

# QUALITY OF LIFE OF PARENTS WITH CHILDREN WITH AND WITHOUT DISABILITIES DURING COVID-19 RESTRICTIONS: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

**Lefkothea Kartasidou, Maria Platsidou, Eleni Kyriakidou,  
Aristi Trokana, Georgia Diamantopoulou, & Pagona Leonidou**  
*Department of Educational and Social Policy, University of Macedonia (Greece)*

## Abstract

The present study examines family functioning with a particular emphasis on the quality of life of parents during the implementation of restrictive measures aimed at preventing the spread of COVID-19. This period was characterized by several notable changes, including reduced mobility, diminished social interactions, alterations to daily routines due to the suspension of activities such as organized sports, the shift to distance learning and telecommuting, and temporary work interruptions. These circumstances suggest that the pandemic may have served as a potential influencing factor on parents' quality of life. The primary objective of this research is to investigate and compare the quality of life of parents with children with disabilities to that of parents with children without disabilities during the early stages of the pandemic. A total of 242 parents participated in the study, including 101 parents of children with disabilities and 141 parents of children without disabilities. Following a quantitative research methodology, the study employed two instruments for data collection: (a) the WHOQOL-BREF questionnaire (Ginieri-Coccosis, Antonopoulou & Christodoulou, 2001) and (b) a custom-designed questionnaire consisting of five Likert-scale statements that assessed participants' emotional responses over the previous month during the implementation of COVID-19 containment measures. Data were collected via Google Forms during the final ten days of the restrictive measures, covering a period of up to one month prior. Analysis revealed a statistically significant difference between the two groups in the social relationships subscale, with parents of children with disabilities reporting lower mean scores. Correlations between the two questionnaires suggest that the family unit played a critical role in managing the various challenges encountered during the early stages of the pandemic.

**Keywords:** *Quality of life, disability, parents, Covid-19.*

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## 1. Introduction

Quality of life is a critical indicator of overall well-being, especially in times of crisis. COVID-19 has profoundly changed societies worldwide, as all people have faced serious health, social and economic challenges, that have affected their quality of life. School closures, reduced social interactions and the imposition of long-term social distancing have a negative impact on the psychological, physical and mental health of children and adults (Wang et al., 2020). The prolonged lockdown coupled with the absence of extracurricular activities led to increased feelings of isolation, anxiety, and frustration. Families changed their daily routines, as many parents became unemployed or were forced to work online to take care for their children who stayed home for long periods due to the quarantine.

This period of restrictive measures not only strained family relationships but also highlighted the essential role of social connectedness and structured routines in maintaining overall well-being. Although maintaining family routines was a significant challenge during the COVID-19 pandemic, these routines proved crucial in supporting individual and family well-being in the midst of health, economic, and social stress (Bates et al., 2021). All of these changes make it imperative to understand the consequences for individuals and families, particularly those with disabilities.

In particular, people with disabilities faced increased challenges to their full participation in the community due to pre-existing inequalities which were highlighted by the pandemic (Pikoulis et al., 2024). Carers of people with intellectual disabilities experience accumulated stress and therefore more likely to develop mental health problems than carers of typically developing children (Singer, 2006). Furthermore, during the COVID-19 pandemic, families with a disabled member were more likely to experience difficulties accessing their basic needs (Streuli et al., 2023).

While previous research has documented the prevalence of difficulties experienced by people with disabilities during COVID-19, there are few studies in Greece that have examined the quality of life of families with children with and without disabilities and have understood how the pandemic has affected them in particular.

## **2. Aim of the study – research questions**

The aim of the study was to investigate and compare the quality of life of parents of children with disabilities with that of parents of children without disabilities during the early stages of the pandemic. Specifically, the following research questions were formulated: a) Is there a statistically significant difference in the 4 dimensions of quality of life of parents with children with disabilities compared to parents with children without disabilities during the early stages of the pandemic? b) Is there a correlation between the responses to the two questionnaires of parents with children with disabilities compared to parents with children without disabilities during the early stages of the pandemic?

## **3. Method**

This study uses quantitative research methods, which focus on understanding social phenomena by collecting information for large numbers of people and generalizing across groups of people.

### **3.1. Participants**

The sample was collected randomly by distributing the Google Form questionnaire to parents of children with and without disabilities. A total of 242 people aged between 22 and 66 took part in the survey, including 101 parents of children with disabilities and 141 parents of children without disabilities. The majority of participants were female (84.5%) and reported being married (74.8%). Furthermore, 81% of the participants live in Thessaloniki, Athens or another large city. When asked if their profession had been affected by Covid-19, most participants (64.9%) answered negatively, and most participants (81.4%) said that their family members hadn't been affected by Covid-19.

