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### RESEARCH ARTICLE

## 3 R FRAMEWORK FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD LEARNING IN THE PANDEMIC ERA AND BEYOND

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### Manuscript Info

#### Manuscript History

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### Abstract

This framework is an outcome of our regular interaction with the parent's community in the past year. Last year post lockdown parents reached out to us concerned about developmental issues with their kids. How can we make some engaging fun-learning supplies to support home-based learning? It was not to discount the effort schools have put to cope with this sudden change in education delivery. The idea was to augment the efforts for the overall development of their child. Our continuous interaction with parents led us to launch a survey to understand the impact on larger groups across India. We will be releasing a second report on this framework after we have analysed the data collected. The framework proposed here focuses on renewing the strategy for child development adopted so far in light of the unforeseen situation created by the pandemic. It enables parents and teachers to work in tandem to create a conducive environment for the overall development of a child. The report will showcase how the early childhood community can help ensure that our future generation is less impacted because of restrictions imposed due to coronavirus. We have also taken inferences from various research and reports published in the last year across the globe that highlight the impact Covid19 had on kids and their development. We have given concise insights on what kids were missing last year. What steps to take to create the right development opportunity for kids this year? Finally, it will provide a way forward, what we early childhood community can do to fill these gaps with our collective effort and ensure the overall development for all our kids in the early childhood learning phase.

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### Introduction:-

#### How The World Changed For Kids?

One day you were swinging in the garden with kids your age. You come home, have your dinner, and went off to sleep. The next day you woke up into a very different world. Now you were not allowed to step out and meet your friends. Online videos replaced your school. Your world was limited to the four walls of your own home. For the next whole year, you got stuck in the same monotony. And you did not know what to do with what you got?

It is what we gave our little kids last year. We are on the verge of replaying it this year again.

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Let us look at some of the indirect impacts' pandemics have made in the lives of our children. Things that got overlooked last year because pandemic was a sudden phenomenon and caught us unprepared. This year we have the advantage of reflecting on last year's learnings. Leverage those to come up with better implementations.

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*Children who appear at relatively lower risk from Covid-19, are disproportionately harmed by precautions involved with lockdowns and social distancing norms.*

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### UNICEF Article

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Across the globe, people researched to understand the indirect impact of the pandemic on kids. Various reports and articles sighted some alarming findings. We have consolidated these findings from various research into broad categories. In the following pages we will be listing down these.

#### **Things that were missed**

##### **Social interaction**

What was once so common became so rare in this post-pandemic world. Kids would meet other kids in the classroom, school bus, playgrounds. These interactions lead to experiences of varied kinds.

Kids would come up with a lot of queries. They would share an observation about others and also the events that happened in these places. Since last year all this has stopped for many kids.



**Picture 1:-** Happy kids in outdoor environment.

The interaction with various other people like shopkeepers, vegetable vendors, doctors, teachers, house helps was negligible this year. Meeting with family and friends and having fun could not be done. This year has stagnated social interaction-based learning and growth.

**Playtime with friends**

Children enjoyed pretend-play with their friends on a playdate. It contributed to their creativity and expanded imagination. A simple tea party with their dolls and cooking set added so much joy. It facilitated indirectly to learning etiquettes and good behaviour.



**Picture 2:-** Little girl enjoying tea party pretend play.

Outdoor play was a significant part of kids' playtime. Now outdoor is not meant for group play but individual activities. Kids are missing big time on team building, group play, and the lessons of patience, sharing caring that outdoor group activities facilitated.

**Life skill development**

In the pre-pandemic world, our kids got several indirect opportunities for gross and fine motor skills development. Opening the doors and using the knobs several times a day was gross motor skill development. Passing pencils and crayons to your classmate worked on fine motor development.



**Picture 3:-** Kids going to school carrying their school bags.

Carrying your school bag and boarding a school bus, finding a place to sit, sometimes requesting someone to make space for you to sit – all these were indirect life skill development opportunities. The little kids who entered the early learning phase last year missed all these indirect simulations.



**Learning by observing**

Little ones learn and imbibe a lot by observing behaviours and actions, be it their parent, grandparent or teachers, other community helpers. This year can be termed a lost year in this aspect. When you open a car for an elder and help them get down gently, your child watches and learns how to do it. In a restaurant, you order food with politeness your child learns to respect people irrespective of their profile.



