



Tracing emotional experiences and the well-being during the pandemic through drawings by Spanish children

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Abstract

The changes in emotions experienced during the pandemic and their effects on children's well-being remain a significant issue. This study analyses 86 drawings created by children aged 5–13, collected in fieldwork conducted through workshops across various regions of Spain. The main objective was to describe how children portray their emotional changes and the resulting impact on their lives within the context of the pandemic. We employed qualitative bottom-up logic to code the drawings using CAQDAS. Findings revealed a discernible emotional impact, expressed more explicitly by girls,

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as well as lasting elements concerning the pandemic and the enduring restrictions on social interactions, even beyond the widespread lockdowns of 2020.

KEYWORDS

adolescence, childhood, drawing, pandemic, well-being

INTRODUCTION

Currently, it is challenging for us to reflect on the past as society increasingly references a return to 'normality'. While such discourse is embedded in collective thinking, we must not overlook or dismiss the profound societal consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly within the most vulnerable social strata, such as children (Berasategi et al., 2020; Varela et al., 2023).

Globally, across numerous countries, the closure of schools during the pandemic confined children to their homes (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2020). This confinement was notably rigid in Spain, enforced through Royal Decree 463/2020 (Grechyna, 2020). The associated regulations propagated a discourse that could potentially stigmatize children, framing them as potential virus transmitters and posing a threat to older generations (Berasategi et al., 2020; Rodríguez-Pascual, 2021). Consequently, health professionals warned about the adverse physical and emotional effects that these measures could impose on minors.

As various studies examining the repercussions of the pandemic for children begin to surface, concerns emerge on multiple fronts. Although most children have experienced milder symptoms at the health level, some have developed severe disease (Torres-Cantero et al., 2022). There is also heightened apprehension about the potential development of multisystem inflammatory syndrome (MIDS) in children, a rare condition associated with COVID-19 (Arango et al., 2021). Furthermore, the closure of sports facilities and restrictions on outdoor activities have notably impacted physical health, contributing to issues such as childhood obesity resulting from sedentary lifestyles (Bueno, 2021; Formoso et al., 2023).

In tandem with the impact on physical health, the mental well-being of children has been significantly compromised, and several studies point directly to the psychological impact of confinement on children (Amorós et al., 2022; Cowie & Myers, 2021; Lillo et al., 2022; Restrepo et al., 2022; Unicef, 2020). Many have struggled with feelings of anxiety, fear, sadness and stress stemming from social isolation, uncertainty and concerns for the health of their loved ones (Idoiaga, Eiguren, Berasategi, Picaza, & Dosil, 2022). This imposed social isolation has additionally hindered the development of social skills due to a lack of interaction with peers (Carter et al., 2023).

At the educational level, the closure of schools and the shift to online learning posed additional challenges for many children, particularly those with limited resources who lacked electronic devices or internet connectivity (García-Gutiérrez et al., 2023; López-Aguado, 2020; López et al., 2020; Medrano et al., 2020). This predicament was particularly exacerbated for children with special educational needs or disabilities (Amorim et al., 2020). The period during which these children were excluded from the educational system has directly affected their academic progress, slowing their learning (Espinosa, 2020). Moreover, the pandemic has accentuated

pre-existing inequalities among the most vulnerable children. Some have even experienced nutritional challenges due to the absence of school canteen services (Save the Children, 2020).

Given the precarious state of child welfare amid the pandemic, it is imperative to continue investigating the long-term impact on the childhood experiences of these vulnerable children as well as assessing their agency and ability to navigate uncertain circumstances. Such efforts are crucial to avoid succumbing to the illusion of false normality that dismisses or erases the pandemic from collective consciousness. Indeed, it remains unclear whether the COVID-19 pandemic will influence the development of mental disorders in minors (Santos et al., 2021). In this regard, the results of such studies could serve as a diagnostic tool, guiding the implementation of programs and interventions aimed at restoring and safeguarding child well-being.

Moreover, this study is relevant for two reasons. First, it represents a research exercise occurring at a later phase or concluding period of the pandemic (officially declared closed by the WHO on May 5, 2023). This temporal positioning enables an assessment of the enduring emotional imprint caused by the pandemic and the 2020 confinements from the perspective of children. Second, the study is particularly relevant in a societal context that, at least initially, imposed exceptionally restrictive containment measures on the lives of children in Europe. Consequently, it is reasonable to assume that these measures have had a pronounced impact on both girls and boys.

