

Caring for Children: Responding to Vulnerabilities

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The Centre for Publishing is committed to initiating discussion on current issues, documenting knowledge generated through these discussions and engaging students to participate in these sessions to expand their horizon of learning beyond the classrooms. Five experts with expertise in different areas and disciplinary training presented their thoughts on the topic of “Caring for Children: Responding to Vulnerabilities” on July 30, 2021. While many students and faculty attended the session, six students from different disciplines and programs volunteered to share their thoughts on the presentations by writing reflexive essays³.

These narratives, provoked by the experts’ presentations, provide very interesting insights into the selective ways in which each student has connected with the issues raised by the speakers in the panel. Each blog identifies specific aspects of the discussion and appears to construct meaning of the deliberations through the lenses of their respective academic disciplines, course readings, internships and lived experiences during the crisis. Thus they not only reflect the students’ own sensibilities and priorities but also add further value to the presentations made by offering multiple perspectives on the issues raised.

While each reflexive essay is thought provoking and a standalone piece in its own right, there are certain common themes that emerge from these narratives which contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the issues raised. A few essays raise the issue of vulnerability and ‘invisibility’ of young children, who have no voice and have had to face multiple challenges during the unprecedented Covid 19 pandemic. Many of these challenges have been due to repercussions of the distressing contexts of their parents; while some of these contexts have been widely discussed, the impact on children has not been considered significant enough to be part of the mainstream discussions.

This concern is voiced in many blogs but is especially evident in the first three narratives which highlight the challenges related to the absence of opportunities for play and socialisation, loss of academic learning, impact on health and nutritional status. Alongside, the trauma of

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experiencing death in the family children have lived through changes in family structure and socialization, and many have been orphaned. An important learning from these reflections is that addressing children's needs at any given time, but particularly in adverse situations such as these, cannot be just limited to a government hand out of a financial grant, but needs to be more comprehensive and holistic to scaffold and enable each child's appropriate rehabilitation and be sensitive to their individual needs.

Some students grapple with the evident emergence of a "new normal" with conventional notions of child, childhood, learning and education getting disrupted and articulate the need to re-examine and re-imagine these in the context of the experiences of the response to the crisis in the last twenty months. One of the writers raises a very fundamental issue in the context of the experience during the Covid phase of 'online learning' by asking 'can education be limited to academic learning?'

In another set of blogs, students have explored the child rights' perspective, particularly focusing on learning and play and the tendency in the system to accept the inherent 'resilience' of childhood as a defence for neglect of children's developmental and social needs. Some of the writers have offered constructive suggestions for improving preparation for such eventualities in the future through developing resources for alternative modes of learning in a hybrid situation, empowering the community to address children's needs and training teachers and other personnel to respond adequately to the demands of the situation. While some have explored the issue as a whole, others have taken a deep dive and explored specific topics from a multidisciplinary frame raising issues such as children's right to play, engagement of the community in decisions regarding adoption, ensuring availability of counsellors for addressing children's socio emotional, mental health needs and all these supported by government's role in instituting social and economic safeguards to create a robust safety nets to mitigate the impact of any crisis.

The presentations have clearly motivated students to explore the notion of the child, childhood and challenges of social inequity and multiple childhoods. They have recognized the opportunity to further research on survival, development and learning in crisis situations, to further contribute to the debates and discourse to arrive at a more nuanced understanding of childhood in various contexts. More specifically, students have reflected on children living in poverty, on child labour, children with disabilities, children from tribal communities, many or all of whom have been affected disproportionately. In the process, while addressing the differential effects of the crisis, they have also tried to explore issues of power, inequity and marginality. These

reflections have articulated how the crisis affected children at a critical age, the idea of “lost childhood” and the long term ramifications of this loss as a serious concern. Finally, despite the despondency, they have also captured the messages of hope and the urgent need to use the context of the crisis to further research, theorize and also reconstruct systems, communities and knowledge as we attempt to move forward to ensure children get a wholesome childhood.

A Tragedy with an Opportunity

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The last two years are living proof of the devastating effects of the Covid-19 induced pandemic in India as well as the whole world. While the series is titled 'Beyond Crisis: Ways of Reconstructing Lives', as Professor RachnaJohri mentioned, it is important to understand and recognise that the pandemic and the problems are not yet over. They are very much a part of the present reality and require immediate attention. The experience of the pandemic has been different for everyone. Children and adolescents are often neglected on the pretext that they are not directly or immediately affected by the disease. However, it is important to consider the issue in the context of nationwide economic and social crisis. Recent research also indicates that their sensitive and impressionable minds are considerably affected by everything that is happening around them.

