Covid-19 Quarantine Effect on Education and Psychological Wellbeing of Children with Disability and Underprivileged Children in India

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Abstract

The ongoing global pandemic, known as the coronavirus pandemic, has affected millions of lives across the world. India has been overwhelmed by the surge of cases and the multitude of deaths and infections occurring every day. This resulted in fear and uncertainty in the lives of adults and children. The quarantine had a significant impact on the psychological health and education of the children, especially those with intellectual or physical disability and those belonging to the socio-economically backward sections of the society. A nationwide lockdown of educational institutions, workplaces led people to rely completely on technology to stay connected. As a result, online schooling has taken dominance, which in turn widened the existing digital gap in India. The sudden change in the routine lives proved to be frustrating for children with disability. Several studies reported feelings of isolation and loneliness in children as a result of the quarantine. The quarantine also made it difficult for the parents to avail the much required therapeutic help. The purpose of this article is to highlight the different issues that are being faced by the children due to the quarantine.

Keywords: COVID-19 Quarantine; India; Children With Disability; Underprivileged Children; Digital Divide

Introduction

The covid-19 pandemic has affected and upturned the lives of millions of people across the world. It has not only ravaged the world's economy [1] but also brought forth psychological distress in the lives of many [2]. The education system underwent a drastic change [3]. In efforts to contain the virus, the Government of India imposed a nationwide lockdown where all the educational institutions, workplaces and recreational places were shut down [4-6]. These mitigating measures that were undertaken to reduce the spread of the virus had a considerable impact on children's education and psychological wellbeing [7].

With the schools being closed, the routine lives of the children have been disrupted and most of the children and their families are confined to the safety of their homes. The children can no longer play outside, attend schools and coaching institutes or engage in any outdoor recreational activity. As a result, most of the children, especially those who do not have siblings, have reported feelings of loneliness and isolation. Children, from a tender age of 2 are aware of the changes around them [8]. The current atmosphere of fear and uncertainty, anxiety in their parents and loss of loved ones are largely affecting the mental health of the children. In a study by Saurabh., *et al.* (2020), quarantined children were found to experience higher levels of psychological distress than non-quarantined children [9]. These children also report aggressive behaviours, irritability and temper tantrums. Children belonging to the families of migrant workers also reported higher levels of anxiety and anger, due to concerns about their father's financial loss and the lack of daily necessities like food and water [6,9].

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In the midst of the ongoing fear and uncertainty, the intellectually disabled children and those belonging to lower socio-economic backgrounds perhaps are in the most disadvantaged position [10].

Analysis

Since the lockdown, several schools have shifted the classes to online platforms like Zoom, Google Meet, and Microsoft Teams. Most of the students have responded positively to this change. This had also provided some relief to the children as it allowed them to interact with peers and teachers.

However, in a developing country like India, not everyone has the privilege to adopt such means of learning. Children from rural areas or lower socio-economic backgrounds often do not have access to electronic devices like laptops, computers or smartphones.

There are also several children living in remote regions who do not have access to the internet. In most middle-class Indian families, several people share one computer [11,12] and children are only allowed a personal smartphone after a certain age [13]. Thus, they have to depend on their parents or older family members for the availability of the devices, which becomes difficult as most of the parents are working from home. Access is even less for a girl child in India [14].

Even though many children have benefited from online learning [15,16], the students still lack the real-life experiences provided by face-to-face learning. Moreover, many parents complained of their children's loss of interest in studies and difficulty in understanding study materials presented online [17]. Several teachers are also struggling to adapt to the new technology, and they are often finding it difficult to keep the children engaged [18].

One cannot ignore the negative effects of screen time. As the students need to stare at the screen for a long stretch of hours, they often report dry eye or computer vision syndrome, headaches, redness and watering of eyes. Extended periods of screen time also have several detrimental effects on brain development [19] and sleep [20].

The quarantine had a major impact on the education of children with disability. In India, about 1.7% of the total child population has some form of disability [21]. Recent years has seen significant advancements regarding spreading awareness about the different problems faced by these children.

Several measures have been undertaken by the Government to ensure the education of children with disability. This included the implementation of the Samagra Shiksha Scheme (2018 - 2019), regulated by the RTE Act (2009), and the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPWD) Act (2016) [22].

The aim was to provide assistive devices, teaching-learning materials (TLMs), assessment camps, transportation, allowances and stipends. However, the sad reality appeared to be that three-fourths of these children at the age of 5 years and one-fourth between 5 - 19 years do not get any formal schooling [23].

In the present pandemic situation, online education has become a luxury for many. This may result in many children being forced to discontinue their education. Among those who can attend classes, the parents often had to ensure that the child remains seated for lengthy periods in front of the laptops. This is especially difficult in the case of children who have trouble holding their attention to a particular task for longer periods and gets distracted easily. Also, online tools and platforms used for teaching are not always compatible with children having visual impairment. Such children require assistive technology for their learning which is not available on online platforms [24]. This widens the already existing digital divide present in India.

There have been huge ongoing pressure on the healthcare services as most of the resources are being diverted towards those affected by Covid. As a result, the families are finding it increasingly difficult to receive the needed therapeutic help.

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Children diagnosed with ASD exhibit several challenging behaviours, and disruption in therapies may lead to aggravation of pre-existing behavioural problems or even the development of novel symptoms [25].

Occupational therapy and speech therapy sessions cannot be successfully conducted through online sessions, as a result, there could be a delay in the child in reaching developmental milestones [26]. This sudden change and the need to adapt to the 'new normal' also took significant adjustments from both the children and the parents. This has caused stress in the caregivers and has proven to be frustrating for children with mental and physical disability. Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) have also reported being more grumpy, anxious, restless, and develop unpleasant feelings due to uncertainty and lack of routine [24-26].

Conclusion

The daily lives of people have been severely affected due to the pandemic. To counteract the feelings of hopelessness the parents must engage the children in household activities and indoor plays. The concept of social distancing may be new to the children. Hence, it becomes the responsibility of the parents to teach children the social distancing rules to protect them from the virus.

Although quality services are available to Indian children with Special Needs by now, there is still a dearth of trained professionals, occupational therapists and special educators who are equipped with the knowledge to assist the children in this hour of need nationwide.

Thus, steps must also be undertaken to make tele-intervention and volunteer services as widely accessible as possible so that scant availability of expert resources can be multiplied across regions.

Moreover, since delay in treatment may aggravate the existing behavioural problems due to Neural Plasticity [27], in this pandemic world, online learning has become a necessity, even more for children with Special Needs.

However, it should not be limited to those who can afford it. Therefore, further initiatives should be taken to bridge the digital gap in education. This is more pertinent following the adoption of the Disability Act, 2016 [22].

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