



MENTAL HEALTH PREPAREDNESS FOR SCHOOL CHILDREN DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Nursing

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ABSTRACT

COVID-19-related school closures have affected over 1.5 billion children around the world. It is highly significant to provide an insight into the mental health challenges faced by children during the pandemic. Significance of school children mental health in relation to pandemic included limited coping strategies, stress and anxiety. Emotional supports for parents and children included normalizing their emotional response, focusing on self-compassion, emotional awareness, and coping strategies, helping parents understand their child's emotional signals. Tips for children and parents comprises of words and practices to help children cope with their feelings, being calm, listen to children, provide age-appropriate information about COVID-19 to keep themselves healthy and safe, be honest, reassuring, acknowledging distress and answering all their questions, implement routines, create a basic loose structure for day and week, setting a goal, provide exercise, fun and recreation. Interventions for promoting child mental health in younger children were spending more quality time with child, listening to music, singing, dancing, setting up a routine, encourage hand hygiene, video chat, reading story, free play, art activities. In older children, mental health promotion interventions included setting time for regular activities, encourage social interactions, spend in outdoor activities, exercise, video chat, positive use of social media. World Health Organization recommendations included behavioural aspects, community level, safety and security measures, hygiene and daily practices, screening and care of sick students, teachers and other school staff, protection of individuals at high-risk, communication with parents and students, immunization checks and vaccination programmes, remote learning, physical distancing outside and inside classroom. Supporting child's mental health during COVID 19 school return is significant. Students need to be supported and encouraged to reconnect, heal and develop their own social and emotional capacities.

KEYWORDS

COVID-19, Pandemic, Mental Health, Emotional support, Emotional awareness, Self compassion, Coping strategies, Mental Health promotion interventions, World Health Organization recommendations

INTRODUCTION

The outbreak of the Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) has affected more than 200 countries around the world. COVID-19-related school closures have affected over 1.5 billion children around the world. Concern has been raised about adverse mental health consequences of social isolation, lack of access to usual therapies and activities, and family stress related to finances and illness. Public health emergencies such as COVID-19 have a significant impact on students and their families, educators and the school mental health workforce, as well as the school mental health system. It is highly significant to provide an insight into the mental health challenges faced by children in the wake of recent COVID-19 pandemic. Addressing the mental health impact on students, parents, teachers and school personnel has become more important and necessary than ever before. The corona virus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic and the social distancing measures that many countries have implemented, have caused disruptions to daily routines. According to Jenny Radesky, Children's psychological adjustment examination done by researchers who surveyed 1784 children in grades 2 to 6 living in Hubei province whose schools had been closed for over a month. Overall, 22.6% of students reported depression symptoms and 18.9% reported anxiety symptoms. For children and adolescents with mental health needs, such closures mean a lack of access to the resources they usually have through schools. In a survey by the mental health charity Young Minds, which included 2111 participants up to age 25 years with a mental illness history in the UK, 83% said the pandemic had made their conditions worse, 26% said they were unable to access mental health support, peer support groups and face-to-face services have been cancelled, and support by phone or online can be challenging for some young people. School closures and emergency distance-learning plans have turned young people's routines and peer interactions upside down. School closures have clear negative impacts on child health, education and development, family income and the overall economy. School routines are important coping mechanisms for young people with mental health issues as when schools are closed, they lose an anchor in life and their symptoms could relapse. There will be considerable difficulties adjusting back to normal life when school resumes. According to Young Minds, COVID-19 January 2021 survey carried out with 2,438 young people aged 13-25, between 26th January and 12th February 2021 shows that 75% of respondents agreed that they have found the current lockdown harder to cope with than the previous ones, 67% believed that the pandemic will have a long-term negative effect on their mental health. This includes young people who had been bereaved or undergone traumatic experiences during the pandemic, who were concerned about whether friendships would recover, or who were worried about

the loss of education or their prospects of finding work.

