



COVID-19 AND PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

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ABSTRACT The COVID-19 does not differentiate between borders, ethnicities, disability status, age or gender. The World Health Organization (WHO) and public health authorities around the world are taking action to contain the COVID-19 outbreak. Certain populations, such as those with disability, may be impacted more significantly by COVID-19. This impact can be mitigated if simple actions and protective measures are taken by key stakeholders. Due to cognitive limitation, low comprehension ability and limited communication skills certain types persons with disabilities may not understand the seriousness of current pandemic. However, the protection of children and educational facilities is particularly important. The system are prepared to tackle the challenges and has invoked Section 8 of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 and has issued guidelines to the States and local authorities for the protection and safety of persons with disabilities. The experience of persons with disabilities and understanding about COVID is different. There is gap between services being provided and required services also. This paper is discussing impact of COVID-19, strategies to overcome anxiety, protective guidelines and implementation mechanism for persons with disabilities.

KEYWORDS : Covid-19, Persons with Disabilities, Intellectual Disability, RPD Act

INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 is a disease caused by a new strain of corona virus. 'CO' stands for corona, 'VI' for virus, and 'D' for disease. Formerly, this disease was referred to as '2019 novel coronavirus' or '2019-nCoV.' The COVID-19 virus is a new virus linked to the same family of viruses as Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) and some types of common cold. Symptoms can include fever, cough and shortness of breath. In more severe cases, infection can cause pneumonia or breathing difficulties. More rarely, the disease can be fatal. These symptoms are similar to the flu (influenza) or the common cold, which are a lot more common than COVID-19. While a lot is still unknown about the virus that causes COVID-19, we do know that it is transmitted through direct contact with respiratory droplets of an infected person (generated through coughing and sneezing) Individuals can also be infected from touching surfaces contaminated with the virus and touching their face (e.g., eyes, nose, mouth). This is why testing is required to confirm if someone has COVID-19. The COVID-19 virus may survive on surfaces for several hours, but simple disinfectants can kill it.

The protection of children and educational facilities is particularly important. Precautions are necessary to prevent the potential spread of COVID-19 in school settings; however, care must also be taken to avoid stigmatizing students and staff who may have been exposed to the virus. It is important to remember that COVID-19 does not differentiate between borders, ethnicities, disability status, age or gender. Education settings should continue to be welcoming, respectful, inclusive, and supportive environments to all. Measures taken by schools can prevent the entry and spread of COVID-19 by students and staff who may have been exposed to the virus, while minimizing disruption and protecting students and staff from discrimination

This virus is contagious in nature and can cause infection at mass level in the society which can be considered as community transmission of virus. This virus has a life span from 6 hours to 3 days on various objects as is found from various researches taken place since its outburst and tests done so far. The virus passes from one person to others through mass gathering and contaminated objects viz. door bells, stair railings, shaking hands with infected persons and any object or surface which has been touched or used by the infected person. The chronic symptoms of Corona infection are dry cough, high fever, severe headache, sore throat and respiratory problems. Due to cognitive limitation, low comprehension ability and limited communication skills children with disabilities especially intellectual disability may not understand the seriousness of current pandemic.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR CHILDREN AND ADULTS WITH DISABILITIES

People experiencing social disadvantage and marginalization are known to be disproportionately impacted by ill-health. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, persons with disabilities may have increased risk for exposure, complications, and death as Persons with disabilities are disproportionately represented among older populations, who are known to be at increased risk in the COVID-19 pandemic. It is estimated that more than 46% of the India's population of people over age 60 have disabilities. Children and adults with disabilities may have underlying health conditions that increase their risk of serious complications from COVID-19. Persons with disabilities are disproportionately represented among the world's people living in poverty. It has been identified that the impacts of COVID-19 are likely to be worse for people in lower socio-economic groups.

In India, the system are prepared to tackle the challenges COVID-19 has created for all of us, but we also understand it has created additional challenges for families of persons with disabilities (Divyangjan) and related special needs. All children are living in restrained space for a long period of time, possibly can exaggerate behavior problems among them. As a result, specialists have created the following tips and suggestions to support families of children with disabilities during COVID-19:

- **Create a new schedule with/for your child.**

Children like knowing what to expect and what is expected of them. Creating a structure allows your child to feel control in a seemingly uncontrollable environment. If your child's schedule has changed, work with him or her to develop a new one and talk about it together. Post the schedule somewhere visible so your child can refer to it easily. Some children are fine with a written schedule; others may benefit from black and white icons or from actual pictures. Families can take their own pictures, use Google images to find picture icons. The schedule doesn't need to be complicated or even time-based.