Challenges

The multidimensional effect of the pandemic was evident from the presentations. Dr. Bhargava brought forward a number of issues that continue to shape and change family life and kinship relations during this global health crisis. *(Sudden) Loss of jobs, death in family, forced but essential social confinement, lack of physical interaction etc. have all had detrimental consequences on the emotional, physical and mental well-being of both parents and their children.* For some, the social distancing measures and the resultant work from home regime has brought family members closer together due to the increase in time spent at home. However, for many, the situation has not been so positive. Due to countrywide shutdown, loss of livelihood and a decrease in family income, many families have been struggling to make ends meet. Apart from financial difficulties, instances of domestic violence, sexual violence, verbal as well as physical abuse, child labour, and child marriage has increased considerably.

The state of the family directly affects the state of the child/children. As primary agents of socialisation, families have a strong on young children. Due to the restrictions imposed by the lockdowns, the complete shut-down of educational institutions and public spaces, socialisation of children was limited to their families and some online interactions. These gaps may lead to a decline in opportunities for early learning, language development and may contribute to lifestyle disorders. *Children living in economically weak, abusive, less interactive families are more vulnerable to*

emotional, physical and mental problems. A recent study also linked the increased stress and work pressure among women in nuclear families to adverse effects on children and their relationships with their parents.

Death is a complicated and painful experience for any family. *Parental loss can have devastating effects on children leading to many mental health issues such as PTSD, depression, anxiety, separation issues, toxic stress etc.* It also interferes with a child's education, cognitive development and ability to form relationships with others. The COVID-19 pandemic, especially the second wave which peaked in the months of April and May 2021 in India, reported more than 250,000 deaths in the country. For most, the loss was sudden and unexpected. Many children were orphaned, surrendered or abandoned as Dr. Bhargava mentioned in her presentation. Due to the contagious nature of the disease, several could not even bid their last goodbyes.

Birth, marriage and death are three significant events in people's lives where we observe great involvement and importance of kin. The pandemic robbed people of performing the last rites of their family members with peace and dignity. Due to severe transportation restrictions, many had to attend such rituals on video calls and meetings.

In addition to parents, numerous caregivers in adoption institutes lost their lives too as Dr. Bhargava described, creating a shortage of institutional care for children who were in need of immediate attention. The adoption laws could not accommodate the sudden surge of cases and many loopholes came into open light. Though a couple of reforms were made, they were devised keeping in mind the best interest of parents and not children.

Opportunities

Community solidarity played a major role in helping people deal with the crisis. Strangers going out of their way to help others were almost like 'extended kin' bringing people closer together. Professor Johri and Professor Meenai pointed out the helpful role community members can play, especially when there are problems in family functioning and if there is abuse or negligence. However, in addition to this, there is urgency for more structured and institutional ways to handle the current situation.

The concept of Risk Society theorised by the German sociologist Ulrich Beck provides and gives an analysis of the late modernity period which is characterised by how a society organises and responds to risks. *Global catastrophes such as the Covid-19 pandemic expose the neglect and unpreparedness towards these unanticipated hazards which cause great damage. According to Beck, the response to these disasters*

is highly scientific in nature wherein the social implications go unnoticed. As mentioned before, the pandemic has had severe consequences on not only the economy and public health but also on social institutions such as family, kinship, education etc. Death, loss, abandonment, unemployment and rapidly increasing mental health issues must be carefully observed and studied.

There has not been much research on the effects of the pandemic, death, and losses in families and kinship relations. Therefore there not much data exists to help navigate familial problems and its changing patterns in the current situation. *There is also a need to rethink current strategies and policies to accommodate this 'new normal'.* As Professor Rachana Johri suggested, it is imperative to follow a holistic approach to find answers and solutions to these issues where research and policy go hand in hand.

This also paves the way for new theories to emerge. The present can serve as the 'field' where evidence and conclusions can be drawn. There is a need to reflect on the past and present to understand where the problems lie. The reflection can guide further research and then finally reform (not only make small adjustments) the current structures to improve on issues that are hard to resolve like adoption laws, family management, who and how should practical support be given to families/single parents/ spouses who have lost loved ones unexpectedly. This current lack of preparedness can serve as a lesson and an opportunity if the actions are taken at the right time.

It is also important to consider the implications of mitigation policies by examining the effects on people from various sections of the society. Policies should be made keeping in mind the best interest of young children whose future depends on their present which we must try to improve through an integrated and multidisciplinary approach.

Children - The Biggest Casualty of Covid-19 Pandemic

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On a global level, COVID-19 has shaken our world, causing catastrophic damage to children and families. There are a variety of stressors that affect families and children, ranging from loss of employment to supply shortages. One thing that can be reasonably said is that most people are unlikely ever to be as precise as they once were before the Covid pandemic, a time that seems far from reality today. *Much of the last two years have been a blur for many, with days of the week—becoming merely "yesterday" and "tomorrow" or "just one more day."* Since early 2020, the world has been plagued with fear of uncertainty, anxiety, and paranoia. Many of our life's interpretations have suddenly been turned on its head. Misinformation and speculations are born out of fear — both dystopian predictions and promises.

