

PSYCHOSOCIAL WELLNESS AMONG CHILDREN – SUGGESTIONS AND RECOMMENDATION TO PARENTS, FAMILY MEMBERS AND COUNSELLORS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC – A REVIEW PAPER

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Abstract

Although children are minimally susceptible to 2019-Corona virus disease (COVID-19), they are hit the hardest by psychosocial impact of this pandemic. Being quarantined in homes may impose greater psychological burden than the physical sufferings caused by the virus. There is a need to educate parents and adult caregivers to support children in these difficult times and build psychosocial resilience. children have access to different kinds of information and news through social media and digital platforms, some of them may not be factually true, causing fear, stress and anxiety. Children's responses to stressful events are unique and varied. The primary factor is the presence of a supportive parents and adult caregiver in a child's life. Children, need quality time with their parents and caregivers in their lives. An acronym "ARCH" is a curved structure that could solve important problem by being able to support a large amount of weight. Thus, this review paper provides a few recommendations to parents, family members and counsellors to assist, help and support children in enhancing psychosocial wellness. Some of the recommendations include providing age-appropriate information; Creating a safe physical and emotional environment; Reassuring and carrying out routines and regulation; emphasizing strengths, hope and positivity and also parents and adult caregivers could help by focusing children's attention on stories that can be healing and comforting to children.



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Introduction

As COVID-19 pandemic continues to expand in India and in the world, only one thing is certain: the current outbreak is believed to have a profound impact not only in the health and economic situation, but also on the psychosocial well-being of societies across nations. The impacts will be felt differently among different population groups. Among these, one group will face additional challenges to understand, absorb, and deal with the changes that COVID-19 are bringing to our world: the children.

Amidst the COVID-19 outbreak, everyday life has changed and will continue to change for most people in the India, often with little notice. Children may struggle with significant adjustments to their routines in relation to school, child care, social distancing and moreover confinement to the four walls of the home. All of this may interfere with their sense of routine, structure, predictability and social-emotional and physical security.

COVID-19 is also bringing new stressors on parent and caregivers and in turn the counsellors too. This can hamper their capacity to provide care and remain engaged with their children. Being very keen observers of people and environments, children will notice, absorb and react to the stress in their caregivers and community members, which unavoidably will affect their well-being, and the above is only the beginning. Levels of stress will be exponentially higher among vulnerable families.

The entire life span of Human Development namely, the elderly, adult, adolescence, teens, school going children, infants and toddlers are keen observers of people and environments, and they notice and react to stress in their parents and other caregivers, peers, and society or community members. They may ask direct questions about what is happening now or what will happen in the future and may behave differently in reaction to strong feelings such as fear, anxiety, worry, sadness, anger and temper tantrums about the pandemic and related conditions. Children also may worry about their own safety and the safety of their loved ones, how they will get their basic needs met on the regular day to day needs of food, shelter, clothing and uncertainties for the future. While most children eventually return to their typical working and functioning when they receive constant and consistent care, help, reassurance, support from sensitive and responsive other family members and caregivers. These children develop a system of managing difficulties and problems, including stress, trauma, anxiety and so a large extent the feeling of depression.

In the current context of lock down and restriction of movements, children have constrained access to socialization, play, and even physical contact, critical for their psychosocial wellbeing and development. School closures are preventing children from access to learning and limiting their interactions with peers. Children may feel confused and at loss with the current situation, leading to frustration and anxiety, which will only increase with the overexposure to mass and social media, especially among adolescents. Some adults may

struggle to find ways to explain and communicate with children about the current situation in a way that is understandable by this age group, which will add frustration and disquietude.

Childhood is a critical period in any human's life, which marks the foundation of the personality and emotional resilience's capacity of any person. In this difficult time, let's all commit to mitigate the effects of COVID-19 on those whom deserve the most protection: the children.