- **Use Social Stories**

Along with your schedule, it may be helpful to include social stories that describe – in words and pictures – new activities. You may be able to find some social stories online that are ready to use, including some to help explain COVID-19. Or, you can make your own social stories using drawings, photos or pictures cut out of magazines.

- **Use Visual or auditory reminders.**

Reminders help your child know how long an activity should last, how

long a caregiver needs to do work or when an activity is about to end. You can use a visual timer, the timer on your microwave, a timer on your phone and/or a transitional warning. For example, "In 5 minutes, it will be time to wash your hands, so you have 5 more minutes to play."

- **Go On Virtual Outings**

Some places offer online experiences and webcams to tour their spaces. These afford opportunities for your child to see and learn about some of their favorite things (e.g., dinosaurs, animals) from a distance. This can also be a helpful way to prepare your child for in-person trips in the future.

- **Enjoy being outdoors.**

Take a family walk or bike ride on floor, parking etc. Kick a ball, play with your pet or have a picnic in the back yard. Take a drive and look for bluebonnets. Fresh air and sunshine are important for staying healthy!

- **Read book online**

In lieu of going to the library, check out online options for accessing books, such as Epic. Accounts can be tailored for multiple children in the family and the program can read some books to children or they can read them themselves.

- **Keep Preferred Foods/Snacks on Hand**

Some children with disabilities may have particular diets or limit the variety of foods they will eat. Try to keep these foods in supply. Although continuing to offer and encourage new foods is important, ensuring that the preferred foods or snacks are on hand will be one less stressor.

- **Signup Aarogya Aetu**

If you haven't already, **Aarogya setu**. This may be a valuable way to communicate with specialist /treating doctors in non-urgent situations or when in-person visits are not possible.

- **Practice Self Care**

Remember it is just as important to take care of yourself as it is to take care of your child. Be sure to take a few minutes out of the day to engage in a relaxation technique like deep breathing, listening to soothing music or imagining one of your favorite peaceful places. Try not to overwhelm yourself by attempting to recreate all of the services your child usually receives from teachers and therapists. Do the best you can with what you have. Children are resilient and will be ok.

- **Foster calm**

In times of change, opportunities to engage in calming behaviors become especially important, so schedule coping and calming activities into a child's day and consider ways to introduce new calming behaviors.

- **Be Empathetic.**

Acknowledge that your child may not have their usual school or disability-related equipment, which may lead to added difficulties, discomfort or pain. Validate their feelings and try reaching out to therapists and other families in similar situations to brainstorm ideas to address any discomfort and/or sensory, communication, and movement challenges to the extent possible.

- **Encourage them to talk about their feelings**

Children with disabilities often experience feelings of social isolation from their peers, and social distancing policies related to COVID-19 may amplify these feelings. Give your child opportunities discuss these feelings and brainstorm ways for your child to interact with others through texting, phone calls, and video chatting and other virtual platforms.

PROTECTIVE GUIDELINES

With the leadership and help of some dedicated disabled persons and their organizations, the Central Government has invoked Section 8 of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 and has issued guidelines to the States and local authorities for the protection and safety of persons with disabilities during the Covid-19 pandemic and the 21-day national lockdown. The guidelines, issued provide for a range of measures to ensure that persons with disabilities have access to essential support services like care giver support, and that supplies and medical aid are available at their doorstep, given the severe restrictions imposed on the movement of people.

Significantly, the guidelines state that caregivers of persons with disabilities should be allowed to reach them by exempting the caregivers from restrictions during lockdown or providing passes in a simplified manner on priority. Persons with disabilities should be given priority in treatment, and special care should be taken in respect of children and women with disabilities. They should be given access to essential food, water, medicine, and, to the extent possible, such items should be delivered at their residence. Additional protective measures should be taken for persons with disabilities based on their impairment who need to travel during the emergency period and the authorities should be sensitized for their personal safety and protection. A 24X7 helpline number at State Level should be set up exclusively for persons with disabilities with facilities of sign language interpretation and video calling.

