

## Children's Lived Emotional Experiences of COVID-19 Lockdown: Insights from an Arts-Based Qualitative Study



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**Abstract:** *Children have been especially vulnerable to the emotional impact of a large-scale crisis like an infectious disease outbreak. Events like the COVID-19 pandemic can disrupt day-to-day life, relationships, and sense of stability for children, and impact their mental health and wellbeing. This study aimed to explore how children in Pakistan experienced and made sense of their emotional wellbeing during the COVID-19 lockdown, using an arts-based qualitative approach that combined drawing with reflective diary writing. An arts-based qualitative approach was used for this study. With parental consent, 23 children (11 boys and 12 girls) aged between 9 and 15 years participated; each had been home confined for a minimum of 1 month. They were all provided with a drawing pad, diary, and drawing tools and asked to document their thoughts, emotions, and moods each day for a period of two weeks. They shared experiences in writing and drawing about loneliness, anxiety, sadness, and changes in attitudes and conduct. Focus group discussions were later held to understand their interpretations and meanings regarding their drawings and expressed thoughts. Children reported emotional stressors during lockdown, including fear of infection, loneliness, sadness, and ongoing worry. The virus was seen as a silent threat, creating uncertainty and insecurity. Loss of routine and limited social interaction worsened experiences, though children also showed resilience supported by family ties, parenting, creativity, and helping behaviors. The results indicate children faced emotional stressors like fear, loneliness, sadness, and worry during lockdown, seeing the virus as a silent threat. Routine loss worsened insecurity, yet resilience emerged through family ties, supportive parenting, creativity, and helping behaviors.*

**Keywords:** Arts-based Methods, COVID-19, Diary Writing, Drawing, Emotional Wellbeing, Children, Pakistan, Qualitative Research, Resilience

### Introduction

The outbreak of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) marked an unprecedented event in modern history, rapidly emerging as a global health crisis on an extraordinary scale. On 31 January 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the outbreak a Public Health Emergency of International Concern, and by March 2020, it was seen as a global pandemic (WHO, 2020a, 2020b). Although it was initially a physical health crisis, it quickly became apparent how the broader population, social participation, and mental health were being impacted by the pandemic (Holmes et al., 2020). The implementations of the COVID-19 containment measures impacted the daily life of everyone, especially children, by changing their routines drastically (UNICEF, 2021).

Children are particularly vulnerable to such disruptions. Having stable routines, familiar surroundings, and trusting relationships is associated with their emotional development (Masten & Narayan, 2012). Children can have difficulty adjusting when faced with disruption, such as during lockdown. Several studies have shown that the decreased participation in peer interactions, outdoor activities, and schooling during COVID-19 has been associated with greater anxiety, decreased mood, increased irritability, and feelings of loneliness in children and adolescents (Loades et al., 2020; Orgilés et al., 2020). Importantly, children's emotional reactions are influenced not only by their direct experiences of these events, but also by observing

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parental stress, exposure to media messages, and wider community and social anxiety (Bartlett et al., 2020; Dalton et al., 2020).

In Pakistan, a new line of research is beginning to emerge around the same concerns. Studies around the pandemic point to children feeling more emotional distress, such as fear of contracting the pandemic virus, to anxiety about study-related issues, as well as feeling socially isolated (Imran et al., 2020; Javed et al., 2021). Beyond the educational impact on children, millions of children lost schooling, and these closures exacerbated inequalities and decreased opportunities for children's social interaction and formal (macro) supports (Malik et al., 2022). Additionally, children's experiences were shaped by a wider socio-cultural lens, and there was evidence of how children's coping was interlinked with their experiences and wider socio-cultural context, such as extended family systems, socio-economic pressures, and access to resources (Riaz et al., 2021). In spite of this increasing volume, there is still a research void regarding the voices of children and the way they interpret their experience through their own means, in a participatory and creative style.