The importance of listening to the voices of children in the face of the pandemic: Participatory techniques

The 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, coupled with the inclusive perspective, marks a pivotal turning point, recognizing children as subjects with rights and the child population as an integral part of the social structure (Howarth et al., 2021; Lansdown, 2010; O'Kane, 2008). Therefore, children should actively participate in decision-making programs within both research and policy development (Barker & Weller, 2003; Muscroft, 1999).

In this context, shifting from traditional research paradigms, an inclusive perspective emphasizes conducting research 'with' people, as opposed to 'on' or 'towards' them. (Gaintza et al., 2020; Nind, 2017). Thus, when discussing the experiences and consequences children have faced during and after the pandemic, it is crucial to consider them as active participants in the research process rather than mere objects or informants (Pallisra & y Puyalto, 2014). Recent works have highlighted the active role children might play through their agency in discovering or creating mechanisms to adapt to evolving and challenging circumstances (Oswell, 2021; Wei, 2023).

Within this framework, creative and participatory methodologies challenge the power relations inherent in traditional research approaches (Howarth et al., 2021), affording greater control over the research agenda and providing more time and space for discussing issues of concern (Beresford, 2016; Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995). These methodologies actively involve individuals conventionally seen as objects of research, transforming them into co-researchers. In this regard, various investigations have demonstrated that children tend to articulate more when given the opportunity to draw or utilize supporting images to describe their experiences. This approach redirects attention to elements that might otherwise remain in the background, unveiling aspects of a situation that are difficult to approach through oral or written observations alone (Dockett & Perry, 2005; Schratz & Walker, 1995; Weidel, 1995). Pictures or drawings offer an alternative means of expression, transcending literacy barriers (Young & Barrett, 2001) and yielding a wealth of information in a short period. This approach offers a distinct and more enriching 'new way of

telling' (Fasoli, 2003; Kirova & Emme, 2006; Thomson, 2009). It serves as a powerful means of making the invisible visible and provides a more nuanced understanding of experiences that may be challenging to articulate through traditional forms of communication.

In this context, international research has focused on drawing to describe children's voices and perspectives in the aftermath of the pandemic. Specifically, a study conducted in the Basque Autonomous Community and Navarra analysed the different experiences of 1046 minors during confinement. The children participated by creating drawings as part of a questionnaire, expressing their sadness and fear regarding the possibility of transmitting the virus to their grandparents (Idoiaga, Eiguren, Berasategui, Picaza & Dosil 2022). Similarly, other studies conducted in Spain examining children's drawings during confinement highlight the importance children place on outdoor play and peer interaction (González-Calvo et al., 2022). Additionally, these findings indicate the necessity of considering children's perspectives and emphasize the importance of social and inclusive education, advocating for policies that actively involve children in decision-making processes (Idoiaga, Eiguren, Berasategui, & Ozamiz, 2022).

Similar findings have been reported worldwide. For instance, Kirby et al. (2023) conclude, based on their analysis of children's drawings, that current education systems require reevaluation to better support students in an integral and effective manner. Sarkadi et al. (2023) demonstrated the efficacy of employing drawings as a technique for exploring children's emotional states, allowing for appropriate interventions. Likewise, the importance of capturing the voices of minors to influence public health policies has also been stressed (Thompson et al., 2021), as the implemented measures have resulted in low self-esteem, negative emotions and feelings of abandonment among children and young people (Tishelman et al., 2022; Vettori et al., 2022). Hence, various social spheres, such as education, politics and health, must make concerted efforts to promote child welfare. This approach necessitates children's active and genuine participation, utilizing techniques and methodologies that broaden perspectives to include diverse viewpoints and voices (Dominguez-Serrano & Pérez, 2021).

This article describes an investigation that, based on the analysis of multiple children's drawings collected from an extensive sample across various regions of Spain, seeks to identify the main indicators of the pandemic's impact on children's lives. The comprehensive scope of the study, including the representation of the diverse conditions experienced by children during the pandemic, makes it particularly relevant in a society that, especially in the first wave, implemented uniquely restrictive confinement measures affecting children's daily lives. It should be added that conducting fieldwork in 2022 makes this research particularly valuable, offering new insights into children's well-being at a later phase of the pandemic.

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative research, with an interpretative and phenomenological approach, focuses on the participant's own experiences and perceptions to get closer to their reality. In other words, the experiences of the children who participate in the study constitute the main source of knowledge.

