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## in Crisis: Early Detection of Young Children's Mental Health During the Covid-19 Pandemic in Indonesia

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#### **Abstract**

The Covid-19 pandemic has an impact on every aspect of human life, one of which is the mental health of the children. There are drastic changes in the child's life cycle and activities that cause mood fluctuations, feelings of sadness, fear, that cause excessive stress reactions. The Covid-19 pandemic is a difficult situation for children, even the impact affects their future. Therefore, there is a need for early detection to track children's mental health. This research aimed to inform teachers' in Bekasi city of their understanding of children's mental health conditions during the Covid-19 pandemic. The purpose of this research is that teachers will have skills in early detection of mental health in children. The method employed descriptive analysis and used survey methods, and questionnaires in collecting the data. The results of this study reveal that early detection knowledge is very important to be understood by teachers as a preventive step in preventing young children's mental health disorders in the future, so that children can be productive and active again to live their lives.

**Keywords:** children; early detection; mental health; pandemic; teacher understanding

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#### Introduction

When the outbreak of Covid-19 spread widely throughout the country, all aspects of supporting human life like the economic, political, to educational fields have been drastically changed. This new condition with all its policy formulations causes significant changes to human life, especially children. For example, in the world of education, face-to-face teaching learning processes are totally closed. Even at the beginning of the outbreak, to cope with the crisis, teaching and learning are done from home by utilizing computer apps. like Zoom, GMeet or even WhatsApp so. Children's living environment is then limited and they do not have the opportunity to socialize with their peers in school, though we know that the school environment is one place that can stimulate children's social development. The situation during a pandemic is something new for children, despite the fact that children tend to respond quickly to changing conditions, the Covid-19 outbreak spreads very quickly, affecting the policies and activities of humans all over the world.

The Covid-19 outbreak certainly has a huge impact on children, one of which is mental health. Mental health in children is recognizing the relationship between concepts that are intertwined with family values, society, cultural standards, social expectations, and the development of self-capacity (UNICEF, 2021). The latest UNICEF data (2021) shows that annually around 46,000 children and adolescents commit suicide, during the pandemic, it was reported that adolescent often felt depressed and had low interest in doing something. In Indonesia, according to the results of the RISDAKES report in 2018 by Ditjen P2P (2020), under the age of 15 around 12 million people felt depression and around 19 million people had emotional mental disorders. Conditions worsened due to excessive worry and anxiety about the transmission of Covid-19 (Isella et al., 2021). Many things have since changed drastically, especially in the education and economic sectors. In the case of young children, face-to-face learning is crucial to assess their holistic development. During Covid-19, an alternative way for children to be able to carry out socialization as well as learning is through internet devices. At the beginning of the implementation of distance learning, it faced a lot of controversies. The main issue in Indonesian education is the uneven distribution of internet access and technological sophistication. Furthermore, sudden changes to the learning material design added to the problem. At the early childhood education level, distance learning can be difficult to implement since it cannot directly assess children's development, which can only be accessed through screens.

The problems then continued, when the teacher looking in real conditions, early childhood is not used to participating in online learning (in the network). Teaching staff also have difficulty adapting to the latest learning system. Unfortunately, these digital devices actually further hinder children's social interactions while at home, decreasing physical health and decreasing psychosocial health (Pratiwi, 2020). Commonly when screen time can not be controlled, it will lead to addiction and result in tantrums as their desire is not fulfilled. With all the above conditions and obstacles, it seems that children are forced to adapt to the exigency very quickly. Children's adaptive behavior during a pandemic can be used as a sign of the emergence of child psychological disorders (Luca Pisano, Domenico Galimi, 2020). This was then reinforced by the results of various studies during the Covid-19 pandemic, children were more emotional, had difficulty focusing, were aggressive, and had no enthusiasm to do anything (Isella et al., 2021).

