

Corona and the Psycho-Social Impact on Children

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Abstract

Lockdown restrictions in the covid times are bearing heavy on people but especially on the children and adolescents. It is this group of population that is undergoing a lot of physical changes and so its' psycho-social needs and requirements are also immense and different. Many studies have shown that restrictions have been especially difficult for this group. It is this group that is very sensitive to the changes around and any kind of impact on it's mental well being is carried forward to adulthood also. We must be aware that this population will be the adults of tomorrow, who will build the future society and who will be the parents and teachers and all those who matter, tomorrow. Hence special attention must be paid to the people of this developing age and intervention at all levels must be tried to mitigate the ill effects of lockdown boundations.

Keywords: Pandemic, Adolescents, Young Adults, Lockdown Restrictions, Socio-Economic Problems, Mental Health, Intervention, Policy Decisions.

Introduction

In the times of the Corona pandemic, things are really difficult. While for some it is a question of life and death for they are ill and struggling for life, others are worried about ailing family members, and still others are healthy as of now but have to face the challenge of lockdown conditions. On top of this there is the general apprehension of what might happen in the near future and a question as to when will the situation improve. A general boredom prevails everywhere because morning and evening walks, travelling, meeting and inviting people, and all kinds of gatherings have been temporarily stopped. Restaurants, offices and more are either closed or managing with minimum workers. People have stopped going to work and are mostly working online depending on the nature of their job.

Among this group of people there is another group of children and adolescents who are mostly non-vocal about this situation. They are the ones who are facing maximum load of these restrictions. In government speeches there is not a single mention of children though they are facing the harshest bondage. We hear government decisions regarding annual exams and board exams but nothing that shows empathy towards the condition of children, nor is their condition the cause of forming any policy yet. There is absolutely nothing from the government that shows that the conditions being faced by the children is worrisome. Schools have shut down but online classes continue to demand their full attention, home assignments are piling up because children now do not heed to the teachers as before, and not meeting their peers has ended their cheerfulness. Now in many homes there are children, bored and irritated, and at the same time fearful of the situation. Some of them even face more domestic violence at home than before. (Camila Saggiore de Figueiredo et. al., 2021)

Objective of the Study

The present paper aims to understand the effect of the present situation on children specially those who are in the age group of 9 yrs and above by analysing some Indian and international research articles on this theme. The study should be deemed significant in the light of the fact that nearly 41% population of India is below 18 yrs of age. (Census of India-2001)



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Methodology

Many studies on the mental aspect of children and adolescents were gone through in this regard. Studies that focussed specially on the impact of lockdown restrictions on children were given prominence. For this purpose, both International and Indian cases were considered. Moreover, suggestions and recommendations given by these studies have also been given due importance alongwith the views of the author of this paper.

Review of Literature and Findings

Regarding such lockdown restrictions, a study was conducted by researchers of Brazil to shed light on points that should be considered by governments and health authorities to start a follow-up on the young population. Their research suggests that isolation and stress related to the pandemic can cause neuro-immuno-endocrine changes in people who do not have such histories. Children have been affected because of abrupt withdrawal from school and less peer activity. Their outdoor activities have ceased. At the same time there is a change in their diets also. The study outlines that withdrawal from social life and other activities like attending school, feelings of anxiety and being apprehensive about the future, increases the risk of developing psychiatric disorders in the future. Their work suggests that stressors like these can affect behaviour (neuropsychiatric changes) which shows up in early adulthood (Camila Saggiore de Figueiredo, et. al., 2021).

Among this lot of affected children is the more vulnerable group of poor children also. The lockdown seems to have affected 40 million children belonging to poor families of India. They are children who work on farms and fields in rural areas, they are the children of migrant workers, or are themselves such workers too and they are those who live by the roadsides. (Singh, 2020; Rosenthal et al., 2020)

Some such studies have been conducted in India too which have tried to delve deep into family life and other activities of children. In a recent study by the Professors of Harisingh Gaur Vishwavidyalaya, Sagar, Madhya Pradesh who were studying the lockdown and quarantine effect on children aged 9-11 as perceived by their mothers; the authors reported poor social and emotional responses by the children, they showed less interest in studies and other creative activities than before, they faced psychological distress due to restrictions and many other negative physical health symptoms (Tiwari et al., 2020). Prior studies in other countries have also suggested that interaction and social connectivity is helpful for the development of youth. Some other researchers tried to study the relation of connectedness with emotional and behavioural problems. They found that when the youth stay connected with family, friends and peers they display less behavioural problems. Their paper even suggests connectedness as a promising intervention for youth already on a risk path. (The study was conducted on youth 12 to 15 yrs of age - Foster et al., 2017)

Another Indian study also suggests that quarantine as it is being used now here, must be studied further, reformed, and then used because it had negative impact on the studied group. One hundred one children and adolescents and their parents were interviewed for the purpose. It was realized that quarantine like restrictions might have adverse effect on the psyche of the children. This study aimed to describe the understanding, compliance of the restriction measures and psychological impact of quarantine on children and adolescents in the age group 9 to 18 years during the corona pandemic. The group reported that not going out to socialise, was the most difficult task faced by them. Maximum number of the quarantined children (around 68%) showed some or the other form of psychological distress which was much higher than the non-quarantined group with statistically significant difference in most of the feelings. There was a frequency of worry, helplessness and fear in the studied group of the quarantined youth (Saurabh et. al., 2020). An offshore study reported that children experienced disturbed sleep, nightmares, poor appetite, agitation, inattention and separation related anxiety (Jiao et.al, 2020).

