

# Handling Stress in the Young

Sharon Sylvia

*'I need my space. Why can't you understand? You don't care about me!'*

For the parent, who stood astonished as he heard his twelve-year-old yell this out, what was racing through his mind was: 'We're working hard to provide everything for our child during a crisis such as this! We're there for him when he needs us most. But nothing seems to make him feel content. He is constantly irritated and annoyed, both with himself and us.' This, or similar, experiences may resonate with parents of young children, particularly teenage children because the struggle is real for both the parent and the child. Today, we are presented with a *new normal*, comprising not only new work ethics and new familial engagements, but also new mechanisms to deal with the stressors of daily life. The unprecedented situation we are faced with due to COVID-19 has impacted our young people on various fronts, their psychosocial health being one of them. The pandemic has created an overwhelming sense of helplessness and this is being observed in homes.

## **Drastic changes in routine**

A child wakes up to a certain routine almost every day, a routine that prepares him for the day, that sets the expectations from him and prepares him for socialisation. With the ongoing pandemic, much of that routine has taken a hit, creating a sense of confusion for the child. This has emotionally burdened different age groups differently. Little children might not realise that much has altered, apart from the fact that their parents and the rest of the family are at home all the time while school is closed. For them, this could be a welcome change because spending time at home with their families is what they long for. For teenagers, however, this pandemic could be turning their lives upside down because being in the company of their peer group is what that they look forward to. It must also be noted that COVID-19 has had a varied impact on children from different socio-economic groups. The geographical location of these groups has also had a role to play in the impact this has caused.

Our focus, however, is the impact it has had on school-going children in India, their families and their educators. The emotional challenges that exist in this space are vast. Let us take a deeper look into these challenges, children's needs and what we can do to support them.

## **Talking about COVID-19**

The news around COVID-19 is nerve-wracking for most people and more so for children who do not fully understand the magnitude of the issue but are in fear of losing family members to this pandemic. Further, exposure to the media circulates a lot of false information, causing unnecessary distress to children. Also, a lot of unreliable information is exchanged among children during peer interaction, further building up a sense of fear.

### *What you can do*

At home, approach the situation at hand from a *preventive* stance. It is important for parents to educate children about the pandemic, explaining in simple terms what the concerns about COVID 19 are. Avoid giving your child information that could unnecessarily exhaust her. Reduce the intensity and frequency of the news that the media has to offer which needlessly bogs down children and, instead, use trustworthy sites to help them understand what the virus is and the impact that it is making on the world today. Being ready and willing to have a conversation with them about it relieves them of baseless thoughts.

Schools could send out age-appropriate information regarding COVID-19 so that children have access to reliable information. The safety measures to be followed during the pandemic can be shared and discussed with children so that they can do their part and feel in control of the situation.

## **The need to be heard**

Parents have their hands full with their daily work routine that involves taking care of home chores as well as their professional commitments. The whole family staying at home has paradoxically led to a *lack* of time rather than having *more* time, with each

other because of each one's workload. Families have very little time to interact with each other. The growing nature of this situation in families does not give children opportunities to share simple things, like daily experiences, at home.

With the rise in online academics, children are caught up in a monotonous roll of classes, which do not allow much space for discussions of any sort. Children have been found increasingly to shy away from interactions during online class hours. A child recently told me, 'The teacher has a lot on her plate. I would rather save my questions for later than disturb a class to get an answer.' Eventually, this is not attended to.

#### *What you can do*

Families need to set time apart for discussion and reassurance. The work at hand tends never to cease because such are the demands of the working world during the pandemic. However, the biggest support system for children is their family and so family-time needs to be increased in the present circumstances. Educators can begin classes with a five-minute *sharing time* to enhance the sense of togetherness in a class.

#### **Being alert to online exploitation**

Children are reaching out to others, sometimes strangers, to fill the social void experienced as a result of schools being closed. The struggle of staying indoors without a choice is making children restless. With schools shut, their lives are devoid of the structure that school provides. They lack the stimulation that is brought about by the school environment, further affecting their regular social interactions.

All of this directly impacts their mental wellbeing. The mediums of communication and social interaction for children have predominantly become digital. Since a substantial chunk of their socialising and academics is online, children are also being exposed to various threats in cyberspace. Today, with every academic transaction being on-screen, children unavoidably spend more time in front of the screen, with all its manifold distractions.

#### *What you can do*

As difficult as this may sound, devising creative spaces at home for children reduces screen time for them. Spaces that children can spend time in, doing tasks that enhance creativity and keep them constructively occupied are essential. Some ideas

are: art spaces, reading corners and music spots (dedicated spaces at home where a child can listen to music or play an instrument).

Another aspect to take into consideration is making safety rules for internet use. Educators too could reiterate the rules for cyber-safety so as to emphasise the need to be conscientious about any online encounters. Some simple safety rules are:

- Avoid accepting requests from strangers and people you are not comfortable with
- Keep your passwords safe
- Avoid using the webcam for any other purpose apart from academic ones required by the school
- Avoid exchanging personal information.