**Picture 4:-** Father and son, observing and learning at an aquarium.

When they see a postman delivering a letter, cobbler mending shoes, a fruit seller pushing the cart, they learn about occupations. We do not force-feed these into their neural networks. All this is part of learning by observation. It is not academic, it is learning, and this is important.

**Healthy competitiveness**

A child who indulges in outdoor play learns to be competitive in a healthy manner. They learn skills from each other and try to improve themselves. A running race between friends will motivate a few of the kids to better their running speed.



**Picture 5:-** Kids having a race in playground.

Watching your peer's good handwriting in a notebook motivates one to do the same. So many things that flowed naturally from one child to another are now in limbo.

### Understanding of the outside world

Since their primary interaction is with masked persons, it may impact their understanding of emotional expressions. They have not been exposed to facial expressions while communicating with people.



**Picture 6:-** Various masked people.

It is especially true for kids in the early learning segment, where first exposure to the outside world is through masked men and women. They see sanitizer at all places wherever they go.

In all probability, some of these kids will grow up to be obsessed with hygiene.

### Query-based learning

Many a time, the outside world interactions and experiences led to a lot of queries. These queries also formed a crucial part of child development. A simple question, why a shopkeeper gave you money back, would lead to an explanation of concept of currency, money exchange, addition, and subtraction.



**Picture 7:-** A family at the checkout counter in a mart.

Or a query about different coloured number plates on cars would lead to a parent explaining the types of vehicles on road taxi, private cars, government vehicle.

How many parents would have answered these kinds of queries in this past year? Very few, because there was no opportunity given to kids to explore, observe the world, and then ask questions.

### Impact of this new normal

Young kids are having difficulties going to bed. They stay awake in the night for longer hours. There is a predominance of anticipatory grief in kids. It is creating anxiety and stress even in kids as young as 5-6years old.

Some kids have turned paranoid about hygiene and cleanliness. They are afraid of stepping out of the house and breathing in the air outside.

## EXCERPTS FROM THE GUARDIAN ARTICLE

Lucy, 35, a mother of two, in Brighton said she was concerned that her 10-month-old daughter was missing out on crucial milestones of early development, particularly social interaction and understanding of facial expressions.

“My 10 moth old daughter has never sat down next to another baby,” she said. “When I think back to my experience when my son was a baby, it was quite typical of all of my friends with children to get together on almost a daily basis.”

Another parent Hunt, who lives in Sussex, said “My daughter has become far more emotional. She cries at the smallest things. She used to be a good sleeper, but is now having issues getting to sleep, and staying asleep, often getting up several times a night,” “I think it’s the isolation.”

Hunt is confident that her daughter will catch up with education, but has concerns about the impact on her mental wellbeing, and the adjustment back to normal life.



**Picture 8:-** Infographics of various adverse impact of the pandemic on early learners.

Social skills have gone for a toss. Kids are experiencing awkwardness in meeting people and connecting with them. One of our team member's daughter started school this year. She is a talkative child. As soon as the online class video would start, she would turn mum. She was afraid of this mode of lesson delivery.

A neighbour's 1-year-old granddaughter sees us and tries to come to our house. Both her granny and I wish to be extra safe with her, so we chat with her maintaining a safe distance. The baby is missing so much joy and development that used to stem from such social interactions.

A lot of kids are feeling frustrated and have turned into screen addicts. The reason for this is losing the ability to be carefree and engaging in spontaneous playfulness. Kids do feel sad emotions but find it difficult to express what they are going through.

When kids went to school, they were involved in lots of physical activities and interactions with people. These helped channelized their energy. Now caged inside the house (especially in a flat system), kids find solace in online games. It is making them lazy and laidback. With not many opportunities for physical movements, kids are also becoming obese.

The continuous exposure to TV news is contributing to a heightened level of anxiety. Kids are afraid to lose their grandparents, parents, other family members, and friends. Some have already seen the grief due to the pandemic. Few are experiencing anticipatory grief. These kids will also face long-term psychological

implications.

As a society, we need to act with responsibility and re-create an environment that will allow children to enjoy childhood even in these circumstances.

### **Long term effect**

In this section, we are touching upon the long-term impacts pandemic circumstance will have on our kids. We have extracted these from research carried out in various countries. We are mentioning these here so that readers are aware of these indirect implications.