Notwithstanding our innate nature and circumstances, we chose to believe what we wanted and propagated these views widely. Still, nearly every government has jerked its knees in response. *A more subtle effect of the covid-19 pandemic has been the alteration in our experience of reality. A billion versions exist now, each one accurate to its own observer.* We have versions of our great big world and versions of our individual lives. Covid-19's tangible and emotional agony will most likely leave the vast bulk of us relatively unscathed. However, it appears that little has been addressed about those who have been the most adversely affected and scarred—the young children.

We are well aware that children are not the face of this pandemic. However, they are at a risk of being among its biggest casualty. Their social-emotional well-being is profoundly affected by the COVID-19 issue, even though they have been mostly spared from the direct health consequences till now. Each and every kid in the world is afflicted by the socio-economic repercussions and in some cases by preventive attempts which may as well unwittingly cause more damage than good. *This is a global catastrophe that will have a lifetime impact upon such children.* However, they run the danger of becoming one of its most infamous casualties. Regardless of the reality that COVID-19 has so far mainly spared them from direct health repercussions, the pandemic has made its presence known by impacting their social and emotional well-being. Each and every child, regardless of age or geographic area, is subject to socio-economic consequences, as well as preventive methods that may unintentionally cause more harm than good. *It is also worth noting that the consequences of this pandemic will not be dispersed equitably.* Most likely, they will have the most detrimental effects on children in the nations with poor healthcare systems, impoverished neighbourhoods, and the most disadvantaged groups.

Children have been caged up at home for more than a year now, unable to go outside and socialize with friends, denied freedom and recreational activities. They have not sat in classes, burst out laughing with their peers, traded objects, or hurried out cheerfully at the end of the day, looking forward to returning the next day and picking up where they left off. Several pieces of research have conclusively proven that Covid-19 has negatively damaged the mental health of many children. The lack of peer group support during a time in life when social engagement is critical for: cognitive development, self-concept formation, and, ultimately, mental health has resulted in detrimental feelings of isolation and, in some cases, anxiety. Children in early childhood learn socialization as well as some core principles and life skills, which is evident when talking about the youngest school children.

Moreover, they have no way of comparing the pandemic milieu to what they used to know as the norm. In fact, they will remember this period with a mysterious ambiguity paired with rigorous conformism. This might have a long-term impact on their worldview.

COVID-19's lethal grip has brutally and forcibly taken either one or, in more heartbreaking situations, both parents from over a thousand children in Delhi since the virus emerged in India. According to Mr. Anurag Kundu, Chairperson of DCPCR, the government body has asked users on social media to contact their helpline number about situations where children need critical supplies and have lost a parent(s) or are suffering to sustain themselves owing to the disease. Following that, Mr. Kundu discussed the flood of requests for adopting orphaned children as a result of the pandemic. Adoption, he continued, is a wonderful idea. While it gives young children stability and affection, it also gives them a new point of reference to view their world. As the session progressed, he held out hope that more individuals would step forth to adopt children. Adoptions must, however, follow the proper legal procedure exclusively. He emphasized not trusting anything on social media. Foster care, according to the JJ Act of 2016, is "an arrangement whereby a child is put for the purpose of alternative care in the domestic setting of a family, generally for a short term or extended period of time, with unrelated family members for the purpose of care and protection." *As a consequence, it is easy to understand why, in all Indian contexts, Foster Care, particularly in the individual model, is regarded solely as an alternate model of child care and protection, and is never regarded as a valid form of family structure.* The Kinship model requires that the child be placed with an extended family — someone with biological links to the child, regardless of closeness or distance. In such an arrangement, the relatives must be willing to support a child and be held accountable for them.

The most essential aspects for children who have lost parents or other family members are outreach, financial and educational aid, and social-emotional support. DCPCR has been proactively trying to locate and reach out to families. The agency used the death database to swiftly identify children who had lost one or both parents. In terms of children's schemes, Mr. Kundu feels that governments should be more flexible and broad in their definition of Covid-19. It is not adequate to minimize governance to a simple transaction. It is imperative that these families, especially the children, have potent means to channel their anxieties, distress, grief, and suffering. In order for these families to grieve the loss of a loved one, counselling is absolutely necessary. This is an important role for schools to play in this process as well. The affection, care, and stability that parents offer to their children cannot be substituted by government support. Parental death results in a loss of income, for which the financial support can at best compensate.

Every caregiver, educator, and fully adult human has a fundamental responsibility to help in healing the children. Our children's future would be lost if we let them grow up with fear and a dim view of what the world has to offer. Scepticism would triumph and that is something the human race does not deserve.