### **3.2. Measures**

The research team designed an online survey that included demographic questions and two data collection instruments: (a) the WHOQOL-BREF questionnaire (Ginieri-Coccosis et al., 2001) and (b) a custom-designed questionnaire. The WHOQOL-BREF questionnaire (Ginieri-Coccosis et al., 2001) is the development of the Greek version of the WHOQOL-100 measuring quality of life. It consists of 26 questions covering four dimensions: physical health, psychological health, social relationships and environment. In this survey, the questionnaire was adapted by adding the phrase "during the period of Covid-19" at the end of the 26 statements. The custom-designed questionnaire contains five statements relating to the support of family members, the external help and medical care available to them, and the satisfaction of basic family needs. Participants were asked to select the response that best described their emotional reactions during the implementation of COVID-19 containment measures over the previous month, using a five-point Likert scale.

### **3.3. Procedure – data analysis – ethics**

The study was conducted during the last ten days of the restrictive measures in May 2020, and for a period of up to one month prior, only via the internet, to ensure the safety of the participants. A google form questionnaire was created and the link was distributed to Greek parent associations with children with disabilities, schools and social media, as well as to other parent associations without children with disabilities. Parents were informed that their participation was voluntary and anonymous, and that the information collected would be confidential and used for research purposes only. Informed consent was obtained from respondents prior to the start of the survey. The data collected were coded and analyzed using the SPSS 28.0 statistical package. Descriptive statistics, correlations and t-tests were calculated to check the differences between the two groups, parents of children with and without disabilities.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Descriptive statistics

This exploratory study focuses on the differences between the quality of life of parents of children with disabilities and that of parents of children without disabilities during the COVID-19 pandemic. The descriptive statistics of the custom-designed questionnaire (see Table 1) highlight the difference between mean scores of statements 1, 3, 4 and 5 to statement 2 ( $M: 2,37$ ,  $SD:1,38$ ), which refers to the external help available to the family during the pandemic. On the contrary, the mean score of Statement 1 (My family members support each other during the COVID-19 period) ( $M: 4,57$ ,  $SD: 0,73$ ) is the highest, indicating that most participants relied on internal family support during the pandemic.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of the custom-designed questionnaire.

Questions	Min.	Max.	Mean	Std. Deviation
S1. My family members support each other during the COVID-19 period.	1	5	4,57	,732
S5. The parents in the family can take care of each child's individual needs during the COVID-19 period.	1	5	3,90	1,079
S3. My family can manage its financial expenses during the COVID-19 period.	1	5	3,87	1,172
S4. My family has access to medical care during the COVID-19 period.	1	5	3,51	1,308
S2. My family has external help available during the COVID-19 period.	1	5	2,37	1,388

Concerning the 4 dimensions of quality of life (WHOQOL-BREF questionnaire) (see Table 2) participants scored higher on psychological health ( $M: 3,09$ ,  $SD: 0,46$ ) and lower on physical health ( $M: 2,66$ ,  $SD: 0,41$ ). Moreover, the high standard deviation of social relationships' dimension ( $M: 3,04$ ,  $SD:0,76$ ) indicates that participants' emotional responses are spread out over a wider range.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of 4 dimensions of quality of life (WHOQOL-BREF questionnaire).

QoL Dimensions	Min.	Max.	Mean	Std. Deviation
Psychological health	1,50	4,33	3,0930	,46965
Environment	1,63	4,50	3,0739	,51182
Social relationships	1,00	4,67	3,0427	,76671
Physical health	1,57	3,57	2,6659	,41870

### 4.2. Inferential statistics

Regarding the first research question, a statistically significant correlation was found between the 4 dimensions of quality of life ( $p<0.01$ ). The statistical analysis revealed interesting results about parents with children with disabilities and parents with children without disabilities. It seems that parents of children with disabilities reported lower mean scores on the WHOQOL-BREF questionnaire. More specifically, the largest difference between the two groups was found in the social dimension (see Table 3).

Table 3. Comparison of the two groups at the 4 dimensions of quality of life (WHOQOL-BREF questionnaire).

