



SPECIAL FEATURE:
REFLECTIONS ON COVID-19

**SEEING THE SILVER LINING IN
THE CLOUD:
RESILIENCY DEMONSTRATED
BY CHILDREN IN RESIDENTIAL
CARE IN INDIA DURING THE
COVID-19 CRISIS**

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Seeing the silver lining in the cloud: Resiliency demonstrated by children in residential care in India during the COVID- 19 crisis

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Abstract

The main priority during the COVID-19 emergency for Udayan Care, an NGO based in Delhi, India, is to quickly assess the risks and take steps to mitigate them so that the children and youth in the care system, and the care leavers, already unsupported and left in the lurch, do not succumb to the harsh realities caused by the pandemic. This article describes ways in which children and staff have been adapting to the difficult circumstances they are facing.

Keywords

COVID-19, lockdown, child and youth care, childhood trauma, India

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As practitioners of child and youth care for over 26 years now, at [Udayan Care](#) we are experiencing the kind of an unprecedented global crisis that has left everyone deeply impacted and wounded. We see more cases being reported, more severe problems every day, greater lockdowns, businesses shutting down, people getting laid off, jobs getting scarcer, communities of daily wage earners and migrant labourers locked down in big cities, with no work, no home and affected by hunger. As the situation seems to be getting gloomier by the day, children become more vulnerable.

For children in such difficult circumstances even in normal times it is always a crisis, but what we face now and in times to come, is not just a global health crisis; it is severely affecting each and every aspect of life. It will increase the responsibility of people like us, child and youth care workers, as we continue to work with the most vulnerable cohort. The main priority is to quickly assess the associated risks and take steps to mitigate them so that the children and youth in the care system, and the care leavers, already unsupported and left in the lurch, do not succumb to the harsh realities caused by the pandemic and are enabled to maintain their balance. Having said this, it is not a one-off job; it calls for daily vigilance, as there is no play book or 'standard operational procedures' to manage this. It also calls for a constant state of preparedness to mitigate all the risks of unimaginable harms, and to ensure physical safety and availability of essential commodities like food, medicines, and timely addressing of the ever-rising mental health issues of children, youth and staff.

Children who live in settings that are not their biological families are likely to have experienced early childhood trauma, deprivations of all kinds and met with human depravity of different shades. The slightest trigger can send them to critical re-traumatisation. To be able to prevent this, in the face of the rising issues caused by the pandemic, it remains critical that we carry out proper assessments and effective interventions to keep the trust of children and care givers.

The COVID-19 global pandemic has affected the lives of everyone. These difficult times have shown adults how quickly life could suddenly come to a halt. For children and youth, especially those already vulnerable and in receipt of support

by organisations such as Udayan Care, it has shown them an unprecedented challenge, touching their lives more closely than they can express. For children living in children's homes under the juvenile justice system, at Udayan Care we had to immediately shift our priority and attention to the 200 children staying with us across our 17 small group homes in four states of India. Thankfully, the model of keeping fewer children in our homes and locating our homes in the middle class neighbourhoods has paid off really well during this crisis. The first step undertaken was to access all the advice and guidelines issued by various agencies and strictly comply with them. As such, one of the first steps taken across all our homes was to prevent entry of volunteers and mentors.

The support staff in a timely manner and on a daily basis was able to ensure that no home was falling short of essentials and required commodities. We co-ordinated with the municipal corporations to facilitate the fumigation of all of our settings. Support was welcomed from a range of 'Good Samaritans', but the dedication of our care givers was outstanding during this crisis. The response and sensitivity of the child protection professionals also was unprecedented, as each agency kept coming forward to extend support, remotely and over the phone. To share a story, when one of our children in a Delhi home was affected by symptoms of fever, and the caregivers' efforts to take the child to the local hospital did not materialise, we had the district child protection officer arrange for a government hospital doctor to speak to the child over the phone, interpret the symptoms and provide immediate medical advice.

