ResearchGate

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/344365379

# Children, COVID-19 and the media. A study on the challenges children are facing in the 2020 coronavirus crisis

**Article** · June 2020

CITATIONS
9

READS
344

**55 authors**, including:



Maya Götz
Internationales Zentralinstitut für das Jugend- und Bildungsfernsehen
**58** PUBLICATIONS **136** CITATIONS
SEE PROFILE



Caroline Mendel
**4** PUBLICATIONS **22** CITATIONS
SEE PROFILE



Dafna Lemish
Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey
**125** PUBLICATIONS **2,562** CITATIONS
SEE PROFILE



Nancy A Jennings
University of Cincinnati
**34** PUBLICATIONS **712** CITATIONS
SEE PROFILE

**Some of the authors of this publication are also working on these related projects:**




Children's Media View project




Encyclopedia item View project

All content following this page was uploaded by Christina Ortner on 24 September 2020.

The user has requested enhancement of the downloaded file.

# Children, COVID-19 and the media

## A STUDY ON THE CHALLENGES CHILDREN ARE FACING IN THE 2020 CORONAVIRUS CRISIS

*Maya Götz, Caroline Mendel, Dafna Lemish, Nancy Jennings, Rebecca Hains, Fatima Abdul, Meryl Alper, Hania Asgari, Hadiza Babayaro, Catherine Blaya, Dina Borzekowski, Sandra Cadavid, Anne-Linda Camerini, Beth Carmona, Cynthia Carter, Mussa Chale, Mareike Düssel, Aldana Duhalde, Andria Gayed, Patricia Núñez Gómez, Macarena García González, Yuval Gozansky, Eileen Sanabria Herrera, Kirsten Huang, Liselot Hudders, Yisra Al-Haj Hussein, Hayuki Ishikawa, Ruchi Kher Jaggi, Colleen Russo Johnson, Andreas Klempin, Jennifer Kotler, Cheryl Kotwal, Geoff Lealand, Sun Sun Lim, Thomas Enemark Lundtofte, Mónica Maruri, Giovanna Mascheroni, Markus Mendel, Máire Messenger-Davis, Joél Mulongo, Diana Nastasia, Sorin Nastasia, Christina Ortner, Grace Torres Panganiban, Nilüfer Pembecioğlu, Martina Peštaj, Adrianna Ruggiero, Ulises Soto Ruiz, Isolde Stanczak, Jeanette Steemers, Fadi Taher, Sandra Téllez, Moses Tholley, Ekatarina Yakusheva, Andrew Zi Han Yee*

**An international study in 42 countries inquired children's perception of the coronacrisis, their knowledge on COVID-19 and the role the media play in this.**

The COVID-19 pandemic is causing a worldwide crisis. Many countries have closed schools and daycare centers, canceled events, imposed stay-at-home orders, and closed borders. Everyday activities like going to school, doing leisure activities, and meeting friends have been canceled and prohibited with short notice.

A study of 101 children and teens in 13 countries conducted by World Vision (2020) found that their everyday life has changed significantly. As schools are closed, many children report that social distancing, isolation, and loneliness have caused emotional hardship. In Germany, interviews with employees and volunteers of helplines for children (see Pütz in this issue) revealed that the situation is problematic and the range of emotional distress is broad. Likewise, a Chinese study (Liang et al., 2020) found that 2 weeks following the outbreak of COVID-19, 2 out of 5 adolescents and adults (14 to 35 years old) suffered from psychological problems, and 14% showed signs of PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder). A press release by Save the Children (2020) summarizing the results of a survey among 1,002 parents and children in Germany revealed that 65% of the children who responded reported feelings of boredom and isolation.

Children are dependent on the circumstances they grow up in, and these vary widely in different countries. But as the pandemic is global, it is creating at least some similar circumstances across many countries and regions. As researchers interested in children's lives and media engagement, we wondered: How do children around the world perceive their situations in this pandemic? What are their levels of knowledge and emotional statuses with respect to the coronavirus and crisis? And, what roles do the media play in their situations?

