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Addressing the Well-Being of Young Children

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted young learners' daily routines, learning environments, and home life stability, severely impacting their well-being. Children's issues with mental health, such as anxiety, stress, and depression, significantly impact their ability and interest to achieve in school settings. Additionally, the pandemic affected parents, caregivers, and educators, which had repercussions on their children and students. The authors conducted a literature review, identifying 26 articles that reported on young children's mental health and well-being with a particular interest in the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and identified gifted children. This review illuminated some main themes: young children have mental health issues; parents, caregivers, and the environment impact the well-being of young children; mental health services are not readily available to support families and their young children; COVID-19 adversely impacted students, caregivers, and teachers; and strategies exist to better understand and support young children, their families, caregivers, and teachers. Therefore, it is essential to understand the impacts on young children's mental health and how to best support them during these unprecedented times.

Keywords: *early childhood • well-being • COVID-19 • literature review • mental health*

It is almost all too common to hear about the mental health problems of adolescents and the negative impacts that bullying, isolation, and peer relationships have on the well-being of middle and high school students. However, it is less common to acknowledge and address the well-being of our young students, whose lives have been disrupted since the worldwide pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted young learners' daily routines, learning environments, and home life stability, impacting their mental health. In particular, young children are facing anxiety and depression at alarming rates. "From mid-March 2020 to October 2020, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention surveillance data indicated that the proportion of ED [Emergency Department] visits by children for mental health conditions increased by 24% among children aged 5-11" (Hoffman & Duffy, 2021, p.1485). Children's issues with mental health significantly impact their ability and interests to achieve. The pandemic has also shed light on the systemic inequities affecting students of color, students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, and students from families where English is not their first language. Iruka et al. (2021) published a report highlighting black families' experiences during the pandemic, from financial distress and educational disruptions to mental and physical health issues. Berasategi Sancho et al. (2021) showed how the pandemic impacted students with disabilities

through increased negative emotions and unhealthy habits. Consequently, it is crucial to understand how new realities in classrooms and at home impact young learners' well-being in their daily life.

In this review of the literature, we searched for perspectives on how the well-being of all young children (ages 3-8), inclusive of those with disabilities and those who may be identified as gifted, was impacted by COVID-19. The literature review focuses on the following three questions: 1) What does the research say about young children's mental health and well-being, 2) How has COVID-19 impacted the well-being of young children, and 3) How can parents, caregivers, and teachers, support their young learners' mental health needs in and out of the classroom?

Methods

This literature review included peer-reviewed articles from the last ten years written in English that focused on young children (up to age 8) in the United States and addressed COVID-19, mental health, and issues of young children's well-being. This literature review was conducted using the following databases: ERIC, Scopus, Education Research Complete, ProQuest, PsycINFO, Education Source, and Wiley in the University of Washington Library system.

We did multiple searches to focus on different aspects of young children's mental health and well-being. We first applied a broad set of terms to identify potential references, such as "mental health" and "young

children." Then, we narrowed down some of our searches with articles referring to COVID-19 (See Table 1). Finally, we conducted searches that explicitly aimed at young children who may have been identified as gifted. However, when we looked at the articles, only three papers had the overlapping subjects of young children, well-being, COVID-19, and identified gifted (Hong et al., 2021; Minkos & Gelbar, 2021; Papadopoulos, 2021) (see Table 2). As the COVID-19 pandemic is a current event, we searched for relevant articles through worldwide organizations' websites such as the World Health Organization (WHO), United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) (see Table 3). From each search, we read the individual abstracts of the unique articles that resulted. We excluded articles in which the abstract did not correspond to the correct age range or was not from the United States (see Table 4).

We read 26 articles encompassing empirical studies, literature reviews, editorials, and opinion pieces. We used their references to find additional studies and articles that would supplement our searches within our inclusion criteria (see Table 4). Among those 26 articles, nine focused on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on young children's, their caregivers', and teachers' mental health and well-being, and five discussed how to support young children during and since the pandemic. In addition, six articles focused on the mental health of young learners, three looked at their mental health in relation to their parents' and caregivers' mental health, and one focused on teachers' mental health.

