

Pandemic and Children: A Sociological Study on the mental health of the Children Age between 7 to 14 in Arambagh of Hooghly District of West Bengal (India)

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Abstract

Mental well-being is as crucial as physical well-being in completing developmental milestones during childhood. In addition, it helps children's emotional well-being and social abilities. Children who are psychologically better at home, school, and their communities have a better chance of enjoying a happy and successful life. The other hand, poor mental health during childhood can significantly impact how children learn, behave, and manage their emotions. The COVID-19 pandemic has posed complex issues for everyone, especially children and adolescents, with mental health implications. Children's mental health has been significantly impacted by grief, worry, uncertainty, social isolation, increased screen usage, and parental weariness. Children's friendships and family support are powerful stabilizing influences, but the COVID-19 Pandemic has thrown them off. This paper attempts to highlight children's (aged between 7- 14) mental status due to the COVID-19 pandemic and its impacts on their relations in the family, peer group, and society.

Methods: Household Survey, Unstructured Interview, and Case Study.

Keywords: Mental health, Childhood, COVID-19, Family, Friendship.

1. Introduction

December 2019, the 2019 novel coronavirus (COVID-19) had more than 37 million confirmed cases and one million deaths globally. COVID-19 is a kind of respiratory illness, occasionally induces severe pneumonia and critical respiratory distress syndrome. Although comparisons have been made between COVID-19 and the 2003 severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), it was found that due to the less severe clinical picture of COVID-19, the virus can spread more quickly in the community than either SARS or Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS). In addition, the lower fatality rate of COVID-19 indicates that many more people are likely to survive their illness and face psychological consequences.

Some groups of people may be more vulnerable to the psychosocial effects of pandemics than others. Because they are in a critical developmental period, children and adolescents deserve special care to preserve and promote their mental health. The pandemic history has experienced unprecedented changes in recent years. Among them are the drastic modifications of children's routines. They suppressed learning classes and moved all children's activities to home. In addition, distance education systems and television stations routinely offer classes or suppress them.

Physical exercise has been reduced or suppressed. The presence of parents and children's involvement in home activities helps in the child's routine and autonomy. However, isolation imposes a more significant contact between parents and children, including opportunities for play and friction. Not all homes are safe places, and some children may be exposed to various types of abuse. Although screen time can be relaxed during this quarantine period, the lack of supervision over internet access increases vulnerability to online offenders, attempted fraud, and access to sexually inappropriate content. As a result, problems such as worsening school performance, increased agitation, aggression, and regression may arise or become more evident. In this scenario, the study of mental status becomes even more critical because the impact of the environment that favors or impairs the child's mental health can be modified by several initiatives. This study reviews the literature on the Mental Health of Children during the COVID-19 Pandemic.

2. Objectives

This study aimed to explore the impact of the pandemic on children's mental health and well-being.

1. Methods

In this paper, the researcher collected data from 40 respondents (age 7-14) for this study. The study area is Arambagh town; effective data collection methods are Household surveys and unstructured Interviews. During the face-to-face interviews, respondents were encouraged to communicate their perspectives transparently and were assured that their reactions would be used for analysis and report generation, not for investigation purposes. The researcher also conducted a few case studies for this work.

Table: 1 Age group and number of respondents

Age group	Number of respondents
7-10	20
10-14	20
Total	40

Case study 1

A 12-year-old boy named Sourav Chatterjee was a very talkative student at school. During the COVID-19 pandemic, when the school was closed, he could not meet his friends and teachers. So, he is stuck at home and getting depressed. After a few days, he cannot enjoy his parent's company, and day by day, he becomes sad and loses interest in activities he once loved. He also cannot concentrate on

his studies and other sports activities. His parents tried to make him happy, but his situation could not improve. After a few days, he also feared losing his friends at school and became very anxious. After that, his parents provided medical help to recover him from this situation. So, childlike Sourav cannot adjust to this sudden lockdown and detachment from his friends and becomes depressed.

