



# A Study on the Mental Health of Primary Grade Students During the Pandemic

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## Abstract

COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown has brought about a sense of fear and anxiety around the globe. This phenomenon has led to short term as well as long term psychosocial and mental health implications for children and adolescents. The quality and magnitude of impact on minors is determined by many vulnerability factors like developmental age, educational status, pre-existing mental health condition, being economically underprivileged or being quarantined due to infection or fear of infection.

Parents could notice many changes in their children which in turn lead to some changes in their eating, sleeping and other behavioral patterns. This study was done on children studying in the primary grade in a private school. Parents of 60 students were asked to fill the online questionnaire. Parents noticed a significant time spent on playing games, watching T.V and taking online classes, which further indicated a significant change in the behavioral patterns of the children and it affected eating, sleeping and concentration in children. It also showed a significant change in their mood and way of talking to the family members.

**Key Words-**Behavioral changes, Primary grade children, Pandemic

## Introduction

Throughout the world in the year 2020-21, essential modus of prevention from COVID- 19 infection has been isolation and social distancing strategies to protect from the risk of infection. On these grounds, since the beginning of 2020, various countries started implementing regional and national containment measures or lockdowns. In this backdrop one of the principle measures taken during lockdown has been closure of schools, educational institutes and activity areas. These inevitable circumstances which are beyond normal experience, lead to stress, anxiety and a feeling of helplessness in all.

It has been indicated that compared to adults, this pandemic may continue to have increased long term adverse consequences on children and adolescents. The nature and extent of impact on this age group depends on many vulnerability factors such as the developmental age, current educational status, having special needs, pre-existing mental health condition, being economically under privileged and child/ parent being quarantined due to infection or even death of a family member. During these harsh times mental health which includes our emotional, psychological, and social well-being has been affected. It affects how we think, feel, act and make choices.

The closure of schools, shifting of classes to home based online learning models-lead to confinement of children at home. The grasp of this pandemic has led them to be the most helpless. The drastic effect of it have led to forced stay at home for extended periods resulting in minimal interaction with peers and no or minimal opportunities for exploration and physical activities. All of these adversely impact children's mental health and welfare, leading to a wide variety of health issues such as weight gain, dry eyes, headaches etc. Children started experiencing loss of interest in friends and activities they usually enjoyed, significant increase in time spent alone, excessive worrying or anxiety, persistent nightmares or night terrors, disobedience or aggressive behavior. Along with these, they exhibit behavioural changes such as bedtime fear, stubbornness, throw tantrums, make careless mistakes, have lower attention for household tasks, avoid routines than before, and show lesser interest in indoor games or playing with peers. These have been found by a study on increasing incidences of screen addiction due to online classes during the pandemic, and its association with psychiatric disorders in youth.

There are families where the TV news is tuned in for almost 12 hours a day ,these reports about Coronavirus in the news on TV and social media is adding to the panic. Many of them struggle with boredom and isolation. The only way to interact with the friends and relatives is through the calls, facetime and other ways.

Through the online mode schools are providing the best possible platform for every activity -interschool quiz, debate, poster making and other competitions. The children get the exposure of participation or watching through the online mode only. Before the onset of Pandemic students of various schools were getting the opportunity to interact with each other but now that part is totally lost. According to Vygotsky, social interaction is very vital for the development of children but in this scenario, everything is missing.

### **COVID 19 and its Impact**

“Being restricted to four walls, having lesser chances of socializing or playing with peers, uncertainty and lack of proper information regarding the need for such a measure etc can aggravate their existing unhealthy coping mechanisms. Children who are subjected to emotional or sexual abuse within the family or neighborhood can also be vulnerable to encountering such situations. Hence, there is a need for parents or primary caregivers to be mindful about these and address it in an age-appropriate manner with their children” Radhika K (2020).

According to Bhavani K, “When children move away from the daily routine, they are disturbed and feel lost very often. Loneliness makes it worse. They might even feel unwanted amongst other people. As they are very sensitive, they would like to see their peers, teachers and usual surroundings from which they are forced to be away from now”.

In the study, *'Parents' Stress and Children's Psychological Problems in Families Facing the COVID-19 Outbreak in Italy'*. Parents of children aged between 2-14 years, were asked to complete an online survey reporting their home environment conditions. Relation they had due to the pandemic consequences, their difficulties experienced due to quarantine, their perception of individual and parent-child dyadic stress, and their children's emotional and behavioral problems.

