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Early child development amid the pandemic

Zain Saeed Siddiqui

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EARLY CHILD DEVELOPMENT AMID THE PANDEMIC

This Capstone Project is submitted to the Faculty of Business Administration as partial fulfillment of Master of Science in Journalism (MSJ) degree

by

Zain Saeed Siddiqui

Supervised by

Shahzeb Ahmed Hashim

Lecturer

Centre for Excellence in Journalism (CEJ)

Institute of Business Administration (IBA), Karachi

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Institute of Business Administration (IBA), Karachi, Pakistan

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Zain Saeed Siddiqui
(Student Number: 19916)

Committee/Panel:

Muna Khan
CEJ, IBA

Sameer Mandhro
Express Tribune

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Abstract

I would like to bring to notice the importance of early child development because the early years are crucial for the development especially the skills that are going to help children succeed in life. Basically, I would like to focus on the natural development of the human being from birth to maturity, enabling children to become the transforming elements of society, leading to a harmonious and peaceful world. Emotional well-being and social competence provide a strong foundation for emerging cognitive abilities, and together they are the bricks and mortar that comprise the foundation of human development.

Generally, development happens in the same order in most children, but skills might develop at different ages. For example, children usually learn to stand, and then they learn to walk. But this development can happen any time between 8 and 18 months.

Investing in early childhood education can be a powerful way to reduce gaps that often- put children with low social and economic status at a disadvantage. Studies show that the returns on such investments are highest among poorer children, for whom these programmes may serve as a stepping stone out of poverty or exclusion. The main reason for giving prominent attention to mental development from conception through the first 24 months of life is that early unfavorable conditions can impair the normal development of the brain.

In the first few years of life, more than 1 million new neural connections are formed every second. After this period of rapid proliferation, connections are reduced through a process called pruning, so that brain circuits become more efficient. Brain architecture is built over a succession of “sensitive periods,” each of which is associated with the formation of specific circuits that are associated with specific abilities

Early Child Development amid the pandemic

HL: Arrested development

Excerpt: Amid the pandemic, cognitive development of an entire generation is at stake

Young Musab used to jump out of bed every morning, buzzing with excitement as he prepared to go to school. A Prep II student, he looked forward to the new activities the teachers introduced him to each day.

The day before schools shut down due to the Covid-19 pandemic earlier this year was no different in this regard – but while having breakfast, his mood suddenly shifted.

“Baba, why is my school closing? Will I be able to meet my friends again?” he asked his father, 35-year-old Syed Mohsin Hussain Naqvi, who works at Pak Grease.

Not really knowing how to respond or how long the closure would extend, all Naqvi could do was smile at him and assure him he would.



Sindh Education Minister Saeed Ghani announced that the public and private educational institutes throughout the province will remain closed till March 13, 2020. Federal education Minister Shafqat Mahmood announced the extension of school closure later on.

Neither teachers nor parents were prepared for the pandemic, the lockdown and the subsequent shift to online teaching – or the psychological impact on the students, especially

those in pre-primary classes.

Moving from a proper classroom, where children could interact with their peers, to home-based learning – which often involved sitting in front of an electronic device attending online classes for hours – made parents realize the difficult task of getting their children to focus.

It wasn't long before Musab began complaining that he missed his friends, his teachers and his classroom. Of course, he'd complete all his homework and he even got to watch all sorts of cartoons. But soon, his parents were left with no fresh activities to keep him occupied.

“It was with the lockdown that I realized, as a father, I will have to adjust and make more effort to provide my son the proper, structured environment of a classroom,” said Naqvi.

And he wasn't alone in this. Parents across the country and much of the world quickly grasped the fact that adapting to the 'new normal' would not be as easy as it might seem.

With 188 countries imposing nation-wide school closures during the pandemic, over 1.6 billion children have been affected. In Pakistan, the closures disrupted the education of 55.3 million children between the ages of five and 16 years – and younger children are especially unsettled by it.

The teachers soon realized that online teaching is not an alternative of the face-to-face teaching in schools. Teaching online is clearly a different instruction concept which also requires different skills most of the teachers haven't developed and support that many institutions don't provide like fewer devices for access to online classes, internet connectivity and others.

Also the lack of access to friends, teachers, social workers and the safe school space, children end up struggling with loss of learning, increased screen time, behavioural changes and reduced interest in their studies.