Case study 2

A 14-year-old girl named Chandrima Ghosh was a culturally active student at a school. She loved to dance in every school program, but the sudden lockdown due to the Pandemic separated her from school and her passion. At that time, she was addicted to the internet and spent most of her time in front of the screen. High internet usage causes sleeping disorders, irritation, and anxiety found in the girl Chandrima; she was also suffering from an ophthalmological problem. Day by day, internet usage also invites internet addiction, which ruins her social life. When her parents limit her internet access, she becomes angry and anxious.

2. Major findings

The selected studies assessed mental health status in unstructured Interviews, household surveys, and case studies. Most of the included studies utilized the detection of anxiety and depression symptoms as a benchmark for mental health—the data found on the frequency of anxiety and depression symptoms in children.

a. Age

Age has been an essential variable in several studies analyzing mental health. Different researches compared children's and adolescents' mental health to adults. In this research, the researcher collected data from ages 7-14. Based on age, mental, and emotional development, the researcher divided the selected age group into two groups: 7-10 and 10-14. Depression and anxiety disorders are the most common problems of mental health. In the case of children, a pandemic offers a huge mental shock. It was found that most children could not adjust to this sudden lockdown. Therefore, in that case, different symptoms related to anxiety are primarily found in 7-10 age groups; on the other hand, depression is mainly found in 10-14 age groups.

b. Gender

Gender was essential in analysing the general mental health state. Few studies have shown that depression and anxiety are more likely to be found in girls than boys. In this study, it was found that there is no such difference found between girls and boys in the age group 7-10. However, 10-14 depressive symptoms and anxiety are more common among girls than boys. The biological reason for this is that girls reach puberty before boys, and hormonal changes can cause depression. However, Not only the biological reason for the Pandemic when going outside is restricted sexual abuse by a family member but also depression was found by a researcher.

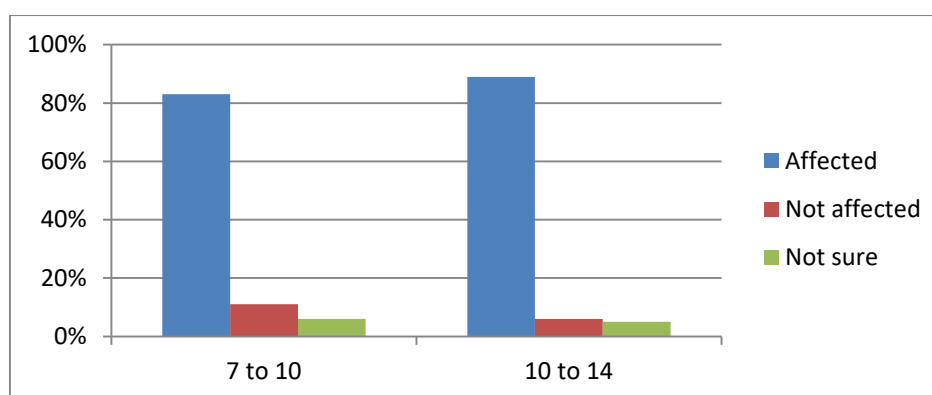
c. School closure and, physical and mental health

School closure influences children's behavior in various ways. Several articles have expressed concerns about food nutrition, physical activity, and the mental well-being of children. In this study, it was found that sudden lockdowns make children both physically and mentally shattered. School plays a vital role in a child. Systematic school activities, routines, class time, and tidy time and playground fun all have a higher impact on children's physical and mental health. School is not about reading and the syllabus. It is an excellent place for interaction between teachers, students, and peer groups. However, sudden pandemics deprive children of this ability. A 7 years old child Shivam said that the smell of school made him happy that he was badly missed during the Pandemic.

Table 2 School closure influences: physical and mental health

Age group	Affected	Not affected	Not sure
7 - 10	83%	11%	6%
10 - 14	89%	6%	5%

Figure 1: School closure influences: physical and mental health



d. Knowledge and expectations regarding COVID-19

Pandemic fears may have a various effects on children's mental health. Pessimistic attitudes toward the Pandemic, for example, fear of infection or having a relative infected, may result in behavioral changes. Lower depression scores were obtained by being optimistic about the Pandemic and not concerned about becoming infected. However, having expectations misplaced or frustrated (for example, quarantine lasting longer than expected) can lead to anxiety and depression.