Steering Through Complicated Adoption Laws Amidst the Storm of Covid 19

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National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR) [informed](#) the Supreme Court on June 5, that as per data submitted by different states, as many as 30,071 children were orphaned, lost a parent or have been abandoned due to the pandemic. Out of the total, 26,176 children who've lost a parent, 3,621 have been orphaned and 274 have been abandoned.

Subsequently, a Supreme Court bench of Justices L. N. Rao and Aniruddha Bose on 8 June 2021 [ordered](#), directions for care and protection of minors who have become orphans or have lost one parent or were abandoned. The court highlighted that the invitation for the adoption of orphans is contrary to law as no adoption can be permitted without the involvement of the [Central Adoption Resource Authority\(CARA\)](#).

What is CARA?

Central Adoption Resource Authority (CARA) is an institution that deals with the adoption of orphaned, abandoned and surrendered children through its associated /recognised adoption agencies. CARA is a statutory body of Ministry of Women and Child Development, Government of India. It functions as the nodal body for the adoption of Indian children and is mandated to monitor and regulate in-country and inter-country adoptions. CARA also manages inter-country adoptions in accordance with the provisions of the Hague Convention on Inter-country Adoption, 1993, ratified by the Government of India in 2003.

Eligibility for Adoption

Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015, issued by the Ministry of Women and Child Development lays down the eligibility criteria for prospective adoptive parents: (i) The prospective adoptive parents “should be physically, mentally and emotionally stable, financially capable and shall not have any life-threatening medical condition.” (ii). A person can adopt irrespective of their marital status and whether or not he or she has a biological son or daughter. (iii) A single woman can adopt a child of any gender but a single man is not eligible to adopt a girl child. In case of a married couple consent for adoption is vital from both spouses, married for minimum two years with less than three children. (iv). Couples with three or more children are considered for adoption only in the “case of special need children”(as defined in Regulation

2(21), “hard to place children” (Regulation 50) and in case of “relative adoption and adoption by step-parent”. Apart from resident and non-resident Indians, even overseas citizens of India and foreign parents can adopt children from the country.

Adoption: A Never-ending Wait?

With the Covid-19 pandemic, the waiting time for parents who were on the verge of getting matched the children was delayed by several months owing to mandated lockdown. The same was expected to be longer for thousands of other parents further down the waitlist. It was during the peak of pandemic, when CARA brought out a changes to address immediate care and relief for children abandoned, relinquished or whose parents had died. Dr. Bhargava a member of Adoption Recommendation Committee at CARA, has described a few distressing aspects of adoption process during the pandemic that influenced many lives of children across the country.

According to the Juvenile Justice Act, adoption cases can be heard by either a district court, or a family court or a city civil court. *But the courts were shut during the lockdown - it was only until mid-June 2021, when the courts began opening up.* In this situation, CARA requested district courts to conduct video conference hearings for adoption cases. Unfortunately this facility was only limited to metropolitan cities.

Exacerbated Parents: Navigating Adoption Laws During the Lockdown

Prospective adoptive parents based in India were permitted to take adopted children home during the foster period before the court grants adoption orders. This foster period usually lasts for two months. *But Dr. Bhargava pointed out that several prospective parents were faced with tremendous pain and anxiety waiting for over two years to be matched with a baby, only to be blocked by Covid 19 lockdown. Non Resident Indian (NRIs) could not leave the country without furnishing necessary documents of the adopted child such as the birth certificate or a valid passport.* As a result they were languishing in hotel rooms for several months waiting for further instructions. In such a situation, CARA could have facilitated inter-state and inter district fostering and adoption as admitted by Dr. Bhargava who also admitted that this process too would have been complicated if implemented. She highlighted other reasons for adopting more urgently – poor nutritional and health issues of most children in Childcare Institutions(CCI), she urges, “the sooner a child leaves, the better it is for them”.

CARA’s Intervention During the Lockdown

Procedurally a prospective parent may choose the gender and age group of the child and also select three states from where they could adopt, depending on availability. Additionally, they also select one of CARA's affiliated adoption agencies(CCI) in their city for a procedural Home Study Report (HSR) that determines the suitability of prospective parents. Once their HSR is approved they land on the waiting list. Usually, the moment a child becomes available for adoption in any of the three states selected, the prospective parent is notified and given a 48 hour window to meet the child and make a decision. CARA, during the lockdown increased this window to 96 hours. During this window if the prospective parent does not proceed they lose their spot on the waiting list and move right at the bottom of the list.

