



**COVID-19 Impacted the Coping Strategies of Pediatric Oncology Patients Both Positively and Negatively**

**Taylor Thompson (Faculty Mentor: Marissa Diener, PhD.)  
Department of Family and Consumer Studies**

**Background**

A little over 11,000 children are diagnosed with cancer in the U.S. every year (American Cancer Society, 2020). These children may face problems coping with frequent hospital visits, the pain associated with multiple treatments, disruption to their routine and social relationships, the uncertainty and unfamiliarity of the medical experience, and the threat of death (Hildenbrand, Clawson, Alderfer, & Marsac, 2011).

**Purpose**

The restrictive policies implemented in hospitals since the COVID-19 pandemic started, like limiting the number of visitors allowed per patient, are likely to impact this patient population. This study was conducted in order to investigate that impact of COVID on children receiving frequent medical care in order to accommodate their needs in the future.

**Methodology**

Eighteen patients ages 5-19 who were receiving treatment for cancer and their caregivers were interviewed. Questions addressed hospital experience, coping strategies, and impact of COVID-19; interviews were transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were coded using qualitative techniques and Dedoose software.

**Results**

Three overall categories emerged from the data. The first was that COVID impacted the children's coping positively by 1) enabling them to continue their education through treatment, 2) helping them feel similarly to peers whose lives are also on hold due to the pandemic, and 3) feeling safer because of COVID restrictions. However, children's coping strategies were also affected negatively. As expected, the decreased number of visitors allowed limited the support the child received while in the hospital. In addition, caregivers were under greater stress, which diminished their ability to support their child. Greater distance from the child's support people caused increased loneliness, and less access to activities negatively impacted the child's ability to cope both inside and outside of the hospital. Finally, fear of the immunocompromised child contracting COVID caused much stress among some participants. The final category that emerged was that COVID-19 had no impact on the child's ability to cope. This theme was common among patients that received their diagnosis during the pandemic and did not know what hospital policy was like prior.

## **Discussion**

Hospital policies should accommodate access to support people and attempt to maintain the availability of coping-related activities. As the COVID-19 pandemic recedes, children dealing with cancer may experience changes and/or challenges with their coping strategies.

## References

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- Hildenbrand, A. K., Clawson, K. J., Alderfer, M. A., & Marsac, M. L. (2011). Coping with pediatric cancer: Strategies employed by children and their parents to manage cancer-related stressors during treatment. *Journal of Pediatric Oncology Nursing*, 28(6), 344-354. Doi 10.1177/1043454211430823