

## Stuck At Home: Psychosocial Effects on Children and Adolescents During COVID-19

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### ABSTRACT

The Covid-19 pandemic led to a complete shift in our lifestyle. To combat the outspread of this highly transmissible virus, lockdown and social distancing policies were introduced globally. It resulted in multiple psychosocial repercussions for everyone worldwide. The current study focuses on the psychosocial implications of lockdown on children and adolescents. The paper highlights the role of several factors like online education, physical inactivity, social media usage, family dynamics, etc. leading to emotional distress in the target population. Low mood, isolation, irritability, lack of external support, frustration, clinginess, etc. were a few psychosocial implications presented in the paper. In such unprecedented times, an effective support system composed of caregivers, mental health professionals and teachers can play a crucial part in providing fruitful interventions.

**Keywords:** Covid-19, Children, Adolescents, Lockdown, Psychosocial

Covid-19, more popularly known as coronavirus, has spread worldwide, which turned into a pandemic within a span of a few months of early 2020 (WHO, 2020). This fatal infectious disease has led to an upsurge of cases leading to deaths globally. Ever since its advent in 2019, its signs and symptoms have evolved for the worse owing to its multiple variants. From fever, shivers, dry cough, body aches, shortness of breath to its impact on gastrointestinal tract, pneumonia, stark dip in oxygen levels, chest pain, this virus has truly shown that ‘no one is safe, until everyone is safe’ (UN, 2021). Recent evidence suggests that new variants have multiple transmission routes, shorter incubation period and a rapid contamination rate worsening the situation further (Wang et. al., 2021). In response to contain the outbreak, lockdown was introduced as an emergency protocol worldwide. The lockdown was implemented with the aim to limit human movement by imposing restrictions on travel, commercial and industrial activities. Furthermore, socio-political, religious and educational institutions were also closed.

Starting off as medical jargons, ‘social distancing’ and ‘quarantine’ became two frequently used terms in connotation with the lockdown. Adjustment to the ‘new’ normal turned out to

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## **Stuck At Home: Psychosocial Effects on Children and Adolescents During COVID-19**

be a challenge where everything from work to shopping shifted to an online platform. Longer working hours, physical inactivity, fewer access to resources, change in teaching pedagogy have been some of the characteristics of this new normal. So essentially, what started as a crucial measure to fight the virus led to multiple psychosocial implications for various populations. (Fuzeki, Groneberg & Banzer, 2020)

The umbrella term of psychosocial factors involves the relationship between the person and his/her environment. A psychosocial approach in the context of covid and the lockdown could be understood through the psychological and behavioural changes that occurred because of the worldwide emergency (Vizzotto, Oliveira,Elkis, Quirino & Buchain, 2013). As the famous proverb goes, ‘humans are social animals’, restricting the social activity meant that it would compromise one’s well-being. Some of the negative consequences of the same have been, isolation leading to feelings of loneliness, uncertainty in financial and health terms, symptoms of depression and anxiety, insomnia, suicidal ideation, apprehension about shortage of resources, feelings of frustration, stress and burnout as well as loss of control. (Ivbijaro, Brooks, Kolkiewicz, Sunkel & Long, 2020; Grover, et. al.2020).

Imposed quarantine restrictions majorly impacted the vulnerable population as they neglected their health and hygiene, their routine was hampered and accessibility of healthcare supplies was limited. In addition to the aforementioned symptoms of depression and anxiety the frontline workers also faced other challenges like inability to meet their loved ones, burnout, feelings of worthlessness and guilt, fear of contracting the virus etc. Parallel to the outbreak of the pandemic has been the outbreak of the ‘infodemic’ which has added on to the panic, worry, fear and paranoia in people (Dubey et. al., 2020). Moreover, with new mutations young populations have become more susceptible to contracting the virus (Simon, 2021). Considering that children and adolescents make up around 26% of the world’s population, it is important to shed light on their struggles during this period (World Bank, n.d.). Therefore, the focus of the present study is to understand how psychosocial factors have been compromised in children and adolescents due to the lockdown during covid.

### **PSYCHOSOCIAL CHANGES DUES TO LIFESTYLE CHALLENGES**

Long term isolation and restriction on movement resulted in detrimental effects on the well-being of children and adolescents. Crawford & Crawford (2021) have called it the ‘greatest confinement in history’ which has disrupted the psychological, emotional, social and physiological welfare, taking a toll on the holistic development of children and adolescents. Crawford (2021) introduced an umbrella term ‘cabin fever’ to elaborate upon a myriad of symptoms as a result of this forced captivity. It is an amalgamation of feelings of anxiety, irritability, depression, boredom, dissatisfaction, uncertainty of the future, etc. Furthermore, this also includes intrusive thoughts, insomnia or hypersomnia, paranoia, difficulty in decision making, suicidal ideation, violence and aggression.

