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Consequences of COVID-19 pandemic on children's mental health

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated mental health problems in many individuals, including children. Children with pre-existing socio-demographic or developmental risk factors may be particularly vulnerable to the negative effects of the pandemic and associated public health preventive measures.

Keywords: COVID-19, Mental health, UNICEF, Pediatrician

Introduction

In December 2019, a highly infectious strain of the coronavirus (COVID-19) emerged in China and spread globally within a few months. This led the World Health Organization to declare a global pandemic status. In early 2020, several countries implemented lockdown measures, leading to extended school closures, and home lockdown for children and their families. Though lockdown measures were gradually lifted, and some schools were allowed to reopen, children's regular routines were disrupted with the addition of new rules, such as wearing a mask in class or making a transition to online or hybrid schooling (instead of in-person learning). Emerging research has suggested that these various restrictions, as well as the fear of the virus itself, may have caused children to experience negative mental health consequences.

Generally, mentally healthy children function well at home, in school, and in their communities and have greater chances of leading a happy and successful life. On the contrary, poor mental health during childhood can severely impact the way children learn, behave, or handle their emotions.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought a complex array of challenges which had mental health repercussions for everyone, including children and adolescents. Grief, fear, uncertainty, social isolation, increased screen time, and parental fatigue have negatively affected the mental health of children. Friendships and family support are strong stabilizing forces for children, but the COVID-19 pandemic has also disrupted them. Children could feel the impact of COVID-19 on their mental health and well-being for many years to come.

According to "The State of the World's Children 2021; On My Mind: promoting, protecting and caring for children's mental health" – UNICEF's most comprehensive look at the mental health of children, adolescents and caregivers in the 21st century – even before COVID-19, children and young people carried the burden of mental health conditions without significant investment in addressing them. According to the latest available estimates, more than 1 in 7 adolescents aged 10–19 is estimated to live with a diagnosed mental disorder globally. Almost 46,000 adolescents die from suicide each year, among the top five causes of death for their age group. Meanwhile, wide gaps persist between mental health needs and mental health funding. The report finds that about 2 per cent of government health budgets are allocated to mental health spending globally.

"It has been a long, long 18 months for all of us – especially children. With nationwide lockdowns and pandemic-related movement restrictions, children have spent indelible years of their lives away from family, friends, classrooms, play – key elements of childhood itself," said UNICEF Executive Director Henrietta Fore. "The impact is significant, and it is just the tip of the iceberg. Even before the pandemic, far too many children were burdened under the weight of unaddressed mental health issues.

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Too little investment is being made by governments to address these critical needs. Not enough importance is being placed on the relationship between mental health and future life outcomes.”

The mental health of millions of children worldwide has been put at risk, with at least one in seven forced to remain at home under nationwide public health orders – or recommendations – during the COVID-19 pandemic. More than 330 million youngsters have been stuck at home, till March 2021, for at least nine months, since the virus spread uncontrollably this time last year.

It has become difficult for parents to calm their children's anxieties because of the uncertainty and stress in their own lives. The occupational or emotional challenges parents face is interfering with their usual ability to address their children's needs and worries.

When will the school reopen? When can they go out and play? When can they visit their favourite places? These are some common questions that children may be worrying about.

It is not unusual for children to experience negative emotions such as fear, disappointment, sadness, anxiety, anger, loss etc. But it is the prolonged, restrictive, and widespread nature of the COVID-19 pandemic that has exacerbated the situation. Increased screen time, strained family relations or sedentary lifestyle at home pose additional challenges.

- Being a parent is a daily challenge and faced with the realities of COVID 19, social distancing and self-quarantine, it may be a struggle. For parents, the best way to help their children is to firstly take care of themselves.
- Self-care during these times is not selfish because it enables the caregivers to be there for their children as a stable, calm and soothing parent. This way, parents will also be able to better understand their children and help them feel reassured, relaxed and focused.
- It is important to be calm and proactive in your conversations with children – check in with them to see how they are doing. Their emotions will change regularly and you need to show them that’s okay.
- Whether at school or at home, caregivers can engage children in creative activities, such as playing and drawing, to help them express and communicate any negative feelings they may be experiencing in a safe and supportive environment. This helps children find positive ways to express difficult feelings such as anger, fear or sadness.
- As children often take their emotional cues from the key adults in their lives – including parents and teachers – it is important that adults manage their own emotions well and remain calm, listen to children’s concerns, speak kindly and reassure them.
- Unattended mental health problems can disrupt children's functioning at home, school and in the community. Parents and teachers should get equipped to detect and deal with early signs of mental health problems among children as they are the first to notice changes in child’s emotions or behaviour.
- Children and adolescents should also be encouraged to talk about their feelings and reach out to a trusted friend or family member. Early intervention can prevent long term mental health consequences from this COVID-19 pandemic.

Recognizing signs of stress in your child

Mild signs of anxiety, such as difficulty in sleeping or concentrating, have become common. But children are very resilient, and most will manage to cope with parents and peers' support. However, some children are at greater risk of developing intense reactions, including severe anxiety, depression, and suicidal tendencies. Any pre-existing mental health problem, past traumatic experiences or abuse, family instability, or losing a loved one can make children highly vulnerable to developing severe mental health conditions.

