

# The Impact of Covid-19 on the Quality of Daily Routines in Nurseries and the Influence on Young Children

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## Abstract

Daily routines in nurseries are among the key elements of their program. Specifically, routines are essential to the function of nurseries, while providing children with stability and a safe environment for exploration and learning experiences. However, compliance with health protocols for covid-19 has brought about significant changes in the way they operate. The aim of this study is to explore the views of 31 educators working in nurseries in Attica (Greece) with children under the age of 3, on how the restrictions they must adhere to have affected the quality of their daily routines and, by extension, the children themselves. A semi-structured interview was chosen for data collection. The results of the survey showed that the quality of the children's morning welcome, morning circle, play corners, outdoor play, outdoor walks, lending library and lunch routine, have deteriorated. In addition, educators report that children feel disorganized and unsafe to explore the environment and have limited learning experiences. Finally, the results of this study may contribute to the scientific literature on the effects of covid-19 and provide useful information for educators.

**Keywords:** covid-19, daily routines, children under the age of 3, children development, Greek ECEC

## 1. The Meaning of Daily Routines in Children's Development and Education

From the earliest days of children's lives, routines are among the main activities of daily living. The primary caregiver sets the appropriate time for feeding, bathing, playing, walking and sleeping (Harries & Brown, 2019; Sadeh et al., 2010). This organization creates structural patterns that children internalize as they grow up because it allows them, through predictability, to feel secure. That feeling of safety created through well-structured daily routines stimulates the children's desire to learn about the world and develop their skills (Fitton, 2013; Hofer, 2006; Siren-Tiusanen & Robinson, 2001).

Conversely, when children grow up in an environment without routines in which chaos and unpredictability prevail, the fear of the unknown and the insecurity that is created can have a negative impact on children's development (Fitton, 2013; Hofer, 2006; Denham, 2002). For example, several studies (De Stasio et al., 2018; Fitton, 2013) emphasize that children who grew up without a sense of stability tend to show intense fear of changes in their environment, struggle to adapt to these changes and are less confident of their skills.

However, routines are not limited to the children's family environment as they are also an important part of the nursery's daily schedule. More specifically, routines are defined as activities that are usually repeated daily in the same or similar way at relatively fixed times and are an integral part of the pedagogical process (Watson & Dicario, 2015; Post & Hohmann, 2000). Some of the routines are found in all nurseries, while some of them are found only in specific classes. Also, the way in which they are implemented often varies from one classroom to another or from one nursery to another. That way of executing the routines may be the result of a negotiation between the educator and the children (Sandall et al., 2005; Ostrosky et al., 2003).

At this point it should be clarified that, although the terms routine and schedule are often used as identical, their meaning is actually different. As pointed out in Early Head Start National Resource Center (2014), the term schedule corresponds to all daily activities that take place in nurseries, while routines refer to the steps needed to implement the schedule. In general, the schedule refers to the division of time into activities and is characterized by a continuity, while routines refer to activities and procedures that occur at regular intervals (Ostrosky et al., 2003). However, both should be characterized by flexibility (Watson & Dicario, 2015; Sandall et al., 2008).

Regarding routines, a wide variety can be identified and divided into categories without the boundaries always being distinct. That division can be made according to the (Watson & Dicario, 2015; Sandall et al., 2008; Sandall et al., 2005; Ostrosky et al., 2003; Post & Hohmann, 2000): (a) frequency with which they are applied (daily, weekly, monthly, occasionally, etc.), (b) educational circumstance (during the child's welcome-departure, during free activities, at lunch, at break time, etc.), (c) place where they occur (in the circle, in the yard, in play corners, etc.), and (d) the goal they have (children's transition, interaction, rule-keeping, evaluation, self-evaluation, development of thinking, etc.).

More specifically, some examples of routines in nurseries may include the following (Early

Head Start National Resource Center, 2014; Sandall et al., 2008): (a) daily routines: e.g., children's transition to class and arrangement of their personal belongings, creating a circle in which they discuss their news or carry out other activities, lunch time when they have to wash their hands before entering the dining room, etc.; (b) educational occasions: e.g., dealing with problems such as conflicts between children, the implementation of play corners; the number of children who can participate at any time, how to use the equipment, etc.; (c) weekly/monthly: e.g., lending library operation, notes to parents, walks outside the nursery, etc.

The pedagogical value of the routines lies in their contribution to the socio-emotional and cognitive development of children and the improvement of their responsibility, autonomy and self-control (Banerjee & Horn, 2012; Degotardi, 2010). In a safe and predictable environment, children can understand and respond to the expectations others have of them and thus enhance their self-confidence (Watson & Dicario, 2015; Banerjee & Horn, 2012). In addition, routines can help to reduce conflict between children and prepare them to manage situations in later life (Zimmerman et al., 2017).

