

**IMPACT OF COVID-19 PREVENTION MEASURES
ON THE MENTAL HEALTH OF CHILDREN IN MONTENEGRO
(OBSERVED THROUGH THE EXERCISE OF THE RIGHT TO EDUCATION,
LEISURE AND VIOLENCE AGAINST / AMONG CHILDREN)**

Podgorica, August 2021

INTRODUCTION

The Institution of Ombudsman (the Protector of Human Rights and Freedoms) of Montenegro within the European Network of Ombudsmen for Children (ENOC) and with the support of UNICEF conducted a study on the impact of measures, taken in Montenegro in order to prevent the spread of COVID-19 virus, on children's mental health. The assessment of the impact (CRIA) of the adopted measures on the mental health of children was observed through the exercise of the right to education, leisure and violence against/among children.

Assuming that the Covid-19 pandemic has affected, and will continue to affect, all children worldwide, ENOC and the UNICEF Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia have agreed and committed themselves to closely monitor the situation of all children, as well as responses from local, national and European authorities during and after the completion of isolation measures, and to continue to exchange information, good practices and experiences in order to ensure the safety of children and their families and to ensure respect for children's rights under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and other relevant European and international human rights instruments.

Although the medical literature shows that children are minimally susceptible to the Covid-19 virus, they are most severely affected by the psycho-social impact of this pandemic. Quarantine in homes and institutions can impose a great psychological burden, especially on children in transitional periods of schooling when socialization is the most important part of their growth and development.

School closures, lack of outdoor activities, disturbed dietary and sleeping habits, sudden parental unemployment, and the risk of poverty are more likely to disrupt children's normal lifestyles. All of the above can potentially lead to changes in the mood of children, increased anxiety, impatience, as well as other neuropsychiatric manifestations. Although there are no official statistics to confirm this there is an increasing discussion in the public about the increased domestic violence. The domestic violence, child abuse, and online violence is also on the rise, which is a clear indicator that this topic needs special attention. The Ombudsman decided to conduct a Child Rights Impact Assessment on some of the COVID-19 related measures and assess the impact of those measures on children's mental health, due to the fact that lack of exercise of rights in different areas (health, education, family, social status/poverty, free time, etc.) respective and/or different rights all together affect the mental health and mental development of the child. In addition, the analysis of this topic and the results obtained will show the true impact of restrictive measures to help cope with the situation in the future and help decision makers to create future measures in the best interests of children, and to always keep in mind provision of timely assistance to children and young people at risk, in order to develop and strengthen resilience, and mitigate the impact of the current situation on the development and mental health of children and young people.

Mental health care is a priority today, and protecting children is our duty

Context in the country

Montenegro is a country located in Southeast Europe – in the Balkans; it has the upper middle income; it is divided into three regions: northern, central and southern and has 24 administrative units.

In the middle of 2020, there were 621,306 inhabitants in Montenegro: 307,210 men (49.45%) and 314,096 women (50.55%). The number of children (ages 0 to 17) was 134,363 or 21.6% of the total population (52.08% of boys and 47.92% of girls).

The country's population includes several major ethnic groups: Montenegrins (45%), Serbs (29%), Bosniaks (8.6%) and Albanians (4.9%).

The capital, and largest city, is Podgorica, where about 30% of the country's total population lives.

Since regaining independence in 2006, Montenegro's priority has been integration into the European Union (EU), (EU membership is considered possible after 2025) and in this regard Montenegro has strengthened its institutional, legislative and administrative capacities and has worked to align policies with the EU acquis. The country has also signed and ratified key international conventions relating to children, either directly or indirectly, including the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention) and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. As a member state of the United Nations, Montenegro is obliged to prepare a Universal Periodic Review (UPR) to be submitted to the Human Rights Council for an audit. The audits confirm that progress has been made in implementing reforms aimed at ensuring the realization of children's rights in accordance with the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

During 2018 and 2019, significant growth of gross domestic product (GDP) was achieved. However, the Covid-19 pandemic is changing the direction of these positive trends: according to the World Bank report, GDP estimates in 2020 were at a level of minus 14.9%.¹ The economy has proved to be particularly vulnerable to the impact of the pandemic due to its high dependence on the tourism sector, which accounts for over one-fifth of national income. Although estimates vary, there is an agreement that the economy is facing the deepest recession in the last two decades. The World Bank predicts a gradual return to growth during 2021, provided the tourism sector recovers during the spring and summer season. The economic recovery is further complicated by the country's fiscal deficit, which was expected to rise to approximately 11% of GDP during 2020. The public debt and public guarantees in Montenegro, which are already high due to additional indebtedness for financing infrastructure projects, could reach 104% of GDP, as it seems certain that the growing fiscal deficit will be financed by new loans.² Pressure to maintain debt at a reasonable level, and to respect the dynamics of the EU accession, will lead to pressures to limit

¹ Regular Economic Report for Europe and Central Asia 2021, World Bank Group, 2021
<https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/35273/9781464816987.pdf?sequence=4&isAllowed=y>

² Regular Economic Report for Europe and Central Asia 2021, World Bank Group, 2021
<https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/35273/9781464816987.pdf?sequence=4&isAllowed=y>

budget expenditures at a time when the needs in the areas of social protection, education, health and other areas are likely to be even greater.

During 2019, it was estimated that 24.5% of the population was at risk of poverty, i.e. 30% of the households with dependent children and 34% of children under 18 years of age.³ The official EU-SILC study uses the term “poverty risk” which in any case indicates the limited financial capacity of individuals or families compared to the rest of the society. As an example, in 2019, the “poverty risk” line for a family of four (two adults and two children under the age of 14), below which the family was considered at risk, was around EUR 395.60 per month.⁴

Similar to the largest number of countries in the world, Montenegro has reached out to declare an epidemic on its territory on two occasions, depending on the evolution of the epidemiological situation, which was monitored on daily basis. The Corona virus epidemic in Montenegro was first officially declared on March 26, 2020, and the second time on July 21, 2020. The measures taken (the system of physical and sociological restrictions) had the character of restrictions of certain human rights and freedoms due to the principles on which they have been performed and in accordance with international legal standards that prescribe them.⁵

The following human rights restrictions sought to limit social contacts, but also other contacts such as family contacts, communication between close relatives, relationships between children and parents with whom they do not live, contact with people who are in any way dependent on communication with relatives and other persons close to each other (households with elderly, sick and bedridden persons, guardians and persons who support or care for such persons), the status of persons deprived of liberty in relation to contact with the family, especially children. In addition, the measures related to the interruption of communication due to the ban on leaving the place of residence, partial blockade of borders, ban on movement at a certain time, ban on commercial activities, primarily provision of services, ban on communication between local communities that constituted a unique living and working space. This referred to the situations when local communication is necessary because of the owners of real estate, when they had agricultural properties and the other kinds of property in another place; also for employees who live in one area and exercise the right to work in another municipality; when the accompanying infrastructure is not provided in the place of residence (post office, bank, etc.). Also, the measures resorted to are the restrictions, i.e. prohibition of public gatherings, please note that the measure of prohibition is not allowed by the Constitution, i.e. it cannot be imposed by an act of lesser legal force such as law, rulebook or order, and therefore such acts of law could not derogate these rights. In addition, the question that was raised is the one of the proportionality of certain measures in terms of the goal that was planned to be achieved, which is the protection of health as a public interest.⁶ Detailed information provided during the pandemic can be found in the LEGAL FRAMEWORK section.

Of course, all the adopted measures had a multifaceted impact on the exercising of children's rights: suspension of the regular educational process in schools and the transition to online

³ Statistical Office of Montenegro (MONSTAT), Press release no. 205, December 7, 2020

⁴ Press release Survey on income_and_conditions of life_EU-SILC_2019.pdf (monstat.org)

⁵ https://www.ombudsman.co.me/docs/1619074992_izvjestaj_01042021.pdf

⁶ https://www.ombudsman.co.me/docs/1619074992_izvjestaj_01042021.pdf

teaching, ban on providing services within day care centres for children with disabilities, ban on movement of children living in institutions, poor accessibility to social and child care services as well as the availability of health care. Some measures were contradictory and illogical from the point of view of exercising the rights of the child. During 2020, the Ombudsman has worked on the cases related to the exercise of children's rights in a pandemic and the validity of measures taken by state authorities.⁷

CRIA OBJECTIVES

The Institution of Ombudsman of Montenegro conducted the CRIA in order to strengthen the overall Montenegrin system in creating policies that directly and/or indirectly affect respect for children's rights, based on lessons learned from the previous period, with special reference to children's mental health during pandemics.

In addition, this research sought to influence decision-makers and competent authorities, when creating measures, to keep in mind the focus on the impact of the exercising of children's rights, without losing sight of the impact on their mental health.

Also, the Ombudsman believes that the results of this analysis, pointing out the shortcomings in the work so far, and the recommendations that are given, will affect the improvement of support for children and families through the strengthening of specialized services and the improvement of systems in this area.

SCOPE

The scope of the impact assessment of restrictive measures adopted to combat the spread of Covid 19 (CRIA) viruses in order to achieve the set objectives is as follows:

Restrictive measures to which CRIA applied are specifically listed in the LEGAL ANALYSIS section, and they include all those measures that directly and / or indirectly affected children's daily lives, organization of days and lives, children's feelings and mental health and certainly the exercise of guaranteed rights. Although the adopted measures, each individually and all together, affected the child, the measures that directly related to:

- Restriction of movement (quarantine, lock down);
- Obligation of social distance;
- Transition to online teaching and suspension of educational institutions (schools, kindergartens, resource centers, etc.);
- Prohibition of recreational centers and prohibition of sports activities and group activities in general;
- No personal contact between the child and the parent with whom the child does not live in the community (ban on contact - except with members of their household, ban on inter-local traffic, ban on contact with children who are in collective accommodation, etc.);

⁷ https://www.ombudsman.co.me/docs/1619074992_izvjestaj_01042021.pdf

- Restrictive measures for children living in collective accommodation (Public Institution Children's Home "Mladost" – for children without parental care).

Territorially, CRIA includes an analysis of the feelings of children from all over Montenegro, which was attempted by collecting data from children from different cities (north, south, central region). Although the responses of children or their parents were not collected from each town / village, the collected results were assessed as relevant given that there is coverage of different territorial areas of our country. Each region has its own specifics which are reflected in the differences in development, socio-economic strength of families as well as the availability of certain services, which was especially considered in the analysis of the obtained results. .

The Impact Assessment of Restrictive Measures (CRIA) was analyzed separately in relation to the exercise of guaranteed rights, namely: the right to education, the right to leisure, protection from violence. The analysis also included the basic principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child: the right to life, the best interests of the child, children's participation in decision-making - participation and non-discrimination. .

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

Following the harmonized methodology within the ENOC and UNICEF, the Ombudsman decided to directly analyse the impact of measures taken by the state (within the suppression of the spread of the Covid-19 virus pandemic) on the mental health of children in Montenegro by analysing the impact on their feelings and various segments of the child's life and growing up (education, family, social status, violence, free time, etc.). The process of developing the methodology and final conclusions of the report also went through the standard procedure of the UNICEF Ethics Committee.

The subjects of the analysis were the attitudes and opinions of children and professionals (pedagogues, educators, social workers, teachers, etc.) who work directly with children.

The analysis was conducted by using different methodological techniques, namely: online questionnaire, focus groups and individual interviews.

Within this analysis, the Ombudsman paid special attention to the analysis of the normative framework in relation to the entry into force of various restrictive measures through their impact on the exercise of certain rights of the child, taking into account the dynamics of measures, their restrictive power and coverage of children. The impact of those measures on the realization of the rights of children of vulnerable categories was analysed separately.

Given the complex epidemiological situation caused by Covid-19, the safest method of data collection was chosen. It limited contact and did not put respondents in a situation to get infected – the survey was done with CAWI (Computer Assisted Web Interviewing) technique.

The quantitative research included three groups of children:

1. Children attending the first and second grade of primary school (6-7 years old), as a group that entered the education system during the Covid-19 pandemic (the questionnaire for this category was filled in by the children's parents, taking into account that children of that age do not have the capacity to complete it themselves given the complexity of the topic and the fact that first graders in particular still do not know how to write and read);
2. Children attending 8th and 9th grade of primary school (13-14 years old), as a group transitioning to secondary school during the Covid-19 pandemic;
3. Children attending 3rd and 4th grade (17-18 years old) of high school, as a group in transition from high school to higher education.

Primary and secondary schools from all regions of Montenegro are involved in creating the sample. For primary schools, 9 schools from the north are included, 18 schools from the centre, as well as 8 schools from the south. When it comes to high schools, 8 schools from the north, 13 schools from the centre, as well as 4 schools from the south were included.

The research included 1658 responses of parents for the first group (846 parents of girls, 812 parents of boys of this age), i.e. responses of parents of children of 1st and 2nd grade, 826 responses of students of 8th and 9th grade from primary schools (424 girls, 402 boys) , and 455 responses of students of 3rd and 4th grade from secondary schools (269 girls, 186 boys).

The qualitative research included vulnerable categories of children, as follows:

1. Children with disabilities and
2. Children without parental care.

The experiences of children with disabilities were recorded by conducting focus groups with their parents. A total of 6 focus groups with parents/guardians were conducted in different cities of Montenegro, in which a total of 52 parents/guardians participated (24 parents of boys with developmental disabilities, 28 parents of girls with developmental disabilities). To examine the impact of measures on the position and feelings of children with disabilities, we decided to work in this way, due to insufficient capacity to organize adequate, professional and safe direct communication with children.

Experiences of children without parental care were recorded by conducting 5 focus groups. Children without parental care in Montenegro are placed in the only institution of this type – Public Institution Children's Home "Mladost". Having in mind the fact that this is a collective accommodation of this inherently vulnerable category of children, we considered it very important to assess how they experienced the impact of restrictive measures. Focus groups with this category of children were organized in relation to their age, and the manner of work was adjusted to their psycho-physical maturity. Within this institution, a focus group was conducted with educators and professionals who directly work and spend time with children without parental care. This activity includes a total of 57 children and 12 educators/professional associates.

Age structure of children, focus groups – Children’s home “Mladost”

6-7 years old – 11 children	13-14 years old – 25 children	17-18 years old -21 children
6 boys	10 boys	12 boys
5 girls	15 girls	9 girls

The research also included answers, experiences and observations of experts who work directly with children from educational, and social and child protection institutions (psychological and pedagogical services, teachers, educators, social workers, teachers for children with disabilities, therapists, etc.), a total of 24. The data and experiences were collected according to the respective categories: general population, children with disabilities and children without parental care, and those data and experiences were used in defining conclusions and making recommendations.

The Ombudsman has specially collected the answers/attitudes/opinions/experiences of the children, members of the Network of Golden Advisors of Ombudsman. The Ombudsman's Golden Advisors are directly involved in the work of the Ombudsman's institution by giving proposals, suggestions and opinions on matters that directly affect the children in Montenegro. They represent the "voice of the child" that the Ombudsman needs when he is implementing activities to promote, protect, and improve the rights of the child. Members of the Network are always involved in the processes of enacting laws, regulations, strategies, action plans and other acts related to children and certainly always participate in the process of research of any topic related to children. Their participation in this research is reflected in the use of their attitudes and experiences in defining conclusions and recommendations.

Qualitative research was conducted by a specialized research agency.⁸

Focus groups and individual interviews were conducted by professionals with many years of experience in working with children from different categories, who have special knowledge in the field of children's rights.

The challenges in implementing CRIA were reflected in organizational difficulties because of the limiting measures and avoiding contact with a larger number of people indoors. Focus groups gathered in small numbers of participants or were conducted online. In addition, we note that children attending high school responded to the online questionnaire in smaller numbers, which we justify by the fact that high school graduates were at the very end of the school year and it was harder to reach them.

LEGAL FRAMEWORK

Domestic regulations:

The Law on Protection of the Population from Infectious Diseases is in force in Montenegro, and it stipulates the protection of the population from infectious diseases, measures for their

⁸ <http://www.defacto.me/portfolio/index.html>

prevention, suppression and eradication, implementation of epidemiological surveillance, competent entities for their implementation, manner of providing funds for their implementation, supervision over the implementation of this law, as well as other issues of importance for protection of the population from infectious diseases.

This law, inter alia, stipulates what is a house isolation (accommodation of infected persons who have mild symptoms of the disease during the period of contagion and persons suspected of suffering from contagious disease in family accommodation, in order to prevent the introduction of contagious diseases into the country; suppression and prevention of transmission to other countries, as well as protection of the population from infectious diseases in accordance with epidemiological indications), which facilities are under sanitary supervision and include, inter alia, facilities in which educational activities are performed and collective accommodation of children is organized; public transportation facilities; cultural, physical culture, sports and recreation facilities;

The law further stipulates that the following bodies participate in the provision and implementation of protection of the population from infectious diseases: state administration bodies and local administration bodies; health care institutions and other legal entities that provide health care services in accordance with a special law; health workers and health associates; health insurance organizations; educational, sports and other institutions and organizations in which service activities are performed; legal entities and entrepreneurs; humanitarian, religious and other organizations, communities and associations and citizens.

Protection of the population from infectious diseases is carried out by implementing general, special, extraordinary and other measures in accordance with this law.

The law defines the state of emergency, as well as the following measures to be implemented in that case:

- 1) rapid epidemiological assessment in order to urgently take immediate measures to protect the population;
- 2) organizing, planning and ensuring the implementation of measures for the prevention and control of infectious diseases;
- 3) epidemiological surveillance in an emergency situation, by introducing an early warning system;
- 4) transportation, isolation and quarantine if there is an indication;
- 5) activation of the emergency communication system;
- 6) mandatory participation of health care institutions, legal entities, entrepreneurs and citizens in the suppression of risks to public health and the use of certain facilities, equipment and means of transportation to prevent and suppress the transmission of infectious diseases, based on the order of the Ministry.

Epidemiological surveillance shall be carried out as long as there are the reasons specified in paragraph 1 of this Article.

Epidemiological surveillance in an emergency situation and it is organized and conducted by the competent health institutions and the Institute of Public Health, in cooperation with the Ministry.

The implementation of emergency measures is carried out in accordance with the law governing protection and rescue and in accordance with this law. (Art. 53)

The Ministry, at the proposal of the Institute may order:

- 1) restriction of gatherings in public places;
- 2) restriction of population movement in the area affected by the emergency situation;
- 3) travel ban or restriction;
- 4) prohibition or restriction of trade in certain types of goods and products;
- 5) emergency vaccination; and
- 6) other measures, according to epidemiological indications.

The measures referred to in paragraph 1 of this Article shall last until the danger ceases.

In order to prevent the introduction of infectious diseases into the country, to suppress and prevent the transmission to other countries, the Ministry, at the proposal of the Institute, may order measures to protect the population from infectious diseases, including:

- a ban on travel to a country where there is an epidemic of a contagious disease;
- travel conditions for persons traveling to or coming from infected areas;
- prohibition or restriction of movement of the population in the area affected by a certain contagious disease, i.e. epidemic of that contagious disease;

The Ministry may also order: mandatory adherence to the prescribed measure of physical distance between persons, during a stay in an open public place (except for members of a joint family household), as well as during a stay in facilities under sanitary supervision; mandatory use of prescribed personal protective equipment of employees (masks, gloves, visor face shields, etc.), as follows:

- in facilities under sanitary supervision; in facilities where trade is carried out, including markets; in facilities where catering is provided, where tourist, craft and other services to citizens are provided; where games of chance are organized, and where food businesses perform their activities in accordance with the law.

