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A Review on Assessing Mental Health Issues Faced by Parents and Families Having Children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities During Covid-19

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A Review on Assessing Mental Health Issues Faced by Parents and Families Having Children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities During Covid-19

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Abstract

COVID-19 has overwhelmed the entire world in a limited interval of time. Meanwhile, the children with psychological, physical, or neurodevelopmental disabilities and their families are supposed to be the most vulnerable during times of pandemics. The literature was hunted vigilantly, and 10 out of 30 studies were considered to be the most relevant to review for the current topic. The pandemics like COVID-19 laid greater and irreversible impacts on the children with special needs and their families, as they are more prone to get psychological distress and a lack of social support during these emergency situations. Consequently, in order to study the impacts of pandemics on the mental health of disabled children and their caregivers, it is essential to highlight the issues faced by these susceptible populations and to provide them with better psychological support.

Keywords: Caregiving Burden, Covid-19, Children With Disabilities, Mental-Health, Psychological Health, Special Needs

Introduction

At the end of the year 2019, the world was struck by a novel emergency situation, which created a worldwide health crisis. These circumstances were first confirmed as an epidemic, but later on, unfortunately, considering their wider destruction, it was declared a pandemic. This pandemic has

influenced the world as a whole and individually. Throughout the world, all populations were influenced mentally, physically, socially, and psychologically. The COVID-19-related conditions, like closure of educational institutes, lockdowns, social distancing, isolation, and quarantine, had a negative impact on mental health. At this period, the children and people having any kind of disabilities and their



families are the vulnerable groups. It is obvious that the parents of disabled children or children with special educational needs and disabilities encounter additional problems rather than the normal ones (McConnell & Savage, 2015; McStay et al., 2014).

Among caregivers, mostly mothers are involved in taking care of their child. The closure of the school has caused hindrances in the learning and training being provided by the school. The burden on mothers has increased because of the extra duties of looking forward to the entire members of family, as well as the special one. The social support offered by society serves these types of families as a protective factor. During situations like COVID-19, it has become very challenging for people to interact with other members of their society due to getting infected, hence, resulting in a lack of social support.

Collectively, these issues contribute to the problems of mental health of children as well as families with physical, psychological, and neurodevelopmental disabilities. The burden of caregiving rises with the increase in duties of parents who look after their disabled or special child. Difficulties encountered by the families involve depression, anxiety, stress, poor quality of life, and problems sustaining their day-to-day activities. These types of stressors can cause a negative impact on the worth of family matters and create so many challenges to the child and their caregivers (Osborne et al., 2008). In order to proliferation the well-being and mental health of children with special needs and disabilities during pandemics, it is obligatory that the mental health assistance services should be furnished with strategies and sufficient care services that may provide well-organized and eminent welfare to those individuals and families. This paper highlights the needs and problems of children with special needs and their families with regard to COVID-19, and aims to enhance psychological help in an adequate manner, and to highlight the issues in a convincing manner.

Methods

The study comprised of theoretical understanding of the dimensions of impacts that COVID-19-related issues have on children with disabilities and their

caregivers/ families. The current study is based on the reviewed articles on the impact of COVID-19 on children with disabilities and their families published in different national and international psychological and neuroscience journals. Only a few studies were intended to focus on topics like COVID-19, caregivers' problems, mental health of disabled children, and their needs. The selection of articles was made on the basis of inclusion and exclusion criteria. The electronic data was collected by using PubMed and Medline databases published in 2019-2020, and the actual studies were separated, which conveyed different aspects of COVID-19 on children with disabilities and their families. As the main focus of my study was on COVID-19 and its underlying effects on children with disabilities and their families in Pakistan and that is why it appeared to be a bit challenging to find sufficient information on the topic. In the initial steps of researching data, 30 studies were selected, while after scrutiny, only 10 articles, which were most closely relevant to the topic, were selected. After reading the articles in detail, the main points were highlighted and summarized in order to form a critical analysis of the given information.

Children with Disabilities

"Disabilities" is an umbrella term for a cluster of problems, according to WHO (2011). Disability is a wide-ranging phenomenon; it refers to both lawful and systematic behaviors and involves a variety of disorders, including physical, psychological, neurodevelopmental, cerebral, and socioemotional impairments. A disability takes into account a physical impairment, for instance, motor, hearing, visual, and linguistic problems. Age-related and delayed milestones may disturb the behavior, emotional expressions, and learning capabilities of the individual. This also involves various levels of disabilities ranging from mild to severe, from cerebral palsy, paralysis and amputation, autism spectrum disorder, specific learning disability, Down syndrome, disabilities, to loss of sight, deafness, autism, and dyslexia. Disabilities might be by birth or developed as an antecedent of some kind of ailment, mishandling, or any sort of injury. E.g., a number of

children become the victims of incidents, accidents, or disasters.