In particular, children under the age of 3, when interacting in an environment with routines, can feel safe and free to explore the world in order to and learn and develop themselves (Banerjee & Horn, 2012; Ostrosky et al., 2003). Routines are a source of knowledge and experience for children as they enhance their contact with adults and other children, help them learn concepts, develop skills and understand the cause-and-effect relationship. It is also important that the routines implemented by children and the educator create a common code of communication that stimulates the formation of a strong bond between them (Early Head Start National Resource Center, 2014; Degotardi, 2010).

Essentially, the existence and repetitive nature of the routines ensure that children have many opportunities for spontaneous learning, as well as for organizing a variety of learning experiences that arise naturally and effortlessly (Salmon, 2010; Woods & Goldstein, 2003). Although there is no universally accepted definition of quality in education and care programs for children (ECEC), many studies (e.g., Slot et al., 2017; Barros et al., 2016; Harms et al., 1990) attempting to define the criteria of quality, propose the evaluation of routines (e.g., sleep time, lunch time, diapering, etc.) as an important indicator of quality.

Therefore, the importance of routines in the quality of ECEC and in children's development is obvious. In this context, considering the restrictions imposed by the pandemic, the aim of this study is to explore the perspectives of 31 educators working in nurseries in Attica (Greece), on how the restrictions of the covid-19 health protocols have affected children under 3 years old, emphasizing on the quality of their daily routines.

More specifically, the research questions are the following:

- How has the implementation of the covid-19 health protocols affected the quality of routines?
- In what way might it affect children?

To answer the above research questions, data were collected by conducting semi-structured interviews and then analyzed using the thematic analysis. Using that method, the researchers were able to explore in depth the views of the educators (Robson, 2007) and highlight their concerns about the impact of the pandemic on the quality of routines in nurseries and the effect it may have on children.

In summary, the available research on the impact of covid-19 on children in nurseries is scarce in the scientific literature that we reviewed (e.g., Bertia et al., 2021; Egan et al., 2021; Davies et al., 2021; Lafave et al., 2021). Furthermore, to our knowledge there is no similar research in Greece. Therefore, we anticipate that the results of this study will contribute to the scientific knowledge about the impact of the pandemic and will encourage further research.

## **2. Method**

### *2.1 Research Method and Instrument*

Thematic analysis was chosen as the method of analysis in this study. Using this method in qualitative research, descriptive data is gathered to answer the research problem (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Once the data has been collected, the researcher codes them looking for patterns and sub-themes guided by the research questions (Tsiolis, 2014; Braun & Clarke, 2012).

Regarding the research instrument, the semi-structured interview was chosen. That was considered most appropriate because it includes predefined questions, but additional questions can be asked to gain a deeper understanding of the research problem (Creswell, 2016; Robson, 2007).

In terms of research ethics, the educators participated voluntarily. Also, before the interview they were informed of the purpose of the study, the reasons why their participation was necessary and the possibility of withdrawing at any stage of the interview if they wished. Additionally, the researchers provided assurance of the participants' anonymity and that the research data would only be used for the specific research purpose (Cohen et al., 2012).

### *2.2 Participant Characteristics*

The study consists of 31 educators working in nurseries in Attica (Greece) with children under the age of 3. The majority of the participants were women, which generally characterizes the gender situation of educators in Greece. Their age was 25-56 years and their work experience 5-23 years. Finally, all educators were university graduates and a few of them held a postgraduate degree.

### *2.3 Reliability and Credibility of Research*

The reliability of the survey was supported through participant checks. Specifically, transcripts of the interviews, interpretation and discussion of the findings were returned to the participating educators (Cohen et al., 2012). They were asked to study the section describing their own experience and to make comments if they felt that the paper did not represent their

views. The comments were considered by the researchers. In this way, validation of the findings by the participants was achieved (Creswell, 2016).

In terms of the validity of the study, the researchers described the findings in detail and consistently. Since it is impossible to present all the educators' responses, the most typical cases and those that most clearly answered the research questions were selected (Cohen et al., 2012). Therefore, readers of the paper can engage in interpreting the findings and reach their own conclusions (Silverman, 2020).

### 3. Results

The responses of the educators were analyzed and coded following the research questions. Therefore, the analysis of the data related to the first research question showed that the restrictions due to the adherence to the health protocols of covid-19 changed the daily routines of the nurseries and possibly their quality.

