CUWB Panel 1: CHILDREN'S PERSPECTIVES ON THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND ITS EFFECTS ON THEIR WELL-BEING

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Theme
- Impacts of COVID-19 on childhood and adolescence

Subtheme
- Children's participation and voices

Summary of the panel
The Covid-19 pandemic has significantly affected children's lives. Yet, children are rarely included in dialogue on the pandemic, and limited research exists exploring children's perspectives on the effects of the pandemic on their well-being, whether these effects have had ambivalent consequences, and how these consequences of living in a 'COVID-19 normal world map onto existing inequalities or have created new divisions. The presentations in this session engage with these issues, by starting from children's perspectives, therefore deepening our understanding of the taken-for-granted effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on children's well-being. The papers present findings from India, Canada, the United States of America and South Africa.

Paper 1
Title: "The internet is keeping me from dying from boredom": Understanding the management and social construction of the self through middle-class Indian children's engagement with digital technologies during the COVID-19 lockdown

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Abstract:
This paper unpacks how everyday lives of urban middle-class children were mediated by digital technologies during the COVID-19 national lockdown in India. In contemporary India, children's engagements with digital technologies are structured by their social class, gender and geographical locations. The resultant disparities between 'media rich' and 'media poor' childhoods in India are stark (Banaji, 2017). In this paper, we argue that the national lockdown in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic exposed India's 'media-rich' children to greater potential risks with possible threat to their well-being. Based on semi-structured interviews and mapping exercises with 16-to-17-year-old urban middle-class young people, we explore how, being confined to their homes for an extended period when their schools shifted to online delivery of teaching and learning; young people negotiated

risks and sought digital opportunities in the management and social construction of the self (Callero 2003, 2014). While the majority of existing studies focus on societal anxieties around children's digital media use and its impact on parenting practices (Lim, 2020; Livingstone and Blum-Ross, 2020), we shift attention to how children reflect on their engagement with technology and shape their own well-being through the social construction of the self. Our findings demonstrate that children are reflexive users of digital technologies, as they navigate network failure issues, the demands of online classrooms, their own mental health and social relationships, and deploy the affordances of digital technologies to combat loneliness, nurture contact with friends and explore educational and career resources. These strategies, in the management and social construction of the self, play out within the discourse of pedagogised middle-class childhood in India which is imbued with notions of academic success and failure (Kumar, 2016; Sen, 2014). Media-rich middle-class young people's management and social construction of the self, in a context of crisis and uncertainty, helps promote our understandings of the relationship between social structure, self-structure, and behavior choices and the implications of this for child well-being; and the reproduction of social inequality in society.

Paper 2
Title: Relational experiences of Canadian children contributing to and harming their well-being during the first year of the COVID19 pandemic

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Abstract:
Background: This study, part of the work of the Children's Understandings of Well-Being (CUWB) network, is based on testimonials from 156 Canadian children and adolescents regarding their experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic, which turned the lives of children and their family upside down around the world. Restrictive measures such as lockdowns, social distancing, the closing of schools and shops, the ban on gatherings and sports activities as well as the wearing of masks are transforming young people's daily lives and their well-being.

Objective: To analyze the meanings of well-being in the context of the pandemic from children's perspectives and identify how different experiences contribute to their well-being through the pandemic stages.

Methodology: This longitudinal mixed study included three measurement time (T1: May 2020 lockdown, T2: July 2020 progressive reopening and T3: beginning of the 2nd wave). For each measurement period, participants were met virtually for semi-directed interviews about their well-being during the pandemic and they also completed a questionnaire measuring their quality of life.

Conceptual framework: Grounded in a child-centred approach, this study aims to do research *with* children rather than *on* children. Children are seen as social actors, with the ability to contribute to the body knowledge about pandemic social issues through their own understanding of the world around them.

Preliminary findings: Participants were categorized into three groups based on whether they reported a worrisome health-related quality of life (N:32, 22%), one that is similar to the population average (N: 90, 60%) or a high one (N:27, 18%) during the third measurement period. The comparative thematic analysis of the discourse of these three groups allows us to distinguish between the experiences that are favourable and unfavourable to the well-being of young people throughout the pandemic, in particular in relation to their family relations and social relations.

Conclusion: The results provide a nuanced look at the positive and negative experiences children lived through during the pandemic and their contribution to their well-being from their own perspectives. They also allow us to understand social inequalities that underlie the lived pandemic experiences, and how some conditions amplify children's vulnerability. The importance of listening to what children have to say and supporting their agency in a context where individual freedoms are being redefined will be discussed.

Paper 3
Title: Rural Children's Well-Being in the Context of the Covid-19 Pandemic: Perspectives from Children in the Midwestern U.S.

