

COVID 19 AND IMPACT ON GHANAIAN SCHOOL CHILDREN

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Introduction

The world is grappling with a rampaging corona virus pandemic wreaking havoc on local and global economies. No nation has been spared the effects of the novel virus which is threatening the existence of our species and deeply ingrained socio-cultural ways. Lockdowns, restriction of movement, ban on gatherings, the need to observe health and safety protocols including donning face masks have become the new normal. Millions of children are out of school and parents with little or no teaching experience have to school their wards on top of dealing with their own anxieties. It goes without saying that these are challenging times for everyone but for children these new arrangements can be even more daunting.

Domestic Violence

As children are restricted to their homes, most of them easily become victims of domestic violence. Many children suffer from Focus Attention Disorder (FAD) and leaving them at the mercy of parents who are not professionally trained as teachers is a recipe for some sort of abuse. Again, parents who are stressed are more likely to react to their children's inappropriate behaviors or demands in abusive ways, directly or indirectly. Increased stress levels among parents is often a major predictor of physical abuse and neglect of children says Yo Jackson,

PhD, child psychologist and associate director of the Child Maltreatment Solutions Network at Penn State (Abraham 2020).

Stress and Depression

For the last two months, children of school going age have been forced apart, their interaction with friends and school mates cut off abruptly. This situation is especially difficult for only children, their interactions have been restricted to the adults they live with. These sudden changes can hurl children into depression. We shouldn't also forget that some children are also scared of the deadly impact of this COVID 19. They are likely to engage in mind fantasies and are likely to jump into illogical conclusions during this pandemic. For instance, they may be thinking about what will become of them when they lose their parents or loved ones to the virus. Are all my friends safe? Am I going to die too? All these 'irrational' thoughts are likely to plague children during this period.

The fate of 2020 WASSCE and BECE candidates is uncertain. This is a confusing situation and without psychological assistance, candidates' preparedness when new dates are announced can be affected. University students have been forced into online lectures, quizzes and examinations. Even in cities network challenges abound, cost of data subscriptions are out of the reach of many especially at a time when job losses have become the order of the day.

Bodily Changes/Diseases

Parents must monitor the eating habits of children during this time. Most children are likely to gain weight as a result of mindless eating. Since children are at home and less engaged, they tend to eat more and junk food seem even more attractive at this time. If we all lose sight of eating habits, we are likely to see an incidence and increase in lifestyle disease such as obesity and diabetes.

Decline in Academic Performance

Since the pandemic started, governments and educators all over the world have responded in stride, finding innovative ways to keep children learning. The Ghana learning television channel launched to help educate children in other to compensate for the loss of contact hours with teachers in school is one such innovation. How helpful are these television learning sessions to the many school going children who live in areas without televisions or access to electricity? And how do we answer the questions children with access may have while they learn? This situation will likely contribute to the decline in academic performance of children. Already, parents and guardians are struggling to keep up with their new forced role as educators.

Acquisition of Strange Behaviors

Clearly, in this time of 'house arrest' surfing the internet is going to be the order of the day. Research indicates that the internet is a new and innovative medium that can completely change the lives of people much as television did in the 1950s and 1960 (Kim 2003). Kim argues that the

number of kids and teens who are using the internet is growing fast every year. Obviously, children in Ghana today cannot do away with the internet. What are they reading and watching on the internet? Who is controlling what they read and watch on the internet? I strongly believe these questions and many others must be asked during this pandemic. Children are likely to be exposed to novel and dangerous behaviors if surfing the internet is not checked. Some of these foreign behaviors on the internet can have negative repercussions on the moral standards of the Ghanaian child especially during this period.

Recommendation

Firstly, I strongly recommend parents and guardians make a conscious effort to keep their stress and anxiety levels as low as possible especially during this period. According to Amy Damashek, PhD, a Child Psychologist at Western Michigan University, ‘Anything that reduces stress can reduce the risk for abuse and neglect’ (Abraham 2020). Parents must learn not to project their anger, fury and disappointment on their wards after engaging in heated arguments with their partners. They are children and must not be victims of chaos in the home.

Also, parents who can afford the services of nutritionists must do that as soon as possible. This will help regulate the eating habits of children and the entire family. Those who cannot afford the services of nutritionists should kindly monitor the food their wards eat while waiting for this pandemic to be over.

Parents and guardians need to assist their children to engage in cognitive exercises while at home. Cognitive exercises or rehearsals help stimulate the brain and make it active and reduce the chances of memory loss and forgetfulness. Cognitive exercises can be one of the following:

- a. Go through children's Assignment Books and repeat the same assignments they were given when they were in school
- b. Give children Mathematics questions to solve.
- c. Engage children in discussions that demand a lot of thinking.
- d. Buy a lot of story books for children to read
- e. Children can use this period to learn how to effectively use the computer and can also be assisted to improve on their typing skills.

During this period, parents who are perceived to have good child management skills and love their kids most are all going to be tested. Therefore, all parents and guardians must consciously devise a strategy that will help them consistently have the welfare of their kids in mind. They shouldn't lose sight of their children. At any point in time, parents should be aware of what their children are engaging in.

Internet usage is not bad. However, the way and manner it is used can make it devastating.

Parents and guardians are encouraged to monitor and control what their kids read and watch on the internet. University authorities and managements should take into consideration challenges students are likely to encounter with the online lessons and examinations. I recommend a take-home assessment for all students in the tertiary institutions. Modules should be put online for students to read and assessment should be a take-home type. When students are done, they just have to email the assignments to their various lecturers. This I think can drastically reduce the stress level of students.

Counselling Psychologists and other Psychologists should make their services available and free to all school going children, families and university students especially during this period. This is the period when our services are needed most. We should support national efforts to fight this deadly virus. Media houses are encouraged to engage the services of Psychologists in this difficult times.

Religious teachers who handle the children can also assist by intermittently checking on their children as to how they are coping with this pandemic at home. I believe some of these children who will be undergoing some sort of abuse can confide in their teachers which when handled well can ameliorate the condition of such children.

We all have a part to play in making our children feel more comfortable and grow strongly in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic. Children are the most vulnerable population in this period and must be protected and not ignored. Their interests and concerns must be at the fore of discussions and I hope all school going children in Ghana will come out of this pandemic stronger than before.

Reference

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