The study is based on an exploratory analysis of a large and diverse sample of $n = 86$ drawings created by children aged 5–13 years. Of these, 54 were created by girls, 26 by boys and 6 drawings could not be attributed to a child of a specific gender. These drawings were collected as part of the fieldwork conducted within the R + D + i INFAPOST project. While other phases of the project also involved group interviews with adolescents and young adults, our focus in this text is on analysing the so-called visual voices of girls and boys (Stirling & Yamada-Rice, 2015), highlighting

the emotional changes that occurred during these earlier developmental stages, in which drawing serves as a particularly expressive medium.

This fieldwork initially comprised seven participatory workshops carried out with children from various social backgrounds and geographical regions in Spain. These workshops were designed to ensure adequate representation along the urban–rural spectrum and to include children from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, including migrant communities. In the final sampling phase, several schools and institutions were invited to nominate children who volunteered to participate. All workshops took place between April and May 2022, except for one held in Barcelona in December, with the majority conducted in publicly funded or privately subsidized schools.

During these workshops, the children were invited to express their feelings about COVID-19 through drawings, prompted by the question, ‘How do you feel when you think about the situation you are going through because of COVID-19?’ Most of the children participating in the research were older than 8 years, so it was not necessary to provide additional clarifications to this question. Only in the case of one of the workshops, where there were participants below this age, were they asked to think about ‘their feelings’, ‘the things they do every day’ or ‘their mood’ during the pandemic as an example. No specific instructions were given regarding the inclusion of textual annotations in the drawings. However, many children spontaneously incorporated text as part of their illustrations. In the second part of the session, children had the option to provide voluntary explanations for their drawings, which were transcribed (In some cases, these texts were translated from other co-official languages other than Spanish, such as Catalan and Basque.) and included in the analysis. Additionally, at least 28 more drawings were collected using the same question during a project event: a participatory workshop for children held in the context of the European Researchers’ Night in September 2022. In this case, only visual material was collected. The participant characteristics are displayed in [Table 1](#).

TABLE 1 Detailed characteristics of the participatory workshops of the INFAPOST project.

Location	Type	Age	No part.	Girls	Boys	Location
Huelva	Urban school	9–10	10	7	3	Private Educational Center
Las Mesas (Cuenca)	Extracurricular-rural	10–12	10	4	6	Municipal local: children at risk of exclusion
Cádiz	Urban school	11–12	7	4	3	Public Educational Center
Sopelana (Bizkaia)	Urban school	10–12	7	4	3	Public Educational Center
Urretxu (Gipuzkoa)	Urban school	12	5	4	1	Public Educational Center
A Coruña	Urban school	9–13	7	4	3	Public Educational Center
Barcelona	Extracurricular: urban	8–10	10	5	5	Socio-educational Center: children at risk of social exclusion
Huelva	Participatory event open to a diverse family audience	5–13	30	23	7	Diverse
Total		5–13	86	55	31	

Source: Authors’ own.

The objectives of the drawing analysis were twofold: (a) to identify signs of emotional shifts in children's well-being during the COVID-19 crisis and (b) to analyse the expressed experiences of children during and after the pandemic crisis. Our analysis focuses specifically on the emotional impact of the pandemic rather than taking a general approach due to the particularly severe and restrictive early phases experienced by Spanish children, as discussed in the introduction. This highlights the importance of investigating the emotional repercussions of the pandemic.

The CAQDAS Atlas.ti software (Version 9) was used to categorize all recognizable visual and textual elements in the drawings. The starting point was a visual analysis employing a strictly inductive or bottom-up coding logic, progressively identifying single elements present in the drawings analysed and the accompanying textual elements until broader categories of analysis emerged. Several analysts resolved potential uncertainties in the coding work, providing an intercoding validation criterion. Most of the analysed material included drawings alluding to the pandemic and small phrases and textual references, all of which were coded. Through this process, at least 518 items were identified and tagged using 230 codes.

Ethical aspects and limitations of the research

In terms of ethical considerations, all children participated voluntarily and were provided with verbal information regarding the research procedure. Additionally, parental written consent was obtained before participating in the study. Throughout the research process, children were reminded on multiple occasions that they could withdraw from the study without facing any consequences and their informed assent was consistently sought to ensure their understanding and willingness to participate. There was also a commitment to safeguarding children from any potential psychological distress or suffering during the fieldwork, as agreed upon with the participating organizations. This research received approval from the Ethics Committee of the UPV/EHU (M10/2021/370).