Further, it may order:

- restriction of gathering of the population in closed and open public places;
- implementation of emergency vaccination; and other measures according to epidemiological indications.

The measures may last as long as there is a danger of introducing a contagious disease into the country, i.e. of spreading the contagious disease due to which the measures were introduced. The orders are published in the "Official Gazette of Montenegro".

The General Law on Education of Montenegro prescribes:

Educational work in the institution can be interrupted only in especially justified cases (epidemic, natural disaster, etc.)

In order to terminate the work of the institution in the event of an epidemic, it is necessary to obtain the opinion of the competent health institution.

The decision on the termination of educational work in the cases referred to in paragraph 1 of this Article, lasting up to five days, is made by the director of the institution, and over five days by the Ministry, and for a private institution by the founder, according to the mentioned regulations.

The Ministry of Health has issued a large number of orders to take temporary measures to prevent the introduction into the country, to suppress and prevent the transmission of the new Corona virus.

Several issued orders were related to children (movement, education, free time, play) that to a greater or lesser extent affected children and their daily lives.

Also, orders were issued that referred only to citizens in certain municipalities, depending on the number of patients, which lasted for a certain period.

In the text that follows, the restrictive measures are listed according to the different categories to which they applied:

- **COVID-19 related measures having an impact on the rights of children of primary and secondary school age:**

Restriction of movement – It was forbidden to leave residential buildings at certain times of the day, and there was the ban on staying in open public space, in the period from 5am to 7pm, for children under 12 years of age, without the presence of one parent/guardian or adult. Later, the measure was changed in relation to children with autism spectrum disorders and people who use wheelchairs, accompanied by one person they were allowed to stay in a public area for 60 minutes a day. In November 2020, an exception was provided for students returning from school to the residential building, based on a certificate issued by the educational institution.

Termination of school - in March 2021, an order from which Ministry of health was issued to terminate educational work in public and private educational institutions. After two weeks, schools switched to the online model (via TV channels as well as mobile applications).

Postponement of the beginning of the school year 2020/2021 - At the proposal of the Institute of Public Health of Montenegro, the Ministry of Education postponed the beginning of the school year 2020/2021 for a month, i.e. for October 1, 2020.

Online teaching ("Learn at home" application, "Viber", Microsoft teams, etc.) - In the first half of the 2020/2021 school year, educational institutions, in accordance with the instructions of the Ministry of Education, organized classes in such way that some students attended school (younger students up to 6th grade of primary school and students of 1st grade of secondary school) while others had online teaching. **Please note that online teaching, as such, is not defined by any positive legal regulation.**

In the second semester, the Ministry of Education left to schools to make their own syllabus depending on the number of students and available classrooms, bearing in mind that a maximum of 17 students could be present in one classroom.

Division of classes into groups - in some, mostly larger city schools, children took turns for a week (while some attended classes at school, others were on online platforms that week). Students with special educational needs were allowed to attend classes at school every week, in groups from their class.

Prohibition of school excursions – The orders for a longer period prescribed a ban on organizing all school and student excursions, picnics, educational gatherings, etc. abroad. Later the organization of student excursions in Montenegro was allowed for a maximum of 100 students.

Free time - introduced measure was a ban on group training, as well as organizing entertainment and recreational activities for children and adults in open public places (amusement park, panoramic wheel, etc.), except for professional athletes in compliance with the prescribed measures.

Wearing protective masks - an obligation of wearing protective mask on the face, that covers the nose and mouth, has been introduced and it included children older than five years.

- **Measures that applied also to parents**

Paid leave – due to the interruption of classes and the transition to online classes for the 2019/2020 school year:

One of the parents/guardians/foster parents/adoptive parents or a single parent of a child not older than 11 years of age was entitled to paid leave from work, except for employees in certain activities (health, defence, police, etc.), which was valid for a certain period, and this measure was adopted again later in the new school year upon the recommendation of the Ombudsman.

- **Personal relationships between children and parents with whom they do not live**

As the ban on intercity passenger transportation was valid at some point, in the period from Friday from 10pm to Monday at 5am, it was reflected in the maintenance of personal relations between children and parents with whom they do not live. Only as exceptions to the ban on intercity passenger transportation, the following was introduced: transportation of parents and children for the purpose of maintaining personal relations with a parent with whom they do not live, in accordance with a court decision or a decision of the competent centre for social work.

- **Children without parental care placed in the Public Institution "Mladost" home for children, Bijela**

Education – For children without parental care who are placed in the Public Institution "Mladost" Children's Home (social and child protection institution) when it comes to education, the general measures described in the section for children of preschool age, primary and secondary education applied.

Restriction of movement and making contacts – The ban on visiting and leaving institutions has been introduced in this, as well as in other institutions of social and child protection. After more

than a year, by order of May 7, 2021, the visits to the persons accommodated in these institutions, could be organized in accordance with the recommendations of the Institute;

Also, the measure of restriction of movement was valid for the users of this institution, who were not allowed to leave the facility at all for a longer time period, and this measure significantly affected them (more information in the Children without Parental Care section).

Prohibition of school excursions – In a longer period a ban on organizing all school and student excursions, picnics, educational gatherings, etc. was imposed.

Free time – When it comes to this right, the children without parental care, who were in a social and child protection institution, had been in a disadvantaged position compared to the general population. Namely, the change - the easing of measures did not apply to these children, they still had to adhere to the measures that were valid for the institutions of collective accommodation.

It should be mentioned that various other measures, which did not directly affect the children but certainly had an indirect impact on the exercise of their rights, were adopted. For example by the Order of the Government, a number of measures restricting business activities, starting from a complete ban on work to part-time work were introduced, so in one period many activities (taxi carriers, catering facilities, craft shops, etc.) therefore these families, whose parents were unable to work, were at greater risk of poverty.

Here you could explain which measures you decided to focus on and for which reasons.

Regulatory assessment:

It was noticed that the measures that affected the citizens to the greatest extent were restrictions of movement at certain times of the day, the ban on intercity passenger transportation, the ban on staying in public areas of more than 2 or 4 people, etc.

It is important to note that the measure of curfew, as an exception, provided for persons taking the pets out, they were able to stay in a public area for a maximum of 60 minutes, while children with autism spectrum who needed to stay outdoors were not allowed, but this was corrected later.

Also, the original measures prohibited the stay of children under 12 years of age in the open public space, from 5am to 7pm, without the presence of one parent, guardian, adoptive parent, foster parent or other adult member of the family household, with the obligation to adhere to the prescribed distance measures from other persons of at least two meters, and this measure affected most the children who live in apartments and who in that period were not "allowed" to go alone even to the store.

It was noted that measures that apply exclusively to children as a vulnerable category are rare. Some were adopted only after the reaction of the Ombudsman. Thus, the Order on Paid Leave - after the declaration of the epidemic for the second time, and the postponement of the school year, was passed only in late October 2020. This Order also enabled the parents of children with disabilities, i.e. children with special educational needs, to have the right to a paid leave (even if the child was older than 11 years).

This provision is important for parents of children with disabilities, because these children need support during online classes, bearing in mind that teaching assistants could not go to housing facilities.

It was noticed that in our educational system, teaching was very diverse, and that there was no uniform model for everyone. It was left to educational institutions to organize themselves depending on the conditions in the given environment and the number of students, and they made plans accordingly. Therefore, there were different models of teaching depending on the age of the children, while exercises and practical classes were held in schools or with employers. Consultations and knowledge tests were conducted in schools.

Students with special educational needs had the opportunity to attend classes every week at school, in groups from their class.

Measures for health protection in schools were prescribed, and, inter alia, classes lasted 30 minutes; wearing protective masks was mandatory for all employees and students, except for pre-schoolers.

The conditions for online teaching for class transitions, shifts and schools were also prescribed.⁹

Children with disabilities who are users of day care centres were in a situation where they could not use the day care service in day care centres, as they suspended their work with users for a period, and later, they started working adhering to the recommendations of the Institute of Public Health.

The fact is that, in accordance with the issued orders, and with the aim to prevent the transmission of the virus, gathering in the housing facilities of persons who are not members of the family household was forbidden. This measure may have caused confusion in some cases, given that children move between their families when maintaining personal relationships, therefore, this measure could not apply to contacts of children and parents (unless they were in self-isolation).

RESEARCH RESULTS Childhood is an important period in the development of personality and character. Researches in the field of child development show that the basis of good mental health is formed early in life. Mental health includes, above all, the proper psychophysical development of children, of their potentials and possibilities, strengthening of their personality and endurance, resistance to stress and taking on other and new roles that await them in their personal life and in building of society. Risks or problems, which lead to mental health disorders, are becoming more

⁹ <http://www.covid19.edu.me/> “If more than 30% of students from one class is infected or if the teacher is infected and it is not possible to find an adequate replacement. The transition of shift to online teaching: If in most of the classes of that shift more than 20% is infected, or if more than 15% of teachers from that shift is infected, and it is not possible to find an adequate replacement. School transition to online teaching: School transition to online teaching: If more than 20% of students in all the shifts are infected or more than 15% of teachers in both shifts are infected and it is not possible to provide an adequate replacement. Furthermore, if the transition to online teaching is required because of the measures due to deterioration of the epidemiological situation in the municipality or on the entire territory of Montenegro.”

numerous today, in the conditions of the modern way of life and are determined by the difficulties and problems of the development of modern society, in all its aspects.

In the professional literature, the most frequently mentioned problems that occur in children are: emotional difficulties, mood disorders, adjustment, behavioral disorders, problems with mastering school materials or lack of motivation to learn, conflicts with parents, peer violence, domestic violence, emotional ties, stress, that there is a standstill in everything that is done with the absence or decline of motivation, the tendency to experiment with addictive substances that begins with smoking cigarettes and consuming alcohol. This problem is accompanied by various forms of suffering, anxiety and depressive reactions, a decline in self-respect and self-esteem and the collapse of mental health, and often falls into situations from which there is no easy and quick way out and quick recovery.¹⁰

We assessed the impact of the Covid-19 related measures on the mental health of children in Montenegro by analysing: children's feelings, the educational process, free time, and we paid particular attention to violence.

I THE FEELINGS OF CHILDREN DURING THE PANDEMIC

Restrictive measures

The Law on Protection of the Population from Infectious Diseases stipulates what is a house isolation (accommodation of infected persons who have mild symptoms of the disease during the period of contagion and persons suspected of suffering from contagious disease in family accommodation, in order to prevent the introduction of contagious diseases into the country; suppression and prevention of transmission to other countries, as well as protection of the population from infectious diseases in accordance with epidemiological indications), which facilities are under sanitary supervision and include, inter alia, facilities in which educational activities are performed and collective accommodation of children is organized; public transportation facilities; cultural, physical culture, sports and recreation facilities;

The Ministry, at the proposal of the Institute may order:

- 1) restriction of gatherings in public places;
- 2) restriction of population movement in the area affected by the emergency situation;
- 3) travel ban or restriction;
- 4) prohibition or restriction of trade in certain types of goods and products;
- 5) emergency vaccination; and
- 6) other measures, according to epidemiological indications.

¹⁰ <https://www.ombudsman.co.me/img-publications/25/mentalno-zdravlje-2018-1010.pdf>

The measures referred to in paragraph 1 of this Article shall last until the danger ceases.

Further, it may order:

- restriction of gathering of the population in closed and open public places;
- implementation of emergency vaccination; and other measures according to epidemiological indications.

The measures may last as long as there is a danger of introducing a contagious disease into the country, i.e. of spreading the contagious disease due to which the measures were introduced. The orders are published in the "Official Gazette of Montenegro".

Restriction of movement – It was forbidden to leave residential buildings at certain times of the day, and there was the ban on staying in open public space, in the period from 5am to 7pm, for children under 12 years of age, without the presence of one parent/guardian or adult. Later, the measure was changed in relation to children with autism spectrum disorders and people who use wheelchairs, accompanied by one person they were allowed to stay in a public area for 60 minutes a day. In November 2020, an exception was provided for students returning from school to the residential building, based on a certificate issued by the educational institution.

Wearing protective masks - an obligation of wearing protective mask on the face, that covers the nose and mouth, has been introduced and it included children older than five years.

Personal relationships between children and parents with whom they do not live

As the ban on intercity passenger transportation was valid at some point, in the period from Friday from 10pm to Monday at 5am, it was reflected in the maintenance of personal relations between children and parents with whom they do not live. Only as exceptions to the ban on intercity passenger transportation, the following was introduced: transportation of parents and children for the purpose of maintaining personal relations with a parent with whom they do not live, in accordance with a court decision or a decision of the competent centre for social work.

In the situation of a pandemic, restrictive measures adopted to prevent and control the virus affected the physical health, caused changes in the physical functioning, and it also caused consequences for the mental health of the children. The changed way of living, as a consequence of the measures that were adopted and the presence of the virus, also affected the feelings, thoughts, and the body. The developmental tasks that are in front of the child are different depending on the age; the support systems are different, so that, for example, restriction of movement, prohibition of gathering will not affect the adolescent and the 6-year-old child in the same way. The period of adolescence is in itself a period of turbulent changes, and some of the measures adopted did not support their development. Interruption of the educational process, ban on gatherings, sports activities, closing of promenades, outdoor playgrounds, parks, beaches, etc.

denied children important support systems - socializing with peers, while children just starting school were denied constant direct contact with the teacher due to frequent transitions to distance learning and masks and distance while they were in school.

- **Children of 1st and 2nd grade of primary school**

The feelings of children attending the first and second grade of primary school, as a group that entered the education system during the Covid-19 pandemic, were examined through questionnaires filled out by children's parents, taking into account that children at that age do not have the capacity to complete it.

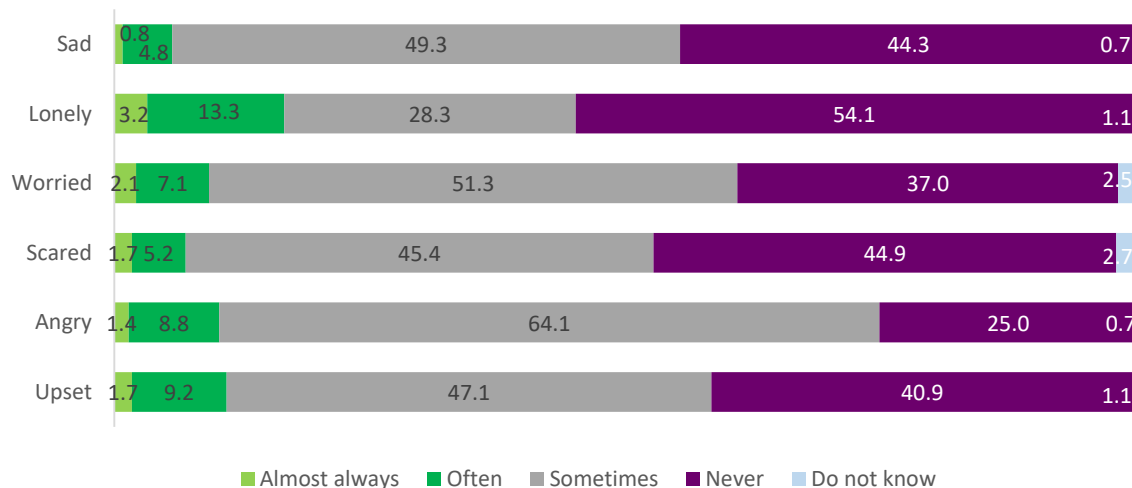
Areas of our interest were divided into four segments, namely: the child's feelings, the child's socializing with peers, the child's mood and behaviour, and the organization of teaching and learning.

When it comes to demographics of parents who responded to the questionnaire, 90.3% of the responses were received from mothers. 26.4% of them are from the northern region, 54.6% from the central region, and 19.0% from the south. The children of 53.7% of parents went to the first grade, while 46.3% of them went to the second grade of primary school.

In order to have the insight into feelings/moods that children have experienced since the beginning of the pandemic and their changed school life, we presented parents with a series of statements where it was necessary to determine the extent to which their child actually felt that way, or experienced certain feelings.

Table No.1 - feelings of the child (according to their parents)

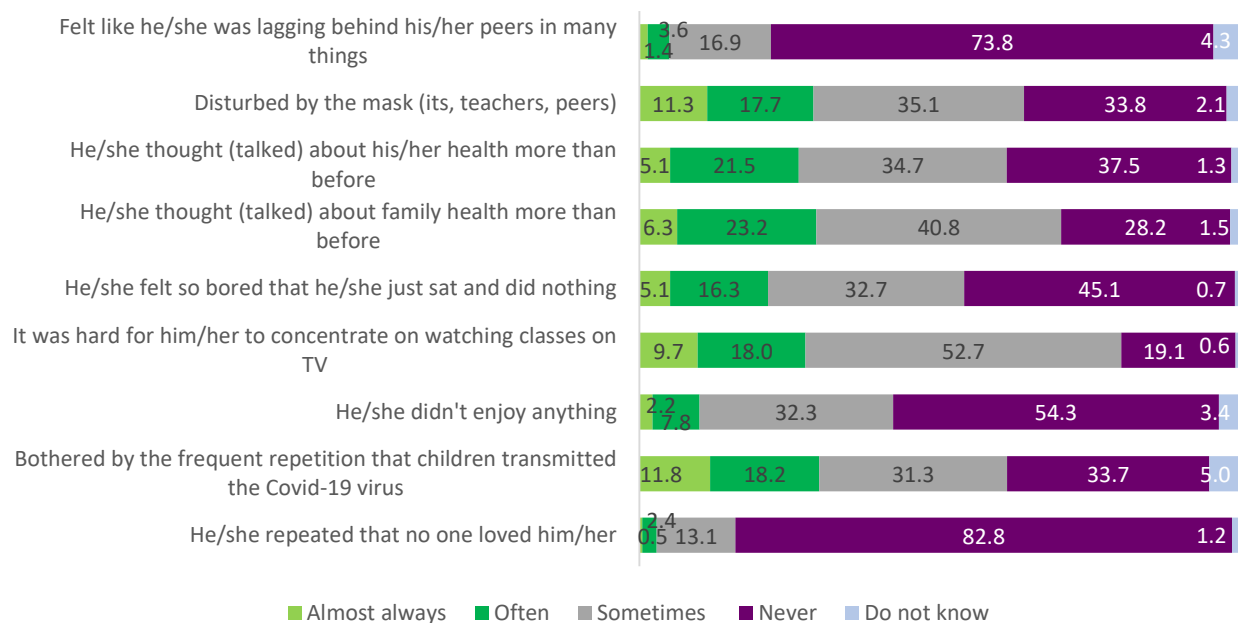
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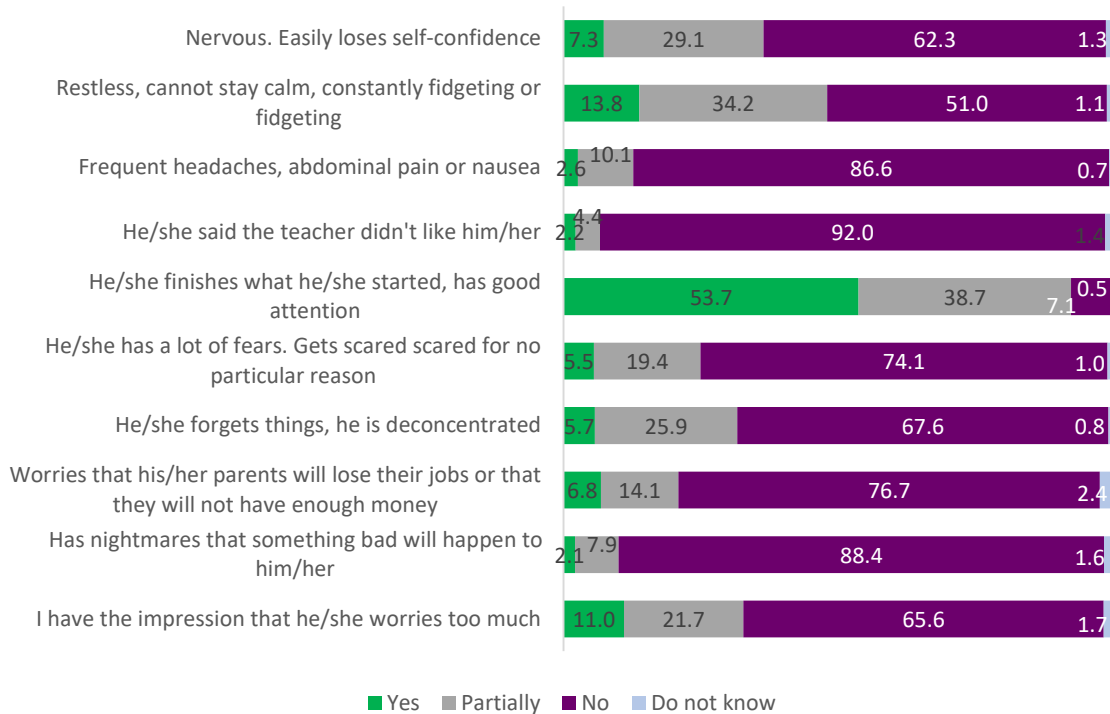
As for the feelings/moods during the pandemic, the largest percentage of parents recognized that their children were sometimes sad, worried, upset, and angry. A slightly higher percentage of parents recognized loneliness in their children - 44.8% of parents stated that children almost always, often, sometimes felt lonely.

