

# COVID-19's Impact on Children: Revisiting Buddha's Therapeutic Teaching and Practice

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Covid-19 has caused many challenges in our day-to-day lives. The whole world is affected by this deadly crisis. Children are no exception to this. The fear of infection from coronavirus, no access to outdoor games and social distancing from friends and loved ones are causing major ill effects on the minds of children. These problems can turn into adverse effects in their later age as well. Today anxiety, worry, distress, feeling of insecurity, excessive social media activities of the children is increasing concerns of the parents. Hence, it has become very important to manage children's changing behaviour and stress during Covid- 19.

The teaching of Buddha can become a true mentor for the children in this crisis. This teaching is compiled in the Pali literature in the form of prose and poetries. It not only talks about spirituality but also tries to give answers to all questions that arise in our day-to-day life. It can provide possible solutions to overcome children's psychological as well as physical challenges in the course of Covid-19.

This paper is a small attempt to study the psychological impact of Covid-19 crisis on the children between 3 to 12 years. It also examines the behavioural changes in these children caused due to ongoing crisis. The paper deals with the following points.

1. The impact of Covid-19 pandemic on children.
2. How to train children to overcome psychological issues arising due to Covid-19.
3. The role of the teaching of Buddha in maintaining mental and physical health of children during the pandemic Covid-19.
4. The relevance of the Buddha's teachings during this pandemic.

## **Covid-19 and its Effects on Children**

In today's age, children are continuously exposed to electronic gadgets. Until few years ago, kids used to play outdoor games most of the time. However, nowadays due to changing lifestyle, they have a regular access to electronic gadgets like smart phones, television, laptops and so on. Constant access to screen is affecting their mental and physical health. In addition, they have to stay at home to be safe during the lockdown and their usage of gadgets has increased.

The programs and movies on television can have violence, fights, horror etc. This can have adverse effects on the minds of children like sleep disturbance, violent and abusive behaviour. It has been observed that several times children think that the shows on television are true and real. After watching a particular movie, they may try to emulate one of the characters in the movie. In this way, violence in movies may instil violent behaviours in impressionable minds of children. Horror movies and shows can increase the fear and insecurity in the minds of kids that can prolong for a long time, sometimes in later age as well. Early childhood plays crucial role in the future developmental phases of adolescence and adulthood. Hence, fearful mind can lead to various mental illnesses in their later stages of life.

Covid-19 has led to physical and mental problems among children. They are struggling to cope with problems like aggression, fear, distress, impatience,

annoyance and mood swings. Further, children draw their own analysis and observation about any problem or issue. In the course of this critical situation, they are likely to make their own analysis about the pandemic and lockdown. They are feeling unsafe and insecure even though they are in their homes in a secured environment. Their negativity about this crisis has been increasing since its outbreak. A recent report by UN on impact of Covid-19 on children says that, “Children today face anxiety about the negative impact of the pandemic on their lives and their communities and uncertainty regarding the future: how long today’s extraordinary circumstances will endure and how the pandemic will ultimately be resolved.” (United Nations 2020, 9)

In these days, there is a continuous bombarding of news about corona disease. The news of social distancing, lockdown, deaths due to corona could cause worry and anxiety. They may feel lonely because their gathering with friends and relatives has completely stopped. As it is said, that man is a social animal, he cannot live in isolation without meeting his loved ones. However, due to the widespread of coronavirus disease, it is recommended that people should not move out except in emergency. In addition, children and the elderly are at a higher risk of infection due to their compromised or low immunity. In these days, increasing annoyance and unstable mind are main concerns for the parents. Hence, parents should take active measures to extend psychosocial support to their children during Covid-19. Here, the role of the parents and teachers is to train children in such a way that they can regulate and manage their own mental health. Parents have to take all measures to help develop their mental as well as physical strength.

## **The Teaching of the Buddha, a Light in the Darkness**

The teaching of the Buddha is compiled in the Tipiṭaka. Buddha’s teaching is also divided in nine forms. The Paṭhamadhammavīhārīsutta of the Aṅguttaranikāya explains such nine divisions.

“*Idha, bhikkhu, bhikkhu dhammaṃ pariyāpuṇāti – suttaṃ, geyyaṃ, veyyākaraṇaṃ, gāthaṃ,*

udānaṃ, itivuttakaṃ, jātakaṃ, abbhutadhammaṃ, vedallaṃ.”<sup>1</sup>

“Here, Oh monks, a particular monk learns the teaching (Of Buddha) by heart which is in the form of sutta, mixed prose and verse, exposition, verses, joyous utterances, sayings of the Buddha, past birth stories, supernatural phenomenon and questions and answers.”

