



Children in Spain under Covid-19 Towards a Sociology of Urgency: Why Listen to Children and Adolescents in Confinement

<https://infanciaconfinada.com/>

Marta Martínez Muñoz, Iván Rodríguez Pascual and Gabriela Velásques Crespo¹

Introduction

COVID-19 confined 47 million people in Spain, including 8.3 million under 18 years of age. In the second week of March 2020 the government ordered the closure of the schools and they were left empty. From one day to the next they found themselves at home, unable to go out into the street and forced to 'tele-study'. Their social relations with all the people they did not live with at home, including teachers, classmates and friends, were equally disrupted and became only virtual.

The children's voices barely transcended the homes in which they were confined. As we have defended on many occasions in our research (Rodríguez & Martínez, 2020), children do not live in isolated universes, they form part of the social world, of their society, and denying this condition implies disregarding the possibility of building a relationship with the child population on an equal footing. On the other hand (more practical), they can provide a useful and different vision of certain essential processes in our society (education, for example) which other social agents whose experiences are far removed from the world of children could hardly provide. This willingness to listen implied, within a framework of confinement, asking oneself: how can we reach children?

¹ **Marta Martínez Muñoz**. Sociologist and Evaluator of Public Policies. Enclave de Evaluación. **Iván Rodríguez Pascual**. Sociologist. Professor at University of Huelva (Department of Sociology, Social Work and Public Health). **Gabriela Velásquez Crespo**. Lawyer. PhD candidate at Institute of Human Rights Bartolomé de las Casas - IDHBC of the University Carlos III of Madrid.

Methodology

To this end, we launched 'Childhood in Confinement' (<https://infanciainconfinada.com/>), a research project that was born, on the seventh day of confinement, from three key questions: what do children think about the situation of confinement, how is COVID-19 affecting them in their daily lives, and how are they individually and collectively constructing the meaning of this situation?

In order to meet the objectives of an urgent sociological research that does not deny the methodological rigor, we opted for a virtual access to the population under study through a self-completed online questionnaire, defining an optimal age range to perform the field work: between 10 and 14 years.

The questionnaire was hosted on the Limesurvey platform, to ensure anonymity, and was promoted through different social networks and the researchers' own contacts with the 'snowball' method², obtaining 425 questionnaires answered by girls (52%) and boys (48%) living in different autonomous communities.³ Although not representative of the entire population in this age range, the sample allows tentative conclusions to be drawn and represented the first attempt to obtain data from this age group during the confinement in Spain.

How they have felt: subjective well-being and confinement

Children and adolescents have been great supporters during this pandemic in the private sphere, despite this, the message they have received almost permanently has been to 'hold on, resist and behave well'; they have been asked to make great sacrifices, giving them very little in return except to be labelled as 'vectors of transmission', even by the health authorities themselves. They have shown a wide repertoire of ways of defining, understanding and abiding by concepts that were totally new as an experience for almost the whole of society and in the face of such a radical measure as confinement, all of them under the umbrella of a broad consensus: more than 94% show their support for confinement as a necessary measure to avoid contagion. It is not surprising, therefore, that the subjective well-being of children, even within confinement, is unusually high: on a scale of 7 points, where 7 means being completely satisfied with life, the average score in our study was close to 6 points (5.8). The main reason for this well-being is the satisfaction they have with their family relationships, the fact of

² The semi-closed survey was open from March 21st to April 7th, 2020 and had 25 questions, divided into seven sections: consent and presentation; socio-demographic identification; rights and confinement; housing, activities and main concerns and feelings; subjective well-being; dreams, fears, joys and sorrows (SMAT).

³ 15 of 17 communities. However, 70% of the sample corresponds to Madrid, Valencia and Catalonia.

being at home and being able to maintain closeness and accessibility with their parents, is what they indicate they have enjoyed most during this period.

However, exclusionary factors have continued to operate within the confinement. There are some children who have not been able to count on this closeness, their parents have not been able to spend enough time with them, or there are arguments within the home. Thus, we asked ourselves what the profile of those who expressed the least and greatest life satisfaction was, which we summarize in the following table.

Table 1: Comparative profile of the child and adolescent population with the lowest and highest life satisfaction (25%-75%), respectively (% over total response for each variable, life satisfaction measured on a scale of 1 to 7)

Variables	25% with lower life satisfaction (n=73)	25% with higher life satisfaction (n=125)
Sex	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 65,7% are girls 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 52,9% are girls
Age	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 52.9% are over 13 years old 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 22,8% are over 13 years old
Health status	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 39.7% rate their health as 'very good' 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 79% rate their health as 'very good'
Feelings during confinement (frequency: the figure is the sum of 'quite a few times' plus 'every day')	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 51.4% felt sadness 53.5% were concerned 31.9% have felt fear 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 11,2% felt sadness 27,2% were concerned 6,4% have felt fear
Frequency of discussions with parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 15.1% say they argue with their parents 'every day' 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 4% say they argue with their parents 'every day'
Availability of time with parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 26.4% fully agree with the statement 'My father or mother is with me as long as I would like' 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 59,2% fully agree with the statement 'My father or mother is with me as long as I would like'
Concern about the family's financial situation (frequency: the figure is the sum of 'often' plus 'every day')	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 23.9% say they are concerned about the lack of money in their family 26.8% say they are worried about their parents losing their jobs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 12,9% say they are concerned about the lack of money in their family 18,7% say they are worried about their parents losing their jobs
Activities during confinement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 11% have never done a sport or dance activity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 4% have never done a sport or dance activity

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 11% have never called another person 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1,6% have never called another person
Perception of the burden of school work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 45.8% say that 'many times it is so much work that I can't finish it'. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 13,8% say that 'many times it is so much work that I can't finish it'.