If we collaborate and initiate corrective measures now proactively, we can hope to mitigate these long-term impacts.

### **Depression**

According to research, kids who have emotionally, mentally struggled during this pandemic may experience depression later in life. The impact of this will not be visible immediately but after 10-15 years later.

"From our analysis, it is clear there are strong associations between loneliness and depression in young people, both in the immediate and the longer term. We know this effect can sometimes be lagged, meaning it can take up to 10 years to really understand the scale of the mental health impact the COVID-19 crisis has created," said Dr Maria Loades, clinical psychologist from the Department of Psychology at the University of Bath, who led the work.

### **Anxiety**

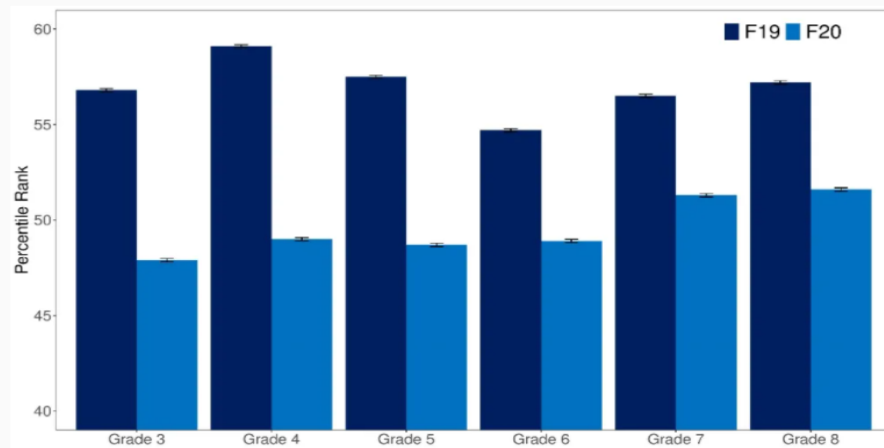
Due to the loss of routine and no socialization with friends, kids are experiencing anxiety and upheaval. These kids may later have symptoms of disruptive behaviour disorder. Many will have mood and anxiety disorders. No one knows how long this anxiety will last after the pandemic is over. But experts feel parents can play a crucial role in preventing these long-term mental health issues.

Jennifer Johnston-Jones, Ph.D., a California-based psychologist and author of *Transformational Parenting* says how we parent during the pandemic is the most important indicator. "The long-term mental health effects on children from the pandemic will vary. How we choose to parent during the pandemic will determine if our children come out of this traumatized, or able to sense that they will be OK," she says.

### **Loss in Academics**

The research in this area is very recent. One that stands out is the analysis by Brown Centre Chalkboard

**Figure 1: MAP Growth Percentiles in Math by Grade Level in Fall 2019 and Fall 2020**



*Source: Author calculations with MAP Growth data.*

*Notes: Each bar represents the median percentile rank in a given grade/term.*

It shows that mathematical skills across all grades have fallen in the year 2020. This is signalling towards a deeper implication of the current scenario on kids learning.

#### **Less productive workforce**

It again could be a point of debate since the impact will not be visible immediately. But reports are suggesting that when this generation enters the workforce, they will be less productive.

“In the UK, it is estimated that the impact on education thus far may lead to a quarter of the national workforce having lower skills for a generation after the mid-2020s.”

