

The Ramifications of Pandemic Lockdown Crisis on Children with Autism and Developmental Disorders: A Social Commentary

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Since the beginning of the year 2020, the world has been experiencing an unprecedented crisis of the Novel Corona virus pandemic [1]. The only solution, mankind could come up was to enforce lockdown and social distancing; essentially prevention was the key [2]. Countries like India shut their borders with enforcement of stern lockdown measures in the month of March 2020 [3]. The worst hit were the most vulnerable population of children with Autism and neurodevelopmental disorders like Down syndrome, cerebral palsy, learning disabilities and Attention deficit Hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) [4]. It is estimated that 1 in 100 children under age of 10 have autism, and nearly 1 in 8 has neuro-developmental disorders [5]. Under normal circumstances, children with autism spectrum disorder and neuro-developmental disorders require specialist therapists like occupational therapy, speech therapy and trained psychologist for holistic approach in taking care of them. Families with such children often rely on some of the committed professionals such as therapists, coaches and other support staff who help in providing sensory inputs and emotional support to the children with autism. The impact of COVID-19 pandemic has been multi-faceted on these children in regards to 1) demand for increased medical assistance, 2) requirement of community-based services like therapist, 3) psychological concerns and 4) financial concerns for the family.

Demand for increased medical assistance

Children with autism and other developmental disorder are in greater health care needs in comparison to developmentally appropriate children. Children with developmental disorders like Down syndrome may also have other medical manifestations like atrial septal defect, ventricular septal defect with psychiatric manifestations which require routine medical care [6]. Even children with autism spectrum disorders have higher predisposition for gastro-intestinal problems in comparison to others. With lockdown enforced, private clinic setup in India were closed and parents were also sceptical about taking them to hospitals, as it can expose them to the virus. All the resources in the government hospitals focused on taking care of the rapidly developing COVID-19 situation. Thus, with all these barriers in place, it became extremely hard to take care of their regular medical needs. However, many General Paediatrician did adopt for telemedicine, but it was difficult for the physicians as well as for the parents. Moreover, India is still a developing country trying to build its telecommunication infrastructure. Thereby, many of the parents in rural setup did not have access to internet to avail these services and with parents not being tech savvy, it added fuel to the fire.

Requirement of community-based services like therapist

One of the main pillars of management of autism and developmental disorder is through various therapist like 1) physiotherapist, 2) occupational therapist, 3) speech therapist and 4) psychologist. Children with autism spectrum disorders face multiple occupational challenges in their school as well as in home environment. Thus, role of occupational therapist becomes important to develop skills, learning strategies and self-care in them. With lockdown being enforced it became really difficult for various therapist to actually commute and continue the therapy [7]. Although many therapists did resort to telemedicine therapy, it becomes very difficult for parents of these

children. As many parents were not really aware on how to deal with them and their behaviour. Thus, it became stressful for not only the children but also for their parents.

Psychologic health concerns

Children with developmental disorder are very much vulnerable to mental health concerns due to the ongoing pandemic situation added with lockdown effect. Children with developmental disorders are more prone to develop other mental conditions like generalized anxiety disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), mood disorders [8]. The major contributing factors that has played vital role in creating psychological stress in these children are social confinement in the house, isolation from the school along with physical illness. When compared to Indian scenario, where many families are either nuclear unit or joint family, all the members in the house during lockdown period have put strain on children with autism spectrum disorder. Under normal circumstances, these children usually attend regular counselling sessions and also attend school. But in absence of schooling and lack of social interaction has made it worse for them to cope with thereby aggravating their mental stress. Parents were left with the daunting task of keeping them busy and occupied in various tasks. The pandemic has impacted children with OCD worst, as because of following strict hand-care hygiene and surrounding anxiety around the disease itself [9]. Thus, in conclusion, pandemic has unearthed the underlying psychological concerns in these children. With the prevention of spread of the virus being in the centre of the government policy, many specialized institutions dealing with Autism spectrum disorder, ADHD, learning disabilities children were shut for periods extending for long than two months or so with uncertainty regarding re-opening of institutions. The closure of the institutions not only impacted the children, but also left parents in the lurch. Furthermore, what has made hard for the parents is that lack of cognitive flexibility in children with neuro-developmental disorders and autism spectrum disorder to make them understand the gravity of the current scenario the world is facing.

