

# Indian Children during the Second Wave: Challenges of the Adaptive Measures

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## Abstract

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has been highly devastating for children. They suffered not only in terms of facing physical health issues but also lack balance in maintaining overall wellbeing. The loss faced by children and adolescents during this crucial stage of life where learning and growth shape future life, the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic cannot be overlooked even if the pandemic is over. The present paper discusses the severely disrupted areas of a child's world during the second wave of the pandemic to highlight the fact that even a small hurdle in the way of ensuring optimal development could prove immensely disturbing for a dependent child, still in the process of exploring, learning about the environment and self, and how the children have adapted to these unforeseen challenges. The findings of the study revealed that though the impact of the pandemic could be direct or indirect, small-scale or extensive, the immediate need to derive eclectic solutions for the best interests of the children must be based on multi-dimensional approach.

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**Keywords:** Children, second wave, COVID-19 pandemic, adolescents, educational barriers, health, wellbeing, abuse.

## Introduction

In India, young children and adolescents tested COVID positive during the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. Though they were less vulnerable to the infection during the first year of the pandemic, many positive cases were registered with mild symptoms and a low mortality rate from April 2021 onwards (*More Children Infected in Second Wave, but No Need for Panic: Experts*, 2021; Sharma et al., 2021). The term 'parallel pandemic' has been explained as a product of the COVID-19 pandemic. It enlightens that a range of psychosocial problems related to family, mental health, and safety issues of children and adolescents are consequences of the deprived healthy psychosocial environment during the pandemic leading to severe issues impacting their later life (Imran Id et al., 2022). The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic such as health issues, fear of the disease, loss of a family member, restriction on travelling, home quarantine, online education, stress, lack of physical activity, disrupted lifestyle combined with a history of psychological condition, abuse, violence, low-income background could impact the wellbeing of the children and adolescents significantly (Daniunaite et al., 2021; Haleem et al., 2020).

Children and adolescents presented a range of coping strategies during the pandemic such as humour, wishful thinking, positive emotion regulation, and seeking instrumental social support (Dąbkowska et al., 2021). When it comes to adaptability to a given environmental change, numerous factors are responsible

namely, age, sex, education, socio-economic status, values, health, social environment, cognition, and so on. Ensuring survival and protection of children were highly concerning issues as cases of children losing parents to COVID-19 mounted during the second wave, leaving them orphaned or dependent on a single parent unable to look after their children psychologically and financially, and making them more vulnerable to illegal adoption strategies (Haq, 2021). Almost every part of children's world has been disrupted by the pandemic directly or indirectly exacerbating the cases of violated child rights due to increased vulnerabilities and widened inequalities, thus creating an increased gap between advantaged and disadvantaged children or privileged or unprivileged children (*Combatting COVID-19's Effect on Children*, 2020).

Thus, the literature emphasises the importance to study the impact of the pandemic in its second year on the various aspects of children's life- health and wellbeing, relationships, lifestyle, behavioural changes, social skills, educational barriers, violence, abuse, and other threats to child rights. As children and adolescents were deeply affected by the consequences of the second wave and employed various adaptive strategies in response, the paper attempts to highlight the disruptions produced by the pandemic in order to understand the critically affected domains to strengthen the guidelines for ensuring the best interests of the children in the future.

### Method

The present paper explores the impact of the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic on the various inter-related domains of child development highlighting the crucial issues and children's adaptation to the environmental changes that took place during the pandemic. An integrated review of literature sources was done using four research databases- PubMed, Google Scholar, Science Direct, and JSTOR to identify relevant research papers for further reading. Google search was also used to find case studies and news articles to form a comprehensive understanding of the impact of the second wave of the pandemic on various factors contributing to child development. A 'child' as defined by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) refers to human beings under the age of 18 years. So, the study also presents the critical issues faced by adolescents that could result in life-long consequences.

### Findings & Discussion

The second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic possessed a major threat to children's protection, education, health, and well-being. The functioning of organisations working for the welfare of children also faced the greatest challenges to protect child rights in India as the childcare helplines have received even more calls than in the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic as reported by the CEO of Save the Children in India (*Recent COVID Spike in India Further Risks Children's Education and Mental Health*, 2021). The following aspects of children's life are discussed in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic to understand disruptions and overall impact.

- **Health, well-being and sleep**

In India, a large number of children and adolescents contracted novel coronavirus during the second wave of the pandemic, though mild symptoms were experienced the magnitude of getting infected was relatively larger than in the first year of the pandemic (*Covid-19 Second Wave and Children: What Are the Symptoms, What Should Parents Do - Coronavirus Outbreak News*, 2021). The concern for children's well-being was further increased due to the absence of vaccines, already collapsing healthcare facilities, increased fear, dependence on infected adult caregivers, and loss of caregivers. Children entering puberty are also more vulnerable to psychological problems like anxiety, stress, and risky behaviours due to prolonged isolation amid the COVID-19 pandemic (WHO et al., 2020). Children and adolescents have experienced significant changes in circadian rhythm and sleep as revealed in a study conducted before and during the COVID-19 pandemic that was found to be associated with high risks of mental health issues during the pandemic (Zhao et al., 2022). Pre-existing sleep problems and feelings of anxiety, sadness, and loneliness further increase the vulnerability to psychological distress and stressors during the pandemic (Kiss et al., 2022). Sleep disturbance due to increased screen time among children had majorly impacted emotional health, immune response, and risk of cardio-metabolic diseases (Scapatucci et al., 2022). It was also

reported that stress due to the COVID-19 situation has resulted in a high linkage between child maltreatment and sleep problems among boys (Zhang et al., 2022).

