

Indian Academy of Pediatrics (IAP)



GUIDELINES FOR PARENTS

Psychosocial Concerns during Pandemic

Convener: Preeti M Galagali

Members: Samir H Dalwai, Swati Ghate

Reviewer: Piyush Gupta



10 FAQs on PSYCHOSOCIAL CONCERNS DURING PANDEMIC

1. How will I know that my child is having some psychosocial issues because of the pandemic?
2. Which children are more likely to be affected than others by pandemic?
3. What can I do to keep my preschool child joyfully engaged?
4. How can I make learning enjoyable for my 7-year-old child who is in primary school?
5. How can I ensure that my children follow a healthy lifestyle while schools are closed?
6. How can we reassure children who are worried about their future educational and career plans?
7. My 8-year-old child is always on the mobile phone and gets angry when it is taken away. What should I do?
8. My 18-year-old child is getting suicidal thoughts since a week. Should I take this seriously? How should I respond?
9. Can I adopt a child in my neighborhood who has lost both parents due to COVID-19?
10. My 10-year-old child has become very sad and quiet after the death of his grandfather due to severe COVID-19 disease. What should I do?

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National Co-ordinator

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Psychosocial Concerns during Pandemic

Q1

How will I know that my child is having some psychosocial issues because of the pandemic?

Common behavioral and emotional changes in children during the pandemic are listed in **Table 1**.

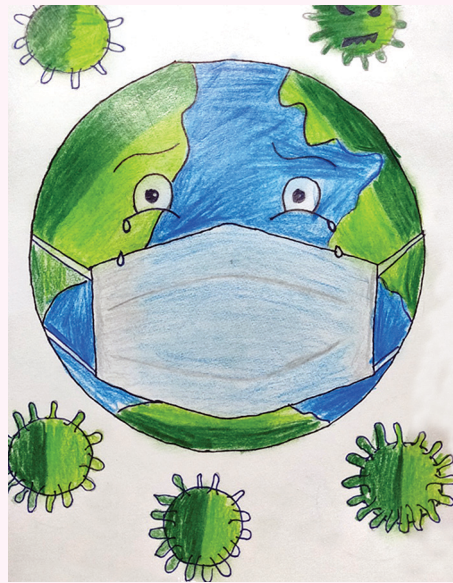
TABLE 1: Common behavioral and emotional changes in children during the pandemic.

Young children (0–5 years)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Difficult to manage”, cranky, clingy, not leaving the parents, irritable, not playful, not cooperative, aggressive • Regressing on their (already achieved) developmental milestones: thumb-sucking, bed-wetting, not doing activities of daily living such as eating, bathing, etc. by themselves • Poor feeding, sleep issues
Older children and adolescents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Refusal to comply, stubbornness • Inability to follow simple day-to-day goals, carelessness, poor grooming, altered eating, and sleeping patterns • Aches or pains for no apparent reasons • Weight gain or loss • Constant bickering, anger, aggression, bullying, self-harm • Sadness, remaining aloof, lack of interest in hobbies • Reduced attention span, academic under-performance • Overuse of gadgets and social media, gaming, watching pornography • Drug abuse

- Children are badly missing their routines, their freedom, and are distressed and frustrated because of the long and uncertain course of the pandemic. Many of them are feeling helpless and hopeless.
- Some children are extremely fearful of catching coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) by themselves or by their near and dear ones.
- They are lonely and bored without friends, schools, and extracurricular activities.
- The young generation is increasingly getting restless, irritated, and gloomy.

When to Consult a Pediatrician?

Excessive weight gain or loss, media overuse, poor interpersonal relationships, falling grades and substance abuse need professional evaluation and support. Recurrent disturbing thoughts and actions (like washing hands too often), too much of a worry, sad mood and irrelevant talks also warrant an expert’s opinion. Any severe and sudden symptoms of emotional disturbances and suicidal thoughts should never ever be neglected.



Psychosocial distress can be seen in children during pandemic.
Courtesy: Yash Pahadiya.

Q2

Which children are more likely to be affected than others by pandemic?

- Children belonging to socioeconomically deprived families, migrant families, families under stress (for example, chronic illnesses in parents and single parent families)
- Children with pre-existing issues such as physical disabilities, chronic diseases (diabetes, asthma, etc.), developmental disorders (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, dyslexia, etc.) or mental disorders (anxiety, depression, etc.)
- Children who have experienced adverse childhood experiences. These include neglect, physical or sexual abuse, child labor, parental loss or discord, and substance abuse in the family.
- Direct COVID-19 experiences such as parents serving as frontline warriors, severe infection in self or in immediate family members.
- Death, hospitalization, quarantine, isolation, discrimination within the family or friends, and loss of family income are likely to leave a lasting impression on tender minds.

