

# Counseling Gen Alpha: Pandemic's Impact on Developmental and Mental Health

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## Abstract

The covid-19 pandemic has had a widespread impact on global health. Many studies have discussed its effect on various populations and continue to study measures to work on them. The upcoming research has a limited focus on Generation Alpha: individuals born after 2010 who have been exposed to these adverse effects from their formative years: the digital age, social isolation, and environmental stressors. It has left a significant impression on their developmental milestones and mental health for which the healthcare professionals and parents are not fully equipped with. This review paper aims to discuss how the flexible and adaptive nature of counseling can employ strategies to help overcome these problems and assist in the 'digital pandemic' that is here to stay. The review method will analyze existing literature using citation tracking, conference proceedings, internet search engines, and primarily through open peer-reviewed electronic databases like PubMed, Research Gate, and ScienceDirect.. The results and implications of the study will be highlighted in the full paper.

**Keywords:** Generation alpha, mental health, counseling, developmental milestone

## 1. Introduction

It seems a long while ago when the whole world was brought upon a pandemic that has left us with pieces to gather. Covid-19 was a period marked by fear, isolation, and helplessness. However as is the nature of mankind we have overcome it marvelously with our hope in the future. Although its repercussions are felt everywhere it is undeniably a lot in the upcoming children born close to or during the pandemic, the generation Alpha. Generation Alpha or Gen-Alpha is a cohort of children born after 2010, on whom the pandemic risks and strategies have caused a major disturbance in their formative years.

The containment measures resulted in isolation from schools manifested as loneliness, anxiety, and uncertainty significantly hampered their psychological, developmental, and educational health. Children already diagnosed with mental health conditions had problems adjusting to environment variation, with increased chances of going off therapy. Compulsive gaming and social media use as a result of untimed exposure put the vulnerable population at high risk. Additional vulnerability factors included developmental age, economic privilege/ unprivileged, preexisting mental conditions, and educational stress (Singh et al., 2020).

Singh et al. (2020) suggest the need for an improved, collaborative, and accessible mental health care system for children to address mental health challenges not only during but also post-pandemic era. The policy-making should encompass prevention, promotion, and intervention parallelly to the public mental health needs.

### 1.1 Current trends to be addressed

The American Academy of Paediatrics and Canadian Paediatric Society's recommendation for normal screen time was 1-2 hours which was significantly exceeded in children during COVID-19 due to distancing and halt in everyday life and education. It has caused even more mental problems when compared to pre-pandemic literature, especially, conduct, anxiety, depression, and hyperactivity/inattention disorder (Gilsbach et al., 2021; Li et al., 2021; Magklara & Kyriakopoulos, 2023).

A systematic review revealed mixed findings on the association when accounting for a correctional sample. Where pre-pandemic online learning transition showed no associations with mental health problems the scenario had changed immensely during the pandemic when online learning had found a different meaning with a study starting it to have worsened mental health increasing depression. The study advocates for therapists to train for problematic media use and provide support and resources to overcome stress and isolation (Li et al., 2021).

Chadi et al. (2022) reported longitudinal data with repeated assessment and interdisciplinary approach would give a more nuanced understanding of the long-term impacts of COVID-19 especially in vulnerable youth populations. He pointed to increased referrals for eating disorders during the pandemic identifying a requirement for a better understanding of the symptomology of various disorders and the integration of digital and traditional in-person treatment methods to be utilized for its wider-reaching potential churning more studies on high-quality intervention.

As the world prepares for worldwide counseling and psychosocial support for its people, the delivery is not well organized or targeted for the said population (Kumar et al., 2020). According to Kumar et al. (2020), 40% of India's population under 18 has been crucially impacted by the pandemic undergoing the same global problems of problematic screen use and traumatic events that can result in different psychopathologies in the future for which enormous and in-depth research on mental health epidemiology and frameworks are required.

### 1.2 How to address

The Integrated care approach in the recent decade has looked to combining primary care with mental health care, however, today Manderscheid and Ward (2024) suggest that the focus has moved from the recipient to the provider, a person-centered approach that is to be renamed in the mental health field as the Behavioural Health Model. A few changes leading to the path have been in terms of addressing workforce issues, developing community-level intervention, implementing population health management, improving reimbursement rates, and exploring AI and Telehealth.