In this unique situation, the International Central Institute for Youth and Educational Television (IZI) and the PRIX JEUNESSE Foundation – together with over 50 scholars and producers worldwide – conducted an international study of children in relation to COVID-19 and the media. Our goal was to learn more about the challenges children are facing in this time of crisis and their ways of coping with these challenges.

## METHOD

Based on a qualitative pre-study with 20 children between 10 and 15 years of age in Germany, an international team developed and revised a questionnaire. The questionnaire comprised 19 questions, mainly closed-ended, but also featuring a few open-ended questions. Our team translated the questionnaire into 26 languages and programmed it into an online format using the SoSci Survey system. The team then conducted the study in 53 countries, with local teams within each country sampling and inviting children between 9 and 13 years of age to participate, according to ethical research requirements applying in each country.

In total, 9,563 children started and 4,267 children finished the online questionnaire plus 55 children in Cuba who wrote their answers into a PDF document. The data collection time was March 31th to April 26th 2020, i.e. the high peak of the shutdown in most countries. Only countries with at least n=50 children were included in the analysis. The final sample includes 42 countries on all continents and 4,322 children, with a relatively balanced age

distribution (between 18% and 21% per age cohort).[1] The number of children per country varied between n=50 and n=698 (see also map with sample description in this issue).

Please note that the sample cannot claim to be representative: It has a clear bias towards middle-class, higher-educated households since it required participation from children with internet access on a home computer and good reading skills to fill out the questionnaire. Nevertheless, the results demonstrate some clear patterns that can inform parents and educators, as well as the work of researchers and producers of children's media.

For our analysis, we statistically weighed the data according to gender and country. We grouped the countries by world regions, in consultation with local partners to ensure we made the right categorizations, considering the regions of each country where the study had taken place.



© steklo/123rf

© Maria Symchych-Navrotska/123rf

© Pongsiri Onkhum/123rf

Ill. 1: Children in 42 countries (ages 9-13) were asked how they perceive the coronacrisis, what they know about COVID-19 and what role the media play in this situation

## THE RESULTS

### Children's situation under the shutdown

"I haven't been able to go out for a long time and it feels strange to be locked up 24/7." (boy, Chile, 11)

### What has changed?

Most of the children who participated reported that they no longer attended school at the time our study was conducted. 6 out of 10 (59%) said they were doing online schooling; of those who were not, some reported a lack of internet access, like in Cuba, or expensive access, like in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, while in other cases, online schooling was not offered. Most of the children reported that they have to stay at home and can't visit friends, except in Cuba and Taiwan, where this applied to fewer children. Half of the children (49%) said that their parents don't go to work anymore. Only a few reported feeling sick themselves or having friends who felt sick.

In their responses to our open-ended questions, the children most often mentioned that they were bored, missed their friends, and described feelings of stress, anxiety, worry, and frustration. As a nonbinary/gender-diverse child reported:

"Anxiety issues and no friends around to help." (UK, 12)

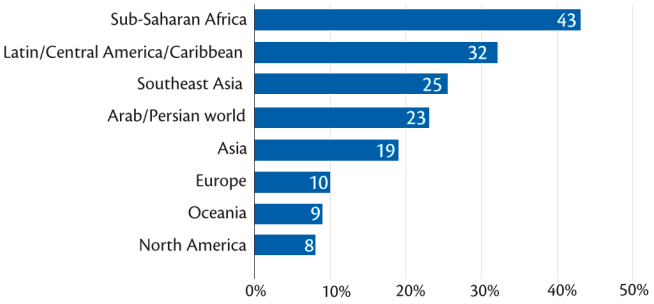
A few children described feeling under stress because they had to do so many things, and that the worst thing was that they couldn't get away from it all:

"That I can't flee from home when everything is getting too much." (boy, Austria, 12)