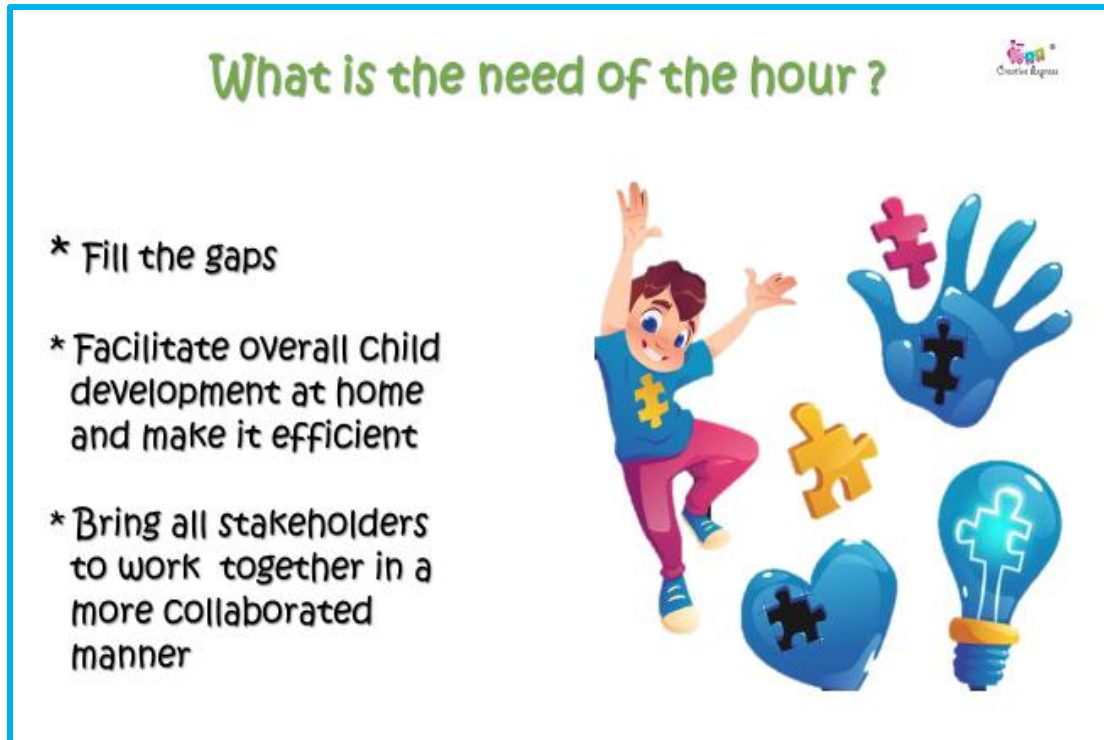
An article from ScienceMag

There could be other long-term impacts of Covid on mental health and the overall skill development of kids. It is too early to analyse and understand the complete picture. We hope that with corrective methodologies and implementation, we would be able to minimize these impacts and nurture the holistic development of our kids in this pandemic era.

#### **What needs to be done?**

As a society, it is our responsibility and duty to ensure that every child develops into a holistic individual. With the way things are unveiling, the pandemic is going to stay here for much longer than people expect. A Harvard study states that till 2024 we are going to live in this COVID era. It means that the pre-schoolers for coming three years will experience a similar situation when they put their first steps into the world of learning. And by this time, our current batch of pre-schoolers would have lived in this situation for three more years. It is a cause of deep concern and needs some concrete actions and measures to be taken.





**Picture 9:-** Why we need 3 R framework?

It is vital that all early childhood learning stakeholders – parents, teachers, early year schools and learning partner and service providers work in collaboration to ensure that development of children is not impacted.