Results showed that the perception of the difficulty of quarantine is a crucial factor that undermines both parents' and children's well-being. Quarantine's impact on children's behavioral and emotional problems is mediated by parent's individual and dyadic stress, with a stronger effect from the latter. Parents who reported more difficulties in dealing with quarantine show more stress. This, in turn, increases the children's problems. Living in a more at-risk area, the quality of the home environment, or the relation they have with the pandemic consequences, do not have an effect on families' well-being.

In the study "*Impact of COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of children in Bangladesh: A cross-sectional study*" Yeasmin, Banik and Hossain, aim to explore the impact of COVID-19 on the mental health of children during the lockdown in Bangladesh. An online cross-sectional study was conducted in April 2020 among 384 parents having at least one child aged between 5–15 years using non-probability sampling. The government of Bangladesh enforced full lockdown and all schools were closed from May 17, 2020. It negatively impacted children's wellbeing through interruption of their health care, nutrition, security, education, and overall mental health. Moreover, there is no literature available in Bangladesh on the long-term impact of COVID-19 pandemic on children's mental health. Thus, it becomes important to determine how extended school closures, stringent social distancing steps and the pandemic itself have impacts on the mental health status of children.

The results of this study show that, higher percentage of mental health disturbances of children with the higher education level of parents, relative infected by COVID-19, parents still need to go the workplace, and parent's abnormal behavior but lower to their counterparts. This paper demonstrates large proportions of children are suffering from mental health disturbances in Bangladesh during the period of lockdown. Implementation of psychological intervention strategies and improvement in house-hold financial conditions, literacy of parents, taking care of children, and job security may help in improving the psychological/mental status of children.

The results showed that the major mental health issues reported were stress, anxiety, depression, insomnia, denial, anger and fear. Children and older people, frontline workers, people with existing mental health illnesses were among the vulnerable in this context. COVID-19 related suicides have also been increasingly common. Globally, measures have been taken to address mental health issues through the use of guidelines and intervention strategies.

Worldwide the NGO's, the government, educational institutes are providing help to children who are facing issues related to any kind of mental issues. The role of social media has also been immense in this context. State-specific intervention strategies, telepsychiatry consultations, toll free number specific for psychological and behavioral issues have been provided by the Government of India.

## **Methodology**

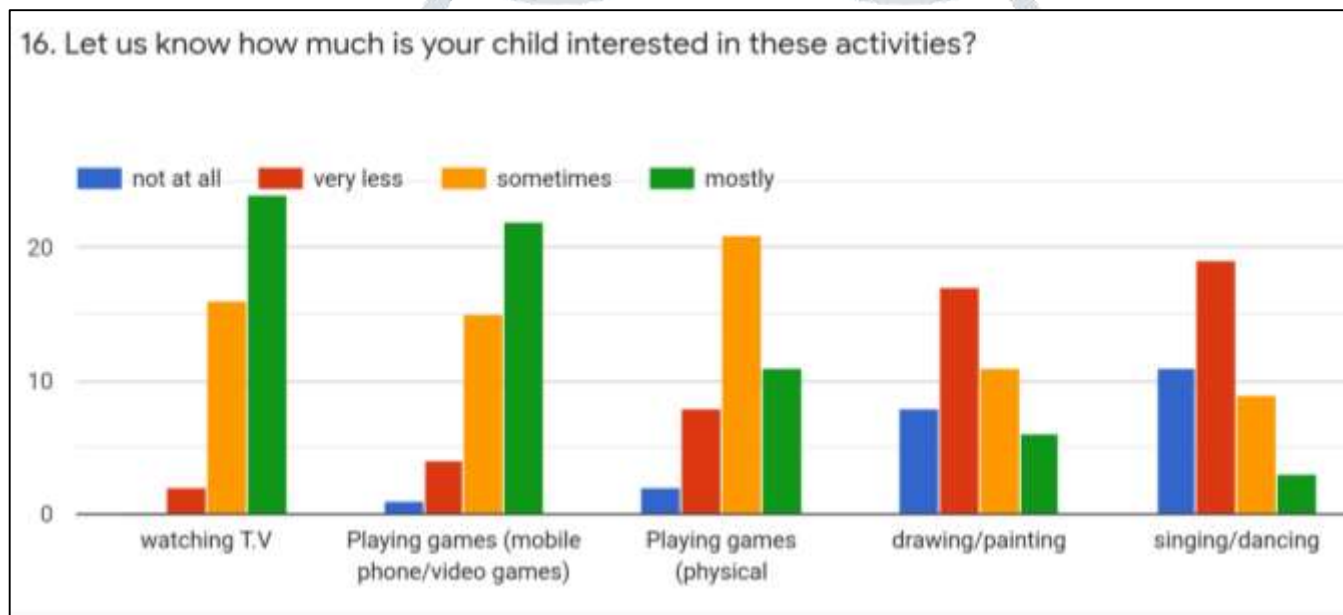
The newspaper articles, talk with the parents and school counsellors motivated the researcher to take up this study. Permission was taken from a private school to conduct this study. The head mistress gave the consent to conduct an online orientation session about the study and how the study will help to understand COVID 19 and the changes in behavioural patterns of Primary grade students. The headmistress randomly allotted two sections out of four sections of grade IV for the study. The parents of two sections of class IV were oriented about the study. 60 parents whose children were studying in primary grade (i.e grade 4) were contacted and were told about the work, they were also told how this study could benefit their children and what strategies can be used by the teachers or the parents to improve the mental health of the primary grade children. After the orientation they were given an online questionnaire through WhatsApp. There were 25 closed ended questions which were designed to know the various parameters about the child's behavioral changes during the pandemic. One week was given to

