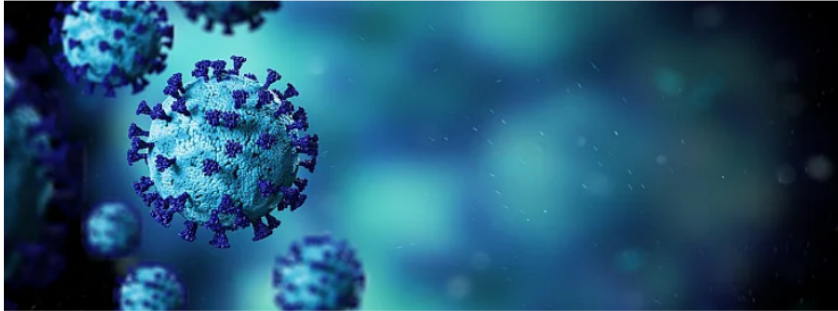


## Lockdown affects children's learning capacity and mental well-being

*Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, schools in India have been closed for the longest period in history, and as a result, many students are unable to recover from its psychological impact.*

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Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, schools in India have been closed for the longest period in history, and as a result many students are unable to recover from its psychological impact.

Recent reports have shown that the closure of schools for such a long period has a direct and serious impact on students' learning ability and mental health.

According to a report, only 8 percent of children in villages have access to online education, while in many places up to 37 percent of students have dropped out.

Lakhs of students have dropped out due to repeated closures of their schools. Many of them lost out on their schooling as proper infrastructure and resources for online education are beyond their reach.

Eminent welfare economist Jean Dreze, who kept a close eye on the socio-economic consequences of the pandemic, in collaboration with several researchers, conducted an in-depth study on online and offline learning of school children.

The study, titled 'Emergency Report on School Education', concluded that only 8 percent of school children in rural India have access to online education while at least 37 percent have dropped out completely.

Similarly, research conducted by Azim Premji University in five states has found direct evidence of a fall in the learning ability of students. Research has also revealed that children are lagging in basic skills such as reading, comprehension, or solving simple math problems, which is worrying.

A few months ago, considering the decrease in active Covid cases, many states opened schools and allowed teaching in the classroom. But the sudden surge due to the Omicron variant again forced the closure of the institutions.

However, now education experts and leading educationists of the country have asserted that frequent and sudden closure of schools can ruin the future of the students.

Vishnu Karthik, Director, Heritage Group of Schools, says, "The frequent closure and intermittent opening of schools have been a very upsetting experience for students and teachers. This has not only increased the stress and dilemma of the children but has also affected their socio-emotional side badly.

We feel that like many other countries, we should also keep schools open during this time. One of the biggest upheavals of the Covid period is the prolonged closure of schools and educational institutions. The vaccination age also needs to be lowered so that students come back to their schools to study again."

In the era of online education, there is no dearth of such students who are deprived of facilities such as the Internet. The education of such students came to a halt which also affected their overall development.

The findings of various researches have shown that due to the closure of schools in the Covid-19 era, children's ability to learn has decreased while their stress has increased. Simultaneously their mutual attachment has also decreased.

Researchers have also suggested that loneliness and psychological problems have been reported in many students along with anxiety and depression. Therefore, it is crucially important to rethink ways of dealing with the pandemic today.

Many world-class experts are in favor of reopening the schools with strict enforcement of safety measures instead of complete closure. At the same time, in case the Covid positivity rate increases, the government has the option to shut down schools.

Commenting on the issue, Rohit Sen Bajaj, Director, Pathways School, says, "It is easy to say that the virtual-hybrid-virtual cycle has become the 'norm' but the transition is not easy. The scholastic and social-emotional skills that children develop through interaction in school classrooms and corridors are not possible in a virtual classroom."

Praveen Raju, co-chairman of FICCI ARISE and founder of Suchitra Academy, is also in favor of reopening the school.

"Due to the prolonged closure of the school, the general education of the students has been badly affected and the gap between resourceful and resourceless students has increased further.

You can also imagine the reality of Indian education in which most of the students do not even have a digital device and hence it is difficult to continue online education. India is one of the countries with the longest school closures and now the World Bank, UNESCO, experts at home and abroad are all warning against the long-term ill-effects of closing schools," he says.

Academics say that in this crisis, all concerned stakeholders will have to strengthen safety measures, and especially in states where the positivity rate is low, the decision of schools' closure should be reconsidered.