### Some have to face special challenges

The circumstances the children are living in vary, and more than 6 out of 10 (63%) reported living in circumstances that make their situations even more critical. More than a quarter of these children reported that they are an only child with no siblings to play with; this was particularly common among the 9-year-olds in our sample, of whom more than a third (35%) reported being an only child. More than 1 in 5 children reported living in a home they perceive as "very loud" and "very

small," and they described that it was difficult for their parents to buy food, and/or that they lived together with someone belonging to a risk group.
When children described their special challenges, some mentioned that their family was facing a difficult economic situation. For example: "My mom's salaries are reduced because of the less income of the company she is working in." (girl, Taiwan, 13) Some named their family itself as challenge, responding to our question by just writing the family member's role such as "father" or "mother," writing "father" much more often than "mother." Some children (mainly boys) wrote about fighting more with their brothers, and others reported that it is too crowded at home:
"We have a big family, everybody is at home now all day, it's hard to find a place not to be troubled by someone." (boy, Russia, 10)



Ill. 2: Percentage of children who are "very much worried" on a 6-point scale (n=4,110)

## Emotions

More than a third (35%) of the children perceived their parents as being "very worried" about the situation. The highest numbers in this context were found in Brazil (75%) and Egypt (68%), and the lowest numbers in Denmark (9%) and Austria (9%). This is similar to the results of a study on the stress level of adults in different countries, in which Denmark is one of the countries with the lowest reported stress level among adults (Travaglino et al., 2020).
We asked our participants to assess on a 6-point scale how worried they felt personally. In response, a little bit more than half of the children (52%) reported feeling worried at least a bit, while the other half indicated that they were not worried (48%). 1 out of 5 children (20%) said they were "very much worried."

We also noted clear differences in world regions (Ill. 2): While in Sub-Saharan Africa 4 out of 10 children said they were "very worried," around 1 out of 10 did so in North America (8%), Oceania (9%) and Europe (10%). The highest percentage was found in Tanzania (73%).[2]

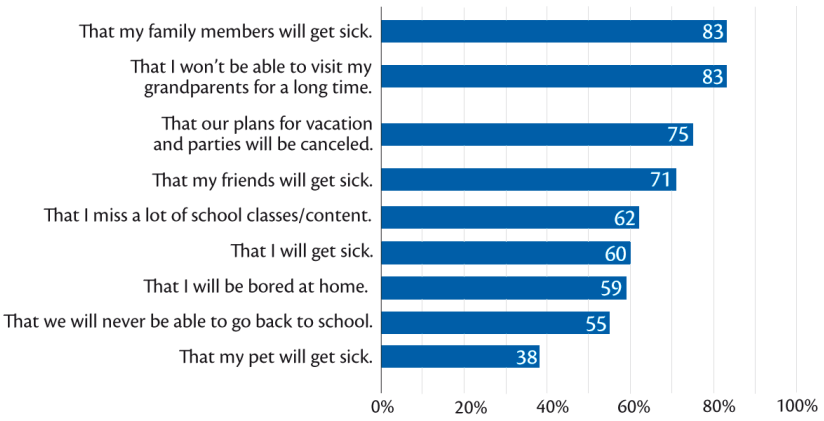
## The most common fears

Children's greatest reported fears were that a family member will fall ill and that they won't be able to visit grandparents and other relatives for a long time. These fears are found worldwide across our sample to a very similar extent (Ill. 3).
6 out of 10 children reported being worried that they themselves fall ill. The percentage highly differs between countries and the highest rate was found in Japan (93%) and Taiwan (86%) and the lowest in Austria (35%) and Germany (39%).
Fewer children, however, were worried that their pet will get ill.
More children who described having to deal with special challenges reported feeling fearful – a difference of up to 10 percentage points – compared to children who do not live in a small, loud and crowded place, for example.