There is a growing need to use arts-based methods to create meaningful impact in this area. Expressing emotions in words can be difficult for many children, especially younger ones. Drawing offers an alternative, age-appropriate means of expressing emotions, fears, and perceptions which might otherwise be unexpressed (Malchiodi, 2012). These techniques have been extensively employed in trauma research to examine a child's perception of distress, their interpretation and meaning-making, and are a useful way to examine the phenomenology of difficult situations (Leitch, 2008). Arts-based inquiry adds a layer of depth to understanding children's perceptions of risk, safety, relationships, and feelings in the midst of an uncertain world in the context of COVID-19.

In addition to expression, arts-centered approaches can facilitate reflecting on and processing emotions. Drawing or creative play can help children externalize their internal experiences, thus facilitating understanding and management. This may be especially significant in communities where it may not always be appropriate for open discussions about emotions, or where people do not have safe places to have conversations about emotions. These visual expressions, when combined with children's own explanations and narratives, bring a fullness of information when describing children's lived realities. Such approaches value children as agents and not subjects, and provide children with a platform to voice how their experiences are understood and represented by others (Abdulah et al., 2020).

Given the limited availability of qualitative studies, child-centered research in low- and middle-income countries, including Pakistan, this study seeks to explore children's emotional wellbeing during COVID-19 home confinement using an arts-based qualitative approach. By examining children's drawings alongside their written and verbal narratives, the study aims to better understand their experiences of fear, safety, relationships, and coping. In doing so, it contributes to the development of culturally relevant and evidence-informed approaches to supporting children's mental health during current and future public health emergencies.

## Methods

This study adopted a qualitative design using arts-based methods to explore children's experiences. Such approaches are particularly useful when working with children and other groups where sensitive topics may be difficult to express through words alone (Liamputtong, 2020). Drawing, in particular, offers a way for children to communicate feelings, experiences, and perceptions that may not be easy to articulate verbally (Søndergaard & Reventlow, 2019). Alongside this, diary writing was used as a complementary method, as it allows for ongoing reflection and helps capture day-to-day emotional experiences over time (Bolger et al., 2003).

Drawing, diary, and focus group discussion were used to collect data. Twenty-three children aged 9 to 15 years (mean = 12.7, SD = 2.4; 11 boys and 12 girls) participated in the study; they all had been home-

confined for at least a month during the COVID-19 pandemic. Information and informed consent from parents were obtained before participation.

Children all received a diary and an art resource kit with markers and stickers. Each participant was asked to write out their thoughts, feelings, and moods every day for two weeks. They had a wide range of opportunities to write and draw in a variety of ways. Children were encouraged to be aware of their own feelings, whether loneliness, anxiety, sadness, or worry, as they spent time at home, but no specific format was imposed. After the 2 weeks, participants were encouraged to explain and describe their drawings and diary notes.

Focus group discussions were conducted in both in-person and online settings to gain a deeper understanding of children's experiences. Discussions were supported with children's drawings and their diary reflection entries. Integrating these various data sources was helpful in creating a more comprehensive and in-depth picture of children's experiences of lockdown.

### **Data Analysis**

Qualitative content analysis and thematic analysis were performed to analyze the data. Initially, children's explanations of their drawings and diary entries were reviewed to identify key ideas and recurring patterns (Liamputtong, 2017). This enabled the analysis to be based on the meaning children themselves attach to their experiences (Liamputtong, 2020).

Data were then analyzed thematically according to the Codebook method (Braun & Clarke, 2019) with inductive and deductive coding. This approach enabled themes to emerge from the data, while also being informed by existing literature. The data were coded twice by two independent researchers, with discussions until consensus was reached in the event of discrepancies. As the discussions with the team continued, themes were further developed to ensure the final interpretations were coherent and consistent and shared the data (Hancock et al., 2016; O'Reilly & Parker, 2013).