Financial concerns

With pandemic and strict measures enforced to curb the spread has caused much collateral damage to the economies of the many developing nations like India. Usually one person is the earning member in typical family in India and lockdown under effect has caused rampant employment with lack of proper funds. Unmasking of financial concerns of the families has put parents under stress and eventually children were at the receiving end of the stress and anxiety over uncertainty [10].

Violence and abuse

Since the time lockdown was enforced on 25th March 2020, CHILDLINE India the non-governmental organization saw surge in the cases of violence against children. As with most of the adult population at the home along with fear of uncertainty and financial concern, children have been the most vulnerable population at home. Within the first week only in the month of March, almost around 300,000 calls were received, which is around 50% increases in the calls [11]. The CHILDLINE India reported that 11% calls were related to physical health. While 8% calls on child labour and 8% were on missing children.

What has been done and what should be done?

Government of India has classified this pandemic as a disaster. Therefore, The Disaster Management Act lays down institutional and coordination mechanism for effective management at national, state, district and local levels.

Access to health care services

In certain states of India like Tamil Nadu and Kerala, doorstep personal physical therapy has been to address medical concerns of ill people [13]. The Institute of Human Behaviour and Allied Sciences have ensured round the clock emergency service for psychiatry and neurology. For disabled children some states have provided physiotherapy through e-physiotherapy sessions. Doctors have been trying to provide medical help through telemedicine.

However, to address concerns of disabled people certain steps can be done. Door step consultation should be considered for this special population in all states. There should be provision of separate COVID-19 testing centres and separate isolation wards for disabled people. Personal protective kit should be provided to the caregiver of the disabled patients. Additionally, patients with developmental disorders and mental health problems who might have accompanying health conditions, should be provided with emergency medicine service and on-line medical counselling.

Specialised therapy and caregivers

Children with autism spectrum disorder and other developmental disorder require ongoing care and specialised therapy. Although some states have appointed professionals as their caregivers, the issue needs to be addressed further. Various safety protocols like proper sanitization methods along with testing should be maintained for the therapist who are visiting, as these children are more susceptible for the infection.

For psychiatric concerns, it is necessary that we communicate with these children effectively and reassure them regarding the present condition. This can be done by providing specialised psychiatrist’s visit to the family. Emphasis should be placed on training of parents on how to keep their children busy with different recreational activities. Various support groups should be formed with the help of Non-governmental organizations (NGOs), through which support system can be formed.

Financial help

In view of COVID-19 crisis, the central government has announced that it will provide 3 months’ pension to people with disabilities under its National Social Assistance Programme. However, parents of children with autism and developmental disorders are also facing financial crisis due to lockdown effect. To help them we can ensure they get monetary help or help with their essential needs like food, ration and medicine. Government can also give subsidies to these families for taxes, bills and also special health care facilities for these children.

Conclusion

Government of India is trying hard to fight this situation, so are some NGOs like National centre for promotion of employment of disabled people (NCPEDP), National Society for Equal Opportunities for the Handicapped and many others. But to find solutions more effectively, it is necessary that government should collaborate with these different NGOs and work at the grass root level (Figure 1). This can be the best way to help these children from national level to local level.

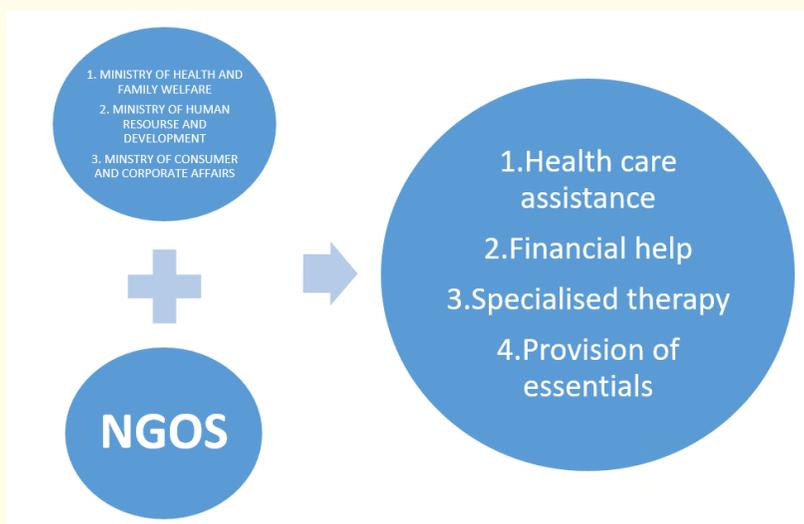


Figure 1: A Collaboration approach between the Government and NGO’s for children with Autism and developmntal disorders.

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