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Reopening of schools in the COVID-19 affected areas: Considerations and suggested recommendations

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Abstract

The coronavirus disease-2019 (COVID-19) pandemic accounted for massive interruptions in the lives of all the age-groups of people and the same stands true for school-going children. Although, the decision of closure of schools was taken to ensure overall well-being and safety of children, but we have to acknowledge the fact that it has resulted in a negative impact on education, health status, development, family income and the economy of the nation at large. It has been advocated that educational facilities should be closed only when there are no other options available. In-fact, the policy makers have been advised to plan and implement a set of measures at different levels to negate the possibility of introduction and onward spread of the infection in schools as well as in the local community. In conclusion, the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly affected the lives of school children and it is high time that we take evidence-based decision to ensure schools are reopened. However, a lot of preparedness and risk mitigation efforts need to be taken to ensure the safety of children as well as the community.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, Schools, Students

Introduction

The coronavirus disease-2019 (COVID-19) pandemic accounted for massive interruptions in the lives of all the age-groups of people and the same stands true for school-going children [1]. Even though, the infection has accounted for more than 30.6 million cases and death of 950000 people, the magnitude of the infection among children is significantly less [2]. The available estimates suggest that only 8.5% of the reported cases have been from the children age-group worldwide [3,4]. However, considering the mode of disease transmission and to ensure safety of the children, all educational institutions, including schools have been closed since the start of the pandemic in almost all the affected nations [1]. The current article has been written to understand the prerequisites which needs to be fulfilled so that schools can be re-opened and the responsibilities expected from different stakeholders in ensuring the safety of school personnel and the community at large.

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Reopening of schools

Although, the decision of closure of schools was taken to ensure overall well-being and safety of children, but we have to acknowledge the fact that it has resulted in a negative impact on education, health status, development, family income and the economy of the nation at large [1,3]. Any decision regarding closure or re-opening of schools should be taken based on the comprehensive risk assessment in the region, which is determined by the level of transmission, clinical profile, the capacity of the schools to improve their preparedness, the anticipated rise in the number of cases after the re-opening of schools, and other public health measures implemented in the local area outside the school boundaries [4].

Suggested preparedness and risk mitigation

In general, it has been proposed that in regions with no or sporadic cases, all schools can be opened after the standard infection prevention and control measures are in place [4]. In regions with clusters transmission, most of the schools can be re-opened after implementation of necessary measures, while in regions with community transmission, a risk-based approach can be adopted

[4,5]. The primary principles which should be kept in mind includes maintaining social learning & development of children in a safe environment, reducing the risk of transmission among all stakeholders of schools, aversion of the possibility that schools act as an amplification site, and that school level public health measures are merged at community level [1,4,5].

Interventions at different level

It has been advocated that educational facilities should be closed only when there are no other options available. In-fact, the policy makers have been advised to plan and implement a set of measures at different levels to negate the possibility of introduction and onward spread of the infection in schools as well as in the local community [4]. In the areas wherein schools are reopening, at the community level measures pertaining to the detection of suspect cases, treatment of cases, contact tracing, and other measures pertaining to promotion of physical distancing and risk reduction strategies have to be intensified [4,5]. At school level, decisions have to be taken with regard to the policies supporting physical distancing, infrastructure support (viz. hand washing facilities, ventilation promotion, etc.), maintenance of a clean environment, school transportation services, etc, [1,3].

At classroom levels, physical distancing of at least 1 metre (if feasible), wearing masks (among children aged 12 years and above plus all staff), frequent handwashing, respiratory etiquette, cleaning and disinfection should be advocated. The decision to encourage the use of mask among children in the 6-11-year age-group should be taken depending on the intensity of transmission, sociocultural attributes, the impact on learning & development, etc [4]. It is very essential to enforce the policy that student or staff should stay at home, if they are not well. Further, the staff has to communicate with the parents and inform them about the measures taken by the school for the safety of their children, clarify rumors, and ask them to report any cases of COVID-19 that are reported in the household [4,6]. Moreover, the teachers have to keep a watch on the condition of the students an should immediately report to the school authorities, if they observe any suspect cases [4-6].

In case, a student or a school personnel becomes symptomatic, they should be isolated in a previously defined earmarked room and should be instructed to use face mask. All the surfaces touched by the suspected person should be disinfected and they should be asked to use a specific toilet which should not be used by others [3-6]. At the same time, arrangements should be made for their transit to the health care facilities for medical attention and collection of laboratory samples, if necessary. In situations, where students cannot attend school, arrangements should be made for remote learning and all steps should be taken to ensure constant monitoring of the school operations [3-5].

Conclusion

In conclusion, the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly affected the lives of school children and it is high time that we take evidence-based decision to ensure schools are reopened. However, a lot of preparedness and risk mitigation efforts need to be taken to ensure the safety of children as well as the community.

Conflict of interests
The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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