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Abstract:
Conceptual Framework: Children in rural areas are more likely to experience a variety of risk factors that increase their vulnerability to physical and mental health disparities, including lack of access to goods, services, and resources, social isolation, economic stress, limited parental job opportunities, poor parental mental health, and transportation

challenges (CDC, 2021; Glendinning et al., 2003; Kelly et al., 2011). Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model (1986) is a useful framework for understanding rural children's perceptions of vulnerability and well-being because it takes into account multiple interactive contexts which are impacted by rurality (from microsystems to macrosystems) and which influence development, as well as the bidirectional influences between child and context (Atilola, 2014; Newland et al., 2015). When a major event such as the Covid-19 pandemic impacts one or more of children's contexts, it is important to examine resulting changes in children's well-being.

Objective: This phenomenological study was designed to explore rural children's perceptions of their well-being and the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on their contexts and well-being.

Methodology: This sub-study of CUWB project followed the qualitative interview protocol (Fattore, Fegter, & Hunner-Kreisel, 2014; 2018), with additional prompts related to the pandemic. Rural children (age 8 to 18, $N = 72$) from the Midwestern U.S. participated from March 2020-November 2021 via teleconferencing, after the Covid-19 pandemic caused lockdowns and restrictions. Most children in the sample experienced a transition to online learning, and some transitioned back to traditional classrooms.

Analyses and Findings: Phenomenological analyses of transcripts focused on the essence of children's understanding of well-being and their perception of the impact of the pandemic on their contexts and well-being. Each transcript was coded by author 1 and verified by author 2, and discrepancies were identified, discussed, and resolved. The third author served as an external auditor to enhance trustworthiness. First-cycle coding focused on children's specific references to well-being experiences during Covid-19. Second-cycle selective coding focused on specific well-being experiences and contexts that were impacted by Covid-19. These codes were used to develop two broad themes. The first theme, "Well This Kinda Stinks, But We Just Adapt", included several subthemes, including "It's Not Really *That* Bad", "I Mean, It Kind of Stinks", "We Adapted Our Families", "We Adapted Our Schooling", "We Adapted Our Friendships", and "We Adapted Our Activities". The second theme, "Safety Means Something Different to Me Now", included two subthemes: "Being Safe Means That We Have to Take Precautions" and "Being Safe Means Protecting Yourself and Others".

Conclusion and implications: The meaning of themes and subthemes is explored within the broader context of child well-being research. This study has implications for parents, teachers, health providers, social service agencies, and others who support children. These implications include the importance of supporting parents who are supporting children; the importance of supporting teachers and school staff who are adapting to meet the needs of children; the importance of modeling and teaching children appropriate coping strategies; and the importance of considering each child's ecocultural niche and identifying their unique needs and supports, taking a whole child as well as a whole context approach.

Paper 4
Title: Children's perspectives on their well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa

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Abstract:

Introduction and objectives: The COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing global lockdowns have had a substantial negative impact on children's well-being. Within South Africa, it has accelerated the vast inequities children experience across all life domains. It has further advanced child vulnerability and neglect, particularly among those in low-income contexts. The pandemic has highlighted the crippling effects of additional constraints to strained resource systems; with the medium and long-term effects still unknown. The socioeconomic status of the household wherein children reside has a direct impact on the support they receive during the pandemic, and how they experience the impact of the pandemic. In the context of limited research on the impact of the pandemic on children's lives, we aimed to explore how children perceive, make sense of, and assign meaning to their lives and well-being in the context of COVID-19.

Method: We conducted individual interviews with 10 children (10-to 12-years-old) using an unstructured interview schedule with three broad questions that asked about the impact of COVID-19 and their well-being. The study forms part of Wave 2 of the Multinational Qualitative Study on Children's Understandings of Well-Being South Africa Study. We analysed the data using thematic analysis.

Results: Our findings confirm the devastating impact that the pandemic has had, and is continuing to have on the lives of children. Children displayed a high level of knowledge about the nature of COVID-19. They also appeared to demonstrate an in-depth understanding of the short and long-term effects of the disease. In particular, they highlighted the negative impact of the pandemic on their education, future aspirations, safety, and relationships. While their narratives appeared to be reproducing those of adults, they similarly displayed a sense of anxiety and uncertainty, which served to authenticate their perspectives. However, the findings also underscored the important role of interpersonal relationships between children and their families, and how this positively influences their well-being. We found that increased time spent together at home during the lockdown fostered closer and healthy family relationships. This was specifically

evident when children lived in homes with a safe and stable family environment, with supportive and encouraging parents and siblings. These factors were found to mitigate the negative effects of the lockdown, anxiety about the pandemic, and the abrupt change in children's routines.

Conclusion and implications: The discussion groups served as a space and platform for children to speak about how COVID-19 has been affecting their lives, and for adults to listen, acknowledge and value their experiences, and take them seriously. Children urged their local and national government to make more jobs available, increase social grants, and create opportunities for online learning – essentially a call to focus on the economic aspects of their lives.