Regarding mental health, having access to information and knowledge about COVID-19 is also essential. Two studies discovered a link between pandemic knowledge and mental health.

Individuals with more knowledge about COVID-19 or who were satisfied with the Pandemic information available were less likely to participate in this study.

e. Community and family relationships

Family relationships during the Pandemic are getting intense. All family members stay together at home. Especially working parents do not have sufficient time to spend with children in pandemics they are getting closed. So, sitting together, having food, playing, and communicating strengthens their bonding. However, on the other hand, the relationship between the community and the friend circle is not strong enough because they cannot meet and share time. Nobody can meet together because of this Covid 19 virus and infection. So, the physical distance between community members makes their bonding weak.

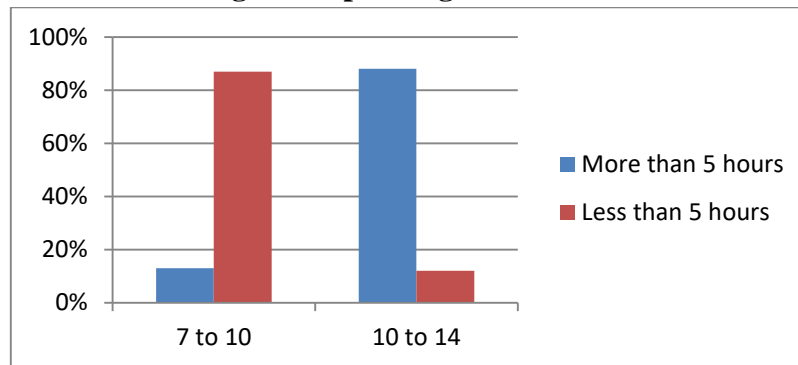
f. Screen time

The Pandemic makes everyone more technology friendly. During a pandemic, consumption of the internet is getting high. Initially, the school was closed, but after a few months, online classes started, and considerable hours children spent in front of the mobile laptop screen; when children got bored, they played online games and watched cartoons and movies. So, spending a massive amount of time in front of a screen can cause anxiety, and sometimes it invites insomnia and others sleeping disorder. However, eyesight problems, itching in the eyes, and watering are also side effects found in this study. It is found that 7-10 age group children spend less than 5 hours in front of the screen, while 10-14 age group children spend more than 5 hours in front of the screen.

Table 3 Spending screen time

Age group	More than 5 hours	Less than 5 hours
7 - 10	13%	87%
10 - 14	88%	12%

Figure 2 Spending Screen time



g. Vulnerable socio-economic condition

This Pandemic leads to an economic recession that invites different problems in the social class system. People are fired from their job, and job options are limited during the Pandemic, which brings unemployment. So, only the lower class group faced major trouble during those days. However, they have a massive impact on children and their mental well-being. Sometimes Children from low-income families might rely only on school for healthy meals, mental health support, and playgrounds for physical exercise. Therefore, school closures and quarantine prevent children from accessing these services and activities, which may cause a decrease in mental health and general well-being.

3. Conclusion

A pandemic could be considered a disaster-like event because a disaster has a non-routine character that exceeds local capacity to respond to it, causing changes in the community, government, and individual support and infrastructure and affecting regional stability. Aside from recruiting many resources from all sources of assistance, it does not prevent other disasters from occurring, and it even amplifies their effects due to a lack of adequate response. It is evident in this revision that many contemporary pediatric problems are maximized, and some new problems and perspectives emerge. We identified the mental health scenario caused by the Pandemic and social isolation. As expected, we respond differently to stress at different stages of development. However, children of all developmental stages experienced high rates of depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic symptoms, as expected in the aftermath of any disaster. We know that several critical points concerning children and adolescents' mental health during pandemics need to be investigated further. Age, gender, school attendance, and the emotional consequences of pandemics have all been studied. However, the study designs are not yet sufficiently robust, precluding definitive conclusions.

Nonetheless, our study summarises essential and readily available data on the mental health of children and adolescents during the COVID-19 Pandemic. In this scenario, we also discuss the impact of school activities, albeit in a small way. Finally, mental health is a critical concern during a pandemic. Children and adolescents are considered a vulnerable subgroup, and there is a need to reduce the Pandemic's mental health burden.

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