This study aims to fill in the gaps in the literature on mental health in early childhood. One of the research that was conducted and the title is "Maintaining mental health stability for early childhood in the new normal era" discussing how to maintain the mental stability of early childhood in the new normal era (Saripudin, 2022). The other relevant research entitled "Children's Mental Health in the Time of COVID-19: How Things Stand and the Aftermath" which discusses mental health, focused on family interaction and there is no way of early detection as a form of early protection (Ramadhan, etc., 2020). The research entitled "Problems of Development and Mental Health in Children Aged 6-12 During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Analysis of Cross-Cultural Research Results" discusses psychosocial differences between continents and child interventions, but does not explicitly discuss how teachers' abilities in detecting and intervening in child mental health (Tinambunan, etc. 2021). Meanwhile, this study focuses on early detection of mental health as a prevention carried out by teachers. Thus, there is a need for early detection to track children's mental health. The limitation of this research is the early detection carried out by the teacher as one of the parties who impart knowledge in schools to children. This research is aimed at teachers in order that they can fully understand students' mental health conditions so that teachers can adjust the teaching and learning they provide.

### Methodology

This study employed a quantitative approach that involves the process of collecting, analyzing, interpreting and writing the results of the research. (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The

method used is descriptive analysis. Researchers want to get an overview of the data that has been taken as a representation of teachers' understanding of children's mental health during the Covid-19 pandemic. In this study, researchers used a survey method with a questionnaire as a data collection technique to generalize opinions from the sample to the population (Fowler, 2014). The sample in this study is 59 teachers in Bekasi City. The sample is direct sampling by using clustering (Babbie, 2014). The questionnaire contains closed questions, so respondents are only allowed to choose answers that have been provided by the researcher. The instrument contains limited exploration of teachers' understanding of children's mental health during a pandemic. Researchers provide a consent sheet for respondents for their willingness to be involved in data collection processes.

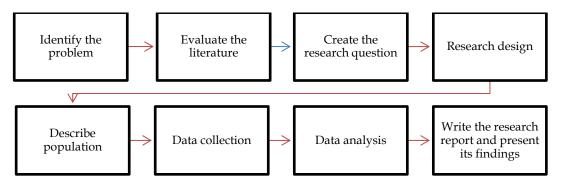


Diagram 1. Research Design Process

#### **Results and Discussion**

#### Concept of Early Childhood Growth and Development

Early childhood is an individual who is experiencing a golden phase in growth and development. The concept of growth is where the aspects within the individual can be measured in the form of numbers. Meanwhile, the concept of development is systematic and continuous, such as cognitive, physical-motor, language, art, moral, and social-emotional. To achieve optimal growth and development, it is necessary to provide stimulation given to children according to their age and development. Stimulation has to be given by the adult who is closest with children, such as parents and reinforcement can be given by the teacher at school (Rantina, Hasmalena, & Nengsih, 2021).

The survey results showed that 67.8% of teachers understood the concept of early childhood growth and development. As many as 89.9% of teachers know the definition of mental health and 93.2% are familiar with the types of mental health disorders in children. As many as 73.9% or 34 people answered correctly when the teacher was faced with a difficult condition for someone who felt unable to do something because he was in trouble. The role of early childhood educators is to facilitate children in constructing knowledge and experiences accurately. In addition, preschool teachers are required to have a participatory observer role, useful in designing learning materials according to children's needs. The most important role for a preschool teacher is to motivate and reinforce children, especially during difficult times (Maryatun, 2016). Therefore, when these roles are applied, the teacher will automatically know and be able to provide preventive measures to prevent children from experiencing mental disorders during difficult times. Difficult situations in dealing with everyday life both at home and in the social environment. Difficult situations can be in the form of social conflicts, nonnatural disasters, or when facing the Covid-19 pandemic situation. The Covid-19 pandemic is also a difficult situation for children, and the impact will even affect their future lives. This is due to a shift in children's lifestyles and socio-economic conditions which have quite a complicated impact on children (Hasbi, 2022). This should be an important note for the teacher to understand and recognize a child's difficult situation.