Despite the challenges, though, it might be the best time to try to adapt. With advancements in the field of early childhood development (ECD), experts now better understand the critical importance of what happens early in life – and how to go about laying a foundation for future success in the initial years of a child's life. And so, both teachers and parents are better positioned to keep the disruption to a minimum.

A child's development

Formal schooling is critical in the development of a child's brain, acting as a building block for language, emotions, vision and memories. And it's not just about textbook knowledge – much of the learning comes from human interaction.

There are three major stages in ECD: from birth to three years, from three to six years and from six to eight years. Each stage requires age-appropriate support from parents, and what happens in these years has a lasting impact, playing a vital role in the child's growth and development for the rest of his life.

A child's cognitive development begins with his ability to concentrate. For this, a structured environment is crucial, whether at home or at school. With minds very unlike those of adults, the child soaks up everything around him like a sponge, making it part of his personality.

This is how children learn language, for example. Toddlers absorb the languages spoken in their surroundings – if they find themselves exposed to four different languages, they will effortlessly learn these.

The development of a child is a process that requires learning adroitness of skills like sitting, walking, talking, skipping, and tying shoes. There is a predictable time period in which children learn skills in five different areas:

1. The capability of a child to learn and solve problems is known as the cognitive development. Usually an infant starts learning to explore the environment with his hands and eyes or for example a five-year-old learning how to solve simple problems of in maths.
2. Children's ability with which they learns to interact with others, including helping themselves and self-control is known as their Social and Emotional Development. Taking example of a six-week-old baby smiling, a ten-month-old baby waving bye-bye, or a five-year-old boy knowing how to take turns in games at school.
3. If the child is able to both understand and use language that will be his Speech and Language Development skill. That may include a 12-month-old baby saying his first words, two-year-old naming parts of the body, or a five-year-old learning to say "feet" instead of "foots".
4. When the child starts to use his small muscles, specifically their hands and fingers, to pick up



The infographic features a purple vertical bar on the left side. At the top left, there is a photograph of a young child sitting at a table with a plate of food. To the right of the photo, the text reads: "188 countries imposed countrywide school closures during the pandemic". Below this, it states: "School closure during the pandemic, affected more than 1.6 billion children and youth".

Situation: Children's lack of access to school friends, teachers, social workers and the safe space

ECD has three major stages including birth to three (0-3) years, three to six years (3-6), and six to eight years.

Challenges:

- There is a loss of learning for all students due to school disruptions
- Increase in screen time
- Behavioral changes
- Lack of interest in studies

Phase: School closures have affected 55.3 million children in Pakistan aged between five and 16.

Main Points:

- Increased digital screen time during COVID-19 may accelerate myopia in epidemic
- Online learning requires a high degree of self-motivation
- It also reduce human interaction which means Education is not only about textbook knowledge but also the learnings they gain from interactions

small objects, hold a spoon, turn pages in a book, or use a crayon to draw, it is because of his

Fine Motor Skill Development.

5. In contrast if the child starts using large muscles refers to the Gross Motor Skill Development. Similarly, if a six-month-old baby learns how to sit up with some support, a 12-month-old baby learns to pull up to a stand holding onto furniture and a five-year-old learns to skip.

Everything around a child is important. According to raisingchildren.net.au — an informational website funded by the Australian government, “It’s not just the relationship between you [the parent] and your child that shapes development. It’s also your relationships with others.”

It goes on to elaborate that the way a parent (or any important adult) behaves and communicates with others, such as their partner, family members or friends, shows the child how to do the same. Plus, it shows them how others will behave in response. “If your child sees kind and respectful relationships around them, your child learns to be kind and respectful with others.”

Dr Anila Amber Malik, the former chairperson of University of Karachi’s psychology department, points out that even newborn infants are aware of their environment and interested in it, when they don’t have the language to express anything.

She believes online learning amid the pandemic – at least in the form it is usually carried out – is not ideal for children. “Kindergarten teachers must use their screen-time to talk to the children and individually understand their mindsets.”

The need for individual attention

Huma Naz, a directress at the Montessori Child Development Centre (MCDC) (Naz 2020), agrees with the need for an individual-based approach.

“I observe the child’s behaviour so I can facilitate them according to their physical and emotional needs,” explained Naz, who has been teaching children between the ages of three to six years for over a decade.

But, she adds, this is tougher when schools are closed. “After all, when children used to come to school, we could easily observe them.”