RESULTS

Through the progressive identification and coding of various visual and textual elements in the drawings, a general impression emerges of what Spanish children express (and how they express it) regarding their emotional experiences during the pandemic. To describe this representation, we initially outline the general evidence found. Subsequent sections will then detail the results concerning the emotional impact of the pandemic reflected in children's representations.

Representations of the pandemic among the Spanish child population

First, a consistent representation emerges across the diverse sample encompassing various geographic and contextual aspects. Despite this diversity, several elements are recurrent. The graph below illustrates the frequency of codes assigned to various graphic and textual elements in the 86 drawings. Specifically, elements appearing five or more times have been selected for analysis.

Graph 1 highlights the high frequency of elements directly related to the health crisis, notably the virus (depicted 91 times) and the mask (38 times). Additionally, representations of the

children themselves are prevalent. Other elements allude to a period characterized by reduced use of public spaces, such as the home, the sun, the clouds and screens. Among these frequent elements, some indicate the emotional state of the child population, including depictions of crying, confinement and the emoticon representing sadness (Figure 1).

Following the initial descriptive coding, the subsequent step involved identifying and categorizing items that depicted an emotional state into two main groups: negative and positive emotions. A total of 213 items were categorized as representing 'negative emotions', while 91 were identified as conveying 'positive emotions'. Due to their significant presence in the collected material, the analysis primarily focuses on the former category. Regarding the distribution of these elements across gender, considering the overrepresentation of girls (who constitute approximately 62% of the sample), the breakdown is as follows: in the 'negative emotions' category, 71.7% of the items were drawn by girls and 28.3% by boys. In the less frequent case of 'positive emotions', 77.9% were drawn by girls, with the remaining 22.1% by boys. Additionally, 138 elements containing textual information inscribed in the drawings were identified. This subset showed a less disparate gender distribution, with 66.3% drawn by girls and 33.6% by boys.

Beyond their strict categorization, the collected drawings allude to a rich and complex emotional expression. Upon closer examination of the drawings and the accompanying textual elements, new interpretations emerge, offering insights into specific aspects of the pandemic.

For example, one notable observation from the analysis reveals expressive differences in how boys and girls represent their experiences. Boys draw action scenes depicting efforts to stop or defeat the virus (see drawings 1 and 2 in the Figure 2 below). In contrast, girls more commonly portray aspects of life and emotional experiences during the pandemic. They frequently resort to self-portraiture (sometimes accompanied by depictions of tears, as in the example provided below). The following figure offers a very expressive sample of these gender-based differences.

These distinct visual representations are further supported by examining the frequency of appearance of labelled elements according to gender. Through coding, the elements drawn by

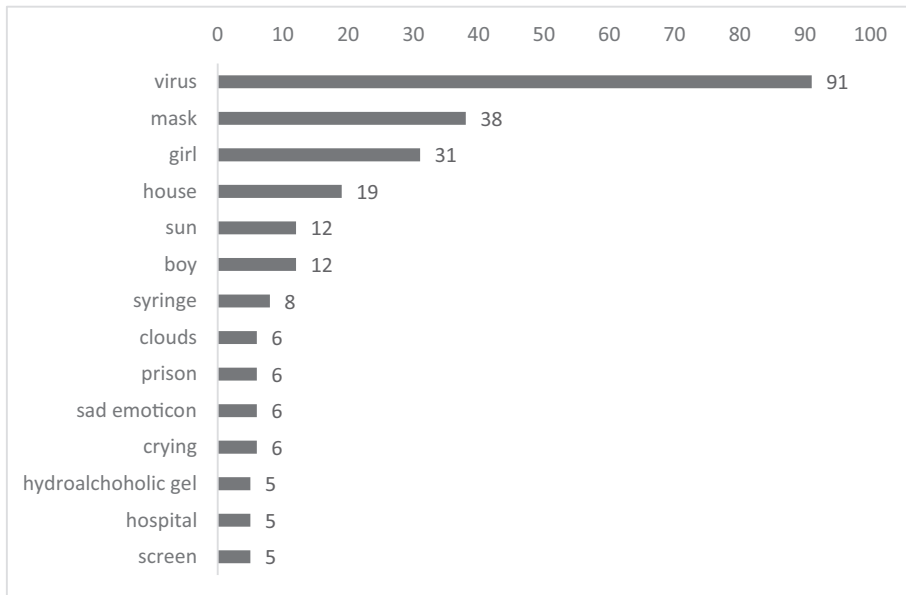


FIGURE 1 Elements with number of appearances in children's drawings ≥ 5 .