Table No.2 - mood of the child (according to their parents):



Every third parent (30%) mentioned that they occasionally notice nervousness, loss of self-confidence, lack of concentration, poor attention in their child and also inability to finish the commitments they have started. One in five parents (20%) occasionally recognized their children's fears, concerns that their parents would lose their jobs and that they would not have enough money. Children almost always and often talked about their health, more than before (26.6%) while 29.5% of parents noticed that children almost always and often care about the health of other household members.

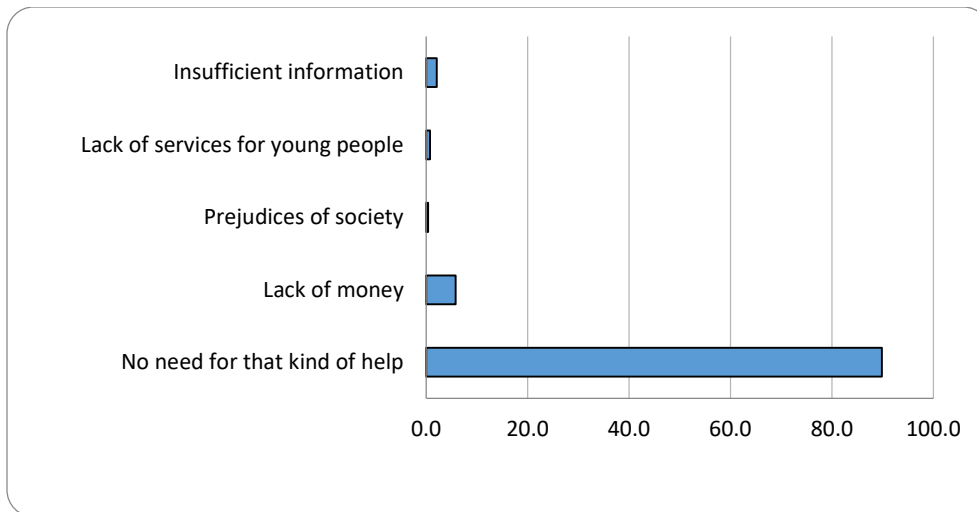
Table No.3 - feelings / mood of the child:



Based on the obtained answers, it was noticed that parents often recognized the appearance of certain behaviours and feelings that may belong to the spectrum of reactions to traumatic experience (psychosomatics, fears, loss of interest, feelings of loneliness, etc.). Occasional reactions and feelings of sadness, worry, and anxiety are expected and correspond to the crisis situation.

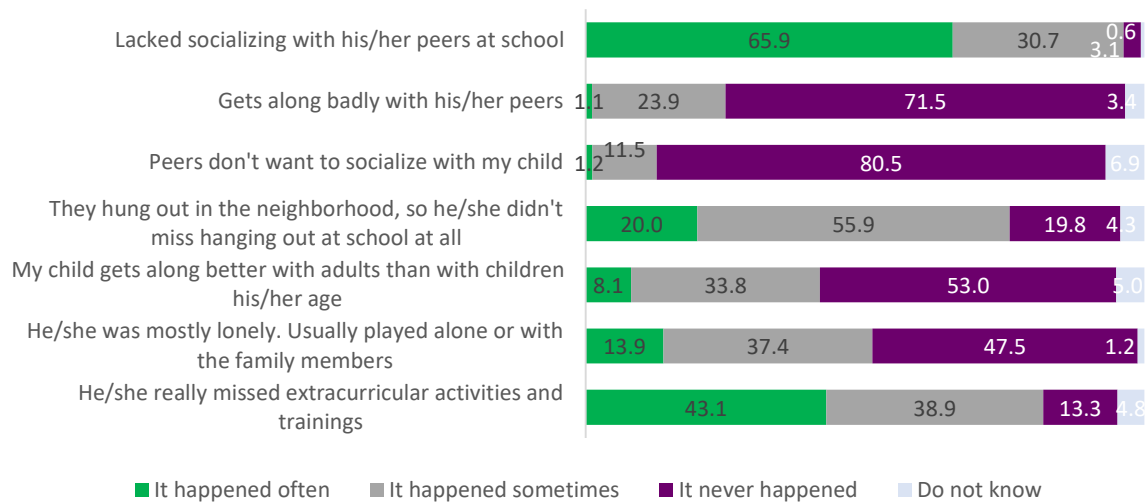
The parents did not seek professional help neither for themselves nor for their children and as a reason (89.9% of them) stated that there was no need, and 5.8% of parents stated that the reason was the lack of money.

Table No.4 - professional help and support:



The lifestyle of the entire population, especially children, has been greatly changed when the pandemic emerged. The children have undergone quite a number of changes, from moving complete classes to homes, to limited movement and the inability to socialize with peers. Socialization has been identified as very important for the growth of children, especially children who have just started school, and many children have spent the first two years of their schooling in unusual conditions without too much contact with their peers.

Table No.5 - socializing with the peers:



More than half of the parents (65.9%) stated that their children greatly missed spending time with their peers at school, while a third of the parents (30.7%) stated that this sometimes happened. However, every fifth parent stated that their children hung out in the neighbourhood with their peers and did not miss hanging out at school at all. Bearing in mind the fact that these are children who are at the beginning of school (I and II grade of primary school)

When it comes to extracurricular activities, clubs and trainings, 43.1% of parents assessed that their children often missed them very much, while 38.9% of them stated that this sometimes happened. It is noted that children from the central region missed such activities more, and which may indicate the offer of contents intended for children, depending on the region in which they live.

Further, 13.9% of parents stated that their child was predominantly lonely and played on their own or with family members, while many of them rated that their child often got along better with adults than with children of their own age.

As regards peer relationships, the results are relatively positive. When it comes to the statement that their children get along badly with their peers, only 1.1% of parents assessed that this happens often.

Further, 80.5% of parents rated that it never happens that peers don't want to hang out with their child, and only 1.2% of parents rated that it happens often.

- **Children in the final grades of primary school (8th and 9th) and the final grades of secondary schools (3rd and 4th)**

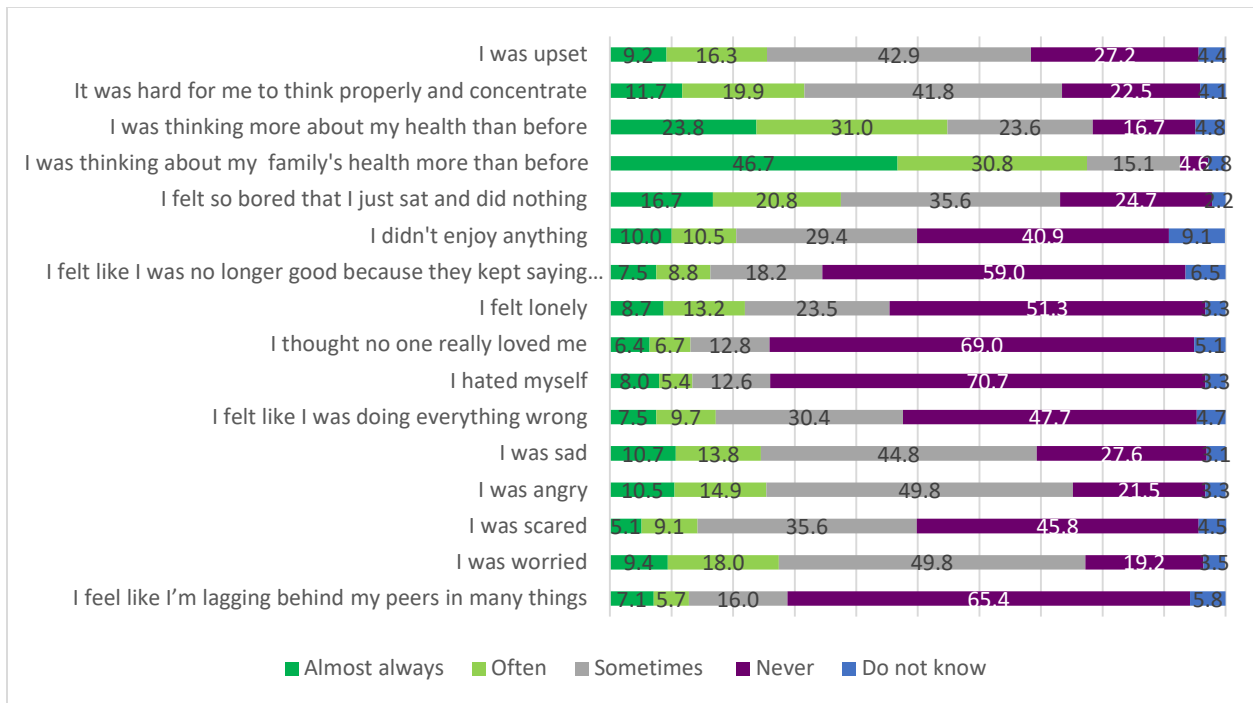
The presence of the virus and the measures taken to stop the spread of the virus are the source of stress for many people. How a child will react to a stressful event depends on a number of factors: the child's age, the child's characteristics, the support of the family and the environment in which the child lives/grows up, the event that causes stress, etc.

When it comes to demographics of children that responded to the questionnaire, it is interesting that there were more responses from girls compared to boys (60% of girls in the final grades of primary school and 63.7% of girls in the final grades of secondary school). Also, the questionnaire was mostly answered by children from the central region (57%), while about 25% of children were from the north, and 57% from the centre and 17% were from the south of the country.

Respondents were asked to rate the extent to which they felt or behaved in a particular way in the previous period.

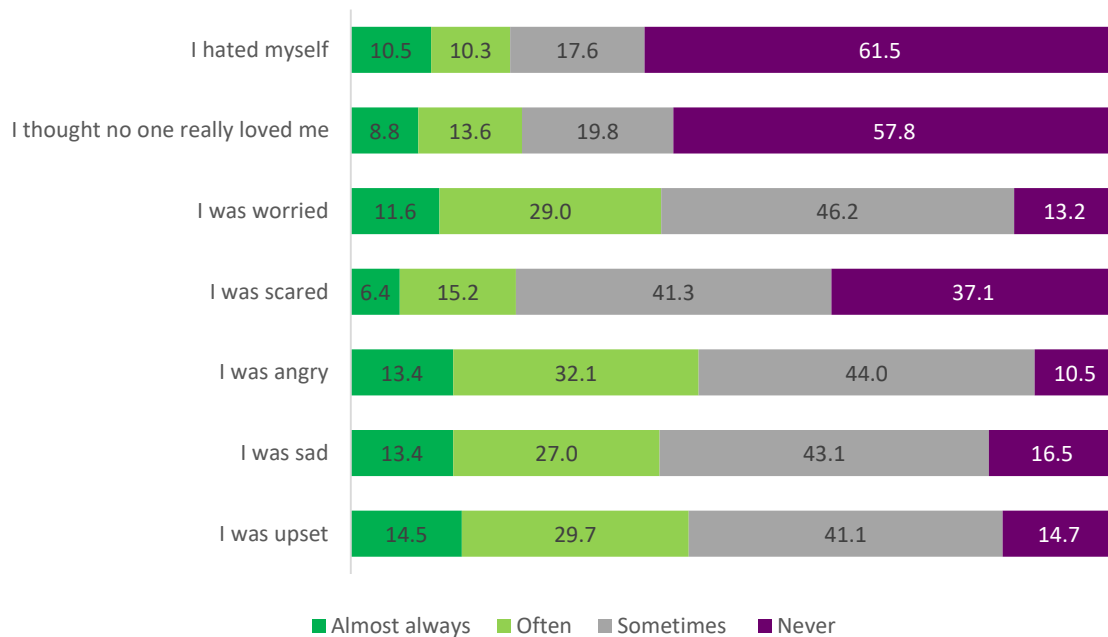
Children of 8th and 9th grades of primary school

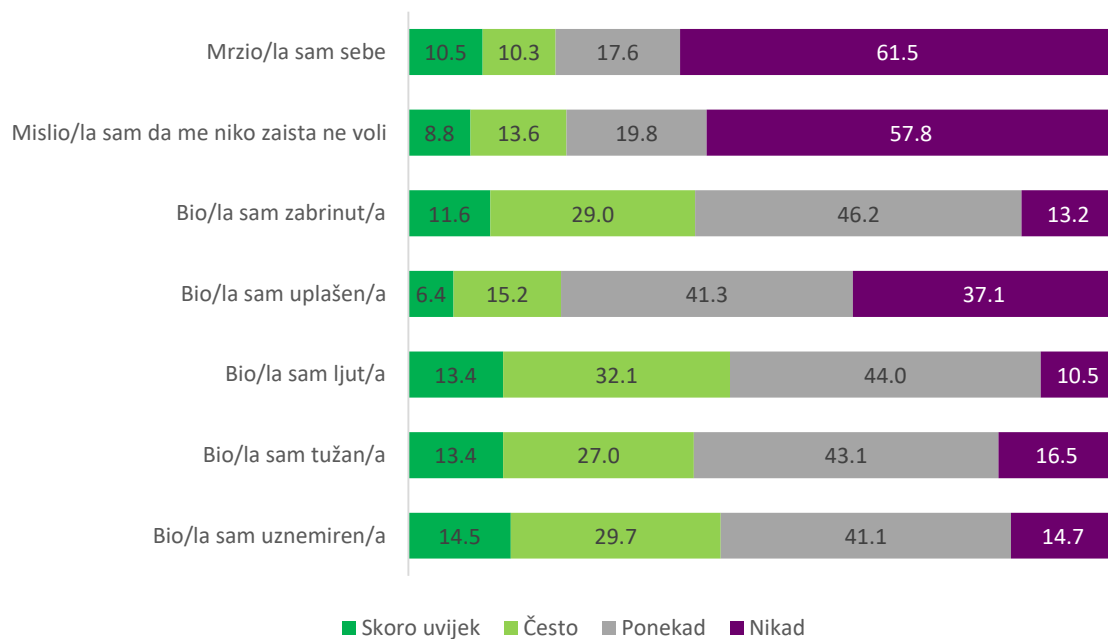
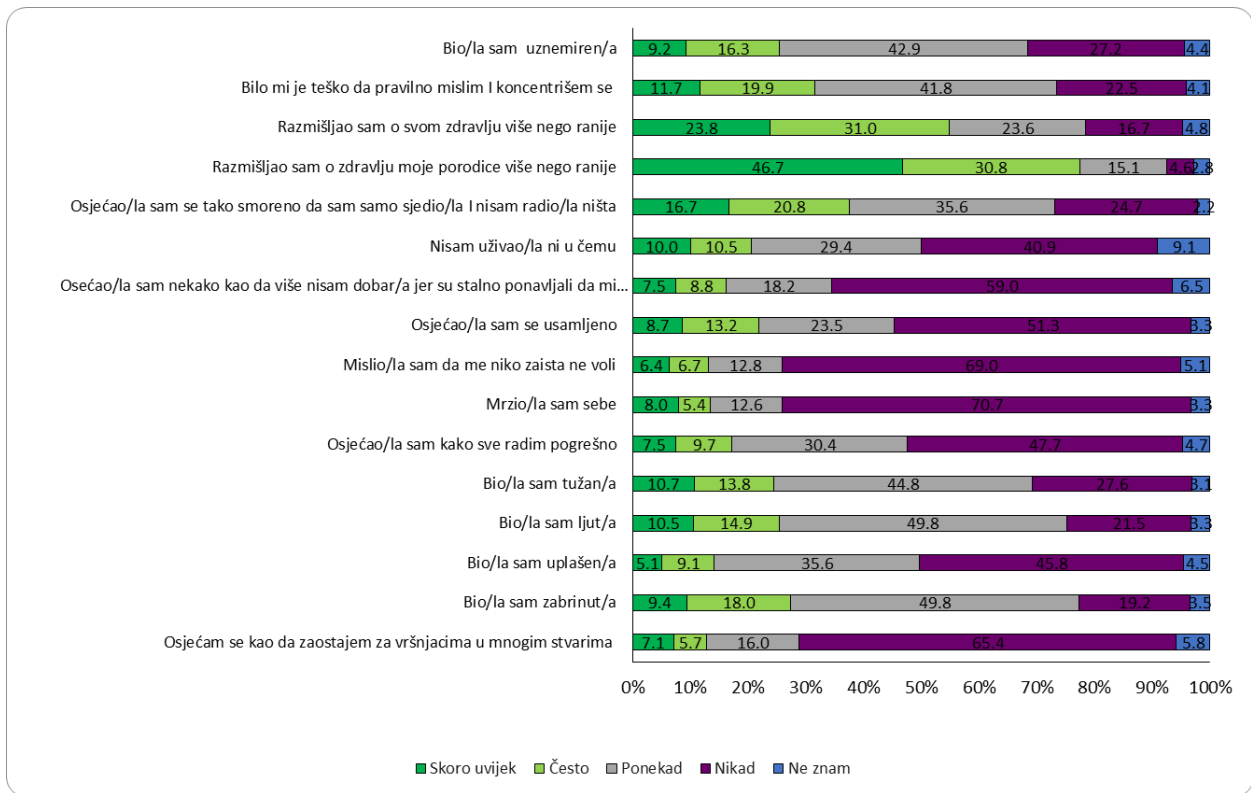
Table No.6 - feelings/mood of the child:



Children of 3rd and 4th grades of high school

Taable No.7 – feelings/mood of the child:



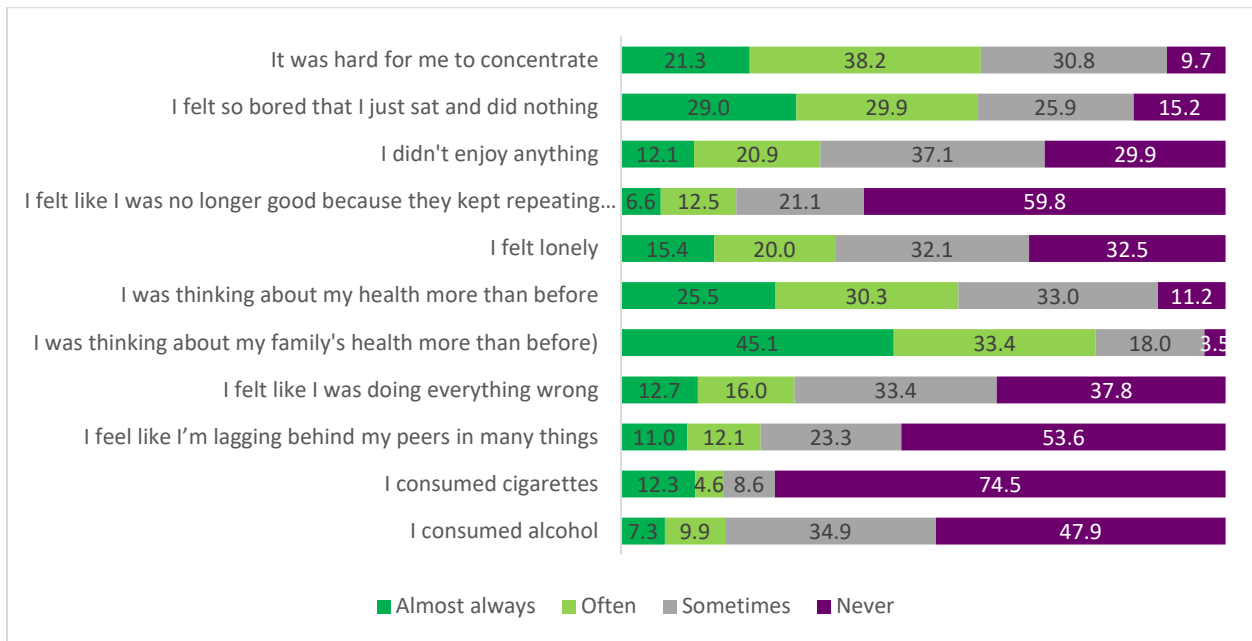


According to the obtained results, a larger number of older children (3rd and 4th grade of high school) have genuine emotional reactions of fear, insecurity, sadness, anger, apathy, and irritability, feelings of helplessness almost always or often - about 40% of children. For example, almost half (over 45%) of high school students were almost always or often upset, and about 44% almost always or often felt angry. For primary school children, this percentage is slightly lower - about 20%. Thought stress reactions were also more pronounced in older children – more than half (60%) of high school students almost always or often had problems with concentration, lack of initiative, willingness to make a move. About 30% of young children almost always or often had the same thought reactions. Although no similar research has been done before the pandemic, it can be assumed that the results obtained are precisely the result of the measures taken.

High school students also had a more pronounced feeling of loneliness, apathy (about 30% of respondents), as well as bad self-images, compared to others, and comparative results showed that this is directly related to the constant recurrence of young people spreading the infection (about 25 % of respondents). There were also more pronounced bodily reactions to stressful events - sweating, abdominal pain, a feeling of fainting, nausea. About 17% of children (older respondents) used alcohol and cigarettes more often than before the pandemics. Physical restlessness was more present in high school students. The fears are directly related to the fact that they were often focused on family members, parents, and at the same time felt uncertainty about the future. According to the survey results, less than half (41%) of high school students expressed concern about further education, while the same question was answered as the affirmative by 36% of primary school children. In both groups of children, there was an equal percentage of concern (more than before) for the health of their loved ones, and more than concern for their own health.

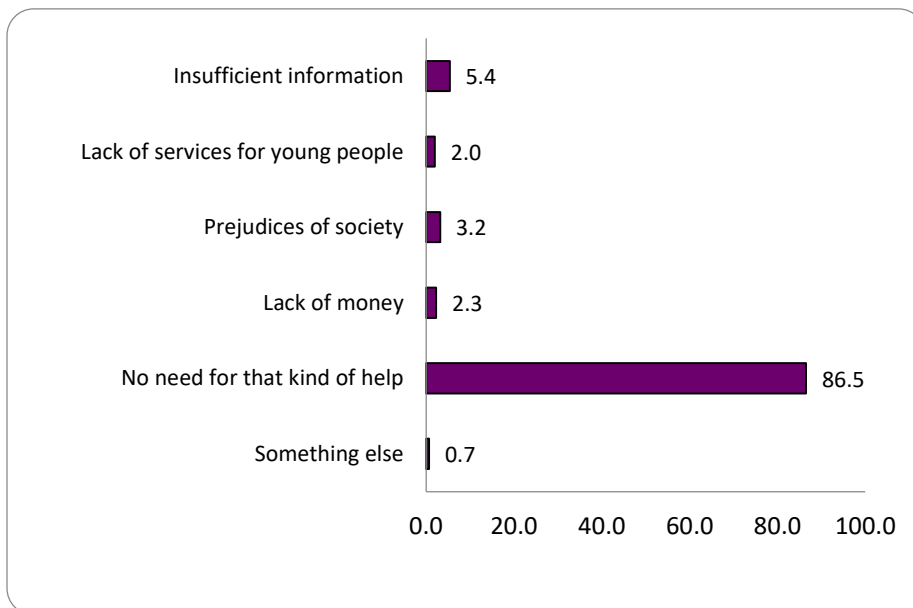
This difference is also expected. Older children are mature enough to understand the event itself and its long-term consequences. Reactions of anger because of the event itself are also characteristic, in addition to depression, because they do not have control over the events and are not able to change them. Understanding the situation certainly depends on the psycho-physical maturity of the child, the environment in which they grow up, but also the source of information they use. The fact is, that information in the media were not placed in a way that was adapted to children (of different ages) nor were children protected from content that could negatively affect them.

Table No. 8 - child's behaviour:



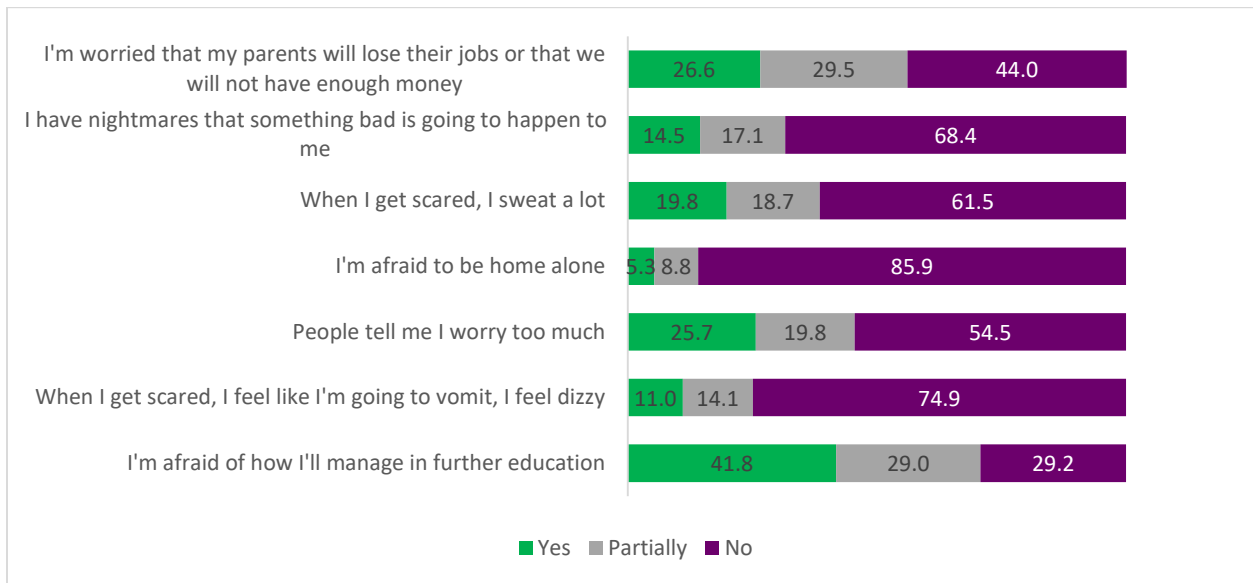
Both family support and the environment support were reduced. The lack of peer support has made it very difficult to cope with stressful events, as well as limited support from professional services. The results show that 8.8% of children from the younger age group (8th and 9th grade of the primary school) sought help, most often from family members. Children who did not ask for help stated that there was no need to ask for it, while 5.4% of children stated that they were not sufficiently informed.

Table No.9 - professional help and support:



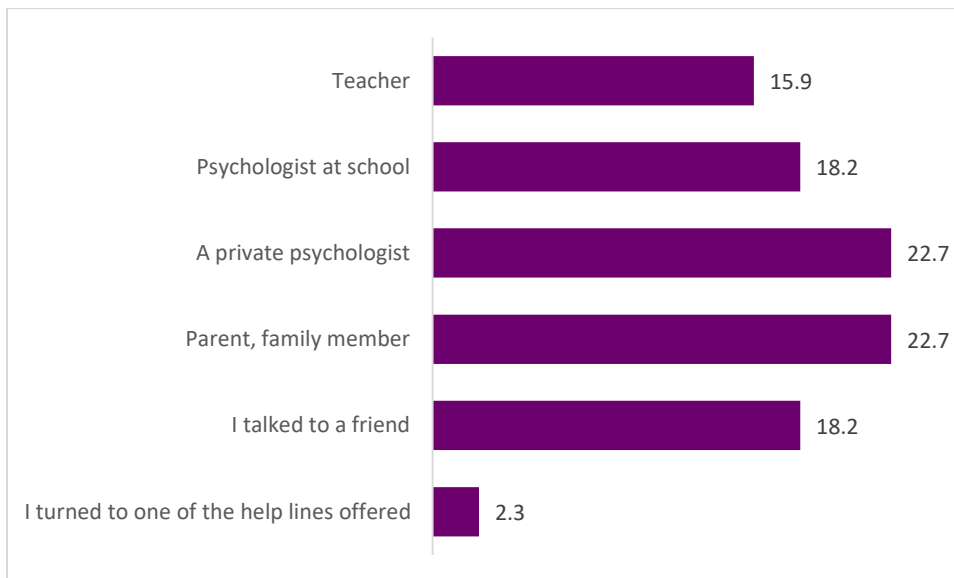
41.8% of high school students worry about how they will cope with further education.

Table No.10 - Child behaviour:



When it comes to professional help and support, one in ten children (9.7%) asked for some form of support. Most of them (22.7%) sought help from parents and from a privately hired psychologist.

Table No.11 - professional help and support:



- **Children with disabilities**

Based on the results of the focus groups with parents of children with disabilities, it can be concluded that these children had mood swings similar to those of the children from the general population, but depending on the type of disorder, psycho-physical condition, different needs and life circumstances they had different experiences of the changed reality.

The ban on movement, the suspension of educational and social and child protection institutions,¹¹ and associations of parents of children with disabilities,¹² the restriction of contacts, the obligatory wearing of masks, and the necessary distance impacted a lot children with disabilities and caused various reactions and changes. What brings all the changes together is one thing - **a change in the routine** that children are used to and many years of efforts have been necessary to acquire it. Depending on the type of disturbance and individual capacities of the child, but also the life circumstances, the reactions differed, just like the changes in the child itself. The changes ranged from a state of high anxiety (especially with children who have some form of disorder from the spectrum of autistic disorders) to complete withdrawal and regression in comparison to previously achieved results. It can be concluded that the child's mood was greatly influenced by the family's circumstances and availability, depending on its capacity to provide support to the child in a changed situation, so families living in houses with a yard or who had the opportunity to move to the countryside had much more positive experiences, unlike families (usually multi-member) who live in an apartment. All respondents agreed that the ban on movement in the first period was very traumatic for them and for the children. They also agreed that the impossibility of using the treatments within associations and other services greatly affected the health of the children as well as their emotional condition, considering that the routine and socialization of the child were lost. Socializing of children with disabilities in day care centres through the implementation of various group and individual treatments is essential for their development, progress and functioning, and the denial of these activities was traumatic for all children (regardless of the characteristics and type of disorder). Both parents and children felt a great fear of contracting the virus due to mistrust and uncertainty as to how the medical treatment itself would be carried out, given that children with disabilities were not recognized as a special category in any protocol or treatment and assistance procedure, and in the cases of assistance and treatment, they were already treated as children from the general population. (for example children with autism spectrum disorders are queuing for a medical examination or testing, as well as all other children and citizens, although they cannot adhere to the prescribed measures, wear a mask, stand still, they lick the handles, put their hands in their mouths, etc.). Parents shared various experiences that were reflected in the complete inability to overcome the situation in cases when the whole family would be infected with the virus, and the parents would not be able to help the child with the disability. The fact that the category of children with disabilities has not been recognized as a separate category for a long

¹¹ There are 14 day care centers for children with disabilities in Montenegro that function as public institutions in the system of social and child protection

¹² Associations of parents of children with disabilities function as NGOs and are organized in two unions: Alliance "Our Initiative" which includes 20 associations (<https://www.nasainicijativa.me/o-nama/lokalna-udruzenja>) and the National Association of Parents, children and youth with disabilities in Montenegro - NARDOS consisting of five associations (<https://nardoscg.me/clanice-nardos-a/>)

time, when adopting restrictive measures, has brought great uncertainty and problems in daily functioning.

“My son has not left the house for more than a year because it is impossible to maintain hygiene, distance and other recommended measures. He licks walls and handles.“

“The fear of the possibility of my daughter becoming infected is reflected in the fear of how they would treat her more than the fear of reacting to the virus itself. It is impossible to give her a pill, let alone carry out the process of treatment and recovery.“

“Since the beginning of the pandemic, my son has not taken off his mask even when he is at home. He spends a litre of disinfectant during the day because he constantly disinfects all the things in the house. He refuses to go outside, which is a big problem for all of us.“

“We have been enjoying since the pandemic started, we moved to the countryside with the child and discovered the great benefit of spending time with animals and staying in nature. Although the measures eased, we decided not to return to the city.“

"My daughter took all this very seriously. We have created a new routine. "

Statements of the parents from the focus groups

- **Children without parental care**

Restriction of movement and making contacts – The ban on visiting and leaving institutions has been introduced in this, as well as in other institutions of social and child protection. After more than a year, by order of May 7, 2021, the visits to the persons accommodated in these institutions, could be organized in accordance with the recommendations of the Institute;

Also, the measure of restriction of movement was valid for the users of this institution, who were not allowed to leave the facility at all for a longer time period, and this measure significantly affected them (more information in the Children without Parental Care section).

Children without parental care who live in the Children's Home "Mladost", in Bijela - the only institution of its kind in Montenegro, during the pandemic faced additional challenges. About 90 children are accommodated in this institution, and out of that number, in accordance with the decisions of the competent municipal assessment commissions, one third has some developmental disabilities. The life circumstances, that led them to grow up in institutional care, are themselves very challenging, and this category of children is singled out as risky in the domain of healthy mental development. The changed circumstances and the entry into force of a series of restrictive measures completely isolated these children from regular life activities and in one period reduced their lives to the boundaries of the institution's fence.

The results of focus groups with children of different ages who are deprived of parental care and are accommodated in the mentioned institution showed that children of all ages feel increased vulnerability due to the isolation they live in from the beginning of the pandemic until today, with certain easing depending on the situation. In addition, children recognize the feeling of insecurity due to the change of routine and the ban on leaving the institution and identify it as difficult access to other services and bodies (police, court, centre for social work, ambulance station). From the conversations with the children, the moment of the ban on movement was recognized as the reason for most of the mood changes that the children were facing. The fact that they are limited to the space of the institution 24 hours a day led them to think that they are in prison while their peers had the opportunity to go out at certain intervals (depending on the period and measures). The children had to rely on each other without the possibility of making direct contact with both peers and biological families.

The following was noticed: a decrease in access, visits and contact with social workers and professionals responsible for assessing their situation, during and after their placement, or for addressing the specific and individual treatment of specific children.

Children without parental care who participated in focus groups, especially those in adolescence, stated that they felt depressed in the changed circumstances, and that they were bored. In addition, they stated that many of them have sudden mood swings that are often accompanied by aggression towards peers or educators. Younger children were mostly bored and very much missed their peers from school. They felt the fear of being infected with the virus more at the beginning of the pandemic, and as time passed the feeling of fear diminished and thus the sense of responsibility to adhere to measures so as not to put themselves and others at risk. Older children mostly shared the opinion that they felt punished by isolation and restrictions.

Children who are closer to leaving the institution and becoming independent showed anxiety that had been caused by uncertainty about what will happen in the future and how the "new normality" will affect the quality of their lives.

None of the children who participated in the focus groups asked for additional help from a professional (psychologist, social worker...), but in everyday communication with educators and peers, they resolved any dilemmas, fears and/or challenges they have.

"I haven't seen my sweetheart for more than half a year!"

"The only good thing about this period is that I saved my pocket money. We couldn't go to the store for several months!"

"The boredom was the hardest for me. At first we were happy - there was no school! We slept late. Then that enjoyment turned into days without end and beginning."

"We hung out with each other and through Instagram and Tik-Tok, but that was not the real thing. We missed other people the most. Not just peers from school but people in general!"

"I don't care about anything anymore. I gained 7 kg."

“The hardest thing for me was that we went to the beach in an organized way and in groups at a time when there were no other people.”

Statements of children without parental care

Conclusion:

Changes in the daily functioning of children, caused by restrictive measures aimed at suppressing the spread of the Covid-19 virus pandemic, have affected the mental health of children. Given that there are no similar studies from earlier periods, it is impossible to make a comparative analysis and clearly define/measure the extent to which changes have actually occurred.

Increased worry, stress, mood swings, irritability and even aggression, uncertainty about the future are conditions that are recognized and that are directly caused by changes in reality and the way they function and can largely be indicators of endangering mental health.

Children did not use support services sufficiently, mainly due to their limited availability and because they did not recognizing the need for it. Support services aimed at protecting and improving the mental health of children in Montenegro were not sufficiently developed and adequately established even before the pandemic, so the restrictive measures further set back the already scarce and unavailable resources.¹³ This data can be commented on from a positive aspect, because of the need for additional, and to a certain extent available, psychological and sociological support, which is not recorded in a significant percentage.

Media coverage of the nature of the Covid-19 virus, its spread, and its consequences has not been adapted to children. Inadequate content, and frequent announcements that children can transmit the virus, explicit scenes of the seriously ill and the dead, as well as the constant publication of the numbers of the infected and the dead further disturbed the children, causing panic, confusion and uncertainty. Also, frequent contradictory announcements, false news and the presentation of "conspiracy theories" further complicated the situation.

The children did not participate in the creation of the measures, nor were they asked by the authorities for their opinion, which caused a feeling of inability to establish control over their time and activities.

