

Addressing the Unspoken Concerns Surrounding the Pediatric Population during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Dear Editor

With great interest, we read the press release of JIPMER on "Corona infection among children—Information for parents and public"; w.r.t No.JIP/PRO/NEWS/014/2021-22, contributed by Dr Adhisivam B, Professor and Head, Department of Neonatology, JIPMER, Puducherry dated June 18, 2021. The document has highlighted crisp points that will surely prevent any panic among the public. It is the need of the hour as it dispels the various rumours that have been circulating regarding the pandemic. Additionally, we would like to point out some issues surrounding the pediatric age group with respect to this pandemic and some recommendations for the same.

Currently, a surge in infection has been noted among those below the age of 18 years. Even when the classes are conducted online, the infection can spread to the children through family members who commute to and fro from home, as well as from their improper safety precautions while playing outside.¹ Prior to the pandemic, the children used to spend time outdoors playing with their friends. But now, the parents are apprehensive to allow their children to play outside due to fear of COVID-19 infection. This supposed house arrest will take a toll on their mental health and lead to a vicious cycle of lack of enthusiasm, over-eating due to boredom, compensating outdoor playtime with binge watching of television shows. This attitude may not have immediate complications, but the children will surely present to hospitals with problems including but not limited to visual disturbances, depression and obesity in near future.

It is not far-fetched to say that poor mental health will have a negative impact on their grades. Besides, the conduct of online classes and exams comes with its own set of technical challenges that may be exhausting for the children. The parents may not be able to help their wards with such issues in their busy schedules. Unlike in classroom teaching, the teachers cannot mentor and guide the children individually. Hence, the school teachers must take care to not overburden the children with excess assignments or arduous instructions. The school authorities can liaison with medical colleges and hospitals. Periodic interactive online webinar sessions can be arranged with experts to sensitize the children and parents about the precautions and the coping strategies to be followed not only during COVID-19 but also in the post-pandemic era.

In case a child presents to hospitals with respiratory distress, the hospitals must have properly equipped pediatric ICUs. The staff, postgraduates and interns posted there must have received adequate training on pediatric emergency care. The Indian government must ensure that there is sufficient production and availability of medical supplies necessary for the pediatric population.

As the children are unaccustomed to the hospital's COVID-19 prevention practices, they may become anxious. Hence, hospitals need to make arrangements for one attendee (parent or

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guardian) to be with them at all times with proper safety measures. We must ensure that the attendee is vaccinated against COVID-19. Testing and treatment must be performed for the attendee when the necessity arises. Adopting a child-friendly environment with toys and entertainment is a good strategy to alleviate the children's anxiety. We can incorporate the US model of training and appointing child life specialists. These specialists will aim to reduce the stressful situations of children in healthcare settings and help them cope through playful methods.²

The Subject Expert Committee (SEC) on COVID-19 has recommended vaccine trials on children aged between 2 and 18 years.³ But it is uncertain as to when we may have an effective vaccine for the under 18 population. Until then, the healthcare system must develop its infrastructure to handle any challenges that may come in the way of keeping our children safe.

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