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## A review on the increasing suicide among children during lockdown period

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### Abstract

We are passing through a stage of complete lockdown, which will in future consider as an era in the history and become part of the curriculum across the world. Various studies have already been initiated on its impact and changes this pandemic brought in the society. With most of the nations in a lockdown mode, an important aspect is to be considered is the impact of COVID-19 on children. Restrictions of physical activities and social isolation due to the lockdown are more of a factor in the mental and physical health of children during this crisis. Unfortunately, in the recent time, days are starting with hearing sad news on unnatural death of children starting from a very low age. Recently reports say that more than 170 numbers of suicide cases since lockdown are reported till November 2020. The figures are very shocking for every citizen and it is unacceptable too. Here, it must be noted that numbers are very high when it evaluates the number of incidents before and after the lockdown consequent to the outbreak of pandemic. The situation definitely demands for a detailed evaluation of parameters that lead to this unacceptable situation especially in a country, where infant mortality is considered as a key health indicator of health status of the country. This article is trying to understand the situations that lead to such tragic situations evaluating the COVID-19 driven lockdown and controls and to identify the possible ways where effective interventions are possible.

**Keywords:** Lockdown, pandemic, depression, distress, behavioural addiction, psychiatry

### Introduction

We are passing through a stage of complete lockdown, which will in future consider as an era in the history and become part of the curriculum across the world. Various studies have already been initiated on its impact and changes this pandemic brought in the society. The current global turmoil due to the COVID-19 pandemic is having a severe effect with everyone being forced to adjust to the changing dynamics of social and interpersonal relationships. With most of the nations in a lockdown mode, an important aspect is to be considered is the impact of COVID-19 on children. Restrictions of physical activities and social isolation due to the lockdown are more of a factor in the mental and physical health of children during this crisis. (<https://www.parashospitals.com/blogs/impact-of-lockdown-on-children/>).

Unfortunately, in the recent time, days are starting with hearing sad news on unnatural death of children starting from a very low age of their childhood when they are not matured enough to understand what is life and what is death or to differentiate its outcomes in human life. Recently reports say that more than 170 numbers of suicide cases since lockdown are reported till November 2020. The figures are very shocking for every citizen and it is unacceptable too. Untimely death happen consequent to accidents or due to carelessness or diseases. But unnatural or purposeful act that leads to harm themselves cannot be left unnoticed. Reasons behind most of the suicidal attempt may be silly and probably an issue possible to ignore, if someone is there to interrupt and give mental support. Since such acts can be prevented, the matter needs to be addressed effectively giving top priority. If required, intervention at policy level, wherever possible, may also be thought off.

Here, it must be noted that numbers are very high when it evaluates the number of incidents before and after the lockdown consequent to the outbreak of pandemic. The situation definitely demands for a detailed evaluation of parameters that lead to this unacceptable situation especially in a country, where infant mortality is considered as a key health indicator of health status of the country.

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No one can hesitate that all of us have started our childhood hearing the famous quote of Shri. Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India, who loves children very much, that "Children are like buds in a garden and should be carefully and lovingly nurtured, as they are the future of the nation and the citizens of tomorrow". This article is trying to understand the situations that lead to such tragic situations evaluating the COVID-19 driven lockdown and controls and to identify the possible ways where effective interventions are possible.

### Reviews and Observations

Outbreak of the pandemic has brought about a sense of fear and anxiety around the globe especially among children and aged. Even though percentage of fatality is much lower than various other contagious diseases, people are at risk of loss of their life. This has created panic among people. Naturally, kids will be given utmost care for not getting infected. In this background, today we are witnessing various unexpected issues popping up from the segment of children during the last few months. They are mentally, physically and emotionally very weak. The degree of impact among children is determined by factors like age, maturity, educational status etc. The situation is more vulnerable when they become part of being quarantined due to infection.

Lockdown began on 25<sup>th</sup> March where youngsters are facing stress which made them unable to bear the unprecedented situation where schools are shut and friends are out of reach to share their woes. In a journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry it is reported that children and adolescents are likely to experience high rates of depression and anxiety long after current lockdown and social isolation ends and clinical services need to be prepared for a future spike in demand. This study also considers about the evidences that are pointing towards the association between loneliness and an increased risk of mental health problems among young people. Duration of loneliness and intensity of loneliness are increasing the risk of future depression among young people.

