



Responding to children's mental health, protection and psychosocial care concerns in the COVID crisis

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The COVID-19 Pandemic has had a multitude of adverse impacts across different contexts and spaces, particularly on vulnerable populations such as children. Children residing in adverse circumstances, in communities wherein people's socio-economic and psychosocial circumstances are marked by precarity and adversity (UNSDG, 2020), have been some of the most impacted.

In addition to psychosocial disruptions and distress due to school closure (Chaabane et al., 2021), loss of access to critical community services and spaces, including school (and school-based healthcare services, nutrition programs), libraries, child healthcare services and critical resources for children with disabilities (ACPHA, 2019), combined with stress and related risk factors for family-based violence, like unemployment and reduced incomes, have caused serious hindrances to children's development, mental health and well-being.

Such concerns are confirmed by global trends reflecting increased reports of domestic violence (30–50% in some cases) (Campbell, 2020). There is also likely to be underreporting of child maltreatment cases (namely abuse and neglect), given the lack of access to community support systems, and the increase in family-related violence, as described above (Rapoport et al., 2021; Campbell, 2020). Further, additional child marriages stemming from the impact of the pandemic are estimated at 10 million, and even with timely programming measures, are estimated at 5 million (United Nations Children's Fund, 2021).

Increased child protection and consequent mental health risks have been exacerbated in the recent 'second wave' of the pandemic, wherein many children have lost loved ones, or have become 'COVID orphans'.

This has placed children at risk for illegal adoptions and unsafe foster care arrangements, and created new mental health issues for children, pertaining to disclosure of illness and death, and the trauma of loss and grief, as children lose their loved ones to the pandemic.

Following the above, there exists an identifiable need to generate awareness and facilitate information sharing amongst all concerned caregivers/child care professionals on locally contextualised 'Mental Health and Psychosocial Support' (MHPSS) responses that are crucial to addressing the challenges and multi-faceted impacts of COVID on vulnerable child populations (Williams and Pontalti, 2020; UNSDG, 2020). Specifically, in the context of emergencies, child and adolescent mental health tends to be overlooked in prevention and mitigation responses, thereby fostering significant mental health issues that can have serious long-term ramifications. As a result, psycho-education for caregivers and service providers plays a significant role in guiding child care decision-making, developing capacities of non-health professionals and caregivers in providing first-level responses, providing information on coping strategies for children, and creating linkages to activate referral processes in cases pertaining to children with serious mental illness (Danese et al., 2020).

In view of the impact of disruptions brought about by COVID to information sharing and knowledge dissemination, and the imperative to recognise that capacity-building efforts are increasingly having to adapt to a changed learning landscape, online web-based platforms can be leveraged to offer interactive learning spaces, that also enable an increased reach. (Sheth et al., 2020).

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ajp.2021.102831>

Table 1
COVID series “Children in Covid Crisis...Like We Never Expected It to Be”.

Series	Focus
Part 1: Saving Children from the Brink - Acting Upon Child Protection Vulnerabilities in the COVID Crisis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Impact and consequences of mental health and child protection risks on children during the COVID crisis. Implications for action i.e. placement-related decision-making in the interest of children’s safety and well-being. Imperative to contextualise the suitability of institutional and non-institutional child care. Use of systematic approaches to psychosocial assessments in understanding the context of children’s experiences.
Part 2: Worries... Fly away! - Helping Children Manage COVID-Related Anxieties	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Need to address COVID-related anxieties and risks in children. Imperative to address children’s sense of unpredictability, their fears about the future and about the well-being and health of loved ones and themselves. Creative methods to provide an age-appropriate and developmentally-sensitive understanding of COVID-related illness. Equip children with techniques to cope with and manage their COVID-related anxieties.
Part 3: Breaking Bad News - Disclosing Illness and Death to children in the COVID crisis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Children’s struggles with difficult thoughts and emotions (such as sadness, anger and guilt) that emerge from the unpredictable and chaotic circumstances. The child mental health impact of the lack of or poorly planned disclosure. Guidelines for developmentally appropriate COVID-related illness and death disclosure, including the use of creative methods, such as stories and comic strips.
Part 4: In my Heart Forever - Supporting Children through Loss & Grief Experiences in the COVID crisis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The importance of allowing children the space to express loss and grief experiences. Providing age-appropriate responses to children’s confusions and questions, on loss and death. Creative and art-based methods for supporting children through experiences of loss and grief following the difficult disclosures of illness and death. Healing and recovery in the context of the trauma of loss and death.

In light of the same, SAMVAD (Support, Advocacy & Mental health interventions for children in Vulnerable circumstances And Distress), a National Initiative & Integrated Resource for Child Protection, Mental Health and Psychosocial Care, under the Ministry of Women and Child Development, Government of India, ran a 4-part Special Series titled “Children in Covid Crisis...Like We Never Expected It to Be” online, in Hindi & English, on its YouTube channel. Participatory methods were used to engage child care service providers, from the arenas of mental health, education, protection and welfare, in discussions, reflections and demonstration of methods to address children’s issues in the pandemic. Given child protection risks and vulnerabilities in the pandemic, the series highlighted: [Table 1](#).

- (i) The salience of undertaking systematic home assessments of families and children ([Daniel, 2010](#)).
- (ii) Mental health impacts of the uncertainty engendered by the pandemic, and methods to educate children about COVID in age-appropriate ways, including creative ways of managing their anxieties ([Dalton et al., 2020](#)).
- (iii) Dilemmas pertaining to disclosure of illness and loss of a caregiver/loved one, including the mental health impacts of silence, evasiveness and poorly planned disclosures ([Dalton et al., 2020](#)).
- (iv) The need to assist children with issues of loss and trauma, through the use of creative, art-based methods.

Reaching 35,518 child care functionaries, mental health professionals and other stakeholders in over 400 districts across the country, the 4-part series discussed systematic approaches to address psychosocial risks and respond to children’s mental health concerns (web-link to the series is available at: https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PL6M-G4mGr43r4ZlImGB6JfmM1Wv_nyz2P).

Financial disclosure

None to declare.

Conflict of interest

None.

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