

Prarthana Mudgal is a class VII student of a private English-medium school in Bhopal. She was just managing to cope with the passing away of her paternal grandmother, who she was very attached to, when schools closed in March. In the heat of north India's summer, it was initially a great reprieve to remain indoors and unexpected school holidays are always welcome. But as children are wont to, Prarthana soon started to look for things to do. And what she ended up doing is truly remarkable, knowing how easy it is for children who have unrestricted access to TVs, laptops and phones to lose track of not just hours and days but weeks and months.

She does not think it as something out of the ordinary and is awkward talking about her work, but we were able to coax her into telling us about the things she did during the lockdown.

Prarthana, like her other schoolmates, began attending online classes started by her school in March. But she could not engage with the online mode and attended less and less, till she dropped out completely. Her parents and teachers discussed the matter and decided to let her be, knowing that her cochlear implant was a barrier to her engagement with the online model. They were aware that the frustration of having to cope with a new medium of learning may manifest in some other emotional issue.

Looking for things to do, Prarthana decided to make masks that were until then still not so easy to come by. In one day, she learnt to operate the sewing machine at home and learned how to stitch masks on *YouTube*. In the coming weeks, she used up all the spare cloth, thread and elastic available in the house to make dozens of masks. These masks were needed by the employees of a petrol pump who were operating as part of essential services even during the national lockdown. When they offered to pay her, they were asked to bring her more material for the masks instead.

One day, Prarthana visited the neighbourhood medical store with her father. Later, to her questions of why those people were working while everyone

else was staying indoors; where they ate and when they rested, she was gently made conscious of the fact that the employees of the medical store keep were keeping it open for the rest of us; that they go without rest from 7 AM to 11 PM, without even a tea stall open from where they can get a cup of tea. We should serve them for serving us, her father mentioned to her. From that day onwards, Prarthana began to make tea for them. Every day, she would make tea and carry it in a one-litre flask to the medical shop. Sometimes, she also carried with it some packets of biscuits or *namkeen*.

At night, the family would have 40-50 extra rotis made and would go around the neighbourhood feeding stray dogs. They were able to cover at least five-seven colonies in the neighbourhood each day. Participating in all this, Prarthana was learning to be an empath and when she saw a dog by the side of the road that was unable to move and refusing eat or drink water, she had her father call an ambulance and waited with the dog till it came and took it to hospital.

As soon as the lockdown was lifted and the NGO run by her father began operations, there was need for hand-sanitiser. This became her next big project. She again turned to *YouTube* and learned to make liquid hand sanitiser with aloe vera that grew aplenty at their home and some other store-bought ingredients, like spirit. Of the people who came to the NGO, there were always some who could not afford to spend on soaps and sanitisers and were offered this liquid that Prarthana prepared in the family's kitchen.

Would it be correct to assume that Prarthana fell back on her learning? Sooner or later, she will be back in school, back on her class desk, learning multiplication or past participle. But which class would teach her to always look out for others? To use her time productively? To have empathy for those who have less? To serve those who serve us? The lockdown was a golden opportunity for parents at home with children to set the right examples, talk and discuss issues that matter the most in our lives.

*As told to Learning Curve*