

# **The Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic in Family Communication on Families with Children with Disabilities**

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**ABSTRACT.** The spread of the COVID-19 virus in Indonesia has caused changes in all aspects of life that affect family situations, especially families with children with disabilities. The purpose of this study was to obtain information about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on family interactions with children with disabilities. A sampling of 361 families with visually impaired children from five cities in West Java using cluster sampling. They responded to questionnaires about family communication, parenting roles, and changes in family activities. The results show that most families of children with disabilities are involved in supportive contact with advice, communication that includes feelings, communication that adjusts attitudes and provides solutions. Parents' philosophy in parenting is mainly related to resolving difficulties, rules and compliance, maintaining cohesiveness, building trust, avoiding conflict, and establishing physical closeness. The impact of the pandemic was experienced by 82% of families in changes in physical and emotional conditions and 75.9% changes in routine activities. The results of correlation analysis showed that family communication was negatively related to changes in family social activities ( $p < .001$ ) and physical and emotional changes ( $p < .01$ ). It is recommended that family communication management increase family resilience in caring for children with disabilities during the pandemic.

**KEYWORDS:** family communication; the role of parents; children with disabilities; COVID-19 pandemic

## **1 INTRODUCTION**

During a pandemic, caring for a child with a disability becomes a different challenge for families. Previous research has reported that parents of children with disabilities face more stress (McConnell & Savage, 2015). There is a change they experience in family activities and a negative impact on the family and their child (Toseeb et al., 2020a). Recent studies on family dynamics show that the stresses during the pandemic are felt in caring for children (Fegert & Schulze, 2020), managing new habits, and changing activities (Epifanio et al., 2021); the need for an interactive approach to adjustment during the COVID-19 pandemic. -19 (Ramadhana et al., 2020). During adjustment to children with disabilities, families can show specific communication, attitudes and interactions in conflict resolution and problem-solving (Olsen et al., 2016).

Family communication is a process that creates meaning through verbal and nonverbal conversations (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2014). As a communication system, the family makes interactions and develops its communication messages based on the experiences of individual members. The message transmitted can be interpreted as contributing to the family crisis achieving resilience (Miller-Day, 2017).

The relationship between communication and changes in family activities has attracted the attention of many researchers. Most studies have linked the impact of the pandemic on family situations and interactions, such as family satisfaction and support (Toseeb et al., 2020b), supportive communication (Daks et al., 2020), with family emotional experiences (Monin et al., 2020), roles in children's education (Yudit Tiwery et al., 2021), and family interactions of deaf children in religious activities (Ramadhana et al., 2020). Still, the conclusions from these studies have not led to what form of family communication they mean. And how it relates to changes in activity that occurred during the pandemic.

Most of these studies used regular family groups, and research studies on family communication related to activity changes in groups of families with children with disabilities were still lacking. This study takes parents of children with disabilities as research objects and answers four research questions about the dominant forms of family communication currently carried out, parents' attitudes towards family care, changes in family activities, and analyzes the relationship between their family communication and changes in activities that occur in the family during the pandemic.

## **2 METHODS**

### **2.1. Procedure and Subject**

This study used a questionnaire distributed from June to August 2021. In this study, 420 families of children with disabilities were surveyed by random sampling. After eliminating questionnaires with incomplete and uncollected data, 361 valid questionnaires remained. They consist of 194 (53.7%) families of children with visual impairments, and 167 (43.6%) families of deaf children from five cities in West Java which were selected based on the highest population of children with disabilities in West Java Province, namely Garut (30.7%), Ciamis (22.7%), Sumedang (20.8), Sukabumi (14.1%) and Depok (11.6%). Respondents consisted of 72% mothers (average age 41.3 years) and 28% fathers (average age 44.5 years) of children with disabilities.

### **2.2. Research Instruments**

The questionnaire on family communication, the role of parents, and the pandemic's impact was developed from interviews with four families of children with disabilities conducted in March 2021 (pre-research). The research team analyzed the results of the discussions to find emerging themes in family communication, parents' role, and the changes that occurred in their families during the pandemic.

Family communication consists of 10 items that focus on the forms of communication parents make to their children with disabilities. The item contains ten themes of forms of communication activity in their families. A 5-point Likert scale (1-5 from never to always) is used; Cronbach's indicates this scale is 0.843 and can be used as a valid assessment instrument. Meanwhile, parents' attitude consists of 10 items that show the role of parents in caring for the families of their children with disabilities. A 5-point Likert scale (1-5 from never to always) is used; Cronbach's indicates this scale is 0.784 and can be used as a valid assessment instrument.

