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**To cite this article:** Irwan Abdullah, Muassomah Muassomah, Esa Nur Wahyuni, Asyifa Nadia Jasmine, Chusnul Chotimah & Karima Nada Medina (06 May 2025): Disregard for Children's Rights in the Face of the COVID-19 Pandemic: Exploring Sociocultural Dynamics, Child Care in Practice, DOI: [10.1080/13575279.2025.2496501](https://doi.org/10.1080/13575279.2025.2496501)

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/13575279.2025.2496501>



Published online: 06 May 2025.



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# Disregard for Children's Rights in the Face of the COVID-19 Pandemic: Exploring Sociocultural Dynamics

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## ABSTRACT

The issue of the disregard for children's rights during the pandemic is critical and demands urgent attention. This article aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the various forms in which children's rights were disregarded by examining the sociocultural context surrounding the management of the COVID-19 pandemic. It explores the intricate relationship between the pandemic and the role of children within the cultural fabric of Indonesian society. Using a qualitative approach, the authors collected data from relevant informants, conducted thorough observations, and reviewed important documents to address the issue of children's rights being disregarded during the pandemic. The collected data is presented in a narrative format and then subjected to interpretative analysis using three conceptual frameworks: paternalism, objectification, and subordinate domination. The findings of this study illustrate a significant disregard for children's rights in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. This disregard is attributed to cultural factors that position children as subordinate to adults, resulting in the imposition of adult-centered standards for meeting children's needs. Furthermore, within patrilineal cultural contexts, children are relegated to the status of objects expected to unquestioningly comply with the decisions of their parents or adult figures. Importantly, children are perceived as passive recipients of the impacts of pandemic policies, with limited involvement in determining their own needs. This study emphasizes that overlooking the potential contributions of children in addressing the challenges posed by the pandemic can give rise to new problems and hinder effective responses to COVID-19.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 19 July 2023  
Accepted 15 April 2025

## KEYWORDS

Disregard of children rights;  
socio-cultural dynamics;  
participation of children;  
COVID-19 pandemic;  
objectification

## Introduction

Children hold a pivotal role in discussions surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic, primarily due to their direct exposure to the health repercussions associated with it. Throughout various pandemics, children have often been overlooked as active contributors to mitigation efforts, being categorized instead as a vulnerable demographic reliant

on adult supervision. This oversight neglects the potential of children to participate in the resolution of such crises, alongside their rights to comprehensive knowledge and direct involvement in pandemic management. Consequently, this neglect has led to the marginalization of their active participation, relegating children to being perceived more as part of the problem rather than as contributors to the solution. In June 2020, Kompas daily newspaper published findings from a UNICEF survey conducted through SMS, WhatsApp, and Facebook Messenger, which garnered over 4,000 responses from students regarding remote learning. The survey revealed that 66% of students across various educational levels in 34 Indonesian provinces expressed discomfort with remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, 87% of these students expressed a strong desire to return to school as soon as possible. A 2021 survey conducted by the Indonesian Child Protection Commission (KPAI) involving 25,114 children from 34 provinces demonstrated that 63% (15,841) of them felt bored while staying at home during the pandemic, 24% (6,027) felt neutral, 6% (1,507) felt happy, 5% (1,256) felt anxious, and 3% (753) felt distressed. The significance of child perspectives, as emphasized by Hilppö, underscores the importance of considering children's viewpoints in discussions surrounding the pandemic. However, amid the constant stream of news regarding the current situation, these perspectives were largely overlooked initially and only gradually gained attention as focus shifted to the potential role of children as disease carriers (Hilppö et al., 2022).

The issue of “the disregard of children’s right to be heard during the pandemic” has received limited attention in previous studies. Existing research primarily focuses on two aspects. Firstly, it examines the challenges children face during the pandemic (Ade-doyin & Soykan, 2023; Adnan & Anwar, 2020; Dong et al., 2020; Muassomah et al., 2022). Secondly, it investigates the traumatic consequences and violence experienced by children within families and educational settings as a result of lockdown and social distancing measures (Fegert & Schulze, 2020; Kovler et al., 2021; Phelps & Sperry, 2020). These studies predominantly portray children as passive subjects, disregarding their subjectivity and overlooking their potential contribution to finding solutions, despite their potential to play a powerful role in crisis management (Çomaklı & Koçyigit, 2021; Muassomah et al., 2023).

