

Impact of Covid-19 On Your Childs Well Being

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Abstract

Times are tough and the most common thing we've all been hearing is social distancing. As adults some people might even be happy to distance themselves socially. However there is someone who doesn't understand the concept of social distancing. A child.

In this article, the following aspects are discussed: The current scenario with regard to the lockdown, the problems children and adolescents might be facing, tentative solutions to those problems.

Keywords: Covid-19; Adolescents; Mental health; Lockdown.

How to cite this article:

Pramod Jog, Shubhangini Sachdeva. Impact of Covid-19 On Your Childs Well Being. Indian J Matern Fetal Neonatal Med. 2020;7(2):87-91.

Introduction

Current Scenario

Covid-19 originated in Wuhan, Hubei province of China. Since then SARS-CoV-2 has infected numerous people and has caused many deaths too. Due to the rapid spread of the virus, the governments of many countries declared lockdown effective immediately. Many of those countries have relaxed the lockdown to a great extent and some of them have also removed it completely. However, parts of few countries like Italy, India, Spain, Iran and UK are still under lockdown. This article aims to explore the effect of lockdown on children and adolescents.

The Problem

WHO defines 'health' as a state of 'complete

physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity'.¹

Children are usually social beings. They are happy and friendly creatures who like to go to school, birthday parties and on playdates. Childhood is all about friends and getting dirty in the sand with them.

However with the current scenario and most of the countries being in lockdown due to Covid-19, this might not be possible. All schools are shut and so are public places like the playground.

The reason to do so is absolutely valid and justified. 'Staying in' is the new trend and the need of the hour, but what about its long term aspects?

Loneliness is defined as a negative feeling experienced by an individual when there is a discrepancy between desired and actual social contact.²

It is important to understand that being lonely is not the same as being in social isolation.

Nicholson defined social isolation as a state in which the individual lacks a sense of belonging socially, lacks engagement with others, has a minimal number of social contacts and they are deficient in fulfilling and quality relationships.³

However, when kept in social isolation for a long time, an individual might begin to feel lonely.

Prevention of social isolation and loneliness in childhood is a protective factor against depression in adulthood.⁴

Studies have shown that not having social interaction for a long period of time can have a detrimental effect on mental wellbeing. It also explains why prisoners start to lose sanity after a while, when kept in isolation and away from the general population. The effect of social isolation (also referred to as solitary confinement) on juvenile offenders is highly detrimental. It causes severe mental as well as physical health problems as it affects their developing mind. Not only does it cause novel psychological problems but it can also worsen the already existing ones.⁵

Sure enough a child staying at home with his or her family with all needs being met and comforts being fulfilled is not comparable to a prisoner, but he or she might start to feel like one when unable to go outside and socialize.

Nowadays almost all schools have online lectures and that covers the educational part of going to school. But what about the other aspects that can't be compensated for, virtually?

A child learns much more than science and mathematics at school. Being social and interacting with other children is one of the most crucial aspects of going to an institution to study.

A child learns how to behave in a social setting, how to talk to his or her peers and how to co-exist with other people. Teamwork, sharing and being friendly is something a child learns at school. The child understands the concept of participating in a healthy discussion without taking offense. There are no classes or lectures held to teach them how to share or how to work in a team. But group activities like class projects, having lunch together and sports day teach children all these things which can't be taught by sitting them down.

There is lot of talk going on about a disturbed routine amongst adults ever since the lockdown started. People have been posting up on social media as to how they sleep, eat and work at odd timings. This promotes an unhealthy lifestyle and many people will find it difficult to fall back into

their routine once things resume to how they used to be.

If adults who might have disciplined themselves for a long time are having so many problems, one can only imagine what a child must go through. Children are not familiar with the concept of self-discipline. If not given a structure to follow, they might not grow up to understand the value of time and being organized.