It is natural for children to feel stress, anxiety, grief, and worry during an ongoing pandemic like COVID-19. Fear and anxiety about their own health and the health of loved ones can be overwhelming and cause strong emotions. In today's digital world, children also access different kinds of information and news through social media and digital platforms, some of them may not be factually true, causing further stress and anxiety. It is enhanced when children are not able to go out, play, attend school or interact freely. For those children and families who are subjected to quarantine or isolation there may be an increased risk of violence and abuse. When stress levels go up for adults and children, there is a greater risk of gender based violence and other forms of violence against children.

In addition to considering and keeping physical safety of children during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is also important to care for their emotional health. Below, we summarize suggestions and recommendations for promoting the psychosocial well-being of children in the face of these types of adversities and provide a list of helpful resources and suggestions.

A. Role as Parent or Caregiver:

- ❖ ***To listen to your child's concerns.*** Acknowledge and validate your child's thoughts and feelings. Be honest, open and supportive. Provide clear, factual information in a reassuring and age-appropriate way. Ask them how they are feeling. Let them know you are there for them.
- ❖ ***To encourage positive behaviours.*** Children are much more likely to do what is asked if they are given positive instructions and praise for their efforts.
- ❖ ***To be a positive role model.*** Model healthy and positive behaviours as children learn almost everything by watching what other people do.
- ❖ ***To create opportunities for quality one-on-one time with each child,*** whenever possible. One-on-one time makes children feel loved and secure, and shows them that they are important.

- ❖ *To promote an environment where children can grow up and develop their full potential having fun and being safe and healthy.*
- ❖ To facilitate a space where children are listened to, they can express their thoughts and feelings, and are free to ask any question and are answered honestly.
- ❖ *To take steps to calm down before you react.* Children may respond to stress and anxiety by acting out. Children need parents the most when they are misbehaving.
 - Before you respond, take three deep breaths or count to ten. Staying calm helps you stay in charge of the situation.
 - If you can safely leave your child, take a step back from the situation to calm down, and reassure your child that you will be back.
 - Respond in a calm and thoughtful way, and redirect your child's attention to a good behaviour.

B. Understanding Psychological and Emotional Needs Of Children:

- ❖ Children may express psychological distress (anxiety, sadness) by acting out in a different way - each child behaves differently. Some may become silent while other may feel and express anger and hyperactivity. Parents and caregivers need to be patient with children and understand their emotions.
- ❖ All emotions are valid emotions, and parents and caregivers need to understand them with empathy.
- ❖ Sometimes engaging in a creative interactive activity, such as colouring, painting, playing and drawing can facilitate this process. Help children find positive ways to express disturbing feelings such as anger, fear and sadness.
- ❖ Keep regular routines and schedules as much as possible.
- ❖ It is possible that the children during pandemic are witnessing arguments, difference of opinions and even violence at home, or if they are the target of the violence, it causes trauma and distress and may lead to disruptive behaviour.
- ❖ Parents and caregiver should explain to the children that nobody should be discriminated, differentiated, stigmatized or signalled for having the disease.
- ❖ Avoid watching, reading, listening or discussing too much news all the time regarding COVID-19. Assistance and persuade children to divert their attention to other topics as well.

- ❖ If someone is sick in the family and have been taken to hospital, or if there has been a death, children may experience added anxiety and may need specialized help.
- ❖ Some children may also face serious mental health issues due to ongoing pandemic. They may exhibit the following signs:
- ❖ Difficulties in sleeping and eating
 - Nightmares
 - Being withdrawn or aggressive
 - Complain of pain in stomach or headache without physical reason
 - Having fears, being afraid to be left alone
 - Clinging, depending behaviours
 - New fears manifest (for instance of the dark)
 - Decreased interest in playing and engaging in playful activities
 - Being sad, crying more than usual or for no apparent reason