Changes in family activities are used to identify four dimensions: changes in work activities, routine activities, social activities, and physical-emotional changes. There are 8 questions for changes in work activities (WA), 9 questions for differences in home activities (HA), 10 questions for changes in social activities (SA), and 8 questions for physical-emotional changes (PE). All questions are given points 1=Unchanged, 2=Partially Changed, and 3=Change. Cronbach's scale is 0.883, and Cronbach's every dimension is 0.724 (WA), 0.738 (HA), 0.900 (SA), and 0.816 (PE); all dimensions can be used as a valid assessment instrument.

### **2.3. Data analysis**

In the family communication and parenting attitudes variable, the scale of "4=often and 5=always" is the identified frequency. In contrast, for the variable of changes in a family activity, the scale of "2=Mostly changed and 3=changed" is the specified frequency. Statistical correlations were used for the variables of family communication, parenting attitudes and changes in family activities. To find the frequency of all variables and statistical correlation using JASP 0.15

## **3 RESULTS**

Table 1A shows the frequency of communication by families of children with disabilities during the pandemic, and 79.9% of families involved in family communication was characterized by frequent (36.5%) and always (43.4%). Dominantly there are 86.4% of families are involved in the form of conversations that provide support and provide advice. 85% of families include feelings/empathy, communication that understands/adjusts attitudes (84.2%), provides solutions (82.8%). Less than 80% of families are involved in meaningful/reflectional conversations, make discussions, listen to opinions,

and ask for ideas from family members. Other findings show that 2.5% of families do not listen to arguments in conversation; on the other hand, 52.4% of families are more dominant in communication that understands/adjusts attitudes.

In caring for children with disabilities (table 1B), 70.2% of parents showed their attitude in parenting during the pandemic. Dominantly there are 78.7% of parents play a more role in solving difficulties with problems, 75.9% of parents demand obedience, are active in maintaining cohesiveness (75.6%), show positive thinking and build trust (74.8%), apply rules (73.1%), avoiding conflict (72.3% parents), and establishing physical closeness (71.2%). Less than 70% of parents manage household affairs, are dependent on children, and use emotions in parenting. Another finding was that 11.6% of parents did not involve emotions in parenting during the pandemic; on the other hand, 45.4% of families were more dominant in showing positive thinking and building trust.

Table 2 shows changes in family activities during the pandemic. 82% of families have changed (partial and significant) in physical and emotional conditions. 75.9% of families experienced in-home activities, 59.8% of families experienced changes in work activities, and changes in social activities (57.3%). Less than 70% of parents manage household affairs, are dependent on children, and use emotions in parenting.

Table 1: Parental communication and attitudes of parents of children with disabilities in parenting (n=361)

Indicator and Item	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
	%	%	%	%	%
<b>A Family Communication</b>	<b>1,1</b>	<b>2,5</b>	<b>16,4</b>	<b>36,5</b>	<b>43,4</b>
Listening to opinions	2,5	3,9	22,2	33,5	38,0
Understanding feelings	0,8	1,9	12,2	32,7	52,4
Understanding attitude	0,8	1,1	13,9	32,4	51,8
Providing Solutions	1,1	3,3	13,0	36,0	46,5
Give support	0,3	1,4	11,9	40,7	45,7
Giving advice	0,8	1,9	10,8	34,3	52,1
Provides insight	0,8	3,9	12,5	36,8	46,0
Create a discussion	1,7	3,3	23,3	38,2	33,5
Asking for ideas	0,8	2,2	28,5	37,4	31,0
Giving meaning	1,7	2,5	16,1	42,9	36,8
<b>B The role of parents in family care</b>	<b>4,3</b>	<b>4,3</b>	<b>21,1</b>	<b>32,6</b>	<b>37,6</b>
Giving rules	2,5	4,7	19,7	32,1	41,0
Demanding obedience	1,7	2,2	20,2	34,9	41,0
Organizing housework	4,4	4,2	23,8	29,1	38,5
Solving difficulties	1,1	2,2	18,0	37,7	41,0
Maintain cohesiveness	1,9	4,2	18,3	36,3	39,3
Positive attitude and trust	1,4	2,2	21,6	29,4	45,4
Maintain physical closeness	2,8	5,5	20,5	33,0	38,2
Avoid conflict	7,2	2,8	17,7	28,8	43,5
Dependence on children	8,3	7,2	23,8	31,9	28,8
Engaging emotions	11,6	8,0	27,7	33,2	19,4

Table 2: Changes in family activities during the pandemic (n=361)

Changes in activity during the pandemic	Little (or no) change	Changed half	Changed most
	%	%	%
Change in work activity	40,2	42,4	17,5
Change in activities at home	24,1	62,9	13,0
Change in social activity	42,7	46,0	11,4
Changes in physical-emotion	18,0	70,6	11,4

