

DISCUSSION PAPER

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Protecting the Filipino Children in Time of COVID-19 Pandemic: Some Risk-Mitigation Measures

Executive Summary

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Protecting the children and the youth is essential during this COVID-19 pandemic. While there have been few reports of confirmed COVID-19 cases among children, their well-being can still be adversely affected. Hence, ensuring their welfare is a must and this should include not only protection from the disease but also ensuring quality of their education, mental health, and safety from other risks such as abuse and exploitation.

With the pandemic, their education has been disrupted and their mental health negatively affected. In this regard it is advised that educators should be trained properly on how to conduct their online classes and how to support the parents or guardians of the students on how to facilitate home learning. Social skills development of the children would also be compromised; hence students should stay connected to their school, teachers, and peers through online homeroom class or a regular visit from the class adviser if internet connection and smart gadgets are inaccessible.

The safety and security of the children both online and offline are also a major concern. Online, children are vulnerable to online predators while offline, they can be at risk by being stuck with possible predators and abusers at home. The youth's safety is also at risk from the hands of the local enforcers if the youth violates curfew or community quarantine guidelines. These should be properly monitored and handled by the Barangay Council for Protection of Children to ensure that no rights of the children are violated.

Last but not the least, the parents and guardians of the children play the most critical role in keeping the children healthy, educated, and safe, but they too need support from the government and school. Collective efforts from the government, private institutions, and the school would aid the parents in properly supporting and guiding their children's development while at home during this time of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The first part of this paper discusses the risks the Filipino children face in this pandemic and the second part proposes measures to mitigate these risks in order to protect and promote their welfare.

Introduction

The Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has compelled the Philippine government to place the entire Luzon and other provinces under community quarantine since March 15, 2020. Social distancing measures have been implemented that placed restrictions on normal public activities. Skeletal workforce and work-from-home arrangements were made both in the public and private sectors. Mass gatherings were prohibited. Closure of schools at all levels was mandated.

Although studies and reports show that the elderly are more vulnerable to the disease than children, President Rodrigo Duterte suspended classes since March 10, 2020 at all levels both in public and private schools in the National Capital Region (NCR) as a measure to slow down the spread of the virus (Geducos, 2020). Thirty-nine per cent of the country's population as of 2017 are ages 0 to 17 and only 6.2 per cent are aged 65 years old and above (PSA, 2017). According to data, as of May 13, 2020 out of 11,618 positive COVID-19 cases, 527 (or 4.53 per cent) are aged 0-17. This figure is relatively small compared to those aged 31-45 with 26.99 per cent infection rate (DOH, 2020). To date, a 29-day old baby boy is so far the youngest COVID-19 fatality in the Philippines (Sabillo, 2020).

While there have been a few reports of confirmed COVID-19 cases among children, their well-being can still be adversely affected and ensuring children's welfare must include not only protection from the disease but also ensuring quality of their education, mental health, and safety from other risks such as abuse and exploitation.

This paper discusses the risks the children are facing during the COVID-19 pandemic based on news accounts and social media reports. It also offers some course of actions for stakeholders to help mitigate such risks.

An Overview of the Risks and Issues Faced by Filipino Children

The risks the Filipino children face during this pandemic can be classified into the following aspects or areas:

Nutrition and Physical Health

Since frequent hand washing with soap and water is one of the key preventive measures against COVID-19, the pandemic brings to attention proper hygiene and basic sanitation conditions of households in the country.

According to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) (2018), as of 2015, only 75 per cent of the population use basic sanitation services and only 45 per cent of this come from the poorest households. In 2017, only 76 per cent of the households in the country use improved toilet facilities (PSA, 2017). Eighty-nine per cent of the households in the country has a place for handwashing where soap and water are present. Availability of soap and water increases alongside wealth of the household, with 98 per cent of the household in the highest wealth quintile and 75 per cent of the household in the lowest wealth quintile having soap and water (PSA, 2017). However, no data that would reflect the frequency of handwashing with water and both soap and water is available. Proper and frequent handwashing should be taught to the children to



Photo by: Al Jazeera

goods and services because of the community keep them safe from contracting and spreading the coronavirus.

Children's nutrition during this pandemic is also an area of concern. Since there has been a slow movement of goods and services because of the community quarantine, fresh and healthy food are not as readily available as before. Many households have stocked up canned and other preserved goods



Photo by: UNICEF Philippines

that have longer shelf life so they can limit the number of times they have to go out given the limitations in mobility due to curfews, suspension of mass transportation, as well as to reduce the risk of exposure to the virus.

