

## Effect of Covid-19 Pandemic on the Wellbeing of Children and Young People in Sub-Saharan Africa

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### Abstract

SARS-COV-2 the novel coronavirus responsible for COVID-19 pandemic first discovered in Wuhan China was declared a pandemic by the WHO March the 11th 2020. The pandemic has been associated with a number of challenges affecting a significant number of people globally, particularly children and young people living in sub-Saharan Africa. The Covid-19 pandemic and the associated lockdowns, physical distancing, self-isolation and quarantine had a devastating effect on the wellbeing of children and young people. The challenges that these children and young people have had to face were innumerable; isolation from friends; compelled to stay longer with adults rather than with their peers (parents and guardians who most times do not seem to understand the peculiar needs of these children and who will often shout and moan over every challenging behaviour products of boredom and monotony), learning from home, sedentary lifestyle with less physical activity, worries that they, their family members or friends might get sick and die from the pandemic and worries that their parents may lose their jobs and may not be able to fend for them. It is critical for government of West Africa states to proactively harness information and data from schools, colleges, public, social health services and parents to enable them better understand the effect the Covid-19 pandemic has had on children and young people across the region to enable them offer the required support and interventions for this and future pandemics to ensure that recovery is maintained. There is need to develop a family-centred approach in caring for an infected family member to limit the spread of the disease to other family members including children and young people. There is also the need for labour market interventions aimed at providing protection and benefits for the unemployed, disabled and other vulnerable members of society. There is an urgent need for government of West African countries Mental health services particularly for children and young people across the to optimize the mental health serviced offered to children and young people. It is critical that government across the region put measures in place to ensure that children and young people continue to receive the mental health and wellbeing support that they deserve even in the midst of the ongoing Covid-19 and future pandemics. There is an urgent need for government across the region to provide palliatives to help low-income individuals. Relaxation of the lockdown restrictions should be an opportunity for government across West Africa to create more opportunities for children and young people to engage in physical activity to improve on their physical, mental, psychological health and wellbeing.

**Keywords:** Covid-19 Pandemic; Wellbeing; Children; Young People; Sub-Saharan Africa

### Introduction

The novel coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) is the causative agent for current global COVID-19 pandemic. The virus first identified in Wuhan, China in 2019 causes a cluster of severe acute respiratory syndrome. On the 30<sup>th</sup> of January 2020, The World Health Organization declared it a Public Health Emergency of International Concern. The virus is transmitted by exposure to respiratory aerosols/droplets from an infected person [1]. A number of preventive measures have been recommended to limit the spread of the virus; covering mouth when sneezing or coughing, disinfecting hands and surfaces, ventilation and air-filtering ensuring fresh, hand washing, observing quarantine and self-isolation rules for persons who are exposed or symptomatic, social or physical distancing and wearing of a face masks in public [2,3]. Africa has been disproportionately affected by Covid-19 (3.4%) compared to the West despite the fact that 17% of the world population reside in Africa [4]. Countries particularly those in West Africa seems blessed particularly as a result of disparity in the number of cases of COVID-19 infection and associated deaths compared to developed economies [5]. Covid-19 related mortality has affected Africans disproportionately compared to other parts of the world. As at the end of 2020 a total of 2,763,421 Africans has been affected with associated 65 602 Covid-19 related mortality, accounting for only 3.4% of the total 82,312,150 cases and 3.6% of 1,798,994 global Covid-19 related mortality. Southern part of Africa has been significantly affected more by Covid-19 (43%) of reported cases and COVID-19 related death (46%) compared to the Central region (3%) of the reported cases and 2% of Covid-related deaths [6]. As at the end of 2020, the number of Covid-19 cases was significantly higher in nine African countries (South Africa, Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, Ethiopia, Libya, Algeria, Kenya, and Nigeria) constituted 82.6% (2,283,613) of Covid-19 cases reported while five other countries (South Africa, Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia, and Algeria) constituted 77% of Covid-19 related deaths [7]. Children and young people particularly those in sub-Saharan Africa responded with resilience to significant changes in their lives during the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown period. The aim of this micro review was to highlight the challenged that Covid-19 has had of health and social wellbeing of children and young people in the West African sub region during the lockdown period. Articles in peer-reviewed journals on Covid-19 and its attendant effects on children, young people and family were used to gather the summary reported in this article. The purpose of this article is to (a) Identify challenges the current Covid-19 and its associated lockdowns has had particularly on children and young people and control measures that can be put in place to manage this and future pandemic and (b) Discuss policy recommendations and priority areas to facilitate the effective management of the current Covid-19 and future pandemics in West Africa.

