

Parenting in the Current COVID-19 Reality – Understanding and Addressing Parental Concerns using a Qualitative Methodology

Abstract

Background: The COVID-19 pandemic has brought in significant changes in the lifestyles of families worldwide. This study is aimed to look at the parental perspectives and concerns related to the challenges in parenting in the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic through qualitative methodology. **Methods:** The dataset for the study was the queries raised by parents who participated in a parent training program that addressed concerns related to parenting in the initial phase of the pandemic situation (April 2020). Two training sessions were conducted by one of the authors as part of community outreach activities in the department of child and adolescent psychiatry at a tertiary care academic institute of national importance. Content analysis was used to analyze the dataset manually. **Results:** The major themes that emerged were concerns related to handling children in home-bound situation, handling siblings of different age groups, caring for children with developmental disorders, managing work-life balance, concerns related to screen time among children, and general parenting-related queries for young children and adolescents. Based on the themes emerged, information pamphlets addressing these specific concerns were prepared for wide dissemination among parents. **Conclusion:** This study attempted to understand the parental perspectives and experiences related to parenting challenges in the current pandemic situation. Parental narratives highlighted some of the unique challenges pertaining to the “new normal.” Disseminating educational and informational resources during the pandemic are an essential systemic response that will benefit the community in resource-limited settings.

Keywords: Challenges, children and adolescents, COVID-19, parenting, qualitative

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented unique challenges for parents across the world. The resulting disruptions in daily life have precipitated an unprecedented situation for the global populace, with especially children and parents struggling to adjust to this “new normal.”^[1]

The nations worldwide have taken extraordinary measures to curtail the spread of the pandemic which could disrupt every aspect of a child’s life. With educational institutions, child-care facilities, and public recreational spaces closed, children are confined to home leading to social isolation, lack of access to outdoor activities, increased dependence on parents, and high degree of uncertainty about their future.^[2] Social media and family conversations being entirely dominated

by the pandemic creates a constant atmosphere of fear and anxiety, exposing children to large amounts of negative information, which can be overwhelming from a developmental perspective.^[3] These adverse effects of the pandemic are likely to be more pronounced in children with preexisting vulnerabilities such as children with special needs and preexisting mental health issues, because of the break-in continuity of much needed specialized care and support, along with added strain of restructuring their daily life.^[4,5]

The pandemic has caused psychological distress and collateral concerns for parents as they take up new roles and responsibilities, both with regard to themselves and their children while adapting to this novel and evolving situation.^[6] Major concerns contributing toward parental stress are related to the health or behavioral issues, educational worries, disciplining the child, future planning, modeling good values, and even

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everyday tasks.^[7] Many parents are working from home and with schools and other supportive services closed, striking a balance between full-time parenting and home-schooling while simultaneously maintaining their work productivity is challenging. Parents are concerned about the implications of their child's social isolation or the approach and outcomes of home-schooling being imparted by them.^[8] With restrictions on movement and limited opportunities for outdoor sports and group activities, children and adolescents are increasingly indulging in the virtual world, leading to frequent interpersonal conflicts with parents. Some parents are also experiencing financial insecurities, leading to increased psychological distress.^[9] Disruption in social ties and reduced access to extra-familial support due to social distancing measures adds to parental stress.^[10]

Accumulating research indicates that increased parental stress is associated with poorer parenting-related outcomes such as harsh parenting and negative parent-child interactions or overprotective parenting, in turn leading to increased propensity of problem behaviors and maladjustment in children.^[11,12] In contrast, the ability to accept and understand children's emotional and behavioral concerns in a comforting and nonjudgmental manner is likely to encourage problem-solving attitudes and promotes resilience in children subjected to traumatic situations like the current pandemic.