FIGURE 2 Different representations expressed by boys and girls. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/cho.12897)]

girls and boys have been labelled, allowing us to identify those that are unique to each gender. In the drawings by girls, unique items include natural elements such as the planet, the rainbow or the stars. Additionally, representations of people and items related to the health environment (women, sick individuals and the Red Cross) and symbols related to the emotional world, such as hearts, skulls, emoticons and smiling monkeys, are prevalent. The list of unique elements in the boys' drawings is comparatively smaller, featuring items such as the police, computers and swimming pools.

This can be further refined by considering the prevalence of the different elements in the drawings of each gender. By calculating the frequency of occurrence of various elements identified in girls' and boys' drawings, we have found that elements related to emotional expression are predominantly identified in drawings created by girls. For instance, sad stick figures (identified in 3 out of 4 instances) or emoticons that express sadness, confinement, or crying (all identified in 4 out of 6 instances) are more prevalent in the girls' drawings. Additionally, elements associated with the health crisis and the healthcare field, such as masks (identified in 26 out of 38 instances), hydroalcoholic gel (identified in 4 out of 5 instances) and antigen tests (identified in 3 out of 4 instances), are also more frequently represented in drawings by girls.

The representation of the restrictive aspects of the pandemic on children's life

The home as an expression of the emotional ambivalences of the pandemic

As expected, in the representation of a pandemic era characterized by significant restrictions on movement and outdoor social activities, our analysis of children's drawings revealed frequent depictions of the home as the central place of life during the pandemic. The home ranks as the fourth most identified element in the set of drawings analysed, appearing in approximately 18%. These representations often feature stereotypical depictions of the home as a single-family dwelling (see figure below). Through the windows, girls and boys are commonly depicted observing life outside—a space they seem to gaze upon longingly from within. This external space is often adorned with radiant suns, trees or clouds. However, it also carries the threat of the virus. Figure 3 illustrates two examples of this type of representation that emphasizes the role of the home as a refuge.

Children's representations also explore the ambivalence characterizing the concept of home during the pandemic. On the one hand, the home is seen as a refuge from contagion and health risks prevalent in the public sphere. However, it is also depicted as a place of confinement and unwelcome seclusion, marked by rigid boundaries that separate children from an external space,

resulting in an interrupted social life. This separation leads to diminished social relations, cultivating a sense of isolation and negative emotions such as frustration and sadness.

The following drawing in Figure 4, created by a 9-year-old girl during one of the workshops held in Barcelona, serves as a poignant example of this ambivalence and its potential emotional significance. The drawing illustrates what should have happened just outside the house—the family celebration of her birthday. However, pandemic restrictions have prevented this. The solitary cake outside the house vividly symbolizes the rigid boundary imposed by the walls of the home for many children during the pandemic—both physical and pertaining to social relationships. The accompanying text provided by the child herself further describes the drawing.

Prison as a metaphor for children's lives during the pandemic

It is striking how children from various parts of Spain share a common representation of the pandemic, symbolized by an image of a prison. We have identified up to six drawings from different



FIGURE 3 Representations of the home as a refuge. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions)]

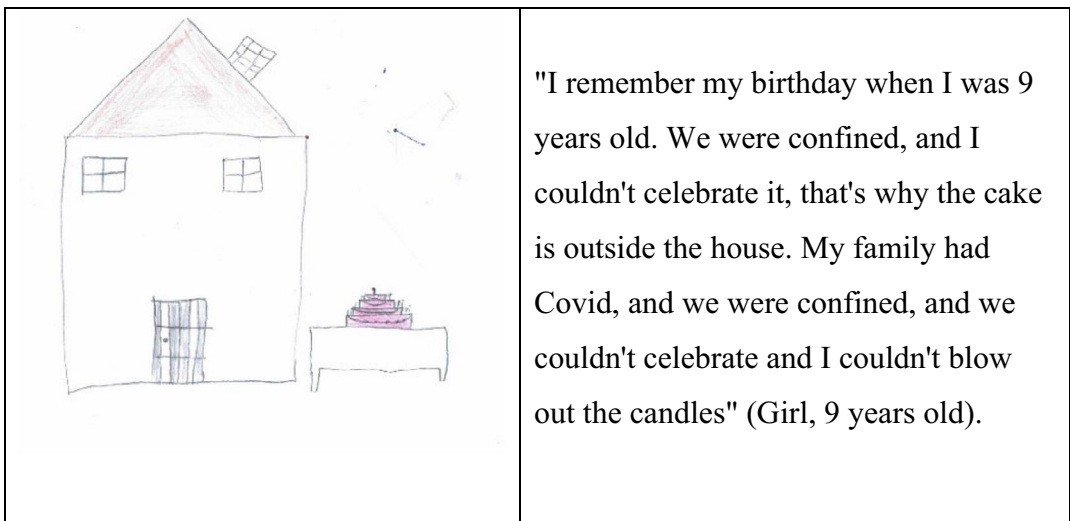


FIGURE 4 Representation of home as a space of confinement. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions)]

