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## EFFECTS OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON CHILD HEALTH IN THE HANOVER REGION: SCHOOL ENTRY DATA AND A PARENT SURVEY

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### ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** Federal law in Germany requires a physical examination and developmental assessment for every child before school entry. Due to general distancing rules and social contact restrictions in addition to reduced attendance in kindergarten, pre-schoolers had less possibilities of interaction with other children and less access to early childhood support in kindergarten and other facilities. The consequences of the pandemic can be seen in the school entry data in the Hanover region. In addition a voluntary parent survey was conducted. **Method:** School entry data of the Hanover Region of the children starting school in the summer of 2019 are compared with the results of the corresponding cohort of 2021. A voluntary parent survey is conducted since 2020 concerning daily activities and wellbeing of children and their families during the pandemic. **Results:** The data of the school entry examination of the 2021 cohort show an increase of overweight or obesity (14,4 %) to the cohort of 2019 (10,4 %). The rise of overweight and obesity was especially marked in socially disadvantaged children. There is also a shift from mild to severe language deficiencies between 2019 and 2021 (12,2 % severe language deficiencies in 2019, 15,1% in 2021). More children receive speech therapy in 2021. Additionally an increase of media consumption and a decrease in general sport activities and swimming can be noted. In the voluntary survey, taken during the COVID-19 pandemic, parents observed an increase of sadness and rage attacks in their children. Children more often had sleeping disorders, stomach-ache, headache or loss of appetite. The longer the COVID-19 pandemic lasted, the higher the share of effected children became. **Discussion:** Mandatory school entry examinations are valuable in detecting special needs in individual children. The results of the school entry examinations deliver precious insights between the cohorts especially during unforeseen events like the COVID-19 pandemic. Children's health and developmental possibilities had suffered during the COVID-19 pandemic. These findings are a strong call for action. Prevention programs targeting at more sports, healthier nutrition, better language development and less media consumption should be started for preschool children, preferably focussing socially disadvantaged children.

### KEY WORDS

Child Health, School entry data