Literature suggests that the lockdown indeed reflected similar symptoms in children and adolescents (Mondragon et. al., 2020; Jiao et. al.,2020; Singh et. al., 2020; Yeasmin et al. 2020). Boredom was reported as the most frequently experienced symptom by the caregivers in their children, followed by loneliness and frustration. The feelings of irritability, restlessness and anger resulted in decreasing the quality of parent-child relationship (Morgül, Kallitsoglou & Essau, 2020). According to Singh et. al. (2020) children from 3-6 years also manifested symptoms of clinginess to family members because of lack of attention received by caregivers at home. The occurrence of these symptoms in children and adolescents may be attributed to a range of interlinked factors. These factors may be displayed in different

intensities for different individuals depending upon their own realities. A few of these factors are mentioned below.

### *Academic and extracurricular*

Pandemic had a major impact on two of the major spheres that make up an important part of a child growing up, i.e. scholastic and co-scholastic activities. Closure of schools inadvertently had an impact on the psychosocial development of children and adolescents (UNESCO, 2021). Absence of a proper structure in daily routine led to difficulties in adjustment to academics and vice versa. In other words, the whole shift from an offline to an online setup made it difficult for children and adolescents to adapt to the change (Lee, 2020). One of the major hindrances in the learning process was the lack of companionship and appropriate environmental stimulation for academic growth. According to the Eriksonian stage of industry v/s inferiority, childhood is the phase wherein an individual's social world expands. Social communication plays an important role in pushing him/her towards fostering a sense of accomplishment (Cherry, 2020). Being stuck at home perhaps led to feelings of boredom and developing less interest in studies, furthermore long durations of online classes also impacted the cognitive, behavioural and affective engagement of children (Venkat & Ananthakrishnan, 2021; Singh et. al., 2020). On the other hand, there were also children and adolescents who managed to displace this hardship towards other useful and engaging activities. This was manifested via them spending more quality time with their parents or caregivers as well as utilizing the online learning portals in a healthy way (Stoecklin, Geravis, Kutsar & Heiti, 2021).

### *Internet dependence*

With everyone being stuck at home, telecommunication and social media became the saving grace. Lockdown gave an opportunity to children and adolescents to reconnect with their peers and extended family members virtually. This helped in maintaining the sense of belonging even if the physical distance was growing. The internet helped children and adolescents continue their learning journey at schools through various tele-mentoring platforms like google meet, zoom, WebEx, Microsoft teams, etc. (Goldschmidt, 2020). These lead to easy access to education online and innovative pedagogical techniques that helped stimulate creativity in young minds.

On the other hand, as much as the internet and social media were a boon for some, they had their own drawbacks. Over usage of these platforms led to increased screen time and gadget dependence in children and adolescents. This has also been associated with unhealthy snacking behaviour which results from leading an inactive lifestyle (Bahatleg, 2021). Thakur, Kumar and Sharma (2020) also reported that excessive media usage resulted in psychosocial implications for children in the form of low self-esteem and a plausibility of developing internet addiction disorder. This could also put children and adolescents at risk of cyberbullying affecting their emotional and mental wellbeing, therefore acting as a double edged sword by increasing the social distance which it sought to decrease. Perhaps, another pitfall of spending more time in front of screens impaired cognitive development.

### *Sedentary behaviour, nutrition and sleep*

Children and adolescents who primarily engage in outdoor activities and play were pushed towards a sedentary lifestyle due to being confined at home. The inactivity was induced as they spent more time at home, by indulging in work, play and hobbies while sitting. The lack of physical activity not only impacts physiological health by putting individuals at risk of developing obesity, diabetes etc but also influences the mental health as it affects their self-

## **Stuck At Home: Psychosocial Effects on Children and Adolescents During COVID-19**

confidence, mood, aggressive tendencies etc. which gets aggravated due to the deprivation of fresh air (Mondragon et. al., 2020).

Literature suggests that age and gender may also depict an association with the inactivity levels. Older children spent more time online playing games or speaking with friends as compared to younger children. Similarly, boys indulged more in online gaming whereas girls spent more time using electronic media to listen to music, talk to friends etc. (Dunton, Do & Wang, 2020).

Another physiological aspect which had its psychosocial implications on children and adolescents was the amount of nutrition intake during the lockdown. According to a study by Upadhyay et al. (2020) the overall nutrition intake reduced due to the unavailability of food as the virus spread in India. Moreover, the unavailability of nutritious food led to around 44 million children from developing countries going hungry due to closure of schools during lockdown (Suri, 2021). A major contributor to the same being the inability to secure food which has been directly associated with feelings of anxiety, irritability, worry etc. (Fang, Thomson & Nayga, 2021). Moreover, prolonged hunger also leads to strong feelings of anger and tantrums (Rohles Jr. & Wilson, 1974).

