Short Communication

Impact of covid-19 on mental health of children

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Coronavirus disease 19 (COVID-19),[1] originated at Wuhan City of China in early December 2019 has rapidly widespread with confirmed cases in almost every country across the world and has become a new global public health crisis. The World Health Organization (WHO) acknowledged this coronavirus epidemic as a pandemic and declared the outbreak as a public health emergency of international concern. Most regions around the world are affected severely, including the United States, Brazil, India, Russia, and Europe, which have seen an increasing number of cases and deaths than the rest of the world.

In India, from 3 January 2020 to 4 February 2022, there have been 41,952,712 confirmed cases of COVID-19 with 500,055 deaths, reported to WHO.[2] As of 31 January 2022, a total of 1,672,194,503 vaccine doses have been administered. The UT Jammu and Kashmir has also been affected. As of 25 January, the total number of cases in the UT was 409166, including 47376 active cases, 357163 recoveries and 4627 deaths.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought a complex range of challenges which had mental health impact for everyone, including children and adolescents. Grief, fear, uncertainty, social isolation, increased screen time, and parental fatigue have negatively affected the mental health of children. During childhood, sound mental health is important as physical health for achieving developmental milestones. It helps children with their emotional wellbeing and social skills. Mentally healthy children function well at home, in school, and in their communities and have greater chances of leading a happy and successful life. While as, poor mental health can severely impact the way children learn, behave, or handle their emotions.[3]

The mental health of children has been influenced by several ways, as this unusual situation changed a way they typically grow, learn, play, behave, interact, and manage emotions. It has caused a tremendous stress level among children, adolescents, and all students in general, primarily due to the closure of their schools. This stress may lead to undesirable adverse effects on the learning and psychological health of children. Children exposed to these incidents can precipitate the development of anxiety, panic attacks, depression, mood disorders, and other mental illnesses. Distressing events such as separation from family and friends, seeing or being aware of critically ill members affected with coronavirus, or the passing of

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loved ones or even thinking of themselves perhaps dying from the virus would have a detrimental effect on the mental health. Additionally, the healthy daily routines of children have been disrupted due to the COVID-19, which contributes to the additional stress and sleeping difficulties that many children face. Uncertainty of their future ambitions, academics, personal relationships, and inactivity due to the pandemic poses a significant threat to their mental well-being and putting them at risk of drug abuse.[4]

COVID-19 can seriously leave a negative impact on children's mental health,[5,6] just like other traumatic experiences humans may face. It can lead to higher rates of depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder. This causes fear in children because the virus threatens not just them but also their families and surroundings, especially as they see their parents working from home, leading to fear and shock.

During this pandemic, children and their families have been exposed to direct or indirect factors that could pose stress and emotional disturbance. Several weeks of homestay has forced parents and/or caregivers to work from home. Also, many families lost their financial independence due to job losses. This disease is installing fear in children because children are worried about not only getting infected but also having their parents staying at home and not leaving for work. Some families are struggling to feed their children, as many were dependent on school programs or food stamps, and not all families with resources can provide adequate supplies.[7] However, the reach of the pandemic is unequal as numerous families have lost loved ones while others live in regions untouched by the virus. Some children have parents who work on the front lines in COVID-19 settings, and others have parents who now work from home or have recently been terminated.

1. Coping strategies

It is paramount to encourage and adopt healthy behaviour to maintain the overall well-being of children. Simple strategies can be use to take care of their mental health which include:

1.1. Manage the child's anxiety

Assess the emotional cues in the child and talk to them regarding the same. Give answers to their questions related to covid to reduce their fear and anxiety. Remember that this is a new situation for the child, so don't get irritated. Spend quality time with them and give them attention.

1.2. Engage children in indoor activities.

In the time of covid children may get easily bored as they can't go out of home for playing, schooling or meeting with friends. Engage children in indoor activities to cut down the boredom. Encourage them to pick a hobby, give them puzzles and crafts. Involve them in simple household chores, dancing, singing, yoga, meditation, stretching exercises at home.[6]

1.3. Set a daily schedule or routine

Broke the free time of child into time for books, puzzles, arts and crafts, table top activities etc. Remember to add meals and snack time in the schedule. Arrange the child's schedule so that work comes before fun activities so as to motivate the child for schoolwork at home as it can be very challenging.[8]

1.4. Contact with friends and relatives

Physical distancing during covid can cause stress among children. Encourage children to talk with their friends and relatives via phone or video calls. Arrange some activities for them virtually so that they can't feel alone. Create healthy and safe online habits.

1.5. Help them in developing positive attitude

Redirect bad behaviour of children. Give proper attention to reinforce good behaviour. Notice good behaviour and point it out. Use rewards and privileges. As long as the child is not doing something dangerous and gets attention for good behaviour, ignoring bad behaviour can be an effective way of stopping it. Maintain family harmony at home.

1.6. Self-care

Teach your child about keeping safe distances. Make a 20 second song for washing hands. Praise children for regular handwashing. Empower children to adopt healthy self-care practices.

2. Strategies for educational institutions

1. Schools should emphasize the mental health of students by supporting and providing updated health organization guidelines through online lectures.
2. licensed counsellor should help students manage the COVID-19 related stress by providing coping mechanisms and strategies in both group and individual sessions.
3. Counselling services should be available to support the mental health and well-being of students on time.
4. Protecting and maintaining the mental health of the future adult generation is only possible with the strong schooling and healthcare system.
5. Recruiting additional school personnel, clinicians, and mental health counsellors to address the strain on the system for supporting students during this pandemic.
6. Children with inadequate information about why quarantine measures have been taken are found to have more anxiety. Therefore, it is essential to expose

children to more information about COVID-19 through several sources.

7. Additionally, communicating with children about how they are processing the information will provide children with the emotional tools they require to do well in quarantine.[6]

8. Children should be taught coping mechanisms to self-regulate their own emotions without dependence on others.

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4. Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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