It must be understood that they have completely lost their vacation. The restrictions have completely shattered their dream plans for spending their holidays. They are forced to remain completely indoors without any extracurricular activities. They could not find any friend to share their thoughts and sorrows. It is reported by media that the physical activities of children have significantly come down in this period thereby leading to health issues. It is also noted that they are completely separated from the society. No schooling, no playing with friends, no space for sharing their thoughts with friends who understands their mutual problems better than anyone else. This leads to anxiety related disorders. Anxiety disorders in children are persistent fears, worries or anxiety that disrupts their ability to participate in playing, school or typical age-appropriate social situations.

[<https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/childrens-health/in-depth/mental-illness-in-children/art-20046577>].

Mental disorders among children are described as serious changes in the way children typically learn, behave, or handle their emotions, which causes distress and problems getting through the day.

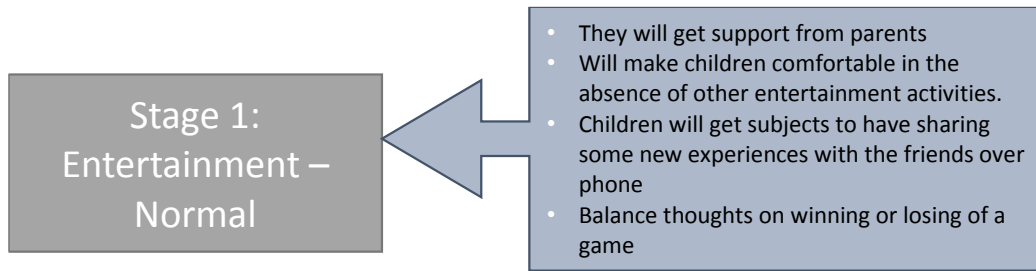
When one look at this restrictions at home, leads to overweight and obesity among children. Even though these are common, the lockdown made the issue worse. Over usage of mobiles/computers/ipads etc. are another issues. Now a day's parent gives mobile for managing their children. Slowly in childhood itself they will get addicted to such electronic devices. Now they cannot move out for playing. Naturally they will try other alternatives for spending time. They will slowly moves to the habit of playing games in their mobile itself. There is enormous number of games with different style. Children can choose games according to their taste. But the battle of making children play real games rather than virtual has been dealt with a big blow due to lockdown. Researches indicate that screen time beyond one hour adversely affects the mental abilities, including cognition and higher functions in children.

Earlier, the parents restricted their children from using mobile. Now the situation changed. Unfortunately, to save from pandemic and to keep kids in house, parents are forced to accept their demands. The newly evolved online educational system with an intention to save children from losing an academic year also compelled the parents to make more vulnerable to allow using electronic equipment. This has pulled down kids into unhealthy habits. Majority are immersed in playing games. Advent of technologies made these virtual games real by making children themselves as one among the characters.

In fact, in India reports pertaining to the unhealthy outcomes of becoming addiction with mobile game heard much earlier. On 31st May 2019, India Today reported about the sad demise of a 15 year old boy from Neemuch town of Madhya Pradesh consequent to cardiac arrest while playing PUB-G game continuously for 6 hours. (<https://www.indiatoday.in/technology/news/story/teenager-dies-of-cardiac-arrest-while-playing-pubg-539409-2019-05-31>).