### Mental health and wellbeing

The coronavirus pandemic seems to have affected families on low-income disproportionately often resulting in a significantly more concern and threats to their health and social welfare. The Covid-19 related policy implementation of social isolation requiring people to stay at home and observe physical and social distancing away from their peers has put parents, children and young people under tremendous distress. It is no longer news that the Covid-19 pandemic has significantly heightened the concern about the health and wellbeing of families. There has been anxiety and fear among children and young people about their friends or family becoming infected with Covid-19. They also often dread their becoming infected and having to self-isolate away from school and their peers. Previous report from the UK has shown that during the lockdown period, a significant number of children reported that they are generally happy while one in every 15 reported low level of happiness [8]. There are growing concerns that Covid-19 associated lockdowns has negatively affected the mental health and has caused a significant psychological distress among children and young people [8]. Pandemic-related implementation of lockdowns and physical distance have had a negative impact on the health, social and emotional wellbeing of families particularly children and young people. In developing countries where the mental health services are suboptimal the effect of lockdown can further negatively impact the services delivered to children and young people. The Covid-19 pandemic has brought to light the inadequacies in the health care systems with attendant lack of healthcare infrastructures and sub-optimally trained and available healthcare workers to handle complex health emergencies [9]. There is also the challenge of fear, perceptions of risk and social stigma associated with the deadly disease like Covid-19 [10]. West African sub region has history of social stigma to infectious diseases (Ebola, influenza, tuberculo-

sis, HIV/AIDS and severe acute respiratory syndrome [11-13]. All these factors further negatively affect the welfare of children and young people. Unlike in the West, there is paucity of data and research on child mental health in low- and middle-income countries [14]. Prior to Covid-19, considerable evidence suggest that considerable levels of mental health challenges existed among children and young people in Africa [15]. Accessibility to prompt supportive care is essential for infected parents, their family and loved ones. Time off from education, being isolated from friends and sometimes family, fewer opportunities for physical activity could have had a tremendous effect on the mental health and social wellbeing of children and young people across the region. There is the need for government of sub-Saharan Africa countries to invest significantly in meeting the mental health needs as well as making mental healthcare and wellbeing a critical component of overall health care planning [16-18]. There is no doubt that the easing of the lockdown and students returning to schools and colleges has played a significant role in improving the mental health and fears many families and students had. It is glaringly clear improvement in the health and welfare of children is essential to achieving the United Nations Millennium Development Goals [19]. The Covid-19 -related restrictions to mobility imposed by lockdowns in West African countries significantly affected access to health services particularly for families including children and young people. There is need for government of West African countries to increase funding for healthcare services to manage psychosocial effects of the current and future pandemics. It is extremely vital that essential counselling, mental health and other social support services remain accessible. There is need to invest on technology required to provide healthcare support in situations where there is limited mobility seen during the COVID-19 pandemic (telemedicine, virtual peer support and online counselling services). There is need for governments across the West African sub region to adequately fund mental health care services particularly for children and young people in the face of the ongoing Covid-19 and future pandemics. Relaxation of the lockdown restrictions should be an opportunity for government across West Africa to create more opportunities for Children and young people to engage in physical activity to improve on their physical, mental, psychological health and wellbeing.