The objective of this paper is to address the limitations of previous studies, which have treated children as objects and disregarded their subjectivity in the context of pandemic management. Specifically, it aims to map the various manifestations of disregarding children’s rights and analyze how the sociocultural context influences attitudes and actions regarding children’s involvement in addressing the COVID-19 pandemic. Through an examination of the relationship between the pandemic and children’s roles, this analysis will provide insights into the functioning of cultural systems within society.

This paper argues that the disregard of children’s rights during the pandemic is influenced by the subordinate position of children in the adult world. In Indonesian culture, for instance, children are usually seen as needing to follow adult rules and expectations (Hidayat et al., 2022). Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, children not only experience the negative effects of the crisis but also become the focus of decisions made by adults (Idoiaga et al., 2020). There’s a common view of children as being at risk of harm or neglect, rather than seeing them as potential contributors with valuable ideas and solutions for societal problems. This inclination gives rise to a paternalistic

mindset that can lead to disparities in the allocation of resources and obligations (Fadlon & Laibson, 2022). The overlooked potential of children to contribute to pandemic solutions poses a risk to the less effective management of COVID-19.

## Literature review

### *Disregard of children's rights*

The disregard of children's rights frequently arises from the disparities in age and experience between children and adults, resulting in parents often underestimating their children's opinions (Pranoto & Hong, 2020). This is closely linked to the prevailing assumption that adults serve as the most reliable sources of information about children, consequently deeming children as unreliable and unaccountable informants (Ben-Arieh & Kosher, 2020). Even within educational contexts, children's participation is often limited to being passive recipients of information and experiences during their presence in school. This restriction aligns with traditional perspectives that define acceptable communication from children. Children are expected to conform to behavioral norms, including politeness, in their communication, while simultaneously facing cultural mistrust and limited opportunities to express their own opinions (Gillett-Swan & Sargeant, 2018). Consequently, children encounter difficulties in voicing their own perspectives as parents tend to disregard their input, leading them to speak up only when prompted (Pramono et al., 2019). This ongoing disregard persists due to the perception of children as subordinate to adults.

The disregard of children's rights is rooted in various assumptions that adults continue to reinforce. Broadly, three assumptions contribute to the neglect of children's rights. Firstly, there is a lack of trust in children by parents (Arbeiter & Toros, 2017), encompassing the belief that children lack the capacity to form rational and acceptable opinions in the eyes of adults (Siagian et al., 2019), thereby resulting in parents making all decisions involving children without considering their input (Hancock & Cheatham, 2021). Secondly, parents perceive themselves as superior to children, frequently dismissing children's expressed opinions without providing mechanisms for their voices to be heard by adults (Perry-Hazan, 2016). Thirdly, children are often regarded as mere objects (Gillett-Swan & Sargeant, 2018), thereby disregarding their ideas and undermining their desire to actively participate (Nawaila et al., 2018). These three assumptions perpetuate the neglect of children's rights across various domains, often resulting in the imposition of specific values and norms, considered important by parents, upon their children (Olla et al., 2018).

### *Children as passive objects*

The relationship between children and their families (parents) is the first connection children encounter (Rahayu & Hendrati, 2015). Parents have the responsibility to educate, nurture, and guide their children to reach specific milestones that prepare them for social life (Ruli, 2020). However, within a family, children are often positioned as implementers, rather than as individuals who also deserve respect and the opportunity to express their opinions (Panilih, 2016). In family life, children usually have their own

opinions and can even provide suggestions to their parents, but in some families, it is found that parents do not involve children in significant decision-making within the family (Nurhajati & Wardyaningrum, 2012). Parents who hold a strategic position in the family and typically make unilateral decisions, which results in ineffective communication and decision-making processes between children and parents (Rini, 2014). Parents who adopt an authoritarian parenting style enforce, control, and demand that children comply with all their wishes and commands, thereby treating children as uncreative, lacking in confidence, and dependent objects (Rakhmawati, 2015).

The realization of the principle of respecting children's rights to express their opinions and perspectives has been integrated within the family (Kusumaningrum et al., 2022). As a consequence, children often experience emotional violence in the form of neglect of their rights (Massarweh & Kosher, 2023). Decisions made unilaterally by parents do not provide opportunities for children to learn to make their own choices and express their opinions and aspirations. Children who are not involved in the decision-making process may become dependent and hesitant to make decisions on their own in the future (Rini, 2014). Parents often forget that children demonstrate cognitive and social maturity from birth to adolescence. Children develop their abilities to think critically about their environment and acquire skills in seeking information, enabling them to better categorize and utilize what they learn from their surroundings. This includes developing a deeper understanding of interpersonal situations by allowing them to see the world from various perspectives. Therefore, the development of social and cognitive aspects during this period provides insight into children's experiential growth, enabling them to make decisions both individually and within the family context (Miftahuddin et al., 2019).

