

Effects of COVID-19

on the *Health* and *Well-Being* of *Young Children* and their *Caregivers*

Key Issues and Recommendations

Introduction and Rationale

For the last two years, COVID-19 has had a devastating impact on vulnerable groups within cities, especially young children¹ and their caregivers and various inequalities and deprivations have been exposed as a result of disproportionate management mechanisms due to the sudden pandemic crisis within cities (*World Bank, 2021*).

Young children (0-6 years) around the world are not getting healthcare, nutrition, play and love they need to thrive. Caregivers often face stress from income loss and social isolation. Locked down children are often missing outdoor play and interaction with others. Services from vaccinations to home visits have been interrupted during the COVID-19. The effects on young children and their development will last for years.

Previous epidemic episodes apart from COVID-19 show that steps taken to control the outbreak, notably quarantine measures and school closures, especially when prolonged, can reduce children's mental wellbeing.² The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)

countries came out with a short-term policy³ focused on minimising the psychological and physical damage on young children. This was to provide guidance to national governments on actions for improving access of young children to necessary services which shape individual outcomes during childhood (*specifically the formative 0-3 years*).

According to the survey⁴ of December 2021 by NIUA under the ITCN⁵ capacity building programme, pandemic-induced restrictions have impacted the overall health and well-being of young children (0-6 years), as opined by 97% of the 68 respondents. The restrictions on reduced outdoor activities and the resultant increase in screen time is associated with heightened sedentary behaviour amongst young children. This could have adverse physical and mental health outcomes such as loss of muscular and cardio-respiratory fitness, weight gain, psychosocial problems, poor academic achievements and ophthalmic issues (*Observer Research Foundation, 2021*).



¹ Infant, Toddler and Young Children: Child Population in regard to Census of India is described as population of children in the age-group 0-6 years. They are further classified as Infants in the age group of 0-1 year, Toddlers 1-3 years and Young Children 3-6 years <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/childdevelopment/positiveparenting/toddlers.html>

² <https://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/combating-covid-19-s-effect-on-children-2e1f3b2f/> A model that could be replicated in Indian cities as well.

³ https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/view/?ref=132_132643-m91j2scsyh&title=Combating-COVID-19-s-effect-on-children

⁴ A questionnaire was floated to urban practitioners and general audience on their perception of ITC challenges faced during COVID. The analysis is based on a sample size of 68 respondents.

⁵ Infant, Toddler and Caregiver-friendly Neighbourhood (ITCN) Capacity Building Programme.

Young children are highly susceptible to mental health issues because of their inability to fully comprehend the situation and communicate their feelings to adults.⁶ In addition, the heightened disruption of outdoor activities for young children affects them psychologically, in turn impacting their perceptions of the “normal” during early years (UNICEF, 2020). For instance, depriving them of early schooling opportunities, socialisation and physical activities in public and play areas could result in altered ideas of interactions. At a household level, the loss of employment, reduced access to markets, and the fraying of social bonds due to continuing social distancing increased potential disruption of ECD (evidence based response to ECD during COVID-19 crisis, 2021)

The pandemic has provided a different narrative on disruptions in the young children’ continuous access to public facilities and services adding to their vulnerability in city spaces. In the survey⁷ under the ITCN⁸ capacity building programme to identify the essential services which have become difficult to access for young children and their caregivers due to the COVID19, 12% of the respondents mentioned public transportation services, 42% health facilities and 46% open areas and play spaces. This clearly shows that young children are most at risk with the pandemic disrupting essential early childhood care and support services. Also, resulting from suspensions in transportation systems, access to clinics, pre-primary schools, day care centers, anganwadis, social workers, water, sanitation and child protection services were affected which was harmful to the Infant, Toddler and Caregiver (ITCs)’ health and well-being (UNICEF, 2020). The emphasis on care and protection for young children has been emphasised by the Ministry of Women and Child Development, Government of India for children adversely impacted by COVID-19 while following the protocol as mandated under the JJ Act, 2015.⁹ The act consolidates and amends the law related to children alleged and found to be in conflict with the law and children in need of care and protection by fulfilling their basic necessities through proper care and nourishment, protection, treatment, social integration, trainings and also by adopting a child-friendly approach.