### Friendships and family relationships

The COVID-19 pandemic has created extraordinary challenges that has significantly affected the social wellbeing of children and young people [20]. The Covid -19 associated requirements for social distancing, lockdowns, imposed isolation, lockdowns, quarantine and stay-at-home orders resulted in several unique direct and indirect challenges particularly for families, children and young people in most African settings [21]. Children and adolescents tend to be happy when in the midst of their peers. A significant number of children and young people were denied regular contact with friends during the Covid-19 lockdown period. The West African sub region is a highly religious, culturally sensitive and family oriented. The Covid-19 pandemic has resulted in a significant shock to the West African economy. Following the imposition of lockdown, school closures and stay-at-home orders across most of the west African states, the labour market had a significant hit and associated social-economic shock particularly for families that lost jobs, income and loved ones. As a result of the school closures most parents have had no option than to spend a significantly more time with their children even to the extent of key workers having to take time off work. Although there is some evidence that the lockdowns have resulted in improved relationships and bonding between parents and their children, there is also the fear that prolonged lockdown may also have led to perpetuation of physical and emotion abuse in some family settings. Most essential workers had challenge working during the lockdowns and associated school closures. Many could not afford child care cost particularly in the West African settings where social welfare provisions like it is in the developed economies are unavailable. These parents have had no other option than to stay at home to cater for their children. This can have a negative effect on the finances available to the family and can be frustrating for parents. These frustrations can sometimes be transferred to children and young people for no fault of theirs. Covid -19 came with a lot of social shock particularly for families that lost jobs, income, were ill due to the pandemic and those that lost love ones. A previous study [22] indicated that Covid -19 came with a lot of social shock particularly for families that lost jobs, income, were ill due to the pandemic and those that lost love ones. Parental job and income losses are often associated with depression and tension that can have a negative effect in interaction between parents and their children. Children whose parents are exposed to COVID-19 were more likely to have behavioural problems and less parent-child relationship. In contrast, parents who reported investing more quality time in childcare due to Covid-19 pandemic had a more excellent parent-child rela-

relationship [22]. The pandemic -related closure of schools and disruption in learning can a negative implication in the educational development [23]. These effects however depend on the amount of quality time parents have to instruct their children at home and whether they have access to internet facility and associated technology that promote remote learning at home (computers, internet e.t.c.). Economically disadvantaged children who parents are on low-income are at a higher risk of for fall back in their learning and having behavioural problems compared to those from high income homes [24-26].

### School closings and remote learning

During the Covid-19 pandemic and associated lockdowns, schools across the West African subregion has had to close. In most cases, children and young people whose parents could afford to pay for the services and associated technology were able to continue to learn remotely from home. However, for a vast majority of children affordability challenges was a limiting factor that prevented home learning and remote education (lack of access to a computer and internet facilities). Lockdowns meant that many parents who could not afford childcare cost had no option than to stay at home in order to care for young children [27]. Many children and parents did not necessarily find this easy. Parents have had to deal with challenge in maintaining motivation to learn. Previous report indicated that children were more at risk of abuse during pandemic or crisis-related school closures [28]. Length of school closure has been shown to have a significant socio-economic effect on key workers who have to foot the exorbitant cost of childcare when schools are closed. This can also affect the number of frontline staff available to render services to the community at a time when sickness-related absences are essentially high. Evidence from the UK has shown that crisis-related school closure is often linked to high rate of absenteeism of frontline working parents. Many of them may have to stay at home to care of their children because of the associated huge childcare cost. A significant number of staff who are the main carer for dependent children are likely to be absent from work if schools are closed [29]. Lesson learnt so far with the Covid-19 pandemic seems to favour the need for government of West African countries to invest in the development of infrastructure for online virtual learning (internet facility, computers, e-education platforms and steady electricity) required to enable children and young people continue with their learning and educational development [30]. Government of West African states must come to the realization that parents on low income face a more serious financial challenge when schools are short down for a prolonged period. This is justification for government to provide financial support and benefits to help low-income individuals in member countries of ECOWAS [31].

### Provision of necessities and help during pandemics

Africa is home to a significantly higher number of people who live on less than \$2.00 U.S. dollars per day compared to other parts of the globe [32]. Unemployment rates remain relatively high in most African settings with young people disproportionately affected [33]. Most of the employable young people in West Africa rely on the informal sector for employment with many doing daily paid jobs and a significant number on zero-hour contract. The covid-19 related lockdowns have aggravated lack, want and hunger in the region. Other compounding issues are the lack of social protection measures aimed at providing financial benefits and food subsidies for families living in poverty. The extreme poverty in the West African region will likely worsen as a fallout of the Covid-19 pandemic making it extremely difficult to enforce strict adherence in social distancing, self-isolation and quarantine rules. Many on zero hours contract are not likely to obey these rules as they have to continue to work to be able to find for the family particularly in the absence of help from the state. During the Covid-19 associated lockdowns, many parents particularly daily paid workers lost their jobs and could hardly afford basic necessities including food, water, sanitation, and shelter. There is also the challenge of many displaced from communal conflicts and insurgency now living in over-crowded internally displaced people's camps. Closing workplace and schools have ethical implications. Its effectiveness during a pandemic is not certain, coupled with the fact that some individuals particularly low-income workers on zero hours contract or daily paid jobs are worst affected. Workplaces are relevant to the economic survival of employers and employees, so shutting them down has a significant financial implication on both parties. The Covid-19 related lockdown has resulted in lost profits for most businesses forcing many to close down with attendant job losses and financial hardships. Even for people who have permanent jobs and savings, these challenges can have a significant effect, but for those on contract jobs and those on zero- hours contract, the consequences of lost income

