Parenting in the current COVID-19 reality – understanding and addressing parental concerns using a qualitative methodology

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Abstract

Background: The COVID-19 pandemic has brought in significant changes in the lifestyles of families across the world. This study is aimed to look at the parental perspectives and concerns related to challenges in parenting in the current COVID-19 pandemic situation through qualitative methodology.

Method: 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 pandemic situation. 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. Thematic deductive approach was used to analyse the dataset manually.

Results: The major themes that emerged were concerns related to handling children in home-bound situation, handing siblings of different age groups, caring for children with developmental disorders, managing work-life balance, concerns related to screen time in children, 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 is an essential systemic response that will benefit the community in resource-limited settings.

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**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 is an essential systemic response that will benefit the community in resource-limited settings.

**Keywords**: COVID-19, parenting, children and adolescents, challenges, qualitative

**Key messages**: COVID-19 global pandemic has brought unique parenting related challenges. Understanding parental perspectives and concerns during these unprecedented times can serve a long way in addressing this critical issue. Designing and disseminating educational and informational resources on parenting during the global pandemic scenario is the need of the hour.

**Introduction** The novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic has significantly affected family life and has presented unique challenges for parents across the world. The resulting disruptions in daily life have precipitated a largely unprecedented situation for the global populace, a great proportion of which, especially children and parents are struggling to adjust to this “new normal” \(^1\). The nations worldwide have taken extraordinary measures (like physical distancing, quarantine, partial or in some cases complete lockdown) to curtail the spread of the pandemic which could disrupt nearly every aspect of a child’s life. With educational institutions, recreational facilities, parks, child-care facilities and most of the public places closed, children are confined to home leading to social isolation, lack of access to their usual group or outdoor physical activities, loss of sense of predictability, increased dependence on parents, and a high degree of uncertainty about their future \(^2\). There can be an atmosphere of constant fear and anxiety, more so with social media and family conversations being entirely dominated by the pandemic, exposing children to large amounts of negative information, which can be overwhelming considering their young age with limited resources to understand and interpret this kind of stressful situation\(^3\). These adverse effects of the pandemic are likely to be more pronounced in the population of children with pre-existing vulnerabilities such as children with special needs, cognitive disabilities, and pre-existing 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 may cause psychological distress and collateral concerns for parents as they have to take new roles and responsibilities, both with regard to themselves and their children, while adapting to this novel and evolving situation \(^6\). Parenting is stressful even in best of the times and brings with it unique challenges. When it comes to their children, major concerns contributing towards parental stress are related to the health or behavioral issues, educational worries, disciplining the child, division of duties, future planning, modelling good values and even everyday tasks \(^7\). These have been further exacerbated by the prevailing global scenario arising out of COVID-19 pandemic and most of the parents are finding it difficult given the current rise in demands and expectations amidst scarcity of resources, due to the restrictions imposed. Many parents are working from home and with schools and other supportive services closed, they are often finding it difficult to strike a balance between full-time parenting and home-schooling while simultaneously maintaining their work productivity. They may be concerned about the implications of their child’s social isolation, or the approach and outcomes of home-schooling being imparted by them\(^8\). Many schools are providing online teaching which has its own advantages and disadvantages and may be a source of additional stress for parents. 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 with regard to duration and safety of its usage, and consequences on their physical and mental health. Some parents are also experiencing financial insecurities as a result of the changing economy, leading to increased psychological distress which can further hamper their ability to effectively maintain the work-life balance\(^9\). Parents may have doubts about their abilities to address their children’s fears, uncertainties, and concerns regarding reopening of schools or normalisation of routine, and how to reassure them about the pandemic in an age-appropriate manner. With almost complete disruption in children’s routine, keeping them engaged throughout the day, is in itself a daunting task. It is even more demanding for parents who
have an added responsibility of caring for older adults or children with chronic behavioral problems, special needs, or developmental disorders. Another important factor contributing to parental stress is disruption in social ties and reduced access to extra-familial support due to the social distancing measures being put in place. As the pandemic continues to spread globally with no major breakthrough in measures to curtail it, parental stressors are likely to persist and can lead to both emotional and physical fatigue, which may in turn place undue strain on the parent-child relationship. There is ample research evidence to indicate that higher levels of parental stress are associated with poorer parenting-related outcomes such as harsh parenting practices and negative parent-child interactions which in turn leads to increased propensity of problem behaviors in children. Like harsh parenting, anxious and overprotective parenting styles may also lead to higher levels of child maladjustment. In contrast, the ability to accept and understand the children’s emotional and behavioral concerns in a comforting and non-judgmental manner, and be positively involved with the child is likely to encourage problem solving attitudes and promote resilience in children subjected to traumatic situations like the current global scenario arising out of the pandemic. During any health-related disasters, like the current COVID-19 pandemic, it is common for social and health agencies to offer their expertise in the form of guidelines and effective strategies to address parenting related challenges. Organisations like World Health organisation (WHO) and United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) have made several such expert recommendations. However, 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 leading to a better overall adjustment. Although there is plenty of evidence supporting increased parental stress during the ongoing pandemic, there is 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 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.