People have started acknowledging the importance of childcare and development. Urban residents are finding newer forms of positive responsive caregiving and family time. Urban residents have been able to breathe in cleaner and greener spaces especially with lesser vehicular exhaustions on the streets. Communities are stepping up to support and care for each other.

The ITCN programme aims to help cities to realign development policies and programmes to the specific needs of young children, in the age group 0 – 6 years, and their caregivers adopting the Urban95¹⁰ principles. The guiding philosophy is that health and well-being of young children reflect the well-being and health of society. An Infant, Toddler and Caregiver (ITC)-friendly city ensures an enabling urban environment that is healthy, safe and playful for young children, develops their faculties, and fosters their love for community and nature.

The ITCN Capacity Building Programme aims to handhold city stakeholders in neighbourhood planning of essential early childhood services and play facilities which is required to make cities ITC friendly. As a way forward, planning and design concepts such as 15-minute neighbourhood are required to improve city scale planning of essential services including early childhood development services. Additionally, World Health Organization recommends 9 square meter of public spaces per capita in cities, which are functional, safe and accessible to qualify as sustainable and healthy (World Health Organization 2021). COVID-19 demonstrated the need to set targets for social distancing with a surge in cases. In addition, it becomes important to re-think spaces and service provision norms at neighbourhood scales to make cities more resilient to any future risks or crises of a global magnitude. (Wray and Gilliland, 2020)

Issues and Concerns

- Public health programmes for maternal and child health services were either paused or reduced in scale due to COVID-19. There has been a reduction in immunization services during the pandemic. As per a study conducted in one of the districts in Uttar Pradesh, more than 20% decrease was observed in child vaccination except for BCG. (*Impact of COVID-19 pandemic on maternal and child health services in Uttar Pradesh, India, January 2021*).¹¹
- The nutritional intake of infants has been adversely affected by the fall in household income level as a result of COVID-induced economic slowdown, especially for low-income families.

⁶ Based on a study carried out titled “The psychological impact of quarantine and how to reduce it: rapid review of the evidence” comparing post-traumatic stress symptoms in parents and children quarantined with those not quarantined found that the mean post-traumatic stress scores were four times higher in children who had been quarantined than in those who were not quarantined. <https://bernardvanleer.org/news/three-briefs-on-how-leaders-can-support-babies-toddlers-and-the-people-who-care-for-them/>

⁷ A questionnaire was floated to urban practitioners and general audience on their perception of ITC challenges faced during COVID-19. The analysis is based on a sample size of 51 respondents.

⁸ <https://smartnet.niua.org/sites/default/files/resources/1-itcn-policy-framework.pdf>

⁹ <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1724126>

¹⁰ <https://bernardvanleer.org/solutions/urban95/>

¹¹ Anil K Singh, Pankaj K. Jain, Naresh P. Singh, Sandeep Kumar, Prashant K. Bajpai, Soni Singh, Mohan Jha “Impact of COVID-19 pandemic on maternal and child health services in Uttar Pradesh, India, January 2021”

Nurturing care is the set of conditions that provide for children's health, nutrition, security and safety, responsive caregiving and opportunities for early learning. Nurturing children means keeping them safe, healthy and well nourished, paying attention and responding to their needs and interests, encouraging them to explore their environment and interact with caregivers and others.

Nurturing care is not only important for promoting young children's development, it also protects them from the worst effects of adversity by lowering their stress levels and encouraging emotional and cognitive coping mechanisms.

- Children often face psychological distress during the on-going pandemic. High stress in families due to social isolation, economic hardship and loss of livelihood has increased the risks of domestic violence and child abuse, including violence on young children. Importantly, school closures and movement restrictions add stress and anxiety due to lack of access to any physical play areas. (Napier-Raman S, et al. *BMJ Paediatrics Open*, 2021)
- Closures of Early Childhood Education (ECE) centres such as AWCs, Balwadis and Creches have severely disrupted early learning for children (3 to 6 years of age) and has deprived children of cognitive stimulation and socio-emotional development, which fundamentally support their future learning and development. Governments across the country have tried to reach out to the children through different distance measures to keep the learning going (evidence-based response to ECD during the COVID-19 crisis, 2021).