locations, seemingly unrelated, where this symbolism appears. In these depictions, a boy or girl is represented with a sad expression, confined behind thick bars. This imagery is presented in a schematic design for the younger children and in more detail, as exemplified in the drawing in [Figure 5](#). This particular drawing even includes an explicit text entitled ‘pandemic prison’.

Emotional changes during the pandemic and their representation

Through their drawings, children have frequently addressed the theme of the pandemic and its changing emotional impact, especially during its most restrictive period. The drawings reveal various levels of emotional change among the child population during this time.

In this regard, we have catalogued multiple expressions of emotional dissatisfaction that children have added to their drawings. These expressions also serve as examples of child agency, enabling them to critically assess the pandemic situation. Literal examples extracted from the category of textual information spontaneously inscribed in the drawings include phrases such as ‘shitty life with the coronavirus’, ‘I have COVID, I’m dying’, ‘Do I sometimes feel uncomfortable or sad?’ ‘shit, what to do’, ‘I’m bored, I hate my life’. These expressions often accompanied drawings

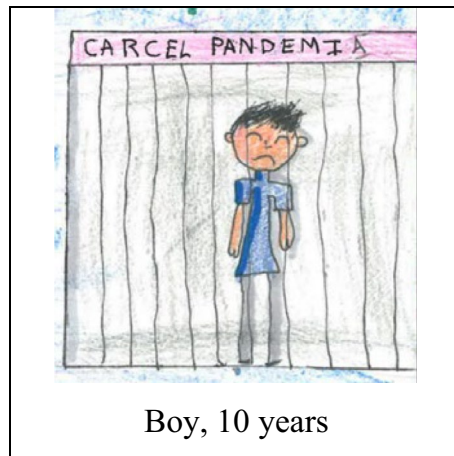


FIGURE 5 Example of the representation of the pandemic as a prison for children. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

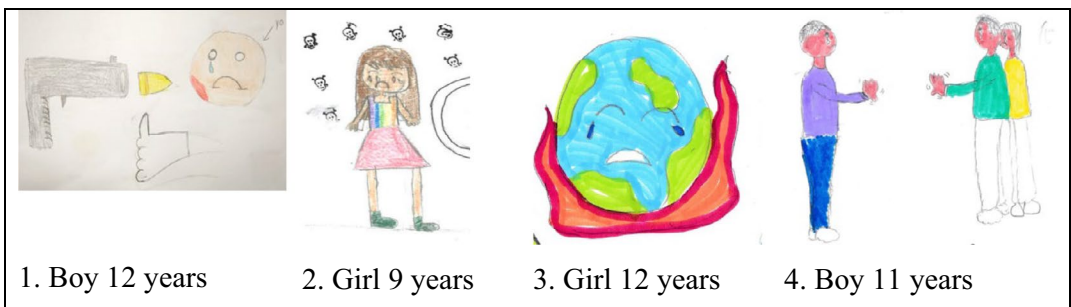


FIGURE 6 Different representations of emotional suffering: Self-harm, sadness and separation from loved ones. [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

depicting various forms of emotional change, including distressing feelings, experienced during the pandemic. In the [Figure 6](#), we have collected some samples of these drawings, alluding to diverse but closely connected aspects, such as self-harm (drawing 1), sadness represented personally or on the planet (drawings 2 and 3) and also sadness at the farewell or separation of older people or relatives (3).

The drawings also depict the pandemic as a period of mental and emotional change. In several instances, children have illustrated vignettes labelled with a 'before' and 'after', representing the onset and conclusion of the March 2020 confinements. In these drawings, they are initially portrayed as happy inside the house, not attending school and playing video games. Repeated confinement-related actions are sometimes depicted ('at 8 o'clock, clap your hands'). However, in the 'after' scenes, they are represented as overwhelmed, lying in bed or even sick (as shown in drawing 1, [Figure 7](#)).

