



## Engagement Redefined: Children and Youth without parental Care during and post Covid-19, India

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## Engagement Redefined: Children and Youth without parental Care during and post Covid-19, India

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Children already in vulnerable situations and difficult circumstances in normal times are always at the threshold of a crisis. Even before coming to alternative settings, children in out of home care have already experienced early childhood trauma, deprivations of all kinds, met with human depravity of different shades. The slightest trigger can send them to critical re-traumatization. To be able to prevent this, in the face of the rising issues caused by this pandemic, right assessments, effective interventions and working to keep the trust of children with their care givers is of paramount importance.

Udayan Care, an NGO in India, headquartered in Delhi, manages 17 group homes for children (Udayan Ghars: Sunshine Homes) and two after-care facilities for youth. We also support a care leavers association for vulnerable children and youth.

It is a huge task for all the social workers, counselors and administrative staff at Udayan Care to reach out to the over 200 children and 30 youth, who are directly under our care and protection, and the over 50 care leavers in two different cities. We need to ensure that they do not lose their voice, do not feel forgotten, do not experience any heightened negative feelings or anxious moments and that they also feel gainfully engaged as lockdown does not permit us, other than the skeletal residential staff, to be physically present at the facilities,

The first steps we implemented involved stopping outsiders from visiting the homes, training children and staff in remaining home bound and to observe safe distancing. This meant that almost all the volunteers and professionals had to stay away from their beloved children and youth. Our residential care staff picked up the cudgels and have stood bravely to face the call of duty. It has been heartening to not only see them keeping children well-fed, well sanitized, and engaged positively in a routine developed together with the children and youth but also quickly adapting to technology to keep connected with the mentors, and other professional staff.

The key has been to keep children engaged. The crisis brought by Covid-19 has given the mentor parents, social workers and the caregivers at homes a chance to be closer to their children and youth even more than they could during normal times. Close conversations even online have definitely increased the trust in each other, showing that life and what we have in life must not be taken for granted. This has helped children see the positive side even in this tough situation as is evident in the words of a 14 year old girl, Sheelu: “this Corona has taught me how to look after my other sisters in the home so that they don’t feel anxious, for my questions on anxiety are so nicely allayed by my counsellor; I feel confident that we will fight it together.” Another youth remarked “With so much crisis in our country at this time due to the Corona virus, I may sound stupid to come out as happy, engaging myself a lot more than before with new online learning tools, as my Counselor *didi* (big sister) has told me to always stay positive and look for opportunities everywhere.”

Finding the most appropriate and suitable care during this pandemic has involved an increased focus on health and hygiene, teaching and managing children remotely, managing work remotely and being able to stay connected virtually. These changes come with challenges. Keeping children engaged online for a long time may become a difficult task for child and youth care practitioners. One major concern for the 23.6 million children without parental care in India who may or may not be in institutions, is non-availability of access to technical resources. At this moment huge efforts are being made by schools and teachers to deliver tutorials online or through television broadcasts. Some institutions may be providing the necessary technology and equipment, but concerns are rising for the impending negative effects of home confinement and these online schooling measures on children’s physical and mental health.

Evidence suggests with less physical activity, longer screen time, irregular sleep patterns, and less favorable diets, there will be a spike in weight gain and a loss of cardiovascular fitness. More neglected will be the attention to psycho-social support to children. With online counseling, that also has not been available immediately and regularly, the stressors like boredom, inability to meet peers and teachers, lack of privacy, worry about their own families back home, and peer abuse, can leave enduring effects on children and adolescents. With no clarity on how long the situation will last, there is also a general uncertainty. For those with huge trauma issues and with special needs, more virtual programmes and strategies will need to be developed to reduce their stress and not let them fall into the vicious cycle of re-traumatization.

The immediate repercussions of this crisis are already being felt. Managing human and financial resources efficiently will be the biggest

cause of concern. With increased focus on humanitarian and relief work, funding for children who stay in institutions, which already was a low priority, will likely be further reduced. Being able to maintain the standards of care with limited budgets available will be the biggest concern most institutions are going to face.

Care leavers, who always had difficulty getting jobs, will be hugely deprived as compared to youth in India who may still have some family support. Lack of jobs will increase homelessness and other issues. We, as a society should start strategizing to overcome these impending challenges.

Going forward, we hope to continue to receive the same and perhaps more committed support from duty bearers, various state agencies, child protection functionaries on the ground, schools, communities and last but not the least our donors. With the long lasting adverse effects of Covid-19 on the global economy, we are already seeing a dip in donor commitments. Government will need to step in and support voluntary efforts. The education sector will need to think of innovative ways of social distancing while still keeping children connected and moving forward. More tele-counseling services will be needed. More innovative practices in fund raising will need to be developed to keep the cogs of the wheel well-oiled and running.

Finally, making the paradigm shift for institutional care toward successful family and community based care, to which India started committing itself more forcefully only recently, may take a dip for the time being. Increased poverty and loss of livelihoods will mean reduced capacities of families to care for their children and steps to prevent separation of children from their families and to support families and communities to keep their children, need to be taken with support systems in place and a lot of monitoring mechanisms. Any unplanned effort to reduce the reliance on institutions in the post-Covid era could lead to a rush to send the children back, even to dysfunctional families. This will not be in the best interest of children and will take a toll on the already inadequate service system.

In such uncertain times, the only certainty is the need to keep evolving and developing, for the sake of our children and youth!