Findings

From the many articles we reviewed, we clarified specific terms used and identified salient themes that we will discuss. First, we report on the literature on mental health for young learners and specifically those who may

be considered advanced academically. Several themes emerged from the literature: young children have mental health issues; parents, caregivers, and the environment impact the well-being of young children; and mental health services are not readily available to support families and their young children. We also share strategies from the literature to better understand and support young children, their caregivers, families, and teachers post COVID-19.

Definition of Terms

The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) defines mental health and emotional well-being as: "being happy and confident and not anxious or depressed...the ability to be autonomous, problem-solve, manage emotions, experience empathy, be resilient and attentive (National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE), 2013 pp. 5)" (O'Connor et al., 2018, p. 413). The World Health Organization defines Mental Health as "the ability to manage thoughts and emotions, the ability to build social relationships, the aptitude to learn and the subsequent consequences of failure to do so" (O'Connor et al., 2018, p. 413). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2022) defines mental health as including "children's mental, emotional, and behavioral well-being. It affects how children think, feel, and act. It also plays a role in how children handle stress, relate to others, and make healthy choices" (para. 1). We include all three of these definitions to give the reader the broader perspective of how mental health issues are discussed in the literature, with a particular focus on the inclusion of well-being (how a child feels socially and emotionally) as a component of mental health.

Mental Health and Young Learners

Based on the literature over the past ten years, mental health has been a growing concern for children and their caregivers at home and school. The 2016 National Survey

Table 1: Search Terms and Identified Articles

Search Terms	Date of Search (2022)	No. of References	No. of Included References	No. of Unique References
* "Mental health" **and** *"young children" **and** *"support" and "COVID" **and** "United States"	January 24th	7	1	1
"COVID" **and** "early childhood" **and** "mental health" and *"United States"	January 26th	2,011	3	3
*"mental health "**and** *"early childhood" **and** "support strategies" and *"United States" **NOT** "adolescent."	February 9th	11	1	-
*"mental health" **and** *"early childhood" **and** "school support" and *"United States" **NOT** "adolescent"	February 9th	16	1	-
"mental health" **and** "early childhood" **and** "interventions" and "United States" **NOT** "adolescent"	February 9th	82	2	1
Total				7

*changed search fields to be subjects

Table 2: Search Terms and Identified Articles

Search Terms	Date of Search (2022)	No. of References	No. of Included References	No. of Unique References
"quality early child mental health" **and** "gifted children" **and** "Social and emotional" **and** "parenting and family" **and** "in the United States"	January 18th	281	2	1
"quality early child mental health" **and** "gifted children" **and** "Social and emotional" **and** "parenting and family" **and** "psychosocial" **and** "in the United States"	January 18th	97	1	1
"high quality mental health young children" **and** "gifted young children" **and** "social and emotional well- being" **and** "COVID-19" **and** " in the United States" **NOT** "secondary High school" **NOT** "adolescent"	January 26th	28	1	1
Total				3

of Children's Health reported that 17.4% of children aged 2–8 years had a diagnosed mental, behavioral, or developmental disorder (Cree et al., 2018). Mental health issues can have negative consequences on children's lives, and if they are not addressed, they can persist into adulthood (Cree et al., 2018). Cree et al. (2018) also found a correlation between children diagnosed with mental, behavioral, or developmental disorders and their families' income. They noticed that children living in poverty had higher rates of diagnosis of mental health disorders and were also less likely to receive continuous care.

Mental Health Related to Children Labeled Gifted

The National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC) convened two different task forces (2002 and 2016) to examine the social and emotional issues of identified gifted students. Findings from researchers were conflicting. Some researchers and educators found that young children identified as gifted had different social and emotional characteristics from non- identified students (Ferguson, 2015; Hébert, 2020; Pfeiffer, 2018; Silverman, 2021). On the other hand, other studies indicated no social and emotional differences between gifted children and their unidentified peers (Cross & Cross, 2015; Neihart et al., 2016; Papadopoulos, 2021; Wood & Peterson, 2018). Hébert (2020) reported that the findings of educators, psychologists, and researchers from the NAGC were not conclusive as to whether gifted children had distinguished social and emotional characteristics from those not labeled gifted. Although anxiety and depression present at similar rates in young children, some researchers identified characteristics like sensitivity, perfectionism, interest in morality, and social justice that impact students' social and emotional development as more evident in some children who have been labeled gifted (Peterson, 2018). Thus, it is essential to have a school environment where young children can develop their identities, have autonomy in their learning

