

*Rejuvenate and realign in the pandemic period to support learning in children*

Nagashree Gollapally, MET Rishikul Vidyalaya

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**Abstract**

The shift in the social, psychological and emotional conditions of young learners from in-person and physical school structure to remote impacted differently across different age groups and economic backgrounds. The new format of learning and changes domestically as well due to pandemic affected children to a great extent.

The way children at specific age groups were affected and some steps initiated to handle this are shared in this article. Identifying some of the important causes and finding meaningful solutions in the current pandemic period are helpful.

While the covid-19 pandemic is witnessing varied responses in the region, educators need to understand the long term effects of remote learning and the modified learning approaches to be employed. The transition to offline schooling must also include the feedback and thoughts of students.

**Introduction** Throughout the world, Covid-19 infection and pandemic condition led to isolation and social distancing strategies to protect from the risk of infection (Shweta Singh et al., 2020). From January, 2020, various countries undertook preventive measures which included regional and national containment measures or lockdowns. This led to the closure of schools, educational institutes and activity areas. This is an unusual experience for students, teachers, parents and educators across all the age groups. The fall out was mostly feeling of uncertainty, stress, anxiety and helplessness in all.

According to some of the research carried out, this pandemic may cause long term adverse consequences on children and adolescents (Shen et al., 2020). The developmental age, prevailing educational status, having special needs, pre-existing mental health condition, being economically under privileged conditions may face after effects of pandemic period to

different extents. Being quarantined, either or both child and parents due to infection or fear of infection will additionally affect students and teachers.

The financial imbalance, disturbance in family health conditions, expectations to teach in the virtual format, connecting with students in the online format, upgrading technical knowledge to be successful equally in teaching using new digital resources in the online format were all new challenges for teachers.

## **Closure of schools-Adverse effects on students**

Mental health of students got affected in a way that needs long term corrective steps to be taken up. The psycho-social aspects of covid-19 among children need careful monitoring by adults. School closures meant minimum social interactions and exchange of information for children. This created confusion, anxiety and irritation among children. This is true for young and the adolescent children.

1. The young children in the age group of 2 to 10 years found themselves locked in the house with adults looking grim and confused. They had limited information to comprehend the situation and handle the new development. The young children showed poor attention, irritability and tendency to cling to adults as common psychological condition. (Jiao, W.Y., Wang, L.N., Liu, J., Fang, S.F., Jiao, F.Y., Pettoello-Mantovani, M., & Somekh, E. 2020).
2. Children of age 11 to 15 years had fewer people to speak to and converse on the pandemic situation and the associated changes. They needed more support to apprehend the routines modified by pandemic period. They were additionally entering the adolescent stage and found the pandemic creating limitations to deal with the challenges. The different methods of social distancing norms led to symptoms of anxiety and depression (Oosternhoff, B, et al 2020).
3. The age group of 15 to 17 years preparing to appear for important board examinations like Gr.10 and 12 remained continuously under stress and anxiety. The online format of learning had limitations for meeting teachers for proper understanding and preparation. Students are reported to have felt helplessness in the event of postponement of examinations (Ng Kang Chug, 5 April 2020).
4. Children with special needs experienced enhanced stress and discomfort during the lockdown and closure of schools. The limited support available for such children to

manage the regular routines and learning associated activities in the online format posed major hurdles.( Shweta et al., 2020). The lack of counselling where prevailed made such students to be inconvenienced. They found it difficult to follow instructions and relate to the complexity of the pandemic situation. Aggravations due to the closure of special schools and day care centres compounded the situation further. This is because they missed the resource materials, peer group interactions and opportunities to develop important social and behavioural skills( Lee,2020). Parents found it difficult to handle the challenged children and adolescents on their own as they lacked the professional understanding and expertise needed( Dalton et al.,2020).

5. Economically poor and underprivileged children faced acute shortage of nutrition and overall protection. It is estimated that in India, 40 million children from poor families were affected adversely due to lockdown.( Dalton et al.,2020; Rosenthal et al., 2020).This may lead to increased vulnerability of these children to face mental and physical health issues due to unfavourable economic, social and environmental circumstances( Birla,2019). This is supposed to have made children victims of violence by elders.

## **Some corrective steps to address the concerns regarding closure of schools for students**

1. Children in the age group of 2 to 10 years would benefit by increase in communication by playing collaborative games, encouraging physical activities, music and art therapies( Jiao,W.Y., Wang,L.N., Liu,J., Fang,S.F., Jiao,F.Y., Pettoello-Mantovani,M., & Somekh,E.2020). Our school, MET Rishikul Vidyalaya( MRV) took few measures to address the concerns in this group. The importance of children being in constant touch with peers and teachers was felt strongly. Due to this, little after the onset of lockdown, our school initiated an activity called MRV CONNECT. Here, teachers began sending motivating and fun filled messages to children. Teachers made videos to get students to understand the pandemic situation in simple and easy language.They also set fun filled tasks like sharing how would children protect themselves by washing hands regularly, wearing masks and maintaining social distance. They encouraged children to share these through videos with the help of their parents. We encouraged parents and families to get involved.This created a buzz and we received many interesting and innovative responses. Our school rewarded the enthusiastic children with appreciation notes and e-certificates and sharing on school official social media. Teachers kept the

momentum further during online classes to get children feel the comfort of the connect with school.

