

The Impact of a Global Pandemic on the Mental Health of Children: The Silent Screams.

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The Pandemic Has Snatched a Generation of British Children. Adults Have Turned a Deaf Ear to Their Tormented Cries

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The Impact of a Global Pandemic on the Mental Health of Children: The Silent Screams.

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Abstract

An unmeasurable impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is its effect on the mental health of children and young adults. This article highlights the repercussions of the pandemic on the psychological wellbeing of our youngest generation. It seeks to foreground the importance of recognising and addressing these harmful impacts and to accentuate the urgency of supporting young people throughout the world during this difficult time.

Key Words

Children; Young Adults; Mental Health; COVID-19; Pandemic

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Priya's Story

Thirteen-year-old Priya has severe depression. Or so we thought. She lives in a deprived suburb with her mother, who speaks little English, and her father, who has schizophrenia. She comes to the clinic with her mother, who meticulously writes down the names of medication in Punjabi. Priya likes to go to school; she has three favourite teachers, two friends, and one bully. She wants to be an artist and practices drawing our faces on the clinic's little blackboard. Despite her depression, there is a sparkle in her eyes when she talks.

Then COVID-19 struck.

We did not hear from Priya for nearly a month. Then comes a frantic telephone call from her mother who cannot communicate with the crisis team because no one in the team speaks Punjabi. Soon enough, a psychologist who speaks Punjabi steps in. We learn that Priya's school has closed and that she has not been attending classes. She is stuck at home with her father, who has a diagnosis of psychosis and is furloughed from work. Her father has been interfering with her medications and stopped them. My colleague says she cannot hear what the mother is saying because Priya is screaming in the background.

This is a Priya we do not recognise. This is a first episode psychosis.

In less than a week, Priya is detained under the Mental Health Act and admitted to a Psychiatric Intensive Care Unit. As the team tries to help her fight the hallucinations, every family of psychotropic medication has been started, from antidepressants to antipsychotics, from mood stabilisers to benzodiazepines.

It is four months since Priya was admitted to hospital. She spends her fourteenth birthday in group therapy, in a psychology session, and on a Skype call to her mother.

Her diagnosis is confirmed as schizo-affective disorder.

She does not draw any more. There is no longer a sparkle in her eyes. They are droopy from the effect of the psychotropic medications.

There have been pandemics throughout the history of mankind, the cost of which are usually calculated in terms of lives lost and economic impact. These are measurable losses, and the performances of different governments and public health organisations are measured against these figures. However, there are several unmeasurable parameters, one of which is the impact on mental health. Adult mental health problems often manifest as increased hospital admissions and contact with mental

health services. Children, especially younger ones, express their mental health problems quite differently, and the true impact may not be felt for quite some time. This article looks at the published literature and guidelines from different parts of the world on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of children and adolescents.

As cases of COVID-19 increased throughout the world, the World Health Organisation declared a public health emergency of national concern in January 2020.¹ The first two cases in the United Kingdom were reported in the same month and, with an increase in the spread of the virus, the British Government imposed a national lockdown on 23rd March 2020. This lasted for three months, followed by subsequent local lockdowns and partial lockdowns in various parts of the country. A second national lockdown was implemented on 5th November 2020, ending on 2nd December 2020.

This pandemic has caused unprecedented disruption to human life all over the globe. The number of deaths from COVID-19 have exceeded 1.6 million globally,² and the long-term morbidity is likely to be manifold.³ There is a huge economic price to be paid for the lockdown, with a rise in unemployment and economic depression. It is no surprise that the pandemic has had a major impact on the mental health of individuals. A systematic review of the recent publications about mental health during this period has highlighted both the direct and indirect effects of COVID-19 through worsening psychiatric symptoms such as an anxiety and depression, as well as the general psychological wellbeing of the population.⁴