In other instances, the drawing sequence suggests a temporal thread (as depicted in drawing 2, in the following figure), starting in an outdoor setting and culminating in a representation of confinement or prison ([Figure 7](#)).

The details in the drawing by an 11-year-old Basque boy ([Figure 8](#)) are particularly expressive, capturing both the physical and emotional confinement experienced during the pandemic. This drawing vividly portrays the ambivalence between the acute childhood capacity to express complex emotions and the evident emotional strain induced by the pandemic. In the illustration, he depicts himself lying down with a nervous expression, shouting and clutching his head. The accompanying explanatory text, originally in Basque, explicitly references the emotional stress endured during the pandemic. Notably, the boy has included a depiction of a broken lamp, referred to in his text, positioned to the side. The text conveys a sense of feeling 'stuck' in an unpleasant situation [I was kind of stuck]. However, it demonstrates the richness of infantile representation, conveying this feeling with particular precision and symbolic complexity. The notion of 'being stuck' carries a dual meaning, referring both to physical confinement and the perceived inability to escape a state of nervousness and discomfort.

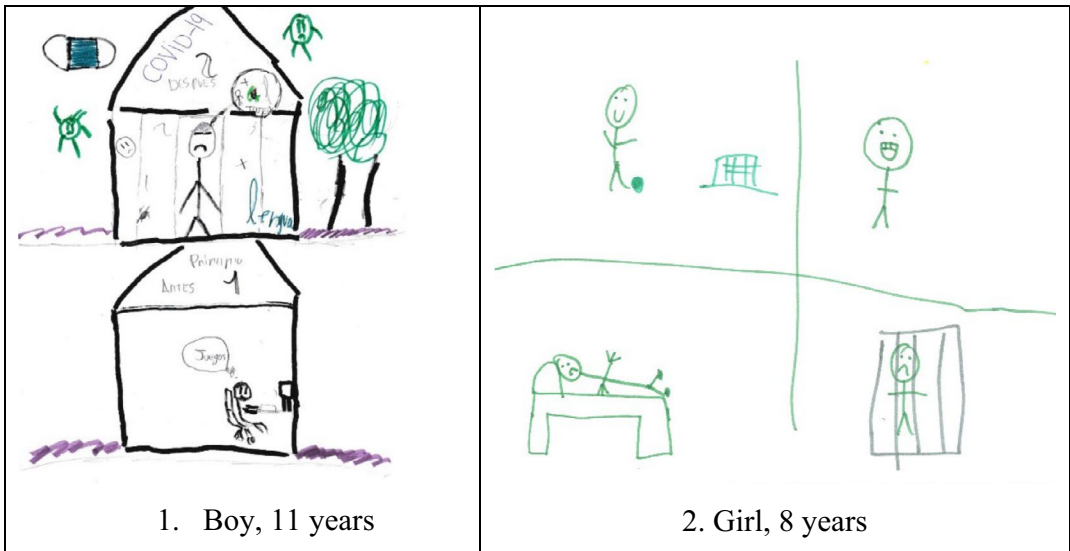


FIGURE 7 Drawings illustrating a 'before and after'. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com)]

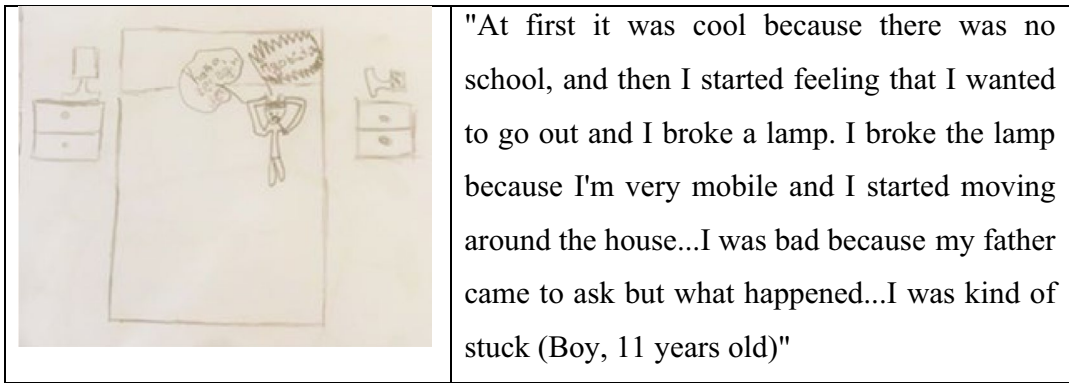


FIGURE 8 The pandemic period as a process of physical and emotional confinement. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/cho.12897)]

DISCUSSION

Despite being collected in the latter stages of the pandemic, the drawings analysed provide substantial evidence indicating that this period is persistently remembered as one marked by emotional change. Recent research also supports this notion (Sabat et al., 2024).