She points to the example of one of her students, prior to the lockdown. “For two years, Wania didn’t speak in any of her classes. She took no interest in any activities and if a teacher tried to be persistent in asking her to do them, she would only take out the exercise material without doing anything.”

The school administration decided to promote her from reception anyway, narrated Naz, with the principal of the view that she may be bored of repetitive exercises and new friends along with a new teacher might help her.

But Naz continued, Wania still didn’t participate in anything, with her notebooks remaining empty. “This was a serious problem, and there were constant complaints from other teachers, who couldn’t understand what the issue was,” she said.

Soon, Wania was transferred to Naz’s class, with the directress tasked with rooting out the problem. She asked the principal to give her a week to observe the child and find out about her home environment and history – some of the best explanations for a child’s behaviour.

“When I asked, Wania’s mother told me she was caring for four children, with a fifth on the way. So I knew her mother didn’t have enough time for her. Soon, I realised her family had no interest in her dressing or what she ate for lunch,” said Naz, adding that if a child knows how to speak but chooses to remain silent, it indicates tremendous self-control on their part. “Children like Wania keep everything to themselves because they are upset with everyone.”

When a child doesn’t receive the environment necessary for their mental and physical needs, they may struggle with deviations in their personality. “Children want you to give them respect; only then will they enter your world,” states Naz.

Once she figured out what was going on, she called Wania’s father in to the school. Explaining that Wania’s growth depended on his actions, she advised him to focus on his daughter

– things like paying attention to what she wore, what she ate, taking her to the park and so on.

Meanwhile, at school, Naz starting taking the girl aside and giving her individual attention.

“She started responding only a week later, even interacting with other students.”

Disrupted learning

A report issued on 15 April earlier by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), a multi-dimensional agency, highlighted another concern about the online shift.

The report read, “Millions of children are at increased risk of harm as their lives move increasingly online during lockdown in the Covid-19 pandemic”.

The report has quoted the UNICEF executive director Henrietta Fore saying, “Under the shadow of Covid-19, the lives of millions of children have temporarily shrunk to just their homes and their screens. We must help them navigate this new reality.”

Talking about the global perspective UNESCO noted, “Half of the total number of learners — some 826 million (82.6 crore) students — kept out of the classroom by the Covid-19 pandemic, do not have access to a household computer and 43 per cent (706 million or 70.6 crore) have no internet at home, at a time when digitally-based distance learning is used to ensure educational continuity in the vast majority of countries.”

But with the pandemic disrupting schooling for months on end – not to mention opening and then quickly closing up again – teachers and parents are struggling to align mental development with the physical growth of students.

Children between the ages of two to seven years are still in the preoperational stage, making it developmentally inappropriate to expect their learning to be entirely screen-based at a time when the foundations for their lifelong health and wellbeing is being laid.

And the type of education being provided changes the child’s social, emotional, behavioral, thinking and communication skills too.

There are “significant differences in the cognitive abilities, attention span, and social and emotional abilities of children ages 3-6,” and therefore “flexibility is needed based on a thorough acquaintance of the teachers with students and their families.” (Israel Psychological Association 2020)

The association adds: “Distance learning requires advanced cognitive abilities, thinking and drawing conclusions that are beyond the ability of kindergartners without adult intervention.”

Five months into the lockdown, Naqvi found himself struggling to provide the right environment for Musab’s growth. How, he wondered, could he keep organizing arts and crafts, music, storytelling and games – all the activities used to promote students’ mental, social and

physical development at school?

His wife, too, was worried about Musab's routine, trying to find a way to deal with his increasing hyperactivity.

“With Musab being at home all the time, it became hard to make him sit down for online classes, stretching for as long as three hours in a single day,” explained Naqvi.

When schools reopened, the prospect of meeting his friends daily after a very long time delighted Musab – and he started taking an interest in his classes once again.

Naqvi recalled his son once asked him why he was the only one studying online, with no one else in class, proceeding to declare he would only study if he could go to school.

“With online classes, he just didn't have the sense of competing with his classmates or doing better than them either. He was hardly interested in what was happening and we had to insist that he sit down and focus on his studies,” he added.

He understood, though, that the fault didn't lie with Musab's teachers. “Maybe they too are finding all this difficult and are having a tough time adapting to online teaching,” he acknowledged, adding that though they were trying very hard, he believed it took longer for them to connect with their students virtually, as opposed to the environment of a proper classroom.