Children with Disabilities and Their Families during COVID-19

People in the current decade are more helpless in case if they have to look after disabled children. Fluctuation of regular on-campus classes to a hybrid mode of communication has increased the problems of families having a history of children with special needs and learning disabilities. It is an additional financial burden to retain or hire a special education teacher for their kids and to maintain their routine around their kids. Tele-medication for cerebral palsy patients as an answer to social distancing has also proved to be a challenge to parents. Because the regular visits and medication are a compulsory component of the treatment, and in tele-medication, they do not satisfy this aspect of treatment. It is very obvious that special children need additional provision, a customized attitude, and improved teaching modules to get an education while staying at home. Moreover, the operational learning system must concentrate on eliminating the challenges for the children having attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder, voices should be presented along with words for those with hearing impairments, using different languages, and accommodate the memory loss (Shearer, [2019](#)).

During COVID-19, perceived stress and anxiety among parents of disabled children have been raised to intense levels. The duties of the parents are prolonged because of the numerous roles during the existing circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic. There are foreseeable negative consequences of parental stress on their children. Among others, the utmost and difficult duty of the parents is to clearly convey and describe the existing condition in all possible ways. Effective communication about complex material has long-lasting impacts on the psychological health of a child (Dalton et al., [2020](#)). When kids are not provided with age-appropriate information, they might get scared about the

endemics or viruses, which might lead to decision-making in the wrong direction (Tandon, [2020](#)).

A study was conducted on the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of caregivers of people with intellectual disabilities. The authors (Willner et al., [2020](#)) involved a casual parents of children and adults with intellectual disabilities and another contrast group having parents of children without any impairment. All the participants were supposed to fill out an online questionnaire. The results of the study revealed that there was a huge difference between the stress, anxiety, and depression levels of both groups of parents. There was a positive correlation established between stress scores and psychological well-being outcomes. It was also revealed that parents having children with disabilities faced a lack of social support during COVID-19. In a study, Parents of disabled children encounter complex health concerns, including fatigue, musculoskeletal pain, and sleep issues and problems. They undergo significant emotional pressure, including symptoms of despair, anxiety, and hopelessness. Social isolation and stigma exacerbate these issues (Shahali et al., [2024](#)). A study from 2023 identified that compared to mothers of children without any disability, mothers of children with disabilities are more likely to be diagnosed with a musculoskeletal disorder, depression, anxiety, sleeping disturbances, or migraines. After controlling for the characteristics of the mothers, children, and families, the disparities between the two groups of mothers diminish, but they are still significant for musculoskeletal disorders, depression, anxiety, and sleeping disorders, even though the absolute differences were smaller (Brekke & Alecu, [2023](#)).

In the report by the World Health Organization ([2011](#)) on disabilities predicted that more than 1 billion of the world (15%) are facing some type of disability, of which 2% to 4% face notable problems in daily functioning. This estimate of the WHO demonstrates the importance of finding associations between disability and health emergencies like COVID-19 and the need for some action. Chen et al. (2020) conducted another study in China to assess the psychological health of 1450 parents having children

with special needs during COVID-19. An online survey was conducted, including different questionnaires to evaluate perceived social support, parental stress, and five-factor inventories. The results of the study displayed significant changes among parents of special children. In a descriptive study, Bruner et al. (2020) conducted the survey on people with disabilities in Argentina, among whom 230 were responded to by caregivers and 79 by the children. The study showed that there were feelings of distress, anxiety, and depression among people with disabilities as well as their caregivers. Asbury et al. (2020) conducted a study with parents of children with special educational needs and disabilities in the United Kingdom in which 241 parents were asked about the impact of COVID-19 on their mental health and their children. It was reported that children and their caregivers experienced damage, anxiety, mood swings, and behavior problems because of the social variation that occurred during COVID-19.

