

Let us not forget the children of front liners in COVID-19

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Dear Editor,

The COVID-19 pandemic has swept across the globe infecting millions and causing global health and economic chaos. On 18th March 2020, the Malaysian government implemented lockdown measures known as Movement Control Order (MCO) to try to mitigate transmission and 'flatten the curve'. Malaysians were ordered to 'stay at home' and schools closed immediately sending almost 8 million school-going children home.

There are many negative psychological aspects due to home quarantine and social isolation of children. Children lose their essential peer support when out of school. They lose the training normally required to build resilience as daily routines, family norms, and social infrastructures are disrupted.^{1,2} Social isolation itself may result in psychological stress, depression, anxiety, and adjustment disorders.¹ Bad habits like excessive screen time or day long snacking may result in long term ill consequences. Increased online access may predispose to exposure to negative online elements.

The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on many specific child groups have been discussed, like children who are infected or have infected or have deceased parents, children with special needs or marginalised children. Unfortunately, the effects on children of front liners have not been highlighted and this is a unique group which merits special attention.

Children of front liners in the COVID-19 are especially vulnerable as firstly, they often endure home quarantine without the companionship of their parents who are required to be at work and often for longer hours or with revised schedules. Even when front liners are off duty, many choose to distance themselves from their family members for fear of infecting them.² Parental companionship is vital not only for normal psychological development and well-being, but the intimacy also helps to ease the stress of quarantine. Therefore, these children have lost an important anchor of security, stability, and guidance in this time of uncertainty.

Secondly, even when parents are at home, the parent-child relationship is modified by their professional roles and mental status. These parents may not hug or sleep with their children.¹ The parents themselves may be stressed, and suffer from anxiety, depression or insomnia.³ These changes in the parental mental status may then be perceived as a threat by

children and contribute to further anxiety.² Parents may also be fatigued or pre-occupied with COVID-19 issues, resulting in missed cues or distress signals from their children. Children may also be fearful of their parents being infected or dying.

Therefore, while the COVID-19 battle continues and the world is becoming increasingly fatigued, let us not forget children of front liners who are at an added risk for the negative psychological impacts of this pandemic. Helpful strategies to overcome these challenges includes providing accurate, timely and age-appropriate explanations and updates of the pandemic and having open, sensitive and emotion-focused conversations exploring, responding and validating feelings and fears of the children.^{4,5} It is also important to reassure these children of measures taken specifically to protect their parents whilst at work and in general, to keep the family safe and sound.⁵

In addition, during this difficult time parents also need to put in place a regular routine for their children to minimise the anxiety caused by uncertainties. Whenever possible, other caring adults like a member of the extended family should be invited to serve as the 'surrogate parents' in their absence.^{4,5} Parents need to be sensitive of the emotions their children and to provide extra attention and affection whenever at home in spite of their own emotions or physical tiredness.⁵ Playtime and fun opportunities, even though limited, should be consciously created and given priority.⁴ Most importantly, reassurance that the loving parent-child relationship has not changed in spite of all the uncertainties around them.

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