More specifically, one of the changes was observed in the routine of children's attendance at the nurseries, e.g.:

*'Parents were not allowed to enter the nurseries, so children have to greet them hurriedly at the door to avoid overcrowding. Before the pandemic, the arrival of children was handled differently: We had a board taped to the door with pictures, such as two people hugging or two people shaking hands, and we would ask the children to show us how they wanted to be welcomed. I think the quality of this routine has decreased because it is now done in a formal way and without touching each other' - N.*

Furthermore, changes are observed in the morning circle routine, in the way the play corners are implemented, in the operation of the lending library, in outdoor play and outdoor walks e.g.:

*'Yes, I think the quality of routines has changed for the worse. A typical example is that we don't implement the morning circle. It's a very important routine where we talk to the children, tell them our news, and generally learn things' - E.*

*'The function of play corners has changed. The number of children who can be in the same area at the same time has been reduced and they can't touch all the items because they need to be disinfected after each use. Essentially, this was a routine promoting social interaction and now it has a lot of restrictions' - V.*

*'Unfortunately, the lending library routine is not implemented. It was a very important routine for eliminating inequalities in children. We cannot implement it because we cannot disinfect the books' - A.*

*'There has been a significant reduction in the quality of routines included in children's outdoor play. We give them fewer toys because we must disinfect them after each use. Even some group games that the children used to play in the outdoor area are now not allowed' - K.*

*'Before the pandemic, once a month we used to go for a walk with the children. Now we don't because we are afraid they might contact someone who is sick or touch something and then get sick with covid-19' - D.*

Also, changes are observed in the lunch routine, e.g.:

*'Before the pandemic we all went to the dining hall together for lunch. It was a very nice routine of social interaction. The children would sit next to each other, help serve and we were all together as a group. Now, we divide the kids into small groups, which enter the dining hall one after the other. Also, children are not sitting together keeping social distancing. They are not allowed to help serve and generally touch things other than their own' - G.*

Regarding the second research question, educators believe that adherence to the health protocols for covid-19 and the changes they have brought to daily routines are affecting children, e.g:

*'Many children cry because they cannot say goodbye to their parents as they would like when they arrive at the nursery. I feel that this affects the children emotionally a lot. It's like they are experiencing a loss. Like we are forcibly separating them from their parents. Sometimes when it's crowded, the process becomes even faster and some children seem shocked at how quickly they enter the nursery' - N.*

*'Yes, I think it affects the children. Through the routines we had before the pandemic, the children were able to interact with their friends more. They were learning to share things, cooperate and generally follow social rules' - M.*

*'Of course, it affects the children. All that fixed routine structure that we originally had has been affected. In addition, the protocols for covid-19 are revised many times during the school year. So, while we are trying to make routines and get the children used to them, suddenly things change, and the children seem lost and insecure' - L.*

*'Yes, I'm sure it affects the children. There are a lot of changes to the routines that we had. The purpose of the routines is to motivate children to explore the world around them by providing a safe environment. With the protocols we must follow, that structure is destabilized: They don't know what they are allowed to do and what they do not. For example, when they go to a play corner and they want to play with a toy or get a storybook, they look at me to confirm that they are allowed to do it' - X.*

#### **4. Discussion**

The results of the survey showed that the covid-19 hygiene protocols that nurseries are required to follow during the pandemic affect the quality of routines, which are a key element of their daily function. Furthermore, educators consider that the deterioration in the quality of routines may have a negative effect on children's development, due to the reduced variety of learning experiences and the feelings of insecurity and disorganization that the children may

experience.

More specifically, educators report that the routine of welcoming children to nurseries has changed. Various welcoming techniques that were used before the pandemic were described, which included vigorous interaction with children (e.g., hugging, patting, shaking hands). These methods aimed to make them feel welcome and relaxed in the nursery setting. In many studies (e.g., Stewart-MacKenzie, 2021; Page, 2018; Badanes et al., 2012) it has been reported that the acceptance, love and care that children feel, contribute to their smooth adaptation to the ECEC settings and are fundamental to their healthy development. However, the covid-19 restrictions have turned the morning welcome routine into a formal process without the prior interaction between educators and children. Therefore, the friendly and warm feeling of the morning welcome has been lost.

In addition, changes are also observed in the morning circle, the play corners, the outdoor play, the outdoor walks, the operation of the lending library and the lunch routine. More specifically, most educators reported that they did not implement the morning circle because of covid-19. The minority of educators who continue to implement it noted that there are several limitations, such as keeping distances between children, minimizing interactions, and shortening the duration of the routine. According to the literature (Simpson & Oh, 2013; Salmon, 2010; Mcnamara & Humphry, 2008), the morning circle routine is particularly important because the children sit together and can talk to each other, share experiences, read stories, sing or engage in common activities. Therefore, if we consider all the above, we can understand how important this routine is for children's development (cognitive, socio-emotional, linguistic) and the variety of stimuli that children are deprived of when it is not implemented or is implemented with restrictions.