opportunities, and grow their social and emotional competencies without adults misunderstanding or inferring that they might have mental health issues. Children identified as gifted, like all children, have a social need for positive peer relationships. However, the label may hinder the perceived acceptance by their peers, cause frustration, affect children's healthy interactions, and may impact emotional and social challenges (Mammadov, 2021).

Asynchronous development may differ among children (Hertzog, 2021; Silverman, 2021; Wiley, 2020). Specifically, some young children may be significantly advanced in one area and show more typical age development in other areas. This disparity may cause frustration for children, difficulties with peer relationships, and additional anxieties in developing their social and emotional competencies (Cross, 2021). Parents, caregivers, and teachers may support children's growth in all domains by understanding that children's strength profiles may be varied across domains. Understanding and formulating age-appropriate expectations for all young children is essential (Hertzog, 2021). However, Hébert (2020) notes that the child's asynchrony may cause an "inevitable mismatch with the environments designed to fit their age peers" (Hébert, 2020, p. 60), which may add additional challenges for the child. A mismatch in a learning environment may be due to a lack of challenge in the curriculum or instruction, a particular teaching style that is not responsive to a child's culture or identity, or simply an instructional approach that discourages autonomy and inquiry. Although not the main focus of this literature review, instructional approaches that optimized learning for advanced young learners may have also been interrupted and adapted due to the pandemic, thus causing additional stress on the child's social and emotional well-being.

There is a lack of research on how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the mental health and well-being of young children identified as gifted. We assume two reasons why few studies have been conducted on the

Table 3: Non-Peer-Reviewed Articles

Search Terms	No. of References
National Center on Early Childhood Health and Wellness	1
CDC	3
UNICEF	1
Save the Children	1
WHO	1
Total	7

Table 4: Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
English	Adolescents
Last 10 Years	Young Adults
Children up to 8 years old	Special Education
United States	Children over the age of 8
	Children were having other forms of illness or disability

well-being of young children identified as gifted during the pandemic. First, young children three to eight are often not yet identified as gifted in school settings. Also, "the lack of a federal mandate for gifted education in the United States leaves states to create their policies and definitions and determine whether services for gifted students will be funded or given priority" (Stambaugh & Wood, 2018, p. 85). Therefore, there may be many school districts where children are not yet identified or placed in gifted programs. During the pandemic, all children were impacted, so we can assume that children with advanced academic abilities were also affected. Students present various social-emotional needs with schools reopening, and it is essential to consider practices to meet the needs of the varied student populations (Minkos & Gelbar, 2021).

Availability of Mental Health Services

Five articles reviewed mentioned a lack of services for young children, especially for families from low socio-economic status and/or marginalized communities. Professionals acknowledged that struggling children cannot learn effectively if those emotional and physical needs are not met, so it is crucial to break down these barriers to access (Darling-Hammond et al., 2019). Several reasons in the literature for the lack of services included barriers to access, understanding and communications with families and caregivers, and a shortage of trained professionals.

Many caregivers, parents, and teachers do not have sufficient understanding and available resources to support the mental health needs of young children. In addition, mental health services are not a traditional part of pediatric care; therefore, some parents do not seek help when they should as they do not have the appropriate tools to do so. Moreover, even when families have primary care, they might experience challenges connecting to mental health-related services (Cree et al., 2018). Furthermore, a reported "workforce shortage of pediatric mental health professionals" (Hoffman & Duffy, 2021, p. 1485) could be an additional barrier to accessing services. There is also a lack of availability of providers in the families' preferred language or appointments after school and work hours that accommodate parents and children (Walter et al., 2019). Finally, even when some parents knew that their

child needed help for mental health reasons "the parent's knowledge of their child was not enough to justify an appointment without a referral from a doctor or from the emergency room" (Walter et al., 2019, p. 186). As a result, many children are not receiving the support they need.

