

The Impact of COVID-19 Crisis on the Wellbeing of Children

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Abstract

The crisis of COVID-19 has disrupted everyone's life all over the world. The global pandemic is not only a health emergency, but also a challenge that humankind has not faced ever. Though children have been largely spared from the direct effects of this global crisis, they risk being amongst the ones facing the colossal damage. The crisis is exceptional and has posed an entirely new set of challenges for child's exacerbated existing vulnerabilities. Also, this pandemic is likely to have a particularly pernicious impact on the children living in poverty. Furthermore, countrywide lockdown imposed by the government to bring down overall transmission has increased the crisis of wellbeing. The condition is intensified by the lack of interaction with school friends, peers and teachers, and lack of access to services provided by the school. Children in conflict settings, as well as crowded situations are also at considerable risks. For many, the growing crisis has increased the risk of abuse, child labour, mental stress and behavioral risks. Therefore, the aim of this article is to highlight the effects pandemic is having on children's life.

Keywords: *children, child's wellbeing, COVID-19, India, pandemic*

Introduction

India declared the Coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak an "informed disaster" on 14th March 2020. The outbreaks posed a whole new set of challenges in everyone's life. Although children are not the face of this crisis and mostly spared from its direct health effects, it has a profound effect on their wellbeing. As the crisis of COVID-19 spreads around the world, it is transforming children's everyday life. The pandemic has intensified the risks of malnourishment, chances of ill-treatment, isolation and likelihood of being exposed to abuse at home. It is probable that these events will cause more damage to the children belonging to vulnerable groups.

The child's wellbeing includes development across all the domains; those are physical, cognitive, emotional and social. Child's wellbeing is essential to enable them to successfully overcome difficulties. Hence, a positive wellbeing promotes right conditions for learning and development. The United Nations policy brief (2020) highlights that children of all ages, in all the countries are being affected by the global pandemic. Further, the COVID-19 crisis poses challenges to children's wellbeing in all the domains. According to the data shared by

Women and Child Development Ministry of India, the Childline received more than 92,000 SOS calls asking for protection from abuse and violence against children during the first 11 days of lockdown. Hence, this paper aims to capture the issues children are facing in this pandemic.

Impact on emotional wellbeing

We all, children notwithstanding are trying to understand the overwhelming uncertainty before us because of the worldwide pandemic. Although children are not so much at risk of infection, they are most vulnerable due to chances of being parted from their loved ones. The reports show children may experience a series of psychological issues such as worry, fear, anxiety, loss of appetite and difficulty in sleeping (Jacob *et al* 2020).

During the crisis, worries of adults can be transferred to children and make them restless and fearful. Without an opportunity for outdoor play and socialisation, children can become easily bored, angry and frustrated. This crisis would have made them even more socially isolated when they would emerge out of this situation (WHO, 2020). For many children, home may not be a safe place— either because it never was or it has become unsafe now due to the crisis. For children the impact of this crisis

might be life-long. The pandemic has created a situation where there is uncertainty, and the lockdown has restricted movement. There is overcrowding at home with many people being around all the time. All of this creates a high-stress home environment and children are generally exposed to diverse forms of abuse. For children who cannot access any e-learning resources that are being provided, there is also an added risk of shame or embarrassment.

Discrimination and stigma related to COVID-19 may make children more vulnerable to abuse and psychosocial distress (UNICEF, 2020). Both direct and indirect exposure of children to physical abuse, psychological aggression and/or neglect by caregivers at a very early age leave permanent wounds in the form of impaired development of brain and psyche, neuro-psychiatric disorders and higher rates of psychosomatic, multiple substance abuse and suicidal thoughts (Tsavoussis *et al* (2013); Al Odhayani *et al* (2013); Iram Rizvi and Najam (2014).

The fear of losing loved ones from COVID-19 infection is most obvious among children who are dealing with immense anxiety and emotional stress brought by the pandemic and lockdown (Shelar, 2020). Large numbers of children are likely to miss out on vaccinations due to postponement of routine vaccinations (GAVI, 2020).

Impact on physical wellbeing

Physical wellbeing represents not just a disease-free life. It includes a healthy lifestyle; stable state of body and mind but the restrictive movements have changed the whole lifestyle. Lockdown during this pandemic has implications for children's physical health. Constrained access to schools, clinics, clean drinking water, and sanitation is a particular threat to the vulnerable populations, and the lack of child protection particularly harmful to children in need of safety (Fore, 2020).