Q3

What can I do to keep my preschool child joyfully engaged?

- Start with making a schedule.
- Include the child’s daily personal chores as well as age-appropriate household chores. The child can be a “helper” for simple day-to-day activities such as cooking with “mummy”, watering the plants with “daddy”, playing with siblings, and being rewarded for the same.
- Create “Fun Corners” in the house for reading colorful books, marked for some messy painting, puzzles, blocks, clay, etc.
- Put on some music and dance.
- Stand at the window and talk about what you can see and hear.
- Incorporate “Clean-up Time” in a fun way so things do not get too cluttered; clean up together with family with a song.

Q4

How can I make learning enjoyable for my 7-year-old child who is in primary school?

- You can begin by keeping the academic books away.
- Make models or do some science experiments—strictly under supervision.
- Provide good reading material as per the child's interests. Discuss what the child has read—ask the child to recall in his own words—this helps the children to improve their vocabulary and language skills.
- Use board games such as “monopoly” to encourage learning of money and planning, or chess and “Ludo” for planning and strategy.
- Encourage stamp and coin collections and performing arts, such as dance and drama and music.
- Discuss appropriate current events.
- Have family debates and discussions or *Antakshri* contests.
- Do not miss celebrating birthdays or return of a family member from the hospital together online.
- Academics can be scheduled in the first half of the day when the child is mentally fresh.



Teach coronavirus disease (COVID) appropriate behavior to children.
 Courtesy: Pankaj Kajla.

Q5

How can I ensure that my children follow a healthy lifestyle while schools are closed?

- Make a daily timetable, personalized for each child preferably according to his/her preferences.
- Set rules of good health for the family:
 - 1 hour of physical activity daily
 - No gadgets on bed
 - Junk food only once in a fortnight
 - Use creative ways to make this planning a fun and play rather than a strict rule book.
- Offer choices. Like, for physical activities, let the child select from daily chores, dance, yoga, aerobics, jogging, skipping, etc.
- Encourage older children to use Apps (like Google Fit) to track their physical activities.
- Involve children in cooking and serving activities. Model a healthy lifestyle yourself. Teach lifeskills and healthy stress management strategies.
- *Media and screen use:* Avoid watching anxiety provoking news on the television and help children to recognize fake media messages.

You can see Indian Academy of Pediatrics (IAP) guidelines on school reopening, remote learning and curriculum in and after the COVID-19; online available at: <https://indianpediatrics.net/dec2020/dec-1153-1165.htm>. IAP parenting guidelines on screentime can be also viewed at: <https://iapindia.org/pdf/Screentime-Guidelines-for-Parents-Ch-005.pdf>.
- Help your children to connect with friends, teachers, and extended family members by permitting them to use tele- and videoconferencing digital platforms in a controlled manner.
- Adolescents could organize online meetings with their loved ones to share experiences, play games, watch movies and TV shows, do fitness, study or cooking sessions, express gratitude, compose music, short films, dance recitals, and organize literary and art programs.



Encourage children to follow a “healthy lifestyle” during the “lockdown”.

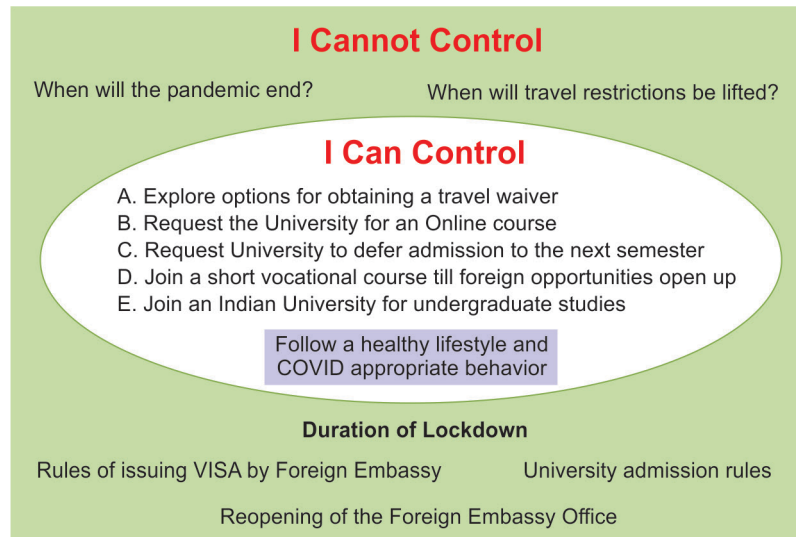
Courtesy: Bahulika Sarkar.

Q6

How can we reassure children who are worried about their future educational and career plans?