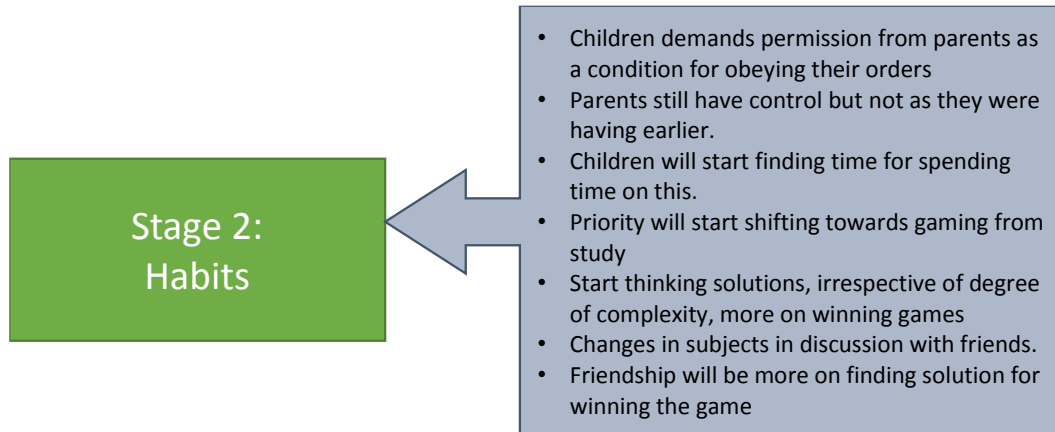
Later after one year i.e. in May 2020, Times of India reported a similar case from Erode Tamil Nadu. Here also a boy of 16 years died after continuous playing of similar game. Unfortunately, this time it was also reported that, this guy had no idea about the game till the lockdown started. Surveys conducted on mobile game players across all people irrespective of age group found that they don't consider themselves as "gamers" This means that these activities are capable of placing people in a stage of hallucination. If this is the case with adults, think about the childhood mind-sets, which can be easily moulded with the support of changes in their surroundings.

We can classify the stages broadly probably through which a child passes before they lost their mental stability at this point of time.



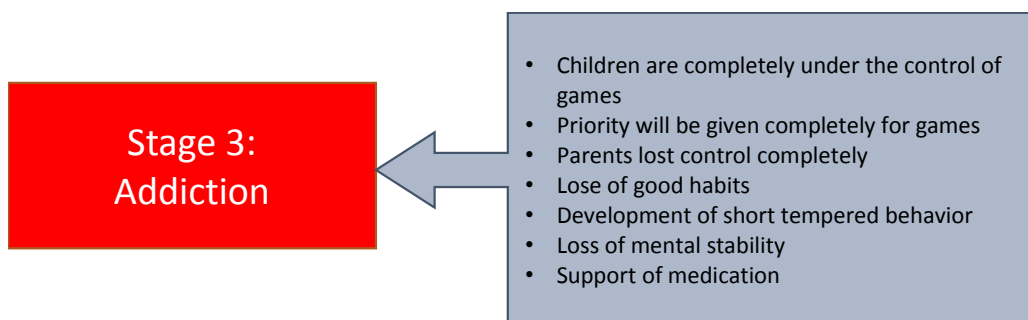
As explained, initially gaming starts considering this as an entertainment for enjoying the spare time with the support of game. There will be lot of positive factors also like keeping their mind set in a stable mode and equipping

children for obeying instructions from the teachers as well as from parents, family members etc. They will also get subjects for discussion with friends and all. They will find happy to be at home in the absence of no outings.



Slowly the entertainment activities turn into a habit. This is the stage where the capability of parents is being tested. If they failed to understand the condition through which their kids are passing, they will not be able to recognize the severity and will not take any remedial measures to keep their children in a normal stage. We can see various efforts put in by government for cautioning parents in various

media to have a keep watch over their children while using their mobiles. Children with fast figure are smart enough to change the screen which they were using when parent approaches. Hence the intention of parents must be kept in a smart form keeping the kids as their friends. Unless, the bad habit of children will turn in to addiction.



This is the stage where the kids are completely immersed with mobile games. Unfortunately and unknowingly, they will copy the attitudes of their favourite game characters. As a result of this they started behaving or thinking like characters in the games. Failure in the game makes them feel as they are failures in life. Since these developments came very slowly and hence people were not aware about the dangerous outcome of such situation.

