The COVID-19 Unmasked survey: Study design and global collaboration
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Background: Early empirical data shows that school-aged children and adolescents are experiencing elevated levels of anxiety and depression during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, there is only scarce evidence regarding the mental health and wellbeing impact on infants and pre-school-aged children. Objective: This global study aims to (a) describe and compare the COVID-19 related experiences within and across countries; (b) examine mental health outcomes for young children (1 to 5 years) and (c) caregivers over a 12-month period during the COVID-19 pandemic; (d) identify the risk and protective factors for child and caregiver emotional wellbeing. In this presentation, we will outline the background, study design, and measures for global collaboration. Method: We have developed partnerships with eight international sites (Australia, Cyprus and Greece, The Netherlands, Poland, Spain, Turkey, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America). Research partners are collecting data from caregivers of young children aged 1-5 years old on 4 occasions (baseline and 3-, 6- 12-months). Caregivers answer questions online about COVID-19 related exposure and experiences, their child's wellbeing, their own mental health, and parenting. Results: The course of psychological wellbeing and the impact of risk and protective factors will be analysed using multivariate models accounting for nested effects (e.g. region) and repeated measures. Conclusions: The findings from the COVID-19 Unmasked global collaboration will directly translate into mental health promotion and prevention models for the early years by informing public health advice and identifying factors that contribute to positive outcome trajectories.
Background: Studies investigating child wellbeing during the COVID-19 pandemic have focused primarily on school-aged children. Objective: This study aimed to describe COVID-19-related experiences and wellbeing of young children during the pandemic. Method: We collected baseline data between May and August 2020 in Australia and between July 2020 and February 2021 in the United States (US) via online surveys. Participants included caregivers of children aged 1-5 years (N = 826 Australia; N = 631 US). For each country, we analysed the distribution of indicators of child wellbeing and conducted linear regression models to determine whether an index of COVID-19 related challenges (range 0-60, e.g., job/ income loss, loss of childcare), pre-existing child mental health difficulties, and caregiver distress predicted child wellbeing. Results: Although participants from Australia and the US differed in their direct exposure to COVID-19 itself, the indirect impact due to loss and disruptions to daily life was similar (Australia: M = 18.5, SD = 9.4; US: M = 20.4, SD = 9.6). Between 26.1% and 27.5% of children in Australia and 12.5% and 20.8% of children in the US demonstrated high to very high levels of anger, anxiety, depression, and sleep disturbance. In both countries, greater exposure to indirect impacts of the pandemic was significantly associated with more child emotional and behavioural difficulties (β = .16 to .27) even when controlling for pre-existing child emotional difficulties and caregiver distress. Conclusions: Findings indicate that the challenges very young children are facing during the pandemic should not be underestimated. Targeted intervention is needed to support young children and their families in coping with the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.