



Impact of Pandemic on Child Protection -A Response to COVID-19

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Abstract: School closures and extended periods of isolation at home may negatively impact the mental health and well-being of children and youth. Children who live in stressful or violent environments, particularly the youngest children, face psychological distress, physical harm, and negative impacts on brain development due to toxic stress. Children may also experience an increased risk of exposure to child labor, all types of violence and exploitation. Due to the unpredictability of the issues and research, a narrative review method has chosen. A selective scientific literature review was conducted based on knowledge about the course of epidemics, current experiences and impacts of covid -19 on children and their families and discussed the measures has taken by the government of India nationally. The long way back to normality after the pandemic, is one major challenge after the pandemic will be to deal with its sequelae. One main consequence will be the economic recession and its implications for mental health of children and their families, as discussed .The successful management of stress and trauma can lead to personal growth, which in turn reinforces the sense of competence and becomes a protective factor for coping with future stressors.

Key Words: Child Protection, Pandemic, Covid 19, Mental Health, Violence.

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Introduction

The novel coronavirus pandemic, which was first detected in Wuhan, China in December, 2019 has impacted the world like never before. The pandemic has brought many countries to standstill, with lockdown, followed by profound and unprecedented impact on economy, affecting many sectors all over the world. Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) is profoundly affecting lives around the globe. Isolation, contact restrictions and economic shutdown impose a complete

change to the psychosocial environment of affected countries. Parents are approached to help their youngsters with self-teaching, while simultaneously works from home. Outside help by other relatives and social supportive networks have fallen away. Beside worries and anxieties related to COVID-19, the economic situation has worsened with high and rising levels of unemployment in all affected countries. This has put a lot of pressure on children, adolescents and their families which could result in distress, mental health problems and violence.

Methods

Due to the unpredictability of the issues and research, a narrative review method has chosen. A selective scientific literature review was conducted based on knowledge about the course of epidemics, current experiences and impacts of covid -19 on children and their families and discussed the measures has taken by the government of India nationally.

Pandemic related mental health risks of children and adolescents

During the Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID19) outbreak in China, 54% of the participants of a large online study (Team ICC-R, 2020) rated the impact of the outbreak on their mental health as moderate to severe, with depressive symptoms and anxiety being the conditions most often stated.

Community related risks for mental health

Since the pandemic was announced, at the community level, there has been disruption of, or more limited access to basic services, such as kindergarten, schools, and routine medical care. Several countries have seen a re-organization of hospital services, with provisional care including re-assigning doctors and nurses not usually involved in critical care (Wang C et al., 2020).

Many countries have experienced a lockdown of schools. As pointed out by a recent review (BBC,2020), school closures may not have a major impact on reducing infections and preventing deaths. Hence, possible negative consequences such as loss of education time, restricted access to peers and loss of daily structure need to be taken into account when estimating the advantages and disadvantages of this particular measure. Moreover, in some communities, stigmatization of infected children and families may occur.

Challenges within the families

At the family level, the pandemic has led to a re-organization of everyday life. All family members have to cope with the stress of quarantine and social distancing. School shutdowns

have led to home-schooling and potential postponement of exams. Fear of losing family members who belong to a risk group can increase. In case of death, the pandemic disrupts the normal bereavement processes of families (Bakrania et al., 2020). Grief and mourning of lost family members, especially in cases where contact with the infected member is restricted or refused, could lead to adjustment problems, post-traumatic stress disorder, depression and even suicide of both, adults and young people . It also has fallen on the parents' shoulders to inform and explain to children about the COVID-19 pandemic, and to handle fear and anxiety accompanying these uncertain times. All family members may have own fears related to COVID-19. Taken together, this can result in enormous stress and psychological distress for all family members.

The pandemic has major economic implications and puts financial pressure on many families. It has been shown in previous economic recessions that economic pressure, even if not accompanied by social distancing, can pose a severe threat to mental health. Mental illness and substance abuse of parents significantly influence parent-child relations (Stikkelbroek et al.,2016) and increase the risk for mental health problems in children .