Later on, we have seen much news in TV saying that spread of pandemic leading to an increase in anxiety levels of human beings. This could be another reason for creating mood swings among kids. Because, anxiety and worries of the parents are easily absorbed by children, as they are very sensitive to changes in the environment. Such unpleasant

situation will bring pessimistic thoughts in human mind especially in children leading to depression, anxiety and loneliness. This will in-turn will result into attendant sleep disorders, somatoform disorders, and depression. We have heard many issues during this lockdown period. Of which, 140 suicide cases reported on 19<sup>th</sup> June 2020 in Nagpur in the past 87 days.

(<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/nagpur/covid-killed-18-suicides-claimed-over-140-in-lockdown/articleshow/76452625.cms>).

These incidents are showing how the lockdown phenomenon consequent to the pandemic has affected the human mind. These 140 suicides include housewives, students, employed, businessmen and migrants and mostly

below 45 years of age. It is also reported by an activist of the social awareness group that the daily news reporting may omit many cases including those of attempted suicides. Apart from this, very shockingly, Government of Kerala has reported increasing suicides among children pointing out the suicidal death of 66 children since March 2020. This is really shocking as these are the cases of children who are not even matured enough to learn about life. External supports required for many of these children and their parents in the form of counselling. System should be equipped in such a way that issues with children could be identified in advance for an early intervention to avoid such unpleasant issues. Also the factors that lead to a decision to end the life need to be evaluated.

Government sources also says that there has been an increasing instances of suicidal tendencies among children in the state due to various reasons, including parents scolding them over mobile phone use and failure to attend online classes, A mother scolding her child for not attending the on-going online classes, or a parent questioning a child for downloading a sleazy video on the smart phone or the constant rift between the parents, as the schools have not yet re-opened due to the Corona pandemic, the children are unable to meet their friends and share their problems were among the reasons which triggered the suicidal tendency

An article in the Express news service on Suicide rate on the rise among youths in Kerala published on 9th May 2018 said that while the general suicide rate has been decreasing gradually compared to other states, the suicide rate among youngsters and family suicides are on the rise in Kerala. It is the news of a young girl who took her life by jumping off her hostel building in Thiruvananthapuram. The police are yet to ascertain the real cause of death. However, preliminary inquiry suggests it is a case of suicide. As per the records available with the government, 12, 988 persons committed suicide since May 2016 due to various reasons. Of this, 2, 946 were women and 401 children. "Social isolation among the youths is the prime reason behind the increased suicide rate among the youths," said Dr Arun B Nair, Associate professor, Department of Psychiatry, Medical College Thiruvananthapuram. According to him, increased suicide rate prevails in teenagers, youths and persons above 60 years. "There is an increased prevalence in the number of emotionally unstable persons in society. And one of the most important aspects is the inability to control any kind of emotion and the inability to tolerate frustration leading to injuring and annihilating oneself when the mildest setbacks in life occur," he added.

Experts said 'behavioural addiction' is prevalent among those showing a tendency to commit suicide. Addiction to the internet, mobile phones, social media, porn etc., is part of this. These persons suffer from mental disorders, they added. "Removing the stigma associated with mental health is the prime thing to curb this menace. The family members are reluctant to provide treatment for depression fearing shame. This attitude should be changed to cut down the increasing suicide rates."

Let us look at the opinions of various doctors available in the public domains.

- Dr. Arun, Associate professor, Department of Psychiatry, Medical College Thiruvananthapuram says that "Just like adults, children and adolescents face mental health issues like stress and depression".

- Dr. Sandeesh, clinical psychologist, Government Mental Health Centre, Kozhikode says that "It is not only in adults; children, especially adolescents, are prone to mental health issues like depression and stress which can, in some cases, possibly lead to suicides".
- Dr. Sandeesh also added that the commonly seen problems among children are issues related to school and family problems among others. But in the context of lockdown, there are other sets of issues that children are facing which need to be addressed.

"Due to lockdown, unlike before, children are spending more time with their families. They cannot go to school, nor go out to play. This gives a chance for more possible parent-children clashes. Especially for adolescents, who are at a stage of their life where they have started to be more connected to their friends than their families, this can be more problematic"

Playing outdoors has been an important stress buster for children. But with physical distancing restrictions required to prevent the pandemic spread, children do not have the option to go out and engage in physical activities. "All these factors build up tension in children, just like a balloon that's been blown up and could burst at any moment. At any time, the tension can result in impulsive acts such as suicide," Dr Sandeesh added.