The repercussions of the pandemic on children and young adults have been tremendous: school closures have caused disruption to learning, the cancellation of examinations has engendered confusion and panic, and many vulnerable children have found themselves away from the safety of their school. The impact on children's mental health has been as severe as, or perhaps even worse than, that experienced by adults.⁵ NHS Digital conducted an online survey in 2020, which was a follow-up from a face-to-face survey carried out on

3,750 children and young adults in 2017.⁵ The study showed that the incidence of a mental health problem was one in six in 2020, a rise from one in nine in 2017. A total of 54.1% of the 11 to 16-year-olds surveyed and 59% of the 17 to 22-year-olds questioned, all of whom had a probable mental health disorder, felt that their mental health had worsened during the pandemic.⁵ Several studies from all over the world have examined the impact of the pandemic on the mental health of children and young adults.^{5,6,7}

The reasons for this are obvious. Children are very perceptive. The information delivered through the media is encountered by children who often process it in a different manner to adults. This causes them to feel anxious about their own health, as well as that of their parents and grandparents. Schools provide more than academic learning for children. They are places of social interaction which help them to allay many of their fears and anxieties. A loss of the social support from their friends and teachers can aggravate these fears. The time spent at home during the lockdown meant that children had an undue exposure to television, gaming, and social media. Children, who were often left unsupervised, have suffered a negative impact from the above. These are children who previously had no developmental or mental health issues. Children who did have pre-existing developmental needs and mental health issues found their support systems inadequate, and their performance therefore worsened during this period.

Mental health effects in children during the pandemic can be broadly divided into worsening of mental health problems in children with pre-existing psychiatric problems and new onset symptoms in previously well children indicating a worsening psychological state. These effects have been seen from the very young to young adults, though the manifestations have been different.

The psychological impact manifested differently in younger children (three to six-year-olds) compared to older children (six to 18-year-olds). Younger children demonstrated clinginess and a fear of family members being affected by COVID-19, whereas older children

showed more irritability and inattention. Children of school age also expressed lower mood due to the inability to socialise with other children.⁷ These behavioural changes may not always be picked up by parents. For older children, uncertainty about the cancellation of exams caused anxiety and low mood.⁸

Children with pre-existing mental health conditions saw their conditions worsen during the pandemic.⁵ Children with autism were difficult to be managed at home without the regular support they were receiving from therapy and other services.⁹ Likewise, children with ADHD were a challenging group to manage at home during the lockdown.¹⁰ Children with obsessive compulsive disorders were seen to have worsening symptoms, with obsessive hand washing and anxiety about hygiene.^{11,12}

In many countries, parents were required to quarantine away from home, and this caused separation anxiety in young children. In some countries, children were also expected to quarantine if they developed infection.¹³ Prior to the pandemic, many younger children were cared for by their grandparents and, as a result, have strong bonds with them. Material hardship and parenting stress have affected grandparents during the pandemic which, in turn, may have a detrimental effect on children's mental health.¹⁴

Most of the published literature on children's mental health during the pandemic has identified a rise in depression and anxiety,¹⁵ and it has highlighted worsening symptoms in children with obsessive compulsive disorder.^{11,12} However, as our patient's case illustrated, psychotic episodes can also manifest for the first time in such circumstances. This has not been described in most of the published articles.^{6,7,8,14}

Many internet forums and mental health charities have tried to address some of these issues by highlighting the problem and trying to educate parents.^{16,17} The broad recommendations have been:

- recognise that the mental health impact on children can be to the same extent, or perhaps even greater, as in adults.

- subtle symptoms such as clinginess or irritability can be signs of underlying psychological issues in children.
- try and explain the pandemic to children in simple terms without worrying them.
- avoid over-exposure to the media for children, especially if the news is likely to cause mental distress.
- try and engage children in hobbies and other interests.
- recognise the help available for counselling through virtual communications.

It is reassuring that the mental health problems of children during this pandemic have been recognised in most developing countries, and steps have been taken to reduce the impact. However, the effect in some resource-poor countries may not be recognised, and similar resources may not be available. It is important to disseminate the message through global online platforms and make help available to children across the globe.

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