

Children's fear of COVID-19: Associations with subjective and psychological well-being in South Africa

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Thematic relevance: The current study examines the relation between children's fear of COVID-19, psychological well-being (PWB), and subjective well-being (SWB) from two provinces in South Africa. While there is an emerging literature on the impacts of the pandemic on children's subjective well-being, this is the first identified study that examines the influence of the fear of COVID-19 on children's PWB and SWB. The study aligns to the overall conference theme of "Children's rights and opportunities in an unequal world: Research, policy and intervention", and two conference themes namely: *Innovations in research design and measurement on the focus of the Conference* and *Impacts of COVID-19 on childhood and adolescence*.

Theme/s: Innovations in research design and measurement on the focus of the Conference; Impacts of COVID-19 on childhood and adolescence

Subtheme: Subjective well-being

Introduction and objectives: The COVID-19 pandemic has had substantial negative impacts on children's well-being in South Africa (SA). This is evident in the intersection of multiple overlapping levels of deprivation and vulnerability that children face within their personal, social, economic, and health ecologies. The escalation of the pandemic has resulted in heightened fear, anxieties, and worries among children, despite them being spared from COVID-19 related mortality. Fear is a distinctive feature related to infectious disease transmission rates, morbidity, and mortality, which exacerbates psychosocial issues. Children's fear of the pandemic further influences their SWB and PWB. This relation is potentially exacerbated by high levels of social inequality in SA, with children across various socio-economic status (SES) contexts having a differential experience of COVID-19. Given this relation, this is the first identified study that examines the influence of the fear of COVID-19 on children's SWB and PWB. We aim to contribute to the limited research in SA to determine the influence of fear as a psychosocial factor, on children's SWB and PWB. We further aim to explore the differential nature of this relation across four SES groups (low, lower-middle, middle, and high).

Method: We use data from the *Children's Worlds: COVID-19 Supplement Study South Africa* conducted in two of the nine provinces (Western Cape and Northern Cape) in SA. Participants were selected from primary schools located in the two provinces using stratified random sampling, across education management district councils, SES (low, lower-middle, middle, and high), and geographical context (urban and rural). The sample comprised 1001 children between 10-12-years-old ($M_{age} = 11.72$, $SD = .465$; Girls = 40.1%). We used the Fear of COVID-19 Scale to assess children's fear of the pandemic, the Children's Worlds SWB Scale to measure SWB, and the Children's Worlds PWB to measure PWB. Data were analysed using confirmatory factor analysis and structural equation modelling.

Results: For the overall model, we found an appropriate fit structure for both SWB and PWB. However, we found that 'Fear of COVID-19' did not significantly contribute to the

variation in children's SWB. As it relates to PWB, while 'Fear of COVID-19' was a significant predictor of PWB, it only contributed 3% to the variation in children's PWB. Across SES, we similarly found no significant differences for the relation with SWB. For the relation with PWB, we found higher contributions for the low and lower-middle groups than for the middle and high SES groups.

Conclusion and implications: Given the impact of the pandemic on children's daily lives, a much stronger relation between the constructs was hypothesised – the results are therefore somewhat surprising. It is likely that there are factors that are buffering the impact of the 'Fear of COVID-19' on children's SWB and PWB. These buffers are functioning to maintain SWB and PWB at an acceptable level, even in the context of adversity. Children's fears of COVID-19 have found to be 'normative'; pointing to an adaptive mechanism employed by children. Future research should explore the dynamics of the aforementioned buffers and this adaptation mechanism.