Dhiman et al. (2020) in their study on the mental health and change in perceived strain of children and their caregivers during the COVID-19 pandemic. An online survey was conducted on 264 parents of children with special needs and their perception about online-rehabilitation, homecare therapy, caregiver strain, and mental health. It was found that the occurrence of depression, anxiety, and stress symptoms was 62.5%, 20.5%, and 36.4% respectively. The significance level was ($p < 0.001$), showing that there was a significant difference in caregivers' strain during the COVID-19 outbreak. The risk level was higher for those who don't use tele-rehabilitation, in addition to those having a negative perspective about home-based therapeutic interventions, who were strongly connected with complex mental health indications and stress. The study recognized a high level of occurrence of depression and a significant difference in strain shown by parents during COVID-19.

Neece et al. (2020) piloted an interview-based study with 77 families having children with intellectual and developmental disabilities with ethnic, linguistic, and socioeconomic diversities in order to assess the impact of COVID-19. As a result of the

study, staying at home and taking care of children with disabilities becomes a challenge for parents. Staying home and spending quality time with kids was a positive aspect of the study, too. It will be serious to consider family wellbeing and child developmental outcomes, and professional support during the initial stages of institutes again.

Another study, published A few months ago, was conducted in Central Uganda in order to assess the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on families of children with disabilities. It was a qualitative sort of analysis in which phone call-based interviews were conducted with the parents and kids with disabilities during the initial 5 months of the pandemic occurrence. It was obvious from the interviews that most of the participants were well aware of the current pandemic situation. As a result of the study, a major proportion of the respondents revealed that lockdown, as a consequence of COVID-19, has negatively influenced their lives physically, mentally, socially, financially, academically, and in terms of food security. Among them, the majority of the parents reported their job/work loss, which subsequently caused problems in providing enough food and paying rent. The parents were tense about the education of the children and their social life.

Where there were problems for special children, like; they were unable to attend the schools and daily activities. They were even failing to get proper treatments, physical checkups, as well as proper look after of the specialists. At the same time, it was a challenge for the caregivers or the parents of these handicapped children and individuals, as they were already suffering from many challenges. While reviewing all the relevant literature, it was noticed that almost all the studies were intended to measure whether COVID-19 has increased the caregiving burdens of the parents. Those having children with special needs and disabilities were more prone to being affected psychologically during this pandemic outbreak. Throughout the literature review, it was obvious that the female caregivers were more likely to have issues like depression, anxiety, stress, and a lack of social support during COVID-19. In current studies, the literature revealed that there were the

psychological issues faced by those caregivers were reported in almost all of the studies. Parents of kids having special needs and disabilities were more prone to face anxiety, depression, and stress while managing their lives around COVID-19. As far as the positive consequences are concerned, the literature revealed only a few studies in which the parents reported that they have spent a very good quality of time with their family members.

Conclusion

Mental health issues during the pandemic outbreak have become an alarming trend for people and families with disabilities. The worldwide health services are keenly involved in developing the vaccination for COVID-19 infection, and the issue has reached its climax as a top priority. This emergency is hence drawing the attention of people and management to the issues of disabled children and their primary needs. An increase in the health risks and precautionary measures taken to minimize the challenges has increased the mental health difficulties of the caregivers of children with special needs. Caregivers, especially mothers of children with intellectual or developmental as well as physical or psychological disabilities, are at higher risk of getting social, psychological, physical, and emotional distress during the pandemic. Special pressures, such as emotional discomfort, social isolation, and heavy caregiving responsibilities, are frequently associated with raising kids with a disability (Ayoola et al., [2025](#)). The issues like quarantine period, lockdowns, and social distancing have created a burden for the

caregivers of children with disabilities during COVID-19. The mental well-being of the caregivers is at risk because of depression, anxiety, stress, and a lack of social support. Only a few studies revealed the positive aspect of COVID-19 on people and families having children with special needs and disabilities. The details of mental health issues and problems for the caregivers of children with disabilities are well explained in the literature. Technology is the best solution to different issues, and it can produce the best outcomes in managing the disabilities and the mental health of people.

Limitations

The following study has a few shortcomings, including the major limitation of the current paper being that there is limited literature on the topic. The most disregarded and overlooked population during the pandemic is that of disabled or handicapped individuals. The results of the literature serve a number of shortcomings that it is not applicable and generalizable for any disability alone.

Recommendations

The government should invest more in the mental and physical health of people having special needs and disabilities. Furthermore, specifically in Pakistan, there is little work done on the most crucial population in times of an emergency; all the studies conducted in the literature are foreign studies. More work is needed to be done in order to overcome the gap in the literature on disabilities during pandemics like COVID-19.

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