During any health-related disaster, it is common for social and health agencies to offer their expertise in the form of guidelines to address emerging challenges. Organizations like the World Health Organization and United Nations Children's Fund have made expert recommendations on parenting. However, it is still unknown to what extent parents are able to follow and benefit from these general recommendations, and there is a felt need to gain more insights into the specific parental perspectives under these stressful circumstances. This would in turn be beneficial in devising appropriate and culturally relevant solutions best suited to the needs of both parents and children, thereby mitigating the impact of COVID-19 and facilitating a better overall adjustment.

Although there is a plenty of evidence supporting increased parental stress during the pandemic, there is a paucity of qualitative research on understanding parental perspectives and specific parental concerns in the current scenario. The primary objective of the study is to understand the parental perspectives and concerns related to the challenges in parenting in the current COVID-19 pandemic situation using a qualitative methodological approach. The secondary objective is to prepare and disseminate information leaflets addressing specific parental concerns.

METHODS

The study was conducted as part of community outreach activity by the Department of Child and Adolescent

Psychiatry at a tertiary care academic institute during the first wave of the pandemic (April 2020). One of the authors conducted two educational parent training sessions on an online platform for the staff of an organization on parenting challenges during the pandemic. The sessions were attended by a large number of participants who were mostly working parents living all across the country, with children and adolescents aged 8 months – 18 years. At the end of the program, parental concerns and queries were invited in the form of written questions. The total number of questions received was $n = 45$, broadly related to the challenges of parenting during the pandemic. These 45 questions were considered as dataset for the current study after obtaining permission from the organization to use them as the part of the study. The study was approved by the institutional ethics committee.

The dataset was shared with the co-authors, who repeatedly went through it to understand and identify the context of concerns and queries. Reading and re-reading the datasets were done to familiarize with the data. Content analysis was done manually by examining core statements, commonalities, and differences were examined. A deductive approach was used to complement the study objective. A framework of themes and subthemes was used. The consensus on the themes and subthemes framework was arrived based on joint discussions to ensure the reliability of the findings. Based on the final themes, information leaflets addressing each theme and corresponding subthemes were prepared and jointly evaluated by the co-authors. All response documents were collated in the form of a booklet for dissemination among the participants and in the community for the benefit of a larger number of families. Figure 1 depicts the process flow of the study.

RESULTS

The dataset was divided into two broad categories: (i) concerns related to young children (<6 years of age) and (ii) concerns related to school-going children and adolescents, given the differences in the developmental needs and parenting strategies between the two groups.

The major themes and subthemes based on the participant parents' concerns are tabulated in Table 1. The samples of questions and core statements from parents are presented at the end of each subsection, reflecting the themes and subthemes centering on their experiences and concerns related to parenting in the current pandemic situation. The results are presented according to the major themes generated from the data set.

Engaging young children in a home-bound situation

In our study, concerns related to engaging children reflected difficulties in planning and establishing a routine ($n = 4$), challenges in providing age-appropriate engagement ($n = 16$), helping children cope with prolonged indoor environments ($n = 8$).