Persons with disabilities and Parents of children with disabilities may be wondering how best to care for their child during the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic. Children are largely unaffected, even those with underlying chronic conditions. Simple precautions that apply to all families should be followed to best protect children with chronic conditions.

a)Social Distancing: Social distancing is one of the most effective ways to protect your child and family from exposure to COVID-19. This means avoiding public spaces, staying home as much as possible and staying at least 6 feet away from non-family members.

b)Hand washing: Hand washing for 20 seconds with soap and water is effective in removing viruses from hands. Remind your child to avoid touching their face and to avoid direct contact with other people. Use hand sanitizers that are at least 60% alcohol when hand washing is not possible.

c)Taking precautions: Taking precautions within your home is especially critical if other members of the household must leave the house for work or other essential tasks. Cleaning frequently touched surfaces, washing dishes and laundry quickly, and keeping anyone who shows symptoms of illness in a separate room of the home will also help your child stay as healthy as possible.

Follow Guidelines: Make sure you follow the guidelines from your local health department and other officials who can communicate specifics for the community where you live.

STRATEGIES TO EASE STRESSORS

Research by psychologists' points to several important ways parents and caregivers of children and youth with disabilities can cope with the challenges created by the COVID-19 pandemic.

- **Stay Informed, but don't over do media** While it is important to keep up to date on the rapidly changing information on COVID-19 in your community, the oversaturation of information can add to stress. To stay informed and keep your family up to date while remaining safe, identify a few trusted sources for accurate updates and limit social media.
- **Talk to your children and other family members about COVID-19.** Choose a safe, comfortable place and time to openly discuss the reason for the changes to their lives. Social narratives, which draw on text and pictures to talk about situations and responses, can be a useful tool (links to social narratives on COVID-19 appear below). Remember, children may have difficulty expressing their feelings in words and sometimes anxiety, fear and frustration can be expressed through challenging behaviors. Other children may express these feelings through play. Answer their questions and assure them of the shared goal to keep everyone safe. Revisit the topic periodically to be sure they understand what's happening around them.
- **Check-in with your child's school, teachers and therapists.** about how educational and therapeutic service delivery may change in the coming weeks. If schools offer distance-learning opportunities to students without disabilities, the same support should be offered to students with disabilities. Don't feel pressured to exactly replicate school and therapy at home. With flexibility, you may identify new ways to learn and grow together that would be more difficult in a typical time.
- **Check-in with your child's health-care provider by calling or using telehealth services if available.** If your child has a chronic or acute medical condition, talking with the healthcare provider

can guide decisions about how to access needed equipment, supplies, medications, etc., and whether it is best to visit a healthcare facility or stay at home.

IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGY

For their implementation, the guidelines also require the States to declare the Disability Commissioner and the responsible social welfare officer in each District to be the State and District level nodal authority respectively for resolving disability specific issues during the crisis period. It is therefore critical that the Disability Commissioners in each State issue directions forthwith to all State and local authorities dealing with exigencies arising out of Covid-19, as well as to the police, to ensure that persons with disabilities within their jurisdiction have access to essential support services, supplies and medical aid at their doorstep, given the severe restrictions imposed on the movement of people. The Directors General / Commissioners of Police, should take appropriate action as per the guidelines, especially that caregivers should be allowed to reach persons with disabilities by exempting them from restrictions during lockdown or providing passes in a simplified manner on priority.

HELPFUL TIPS FOR PARENTS AND CAREGIVER OF CHILDREN AND PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

- Changes in routine may be confusing for your child and lead to feelings they can't describe or understand such as fear and frustration. Behavior changes sometimes may occur. Providing a comfortable and predictable environment may help your child feel safe and in control. Spend time together doing things your child enjoys.
- Your child may have difficulty with the change in schedule and/or the environment. Help your child to keep busy throughout the day.
- Your child may not understand why schools are closed. Explain that in order to help keep everyone healthy, sometimes students have to stay home instead of going to their school. Let them know it is still important to do their homework and that the school staff will let everyone know when they can come back to school. In the meantime, reassure your child that he or she is safe at home.
- There is so much information that is being shared about COVID-19. It might be helpful to limit your child's exposure to news and social media to filter what they are hearing. Help put things into your child's perspective using simple facts they can understand. Managing your own reactions may help reduce any anxiety that your child may be feeling.
- Your child may miss friends and family. Stay connected with family and friends by phone or through other electronic devices.

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