The Impact of COVID-19

Many factors contribute to the well-being of children. First, they need a supportive and caring environment where they feel valued and physically and emotionally safe (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). Within that environment, students should get a sense of predictability and continuity in their routines and receive social-emotional learning to foster skills such as interpersonal awareness and conflict resolution (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). Additionally, adults in children's lives can significantly impact their mental health and well-being as poor mental health in caregivers has been shown to be correlated to children's poor mental health (Wolicki et al., 2021).

As research grows around the impacts of COVID-19 on children's lives and mental health, it is clear that young children's well-being and learning were affected by the pandemic. A study from Save the Children (2020) found that "nearly half (49 percent) of interviewed children in the United States said they were worried, while just over one third (34 percent) reported feeling scared, and one quarter (27 percent) felt anxious" (Save the Children, 2020, para. 7). Children are worried about themselves or their loved ones contracting COVID-19, which leads to anxiety. Overall, the pandemic may worsen existing mental health problems for some students and lead to more cases because of the public health crisis, social isolation from school closure and mandates, and an economic recession (Golberstein et al., 2020). Additionally, children receiving mental health services might have seen those services halted because of the pandemic (Hoffman & Duffy, 2021).

Routines and Change

Routines and predictability of students' schedules are essential to their well-being and maintaining positive attitudes. Unfortunately, the recent COVID-19 pandemic has shaken this aspect of the children's lives, among other

things, through school closures, online school, illness, parent job loss, and more. For instance, as Barnett et al. (2021) commented:

> Due to COVID-19, children and staff have experienced even more varying levels of social isolation, stress, anxiety, and trauma. Understanding these stressors and their impacts is particularly significant since many young learners have not yet internalized or experienced typical classroom routines, which could be considered prerequisites to effective teaching and learning. (p. 117)

Moreover, teachers have difficulty adjusting to new daily routines and teaching students through new mediums. During the COVID-19 pandemic, schools closed for some time and transitioned to online and hybrid learning. "Nearly all of the 55 million students in kindergarten through 12th grade in the US are affected by these closures" (Golberstein et al., 2020, p. 819). This remarkable change had many consequences on children due to the disruption to their lives and their families. This interruption of school routines may have led to fewer enjoyable and physical activities (Danese & Smith, 2020). Research shows that routines at home and school are essential to the well-being of children, especially the younger ones (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). Consequently, the pandemic's abrupt disruption of those routines harmed children's mental health.

Impact on Adults - Parents and Caregivers

Parents also saw increases in depression and anxiety (Feinberg et al., 2021). Caregivers were experiencing cumulative stressors due to the pandemic, which impacted their mental health and their children's (Brown et al., 2020). There was a significant deterioration of parents and children's mental and behavioral health during the first months of the pandemic due to new anxiety and stress, which in some cases amplified pre-existing risks of depression (Feinberg et al., 2021).

With lockdowns and stay-at-home orders, some children were exposed to stressful home environments such as family violence, substance use disorders, child abuse, neglect, food insecurity, or increased economic strains (Danese & Smith, 2020; Samji et al., 2021). In their study, Brown et al. (2020) found that "emotional and social support a parent receives is significantly associated with lower perceptions of stress and risk of child abuse potential" (p. 11). Therefore, actively supporting families during and after the pandemic might be crucial to children's well-being. On the other hand, some might argue that while schools are a positive environment for most children, those who were affected by bullying or intense academic pressure may have fared better during the lockdowns (Danese & Smith, 2020).

As the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted inequities in our society, mental health services access was no exception (Iruka et al., 2021). Unfortunately, some populations had little to no access to mental health services, and some were more prone to mental health issues because of the pandemic. For example, Falicov et al. (2020) reported "that COVID-19-related fear and associated anxiety and depressive symptoms were higher for women, Hispanic, Asian, and immigrant individuals and also families with small children" (p. 866). Also, parents of immigrants struggled with a lack of resources and support, language and communication barriers, and developmental concerns about their children amid COVID-19 (Hong et al., 2021). Others who received services had to endure disruptions due to the pandemic (Golberstein et al., 2020).