### **Results**

The study included twenty-three children aged between 9 and 15 years (11 boys and 12 girls), with a mean age of 12.7 years ( $SD = 2.4$ ). Analysis of the drawings, diary entries, and discussions revealed a range of emotional experiences that were organized into five interconnected themes:

- a) Perceived risk and fear of COVID-19 infection,
- b) Home as a safe space alongside emerging awareness of community support,
- c) Disrupted peer relationships and strengthened family connections,
- d) Emotional distress and changes in daily routines, and
- e) Resilience, coping, and meaning-making.

#### **A. Perceived Risk and Fear of COVID-19 Infection in Children**

Children in this study spoke frequently about their fear of catching COVID-19 during the lockdown. For many, the outside world felt unsafe, and leaving the home was often linked with a strong expectation of becoming infected. This sense of risk appeared to shape their behavior, with several children avoiding outdoor activities and describing increased feelings of anxiety.

One 12-year-old girl described the virus as something "waiting outside the house," illustrating her home surrounded by coronavirus particles, alongside images of police enforcing lockdown. She explained, "If we go outside... we will be infected... we are safe at home." Her account reflects how public health messaging, combined with visible restrictions, influenced how children understood safety, leading them to draw a clear boundary between inside and outside spaces.

**Figure 1**

*Nine-year-old Girl Described the Virus as Something Waiting Outside the House*



Many kids described the virus as big, strong, and hard to manage. A student in one drawing showed the coronavirus as a huge figure covering the whole earth. He wrote, "The Corona is so big, it has affected the whole world, anybody can become infected." Others expressed uncertainty in more everyday terms, saying that no one knows who has it, anyone can get sick, or if someone sneezes, it means that they might have coronavirus. These responses indicated that children were coping by trying to make sense of what it was they were seeing, sometimes seeing everyday behavior as a threat.

**Figure 2**

*A Ten-year-old Boy Described COVID-19 as a Widespread Threat Affecting the Entire World*

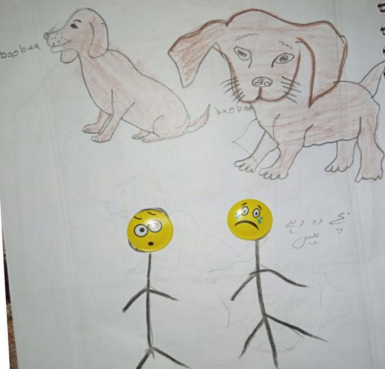


Media exposure appeared to play an important role in shaping these fears. One child said, "The news that I watched made me feel afraid not to have contact with anyone...so I stopped going out and stayed at home because of that". Another child explained how influential all the news and warnings of touching others and washing hands were on him emotionally: "I feel worried all the time, because after watching the news, it's like it's saying don't touch anybody and just wash your hands, it's making me more worried emotionally." These fears were worsened for some children, based on their own experiences. One participant commented on the death of a relative, making reference to "negative thoughts about what will happen to all of us."

Younger children expressed their feelings in more concrete and relational ways. An eleven-year-old boy asked: "What if my dog gets Corona? What can we do?" This underscores the reach of the fear, beyond the health of humanity, and from the lack of understanding.

**Figure 3**

*Eleven-Year-Old Boys Concern: What if My Pet Dogs Get the Coronavirus?*



An eight-year-old said that the virus was very big: "It's very strong and can infect my entire family." Older children were more likely to describe the emotional consequences of these fears, with one saying, "I want to play outside, but instead I am stuck indoors watching others".

**Figure 4**

*A thirteen-year-old girl described that constant news reminders make me anxious, Even When I try to Ignore Them.*



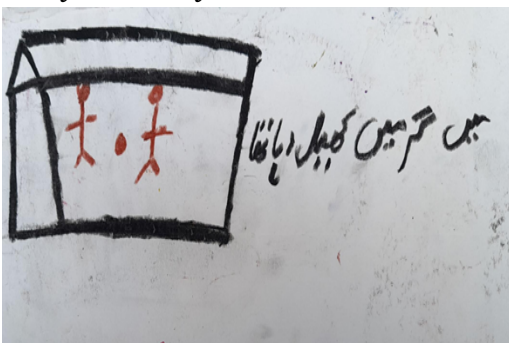
Overall, these illustrate a strong sense of risk children developed during the pandemic as a result of continuously hearing and seeing information around them, both in the media and within the home environment. Their responses indicate that fear was not only cognitive, but also deeply emotional, influencing their behavior, relationships, and perceptions of the world.