In broad terms, the drawings in our analysis effectively depict the restrictions of pandemic life and their impact on children, along with distinctive aspects related to the key elements of this challenging period within the context of Spanish society, which is consistent with other studies. For instance, they point to the pandemic as a context of uncertainty for the child population (Kirby et al., 2023) while also conveying a yearning for open spaces (González-Calvo et al., 2022), and highlighting significant negative emotions and signs of emotional distress (Idoiaga, Eiguren, Berasategi, & Ozamiz, 2022; Idoiaga, Eiguren, Berasategi, Picaza, & Dosil, 2022; Tishelman et al., 2022; Vettori et al., 2022). This holds true even in environments with less restrictive measures, such as Sweden (Sarkadi et al., 2023).

Our analysis indicates that girls have predominantly chosen to represent emotional discomfort, creating a visual discourse that more effectively communicates the profound impact of the pandemic on global health and emotions (Amorós et al., 2022). Conversely, boys tended to create images more closely associated with action and screens (López et al., 2020; Medrano et al., 2020). Comparing our findings with the existing literature, our research identifies a notable portrayal of childhood emotional change, both in written and visual form. This results in a complex and ambivalent representation, showing children's ability to observe and critically evaluate the pandemic context and its effects on their lives while offering clear insights into the emotional impact they have represented in their drawings. Moreover, we can observe a clear link between the pandemic and the concept of seclusion as a process contributing to emotional dissatisfaction. This connection seems particularly pronounced in Spanish society, which experienced stringent restrictions impacting the child population. Notably, these aspects persist in the visual discourse of both girls and boys long after the most restrictive confinements of 2020, highlighting the idea that the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on child and adolescent emotional well-being may endure over time and should continue to be monitored.

CONCLUSIONS

Through their visual or graphic expressions, children have critically represented the pandemic's profound impact on their lives, offering insights into how these experiences will be etched into their childhood memories. The expressive nature of children's drawings makes this a valuable technique for understanding the nature and extent of the emotional impact suffered by the child population during the pandemic. We hope that studies like the one presented here will contribute to establishing this method as a useful tool in social research and social intervention involving children.

This study also has certain limitations that should be considered. There is an overrepresentation of girls in the sample, and certain regions of Spain are not adequately represented. Additionally, the research has taken a broad approach, making it difficult to specifically describe the impact of the pandemic on particularly vulnerable groups of children, such as those with disabilities. Future research should aim to include a more diverse range of geographical areas within Spain and focus on specific vulnerable groups of children to facilitate comparative studies.

Consequently, this type of analysis can help design strategies for adapting to anomalous or disrupted contexts to mitigate the potential negative effects on the well-being of younger generations. This evidence must also be considered as we enter the post-pandemic period, as it reveals a significant emotional imprint and highlights the necessity of formulating social policies that prioritize the experiences and opinions of children. Given the growing importance of mental health and emotional well-being for all individuals, employing techniques such as storytelling and drawing for emotional expression in childhood offers a valuable and complementary approach to other instruments. This would involve integrating objective and standardized measures with subjective interpretation. By adopting this approach, we can address the low visibility of children's perspectives during the pandemic and ensure their viewpoints are central in shaping post-pandemic strategies.

We want to emphasize that the continued presence of representations depicting deep emotional complexity, often accompanied by elements of criticism and dissatisfaction from the child population, highlights the necessity of implementing child-centred public policies. Insights presented in this research could inform child-centred policy' in relation to children's well-being, achieving a better quality of life in childhood and therefore a social transformation. These policies should aim to restore the emotional well-being of this population and also prioritize the interests and rights of both girls and boys in our reflections on the post-pandemic context.

Finally, our findings can offer valuable insights for informing the design of preventive measures in similar circumstances. These actions could involve establishing voluntary support networks to identify and alleviate feelings of loneliness, stress and emotional distress in children. Additionally, we recommend enhancing training in emotional competencies from an early age to strengthen their responses to crises or significant emotional changes. It is proposed that all these actions, whether preventive or aimed at enhancing children's resilience, be systematized into a protocol that integrates the resources of educators, families and social workers to prepare for future adverse situations.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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