Plus, the increased screen-time wasn't ideal. “He seemed to be more interested in watching cartoon movies than in paying attention to his teacher,” complained Naqvi.

Early data from a landmark National Institute of Health (NIH) study that began in 2018 indicates that children who spend more than two hours a day on screen-based activities tend to score lower on language and thinking tests. Not only this, but some children exposed to more than seven hours of screen-time in a day experienced thinning of the brain's cortex – the part of the brain responsible for critical thinking and reasoning skills.

Moreover, according to a review paper (Wong, et al. 2020), there is concern that the increase in screen-time that comes with virtual learning, as well as the reduced time outdoors that is a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, more children may end up struggling with vision damage manifesting itself in the form of myopia – shortsightedness.

“There is a possibility that a prolonged battle against the Covid-19 virus may lead to an increase in the incidence of myopia by shaping long-term behavioral changes conducive for the onset and progression of myopia,” warns the paper.

A study (Twenge and Campbell 2018) states that, young people who spend seven hours or

more a day on screens are more than twice as likely to be diagnosed with depression or anxiety as those who use screens for an hour a day.

The role of parents

Faiza Zaheer, a Montessori teacher at the Aster School, stressed the importance of the teacher's role in handling a generation of students, especially in times like these.

Citing Dr Maria Montessori – the Italian educator known for the innovative education philosophy named after her – Zaheer said, “If we combine the souls of a Sufi and a scientist, the soul of a teacher is formed.”

In other words, she explained, a teacher had a love for humanity, a passion for teaching without worldly gain, and a scientist-like nature.

“A teacher with a keen sense of comprehension and a fine-tuned ability for observation is the first requirement of any good school. Good schools are made up of good teachers, whether they sit in a building or teach under a tree,” she maintained.

In her eyes, parents play a crucial role especially when it comes to virtual learning.

At school, teachers had a prepared, structured environment for their students, she elaborated. “When a child comes to school and sits with his friends in class, he listens to his teachers and it's not too difficult for him to focus and understand what they are trying to explain,” she pointed out. (Zaheer 2020)

But in online learning, it is not just the teachers who have to put in the work. “Parents must play their part equally during class. Otherwise, if parents and teachers do not coordinate their efforts, the children will not be able to focus,” she said.

Child psychologist Dr Bushra Khan turned to a theory formulated by Swiss developmental psychologist Jean Piaget in 1936 to explain how a child constructs a mental model of the world.

Piaget, she said, disagreed with the idea that intelligence was a fixed trait and regarded cognitive development as a process that occurs due to biological maturation and interaction with the environment.

“Now, with the second wave of the coronavirus, teachers want parents to play an equal part in this and provide their children with a proper environment [to enable learning] at home,” added Dr Khan.

Uzma Nadeem, a course assistant at the Montessori Teachers Training Centre (MTTC) in Karachi, highlighted that children needed extra care and attention to their needs during the stressful pandemic.

“With the lockdown, children are not allowed to go out much and end up being mostly at

home. In such a situation, they become more easily irritated and their behaviour needs more attention from the adults around them,” she explained.

She brought up one of her students and how his behaviour changed with the switch to online learning. “He was very hyperactive online and became restless and easily bored. He had trouble sitting still and everyone in his family thought he was just being mischievous.”

But Nadeem realized he wasn’t being naughty. “It was just the energy inside him [seeking an outlet], which the adults around him did not understand. It is the duty of parents and teachers to utilize that energy which children have and channel it into purposeful movements.” (Nadeem 2020)

Inexperience of Teachers

Another factor that keeps kids from gaining interest in online learning is the teachers' inexperience of teaching online. It is not necessary that the inexperience is just limited to the knowledge of the subject they are teaching but also the ins and outs of online education. A pre-school teacher can be reasonably well experienced with all the Montessori teaching methods, but if they don't know how to format their class, prepare an online lesson, they will still be categorized as inexperienced.

Teachers should give the child his freedom to ask questions and interact with their peers. The teacher should take responsibility to make sure their classes are conducted seamlessly where every kid is satisfied, understood what they have learned.

Whereas, the online educator should also be encouraging and supportive of their class without being too hard on them.

Earlier this year in August, CNN published the photo of a boy who was crying in his virtual class to show difficulties of distance learning during pandemic.