- Remain calm and role model living “life in the moment”.
- Instill hope by stating that the uncertainty is temporary.
- Empathize and give unconditional love and support.
- Listen to children’s concerns patiently and ask them to focus on things that are under their control and not to worry about those that are out of their control.
- Encourage to look for multiple solutions to their problems.
- Assist in listing the most suitable solutions after analyzing the pros and cons of each.
- Finally, help to formulate short-term and long-term flexible plans according to feasibility and aspirations of the child.

For example, parents of a disappointed 18 years old child who had to drop plans of going abroad for undergraduate studies helped the teen to make an informed decision through this diagram.



After critical evaluation, the teenager prioritized the solutions as A to E, and began to implement them in succession to test their feasibility. In this way, the parents could help the teenager effectively in handling anxiety regarding future education.

Q7

My 8-year-old child is always on the mobile phone and gets angry when it is taken away. What should I do?

Mobile phone use has increased during the pandemic as children often feel lonely and bored at home. They get upset when mobile is taken away because it is their main source of enjoyment and play. To prevent its excessive use, parents can do the following:

- Make a daily schedule, allocating time for family activities, play, recreation, meals, hobbies, sleep, study, online schooling, household errands, and media usage.
- Formulate rules for usage, e.g., encourage viewing educational programs and avoid violent games, restrict continuous use of devices beyond 20–30 minutes.
- Be mindful about personal phone usage and join the child in fun-filled activities such as playing board games, reading story and comic books, sharing experiences, gardening, cooking, dancing, singing, drawing, and painting.
- Co-view media with the child to understand their reasons for using it. For example, children may use the mobile to learn new hobbies or to escape from abusive family interactions. Learning via media could be encouraged under parental monitoring while forming positive relationships at home in the latter case, could reduce mobile usage.

Q8

My 18-year-old child is getting suicidal thoughts since a week. Should I take this seriously? How should I respond?

Suicidal thoughts need to be taken very seriously and never be neglected. Suicidality is a cry for help from a person who has exhausted all his coping mechanisms. There is a real threat to life.

Mental first aid should be given by parents and the child should be taken to a psychiatrist without any hesitation or delay.

- You should respond to the situation with utmost calm and care.
- Do not panic, get angry or ridicule him. Do not minimize his worries and frustrations.
- Tell him that you are very concerned for him.
- Explain to him that when people are under immense stress, they sometimes feel like ending their lives. Healthy-coping strategies and timely professional help are the ways to come out of such troubling situations.
- Make a safety plan. Write down what triggers the suicidal thoughts, what coping strategies (relaxation techniques, talking to someone, writing a diary, prayers, etc.) could be used and whom to contact in such a case (professional, parent).
- Ask him if he has any concrete plans of committing suicide. If so, take an assurance from him that he will not go ahead with the same. Try to distract him and keep him involved in activities of his interest till he gets professional help.
- Keep away all household means of suicide such as weapons, knives, medicines, ropes, volatile liquids such as acids, etc. Be watchful and never leave him alone.
- Maintain positivity by a supportive and caring environment.

Q9

Can I adopt a child in my neighborhood who has lost both parents due to COVID-19?

You can adopt a child legally by registering with the Child Adoption Resource Authority (CARA). Details regarding adoption procedure are available at: <http://cara.nic.in>. Illegal adoption can amount to child trafficking and is punishable under the law. If an orphaned child is found alone, a report should be made to the Childline (Telephone number: 1098) or the District Child Welfare Committee or the District Child Protection Unit or the Police for immediate placement in a childcare institution.

Q10

My 10-year-old child has become very sad and quiet after the death of his grandfather due to severe COVID-19 disease. What should I do?

Young children in distress usually find it difficult to express grief and emotions on the death of a loved one. They sometimes blame themselves and their “bad” behavior for the death. They may show behavioral changes in the form of social withdrawal, irritability, anger, and loss of appetite and sleep. Caregivers could help the children by doing the following:

- Be calm, patient, sensitive, and empathetic.
- Share age-appropriate information regarding health, sickness, and death and do not give false assurances. For example, it can be said, “People are healthy when they can eat, drink, sleep, ‘small illnesses’ can be cured by taking medicines at home, ‘big/serious illnesses’ require admission to the hospital and sometimes even after receiving the best care by doctors and nurses, the heart, brain and lungs stop functioning and people die. This is what happened with grandfather. His memory will always stay with us in our hearts”.
- Allow children to be a part of the family memorial ceremonies and motivate them to return to their daily routine activities at the earliest.
- Reassure them about the love and support of the family members and not to blame themselves for the death.
- Allow them to talk about the dead family members, express grief, cherish the happy times spent with them, and remember their inspiring qualities.
- Encourage them to make a photograph collection or draw the good times spent with the deceased or plant a tree in their memory.