other hand, teachers express "hope" for having a high resilience capacity, adapting to the situation that has occurred and getting stronger (Trujillo-Sáez *et al.*, 2020).

In times of pandemic, it is considered pertinent that both teachers and families are able to become a support for the containment of feelings or emotions, to prevent certain situations such as the one that occurred from altering the mental health of people exposed to it, as well as being promoters of resilience, developing skills that contribute to overcoming adversity, and in an emotional advisor (Villafuerte et al., 2020). In order to carry out this complex task, it is key that teachers have adequate emotional well-being, which depends "on the context in which teachers carry out their activity, on social beliefs about teaching and cultural regulation of the emotional world" (De Pablos, González & González, 2008, p. 48).

In a nationwide survey conducted in the United States (Patrick et al., 2020), the data showed that 27% of the parents surveyed noted a deterioration in their mental health, this being 14% for children and 10% for % for the worst behaved children; all of which is consistent with the research carried out by Bartlett, Griffin & Thomson (2020) and Gassman-Pines, Ananat &Fitz-Henley (2020), which concluded that the emotional well-being of both parents and children worsened after the lockdown. Along these same lines, the response that children give to stressful situations such as confinement are unique and varied (Morelli et al., 2020; Prime, Wade & Browne, 2020). For his part, Jiaoet al. (2020) concluded that the emotional implications that confinement has entailed have been greater irritability, lack of attention, sleep problems and decreased appetite, among others.

On the other hand, studies have been carried out that identify that teachers have suffered an increase in stress and insecurity when dealing with this new situation, both in Early Childhood education (Bassoket *al.*, 2020) and in primary school (Moss *et al.*, 2020) or in secondary school (Ramos- Huenteo*et al.*, 2020).

Different investigations (Spinelli *et al.*, 2020; United Nations, 2020) have indicated that, during confinement, the emotional wellbeing of children has been impaired, among other reasons, by the stress suffered by the parents, affecting their behavior (WHO, 2020). UNICEF (2020) also points out that strong mental and physical deterioration has been detected in children during the pandemic. It therefore seems important to analyze the emotional implications for parents, children and teachers during the pandemic in Spain.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

The sample of this study is made up, on the one hand, of 1,235 teachers from early childhood education centers in Spain, of which 90.7% are women and 9.3% are men. On the other hand, there was a sample of 1,266 families with children attending these centers, 87.5% being mothers, 12.3% parents and 0.02% legal guardians. With regard to teachers, 72% work in public centers, 18.9% in private schools and 7.9% in private centers; teaching first cycle (0-3) 35.7% of cases, second cycle (3-6) 56.4% and both cycles 7.9%. Their employment situation, as a result of the COVID-19 crisis, has remained unchanged on 82.6% of occasions.

On the other hand, all families have children born between 2014 and 2019 who attend public (59.2%), concerted (29.3%) and

private (11.5%) centers. Furthermore, half of the families have two children, while 42.3% have one and 7.3% have three or more. Lastly, the majority of minors attend public schools (59.2%), while 29.3% attend state-subsidized schools and 11.5% private schools.

## Instruments

The present work is a descriptive study, for which the survey has been used as an instrument, and in which the information has been collected from two questionnaires designed *ad hoc*. The first of them is aimed at teachers, while the second is aimed at families.

The questionnaire for teachers consists of 19 items made up of closed-ended questions and Likert scales (1-6). This questionnaire is composed, on the one hand, of a section of closed questions that are linked to personal and socio-occupational characteristics and, on the other, of Likert scales in which a score of 6 corresponds to "completely agree" and a score of 1 with "strongly disagree". This second part of the questionnaire measures the perception of teachers about their educational tools and training, and about aspects related to the contact established with families.

The questionnaire for families consists of 28 questions. The closed questions that constitute the first part of the questionnaire are linked to personal issues and those related to the socioeconomic status of the families. The second part consists of a 1-6 Likert scale in which the educational activities carried out during confinement, the routines and the perception of well-being by the families, the educational skills of the parents, the contact established with the center's educational consequences of the pandemic.