Material and Methods

The study was conducted as a part of community outreach activity conducted by the Department of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry at a tertiary care academic institute. One of the authors conducted two educational parent training sessions on an online platform for the staff of an organisation on parenting challenges during the current COVID-19 reality. 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 to 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 were n = 45 and they were broadly related to parenting related challenges in the current global pandemic scenario. These 45 questions were considered as dataset for the current study after obtaining permission from the organisation to use them as part of the study. 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 data sets were done to familiarise with the data and the context of concerns. Content analysis was done manually by examining core statements. Thematic analysis was done, commonalities and differences were examined, and repetitive themes were identified. The deductive approach was used to complement the study objective. A framework of themes, subthemes and codes were used. A joint discussion was held between the co-authors and consensus arrived at the themes and subthemes framework. This 2 step procedure was followed to ensure reliability of the findings. Based on the themes finalized, information leaflets for parents, addressing each theme and corresponding subthemes was prepared individually by co-authors. The response documents were then evaluated jointly by co-authors and necessary amendments were made. All response documents were collated in a booklet form for dissemination among the participants and in the community for benefit of larger number of parents and children. The 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. These broad categories were considered given the differences in the developmental needs and parenting strategies between the two groups.

Repetitive themes emerged in the areas of concerns in engaging and parenting young children, siblings of different developmental ages, children with developmental disorders, managing work-life balance, increased screen time and understanding the needs of adolescents. The major themes and subthemes 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 centring 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.

3.1 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). Samples of queries and parental narratives:

“Can you share effective tips to create and maintain routines .......that 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”.

3.2 Parenting young children

Among the various challenges of the pandemic situation, associated with the rapid shift from normality to getting accustomed to the ‘new normal’, parenting young children is pivotal. The dataset reflected the following themes concerning parenting young children: Handling temper tantrums in young children (n = 5), multiple parenting situations (n = 2), understanding and practising positive and effective parenting (n = 5), quality time with young children (n = 7), using instructions and commands for young children (n = 7), increased expectations from young children (n = 8).

“My 2 year old has developed a habit of crying for simple reasons....... 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”.

3.3 Handling siblings

The following repetitive sub-themes are identified with regard to handling siblings: Handling Sibling rivalry (n = 4), giving protected time (n = 2), 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........”.

4
“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?”.

3.4 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 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 as he seems not interested in anything we do? We are in a nuclear family setup only me and my wife to look after 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 know and can sense he enjoys it. However I want him to explore his surroundings. How do I handle it”.

3.5 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).

“My son is 20 months old. Since we both work whole day on the laptop he gets irritated. I don’t understand how to make him understand that it is important for us to work.”

“I live in a nuclear family and my role requires me to work for long hours at times. Since the lockdown, I have gone crazy juggling between the roles. I am able to do only half of the work, creating so much of guilt. 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?”.

3.6 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 year old? It is difficult to make him concentrate on studies”.

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

3.7 Understanding the needs of adolescents

Samples of parental narratives reflecting concerns related to adolescents:

“My daughter is 11 years. I have created an every sat 1.5 hour zoom meet up call for her to talk to her school friends in absence of physical school? Is this okay. I feel kids need to talk to their own age kids”.

“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 as a minor theme in terms of repetitiveness.

Table 1:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Major themes generated</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Sub-themes generated</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Engaging young children in a home-bound situation</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Challenges in establishing a routine (n = 4) Challenges in providing age appropriate engagement (n = 16) Helping children cope with prolonged indoor environments (n = 8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parenting young children</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>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)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Handling siblings</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Handling Sibling rivalry (n = 4) Giving protected time (n = 2) Engaging children of different developmental ages (n = 3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caring for children with developmental disorders</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Lack of access to therapy/continuity of care (n = 4) Home-based interventions (n = 4) Engaging children during working hours (n = 8) Parental role strain (n = 4) Negative emotions in parents (n = 4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managing work-life balance during COVID-19</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Engaging children during working hours (n = 8) Parental role strain (n = 4) Negative emotions in parents (n = 4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concerns related to screen time use in children and adolescents</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>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)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding adolescents</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Understanding normative adolescent needs. (n = 4)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4. 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. Given the dearth of studies on parenting experiences during the pandemic, this study adds relevant insights to this area. Parents play a vital role in enhancing and promoting the mental
health of children and adolescents. Understanding the parental perspectives and areas of concerns will help formulate and tailor interventions to suit the needs of the families. The findings of the study are consistent with the literature on the impact of COVID-19 on parenting.

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 behavioral 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) was collated into a parent resource booklet.

Among the host of challenges posed by the pandemic, parenting young children is pivotal. It may naturally increase parental stress and negative emotionality when they are unable to keep up to their child’s needs and expectations, as compared to the pre-pandemic period. Indian parents also have unique challenges in terms of skewed expectations of parental roles more from mothers than fathers. Parallel performance of both roles may not only be difficult but are many-a-times expected to be exclusive. Division of responsibilities among the partners, including parenting is indispensable in the current situation. Multiple parenting figures in an extended family environment is unique to the collectivistic societies, especially the Indian settings. On one hand, multiple and extended family members offer additional support in child rearing practices, which are withdrawn due to the national policies on social distancing. On the other, 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. Though 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 post-pandemic situation, and the long term impact of this adversity, commitment to consistent practices of positive and effective parenting, value-based behaviors, positive family interactions promoting cohesiveness and self-esteem of individuals is imperative. 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 physical disabilities and developmental disorders undergo significant stress. Transitioning from centre-based interventions to home-bound environments, getting accustomed to new routine and home-based activities pose additional challenges. This is compounded by the paucity of developmentally-appropriate and meaningful resources for children’s engagement and their difficulty in understanding and complying with healthcare policies. Learning through a virtual modality is challenging and may pose additional stress on children with special needs. 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. Empowering parents of children with developmental disorders to provide home-based interventions using effective therapeutic strategies, behavior management, and identifying key issues necessitating consultation is preeminent.

Though 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 (ACE), 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 pre-school 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 to formulate more meaningful and culturally-appropriate intervention strategies.

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 pre-emptive interventions to mitigate the effects of the pandemic on the mental health of families and children.

References:


