

Child Neglect And Its Repercussions In Covid Era

Child Neglect: Concept, Indian perspective and its repercussion in covid era

Nagalakshmi Chowdhary¹, B Suba Ranjana², Subhathira Rajasekaran³, V Rajashekar Reddy⁴, Nisha Gupta⁵, A Thirumagal Anuraaga⁶

¹*Professor and HOD, Department of Paediatric and Preventive Dentistry, Sri Siddhartha Dental College and Hospital, Tumkur;*

²*Postgraduate, Department of Paediatric and Preventive Dentistry, Sri Siddhartha Dental College and Hospital, Tumkur (Corresponding Author);*

³*Senior lecturer, Department of Paediatric and Preventive Dentistry, Sri Siddhartha Dental College and Hospital, Tumkur;*

⁴*Reader, Department of Paediatric and Preventive Dentistry, Sri Siddhartha Dental College and Hospital, Tumkur;*

^{5,6}*Post Graduate, Department of Paediatric and Preventive Dentistry, Sri Siddhartha Dental College and Hospital, Tumkur;*

⁶*Post Graduate, Department of Paediatric and Preventive Dentistry, Sri Siddhartha Dental College and Hospital, Tumkur*

ABSTRACT:

Neglect is one of the most common forms of child abuse, yet is different from other forms of abuse as it refers to omission or negligence in meeting the basic needs of the child. "Neglect of Neglect" is a universal problem that needs one step more attention than the ever soaring physical and sexual abuse. The wellbeing and security of children makes a fundamental part in developing a prosperous nation. Healthcare professionals and teachers play a key role in identifying the child abuse and neglect, and thereby provide an immediate and a long term support to the children. A search was done from pubmed and google scholar with key terms "child" "child neglect" "Covid" "child rights". The purpose of the present article is to provide an overview of the child neglect from a medical to socio-legal perspective in India and its negligence amidst the Covid pandemic and to ensure a prompt comprehensive multidisciplinary approach to protect the neglected child.

Keywords : *Child neglect, Child neglect model, child protection legislations, Covid-19*

1. INTRODUCTION

Neglect is the most prevalent forms of child abuse that is often associated with other forms of abuse. Child neglect is different from other forms of abuse, because it refers to omissions or negligence in meeting the basic needs of a child. These omissions repeated over time can lead to serious health problems including the death of a child.¹ The “neglect of neglect” is a universal problem, which needs to be understood in the background of giving more attention to physical and sexual abuse by agencies and neglecting the ‘child neglect’ as such. However the evidence from different sources show that the child neglect is a condition which is as prevalent upto 70-80% even in developed countries like United States.² The amount of research conducted in this domain is also limited. Child neglect continues to receive less research attention than other forms of maltreatment despite its contribution to individual and system costs and outcomes. The lack of clear conceptualization has contributed to the limitations with respect to the knowledge and practice related aspects of child neglect.³ A developing nation like India is facing multiple challenges in the domain of child neglect; nevertheless, we need to find better solutions to the issue. Resolving the problem of child neglect is very important for the future of an aspiring nation like ours. Hence, the purpose of the present article is to provide an overview of the child neglect from a medical to socio-legal perspective in India and its negligence amidst the Covid pandemic and to ensure a prompt comprehensive multidisciplinary approach to protect the neglected child.

2. DEFINITION, CONCEPT & TYPES

A. World Health Organization defined Child Abuse and Neglect (CAN) as “Every kind of physical, sexual, emotional abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, commercial or other exploitation resulting in actual or potential harm to the child’s health, survival, development or dignity in the context of a relationship of responsibility, trust or power.”⁴ Legal definitions of Child Neglect accounts or blames the parent and or the caregiver, it fails to get the big picture that it involves shared responsibility between the parent, family, community, society.⁵

B. Child neglect can happen for a number of reasons. There is no unique theoretical model for explaining this phenomenon. Blumenthal summarizes the three different causal neglect models such as, model of parental deficit, an environmental deficit model and an ecological-transactional model.

B1. In Parental deficit model, it focuses primarily on individual i.e parent or the guardian but not the community that is responsible for ensuring child welfare. This does not account for social or economical circumstances that could affect parenting.

B2. In environmental deficit model, it focuses on the material deprivation causing child neglect i.e., the poverty that induces stress making the parent deprive the child of material and emotional needs.

B3. In ecological-transactional model, it is the interaction of family characteristic and environmental factors i.e., the parental low self-esteem, unemployment, mocking of the community, lack of social and governmental support, poor relationship with community and society as a whole.

Child neglect is a heterogeneous structure that covers rather negative psychological experiences of children, such as poor quality of supervision, inadequate food, lack of education, and lack of appropriate healthcare.³ The prevailing structure in which the modern child is understood is established by psychological and sociological models of child development and maturation. Children are considered more as vulnerable sector who need constant positive guidance, support and encouragement to grow up to be self independent adult. Research in the areas of child neglect support the ecological approach. Many factors which are interlinked contribute towards child neglect. Within a larger and intersecting context of individual, family, community and social factors, child neglect occurs. The key to proactive policy and program planning is to identify what modifiable factors influence recurrence.⁵ Amongst the reported child abuse and victim cases, child neglect accounts for approximately 47% and child abuse approximately 53%. Since child neglect definitions differ and reporting of abuse laws do not always require the mandatory reporting of neglect, it is difficult to estimate or significantly compare the global dimensions of the issue.

C. Four prominent types of child neglect are: ¹

1. Physical Neglect – where the basic needs are not met such as food, water, shelter etc.,
2. Educational neglect – where the child is denied of education,
3. Emotional Neglect- where the child is denied of warmth and care,
4. Medical/Dental Neglect – unacknowledged medical/dental conditions, child is denied of appropriate treatment, vaccinations etc,

UNITED NATION'S APPROACH:

As per the widely acknowledged UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN CRC) (1989), all persons up to the age of 18 years are children.⁶ Child Protection has been defined in the UN CRC, Article 19.1, as “States Parties shall take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse, while in the care of parent(s), legal guardian(s) or any other person who has the care of the child.”⁷ The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) represents the highest aspirations for a bright future for the world’s children and is a crucial opportunity to realize the rights of the child worldwide. It dispenses a clear framework for execution and aims to improve children’s lives through a universal agenda with clear goals and targets. Fulfilling children’s rights is a prerequisite for realizing the 2030 Agenda.⁸ Children are more than twice as likely as adults to struggle to make ends meet, in spite of global initiatives. Approximately 663 million live in “multi-dimensionally poor” households, lacking necessities such as nutrition or clean water. Around 385 million are estimated to live in extreme poverty, surviving on less than USD \$1.90 a day. The SDGs will not be reached by 2030 and children will continue to be left behind without accelerated intervention, systemic, concrete implementation and lasting solutions at global and domestic levels.⁹

CONSEQUENCES OF NEGLECT

While child neglect is seen as a universal concern, research on the direct effects of neglect are sparse and in the shadow of studies of other types of child abuse. Despite this, it is evident that the effects of neglect are several and long-term, based on the research findings so far.¹⁰ Up to a certain point, all functions of the brain depend on the presence of suitably designed and timed repeated characters that stimulate neural system. Normal development can be interrupted by deprivation related to neglect and result in dysregulation of the neural system and lead to neurocognitive deficits.¹¹ When exposed to a combination of neglect and other forms of abuse, it results in the excessive development of areas of the brain responsible for survival which leads to anxiety, impulsiveness, poor affective regulation and hyperactivity, while limbic and cortical functions remain less developed which affects empathy and cognitive skills. The children who experienced neglect in early childhood have difficulties in cognitive, linguistic and behavioral functioning.¹² Children who are neglected suffer more from repression than the peers that are subjected to other types of abuse.¹³ In the social and physical environment, children are more passive, withdrawn, apathetic, less involved, showing significant neurocognitive and linguistic developmental delays. The child is thought to internalize the message of his worthlessness and assume that he will not succeed in acquiring it.¹⁴ Children with early experience of neglect can develop internalized (depression, withdrawal, lack of confidence) and externalized (impulsive, aggressive, acting out) behavioural problems in later periods.¹² A persistent negative view of themselves and others, negative interpersonal perceptions and difficulties in solving interpersonal problems and difficulties in achieving academic achievement accompany the neglect of school-age children.¹⁵