The advent of COVID-19 also had an impact on the quality of sleep in children and adolescents. As the initial phase of lockdown began, the disruption of daily routine resulted in poor quality of sleep and a decreased sleep time for children (Dellagiulia et al. 2020). The disturbed sleep patterns also lead to nightmares, irritability, anxious and negative mood symptoms in both children and adolescents (Panda et. al, 2021).

### ***Environmental forces***

Social and psychological development from childhood to adolescence is impacted by several environmental layers as proposed by Bronfenbrenner (1979) in his ecological systems theory. Considering that the outspread of COVID-19 was occurring at a macro-level, it was directly impacting the layers within, namely, micro, meso and exo.

The micro level mainly included the parents and primary caregivers functioning in the home environment. The lockdown forced family members to coexist which led to more distress within the family and hence influencing the emotional and behavioural functioning of children and adolescents. Parents with existing mental illness were facing more challenges in responding to needs of their offsprings making them vulnerable to showcasing aggressive and negative behaviours (Morgul, Kallitsoglou & Essau, 2020). Adjustment to this new normal impacted the dynamics of parenting, like inadequate communication, redefining limits and discipline, increasing the stress levels which impinged the aggressive tendencies within children (Pinquart, 2017). At the same time, another factor influencing the psychosocial functioning of children and adolescents was absence of primary caregiver which may be due to death, harm, illness, abandonment and/or professional duties- frontline workers. Literature has shown that extended separation from primary caregiver results in negative emotional well-being of children and adolescents (Briggs-Gowan et. al. 2019).

The exo system comprises industries, social media, workplace of caregivers, etc. The pandemic hit the economic sector globally leading to downsize and layoffs in several industries. This had its financial repercussions on the livelihoods of people, showing the presence of the meso system. Economic instability gave rise to fear, tension and uncertainties which led to an environment of stress in the household also termed as 'stress contagion'. In

other words, the stress had its own spill over effects from one generation to another. Review has also showcased a relationship between low economic status and negative psychological impact on children (Venkat & Ananthakrishnan, 2021). The intense pressure created by the aforementioned factors gave rise to violence in the family, affecting the mental well-being of children and adolescents. Reynolds and Wilkinson (2020) reported that parental consumption of alcohol and drugs to alleviate their stress and tension at home led to acts of violence against children. In other words, caregivers' psychological and emotional well-being has direct impacts on their offspring's well-being (Newland, 2015).

### *Intervention Via Support System*

As discussed above, all of these factors lead to a deterioration of mental health in children and adolescents. In order to control the declining effects further, several interventions can be implemented. The primary way to pacify the negative effects of lockdown in children and adolescents is to start by imparting knowledge about the current situation, reasons and precautions to be taken for the safety of family members. This will not only help children and adolescents understand the gravity situation but also will help them make informed choices.

The role of caregivers becomes important as they act as mediators between children and their learning of specific abilities like problem solving, attention, decision making etc. as proposed in Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of cognitive development (Moore, 2011). During these unprecedented times the involvement of caregivers with their offsprings becomes all the more crucial as there are restrictions on physical social interactions with others from their community. Some practices that can be followed by the caregivers are setting up phone/video calls for their offspring with their peers, engaging in co-viewing using learning applications, spending leisure time with them while watching movies and playing games. This will not only help children and adolescents strengthen their coping strategies but also lead them towards aiding their psychosocial wellbeing.

Resilience is the innate human capacity that can be learnt and developed in the face of adversity. During these turbulent times it acts as an important psychological asset. Children are described as inherently resilient beings who possess this ability to bounce back from adverse situations, if provided with enough environmental support and nurturance (Masten, 2018). A few ways through which this environmental nurturance can be fostered are by accepting the new normal and perceiving one's home as a safe haven rather than a place of confinement. Adolescents can engage in mindful living styles by taking care of their nutrition, hydration, sleep and exercise. Further they can also use the media of art, craft, music, dance, etc. to creatively express themselves (Crawford & Crawford, 2021). As these challenging times continue to impact the psychosocial health of children and adolescents, the role of mental health professionals becomes crucial. The need of the hour is to help and encourage children and adolescents to access the mental health services available online within the comfort of their homes.

## **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, the pandemic and the measures that followed to control its outspread led to unanticipated psychological and social consequences in children and adolescents. The dynamic interplay of multiple factors like virtual learning, internet addiction, sedentary behaviour, family environment etc. resulted in such mental health difficulties ever since the onset of the lockdown. Considering the pivotal role that elders play in the lives of children and adolescents, their constructive intervention becomes essential in pacifying these negative psychosocial effects and promoting positive wellbeing. Harbouring resilience as a trait helps

in dealing with these turbulent times and guides healthy coping with bereavement which is almost synonymous to this virus.

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## Stuck At Home: Psychosocial Effects on Children and Adolescents During COVID-19

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