#### Types of mental health disorder in children's

The process of growth and development is the raising of human ability as the result of a maturity process (Nardina et al., 2022). Human growth and development has started from the prenatal period or before birth. The process of growth and development in early childhood is the most important period and cannot be missed, since it becomes a benchmark in determining further development. Early childhood is also the right time to develop aspects of development such as language, physical-motor, social-emotional, self-concept, art, morals and religious values (Ariyanti, 2016). In addition, many aspects of development are interrelated and reinforce one another. The process of optimal child growth and development is influenced by genetic factors and the biological, physical and psychosocial environment (Solicha & Na'imah, 2020). In fact, in the process of child development, it cannot be separated from external factors that influence it. Basic needs in the development of children should provide willingness to teach, love, and care. According to Alifiani & Maharani (2012) care needs include biological aspects, such as food, shelter, and clothing; the need for compassion is the need for affection and a sense of security given to children; while teaching is a mental stimulation in the learning process of children and honing children's abilities. These three aspects can support the child's growth and development process to be optimal. The results of the survey that has been conducted, as much as 71.7% of the respondents understand what aspects are needed in developing the child's growth and development process. There are several detailed aspects of which are aspects of biological needs such as a sense of security, affection and teaching abilities. Some of these aspects ultimately become important keys for children to undergo an ideal growth and development processes.

#### Early detection by teacher

The teacher's knowledge of early detection of young children's mental health disorders is 15.3%. Referring to the survey results, it is necessary to emphasize early detection. This helps prevent problems that cause mental health. It is better to detect problems or causes earlier so that they can be strengthened with more optimal support system (Costello, 2016). Early detection in early childhood regarding mental health problems certainly has a big impact on the stability of children's enthusiasm for learning both academic and non-academic, minimizing mental health problems when children are teenagers and adults, and provides intervention as early as possible to avoid unwanted things (Cuellar, 2015; Deighton et al., 2018). In previous research it was found that if early detection is carried out then appropriate interventions are carried out at a term that does not expire, it will have a positive effect on children's social emotional development. The education process continues to be given to early childhood teachers. This is intended to increase the knowledge of preschool teachers. The improvement of early detection skills for mental health can be provided in the form of seminars or workshops. The workshops are presented through practical actions by educational institutions collaborating with psychological counseling agencies that have professional staff to increase awareness about the importance of mental health in children, both among teachers and parents. However, the carrying capacity is limited, there are still many teachers who do not have access to this education. Of course, the stimulation for PAUD students is different from the identification of teachers in secondary schools. In assessing students' mental health, teachers should understand new insights into early childhood development and experiences. if not all symptoms are exhibited at the same time or at the same level of intensity. This is because the forms of children's expression are so abstract that it is difficult to distinguish between depressed students and demoralized students (Johnson et al., 2011). Therefore, it is very important that teachers are well trained to recognize the red flags of potential mental health conditions.