Teachers Affected by COVID-19

The pandemic also impacted teachers as their whole profession was turned upside down in weeks, if not days. They had to learn how to teach virtually and continue to support their students' learning and well-being while trying to take care of themselves and their own families. Jelińska and Paradowski (2021) found that "53.2% of the teachers estimated that the pandemic situation had affected teachers and students equally, whereas 33.1% found students to be in a worse situation than the teachers" (p. 3).

The literature also revealed that teachers' mental health was related to the classroom climate and students' well-being as struggling adults cannot appropriately support children (Doucet et al., 2020; Himmelstein, 2021). Literature addressed how teachers' depressive symptoms can be negatively associated with the quality of the classroom learning environment, such as lower classroom organization and instructional support (Sandilos et al., 2015). Especially in the context of young learners, "early childhood teachers, regardless of their mental health status, may be investing a great deal of energy into dimensions associated with emotional support" (Sandilos et al., 2015, p. 1122) which can have a great impact on their students. The pandemic has only exacerbated teachers' vulnerabilities to stress, anxiety, and depression, emphasizing the need to help "educators heal from the stresses of working during COVID" (Himmelstein, 2021, p. 2).

Strategies for Support

The literature review highlighted strategies and recommendations to support children and caregivers. "The WHO identifies the need for a holistic approach to the well-being of young people as MH [Mental Health] problems can have a negative effect on all areas of development." (O'Connor et al., 2018, p. 413). Therefore, one systemic intervention that would benefit all parties involved would be integrating mental health services in schools. Thus, better collaboration and communication would be possible between providers, schools, and caregivers. Furthermore, cooperation with developmental

and behavioral health services in public assistance programs could provide opportunities to connect and give access to services to more families living in poverty (Cree et al., 2018). Therefore, funding school-based mental health centers would allow care in the spaces students spend most of their days. This integration would better support children by offering more information about mental health services and prevention and ensuring early screening and diagnosis for children with mental health issues. Cree et al. (2018) argued that "Early identification and treatment of MBDDs [Mental Behavioral Developmental Disorders] could positively impact a child's functioning and reduce the need for costly interventions over time" (p. 1377). Consequently, school staff should receive training to recognize signs of pediatric mental health problems (Hoffman & Duffy, 2021).

School-based programs can positively impact children's well-being, and multiple approaches can be promising (O'Connor et al., 2018). Two types of interventions can be implemented within those programs: universal and targeted. O'Connor et al. (2018) defined them as:

> Universal interventions are those that target general population groups; for example, in schools this may be the whole school or all within an age range. Targeted interventions are designed to be delivered to specific groups or individuals who have been identified to need specific support or treatment due to an existing illness, vulnerability, or risk factor. (p. 414)

Overall, the main idea to keep in mind is that "for a whole-school approach to be engaged, the school must commit to creating a health-promoting environment, with all staff supporting the initiative and ensuring that MH [Mental Health] and social and emotional well-being is placed throughout the school's curriculum" (O'Connor et al., 2018, p. 413).

Some strategies can also be implemented in the classrooms and schools on a smaller scale and still be beneficial. For instance, educators can create environments to help students develop their self-regulation, emotional intelligence, and relationship skills in schools, classrooms, and libraries. They can do so by having a calm-down space, creating predictable routines, providing a wide variety of multicultural books that affirm all students' identities, and engaging in respectful conversations with children (Himmelstein, 2021). For example, in collaboration with 58 other organizations, the World Health Organization and UNICEF published a children's book called *My Hero is You: How Kids can Fight COVID-19!* (WHO, September 2021). This book is meant to help children stay hope-ful during the pandemic. The book is available in 142 languages.

Barnett et al. (2021) noted that "young learners are especially susceptible to such shifts in schedule, and thus schools will need to make a concerted effort to engage families by providing clear guidance on how to prepare

children to cope with the changes" (p. 116). Moreover, there needs to be support for adults and school staff because struggling adults cannot help struggling students. Therefore, emotional support is essential for students and early childhood educators. Individual and family resilience can be promoted through "coping skills, mood management, family relationship quality and access to social support" (Feinberg et al., 2021).