C. Helping and Dealing with the Psychosocial or Emotional Stressful Pandemic Situation:

- ❖ **Listen:** Give children opportunities to talk about what they are feeling. Encourage them to share concerns and ask questions
- ❖ **Comfort:** Use simple tools to comfort and calm children, for e.g. telling stories, singing with them and playing games. Praise, reinforce and appreciate them frequently for their strengths, such as showing courage, compassion and helpfulness and kindness.
- ❖ **Reassure:** Comfort, calm and support children that you are prepared to keep them safe. Provide them with correct information through valid sources
- ❖ **Get Regular Exercise:** We can take advantage of the time we have now to do things that were extremely difficult to do prior to COVID-19, such as getting regular exercise. Most of our mornings start out slower than they once did, so activities such as morning walks within home and home premises, stretching and yoga can be a great way to get the blood and oxygen flowing through the body.
- ❖ **Help Your Child Focus on Assignments:** While engaging in school tasks are a given, staring into a computer screen for long periods of time can be mentally draining and create a strain on the eyes. The longer we focus on a mental task, the more we need

breaks to rest. Considering the age of your child, try implementing 20 to 60-minute work periods without any distractions (such as cell phones, television, etc.). Talk to your child's teachers and use the resources and suggestions provided.

Look up from your book or electronic device (computer, Mobile, Tablet, etc.) and focus on anything that is at least 20 feet away from you for 20 seconds.

20-20-20:

Every 20 minutes,

Look at something 20 feet away,

For at least 20 seconds

This short vision break is so important, you might want to print it out and hang it for your child at home to remind you to take a vision break every 20 minutes while you're working.

- ❖ **Encourage Originality and Creativity:** Inventive and resourceful time could be a great way to allow a child to decompress after engaging in online or school related assignments. Consider activities, such as arts and crafts, singing, dancing, and acting out a skit, creative writing (such as, autobiographies, creating stories), reading story books, magazines, listening to music, playing instruments or playing with toys, exploring and experimenting with simple cooking recipes, are some of the developmental appropriate activity that might spark creativity among children.
- ❖ **Continue Your Child's Regular Chores and Household Responsibilities:** By having your child continue their chores and daily responsibilities each day, they will help contribute to the household environment and build character.

➤ ***Home Responsibilities and Chores For Children Ages 2 To 3 (with parental assistance)***

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| ✓ Pick up toys after use and put them in the proper place. | ✓ Make a choice between two foods for breakfast (learn to make simple decisions). |
| ✓ Put books and magazines in a rack/shelf. | ✓ Simple hygiene – brush teeth, wash and dry hands and brush hair. |
| ✓ Clear own place at the table. | ✓ Undress self – get dressed with some help. Choose their own outfit. |
| ✓ Clean up what they drop after eating. | |

➤ **Home Responsibilities and Chores For Children Ages 4 to 5**

- ✓ Any of the above chores, plus:
- ✓ Empty wastebaskets
- ✓ Wash plastic dishes at sink
- ✓ Help put the groceries away (lower shelves).
- ✓ Help with compiling a grocery list.
- ✓ Follow a schedule for feeding pets.
- ✓ Help make their bed.
- ✓ Dress themselves.
- ✓ Help to set and or clear the table.
- ✓ Make a simple salads or dessert
- ✓ Put laundry in the basket.

➤ **Home Responsibilities and Chores for Children ages 6 to 7**

- ✓ Any of the above chores, plus:
- ✓ Sort laundry: Separate clothing for washing, eg. put white clothes in one separate pile and coloured in another.
- ✓ Sweep or mop floors
- ✓ Empty garbage into larger bin.
- ✓ Make own sandwich or simple breakfast and clean up afterwards.
- ✓ Set and clear the lunch and dinner table.
- ✓ Make bed and clean room.
- ✓ Dress on own and choose weather-appropriate outfit for the day.
- ✓ Fold clean clothes and put them away.
- ✓ Care for pets and water plants.
- ✓ Get own breakfast.
- ✓ Leave the bathroom in order: hang up clean towels, keep the brush and toothpaste in place, rinse the sink/basin etc.
- ✓ Wash dishes and/or rinse and place.
- ✓ Sweep/dust non-breakable/precious items.