### **B. Home as a Safe Space and Emergence of Community Support**

Children in this study repeatedly described how they felt "safe" in their homes during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many children clearly distinguished between "safe and unsafe spaces". This distinction was expressed not only verbally but also visually in their drawing, where some children used lines or boundaries to separate the two environments. A 13-year-old boy drew two contrasting pictures and explained, "Outside people get infected, inside the home it is safe." Such responses suggest that children were not simply passively absorbing public health messages, but rather they were actively trying to make sense of the pandemic by organizing their understanding of risk, safety, and protection.

**Figure 5**

*Nine-year-old Boy Illustrated Inside the Home is Safe, but Outside People Get Infected*



Meanwhile, kids were conscious of what was taking place beyond their own homes. There was a lot of observation of supportive behaviors in people's communities and discussion of the need to support others. One child said, "We can help people by donating groceries and other necessary things." Another child stated, "My cousin gave out food, and I helped him". These accounts suggest that children were not only observing prosocial behavior but were also recognizing their importance and, in some cases, actively participating in helping others.

Some of the children spoke of more structured levels of support in the community. One Child shared, "Our neighbor is a doctor; he organized free clinics in our area for the sick and poor," while another reflected, "It was amazing to see people coming together to help everyone during this time of crisis." Children also described the role of local NGO's in distributing grocery packages to families in need. These suggested that children were aware of both informal community support and more organized responses to crisis, and they recognized the importance of collective care during difficult times.

### Figure 6

*A Ten-Year-Old Boy's Drawing of a Neighborhood Doctor Setting Up a Free Clinic for the Sick and Needy*



But children also identified that support was not the same for everyone. As one child noted, "Some people were ready to help, but others weren't doing anything," increasing awareness of variation in response among people within the community. Some people were facing more financial difficulties, a child stated, "I saw a lot of people who were struggling financially," and "People who needed some help because they had financial troubles." These reflections revealed that children were not just reflective of their own experience, but they were mindful of how the pandemic was socially impacting families, as well.

Importantly, some children spoke of empathy that transcended social or cultural divides. One child wrote, "There was no culture difference or religion difference. The people helped each other; we did very much to help our sweeper as he needed it. He is human, too. The statements indicate a developing empathy and sense of moral virtue that emerged from their experiences during lockdown.

Overall, children discussed how the home was important for their feelings of safety, but there was more than a sense of pandemic-associated community life. They identified the difficulties people may experience and how other people might help, emphasizing the value of care, responsibility, and connection in helping to support people at times of crisis.

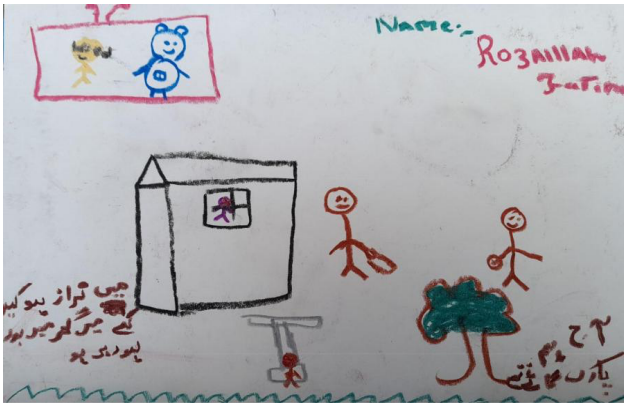
### **C. Disrupted Peer Interaction and Strengthened Family Relationships**