2. Children of age 11 to 15 faced varying levels of challenges. They need to be provided with guidance to learn responsibility, involvement, accountability and collaboration with peers and teachers through online platform. Sorting and managing daily routines, keeping their belongings and utility items are the focus needed in this group. MRV conducted MRV Connect in this group similar as explained in point 1 along with focus on subject areas. The appreciation certificates issued and involving parents and families in this activity saw fantastic response and engagement for our students.
3. Students in age group 15 to 17 needed clear understanding of the consequences of examinations postponed. Completion of syllabus, revision and preparations for examinations and further prospects of admission post examination were the focus areas. Continuous sharing of information on the developments and considerations by governing education authorities with students is extremely important. Students need to be provided with timely information and all possible options and support on a continuous basis along with providing guidance for minimising anxiety. MRV scheduled regular counselling sessions by counsellors, career guidance and subject -wise expert sessions for preparation for examination. This led to gathering of better information by students for their future academic plans. Monthly meetings through virtual platforms were conducted for parents and students regarding the updates on conduct of examinations, preparations, examination schedules and process of completing the requirements for submitting application for examinations. This has been appreciated by our school parents as students were aware of the latest information. The guidance included steps for alternate planning for completing board examinations in the new formats as advised.
4. Children with special needs required modified and simple learning resources for the online learning. Parents and family members had to be guided and trained to take up the role in the absence of special schools and day care centres. MRV got the special educators and counsellors to design sessions with parents and teachers to help the children. The counsellors have been conducting customised sessions with children to help them share concerns and provide tips to handle the challenges of pandemic period. Parents were suggested to include consideration of child's condition, have realistic expectations and encourage active engagement for positive frame of mind. Counsellors involved children with special needs in the MRV CONNECT activity as well by encouraging to participate. Our school collaborated with ADAPT ( Able Disable All People Together), Mumbai , an institution working for children with special needs to celebrate Children's

Day, Diwali and Christmas party online from August to December 2020. Our school also associated with Aliyavarjung Institute for Hearing and Speech Impaired, Mumbai in the same period by providing interactions between students and developing useful teaching aides. The festivals were celebrated online together. The collaboration with both these institutions made our students enjoy equally.

5. MRV associated with the NGO, Angel Express Foundation (AXF) Mumbai which works for the education of street children from Aug'21 onwards. Our students, staff and parents collected sanitizers, masks, books, stationery, toys and games to be gifted during Diwali. Similar initiative were taken up for Christmas. Weekly teaching sessions are conducted by our students with the children of this organisation through whatsapp option on mobile phones with the monitoring by both teachers and coordinators of MRV and AXF. This has established beautiful rapport between both groups of students while our students are more compassionate and feel responsible to support the children of the NGO.

### **Some of the other measures taken up by our school for maintaining positive frame of mind included**

a. Joy of bonding: Students from age 2 yrs to 17 yrs visiting school in small numbers when conditions were suitable for social and emotional bonding with peers and teachers. This significantly lifted the morale of students.

b. Knowledge Fair: when situation was conducive to get students to visit school premise in small numbers and share their online learning as presentations and discussions. Students looked forward to the positive experience.

c. My moment of Joy: An online event where children from Pre Primary to Gr.12 showcased their talent and any activity that made them happy as video. These were then shared with all the students of the class by the teacher with interesting and appreciative comments that was thoroughly enjoyed by all the students and parents. This helped in bonding amongst children and they cheered each other as they watched the performances.

d. Regular and continuous counselling by special educators, experts in early child education, experts from medical and education professions were conducted for students, teachers and parents. MRV counsellors monitored behaviour and participation of students and keenly observed for any concerns. Weekly interactions with students and age appropriate issues in the pandemic period were chosen for briefing students of the approaches that may be adopted.

e. MRV employed Moderators in addition to regular teachers during online classes to note

any concern and need for corrective steps continuously. f. Workshops and orientation for Mental and Physical Wellbeing, Rejuvenation and Realignment by experts in Psychological and mental health were organised quarterly for parents, teachers and school staff. Students were encouraged to develop prosocial behaviour.

## Conclusion

These steps and regular monitoring of the way all areas of the new pandemic norms are adhered to and followed have helped our school to manage the learning uninterrupted. The steps initiated by our school as above from “a to f” are realistic and will be continued for longer periods ahead in view of the requirements of the pandemic period.

The new normal situation of adhering to covid -19 guidelines, understanding the changes in the learning patterns in students and continuously supporting students, teachers and parents will be required. Coordinated and innovative approach for staying healthy and connected with each other, be it with students, with staff, with parents or with community beyond school may need to be embraced in the current period. This may be true now more than any other time.

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