He said that even financial constraints experienced by some families during this time (due to job losses, salary cuts, etc.), can affect children. "A huge number of parents used to provide nearly everything the children asked for. But now since there is economic instability, many parents are compelled to say 'no' to children. This can affect them adversely if it is not properly handled."

According to a 2012 *Lancet* report, suicide rates in India are highest in the 15-29 age group — the youth population. The report says that among men, 40% suicides were by individuals aged 15-29, while for women it was almost 60%.

Mrugesh Vaishnav, president of the Indian Psychiatric Society said, "Stress, anxiety disorder, depression, personality disorder results in mental illness that leads a student towards suicide. This happens when the students are not familiar/satisfied with his or her surroundings." Relationship breakdown is another leading cause.

In 2017, Lokniti-CSDS released a survey which showed that 4 out of 10 students went through depression. The survey conducted in the age group 15-34 years also found that one out of every four youth moderately suffered from depression, loneliness, worthlessness and suicidal thoughts. Six percent of them got suicidal thoughts at least once.

Mohd.. Sanjeer Alam, faculty at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, New Delhi, said, "A student commits suicide when he/she doesn't get emotional support at the time of crisis. This might happen when individual expectations are too high. Parental and peer pressure also have an adverse effect."

A.K. Joshi, Professor and Head of Sociology, Banaras Hindu University, stated, "Academic stress is an obvious factor for students taking their own lives. After studying to a certain level when they feel they are support less or he/she can't fulfil their own and their parents' role expectations, a role conflict starts within the student. In this type of situation students feel they are left without any choice and so they take such an extreme step."

Pradip Kumar Saha, Director of Institute of Psychiatry, Kolkata, said, "Fear of failure is a leading cause for suicide among students. When students pass through an unsuccessful phase, everything seems pessimistic to them. They feel their future is bleak and this may result in committing suicide."

Look at all these observation, these are pointing towards various factors like mental, social, emotional, psychological, etc. that could be the reasons for the increasing suicidal cases.

This has prompted the government to launch a tele-consultation facility for children facing stress and also cautioning parents against hurting their sentiments while being concerned about welfare of their wards. The Government of Kerala has also rolled out a comprehensive plan to achieve high health indicators by 2030 as part of the UN programme on Sustainable Development Goals in September 2016. The plan included bringing the suicide rate down from 24.9 per lakh to 16 per lakh population.

### Conclusion

Youth including children are strength of any country for the development of a steady and strong future for the country. Human being always does what he has trained/seen/observed/practices since child hood even if he has grown up. The only changes would be in selection/style of actions which always will be based on the maturity he/she has gained at the time of decision making. Here unexpected situations influenced the mind-set of the entire people especially children. Their immature and in-experienced mind sets are very weak to face such situations. People have not faced such situations before and they are not expecting such incidents in their life. And hence it will take time to take adequate precaution for keeping the mental stability of children. Activities are concentrated more on preventing the spread of pandemic.

A healthy body is very important and regular physical exercise is essential in the present circumstances. At home, skipping, treadmill, sit-ups, push ups, jumping, dancing etc. can be done depending on the age and ability of the child. It is a good idea if parents and kids do it together, it would be fun time for the family. Not only will this keep the body healthy but will also keep the depression away.

Restrict screen time and news time for children. Engage them in creative activities like drawing, craft work or even cooking. Any sign of anxiety or depression in the child must be given cognizance. Parents must talk to their children to comfort them and allay their anxiety. Take professional help if required.

Another important aspect to be kept in mind is the diet. With reduction of physical activity the diet too should be modified accordingly more of green vegetables and fresh fruits and less of carbohydrates, specially sweets and junk foods.

Love, care and support from family members especially mothers and fathers so that children can open up their feelings and anxiety to clear their mind.

Finally we must let our children know that nothing in this world is permanent. Bad times too will pass away and the experience may turn us into better human beings. It is a good idea to inculcate optimism in your child.

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