Due to decreased physical activity and too much consumption of fast food, children from privileged sections of the society may become overweight. In contrast, children from less privileged sections of society may suffer from malnourishment. Furthermore, excessive screen time during lockdown may cause eye strain and other behavioral issues (Kinikar & Kulkarni, 2020).

School closure may heighten food insecurity for children, who depend on mid-day meal programs (Jamal 2020). Further adverse effects include delays in seeking care for illnesses which are not related to coronavirus. Other effects vary from delayed medical attention to omissions of routine vaccinations of children due to parent's fears of exposure to corona virus in hospitals.

Impact on intellectual wellbeing

Increased digitalization is likely to extend inequalities between children, as poor children are least likely to have the tools to access on-line education and have a quiet environment in their home to focus on their studies. There may be long-lasting effects of this education-gap. Further, regular schedules have been disturbed without knowing when the schools will be reopened (Jacob *et al*, 2020). Therefore, children are missing the consistent reinforcement of their learning at school and all the chances to expand their existing knowledge. Since there is lack of opportunities for intellectual nourishment, some children are likely to regress even more than they would during a usual break from school (Robson, 2020). It's not just the lack of learning opportunities; however, the more serious concern is a reversion that will be much harder to remedify. This could result in severe lifelong impact on cognitive abilities of children.

Besides the disruption in the school year, there is a risk of prolonged out-of-school learning which may lead to isolation of children and exacerbation of existing inequalities. Due to lack of resources, the learning gap will also widen between children from lower and higher-income families during the institute closure (Van Lancker & Parolin, 2020). Nor will these inequalities end once the schools start to re-open. A study by Andrew *et al* shows that poor families are less eager to let their children return to schools (Robson, 2020).

Impact on social wellbeing

The worldwide school closure has no precedence. All over the world, 188 countries have enforced countrywide closures of schools, affecting more than 1.5 billion children and youth (UNESCO, 2020). Making real life connections, and spending time with friends and peers, is much easier when you're regularly meeting someone (Robson 2020). But due to lockdown, children have limited or no

opportunity for socialization which is making them angry and easily frustrated (Kumar et al 2020). The UNICEF (2020) report stated that the COVID-19 lockdown in India has adversely impacted the education of over 247 million school children enrolled in elementary and secondary schools, apart from the 28 million attending pre-school classes in the countries' many Anganwadi centres.

School is not only an educational hub for children, but also a home away from the home with ample free space. Besides providing education, schools offer a window to freedom, scope of interaction with fellows and seniors. Schools play an enlightening role in promoting social interactions, personal hygiene, physical activity, and healthy food habits (Sylva, 1994). A school is a support system for many children living in difficult circumstances and constrained access school is a particular threat to these children. School also provides a safe space for children while parents are at work.

Children may become increasingly engrossed in social media and increased unsupervised on-line internet can also magnify risks of sexual exploitation and cyber-bullying. "Child Abuse materials" seeking activity are rising as children are expected to be less supervised, having more online exposure and are thus easy targets (Closure of schools, 2020). Children's dependency on online platforms for distance learning has also magnified their risk of exposure to unsuitable content and online predators (UN Policy Brief, 2020).

Conclusion

However, children who contract COVID-19 seem to have less severe symptoms and lower mortality rates than other age groups at least till date. But in many other ways, the crisis is having a profound effect on children's wellbeing, with potentially long-term negative impacts. The accompanying economic crisis during the pandemic is putting poor children at even greater risk and increasing their existing vulnerabilities. The data from various global as well as national reports it is apparent that a large student population is out of school, and widespread economic insecurity is likely to increase violence against children- child labor, sexual exploitation, and child marriage. School closures, though, is an important way to stave off the spread of COVID-19, but chances are that it could result in increased social isolation for the young population. Stress on families, lockdowns and constrained freedom of movement, may increase the prevalence of violence at home. The reports and articles reviewed, child safety and wellbeing came out to be a major concern during pandemic. Hence special care of children is one of the most important task during this time and for this we all have to work together. It is necessary to give children correct information of what is happening around the globe so they overcome the difficulties of this period and come out stronger. Though children are resilient, families need to make children feel secure and loved, spend quality time, look out for emotional cues and talk to them about the same. Our Government, media and community need to support families so that children come out from this pandemic mentally and physically healthy and stronger.

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