Moreover, several studies emphasize the importance of involving children as active participants. Waters-Davies et al. (2024) report that children in Wales are granted extensive rights to participate in early education settings, highlighting that legislation and policies concerning children's rights have become a central feature of the Welsh government's agenda. Similarly, Cureton (2024) explains that the U.S. education system utilizes a framework of student engagement and situational awareness, wherein students take an active role in their learning, allowing them to shape their own experiences as well as the social and academic outcomes they wish to achieve. In line with this, Fegert et al. (2023) report the perceptions of children in Germany, showing that play remains valuable and serves as an expression of adaptability, confidence, and positivity.

### ***Children within paternalistic culture***

The examination of cultural ideologies provides insight into the inherent dynamics of subordination, with ideological inequalities rooted in cultural beliefs and practices contributing to the maintenance and reinforcement of structural inequality (Lee, 2018). The concept of paternalism plays a pivotal role in the developmental trajectory of children, underscoring the essential function of parental guidance and education in their comprehensive growth (Kurniati et al., 2020). The influence of parents, particularly regarding religious education, significantly affects children's educational progress and overall development (Rosmilani, 2022). Furthermore, the parenting style adopted by parents

profoundly impacts the personality development of a child, highlighting the critical nature of parental guidance in the formation of a child's character (Hastuti, 2022). The obligations of parents in fostering and educating their offspring, especially highlighted during the COVID-19 pandemic, underscore the vital involvement of parental engagement in the educational advancement of a child (Syahrul & Nurhafizah, 2021). Additionally, the influence of local cultural traditions plays a crucial role in the early stages of a child's development (We & Fauziah, 2020).

Parents exert a significant influence on the future decisions of their children (Permadin et al., 2021). The concept of the intergenerational transfer of human capital posits that parental behavior, characterized by a form of paternalistic altruism, profoundly impacts the life choices of their offspring (Cremer et al., 2006). During the COVID-19 pandemic, children have become a particularly vulnerable group. They are experiencing increased levels of anxiety, aggression, and psychiatric issues, highlighting their greater susceptibility during such crises (Mutluer et al., 2020; Vasa et al., 2021). This period has also accentuated a cultural perception that undermines children's agency in problem-solving, predicated on the belief that children lack the capability to address challenges and are not afforded adequate autonomy to make decisions.

Children's subordination is also closely related to paternalistic relationships within smaller spheres. Firstly, paternalism within the family setting. Here, children's positions are weakened and the idea of passivity is reinforced, where children must submit to the authority of adults (Nascimento, 2018). In this context, mechanisms of coercion and control in discussions are used to enforce compliance (Alfandari, 2017). Vasli et al. (2015) mention at least five aspects of paternalism within the family: separation of children from their parents, a non-possessed environment, non-interactive communication, limited participation, and a combination of affection and sympathy with superiority. Paternalism becomes dangerous when children become accustomed to the subordination that occurs, which contradicts their own desires and bodies (Wirth & Schmiedebach, 2019).

Secondly, paternalism accompanies the relationship between students and schools. Silva et al. (2018) exemplify this with the paternalistic nature of school feeding programs. Discussions start with discourse and practices that identify school feeding as food for the poor. From this phenomenon, it can be observed that power mechanisms are used to label school children with identities of poverty and inferiority (Silva et al., 2018). When children are perceived as dependent entities incapable of making rational decisions, paternalism seems to take its place (Siagian et al., 2019). From these various phenomena, it is evident that children are consistently positioned within paternalistic systems, whether within the family or school environments.

### ***Children's rights in Indonesia***

In Indonesia, the rights of children are grounded in human rights principles that are enshrined in several pivotal legal documents, including the 1945 Constitution, Law No. 23 of 2002, and Law No. 35 of 2014. These documents are dedicated to the protection and welfare of children (Mardiantari & Dwilestari, 2021). The commitment to children's rights is further reinforced by Indonesia's ratification of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which underpins Presidential Decree Number 36 of 1990 and Government

Regulation Number 78 of 2021, providing a robust legal framework for the protection of children within the jurisdiction of the Indonesian state (Rumiarta & Jayantiari, 2023). These legal provisions guarantee children the right to life, growth, and development in an environment free from discrimination, violence, exploitation, and neglect.

The body of laws and regulations concerning children's rights serves as a directive for both the state and society to fulfill and uphold these rights (Bukido & Wantu, 2020). This legal protection is a manifestation of the state's commitment to safeguarding the welfare and rights of children, recognizing them as rights-holders from birth—and even before birth, for those in utero (Rachman, 2020).