Middle-income families or families with members who are working in the formal economy have better means to buy medicines and food supplies than low-income families during this pandemic. According to the 2015 Family Income and Expenditure Survey, 58.4 per cent of the population belonged to the low-income class. Most of them work in the informal economy sector and during this pandemic they are considered the most affected given their “no work no pay” situation.

While these low-income families are the government's priority in the distribution of relief goods and cash assistance, relief goods from local government units (LGUs) most often include rice, and instant noodles and canned goods which are considered unhealthy. Some LGUs, especially in the provinces, are able to include fresh food supplies in their relief packs. However, since relief packs are mostly good for up to two weeks for a family of five, there would still be days when a family would not be able to eat properly, which in turn would affect their nutritional intake.

Furthermore, due to limitations on physical activity due to ECQ and social distancing, physical and even mental health and overall development is also affected. LGUs should continuously provide vitamins and vaccines to children.

Education

As a measure to slow down the spread of the virus, suspensions of classes were declared in Metro Manila and other provinces and this disruption of normal school activities together with transition to new modes of learning affect the education and development of children in different ways.

To ensure that education continues, many public and private schools transitioned to online learning. The Department of Education (DepEd) opened access to the DepEd Commons to private schools as well to help them during this quarantine period (DepEd, 2020). Some colleges and universities that are mostly in the second semester of the academic year also transitioned to online classes, while some decided to end the semester early.

However, this method of alternative learning was urged to be suspended through a petition of students and faculty from top schools in the country (Bagayas, 2020). Again, due to the economic situation in the country, not all students have access to resources needed for online classes. Internet connection is not freely available for everyone in our country, moreover, there are problems on the reliability, stability, and speed of internet connection. Aside from the problem on internet connection, personal computers, smart phones, and other electronic equipment that can be used for online learning are not equally available for students in different income classes.

Further, online learning is equivalent to home learning which require not only internet connection and equipment but also learning space inside the home. Parents need to ensure that their children keep a daily schedule and an environment conducive to learning, ideally with minimal or no distractions (Cross, 2020). This is less feasible for families in low-income class due to poor housing condition. Parents or household managers would be too busy worrying about what their family will eat daily and where to get financial aid, hence they would have limited attention and capacity to home school the children. This should be addressed properly by DepEd, schools, and the parents to keep the children's interest in learning, otherwise, decrease in quality of education and increase in school dropouts can be expected. Institutional support for online learning is as important as the support from the parents, especially for those who are in the primary and elementary level.

Mental Health and Other Issues

School closure and social distancing have caused disruptions to everyone's daily routine and this pandemic has caused both adults and children to feel sad, nervous, confused, and afraid. It is important that parents or adults provide the children with correct information about the virus and explain properly the situation why everyone needs to stay



Photo by: Yanalya, 2017

at home and observe proper hygiene to reduce the confusion and anxiety of the children.

Students with Mental Health Issues

Children with mental health issues can worsen because of the pandemic as they face anxieties and distress. Access to mental health support can be limited during the ECQ (Lee, 2020).

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Students with Special Education Needs

Students with special education needs are generally characterized as being short-tempered when their daily routine gets disrupted. Most of these students attend occupation and speech therapy sessions, and due to the pandemic, such sessions are cancelled. This could be a hindrance in their progress in development (Lee, 2020).

Students Stranded in Dormitories

Apart from the cancellation of classes and transition to online classes, being stranded in their respective dormitories is an added stress to some college students. Nearly 9,400 students

were stranded in dormitories and schools nationwide due to the ECQ (Aguila & Mercado, 2020). Aside from being worried about their own health and living situation, they also worry about their families as they are far from each other.

With the suspension of public transport, the students also worry about their food and daily supplies since there are limited establishments where they could buy their necessities. Lack of stable and reliable internet connection to comply with their academic requirements is also an issue for many the students stranded in dormitories.

Safety and Security

There are also a number of safety and security risks for children staying at home during the ECQ. Being forced to stay at home, violence within the family may increase and spending more time online without the proper guidance of the parents or adult guardians increases the risk of the children to online sexual exploitation (Adelson, 2020).

The crisis also increases the children's risks for abuse. Many children are forced to stay at home with their abusers and have limited chances for escape from human traffickers. There were seven children rescued by the Philippine National Police last April 2020 who were sexually exploited online (IJM, 2020).