SIGNIFICANCE OF SCHOOL CHILDREN MENTAL HEALTH IN RELATION TO PANDEMIC

- Pandemic take a toll on physical as well as mental health of School Children as they are vulnerable because of their limited understanding of the event. They are unable to escape the harms of the situation physically and mentally as they have limited coping strategies.
- Closure of schools and separation from friends can cause stress and anxiety in children.
- Response of a child to a crisis situation depends upon his / her prior exposure to emergency situations, his / her physical and mental health, socio-economic circumstances of the family, and cultural background.
- Rapid rise in the number of infected cases and deaths, disruption of daily routines, home confinement, fear of infection, social distancing from peers and friends, and lack of access to educational resources have created a feeling of uncertainty and anxiety among the children and the adolescents.
- Children and adolescent may feel disappointed for missing birthday parties, school plays, dance competitions, hanging out with their friends, sport activities like playing cricket in playground with other team members, as well as not being able to visit their grandparents, aunts, friends, and cousins.
- Increase Screen time - Exposure to mass media coverage of crisis event and unverified information circulating on social media may aggravate the mental distress. Research has shown that excessive television exposure led to increased incidences of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and other mental health disorders.
- Excessive social media usage makes children vulnerable to online predators, cyber bullying and potentially harmful content.
- It also results in Parental Stress.
- Children with special needs - Children can become frustrated due to disruptions in their daily routines. Children with Mental Health Issues, Depression, Special education needs, such as those with autism spectrum disorder and neurocognitive disability are also at risk.

SAFEGUARDING STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH

COVID-19 and its repercussions are throwing a light on the critical need for mental health services of children and adolescents. One silver lining of this global crisis may be that no longer mental health of school students may be ignored. Hence it is significant to invest in students (and teachers) mental health.

School children without mental health challenges will face a tough readjustment period and some may be emotionally dysregulated. It is needed to figure out how to instill a sense of hope and optimism and wellness as they return back. (Hoover).

According to Enedina Vázquez, New Mexico State University and president of APA's Division 16. "Supporting children now will stave off future problems".

COVID challenges - It affected social and emotional learning while letting those efforts fall by the wayside. A lot of people are reverting back to a singular focus on academics, rather than figuring out how to connect with children emotionally. In rural areas, large numbers of students were without internet access or reliable devices. Students who receive free and beneficial services at school were at risk of being deprived of their needs.

Reimagining the future - This crisis will lead to recognize that educators are part of the front-line mental health workforce. School closures should be treated like a low-grade traumatic stress event for most children and recognize that stress effects will be more severe in those with pre-existing emotional disorders and those from vulnerable families.

TRAUMA-INFORMED EMOTIONAL SUPPORTS FOR PARENTS AND CHILDREN DURING THIS TIME INCLUDE:

- 1) Normalizing their emotional response
- 2) Focusing on self-compassion, emotional awareness, and coping strategies
- 3) Helping parents understand their child's emotional signals

Tips and Resources for Children and Parents (WHO, UNICEF, AACAP, IACAP GUIDELINES)

- Children may have questions for parents and caregivers about the disease especially as normal routines change and children may display signs of worry about themselves, their families, and their friends. Hence certain words and practices can help children cope with their feelings and help guide discussions.
- Stay calm - The calmer parents seem, the more relaxed child will be, which helps children better understand the information they are told.
- Make time to listen to children.
- Be aware of what children see and hear on television, the radio and online.
- Learn what child already knows.
- Children are curious by nature and follow child's lead by responding to questions they ask.
- Provide age-appropriate information that they need to keep themselves healthy and safe, as well as appropriately informed.
- Be honest, but reassuring.
- Letting children know the information about COVID-19 that can help them feel like they have some control and exhibit less worry, educating children on maintaining safe distances and practicing personal hygiene.
- Acknowledging their distress and answering all their questions with honesty. Parents should avoid unnecessary separation from children.
- Maintain or implement routines especially when there is increased uncertainty and stress. Example: Getting ready for the day and bedtime schedules.
- Create a basic loose structure for the day and week.

