

Impact of congenital Zika virus and COVID-19 on childhood disability in Latin America

Latin America has endured two global outbreaks in the last decade. The first outbreak was caused by the Zika virus in 2015, which infected pregnant females causing congenital Zika syndrome, including brain abnormalities, neural tube defects, eye abnormalities, hearing problems, seizures, feeding difficulties, and numerous restrictions in daily activities.¹ In Brazil, the Zika virus has had devastating social, medical, and financial consequences for families, affecting more than 3500 children with confirmed congenital Zika syndrome.^{2,3} Importantly, parents emphasized that their greatest concerns related to Zika involve environmental factors, such as timely access and quality of health and social services.³ Zika is now considered a long-term public health challenge in Latin America.

The second outbreak caused by SARS-CoV-2, responsible for coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), is still impacting the Latin American population. Currently, Latin America is considered the epicentre of this ongoing pandemic, particularly in Brazil. Across Latin America, mandatory lockdown and/or strict social distancing measures have caused major disruptions in service provision. Moreover, this health crisis continues to impact children's rights to health and education.⁴ For children with disabilities and their families, social distancing measures mean a lack of access to the resources they usually have through schools and habilitation or rehabilitation services. This is a major challenge in low- and middle-income countries such as many Latin American countries.

In 2020, the Latin American Academy of Child Development and Disability (ALDID) participated in the International Alliance of Academies of Childhood Disability COVID-19 Task Force. The main goal of the Task Force was to understand the global effect of COVID-19 on children with disabilities and their families. One of our initiatives was the Global COVID-19 Childhood Disability Data Coordination project in which members of ALDID collated information from international surveys addressing the impact of COVID-19 on disability.⁵ We learned that COVID-19 has negatively affected several areas of functioning, overall well-being, and rights of people with disabilities and their families worldwide. Mental health of

people with disabilities, caregivers, and professionals continues to be a major global issue, requiring immediate action to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 measures and social restrictions. As such, ALDID has actively shared information with colleagues and families of children with disabilities, educating and advocating for rights for all children in the Latin American region.⁴

During challenging times, collaboration becomes a powerful tool. Exchanging experiences with families, researchers, and professionals across the world enables timely and more accurate actions to mitigate the effects of public health emergencies. For children with and without disabilities, opportune actions make a great difference as there is no time to lose. ALDID is therefore committed to facilitating collaboration and disseminating knowledge across its member countries and other partners, using culturally sensitive language which is easily accessible to professionals and families alike.

Finally, ALDID invites students, trainees, families, researchers, and clinicians working in the field of pediatric disability to participate in the upcoming biannual virtual meeting which will be held on 12th and 13th November 2021, hosted by our colleagues in Brazil. The theme of the meeting is 'Collaborating with a World in Transition' (<https://congresosusp.com/ALDID/>). We hope that we can share lessons from the ongoing outbreaks, and plan and prepare for inclusive emergency responses in our communities in the future.

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