Domestic violence and child maltreatment

Domestic violence and child maltreatment Additionally, in economic recessions a significant increase in domestic violence can be seen(Holt S et al., 2008). Income loss and economic hardship can lead to feelings of economic stress and consequent marital conflict. Quarantine can lead to decreased freedom and privacy, and consequently higher stress. It may also increase existing controlling behaviors by perpetrators as they struggle to regain a sense of control. Exposure to perpetrators is increased, and the possibilities of victims to temporarily escape abusive partners are reduced.

Moreover, a notable increase in physical, emotional and sexualized violence against children during recession has been reported. In the literature, an increase of all forms of child maltreatment has been proven during a recession in a wide variety of cultures. Taken together, despite a lack of literature specifically addressing the impact of recession on children, existing data point towards threats to mental health of children and adolescents.

Focus on high risk children

The consequences of the pandemic can hit every child. However, there are several indicators that children who are already disadvantaged are at highest risk. First, financial losses will cause

increased economic pressure to low income families due to lack of savings. Second, there may be increased disparities between families with high and low socio-economic status, for example due to differences in parental support for home schooling and leisure activities during the pandemic.

For children with intellectual disability, it can be hard to understand the situation and the necessity for the restrictions, with consequent increase in anxiety and agitation (Gifford-Smith et al., 2003). Besides, children with disabilities are at higher risk for child maltreatment. Additionally, as some early cases of COVID-19 have been reported in refugee institutions, shelters and camps, the consequent panic and fear of infection can increase the risk of stigmatization of refugees. As many countries are hosting a large number of refugees, and there is a lack of medical and psychiatric specialist care for them, COVID-19-associated mental health risk may disproportionately hit these children and adolescents already disadvantaged and marginalized (Team ICC-R,2020).

The COVID-19 global pandemic has affected millions of children in almost every country in the world. At the height of the pandemic, nearly 90 percent of students were affected by the closure of schools, universities, and other institutions (UNESCO, April 2020). Many papers, documents, and resources have highlighted how COVID-19 has impacted access to quality education and learning due to widespread school closures (UNESCO, 2020). This evidence suggests that the COVID-19 crisis jeopardizes the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4) and leaves the most marginalized children and youth especially those in vulnerable situations even further behind their less vulnerable peers.

The challenges of children at the pandemic period

“Staying at home is not exactly hard, per se, but the whole lockdown itself is stressful and we don’t know what to do with ourselves.” (Conclusion of a group of thirteen 10- to 19-year-olds in India) for this right disrupted and denied (UNESCO, 2019). This pandemic has also increased protection risks, including those related to various forms of violence, abuse, and exploitation, thereby putting the achievement of SDGs 5.2, 5.3, 8.7 and 16.2 further from reach. It is evident that access to safe, quality education is a protective factor against the violations of children’s rights as defined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Yet, as of June 2020, full and partial school closures remain in place for over 60 percent of students worldwide (UNESCO, 2020).

Child protection

School closures and extended periods of isolation at home may negatively impact the mental health and well-being of children and youth. Children and young people who live in stressful or violent environments, particularly the youngest children, face psychological distress, physical harm, and negative impacts on brain development due to toxic stress. Children may also experience an increased risk of exposure to child labor, all types of violence and exploitation, and (for girls) early marriage and teen pregnancies (PLAN International,2020).

Health

Although school closures are often viewed as a way of supporting public health, they may not significantly reduce the risks of COVID-19 infection and transmission in contexts such as low-resource settings, high-density temporary housing,Refugee camps, Informal settlements and households without access to basic sanitation (The Lancet,2020).

The response to COVID-19 goes through various stages that are dynamic and not linear preparedness, response including containment and mitigation, transition, and recovery. In each country, public health measures are being implemented in unique ways and are resulting in different impacts on children and young people.

Education

Over the summer holidays, children “normally lose between 20 percent and 50 percent of the skills they gained over the school year” (The Economist). School closures due to Covid-19 are expected to last much longer than a typical summer break. Depending upon the quality and availability of alternative educational opportunities (i.e. distance education), pandemic-related school closures could produce even greater negative impacts on the learning outcomes and well-being of children. These impacts will be most severe for children and youth who are already marginalized or affected by humanitarian crises (INEE, 2020). There is widespread recognition of the psychological and protective nature of safe, quality education, the loss of which can cause severe distress and anxiety (Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action,2020).