can be far-reaching. The reality from the Covid-19 pandemic has shown that many workers may struggle to meet their financial obligation (pay their rent, mortgages, buy food or even medicines) particularly if workplace closure lingers for longer. The decision by the ministries of education in ECOWAS member states to close schools must be based on evidence and must involve the carrying out of a cost benefit analysis and the potential health benefits of reduction in number of infections must be weight against the economic and social realities associated of such closures. Physical distancing may be associated with health benefits and may play a role in prevention of disease spread. There is however increasing advocacy that the decision or policy on when, how and length of school closure should be based evidence [34-35]. Recent report does indicate that there is lack of empirical evidence to prove that physical distancing measures including school closure does have any significant effect of Covid-19 transmission to warrant school closures [36,37]. However, there seems some limited evidence to prove that school closure does reduce seasonal transmission of influenza infection [38-40]. The Covid-19 pandemic like other before it is often associated with limited access to public places, such as parks, shops doctors' surgeries and pharmacies [41,42]. It is critical that countries in SSA realize that the pandemic-related lockdowns can significantly affect access to food, medicine, and other necessities [43]. Covid-19 related lockdowns have implication on mobility particularly for those with no alternative source of mobility when mass transportation is shutdown. Government of ECOWAS member countries will need to rise up to their responsibilities by putting in place backup plans to ensure the unhindered supply chain for food and other essentials during the ongoing Covid-19 and future pandemics. The supply chain industries are often driven by small numbers of dedicated workforce and their replacement resulting from ill health, death, isolation and quarantine may be challenging. Effective logistics and transportation system is critical to uninterrupted supply of necessities for the citizenry. Disruption in transportation systems can have a far-reaching negative implication on the social-economy of member nations. There is need for national government to partner with the logistic industry, labour unions and relevant stakeholders to ensure essential supplies are maintained in the ongoing Covid-19 and future pandemics [44]. Evidence has shown that ability to stockpile essential supplies is hinged on affordability with many on low incomes unable to stockpile supplies before the take-off of an announced lockdown. Government of ECOWAS member countries can do well by provide their citizens particularly those that are unemployed and those with low-income financial help or benefits to enable their family basic needs during the pandemic [45]. Government of ECOWAS member states must learn from evidenced-based best practice from developed economies by providing palliatives (maintenance funds and vouchers for food, medicine and other basic necessities) for their citizens. There is need to implement advance warning about a pandemics and related lockdowns allowing for enough time for citizens to stockpile essential supplies including food and medicine. National government should be able to guarantee logistics of essential goods by ensuring an unhindered supply to distribution outlets to ensure that supplies continue to run unhindered [46]. Experience from South America has indicated the need for the implementation of a system and provision of facilities to allow for the safe removal of dead bodies from the streets and homes particularly for families that lack the affordability for such services. Ambulances, mortuary and cremation facilities need to be optimized to allow for a dignified management of corpses [47].