3. INDIAN PERSPECTIVE:

The number of children needing treatment and protection in India is enormous and growing. Unmonitored families, widespread poverty and lack of education contribute to very little child care during the early developmental years. Even services that are freely available are poorly utilized.¹⁶ There are approximately 440 million children in India; about 40 percent of them are disadvantaged or suffer from difficult circumstances. Every year, 27 million babies are born. A large majority of these births, often unplanned and where parents cannot afford adequate care for the child, and are among the underprivileged segment of the population. Especially important are the condition of the infant and early childhood as the rates of morbidity and mortality remain very high. Maternal feeding, unsafe births, low birth weight babies and inadequate treatment for newborns, lack of sufficient vaccinations, malnutrition, gender inequality, neglect of early development and education are critical concerns that need to be adequately addressed. Child rearing practices reflect social norms and, very often, adverse traditions, especially in illiterate and poorly informed societies they are transferred from one generation to the next and are extremely resistant to change. The prevalence of all forms of child abuse (physical abuse (66 %), sexual abuse (50%) and emotional abuse (50 %) is extremely high, and cases of child neglect gets unreported as per the Government of India survey (2007).^{17,18} The Government has given the Ministry of Women and Child Development a focal responsibility for child rights and development (MWCD). The central ministries and other sectoral management of the system has not given children the convergent

attention they deserve. Health services are in one sectoral portfolio, child growth and nutrition in another, schooling in another, services for children with disabilities in another, community services impacting older children in another and initiatives for children rescued from child labour in another.¹⁹ The 9th ISPCAN Asia-Pacific Conference on Child Abuse & Neglect (APCCAN 2011) outcome document "Delhi Declaration" reiterated its determination to condemn neglect and abuse of children and to work for the achievement of children's rights and the building of a loving society for every child, free from violence and discrimination.²⁰ It urged and affirmed the urgent need to integrate guidelines, norms and measures into nationwide strategic planning, to prevent and respond to violence against children. The idea of a 'careful community' as a children's right, proposed a generation ago by Dr. Eric Ram, an eminent Indian public health expert, argues that every sector, every service or infrastructure in the day-to-day life of a child—and every person in any of these—every branch of the state and its institutions—has the potential to be a 'careful community' for children. It is a concern of attitude, not just caring for the child, but also caring for what happens to a child, and thus respecting the ethics that should direct each and every relationship with any child.²¹

NATIONAL LEGISLATIONS

With the drafting of new legislation and revisions to current laws, the legal structure for children's rights is being improved. These include the Food Security Act (2013), The Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, 2012, Right to Free and Compulsory Education Act (2009), Prohibition of Child Marriage Act (2006), the Commissions for Protection of Child Rights Act (2005), Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act 2000, amended in 2006, Right to Information Act (RTI) 2005, the Goa Children's (amendment) Act 2005, the Child Labour (Prohibition & Regulation) Act, 1986 (two notifications in 2006 & 2008), expanded the list of banned and hazardous processes and occupation) and the Information and Technology (Amendment) Act 2008.²² The child helpline number 1098 that was launched in 1996 is India's first 24 hour telephonic service that is accessible to anyone in need working socially for children in distress across the nation. The call is answered by trained Contact officers present across six call centres such as in Mumbai, Delhi, Kolkata, Chennai and Bengaluru. The call gets further connected to the field partner of Childline India Foundation of the concerned city. The service operates in 366 cities in 24 states and union territories, supported by the Ministry of Women and Child Development, Government of India.²³ The Prohibition of Child Marriage Act 2006, the Child Labor Prohibition and Control Act 1986, or the Right to Education Act 2009, require harmonisation. Among these laws and regulations, important discrepancies occur, beginning with the child's definition and age. Conflicts with personal laws should also be addressed, ensuring universal safety of the children irrespective of the community they belong to.²⁴

COVID 19 AND ITS IMPACT IN INDIA:

Worldwide, children have been profoundly affected by the social and economic upheavals caused by COVID-19. The pandemic unleashed a perfect storm into the marginalized lives of children. A single disaster that created a domino effect creating ripples of unforeseen chain of secondary or multiple risks. The multifaceted impacts on children are psychological, mental, physical, social and cultural. Due to lockdown, children got limited or no opportunity

to connect with their peers, teachers and or healthcare professionals making them vulnerable to negative situations.²⁵ Common risk factors for violence, abuse and neglect associated with Covid 19 irrespective of the community they belong to include:²⁶ Increased poverty and food insecurity due to loss of jobs and incomes in the family; The inability of the children to access education either in person or online; Increase in children's digital activity and a decrease in caregiver monitoring, exposing them to greater digital risks; Absence of nutritious meal previously provided by the schools and care programmes such as Mid Day Meal Scheme; Disruption of peer, social support network for children/caregivers; Breakdown in routines of children/caregiver; Forceful discontinuation from school and steered in the direction of child labour; Gender inequality with girl child under the age of 15 are forced to marry early. All of these factors can increase the risk of harm to children who are already trapped in abusive and neglectful situations. In the first week of April itself, the government helpline "Childline 1098" received more than 92,000 SOS calls. Unfortunately, whatever limited discussion takes place over CAN, it is mostly centred towards physical aspect of abuse. The visible damage outweighs the potential damage in the eyes of society. Nevertheless, non-physical forms of hostile treatment affects the emotional development of the child, especially in current times of pandemic.²⁷

4. PREVENTION OF CHILD ABUSE, VIOLENCE AND NEGLECT AMIDST PANDEMIC

As per the ecological model, they argued that children's basic needs were numerous and should be met by families, communities, and societies.³

At micro-level (Parents)

Especially in these pandemic circumstances, it is vital for parents to note the simple actions that children need to adopt, such as washing hands regularly with soap, not touching the face and social distance that helps protect themselves and their families. Speak and listen: ask the kids to talk about what is happening. Let them express what they feel about pandemic, school closure, quarantine and or anything that is in their mind so that they can be comforted of anxiety. Have Corona free time. Make sure that the corona conversations do not dominate every time which may create fear in the children. Ask them to play games, listen to music, creative learning to engage in activities which give comfort to the child. Make sure the children eat first if things really get rough on the family's income and also ensure to engage and monitor them that they do not lag themselves behind in terms of education.²⁶

At Macro-level (Government)

Staff from the health, education and child services departments should be educated on pandemic-related risks to child safety, including prevention of sexual exploitation and violence, and trained for methodological reporting of these concerns at the earliest and safely. Referral pathways should be established and children whose parents or guardians are admitted to treatment centers should be offered psychosocial assistance. The provision of critical health services by ring fence midwives and nurses who provide perinatal care should be safe and protected. Economic and materialistic assistance should be given to families facing a financial crisis in the midst of a pandemic that can be potentially benefit the children.

The government should design, broadcast and publish distant material (television lessons, online), print and safely supply textbooks and home study workbooks as the schools are closed. If schools began to re-open it should ensure the safety of the health of children, adequate measures to maintain social distancing. The pandemic has created chaos for the future of the child, from academic achievement to social abilities thereby impacting their mental health as well. The need for the hour is to protect the child, as the fall out will not leave them in their lives. The best interest of the child is the key goal that can be accomplished by protecting the child and making the child the highest priority in this pandemic.²⁶

5. CONCLUSION

As labeled by scholars the "neglect of neglect," child neglect has gained the least scientific and public attention compared to other forms of abuse. Child neglect should be addressed from an ecological viewpoint and intervention strategies should be of a holistic nature. The nation's future relies on how its children contribute to the development. It is therefore the responsibility of the state or society to look after every child in order to ensure the complete development of his or her personality. Given the large population of children, particularly among deprived rural and urban communities in India, socio-economic constraints and the lack of well-developed child protection systems, it is of highest concern to take all possible steps to prevent child neglect primarily. Illiterate parents are unaware of their rights of children. They need to be made aware of the rights of children, to claim and gain them. Multidisciplinary child protection practitioners should work together and track the efforts of the government to protect children's rights.

6. REFERENCE

- [1] Avdibegović E, Brkić M. Child Neglect-Causes and Consequences. *Psychiatria Danubina*. 2020 Oct 1;32(Suppl 3):337-42.
- [2] Dubowitz H. Child neglect. *Pediatric annals*. 2014 Nov 1;43(11):444-5.
- [3] Dubowitz H, Black M, Starr Jr RH, Zuravin S. A conceptual definition of child neglect. *Criminal justice and behavior*. 1993 Mar;20(1):8-26.
- [4] Mulder TM, Kuiper KC, van der Put CE, Stams GJ, Assink M. Risk factors for child neglect: A meta-analytic review. *Child abuse & neglect*. 2018 Mar 1;77:198-210.
- [5] Mayall B. Values and assumptions underpinning policy for children and young people in England. *Children's Geographies*. 2006 Apr 1;4(01):9-17.
- [6] UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (with optional protocols). www.unicef.org/crc.
- [7] Committee on the Rights of the Child, 56th session General Comment No.13 (2011) Article 19: The right of the child to freedom from all forms of violence.
- [8] Keeley B, Little C. *The State of the Worlds Children 2017: Children in a Digital World*. UNICEF. 3 United Nations Plaza, New York, NY 10017; 2017 Dec.
- [9] National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. *A roadmap to reducing child poverty*. National Academies Press; 2019 Aug 16.