Parents or caregivers are similarly affected. In addition to the general challenges, risks, and restrictions caused by the pandemic, parents or caregivers have faced, and continue to face, increased pressure to ensure that academic learning continues at home. This is a task that some families simply cannot accomplish due to limits on time, skills, or resources (UN).

Children and family at risk

The implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on girls and young women across the world will have devastating effects on all areas of their lives. As more and more people are confined to their homes in government-mandated lockdowns, rapidly rising rates of violence against girls and women are causing an invisible catastrophe. For many girls and women, home is not a safe space. As social structures are upended and millions of people are confined to their homes, significant stress is being placed on families. This can compound existing gender inequalities and cause a rise of violence within the home. Health impacts of the outbreak, combined with an increased economic burden on families and communities, also contribute to this. Children who identify as LGBTQI+ are also at increased risk as they may be quarantined in homes or communities that are not accepting of their identity(Viner et al., 2020).

Plan International's research (PIR,2020) shows that, during crises, [adolescent girls are particularly vulnerable](#). Experiencing crisis during their formative years can disrupt all aspects of girls' lives. This includes their nutrition, education, safety, sexual and reproductive health and rights, and their ability to be active citizens. In humanitarian contexts, as communities face further erosion of already weak protection structures, girls, especially those from marginalized communities and with disabilities, may be particularly hard hit. To protect the rights of children during and following the coronavirus outbreak, it is crucial that governments ensure protection services remain central to all COVID-19 responses. They must be recognised as essential services and continue to be funded adequately throughout all stages of the outbreak response. Services must also be adapted to adjust to the impacts of the outbreak.

Steps taken by India to ensure care and protection for children and their family

Lockdown and quarantine

After the WHO declared the novel corona virus (COVID 19) outbreak to be a pandemic on the 11 March 2020, India lost no time in taking the first step to quarantine itself. On 24 March, the Prime Minister announced a 21-day nationwide lockdown across the country. This was extended till July. The Central Government advised all the states and the Union Territories to invoke the provisions of the Epidemic Diseases Act, 1897, which would enable them to enforce advisories as and when needed.

Social measures: HRD Ministry had launched a week-long 'Bharat Padhe Online' campaign for Crowd sourcing of Ideas for Improving Online Education ecosystem of India on 10th April 2020. The campaign is gaining popularity among social media users and the HRD Ministry

received more than 3700 suggestions for ‘Bharat Padhe Online’ campaign in just 3 days on Twitter and e-mail.

Economic measures: The Government of India announced a Rs. 1.7 lakh crore financial package in order to protect the weaker sections of the society from the economic fallout of Covid-19 in the country.

According to the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, India is following a strategic approach considering different possible scenarios – travel-related cases, local transmission of COVID-19, large outbreaks amenable to containment, and widespread community transmission of COVID-19.

Return to normality

The long way back to normality after the pandemic, is one major challenge after the pandemic will be to deal with its sequelae. One main consequence will be the economic recession and its implications for mental health of children and their families, as discussed above. The successful management of stress and trauma can lead to personal growth, which in turn reinforces the sense of competence and becomes a protective factor for coping with future stressors.

Further research

The current COVID-19 crisis has imposed numerous restrictions on research. Laboratories have been closed, scientific staff has been working from home, recruitment in studies has been paused. Prevalence of mental health disorders including anxiety disorders, depression, posttraumatic stress disorder, suicide attempts in children and parents should be monitored. The role of previous traumatization and other environmental and individual factors on stress regulation and coping can give meaningful insights on stress resilience research.

Conclusion

Children are largely invisible in the response yet are often the most affected. In this global crisis, the risks are too high - children cannot be left behind in the COVID-19 response. Their needs must be met, their voices must be heard, and their protection must be prioritized. It may be an unprecedented pandemic the world was not prepared for. But there has to be a clear action plan to address the physical, mental, financial and emotional needs of children and there has to be concerted efforts to deal with the children, by different countries, organizations and charities. For a pandemic like covid-19, the effect would be seen for years to come and hence, all efforts should be headed in a right direction.

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