

COVID-19 IMPACTS

MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES

in

CHILDREN & ADOLESCENTS



A Social Initiative From
**Indian Academy of
Pediatrics Delhi**



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Introduction

C OVID-19 pandemic created a panic, insecurity all around the world. Adults, children and adolescents no one is spared. The pandemic and the resultant lockdown has resulted in serious concerns about psychosocial and mental health issues in children and adolescents and which may have long term implications even when pandemic is over. This document has been prepared after reviewing the literature on the impact on mental health issues in children and considering the views of experts and advisory from International organisations. The impact due to pandemic and its secondary effects of lockdown have been briefed as well as few recommendations to parents, children and adolescents and other stakeholders such as schools, govt and private as well the state government.

We all stakeholders which include paediatricians, psychologists, psychiatrists, school teachers and government agencies need to develop the mechanisms to provide access to mental health services and help to cope with the ongoing crisis on mental health issues. The mental issues have been briefly discussed along with the supportive measures.

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Impact on children

In India children and adolescents till 18 years constitute 472 million of the population. The unprecedented situation of COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in lockdown and leading

to closure of schools and teaching institutions. These unusual circumstances have led to anxiety, depression, insecurity among all but in children and adolescents it can have long term implications as compared to adults.

Factors which may have impact on mental health issues in children and adolescents are

- Pre existing mental health problems
- Developmental age
- Children and adolescents with special needs
- Underprivileged children
- Educational status
- Effects of quarantine of parents/ family members

The following are the mental health issues in children

- Clinginess behaviour common in age 3-6 years
- Inattention in children above 6 years
- Anxiety and fear of death
- Irritability
- Loss of appetite
- Sleep disturbances
- Internet addiction

Impact on adolescents

Closure of schools and colleges have confined all of them to remain at home with no social interaction and online classes with strict time schedules have led to boredom, irregular sleep patterns, psychosocial adjustments, anxiety, stress, irritability and stubbornness in them. The overuse of electronic gadgets and on line classes and spending with more time on these have led to internet addiction disorder. It still remains a matter of debate when to open schools and colleges with so many issues involved due to pandemic.

Impact on children and adolescents with special needs

Young Children with cerebral palsy, autism, developmental delays, attention deficit have poor access to health care facilities in pandemic due to shutdown of day care centre and special schools, enforcement of restrictions in a closed environment they have never been in to it and so many other factors related to conflict between parents and children have led to aggravation of symptoms, relapse and regression of development. In Autistic children and children with ADHD (Attention and Hyperactive Disorder) there have been reports of relapse. In adolescents with OCD (Obsessive Compulsive Disorder) the illness gets aggravated.

Impact on underprivileged children

Effects on children in India with largest children 472 population, 40 millions with limited resources have severe impact on them. Family conflicts have led to child abuse, child labour, maladjustment, deterioration of school performance and there has been increasing distress calls on child helpline 1098 during lockdown.

Impact on children due to quarantine of parents

- Separation from parents can result in
- Sadness
- Anxiety
- Depression
- Fear of death
- Distress

Recommendations for ensuring mental health issues for all stakeholders have been described in the table below

Mental health care of children and adolescents by various support systems.

S. no.	Target Group/ Support System	Primary Roles
Young Children		
Parents		Healthy parenting, engaging in interactive play activities, practising mental health hygiene, maintain consistent routine, promoting health behaviour.
Paediatrician		Screening of vulnerable children, educating parents about developmental needs of children, managing mild stress and anxiety in children, referring to mental health care professionals
Teachers/School counsellors		Educating about COVID-19, mental health promotion, coordinating with parents, referring to mental health care professionals
Mental Healthcare Workers		Providing psych education by Tele-counselling, orienting brief diagnostic and psychological assessment tools to paediatricians, providing tele-therapy, providing face to face therapy following social distancing measures if necessary

S. no.	Target Group/ Support System	Primary Roles
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School going Children and Adolescents

Teachers/ School counsellors	Life skill training, Educating about COVID-19, promoting Mental health, referring to mental health care professionals
Parents	Practicing healthy communication, mental health hygiene, being positive role models, practicing adaptive coping
Peer Group	Providing supportive role, problem solving
Online support systems	Providing supportive role, referring to mental health care professionals
Mental Healthcare Workers	tele counselling, providing online orientation for teachers, creating material for school teachers and school counsellors related to mental health promotion, life skill training, coordinating with parents

Children with special needs

Parents	Participating in management of behaviour problems, maintaining consistent routine, promoting health behaviour
Special schools	Educating about COVID-19, Mental health promotion, referring to mental health care professionals
Community Volunteers	Identifying high risk children, Providing psychological first aid, coordinating with care givers, referring to mental health care professionals
Mental Healthcare Workers	Providing Tele Consultations, providing parent-focused interventions and mental-wellbeing interventions, weighing risks and benefits of psychotropic medications

S. no.	Target Group/ Support System	Primary Roles
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Underprivileged/vulnerable children

Teachers/ School counsellors	Healthy parenting, being supportive, problem solving
Parents	Providing psychological first aid, financial empowerment if possible, coordinating with care givers, referring to mental health care professionals
Peer Group	identify high risk children, providing psychological first aid, coordinating with care givers and mental health care professionals
Online support systems	Providing psychological first aid, referring to mental health care professionals
Mental Healthcare Workers	Creating material for community volunteers and NGOs for identifying high risk children e.g. underprivileged children, children of migrants, provide psychological first aid, coordinating with care givers and mental health care professionals.