Children in Indonesia have a broad spectrum of rights, including access to education (Liestyasari et al., 2023), healthcare services tailored to their needs (Bhima et al., 2023), and opportunities for expressing their opinions and engaging in creative activities (Plush et al., 2020). Additionally, the provision of spaces designated for recreation emphasizes the recognition of children's right to play and leisure (Dewiyanti et al., 2023). The Indonesian government actively endeavors to fulfill these rights through the implementation of policies and initiatives aimed at promoting the well-being and protection of children, reflecting a comprehensive approach to ensuring their rights within the societal context.

## Method

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed various issues related to the neglect of children's rights in response to the crisis. This study aims to investigate the growing disregard for children's rights within the context of COVID-19 policies that prioritize adult perspectives, effectively rendering school-aged children passive and objectified, thus depriving them of their rights to participate in disease prevention efforts. To address ethical considerations, this study adhered to rigorous ethical standards, including obtaining informed consent from both children and their parents. Children received age-appropriate explanations about the study's purpose, methods, and their rights to withdraw at any point. Consent forms were distributed to parents, and verbal explanations were provided to ensure children's understanding.

Elementary school children were selected as the primary subjects of this study, with consideration given to their geographical distribution (rural, sub-district, and urban areas). This selection was made in response to the observed tendency to sideline children's rights during pandemic-related activities. The absence of policies involving children as active contributors to COVID-19 mitigation efforts has resulted in adverse consequences, including the loss of their rights to education and knowledge about the pandemic. Therefore, this study endeavors to incorporate children's perspectives into the analysis of pandemic response policies.

The data collection process employed semi-structured interviews with children as primary informants. Sample questions included: "What do you know about COVID-19?" and "How do you feel about learning from home?" These interviews aimed to explore their understanding, experiences, and perspectives regarding the pandemic. Additionally, focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted virtually via Zoom to further explore children's experiences. The FGDs were facilitated by trained moderators to ensure a child-friendly environment that encouraged open dialogue.



This research employed a combined research design, blending a case study approach with a survey approach. The survey phase aimed to collect baseline data that subsequently informed the development of more comprehensive interview questions. Furthermore, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted to explore expert insights into the issue of children's rights. These FGDs were held virtually using the Zoom platform and featured participants from diverse academic backgrounds and regions. The panel comprised five experts: a psychology lecturer, an Islamic studies lecturer, a family law lecturer, a gender and child development expert, and a humanities lecturer. Adult experts were selected to provide a fundamental understanding of the issue of children's rights during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Their extensive knowledge, experience, and perspectives in various fields were used as the basis for the research analysis. Through their collective expertise, this study delved deeply into pertinent issues. The questions asked to adult experts covered aspects of: patterns of children's involvement in handling the COVID-19 pandemic, the absence of children in various COVID-19 handling actions, reasons for parents or families not involving children in handling COVID-19, cultural significance of the status and role of children in the health crisis, and children's social responsibility in society.

This study included not only elementary school children as primary participants but also parents, scholars, and child development experts as secondary data sources. While the children had limited knowledge about COVID-19, they faced various challenges stemming from the neglect of their rights. The ten children who served as primary informants were chosen to ensure regional diversity, comprising three from rural areas, three from sub-districts, and four from urban areas. Similarly, two parent informants and five scientist/child development expert informants were selected to cater to the data requirements (Table 1).

Children actively contributed to this study by providing insights into their knowledge of COVID-19, their experiences with health protocols, and their views on how challenges were handled during the pandemic. This included their involvement, or lack thereof, in mitigation activities. For instance, questions posed to children included: "What information have you received about COVID-19, and from whom?" and "What role do you think children should have in preventing the spread of COVID-19?" Their responses were crucial in understanding the broader sociocultural context and validating the study's findings.

The research process commenced with data collection in East Java, Indonesia, involving direct observations across various regions. East Java was chosen for its representativeness in illustrating the COVID-19 experience in Indonesia, given its significant population diversity. East Java, along with West Java, is one of the most populous provinces in the country. However, East Java boasts a higher degree of population heterogeneity than West Java. In this heterogeneous society, reflective of Indonesia's pluralistic nature, it could be observed how socio-cultural context played a role in neglecting children's rights during the pandemic. The accessibility of East Java allowed for comprehensive field research, complemented by interviews with parents and FGDs featuring experts as comparative informants. The collected data was subsequently thematically mapped according to identified issues. However, this approach has representational limitations and potential biases.