Single Women as Prospective Parents: Reported Gendered Stereotypes in HSR

It has been [reported](#) single women are often discouraged to adopt even though the number of applicants in this category has increased considerably. In 2015-16, 412 single women registered for adoption with CARA. By the end of 2017, the numbers almost doubled to 817⁴. While this was only one-twentieth of the 18,000 registrations that year, the numbers are growing consistently. Seventy five single women adopted a child in 2015-16, 93 in 2016-17, 106 in 2017-18, and 121 in 2018-19. Still, it has not been easy for several single prospective women, who complain that specialised agencies — conducting HSR— have been reported to be biased towards them. However, CARA has the last word on any adoption-related matter, the agencies have the right to raise objections, often turning what could be a seamless process into an even longer and tedious procedure. ([Economic Times 2019](#))

“Best Interest of the Child”: A Need for Re-Evaluation of Adoption Policies

Dr. Bhargava also highlighted the emotional and social well-being of children impacted by loss of parental jobs, death of family members, education disruptions, domestic violence, forced home confinement, sexual violence, trafficking, child marriage, excessive digital exposure, distorted human interactions. These areas are often left out of policy discussion and decisions for adoption and child care. In her experience, she described how some single parents wanted to return their children to the agency when they feared that they may lose their lives due to Covid. Many of them faced severe financial struggles.

⁴ In July 2017, this law became favourable for single women over the age of 40 owing to the increase of single women applicants. Their waiting period for adoption was fast-tracked by six months two years or other prospective parents.

https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/despite-a-favourable-law-why-do-single-women-and-men-struggle-to-adopt-a-child-in-india/articleshow/70621618.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst

The immediate need remains the safety of the children especially girl children and reaching them in time because of lockdown and the next priority is to create more support groups. The Department of Women and Child Development Government of N.C.T of Delhi [organized](#) a program, where students talked to children orphaned due to Covid, on a regular basis talking about their grief and trauma. These are very valuable steps to reach out to distressed children in need, however, there is plenty of ground to cover with regard to adoption laws and practices keeping the child's needs in mind. There is no doubt that adoption laws and procedures must follow the best interest of the child, but what if following these "best interests" may prove to be counterproductive?

Communal Child-rearing: A Possibility?

A lengthy cumbersome adoption and screening process, on one hand, may ensure 'suitable' prospective parents enter the waitlist but, the same cumbersome process may keep a child in childcare institutions (CCI) longer than it is required, which has proved to be detrimental to a child's health. It is also pertinent to engage with the functioning of registered and unregistered CCIs and their settings for a better understanding of childcare needs and protection that may have a bearing on adoption related priorities. The longer the procedure, longer is the wait time for children in CCIs. *However, outside of institutional care such as CCIs and familial settings can we imagine building a community based model of care?* My Sociology Master's classroom discussion from the course Relationships and Affinities reminded me of a captivating discussion on communal or collective childrearing as alternatives to familial settings. Can we imagine extending services that are only accessible to families available in these community based model of child care in the least restrictive setting possible. The communal child-rearing or establishing a collective of caretakers that raise children in a familiar setting with financial support from the state may prove to be useful and is being widely discussed across the world⁵.

Dr. Bhargava emphasized on the need to look at the policy from the perspective of the best interest of the child and not necessarily of the parents adopting the child. She urged, if laws related to taxation can change so seamlessly then a change in some of the rules for finding homes quickly should be a priority. But unfortunately the waiting time for both children and prospective parents tells us a different story. These issues have exposed the worst of Indian bureaucracy, especially during Covid. It revealed lack of initiative to offer any procedural ease or

⁵ Taj Lalwani May 22, 2021. Communal Child-Rearing: An Exploration Could collective childcare be the future of parenting? Source:

<https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/086c3282dd714f6d85a7828a6136fa1f>

Child Welfare Information Gateway. United States.

<https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/management/reform/soc/history/community/>

alternatives to inaccessible institutions that grant adoption and furnish relevant legal documentation. It instead prioritised lengthy and cumbersome paperwork above safety and care of children for the sake of securing the 'best interest of the child'.

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Children in Covid Crisis: What is the Sustainable Way Forward?

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Humans are obsessed with building skills in the current times that will make way for them in the future. There is much discussion regarding the different kinds of skills that future generations will need. They want to teach skills to the upcoming generations to help them spearhead missions in the future, which one cannot even imagine today. One of the many 21st-century skills identified by various international and national organisations is the skill of problem-solving. It is essential to survive the demands of the changing times. The Covid-19 pandemic's arrival has led to a drastic change in every individual's lifestyle. From lockdowns to fighting for limited resources, from facing isolation to experiencing loss, the pandemic has pushed us to deal with situations one could never imagine.

The pandemic is a global crisis as it has affected thousands of people in each country. There have been months-long countrywide lockdowns that have led to economic, physical, social and mental crises. Thus, calling for urgent action. The crisis has hit everyone despite the variations in access to resources. It has affected all generations of people. However, children have been affected the most.

How has Covid Affected Children?