- **Lifestyle and behaviours**

Children and adolescents were less likely to be affected by the pandemic directly, though the collateral impact could not be escaped. They not only indulged in sedentary behaviours but the inactive lifestyle also made them vulnerable to contracting infections and worsening health conditions. Physical activity and outdoor play have a significant role in preventing depression symptoms among children. Limited and restricted outdoor activities have been correlated with the decline in cardiorespiratory health and increased cases of both underweight and overweight in children. The term ‘Covibesity’ refers to the increased obesity rates during the lockdown period due to poor eating habits, and an unbalanced diet (Scapatucci et al., 2022).

- **Social skills and relationships**

The pandemic-induced disruptions created an isolated and inactive lifestyle obstructing children to learn and interact with their surroundings. Limited social interaction created a barrier to learning socially-appropriate behaviour and skills. Inability to meet the social needs affected the cognition and emotional health of children posing a threat to mental health (Ravi & Chakravarthy, 2021). Both positive and negative effects on child-parent relationships have been reported. A number of conflicts between the children and parents over the rules of controlling activities, anger issues, boredom, and communication problems were stated as a result of increased time spent at home. On the other hand, working parents were able to share more time with their children, and engaged in many educational and play activities leading to positive communication and the development of supportive behaviour (Öngören, 2021). Many longitudinal studies observed that there was little change or only improvements in the quality of relationships among adolescents and their families, and neither the disruptions in the daily routine have created an imbalance in the equilibrium in the families (Bülow et al., 2020; Martin-Storey et al., 2021).

- **Violence, abuse and threat to child rights**

Vulnerable children in India were already affected by multiple deprivations in meeting all the basic necessities to ensure survival, protection, and development. A survey conducted on 416 girls (11-18 years) in Delhi, Haryana, Jharkhand, Uttarakhand, Odisha, and Chattisgarh, by a non-profit organisation Protsahan, along with its partner organisations Deepalaya, Martha Farrell Foundation, and the Shades of Happiness Foundation revealed that 17% children reported of being aware of a child marriage taking place in neighbourhood while denying to give details, 19% children were engaged in labour (*majdoori*) to help parents earn during the pandemic, while 41 children lost their fathers to the pandemic, they were subjected to increased vulnerabilities in terms of survival, safety and often end up into forced begging (Khaitan, 2021a). Children were also victims of socio-economic measures taken during the pandemic as they fall prey to physical, sexual, and even mental abuse by family members. Facing hunger, forced marriages, domestic violence accompanied by feelings of loneliness, restlessness, and claustrophobia were reported during the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic (Mehra, 2021). Being an easy target of venting out frustration by the parents and grandparents, increased exposure to the abuser amid the pandemic could be worse if children and adolescents are already victims of violence as studies by the People’s Organisation for Rural Development (PORD), a CRY partner and Protsahan revealed that children are routinely beaten up, denied justice or even fair treatment if the sexual abuse is incest (Khaitan, 2021b; World Health Organisation, 2020). All these studies not only question the child protection framework of the country but open the eyes of the various stakeholders to the efficiency of monetary and protection-focused schemes developed for the best interests of the children (Chakraborty, 2021).

- **Barriers to education**

The education crisis created due to the COVID-19 pandemic has affected 250 million children across India as a consequence of the closure of educational institutions which has resulted in ‘regression in learning’ majorly targeting the poor population and girls specifically as a result of existing socio-economic disparity in the society. The need to attain foundational literacy and numeracy for children has become the most important concern post the COVID-19 pandemic as stressed by National Education Policy, 2020 (Kalra & Jolad, 2021). The pandemic has only widened the disparity in terms of accessing education between the children who are privileged to afford resources and continue their education and less privileged who had to face financial crises in families, are unable to afford resources like smartphones and laptops, and struggle to continue education. It was found that drop-out rates of girls were more than boys, and this has often become an excuse for girls being forced into marriages before turning 18, for a conservative society this only can ‘control’ their mobility and provide a sense of responsibility, and identity resulting in increased child marriages during the pandemic (Murali & Maiorano, 2021). A case study on the impact of the COVID-19 on the Indian education sector revealed that education of children with disabilities, children of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, and children in remote areas have been severely affected that the problems like limited or no access to education, dropping out of schools, difficulty in re-joining schools during the pandemic can result in an inability to continue education even after the pandemic is over (United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) & United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), 2021).

### **Conclusion**

The findings of the study emphasized that the complex challenges posed by the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic require an eclectic approach to understanding and resolving the problem for ensuring ‘the best interests of the children’ as the only priority. The impact on the inter-linked and inter-related domains of development due to loss of a caregiver, high sense of dependence, lifestyle and behavioural problems, health issues, financial problems in the family, familial conflicts, inaccessible education, and being a victim to various forms of violence and abuse could be highly traumatic for a child’s development. The second year of the COVID-19 pandemic intensified vulnerabilities, and dependence on adults, and posed major threats to ensuring child rights in India. However, forming child rights as the basic guidelines for planning further actions towards the welfare of the children along with cultural and child-specific approaches could turn the situation into an opportunity to protect the Indian children through accessible, appropriate, and timely measures.

### **Author contribution**

Conceptualisations, methodology and analysis by KP and WV; Writing-original draft preparation by KP; Writing-review and editing by WV and GR; Project administration by WV. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

### **Ethical considerations**

Ethical issues including plagiarism, data fabrication and/or falsification, have been completely observed by the authors.

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