**Special needs**

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ONE of the biggest impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic has been on the education of children. Months-long school closure resulting from concerns of virus transmission has affected their learning outside the classroom environment. Almost a year after the pandemic began, the world around them has not returned to normalcy as the second and third waves of the coronavirus contagion have pushed many communities into lockdowns.

Amidst the chaos, children with learning disabilities and special needs have faced greater challenges than their counterparts who do not fall in the same category. Their learning needs have been hampered by the lack of assistive learning technology at home.

Parents and caregivers are often unable to provide special instructions at home, and these children may be reeling from the effects of the drastic change in their routines, that are also affecting their emotional well-being.

In addition, the expense of assistive, custom-designed learning material is a major concern along with the technical challenge that parents face as the children need specialised learning instructions and therapybased interventions that are difficult to provide in home settings.

It is critical for families to be extra caring, loving and supportive towards children with special needs so that they feel confident, loved and secure. Adults and peers must be encouraged to communicate frequently with them. Healthy interactions foster compassion and care a show of concern that is needed for all people in these times. In the case of children with special needs, such communication is all the more necessary especially during lockdowns as it could alleviate anxiety and stress in those who face disrupted routines. Children who are used to attending special schools may be confined to their homes with no option but to participate in online schooling which is not suited to their learning needs.

Parents of children with special needs also require support and detailed information on techniques to manage their child`s routine at home. Parents should have the assurance that their child`s doctor, professional caregiver or teacher is available online and can be approached in person should the need arise.

Occasional home visits by professional caregivers and teachers could help both parents and their special-needs child feel less anxious. Videoconferencing, voice chat, messaging services, etc should also be available.

Health systems must continue to provide services to children with special needs and arrange for special clinics, including mobile clinics to ensure they have access to medical care when required.Prevention for everyone is key during the pandemic, and children with special needs may need extra attention where following SOPs is concerned in order to ensure that they are protected from the virus.

There will always be a sense of greater responsibility attached to parents of children with special needs. Life will often call upon them to `balance the act`, and ensure that the special-needs child and his or her siblings who may be self-sufficient in comparison receive equal love and support. Such groups of parents must receive adequate outside support in order to manage the needs of their family; they must be made to understand the importance of routines and lifestyles that suit the needs of the whole family, while mal(ing the necessary adjustments to accommodate the needs of their special-needs child.

Support can include linking up or sharing experiences with other families that face similar challenges, although each individual family should feel empowered enough to adapt routines to the needs of their own household. Being part of support groups,enrolling in courses and learning circles that provide opportunities for discussion, sharing best practices and parenting techniques, will help them resolve concerns regarding emotional and social acceptance in thewider community.

Parents as well as caregivers must be able to derive benefit from a systemic support mechanism where the continuum of care encircles healthcare, education, mainstream opportunities, community inclusion and support.

Hospitals and schools have excellent opportunities to collaborate and provide much-needed support to all parents and caregivers in terms of education and professional training for growth and development, in addition to community and state support.

Herein lies the importance of policy at the national level, where the needs of differently abled children are addressed through the universal laws of compassionate care. Special schools, inclusion in mainstream schools and institutes for learning and rehabilitative care can be established when policies support the initiation and establishment of such programmes. Dr Shelina Bhamani leads Parenting Education at the Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology, Aga Khan University.

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