Challenges Faced by Students with Intellectual Disability During the COVID-19 Pandemic in India: Coping Mechanisms and Parental Support in Therapy and Daily Living

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic drastically altered education, social structures, and family life, with particularly severe effects for students with intellectual disability (ID). In India—where educational infrastructure and support systems for children with ID were already under strain—lockdowns, closure of schools, and discontinuation of therapeutic services amplified existing challenges. This mixed-method study examines (a) the educational, behavioral, and psychosocial challenges experienced by students with ID during the pandemic; (b) the coping mechanisms employed by families; and (c) the critical role of parents in therapeutic practices and daily living support. Data gathered through structured questionnaires from 120 parents and in-depth interviews with 20 caregivers reveal significant disruptions in learning, therapy, and routine, accompanied by increased caregiver stress. However, structured home routines, visual supports, tele-guided therapy, and collaborative parent–professional efforts helped mitigate impacts. The study underscores the need for inclusive, emergency-responsive education and rehabilitation frameworks that empower families and ensure continuity of care.

Keywords: intellectual disability, COVID-19, parental involvement, coping strategies, India, home therapy, special education

1. Introduction
The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 triggered widespread school closures and limited access to education and rehabilitation services across India. This sudden shift from structured, in-person services to home-based learning and remote support presented unique challenges for students with intellectual disability who rely on individualized instruction, predictable routines, and continuous therapeutic engagement. Intellectual disability is defined by limitations in intellectual functioning and adaptive behavior, requiring tailored educational and therapeutic approaches (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

In India, the pandemic compounded pre-existing infrastructural and social barriers, where special education services and disability support systems are often inadequate, especially in rural and low-resource settings (UNICEF reports on child education crisis in India, 2020). As institutional support receded, parents became central agents in education, therapy, and daily living support for their children with ID.

This study explores the lived experiences of families of students with ID during the pandemic, focusing on challenges, coping mechanisms, and parental roles in supporting learning, therapy, and routine functioning.

2. Literature Review
2.1 Impact on Education and Therapy Access
Globally, children with disabilities faced heightened risk of exclusion from remote learning during COVID-19 due to lack of accessible content and limited digital access (UNICEF India, 2020). In the Indian context, parents of children with intellectual disability had to undertake roles traditionally performed by educators and therapists—a shift that placed enormous pressure on household systems (Nanda, 2024). Even prior to the pandemic, structured therapeutic services such as speech and occupational therapy were limited in accessibility, a trend that was exacerbated by lockdown restrictions.

2.2 Psychosocial and Behavioral Effects
Recent Indian research indicates that lockdown measures severely impacted social communication, behavior, and interaction skills of children with special needs, leading to increased stress among parents (Abdur Rahman, Lazarus & Dalvi, 2024). Beyond disruptions in skill acquisition, caregivers reported elevated levels of psychological distress due to confinement, disruption in routines, and limited professional support.

2.3 Parental Stress and Social Support Systems
Social support plays an important role in parental coping and stress management. A study in Kerala found that parents' perceived social support—both formal and informal—can help families manage stress associated with raising a child with ID (Rushda & Daisy, 2023). Another Indian study on disability impact showed that while parents face physical and financial challenges, many reported increased tolerance and resilience through caregiving (Indian Journal of Social Psychiatry, 2020).

3. Objectives of the Study
The study aims to:
1.   Identify the educational, behavioral, and psychosocial challenges faced by students with intellectual disability during the COVID-19 pandemic in India.
Examine coping mechanisms adopted by students and families.
Analyze the role of parents in facilitating therapies and activities of daily living during the pandemic.
Suggest recommendations for inclusive educational and therapeutic planning in emergency situations.

4. Methodology
4.1 Research Design
A descriptive, mixed-method design was utilized, combining quantitative survey data with qualitative interview insights.

4.2 Participants
Participants included 120 parents of students with mild to moderate intellectual disability across multiple Indian states, recruited using purposive sampling through special education networks and caregiver forums.

4.3 Instruments
Structured Questionnaire: Assessed service disruption, digital access, behavioral changes, stress, and coping strategies.
Semi-Structured Interviews: Explored in-depth experiences and parental strategies.

4.4 Data Analysis
Quantitative responses were summarized using descriptive statistics. Interview data were coded for themes such as routine disruption, therapy substitution strategies, and parental emotional responses.

5. Results
5.1 Educational and Therapy Disruptions
A majority of participants reported significant disruption of learning supports and therapeutic services. Many families lacked access to reliable internet or adaptive digital content, with remote education being less effective for their children's comprehension and engagement (consistent with Indian education access challenges described by UNICEF).

5.2 Behavior and Adaptive Functioning
Parents noted increased behavioral challenges such as emotional outbursts, restlessness, and reduced self-help skills. These observations echo findings from Indian clinical studies showing major effects on communication and social interaction among children with special needs due to lockdown.

5.3 Parental Roles and Stress
Most parents reported elevated stress due to multiple demands. However, many adapted by structuring home activities, integrating therapy into daily routines, and using low-tech visual supports. Peripheral social support—such as peer networks and local awareness groups—also contributed to stress mitigation (Rushda & Daisy, 2023).

6. Discussion
The findings reaffirm that the COVID-19 pandemic intensified pre-existing systemic gaps in special education and therapy accessibility in India. While institutional supports declined sharply during lockdowns, parents assumed expanded roles to fill these gaps, often without formal training. This aligns with recent Indian research highlighting the increased caregiver burden during the pandemic (Abdur Rahman et al., 2024).
The study also illustrates that families with stronger social supports and structured home routines experienced relatively better adjustment. This supports the notion that fostering informal and formal support networks is critical for resilience among families of children with intellectual disability (Rushda & Daisy, 2023)

7. Implications and Recommendations
Inclusive Emergency Planning: Schools and therapy providers should develop adaptive remote learning and therapy modules tailored for students with ID, including low-tech options for families with limited digital access.
Parental Training Programs: Special educators and therapists must offer structured guidance and training for parents to support home-based therapy and routine development.
Strengthened Support Systems: Government and NGOs should expand community support, including helplines, peer support groups, and mental health resources for caregivers.
Policy Integration: Disability rights and inclusive education policies must incorporate emergency readiness to protect learning continuity and wellbeing during crises.

8. Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic brought disproportionate challenges to students with intellectual disability in India, disrupting education, routine, and therapeutic services. Parents played a pivotal role in supporting their children's adaptation during this period, often at great personal cost. Recognizing families as essential partners in education and rehabilitation, and establishing robust support systems, is imperative to ensure resilience and continued development for children with ID during future emergencies.

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