It should be noted that there might be plenty of reasons why it leaves some kids crying. Teachers in the kindergarten have to cover ground that's taken for granted at other levels. At this stage of life these kids learn how to separate from their caregivers, how to line up, and how to ask to use the restroom. With this important phase of life, in many cases, kindergarteners are now expected to learn how to read—one of the most cognitively demanding challenges we take on as a species.

This only makes it more important for teachers to really convey things like the importance of cooperation and how to resolve conflict when students only see their friends in tiny boxes through Google Meet or Zoom? If they can focus on the work that's required to teach a 5-year-old child how to decode words?

On the other hand, there's the children, who aren't really built for it. Preschoolers usually need a lot of movement and exploration, and these are things that you can't really do remotely, especially having to sit and stare at a screen rather than having a prepared environment of a class.

‘A whole other struggle’

Sufia Bilal, a housewife, is aware of the role parents must play when it comes to e-learning – and how difficult it can be.

“Making sure my daughter Sualeha was attending and focusing on her online classes was a whole other struggle,” she sighed. “Getting younger children to take a lecture through a screen is far more difficult than just sending them off to school, especially when I myself have to work along with managing the household.”

Bilal said she spent a lot of time trying to make sure her children were attentive during their classes, pointing out that their teachers could not pay attention to every single student in a class of 60 children through a video call.

After all, she said, this medium of learning was new for teachers, students and parents alike, and it wasn’t just the teacher’s responsibility to make sure it worked with full accuracy.

Despite the drawbacks, though, she expressed the belief that virtual classes were better than nothing. “When the lockdown began, it was worrisome because the kids were simply wasting their time sitting at home. But at least with the inception of online classes, it has become easier for us to make them follow a certain study routine, even if virtual learning is not as effective as traditional classes,” she opined.

The pandemic has taken a toll on parents in other ways too. A study published in *Pediatrics* revealed that 45 per cent of parents had experienced increased caregiver burden since the beginning of the pandemic.

Moreover, the frequency of reporting daily negative moods increased significantly since the start of the pandemic, too.

The number of parents reporting a negative mood some of the time went from 10 per cent of days to 33 per cent of days and reporting an all-day negative mood increased from 9 per cent of days to 29 per cent of days.

Many parents also reported experiencing some sort of hardship linked to the Covid-19 pandemic – 60 per cent of them said they had experienced job losses; 69 per cent said that the household income had declined; 45 per cent said the caregiving burden had risen; and 12 per cent had experienced illness.

In fact, only 14 per cent of the study’s participants said they hadn’t experienced any of the listed hardships during the pandemic.

‘Make Online learning effective’

There are 7 points that can potentially help a teacher in making online learning of a preschooler more effective.

1. **Allow the child to guide you:** Since there are no physical classes at school the children are still playing, exploring, and learning in their homes. The teachers should ask the parents submit photos or videos of children’s play.
2. **Come up with meaningful alternatives to screen time:** In ages between 2 and 7, children are still in the preoperational stage, that makes it developmentally inappropriate to expect their learning to be entirely screen-based.
3. **Consider the families as your partners:** Generally, the families are excellent allies and can support you by extending children’s learning at home. More importantly, the teachers should remember that parents have other responsibilities outside of supporting us with our lessons. Just for the convenience the attendance at the virtual meetings voluntary, only if a family misses one or neglects to complete a project, then send a note to check in and share what was missed, but don’t require participation.
4. **Online relationship-building is crucial:** Student-Teacher relationships are the bedrock of any school. Since the teachers cannot be together, they can stay in touch and show we care. The teachers to connect with families individually once a week over the phone or via video chat— In the way that works best for them.
5. **Children respond well to Music:** Try and conduct the classes in which they have to sing poems online. As for a child, participating in a poem is an easy way to engage with a screen because they can follow the leader. Apparently the rule for this kind of interaction is clear and can easily work very well in an online format. For example, a class-wide sing-along or use poems intermittently to re-engage children who may be distracted during a virtual meeting.
6. **Ask tech-savvy team members for some creativity:** Usually a school have a low-tech environment, but there are likely teachers or parents in the families who are tech-savvy. Ask them for their creativity to make online videos and the content better.
7. **Be affectionate to Oneself:** Try and focus that if children are disinterested during a virtual meeting, remember that they are young and this is new to everyone. If someone takes abrupt exit, then do not take it personally. In case the overall attendance is dwindling, contact the families to find out what they need and try your best to adapt. It is very important to

acknowledge that you cannot be the exact right thing for everyone at all times. We are all just doing our best.