Given that children are in the developing stage, they have suffered the most. The pandemic has forced them to stay inside their houses and limited their socialisation to their immediate environment. They are unable to play outside, which has limited their peer interaction; their education has been limited to the digital medium. Many have experienced loss of loved ones and loss of both parents. Some were forced to leave school. These times have brought grave traumatic experiences for the children that cannot be ignored; the impact can be observed in their physical and mental health. With severe cases affecting adults, many children have lost their

parents. Consequently, leading to an increase in the [orphan rate](#). On the other hand, as the education mode shifted online, many students have lost access to education due to a lack of necessary devices and the internet. Thereby widening the gap of [the digital divide](#). *In a way, the pandemic has exposed the existing gaps in the systemic structures.*

Need for Collective Responsibility

While many negative scenarios were emerging with each day, people stepped up to support each other. There were volunteers to locate help for ambulances, hospital beds, meals, sharing digital devices for children's education, fundraisers, and publicity for help. Thus, collective responsibility could be observed. Dr. Bhargava, a member of the Adoption Recommendation Committee, [Central Adoption Resource Agency \(CARA\)](#), shared her concerns related to her experiences during the pandemic. *She highlighted a need for increased safeguarding for children (especially girls) because the misinformation on social media has increased illegal adoption and the possibility of human trafficking.* She emphasised the urgent need for grief and trauma counselling for children. *While another panellist, Professor Jobri, [CPCR](#) asserted that there is a misconception that children will forget the loss of loved ones and traumatic issues because they are small.* She further argued that children have struggled with the restrictive middle-class mindset that restricts children's activities such as play and peer group interactions. Furthermore, Mr Anurag Kundu, Chair [DCPCR](#), suggested that policies need to be inclusive for all children irrespective of their backgrounds. The loopholes in the system can be addressed if policies are designed to reach each member of society, which will further legally support the vulnerable in society.

What is the Way Forward?

Although people have come forward to address issues concerning children, there is a need for effective solutions. For example, the messages circulating about adoption through illegal means could have been prevented if the citizens had been more informed about the basic protocols of

adoption. This, nevertheless, highlights people's ability to problem-solve by coming forward to help each other. However, the question arises are these solutions helpful?

Check Source's Credibility

According to Dr. Bhargava, the media does play an essential role in informing the public. Thus, whenever one receives a message seeking help or providing help, it becomes an individual responsibility to check the credibility of the sources. On the other hand, authorities can step up and raise awareness for issues that may raise concern, such as educating on protocols for adoption.

Let Children Engage in Play

Concerning children's physical and mental health, parents need to remember to avoid restricting children from play. Play is an essential space for children to express as well as helps in their development. Moreover, there need to be spaces where dialogues for one's emotions can be expressed. Prof.Johri suggests that there is a need for spaces where grief can be articulated in cases of children dealing with trauma. Hence, having dialogues within families and with counsellors that encourage the expression of emotions can ease the burden.

Use Existing Data for Effective Solutions

Since the government sources have been collecting regular data on children's basic needs (health, safety, education etc.), such data can be used effectively to brainstorm effective solutions. Mr.Kundu suggested school attendance as one of the most important predictors of adversity. For example, if a child has been absent from school for longer than expected. In that case, the teachers may follow up to identify possible factors for the child's absence. *Thus, using attendance as indicators can help recognise children who may need support in various domains.*

As a student of Early Childhood Care and Education, I could draw connections across the courses that I am taking. In a course called Play Learning and Creativity, it highlighted how children's play spaces can be an important aspect for children to display some important skills

such as creativity and negotiation in claiming their space. *In play, they reflect on what they observe in society and are motivated to maximize their play experiences through inventions and reimaginings. Play can be an essential part of practising their agency and expressing themselves.* Second, I could draw connections to the family systems theory by Turnbull, Turnbull, Soodak, and Shogren (2011) which suggests an outline of how family systems function. The authors argue that families which are well functioning are often able to balance between the extremes of low and high adaptability. This theory helps us to understand the stress that families experienced during the pandemic due to the demand to adjust quickly to an unpredictable fast changing environment and how some families may have lost their equilibrium.

In conclusion, it can be suggested that there is an urgent need for collective action to support the children in crisis, given that all disciplines are interconnected. Therefore, no advances in sustainable solutions can occur in the coming years without the multi-sectional community contributing to societal improvement.

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Children on the Margins: In Hindsight of the Pandemic

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From my window, on the other-side of the road, you can see my alma mater standing tall. My younger sibling, who is currently studying in the same school, often stands on the window sighing and longingly looking at the empty classrooms visible from our apartment. The pandemic has deprived us of much, losing what little stability we had in pre-Covid world. While some losses are being measured and evaluated, as a student-educator I could not help but wonder about the loss of childhood experiences of many, which we adults still tend to cherish and look back for solace.

Child, as defined in Right to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009, is a male or female child of upto to fourteen years of age. Though, unlike “Child”, there are no legal definitions of childhood. Dian Gittin (2015), defines Childhood as a general state of being a child, which has changed over time varying between cultures. Gittin states, “Childhood...is arguably a construction, a fiction interwoven with personal memories: cultural representations that serve to disguise differences between children - whether in terms of gender, ethnicity, class or physical ability.” (pp 27, 2015) How has then the nature of a child come to define itself in lockdown and childhood that is crucial to a child’s development as a complete human?