the parents to fill the questionnaire, out of 60 questionnaires only 42 responses were received back. 18 parents were not keen to participate in this study.

## Analysis

There was a range of questions asked for the study. Some related to demographic details of the family, the interest of the child, change in the sleeping and eating pattern of the children during pandemic but only the relevant ones were analysed for this study.

During the pandemic 45.2% fathers had to go for work (full time or part time) and 64.3% of mothers are not working during the pandemic. Either of the parent was at home to take care of the children and monitor the children closely.



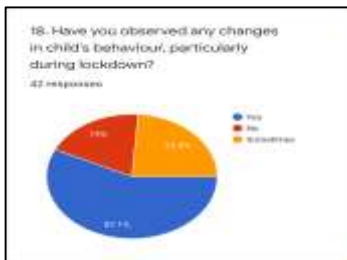
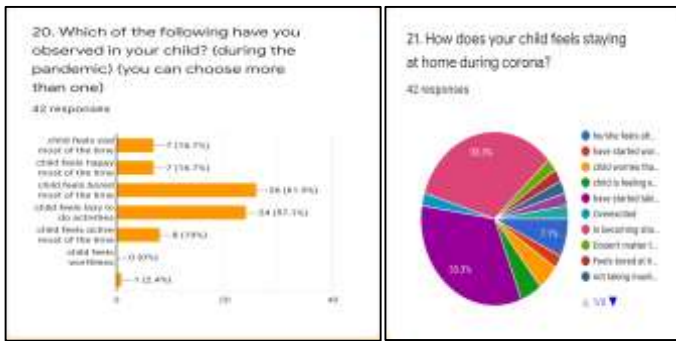
**Table-1**

The question was asked to know the interest of the child in the activity which the child does besides attending online academic classes.

The graph in Table 1 shows that children are mostly involved in watching television and playing video games on phone or computer. The reasons for this could be online school classes, no outdoor activities and no socialization in the neighborhood and with peers. Another factor could be involvement in work by the parents from home. Many parents were allowing extended hours of online play or watching TV in order to keep their children busy. An article in Economic Times, '*Covid -19 impact: Screen time up 100% for children*', indicated that the screen time for children of age group 5- 15 years had increased by 100% since the first lockdown.

According to Malhi.P(2020), excess screen time does not explicitly hamper learning capabilities, but can create attention deficiency and extreme mood alterations in children, which in turn disrupts learning capabilities. It is an established fact that active learning is the best way to retain information, so if they stare at screen all day then their attention spans will decrease and there will be issues concentrating in class which will affect learning.

## Behavioural changes seen among children during the pandemic



Questions on behavioural changes in children and the above graphs indicate that 57.1% of respondents have observed changes in their child's behaviour particularly during the pandemic. 61.9% of them responded that their child feels bored most of the time and around 57.1% shared that their child feels lazy to do activities. Only 16% felt that their child feels happy, 19% shared that their child feels active most of the time.

The graph related to question 21 indicates that 33.3% of children have become short tempered and pick up fight with their siblings or family members, they have become lazy and stubborn, often cranky, arrogant, get bored easily in an activity, get irritated easily and get aggressive”

After comparing this data with other factors like occupation of the parents and the behavioural changes of their children it is seen that those children who have started feeling bored and lazy or are easily irritated, both parents were working (from home or going out for work).