The Buddha gave Dhamma (doctrine) according to the temperament and level of understanding of an individual. Hence, it is observed that the individuals who could understand the higher teaching, for them he delivered the higher Dhamma. Further, to those individuals who could understand the Buddha’s teaching in the form of narratives, he gave teaching in the form of narratives. The Teaching in the form of narratives was quite popular in ancient India. Narratives from the sutta and aṭṭhakathā literature are best to be introduced to children during this crisis. Jātaka aṭṭhakathā, Dhammapada aṭṭhakathā, Vimānavatthu and Petavatthu aṭṭhakathā, Thera and Therīgatha aṭṭhakathā can be a great source of learning the narrative literature for the children.

## **Narrative, as an entertainment tool**

It is very difficult in today’s age where parents are helpless and not able to connect with children when their attention is occupied with attractive games, cartoons, programmes on electronic gadgets and television. The narratives could be an effective tool to keep them away from the screen. It also helps inculcate moral values among the children.

We were all brought up listening to such narratives from our parents and grandparents since our childhood. Children like to make up their own stories because narrative culture is rooted in their daily life. They are brought up by creating their own stories. It is observed that while playing, they speak to themselves and jot down all incidences together, known or unknown, to make their new stories. Hence, the story telling method can become the best solution for the children during this pandemic. Here, the parents have to play a very

important role in creating interest in children so that they can listen to the stories. Parents can entertain children by telling stories that can help them to stay away from the screen. The method of storytelling can hold the children's attention over a prolonged period.

In addition, the method of storytelling is the best way to teach moral values. There are several Pali narratives, which inculcate such values. Children can learn these values without taking any effort. At the same time, these narratives can be the best form of learning things through entertainment. Narratives in the Pali literature are rich source of various similes, imaginaries, metaphors, symbolism etc. This form of teaching is rich source of literary values. Narratives included in the aṭṭhakathā literature are in a true sense, full of various expressions and emotions such as humour, excitement, horror, joy, admiration, appreciation etc.

The Revatīvimānavathu aṭṭhakathā is humorous, which makes it one of the best narratives to be told to children. We find similar story in the Revatīpetavatthu aṭṭhakathā. The Revatīvimānavathu aṭṭhakathā is a story of Revatī's *akusala kamma* (sinful acts) and *kusala kamma* (meritorious deeds) of Nandiya. Revatī was the wife of *upāsaka* Nandiya. Nandiya was generous; on the other hand, Revatī was mean and selfish. She did not like giving *dāna* or respecting any holy men. She would use abusive words against the *bhikkhus* who would come to her house for alms. In this way, she does not perform any *kusala kamma* in her life. When she dies, she was reborn in the *petā* world and her husband Nandiya was reborn in the *deva* world. The story explains how Nandiya was reborn in a *deva loka* with beautiful *vimāna* and how Revatī was reborn in the *petā loka*. When Revatī was being taken by Yama's messengers to the *petā loka*, she was trying to reject the charge on her and urged them that she should not be punished. She tries to convince the messengers in every manner that she is right. In addition, she repeatedly requests them to take her back to human world where she can perform meritorious deeds. "Sādhu kho maṃ paṇinetha"<sup>2</sup> (Please) take me back to (human world) that would be nice." Further, she keeps on asserting that she deserves the luxury of heaven and not the sufferings and miseries of the *petā* world.

This conversation of Revatī creates humour here. It is because even after performing sinful acts, she wants to justify herself that she was right. It reminds

us of people who despite having fallen, still show that they won. The episode mentioned in the aṭṭhakathā explores the human nature where an individual commits mistakes but does not take responsibility for them. Further, that person tries to exaggerate his good characteristics even though he does not possess them. The episode from Revatī's narrative explores *hasya rasa*, which is one of the *rasa* (sentiments or emotions) of nine *rasās*.

The narrative also emphasises on the teachings of *kamma-vipaka* taught by the Buddha. It explains that one should not perform *akusala kamma* that leads to bad consequences. In this way, the narrative can explore moral values among children.

Further, if parents want their children to learn the importance of *mettā bhāvanā* (loving-kindness) towards all beings, they should choose a narrative that gives these teachings. The narrative of Ratana sutta is worth mentioning here. This narrative is best example to relate with ongoing pandemic crisis.