Professor RachanaJohri, posed several questions exploring the nature of children and the effects of curbing their individual rights due to lockdowns during the pandemic. Schools as a space for socialization where children start forming valuable bonds outside their homes, have been reduced to a rectangular screen they have to sit in front of, for four-five hours a day. Forming bonds have been limited to immediate family members, who are often adults, who have their responsibilities besides focusing on the learning or leisure time of the child. Lack of human touch in online classes does not leave much room for friendships to be formed. Digital learning has indeed taken away the personal interaction with their teachers, plays and banter with their classmates and the very space they call classroom.

While I am of the belief that learning space can be in the open, among greens as well as a closed classroom or a laboratory, we need to understand that in lockdown, the children have been deprived of them all. Spaces and the context we built in interaction with them have been

redefined. Classrooms with blackboards, display boards with art and craft, library with books, playgrounds with sports equipment and music room with musical instruments, each provide the child with a space to learn. They encourage them to engage with and explore these spaces and what constitutes these spaces, to grow.

As adults, work-from-home for us has erased the line of public and private space. Where public space is seen as a space for people to socialize, private space remains for self and other members of the household. Even though their relationship is fluctuating and flexible, lockdown has led to restricted socialization, merging of responsibilities one has in public and private space, and limited space for self-recreation. One can only imagine the eraser of the same for a child. Many children lack the luxury of private space altogether at their homes, much less a learning environment to pursue their scholastic knowledge. It has widened the learning gap for marginalized groups among the children. Few of them being children with special needs, children lacking devices and stable connections, children of migrant workers, etc.

Systemic failures have finally taken its toll as it has compromised the education of these children. In a conversation with one of my good friends residing in the tea gardens of West Bengal, I realized the undue disadvantage the adivasi children of their community were facing due to the lockdown. They had identified multiple children who had dropped out due to inaccessible online classes and lack of connectivity. It was distressing to see how many of them were pushed into the labor market to sustain the financial conditions of the family in absence of school which seemed to have forgotten these children, and made limited efforts to contact them. While my friend did believe this will stunt the community's growth in the long run, I wonder if this has not also forced the children to crossover to adult responsibilities while giving up on many childhood experiences?

Children of the migrant workers too have become further vulnerable amidst the pandemic. The latter months of the first lockdown, saw India's largest migration since partition due to inability of the cities to contain migrant workers and meet their basic needs (Misra, 2021). . In the words of Alex Paul Menon (Labour Commissioner, Chhattisgarh) we remained ignorant and indifferent to our labour class and especially our migrant workers. The brunt of which was faced by the children who had been enrolled in the schools of cities their parents had previously worked in.

During my internship period at Delhi Commission for Protection of Child Rights, where I dealt with grievances related to education and children with special needs, I often came across cases where children of workers who were forced to migrate in the last academic year were removed

from the school due to lack of attendance. Parents who were already struggling to meet the financial needs of the family and availing online classes were simply faced with further hurdles. We also received letters of children seeking fee exemption, whose guardians had either passed away or lost source of income.

While this reflected children's agency and their knowledge and struggles to have their basic rights, it also showed the darker side of the system that is supposed to provide children with education that ensures their right to life but instead tangled them in shortcomings of the adults who failed to practice their roles and responsibilities that ensured this.

As systems fail to keep up with rapid change in the pandemic, children with special needs are blind-sided, whether it be their medical needs or education. Long duration of waiting to avail their regular check-up and device assistance has disrupted what little normalcy they can hope for. Online classes have taken away the care and learning they were provided in schools. With limited online resources and technology, they are struggling to keep up.

Pandemic has bared the failures and gaps in policy implementation that protect and ensure children's rights. Therefore, it is about time we recognize the various social, political, economic and cultural backgrounds children come from."...we live from birth to death in a world of persons and things which in large measure is what it is because of what has been done and transmitted from previous human activities...experience does not occur in a vacuum" (John Dewey, 1986. P.). Childhood encompasses these varied experiences a child goes through, on which this pandemic will leave a big impact on. As educators and policy-makers, we need to make sense of a child's reality during the pandemic and how these experiences will shape them in coming years. So, while we bridge these gaps, it becomes imperative now more than ever to understand the nature of a child, a child's agency, autonomy and politics to have a child-centric outlook.

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A Responsibility Towards A Generation Heading Into A Crisis: Are We Making Them A Liability?

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When the world was hit with Covid-19, it was a challenge for the state to decide on measures to reach education to every child. In essence, the pandemic limited the socioeconomic opportunities available to children. On these lines, I will share my reflection from the panel discussion. This discussion offered the opportunity to examine the issue of responding to vulnerabilities, faced by children using different lenses.

