

# SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND PERCEIVED SOCIAL SUPPORT OF ORPHANS DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN MALAYSIA: A CONCEPT PAPER

Syed Ahmad Muhajir Alhaddad bin Syed Esa<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has taken a toll on everyone regardless of their social class or status. The impact can be seen from people's everyday lives as they lose their jobs, leading to an increase in broken families and poverty and mental health issues affecting many groups within Malaysian society. One of the most vulnerable yet often overlooked groups within society is orphans. In this concept paper, the author highlighted the need to research orphans regarding their social-emotional development and perceived social support, which are essential variables requiring immediate attention. At the end of this paper, suggestions are provided on how to help orphans in Malaysia to have a healthy social-emotional development amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, Orphans, Perceived social support, Social-emotional development

## Introduction

When COVID-19 was declared a worldwide pandemic in March of 2020 (World Health Organization, 2020), the Malaysian government took a drastic preventive measure by introducing a nationwide lockdown known as the Movement Control Order (MCO) to curb the virus from spreading further. During the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in Malaysia, the government ordered all non-essential services to be closed (Bunyan, 2020). In addition, under the Movement Control Order (MCO), movement within and out of the country was restricted, and mass gatherings were also prohibited as an effort to curb the virus from infecting Malaysian citizens (Domingo, 2020). This measure was taken even more seriously as a caregiver in an orphanage in Kajang died recently due to COVID-19 in May 2021, while most orphans tested positive for COVID-19 (Malaysiakini, 2021).

<sup>1</sup> Department of Psychology, Kuliyyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences, International Islamic University Malaysia, P.O. Box 10, 50728 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

Corresponding author: [muhajir@iium.edu.my](mailto:muhajir@iium.edu.my)

With that said, the recent COVID-19 pandemic has caused a chain of economic downfall that led to mass retrenchment by companies as they struggle to survive and an increase in mental health issues among the Malaysian population in general (Shanmugam et al., 2020). Orphans, mainly, are no exception to this domino effect. However, their struggles are often not well-reported since they have no extrinsic values for people to care about.

Some orphanages even stopped operating during the MCO, with the orphans sent to their immediate relatives for care due to financial constraints and lack of human resources (Hadir, 2020; Sabapatty, 2020). Therefore, it is unknown what happened to those orphans and whether their well-being is being cared for as everyone struggles to make ends meet during these challenging times.

Hence, in line with the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) ratified in 1994, which calls for the need to ensure protection and development for children (Siti Hajar & Pathmanathan, 2011), this paper attempts to provide an insight on how the pandemic has been affecting the social-emotional development of orphans in Malaysia as well as the importance of perceived social support in time of their need. Furthermore, further actions and recommendations that can be taken to improve the condition of orphans in Malaysia for interested parties are also discussed in this paper.

### **Key Points in the Solidarity Call to Action**

#### **RESEARCH FUNDER SHOULD:**

- Take action to spread awareness about the condition of orphans in Malaysia during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Consider funding research which focuses on intervention for orphans who are psychologically affected due to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Ensure that all research outcomes are available and accessible for the public to benefit together.
- Encourage a collaborative approach among researchers to tackle the issue efficiently.
- Liaise with NGOs in ensuring the orphans in Malaysia are getting the help needed. The relevant NGOs may have more experience in dealing with orphans, making it more effective in identifying orphans that need help.

This paper seeks to highlight the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on orphans' social-emotional development and perceived support. It covers the following points:

- 1) Why orphans?
- 2) The importance of social-emotional development
- 3) The importance of perceived social support
- 4) Improving orphan's socioemotional wellbeing during the COVID-19 pandemic



## Why Orphans?

It is important to note here that orphans are chosen as the primary target group for this study due to several reasons. First, orphans are defined as children that have experienced parental loss and are placed within institutional care. In general, orphans miss a big part of their lives by growing up without parents, essential for children's social-emotional development. Therefore, orphans are more likely to have poor mental health due to the lack of social support needed during their development, unlike normal children where the family exists as an agent for a social institution to fulfil their social and emotional needs.

Second, previous studies have shown that institutionalised children such as orphans who grow up without adequate psychological and social needs are susceptible to psychological and social vulnerabilities, which affect their mental health negatively (Ntshunshu & Taukeni, 2020). Children in orphanages lack good social connections as they are used to being on their own most of the time. Moreover, unlike in a traditional family setting where parents remain consistent by their children's side, it is hard for orphans to maintain an emotional bond with their caregivers as most of them are volunteers that usually come and go or are replaceable depending on the needs.