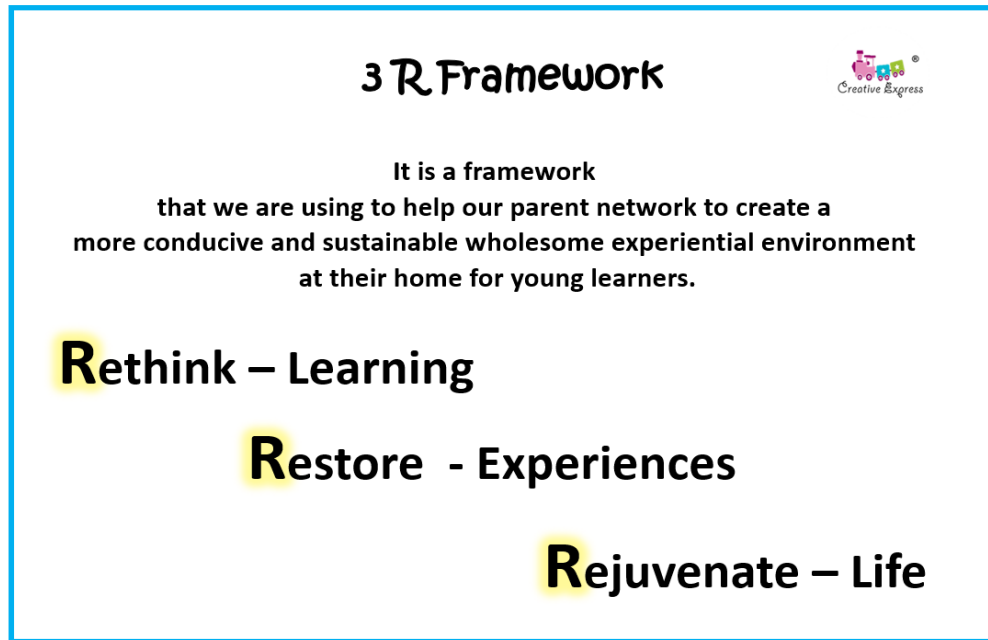
#### **What is 3R Framework?**

To address the problem statement highlighted in the early section of this report and cater to the specific area of developmental needs, we have started using a framework for our parent community.

We are India's first and only bespoke learning supply team. Our clients are working parents, home schoolers, and educational institutes. We design and create fun-learning supplies to address the specific development or learning needs of a child.

This year when parents started approaching us for a different set of requirements, we realized that these are not just learning issues but a deep disconnect in how children engaged during the pandemic. The solution has to come from a collaborative effort of the parent community, educators, and learning companies like us.

Hence the 3 R framework came into the picture. It is helping us to understand and identify specific needs better. Design and propose a fun learning strategy and physical resources to parents to keep their child happily engaged and developed in this trying time.



**Picture 10:-** 3 R framework definition.

Through 3 R we are proposing all the stakeholder of early childhood development to –

**Rethink – How kids were learning last year?**

**Restore – What they missed?**

**Rejuvenate – What is crucial part of early life?**

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*“International research demonstrates conclusively that 90% of brain growth occurs by age 5. This means that children’s environment and the inputs and the support they received in their early years will have an enormous impact on their future.”*

*UNICEF Report*

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In the following segment, we will describe our 3 R framework in detail. We hope that fellow educators and other vendors in the learning space will also take some cues from this. It will help parents build a more conducive environment at home for complete child development until the external support system of schools and teachers bounce back in full swing.

Our focus here is on early childhood learning because kids in this age group suffered the most due to the indirect invisible impacts of the pandemic. The other age groups already had some exposure to the outside world, and they have past experiences to rely on when they step out again. But the little ones who started their life caged inside the house met their teacher and classmates for the first time in virtual meet had missed the most. And this will remain our focus for the 3 R Framework.