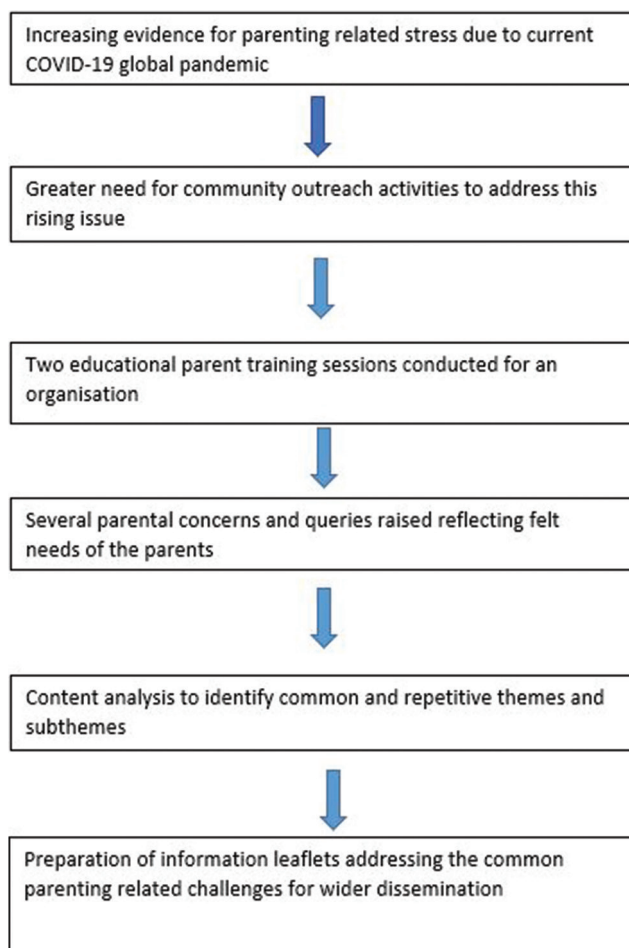


Figure 1: Process flow of the study

“Can you share effective tips to create and maintain routinesthat over a period of time a child can relate to? It is very difficult to establish routines that could be followed regularly.”

“Could you.....recommend some indoor games/names for my 3 year old ...enjoy and can play without parental support.”

“How to make 2 year olds sit next to us when we are working and get engaged in some activity.....I try getting toys or activity sets next to me, he never sits and wants to go around climbing on the laptop.”

Parenting young children

Among the various challenges of the pandemic, parenting young children are pivotal. The dataset reflected the following themes concerning parenting young children: handling temper tantrums ($n = 5$), multiple parenting situations ($n = 2$), understanding and practicing positive and effective parenting ($n = 5$), quality time with young children ($n = 7$), using instructions and commands for young children ($n = 7$), and increased expectations from young children ($n = 8$).

Table 1: Major themes and sub-themes based on the participant parent’s perspectives and concerns

| Major themes generated (n =frequency of themes) | Sub-themes generated (n =frequency of subthemes) |
|--|---|
| Engaging young children in a home-bound situation ($n=13$) | Challenges in establishing a routine ($n=4$) Challenges in providing age appropriate engagement ($n=16$) Helping children cope with prolonged indoor environments ($n=8$) |
| Parenting young children ($n=20$) | Handling temper tantrums in young children ($n=5$) Positive and effective parenting ($n=5$) Quality time with young children ($n=7$) Multiple parenting situations ($n=2$) Using instructions and commands for young children ($n=7$) Increased expectations from young children ($n=8$) |
| Handling siblings ($n=4$) | Handling sibling rivalry ($n=4$) Giving protected time ($n=2$) Engaging children of different developmental ages ($n=3$) |
| Caring for children with developmental disorders ($n=6$) | Lack of access to therapy/continuity of care ($n=4$) Home-based interventions ($n=4$) |
| Managing work-life balance during COVID-19 ($n=7$) | Engaging children during working hours ($n=8$) Parental role strain ($n=4$) Negative emotions in parents ($n=4$) |
| Concerns related to screen time use in children and adolescents ($n=10$) | Impact of screen time on child development ($n=4$) Screen time as a pacifier ($n=2$) Online/virtual learning ($n=6$) Balancing screen time with age appropriate activities ($n=6$) Knowledge regarding professional recommendations ($n=2$) |
| Understanding adolescents ($n=4$) | Understanding normative adolescent needs ($n=4$) |

“My 2-year-old daughter has developed a habit of crying for simple reasons...For ex., when I ask her not to touch the laptop.... How do we deal with this?”

“We have a 3-year-old son. As of now, my in-laws are staying with us due to the lockdown.....We might tell him to behave in a manner which is completely different from what his grandparents advise him. How do we manage this conflict?”

“How can one refrain from using negative words while dealing with 2- and 6-year-old kids because they tend to learn those words-for example the word no, don’t or stop, etc.?”

“My son is 20 months old. Since we both work whole day and are busy working on the laptop he gets irritated. He hates our laptops..... comes to us to try to shut down it directly. I don't know how to make him understand that it is important for us to work.”