Third, failure to maintain an emotional bond can be detrimental for an orphan's development, not only in their present life but also the future, as they are at a disadvantage when it comes to completing their studies or even getting a job as they grow older (Earls et al., 2008). Furthermore, healthy children in a typical family setting strive to look forward to the future. In contrast, the same cannot be said about orphans as they lack the same level of motivation that is typically acquired via the emotional bond made with significant others such as parents. Hence, non-orphaned children are more likely to be motivated and optimistic about the future. In contrast, orphans have a hard time establishing a secure attachment with others and are at risk for behavioural problems (Munyua, 2019).

Fourth, previous researchers have also found that children's mental health, especially that of orphans, should be observed as they are seven times more vulnerable to psychological problems (Mohammadzadeh et al., 2019). It may also be argued that the vulnerabilities towards psychological problems experienced by orphans may have been caused by a lack of proper care and problematic orphanages. However, research has shown that orphans are not exempted from these psychological vulnerabilities even when raised in a well-run institution (Rahman et al., 2012).

Accordingly, from what is evident from past research, it is expected that the COVID-19 pandemic will affect orphans far worse than it would to the average child, which is why there is a need to conduct this study. This study aims not only to affirm what is assumed but also as a precursor for an intervention plan.



## The Importance of Social-Emotional Development

In order to assess how the COVID-19 pandemic may have been affecting children's aspects of development, it is vital first to understand how psychologists understand human growth and development. Children's developments are observed and indicated based on their capabilities in reaching certain milestones that are expected of their age. For a start, in early childhood, socio-emotional development is essential for forming expression, personality, and attachment in children (Doherty & Hughes, 2009). However, the disruption brought upon by the pandemic leaves their social needs unattended due to isolation since the children are unable to mingle with their peers. It is not right to blame the parents as they also have their responsibilities to cater for instead of serving as playmates to their children. As a result, children may throw more tantrums than usual as they cope with the stress due to prolonged isolation and the lack of opportunity to interact with their peers (UNICEF, 2021).

As for the adolescence phase, a child is expected to identify themselves and relate to others during the social identity process in the Identity vs. Role Confusion stage. However, the social identity process for orphans is complicated and not as straightforward as it is for non-orphans. In a traditional family system, adolescents can relate to their family members during the identity formation process. In contrast, orphans only have their caregivers and peers within the same living environment to relate with. Therefore, it can be perplexing for orphans that require social and emotional support from significant figures. However, they are unable to do so, which can result in frustration and potential communication problems when integrating with other families (Shulga et al., 2016). Hence, it is essential to first look into the expected developmental growth and consider the possible aspects of the affected milestones experienced by orphans during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Children's social and emotional development has been the central theme in research areas in developmental psychology for decades. An important figure that comes to mind when discussing social and emotional development is Erikson's psychosocial development theory (Widick et al., 1978). The theory postulates how the social environment and biological maturation helps in resolving crisis as we develop and move forward to different stages in life, starting from birth to death. For this reason, social-emotional development very much depends on not only the environment where the children are being raised but also their capacities for handling challenges which vary according to their biological maturation.

Moreover, social-emotional development is crucial as it serves as a milestone for developmental growth in an individual. Good social-emotional development can indicate good adaptive child development, whereas a bad one can result in maladaptive behaviours, tough on orphans (Chitiyo & Chitiyo, 2018). A healthy social and emotional development includes maintaining interpersonal relationships with others, which may not be evident for orphans as they may perceive others merely as caregivers rather than actual family members that they can relate.



As pointed out initially, due to the complexity of the social identity process experienced by orphans, the developmental process or outcome may differ as they resolve their conflicts from non-orphans who can meet their social needs and resolve their crises better. It can be observed from the role of caregivers as they soothe and respond to the child's emotions. For non-orphans, the mother is considered a significant figure to ensure a maternal bond takes place. Therefore, it is regarded as an essential phase to facilitate emotional development in children. This process is crucial as it serves as the foundation for children in determining their level of self-esteem, security, and emotional regulation as they grow up (Malik & Marwaha, 2019).

However, orphans without parents lack such privilege as the only people they have to connect and establish bonds with are peers living in the same environment or caregivers hired in an orphanage. During the COVID-19 pandemic, access to orphanages by outsiders was restricted, with only a limited number of caregivers available to look after the orphans (Ahmad, 2020). It can be distressing for orphans as they look forward to having visitors and socialize with others outside their circle in normal circumstances.