From the time a child gets up to the time he or she sleeps, going to school provides them with a routine. A fixed time should be allotted to do things, which are essential for mental and physical wellbeing. It gives the child or in fact any human being a sense of purpose and a need to be organized. When he or she knows that they have to go to school, they would understand why it is important to sleep and wake up on time. Their meals would be scheduled and so would their study and play time.

Being at home all day restricts movement to a great extent. During their prime years of growth a child needs to go to the playground to run around and exercise. Many parents enroll their children in classes where they learn various sports and activities. This encourages physical activity in a fun manner and promotes an active and healthy lifestyle. With social gatherings prohibited, it is not possible for a child to do these things. Again, playing is not only a way to keep fit but also a platform to socialize with other children.

Another point of concern is the mental health of adolescents.

Going to school or after school classes is also an outlet and a get-away for most adolescents. It is a time period in everybody's life where the company of friends trumps the company of family. Teenagers find it easier to share their feelings and problems with peers as it gives them a feeling of being understood. Being unable to do so might propagate feelings of negativity and even depression amongst teenagers. Being unable to go to school physically, leads to less social interaction and some children also end up losing touch with their friends completely.⁶

A study of 4,526 adolescents aged between 13 and 19 years was conducted by the researchers of the Norwegian Institute of Public Health. They studied positive and negative factors that affect the mental health of adolescents. They concluded that "social support from friends" and "spending spare time with friends" were the two strongest protective factors against mental disorders among adolescents.⁷

Even though parents are there with teens at home during this period, support from friends is unparalleled. It has been proven that friends are the main source of support during adolescence.⁸

A Proposed Solution

The following are a few things which parents can do to make their child feel that things are still the way they used to be:

1. Make a routine for your child. Children are used to routines which include a fixed time to carry out their activities. Make sure the routine has a specific time to sleep and wake up so that there is a good start and end to their day. Try to revolve the schedule around a day which would have been, if your child were to go to school. Keep fixed timings for meals, studies and physical activity. Help your child follow the routine with positive enforcement. It will keep him or her motivated and willing to follow the schedule designed for them. Take their opinion and choices into consideration while making one.
2. Keep your child's diet healthy. Give them a proper healthy meal three times a day. Give them ample of fresh uncooked fruits and vegetables to them as snacks. This will keep their minds fresh and promote being physically active too. Avoid oily and sugary foods. This way your child will not feel lethargic and will be active and lively. Also make sure that immune boosting foods are included in their diet. It has been proven that social isolation weakens the immune response.⁹
3. Make sure to inculcate at least 1-2 hours of exercise in your child's schedule. Engage them in physical play. Children will have a lot of pent up energy, which releases in the form of unnecessary kicking/pushing if not used well. Encourage activities, like dance, yoga, aerobics and zumba, which can be done at home. Keep in mind the phrase 'healthy body, healthy mind'. Also, participate with your child in these activities. Make it fun rather than laborious and encourage them in a positive manner. You can make use of star charts and give out rewards when your child achieves his/her goals. Play small games like child versus virus games where they get points on each healthy practice.
4. Engage them in cognitive play. This time can be utilized to stimulate their brain in different ways. Play a lot of indoor games, board games, read books, listen to audiobooks, listen to music and songs in different languages, do art and craft activities. Let them choose and play. You too can join in, it will help you connect with your child.
5. Keep your child busy with small activities. Encourage them to help you in household work. You can keep a challenge of household chores or a competition of making any routine chore like cooking or cleaning innovative. Give them small rewards for completing the task. Kids love to be useful, with some acknowledgement & encouragement. It also teaches them responsibility and following instructions. Don't allow them to laze around in front of the TV or modern technology gadgets. Spend quality time with your children, communicate with them in a way which helps develop bonding. Play with them and spend gadget free time together. Being idle propagates anxiety and feelings of negativity.
6. Talk to your child and counsel them. Explain the situation to them in a child friendly manner. Tell them why they can't meet their friends right now and that things will be fine eventually. Don't create a stressful environment for the children by talking about Covid-19 repeatedly. However, keep them updated and explain the precautions that are to be taken. Keep a positive and light attitude in your household.
7. Don't let quarantine become quarrel-time. There might be fights between you and your spouse as you are with each other face to face, 24/7. Don't create a stressful environment in your household that might affect your child's mental and physical wellbeing. Also, children observe and learn. Everything doesn't have to be taught to them directly. If you drink alcohol or abuse your spouse or are always on your mobile or TV, they may learn the same. However, if you read, study, pray, work, exercise and cope with your problems in a healthy way and utilize your free time well, your child will pick on your habits and do the same. Be good to your spouse. Everyone has their moments of frustration especially in this scenario. Be calm and patient with your family. Try not to constantly get angry or take out your frustration on them.

