

# School as an Extension of the Family

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The marginalised sections of our society have been notably impacted by the nearly two-year-long school shutdown that started in March 2020 and the subsequent health, employment and social security concerns. Even among them, children are in a dire situation since they have watched in silence and have been dealing with anxieties, uncertainties, and deprivations. While adults found ways to deal with circumstances, children typically had few choices. For children, a school is a place where they interact with other children, express themselves, make new friends, learn new things by engaging in creative pursuits and get opportunities to feel a sense of achievement. While doing so, they are temporarily away from the stressful environment of their homes and surroundings, which helps them recover greatly from any emotional crisis. In theory, it seems like a nice idea, but in practice, there is a great need for awareness and sensitivity towards this at the school level.

We must remember that children from communities with low socio-economic status also struggle with expression and under these circumstances, teachers' efforts and responsibilities are greatly compounded. It would be wonderful if the school could foster a sense of self-assurance, love, security, and belonging along with emotional support; where the teacher, as an adult, can support children by offering companionship and trust and help children in taking care of themselves in challenging circumstances.

Most of the students in our school live in slums. During the lockdown, several people lost their jobs. The largest industry for employment – construction – remained closed. People also used up their meagre savings to cover daily expenses; and are currently burdened with debt while their incomes continue to be low. The resultant stress is being felt by the entire family. Here are some of our experiences with children in difficult circumstances and how we are trying to support them in ways that we can at school.

## Children in challenging circumstances

Mehak is a 9-year-old girl. Her father is a sanitation worker. He was unemployed for almost one whole year. He went back to the village with his family for a few months. But even in the village, sustaining the whole family for a long time without farming was difficult. At least in the city, some work would be available, so they came back. Now there is a shortage of everything, every day. Food expenses are met by taking loans. Occasionally, some work is found, but an atmosphere of uncertainty and tension prevails in the house all the time.

When the school reopened, Mehak started coming, but she was very scared. The way she used to mix, play, and have fun with the rest of the children earlier, had changed. We observed and understood that there was a need to talk to her. In the morning *sangeet sabha*, she continued to sing for some time, but her face was dull. The three of us, teachers, divided this work amongst ourselves – my job was to talk to her during play time and get her to speak about her thoughts and feelings. Another teacher, Ankit, took on the responsibility of sitting and eating with her. The third teacher, Sonam, took on the responsibility of helping her to participate more in the class. At our school, we have a daily meeting to discuss each child and the class process for the day. We document it daily.

While talking to Mehak, I came to know that no one in her house had eaten the previous night. Not much money was available. I kept talking to her while walking in the field. I talked about the struggles of my family in the early days. Also, I told her that bad times pass. She spoke about the fight between her grandparents. I also mentioned not being able to buy new clothes or pay my tuition fees as a child. We talked almost every day. Ankit shared his breakfast with Mehak several times. We used to gather many children and pool our food and share it. Sonam told me that Mehak composed a poem on birds and flowers in class. She also made a poster of this poem and put it in the classroom.

After some 15-20 days of this planned work, we realised that Mehak was almost back to her usual self. She not only played with other children but also actively participated in class.

We know that Mehak is in school only for six hours, and for the remaining 18 hours, she has to live with and face her family in the same difficult circumstances. However, in order to make these six hours emotionally beneficial and assist the children in regaining their lost confidence and seeing themselves as a part of the larger society, we must become aware of and sensitive to them. We may not be able to make any permanent or direct change in Mehak's life, but we can definitely help her to take care of herself as an individual and overcome this difficult time.

Roshni, 13 years old, came to Bhopal from Jharkhand. She has been in our school for three years. Her father has remarried and works as a painter. When Roshni came after the school reopened, she looked very weak. Although she has never been very healthy, now, because of the frequent visits to their village, the shortage of food there, coming back and staying locked in at home, staying away from school, etc., her health has deteriorated. Getting a hot, fresh lunch at school was a really big deal for her. We noticed improvements in her health since joining the school and understood the importance of eating right at least once a day. Earlier, in view of the many practical difficulties in running the kitchen, we had decided to close it and bring our own food. Then we realised that for some children, the school lunch is a big relief and should be continued at all costs. We found many donors and kept the kitchen running. Roshni was the most important beneficiary of this kitchen, as she was in dire need of the food.

Roshni spoke only Bhojpuri. We started talking with her in broken Bhojpuri. Ankita, her sister, also used to come to school. Both were almost the same age. They were more like friends than sisters. But the atmosphere at home was not favourable. Then, there was also the issue of the stepbrother. When the parents were out for work, they were left with him for prolonged periods of time. Also, they were coming to school regularly but would not participate in the daily activities. It was as if they were doing everything mechanically. We discussed this issue in our daily meeting. We realised that they were doing all the household work, but there was no recognition for it, nor did anyone understand its importance. During that time, we organised *Umang*

*Sports Fair* in the school, and along with two other children, Roshni and Ankita were entrusted with the task of coordinating the entire event. Ankit, the maths teacher, was in their team. And then some magic happened! Ankita and Roshni were planning each day's activity with us. They were selecting teams of children, making a list of essential items, and keeping all the accounts. Both wrote reports together for each day of this three-day event. We had an appreciation session for Roshni and Ankita's work in the morning *sangeet sabha*. We told everyone that their mother and father had gone out to work and that Ankita and Roshni, along with taking care of their younger brother, did all the household chores, came to school regularly, and took care of the event also. Everyone clapped for them. On behalf of the school, Namita gave them a storybook each. In the coming days, Ankita got better at Hindi and Roshni started doing well in mathematics. They will go to class nine next year and feel sad that they will have to leave this school.

Gopal is 12 years old. He lives with his grandparents in a nearby hut. He has four buffaloes and runs a small milk dairy with his grandparents. Early in the morning, after feeding the buffaloes, he goes to distribute milk on a bicycle and then comes to school. The parents are in the village but there is probably some family dispute due to which neither they nor Gopal visit each other. His grandparents have been everything to him. The grandfather passed away during the pandemic. This was the most difficult time for Gopal. The school remained closed. But sports teacher Vijay and I kept meeting him regularly. When the school reopened, he started coming to school after doing all the household and dairy work. He needed the 'school family' very much. We felt the same way. One day, we went to his dairy with all the children. We took food from the school kitchen, and everyone had it there. His grandmother started crying emotionally. She spoke these words in Bundeli with a huge lump in her throat, 'Gopal is not an orphan; the school is his family.' She gave jaggery to all the children.

What can anyone do to compensate Gopal for his family? If the school is with him and takes care of him, then this is enough for Gopal. Gopal supplies milk to the school and keeps an account because this is his livelihood. But yes, sometimes he brings buttermilk for free, and *kadhi* is prepared in the school kitchen, and everyone eats it with pleasure. At Anand Niketan, our morning assembly is full of songs and music so that the children start their day

in a joyful, free, and participatory environment. A daily podium session for the children to put forth their points of view has been successful to a great extent in bringing their pent-up thoughts and feelings to the fore and helping the teachers get hold of several threads of the children's personal lives. Teachers have also started sharing their thoughts, creating an atmosphere of equality in

the process. It is a great relief to the children to know that their teachers lead normal lives like them; they too have their own fears, anxieties, and shortcomings, and together we can give each other emotional support. In the cases of Mehak, Roshni, Ankita, and Gopal, it is clearly seen that this school environment and process helped them tremendously.

*\*Names have been changed to protect children's identities.*



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