

SPECTRUM

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The world is rising from the embers of a prevailing pandemic. Yet, the world is not going to be what it used to be two years ago. The pandemic poses a heavy blow on school education and schoolchildren. The pandemic-caused lockdown, of course, altered and modified the human lifestyle. For the middle-aged and the elderly it was somewhat a break. For extroverts it was a claustrophobic phenomenon. For introverts, it was a blessing in disguise. But it meant a disaster for children, whoever they are and whatever characteristics inherent in them.

In his election manifesto, Vistas of Prosperity and Splendour, President Gotabaya Rajapaksa spells out the visionary path of Sri Lankan education:

“Comprehensive reforms will be undertaken to establish a quality education system to which all children would have a right to access from pre-school to the tertiary level education under a single curriculum in accordance with international standards.

This will enable young children to develop their inherent talents and skills and also to select the education stream that would provide them with a pathway to the employment market.”

Implementing education in the strictest measure laid down in the manifesto was a challenge for the government.

Best alternative

According to the study findings published in the Journal of Sport and Health Science, the lockdown has affected schoolchildren drastically with the shift from active physical presence to the sedentary device-held lifestyle. The sedentary device-held lifestyle was an inescapable swing, as it was the best alternative when almost every kind of outdoor gathering was pulled to a stop, and had been in force for two years.

Two years for an average adult. But it counts more so for a growing child as it affects their formative stages of socialisation, notes Dr Mahesan Ganesan, a Consultant Psychiatrist at the National Institute of Mental Health.

“A school is not a place where you receive textual education. No one of us has enjoyed our school days because of the text-based syllabus. We enjoyed being with our friends and the play. That is the first lesson of socialisation. As adults, we don't miss much. But this is the formative stage of a child's socialisation. When they miss it, they miss a great deal.”

At the school, the child has the

Education that cannot wait

opportunity to study and learn the art of living with others. Homebound, they missed this vital lesson for two years. The consequences of this would emerge in years to come, Dr Ganesan said.

During the lockdown, the child had to be satisfied with a school environment virtually manifested at school. However, that virtual manifestation was not up to the standard.

Negative outcomes

“On the bright side, the children and the parents had the opportunity to encounter each other. On certain occasions, this provided the parents with an opportunity to spend more time with their children. But on the other hand, certain parents did not make use of this opportunity and chose to spend more time with their computers and devices.”

They cannot be blamed, of course, as the work-from-home compels you to be with the computer. The negative outcome is that the par-

ents become too stressed and tend to take it out on their child. Later they forget their folly, but the child never forgets.

“What we must understand is that children are not small adults. Children are a fresh human species. Let us take tortoises for example. Tortoise mother leaves eggs. The tortoise cubs are so intelligent ever since they come out of their shells. They have acquired intelligence on how to live in the world. Where can they find food? Where is that protection? Who will be posing a threat to them?”

Live-in experiences

The little tortoises have intuitive knowledge, whereas the children do not. The human babies are born empty-brained. Live-in experience



Dr Mahesan Ganesan

is how children learn.

Dr Ganesan adds that parental behaviour is an important element in a child's learning procedure. Children learn by experience. They absorb certain things through observation. Parents offer thousands of advice to children. But children do not listen to or follow them. Most parents behave against their own ad-

vice. Children choose to see their behaviour, not hear the verbal advice.

“Peer association is essential for children. This is how they learn the way of living. The school or tuition books do not teach it. What made the parents worry about the lockdown is that the children were deprived of the book knowledge. No, the online education sessions made sure they received book knowledge. What they missed was the peer company. This



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is what must concern the parents. There is a large difference between us who have already learnt how to face life as adults and the children who have missed the social company,” Dr Ganesan added.

Friends are the most important element in the early stage of the socialisation process. They are particularly important for girls.

In the absence of a peer company, the child would inadvertently reach for the internet devices to an addictive extent. The parents must be mindful of the child's behavior on the Internet. Certain parents claim boastfully that their children know more than themselves. But that must not be the case. The parents must be aware of what is happening on the Internet.

Three major phenomena

The parental negligence would victimise the child in three major phenomena: pornography, cyber abuse and cyber bully. The Covid pandemic was an opportunity. The lockdown was an opportunity. But the problem is whether we made use of it properly?

“Parents must try to mitigate the miserable condition experienced by children during this pandemic. The children need a friend. A partner. Sri Lankan parents hardly play with children. Quite often the children approach parents to get them to play. But the elders would offer some excuse and avoid it. It is parents who must play with children. Then their relationship grows. This is a golden opportunity for the parents. Children have been homebound for two years and the family people can live a good quality time. Such an opportunity will never come again.”

Prior to his work at the mental Hospital, Dr Ganesan worked extensively in the conflict and tsunami affected district of Batticaloa, in Eastern Sri Lanka where he was instrumental in developing a community mental health service model.