### 1.3 Objective

The objective of this review is to examine how the adaptive and flexible nature of counseling can help deal with mental and developmental health challenges in Gen- Alpha post-pandemic. The aim is to discuss effective strategies to assist the 'digital pandemic' faced by the generation.

### 1.4 Research Question

How can counseling strategies be adapted to address developmental and mental health in Gen-Alpha due to the pandemic?

## 2. Method

### 2.1 Evaluation Criteria

#### Inclusion Criteria:

- Studies focusing on Generation Alpha (born after 2010).
- Research addressing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on developmental milestones and mental health.
- Articles discussing counseling (or) therapeutic strategies for children and adolescents.
- Peer-reviewed journal articles in English.

#### Exclusion Criteria:

- Studies focusing on other generations.
- Articles not addressing mental health or developmental issues.
- Non-peer-reviewed sources and articles not in English.

### 2.2 Literature Search Strategy

The review involved a comprehensive literature search using open electronic databases such as PubMed, ResearchGate and ScienceDirect. The search included peer-reviewed articles, conference proceedings, and relevant internet sources. The following filters were applied on PubMed: free full text, English, Newborn (Birth- 1 month), Infant (Birth- 23 month), Preschooler Child (2-5 year) and Child (6-12 years)

The following prompt was used on PubMed for selecting articles:

**“pandemic AND developmental milestones”** The search yielded 5 pages of article 44 in number in which articles with words and phrases as follows in either their topic or abstract were selected that were 24 in number: ‘development’ ‘developmental milestones’ ‘milestone’ ‘pandemic’ ‘young ones’ ‘children born during covid/pandemic’ ‘post pandemic effects on children’ ‘impact on young children’ ‘Caregiver’ ‘virtual care/ interventions’ ‘neonatal’ ‘pre-natal. Studies with the following were excluded ‘adolescent’ ‘caregiver health’ ‘pediatric migraine’ ‘Acute Leukoencephalopathy “developmental milestones’ “pandemic and mental health and children (children OR adolescents) AND (COVID-19 OR pandemic) AND (development\* OR mental health OR social isolation OR digital exposure) AND (counseling OR therapy OR "mental health support" OR telehealth OR telemedicine)” ‘children’ ‘adolescent’ ‘isolation’ ‘mental health’ ‘digital exposure’ ‘Telehealth in mental health’ ‘Telepsychiatry’

Studies with the following were excluded: children are not the primary population. Conditions other than mental health or changes in developmental milestones. A clinical intervention like vaccination. The mental health of children with physical ailments.

Citation tracking and full text versions were used and obtained on Research Gate and Science Direct.

### 2.3 Screening and Selection Process

The Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines were followed for the screening and selection process.

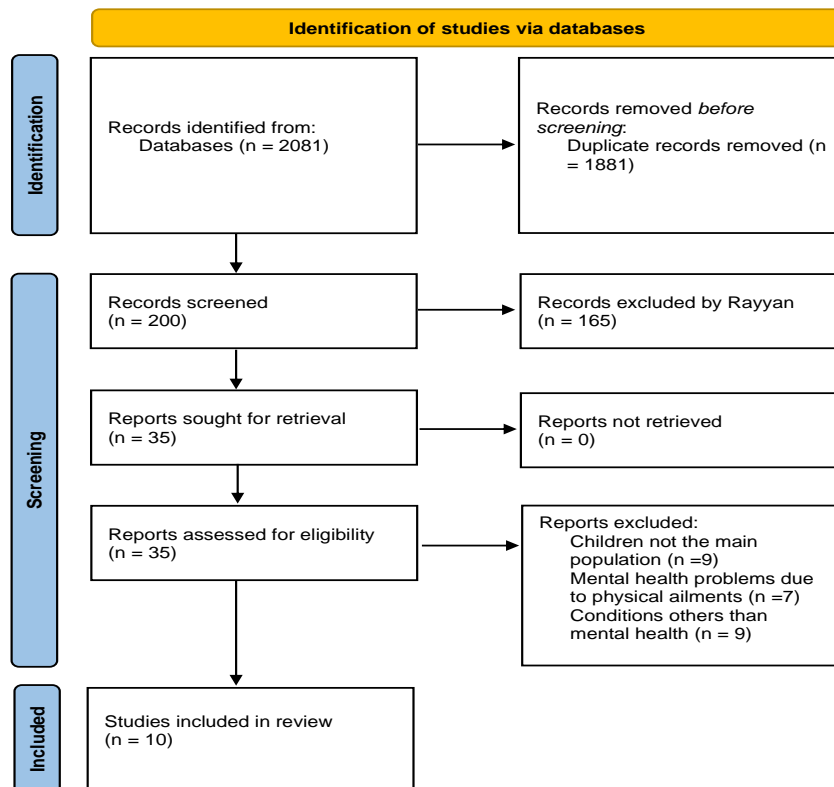
- Initial Search: 2081 articles identified.
- Duplicates Removed: 1881 articles.
- Title and Abstract Screening: 200 articles screened, 165 excluded based on irrelevance.
- Full-Text Screening: 35 articles assessed, 10 excluded for not meeting criteria.
- Final Selection: articles included in the review.