Teachers generally know their students and how they were doing emotionally before school closure. Therefore, teachers' input is crucial to appropriately support their students academically, socially, and emotionally, which means educators' voices should be empowered and valued in the conversations about policies and practices (Doucet et al., 2020). In addition, teachers have both direct and indirect effects on students in the classroom. For instance, teachers' interactions influence students' social behavior and inclusion (Jelińska & Paradowski, 2021). However, during COVID-19, it was challenging for teachers to support their learners because communications and interactions were not the same as before the pandemic (Reimers et al., 2020). For example, "Facial expressions are used to help communicate feelings and provide reassurance, so being around masked faces can add to feelings of uncertainty" (CDC, 2022b, para. 4). Therefore, some adjustments were needed to support young children in new learning spaces. For instance, Darling-Hammond (2020) mentioned that differentiated teaching and support enhance children's confidence and motivation. Thus, creating a classroom climate of positive interaction and productive relationships culturally and academically during and post-pandemic is critical for young children's healthy growth in all domains.

Because teachers' well-being may impact their students, it is essential to support their mental health. Therefore, instituting a recurring system of mental health support for school staff can go a long way to minimize stress, anxiety, depression, and burnout for teachers and improve the classroom environment and children's well-being (Himmelstein, 2021; Sandilos et al., 2015).

Home Support During the Pandemic

Parents and families are influential in supporting children's social and emotional well-being by creating home environments with positive relationships and warm interactions. Healthy relationships between parents and children enhance psychological well-being (Kroesbergen et al., 2016). Unfortunately, recent research demonstrated that 7.2% of children in the U.S. had at least one caregiver with poor mental health (Wolicki et al., 2021). The pandemic revealed how vital a student's home and school partnership is to support young children isolated from their peers during times of crisis. Parents' interaction styles and the quality of their relationships are crucial components of children's well-being.

UNICEF (2020) suggested six ways parents could support their children through the COVID-19 pandemic: 1) having conversations about staying healthy and empathizing with children, 2) helping children have a routine schedule with structure and predictableness, 3) helping children express their emotions, including sadness and struggle, 4) having daily check- ins about misunderstandings and misconceptions of COVID-19, 5) creating family time and keeping their technology time, and 6) managing parents' behaviors and emotions to continue to provide a sense of safety and security to their children.

Outside of Home Support

As schools and early childhood centers transition back to in-person learning, there are a few steps parents and teachers can take to support their children. First, teachers and parents should open communication about what happens in and out of the classroom to build strong relationships (CDC, 2022b; National Center on Early Childhood Health and Wellness, 2021). Teachers should try to meet parents before children start school and give them updates throughout the day. If possible, teachers should provide parents with an idea of what the routines at school would look like so they can prepare their children and mirror them at home for continuity. Finally, caregivers and teachers need to support their young learners to return to school and have a stable and predictable day-to-day life by allowing young children to use their daily routine in family conversations and experiences at home.

Additionally, having socio-emotional learning embedded in school activities can benefit all parties (Himmelstein, 2021). For example, parents should remain calm and reassure their children when they transition to drop-off (CDC, 2022b). Caregivers should remember to take care of their mental health and contact health care and mental health care professionals if they have any concerns. Above all, the most crucial concept to remember is to "make sure their child has a daily, predictable routine, with regular times for healthy meals, naps, and night sleep at home. Having a rested body and knowing what to expect at home helps children cope" (CDC, 2022b, para. 9).

Additional Resources for Support

The Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute from the University of North Carolina offers a multitude of evidence-based resources for caregivers and educators to help support their children during and post-pandemic. The Institute provides a wide range of resources, from supporting children with autism and other special needs to blended learning strategies. In addition, they consistently update their website as more research becomes available to continue their commitment to supporting children and their families during these unprecedented times (UNC Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute, n.d.).

Another resource for early childhood educators is the Pyramid Model which addresses explicit teaching of social skills and emotional regulation to support all young children, specifically children with disabilities in the classroom. It also offers support for caregivers outside of schools (The Pyramid Model Consortium, n.d.).