### Investment in relevant technologies that facilitates working remotely from home

The need for the implementation requiring workers to work from home (WFH) and provision of the required technology that facilitate remote working from home as a way of limiting the spread of Covid-19 cannot be over emphasized [48]. There is also the need for effective contact tracing and for citizens who have had contact with infected persons to self-isolate at home for length of time justifiable by empirical evidence usually 10 - 14 days. Within such isolation period, it makes public health sense for such staff to work remotely from home to help mitigate against the risk of disease transmission [49]. Access to a computer, internet facility and the right technology is a key requirement to working remotely from home [50]. One major disadvantage of remote working from home is the challenge of cyber security and vulnerability to cybercriminals. WFH has led to a surge in demand for remote working-friendly applications (goggle meeting, WeChat Work, zoom, Ding Talk, e.t.c.). Following the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and associated lockdowns left many businesses, educational institutions and workers looking for relevant technologies and processes that facilitate WFH [51,52]. This trend has led to many IT companies and other video-conferencing providers seeing a significant rise in their stock values. There are several advantages associated with WFH (improved productivity, cost effective, reduction in carbon footprint, less physically and mentally stressful, family

friendly and reduced risk of transmission of the virus), The disadvantages associated with WFH (risk of skiving, risk of distraction by family members and difficulty associated with maintaining a focus [53]. It is anticipated that WFH may likely remain an acceptable norm for many businesses in the evolving Covid-19 pandemic and post pandemic. Many industries where WFH is not a realistic option have struggled with meeting the needs of their customers in the midst of Covid-19 pandemic. The Covid -19 pandemic is a justification for businesses particularly in sub-Saharan Africa to strategically look as building capacity, implementing policies and acquiring relevant technologies that facilitate remote working [54]. It is envisaged that WFH may become a widely acceptable way of working in the aftermath of the current Covid-19 and future pandemics. The Covid-19 outbreak has brought about the need for companies to invest in promoting a corporate culture of flexibility, virtual and remote working that is mutually beneficial to both employers and employees. There is need to digitalize maybe the strategic way forward in working during the ongoing Covid-19 and other future pandemics [55]. Covid-19 has not only brought about a significant change in the way we live our working lives with many left with no other option than to WFH. Businesses in developing countries can learn from the evidenced -based best practice fallout from the Covid-19 pandemic in the West by putting processes in place and acquiring adaptable digital technologies that facilitate WFH.

### Being outdoors and physical activities

The Covid-19 pandemic and the associated lockdowns has forced many children and young people into sedentary lifestyles. Majority of children and young people although physically active were unable to achieve the recommended amount of daily physical activity. There is risk of increase in diseases like obesity, diabetes and heart disease because of suboptimal physical activity. Previous report [55] indicates sedentary lifestyles put people at a higher risk of developing non-communicable chronic illnesses such as diabetes and hypertension. These illnesses which is already a growing concern in West Africa is likely going to be worsened by Covid -19 pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in governments of West African countries implementing disease control measures including school closures, social distancing, self-isolation and quarantine. Children and young people are prone to loneliness from prolonged state of physical isolation from their peers, teachers, extended families, community and religious networks. Loneliness and decreased physical activity are risk factors for worsening mental health during the pandemic [56]. Previous report indicates that loneliness and reduced physical activity can negative affect one's mental health, and therefore need to be closely monitored during a pandemic [57,58]. Involvement in adequate physical activity has been shown to be associated with reduced risk for depression [59]. Physical activity has a significant effect on the mental health and well-being of individuals [60]. It is known to aid psychological well-being. PA is an effective strategy to implement in the face of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic in a bid to reducing the psychological effects and the prevalence of psychiatric disorders [61]. There is need for government across the West Africa region to invest in creating outdoor green spaced, playing areas as well as recreational facilities in local communities both in urban and rural areas for children and young people. Government across the west African region will need to learn form this ongoing pandemic and make strategic decision on preparedness to facilitate better manage the needs; health, physical and spiritual wellbeing as well as the mental health of children in future pandemics. It is no longer news that the Covid-19 pandemic has brought a number of challenges, disruption and uncertainty to many particularly children and young people in developing economies. These challenges have put a significant pressure on children and young people across the West African sub region. It is critical that mental health services particularly for children and young people across the West African region be optimized. It is critical that government across the region put measures in place to ensure that children and young people continue to receive the mental health and wellbeing support that they deserve even in the midst of this and future pandemic.