### 2.4 Bias Reduction

- To minimize bias, the following precautions were taken:

- Use of inclusion and exclusion criteria.
- ‘Rayyan’ – an artificial intelligence tool was utilised to exclude duplicate data.
- Transparent documentation of the selection process.

**Figure 1: Flowchart of the Selection Process (below)**



## 1. Results

### 4.1 Comparative studies about impact of pandemic on mental and developmental health

Johnson et al. (2022) in an interrupted time series study from 2018 (pre-pandemic) till 2022 (intrapandemic) for cohort of children from 0 to 5 years of age (50 205 children - 25 852 [51.5%] male; mean [SD] age, 18.6 [16.0] months) using caregiver’s reporting on ASQ-3 found a modest decrease in communication, problem solving and personal social domains significantly from pre to intra pandemic. However, no changes in gross or fine motor development were noted.

Another study utilised the ASQ-3 screening tool for pre and post pandemic from 1024 patients of 6,12,18,24 and 36 months showed significant decrease and increase in problem solving among 6 month and 24 months respectively post pandemic. A slight decrease was noted in the communication domain of 6- and 12-month-olds (Imboden et al., 2021). The study further encourages studies on communication patterns, parent child relationship, care giver support and play exploration are to be done (Imboden et al., 2021).

The Irish CORAL (Impact of Corona Virus Pandemic on Allergic and Autoimmune Dysregulation in Infants Born During Lockdown) study by Byrne et al. (2022) compared the 12-month 309 pandemic babies to their historic, 1629 pracademic baseline cohort on communication behaviors like one definite meaningful word, pointing and waving. Results demonstrated a decrease in social communication skills. Subsequently in 2023, addressing the gap of using a standardized tool from the previous study they aimed

to look at 24 months old developmental and behavioral outcomes using ASQ by comparing them to their pandemic counterparts and found a significant decline in the communication domain (Byrne et al., 2023). Additional studies focused on the association between development and screen time usage. Binet et al. (2024) demonstrated in 315 children 3.5 years of age screen time was categorized as light (<1 hr/d), moderate (1-4 hr/d), or intensive (>4 hr/d) use. The intensive use shows delays in global development in 4.5 years.

#### **4.2 Counseling strategies for dealing with mental and developmental health issues**

Manning et al. (2020) validate tele-practices for remote children in their study aimed at assessing the reliability and validity of video chat as a language assessment tool comparable to in-person sessions. Both the pilot and the main study reported no significant difference in the child's language and speech measures. The study utilized parent-child play in dyads with both within and in-between subject designs.

McGrath (2020) spoke on Health literacy models that were successfully applied to adolescents in Brazil showing better health-related decision-making and physical and mental exposure. A part of the study included intervention with young children (1st to 3rd grade) where digital health literacy during the pandemic showed favourable outcomes of healthy lifestyle. Further studies on the application of the model and the need for healthcare professionals to help design effective strategies for prevention were communicated (McGrath, 2020).

Given the increased presentation of aggression and conduct-related problems, Holzman et al. (2022) assessed the effectiveness of Behavioural parent training (BPT) using telehealth of 6 brief sessions for families of children from 3-7 years of age with two caregivers participating. Each session had a unique strategy: 1) praise session – 5 praises were rewarded for 1 negative interaction where the parent would 'catch' the child's positive action and praise them for it. 2) Child-led play sessions gave 5-15 mins for caregiver to spend with their child using non-directive statements like reflections as opposed to commands. 3) the visual reminder session had visual reminders placed throughout the house, offering incentives for good behaviors. 4) active ignoring session where the caregiver did not give attention to negative behaviors which reinforced non-compliance. 5) effective communication sessions included simple mindful directions to reduce aggression causing antecedent events. And 6) time-out sessions that included appropriate behaviors like restriction from fun items for a limited time frame. . A significant decrease in their problematic behaviors and an increase in self-efficacy was noted. High engagement with 81% attendance with at least one caregiver present during the session was noted along with a decrease in inconsistent punishment and caregiver stress.

