

The Impact of the Pandemic on Child and Adolescent Mental Health: A Systematic Assessment

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Abstract: The present paper aims to explore the impact of the COVID - 19 pandemic on the mental health of children and adolescents based on individual counselling sessions conducted under the Are You Okay program. The target population for the study were students from 7th Std to 10th Std. (Some children were left out in the beginning phase, as they opted for online classes for an extended period). Are You Okay program started in February 2021 and continued till March 2022. A total number of 550 students attended the individual counselling sessions. A phenomenological approach is taken to give shape to the research. As in the research, human experience during the phase of a pandemic is focused, thematic analysis is used for data collection and analysis. The data were analysed using systematic text condensation leading to two themes based on individual counselling, observation, and diary notes. 1) The common themes depicting the positive impact on the mental health of children and adolescents, and 2) the common themes depicting the negative impact on the mental health of children and adolescents. The study reveals both positive and negative effects on mental health, with the detrimental effects being conspicuous. The paper also attempts to discuss coping strategies for long - term benefits. The findings of the present paper would help to bring back focus on children's mental health and to make it a priority. It could help professionals to train children to develop characteristics such as resilience, and to cope with problems in ever - changing world in an effective manner.

Keywords: Pandemic, Mental Health, Children, Adolescents, Are You Okay Program, Counselling Sessions, Impact of a Pandemic, Coping Strategies

1. Introduction

After an unprecedented period of pandemic, the entire universe moved back to normalcy with time. The period of seclusion gave us the much - needed time to reflect on our lives, but at the same time, it withheld immense suffering in the form of a mental burden. Even so, adults faced a lot of mental health issues due to the pandemic - it was the children who were deeply affected. Shen et al., 2020 indicated that compared to adults, the pandemic may continue to have increased long - term consequences on children and adolescents. The child's mental health encompasses the complete well - being and optimal development of a child in the emotional, behavioural, social, and cognitive domains.

Even if children suffer, they fail to bring to the notice of an adult the difficulties they are going through. In the present paper, the researcher tried to enter the child's world to understand what they are going through after the pandemic.

Children and Mental Health

According to the Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, Mental health in childhood means reaching developmental and emotional milestones, and learning healthy social skills and how to cope when there are problems. Mentally healthy children have a positive quality of life and can function well at home, in school, and in their communities. The early years of childhood are crucial for overall development. Various stages of life set a pace for the development in different vital areas - cognitive, social, emotional, language and speech, and motor development. All areas are developed age - appropriately to foster the overall development of the child.

The World Health Organization states that childhood and adolescence are critical stages of life for mental health. This is a time when rapid growth and development take place in the brain. Children and adolescents acquire cognitive and social - emotional skills that shape their future mental health

and are important for assuming adult roles in society. The quality of the environment where children and adolescents grow up shapes their well - being and development. Early negative experiences in homes, schools, or digital spaces, such as exposure to violence, the mental illness of a parent or other caregiver, bullying and poverty, increase the risk of mental illness.

According to the American Psychological Association, Mental health—an essential part of children's overall health—has a complex interactive relationship with their physical health and their ability to succeed in school, at work, and in society. Both physical and mental health affect how we think, feel, and act on the inside and outside. Mental health is important throughout childhood—from prenatal considerations through transitions to adulthood.

Playtime and education are work for children. However, due to the pandemic, the overall development of children is compromised. As a result, it left footprints of short - term and long - term implications for children and adolescents. Children were suffering silently, and we needed a way to reach them. Are You Okay Program was implemented to know if children in school were doing okay. Childhood and adolescence provide critical periods for prevention, early detection, and intervention to promote a child's mental and behavioural health.

2. Methodology

The Essence of the Inquiry: Research Questions - The purpose of the study is to explore the impact of a pandemic on the mental health of children and adolescents and to find out if they are doing okay post - pandemic. As research is concerned with Child and Adolescent Mental Health, researchers attempted to find the answers to these questions.

- 1) Are children and adolescents doing okay post - pandemic?

- 2) How pandemic has affected the mental health of children?
- 3) Are children and adolescents suffering silently?