**Table 1.** List of respondents.

No.	Respondents	Age	Gender	Description	Institution	Region
1	R1	10	M	4th grade elementary school	MI Nurul Huda	Rural
2	R2	11	F	5th grade elementary school	SDI Surya Buana	Sub-districts
3	R3	10	F	4th grade elementary school	SD Smart School	Urban
4	R4	9	M	3rd grade elementary school	MIN 1 Malang	urban
5	R5	9	M	4th grade elementary school	SD Muhammadiyah 8	sub-districts
6	R6	11	M	5th grade elementary school	SD Percobaan	urban
7	R7	9	M	3rd grade elementary school	MIN 2 Malang	Sub-districts
8	R8	11	F	5th grade elementary school	SDN 1 Tumpang	Rural
9	R9	10	F	4th grade elementary school	SD Muhammadiyah 9	Urban
10	R10	10	F	4th grade elementary school	MI Hidayatul Muhtadiin	Rural
11	R11	35	F	Parent	Malang	Urban
12	R12	41	F	Parent	Malang	Sub-districts
13	R13	45	F	Lecturer of Psychology	Institut Agama Islam Negeri Metro, Indonesia	Sumatra
14	R14	52	M	Lecturer of Islamic studies	Universitas Islam Negeri Banten, Indonesia	Jawa Barat
15	R15	38	F	Lecturer of Islamic Family Law	Universitas Islam Negeri Palembang, Indonesia	Sumatra
16	R16	56	F	Lecturer of the Humanities, observer of gender and children	Universitas Islam Negeri Malang, Indonesia	Jawa Timur
17	R17	50	M	Lecturer of the Humanities	Universitas Islam Negeri Malang, Indonesia	Jawa Timur

The data collected through these procedures was chosen to address the research questions. It was transformed into narrative form, derived from observations and interviews, and presented sequentially in the results section. Subsequently, an interpretive analysis was conducted, employing three conceptual approaches: paternalism, objectification, and domination (subordination). These conceptual frameworks served as analytical tools to explore the disregard for children's rights during the pandemic, revealing how various situations and conditions exacerbated this issue.

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the Research and Community Services Institute (Lembaga Penelitian dan Pengabdian kepada Masyarakat/LPPM), Universitas Islam Negeri Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang, Indonesia, under approval number B-1278/LP2M/TL.00/08/2022, issued on August 23th, 2022. All participants were informed about the purpose of the study and voluntarily provided their informed consent prior to participation.

## Findings

### *Children's limited knowledge of COVID-19*

Policies related to the COVID-19 pandemic have not fully recognized children as citizens with equal rights to access accurate and age-appropriate knowledge about the virus. The widespread assumption that children are too young to understand the complexities of COVID-19 has led to inconsistencies in the way they receive information. While some parents made efforts to explain the pandemic to their children, many others either

minimized the discussion or assumed that children would acquire knowledge independently through school or media.

As a result, children often developed fragmented or misleading understandings of the virus. For instance, Respondent 1 (R1) described COVID-19 as a “deadly virus, and anyone infected with COVID-19 will die immediately if not taken to the hospital.” Similarly, Respondent 3 (R3) expressed disbelief in the existence of COVID-19, stating, “It is just a lie [told to] scare us all.” Similarly, R4 said: “I am somewhat skeptical about COVID-19 because my aunt was diagnosed with COVID-19 but only had a common illness.” These diverse perceptions illustrate the lack of structured, guided discussions with children about the pandemic, leaving them vulnerable to misinformation.

While some children relied on school-based information, others turned to digital platforms as their primary sources of knowledge. Respondent 2 (R2) stated: “I learned about COVID-19 from Browser and Chrome unintentionally while searching for answers for school assignments; suddenly, COVID-19 information appeared on the screen.” Likewise, Respondent 5 (R5) said: “I know about COVID-19 from the internet and Google; it always popped up on my phone without me searching for it.” Respondent 6 (R6) mentioned getting COVID-19 information from television. These findings highlight that, in the absence of structured conversations with parents or educators, children were left to interpret information independently, often reinforcing fears or misconceptions.

The prevailing logic in society is that children are considered too young to understand anything dangerous, including COVID-19. Consequently, it is believed that children do not need to be aware of sufficient and accurate information about COVID-19. R1 admitted: “I wear a mask because my mom told me to.” Similarly, R7 stated: “[We] wear a mask to be cautious because if we don’t, we will be fined by the police.” Furthermore, R8 mentioned: “The reason for wearing a mask is so that people who see me won’t be surprised and to avoid being avoided by others and friends.” In contrast, R9 admitted to never wearing a mask when going out to buy snacks in the neighborhood, as there are no police officers monitoring, and it is perceived as not dangerous because it is only for a short while. The logics constructed by children depict their limited understanding of the dangers of COVID-19.

