

Young Children and Psychological Distress

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Sitting away from my clients (children and adults) and watching them on the screen talk about the way they are coping with the pandemic, I have been witnessing a lot of anxiety each one is dealing with. It is hard to say who is more affected, difficult to identify the depth of breakdown of internal coping for each one and decide the severity of the impact of the dilution of physical boundaries on each member of the family. The focus here is on the impact of these increased anxieties on the very young (children in the primary years of schooling) as unlike adolescents and adults, their dependence on family systems for attending to their emotional and learning needs are much higher. While one is categorising families and children's experiences based on reporting, it is important to highlight that there is a significant role that the segregation of home and school boundaries play as both spaces offer differing boundary settings and containment experiences that complement a child's holistic growth. The dilution of physical boundaries and classrooms moving into personal spaces has taken away the advantages of these two separate spaces for the child.

I am highlighting some of the recurring themes in counselling sessions with the objective of broadening the understanding of the psychological distress being experienced by children.

To begin, it is important to establish that a classroom is a place where children bring, create and carry back emotions. It is this continuum of learning between the family to the classroom and back to the family that has got severely disrupted by the entry of COVID-19 into our lives. As Vygotsky's Theory of Development states, the construction of knowledge and understanding is an inherently social activity. The adult and child interact and together they construct new knowledge (intermental). It is only by following this that it is possible for the child to internalise new knowledge for individual reflection and understanding (intramental stage). Intramental activity is

accelerated by intermental (social activity). For learning to happen, the intermental zone needs to be successfully maintained. However, if the dialogue between the learner and teacher fails to keep minds mutually attuned, the intermental development zone collapses, and the learning comes to a halt.

Let us look at how the changes brought about by COVID-19 have impacted the intermental development zone, thus affecting the intramental space of children with the following example of a father.

Robert, a young, single father elaborates: *'It is so many changes in such a short period that Varun (his 5 1/2-year-old son) and I don't know how to adapt with it. Some days I know what to do, but I can't implement the said idea while earning my bread and butter. I have been managing my job, home and son for the last 4 years quite effectively with some support from my live-in caretaker and parents. But with the pandemic hitting our country in March, my parents are no longer visiting me, and the caretaker has moved back to her village in Sirsi due to the loss of her husband's job. The temporary caretaker is not as well known to Varun, which impacts his moods severely.'*

One of the first impacts of COVID-19 was the sudden changes in the entire functioning of all systems around us, be it family, school or office. As a result, one had to deal with new rules of conduct before one could grieve over the loss of familiar and safe spaces. This particularly increased fear and anxiety among young children who are usually dependent upon adult caretakers in school and home for containing it for them. In Varun's case, the loss of his caretaker, his grandparents, his peers and, lastly, his school, left him entirely dependent upon his father and teachers for containing his emotions. However, both these sets of caretakers were also struggling with the new and *unfamiliar*. The child's needs thus ended up competing with the adult's needs and increased anxiety at all

levels, disturbing the possibility of nurturing the *intermental connection*.

Secondly, when we look back at the last six months, we see that there were multiple layers of newness. Schools shut down as they neared the end of the academic year, as usual. But when they finally reopened, the children were abruptly thrust into an entirely foreign environment, that of online learning, with a new class, unfamiliar teachers, classmates who did not even know each other's names. It was exponentially worse for children with new admissions. As a ground rule, new tasks, routines and settings are introduced only gradually to young children as their cognitive and emotional development lacks the absorption capacity, unlike that of an adolescent or adult mind. However, in 2020, the enormous amount of newness in the environment was combined with learning goals and before attaining an optimum comfort with those, young children were expected to learn. No wonder we are observing an increased reporting of children's withdrawal symptoms in academic spaces. It is a sign that the intermental space between the learner and teacher is not attuned to the needs of the child and is showing up in the decreased intramental absorption.

Let us go back to Robert's example to understand this further. *'I notice my son being very sad and anxious in the mornings, unlike when he was going to school. I notice he is losing interest in attending classes and is not even doing any writing work despite multiple reminders by teachers. He was far more engaged with his studies last year. I think the loss of excitement is related to multiple reasons, such as loss of fun of getting ready for school, waiting at the bus stand, chatting with friends on the way to school. His young mind is finding it hard to adjust with so many changes and frankly, I am falling short of addressing his needs and so are his teachers.'*

I have been seeing Robert in therapy for the last two years and this is the first time I find him unable to support his son. What this is pointing to is that the children are shifting into primitive defences needed for their survival but in the absence of an understanding among adults regarding *'what is happening to them'*, they are genuinely challenged to support children to stay in touch with their feelings. Sigmund Freud, the father of modern psychology and the founder of psychoanalysis, elaborates on the defences that develop in the context of anxiety as the life-instinct of human beings naturally/unconsciously triggers survival

by distorting reality. As in the above case, Varun is just displaying some of the defences such as denial, repression, regression, dissociation and an instinctive shifting towards numbing his senses and this is clearly apparent through his withdrawal behaviours in personal and academic spaces.

Children's sense of loss

The loss is both at the inter- and intra-psycho experience levels. The physical segregation of spaces and activities conducted in these, in a normal situation, used to offer an opportunity for young children to systemically experience themselves through multiple senses like *touch, smell, sight, sound and finally, words*. In the last six to seven months, the experience of the self and learning is limited to two senses, i.e. hearing and seeing screens. In my experience, the comfort of familiar external physical contact that leads to the associated connection with the self and one's senses and varied opportunities of containment while engagement in learning has disappeared.

