

CHAPTER X:

EARLY CHILDHOOD, EDUCATION, AND SOCIAL ASSISTANCE IN THE COVID-19 ERA¹⁷⁶

1. EDUCATING AND FEEDING CHILDREN IN A SOCIAL ISOLATION CONTEXT

The social distancing and quarantine measures in force in many countries hit by COVID-19 have confined families to their homes and forced them to find new ways of living together and connecting with their social environment. While distance learning through digital media is becoming the practice to continue children's education, it is mostly available in countries which possess well developed educational institutions and programs, and extensive internet access. Distance learning is thus becoming generally accessible to a high-income social minority.

All over the world, children's and adolescents' education happens mostly in schools, with families playing an important, but subsidiary role in curricular activities. Indeed, the education that school-age children receive at school is vital when it comes to assimilating content. Responses to the COVID-19 outbreak included class suspensions. This has posed a new challenge for families: mothers and fathers have had to take over the role of educators in the home, and are the ones leading the process of pedagogical and curricular training of their children.

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The fact that children and adolescents cannot continue their education in school classrooms has also challenged traditional teaching methods and has forced families to play a major role in the learning process of their children. Helping out with homework and school assignments, something that used to be done quickly and as an additional task among many others in the home, has now taken prominence and requires families to tap into available didactic materials, also online, to support children's educational progress. This, however, is not applicable to the most vulnerable households that have limited access to computer equipment and internet, and where parents do not have the educational level to support their children. In other words, these challenges brought by the pandemic are compounded with the already-existing ones that limited children's educational attainments in vulnerable households. Even in households equipped with the appropriate technology for distance learning, there may clearly be limitations for educating children and adolescents, such as lack of familiarity with the proper use of the technological tools or other psychological and relational impediments exacerbated by social isolation.

In other words, today's circumstances redefine and widen a set of preexisting inequality gaps: households' digital and human capital gaps in a broad sense (educational and psychosocial health) are already a barrier to equalizing the curricular education provided to all the children and adolescents continuing their studies at home.

Another constraint that cannot be ignored in this diagnostic assessment is the size of available living space. Overcrowding or lack of space is a major obstacle to doing homework and is probably also detrimental to the quality and strength of human bonds within households. Even though overcrowding predates COVID-19, during quarantines it becomes a permanent feature of family life. The current social context increases the likelihood of domestic violence, of which children and adolescents are often the main victims.

Similarly, in the current context of class suspensions, inequality gaps in education exponentially widen between families with and those without paid care options. For that reason, States are attempting to take steps to mitigate these tensions, albeit with mixed success and for periods of time that remain uncertain. It seems clear that schools have not been able to adapt to the pace of the measures imposed by the pandemic, given the lack of substantive reforms in the educational systems of the region.

However, in the Americas, apart from their traditional role, schools today also fulfill another function, perhaps even more essential in terms of sustaining life, than its traditional role as the guarantor of social reproduction and citizen training. For years now, schools have become sources of food for children and adolescents. This amended role of the educational institution challenges us to consider the relationship between education and social inequality.

A particularly challenging issue is that, as a result of food insecurity, many families rely on educational, and other institutions, to obtain food. In the current context, schools' food assistance function for children is not there anymore, as the risk of contagion

takes precedence over food insecurity. In that context, homeless children pose a specific problem, as they require not only food assistance but a comprehensive social protection system as well. In the scenario triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic, these dimensions are particularly worrisome, not so much due to the number of infected persons in the region, but rather due to the consequences that the protective measures being adopted by governments may have on the most vulnerable segments of society if states do not respond quickly and prioritize them on their agenda.

Finally, it is important to pinpoint certain cross-cutting vulnerabilities for all children and adolescents during quarantines and social isolation measures. One of the main needs of this age group is to socialize with peers, and practice sports and engage in other physical activities, and play. In fact, these constitute children's and adolescents' rights. One internationally influential benchmark in this respect is the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans (2008). The section on children and adolescents in those Guidelines recommends 60 or more minutes a day of physical activity. A lack of physical activity and the opportunity to socialize with peer groups in face-to-face activities may impair children's and adolescents' physical health (overweight, obesity, immune system disorders, etc.); emotional health (anxiety, depression, mood disorders, etc.); and mental health (distractedness, sleep disorders, etc.).

It is also important to consider the particular situation of children and adolescents with divorced parents who share custody rights or have made other family arrangements. It is crucial to protect their visiting rights to see each of their parents.

2. REGULATORY FRAMEWORK AND LEGAL PROTECTION OF CHILDREN

Children's human and social development is safeguarded by rights embodied in numerous international regulatory instruments generated by multilateral consensus, beginning with those that became consolidated as universal and general frameworks for the protection of human rights, such as the **Universal Declaration of Human Rights** (United Nations, 1948), the **International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights** (United Nations, 1966); and the **Convention on the Rights of the Child** (United Nations, 1989)

More specifically, and at the inter-American level, States have a duty to grant special protection to children and adolescents, as established in the following instruments:

- Article VII of the **American Declaration of the Rights and Duties of Man** (1948) provides that "*All women, during pregnancy and the nursing period, and all children have the right to special protection, care and aid.*"
- The **American Convention on Human Rights** (OAS, 1969) protects the right of the child in Article 19, which establishes that "*Every minor child has the right to the measures of protection required by his condition as a minor on the*

part of his family, society, and the state."