### Process

The present study took place during the suspension of face-to-face educational activity caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. To do this, during the months of April and May 2020, the questionnaires were sent by email to the educational centers and their collaboration was requested to forward the second questionnaire to the families of the students enrolled in early childhood education.

To do this, a database was created with more than 5,000 centers from all the Autonomous Communities and Cities of Spain that provide first and second cycles of early childhood education, which made it possible to analyze information from all Spanish regions (Table 1).

**Table 1-** Sample of centers and families (%)by Autonomous Community/City

Autonomous Community/City	centers	families
Andalusia	19.8	14.5
Aragon	6.3	1.9
Asturias	5.2	3.7
Balearics	8.3	11.6
Canary Islands	4.9	1.1
Cantabria	1.8	0.4
Castilla la Mancha	11.4	13.5
Castile and Leon	1.4	0.7
Catalonia	13.6	11.4
Ceuta	1.1	0.8
Valencian Community	4.8	13.5
Estremadura	3.3	1.6
Galicia	2.1	0.9
Madrid	4.6	15.8
Melilla	0.2	0.0
Murcia	0.6	0.2
Navarre	1.7	0.2
Basque Country	7.9	7.9
Rioja	0.2	0.0
Not indicated	0.8	0.2

## Analysis of data

First, an exploratory examination of the main variables considered was carried out. Next, the experimentation of changes in the minors and in the parents was analyzed according to the number of children and their age and the educational level of the families. In addition, in the case of teachers, the perception of having the necessary tools to face the educational situation in confinement was studied, in relation to the type of center in which they worked and the cycle they taught.

In order to study the distribution of the variables, the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was used , which revealed that the data do not fit a normal distribution. For this reason, a non-parametric perspective was adopted using the Kruskal-Wallis H test, establishing a significance level of 0.05. Data analysis was performed using the statistical package SPSS version 25.

## RESULTS

# **1.** Emotional well-being of children and families

The results show that the confinement situation has caused changes in the wellbeing of families. In this sense, 27% of families strongly agree that their children have experienced changes in mood, while 34.2% strongly agree that they have suffered changes in mood themselves (table 2). **Table 2-** Degree of agreement (%) of the familieswith the existence of changes in their children andin themselves on a scale of 1-6

	degree of agreement						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	
Changes in the minor	13.7	9.7	9.2	21.2	19.1	27.1	
Changes in the parent	6.5	4.9	10	20.3	24	34.3	

Among the reasons for the changes mentioned, the existence of greater irascibility stands out, both in the minors and in the parents (65.9% and 60.9% respectively), as well as greater disobedience on the part of the former (58.9%) and less patience in the latter (61.6%) (Table 3).

**Table 3** - Changes produced in minors andfamilies (%)

	less patie nce	more irasci ble	more disobed ient	mo re sle ep	eat wor se	Posit ive chan ges
Chan ges in the minor	Does not apply	65.9	58.9	39. 2	26	13.7
Chan ges in the paren t	61.6	60.9	Does not apply	59. 8	23.5	10.2

The Kruskal-Wallis H test shows statistically significant differences in the existence of emotional changes in parents, depending on the year of birth of their children (H=16.527; gl =5; p=0.005). This test also reveals changes in minors according to the number of children in the family (H=7.791; gl =2; p=0.020) and the educational level of the parents (H=14.972; gl =5; p=0.010).

However, the results do not reveal statistically significant differences in the existence of changes in the parents, depending on the number of children (H=0.727; gl =2; p=0.695) or their own

educational level (H=7.729; gl =5, P=0.172). Nor has the existence of statistically significant differences been demonstrated in relation to the changes in minors according to their year of birth (H=7.183; gl =5; p=0.207).

Additionally, tables 4 and 5 show the conditioned distributions for the grade, according to the existence of emotional changes in the parent and in the minors, respectively, for each category of the variables that have been statistically significant.

**Table 4-** Degree of agreement (%) of the parents with the existence of emotional changes in themselves on a scale of 1-6 in relation to the year of birth.

