Issues that affected the mental health of children in India during COVID-19 and efforts taken by the Indian Government to address them

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The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in the world's strictest lockdown, that had a tremendous influence on the mental health of all people worldwide, especially with children being a vulnerable group prone to negative consequences. This commentary deals with the issues that affected mental health of children during the pandemic and the corrective actions taken by Government of India (GOI), Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) to handle them.

According to a report released by 'Save the children' NGO that conducted a survey of 4000 people from six Indian states, it was found that 27% of children felt lonely, 39% were anxious about death, illness and separation from loved ones where as 25% reported less sleep because of stress. One in every four parents reported that their children had experienced a sudden emotional or behavioral change (27%) also abandoning previous play habits (29%) (1).

As the lockdown started extending, children from low-income households as well as those suffering from major illness or mental disorders, became easy targets for mental and physical abuse as they were increasingly exposed to adverse economic and social circumstances. Such children found it challenging to understand and comply with the situation.

Helplessness faced by poor families sometimes manifested in form of violence towards children. 25% of parents said they scolded or punished their children more frequently (1). This violence increased children's susceptibility to anxiety, depression, and even suicide. Prolonged closure of schools forced more children into child labour that increased form 4% pre pandemic to 5 % post pandemic(1).The Deputy Director of 'CHILDLINE 1098' India, announced that the calls received on the helpline suddenly doubled since the lockdown began (2).

During the lockdown, it became necessary to address and protect the mental health of children for which various initiatives were launched by GOI. SAMVAD (Support, Advocacy, and Mental Health Interventions for Children in Vulnerable Situations and Distress) is an initiative commenced by the National Institute of Mental Health and Neuro Sciences (NIMHANS). It works in the areas of child protection and support mental health needs of children through capacity building and integrating them into legal and judicial systems across the country.

Manodarpan and Kiran were initiatives launched by the Ministry of Education (MoE) and Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment respectively that provided mental health care and psychological support to children during the pandemic through toll-free numbers (3,4).

Prolonged duration of school closures also led to disruption in provision of one-time nutritious meal to children through the Mid-day Meal scheme aggravating malnutrition specially in kids from lower socioeconomic background. The GOI adapted a quick change in the strategy in which the essential food items were distributed to all eligible children as Food Security Allowance (FSA) (5). An RTI revealed that 81% of

the children enrolled under FSA were provided Mid-day Meal (6).

Circumstances under the pandemic strongly promoted use of technology to stay connected; Hence, educational institutions took their teaching from in-person to online mode to ensure continuation of curriculum, making all the multimedia devices a major necessity. But the inequality in access to online education among students coming from high and low-income backgrounds created a digital divide that can be directly related to increasing school dropout rates, pushing the children into labour and early marriages. to make sure the digital divide does not become a barrier in imparting education, government promoted digital education through online platforms, TV and Radio. Department of School Education and Literacy and Ministry of Human Resources Development (MHRD) launched platforms such as Diksha, e-Pathshala, Swayam National Repository of Open Educational Resources (NROER) that provided education through audio-videos courses, and the Swayam Prabha platform broadcast educational content through TV channels. According to the study conducted by Singh M. et. al, 77% of the participants have ranked the government initiatives between good to excellent scale and among them NPTEL and SWAYAM were most positively rated (7). NGOs such as Sampark, Pratham, Eklavya, Vidya and ThinkZone also developed strategies to educate India.

Fear of Examination is another major source of stress in a child's life, especially in an atmosphere where guidelines and examination timetables are subject to the ever-changing spread of cases and government-issued guidelines. MHRD ordered all schools to mass promote children studying in all classes including 10th and 12th to the next grade based on the school-based assessments (8,9).

During the lockdown, the entire weight of childcare fell on the shoulders of parents, who may not be experienced in dealing with the behavioural and physical reactions caused by COVID-19 stress.

MoHFW along with NIMHANS released an advisory for 'taking care of Mental Health of children during COVID-19' encouraging parents to provide assurance and giving children clear information in a simple manner. Parents were advised to keep the children in contact with their friends, engage them in indoor activities and incorporate learning at home in their daily routine (10).

In conclusion, the psychological and physical needs of every child vary, but the Indian government made commendable efforts to meet them. The close collaboration of parents and communities will assist children in coping with the effects of the pandemic in order to receive and create the bright Indian future.

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