Allgaier et al. (2020) regarded the pandemic in establishing digital health intervention (DHI) for treating children and adolescents, a trend that is here to stay. In his analysis of 30 randomized controlled trials DHI, while effective for anxiety and depression had heterogenous standing in children and adolescents with ADHD which was attributed to heterogeneity in their approach from neurofeedback trainings to everyday organisation and planning skills. The results were comparable to in person traditional sessions. Author argues there is still a large amount of work to be done on the technical issues, legal framework or acute crisis management.

Gilsbach et al. (2021) advocated for the needs of special needs children and adolescents due to resource restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic as new stressors only added to their conditions. An increase in the negative symptoms of irritability and impulsivity was noted to be high in children with ADHD. The author encouraged the system to mobilize by 1) reducing interstate licensing requirements to make mental health more accessible, 2) increasing community-based care services, and addressing social determinants

of health.

## 2. Discussion

This review aims to explore the role of counseling in addressing the impact of Covid-19 on Generation Alpha post-pandemic. The following is the discussion of the key findings and their implications for and beyond this study: First, the Impact on the developmental health of children addressed in studies by Byrne et al. (2023), Imboden et al. (2021) Johnson et al. (2022) used AQS standardized questionnaire to measure developmental milestones in various comparative studies across time and population. Communication as a domain was seen to be significantly impacted by the pandemic across all studies along with the cognitive ability of problem-solving. Although no concrete reason for the results was communicated. Moreover, no differences were found in global development measures unless screen time was taken into account. While not included in the review itself, we can see the potential mental health problems that arise from intensive exposure to screen time. Hence, Future studies can focus on the potential relationship between mental health and developmental milestones of the Gen-Alpha population and the role of screen time in it. Second, the selection of studies did not come up with solitary studies on the mental impact of Gen-Alpha either due to the existence of limited studies that did not meet the criteria or bias in the selection process. There is a need for narrower studies about the impact of the pandemic on the mental health of the population of Gen-Alpha. Third, counseling strategies for the mental and developmental challenges in the Gen- Alpha can be applied by using Behavioral Health Model: An integrated care approach by Manderscheid and Ward (2024) as a framework- 1) Addressing Workforce Issue: Gilsbach et al. (2021) points to reducing interstate licensing regulation and Allgaier et al. (2020) by developing a legal framework to make mental care more accessible. 2) developing community-level intervention: McGrath's (2020) health literacy models to support positive and healthy lifestyles in young children and 3) exploring Telehealth and AI: Where AI models can work with communication and speech problems due to COVID by assessment and screening tools using video chat language use as Manning et al. (2020) in his study found it to have no significant difference with in-person session. Or use techniques from Holzman et al. (2022) study as a form of telepsychiatry which can yield enhanced results when practiced along with traditional methods.

Therefore, future studies can validate various counseling techniques and psychotherapy in a digital context, and develop studies for the vulnerable Gen-Alpha population to ensure effective integration in society as they grow up.

## 3. Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has uniquely affected Generation Alpha, impacting their developmental milestones and mental health. This study highlights the role of counseling strategies in adapting to these challenges, with a focus on digital and remote interventions using the Behavioural Health Model: An integrated Care approach as the framework.

### 6.1 Limitations of the Study

There is a limited pool of longitudinal data, more of which can provide us a wholesome perspective. Only open-access articles were used therefore there is a possibility of overlooking information. Potential bias in the selection processes the author may have failed to examine.

### 6.2 Recommendations

There is a requirement for in-depth empirical studies especially longitudinal in nature that can help plan

effective strategies for Generation Alpha. Continued integration of AI's role in enhancing counseling effectiveness while addressing ethical concerns. New policies to ensure equitable access to digital tools and mental health resources. Increased recruitment and specialized training for counsellors to address the unique needs of Generation Alpha.

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