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Letter to Editor

Effect of COVID 19 on physical and mental health of children

Shweta Gangurde^{1,*}, Kavita Thakur¹¹Dept. of Community Medicine, Dr. DY Patil Medical College & Research Centre, Pune, Maharashtra, India

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Dear Sir,

The key for good growth and development of children lies in sound mental, physical, social, financial and environmental health of the child. Recent pandemic has directly or indirectly affected all the determinants of child's health. It has caused mixed feelings of fear and confusion not only in children but also adults. It has affected adults and children equally. There are about 2.2 billion children in the world accounting for 28% of world's population. Till march 2021, 330 million youngsters have been stuck at home.¹

During this pandemic many children have not taken their immunization as per the schedule. It is estimated that 117 million children across 37 nations may have missed their measles vaccination. As a result of these gaps, countries like Democratic republic of Congo, Pakistan and Yemen have already started having measles outbreaks recently.²

As parents are also facing social and economic crisis due to COVID-19 pandemic due to loss of job or wages it is indirectly also going to affect the nutrition of under 5 children especially in Low and middle income countries (LMICs).³

As per the World food programme about 265 million people in LMICs will be facing acute food insecurity.⁴ This pandemic may increase the risk of all forms of malnutrition. Therefore there is an urgent need for to work on nutrition of children especially focusing the nutrition of under five children or else our children will have long term effect on

their growth and development. Therefore now is the time to initiate multisectoral actions and resources to recover and support optimal nutrition in young children.

We used to advise children of hazards of spending excess time on screen more than the recommended time. But in COVID times, closure of schools has led to the concept of Online schooling wherein a child on an average spends 4-5 hours on screen for attending school and after that as children were not allowed to play outside so then again they no other option but to watch screen. Too much screen time, social media and appalling pictures of COVID19 disease and death may overwhelm these young children with fear, anger, loss, clinginess, inattention and irritability. This stress may in long term lead to delay in cognitive development, somatic complaints, obesity, asthma, diabetes, recurrent infections, sleep disturbance, and even premature death.^{5,6}

“Mild signs of anxiety, such as difficulty in sleeping or concentrating, have become common. But children are very resilient, and most will manage to cope with parents and peers' support.”¹ Also it becomes difficult for parents to calm down their children as they themselves are affected with financial uncertainty, emotional challenges. Unattended mental health problems can disrupt children's functioning at home, school and in the community.

Fear, uncertainty, social isolation, increased screen time and parental fatigue has affected children's physical and mental health.¹

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: shwt.gangurde@gmail.com (S. Gangurde).

As children are not allowed to play outdoors, they are deprived of physical, mental and social health benefits of outdoor playing. If this continues these children may start having physical issues like poor immunity, poor growth and development, vitamin D deficiency, mental health issues and poor emotional ventilation leading to more piling of stress and emotions.

“In India, which has the largest child population in the world with 472 million children, the lockdown has significantly impacted 40 million children from poor families. These include children working on farms, fields in rural areas, children of migrants and street children.⁷ An increasing number of poor and street children now have no source of income, making them a high risk population to face abuse and mental health issues with greater vulnerability and exposure to unfavorable economic, social and environmental circumstances”.⁸

The need of time is to now plan intervention to plan programs to take care mental and physical health of children and their caregivers.

1. Financial Support and Sponsorship

Nil.

2. Conflicts of Interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

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Author biography

Shweta Gangurde, Post Graduate Resident

Kavita Thakur, Post Graduate Resident

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