Children with disabilities have largely remained “invisible” as a particular category at risk. The fact that at the very beginning of the pandemic they were not recognized at all as a category with different needs greatly affected children and their families. The lack of special protocols for children with disabilities has significantly marginalized this category of children and made it difficult for them to access various services and facilities in the changed circumstances. The fact that during the adoption of measures this category of children was not recognized and certain measures were not adapted to their special needs leads to the conclusion that in certain situations children with disabilities were in a different position compared to children of the general

¹³ <https://www.ombudsman.co.me/img-publications/25/mentalno-zdravlje-2018-1010.pdf>

population. Children without parental care were additionally limited due to the fact that they were in a collective accommodation, and the current measures have affected their daily lives in various ways and limited them to a much greater extent than that of children of the general population. Although this is a category of children at risk, they were not provided with additional support in order to adapt to the new circumstances and overcome possible crises caused by the measures that were in force. It is also evident that the employees of the institution were, and still are, under a lot of stress and burden, which prevents them from adequately responding to the new challenges. The Ombudsman gave a number of recommendations regarding the functioning of this institution.¹⁴

Recommendations

- When adopting restrictive measures aimed at combating the spread of Covid-19 virus, special attention should be paid to the analysis of the impact of a particular measure on the growth and development of the child, i.e. the exercising of guaranteed rights of the child while not losing sight of the needs of vulnerable categories of children; (Government of Montenegro, Council for Combating Virus covid19, Council for the Rights of the Child)
- Establish various support services for children and families aimed at overcoming the challenges and problems caused by measures for combating the spread of the Covid-19 virus; (Ministry of Finance and Social Welfare, Ministry of Health, Local Self-Government)
- Make support services available to all children in an accessible and adapted way (counseling, youth offices, free psycho-social support programs); (Ministry of Finance and Social Welfare, Ministry of Health, Local Self-Government, Ministry of Public Administration, Digital Society and Media)
- Ensure the participation of children in the creation and adoption of measures that affect them; (Government of Montenegro, Council for Combating Virus covid19, Council for the Rights of the Child)
- Adapt media reporting to children, with special emphasis on the protection of children from negative content and help them to understand the current situation and emergencies in a way they can understand. (Ministry of Public Administration, Digital Society and Media, Agency for Electronic Media)

II Violence against/among children

Restrictive measures

Restriction of movement – It was forbidden to leave residential buildings at certain times of the day, and there was the ban on staying in open public space, in the period from 5am to 7pm, for children under 12 years of age, without the presence of one parent/guardian or adult. Later, the measure was changed in relation to children with autism spectrum disorders and people who use

¹⁴ https://www.ombudsman.co.me/docs/1622613839_26052021_mb.pdf

wheelchairs, accompanied by one person they were allowed to stay in a public area for 60 minutes a day. In November 2020, an exception was provided for students returning from school to the residential building, based on a certificate issued by the educational institution.

Although it cannot be said with complete certainty that the measures taken to deal with the pandemic situation (virus as well as measures imposed to combat the spread of Covid-19 virus) directly caused the violence because there is no data on how much violence there was in certain categories of children before, due to more frequent announcements in the media, announcements of the NGO sector, statistics of the SOS lines it can be concluded that the situation contributed to the development of violent behaviour whether the children were victims or perpetrators of violence. Specificity of the pandemic situation itself - uncertainty, existential fears (illness, death, deprivation of liberty, lack of basic means of subsistence), unavailability of support systems whether caused by the reorganization of work in institutions dealing with children or uneven territorial distribution of support systems, denial of support systems children and parents, constant exposure to the virtual world, denial of sports activities, workshops and various other extracurricular activities, non-involvement of children's opinions in making decisions that mostly affect children, can be a trigger for violent behaviour in some families or only enhance it in situations where it already existed.

- *Children of the general population*

During analysis the results of the online questionnaire that referred to the general population of children, it was concluded that there are certain differences in relation to children of younger age (primary school) compared to children of older age (secondary school). The results show that 13.1% of young children surveyed often quarrel, get angry or lose control, while 21.5% of them say that it is partly true. According to the obtained results, high school children (21.6%) often get angry, quarrel and lose control, with schoolgirls experiencing this behaviour more often. When analysis of the results were made, it was concluded that in the group of older children (high school students) there are more forms of behaviour that indicate dominance, impulsivity, but on the other hand, also insecurity in front of others.

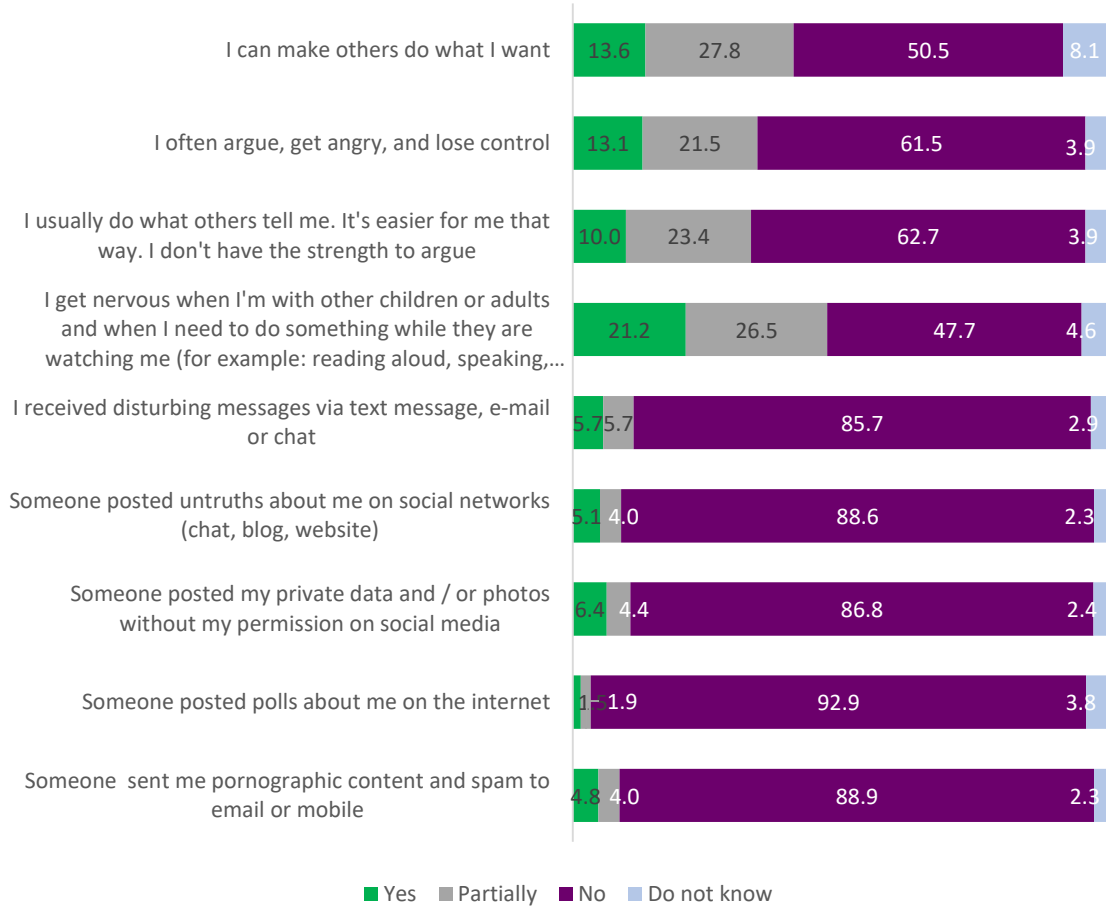
When it comes to behaviours that can be associated with online violence, the results are partly positive, i.e. a small percentage of children report experiencing some of the forms of violence we have listed. Namely, 5.1% of younger children stated that their peers published untruths about them on social networks, while 4.0% said that it was partly true. Also, 1.5% of children experienced someone posting an online survey about them. When it comes to posting private data and photos without their approval on social media, 6.4% of children said they had that experience. 4.8% of children received pornographic content and spam (e-mail or mobile phone), and 5.5% of older children received disturbing messages via SMS, email, etc. When it comes to high school students, only 2.4% of respondents received pornographic content and spam via email or mobile phone. The same percentage experienced password theft on one of the social networks.

4.6% of respondents experienced the publication of untruths about them on social networks, while 3.3% of respondents experienced that their private photos and data were published on social

networks without their approval. Only 0.7% of respondents said that surveys about them were posted online.

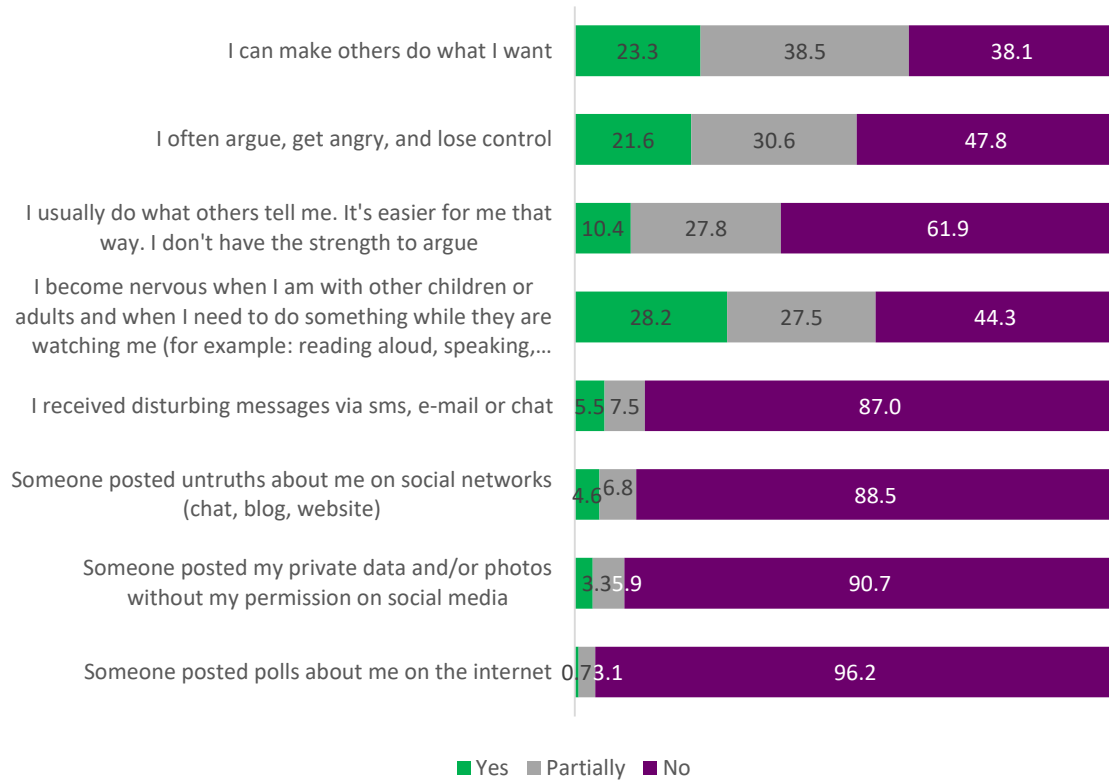
Answers of primary school children

Table No.12 – experience with violence



Answers of high school children

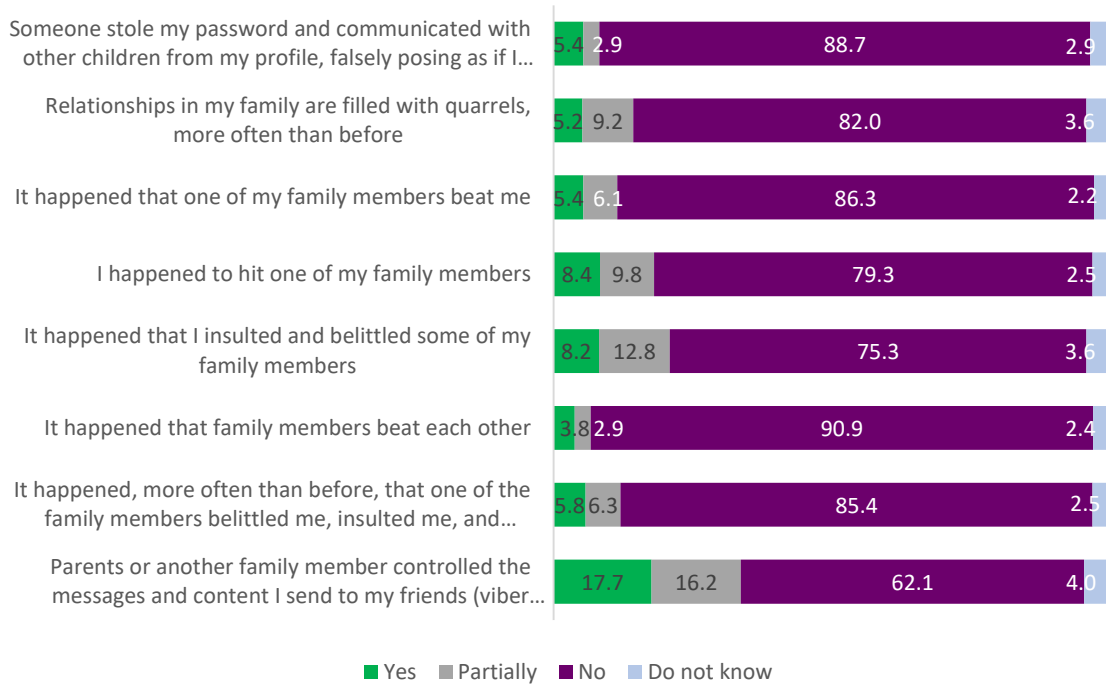
Table no. 13 - experiences with violence



The Issues related to possible domestic violence were recognized by the children in several .life situations Thus, one in twenty primary school children (17.7%) was in a situation where their parents controlled the messages and content of what they wrote with their peers and friends. 5.8% of children experienced disparagement, insults and swearing by family members, while 8.4% of children did the same to family members. Primary school students (5.2%) estimated that quarrels in the family were more frequent than before, while 3.8% of children reported that there was physical violence among family members.

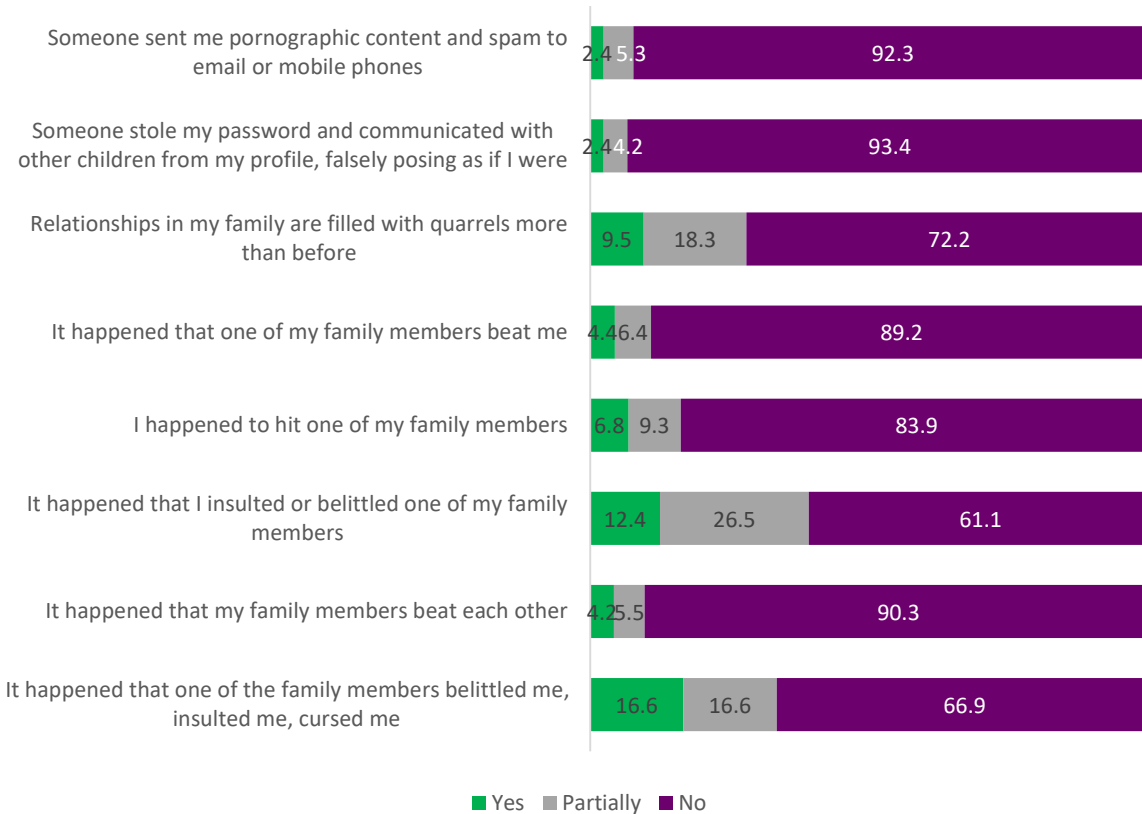
When it comes to family relationships, 16.6% of older respondents experienced that some of the household members belittled, insulted and cursed them. 12.4% of them did the same to their family members. 4.4% of high school students experienced physical violence from family members, i.e. someone beating them, while 6.8% of respondents did it to someone from the household.

Answers of primary school children
Table no. 14 - experiences with violence



Answers of high school children

Table no. 15 - experiences with violence



There are no statistically significant differences when it comes to gender, grade, region, or employment of the parents.

- ***Children with disabilities***

Given the fact that the focus groups on how restrictive measures affected children with disabilities and their mental health were conducted with parents/guardians, the answers to the questions related to the topic of violence were almost 100% negative. The fact is that children spent much of their time in homes within the family with limited capacity to use the Internet. None of the parents mentioned the occurrence of violent behaviour within their family, or that they have knowledge about the possible online bullying/violence that their child was facing.

Parents reported increased levels of stress and nervousness within their families, which was definitely caused by imposed isolation, family members spent time alone, often in insufficient space, limited contact with other people, inaccessibility of support services for children and family members, etc. These circumstances led to disagreements and possible shouting, which probably

affected the children as well, but the parents consider these situations inevitable in the given circumstances.

- *Children without parental care*

Children without parental care, placed in the Children's Home "Mladost", as explained in the previous section, have been isolated from the outside world and had to rely on each other for a large part of the time since the beginning of the pandemic. According to the results of the focus groups, the children exhibited aggressive behaviour towards their peers and within the groups/families in which they were placed within the institution. Children have explained this with a state of stress and nervousness due to the circumstances that had befallen them and the inability to socialize with their friends outside the institution, they were already forced to spend all their time in their community in the home. According to the opinions and experiences of children, peer violence was present among children of almost all ages. Children believe that both disengagement and excess free time have greatly contributed to intolerance and incidental situations among children in the institution.

When it comes to online violence, children shared different experiences and the general impression is that it happened and manifested in different ways. Namely, the fact that the children switched to online classes and that they had too much free time, deprived of sports activities, and few activities that would occupy their attention, they spent most of their time online. Experiences of violent behaviour via the Internet have been reflected in inappropriate verbal communication, insults, gossip, etc. Children have experiences of harassment by fake profiles on social networks and posting compromising content about a person. In addition, children witness a trend of sexual harassment by peers, etc. The general impression is that children solve these situations by relying on peer support or coping with inconveniences on their own by either retaliating or blocking the person whose behaviour is harassing them online. The children also had experiences of peer violence during online classes/classrooms - kicking a friend out of class, turning off the microphone to a friend who was communicating with the teacher at that moment, taking pictures of a friend online in some ugly poses or with a grimace and then sharing that photo with a larger number of people, etc.