We must remember that it is these adolescents and youths who are facing other socio-economic problems too. Parents of some have lost their job, while other households have less income than before. This is worrisome for the parents as well as the children. Some are witnessing daily fights between adults of the family or domestic violence at home. Still others are feeling left behind in studies for they cannot afford a smartphone or laptop. And then there is the problem of migrant workers who are forced to leave towns where they had been working, and start a journey back home on foot, by trains or buses or by hitchhiking. Many of these migrants are children and adolescents. Of these migration incidents, some stark happenings stand out. One is the case of Lyngdoh who committed suicide because he was an orphan with no one to look after him, and nowhere to go (Vij Shivam, 13th May 2020). Another is the case of the 12 yr old girl who walked 100 miles and died only 11 miles short of her home. Her journey ended in death due to electrolyte imbalance and exhaustion barely 11 kms from her home, and she was the only child of her poor parents (Elsa, Evangelina, 21st April 2020). Then there was that 19 yr old lad in Uttar Pradesh who was beaten to death by the police for he had come out to buy biscuits (Srivastava Piyush, 19th April 2020). There were many more such deaths which reflect that many children were facing grave situations and at some point their body gave in. It is also a reflection of a society unmindful of the significance and needs of its future youth.

The network of all this discussion is that special attention is required for the special needs of this group of society. We cannot afford to have an ill and deprived population of children and young adults. It is this group of society that will grow up into adults of tomorrow and take the reigns of our country in their hands. Stressors and psychological distress in children often leads to mental health problems in

adulthood. Such adults cannot be expected to lead to a normal social life. The social touch or social relationship is essential for development of cognition, emotions, attachment and relationships. It also contributes to the development and regulation of the body's responses to acute stressors as well as other short-term challenges. Social connections or the social touch is important specially during infancy and early childhood because it leads to reinforcement of right learning. (Cascio et.al.,2019) This is the reason that isolation and strict quarantine regimes need to be adapted to the specific requirements of children and young adults and then applied to so as to suit the needs of this lot.

In these pandemic times, there is an utter need to mitigate the impact the young population is subjected to, particularly the more deprived ones or the more vulnerable ones because they are already suffering from social inequalities. Either they are born in families with low income and so not able to access education, or they have been deprived of education for want of a suitable device. There are others who have lost a family member or have lost all means of earning a livelihood. Added to this team, are the children who have special physical, mental or social needs or who have already had a previous Covid-19 diagnosis or who were under treatment for some other disease. (Fegert et al., 2020). Moreover there are children who have faced sexual abuse. For them this pandemic is another major stressor as it forces them to be in close proximity with their oppressor most of the time (Jeeson C Unni, 2020). It should also be noted that due to the fear of the pandemic many parents are reluctant to take their children to hospitals for the treatment of common emergencies like typhoid fever, dengue, status epilepticus, etc. These and other surgical emergencies like torsion testis get delayed treatment as a result (Jeeson C Unni, 2020).

Conclusion and Suggestions

The findings of these and such other studies are a cause of concern. Their outcomes can have important implications for policy makers, teachers, media and community. Ignoring the immediate and long term psychological needs of children is not reasonable, more so, because they account for 42% of the world's total population (Dalton et.al, 2020). In this regard, the media can go a long way in educating the people and the governments about the emotional and other needs of children. The interventions involving media, family and community may protect the health and well-being of children and adolescents and boost them to solve their cognitive, emotional and behavioural issues more effectively. In order to achieve full productivity and to help them to feel safe, secure and healthy, different flexible kind of methods of restrictions should be employed whenever such a need arises. A relaxed atmosphere, leisure and creative activities for children to engage them, and interactions with family and friends which though virtual, can act as a positive intervention. Researchers have also found some positive effects of joint family on children during their study. (Tiwari G.K, 2020) Proper care of sleep and food requirements, good family atmosphere, interventions by other relatives or

community and many more such measures can boost the morale of children and youth in such times.

There is a pressing need for copious longitudinal and developmental studies that can help in careful planning, and then the implementation of an elaborative plan of action to meet the psychological, social and mental health needs of the children and youth during pandemic as well as post pandemic (Singh et.al, 2020). It has been realized now all over the world that the present Covid-19 policies for children and young adults that take lockdown and closed schooling as the only measure to contain infection, is not sufficient. There is a need to better the accessibility to mental health services for children youth and people of all ages in this regard. Special sensitive policies that take regional contextual parameters into account must be formulated to work not only during lockdown but also post lockdown. Herein, the role of mental health care workers, including clinical psychologists, psychiatrists, and psychiatric social workers is crucial keeping in mind their professional and social responsibilities and current challenges. Also, reaching out to mental health services should be encouraged both clinically, via telemedicine or through the numerous digital platforms available nowadays.

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