The routines of play corners aim to meet children's basic needs, such as (Fuligni et al., 2012; Woods & Goldstein, 2003) emotional, the need for movement, play, socialization, autonomy, creativity, imagination, and satisfaction of innate curiosity. According to the educators' responses, although these routines are still implemented, there are important limitations which affect their quality. These restrictions include the number of objects that children can use and the number of children who can be in the same play corner at the same time. Therefore, the adherence to health protocols for covid-19 has affected the basic objectives of this routine, which are to socialize children and explore the environment.

Similarly, the routines of outdoor play and outdoor walks are intended to provide children with a variety of stimuli and opportunities for spontaneous activities, motor development and interaction with other people (Coe, 2018; Herrington & Brussoni, 2015; Tremblay et al., 2015). However, educators report that outdoor play routines have changed: Group play is avoided and children can use limited number of objects. In addition, outdoor walks are not implemented in order to minimize the risk of covid-19 exposure, although the scientific literature (Gubbels et al., 2011; Dowda et al., 2004) highlights that these walks motivate children to learn. The findings on changes in outdoor play and outdoor walks are consistent with previous research (Lafane et al., 2021; Moore et al., 2020, Carroll et al., 2020), which showed that outdoor walks are not implemented (Lafane et al., 2021) and there is a negative

impact on children's outdoor play (limited equipment) due to covid-19 restrictions.

Regarding the lending library routine, educators report that it is not implemented at all as it is difficult to disinfect books and they fear the spread of covid-19. The main goals of the lending library routine are to develop children's early literacy and to familiarize them with written language (Elliot & Olliff, 2008; Philippa et al., 2008). Additionally, this routine aims to provide equal opportunities for the development of children who come from different socio-economic backgrounds. Some of these children may not have enough access to books and adequate language stimuli (Fuligni et al., 2012). It is worth mentioning that several scholars (e.g., Bertia et al., 2021; Davies et al., 2021; Spiteri, 2021) are already expressing their concerns about the impact that covid-19 may have on the function of ECEC settings and the equity in education.

The last routine that according to educators has been negatively affected by health protocols is the lunch routine. Before the pandemic, children would wash their hands, go to the dining room, and help serve food. The interaction between the children was intense. Many studies (e.g., Mcnamara & Humphry, 2008; Alcock, 2007; Woods & Goldstein, 2003) report that the lunch routine is particularly important for children to socialize and learn life skills. However, covid-19 health protocols forced educators to change this routine. Children are divided into groups and take turns going to the dining room. No interaction or assistance in serving is allowed. Therefore, the lunch routine can no longer fulfil its purpose. This finding is confirmed by the study by Lafane et al. (2021) who found that adherence to covid-19 rules deprived educators of the opportunity to provide children with quality interactions during lunch.

Finally, educators believe that all the aforementioned changes in daily routines to comply with health protocols for covid-19 are negatively affecting children. More specifically, the educators report that the morning welcome routine is rushed, and children often need more time to say goodbye to their parents. Possibly, that creates negative feelings and increases the separation anxiety (Wildenger, et al., 2008). Also, the restrictions that apply to all routines prevent children's social interaction, decrease the opportunities for learning (Lafave et al., 2021) and make children feel insecure to explore and understand the world around them.

## **5. Research Limitations and Implications for Practice and Further Research**

Regarding the limitations of the research, it should be mentioned that the views of educators working in a specific city in Greece were examined. This means that in other cities, covid-19 measures may have affected children and their daily routines differently. Therefore, it is recommended that future research should examine this issue in other cities in Greece and abroad, to compare the results and fully document the views of educators.

Furthermore, the results of the survey could serve as a reflection for educators to search for alternative methods, that will retain the benefits of daily routines while adhering to health protocols for covid-19. For example, when the ambient temperature permits, the circle routines could be held outdoors so that children can take advantage of the learning



opportunities that result from conversations, songs, etc. Also, the children could continue to help serve in the lunch routine wearing gloves, to develop their life skills and their sense of responsibility.

## 6. Conclusion

In summary, this study attempted to highlight the impact of adherence to health protocols for covid-19 on the quality of nurseries' daily routines and consequently on children. The educators who participated in the survey reported that the quality of routines had deteriorated and many of them could no longer fulfil their purpose. Also, the educators emphasize that the deterioration of routines affects children as the stable structure of the program is lost and, therefore, children do not feel safe to explore the world around them. We should not forget that, especially for children under the age of 3 who were the focus of our study, stability is especially important for their development. Therefore, it is recommended that educators find alternatives which will maintain the benefits of daily routines and adhere to health protocols for covid-19.

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