Riders on the Storm: Did COVID-19 Change Children's Emotional and Behavioral Profile? A Brief Exploratory Survey

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Received: 6 August 2020 / Accepted: 16 November 2020 / Published online: 25 November 2020
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To the Editor: As one of the first countries involved in the COVID-19 pandemic, in March 2020 Italy established several restrictions in order to contain infections. In that phase, the daily routine of the population changed, with a crucial reduction in social interactions. These changes concerned especially children and adolescents [1, 2], who suffered more than others the impossibility to attend school or to spend time with peers. To understand this situation, we carried out a cross-sectional study aimed at investigating changes in the emotional/behavioural profile of a cohort of children who underwent a psycho-diagnostic assessment at a Child Neuropsychiatric Clinic in Rome during 2019. We administered a self-reported questionnaire in a two-month period (from 5 April 2020 to 5 June 2020) to the parents of 125 children. We collected socio-demographic data and clinical information about the first evaluation, and we asked parents whether there had been changes of habits within the family and in their children's daily routines because of COVID-19-related restrictions.

Overall, 101 questionnaires were completed in the time period considered. The parents of 70 children (age range: 6–15 y, mean age 9.07 ± 2.481 ; 56 M / 14 F) fulfilled the survey, with a response rate of 56%. The most frequent diagnoses included emotional disorders (*e.g.*, depressive disorders, generalized anxiety disorder) in 28.6% of all cases, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) in 24.3%, behavioral disorders (*e.g.*, conduct disorder, oppositional-defiant disorder, disruptive behavior disorder) in 10.0%. By using the Child Behavior Checklist

school-age version (CBCL 6–18) [3], we compared the present results with the ones coming from the previous evaluation. We observed a statistically significant decrease in the average score of internalizing problems in the post-lockdown period ($t_{(44)} = 2.262$; $p < 0.05$), while there were no statistically significant differences in the externalizing CBCL score ($t_{(44)} = -0.478$; $p = 0.635$). Therefore, clinical improvements in children diagnosed with internalizing problems were observed, hypothesizing that the additional time spent at home by parents and the consequent strengthening of the family unit could have helped children to mitigate some of the symptoms previously described. On the other hand, externalizing problems showed no changes during the lockdown, probably because the social limitations prevented children from being in other settings outside the family.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of Interest None.

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