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Recommendations

While children's risk of being infected by COVID-19 is relatively lower than other age groups, the pandemic increases their vulnerability to other risks that can affect their overall well-being. In this context, the following measures are proposed:

On Health and Awareness

Since availability of sanitation facilities in households is tied with the economic conditions, poor households and therefore children belonging to these households have limited access to sanitation facilities. While proper handwashing and other personal hygiene can be taught in school, a government intervention can focus on increased access to clean water supply and soap. Similarly, the LGUs can include hygiene kits in the relief packages they distribute.

To increase health awareness, the government can work with the LGUs, specially the barangay councils, to develop child-friendly messages on COVID-19.

- Child-friendly campaign can be done online through the LGU's and/or barangay council's official social media accounts such as Facebook, since many children and youth are active on social media and free data access to these social media platforms are available.
- Offline campaign can also be done through the barangay public address system and distribution of informational flyers to reach those who do not have smart phones or any access to social media.

On Education and Mental Health

For online learning to be effective, first and foremost educators should be trained properly on how to conduct or facilitate online classes. Likewise, they should be given proper tools to be able to conduct online classes. Given that the start of the school year 2020-2021 would still be on August 24, 2020, there would be an ample time to prepare our educators

in this transition. However, online learning may not be feasible in remote or rural areas where there are problems on internet connectivity and lack of equipment.

In relation to the above, educators should have constant communication with the parents or guardians of the students through home schooling. Class advisers can have a database of the mobile numbers of the parents or guardians so they can communicate through SMS. They can also create support groups via Facebook Messenger, Viber, or WhatsApp so that parents can get support and tips not only from the teacher but from other parents or guardians as well.

Apart from learning online, television can be an alternative mode of learning for the elementary junior high school level. Television networks can be encouraged to air educational shows during weekdays to aid the children in their learning journey. The government can work closely with television networks on how to go about this transition in learning method.

For rural areas or areas with slow to no internet connection, proper training should also be done for educators in formulating modules for take home lessons and tasks.

Before the physical classroom activities resume, there should also be training on proper implementation of social distancing in the classroom.

Aside from learning academics, it is important that the children, especially those with mental health issues to stay engaged with their peers, teachers, and parents to further develop their social skills (Saavedra, 2020) through group chats, online homeroom class and regular visit from the class adviser if internet connection and smart gadgets are inaccessible.

On Safety and Security Online

The government should take measures to keep children and the youth safe online through enhanced safety features and tools such as antivirus or antimalware programs. Social networking platforms are also expected to enhance their security measures since it will be the "new normal" is expected to feature more online modes of learning worldwide.

Parents and guardians should be in-charge of making sure that their children's devices are safe. They should be properly guided through different forms of media such as online, offline, and mass media. There should be an information campaign to help parents ensure that their children's devices are safe and to encourage children to communicate to their parents or guardians how and with whom they are communicating online (Adelson, 2020).



Photo by: B A Pixabay from One News PH

Barangay Council for the Protection of Children

It is during this time that the Barangay Council for the Protection of Children (BCPC), a local special body at the grassroots level, together with the Sangguniang Kabataan (SK) can make the most out of their mandate to protect the welfare of the children. Apart from the regular vaccinations being done by the community health centers to make sure that the children are healthy, and the distribution of relief goods, the BCPC and SK could collaborate in making a thorough check on the children and youth in their community. They can gather data on the needs and concerns of the children and their parents with regard to their education and health. This should inform relevant programs and other interventions that may require the help of the city/ municipal and even provincial government,

if needed.

The BCPC and SK should also be more visible and hands-on when it comes to children and youth who violate the curfew or the community quarantine guidelines to ensure they are protected from abuse. Several reports of abuse by local authorities have come out, such as alleged youth violators who were locked in dog cages, and those whose hair were cut and were stripped naked before being sent home as punishment for violating the guidelines (Human Rights Watch, 2020). The BCPC should ensure that proper protocols in handling cases of the children and the youth are observed and followed to make sure that the children's rights are not violated.

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Photo by: New York Times

Conclusion

Taking care of the children's welfare is as important as flattening the curve of COVID-19 cases. Adults should make sure that the children are physically and mentally healthy, safe both online and in their community, and their education should not suffer because of the pandemic.

To be able to make sure our children stay healthy and safe, and their education is not disrupted during this time of pandemic, a collective effort among the national and local government, private institutions, schools and most especially the parents and guardians of the children is imperative. Proper information dissemination from the government and support from the all concerned stakeholders are critical.

Our society should work together as one during this time not just in fighting the present pandemic but also in making sure that our children – the future of our nation - are well-taken care of.

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**Disclaimer: The views expressed in this discussion paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the author's institutional affiliations and other related agencies.*

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