Adapting to the ‘new normal’

Afshan Aziz, the principal of a Montessori school in Karachi, has turned to trying to adjust to the trying circumstances those children and teachers find themselves in amid the closure of educational institutions.

“Our school is focusing on adapting to online teaching methods for training young minds and allowing the individual development of each child,” she explained, without going into the details.

She pointed to the gradual decline of the joint family system as a factor affecting children’s growth too. “Elders in the family were a source of learning as well. Back in the day, children could observe them and learn many different things [from them],” she elaborated. “Today, though, many children do not live with their grandparents anymore and because of the pandemic, they cannot come to school either.” (Aziz 2020)

MCDC directress Naz, meanwhile, stressed the importance of practical life exercises that help children in their cognitive development, again emphasizing the need for parents to try to create the right environment for their child’s growth.

Practical life activities help the child better understand how their environment works. The child, in turn, enjoys working to keep the environment beautiful for others. This kind of effort builds the child’s self-esteem, besides developing their manual dexterity.



Nadeem from the MTTC, too, underlined the benefits of these exercises, adding that parents could make use of them too. “In the Montessori teaching method, these practical life exercises are very important for children. These are the activities every child sees adults at home doing, and they want to do the same activities by themselves too.”

This desire to carry out the same activities as everyone else, according to her, is termed the ‘tendency to imitate.’ She went on to explain that this was an internal urge that led them to try to become independent of others.

“In the eight years of my career, I have seen this teaching method help children with learning difficulties too. Every class I have taught has had two or three such children, and it is a fact that there were improvements in their personality, ability and intelligence,” she maintained. “For example, if they had problems with movement, this could be resolved through such

purposeful activities, and slowly and gradually, the children were able to gain hand-eye coordination.”

Farida Akbar, the primary trainer and director of pedagogy at MTTC, has a suggestion for how parents should understand their infants.

“It is equally important for both those who already have children and those who are going to be parents for the first time [to understand] that the newly-born child is like a blank piece of paper, where they [the parents] are the ones filling in the colours,” she stated. “The child’s personality will develop in accordance with the environment that we provide them.”

Parents must also know the changes that occur in children as they grow up, she said, adding that this was critical in these times of disarray. “When teachers can only play their part online, the parents form the children’s environment. This will affect the children’s temperament as they mature and is of vital importance in enabling children to make the best possible start in life,” said Akbar.

Besides, she stressed, teachers should provide parents a reflection of their teaching methods, allowing parents to take the steps necessary to transform their homes into places where there is no risk of their children missing out on important phases of growth.

As important as ‘Reading and Writing’

Gone are the days when kindergarteners in different schools spend their time finger-painting and playing in a dress-up corner. More importantly, preschool has become more academic, with some educators calling it the new first grade.

Under these circumstances, many kindergarten students are expected to leave the classroom knowing how to read.

All around the world kids usually start to learn reading by the time they are 6 1/2 or 7 years of age. It is Pakistan that the parents are obsessed how their child can do that earlier and faster than others, which unfortunately does not make it easier.

Sabina Ayaz, a preschool teacher in Mrs. Noor Montessori in Karachi’s North Nazimabad area argues that preschool teachers can make the most of remote learning by focusing on helping students to develop unconstrained literacy skills, mostly refers to the things that are things learned across a lifetime, such as vocabulary and background knowledge.

“We should try and take the online learning of the preschoolers back to being a place where kids just get to explore a lot of interesting ideas and they were given relative exercises to do that, with their parents helping them along,” said Ayaz.

Ayaz suggests that having discussions about having students respond to the book by drawing pictures or using invented spellings to answer questions about it. The teachers can also have their students watch educational videos together and then discuss individually as to what they learned. (Ayaz 2020)

With the world still struggling to come to terms with the sudden changes brought on by the pandemic, it is more necessary than ever for parents as well as teachers to help young students adapt to what is fast becoming the new normal. Unfortunately, early child education seems at the lower end of the priority list for the Pakistani government and education authorities. In such a scenario, it is vital for parents to step in — lest an entire generation is made a victim of arrested development by the coronavirus.

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