Therefore, being deprived of social contact from the outside world may affect the social-emotional development of orphans as socialisation and relationship are the critical components for adolescents in the Identity vs. Role Confusion stage. Failure to resolve this issue can result in orphans who cannot see how they will fit in the society and create a feeling of disappointment at how life is treating them (Erikson, 1993).

## The Importance of Perceived Social Support

Perceived social support can be understood as the kind of support obtained from family, friends, neighbours, and institutions that can enhance the psychological dynamics and help the individual in affective, physical, and cognitive contribution (Gülaçtı, 2010). It has also been associated with wellbeing and support, which includes love and care that provide a positive experience (Siedlecki et al., 2014). Concerning orphans' perceived social support, the relevant focus will mainly be on the institution, peers, and caregivers for apparent reasons.

With the emphasis on institution and peers, Saredidine (2020) found that teachers, schoolmates, and people at school were significant predictors for perceived social support among adolescent orphans. This finding resonates with Erikson's explanation of how adolescents during the Identity vs. Role Confusion stage tend to look for their peers rather than their own families to affirm their own identity. It is interesting to note here that even though some of the orphans in the study conducted still have families of their own, perceived social support remains significant towards nonfamily members. While this may not be a bad thing on its own, the COVID-19 pandemic, however, is affecting the source of social support for adolescent orphans. With schools being shut down during lockdown, so has the perceived social support for adolescent orphans.

As for caregivers, Yimer (2020) pointed out from the study conducted among orphans at schools that fulfilling their physiological needs such as food, shelter, or clothes alone are not sufficient to cater to the needs of orphans. They are not like animals kept in petting zoos that are sustained and protected for the sake of responsibility. Instead, their psychosocial well-being should be taken care of by promoting socialisation and using pro-social words to promote healthy social-emotional development. Therefore, caregivers play an essential role in helping orphans improve their perceived social support. However, this can be tough during the COVID-19 pandemic as the caregivers themselves are also struggling to make ends meet.

Thus, it is crucial to recognise that perceived social support is essential for individuals coping with difficulties in life. Furthermore, a high perceived social support is highly correlated with better physical and mental outcomes in children (Uchino et al., 2012). It is further supported by the fact that adolescents with higher social support are more likely to have higher self-esteem and better mental wellbeing (Poudel et al., 2020). For this reason, the author believes that perceived social support among orphans is worth looking into, not only for filling in research gaps based on their current condition in the COVID-19 pandemic but also as a stepping stone in developing intervention or strategies to enhance their mental health.

## **Improving Orphan's Condition During Covid-19 Pandemic**

Based on what has been presented so far, specific measures on improving the condition of orphans affected by the COVID-19 pandemic are discussed. First and foremost is the need to improve the living conditions of children in institutions. Creating a conducive environment for orphans is vital for their social and emotional development as psychosocial development considers the influence of the environment in determining the quality of the product in orphans (Green et al., 2016). It can be done by having competent caregivers trained in child development programmes to provide appropriate activities to create a safe space that allows for positive socio-emotional development in orphans. It is also important to note that private orphanages also need to be regulated to ensure the children are comfortable living there. There are concerns of abuse when institutions are not appropriately monitored (Swain, 2018).

Besides that, self-help books can be of benefit to children in institutions. It can be done by collaborating with the local or national libraries to provide relevant reading materials suitable for their age with content focusing on raising their self-esteem, confidence, and mental development. For instance, orphans in Belarus were given books such as "My Story" to help orphans with identity development. This enabled the orphans to understand better themselves and how they will fit in society as the caregivers provide them with the necessary guidance in identity formation (Göransson et al., 2008).



Last but not least, the condition of orphans during the COVID-19 pandemic can also be improved by providing caregivers with the necessary skills to help identify orphans with developmental problems and provide social-emotional support to orphans when needed. When preparing the proper training or intervention, it can be done via knowledge sharing by experts, such as clinical psychologists. It is also worth mentioning that caregivers may also need the training to regulate their own emotions, given a high turnover rate in this line of work (Chew, 2017). Hence, it is recommended that caregivers enhance themselves with positive mental health strategies so they can provide quality care for orphans (Proeschold-Bell et al., 2019).

## Conclusion

To conclude, action needs to be taken to address the issues concerning the socio-emotional development of orphans and their perceived social support in Malaysia during the COVID-19 pandemic, as there will be implications on their future. Therefore, all parties must work together to ensure orphans can meet their potential for positive and healthy developmental outcomes.

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