In this study, children freely shared their experiences of the impact of the lockdown on their friendships and peer relations. They missed out on going to school or playing outdoors, which meant they felt isolated, bored, and sad to a certain extent. Many had a hard time with the lack of contact with everyday life. One boy drew a picture of himself inside his house watching an empty football field outside, "I can't go outside and play, coronavirus is everywhere, I am so angry! Likewise, one child, a 9-year-old girl, illustrated two opposing

scenes: a picture of her playing beside an image of being alone at home, to vividly express the emotional experience of being separated from her social community.

**Figure 7**

*A 12-year-old boy's drawing of him watching an Empty Football Ground from His Home, Unable to play, he felt sad.*



Meanwhile, there were multiple observations on how spending more time with families caused the children to feel closer to them. The daily adjustments opened up opportunities for shared activities and discourse, an opportunity for a unique family time experience. A child said, "I got the opportunity to spend family time that I hadn't heard of until then... going back to reading and hearing stories of my grandma's life when she was a child." In addition to missing peer interaction that often helps children build emotional regulation skills and behavior coping, these accounts suggest that children developed other forms of connection with the family context, including stronger inter-generational relationships and new shared family dynamics.

**Figure 8**

*A Ten -year-old girl's drawing, we had more Family Time; My Grandmother Shared Childhood Stories, and I started Reading Again.*



However, it wasn't always a positive change of routine; some children reported that they were having to spend more time on a screen, as a way to cope with boredom or stay connected with others. One participant expressed, "My screen time increased a lot, more time on social media and online games." This suggests how the kids adapted to the situation, but also indicates the changes that might have long-lasting effects on their lifestyle.

Parent support seemed to be an important factor in the children's coping with these changes. Numerous children reported that their caregivers were doing something to actively assist them in managing challenging

feelings. "My mum helped me when I felt sad, she played games with me and told me stories, I can talk to her," said one child, another said, "She never made me feel lonely." Parents also used creative techniques facilitating helpful means of coping. For instance, one participant commented, "I learn to deal with difficult emotions and my mother talked to me and gave me advice on safety precautions and prayed, and my mother was helpful and kept me busy and then she would even help by joining us, painting and other interesting craft " and another said, "My mom kept me busy."

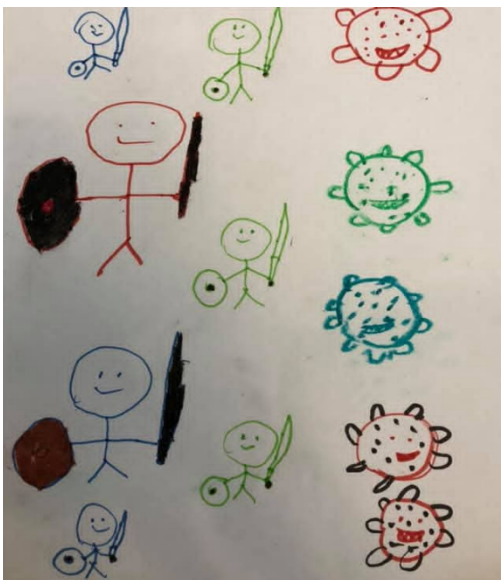
All of these experiences demonstrate that children experienced a lack of peer relationships as a significant loss, but that their families' togetherness served as an important source of comfort and stability. In many instances, the family environment supported children emotionally and offered opportunities for connection and coping with challenges during lockdown.

#### D. Emotional Distress and Disruption of Daily Life

The present study reported a variety of emotions children experienced during their period of home confinement. Sadness, frustration, anxiety, and uncertainty were often expressed. For many, the pandemic presented a real threat and a helpless, puzzling problem. One child said it very clearly, 'The coronavirus is everywhere, it can infect anyone.' One child expressed 'It's like a battle, we have to be on guard all the time, it is really worrying and really frustrating'. Children seemed to have had an ongoing feeling of alertness; they seemed to have experienced their day-to-day lives in a perpetual state of hypervigilance.