Prof.Meenai pointed out that the pandemic exposed and aggravated existing systemic problems. His comments inspired me to look at crisis not as a one-time event. It pushes us to go beyond the usual rhetoric and revisit the notions like learning, care, poverty, and curriculum.

Poor's Quest for Survival

Pandemic clearly shows the dependence of the poor on the state. In the panel discussion, Mr. Anurag Kundu discussed that high and middle-income families may not be dependent on the state in many ways, however, the poor have to rely on the state for: health services, food, and learning activities – We often fail to recognize the rights of people living in poverty and provide services from a welfare perspective.

In an exercise to understand the effects of the pandemic on families, I studied five Indian families. Some of them were struggling for nutritious food for children. Malnutrition of children is a serious problem in our country, and became worse during the pandemic. The families became less capable to fulfil needs for children's growth and development. This is an alarming situation, especially for infants' growth and development. "Young Child Feeding point out that *malnutrition* among children occurs almost entirely during the first two years of life and is *virtually irreversible* after that. In short, child mortality is closely linked with *malnutrition* and inappropriate feeding" (Gupta 2006, p. 3667). If we fail to provide adequate nutrition and stimulation for learning then there's high probability that this will lead to unending poverty. "Some family researchers have theorized that families with limited SES resources may be well justified in believing that they have little control over their environment so very few will plan for any child's future, let alone the future of a child with or without exceptionality" (Turnbull et al, 2010, p. 16). This shows the impact of health on learning.

Lack of Outdoor Activities: Lack of Movement for Children

Prof. Rachana Johari pointed towards decrease in the play of students during pandemic. Parents were scared to send their children outside for play. Children should get access to public places and playgrounds as play is important for child development. However, “The deficiency in the design of children’s outdoor environment does not address children’s needs and preferences resulting in low engagement to the environment” (Agha, Tambiah, Chakravarty, 2019, p. 4). If they are not conducive in normal circumstances, how can the design of playgrounds become friendly in crisis for learning? The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child recognizes the right to play in Article 31. It mentions that “children need to undertake the freely-chosen, self-directed activity (play) because this supports healthy development in specific ways that complement other types of recreational activity” (IPA, 2010, p. 12). In the pandemic, limited movement posed a threat to children’s physical development as play is undervalued. “Right to play doesn’t receive attention in spite of its role in shaping human development” (IPA, 2010, p. 4)

Time to Rethink Structures

Prof. Meenai mentioned that the failure of various systems exposed our preparation to face the pandemic. This was evident in a preschool I am currently engaged in an online mode. When I was observing an online class in the preschool in class 1, I saw the teacher trying hard to conduct classes online amidst challenges. Under the chaos, the teacher was struggling to hear children’s responses, address and acknowledge them. Various early childhood associations stress on providing developmentally appropriate education to meet individual needs. In online mode, catering to individual needs seemed difficult. Are we approaching online and offline mode in a similar way? How prepared are we?

In the online platform, the focus remained on cognitive and language domain; other domains could hardly be addressed in the virtual classroom. The online mode has screen time limitations, zero movement and mute screens. The pedagogy in online mode differs considerably from physical classes. It gets essential to rethink pedagogy and resources, and design effective assessments. I observed that the preschool sourced YouTube videos from non-educational channel. Assessments were on mere rhetoric Q/A format. Any guidelines for online adaptation were unavailable for teachers for conducting classes from credible teaching-learning sources, including assessments to foster online engagement. Doesn’t a shift to online require rethinking pedagogies including resources? It becomes important to enquire ‘how is our early childhood

institutions' prepared to adapt in crisis situation. The nature of a crisis can keep changing in future; it is clear that our ability to predict such crisis is rather poor.

Perceptions of learning in our society

It hit hard to hear from Prof.Meenai about how the positive skill of building resilience is contributing to a greater magnitude of vulnerability.

The schools stopped but the learning too. It became evident during the pandemic that *education is confined to schools, and so is the learning*. This dependence brings long term impact on children learning but the community needs to be empowered to explore and create ways to work towards the larger meaning of learning. In the panel discussion, Mr. Anurag Kundu mentioned that children will be starting from 2018-19 in the context of their educational levels. Are educational levels just a sum of academics? Why students are not learning? Why can't we build communities to create various spaces for learning? The bureaucracy played a critical role in strategizing ways to reach out to communities with the help of NGOs but the onus of learning should be a collective community effort.

Conclusion

The pandemic revealed systemic problems like inaccessibility to food, learning and health. The crisis is unfinished. We need to take the learning of underprivileged children seriously as their quest to survival shouldn't affect education accessibility. We need to question existing systems and reimagine them, evaluate resources for crisis-friendly learning, and equip the community for learning.

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