Handling siblings

The following repetitive subthemes are identified with regard to handling siblings: handling sibling rivalry ($n = 4$), giving protected time ($n = 2$), and engaging children of different developmental ages ($n = 3$).

“I have two kids. One is 1.5 years and the other is 3 years. I am not able to be equally responsive to both. As the younger one is more active, attention unknowingly goes to him, and older one is often silent.”

“I have twins. My son is normal, but daughter has Rett's syndrome. He is too young to understand her situation and it becomes impossible to handle both of them without any external help.”

“I have two daughters, 8 and 5. They both have fun/fight with each other.....When we try to discipline them, they start throwing tantrums,....How to handle this situation?”

Caring for children with developmental disorders

Lack of access to therapy/continuity of care ($n = 4$) and need for home-based interventions ($n = 4$) were the subthemes that emerged.

“I have a 6-year-old son with autism. In the current scenario when most of the kids are engaged in online teaching, there is nothing much for us. We cannot do therapies online effectively. How do we engage him?”

“My child is hyperactive and he has a condition called dystonia. We found that he enjoys rhymes or some music which soothes him. However,.....he is hooked to music and when we shut off the music he gets very cranky..... I can sense he enjoys it. However I want him to explore his surroundings. How do I handle it?”

Managing work-life balance during COVID-19

Subthemes under the major theme of work-life balance were parental role strain ($n = 4$), negative emotions in parents ($n = 4$), and engaging children during working hours ($n = 8$).

“I live in a nuclear family and my role requires me to work for long hours at times. Since the lock down, I have gone crazy juggling between the roles. My daughter keeps telling me to keep my laptop away and play with her. For all the meetings where I have to interact, I have to put on some rhyme for her, so that she does not disturb me, and I feel extremely guilty about it.”

Concerns related to screen time use in children and adolescents

The following subthemes were identified with regard to screen time during COVID-19: Impact of screen time on child development ($n = 4$), screen time as a pacifier ($n = 2$), online/virtual learning ($n = 6$), balancing screen time with age-appropriate activities ($n = 6$), and knowledge regarding professional recommendations ($n = 2$).

“My child has got addicted to the mobile since lockdown. Though I try to play with him in between my busy work schedule, I am unable to restrict his screen time.”

“My son loves to watch videos while eating and it's easy for parents like me to feed him as he is distracted. I am worried that my son is not enjoying food as he eats while watching YouTube. What should I do?”

“How do I manage the virtual learning experience with my 5-years-old son? It is difficult to make him concentrate on studies.”

“Even when I engage my 5-year-old son in coloring or building blocks or other games, he does not involve himself for more than half to one hour and then wants the mobile to watch cartoons.”

Understanding the needs of adolescents

Samples of parental narratives reflecting concerns related to adolescents

“My daughter is 11 years. I have created an every week 1.5 h zoom meet up call for her to talk to her school friends in absence of physical school. Is this okay?”

“I have a 13 year old teenager. With online classes, home work is online, the habit of reading books and writing is going low every day.....I would like to understand what else I can do in the current scenario which can help him with his teenage requirements?”

This was considered a minor theme in terms of repetitiveness.

DISCUSSION

This study was an attempt to understand parents' experiences during the pandemic situation and emerging challenges in parenting. The classification and categorization using a qualitative methodological approach helped understand the depth of the concerns and practical challenges, facilitating the development of educational information leaflets. Parents play a vital role in enhancing and promoting the mental health of children and adolescents. Understanding the parental perspectives will help formulate and tailor interventions to suit the needs of the families. The findings of the study are consistent with the accumulating literature on the impact of COVID-19 on parenting.^[13]

Parent information leaflets were prepared to address each core theme of parental concerns and collated as a booklet for wider dissemination. The educational document was prepared from a universal and promotive interventions perspective, focusing on parenting strategies, engaging children of different developmental ages and needs, and promoting parental mental health and well-being. The leaflets were structured in the form of a background, contextualization of the concerns, and parenting strategies which are informed by developmental and behavioral training principles. Individual leaflets on each core theme ($n = 7$) were collated into a parent resource booklet.

