

Sensory Influences in Children due to Online Classes in the Covid Era

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Received date: July 01, 2020; Accepted date: August 14, 2020; Published date: August 21, 2020

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Editorial Review

School education has undergone a drastic change in recent times due to the Covid-19 Pandemic. The global choice today is delivering remote virtual learning thanks to the availability of internet technology and this has evolved into a 'New Normal'. Both teachers and students are slowly adapting to the art of online classes and are finding ways to engage in learning activity akin to the erstwhile schooling.

In India, the ancient tradition of 'Gurukula' for education laid emphasis on face-to-face physical engagement and mentorship for acquiring wisdom from the Gurus. This was considered the basis for successful learning and later in the British era too, inculcation of western methods into our school curriculum did not obviate the need for such a personal tutorship until recent times. Post-covid when such a teacher-student connection is not-possible, the advent of online teaching has helped recreate the school environment in virtual reality as a panacea through these uncertain times that we live in today.

Virtual classrooms have brought in the flexibility of learning in the comfort zone of homes using affordable technology. Education is a continuous process and both teachers and children continue to adapt to online learning mandated in all schools today. While teachers have been trained for conducting online classes, the students are still learning on-the-job. As any new tool under experimentation, this online system has also come under scrutiny by educationists, parents and students alike. There was initial skepticism about conducting full-day virtual classrooms with quality control, its benefits and challenges and the eventual outcomes among children [1].

Overall, there is a lifestyle change among children in this lockdown period. They tend to be more engaged with electronic devices playing games and watching streaming videos, since they do not have any outdoor activities to engage in or physically connect with their friends. This in addition to online classes, leads to cumulative harm to their sensory organs and mental health and leads to the premise of this article [2].

Schools have now become successful in rendering classes delivered as online modules. Teachers have inculcated self-discipline to their students by providing protocols for limiting screen-time for learning. Formative assessment methods are used for feedback from pupils regarding online classrooms. While older children adapt well to online curriculum, younger minds less than 10 yrs are difficult to engage. Understanding this fact, schools also offer alternative learning activities like yoga, meditation, exercises, dance, music and art classes to de-stress children and make online learning fun. Offering such modules helps to develop the mental and social wellbeing of children, providing them a sense of positivity and focus better with constructive thoughts during their classes [1, 2].

The major hurdle still remains in establishing a uniform connectivity platform to deliver information without a digital divide among students. Certain children are unable to personally engage with the teachers and 'sync' mentally with the rest of the class as they may not be techno-savvy or not adapted this new learning method unlike their peers. It is a challenge for teachers to monitor each child individually if there are persistent connectivity issues. Also peer learning interaction among kids is lost and introducing new concepts are often difficult online without physical feedback. There is also the risk of flawed information and Covid paranoia delivered from the web, which affects the focus and concentration abilities of these young minds. This group of children are the one who are susceptible to ill health, stress and depression leading to 'lockdown syndrome' as in adults [3, 4].

Especially, there appears to be an impact on their higher mental functions like cognition and behavior and also on their special senses of vision and hearing. We as ENT specialists are nowadays consulting anxious parents with their children complaining of episodic headaches, photophobia, eye and ear strain, hearing loss, tinnitus, vertigo, imbalance, stress, fatigue and insomnia. Parents also mention cognitive and behavioral changes including lack of interest and distraction during online classes. Such a phenomenon has been largely unheard of in the past and seems like an emerging issue related to the current trend of virtual learning and gadget addiction [4, 5].

Excessive use of gadgets such as mobile phones, tablets and computers has been known to cause physical and mental damage to children. Children are likely to become sedentary and overweight, have vision problems and can even develop seizures rarely when they spend too much time on gadgets. Noise and music induced hearing loss have been a well known entity among children exposed to prolonged electronic signals. ENT specialists recommend the use of certified good quality head phones with anti-noise filters to offer a pleasing listening experience for learning. Sound levels should not exceed the prescribed limits on these phones and adequate breaks away from noise exposure are crucial to allow time for the ears to recuperate and rejuvenate. Similarly ophthalmologists drive home the point on using radiation filtered screens and to maintain a comfortable distance while online which is more pleasing to the eye. It is essential to make children understand the risks of hearing and visual impairment and restrict their exposure time while adhering to good gadget etiquette [5].

Training children to lead a good life with healthy practices is the shared responsibility of both teachers and parents during this pandemic. As Covid-19 is expected to stay for the best part of this year and there is no clear mandate on reopening of schools in the near future, virtual classes will continue to be the way forward. Keeping the above medical ill-effects in mind, educators need to create a holistic blended online pedagogy combining spaced face-to-face synchronous learning time via Zoom, Google class room, etc along with adequate

asynchronous offline self-learning opportunities, which will allow students to relax, process and reflect on their learning.^{3, 5}

Parental responsibility with supervision becomes paramount in order to create a e-learning friendly environment for their wards, along with healthy lifestyle. Parents need to identify early signs of sensory disturbances in children while they are online, and seek timely medical help. Health workers need to create parental awareness regarding the health issues related to virtual learning and emphasize the importance of implementing gadget etiquette early among their children. Communication gadgets have become an integral part of our life in these testing times to connect to the outside world. Making use of this technology, online classes hail as a crucial lifeline for students caught in the consequences of this pandemic and helps as a way of coping with their home confinement. Thereby, Covid-19 has indeed taught the world of education - a lesson for life!

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