TAKE HOME TIPS AND TOOL

- Have a goal or theme for the week, like organizing a camp
- Use educational resources that child's school provides for a portion of each day, the amount of time may vary depending on the age of the child.
- Spend some time outside each day for exercise and fresh air.
- Include time for fun and relaxation too.
- Keep Children Busy with :
 - Simple activities
 - Yoga, Mindfulness, Meditation for children
- Downloads, videos and science related activity ideas for all ages, Interactive games
- Children's Literacy site, includes videos of individuals reading children's books, Resources for math, English language, arts, and science
- Free animated online lesson for children about corona virus

- Free lesson plans, videos, and games
- A collection of digital games
- Tools for foreign language skills
- Teach lessons for life to the students through animation

Other Resources for Parents – Examples :

- MDH: Mental Well-being for Kids (PDF)
- CDC Tips for talking with children about Coronavirus
- Child Mind Tips for talking with kids about the Coronavirus
- Kidpower, Children's Storybook: Something Strange Happened in My City (PDF) or Something Strange Happened in My City (Audio)

Hotlines - Parent Help line, Child Help line

INTERVENTIONS FOR PROMOTING CHILD MENTAL HEALTH

a) Younger children.

- Ask parents to spend more quality time with him/her/them during the day
- Enjoy blowing bubbles, listening to music or singing/dancing at home.
- Setting up a routine for family.
- Younger children may need a bit more hugs and cuddles than older children
- Turn off the news channels when young children are around as they will hear things or see images or videos that are potentially scary.
- Refrain from talking about the COVID related situation with other adults or older siblings around them.
- Encourage younger children to adequately and frequently wash hands or wipe surfaces of any playful game.
- Encourage video chat. Video chat helps young children build relationships with family members, friends and other caregivers.
- Try to talk about what is happening on the screen while watching programs or playing video games with the children.
- Encourage mix of activities like reading story/book time, free play, art activities, hide & seek, running around, jumping on a trampoline, copying/imitating facial or body gestures, building train tracks, or riding a tricycle.

b) Older children.

- Set times for a few regular activities each day such as home tutoring, telephone calls with a friend, or cooking together, family meals, do these activities at the same time each day.
- Social interactions are important, even during social distancing like video conferencing, telephone, or real-time text-messaging may be worth to consider, possibly at the same time each day.
- Make sure they spend some time outdoors every day, or do some exercise daily. If one cannot go outside, try to spend at least two hours by a window, looking into the daylight, and focusing on being calm.
- Encourage video chat. Video chat helps build relationships with family members, friends and other caregivers.
- Avoid frequent day time naps, especially later in the day. Restrict the nap to 30 minutes.
- Avoid bright (especially blue) light like computer screens, smart phones in the evening.
- Advise to stick with a consistent sleep and wake time that fits their natural rhythms.
- Arranging a surprise birthday party with family and friends on zoom app.
- Exposure of children to panic provoking news on media should be avoided and positive use of social media should be encouraged. Example to form support groups etc.

World Health Organization Recommendations:

Behavioural aspects: - Consider age and capacity of children to put measures in place.

Follow Community level measures:- Early detection, testing, contact tracing and quarantine of contacts need to be done, investigate clusters, ensure physical distancing, hand and hygiene practices and age-appropriate mask use, shield vulnerable groups. Rumour and myths need to be addressed for avoidance as community led initiative.

Understand policy, practice and infrastructure:- It is significant to ensure that the necessary resources, policies and infrastructure are in place that could protect the health and safety of all school children

including people at higher risk.

Follow safety and security measures:- As school closure or school re-opening may affect the safety and security of students, the most vulnerable children may require special attention especially during pick-up from school and drop-off at home.

Hygiene and daily practices at the school and classroom level:- Need to ensure physical distancing for at least 1 metre between individuals including spacing of desks, guidance on age-appropriate mask use, facilities for maintaining frequent hand and respiratory hygiene, ventilation and environmental cleaning measures should be in place to limit exposure. Schools should educate staff and students on COVID-19 prevention measures and develop a schedule for daily cleaning and disinfection of the school environment, facilities and frequently touched surfaces.

Screening and care of sick students, teachers and other school staff:- Schools should enforce the policy of staying at home if unwell and screening the people at risk on arrival back to school.

Protection of individuals at high-risk:- It is important to identify the students and teachers who are at high risk with pre-existing medical conditions to frame and implement strategies for keeping them safe, ensure protocol measures for prevention and avoid transmission of COVID.

Communication with parents and students:- Students and parents need to be informed by school about the measures being implemented to ensure their collaboration and support in prevention and control of COVID.

Additional school-related measures such as immunization checks and vaccination programmes:- School has to ensure the expansion and continuity of essential services that include school feeding, psychosocial support and mental health.

Remote learning :- School has to provide continued access to educational materials and use of technologies in delivering assignments and broadcasting lessons.