➤ **Home Responsibilities and Chores for Children ages 8 to 9**

- ✓ Any of the above chores, plus:
- ✓ Help clean wash and put away groceries
- ✓ Help make dinner
- ✓ Make own snacks
- ✓ Set table for meals and clean table after meals
- ✓ Put away own laundry
- ✓ Sew buttons
- ✓ Make breakfast for self and younger siblings and healthy snacks
- ✓ Peel vegetables
- ✓ Cook simple foods, such as toast

- ✓ Mop floor
- ✓ Prepare a menu and write a grocery list.
- ✓ Run own bath water and follow bedtime routine.
- ✓ Help others with their work around the house when asked.
- ✓ 'Babysit' for short periods of time with adults present.
- ✓ Change sheets on the bed and put dirty sheets in the basket/bin.
- ✓ Operate the washer and/or dryer.
- ✓ Peel vegetables, help with meal preparation.
- ✓ Dust/sweep and wipe the tables and chairs (dusting).
- ✓ Fold and put away laundry (ie sheets).
- ✓ Collect and take out garbage.

➤ **Home Responsibilities and Chores for Children ages 10 and older.**

- ✓ Any of the above chores, plus:
- ✓ Help in cleaning dishes and glasses
- ✓ Wash laundry (with parental assistance) and fold laundry
- ✓ Clean bathroom
- ✓ Cook simple meal with supervision
- ✓ Baby-sit younger siblings (with adult in the home)
- ✓ Clean kitchen
- ✓ Change their bed sheets
- ✓ Scrub pots/pans.
- ✓ Help clean the kitchen.
- ✓ Take responsibility for school work and organizing work to meet homework deadlines.
- ✓ Mop and clean floor
- ✓ Clean sinks.
- ✓ Bring the empty garbage cans in the house and set the dustbin bag.
- ✓ Put younger siblings to bed and help dress them.
- ✓ Make simple meals with the help of parents or adults.
- ✓ Help to organize closets
- ✓ Discuss bedtimes and curfews with parents. Determine based on mutual parent-child discussion and agreement.
- ✓ Complete responsibility of preparing certain family meals. Make meal once/week.
- ✓ Clean the garage.
- ✓ Babysit younger siblings & help with homework.

❖ **Rest and Relaxation:** Always make time to get out of the house to get some fresh air and sunlight. It can help to relieve stress and clear the mind. The amount of sleep your child needs changes as they get older. A 5-year-old needs about 11 hours a night, for example, while a 9-year-old needs roughly 10 hours. Your child doesn't have to be a pre-schooler to benefit from a quick nap to recharge, or even just a time to sit quietly with no disruptions. Take advantage of times where rest is possible. This could be a nice addition to the schedule for everyone. Doing the same relaxing things in the same order and at the same time each night helps promote good sleep:

- ✓ A warm (not hot) bath will help your child relax and get ready for sleep.
- ✓ Keeping lights dim encourages your child's body to produce the sleep hormone, melatonin.
- ✓ Once they're in bed, encourage your child to read quietly or listen to some relaxing music, or read a story together.
- ✓ Avoid screen
- ✓ Time in bedroom: Tablets, smartphones, TVs and other electronic gadgets can affect how easily children get to sleep. Older children may also stay up late or even wake in the middle of the night to use social media. Try to keep your child's bedroom a screen-free zone, and get them to charge their phones in another room.
- ✓ Encourage your child to stop using screens an hour before bedtime.

❖ **Balance Media Consumption:** During this time, it is important to stay informed. However, our media outlets are addressing COVID-19 on rotation, so how frequently your children are watching the news should be monitored. It is difficult to anticipate what your child might hear on television at any given moment, and as a result, what you might be forced to explain in the moment.

D. Recommendations to Support and Protect Children's Psychosocial and Emotional Well-Being during the Pandemic

Getting through tough situations together as a family helps build the confidence, trust, pride, relationships, unity, and skills to face new challenges and rebound from the next crisis. It's a virtuous cycle.

An **ARCH** is a curved structure that could solve important problem by being able to support a large amount of weight. Its purpose is to support or strengthen a building. In the pandemic situation the support needed is to the family and family members. ARCH consists of wedge-shaped blocks.