The intellectual puzzle researcher attempted to explore are as follows -

- 1) That pandemic had adversely affected the mental health of children
- 2) That children are silently suffering
- 3) Mental health care is a need of an hour

A phenomenological approach is taken to give shape to the research. It helps to explore the meaning of lived experiences and how they are perceived by individuals. It seeks to understand people's perspectives, emotions, and behaviour in specific situations. It aims to uncover the human experience. As in the research, human experience during the phase of a pandemic is focused, this design is chosen where thematic analysis is used for data collection and analysis.

3. Procedure

Once school re - opened, the 'Are You Okay Program' was initiated at St Peter's High School, Bowenpally, Telangana, India to find answers to the questions posed by the researcher. Children were taken from 10th Std, 9th Std, 8th Std, and 7th Std. (Some children were left out in the beginning phase, as they opted for an online mode of teaching for a longer period) for one - to - one sessions. 'Are you okay program' commenced in Feb 2021, and continued till 2022. A total number of 550 students attended one to one sitting. Data was generated with the help of excerpts from the individual counselling sessions, observation, and diary notes. Depending on the need and severity of the problems highlighted during the initial session, follow - up sessions were planned. This initiative generated a positive response from students in the initial stage itself, which has helped the researcher to reach more and more children.

4. Data Analysis

Face - to - face data collection methods such as individual counselling specific to the status of their mental health after the pandemic, and diary entries based on the conversations taken place during counselling session were used. Data was generated with the help of excerpts from the individual counselling sessions, observation, and diary notes. A deductive approach is applied, where the analytic starting point is more top - down. Inductive and semantic approaches to coding were applied for theme development. Semantic codes identify and summarize the content of the data they are built around what participants say, mirroring their meaning. The principles of thematic analysis, a qualitative approach involving the active construction of overarching patterns and meaning across a dataset were utilized to generate the themes.

5. Analysis

Within the Qualitative paradigm, there is no single way to analyse the data, because there is no single truth. The subjectivity of the researcher is seen as integral to the process of the research (e. g. Braun and Clarke, 2006) within such approaches, an inductive approach to coding and theme

development is more common. Qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) methodology.

TA involves a six - phase analytic process:

- 1) Familiarizing with the data - it is about intimately knowing the dataset. This facilitates deep engagement with the data. The researcher synthesises observations and notes into ideas or insights related to the dataset, related to the research.
- 2) Generating codes - where familiarisation was the process of making casual observational notes, coding is the systematic and thorough creation of meaningful labels attached to specific segments of the dataset. Coding is a process of both data reduction and a way of starting to organise the data. The researchers organise observation into patterns. Coding provides a rigorous foundation for the analysis.
- 3) Constructing themes - theme development involves examining codes, and combining, clustering, or collapsing codes together into bigger or meaningful patterns. The researcher identifies a central organising concept - a clear core idea or concept that underpins a theme (Braun et al., 2015, p.102).
- 4/5) - Reviewing and Defining themes - The reviewing phase is like a quality control exercise, to ensure that the themes work well in relation to the coded data, the dataset and whether the story told through themes answers the research question. In the reviewing phase, the researcher moves into defining and naming the themes. The researcher pulled out two prominent themes: the positive impact on the mental health of children and adolescents and the Negative impact on the mental health of children and adolescents. A theme captures the richness and diversity around the core meaning.
- 6) Producing the report.

Experiential journeys with children while taking one - to - one sessions substantiate that mental health issues experienced were more concerning than we could think of. Few handled it on their own, while others were suffering silently without knowing where to go, whom to talk to, and how to cope with the difficulties they were going through. The generated themes imbibing the core idea, also corroborate that the negative impact of a pandemic on the mental health of children and adolescents needs immediate measures to reduce the long - term consequence.

The Common Themes Depicting the Positive Impact on The Mental Health of Children and Adolescents are:

- 1) *Opportunity to learn a new skill* - children got the time to learn and refine their areas of interest like - cooking, gardening, computer skills, writing skills, and painting to name a few.
- 2) *Family bonding* - they got the moment to spend more time with family members. It helped many of them to make a stronger bond with them.
- 3) *Reading* - A few of them read a variety of books. It helped them to spend their time productively while increasing their knowledge base.
- 4) *Me - time* - Such a stretched stay within four walls helped many to reflect and introspect about their lives. One child mentioned, 'I am a more evolved person now. I have a

clearer idea about the future now. ' They got an opportunity to tune themselves into a better version of themselves.