Among the host of challenges posed by the pandemic, parenting young children are pivotal. It may naturally increase parental stress and negative emotionality when they are unable to keep up to their child's needs and expectations. Indian parents also have unique challenges in terms of skewed expectations of parental roles. The division of responsibilities among the partners, including parenting is indispensable in the current situation. Multiple parenting figures in an extended family environment are unique to the collectivistic societies, especially the Indian settings. On the one hand, multiple and extended family members offer additional support in child-rearing practices, which are currently withdrawn due to the national policies on social distancing. On the other hand, grandparents and extended family members use differential and inconsistent parenting practices, in turn impacting a young child's socio-emotional development. The evolving nature of the pandemic also poses increasing responsibilities and expectations from young children to maintain equilibrium in the family atmosphere and functioning. Although adolescents may be expected to self-regulate and take up responsibilities, understanding their needs and providing enriching experiences under adequate supervision is important.

The "new normal" should parallelly reconstruct and re-evaluate the expectations, capabilities, and competencies of both children and their parents. Given the uncertainty of the pandemic and postpandemic situation, and its long-term impact, commitment to positive parenting practices, value-based behaviors, and healthy family interactions is imperative.^[14,15] There is a need to educate and sensitize stakeholders regarding the significant impact on parents due to role collisions and increased responsibilities and expectations.

Families of children with special needs undergo significant stress.^[16] Transitioning from center-based interventions to home-bound environments, getting accustomed to a new routine, and learning through virtual modality pose additional challenges. This is compounded by the paucity of developmentally appropriate and meaningful resources for children's engagement. Expert reports and statements have emphasized concerns of delayed diagnosis of developmental

concerns and treatment initiation due to the restriction of healthcare services to emergencies and anxiety surrounding infection in the hospital environments.^[15] Empowering parents of these children to provide home-based interventions using effective therapeutic strategies, behavior management, and identifying key issues necessitating consultation is preminent.

Although the meta-context of the educational sessions was "parenting during the current COVID-19 reality," no specific concerns or queries related to how to talk to children about COVID-19, understanding their perception about the pandemic, and addressing their fears and concerns using age-appropriate methods were raised in the current study. This could be probably because this aspect was adequately addressed during the parent training sessions and wider availability of resource materials.

The pandemic is a significant adverse childhood experience, irrespective of additional vulnerabilities and risk factors. Beyond present challenges, promoting mental health and resilience is indispensable in combating the long-term impact on developmental and psychosocial well-being.

Limitations and future directions

The study results cannot be generalized. The participants in the parent training sessions belonged to middle and high socioeconomic status with a good educational background. The study did not involve participants from economically disadvantaged families who have endured maximum psychosocial impact during the pandemic. Parental concerns in this study predominantly focused on challenges in parenting preschool children and comparatively lesser concerns related to adolescents. This bias could be explained by the fact that most participants were parents of young children.

Since the study was based on qualitative data as part of group parent training sessions, it did not reflect concerns related to specific mental health care needs, such as service utilization in the lockdown period and the need for continuity of care in both children and their parents. One-on-one in-depth interviews using rigorous qualitative methodologies will be of immense help to understand the subjective experiences of children and their parents during the pandemic. Understanding what helped overcome the prolonged period of uncertainty from children's perspective is the need of the hour.

CONCLUSION

This qualitative study was an attempt to understand the parental perspectives and experiences related to challenges in parenting in the current pandemic situation. Parental narratives highlighted some of the unique challenges pertaining to the "new normal." Further large-scale studies with rigorous methodology are required to plan universal

and preemptive interventions to mitigate the effects of the pandemic on the mental health of families and children.

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Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

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