Inclusion in ECE and Mental Health of Children with Special Needs

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The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) affected virtually all countries. Uncertain about the health risk and an increasing financial loss will contribute to widespread emotional distress and an increased risk of psychiatric disorders shortly. Posttraumatic, anxiety, and depression disorders are expected during and aftermath of the pandemic. Some groups, like children, have more susceptibility to having long term consequences in mental health. COVID-19 has brought about a complex array of factors that have an impact on the mental health of children and adolescents.

Predictability is a stabilizing force for children and adolescents, but it has been disrupted since the COVID-19 outbreak. Children have many worries related to the consequences of COVID-19 such as whether they will see their friends and relatives, go to school or get sick. It is often difficult for parents to calm their children's anxieties because of the uncertainty in their lives. Parents are typically adept at making plans for their children, but future plans are currently on hold. The challenges facing parents may interfere with their usual ability to address their children's emotional needs.

New supportive strategies have appeared during this pandemic, but there is no measure of its effectiveness. Some groups seem to be more vulnerable to the mental health burden of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the mitigation actions should prioritize them. The school's role appears to be revalued by society. This review seems to pick good targets to prioritize mitigation actions aiming to spare children not only from the severe cases of COVID-19 but also to help them to deal with the mental health burden of the pandemics.

Inclusion, as we have studied, experienced or heard about, can be of several types. It can be based on cultural differences, economic differences, language based, or on the basis of our abilities & disabilities. The coronavirus pandemic led us to the online mode of learning which according to studies & perspectives, has not been able to replace the offline mode of learning. Rather, is only a supplement to real learning. My personal emphasis in this article is therefore, on Children with special Needs of the country who are struggling in order to get an education during the pandemic.

Children's mental health during the pandemic

There are about 1 in every 6 children within the age group of 2-8 years who have some or the other neurodevelopmental, behavioural or emotional difficulty . These children with special needs [autism, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, cerebral palsy, learning disability, developmental delays and other behavioural and emotional difficulties etc] encounter challenges during the current pandemic and lockdown. They have intolerance for uncertainty and there is an aggravation in the symptoms due to the enforced restrictions and unfriendly environment which does not correspond with their regular routine.

Also, they face difficulties in following instructions, understanding the complexity of the pandemic situation and doing their own work independently. With the closure of special schools and day care centres these children lack access to resource material, peer group interactions and opportunities of learning and developing important social and behavioural skills in due time may lead to regression to the past behaviour as they lose anchor in life, as a result of this their symptoms could relapse . These conditions also trigger outburst of temper tantrums, and conflict between parents and adolescents.

Although prior to the pandemic, these children had been facing difficulties even while attending special schools, but in due course they had learnt to develop a schedule to adhere to for most of the time of the day . To cater to these challenges, it is difficult for parents to handle the challenged children and adolescents on their own, as they lack professional expertise and they mostly relied on schools and therapists to help them out. Since every disorder is different, every child has different needs to be met.

The children with autism find it very difficult to adapt to the changing environment. They become agitated and exasperated when anything is rearranged or shifted from its existing setup.

They might show an increase in their behavioural problems and acts of self-harm. It is a huge challenge for parents to handle autistic children during lockdown. The suspension of speech therapy and occupational therapy sessions could have a negative impact on their skill development and the achievement of the next milestone, as it is difficult for them to learn through online sessions.

The children with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), struggle to make meaning of what is going around them from the cues they get from their caregivers. It is difficult for them to remain confined to a place and not to touch things, which might infect them. Due to being confined to one place the chances of their hyperactivity increases along with heightened impulses and it becomes difficult for the caregivers to engage these children in meaningful activities .

Obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) among the children and adolescents is estimated to be of 0.25%–4% among children and adolescents . Children with OCD are suspected to be one of the most affected ones by this pandemic. Due to obsessions and compulsions related to contamination, hoarding, and somatic preoccupation, they are expected to experience heightened distress.

Hoarding disorder has also been heightened in children and adults.Cleanliness is one key protective measure against the spread of COVID-19. According to United Nations' policy guidelines to fight the infection one has to be careful about washing their hands six times a day, and whenever they touch anything. The lockdown, which has made the healthy population distressed about possessing enough food and prevention related resources like masks and sanitizers, has made it worse for people with hoarding disorder.

Inclusion of Children with Special Needs is not entirely based on the infrastructural level, instead, it also requires a quality level of interest, effort & support from the teacher, peers & parents. The online mode of education has made it difficult for regular school learners to attend classes, and gain a decent amount of understanding towards the concept. One can only think about these children who require a higher amount of practical & hands on activity-based learning. For example, a regular school

student sitting in front of his/her desktop taking notes and listening carefully to the teacher's explanation. Whereas, a student suffering from a mental health disorder, struggling to focus on the monotonous lecture being delivered by the teacher and then expected to write exams based on it. I believe that one can take a moment to think about this from the child's perspective.

Inclusive environments are characterised by repeated and impromptu interactions, which support all children in social, emotional and behavioural development. When children with disabilities or differing abilities attempt to engage their peers in social interaction, typically developing children with experience in inclusive environments respond to these initiations and progress relationships by initiating interactions, negotiating sharing and developing an understanding of other children.

Additionally, children with experience of inclusive environments have been found to approach play with a stronger focus on fairness and equity and utilise more targeted ways to include diverse counterparts in their play. But, in today's situation where the schools have been shut and instead of social interactions, we are being motivated towards maintaining social distancing, it has created a hindrance in children's social and cognitive development.

Role of teachers/educators/facilitators

Establish a trustworthy & a safe environment for all students.

Start by sharing your own struggles, experiences and fears about learning i.e. talk to them instead of only delivering the lecture. Survey your students and try to find out the possible hindrances that could be rectified.

Select resources which promote inclusive learning.

The online mode of learning comes with advantages as well. It has given us the space to look for resources and material online, select videos, graphic aids etc. One can conveniently find interesting resources which also cater to inclusive learning.

Reflect on your beliefs about teaching to enhance self-awareness and commitment to inclusion

Taking time to reflect on your experiences, assumptions about your learners, and online

learning in general is critical to practice as it provides insights into small changes you can make to foster inclusive teaching and learning.

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