Parents and caregivers know their child the best. If they notice a sudden significant difference in their child's behaviour for more than a week, they must seek professional clinical help. Such behavioural symptoms change over time as the child grows:

1. In children younger than five years: thumb sucking, bedwetting, clinging to parents, sleep disturbances, loss of appetite, fear of the dark, regression in behaviour or withdrawal from interaction.
2. In children between 5 to 10 years old: irritability, aggressiveness, clinginess, nightmares, school avoidance, poor concentration, and withdrawal from activities and friends.
3. In adolescents between 10 to 19 years old: hyperactivity or fidgeting, sleeping, and eating disturbances, agitation, increased conflicts, physical complaints, delinquent behaviour, and poor concentration.

Cost to society

Diagnosed mental disorders, including ADHD, anxiety, autism, bipolar disorder, conduct disorder, depression, eating disorders, intellectual disability, and schizophrenia, can significantly harm children and young people’s health, education, life outcomes, and earning capacity.

While the impact on children’s lives is incalculable, a new analysis by the London School of Economics in the report indicates that lost contribution to economies due to mental disorders that lead to disability or death among young people is estimated at nearly \$390 billion a year.

How your pediatrician can help

Staying in touch with your pediatrician is more important than ever during this pandemic. If you have any concerns, ask your pediatrician’s office about checking on your child’s social and emotional health. This can be especially important for children facing higher rates of illness or risk from COVID-19, such as children of color, those living in poverty, special health care needs or developmental differences. Children who are refugees and those involved with the child welfare and juvenile justice systems may also be more at risk.

Pediatricians can screen for depression and ask about other concerns like anxiety or trouble coping with stress. The doctor may also ask about these symptoms in other family members, as this can impact your child’s health, and whether they know anyone who has become sick with COVID-19. It’s important to offer your teen some time to talk one-on-one with the pediatrician during the visit to ensure they have the chance to speak as openly as possible. Many pediatricians are also offering telehealth visits during the pandemic.

Dealing with the loss of a loved one to COVID-19

Children, adolescents, and families who experienced the

loss of a loved family member or friend to COVID-19 are at increased risk for mental health challenges and may need special attention and professional counseling to manage their loss and grief.

Supporting your child

Your pediatrician can give you guidance on ways to best support your child and help them build resilience. Always check in with your child, ask them how they are feeling, and remind them you are there to talk if they want to, when they are ready. Some children or adolescents may need more time and space to express their feelings. Some may do better with gradual conversations and other activities besides talking, such as painting or drawing to express themselves and manage stress. Others might be more comfortable with direct conversations or activities.

A word about suicide risk

Rates of suicide for both adolescents and adults increase during times of high stress. In addition to screening for depression, your pediatrician can screen for suicide risk.

Remember, not everyone who considers suicide will talk about it, and not everyone who talks about suicide will act on their words. However, any talk about suicide should be taken seriously. If you are worried about your child, it is critical to make your home safe by removing weapons and ammunition from the house and securing medications in a locked cabinet.

Seek help immediately by calling the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK or texting the Crisis Text Line by texting 'TALK' to 741741. Reserve 911 for situations where self-harming actions are happening or are about to happen. In a non-crisis situation, talk with your pediatrician about any concerns you have about your child's mental health.

Protective factors

The report notes that a mix of genetics, experience and environmental factors from the earliest days, including parenting, schooling, quality of relationships, exposure to violence or abuse, discrimination, poverty, humanitarian crises, and health emergencies such as COVID-19, all shape and affect children's mental health throughout their lifetime. While protective factors, such as loving caregivers, safe school environments, and positive peer relationships can help reduce the risk of mental disorders, the report warns that significant barriers, including stigma and lack of funding, are preventing too many children from experiencing positive mental health or accessing the support they need.

The State of the World's Children 2021 calls on governments, and public and private sector partners, to commit, communicate and act to promote mental health for all children, adolescents and caregivers, protect those in need of help, and care for the most vulnerable, including:

- Urgent investment in child and adolescent mental health across sectors, not just in health, to support a whole-of-society approach to prevention, promotion and care.
- Integrating and scaling up evidence-based interventions across health, education and social protection sectors - including parenting programmes that promote responsive, nurturing caregiving and support parent and caregiver mental health; and ensuring schools support

mental health through quality services and positive relationships.

- Breaking the silence surrounding mental illness, through addressing stigma and promoting better understanding of mental health and taking seriously the experiences of children and young people.

Self-care and setting the tone

Parents set the tone in the household. Expressing extreme doom or fear can affect your children. It can be challenging to stay positive, especially if you're struggling with your own stress. But try to relay consistent messages that a brighter future lies ahead. It helps to set aside time to take care of yourself when possible, and seek the support you may need for your own mental health. Practicing mindfulness, focusing on the present moment, yoga or stretching can help the entire family build coping skills. Build in down time for the whole family to connect and relax, enjoying a nap, movie time or simply spending time together.

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