The newer ways of contact are hugely dependent on the self. This brings back the limitation concerning young children's development stage that interferes in their healthy engagement in learning if they have to heavily burden themselves with preparatory tasks for learning, such as switching on a laptop, monitoring the connection. As a result, they are arriving with their bodies switched off for learning and mind preoccupied with organising learning tools. To summarise, I can say that the pandemic has taken away the optimum level of hunger satisfaction on the continuum of three Cs in young children's lives to function and learn.

1. Comfort – When a child goes to the same class, keeps his lunch bag on the same table, sits on his desk and waits for the teacher to start the morning ritual, it is this comfort with the familiarity that supports learning.
2. Connection – The connection is at the kinaesthetic level that the child's body gets through moving, touching and feeling his surroundings and peers physically.
3. Containment – The trust in the possibility of containment of his anxiety (if something unexpected troubles him) is enhanced through the presence of his peers and teacher.

Another strongly associated loss for young children is the loss of an opportunity to be seen. It is important to highlight that children in their primary years of schooling are highly dependent on

external stroking to gain a sense of achievement. Their sense of self-worth is experienced through validation of what they do and the experience that stays through social interactions is, *'I do, so I am seen and when I am seen, I am good'*.

Development theorist Erik Erikson elaborates this in his identity theory where he has defined the development milestones for 6 to 11-year-olds of resolving a basic strength of competence. Children of this age travel between industriousness and inferiority while performing tasks and the greater the sense of industry, the greater is the strength of competence. Online classes are taking away the possibility of being seen in multiple ways and thereby directly impacting the psychological growth of children on this parameter. For example, a mother shared how her daughter stopped writing in her notebook because she did not see the point due to the fact that her teacher no longer rewarded her with stars. Another client shared that her 8-year-old loved school for the identity he got from swimming and basketball competitions. Now the only way he can be seen is through academic activities so, he rather not attend classes than feel side-lined.

A small population of children, who prefer fewer interpersonal contacts due to their predisposition towards social anxiety or introverted personality may benefit from not being seen. A couple who seeks counselling were sharing how both their children have shown extremely contrasting reactions to online classes. Their daughter of 6 years being an extrovert, has become extremely disinterested in any form of learning during school and non-school hours while the 10-year-old son, who been an introvert even as an infant has become quite self-generative in creating a lot of activities, tasks around his learning themes that he picks up from online teaching.

Lastly, the theme that is often presented in the counselling space is how diverse coping behaviours demonstrated by young children interact with their home environment, either by adding or reducing their burden. One notices three big categories of families. Firstly, families where there is a lot of space for interpersonal communication and parents who are highly attuned to children's emotions and available for supporting study at home. Secondly, families where parents are unavailable due to social, emotional or professional reasons resulting in children either missing an interaction or disliking a sudden increase in their parent's

physical availability. Thirdly, families where anxiety absorption capacity is minimal and the child's home-schooling is being constantly watched and subsequently, being used to punish them.

As one can imagine, we are not noticing a high number of hurdles among the first set of families as the containment and support is the right combination for children and is, therefore, supporting their ability to learn. However, the bigger distress is being reported by the latter two types of families, as the child's experiences are bordering on neglect and abuse. For example, a young mother puts forth her experience, *'My daughter has never been good in studies and I would be called to the school, but I would often support my daughter and ask school authorities to also accommodate her preferences. But now when I see her being home-schooled, I notice she is just not interested and keeps running out of her room to my workplace. Since it happens daily, I don't have the bandwidth to understand her. Often, she refuses to go back to the study table resulting in me shouting and slapping her. On regular days, by the time she used to return from school, I would have finished my work and would have rested for an hour. This meant that I could attend to her studies without exhausting myself both physically and mentally. But now with the increased workload at home, and her needing my attention all the time, I find myself unable to support her like I previously could'*.

Mitigating distress

To begin with, the most important issue to consider is how we make the self the focus of all the interventions and support the validation of feelings for each member. The teacher who is stretched at all levels needs to be seen for her/his efforts and their feelings need to be considered before we expect them to support children. Parents who are as impacted by the pandemic need to hear that they are important and so are their feelings. And of course, the child who is dependent on both needs to experience that her/his wellbeing is more important than anything that they are doing. Overall a systemic approach is needed. We are noticing many schools have opened their counselling facility for supporting teachers by holding weekly and fortnightly sessions. Similarly, many companies that were not offering free counselling services to their employees have started this service. Such efforts are helpful and need to increase in intensity. Having said this, a reinforced focus would be needed on children. The focus of educational and family

systems needs to be on building an understanding that many children will not be in the *doing mode* during the pandemic as their bodies have moved into coping, yet their *being* is still valuable. So how does one do that? The easiest and most helpful way is by bringing children more and more into a *feeling space* and letting them talk about what is happening to them in an unstructured way. For example, many schools are creating unstructured circle time and life skill classes. Similarly, children

who are feeling more isolated due to lack of communication spaces also need additional support in the form of one-to-one counselling sessions and *feeling checks* set up by the school counsellors. Lastly, as discussed, children derive a lot by being seen through interpersonal contact, so creating group spaces for non-academic activities such as yoga, music, theatre class can be quite beneficial to enable children to come out of their *defence mode* and *become more present in their bodies*.

**Names have been changed to protect identities*



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