



# COVID IMPACT ON OUR CHILDREN, IN THE CLASSROOM

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Looking back at the past 15 months, we have seen many changes in the world at large, but more specifically in our school community and classrooms. Our children have had to learn to embrace change at an alarming rate. One day they are at school, happily learning and socializing and the next they are told that they need to remain at home due to this horrible thing called Covid. They are seeing parents, grandparents and families getting ill and may have even lost a friend or loved one. This in itself, can be seen as a "trauma." Trauma is the result of a distressing or disturbing event that affects our sense of security, our emotions and leaves us feeling helpless and anxious. Despite the fear of actually contracting the virus, the feelings

of isolation and breakdown in daily routines just heighten their anxiety levels.

Our children, to some extent, have had their childhoods "ripped" away from them. They can no longer have birthday parties, sleepovers, play dates, family vacations, play sports or run around freely without the 'large gloomy Covid cloud' hanging over their heads. The childhood that they once knew and enjoyed is slowly becoming a distant memory. Covid in effect goes against everything we as parents and teachers want to teach our children. We want them to share with their friends, to socialize and not sit alone at break and to help a friend who has fallen; these little life lessons now all go against Covid safety protocols.

They have had to learn to take on several new

responsibilities: remembering to wear their masks, sanitize, social distance, online learning (when forced to stay at home), and then remembering which books to bring back to school when they are no longer doing online schooling. Although these may seem like small responsibilities, to our children these are big tasks added on to their already busy daily activities.

What are we seeing at school? In the younger grades, some of the girls are anxious to come to school, they fear leaving their parent/s. What was once an exciting morning routine, has now become a laborious and scary practice.

Some girls have lost loved ones to Covid, so they are scared to leave their parents in case, "Mommy/Daddy gets Covid and I don't see them again." Our children are living in fear, fear of Covid, fear of the unknown, fear of losing a family member, fear of life. This fear is manifesting as anxiety in most, if not all our children. When walking the corridors of the school, the chatter amongst the children is mostly about how much they hate wearing masks, how they wish Covid was over or never existed, how they miss seeing their



friends faces or playing freely on the playground. They talk about how they have lost out on their sports fixtures, lost out on camp or fun school outings.

In our classrooms teachers are noticing how the girls are far less independent and are often afraid to start a task without the reassurance of the teacher.

When asking the girls to do written tasks or speeches, one teacher remarked that the girls are adding Covid 19 in their work even if the topic is not about Covid - they find a way to include it. These children hear about Covid at school, at home, on TV, on social media and it has become an all-encompassing topic in their worlds. Another teacher reported that she is worried about the emotional state of the girls as their levels of anxiety are far higher than ever before. Now, more than ever, the mental health and emotional well-being of our children is of utmost importance.

At school, we are focusing more on our girls' mental and emotional wellness. We have introduced breathing exercises during the day - to calm them when their anxiety levels seem too high.

Breathing is important in calming down the autonomic nervous system and thus puts the brain into a calmer state that also makes it more susceptible to learning. We have regular 'brain breaks', where we actively listen to the girls' experiences and fears.

Teachers are giving the girls time to 'offload' when they are having a difficult day, opening up safe spaces for discussions and creating calm. Rather than focusing on the curriculum and content, we are being guided by our girls' pace and emotional state.

## So what else can we as parents and teachers do?

- LISTEN to our children's concerns and fears without downplaying it and telling them that they are overreacting. If we do not acknowledge their fears, they will slowly start to retract and bottle up their emotions. Let them know that their feelings are safe with you.
- Don't focus on their grades/marks, their mental health is more important than their grades.
- Focus on building and strengthening your relationship with them - learning won't happen until they feel safe in their relationship with you.
- Spend quality time with them, enjoy playing games, reading books or doing arts and crafts together. Time for fun and laughter is more important than ever before.
- REMEMBER- "The world has changed, especially for children but children's needs haven't changed. They still need to feel safe, be close to their families, like their teachers and have friends to play with" Beverly Cleary.