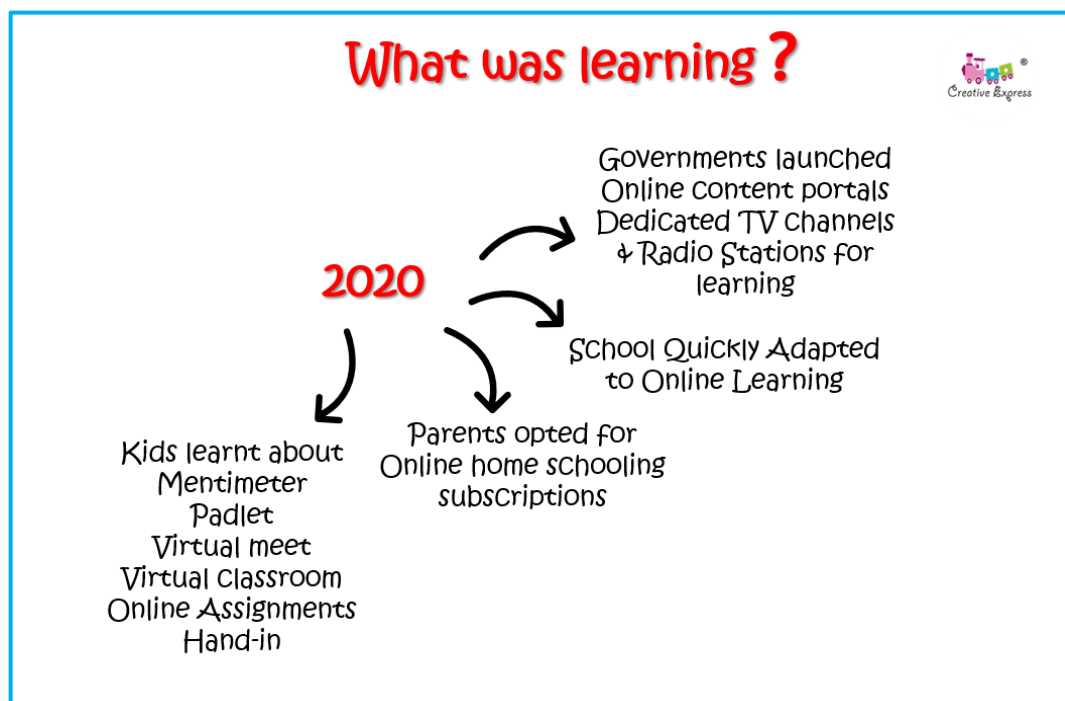
**Rethink what?**

We ask you to rethink early childhood learning in the pandemic on four aspects

1. How are kids learning?
2. How are we teaching?
3. What are kids learning?
4. What are we teaching?

As you answer these four questions, you will start seeing the glaring gap that has crept into the lives of our early learners. You will recall this is the age where the majority of development takes place. This year we have not created enough opportunity for this development to take place properly.

Last year majority of learning in schools moved online. A lot of parents who decided to homeschool early learners relied on online resources and digital learning subscriptions. TV played nursery rhymes most of the time, YouTube videos became an integral part of learning, and even worksheets moved online in the form of interactive assignments. All this added to increase the screen time of our early learners.



**Picture 11:-** Learning in the pandemic year 2020.

This dependency on online medium had given rise to a series of negative impacts. We have mentioned many of these in the earlier section of the report. Increased screen time is responsible for disturbed sleeping patterns, eating habits, and anger issues in kids.

"Concentration is a big trouble for young children. Adding to that, most children feel ignored as they feel cut off from a teacher. Teachers, too are, struggling to engage with the children and see them all at once. So there is the issue of teaching becoming a one-sided affair. As homework shifts online, increased screen time is another unwanted side effect," the mother of a 4-year old child told Business Insider India.

**Picture 12:-** Excerpts from Business Insider India Article.

At the same time, it did not ease a teacher's job, increased their workload. In addition to their expected role, they went out of their comfort zones to create a suitable learning environment for early learners under their care.

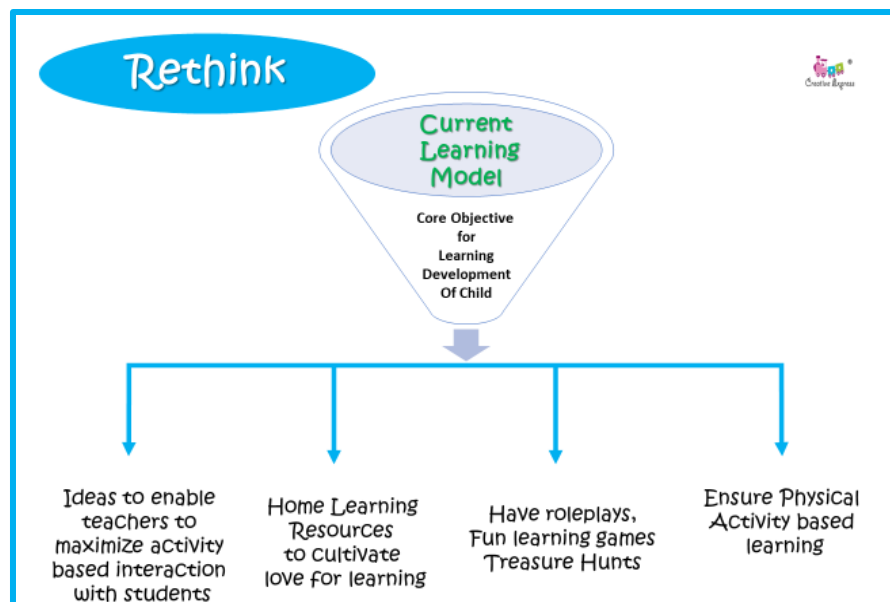
Sometimes it was not well received by young learners. It has been a tough year for both the distributors and receivers of knowledge and learning.

We have to rethink a way where the use of online content is minimum. Use it to give a head start to kids on a concept. The kids must be also augmented with physical resources, fun learning games that promote physical movement, social behavior simulations so that learning and exploration continue without any screen time dependency.

