

**A SHORT REVIEW ON COVID 19 AND CHILD PSYCHE: IMPACT
AND PROBABLE REMEDIAL MEASURES****Kuntal Gupta***

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World Health Organization (WHO) has declared the 2019 Corona Virus Disease (COVID-19) outbreak an international public health emergency in January, 2020. Majority of world's population is primarily restricted to their homes, owing to nation-wide lockdowns and home-confinement strategies. In addition to physical sufferings, the consequences of this quarantine on the mental health and well-being at personal and population-levels are many folds. Studies showed that the pandemic has increased long term adverse consequences on children and adolescents particularly in the psychological domain compared to adults. The present review aimed to

focus on various studies carried out since the outbreak of COVID-19 and its psychological effect on the younger children and the adolescent population. It is concluded from several studies that the nature and extent of this impact depend on several factors such as the age, education level, pre-existing mental health condition, socioeconomic status, state of infection or fear of infection and many more. Studies indicated that young children express more attachment, sleep disturbance, nightmares, poor appetite, inattentiveness and significant separation problems. Adolescents, on the other hand, showed increased use of internet and social media predisposes them to use internet compulsively, access objectionable content. Remedial measures at various levels such as family, educational institution, society have been suggested in various studies and in this role of parents, teachers, psychological counsellors, pediatricians are particularly emphasized.

KEYWORDS: COVID-19, Mental Health, Children, Adolescent, Parents.

INTRODUCTION

The children of the world constitute about 28% and the teen agers constitute about 16% of the world population^[1] (UNICEF, 2019). The leading cause of disability worldwide in adolescents and children is the Mental disorders. Adolescence is the most vulnerable period of time in the life of an individual when mental illness can affect him/her most likely.^[2] Thirty percent of the leading causes of disability in people between the ages of 15 and 44 are mental disorders, and the other causes are often associated with mental disorders.^[3] COVID-19 has affected the lives of children and adolescents people around the world more than the other age group in the society.^[4] The World Health Organization (WHO) acknowledged this coronavirus epidemic as a pandemic and declared the outbreak as a public health emergency of international concern Isolation and social distancing strategies have been adopted in all countries throughout world to protect from the risk of infection of COVID-19.^[5] Lockdowns and containment have been started in India since early part of 2020 in various part of the world including India. The spread of the virus has caused global economic and social disruptions and has brutally overwhelmed the healthcare and educational systems. All the educational institutions and Institutes have been closed since that period throughout the world. By the middle of the year 2020, have closed schools and educational facilities were closed in 143 countries worldwide due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This affected about 67.6% of students globally.^[2] It has forced several countries to implement home-based learning or online training. These inexorable circumstances which are beyond normal experience, lead to stress, anxiety and a feeling of helplessness in all. Studies^[5] indicated that the pandemic situation prevailing since the early part of 2020 have affected the children and adolescent age group more in the psychological way than the physical basis.^[5] The effect of such events depends on various factors such as age group, education level, socioeconomic status, physiological health and many others. This unpredictable, fast spreading infectious disease has been causing universal awareness, anxiety and distress, all of which according to WHO are natural psychological responses to the randomly changing condition. Adverse psychosomatic outcomes among common people are nevertheless expected to increase significantly due to the pandemic itself and also due to constant flow of readily available information and reinforced messaging obtained via online social networking. Services of almost all forms. The present review limits its discussion regarding the psychological impact of young children and the adolescents due to a year-long lockdown condition implemented in various areas of the world as a preventive measure to prevent further spread of infection.

Psychological effect on younger age group

Pregnancy and child birth is considered as a physiological stressful event. The unborn baby starts to feel stress inside the mother's body since the very first day of conception. After birth, the baby continues to suffer from a stressful condition in this world unknown hitherto. On the other hand, the mother also suffers from the stress during her conception leading to a psychologically vulnerable state to experience anxiety and depression which is biologically linked to the wellbeing of the foetus.^[6,7] During this pandemic, young children along with other family members have been exposed to direct or indirect factors that could pose stress and emotional disturbance. Several weeks of homestay has forced parents and/or caregivers to work from home. Different psychological manifestations were found in children of different age groups. Younger children, those between 3 and 6 years showed an increased attachment and a fear for loss of family members particularly parents, whereas adolescents expressed symptoms of irritability, inattention, mood swinging during the year of lockdown.^[8] Findings from studies done on the basis of the responses given by the parents showed that children experienced disturbed sleep, nightmares, poor appetite, agitation, inattention and separation related anxiety.^[9] The psychological impact was more prominent and obvious among Children with pre-existing psychiatric disorders such as attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), anxiety, depression, mood disorders, and behavior disorders. Depression is one of the major leading causes of mental illness amongst children and is the leading cause of morbidity in this group². Events those have a detrimental effect on the mental health include such as separation from family and friends, seeing or being aware of critically ill members affected with coronavirus, or the passing of loved ones or even thinking of themselves perhaps dying from the virus. Moreover, the healthy daily routines of children have been disrupted due to the COVID-19, which contributes to the problems such as additional stress and sleeping difficulties. Uncertainty of their future ambitions, academics, personal relationships, and inactivity due to the pandemic poses a significant threat to their mental well-being and putting them at risk of drug abuse.^[10] Loss of job put many families in economic crisis which also affects the children who find their parents staying at home instead of going to work place. Many families depend on their school feeding programmes in various states of India.^[11] The impact of pandemic is not equal to all the families living in different parts of the world some children have parents who work on the front lines in COVID-19 settings, and others have parents who now work from home or have recently been terminated. Disruption in routine, boredom and lack of innovative ideas for engaging in various academic and extracurricular activities results due to closing of educational institutions for a long