- The top centre stone, called the keystone **A for Adapt, Adjust and Accommodate**
- The middle stones **R – Resilience, Flexibility and Ability to Bounce Back** and **C – Collaboration, Partnership and Alliance**.
- The last block to be inserted is **H – Humour, Fun and Wittiness**

ARCH acronym stands for

A- Adapt, Adjust and Accommodate

R – Resilience, Flexibility Ability to Bounce Back

C – Collaboration, Partnership and Alliance

H – Humour, Fun, Wittiness

- ❖ A family can build and strengthen in good times and also during a crisis. In the midst of the current pandemic crisis, these actions will help:
 - A family grows stronger as a unit by *pulling together* toward a common goal, supporting one another, and collaboratively problem-solving through hard times. Set previous disagreements aside. Don't let them divide you in these times.
 - Family *leaders (head of the family) need to actively shepherd the family* through this crisis: be open with the family about the challenges they face, give hope that family will make it through this time, focus the family on specific concrete goals and actions, and stress the need for trust, acceptance and collaboration.
 - Each member of the family need strong performance during this time, emphasize the importance of *behaving according to core family values*. A family will be proud not just because it survived a crisis, but because it survived the crisis while keeping its values.
 - Members of the families need to know what, besides saving the family's fortune, the family should try to accomplish in this crisis. *Define what your family wants to protect and what its big goals are*. Be open in this time to redefining how you achieve success as a family.

- *Praise teamwork and support collaboration* among family members. Challenge any attempts by some to achieve political advantage of the crisis for one faction or another in the family.
- *Be a role model* for future generations. An individual, a generation of the family, or the whole family can be a good role model for future generations regarding overcoming a crisis. Resilience is transmitted through the generations not only through successfully rebounding from adversity but also through role models. You learn from role models who acted bravely in crisis periods; they become memories that you will recall when you're experiencing future challenges.
- Humour is mankind's built-in coping mechanism that distracts us from the difficulty of the situation we are living and allows us to release some built-up tension. It's a type of mental armour that allows us to manage the unmanageable. Research also indicates that humour benefits both a person's physical and psychological state. In fact, studies show that humour has the ability to provide pain relief, improve positive emotions, regulate stress, disengage from distress, and improve interpersonal communications.
- ❖ **Understand that reactions to the pandemic may vary.** Children's responses to stressful events are unique and varied. Some children may be irritable or clingy, and some may regress, demand extra attention, or have difficulty with self-care, sleeping, and eating. New and challenging behaviours are natural responses, and adults can help by showing empathy and patience and by calmly setting limits when needed.
- ❖ **Ensure the presence of a sensitive and responsive caregiver.** The primary factor in recovery from a traumatic event is the presence of a supportive, caring adult in a child's life. Even when a parent is not available, children can benefit greatly from care provided by other adults (e.g., grandparents, relatives, and friends) who can offer them consistent, sensitive care that helps protect them from a pandemic's harmful effects.
- ❖ **Social distancing should not mean social isolation.** Children—especially young children—need quality time with their parents and caregivers and other important people in their lives. Social connectedness improves children's chances of showing resilience to adversity. Creative approaches to staying connected are important (e.g., writing letters, online video chats).

- ❖ **Provide age-appropriate information.** Children tend to rely on their imaginations when they lack adequate information. Parents and family member's decisions to withhold information are usually more stressful for children than telling the truth in age-appropriate ways. Parents should instead make themselves available for children to ask questions and talk about their concerns. They might, for example, provide opportunities for kids to access books, websites, and other activities on COVID-19 that present information in child-friendly ways. In addition, adults should limit children's exposure to media coverage, social media, and adult conversations about the pandemic, as these channels may be less age-appropriate. Ongoing access to news and social media about the pandemic and constant conversation about threats to public safety can cause unnecessary stress for children.
- ❖ **Create a safe physical and emotional environment by practicing the 3 R's: Reassurance, Routines, and Regulation.**
 - Firstly, parents or adults should *reassure* children about their safety and the safety of loved ones, and tell them that it is adults' job to ensure their safety.
 - Secondly, parents or adults should maintain *routines* to provide children with a sense of safety and predictability (e.g., regular bedtimes and meals, daily schedules for learning and play).
 - Thirdly, parents or adults should support children's development of *regulation*.