The narratives of Ratana sutta state that there was an epidemic of plague in the city of Vaishali at the time of Buddha. The adverse effects of a famine turned into an epidemic and various calamities. Many people were infected and died as an effect of outbreak of famine. The grave consequences of this crisis increased due to the fear and terror in the minds of people. Then the Mahali Licchavi of the Vaishali invites the Buddha to the city so that he could show a way to come out of this crisis. When the Buddha visited Vaishali, he instructed Anandhathera to recite Ratana sutta while taking a tour in the entire city. The sutta was given to protect the people and animals from the famine caused due to epidemic. The narratives describe the teaching of *metta* “*Sabbeva bhūtā sumanā bhavantū*”<sup>3</sup> “May all beings, be happy.” The message of *mettā bhāvanā* was spread in the city by developing loving kindness towards all beings. It was repeated for seven days. The qualities and characteristics of three *ratanās* have been stressed in this *sutta*. These three *ratanās* are the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Saṅgha. The teaching of the sutta becomes blessing for the city as entire Vaishali becomes free from all evil effects caused due to famine.

The narratives state that this sutta is recited to protect all beings from dangers,

fear and calamities that arose due to famine and epidemic. It emphasises on the message of being loving and kind towards all beings that are suffering. In addition to this, it stresses on the importance of the truth of three *ratanās* (Gems) and their qualities.

Further, the narrative is also significant to be narrated to children during Covid-19 pandemic. It is observed that there was an epidemic like situation that caused several deaths. This situation can be related to the ongoing crisis. A similar kind of fear and terror arose in the minds of people at that time. Hence, this sutta's narrative is relevant today also because it offers a way to come out of this deadly calamity. It teaches us how to be concerned for others during any crisis. This can help kids learn the importance of *mettā bhavanā* and develop concerns for others who are in the difficult situation like Covid-19.

Both narratives explore their relevance and importance to children. In this way, the narratives can be the powerful tool for entertaining children. We can say that the narratives can prove to be mentors in true sense of the word to people of all ages.

Here, parents and teachers' roles are very crucial in creating an interest in listening to narratives. The story telling process can become useful for them in various ways. It can also strengthen the bond between children and their parents. It can be so powerful that sometimes children can picture these stories in vivid details. While narrating the stories, parents should encourage children's interaction. They have to make children active participants instead of passive listeners to draw their sustained attention for longer periods of time. However, parents' and elder people's engagement in this process of telling stories is needed. These narratives should be selected according to:

- The age of children.
- Interest of the children in a particular subject.
- Language that they understand easily.
- Moral values, parents want to inculcate among them.

In this way, narratives can be considered as an entertainment tool for the children. In true sense, they can act as their friends during this calamity.

## Learning various skills and arts

It is observed that children like to engage in fun-loving creative activities. Learning various skills and arts make them confident and happy. When they make something creative by themselves, they feel positive, cheerful and motivated. It helps them promote their mental and emotional development. In addition to this, children can be engaged for long period in creative activities of their interest. The skill learning can be very useful for children these days.

The teachings of Buddha give importance to learning various skills and arts. Learning various arts help kids develop their personality. According to the *Maṅgalasutta* of the *Suttanipāta*, learning a skill or arts is considered as one of the *maṅgala* (blessings). “*Bāhusaccañca sippañca*”<sup>4</sup> “Being learned and skilled” (is one of the *maṅgala* that one should do in his life). According to the *Suttanipāta atthakathā*, *sippa* means “*Sippanti yaṃkiñci hatthakosallaṃ*”<sup>5</sup> “Skills means any handmade creativity.” It is any kind of art or skill that is possessed by someone like the art of a jewellery maker or goldsmith *maṇikārasuvaṇṇakārakammādi*.<sup>6</sup>

The teachers can also motivate the children to learn such skills. The *Siṅgālasutta* of the *Dīghanikāya* states that pupil should minister his teachers in five ways. One of the ways is “*Sakkaccaṃ sippapaṭiggahaṇena*.”<sup>7</sup> “By learning skills attentively.” In other words, pupil learns various skills and arts from his teachers and that is why he should minister his teachers. Here, the verse explains how teachers could be great mentors for the children in the process of developing their skills. These skills can be taught along with their regular studies, which can keep them engaged during Covid-19 pandemic.

From above references, it is clear that the skill like jewellery making was one of the popularly learnt skills at the time of Buddha. According to the changing lifestyle and period, there has been a change in the kind of skills acquired as well. Hence, today whatever skills are popular; they may not be known at the time of Buddha. Today, making crafts, painting, drawing, technical skills and culinary arts are some of the popular skills that can be taught to children.

In the process of acquiring skills, parents can help children find out their inherent