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Parental perception about the pandemic impact on mental health of children: a cross-sectional study

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Background:

The pandemic may increase mental issues among children. This study aimed to explore parental perceptions on the pandemic impact on the health status of their children, with a focus on mental health.

Methods:

An online nationwide cross-sectional study has been conducted amongst Italian parents (from April 2022-ongoing). The survey included: Strength and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ), Kessler-6 (K6) for parent's psychological distress, and pandemic-related items. The outcomes were: child's SDQ above the clinical cut-off and perceived child's worsening of sleep, appetite, physical and mental health during the pandemic. Multivariable regressions were run ($p < 0.05$ as significant).

Results:

Up to date, participants were 333 (88% female). Mean age was 40.7 years (SD = 6.7). Considering their children, 52.9% were female and mean age was 6.62 (SD = 4.3). A total of 12.6% of children passed the SDQ cut-off. Having parents who are healthcare workers (adjOR = 4.1), having parents positive for K6 (adjOR = 4.0) and having a poor economic situation (adjOR = 3.9) were significantly associated with a higher probability of passing the cut-off. Considering the pandemic, 15.4% declared their child had worse sleep, 12.2% lower appetite, 6.6% more physical issues, and 22.9% more mental issues. Using electronic devices more than before the pandemic was significantly associated with worsening of sleep (adjOR = 2.9) and appetite (adjOR = 6.9). Having parents who are healthcare workers was significantly associated with worsening of sleep (adjOR = 2.3) and mental health (adjOR = 2.4). Having parents positive for K6 was significantly associated with worsening of mental health (adjOR = 5.3).

Conclusions:

This study suggested a perceived substantial worsening of children's health, especially considering mental health. Exploring how parents recognize their children's health and how the COVID-19 has changed daily habits should be considered as a public health priority in Europe.

Key messages:

- Children having parents who are healthcare workers, having parents positive for K6 and having a poor economic situation had a higher risk to pass the clinical cut-off of SDQ.
- According to parents' perceptions, the impact of the pandemic was relevant on children's health, especially on mental health.