**Figure 9**

*A Nine-Year-Old Boy's Drawing Shows the Ongoing Coronavirus Battle and the Need to Stay Vigilant*



Daily habits were important factors in these emotional engagements. Familiar school routines and social interaction were disrupted because of the school's closing and inability to attend. A lot of them said they felt mixed and confused feelings about staying within the house. One participant commented, "Some students were happy but sad we weren't able to go outside." This expressed a mix of joy and sorrow. Others voiced their concern for those people who are impacted by the virus. One child said, "I was happy when the rate of corona cases decreased... but on the other hand, I was sad to see the corona-infected people and so many people died." A wide range of emotional reactions were experienced; some children reported their feelings of anger and physical pain. One of them said, "We were so angry... we even began to get headaches because we were sitting at home all the time, that's the physical impact of living in confinement." Academic concerns were also mentioned, with one child saying, "I was afraid that I would forget all my material if there was a delay in exams."

**Figure 10**

*A Twelve-year-old Girl Described Feeling Sad and Anxious Due to School Closures and Lack of Social Interaction*



The lack of familiar social surroundings was another factor that made one feel isolated. Children reported their "transforming world," including one who commented, "It was sad that there aren't any children playing in my streets, the neighborhood used to be very noisy." These observations indicate the impact of the absence of social activities they were used to on their emotional health. Some children responded by trying to find other means to connect, such as through technology. There was an attempt to remain in touch with friends even though they could not meet, one participant explained: "We couldn't come together to see each other, so we did video calls with friends."

Many children felt safe in their homes, but noted the experience was not positive for some families. For instance, one participant said, "A neighbor was yelling and throwing things, which upset me while working on my studies," and another reported that "Angry people got angrier during lockdown." These experiences indicate that for a certain group of children, living in confined spaces may have exacerbated the already existing conflicts in the family or in the neighborhood, providing an additional source of emotional stress.

**Figure 11**

*A Ten-year-old boy's Drawing Shows How Lockdown Increased Anger among People.*



Overall, factors of uncertainty, disrupted routines, limited social interactions, and, in some instances, difficult living contexts influenced the experiences of children during these times of lockdown. Their stories reveal not just the trauma of the virus, but of life's changes that surrounded it.

### **E. Resilience, Coping, and Meaning-Making**

Although lockdown was challenging, this study revealed a clear way in which many children reacted to it in their own ways. They reported that their families provided support and guidance to them, and that this was also reflected in their means of developing resilience. Faith was a significant way of helping some people to

make sense of what was occurring. Religious beliefs helped to provide reassurance and a sense of stability during uncertain times, as one child explained, "That we should not rely on rumors, we should rely, if we can, only on Allah... otherwise we get disturbed."

**Figure 12**

*An Eleven-year-old Girl's Drawing Illustrated How Positive Activities and Faith Helped her Cope with Anxiety During Lockdown*



Several children described the lockdown period as an opportunity to explore new interests or reconnect with activities they had previously enjoyed. Creative interests like photography, planting, and other hobbies were noted, as well as ways to stay productive and focused. Another participant shared, "I think we should consider our future when we have a little spare time, enjoy reading interesting and informative content, and practice new skills such as drawing and writing poetry." Others shared the importance of patience and having a positive attitude: "Having patience makes things easy", "We should look at things with positivity; we should be grateful to God." These responses reveal the children's attempts to both respond to the situation, as well as attempt to understand and manage.

Children's emotional experiences seemed to be related to creative activities. The artwork, listening to music, and writing were reported as relaxation activities and means to better themselves. Some children commented: "I learned new skills... when I felt sad, I did artwork, and it made me feel good," and "Listening to my favorite music changed my mood," and "Drawing makes me feel happy and relaxed." Some children also used the diary writing experience to reflect on how they felt over time, as one child explained: "Initially, I was sad in my writing and gradually, as I was relaxed and happy, my writing became more positive." These kinds of activities appear to have enabled children to process their emotions in an effective manner.