Additional authors have suggested some tips for early childhood educators and caregivers to support their children in developing self-regulation skills (Pahigiannis et al., 2019). Buka et al. (2022) argued for more pediatric mental health services that focus not only on the child but on the family as a whole. They offered intervention approaches in primary care settings and home settings and ideas for policy change to support all families' well-being.

Discussion

Children live and grow within a system of interconnected spaces that impact their well- being. As Bronfenbrenner (1977) suggests, children live within an ecological system made of multiple systems that impact children's lives, development, and learning. Children are impacted by their environment, including their families, schools, friends, neighborhood, place of worship, community, and more broadly, society, culture, and media. Consequently, it is not unfathomable that the pandemic impacted young children as every aspect of their ecological system was disrupted in one way or another. For example, schools were closed, and parents may have lost employment or switched to working from home. Families also lost access to grandparents or other older caregivers. These changes impacted multiple parts of children's ecological systems, disrupting their daily lives, and impacting their sense of happiness and well-being. Also, every child has their own system they grow up in, which will impact their development process. Therefore, more individualized support and strategies that are responsive to the needs of each child are necessary to fully help them (Farmer et al., 2021).

In more recent work, Bronfenbrenner highlights the importance of bi-directional interactions between children and adults in their lives in his Person-Process-Context-Time (PPCT) model (Bronfenbrenner, 1995; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Therefore, emotional and instructional support are essential to the optimal growth of children, which means that if one actor in the interactions is struggling with poor mental health, it might impact the child's emotional development (Wasik & Coleman, 2019). It reinforces the idea that teachers' and caregivers' well-being is as important as children's for their healthy development.

For educators, it is important to understand individual and familial circumstances surrounding the process of coming back to school and developing new and perhaps

unfamiliar routines impacting how children learn. Support for all parties involved will be essential to keep children, teachers, and caregivers healthy. Many resources outline strategies for collaboration between caregivers and early childhood staff for a smoother return to school environments. The literature predominantly argues that schools must be at the forefront of mental health services for students and teachers. With that in mind, it is essential to prioritize the little resources and funds that schools allocate towards mental health services and support for their students and their workforce. Especially in the wake of the pandemic, these prioritizations will be crucial. Conversations with students about mental health and well-being should be an integral part of every child's instructional day.

Implications and Conclusions

Future studies need to be conducted to understand the potentially long-lasting effects of COVID-19 on children's, caregivers', and teachers' mental health. The continuation of the pandemic may necessitate new routines to be established for young children at school and at home to navigate these unprecedented times. Young children's mental health and well-being are essential aspects of their learning journey that need to be acknowledged and supported accordingly. Even at a young age, children can experience stress, anxiety, and depression. As we continue to monitor the COVID-19 pandemic, there remains some unknowns for the future and potential lasting impacts on children's mental health and well-being. Therefore, it will be important to follow children and their families and screen for disruptions in parent and child well-being (Feinberg et al., 2021). Dudovitz et al. (2021) offer a research agenda identifying the most critical areas of research that need to be conducted to further understand the pandemic's impact on children and adults. Their recommendations focus on equity, strength-based and anti- racist methodologies that also involve the community (Dudovitz et al., 2021). With the rise in the use of technology in many different domains, possibilities for future research on how technology has impacted access to mental health services, especially for younger children, may be pursued.

Additionally, researchers could look at how technology has disrupted learning environments while also bringing new opportunities to early childhood classrooms.

This literature review addressed and acknowledged the impacts of the recent pandemic on young children and their caregivers in educational contexts. Young children's mental health and well-being are an integral part of their learning journey and development that needs to be understood by educators, families, and those in the community who work with children. Young children are susceptible to mental health issues, and as highlighted by the literature, COVID-19 has increased their vulnerability. Although we do not have research to show that young children identified as gifted were any more vulnerable than others, it is possible that some young children with more advanced understandings of the dangers of the pandemic or with more sensitivities to the losses they may have suffered could be more at risk of developing social or emotional problems. We offered some strategies found in the literature to potentially support children, parents, and teachers in their daily endeavors to maintain their wellness and well-being. We urge educators to prioritize support for mental health services for their students and themselves.

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