period of time. Lesser impact of the pandemic seen in some studies among the children for not being able to play outdoors, not meeting friends and not engaging in the in-person school activities.^[12-14] The characteristics which are evident in these children are that they become more attention seekers from their parents and clinging with their parents. home outside the home with plentiful free space. Schools offer window of freedom, scope of interaction with fellows and seniors, psychological solace besides providing pedagogy and scholastics. Schools play an edifying role in promoting importance of personal hygiene, physical activity, healthy food and body habits.^[15] Children might lose interest going to school after the lockdown gets over and may face difficulty in acquainted with their mentors after the schools reopen.^[13] Studies found that older adolescents and youth were anxious regarding cancellation of examinations, exchange programs and academic events in studies.^[12]

In present pandemic situation a rise in the hoarding behavior was found to rise among the teenagers.^[16] Increased use of internet and social media due to prolonged lockdown make the younger children susceptible to exposure to the unwanted contents and also increases their vulnerability for getting bullied or abused.^[17] The situation is worse due to non-functionality of judiciary due to which children are rarely in a position to report violence, abuse and harm if they themselves have abusive homes. As a result, abuse, neglect, exploitation and domestic violence are on serious rise at the time of COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown.^[18] Impaired development of brain and psyche, higher rates of psychosomatic and neuro-psychiatric disorders, multiple substance abuse and suicidal thoughts due to psychological aggression and/or physical punishment by caregivers at a very early age leave permanent wounds. India saw a 50 per cent increase in the calls received on helpline for children since the lockdown began according to the concerned Deputy Director.^[4] The economically backward families have no source of daily wages which lead to frustration and feelings of helplessness, the frustration and family conflict increase the violence towards children. This can make the child more vulnerable to depression, anxiety and suicide.^[19] Schools have offered distance learning or online courses to students to compensate the loss of education years. However, this opportunity is not available to children of lower socioeconomic strata as a result of which they face a lack of stimulation and have no access to online resource material to study. A study pointed out that in poor families, girls have decreased access to gadgets compared to boys.^[20]

Remedial measures for psychological stress

It is important to and healthy behavior to maintain the overall well-being of families. The psychological state of the parents can directly impact the mental health of the children. World Health Organization (WHO) provided the guideline for parents and common people in order to prevent the rapid spread of COVID-19. Social distancing and avoidance of close contact with any person with respiratory symptoms are to be strictly followed according to the WHO authority. Consistently washing hands and using appropriate protective gear such as facial masks are the emphasized measures according to the WHO authority for maintaining better hygiene. Taking breaks from watching, reading, or listening to news stories, including social media are also recommended as continuous news of the pandemic can be detrimental for mental health. Regular exercise, yoga and meditation, eating healthy, taking adequate and proper sleeping properly, and avoiding alcohol or drugs is key to maintaining mental health. The role of parents to support to their children and help them to process the information about the pandemic because these interventions could help minimize their anxiety or fear. The role of the educational institutions in eradicating the psychological burden of the children is not of less importance. Special psychological counselling sessions are to be conducted from the schools and colleges regularly in order to help the students to coping with the burden of the long-term social isolation and confinement. A licensed counselor should help students manage the COVID-19 related stress by providing coping mechanisms and strategies in both group and individual sessions. Physiological and psychological health are intimately correlated with each other in shaping the life of an individual in any age during life time. Mental illnesses such as depression disrupts rational thinking and predispose an individual to the risk for other health problems such as diabetes. The presence of chronic illness can increase the risk of mental disturbances. It is vital to strike a healthy balance between students' physical and psychological well-being. Regular interaction between teachers and parents should be arranged regarding the behavioral pattern of the students at home where they spend 24 hours a day nowadays. Expert psychological counselors may be invited to intervene in the matter where such event become necessary. Regular online creative sessions may be arranged along with academic routine to promote the extracurricular qualities of the students such as painting, recitation, quiz contests, debating and many more. This break the monotony of the confined lifestyle and promotes the interactions and thought sharing between classmates. Parents should be in constant touch with the child psychologists and pediatricians to discuss any mental and physical abnormality they might observed in their offspring during this period. Specialists and professional should train parents about the

developmental needs of the children in various phases of childhood and also disseminate simple and specific mental health promotion reading material online or through handouts to parents. Psychological examination should be conducted with the help of screening tools through questionnaires by which they can easily screen various mental health problems in children especially including ADHD, autism, anxiety disorders, and depression.

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