**Figure 13**

*A thirteen-year-old Girl's Drawing Showed Art, Music, and writing as Sources of Relaxation during Lockdown.*

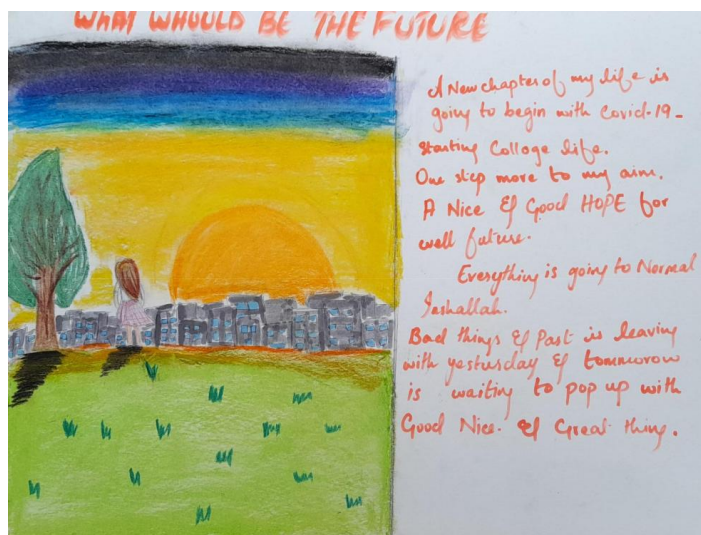


Another significant factor in coping was staying connected with others. Children maintained relationships through virtual communications, shared online activities, and small gestures of care and connections. These activities seemed to help maintain a feeling of connection and belonging.

Children's experiences of 'Lockdown' generally indicated that resilience was encouraged through a variety of ways, such as family relationships, faith, creativity, and 'day-to-day' active coping skills. Some children identified ways of adapting, and in some instances, managing to see hope in a different way, while maintaining a sense of uncertainty. Their responses reflect not only the challenges they faced but also their ability to adapt, learn, and make sense of a tough situation.

**Figure 14**

*A Fifteen-Year-old Girl's Drawing Reflected Hope for a Brighter Future and a New Beginning*



## Discussion

Using the expressive language and artwork of children, this study provides a closer look at how the children experienced the COVID-19 lockdown. The virus was perceived by many children as always present and hard to avoid, with ongoing and intense fear of infection. This seemed to be internalized as their drawings included pictures of a house being surrounded by the virus, or such a 'safe' space being separated from an 'unsafe' one. Many of the words that have been used (e.g., 'the corona is everywhere') indicate that a constant threat was identified. This trend has also been observed in international research, with children becoming more anxious, fearful, and health-aware throughout the pandemic, and exaggerating risks (Loades et al., 2020; Orgilés et al., 2020). Several factors, including fear and uncertainty, were also linked to emotional distress in children and adolescents, with similar evidence from Pakistan (Imran et al., 2020; Javed et al., 2021).

At the same time, children shared their experiences of a variety of challenging emotions such as sadness, loneliness, and frustration. These experiences were strongly associated with disturbances of normal daily tasks and abrupt changes in daily living activities with friends. There seemed to be emotional consequences of missing school, outdoor activities, and regular socialization. Children's experiences of feeling 'depressed', seeing no one on the streets, and wanting to play outside are consistent with a wider study, which found social isolation has a negative effect on young people's mental health (Loades et al., 2020). Similarly, longer school closures and less structured activities have been related to emotional and behavioral problems during schooling in Pakistan (Malik et al., 2022). Children's accounts were by no means one-dimensional; some spoke of being happy about not going to school, but also of boredom and sadness, signaling the conflicting and dual nature of these children's experiences.