## KNOWLEDGE ABOUT CORONA/COVID-19

### Where did the virus appear first?

We asked the children different questions about their knowledge on corona/COVID-19. Most children (97%) indicated that they knew the country in which the virus first appeared, and most of them (95%) were right, indicating China. In Cuba, 5 children wrote into the field "other" another country: USA. This may be due to the US embargo, which may make children think that the USA is the aggressor and to be blamed for the current crisis.



Ill. 3: The most common fears of children on the subject of the coronavirus (n=4,200)

## Vulnerable groups

Regarding the children's knowledge on the groups most vulnerable to COVID-19, 9 out of 10 children (92%) knew that adults aged 60 years or older are considered an at-risk group. A little bit less, but still the majority of the children (76%), knew that people with lung diseases are vulnerable. However, only half of the children knew that people with diabetes are more vulnerable than others. A relatively large number of children (17%) guessed that babies are especially vulnerable in this context, and 12% of them think adults aged 40 to 59 years are at risk.

## Main symptoms

Most children could identify the symptoms of COVID-19. 9 out of 10 ticked the answer "coughing," and about 8 out of 10 ticked "fever" (83%) and "breathing difficulties" (79%) as obvious symptoms. While we found hardly any age differences with respect to knowledge on "coughing" and "fever" as frequent symptoms, the symptom "breathing difficulties" was a little bit less known among 9-year-olds (72%) and better known among 13-year-olds (82%). More than 1 out of 5 children (23%) considered "sneezing" a main symptom of COVID-19.

## How to protect yourself and others

Around the topic "How to protect yourself and others from getting infected?" we offered the children 14 answer choices, 8 of which were right. We asked the participants to choose 3 options. Their most common answers were "wash your hands" (90%) and "stay at home" (70%), followed, at a considerable distance, by "keeping distance" (38%), "cover your mouth and nose when coughing or sneezing" (21%), "don't touch your face with your hands" (18%), "avoid crowds" (18%) and "don't get too close to sick people" (15%).

## Fake news and rumors

In our questionnaire, we also presented the children 5 statements – 4 rumors and 1 fact – and we asked them whether those statements were right or wrong. 87% of the children correctly responded that Ibuprofen can't cure COVID-19, with no visible age or gender tendencies in their responses. Meanwhile, although 84% knew that garlic can't prevent infection, 16% didn't know that this is fake news.

8 out of 10 children knew that it is not true that spraying alcohol or chlorine all over your body will kill viruses that have already entered your body, yet 2 out of 10 children didn't know that this is misinformation. We found similar results regarding the rumor that the coronavirus is spread by a foreign government as a weapon, with 79% of the children stating that this is false, and 21% indicating that it is true. In this context, the 13-year-old age group believed this fake news more often than did the other age-groups (29%). We also presented a true statement that several coronaviruses have been known for years, but that special one is new. 7 out of 10 children correctly identified this as a true statement.

The majority of the children surveyed could identify fake news, but some could not. Out of the 4,200 children, 1,444 identified all fake news correctly (34%). Another 1,421 children gave 1 wrong answer (34%). 18% (748 children) gave 2 wrong answers and a minority answered 3, 4 or all fake news incorrectly (3=292; 4=148; all=147).

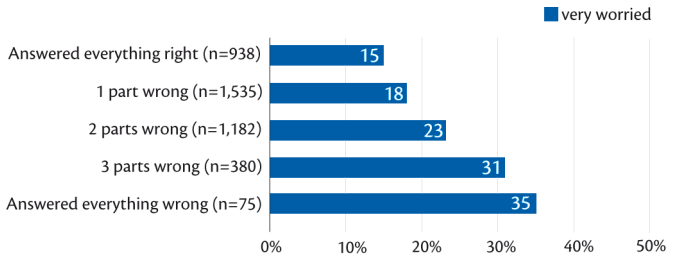
Overall, most children demonstrated some knowledge about the coronavirus and vulnerable groups, could identify main symptoms and basic measures to prevent themselves and others from getting infected (as far as medical research knows to date), and could identify rumors and fake news.

