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RESEARCH ARTICLE

DETERMINANTS OF LOCKDOWN IMPACT ON PRESCHOOL CHILDREN

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ABSTRACT

COVID-19 pandemic has changed the living of people of all ages throughout the world. While it led to fear and restricted movements of all, it also resulted in the problems related to least movements such as overcrowding in small houses, increased domestic violence, joblessness, addiction, etc. Most of these had detrimental effects on the lives of people including preschool children. Normally preschool children attend anganwadi/ Balwadi or the pay group nursery in India. This is the time to prepare the children for schooling in next few years, normally. The preschool phase lasts for two to three years. The phase emphasizes separation individuation of the child from the primary caregiver, - the mother in most cases. It is also a phase of social skill training like learning to mix, talk, share and play with other children. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought these activities to absolute standstill in last one and a half year. Naturally the children today with lockdown lifted and school opened offline are poorly prepared for the schooling. The foregoing article gives and account of the multiple dimensions in which this lockdown might have influenced the preschool children.

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INTRODUCTION

Preschool age is the ages between 3 and 6 years. It is the phase of transition from clumsy toddlers into curious explorers of their world. Rearing a pre-schooler is a challenging round a clock task. Literature suggests that early life experience and adverse life events have a negative impact on the health and development of children.1 The impact of COVID-19 on pre-schoolers is beyond the disease itself as the virus was not very virulent in children.2 The five areas of development of a preschool child are.

- **Physical development.** A child becomes stronger and taller. May look thin.
- **Cognitive development.** A remarkable development is seen in ability to think and reason. Children learn alphabets, numbers, and colours.
- **Emotional and social development.** Children learn to manage their feelings most of the times. Friends are important in this phase.
- **Language.** A child can use thousands of words in conversations and tell stories by the age of five.

- **Sensory and motor development.** The more the child gets exposed to the things the more active it becomes. The children acquire skills required for climb up and down, jump, run, draw, kick, etc.1

The child may be good in one area than the other one.3

DETERMINANTS OF LOCKDOWN IMPACT: Lockdown restrictions adversely influenced the social life and opportunities to develop social skills for almost all the children. The impact in pre-schoolers shall be visible only after a few years of schooling.

Routine Medical Visits: Lockdown imposed restriction on regular medical visits of children for assessing normal growth and development. The vaccination schedules toppled for many preschool children mainly because of non-accessibility and non-availability of the vaccines given regularly under immunization programme for the children.

Emergency Medical Visits: Most of the doctors were busy in treating the COVID patients and thus were not available for the

children. In emergencies like bites, falls and unintentional injuries the children were treated at home by the unprofessional and unskilled persons. Burns, fractures, etc. might have been ill treated and turned into life long disability.²

Nutrition: The lockdown conditions resulted into loss of job for many. Parents who lost their jobs found it difficult to meet the nutritional needs of the children in this age group. Resulting stunting and diseases like anemia, malnutrition, etc. can have long term adverse effects.

Play: Lockdown restricted the movement of people including children. Further the restrictions on preschool children increased due to fear of contacting the disease and non-availability of vaccine for children. The children may have trouble sharing their things with others and interacting in groups.³

Language: The pre-school children did not have social interactions to develop language skills. The language and words spoken at home by the family members only were language exposures. The delay in speech and language are common.

Emotional Control: The Pre-school children had only limited people to interact with which led to increased emotional expressions. Social interaction provides for learning emotional control.⁴

Psychomotor development: The physical space to move about was limited due to lockdown. This limited space also limited the physical activities of children. Grounds were closed, so the team games were not possible. Team games help them to showcase their mastery and provide opportunity to overcome weaknesses. The developmental delay may result due to lockdown. The social and cognitive stimulation was almost nil during lockdown for the children of this age. Parents could not afford the costly toys and even if some could afford their sales were stopped.