The Common Themes Depicting the Negative Impact on The Mental Health of Children and Adolescents are:

1) *Struggle with studies* - most of them struggled with online mode. They felt they found it difficult to focus and recall in the way they used to before the pandemic. They felt lost when the switch happened from offline to online, then online to offline mode.

2) *The feeling of helplessness* - they missed their friends as they could not meet them. They could not share and talk, as earlier. It made them sad and helpless, as it was beyond their control.

3) *Loneliness* - even though each family member was available at home - children felt lonely, as mostly they did not share their feelings with their parents.

4) *Exposed to the bitter reality* - when everyone was required to stay inside four walls, 24*7 - children could see beneath the mask. Every aspect came to the forefront when some of them witnessed constant fights and quarrels among their parents. It led to anxiousness among many.

5) *Fear* - what if something happens to my parents? Negative thoughts were prominently observed among those who witnessed the loss of their neighbours, and friends' parents due to COVID - 19. Viner et al. conducted a study in 2020a and found that fear of family member being infected was found among 3 - 6 years old than 6 - 18 years, but when children from the age group of 13 - 14 years were taken, such fear of 'what if' was found especially among those who experienced loss nearby.

6) *Grief* - Few were struggling with the period of grieving due to the loss of their parent or near ones.

7) *Learning difficulties* - Children showed problems in reading, spelling, mathematics, and written expression during the regular offline classes.

8) *Gadget Addiction* - It emerged as the most dominant issue due to dependence on gadgets for online classes. Children knowingly and unknowingly got caught in the web of compulsive gaming, chatting, memes, and shots to name a few. Likes on photos manipulated their emotions like happiness, and few likes led to questioning their self - worth. As a result, children displayed inappropriate emotional responses to parents when asked to leave the screen - aggression, fear of missing out, anxiety, the feeling of worthlessness, and self - doubt. The children showed aggression or appeared tensed when they could not get online. They felt hopeless and worthless when away from the devices, and this feeling magically went away when being with the devices. Children displayed attention and concentration issues, lack of focus, restlessness, and impulsiveness. Too much use of gadgets found its way into depressive thoughts.

9) *Speech and language delay* - Many children at a critical age of achieving milestones suffer from delays in milestones, especially speech. A few adolescents' siblings shared concerns as their brother/sister does not speak age appropriately, and mobile seems like their toy to hold all the time. Children would learn to talk and communicate through interactions with others. Every minute a child spends on the screen minuses a minute that he can speak or learn with others. The screen steals the time that a child could spend talking and communicating with others. The more time children spent on screens such as smartphones, tablets, and electronic games, the more likely they were to experience speech delays - adding to social communication issues.

Simple Coping Strategies for Long - Term Benefits

Depending on the intensity of the issues, children learn simple yet effective ways to cope with the problems in their lives efficiently.

- 1) Children learnt about the thought process, especially automatic thoughts, and the role it plays
- 2) How to monitor their thoughts as an outsider
- 3) Free flow journaling,
- 4) Focus on intrinsic motivation,
- 5) Mindfulness - based activities
- 6) Deep breathing relaxation technique
- 7) Meditation technique, and
- 8) Life skills education

6. Conclusion

The Are You Okay program revealed significant impacts of the pandemic on the mental health of children and adolescents. While positives are present, the undesirable effects of the pandemic are more concerning. It also revealed that children were suffering silently. To set Mental health as a priority is the need of the time.

Are You Okay Program initiative brings to the limelight the need to set mental health as a priority from childhood. The study underscores the need for targeted interventions for children and adolescents. The parent's training program is fundamental to creating awareness about the importance of children's mental health. It prepares children to have their coping strategies - to support their mental health needs during crises in their lives.

Each child benefitted in some way. It was an experiential journey where the researcher realised that until we bend down to their level, their world would be unreachable. Almost always, children do not expose their mental wounds - it is manifested in various forms in their behaviour as well as in emotional responses. It is our responsibility to sense it and help them.

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