When children are stressed, their bodies respond by activating their stress response systems. To help them manage these reactions, it is important to both validate their feelings (e.g., "I know that this might feel scary or frightening") and encourage them to engage in activities that help them self-regulate (e.g., exercise, deep breathing, mindfulness or meditation activities, regular routines for sleeping and eating). In addition, it is essential to both children's emotional and physical well-being to ensure that families can meet their basic needs (e.g., food, shelter, and clothing).
- ❖ **Keep children busy.** When children are bored, their levels of worry and disruptive behaviours may increase. Parents or adults can provide options for safe activities (e.g., outside play, blocks, modelling clay, art, music, games) and involve children in brainstorming other creative ideas. Children need ample time to engage in play and other joyful or learning experiences without worrying or talking about the pandemic.

- ❖ **Increase children's self-efficacy.** Self-efficacy is an individual's belief in his or her capacity to execute behaviours necessary to produce specific performance attainments. It reflects confidence in the ability to exert control over one's own motivation, behaviour, and social environment. It is the sense of having agency or control—an especially important trait during times of fear and uncertainty. Children often feel more in control when they can play an active role in helping themselves, their families, and their communities. For example, children can help by following safety guidelines (e.g., washing their hands), preparing for home confinement (e.g., helping to cook and freeze food), or volunteering in the community (e.g., helping elderly at home or in the neighbourhood, creating art for a sick friends and sharing via social media or chat group, sharing extra supplies with a neighbour).
- ❖ **Create opportunities for caregivers (which may mean yourself!) to take care of themselves.** Children's well-being depends on the well-being of their parents and other caregivers. Parents and caregivers must take care of themselves so they have the internal resources to care for others. To this end, adult caregivers can engage in self-care by staying connected to social supports, getting enough rest, and taking time for restorative activities (e.g., exercise, meditation, reading, indoor activities, prayer etc).
- ❖ **Seek professional help if children show signs of trauma that do not resolve relatively quickly.** Emotional and behavioural changes in children are to be expected during a pandemic, as everyone adjusts to a new sense of normal. If children show an ongoing pattern of emotional or behavioural concerns (e.g., nightmares, excessive focus on anxieties, increased aggression, regressive behaviours, or self-harm) that do not resolve with supports, professional help may be needed.
- ❖ **Emphasize strengths, hope, and positivity.** Children need to feel safe, secure, and positive about their present and future. Parents and adult caregivers can help by focusing children's attention on stories about how people come together, find creative solutions to difficult problems, and overcome adversity during the epidemic. Talking about these stories can be healing and reassuring to children and adults alike. Some of the examples are stories by Martine Agassi, Elizabeth Verdick are award-winning children's book author and creator of *Germs Are Not For Sharing, Hands Are Not For Hitting, Voices Are Not For Yelling, Teeth Are Not For Biting, Feet Are Not For Kicking, Worries Are Not*

Forever, Waiting Is Not Forever, Words Are Not For Hurting. Bruno, Pepper, Bubbles series and stories by Eric Carle. Publisher: Sterling Publishers Pvt.Ltd. Encourage your child to watch interactive programmes / videos to name a few - Peter Rabbit, Dora, Oswald Pingu, Peppa Pig

Conclusion

It is very important to remember that children look to adults for guidance on how to react to stressful events. Since children and adolescents are at home with their parents, the following points are for parents. This advice can be dispensed to parents by health care professionals. For parents who are struggling with their daily needs, expecting them to structure their child's schedule may be impractical. Acknowledging some level of concern, without panicking, is appropriate and can result in taking the necessary actions that reduce the risk of illness. Teaching children positive preventive measures, talking with them about their fears, and giving them a sense of some control over their risk of infection can help reduce anxiety. This is also a tremendous opportunity for adults to model for children problem-solving, flexibility, and compassion as we all work through adjusting daily schedules, balancing work and other activities, getting creative about how we spend time, processing new information from authorities, and connecting and supporting friends and family members in new ways. Nonetheless, some of these principles may be used, where possible. Social distancing itself may be difficult given people's living situations. Parents' anxieties may have to be addressed. This is a difficult time for all with no easy answers but some of these simple strategies may help.

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