Despite these challenges, some families and educational institutions adopted proactive strategies to ensure children had a more comprehensive understanding of the pandemic. Parents who engaged in discussions about COVID-19, using storytelling and interactive media, helped their children develop a more nuanced perspective. Certain schools incorporated pandemic-related lessons into online curricula, integrating scientific explanations about viruses, health precautions, and the societal impacts of the pandemic. These structured efforts demonstrate that when children are provided with clear and accurate information, they are more likely to adopt responsible behaviors and contribute meaningfully to public health efforts.

### ***Children’s participation in the COVID-19 response***

Children were largely excluded from active participation in pandemic responses, reinforcing societal perceptions that they are passive recipients of crisis interventions rather than active contributors. This exclusion was based on the assumption that children’s

bodies were inherently vulnerable, thereby justifying their omission from community-based efforts such as mask distribution and household sanitization. For example, while an older sibling and their peers engaged in social service initiatives like distributing masks, a younger sibling was not allowed to participate (R10). Similarly, parents often restricted their children's involvement in household cleaning activities related to virus prevention (R11).

Even in communal settings such as mosques, the distribution of free food to congregants was handled exclusively by adults (R12), further limiting opportunities for children's engagement. Children culturally are viewed as being under the guardianship of their parents and incapable of making their own decisions (R13). They are regarded as needing affection and pity due to their young age (R15). Within the family hierarchy, children are subordinate and subject to the authority of parents or society. They are even seen as symbols of wealth, well-being, and hope (R14).

However, not all families adhered to this exclusionary approach. Some households encouraged children to participate in collective pandemic responses through small but meaningful activities. For instance, several parents encouraged children to assist in cleaning household surfaces, preparing food, and monitoring family health conditions, fostering a sense of responsibility and agency. In some cases, children actively participated in family discussions about health precautions, strengthening intergenerational learning and awareness.

Additionally, peer groups and online platforms provided an alternative space for children's engagement during remote learning. WhatsApp and Telegram groups, which were initially used for casual social interactions, gradually became informal spaces for knowledge-sharing. Some children reported discussing COVID-19 with their friends, sharing updates on school policies, and exchanging personal experiences about their family's approach to health precautions. These interactions indicate that, despite their limited inclusion in formal mitigation efforts, children found ways to engage with and make sense of the pandemic through digital networks.

Certain schools also took innovative approaches by integrating discussions on pandemic-related health protocols into virtual classrooms. In these settings, children were given opportunities to express their thoughts on the impact of COVID-19, share personal experiences, and reflect on how the crisis affected their daily lives. This practice highlights the importance of structured institutional efforts in ensuring children's meaningful participation in health responses.

### ***Children's marginalization in policy and practice***

Government policies throughout the pandemic largely treated children as passive recipients rather than active participants. Decisions regarding school closures, remote learning, and work-from-home arrangements were made with minimal consideration of children's perspectives. While these measures were necessary for public health, they disproportionately affected children's learning experiences, social development, and mental well-being.

The transition to online education created disparities in access to learning, particularly among children from lower-income families. Some parents struggled to provide the necessary resources—such as stable internet connections and quiet study spaces—

needed for effective remote learning. Consequently, many children experienced reduced academic motivation and engagement. Respondent 10 (R10) described how learning at home was challenging due to distractions and the lack of direct teacher support, emphasizing that “school was not just about studying; it was a place where we could meet friends, compete, and feel motivated.” These sentiments highlight how remote learning policies failed to account for the social and psychological dimensions of education.

Overall, the policies implemented to mitigate the COVID-19 pandemic failed to accommodate children’s perspectives, as they perceive the threat of COVID-19 primarily as an adult concern. Such approach resulted in children being marginalized and treated as passive recipients rather than active participants in pandemic management. As suggested by R16, children are often regarded as incomplete individuals, with their needs being determined by adults. Additionally, based on adult perceptions of safety, various restrictions were imposed on children, supposedly to protect them (R17). The prevailing belief that children are less vulnerable to COVID-19, supported by UNICEF reports on the higher prevalence of cases among adults, further contributed to the lack of attention given to children’s well-being in government policies (Fore, 2020). As a consequence, children remained particularly vulnerable to mistreatment and neglect during the pandemic.