“Older boys sometimes bully us for fun. We can't do anything to them - they are stronger! “

“When you complain to the teacher, he punishes both me and the one who insulted or hit me so it's not worth it! “

“I talk to a social worker and she always helps us reconcile!“

Statements of the childrens without parental care

Conclusion:

Research shows that domestic violence increases during and after extraordinary and natural disasters (wars, fires, earthquakes, floods...). And now there is a significantly higher frequency of domestic violence (more frequent publications in the media, publications of the NGO sector, statistics of the SOS lines. A life that disables social contacts and disrupts the daily routine - causes frustration for everyone. Especially with those who are prone to violent behaviour. They will project aggression and tension on those weaker than themselves - most often women, children, and older family members.

Mood swings caused by the "new reality" have influenced the manifestation of aggressive behaviours in children, especially of those in collective accommodation and online.

There are no specifically established support systems for children who commit or suffer violence or witness domestic violence during a pandemic.

Existing support systems operated in limited capacity during the pandemic and were not adequately accessible.

Children did not have access to professional services (psychologist, pedagogue, speech therapist teacher for children with disabilities...) within the education system and the upbringing element of educators by switching to online education was missing.

SOS telephones were not sufficiently promoted in spaces such as social networks which are accessible for children.

The fact that violent behaviour did not predominate among the surveyed children can be singled out as a positive aspect, and certain indicators can be viewed as a reaction to changed circumstances and an evident crisis rather than as violent behaviour.

Recommendations:

- Identify families with a history of violence and develop a support plan; (Ministry of Finance and Social Welfare, Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sports)
- In the framework of the Protocol on the Suppression of Violence and Vandalism in Schools, include a part related to the manner of providing support in the case of distance learning to children who are recognized in schools as those who commit violence or have been victims of violence; (Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sports)
- Establish a way of effective and for children accessible functioning of psychological and pedagogical services within educational institutions, and also during online teaching; (Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sports)
- Establish continuous education and empowerment of children and parents regarding violence; (Ministry of Finance and Social Welfare, Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sports)

- Strengthen professional capacities in the area of psychological support for children with disabilities; (Ministry of Finance and Social Welfare, Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sports)
- Achieve continuous promotion of all support services in a child-friendly way and in an online spaces whose dominant users are children and youth (social networks, YouTube, etc.) ; (Ministry of Finance and Social Welfare, Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sports, Ministry of Public Administration, Digital Society and Media)
- Strengthen activities that will focus on the possibility of reporting all types of violence as well as access to justice in a child-friendly manner with simplification of procedures (Ministry of Finance and Social Welfare, Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sports, Ministry of Public Administration, Digital Society and Media)
- Provide additional psycho-social support and assistance to children living in institutions; (Ministry of Finance and Social Welfare, Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sports)
- Provide continuous education for professionals working with children and make them available regardless of where the children live. (Ministry of Finance and Social Welfare, Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sports)

III Education

Restrictive measures:

Termination of school - in March 2021, an order from which Ministry of health was issued to terminate educational work in public and private educational institutions. After two weeks, schools switched to the online model (via TV channels as well as mobile applications).

Postponement of the beginning of the school year 2020/2021 - At the proposal of the Institute of Public Health of Montenegro, the Ministry of Education postponed the beginning of the school year 2020/2021 for a month, i.e. for October 1, 2020.

Online teaching ("Learn at home" application, "Viber", Microsoft teams, etc.) - In the first half of the 2020/2021 school year, educational institutions, in accordance with the instructions of the Ministry of Education, organized classes in such way that some students attended school (younger students up to 6th grade of primary school and students of 1st grade of secondary school) while others had online teaching. Please note that *online teaching*, as such, is not defined by any positive legal regulation.

In the second semester, the Ministry of Education left to schools to make their own syllabus depending on the number of students and available classrooms, bearing in mind that a maximum of 17 students could be present in one classroom.

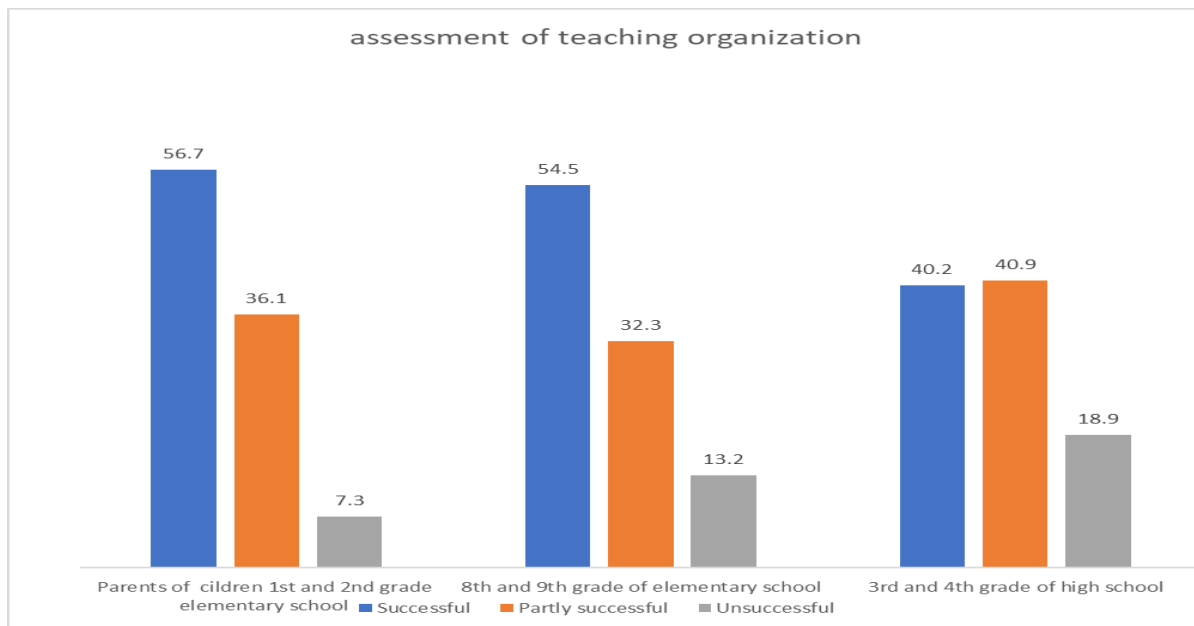
Division of classes into groups - in some, mostly larger city schools, children took turns for a week (while some attended classes at school, others were on online platforms that week). Students with special educational needs were allowed to attend classes at school every week, in groups from their class.

Prohibition of school excursions – The orders for a longer period prescribed a ban on organizing all school and student excursions, picnics, educational gatherings, etc. abroad. Later the organization of student excursions in Montenegro was allowed for a maximum of 100 students.

The research into the impact of the Covid-19 virus on children's mental health, through the prism of restrictive measures, had as its dominant topic the area of exercising the right to education, because the educational process follows growing up at all stages and inevitably contributes to formation of a child’s personality. According to the overall results of the research, the impression was gained that the greatest change and/or influence was experienced by children through the changed way of education.

According to the obtained results, parents (especially parents of students in the first grade of primary school) evaluate teaching more successfully than students in the final grades of primary and secondary school. High school students are the most critical of the organization of classes in the past year. One in five surveyed high school students stated that the organization of classes was unsuccessful.

Table No.16 - assessment of the organization of teaching:



For the first and second grade primary school students, teaching and communication was predominantly organized by exchanging messages and materials. About a fifth of the students in the final grades of primary school and about a quarter of the surveyed high school students had classes in the same way. Primary and high school students most often had classes through Teams online platform (Table 16).

Table No.17 :

Communication with the teacher

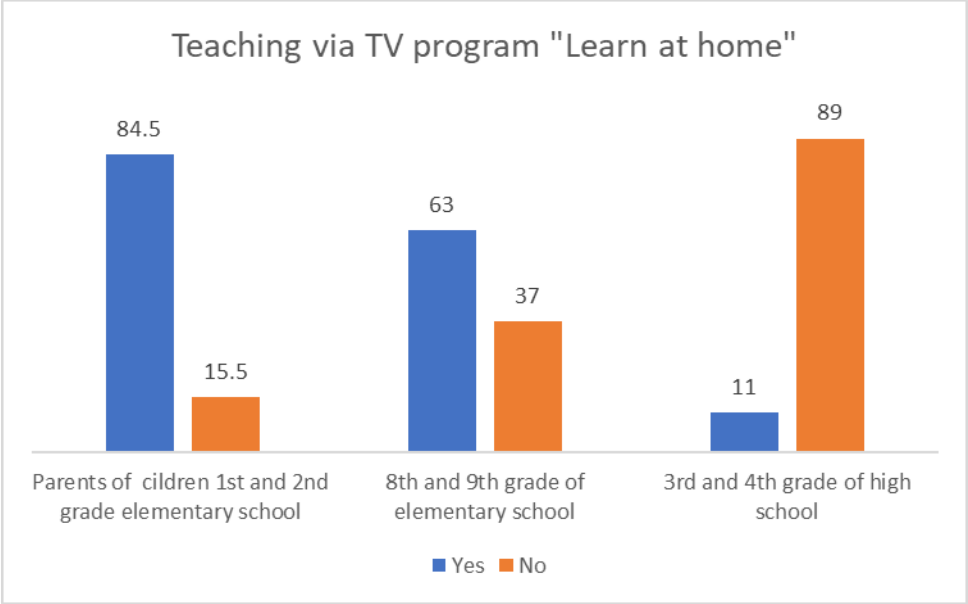
In what way did you most often communicate with your child's teacher?			
	Parents of children of I and II grade of primary school	VIII and IX grade of primary school	III and IV grade of secondary school
By exchanging messages and materials (sms, viber, email, facebook, etc.)	86.4	20.6	26.6
Via video conferencing (zoom, google classroom, moodle ucg, etc.)	0.7	7.6	10.3
By distributing/exchanging printed material	0.6	1.1	0.4
Through Teams	11.9	70.1	61.1
Other	0.4	0.6	1.5

When it comes to the programme/online platform "Learn at home" through which students had the opportunity to watch classes, 84.5% of parents of students in the first and second grade of primary school said that their children watched this programme.

The "Learn at Home" TV program was watched by 63.0% of 8th and 9th grade students, and more by 8th grade students (67.9% of the total number of those who watched it). Classes in this way were predominantly watched by children from the central region. Among the students who watched "Learn at Home" programme, 40.1% of students had "excellent" success.

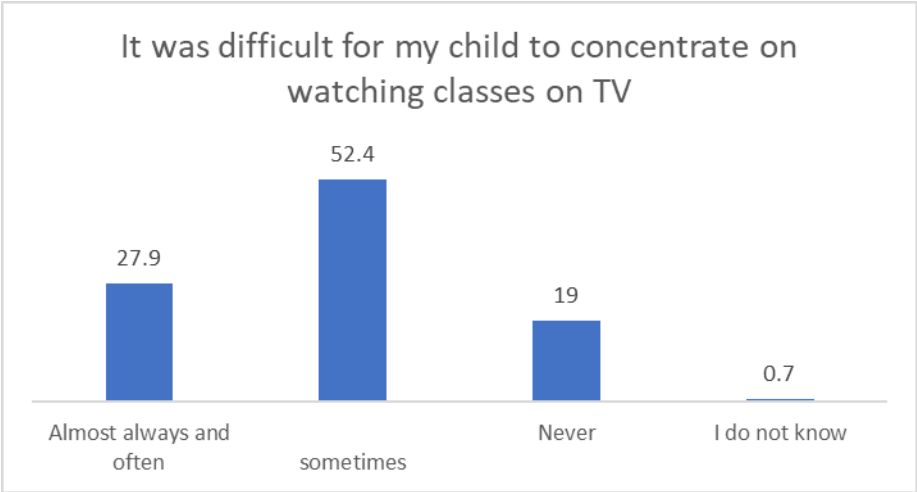
This program was the least watched by high school students, by only 11% of them.

Table No.18 – Teaching via “Learn at Home” -TV



Since of all three surveyed groups, most students of I and II grade watched the program "Learn at home", we were interested in how difficult it was for them to watch the classes on TV. The data show that a cumulative 27.9% of parents rated that their children almost always or often found it difficult to concentrate on watching TV lessons, while more than half (52.4%) of them rated that this was sometimes the case. It was especially problematic to follow classes if there was no possibility of stopping the program and pausing it, because children of this age did not manage to follow the pace of classes.

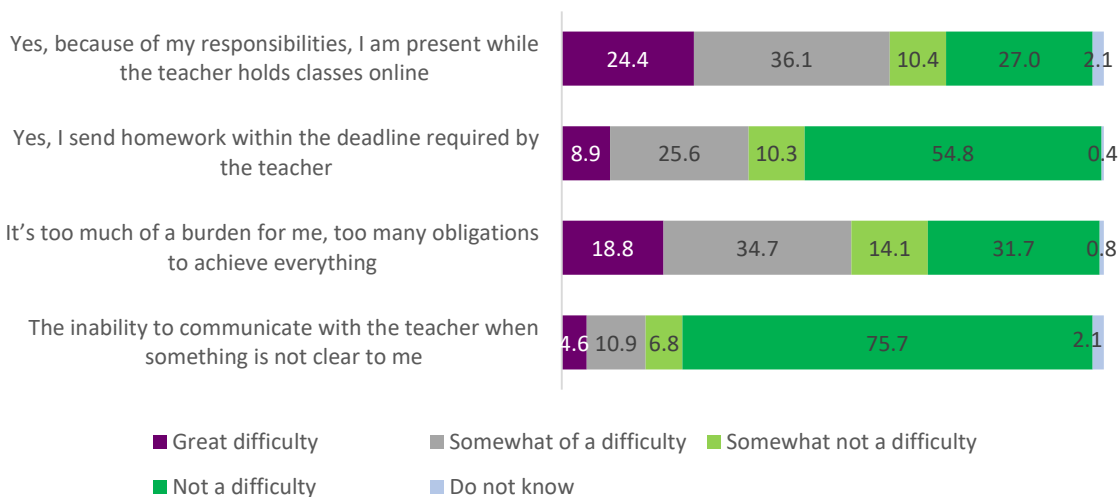
Table No.19 - Difficulty in watching classes on TV:



Distance learning did bring certain challenges. As many as 60.5% of parents stated that it was a very or partially difficult for them to be present, due to their obligations, while the teacher holds classes electronically. Also, more than half of surveyed children (53.5%) stated that to some extent or completely they felt too burdened and that they have too many obligations as? children to

achieve everything. As we have already said, the first and second grade students could not send messages on their own, and watch TV lessons, and their parents were really involved in the entire educational process, and therefore under a lot of burden. Despite the problems related to following the classes, three-quarters of parents said they had no problems to directly communicate with teachers.

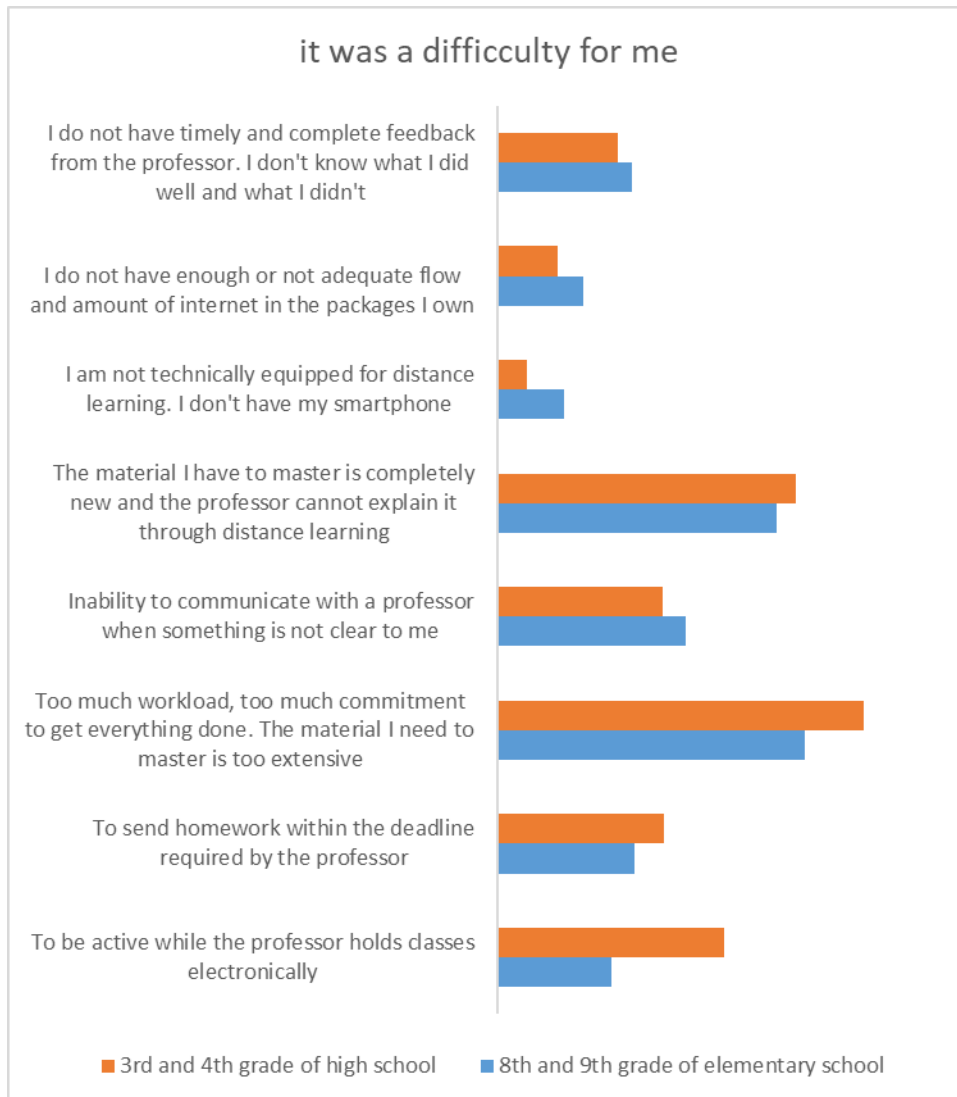
Table No.20 - Assessment of challenges (difficulties) by parents:



The surveyed students, one in two primary school students and high school students (58% of high school students and 48.7% of primary school students) also pointed out the excessive workload, especially emphasizing the excessive material. Another big problem for them was that the material was new and complex, and the teacher could not adequately explain it online. More than one third of high school students (36%) said they had trouble being active during online classes. Also, cumulatively one third (29.9%) of 8th and 9th grade students had great or partial difficulties to communicate with the teacher during consultations and clarification of the material. The same problems were pointed out by one in four high school students, of whom 34.1% are excellent students.

A significant percentage of students, more than 20%, stated that it was a very or partially difficult for them to send homework within the deadline required by the teacher.

Table No. 21 - Assessment of challenges (difficulties) by students of 8^{tr}/9th grades of primary school and 3rd/4th grades of secondary school:



In data processing, we ranked the challenges and difficulties that students of the final high school grades had. Despite the large workload, scope and complexity of the material; grading, passivity during teaching, lack of feedback and organization of practical classes were still highly ranked.