Pearson correlation analysis was performed to examine the relationship between parental communication, parenting attitudes and changes in inactivity. The results showed that parental communication had a significant positive correlation with parental attitudes in parenting ( $\beta=.570$ ,  $P<001$ ), significantly negative with changes in social activity ( $\beta=-.201$ ,  $P<001$ ), and highly damaging with changes in physical activity. -emotional ( $\beta=-.144$ ,  $P<01$ ). Meanwhile, the role of parents in parenting was found to be significantly negatively associated with physical-emotional changes ( $\beta=-.145$ ,  $P<01$ ). As additional information that all aspects of activity change have a significant positive relationship (table 3).

Table 3: Correlation between measurement variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Family Communication	—					
2. The role of parents in family care	0.570 ***	—				
3. Change in work activity	-0.038	0.032	—			
4. Change in activities at home	-0.065	-0.034	0.370 ***	—		
5. Change in social activity	-0.201 ***	-0.679	0.201 ***	0.342 ***	—	
6. Changes in physical-emotion	-0.144 **	-0.145 **	0.132 *	0.267 ***	0.508 ***	—

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$

## 4 DISCUSSION

### 4.1. Family communication and parental attitudes in caring for children with disabilities

This study found that families of children with disabilities used supportive and advisory communication throughout the pandemic. This follows the conclusions of previous research on supportive communication in the application of family functions (Daks et al., 2020). Supportive conversations and parental advice can strengthen children with disabilities during their daily routines and school from home. This study also complements the findings of supportive communication, which is assessed as a predictor of family resilience (Olsen et al., 2016), can be applied in educational situations (such as assisting with learning from home) or support for daily affairs (Comer, 2005) in child care. In this study, some families of children with disabilities were more dominant in implementing attitude-adjusting communication. The role of families in adjusting to their child's attitude is a crucial stage to begin to understand the child's thoughts, feelings and difficulties.

### 4.2. Changes in family activities of children with disabilities during the pandemic

The results showed that most families of children with disabilities reported changes in their physical condition, emotions and routines at home during the pandemic. In contrast, some families experienced changes in work and social activities. These descriptive data are consistent with previous studies such as the negative impact on mental condition (Toseeb et al., 2020a), family predicting more stress (Daks et al., 2020), negative emotional experiences (Ramadhana et al., 2020), fatigue in families that affect well-being (Wu et al., 2020), and usual difficulties in caring for children (Fegert et al., 2020), especially children with disabilities. Since school closures and shifts to learning from home, parents have seen an increase in adjusting to work and taking care of their children at the same time. Changes in other activities in this study are related to social movements; when the status of the area is reported to be dangerous, then children's activities are limited and not allowed to do activities outside the home.

### 4.3. Family communication, parental attitudes and changes in family activities of children with disabilities during the pandemic

A positive relationship between family communication and parental attitudes in parenting explains that the higher the family communication, the greater the possibility of variations in the application of parental attitudes in parenting. These results are similar to previous findings of family communication patterns having a significant impact on family members through relational interactions (Mashalpour Fard, 2020), and parental conformity mediated the effect of parenting style on empathy (Abdullah et al., 2020). Family communication is negatively related to changes in physical-emotional conditions and social activities in the family. The higher the communication within the family, the lower the impact of changes in economic and social needs. The role of interaction is critical in the social

vulnerability of families during a pandemic. Interaction in the family plays a role in the social adjustment of children with disabilities. At the same time, communication is essential as a family's protective function from the changes that arise due to the pandemic situation. Therefore, to reduce the impact of changes in emotional and social conditions, family communication and parenting attitudes can be regarded as a family management system that functions as a family planning and monitoring system (Schoderbek et al., 1985).

## 5 CONCLUSION

This study has concluded that during the pandemic, most families of children with disabilities are involved in supportive communication with advice, including feelings, communication that adjusts attitudes, and conversations between those who provide solutions. Parents' philosophy in parenting is mainly related to resolving difficulties, rules and compliance, maintaining cohesiveness, building trust, avoiding conflict and establishing physical closeness. The impact of the pandemic was experienced by 82% of families in changes in physical and emotional conditions and 75.9% changes in routine activities. The effect of the pandemic was experienced by 82% of families in changes in physical and emotional needs and 75.9% changes in usual activities. The results of correlation analysis showed that family communication was negatively related to changes in family social activities ( $p < .001$ ) and physical and emotional changes ( $p < .01$ ). The family's survival depends on how its members share and coordinate tasks and responsibilities in the family to keep their family functions running as intended during a pandemic.

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