If your child is stress free, he or she would find it easier to cope up with social isolation.

8. Be friends with your child. Talk to them and allow them to express whatever they want to. Tell them you are their friend and mean it. The goal is to replace their actual friends with whom they used to share their feelings. Don't be condescending and listen to them with an open mind. Especially if you are dealing with an adolescent it's very important to make them feel welcome and understood. In a study of 4,227 adolescents aged between 13 and 19 years done by scientists at the Norwegian Social Research Institute (NOVA), it was concluded that adolescents who did not have a close friend to confide in experienced more depressive symptoms as compared to those who did have a close friend.¹⁰ You can involve them in small decision making, discuss various difficulties, conflicts and dilemmas faced by you to expose adolescents to real life challenges and stimulate their moral development.
9. Schedule video calls for your children with their friends. This will allow them to feel connected and keep in touch with their peers. Give them their space. Encourage them to talk about their weekly activities and share small achievements with their friends.
10. Gift them Experiences. The range is restricted here, for obvious reasons. Even times like these can be made memorable by making a Rangoli together, cooking together, go star gazing if you have an outdoor space, give them a pedicure, scrapbooking together, gardening etc. Good experiences are associated with happiness and everyone needs some during these times.
11. Share the responsibility. Share the kid-duties with your spouse/family members. You could take turns to engage them. Utilize the time off to manage other chores and also to look after yourself emotionally and physically. Try to get enough sleep to prevent a burnout.

Teens with Behavioral Problems

It's a tough job to engage children with behavioral problems like ADHD, defiance and conduct in this lockdown.

Here are simple tips for parents to handle such children:

1. Try to understand that each and every child is going through the same difficulty as they all want to play and mingle with their peers. So is your child. Don't be judgmental about their feelings.
2. Acknowledge their frustration. Let them know that you understand them, their feelings and their needs.
3. Bridge the gap: Link up with your child. Try to connect to their fantastic thoughts, ideas, and their perception about what is happening. Try to provide information based on facts and your experience from your childhood. That appeals to them and can help to improve your bond with them.
4. Address their fears and worries: In these stressful situations, children can express various fears depending on their developmental stages. Even if it's a simple worry like; 'my birthday celebration will be cancelled' or a severe one like; 'something untoward might happen to my parents who are working as doctors, in this pandemic.' Though these problems might seem trivial to us adults, they can create feelings of anxiety and worry in an adolescent.
5. Strategic engagement: Involve them in lots of indoor games like carrom, Ludo, snakes and ladder, chess or different entertainment choices like singing, music, dancing, art, drawing and cooking etc. Most importantly don't make them dependent on gadgets as it will be very hard to wean them off later.

Conclusion

The bottom line is that from a pandemic, Covid-19 is on its way to become an endemic disease. It is imperative that we learn to co-exist with the virus and design a lifestyle for ourselves which is wholesome in terms of mental and physical well-being. Especially for children, who are in their formative years and still have a lot to explore.

Food for Thought

One might argue that modern technology overcomes the problem of social interaction. Everyone uses Instagram, twitter, Facebook and

snapchat. Texts and calls are the way of life now. Video calls are trending and everybody uses social media apps to connect with peers personally and professionally. However, is it the same as meeting someone in person to have a personal conversation or even to close a business deal?

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