- Article 16 of the **Additional Protocol to the American Convention on Human Rights in the Area of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights** (OAS, 1988) ratifies what the American Convention on Human Rights has to say about the Rights of the Child and adds that (...) "*every child has the right to free and compulsory education, at least in the elementary phase, and to continue his training at higher levels of the educational system.*"

Specifically regarding nutrition, Article 24 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989) establishes that the States Parties recognize the right of the child *to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health* and commits States to taking a series of measures including "*To combat disease and malnutrition, including within the framework of primary health care, through, inter alia, the application of readily available technology and through the provision of adequate nutritious foods and clean drinking-water, taking into consideration the dangers and risks of environmental pollution.*" Likewise, Article 28 of the Convention recognizes the right of the child to education and explicitly states that it is a duty of states to "*Make educational and vocational information and guidance available and accessible to all children [...and] take all appropriate measures to ensure that school discipline is administered in a manner consistent with the child's human dignity (...).*" It is also important to note that Articles 7, 13, 17, 18, and 31 of the Convention establish the right of the child to participate in cultural life, sports, and technology.

3. RECOMMENDATIONS TO STATES REGARDING RESPONSES TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC THAT TAKE INTO ACCOUNT CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

To assist this process, several international organizations, such as FAO,¹⁷⁷ UNICEF, WHO, IFRC,¹⁷⁸ and others, have compiled a set of key messages and actions for COVID-19 Prevention and Control in Schools and other educational facilities, as well as for parents, caregivers, community members, students and children.

Likewise, FAO (2020) has issued a series of recommendations regarding the pandemic, geared to facilitating the availability of food and its access for households¹:

- It proposes food distribution to the most vulnerable families (preferably fresh food delivery, and if possible, locally produced), at previously established delivery times. To that end, it recommends the use of digital tools (georeferenced applications) to improve communication regarding access points for food deliveries, distribution times, and recommendations for the proper use of food.

¹⁷⁷ Source: United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization. Available at <http://www.fao.org/home/en/>

¹⁷⁸ Source: UNICEF, WHO AND IFRC Key Messages and Actions for COVID-19 Prevention and Control in Schools March 2020 Available at: https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/key-messages-and-actions-for-covid-19-prevention-and-control-in-schools-march-2020.pdf?sfvrsn=baf81d52_4

- Also proposed is the delivery of emergency essential food rations to the most vulnerable communities and territories in coordination with authorized government agencies or international cooperation.
- Redistribution of food from school feeding programs through donations to entities responsible for providing food assistance (such as food banks, social organizations, non-governmental organizations, churches, local clubs, etc.) during the emergency response phase.
- Increase in the economic allocation of social protection programs (such as income transfers) by an amount corresponding to the cost of food rations delivered by school feeding programs.
- Exemption from taxes on basic food for families with school-age children, especially for workers in the most affected economic sectors.
- The continuity of educational processes through schooling partly depends on the strategies that families can devise, the strategies that arise in educational facilities, and the synergies that can be forged within the educational community, including families.
- Once the quarantine and social distancing measures end, and schools reopen, every precaution must be taken to ensure student safety and health. While they remain closed due to isolation, children's routines for personal hygiene, sleep time, clothing, mealtimes, and also, the time and timing of homework must be continued.
- Should social distancing measures continue, these will probably be harder for the most vulnerable families to follow due to their greater material deprivation, greater exposure to psychological stress, and limited space availability in their homes. In those cases, the above listed recommendations and especially those proposed by the FAO with respect to access to food and income transfers to households become a priority. It is also vital in those cases to expand the psychosocial dimension of protection systems for children and adolescents and their principal caregivers.
- In situations involving prolonged social isolation, the use of digital or on-line learning strategies is recommended, along with the assignment of reading materials and exercises to be done at home. Television and radio programs and podcasts with academic content are also useful. Also recommended is daily or weekly monitoring by teachers of activities performed by their students at home, along with the monitoring of their overall situation, so as to detect any rights violations that may be occurring. Another suggestion is to update or create accelerated education strategies (UNICEF, WHO, and IFRC, 2020, p. 5).
- In addition, a broad set of recommendations have been made for school environments at each education level, regarding prevention measures associated with hygiene and health practices. Other recommendations promote preventive practices among students, such as hand washing

and social distancing. In other words, the goal is to foster safe school environments, with respect to hygiene (constant disinfecting) and the personal hygiene habits of students, teachers, and non-teaching staff (through information and by setting an example). One important warning regards the need to avoid stigmatizing and discriminating against others during these prevention-related training and awareness-raising processes (UNICEF, WHO, and IFRC, 2020).