		Degree of agreement with the existence of changes in the parent						
		1	2	3	4	5	6	
Total sample		6.5	4.9	10	20.3	24	34.3	
Year of	2014	8.1	5.6	10.6	20.8	23.9	31.1	
birth	2015	6.8	4.7	7.3	17.3	25.7	38.2	
	2016	5.7	7.4	11.1	21.3	20.1	34.4	
	2017	2,3	3.6	6.8	23.4	25.2	38.7	
	2018	6.5	3.0	11.9	15.9	28.9	33.8	
	2019	12.9	3.5	14.1	24.7	17.6	27.1	

In this sense, the parents who state that they "strongly agree" with having experienced emotional changes to a greater extent are those with children born in 2015 and 2017, standing above the total percentage of the sample (34.3%). At the opposite extreme, the case of relatives with children born in 2019 stands out, who only "strongly agree" with having experienced emotional changes in 27.1 % of cases and "strongly disagree" in 12 .9%. **Table 5-** Degree of agreement (%) of the parents with the existence of emotional changes in their children on a scale of 1-6 in relation to the number of children and educational level of the families.

		Degree of agreement with the existence of changes in the child							
		1 2 3 4 5 6							
Total sample		13.7	9.7	9.2	21.2	19.1	27.1		
Number of	one	16.1	8.6	10.5	21.1	19.3	24.3		
children	two	11.1	11.1	7.7	23.4	19.4	27.3		
	3 or more	17.8	6.7	10.0	5.6	13.3	46.7		
Educational level of families	Primary	15.3	6.8	5.9	21.2	11.9	39.0		
	FP	13.3	6.3	6.3	19.6	22.0	32.5		
	baccalaureate	12.6	9.9	10.6	10.5	17.9	28.5		
	Grade	14.5	11.1	10.0	22.3	20.8	21.3		
	Master	11.8	11.2	11.8	22.5	16.3	26.4		
	Doctorate	9.1	18.2	9.1	13.6	13.6	36.4		

Regarding the number of children, it should be considered that those families with three or more children are the ones who, to a greater extent, have shown themselves to be "very much in agreement" that their children experienced emotional have changes (46.7%), This figure is notably higher than that of families with one (24.3%) or two children (27.3%) and that of the total sample (27.1%). On the other hand, although large families are also the ones that have most "strongly disagreed" with this statement (17.8%), the percentage, in this case, is very close to that of the other two groups (16.1% and 11.1%).

In addition, it should be noted that those family members who have a primary education level are the ones who present the highest percentages, both for the level of agreement (39%) and for the level "strongly disagree" (15.3%), standing at their responses at opposite poles of the scale. On the other hand, parents with a doctorate educational level have also shown "strongly in agreement" (36.4%) with the existence of emotional changes in their children, to a greater extent than family members who have reached different educational levels, except for families with primary education.

# **2.** Insecurity and stress on the part of teachers

The results also show that early childhood education teachers are suffering the consequences of the changes produced in teaching, as a result of the necessary distance education during periods of confinement. In this sense, only 77.2% show some agreement with having sufficient training to perform this task, being little (33.2%), quite a lot (27.8%) or totally (16.2%) in agreement with this statement. However, only 22.8% believe that they do not have the necessary and sufficient knowledge to carry out this activity (totally disagree 1.9 %, disagree 8% and somewhat disagree 12.9%)

The Kruskal-Wallis H test has revealed the existence of statistically significant differences in the perception of teacher training itself depending on the cycle taught by the teachers (H=10.833; df =2; p=0.004) and the ownership of the center educational (H=49.861; df =2; p=0.000).

Additionally, table 6 shows the conditioned distributions of the grade according to the teachers' having adequate training for each category of the variable cycle and type of center.

**Table 6-** Degree of agreement (%) of teachers with having adequate training on a scale of 1-6 for each cycle taught

		Degree of agreement with training tenure (%)					
		1	2	3	4	5	6
Total san	nple	1.9	8	12.9	33.2	27.8	16.2
Cycle	First	2.5	6.8	12.7	29.9	24.9	23.1
-	Second	1.7	9.3	12.3	36.4	28.1	12.1
	Both of them	1.0	4.1	17.5	24.7	38.1	14.4
center	Public	2.1	9.3	14.3	36.0	26.2	12.0
type	Private	2.7	4.5	11.6	27.7	16.1	37.5
	Concerted	0.9	4.7	8.1	25.2	39.3	21.8

The results show that the teachers who teach the first cycle of early childhood education

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are the ones who, to a greater extent, have shown themselves to be "strongly in agreement" with having sufficient training tools to be able to exercise their teaching function (23%); meanwhile, those who teach, both cycles and second cycle, have claimed to be "strongly in agreement" in a proportion below 15%. However, it should be considered that the difference between the last two groups for the next continuum value ("agree") is 10 percentage points in favor of the teachers in charge of both cycles.

