



INDIRECT PANDEMIC RISKS FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH

The Bottom Line

Severe cases of COVID-19 are seemingly rare for young people; however, the systemic, physical, mental, social and academic effects of COVID-19 have a great impact on children and youth. Close contact with vulnerable children, youth and families, and the provision of information, resources, and creative support strategies will reduce these potential impacts.

Systemic and Physical Impacts

Pediatric health admissions data shows that the rate of youth and families receiving regular healthcare has drastically reduced due to service closures, policy changes to visitation, lack of safe transportation and childcare, and fear of disease contraction within healthcare settings.

The Hospital for Sick Children in Toronto reported a 62% reduction in pediatric emergency department visits in April 2020. Globally, delays bringing children who require medical attention into a facility have resulted in non-COVID-19 related deaths.

Decreased visitation to healthcare facilities has also led to worldwide delays in routine vaccinations. This could lead to reduced herd immunity and a resurgence of preventable disease outbreaks.

Possible Responses

- Many children will not disclose feeling ill due to fear of healthcare facilities and repercussions of being ill during this pandemic. Ensure that children and youth know to tell a trusted adult if they do feel ill, and that being sick does not automatically mean they have contracted COVID-19.
- Ensure that families know virtual check-ups are an option, and should be encouraged and arranged regularly. If an in-person check-up is required, explain why this is necessary as well as the precautions in place to keep everyone safe.

Mental and Social Impacts

With economic recession deepening, an increase in family violence is expected. With restrictions on visitations by child welfare services, this may lead to greater non-accidental injury and increased trauma in already vulnerable young people. With more young people spending time online for connection, child internet sexual exploitation has increased across the globe.

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are expected to increase during lock down, putting children at risk. These experiences are amplified for youth experiencing social isolation: especially new Canadians, refugees, marginalized families, and Indigenous communities who may live with inadequate housing conditions, food insecurity, and financial strain.

The impact of stress from school and child care closures on top of financial uncertainty has led to disruption in sleep schedules, boredom, decreased self-control and higher rates of emotional and behavioural problems in both children and youth. School closures have also led to increased screen time, reduced physical activity, loss of connection with others, increased social anxiety, greater food insecurity, and the loss of a safe place for vulnerable children among other things.

Possible Responses

- Provide age appropriate information and resources on COVID-19 as well as on internet safety. Correct any misinformation as it comes up in conversation. Provide supporting services and resources based on individual family needs.
- Increase supervision and reassess risks within families frequently. Asking simple questions may provide more insight into a child/youth's life than direct, abuse-related questions, especially via tele-communications where a caregiver may be close by. Address any COVID-related threats that may prevent a child from disclosing maltreatment.
- Be prepared to explain the importance of not only why restrictions have been put in place, but also why some of them are being lifted and how the youth will be kept safe during this process (e.g. the reopening of schools in the fall). It is okay to not have all the answers; having the conversation and addressing anxieties is most important.

Academic Impacts

COVID-19 has exacerbated already existing inequities in the attainment of education. This has been named the 'COVID slide' and has widened the inequality gap for children and youth.

Among other things, learning discrepancies are often associated with varying socio-economic status and access to technology with a reliable internet connection. Some students were difficult to keep in contact with after the switch to remote learning. This may have resulted in many students being graded on privilege of what they had access to rather than academic performance.

Before COVID-19, noticeable inequalities existed in abilities to complete homework for children and youth from lower-income backgrounds. An academic achievement gap also exists between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, which has been further impacted by forced remote learning. As Indigenous children are an over-represented population in the child welfare system - especially in the Prairie provinces - learning gaps and learning loss during COVID-19 may be significantly experienced by children and youth in care.

Possible Responses

Should remote learning take place once again or upon the re-entry into schools, it is recommended that:

- attention be paid to children and youth's social, emotional, and mental health needs in addition to their academic needs;
- recognition be given to the impacts of the achievement gaps due to teachers' perceptions of marginalized children and the relationship of privilege to normative understandings of success;
- curriculum be simplified to support learning recovery when learning loss is likely to have occurred;
- development of carefully orchestrated remote and technology-based learning strategies should occur;
- support for teachers, parents, and caregivers should be increased; and,
- creative communication with all those involved in a child/youth's life should be increased.

For original sources and documents, please visit: www.childtraumaresearch.ca