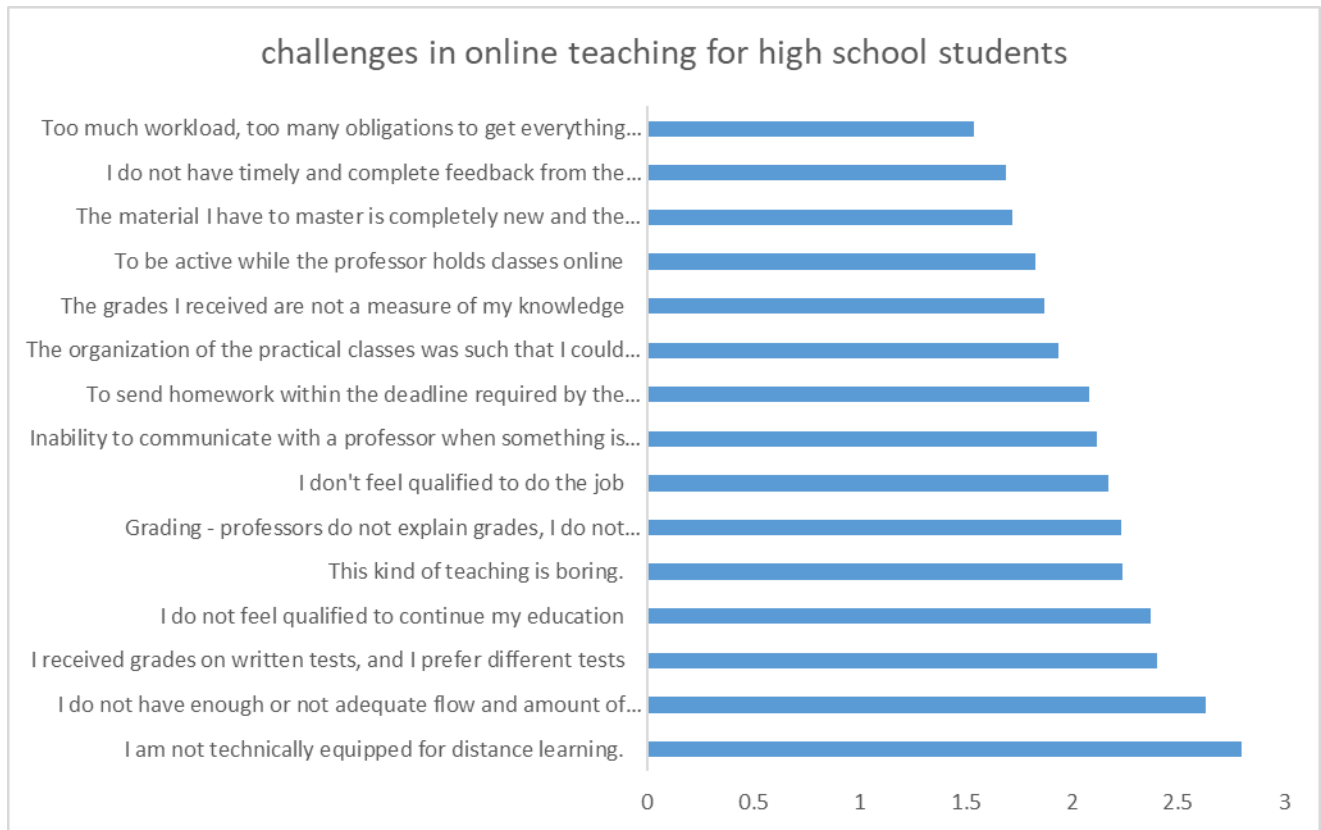
Half of the respondents (49.9%) rated distance learning as boring, while adolescent girls rated it as such more often (70.0%). Also, as many as 39.3% of respondents believe that the grades they received are not an adequate indicator of their knowledge, and 23.3% of respondents report as a difficulty that professors did not explain the grades.

When it comes to practical classes, 36.0% of them stated that it was a great difficulty for them that the organization was bad and they could not learn what they needed. Girls have this attitude more often.

For the graduation exam, 40.9% of respondents, more often high school girls, see their unpreparedness as a difficulty.

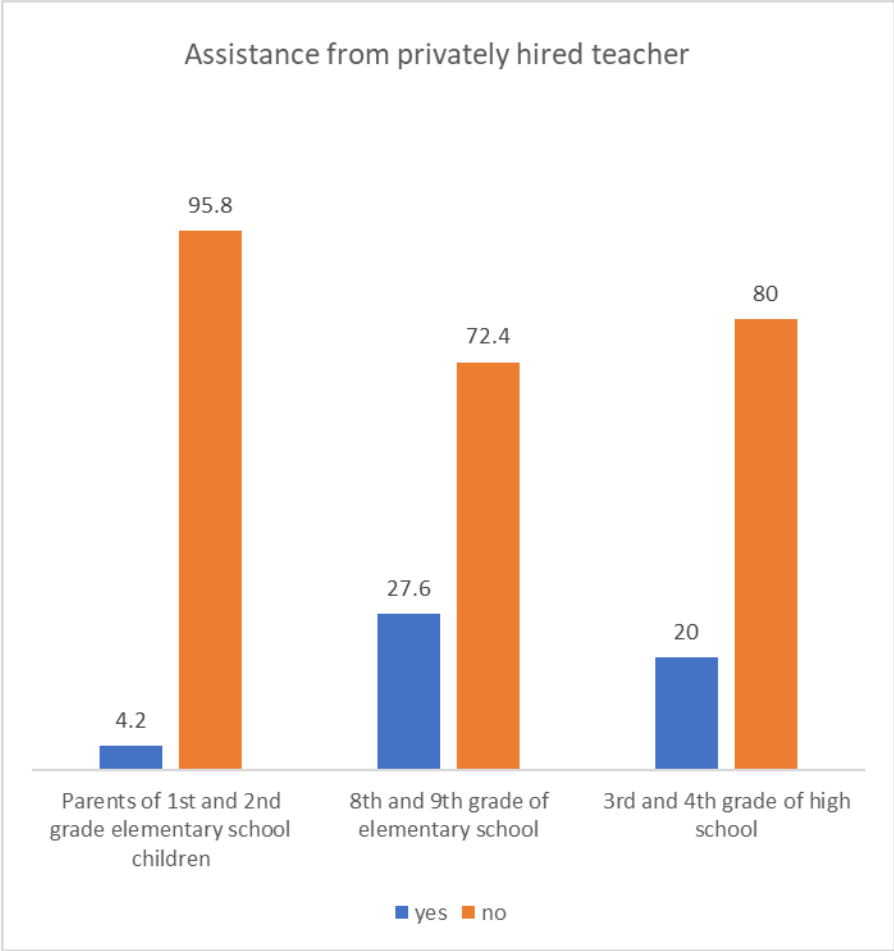
According to the obtained results, the children ranked the technical conditions and the availability of the Internet as the least challenging, but the percentage of those for whom this precondition was not fulfilled is certainly not negligible. When it comes to technical equipment, only 4.8% of high school respondents said that they were not technically equipped for distance learning, i.e. that they did not have a smartphone. Also, 9.7% of them do not have enough internet available or the speed of internet data in the packages they had at home was not adequate. Interestingly, 43.1% of respondents stated that some of their friends were not able to attend online classes.

Table No.22 - Ranking of challenges (difficulties) by students of 3rd and 4th grade:



More than a quarter of the surveyed primary school students and one in five surveyed high school students had the help of a teacher privately hired by their parents. Most often, that help was for one or two subjects.

Table No.23 - Assistance from privately hired teachers:



- Children with disabilities**

The educational process of children with disabilities during the pandemic and changed circumstances was greatly disrupted. Namely, the children who are included in the regular educational process, depending on the disorder, i.e. a special educational need, had a customized or an individual program. The online teaching system was organized in a short time and it was very difficult to adapt it to the special educational needs of individual students. Individual materials for work and following of classes were sent to students who are included in the educational process according to a special program. In the given circumstances, this was the only acceptable way of including these children, and all the communication and the way of working, in accordance with individual needs, was agreed with the parents

The results of focus groups with parents of children with disabilities showed that most of the surveyed parents are not satisfied with the way their children were involved in the educational process, and thus were not satisfied with the quality of the acquired knowledge. The experiences they shared are more or less similar and brought down to the intensity of parental involvement and their commitment to work with the child. They feel that online teaching has not been adapted to the capacities of certain children and that they have only formally participated, often without the

opportunity to follow, understand or get involved. The only difference in this process was the level of satisfactory knowledge in the final examinations. Many children (depending on the disability) were not able to express themselves because, for example, they do not speak but communicate in writing and are not computer literate. A great burden was placed on the parents, especially having in mind the educational capacities, social status, information literacy and other factors that additionally hindered the possibility to help the child to get involved and follow the classes. The routine change and lack of socialization were also assessed as a dominant factor in accepting a new way of schooling for children with disabilities.

However, there were also positive examples. Namely, children with disabilities that belong to the autism spectrum showed much greater knowledge during the final examinations than in the classroom (in the earlier period). This progress is justified by the fact that the child is in his house, in a pleasant and familiar environment, during the examination he has a parent in the room whose presence provides him with support and peace, and the child is freer to express what he has learned in a much better way. These situations have opened the possibility to accept this method of testing in the future because it is really tailored to the needs of the child, with the aim to achieve true inclusion¹⁵.

“Thanks to online classes, the entire family learned how to use a computer!”

“My son follows the classes with curiosity through Teams, but it is clear that he does not understand the reason for that. He's just looking forward to seeing familiar faces (peers) on the screen!”

“Everyone in the family helped with the studying, but honestly we wrote and sent those homework assignments to the teacher!”

Statements of parents of children with disabilities - focus groups

- **Children without parental care**

Children without parental care, accommodated in "Mladost" Home in Bijela, with whom the focus groups were conducted, had different experiences in relation to the educational process, depending on the stages of development of the pandemic and measures that were in power in different periods.

The fact is that these children live and grow up in collective accommodation and are cared for by a relatively small number of educators and professionals (only 14 of them for 90 children). Employees, although there are very few of them, are dedicated and devoted to their work. In the first phase of the pandemic (2020), educators and professionals fully followed the online teaching, they took over communication with teachers/schools, so one teacher at the time studied with 10-15 children each day. In such conditions, professionals did not have the space or time to perform their regular job of support through an individual approach because due to the changed

¹⁵ https://www.ombudsman.co.me/docs/1622030029_12042021_preporuka_ko.pdf

circumstances they had to deal with other jobs in order to ensure the functioning of children and institution in the given circumstances.

According to the children's experiences and their statements, the very beginning of the pandemic was very difficult for them due to the closure of schools and the transition to online classes. In the first period, the children did not have the technical ability to follow the lessons in an adequate way, considering that they are of different ages, and there are not enough TVs for everyone to watch their program, also they did not have enough phones and computers and were quite disorganized. In their statements the children also characterized this period as positive because they did not have to go to school, so they enjoyed the chaos, thus justifying the fact that they did not study. They relied on teachers as much as possible, but they did not always manage to complete their school obligations because there was no one to help/explain to them what was necessary (e.g. the teacher does not know chemistry or English well). During this learning regime, peer solidarity developed and they helped each other, the older ones taught the younger ones - this moment was characterized as positive, many children felt nice in that togetherness.

Experiences are completely different compared to the school year 2020/2021 because the children received technical support in terms of computers, tablets and phones, but also professional support from engaged volunteers who helped them to learn. The engaged volunteers were teaching professionals from different fields (mathematics, physics, IT, English, etc.). Many children have significantly improved their success in school because for the first time in their lives they had the professional support of educated teachers. Regardless of the quality of the acquired knowledge and the achieved success, the children were under a lot of burden because of the school dynamics and believed that they invested much more effort and time to finish all the school obligations compared to the earlier period before the pandemic.

According to experiences shared with focus groups, the children generally rated distance learning as poor and all wanted to return to the classrooms. As a positive thing, they state the fact that they got computers and better internet speed.

“Those who want to study and learn must do that all day long. And those who didn't study even before the pandemic, they are not studying now either - they just got a tablet so they can use it for games and not for school obligations!”

”The teachers who come to help us, they mean a lot to us.”

We have" private lessons "for the first time! “

Statements of children without parental care - focus groups

Conclusion:

The education system was forced to suddenly, almost without preparation, switch to a different organization of work, which, of course, in addition to some positive ones, also brought a number of negative consequences. The positive thing is that in a very short time, and without previous experiences of this type, a distance learning system was organized through the recording of

teaching units that were broadcasted via TV programs, designing different ways of communication with children and parents, establishing online platforms, preparing materials which were delivered to students at their home address, etc. The Ministry of Education has made great efforts to establish this system of teaching and the teachers have shown willingness to make additional efforts to maintain the education process at the best possible level in accordance with the circumstances.

Nevertheless, to date, the online system of education has not been defined by any act, and thus causes multiple ambiguities for children, their parents and teachers, in terms of organization and implementation of educational work, as well as the manner of conducting the educational program.

Namely, the insufficient harmonization of existing syllabus and certain additional instructions and recommendations to adapt to the online model, created additional burden for teachers and students and led to inequality in teaching.

The school environment presupposes not only education but also a very important educational function, the use of a system of pedagogical and psychological support, extracurricular activities, talent development, socialization and socializing. Distance education, however tried to fulfil only the educational function.

Parents have taken over much of the educational process and almost replaced the teacher at many stages, especially with younger students. A parent does not necessarily have the capacity and the availability for such an important role.

The students did not have the continuity in teaching. Different techniques of the educational process were used (TV teaching, communication via Viber application, online programs - teams, etc.) and the same standard in education was not established, it depended on the technique the teacher preferred or it depended on the conditions of the child for a certain technique.

The biggest shortcomings of online teaching are as follows:

- Scope and complexity of materials;
- Lack of student interaction with teachers and other students, the problem of being active during classes due to monotonous teaching;
- Lack of feedback from teachers,
- Availability of classes - more than 10% of primary school students, and slightly fewer high school students had problems with the Internet or technical equipment. This poses a serious problem and an obstacle to online teaching, and raises the question of equal access to education for all and of uniform quality. Also, the injustice, unequal availability of services to all students, was increased by the fact that a significant number of students had the help of a paid teacher. This has further deepened the gap between students who have good material conditions and are able to afford better equipment and the services of a private teacher.
- "Learn at home" project was less watched than it was expected, especially among the high school population, and that may be a consequence of the possibility of choosing different educational models.

Students were exposed to uncertainty because they did not know when they attended online classes and when they will attend classes at school, which further disrupted the routine and introduced confusion into the organization of school obligations and the functioning of the family.

The good side of online teaching is the improvement of information literacy in the area of digital technologies. Some activities related to the work of clubs, extracurricular activities, teacher training, can be done very effectively online even in regular circumstances.

According to the obtained results, parents of children in lower grades of primary school, despite certain difficulties, assessed online classes as generally positive which is very encouraging.

Certain experiences of children with disabilities have shown that they achieved much better results through online testing than before (during the traditional classroom examination) and this type of examination can be accepted as an adequate model of inclusion in accordance with the individual needs of certain students in the future.

It is important to point out that the students, when making and monitoring the decisions regarding the educational process were neither consulted nor they participated in the creation of various measures.

It has proved that teaching and the presence of students in school is the most efficient way of work, and when adopting restrictive measures, the interruption of teaching in school should be the last option! The main arguments for returning the students to the school are: regular classes, structured time, quality of education, socialization, personal interaction with the teacher, and facilitated family organization.

The school, in addition to the family, is the optimal place for learning, acquiring skills for maintaining mental health in a peer group, as the most natural support. Research in pedagogical psychology has confirmed that when a school supports the social and emotional health of students, they are academically more successful than their peers without such support. This kind of support also improves the school environment, the behaviour of students, makes them feel safe and connected and makes them feel that they belong in the school. On the other hand, lack of support is associated with learning and behavioural problems, violence, absence, or dropping out of school.

Recommendations:

- Enable the realization of the educational process within educational institutions, and use the transition to online teaching as the last resort; (Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sports, Council for the Fight Against the Covid-19 Virus)
- Define online teaching in national legislation and establish a standard that this type of teaching must meet, depending on the age of the child and individual capacities; (Ministry of Justice, Human and Minority Rights, Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sports)

- Make professional instructions that would further regulate the manner of planning, organization and implementation of educational work of schools (Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sports)
- Ensure that, when switching to online teaching, all children and teachers receive adequate technical support; (Government of Montenegro, Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sports)
- Continuously educate teachers and students to use different tools, platforms, etc. (Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sports)
- Develop unique platforms and high-quality online content and materials that would allow children to use them as independently as possible, but also to develop more thought processes, problem solving, creativity, critical thinking, without just being passive consumers of content. (Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sports, Bureau for Textbooks and Teaching Aids, Bureau for Educational Services)
- Define standards and indicators of the quality of teachers' work so that classes would be more interactive and dynamic, with enough opportunities for asking questions, dialogues, discussions, research, independent work, group work, etc.; (Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sports, Bureau for Educational Services)
- It is necessary to determine the amount and importance of what was missed in the past period and catch up classes by "repeating" the material and supplementing some missed or misunderstood parts and by providing all students with free learning support services (e.g. compensation programs, additional classes...). (Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sports)
- Take care of physical health through extracurricular and sports activities in accordance with safety measures in outdoor areas (school yard, parks, and picnic areas). (Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sports)

IV Free time - Right to play, leisure and cultural activities

Restriction of movement – It was forbidden to leave residential buildings at certain times of the day, and there was the ban on staying in open public space, in the period from 5am to 7pm, for children under 12 years of age, without the presence of one parent/guardian or adult. Later, the measure was changed in relation to children with autism spectrum disorders and people who use wheelchairs, accompanied by one person they were allowed to stay in a public area for 60 minutes a day. In November 2020, an exception was provided for students returning from school to the residential building, based on a certificate issued by the educational institution.

Free time - introduced measure was a ban on group training, as well as organizing entertainment and recreational activities for children and adults in open public places (amusement park, panoramic wheel, etc.), except for professional athletes in compliance with the prescribed measures.

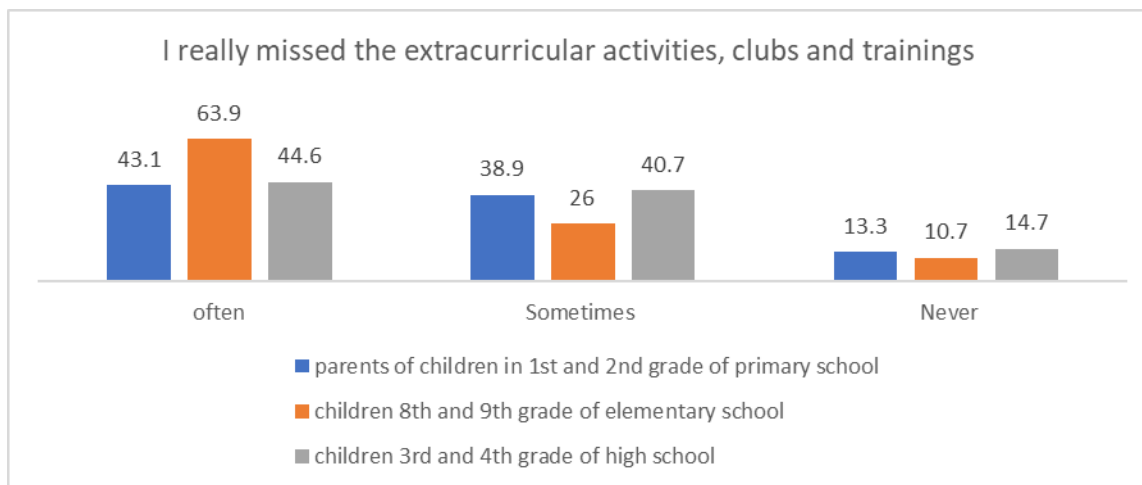
Prohibition of school excursions – The orders for a longer period prescribed a ban on organizing all school and student excursions, picnics, educational gatherings, etc. abroad. Later the organization of student excursions in Montenegro was allowed for a maximum of 100 students.