Taken as a whole, our findings in this area suggest that children aged 9 to 13 would benefit from receiving more age-appropriate information on the COVID-19 pandemic. Parents and teachers could help in this regard, but we posit that children's media could do more to serve this need, as well. Note that this need is especially noted among our 9-year-old participants, who were significantly more likely to respond with incorrect answers, as well as participants from Sub-Saharan Africa and Oceania, who offered the highest numbers of incorrect answers (compared with the lowest numbers found in Europe), suggesting different levels of informational needs in different countries, as well.

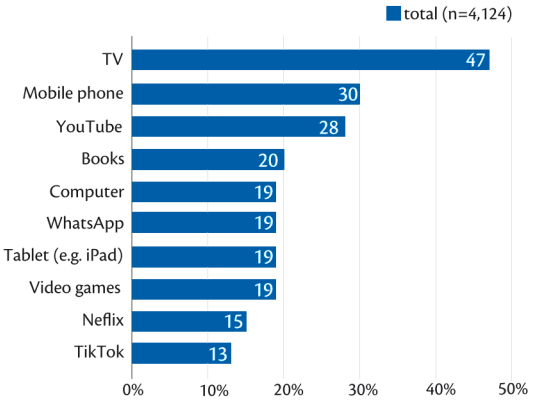
## Knowledge and worries

When combining our data regarding children's knowledge and their fears, a tendency becomes quite clear: The children who described themselves as "very worried" were more likely to know fewer facts and answer more questions incorrectly. Meanwhile, among the children who answered all the questions correctly, only 15% described themselves as "very worried"; and of those children who answered every question incorrectly, the percentage of "very worried" children was 35% (Ill. 4).

We found the same tendencies in relation to their knowledge of fake




Ill. 4: Percentage of "very worried" children in relation to knowledge




Ill. 5: Percentage of children reporting the 3 media they have been using more since the COVID-19 lockdown

news. The more rumors the children believed, the more they reported feeling "very worried." While this is a correlation that does not necessarily indicate causality, meaning that there is a relationship between the 2, but we don't know if one causes the other, we can hypothesize from this pattern that for children, being well-informed and knowledgeable may be linked with a reduction in uncertainty and thus in reduction of worried feelings.

## WHICH MEDIA ARE DEFINITELY USED MORE IN TIMES OF LOCKDOWN?

Obviously, under the circumstances of this global pandemic, most children have to stay at home. In that environment, many become dependent on media as sources of or facilitators of their education, information, and entertainment.

In their yearly trend report, conducted at the same time as this study, the market research company Dubit found that with children in the UK, the use of television, smartphones, streaming services and social media etc. increased by around 15 to 20 percentage points. Parents reported feeling less concerned about the media use of their children than they did the year before (Dubit, 2020).

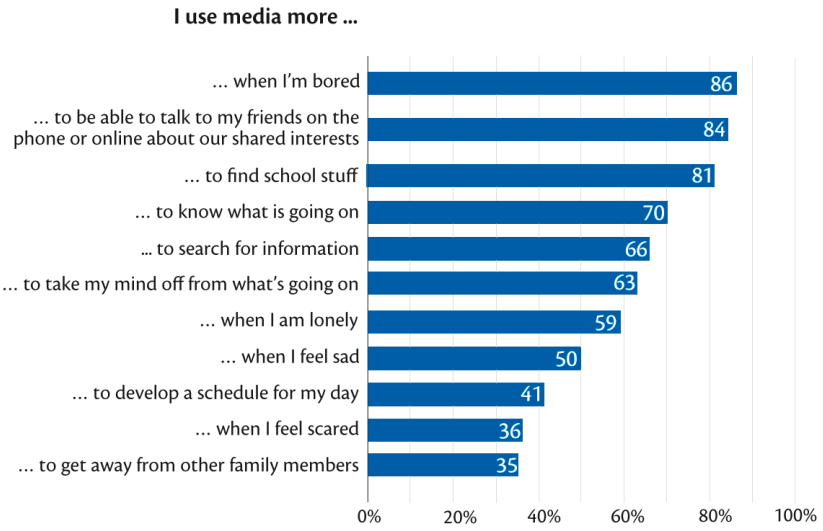
For our study, we asked the children who participated to name 3 media (from a list with 21 options) that they have been using more during the coronavirus pandemic. As illustrated in Ill. 5, nearly half of the children (47%) chose TV, with the 9-year-olds selecting this option more often (61%) than did the 13-year-olds (39%). Comparing data internationally, children in Sub-Saharan Africa and the Arab/Persian region reported an increase in TV use the most (79% and 61%). The highest percentages in a cross-country comparison were found in Cuba (91%) and in Tanzania (90%), where 9 out of 10 children reported watching more TV now than they had previously.