Source: Martínez Muñoz, M.; Rodríguez Pascual, I.; Velásquez Crespo, G. (2020).

As can be seen, the child population that shows less satisfaction with its life presents the following variables:

- Has a more clearly feminine and older profile.
- They value their state of health less.
- Show greater psychological discomfort and feelings such as sadness or worry
- They live in family environments that are more fragile financially and less available to their parents.

Illness and family welfare as main concerns

84% are very concerned 'that people in my family will get sick or die because of the Coronavirus'. The second biggest concern (65%) is 'that my grandparents and other older people will have to spend this time alone'.

The children have been less concerned about economic issues, although four in ten do express great concern about the possible loss of their parents' jobs: 44%. Seventeen per cent are very concerned that their family will be 'poorer or have less money' when the confinement ends. About one-fifth feel a frequent concern (every day or often) that 'their family will not have enough money for the next few months' (20%) or that their parents 'will not have a job for the next few months' (23%).

Disturbing feelings

Children and adolescents are not passive observers of the pandemic crisis or its socio-economic consequences, but have demonstrated critical thinking: connected and aware of the suffering of the whole population and the tension this situation has caused in our way of life, particularly from the point of view of their family environment but also in relation to other broader areas.

They have certainly proved to be resistant to a circumstance as harsh as confinement: many have felt at ease and, above all, have had to deal with boredom.

However, disturbing feelings have also emerged, identifying the socio-affective consequences of confinement: particularly concern and sadness, which a significant part of the population (36% and 28% respectively) have felt very often and more so for girls.

Along the same lines, a bond has been skewed which in Spanish society has a special intensity: the one that unites them with grandmothers and grandfathers. This is reflected in the fact that the latter have become one of the main concerns and sources of sadness during confinement (64.9% are very concerned that they feel alone) but also that of older people in general beyond their family ties, thus giving an account of their intergenerational solidarity and of those who have been especially affected by the pandemic.

What do we learn from the study?

- **Critical Awareness:** Children have shown themselves to be *situated* subjects⁴, with a critical awareness of the situation they are living in. It is not free of charge, therefore, that when they have the opportunity to express their opinions, they do so mainly to claim and demand their right to be heard. In the same way, children also take the opportunity to address different social actors to demand better measures, that confinement is respected and that they do not go beyond their schoolwork. Only by listening to them can we have a broader view of their needs and interests.
- **Situations of vulnerability:** The study has shown that while most of the participating children are in a moderately stable situation, there are, to a lesser extent, situations of vulnerability within their private sphere. Low subjective and material well-being, learning difficulties and weak family economic situations, among others, are some of the conditions in which some participating children live, which are a reflection of the current situation in many Spanish households. As a society and as a State we must take into account the needs of children from their own voices, understanding that the most important work of social intervention will come

⁴ Situated knowledge or subject is a concept developed by Simone de Beauvoir (later revised by Donna Haraway) to refer to the fact that no knowledge is detached from its context or from the subjectivity of the one who is emitting it. For Haraway it does not only happen with women but with all the subaltern groups, and she proposes that each minority must analyze its reality studying the interactions between all the axes of inequality (gender, class, race). To these axes we consider that one should add that based on age, which is usually absent in the analyses of intersectionality. With situated knowledge, the position of the person issuing an opinion is made explicit, since points of view are never neutral in an ethical way. We believe it is appropriate to extend the concept to question the essentialist views of childhood that are unaware of its diversity and to record the critical awareness of the opinions and expressions of the child population, about different social processes or phenomena, as we have observed on many occasions.



after confinement to reverse these situations of disadvantage from a rights-based approach.

The project and the report are available at <https://infanciaconfinada.com/> and in the academic repository of the University of Huelva identified with the handle <http://hdl.handle.net/10272/17913>.

References

- Martínez Muñoz, M.; Rodríguez Pascual, I.; Velásquez Crespo, G. (2020). *Infancia Confinada. ¿Cómo viven la situación de confinamiento niñas, niños y adolescentes?* Madrid. Infancia Confinada y Enclave de Evaluación.
- Rodríguez Pascual, I.; Martínez Muñoz, M.; (2020). "Infancia, investigación e intervención social: horizontes metodológicos en diálogo", in Orgambidez, A.; Borrego, Y. & Vázquez, O. (Eds) (2020). *Tendencias de Investigación en Intervención social*. Editorial Dykinson.

Source: <https://www.documentacionsocial.es/6/ciencia-social/hacia-una-sociologia-de-urgencia-por-que-escuchar-a-las-ninas-ninos-y-adolescentes-confinados/>

Translated from Spanish by Manfred Liebel.

12th of November, 2020