In addition to the family, the school has an irreplaceable role in encouraging the child's development. Its important role in stimulating cognitive development is often emphasized, and less is said about its very important function in stimulating emotional and social development. The most effective way to support these aspects of development are extracurricular activities, workshops, homeroom classes, and other group activities that were largely absent in the past year due to measures that prohibited gatherings and imposed online classes.

When it comes to extracurricular activities, clubs and trainings, 43.1% of parents assessed that their children often missed them, while 38.9% of them stated that this sometimes happened. It is also noted that children from the central region missed such activities more. And that is a consequence of different development levels in the region.

Most students in the final grades of primary school missed extracurricular activities, clubs and trainings very much, since they were usually not organized during this period. The similar percentage of first and second grade primary school students missed these activities.

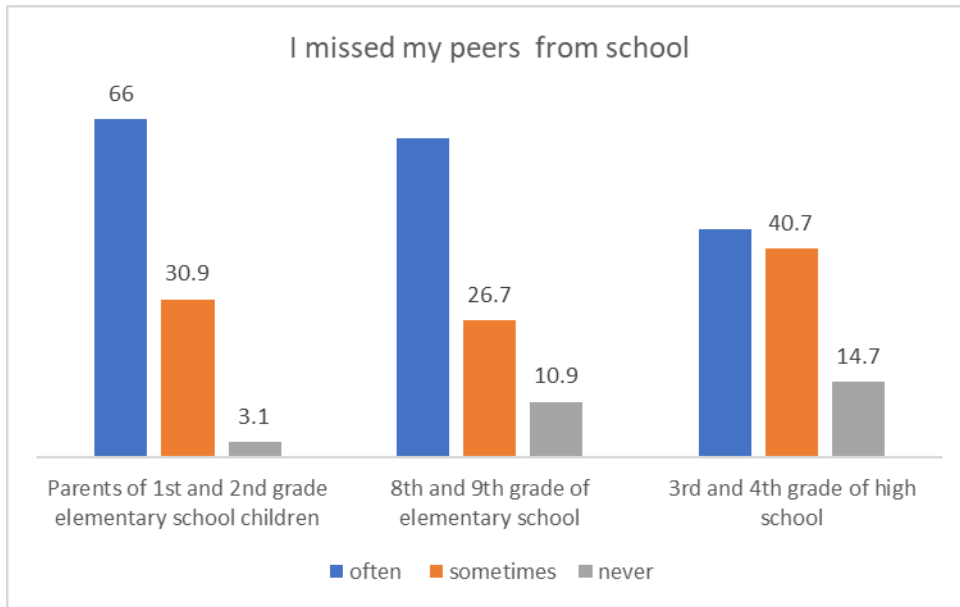
Table No.24 - Assessment of extracurricular activities, clubs and trainings:



More than half of parents (65.9%) stated that their children often missed spending time with their peers at school, while one third (30.7%) of them stated that this sometimes happened, and 13.9% of parents stated that their child was mostly lonely and either played on their own or with family members.

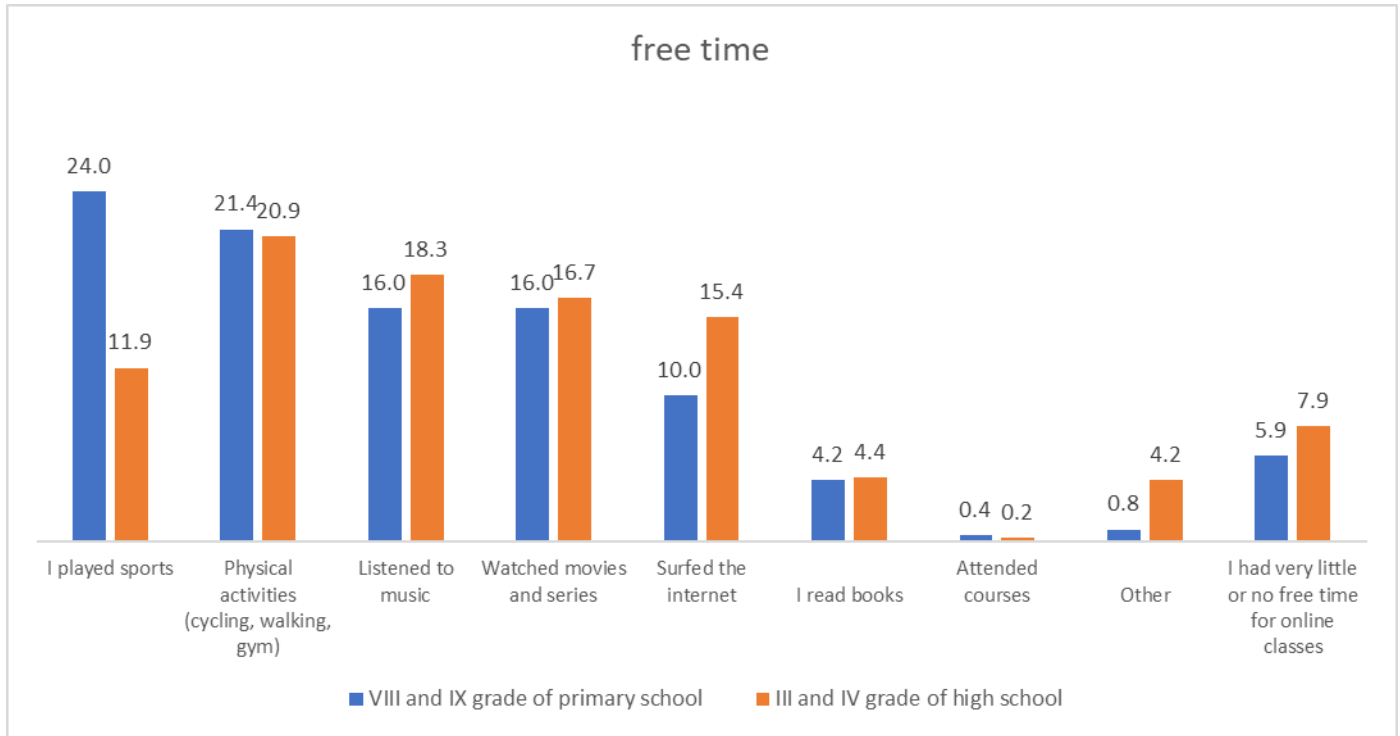
Eighth and ninth grade primary school students also often lacked socializing at school (62.4%). High school students in approximate percentages (44.6% and 40.7%) stated that it was a common case and that sometimes they lacked socializing at school.

Table No.25 - Socializing with peers at school:



Examining the social life of students during the past year, we see that primary school students most often engaged in sports (more often boys) or some other physical activity, cycling or walking (more often girls). High school students also most often practiced walking and cycling and listening to the music. The children spent significantly more free time on social networks and/or playing games, rather than reading books.

Table No.26 – Free time



- **Children with Disabilities**

According to the results of focus groups conducted with parents of children with disabilities, it seems that children with disabilities had too much free time, given that their daily routine was disrupted by restrictive measures and closure of educational institutions, social welfare institutions and parents' associations of children with disabilities.

Parents’ experiences are different in relation to the circumstances in which they live. Thus, children with disabilities who live in the house or had the opportunity to stay in the countryside spent most of their free time in nature with family members, while children who did not have that opportunity spent time in the apartment spending time with family members.

Parents pointed out that they themselves had improvised creative ways to entertain children, trying to carry out part of the activities that children normally carry out with professionals within associations and day care centres. Time will show how successful the parental improvisation was, but one thing is for sure - the parents did not manage to replace the socializing and socialization of the children that they missed the most.

Children who were psychophysically able to use the internet spent most of their time online.

“Every day we invented new games and hobbies to mitigate the change that has come upon us.”

“My son withdrew completely and had no interest in any activity even though we at home really tried everything.”

“My daughter is happiest when we are with the grandmother in the village, she likes to spend time with animals.“

“During this corona time we discovered an application for chess and sudoku, my son was busy with it for 10 hours a day.“

“It meant a lot to us when they allowed us to move. It's easier for all of us when our daughter has the opportunity to go for a walk and spend time outside.“

Statements of parents of children with disabilities – focus groups

- **Children without parental care**

Restrictive measures:

Restriction of movement and making contacts – The ban on visiting and leaving institutions has been introduced in this, as well as in other institutions of social and child protection. After more than a year, by order of May 7, 2021, the visits to the persons accommodated in these institutions, could be organized in accordance with the recommendations of the Institute;

Also, the measure of restriction of movement was valid for the users of this institution, who were not allowed to leave the facility at all for a longer time period, and this measure significantly affected them (more information in the Children without Parental Care section).

Prohibition of school excursions – In a longer period a ban on organizing all school and student excursions, picnics, educational gatherings, etc. was imposed.

Free time – When it comes to this right, the children without parental care, who were in a social and child protection institution, had been in a disadvantaged position compared to the general population. Namely, the change - the easing of measures did not apply to these children, they still had to adhere to the measures that were valid for the institutions of collective accommodation.

Children without parental care, accommodated in the "Mladost" Children's Home, as explained in the previous section, have spent most of the time since the beginning of the pandemic in isolation within their collective accommodation. This fact has placed children without parental care, who live in the institution, in a different position in relation to the general population of children, further limiting them in order to prevent impairment of both their own and general health.

The impossibility of leaving the institution, at least in the allowed intervals (in accordance with the measures that were in power and periods of epidemiological situation development), in addition to exercising the right to education according to children's attitudes and experiences gathered in focus groups, mostly affected them, and their everyday life, feelings and mood.

The children spent their free time in different ways, depending on their age, interests and sensibilities, but also depending on the weather conditions. Namely, children aged 5 to 7 spent time in the yard of the institution whenever the weather conditions allowed it, in organized games alone or with the teachers. Their general impression is that in the first period they enjoyed the freedom they have, because they do not go to school, but over time they got used to it and boredom prevailed. They justify their boredom with the fact that there was not enough content intended for them on the television. They are satisfied with the teachers' efforts to animate them, but they increasingly lacked the opportunity to walk and socialize with their peers outside the institution. Adolescent children were very dissatisfied and sad that their ability to create their free time was limited. Depending on their sensibility, interests and character, they spent time sleeping, playing games, doing sports on the training grounds in the yard, watching series and movies, listening to the music and hanging out with each other. The general impression of these children is that they have been unfairly deprived in comparison to other children and have very quickly begun to resent the opportunities available to them. Children predominantly stated that they miss socializing with their peers the most and that online communication cannot make up for it in the right way. Certain groups of children (mostly girls) stated that they were active on the TikTok social network, and almost throughout the pandemic they actively participated in dance challenges, and devised choreographies and performed in their online world. They mentioned this as a very positive experience. The boys were mostly idle, played games, hung out with each other and played football and basketball if the conditions for that were met (weather conditions, teacher's approval, not enough children for the team...).

It is interesting that none of the focus group participants stated that they read books, acquired a new hobby or engaged in some kind of art.

“We danced all day and filmed for a TikTok. We have a great new choreography from last month - do you want us to show you?!“

“I was bored. I would give everything for a 15 minute walk by the sea. “

“I have never hung out too much with the children from the home, I have a girlfriend and my friends outside. Corona has revealed to me that there are great people among us.“

Statements of the children without parental care – focus group

Conclusion:

In the regular circumstances, daily schedules are organized around school, work, sports, different groups in which we are active, community events. The isolation and different circumstances have changed the daily routine and the organization of free time was a challenge for all children.

The children spent most of their free time online (about 80% of the surveyed children), while a number pointed out that they did not have time for anything else due to school obligations.

Limited socializing with peers is recognized as the biggest challenge in the organization of free time, as well as the impossibility of sports activities, clubs, cultural events, etc.

In these conditions, the children stated as positive that they explored their own capacities with the aim to overcome boredom, by trying to acquire new skills and certain hobbies (cooking, painting, dancing) and with the same aim, to overcome boredom, they watched movies and theatre performances online. In addition, learning about the importance of spending time outside is invaluable and has aroused children's interest in nature and various activities such as: walking, hiking, cycling, and other physical activities. At a time when these activities were available to children, they were unaware of their importance, and the limitations made them look at them from a completely different angle.

Recommendations:

- Provide within local communities various facilities intended for children that will be free, accessible to different ages and categories of children; (Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sports, Local Self-Government)
- Ensure continuity of extracurricular activities, creative clubs, art schools, sports activities. (Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sports, Local Self-Government)

FINAL ASSESSMENT

The general impression in relation to the results of the research is that all participants (children, parents, professionals) answered the questions with a certain distance. Namely, one gets the impression that the respondents accepted the restrictive measures as a “new reality” and avoided a critical review of the changed circumstances. For the most part, they answered: "we are used to it", "we managed", "it's not bad"...

Based on the analysis of the current situation and the results of the conducted research, the Ombudsman noted:

- A pandemic caused by the spread of the Covid-19 virus is an additional risk that leads to mental health issues in children;
- The competent authorities did not develop the methodology for assessing the impact (CRIA) of adopted measures on the exercise of children's rights, with special reference to vulnerable categories;
- Non-involvement of children in the creation and adoption and review of restrictive measures that affect them directly;
- Insufficient legal regulation (the laws, rulebooks, protocols...)of the protection of children's mental health during a pandemic through national regulations and the need for their harmonization with international standards, with special reference to the best interests of the child;

- Insufficient commitment to the implementation of programs to promote the importance of children's mental health, by all sectors and at all levels, during the pandemic and in a child-friendly manner;
- Insufficient number of support programs and services in the community for children and families aimed at adequate growth and development in accordance with individual capabilities and needs;
- Inadequate availability of existing support services within educational, health and social institutions;
- Insufficient cross-sectoral cooperation in the promotion, support and prevention during a pandemic in order to preserve the mental health of a child.
- Inadequate media coverage of the situation caused by the pandemic.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Government of Montenegro

- When adopting restrictive measures aimed at combating the spread of Covid-19 virus, special attention should be paid to the analysis of the impact of a measure on the growth and development of the child, i.e. the realization of guaranteed rights of the child without losing sight of the needs of vulnerable categories of children;
- Ensure the participation of children in the creation and adoption of measures that affect them;
- Ensure that, when switching to online teaching, all children and teachers receive adequate technical support;

Council for fight against Covid-19 virus

- When adopting restrictive measures aimed at combating the spread of Covid-19 virus, special attention should be paid to the impact analysis of a measure on the growth and development of the child, i.e. the realization of guaranteed rights of the child without losing sight of the needs of vulnerable categories of children;
- Ensure the participation of children in the creation and adoption and review of measures that affect them;
- Enable the realization of the educational process within educational institutions, and use the transition to online teaching as the last resort

Child Rights Council

- When adopting restrictive measures aimed at combating the spread of Covid-19 virus, special attention should be paid to the impact analysis of a measure on the growth and development of the child, i.e. the realization of guaranteed rights of the child without losing sight of the needs of vulnerable categories of children;
- Ensure the participation of children in the creation and adoption of measures that affect them;

Ministry of Finance and Social Welfare

- Establish and strengthen various support services for children and families aimed at overcoming the challenges and problems caused by measures for combating the spread of Covid-19 virus;
- Make support services available to all children in an adapted and accessible way;
- Identify families with a history of violence and develop a support plan;
- Establish continuous education and empowerment of children and parents regarding violence;
- Strengthen professional capacities in the area of psychological support for children with disabilities;
- Provide continuous promotion of all support services in a child-friendly way and also in an online space whose dominant users are children and youth (social networks, YouTube, etc.);
- Provide additional psycho-social support and assistance to children living in institutions;
- Provide continuous education for professionals working with children and make them available regardless of where the children live.

Ministry of Health

- Establish various support services for children and families aimed at overcoming the challenges and problems caused by measures for combating the spread of Covid-19 virus;
- Make support services available to all children in an adapted and accessible way;

Ministry of Public Administration, Digital Society and Media

- Make support services available to all children in an adapted and accessible way;
- Adapt media coverage to children, with special emphasis on the protection of children from negative content and direct them to understand the current situation and emergencies in a way that is understandable to them.

Ministry of Justice, Human and Minority Rights

- Define online teaching in national legislation and establish a standard that this type of teaching must meet depending on the age of the child and individual capacities;

Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sports

- Enable the realization of the educational process within educational institutions, and use the transition to online teaching as the last resort;
- Define online teaching in national legislation and establish a standard that this type of teaching must meet depending on the age of the child and individual capacities;
- Adopt professional instructions that would further regulate the manner of planning, organization and implementation of educational work of schools
- Ensure that, when switching to online teaching, all children and teachers receive adequate technical support;
- Continuously educate teachers and students to use different tools, platforms, etc.
- Develop unique platforms and high-quality online content and materials that would enable children to use them as independently as possible, but also to develop more thought processes, problem solving, creativity, critical thinking, in order to make sure children are not just passive consumers of the content.
- Define standards and indicators of the quality of teachers' work in order to make classes more interactive and dynamic, with enough opportunities for asking questions, organising dialogues, discussions, research, independent work, group work, etc.;
- It is necessary to determine the amount and importance of what was missed in the past period and catch up classes by "repeating" the material and supplementing some missed or misunderstood parts and by providing all students with free learning support services (e.g. compensation programs, additional classes...).
- Take care of physical health through extracurricular and sports activities in accordance with safety measures in outdoor areas (school yard, parks, and picnic areas).
- Identify families with a history of violence and develop a support plan;
- Within the Protocol to Combat Violence and Vandalism in Schools, include a section on how to provide support in the case of distance learning to children who are recognized in schools as those who commit violence or have been victims of violence;
- Establish effective and to children accessible way of functioning of psychological and pedagogical services within educational institutions and during online teaching;
- Establish continuous education and empowerment of children and parents regarding violence;

- Strengthen professional capacities in the area of psychological support for children with disabilities;
- Ensure continuous promotion of all support services in a child-friendly way and in an online space whose dominant users are children and youth (social networks, YouTube, etc.);
- Provide additional psycho-social support and assistance to children living in institutions;
- Provide continuous education for professionals working with children and make them available regardless of where the children live;
- Provide within local communities various facilities intended for children that will be free, and accessible to different ages and categories of children;
- Ensure continuity of extracurricular activities, creative clubs, art schools, sports activities.

Bureau for Textbooks and Teaching Aids and Bureau for Educational Services

- Develop unique platforms and high-quality online content and materials that would enable children to use them as independently as possible, but also to develop more thought processes, problem solving, creativity, critical thinking, in order to make sure children are not just passive consumers of the content.
- Define standards and indicators of the quality of teachers' work in order to make classes more interactive and dynamic, with enough opportunities for asking questions, organising dialogues, discussions, research, independent work, group work, etc.;

Agency for Electronic Media

- Adapt media coverage to children, with special emphasis on the protection of children from negative content and direct them to understand the current situation and emergencies in a way that is accessible to them.

Local self-governments

- Establish various support services for children and families aimed at overcoming the challenges and problems caused by measures to combat the spread of the Covid-19 virus;
- Make support services available to all children in an adapted and accessible way (counseling, youth offices, free psycho-social support programs);
- Provide within local communities various facilities intended for children that will be free, and accessible to different ages and categories of children;

- Ensure continuity of extracurricular activities, creative clubs, art schools, sports activities.