With regard to the ownership of educational centers, the highest percentage of teachers who consider themselves "strongly in agreement" with having adequate training is those who work in private centers (37.5%), followed by those who carry out their teaching work in private schools (21.8%) and, lastly, in public centers (12%). In this sense, the high number of teachers from who have concerted schools shown themselves "agree" with having such training (39.3%) stands out. In the case of public centers, despite the fact that only 2.1% have been situated in said lower value, it should be noted that a high 9.3% have shown themselves to "disagree" with having said training.

## DISCUSSION

We are living a moment of uncertainty that affects the whole society. It is not known how long the health situation in which we are immersed will last after the social isolation experienced in the months of March to June 2020 due to COVID-19, nor if more restrictive measures will be applied in the future. It is because of this complicated and unique situation so far that it has been analyzed how confinement has affected the emotional development of children, how their parents and teachers have coped.

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The confinement has affected the three groups differently; although it has meant for all of them to stop going to the center of studies or work (except for some professions considered essential, such as health, logistics, postal services, agriculture and livestock, and supermarkets or State security forces and bodies, among others), not being able to do outdoor activities and stop having contact with their usual environment, among others. Teachers have had to face the new situation of having virtual contact with their students. Children have had to socialize in a different way, being their school contact through Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) and families have had to assume the role of full-time teacher and father or mother, while they have had to telecommute from home. For all this, we wanted to investigate how each mentioned group has coped emotionally.

The main conclusions derived from this study are that the situation of confinement has produced changes at the emotional level in families -parents and children-, according to the parents' perception. Almost 50% agree that this situation has produced changes in the mood of their children, among which the increase in irascibility and disobedience stand out in more than half of the cases. These data coincide with other research carried out at the national level in Spain. For example, Berasategui et al. (2020) show that more than half of the children interviewed (N=1,046) cry more, are more nervous and sadder, and tend to get angrier. For their part, Erades and Sabuco (2020) asked parents (N=113) with children between 3 and 12 years of age and found as a result that almost 70% stated that their children had negative emotional reactions during confinement, 31% sleep problems and almost one in four, behavioral problems. On the other hand, almost 60% of the parents' state that they "strongly agree" or agree that they have suffered changes in their mood, among which it is worth mentioning the

increase in irascibility and the decrease in patience in more than 60 % of the cases. These data coincide with other research that points to the same line Bravo-Gómez and Oviedo-Gutiérrez (2020) and Cifuentes-Faura (2020), which highlight these effects on more vulnerable families. The data provided here also coincide with Sandín*et al.* (2020), who point out that confinement has negative effects on emotional well-being.

Of the variables analyzed in parents and children, the one that has most influenced the former has been the year of birth of their children, this being more pronounced in those who are in the middle of the stage, that is, whose children are between two and a half years and five and a half years. The variables that have most influenced the emotional state of minors have been the number of children, with three or more being the most pronounced case, and the educational level of the parents, being the Primary level in which they have felt these changes the most. emotional.

On the other hand, it can be seen that more than 20% of teachers feel that they do not have the necessary training to adequately deal with this situation. In addition, it has been detected that being in a public school and in the second cycle (3-6 years) increases this feeling of lack of training.

This is why, as future lines of work, the training of teachers in ICT skills is proposed, in such a way that it allows them to have greater security for their normal professional development; This would be very useful in the event that schools are closed again, as well as serve to deepen the study of the needs of teachers and families so that they can have sufficient tools to face this new situation derived from the COVID-19 and being able to accompany their children optimally in the development of their schooling in any situation.

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## **Conflict of interests:**

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

## **Authors' contribution:**

The authors have participated in the writing of the work and analysis of the documents.



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