- [10] Perry B, Applying principles of neurodevelopment to clinical work with maltreated and traumatized children. Working with traumatized youth in child welfare, The Guilford Press, 2006.27-52.
- [11] Lee V, Hoaken PN. Cognition, emotion, and neurobiological development: Mediating the relation between maltreatment and aggression. Child maltreatment. 2007 Aug;12(3):281-98.
- [12] Spratt EG, Friedenbergl SL, Swenson CC, LaRosa A, De Bellis MD, Macias MM, Summer AP, Hulsey TC, Runyan DK, Brady KT. The effects of early neglect on cognitive, language, and behavioral functioning in childhood. Psychology (Irvine, Calif.). 2012 Feb 1;3(2):175.
- [13] Egeland B, Yates T, Appleyard K, Van Dulmen M. The long-term consequences of maltreatment in the early years: A developmental pathway model to antisocial behavior. Children's services: Social policy, research, and practice. 2002 Oct 1;5(4):249-60.
- [14] English DJ, Upadhyaya MP, Litrownik AJ, Marshall JM, Runyan DK, Graham JC, Dubowitz H. Maltreatment's wake: The relationship of maltreatment dimensions to child outcomes. Child abuse & neglect. 2005 May 1;29(5):597-619.
- [15] Shields A, Ryan RM, Cicchetti D. Narrative representations of caregivers and emotion dysregulation as predictors of maltreated children's rejection by peers. Developmental psychology. 2001 May;37(3):321.
- [16] Seth R, Chandrashekhar R, Kansal S, Bose V. Social Justice for Children and Young People. Social Justice for Children and Young People: International Perspectives. 2020 Jun 30:316.
- [17] Ministry of Women and Child Development, Government of India. Study on Child Abuse: India 2007. www.wcd.nic.in/childabuse.pdf.
- [18] Jameel SN, Shah SA. Child Abuse and Neglect. In Addressing Multicultural Needs in School Guidance and Counseling 2020 (pp. 107-135). IGI Global.
- [19] National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR). Eliminating Corporal Punishment in Schools. http://www.ncpcr.gov.in/publications_reports.htm.
- [20] Delhi Declaration 2011. <http://www.indianpediatrics.net/delhideclaration2011.pdf>.
- [21] Srivastava RN. Child abuse and neglect: Asia Pacific Conference and the Delhi Declaration. Indian Pediatr. 2011;49:11-12.
- [22] Narendra S. Child Abuse and Neglect in India: Time to act. JMAJ, September/October 2013;56 (5):302-309
- [23] Rights of children in the time of Covid-19: A Policy Brief. <https://www.haqcrc.org/child-rights-in-india-the-world/rights-of-children-in-the-time-of-covid-19/>
- [24] Bérubé A, Clément MÈ, Lafantaisie V, LeBlanc A, Baron M, Picher G, Turgeon J, Ruiz-Casares M, Lacharité C. How societal responses to COVID-19 could contribute to child neglect. Child Abuse & Neglect. 2020 Oct 15:104761.
- [25] Kumar A, Nayar K R, Bhat L D. Debate: COVID-19 and children in India. Child and adolescent mental health. 2020. doi:10.1111/camh.12398
- [26] The alliance for child protection in humanitarian action, End violence against children, UNICEF, WHO, COVID-19: Protecting children from violence, abuse and neglect in

the home, version 1, May 2020. <https://www.unicef.org/documents/covid-19-protecting-children-violence-abuse-and-neglect-home>

- [27] Van Lancker W, Parolin Z. COVID-19, school closures, and child poverty: a social crisis in the making. *The Lancet Public Health*. 2020 May 1;5(5):e243-4.