- All these recommendations will be more difficult to implement within families and school environments in vulnerable communities. It is thus important to work in partnership with other public health and social services, with a view to ensuring that medical exams are carried out; that access to food and psychological support is provided; and that any child abuse and other violations of the human rights of children with disabilities or in other types of vulnerable situations are reported.
- It is also important to take into consideration the multiple vulnerabilities to which children may be exposed in connection with domestic exploitation (caring for the sick or the elderly, or others) and domestic violence exacerbated by overcrowding and the tensions typically associated with additional shortages in a context in which adult providers have less work and income. It is recommended that awareness-raising campaigns be stepped up, including publication of the telephone numbers available for reporting and requesting help in cases of child abuse, violence, and exploitation, as well as to report and protect homeless children.
- Mass campaigns are also needed to stress the importance of social distancing in situations where people live together and interact with one another in public spaces, with a view to eventually being able to ease up on quarantines and allow children to go outside the house for games and recreational physical activities in parks and squares in major cities. Another recommendation is to plan alternative arrangements for achieving social distancing within physical education courses at school and avoiding the suspension of those crucial educational stimuli that are deemed to be priorities and that only happen in the classroom (UNESCO, 2015).
- Consideration also needs to be given, within the exceptions made in times of quarantines, to making arrangements for the transportation of children and adolescents, their parents, and principal caregivers in emergency situations.

RECOMMENDED MATERIALS:

- 01 OHCHR. **Coronavirus: Human rights need to be front and centre in response, says Bachelet.** March 2020¹⁷⁹
- 02 OHCHR. **The coronavirus outbreak is a test of our systems, values and humanity.** March 2020¹⁸⁰
- 03 World Bank (2006). **Development and the Next Generation. World Development Report, 2007.** Washington, D.C. World Bank.¹⁸¹
- 04 ECLAC and UNICEF (2014). **Children's Rights in the Digital Age.** Santiago, Chile: ECLAC.¹⁸²
- 05 Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (2013). **The Right of Boys and Girls to a Family. Alternative care. Ending Institutionalization in the Americas.** Washington, D.C. OAS.¹⁸³
- 06 FAO **A battle plan for ensuring global food supplies during the COVID-19 crisis.** March 2020¹⁸⁴
- 07 Jorge, E., and González, M. C. (2017). *Estilos de crianza parental. Una revisión teórica. Informes psicológicos*, Vol. 17, No. 2, pp. 39-66.¹⁸⁵
- 08 Mazzola, Roxana (2020). *Desigualdades en niños y niñas en América Latina frente a la pandemia del Coronavirus. Equidad para la Infancia*, March, 2020.¹⁸⁶

¹⁷⁹ Available at <https://www.ohchr.org/SP/NewsEvents/Pages/Media.aspx?IsMediaPageSP=true&LangID=E>

¹⁸⁰ Available at <https://www.unhcr.org/news/latest/2020/3/5e69eea54/coronavirus-outbreak-test-systems-values-humanity.html>

¹⁸¹ Available at <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/5989>

¹⁸² Available at https://repositorio.cepal.org/bitstream/handle/11362/37337/Challenges18_ECLAC_UNICEF_en.pdf

¹⁸³ Available at <https://www.oas.org/en/iachr/children/docs/pdf/Report-Right-to-family.pdf>

¹⁸⁴ Available at <http://www.fao.org/news/story/en/item/1268059/icode/>

¹⁸⁵ Available at <https://dialnet.unirioja.es/servlet/articulo?codigo=7044268>

¹⁸⁶ Available at <http://equidadparalainfancia.org/2020/03/desigualdades-en-ninos-y-ninas-en-america-latina-frente-a-la-pandemia-coronavirus/>

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UNITED NATIONS. **Alarming high' number of children malnourished worldwide: UNICEF report.** October 2019.¹⁸⁷

10

UNESCO (2015). **INTERNATIONAL CHARTER OF PHYSICAL EDUCATION, PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AND SPORT**¹⁸⁸

11

UNICEF. Coronavirus disease (COVID-19). **What parents and teachers should know: how to protect yourself and your children.** March 2020¹⁸⁹

12

UNICEF. **Talking about coronavirus with younger children.** March 2020¹⁹⁰

13

UNICEF, WHO AND IFRC. **Key Messages and Actions for COVID-19 Prevention and Control in Schools.** March 2020¹⁹¹

14

UNICEF (2019). *The State of the World's Children 2019. Children, food and nutrition.*¹⁹²

15

United States Department of Health and Human Services (2008). **Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans.** Date accessed: August 7, 2013 from <http://www.health.gov/paguidelines/pdf/paguide.pdf>

16

WHO (2015). **The Global Strategy for Women's, Children's and Adolescents' Health (2016-2030)**¹⁹³

187 Available at: <https://news.un.org/es/story/2019/10/1463901>

188 Available at http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=13150&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html

189 Available at: <https://www.unicef.org/argentina/guia-adultos-coronavirus>

190 Available at <https://www.unicef.org/lac/en/talking-about-coronavirus-younger-children>

191 Available at: https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/key-messages-and-actions-for-covid-19-prevention-and-control-in-schools-march-2020.pdf?sfvrsn=baf81d52_4

192 Available at: <https://www.unicef.org/media/63016/file/SOWC-2019.pdf>

193 Available at <https://www.who.int/life-course/partners/global-strategy/globalstrategyreport2016-2030-lowres.pdf>