

The Impact of the Lockdown on Children

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... Nobody's going to school anymore,

No child playing in the park,

Nobody's even opening the door,

Except for grocery or stock.

We used to giggle and play

On our swings and slide.

Now, we are caged in our homes,

As Corona gambols outside...

(By Indulekha Agnihotram, Class VII, Telangana)

With the closure of schools and public spaces to slow the transmission of the coronavirus, children have been confined to their homes. Long periods of such separation will affect them both mentally and physically. During such times, they have been forced to change their way of life suddenly and adapt to new ones. The disruption in their normal routines, fear of the alien virus and inability to comprehend the situation has increased their anxiety. Lack of social interaction and separation from friends has made the children feel lonely. The focus of media on pandemic related tragic events around the world leads to an increase in their anxiety levels and causes sleep disorders. Restrictions on movement and closure of parks and gyms, has also reduced their physical activities. CRY, a non – governmental organisation working for the children, conducted a survey among parents and has reported that during the lockdown, screen time has increased, eating patterns have changed and children have become more agitated. Various researches indicate that increase in the screen time beyond 1 hour affects mental abilities and cognition in children. The survey also reported that parents and children have been able to bond and spend time together.

UNICEF executive director stated that “Under the shadow of COVID-19, the lives of millions of children have temporarily shrunk to just their homes and their screens. We must help them navigate this new reality”.

Schools have embraced online classes as a go-to solution to resume classes. However, online lessons come with challenges of their own. The learning gap between children from lower – income and higher – income households will widen. This is because only children who have access to technology, internet and domestic conditions conducive to learning will be benefitted by online lessons, while others will be alienated. A report by a UK – based charity Street Child said that more than 50 percent of children across Asia and Africa were not able to take part in any form of learning.

Another risk that arises, as lives of children move increasingly online, is the danger of online sexual exploitation by predators. Online education cannot be seen as a perfect substitute of the traditional classrooms.

Parents need to take an active role in ensuring the well-being of their children. Communication between parents and children is of utmost importance. Signs of anxiety or depression should be addressed. Screen time should be limited and children should be encouraged to take up productive activities. Children should be made aware of the current situation.

Now, let's see the impact of the lockdown on children from another dimension. How have children from the most vulnerable and marginalized sections of the society been affected? What about the children of migrant labourers, street children, child beggars? Though children aren't worst affected by COVID-19 but poverty, hunger and social constraints will surely kill them. Many child labourers have not returned to their native places. Their families have no way of knowing about their well-being. Those that have returned, haven't been paid their dues. Few have died while returning home by foot. Child labourers are exploited emotionally, sexually and physically by their employers. Employers are also not willing to let go of them, since cheap labour will be required once the lockdown is lifted. Street children whose families depend on them will no longer be able to support them. Those who live on their own have a hard time in search of food and shelter. The condition of child beggars who are forced by the beggar mafia is worrisome, now that there are no donors on the street.

Anganwadi centres and mid-day meal schemes have shut since the lockdown was imposed. Families haven't been able to avail ration due to systemic failures. Children have been pushed into starvation because of these factors.

The government machinery should ensure that child labourers, street workers, beggars and other vulnerable children are admitted in government shelters. Raids should be conducted to rescue child labourers and be freed from bondage. A system should be put in place to help the destitute children return home. People can aid the rehabilitation of helpless children by contacting child helpline 1098. Safety measures should be taken to ensure that they do not fall prey to the virus and medical assistance should be provided to them.

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