Recommendations

- Improve access to long-term child-centric services, in particular the mental health and psycho-social services and community-based child protection programmes.
- Care support for children with disabilities, which has been disrupted due to the pandemic, needs to be strengthened. Although some state departments have provided mental health facilities for young children and adolescents during the pandemic, the efforts have been sporadic. Some states have also started outreach mechanisms, such as Kerala which launched 'Kutty Desk' a student-run helpline as part of a larger programme called 'Our Responsibility to Children' (ORC). Over 200 children were selected and trained to run the programme.
- Life-saving maternal, new-born and child health services, and routine vaccinations services must be maintained. Measures should be taken to reduce the families' apprehensions of getting exposed to the infection while availing care at a public health facility and reinvigorating the demand for routine care among the general public. Children should be kept healthy and well-nourished by providing support services. Continuous facilities for healthcare, nutrition, social protection, early years' health, child services should be continued.
- Integrate research and systematize cross-disciplinary investigations to assess the impact of the pandemic-induced disruptions on physical movement and activity in young children's overall development.
- There is the need to focus on spatial planning for infants and toddler's health and well-being. City development should focus on tracking and investigating long-term health and well-being trajectories of the young population as impacted by the pandemic. "Future analyses should explore the interplay between actions and theories in evaluating the outcomes for social and health equity that occur from these policy and program decisions." (Wray and Gilliland, 2020).
- Make use of the wealth of new data being generated by the crisis and invest in data systems to better target vulnerable families with young children in future pandemics and disasters.
- Strengthen focus on all the components of nurturing is required. While planning for young children, it is important to consider all the aspects that impact their development and learning. It includes all the components as highlighted in the nurturing care framework - nutrition and health, responsive caregiving and opportunities for early learning.

¹². <https://nurturing-care.org/>

¹³. The purpose of the Knowledge Needs Assessment Study carried out under the ITCN Capacity Building Programme was to assess the understanding of the ULB officials on spatial planning parameters and existing urban environment needs of young children and their caregivers at the city and, more importantly, at neighbourhood level and how it is currently being implemented. This was one of the main objectives of the study but not restricted to it.

- Spatial accessibility is one of the key enablers for young children in their development years. The planning and design provisions must catalyse efficient and seamless transit of young children with their caregivers to services and facilities during their foundational years. There is need for playful environment for early stimulation of young children for their holistic development.
- The Knowledge Needs Assessment Report¹³ evaluated the existing database being used to map and visualise the integration of ITCs within programmes. The study revealed COVID-19 disrupted city-level database development and practices. There is the need to equip ULB officials with data mapping, visualization and analytical skills to better understand and correlate impacts of the urban environment on the overall development of ITC through comprehensive training and capacity building.
- The concept of integrating children as key urban stakeholders is relatively new and emerging. The recent government schemes drive the efforts with flagship programmes such as Smart Cities Mission and the Atal Mission for Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation (AMRUT). Fostering the participation of caregivers of young children in city planning and design process strengthens Indian cities to become age-inclusive especially for young children through safe, resilient infrastructure and policies. Support families and households with young children with time and money (i.e. through paid care leave, flexible working and direct cash transfers).

Conclusion

In the COVID era, the pandemic has revealed the harsh realities faced by most vulnerable groups such as young children. The pandemic has additionally shown how various city stakeholders by continuous action can improve

resilience of young children to thrive. It also demonstrates the value spaces, facilities and services have in promoting for young children's health, services and well-being.

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For any queries or suggestions write to us on itcn-cb@niua.org

National Institute of Urban Affairs

1st Floor, Core 4B, India Habitat Centre, Lodhi Road, New Delhi - 110003, INDIA
Phone: (+91 11) 24617517, 24617543, 24617595 ; Fax: (+91 11) 24617513
Website: www.niua.in



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