#### Impact of the pandemic on children's mental health

The difficult situation of Covid-19 has a lasting impact on children. The pandemic situation is considered as a separation with a long span of time from daily social activities. According to Nurfitiriyanie & Kurniawati (2023) the children can suffer from separation anxiety disorder (SAD) when experiencing a separation situation for at least 4 weeks. Mental health conditions during the pandemic experienced mood fluctuations, feeling sad, afraid, and causing excessive stress reactions. Thus, mental health conditions will lead to developmental disabilities. The impact of mental disorders on children can appear later in their life, this is due to family resilience factors such as the economy, parenting during a pandemic, prolonged isolation and learning loss (Sonartra, 2021). Research data from respondents regarding the impact of the pandemic on children's mental health, which causes discomfort leading to tension, stress, and depression is 91.3%. This shows that the teacher already understands the ongoing impact during the difficult times of Covid-19. Mental health is a child's right to health and is an outcome of early childhood social-emotional development (Coburn et al., 2020; Visser et al., 2014). The child's ability to control and distribute energy in social life and how children can deal with the problems that occur. The issue of mental health is not only when children do not have mental disorders, but how far children can take care of it. These symptoms will continue to haunt and disturb children in all kinds of activities both when they play around, at school, even when the child is at home (Kim et al., 2022). At an early age, it is certainly a vital period when parents, teachers and the environment that supposed to be supportive to children are even late to detect it, they don't even recognize the symptoms, which of course will results in children difficulty dealing with their emotions, including when children are playing alone or playing in groups with their friends. Not only to focus on learning, difficulty in speaking, difficulty expressing what is in the mind into action. The effect of this negligence is worse as the child will experience interference during his teenage years. Without early detection, children will carry this condition for a long duration and often do not totally fade away (Neufeld et al., 2017). During the Covid-19 pandemic, children have fears and worries and may feel excessively lonely and sad. The lock down and large-scale social restrictions (policy of the Indonesian government during the pandemic), of course reducing children's social activities, children at home meet only with family members, learning is carried out for more than two years. Excessive fear, worry, loneliness, and sadness if left unchecked will cause anxiety and even depression (Luca Pisano, Domenico Galimi, 2020).

Before the existence of Covid-19, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) found 1 in 5 children had mental disorders. During the pandemic, children experienced the trauma of losing family members and daily worries stagnancy. Mental health crisis increases frequently on March 2020 to October 2020. Emergency department health increases by 24% for children 5-11 years. The pandemic has exacerbated the gap in mental health services, because we know that not all can access this free service and an evenly distributed, low socioeconomic background is one of the factors. The researcher emphasizes the importance of school-based mental health services. Furthermore, including prevention of mental disorders into the national education curriculum is also the right strategy, or for practical reasons, short-term teacher training can also be implemented by focusing on teacher training in early detection of child mental health. Basic skills to encourage children's social emotional development can be done in an easy way in real time to treat mild symptoms. (Catalano et al., 2004). Child stress starts from the uncertainty caused by the pandemic and creates fear. Based on the study results, it is presumed that children living during a pandemic will continue to experience ongoing emotional stress (Muhammad Hasbi, 2022). However, this can be overcome with an appropriate response through family parenting support and care, as well as strengthening from the educational sphere (UNICEF, 2022). In particular, mental health investments need to be made with psychosocial support to help children to be able to cope and teach them to adapt to the stress caused by bad events that will come later.

#### The key of communication with childrens of early detection

Communication between parents and children is an important process in building parent-child relationships, both verbally and non-verbally which take place in everyday life in the family environment. In the family there needs to be a harmonious relationship between parents and children. This can be built through effective communication (Jatmikowati, 2018). The role of communication that is built between parents and children will be effective if each other has a close relationship, mutually open and understands each other. This will later give a feeling of mutual trust in one another and in the future will build a balanced relationship in the family. The key to effective communication is listening, receiving, and speaking as a form of response to the other person. This is because communication is the process of forming, delivering, and processing messages between two or more people with specific goals (Bahri, 2018). As many as 71.7% of the respondents understand the 3 keys to effective communication for children. Communication is very important for children's development, especially if the communication relationship is imbued with affection so that it will form a child's bond with social relations and also affect mental health in children (Souza & Veríssimo, 2015). Therefore, communication patterns can also be indicators of early childhood development.

#### Conclusion

Roles for preschool teachers need to understand the difficult situation of children during the pandemic, mental health for children, the process of child development, and have to be aware of the ideal communication patterns between parents and children and the sustained impact when children face difficult situations. As this research revealed, teachers still need to be given training such as early detection and other mental health knowledge to be able to apply appropriate treatment when the initial symptoms appear in children. This is intended as a structured way to examine the mental health conditions of children. Early identification is also important so that children can get the help they need. The conditions of the current sample limit the generalizability of the findings to other target populations. Future research is expected with a larger and more diverse sample, needed to understand the importance of early detection in children.

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