Policies implemented during the “new normal” phase further reflected the prioritization of adult-centered activities over children’s developmental needs. Shopping centers and workplaces reopened, yet playgrounds and recreational areas remained closed, depriving children of essential spaces for play and social interaction. This imbalance in policy decisions not only undermined children’s well-being but also reinforced the notion that their needs were secondary to those of adults.

Despite these systemic challenges, some communities devised creative solutions to mitigate the restrictions placed on children. Some neighborhoods organized small-scale, health-compliant playgroups, ensuring children had opportunities for socialization within controlled environments. Families also adapted by introducing home-based recreational activities such as gardening, board games, and interactive storytelling to compensate for the lack of public recreational spaces.

These findings underscore the need for inclusive policy approaches that recognize children’s agency and contributions. Moving forward, policymakers should actively incorporate children’s perspectives into crisis management strategies to ensure that their rights, needs, and voices are adequately represented. While children were largely excluded from formal decision-making processes, findings indicate that they actively sought ways to understand and engage with the pandemic through digital platforms, family discussions, and peer interactions. Some households and schools successfully facilitated children’s participation by integrating structured health education and collaborative activities, demonstrating that children are capable of playing a role in pandemic mitigation when given the opportunity.

Moving forward, public health responses must balance protection with inclusion. Future policies should not only prioritize children’s safety but also empower them with knowledge, agency, and opportunities to participate in crisis responses. By adopting a more child-inclusive approach, society can foster resilience, adaptability, and collective responsibility in future public health emergencies.

## Discussion

The findings from this study indicate that the COVID-19 pandemic has been predominantly framed as an adult-centered crisis, leading to the marginalization of children's rights and needs. This exclusion is underpinned by three sociocultural dynamics: paternalism, subordination, and passivity. Consequently, pandemic-related policies often disregarded children's perspectives, limiting their access to essential spaces such as playgrounds and neglecting their potential for meaningful participation in crisis management. However, while much of the pandemic response reflected these exclusionary tendencies, there were also instances where children's engagement was encouraged in family and community settings, highlighting opportunities for a more inclusive approach.

The prevalence of paternalism within family structures was a key factor contributing to children's marginalization during the pandemic. Adults, particularly parents, often assumed unilateral decision-making authority, sidelining children's perspectives under the justification of protection (Fernández-Ballesteros et al., 2019; Kurtz, 2020). This dynamic is deeply embedded in societal norms, where parents exert control over the dissemination of information and the structuring of daily life, particularly during crises. As a result, many children were excluded from discussions about the pandemic, leaving them reliant on informal and sometimes inaccurate sources of information.

However, some families successfully implemented co-learning strategies, allowing children to engage in discussions about COVID-19. In these households, children were actively involved in understanding public health measures, such as hygiene protocols and virus prevention strategies. Structured educational efforts—both at home and in school settings—enhanced children's awareness and preparedness, demonstrating that when given the opportunity, children are capable of processing and responding to health crises in informed ways.

From a policy perspective, paternalism also shaped governmental responses, leading to decisions that prioritized adult needs over children's well-being. For instance, the reopening of shopping malls and workplaces before playgrounds and recreational areas reflected a policy approach that placed economic recovery above children's developmental and psychological needs. If policymakers had incorporated children's perspectives in decision-making, policies could have been better balanced to accommodate both public health concerns and children's right to social development.

The study further highlights how children were subordinated within both family and societal structures, reinforcing the perception that they lack the knowledge and capacity to contribute meaningfully to pandemic responses. Many parents dismissed children's input, assuming that their limited life experience rendered them incapable of participating in decision-making (Arbeiter & Toros, 2017; Perry-Hazan, 2016). This dynamic was reflected in interviews where children expressed feeling unheard in family discussions about COVID-19.

However, some families demonstrated alternative approaches that positioned children as active participants rather than passive recipients. In certain households, children were encouraged to assist with family health measures, such as ensuring handwashing routines, maintaining hygiene in shared spaces, and discussing safety precautions with siblings. These efforts illustrate that when given opportunities, children can play a constructive role in crisis management and develop a greater sense of agency and responsibility.

Beyond the household, schools and community platforms also played a role in reinforcing or mitigating children's subordination. While many schools focused primarily on academic instruction during online learning, some educational institutions integrated pandemic-related discussions into their curricula, allowing children to express their thoughts and concerns about COVID-19. These efforts highlight the potential for structured engagement mechanisms that enable children to contribute to decision-making in meaningful ways.