## THE FUNCTIONS OF MEDIA IN TIMES OF LOCKDOWN

Children reported 3 major reasons for turning to media during the lockdown, as shown in Ill. 6: dealing with boredom; talking to friends and sharing interests in times of the shutdown; and finding school materials. 7 out of 10 children reported using media to access information and to know what is going on; and 6 out of 10 children reported using media to take their minds off from what is going on (escapism). Fewer children reported using the media to develop a daily schedule or to get away from their family. In each of these cases, reports of using media to fulfil this function were more common in older than younger children; girls more than boys; and children facing special challenges more than children without those.

### Media to regulate emotions

Media also play a role in regulating emotions. Half of the children reported using media when they feel sad. Nearly 6 in 10 reported doing so when they are lonely, and more than a third when feeling scared. 8 out of 10 children reported feeling calmed by communicating with friends and relatives through social media (e.g., Instagram, WhatsApp). Also, from the children's subjective perspectives, they reported that watching




Ill. 6: Percentage of children agreeing for what reason they use media more

TV or YouTube relaxed them from stress.

Studies indicate that while media can play a great role in children's identity work (Götz, 2014), it may also contribute to negative effects such as emotional stress (e.g., Abi-Jaoude et al., 2020; Hoge et al., 2017), especially when used too long (e.g., MacDool et al., 2016). From the children's perspective, however, these effects are difficult to see. For them, media serve as information carriers, facilitate remote schooling, and offer a "COVID-19-safe" way of staying in contact with friends. Given media's double-edged functions, children need competencies and media literacy skills to manage their own media use.

### Media for information about coronavirus

Nearly half of the children in our study reported feeling fed up with news on the coronavirus and stated that they didn't want to see, hear or read anything more about it. We noted the largest numbers of such responses in our sample from Iran (72%), and the lowest in our Singapore sample (15%).

Nearly half of the children who participated agreed that news on coronavirus scares them. In fact, 4 out of 10 children reported avoiding news about COVID-19 because they feel that the news fosters their worries. We found the highest percentage of such responses in the Arab/Persian world (62%) and the lowest in the Asian region (22%).

At the same time, more than 6 out of 10 children (65%) stated that they wished that children's television talked more about the coronavirus. We found the highest such numbers in Tanzania (92%) and the Dominican Republic (89%), where the children's news *Notichicos* is the only local production, the rest is bought-in entertainment.

## SUMMARY: THE NEED FOR AGE-APPROPRIATE AND RELIABLE INFORMATION

In this period of lockdown, children face an extraordinary situation. Many everyday routines and activities, such as attending school or participating in leisure activities, are no longer possible. Now, children must stay at home. This sometimes means living in narrow and loud circumstances, causing much more tension within families.

One-third of the children in our study perceived their parents as "very worried," and half of the children expressed feeling worried themselves, with the biggest fear being the possibility of COVID-19 infection among family or friends. Most children demonstrated a basic knowledge about coronavirus and how they can protect themselves and others. Further, most children could identify rumors and fake news, although a proportion of the children we surveyed could not.