Feeling of safety & Belongingness: A child develops friendships and gets a recognition as a member of a group. This sense of belongingness aborted by lockdown. The child may feel insecure attending school as it did not get opportunity to see and interact the unfamiliar. The child may also become dependent in matters that it is supposed to do by itself at the age he/she is.⁵

Long-term effects: The COVID-19 pandemic resulted lockdown may lead to learning disabilities, depression, obesity, heart conditions in long run among the most young population of today.⁶

LITERATURE REPORTS

A study by Bhopal S, Roy R, Verma D, Kumar D, Avan B, Khan B, et al. reported that each extra increase in childhood adversity was associated with both decreased growth and developmental delay at 18 months, a crucial period of life for optimal brain development and an important predictor of future health and wellbeing.⁷ A community-based cross-sectional study was carried out in 520 children in Delhi by Deepti Dabar, Ranjan Das, Seetharamaiya Nagesh, Vikas Yadav, and Abha Mangal. They reported that 10.6% of children less than five years of age in their study had developmental delay. Majority of children (10.1%) had delay in the domain of

'hearing language, concept development'. The strongest association was found with stunting, paternal education, alcohol abuse, and most importantly attendance in anganwadi or playschool.⁸ A systematic review titled "the potential impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on child growth and development" reported that the social restrictions, shutdowns, and school closures during lockdown contribute to stress in parents and children. These risk factors threaten child growth and development and may compromise the Sustainable Development Goals. The studies reviewed suggest that epidemics produce high levels of stress in parents and children that start with concerns about children becoming infected. These studies describe several potential mental and emotional consequences of epidemics such as COVID-19. Severe anxiety or depression among parents and acute stress disorder, post-traumatic stress, anxiety disorders, and depression among children are common mental disorders seen among all age groups of COVID-19 affected population. The psychological and behavioural problems are related to adverse childhood experiences and elevated risk of toxic stress. The more the adverse experiences, the greater the risk of developmental delays and health problems in adulthood, which include but is not limited to cognitive impairment, substance abuse, depression, and non-communicable diseases.⁹

WAYS TO NORMALIZE GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT

Some of the easily adoptable strategies that can help preschool children achieve normal growth and development and be better prepared for schooling include

- **Healthy Diet:** Include fruits, vegetables, and healthy home prepared snacks in the diet of the children. Serve small frequent foods instead of heavy 3 to 4 meals.
- **Spend Quality Time with Children:** Restrict screen time to 1 to 2 hours. Do small activities with children. Plan quality time with children. Indoor or court yard games, involvement of children in household simple tasks, fun time, story telling, singing, dancing with the children.
- **Read and talk to Children:** Read for children story books or rhyme books. This helps them develop language, increase vocabulary and opens them up to new ideas. Allow children talk to friends and relative on phone. Teach them the netikettes.
- **Rest & Sleep:** Ensure that child gets enough sleep. 2 – 3 hours sleep during day and 8 -10 hours sleep during night is required for normal growth and development of the preschool child. Indoor games and physically active outdoor games may be alternately planned for sufficient rest to the body and mind.
- **Help child play with other children:** Enrol child in Preschool or play groups so that children to learn to interact, share, explore and verbalize.
- **Teach skills:** Selfdressing and undressing as well as toilet training can make the preschool child more independent and prepare it for the school life ahead.
- **Make child feel safe and secure:** Set limits but let them explore. Be prompt in meeting the needs of the children. Avoid comparing or criticizing for non-achievements.

CONCLUSION

The literature reviewed for this article reports that adverse experiences in early childhood are the risk factors for developmental delay and stunting. COVID-19 pandemic is one of the biggest adversities along with socio-economic adversities, fear of infection, domestic violence, exposure to addiction by parents, etc. for the preschool children. The impact of lockdown is multidimensional which includes but is not restricted to physical growth, social skills development, psychological and emotional maturation and developing age appropriate coping strategies. Along with providing healthy food and healthful living, it is utmost important to encourage the preschool child of today to interact with other children so that the child is better prepared for schooling and the work life in adulthood.

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