Physical distancing outside classroom:- Need to maintain a distance of at least 1 metre for both staff and students in outside settings.

Physical distancing inside classroom:- Schools have to strictly adhere to policies that include maintaining a physical distance of at least 1 metre between staff and students of all age groups when schools open. This includes increasing spacing of desk and staging breaks, recesses and lunch breaks, as well as limiting the mixing of classes and students. It is significant to maintain smaller classes or maintaining alternate attendance schedules to limit number of students. Good ventilation in classrooms needs to be ensured.

SUPPORTING CHILD'S MENTAL HEALTH DURING COVID-19 SCHOOL RETURN

The return to school will be not only welcome but exciting for many students, others will be feeling anxious or frightened. Starting school or starting a new school year can be stressful. Children may feel nervous or reluctant to return to school, especially if they have been learning at home for months.

Hence support child's mental health by :

- Make Children feel at ease by having an open conversation about what is worrying him / her and letting him / her know that it is natural to feel anxious.
- Be honest. For example child needs to go through some of the changes they may expect at school, such as needing to wear forms of protective clothing like masks.
- Children may also find it difficult being physically distanced from friends and teachers while at school. Encourage them to think about other ways to bond and stay connected.
- Reassure children about safety measures in place to help keep students and teachers healthy and remind children that they can also help prevent germs spreading by washing their hands with soap and coughing or sneezing into their elbow.
- Remind children about the positives that they will be able to see their friends and teachers (if they are physically returning to the classroom) and continue learning new things.

- Letting Children know ahead of time that schools may need to close again will help them to be prepared for the period of adjustment ahead.
- It is also important to continue to remind them that learning can happen anywhere at school and at home.
- One of the best ways to keep children safe from COVID-19 and other diseases is to encourage physical distancing, hand and hygiene practices and age-appropriate mask use. Encourage regular hand washing. Sing along with their favourite song or do a dance together to make learning fun.
- For those with access to the Internet, safe and monitored use of online games, social media and video chat programmes can provide great opportunities for children to connect with, learn and play with their friends, parents and relatives while at home.
- Encourage children to use their voices online to share their views and support those in need during this crisis.
- Encourage children to take advantage of digital tools that get them up and moving, like online exercise videos for children and video games that require physical movement.
- Remember to balance online recreation with offline activities, including time outside, if possible.
- It is important to be calm and proactive in conversations with children, check in with them regularly to see how they are doing as their emotions will change regularly and need to accept the children.
- Engage children in creative activities, such as playing and drawing, to help them express and communicate any negative feelings they may be experiencing in a safe and supportive environment. This helps children find positive ways to express difficult feelings such as anger, fear or sadness.
- As children often take their emotional cues from the key adults in their lives including parents and teachers, it is important that adults manage their own emotions well and remain calm, listen to children's concerns, speak kindly and reassure them.
- Also there may be concerns that incidents of stigmatization and bullying may increase when children return to school, due to some of the misinformation around COVID-19. Remind children that everyone deserves to be safe at school and online. Bullying is always wrong and we should each do our part to spread kindness and support each other.
- Maintain regular sleep routine.
- Talk about school. Start to talk through the daily routine that they were once so familiar with.
- Engage children in open and honest conversations about how to stay safe online.
- Encourage the use of coping strategies that include reconnecting with friends before returning, doing regular exercise or using mindfulness based stress reduction techniques (Relaxation and breathing techniques).
- Parents should make available as much as possible. Children may want to come and "debrief" but may be not when parents expect. Create space for talking in different ways, such as going on a walk together than face to face interaction.
- Look at the positives. It might be helpful to talk about things the child is looking forward to, like their favourite shop reopening, seeing friends in the park or getting ice cream from their favourite café.

CONCLUSION

Ignoring the immediate and long-term psychological effects of COVID-19 Pandemic would be disastrous, especially for School children. Interventions need to focus on nurturing resilience in children and adolescents by better communication to address their fears and concerns, encouraging routines and physical activities, and taking measures to alleviate loneliness. Parents need to look after their own mental health, coping strategies, and model positive psychological attitude in order to support children and adolescents to get through this difficult time. Students need to be supported and encouraged to reconnect, heal and develop their own social and emotional capacities.

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