QoL Dimensions	Children with Disabilities	Mean	Std. Deviation
Physical health	Yes	2,5983	,41488
	No	2,7143	,41615
Psychological health	Yes	3,0545	,45467
	No	3,1206	,47979
Social relationships	Yes	2,8812	,82001
	No	3,1584	,70664
Environment	Yes	2,9554	,49705
	No	3,1587	,50707

To address the second research question about the relationship between the responses of parents of children with disabilities and those of parents of children without disabilities during the early stages of the pandemic, a correlation analysis between the two questionnaires was conducted (see Table 4). Our results showed strong positive correlations between physical health, psychological health, social relationships and environment, suggesting that these aspects of well-being are closely linked. In particular, the very high correlation between mental health and environment ( $r=0,488$ ,  $p<0,001$ ) suggests a strong link between individuals' perceptions of their environment and their mental well-being. The results suggest that both physical health and social support play a crucial role in psychological well-being, as evidenced by the strong positive correlations between physical and psychological health ( $r =0,572$ ,  $p< 0.01$ ) and between social relationships and psychological health ( $r =0,423$ ,  $p<0.01$ ). Further analysis shows that parents' ability to meet their children's individual needs (Statement 5) is highly correlated with physical and psychological health, social relationships and environment. In addition, statement 1 of the custom-designed questionnaire has a strong correlation with the social dimension of the QoL questionnaire ( $r=0,351$ ,  $p<0,001$ ).

Table 4. Correlations.

	Physical health	Psychological health	Social relationships	Environment	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5
Physical health		,572**	,360**	,400**	,187**		,280**	,148*	,267**
Psychological health	,572**		,423**	,488**	,209**	,173**	,210**	,229**	,326**
Social relationships	,360**	,423**		,406**	,351**	,181**	,115	,203**	,363**
Environment	,400**	,488**	,406**				,285**	,313**	,352**
S1	,187**	,209**	,351**			,195**		,142*	,336**
S2		,173**	,181**		,195**			,243**	,193**
S3	,280**	,210**		,285**				,394**	,466**
S4	,148*	,229**	,203**	,313**	,142*	,243**	,394**		,360**
S5	,267**	,326**	,363**	,352**	,336**	,193**	,466**	,360**	

\*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

### 4.3. Reliability

The reliability of the scales measured with Cronbach's Alpha is for the WHOQOL-BREF questionnaire,  $\alpha=.812$  and for the Custom-designed questionnaire,  $\alpha=.617$ , indicating acceptable to high internal consistency.

## 5. Discussion

The current study focuses on the emotional responses of parents of children with and without disabilities during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings of this study are discussed in relation to the research questions. In relation to the *first research question*, it is important to highlight that all dimensions of quality of life are highly correlated and therefore interrelated. Parents of children with disabilities scored lower than parents of children without disabilities in all 4 subscales of the WHOQOL-BREF questionnaire: physical, mental health, social relationships and environment. The analysis highlighted that the social subscale showed the greatest difference between the two groups, with parents of children with disabilities reporting lower mean scores. This may indicate that there was limited external help available to the families at the time. This finding is in line with previous studies indicating that the reduced social support experienced by parents of children with disabilities during the COVID-19 pandemic negatively affected the overall quality of their family life (Rakap et al., 20-22).

With regard to the *second research question*, there is a strong correlation between the responses of the participants in the two groups to specific questionnaires. Specifically, the social dimension appears to be highly correlated with Statement 1, which refers to the internal support of family members during the COVID-19 restrictions. The results show that families acted as a vital support system for the social needs of their members during the pandemic period, which is consistent with the findings of other family-focused studies (Prime, Wade & Browne, 2020).

It appears that families rely on their own strengths to survive during these difficult times. This study highlights the importance of raising awareness among families on how to cope with the challenges that arise during global crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Busaad & Alnaim, 2021). In addition, the low score on available external help highlights the lack of adequate support policies during crises for all families and especially for those with children with disabilities. Other researchers have also focused on families with children with disabilities due to the lack of tailored services, highlighting the need for tailored formal support during emergencies (Hochman et al., 2022).

## 6. Conclusion

In conclusion, further research is recommended in order to compare the emotional responses of participants from different countries considering the 4 dimensions of quality of life, at different stages of the pandemic crisis. From an analytical point of view, it would be interesting to examine the effect of demographic characteristics on the results and to compare them with studies that focused on the post- COVID-19 period. The studies that have focused on issues related to the COVID-19 period have highlighted the important role of family and school in terms of communication and cooperation. The above results have important implications for psychology and education as they show the importance of support systems that must always be in place.

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