The creative side of our children was at its best, with most of them engaging in making drawings and illustrations around COVID-19, depicting what they understood from the present crisis and their hope of being able to put up a united fight against it. They have come up with Corona stories, Corona poems, Corona quizzes, and even Corona theatre. Our counsellors and educators constantly engaged with the children, keeping them occupied with educational materials and telephone counselling as and when needed. The care givers were asked to pay special attention to those children who already had mental health concerns, ensuring that their emotional distress was not any higher. All mentors, social workers, and counsellors were always in touch giving them ideas, hearing

them patiently, allaying any anxieties and misconceptions about precautions that they may pick up from the inevitable WhatsApp videos.

To ensure that our home staff had clear instructions on their roles and responsibilities, we put together a Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) for managing child care during COVID-19. This SOP reflects the unique and critical role that a children's home can play in times of emergency with the aim of ensuring the continuing development and wellbeing of our children. Our children have been able to beautifully deal with the challenges and adapt to a new way of life, showing far more emotional bonding with each other. The little steps each one took has helped maintain a positive environment and see the silver lining, as they say.

The youth who have left care and are living on their own relied heavily on their support group. Being teenagers, and already living in difficult circumstances, this crisis has made their lives even harder. With offices and colleges closed, these young care leavers are missing out on the little social support they had. Keeping the connection through technological modes has helped us keep them motivated, reducing their anxieties and feeling of isolation. One of our care leavers shared as follows:

..anxiety around COVID-19 is completely understandable, but the Zoom meetings with CLAN [support group] members made me feel I am not the only one experiencing this and that I have my friends around me. I now know that there are many things we can do together and be safe and engage even as we practise social distancing.

Others shared how they have understood the meaning of being kind with oneself and with others. The youth were able to see positive aspects, even during this difficult time. Positivity has to drive us and in the words of a care leaver from India:

COVID-19 is with us for now. Life changes have come upon us, with huge changes in ways of living and daily routines, changes in work practices, Right now we can't say when we will free from

this epidemic, but as we know that it only takes a small amount of light to break through darkness, looking for better change.

Our small efforts, alertness and quick decisions as child and youth care practitioners have helped in effectively coping with the crisis and mitigating the risks to children and young people who are already living in the toughest of circumstances. These times have reinforced our belief that working with children and youth always brings energy and positivity and that we get more than what we give to them. In the words of one of our children:

These are times when everyone is appearing troubled and we can do nothing to avoid them. But we should not be afraid of change and must adapt quickly to the new norms of life and deal with the situation positively, after which joyous times will come back.

These tough times have shown us that there are silver linings and working with children and youth in such times helps us discover our strengths as a family. Care leavers, who always had difficulty in getting jobs, will again be hugely deprived compared to other youth in India, who may still have some family support. Lack of jobs may increase homelessness and other issues. As a society we should start creating strategies to overcome this.

We hope to continue to receive the same and perhaps more committed support from duty bearers, various state agencies, child protection professionals 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. It is our view that government will need to step in and support voluntary efforts, which is a huge sector in India, as compared to the West. In addition, more innovative practices in fund raising will need to be evolved to keep the cogs of the wheel well-oiled and running.

Finally, making the paradigm shift from institutional care towards 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, have to be taken. Any unplanned effort to reduce the burden on institutions in the post-COVID-19 era could lead to a rush to send the children back, even to dysfunctional families, which will not be in the best interest of children and will take a toll on the our monitoring system which is only just evolving. In such uncertain times, the only certainty is to keep evolving and developing, for the sake of our children and youth.

About the author

Dr Kiran Modi started Udayan Care, an NGO based in Delhi, India, with the vision 'To Regenerate the Rhythm of Life of the Disadvantaged'. Holding a doctorate from IIT, Delhi, Dr Modi is a person of varied experience in diverse fields, such as media, health care, and children's theatre. Dr Modi is the Founder Liaisoning Editor of an international bi-annual journal on alternative care, *Institutionalised Children: Explorations and Beyond* (ICEB). She publishes papers and organises training and national and international conferences on standards of care in institutions. Besides her management responsibilities, Dr Modi is a Mentor Mother to many children and youths in care.