Faced with extraordinary times, children reported using media more than before, especially to beat boredom, do their homework, stay in contact with friends, get information, and regulate their emotions. These findings demonstrate that children's media are bearing a great responsibility, serving important functions for children during the COVID-19 crisis.

We wish to emphasize the results dealing with children's knowledge and worries, because we observed a correlation between more accurate knowledge about the coronavirus and fewer reports of feeling "very worried." These findings underline that children's media have the potential to play an important role in this pandemic by helping children to 1) cope with this special situation in age-appropriate, readily-understandable ways; 2) develop understandings of responsible behavior for themselves and towards others; and 3) to react appropriately in the given situation.

## NOTES

[1] *Argentina, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Cuba, Czech Republic, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Denmark, Ecuador, Egypt, France, Germany, Iran, Israel, Italy, Japan, Lebanon, Malaysia, Mexico, Poland, Russia, Singapore, Spain, Switzerland, Taiwan, Thailand, Turkey, USA, Dominican Republic, India, New Zealand, Philippines, Slovenia, South Africa, Syria, Tanzania, Nigeria, United Kingdom*

[2] *Background circumstances may be, among other things, inconsistent actions. For example, schools are closed and the international air traffic is stopped, yet adults as far as possible still go to work as usual and use crowded public transport; church services and funerals still take place. The Tanzanian government doubts that protective clothing is effective and announced that praying was better than wearing protection masks (Ohikere, 2020).*

## REFERENCES


*Abi-Jaoude, Elia, Naylor, Karline Treurnicht & Pignatiello, Antonio (2020).* Smartphones, social media use and youth mental health. Canadian Medical Association Journal (CMAJ), 192(6), 136-141. *Available at: https://www.cmaj.ca/content/cmaj/192/6/E136.full.pdf [18.5.20]*

*Dubit (2020).* Kids and media in the time of corona. *Unpublished report, April 24, 2020. London: Dubit.*

*Götz, Maya (2014).* TV-Hero(in)es of boys and girls. Reception studies of favorite characters. *Frankfurt: Peter Lang.*

*Hoge, Elizabeth, Bickham, David & Cantor, Joanne (2017).* Digital media, anxiety, and depression in children. Pediatrics, 140(2), 76-80. *Available at: https://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/140/Supplement_2/S76 [18.5.20]*

*Liang, Leilei et al. (2020).* The effect of COVID-19 on youth mental health. Psychiatric Quarterly, April 21, 2020. *Available at: https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/32319041 [18.5.20]*

*MacDool, Emily, Powell, Philip, Roberts, Jennifer & Taylor, Karl (2016).* Social media use and children's wellbeing. *Bonn: Institute of Labor Economics (IZA). Available at: http://ftp.iza.org/dp10412.pdf [18.5.20]*

*Ohikere, Onize (2020).* Tanzania's troubling response to COVID-19 International. The country's leadership faces criticism for its reaction to the pandemic. *World. Posted 5/08/20. Available at: https://world.wng.org/content/tanzania_s_troubling_response_to_covid_19 [18.5.20]*

*Save the Children (Ed.) (2020).* Corona in Deutschland: Was Kindern und Eltern Sorgen macht. *16.04.2020. Available at: https://www.savethechildren.de/news/corona-in-deutschland-was-kindern-und-eltern-sorgen-macht [18.5.20]*

*Travaglino, Giovanni, Lieberoth, Andreas & Coll Martín, Tao (2020).* How is the COVID19 Pandemic affecting Europeans' lives? *A report of the COVIDiSTRESS global survey. Report on data collection March 30th - April 20th.*

*World Vision (Ed.) (2020).* Children's voices in times of COVID-19. Continued child activism in the face of personal challenges. *World Vision International. Available at: https://www.worldvision.de/sites/worldvision.de/files/pdf/WV_report_childrens_voices_in%20times_of_COVID-19%20Final.pdf [18.5.20]*




View publication stats