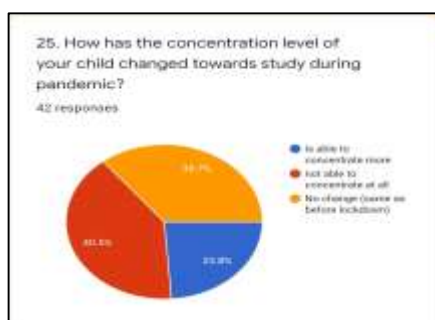
An article *‘The Effect of Parents’ Employment on Children’s Educational Attainment’* states that if the work time of mother is longer, tended to increase child risks of experiencing psychological distress tended to increase the child risks of experiencing psychological distress as a young adult. The addictive nature of being on screens specially if parents are working has made the children so lazy. Some parents told that their children take the classes while still they are in bed and most of the time they are half asleep as the camera is switched off.

Erikson’s psychosocial theory describes the individual social needs to the social environment as a passage through an interdependent series of stages with particular goals and accomplishments. The children in this study fall under the age of 6-10 years which come under the psychosocial crisis of industry versus inferiority. The primary grade students learn different skills that are necessary to become productive members of their culture. If they develop

these skills then they leave the stage with virtue of competence and otherwise if they develop a sense of inferiority which causes them to lose confidence.

In this study it is seen that children are not engaged in productive activities, they are spending maximum time watching T.V and in the online classes as well they are not able to show the competence fully as they are not able to participate in the competitions in which they used to do. And thus, this could be an after effect on children that they might lack confidence as they are unable to be productive members of society or represent their full potential.

### Changes in concentration level of children towards study during lockdown



The figure in Table 4 clearly depicts the changes in concentration level of children towards their studies during pandemic. As per the data collected, 35.7% parents feel that there is a decrease in the concentration level of their children. 40.5 % of the parents responded that the concentration level of their children has decreased during pandemic.

Parents responses.....

*They are hardly able to sit for an activity for 10 mins.*

*Sometimes they are attending classes online and playing with the toys or eating food.*

*They do not listen to the question asked by the teacher and tell the teacher that there is network lag so please repeat the question.*

Danchin,M, gives some factors which affect the concentration level of children- lack of sleep or a poor routine, a diet high in sugar and fat with no sustaining nutrition to assist concentration in the classroom, excessive screen-time, especially prior to going to bed, difficulties at home, such as a recent separation of parents or a family trauma, some medications or organic illnesses, such as low thyroid function or iron deficiency. Poor sleep patterns, eating patterns and excessive use of technology, especially bedtime have a direct impact of concentration of children towards their studies.

The findings of the present study indicates that poor sleep, eating patterns and excessive screen time are very common among primary grade children. These factors are responsible for their diminishing concentration levels towards their studies. Some of these children also have to do household tasks as the working mothers need to go for work.

'Psychological Impacts of Students on Online Learning During the Pandemic COVID-19' Galea, Merchant, & Lurie, (2020) conducted this study to find out understanding of the experiences related to online learning. The findings show that

- Students are bored with online learning after the first two weeks of learning from home
- Considerable anxiety on research subjects whose parents have low income, as they have to buy a quota to be able to take part in online learning
- Emotional disturbances are indicated by changes in mood or mood caused by too many assignments that are considered ineffective by students.
- Boredom is also caused by the increasing distance between people, as a result of the policy of physical distancing and the prohibition to leave the house. Anxiety then arises and gets worse because there is no interpersonal communication

Online learning that makes students communicate through gadget intermediaries makes the interaction between one individual and other individuals lack the meaning of non-verbal communication. The absence of these interactions, coupled with restrictions on physical meetings, make students bored.

### **Conclusion**

Mental health includes our emotional, psychological, and social well-being. It affects how we think, feel, and act. It also helps determine how we handle stress, relate to others, and make choices. Mental health is important at every stage of life, from childhood and adolescence through adulthood.

Good mental health allows children to think clearly, develop socially and learn new skills. Additionally, good friends and encouraging words from adults are all important for helping children develop self-confidence, high self-esteem, and a healthy emotional outlook on life.

In this study the symptoms of mental health issues in children were noticed - Loss of interest in friends and activities they usually enjoy, changes in sleeping and eating habits, significant increase in time spent alone, excessive worrying or anxiety, Persistent nightmares or night terrors, Persistent disobedience or aggressive behavior, decline in school performance, lack of concentration, poor grades despite strong efforts, regular worry or anxiety, hyperactivity or fidgeting, frequent temper tantrums, depression, sadness or irritability.

Through our study we found out that in most of the primary grade students these observing changes were noticed These changes are mainly due to the change in daily routine of children due to pandemic. These have led to increase in screen time of children, which again is responsible for a number of behavioural issues. The parents need to spend Quality time with children, interests of children need to be found out and they need to develop hobbies so that the mental health issues get sorted out and primary children are not so disturbed due to the pandemic.

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