This study also underscores how passivity was imposed on children, both structurally and psychologically, as a result of pandemic policies (Nawaila et al., 2018). The closure of play areas, limited social interaction, and strict movement restrictions imposed significant developmental constraints, reinforcing children's dependence on adults. The inability to access recreational spaces led to increased feelings of isolation and stress, exacerbating mental health concerns among children.

Nonetheless, some communities and families sought creative alternatives to mitigate these effects. Some neighborhoods organized small-scale, health-compliant playgroups, allowing children to engage in safe social interactions. Additionally, certain households adapted their home environments by introducing recreational activities such as gardening, board games, and storytelling sessions, offering children constructive outlets for play and creativity.

From a broader perspective, these findings suggest that policies should move beyond viewing children as passive recipients and instead empower them as active contributors to their own well-being. Structured interventions, such as virtual peer engagement programs and community-based child participation initiatives, could help children maintain their social and emotional well-being during crises.

To safeguard children's rights in future public health crises, the following policy recommendations are essential: (1) Reframing Paternalism—Families and policymakers must recognize children as capable decision-makers by including them in structured discussions on public health and crisis management; (2) Recognizing Children as Active Agents—Schools and community platforms should provide opportunities for meaningful participation, integrating pandemic awareness programs that educate and empower children; (3) Creating Inclusive Policies—Governments must prioritize children's developmental needs by reopening play areas with appropriate health measures and incorporating their perspectives in crisis planning; and (4) Strengthening Communication Channels—Structured dialogues between children, parents, and educators should ensure accurate, age-appropriate information, with digital platforms used to enhance child-friendly public health education.

By implementing these recommendations, society can shift toward a more inclusive framework that respects and upholds children's rights, ensuring their active participation in future crises. Recognizing children's capacity to contribute meaningfully to public health responses will not only benefit children's well-being but also enhance the overall effectiveness of crisis mitigation efforts.

## Conclusion

The exclusion of children from pandemic response efforts was not due to their inability to contribute but rather a consequence of societal structures that positioned them as

passive subjects. Throughout the COVID-19 crisis, children's needs and perspectives were largely determined from an adult-centric viewpoint, limiting their autonomy and participation in decision-making processes. Children, much like marginalized groups in other social structures, were perceived as incapable of agency, reinforcing paternalistic norms that dictated their experiences during the pandemic.

This study highlights that while many children experienced marginalization, there were also instances where families, schools, and communities successfully fostered children's engagement in pandemic-related discussions and activities. Some families encouraged children to actively participate in household pandemic responses, including hygiene management and discussions on health protocols. Similarly, some schools incorporated COVID-19 education into their curricula, providing structured learning opportunities that enhanced children's understanding of the crisis. These positive cases demonstrate that children, when given the opportunity, can actively engage in crisis management efforts and contribute meaningfully to their own well-being and that of their communities.

The utilization of the concept of rights disregard in this study has shed light on the fact that children were not only victims but also targets of policies aimed at preventing the spread of COVID-19. However, instead of ensuring their well-being, these policies often restricted children's creativity, autonomy, and social development, leading to long-term psychological and developmental consequences. The failure to consider children's perspectives in pandemic policies ultimately hindered effective crisis management, as it excluded a critical demographic that could have contributed to community resilience.

To develop more inclusive crisis response frameworks, policymakers and caregivers must integrate children's perspectives into decision-making processes. The pandemic demonstrated the urgent need for policies that actively consider children's voices, recognizing them as stakeholders rather than passive recipients of adult decisions. Moving forward, a child-centered approach to public health and policy is necessary to ensure that children's rights are protected in times of crisis.

This study is limited primarily by its focus on the perspectives of primary school children and the geographic scope of participants, which may not fully capture the diversity of children's experiences across different regions and social contexts. Future research should expand its scope to include a broader demographic, incorporating interviews with policymakers, educators, and families to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the intersection between children's rights and crisis response strategies. Additionally, comparative studies between regions with differing policy approaches could provide valuable insights into best practices for inclusive pandemic management.

By actively involving children, parents, and policymakers in the decision-making process, societies can create resilient, equitable frameworks that safeguard children's rights and well-being. Recognizing children as active, informed participants in public health measures will strengthen societal resilience in future crises, ensuring that policies are both effective and inclusive. This shift in perspective is essential to fostering a generation that is empowered, informed, and capable of navigating global challenges with confidence.

## **Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).



## Author contribution

IA conceptualized the research and drafted the original manuscript; MM was responsible for data collection and curation; ENW performed formal analysis and data validation; ANJ conducted the literature review and contributed to visualization; CC developed the methodology and performed formal analysis; KNM carried out the review and editing. All authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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