An important aspect of the findings is how children understood the level of awareness about safety and the broader social environment that existed. Most of them referred to the house as a sanctuary, but they

were also aware of what was taking place outside. A lot of them commented on financial issues in their communities and on the different impact they observed on family lives. Caring for others and helping to share resources with neighbors and others were cited as positive experiences. The phrase "people helping each other regardless of differences" indicates an increasing level of empathy and the understanding of people and society. This observation is consistent with studies that have reported that family members felt closer and more supported during the pandemic (Prime et al., 2020; Riaz et al., 2021).

Interpersonal family relationships seemed to be a central coping response for children. While kids missed out on interaction with peers, more time at home, with the family or parents, bolstered family bonds for some children. Many reported that caregivers provided support, reassurance, and guidance. The children reported some supportive behaviors by parents in dealing with their worries, including establishing routines, encouraging creativity, and, in some instances, encouraging faith-based practice. This mirrors other research demonstrating that the psychological effects of crises can be overcome by supportive caregiving (Spinelli et al., 2020; Dalton et al., 2020). Such support is likely significant in a context such as Pakistan, where family systems are often tightly knitted together. It is essential to emphasize that levels of stability and support may vary across families.

Children demonstrated their own adaptive ways of coping during lockdown. Creative activities such as drawing, listening to music, and writing were helpful for regulating feelings and important outlets for emotional expression and stress management. With all of these activities, children appeared to have the freedom to express themselves and a sense of relief. Many children also described faith, patience, and positive thinking as important sources of support and coping that helped them make sense of uncertainty during this period.

The attitudes expressed as "be thankful to God" or "having patience makes things easy" reflect the processes of meaning-making that helped with emotional adjustment. Similar studies have also shown that adversity-prepared children's spirituality and creative involvement positively influence their resilience (Masten & Motti-Stefanidi, 2020; Imran et al., 2020).

Even with these adaptive coping responses, the findings also identify certain challenges. Continuous exposure to distressing news, uncertainty about the future, and concerns related to educational goals contributed to children's stress and anxiety. These experiences were sometimes exacerbated by a challenging home environment or neighborhood circumstances. If stressors persist over time, they may increase the risk of long-term mental health difficulties (Holmes et al., 2020). This emphasizes the need for early intervention and prevention strategies.

In general, the results of the study indicate that children are not passive observers of events around them but have an interpretation and reaction to events. It is a multi-faceted combination of personal, relational, and cultural factors impacting their experiences. Arts-based techniques are particularly helpful in capturing these experiences as they allow children to express emotions and perspectives that may be difficult to communicate through conventional verbal techniques.

### **Implications for Policy and Practice**

The findings highlight the need to strengthen child mental health support within pandemic preparedness and response strategies. Schools and community settings have important roles to play and can include psychosocial support in their response. They can be especially supportive to children in their ability to express and process feelings, and approaches using creative or play-based activities might be particularly effective.

Support of parents and caregivers is also crucial. Individual guidance on maintaining routines and responding to children's emotional needs can help provide stability and support within the home environment. In addition, expanding access to child and youth mental health services in Pakistan, particularly in underserved and hard-to-reach areas, through culturally and linguistically appropriate approaches is

essential. Moreover, media literacy initiatives may help to reduce anxiety and fear associated with excessive exposure to distressing information. Providing clear, balanced, age-appropriate communication could improve the emotional well-being of children and families by helping them better understand and process information during a public health crisis.

### **Conclusion**

This study demonstrates that children experienced both significant challenges and adaptive growth during the COVID-19 lockdown. They drew and related stories to give insights into their experience and understanding. Many children experienced fear, uncertainty, and social disconnection, but also were able to experience support within their families, find creative ways to express themselves, and experience support in the form of faith. Identification of these experiences is critical to developing responses to future crises. Helping children towards better mental health needs strategies that are culturally relevant to their worldview, and that involve new forms of creative expression.

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