

COVID-19 is Stealing from the Most Vulnerable

The Negative Impact of the Pandemic on the Education of Children with Disabilities

For the last two years, fully-abled children and youth have struggled with school closures and forced online learning. Even though we are a highly virtual and digital society, prior to a year and a half ago, the thought of ushering our youngest generation to the computer in solitude for screen-time education was downright insane.

Children with disabilities have been called upon to do the same – learn alone from a computer screen. But what are the repercussions?

COVID-19 precautionary implementations in educational environments have challenged kids at every academic level, but nothing can compare to the challenges faced by children with disabilities. In addition to developmental difficulties and learning blocks, this group is now forced to struggle through COVID-19 restrictions on top of it all.

Upheaval to daily life

While daily routine is an important characteristic of every healthy child's life, it is even more critical in the lives of special needs children. Studies show that routines and schedules help children know expectations, decrease anxiety, reduce stress by creating predictability, and instill feelings of safety, stability, and confidence. As a result, solid daily routines help special needs children positively manage their behavior, eating and sleeping patterns, and their overall sense of wellbeing.

Since its onset, COVID-19 has demolished those daily routines on several occasions. Not only is this impacting children's self-confidence and self-control, but it is also creating upheaval in their already-complicated lives through imposed changes such as physical distancing, self-isolation, and termination of community-based services.

All of these negative alterations have the potential to weaken the support systems necessary for these children to develop and thrive in their environments.

Widened gap and perpetual disadvantaged cycle

Naturally, developmentally challenged children were already academically behind their fully-abled peers. COVID-19 school interruptions, closures, and shifts in learning have now made it even more challenging for these children to succeed academically.

This is further compounded by social disadvantage, which presents itself predominantly among those who are classified as educationally vulnerable, and it leads to what experts call the “continuous cycle of disadvantage”. Learning for these children is negatively impacted as a result of their reduced access to educational resources, both human and material. This will only widen the already prominent gap between youth who are *not* disadvantaged, and those who *are*. Preliminary studies indicate the deepening effect on vulnerabilities and disparities to the point of exacerbated marginalization.

Potentially lifelong consequences

While we may be tempted to think of the negative educational impact of COVID-19 in present time, the unfortunate reality is that it likely runs much deeper than that. It isn't a matter of simply “getting back to normal”, but rather re-learning how to deal with everything we've lost as a result, if and when “normal” ever shows its face again.

In the beginning, none of us would have expected COVID-related school interruptions and closures to be intermittently taking place some two years later. This proves that we do not know how many *more* years it might continue, thereby worsening the repercussions over time.

One part of the equation is learning loss. Special needs children are not learning at the pace and capacity they would be in an uninterrupted, in-person classroom. There are larger gaps in their academic skill development, literacy, and numerical education, not to mention the broader benefits of the school including social and emotional intelligence, engagement, motivation, and inclusion. This may, in turn, lead to ill-preparedness as students advance grades, graduate to high school, attend university or college, and attempt to carve their place in the workforce. In the long run, these children may face a deep recession with far fewer opportunities to live independently.

Both UNICEF and UNESCO have raised concerns about COVID-19's negative impact on child education. Now, they claim that the pandemic's health crisis is quickly becoming a child rights crisis, given the fact that access to quality education is hindered, and for some, unavailable. Modeling suggests long-term effects on vulnerable children's educational attainment and lifetime earnings, and therefore, the national economy.

We have a moral obligation to promote and protect children's rights, and to invest in the support of the most vulnerable groups so that they have the best possible chance of realizing their full potential. The COVID-19 crisis is not a reason to reduce or neglect the protection of children's rights, especially those who are disadvantaged. On the contrary, these children need and deserve our attention and consideration. Now.