#### **Attending to high-risk children**

Children who are predisposed to mental health problems and children with learning difficulties face greater challenges than the rest during this pandemic. A lack of routine may frustrate them, a frustration stemming from feelings of helplessness. It might feel almost like losing a strongly-held anchor because of which their symptoms could relapse. A structured environment of academics constitutes the core of learning for them. When this is disturbed, it sets off an alarm, causing distress.

#### *What you can do*

Access to special services needs to be continued during this time for high-risk children. To maintain familiarity, this could be done through the special educators who the children have already been working with.

Parents could also set up schedules at home for children to reduce the anxiety induced by uncertainty. Schools providing special education services for students could enhance teaching by spending longer periods of time with the students not only for academics but also for emotional support.

#### **Abuse and exploitation at home**

*Exhaustion* is the word that surrounds homes at a time like this. Parents are overworked, worried about losing their jobs and struggling to fit in time for domestic chores. Added to this, having to deal with the misbehaviour of children is understandably even more trying. On the other hand, spending time at home with already stressed-out parents might not be a pleasant experience for the children

either. Some homes have children facing the brunt of these stresses.

The ambient stress in a household in which parents are fretting, perhaps quarrelling, does not go unnoticed by children. Children are observant of these cues and these episodes come to them as an unpleasant shock. The UNICEF has claimed that *Childline* has seen a 50 percent spike in the rate of calls during the pandemic to help children, not only with basic nutrition but also to protect them in environments of abuse and violence.

#### *What you can do*

Parents could pick a time when they are themselves calm to focus on concerns around a child's misbehaviour, as a frustrated adult correcting a frustrated child will not address the situation at hand. Parents could also seek help from the mental-wellness departments of schools to assist them with the issues they are facing. Physical and sexual abuse at home is on an increase where many children are unfortunately stuck with their abusers and parents must remain alert to the signs. Teachers must let children know about and encourage them to use the *Childline* for expert, professional help and action, in case of an emergency.

#### **Need for emotional support**

The changes that children are facing during this time are emotionally overwhelming for them and could make them experience feelings of sadness, anxiety, anger, insecurity, aggression, frustration, fear or loneliness. These feelings could stem from news around COVID-19, interactions at home, lack of regular social interaction or the problems of handling online classes. All of these directly impact the mental and emotional wellbeing of children. They need mental space as well as the support of adults to address these emotional concerns.

#### *What you can do*

Parents need to empathise with children and hear them out. Allowing children to express these feelings in a constructive manner will be beneficial for them. Allow children a set of *feeling* words- such as lonely, sad, bored, anxious, scared - to enable them to express what they feel. Another simple strategy could be to give children love and attention and thereby address the issue of the fear that surrounds them.

With online education systems in place, schools should spend more time emphasising emotional

and mental wellbeing. Discussing mental health awareness as part of the school curriculum will build a good, trusting relationship between the school and the child.

#### **Understanding common emotions**

##### *Loneliness*

A lack of, or reduced, social interaction might increase feelings of loneliness for children. Though communication is being carried out by means of the phone or the internet, there is an emptiness that arises from being unable to meet physically and interact with peers.

##### *Boredom*

As much as children thrive on routine, a monotonous lifestyle can bring about an increased sense of boredom. While children usually build on creativity during times of boredom, it can also set a tone of lethargy.

##### *Anxiety*

The lack of structure in their everyday environment leads to anxiety in children. Added to that is the unease built up due to the news about the pandemic. Repetitive negative news affects the mind, more so in children who do not know how to handle that information.

##### *Fear*

The loss of lives from the coronavirus has been extensive. Everyone is living in constant fear of losing a loved one. The fear brings up insecurities, especially for children, who have learnt that the most affected group of people in this pandemic are the elderly, who are already predisposed to illnesses, as grandparents and even parents fall into this category.

#### **A final word**

It must be mentioned that for children who find school an unpleasant experience due to issues of bullying or lack of a supportive peer group have found solace at home during this time. Being at home has brought a sense of calm and security for them.

Watching out for our children at this time can be the biggest help we can provide to them. If you do sense any child needing more help than you can offer, please encourage them to seek therapeutic assistance from a counsellor or psychologist. Positive intervention by professionally trained counsellors may be the support your child needs

at a time such as this. As parents and educators, promoting positive mental health will bring about

a balanced psychosocial environment which is essential for children's learning and growth.



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Equally disturbing is that there is so little discussion or serious national debate on what can be done to address the issue of education and learning. Online education privileges the already better off, leaving the poor to fend for themselves. Notwithstanding the warnings of so many educators and educationists about the ineffectiveness (and even harmful) effects of passive, one-way online communication that passes off as education, governments and several corporate supporters continue to talk about online classes as the only solution in the times of the COVID-19 lockdown.

*Vimala Ramachandran, Preparing to Reopen Schools - What Needs to be Done, p 03.*