### Covid-19 related job loses and effect on parents and children wellbeing

The socioeconomic repercussions resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic is dire and are hitting young people particularly in developing countries faster and harder. Young Africans are facing multiple shocks ranging from school closures and disruptions to education, unemployment, income losses and difficulties in finding good quality jobs. Unemployment is a term used to describe a situation where

one is not having a job even though they are ready to work and actively seeking work. The negative effect and of unemployment on the health and wellbeing of an individual is multi-dimensional. It causes stress, financial hardship, insecurity, reduced self-esteem from inability to provide for the family and it is often associated with stigma. These factors can have a negative effect on the health and wellbeing of the unemployed parents as well as their dependent children. The Covid-19 related restrictions and lockdowns brought about economic uncertainty, depression, anxiety, low self-esteem hardship, job loss and unemployment across West African- a subcontinent previously bedevilled by high unemployment rate [62]. When parents lose their jobs, their ability to fend for and meet the needs of their children can be compromised. There is no doubt that the rates of both unemployment and mental health challenges have increased during the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. The high unemployment rate has led to increased crime rate (armed robbery, banditry, kidnapping for ransom, murder for organ harvesting and internet related frauds). There is need for improvement of the social welfare services in developing countries like it is in the developed economies of the world. There is need for collaboration between the Ministries of Education and Social welfare and Finance across the West African subregion to provide palliatives and other relevant support for parents, children and carers during pandemic-related lockdowns. There is need to continue to support these unemployed individuals into work, working assiduously to achieve higher employment rates and economic prosperity.

### Lack of social protection for children and young people

Poverty has been shown to play a role in the vulnerability and mortality among people infected with Covid-19 [63]. Social protection is about reducing poverty, vulnerability and improving the wellbeing of a people. Social Protection has previously been defined as “a range of public (government funded) measures that provides support to all citizens and helps individuals, households, and communities to better manage risks and participate actively in all spheres of life” [64]. The need for social welfare protection of children and young people particularly during a pandemic cannot be over emphasized. There has been advocacy over the last decade for African countries to invest in social protection particularly based on the stark realities that despite the substantial economic growth that has occurred across the continent, poverty and vulnerability continue to persist and the wellbeing of children and young people continue to be negatively impacted [65]. Implementation of a workable and adaptable social protection policy has the potential to curtail the social fragmentation (rich and poor), gross inequality and the urban-rural divide that exist across the sub-region [68]. Government across west Africa under the umbral of ECOWAS must rise up to their responsibilities by advocating, designing and delivering the social protection that vulnerable persons including children, young people and parents need during a challenging period like during a pandemic. Evidence from the Covid-19 pandemic has reinforced the need for Government of West African states to invest significantly on Social Protection measures; social assistance such as provision of resources such as cash (child benefits, tax credits, income support, training and skills acquisition grants, unemployment benefits, disaster insurance and funeral grants) [66] or in-kind (food vouchers, agricultural seeds, land, livestock, fertilizers) for vulnerable individuals or households [67]. These supports can potentially result in gainful employment, higher levels of income growth, livestock accumulation and food security [68]. The high out-of-pocket (OOP) health care expenditures have also had a devastating effect on household income particularly when a family member become infected with the virus [69]. Other social protection areas where government of West African states will need to focus on including contributory social insurance schemes for the working-class people aimed at reducing the risk in the event of a shock. Healthcare cost is high in countries across the sub region is high and tends to be out of pocket. Social insurance scheme can potentially help mitigate risk from illness and pandemics. There is also the need of labour market interventions aimed at providing protection and benefits for the unemployed, disabled and other vulnerable members of society can have their provided by government as a social assistance measure [70].

### Conclusion and Recommendation

The COVID-19 pandemic and its associated implementation of lockdown, school closures, self-isolation, social distancing and quarantine policies has had significant economic and social implications particularly on children, young people and their families across sub-Saharan Africa. There is need to develop a family-centred approach in caring for an infected family member to limit the spread of the disease

to other family members including children and young people. There is also the need of labour market interventions aimed at providing protection and benefits for the unemployed, disabled and other vulnerable members of society. There is need to expand the scope and quality of mental health services particularly for children and young people across the West African region. It is critical that government across the region put measures in place to ensure that children and young people continue to receive the mental health and wellbeing support that they deserve even in the midst of the ongoing Covid-19 and future pandemics. There is an urgent need for government across the region to provide palliatives to help low-income individuals. Relaxation of the lockdown restrictions should be an opportunity for government across West Africa to create more opportunities for Children and young people to engage in physical activity to improve on their physical, mental, psychological health and wellbeing.

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