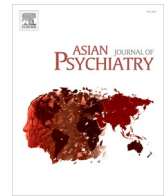




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The impact of school closure on children's well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic

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In March 2021, the World Health Organization declared the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) as a pandemic. As a result, many governments have imposed virus containment measures to prevent and limit the spread of the infection of COVID-19, such as social distancing, stay-at-home policies, lockdown restrictions, and school closure, causing widespread disruptions in parents and children's daily routines (Ortega and Martinez, 2021).

According to UNESCO, in April 2020 primary and elementary schools were suspended nationwide in more than 188 countries and over 1000 million worldwide students were not attending school, creating an unprecedented crisis in the education sector globally (Lee, 2020), and increasing concern about its negative effects on mental health (Tandon, 2021b).

From a mental health perspective, it is well established that social interaction among children at school is a determining factor for their cognitive and emotional development (Shala, 2013), which in turn, influences their academic, social, and family performance (Barrero et al., 2021). Due to the unexpected restrictions, children around the world are attending online distance learning from home, coping with an unprepared and unprecedented scenario of disruptive technological innovation and digital transformation, as well as other issues such as psychological stress from staying isolated at home, and difficulties in completing distance learning task.

Recent studies have highlighted that those children exposed to COVID-19 related measures, such as mandatory school closure are more likely to manifest symptoms of anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), stress, insomnia, emotional disturbance, irritability, sleep and appetite disturbance, negative eating habits, and impairment in social interactions (Petretto et al., 2020). Children are more susceptible to have long-term negative consequences in mental health later in life because of the pandemic crisis according to recent scientific literature (Marques et al., 2020).

As the COVID-19 outbreak has been intensifying across the world, countries such as The United States, Japan, China, Australia, Brazil, The United Kingdom, Spain, and Italy are concerned about the significant increase in emergency calls to report domestic violence, child abuse and neglect after mandatory school closures was imposed as an effort to curb

the spread of the outbreak, highlighting the huge impact this strict measure has on children's integrity (Usher et al., 2020).

Although the debate on the effects of school closures to reduce and delay the peak in the infection rate of COVID-19 is still open, there is a consensus on the negative effects of these policies on children's physical and mental health. These negative effects are becoming a major concern to policymakers and international organizations seeking to promote children's well-being, suggesting that urgent action plans and public health strategies to mitigate physical abuse and severe mental health outcomes of COVID-19 must be applied.

In such a scenario, it is important to discuss some aspects related to school closures and social isolation that can lead to limited opportunities for children and adolescents, and widen inequality gaps, which in turn can create restricted access for those with pre-existing disabilities or learning disabilities (Vélez et al., 2020), and can also increase the exposure to cyberbullying or other types of harassment among peers that can leave long-lasting effects on children's mental health. Furthermore, it has been shown that school closures have negative consequences especially for girls and adolescents due to a higher rate of sexual exploitation, early pregnancy, early and forced marriage, as well as difficult access to education in their own homes as they are forced to perform household chores (UNESCO, 2021). This at-risk group is more likely not to be able to return to school after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Moreover, the lack of resources for mental health services, such as multidisciplinary healthcare workers, have raised concerns about the difficulties in handling the consequences of confinement in children and adolescents, particularly in low-income countries. In fact, some child protective services whose immediate action plans were activated from educational institutions have interrupted their programs and the access for vulnerable children and their families to these services has become more restrictive (Fegert et al., 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic exposed weaknesses in public health structures of healthcare systems globally (Tandon, 2021a).

Mental health has historically been an unattended public health issue, which the COVID-19 has unexpectedly accelerated. Therefore, it is necessary to improve accessibility rates to mental health care pathways. It is also essential to design and implement mental health promotion and

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prevention programs for children and adolescents in the context of the pandemic.

It is a major challenge for schools to generate a reliable and safe environment ensuring cognitive and emotional development, as well as social skills necessary to enhance well-being and to minimize mental health issues. Nevertheless, it is pertinent to bring into consideration that these new post-pandemic life conditions provide an opportunity to restructure the education system by improving teaching-learning models in schools and including new pedagogical and didactic strategies promoting contextualized and integral learning, implementing hybrid methodologies that include a psychosocial component, and mental health support strategies to ensure a positive and safe transition back to schools.

Although the school plays a fundamental role in children's development, the family and caregivers are also responsible for promoting children's mental health, even more in the recent context of the ongoing pandemic to meet the coming challenges concerning children's well-being around the world.

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Contribution

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