Quarantined parents/children

Parents	If child is separated to keeping contact as much as possible, being supportive and reassuring
Community Volunteers	Coordinating with care givers, referring to mental health care professionals
Foster care givers	Being supportive, reassuring and educating
Mental Healthcare Workers	Constructing and administering online questionnaires in order to detect psychological distress and other symptoms for children if they or their parents are quarantined, providing extra support to them and developing ad hoc supportive interventions.

Role of stakeholders in care of mental well being of the children and adolescents

Role of Parents

	For Young Children	For Adolescents
a)	Attention: Physical presence of parents with the children	Open communications with them about COVID-19
b)	Increased awareness about COVID 19: communications with the children about COVID-19	Handing them over Responsibilities, Accountabilities & involvement in the the household
c)	Reduce the anxiety: Limited access to news channels and providing positive encouragement	Avoid excessive internet use
d)	Role model: Parents to act as a role model for behaviour at home for children	Hobbies: Stimulating and inculcating hobbies in them
e)	Consistent Routine: A proper time table for meals, study, play , TV and most important sleep	Advice on COVID-19 appropriate behaviour & guidelines to be followed
f)	Enforcement: Rigidity from parents should be minimal with a positive reinforcement of good behaviour.	Interaction with the peer group
g)		Parents to act as role model and themselves to keep mentally healthy.

Role of School Teachers

a)	Educate children about COVID-19 through online classes and providing right information to children about prevention and guidelines of protection from COVID-19.
b)	Conduct creative and non-creative academic activities like puzzles, quiz, small assignments etc to make the studies more interesting and interactive.
c)	Promotion of mental health through online yoga, exercise, pranayama etc. Teach life skills to children to avoid stress.
d)	Interact with parents about feedback of children.
e)	Identification of high risk children on the online interaction with students and advice to parents and referral to mental health care providers.
f)	Taking care that study material and life skills teaching is available to the underprivileged children who do not have access to internet.

Role of Pediatricians

Being the primary health care providers to children they form a bridge between children and parents and can do the best in providing positive mental health issues

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| a) | They must have Tele consultation facilities to interact with children |
| b) | Educate parents about the developmental needs of the children |
| c) | Recognise physical manifestations and able to recognise stress, anxiety in children while tele consultation |
| d) | They need to ask about child interaction with the peer groups, temperament, functioning and adjustments in the schools |
| e) | Need to find the family environment and identify the stressors in the family |
| f) | Mental health check-up in children to identify ADHD, anxiety, depression |
| g) | To develop strong networks with the child psychologists, psychiatrists so that they can timely seek their help when required. |

Recommendations from IAP Delhi to the Government & policy makers

- Focus on preventive , promotion and treatment of the mental health needs of population according to public mental health system
- To provide platform for interaction of paediatricians, schools and NGO along with the government and health policy makers for children.To conduct online seminars with teachers, paediatricians and state government officials for dissemination of knowledge on mental health issues in children so that as a combined unit we all can look after their mental health needs.We from IAP Delhi advice that it should be a continuous process and help us achieve our objectives of good mental health in children on a long term basis despite the pandemic being over.There is a growing need to address the mental health issues which are increasing gradually and and have a long term adverse effects on children and adolescents.
- IAP Delhi being a prime major organisation of 1500 plus Paediatricians in Delhi who are catering to needs of providing health care services in both private sector and government hospitals and institutions and their services are always available to the government for devising policy making as regards to mental health issues in children and adolescents.

- d) From IAP Delhi we all are committed in fight against this pandemic and fully stand with our government at this hour and will continue to work for health and welfare of the children so even when the pandemic is over.
- e) IAP Delhi has been actively involved in association with Delhi schools in various programs like BLS, MEMS and Nutrition for so many years. IAP Delhi team members have been conducting various charity programs for welfare of children of child care institutions in Delhi and NCR and SOS villages and providing Tele-consultations and advice on mental health issues to children and we can do it similarly for our children in govt schools in Delhi also on immediate basis. These activities have been very useful for promoting mental and physical health through our advice to caretakers of children. We all paediatricians can always provide the guidance and advice to teachers, principals and administrators of schools along with coordination of child psychologists, psychiatrists and school counsellors on mental health issues through various online programs.
- f) Services and guidance of all our esteem experts of paediatrics of IAP Delhi and manpower of all our dear members is always available for any Health issues catering to children and adolescents.
- g) We recommend formulating mental health policies formed by the government that can be flexible and adapted with local health authorities. Policy should be devised according to the developmental stage of the child I.e. Preschoolers, school age and adolescents.
- h) Vulnerable sections of the children such as underprivileged, those with special needs are not neglected.
- i) The school re entry policies considering strict implementation of social distancing and hygiene should be clearly defined when schools reopen.



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