# **The hidden side of the pandemic on children with mental disabilities**

**Source: Dr.SumitShinde, Paediatric Therapist**

Five-year-old Ayan was unable to speak and was found lost in his own world. His parents were concerned about his condition. Residing in the heart of the financial capital, Mumbai, normally awareness about [developmental disabilities is quite high](https://indianexpress.com/article/parenting/health-fitness/children-developmental-disabilities-early-childhood-intervention-5684600/) and early detection is possible. Three-year-old Ayan had been showing symptoms like speech delay and remaining lost for the most part of the day. Earlier, the parents had enrolled him in a school hoping that it may help their child to cure the ongoing problems. However, before the parents could act the entire country went into the lockdown phase, remaining constrained to the house for a long duration.

Ayan’s refusal to sit for online classes and missing out on the early intervention period has impeded his mental growth. On medical assessment, Ayan’s social maturity appears like a two-year-old. This has happened due to a lack of positive development in the past two years. The child is showcasing [severe autistic traits](https://indianexpress.com/article/parenting/family/how-to-know-if-your-child-has-special-needs-7053510/) which otherwise would have been mild and manageable if diagnosed early.

This has been the common condition of many children in the pandemic who have lost their most [critical early intervention period.](https://indianexpress.com/article/parenting/health-fitness/not-all-kids-with-cerebral-palsy-autism-have-intellectual-disabilities-5707135/) In some cases, children who were doing pretty well with the developmental therapies and had high chances of becoming a neurotypical child are now facing several challenges due to the discontinuation of therapies in the lockdown period. The essential technical environment and stimulation was stopped and the over-protective behaviour of the parents has given way to behavioural issues. In some cases, [children have even started throwing tantrums at home](https://indianexpress.com/article/parenting/blog/dont-hide-your-hide-your-childs-disability-help-them-overcome-it-6174792/) and feel erratic. Parents feel that the pandemic has taken away the golden period of their child’s developmental stages.

[**Autism is a neurological disorder**](https://indianexpress.com/article/parenting/family/how-to-know-if-your-child-has-special-needs-7053510/) affecting the child’s social ability, communication and resulting in repetitive behaviour. Such children show difficulties to express mature behaviour in society and require continuous stimulation from the environment for better adaptability and development in the future. It is often seen that the parents of children with autism are more protective and anxious about their child’s mental health. how  and to communicate was hampered, resulting in disturbing the overall growth of the children, mostly the toddlers (1-3 years) and pre-schoolers (3-6 years). These age-groups are termed as the most important stages of development where the child should start getting oriented to his/her surroundings and learn to adapt the environment faster. Their development in terms of communication, social ability, emotional and cognitive aspects is the highest in this age and improves more with the [ongoing social interaction existing](https://indianexpress.com/article/parenting/family/how-can-parents-of-special-kids-secure-their-childrens-future-6147063/) in the surroundings.

This is the age where Developmental disabilities like Autism, ADHD show their prevalence where the child shows delay in speech and social interaction, mostly between the age group of 2-4 years. Early detection is mandatory at this age.

**Problems faced by these children during the lockdown period:**

* Loss of early intervention period.The children in the age group of two-three years who had been diagnosed with developmental disorders like autism and ADHD, could not overcome the [dysfunctions in the early intervention period](https://indianexpress.com/article/parenting/family/early-childhood-intervention-early-years-script-adulthood-5343233/) as maximum brain development happens in this age group. The child and his parents had to work hard to bridge the gap.
* Regression in child development due to lack of stimulation from the environment and lack of opportunities to mingle with the surroundings.
* Children in the age group of three years to five years, where effective integration is essential in order to cope-up with the challenges in school, such as social compatibility. Most school admissions take place as per the age criteria and not the ability criteria. Many pre-schoolers suffering from autism are directly given admission to Senior KG. However, due to the lack of developmental ability, social and cognitive problems, these [children face problems](https://indianexpress.com/article/parenting/family/early-childhood-intervention-early-years-script-adulthood-5343233/) in the higher grades.
* Lack of connect with the society during the pandemic has affected the integrity of autistic children. Such kind of integrity is only possible for these children once the social environment opens up. A child suffering from autism shows a lot of adaptability issues, this becomes a challenge for parents in social situations.
* Lack of Online Study compliance has affected the academic skill development and performance of children suffering from autism.
* Parents who have been overprotective for their autistic child during the pandemic are apprehensive to send their kids in the open environment. Effective social interaction is important for overall development of such children. Overprotection and fear will delay the process of integrity for coping up with Autism.

These are some of the important aspects which need immediate attention from schools, parents and professionals in managing a child’s developmental disabilities, especially autism.