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Tests on children aged from three months to three years old suggest their cognitive development has been held back by the coronavirus pandemic.

Children born during the coronavirus pandemic have significantly reduced verbal, motor and overall cognitive performance compared with children born before, a US study suggests.

The first few years of a child's life are critical to their cognitive development. But with Covid-19 triggering the closure of businesses, nurseries, schools and playgrounds, life for infants changed considerably...

With limited stimulation at home and less interaction with the world outside, pandemic-era children appear to have scored shockingly low on tests designed to assess cognitive development...

In the decade preceding the pandemic, the mean IQ score on standardised tests for children aged between three months and three years of age hovered around 100, but for children born during the pandemic that number tumbled to 78, according to the analysis...

"It's not subtle by any stretch," said Deoni. "You don't typically see things like that, outside of major cognitive disorders."

The study included 672 children from the state of Rhode Island. Of these, 188 were born after July 2020 and 308 were born prior to January 2019, while 176 were born between January 2019 and March 2020.

Those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds fared worse in the tests, the researchers found.

The biggest reason behind the falling scores is likely the lack of stimulation and interaction at home, said Deoni. "Parents are stressed and frazzled ... that interaction the child would normally get has decreased substantially."

Whether these lower cognitive scores will have a long-term impact is unclear. In the first few years of life, the foundations for cognition are laid, much like building a house - it's easier to add rooms or flourishes when you're building the foundation, Deoni said.

Given this data comes from a relatively affluent part of the US, where social support and unemployment benefits are generous, the fear is that things could be worse in poorer parts of the country and the world, he added.

Sir Terence Stephenson, a Nuffield professor of child health at University College London, said the research was interesting given much has been written about the impact on the education of school-age children, but not much has come out on infants.

The key factor influencing these lower scores in infants has likely been stress on parents who faced challenges in both working and providing full-time attentive childcare, he said. "Perhaps not surprising that children from lower socioeconomic families have been most affected as this resonates with many of the other financial, employment and health impacts of the pandemic."

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