Parents whose children can access online lessons are not pleased with this experience either. The massive increase in screen time is of great concern for parents. It includes not just the time they spend attending virtual school sessions, but also the time spent on digital homework as well. Moreover, since there are no physical activities that they can engage in, most of the kids remain glued to the screen all day long for playing video games or watching cartoon shows.

**Picture 13:-** Excerpts from Business Insider India Article.

We recommend a rethinking hat must be put by all parents and school management. Devise a blended learning system that focuses on minimizing screen time for kids and at the same time ensures that learning continues leveraging the physical and emotional setup of their own home.



**Picture 14:-** Our Rethink Step from 3 R framework.

### Restore what?

In the restore part of the framework, we attempt to bring back what was lost last year. This year we need to recreate these missed opportunities for development need. We need to guide and help parents to create the right environment at home.

A lot needs to be done here. What kids lost is not the experience, timely development, and growth, mental health, few also lost loved ones.





**Picture 15:-** Experiences kids missed last year and the impact.

For a child, running around daily in the park, jumping up and down on a see-saw, the physical strength would develop muscles would get stronger. Last year this was lost.

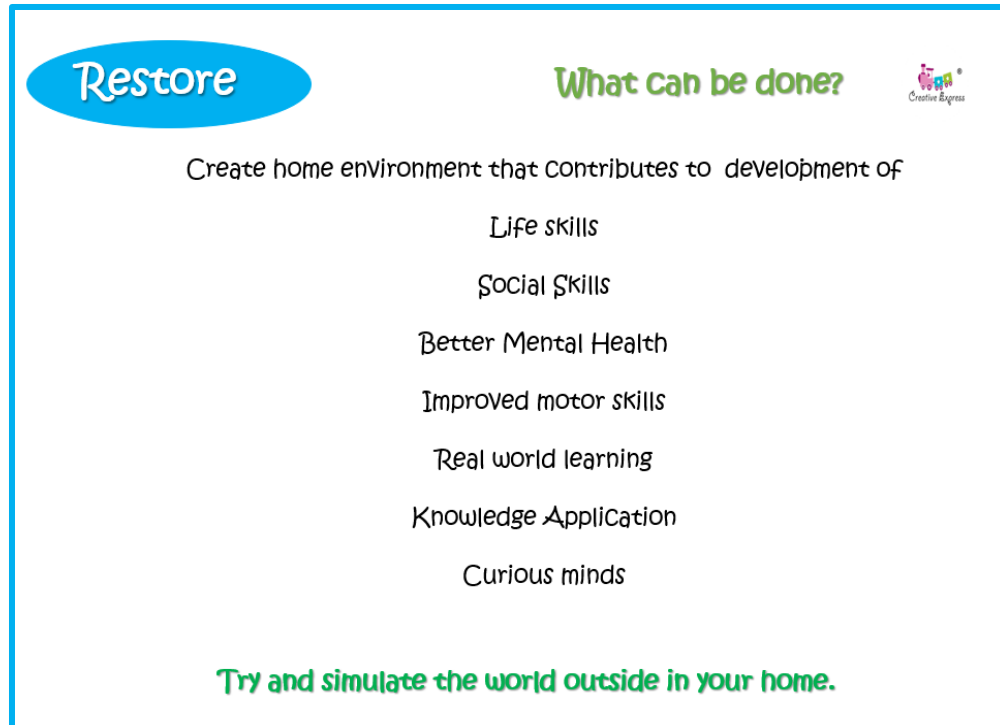
The simple life skill of greeting someone with a smile might be challenging to manage in these kids. They have not met anyone outside their family. They have not had an open social interaction with others. They had no opportunity to explore this aspect of life.

“The physical play that students would have when they are in an outdoor system; that thing is not there in a flat system. It is definitely affecting health, and no social interaction is adding more to this. When students go to school, they have recess or lunch breaks to meet people and chat. But in an online class, students cannot chat,” Dr. Geeta Dalal, a Psychologist, Special Educator & Dyslexia Therapist, told Business Insider India.

**Picture 16:-** Excerpts from Business Insider India article

There were fewer occurrences for the indirect practice of gross and fine motor skills. A child going out would open the door so many times in a day, sit in the car, fiddle with the car – bus fixtures, shake hands with a friend, hug them, pick up a stone on a beach, etc. All this is missing.

The question arises, how these opportunities will get created. It needs careful planning and effort to put in a learning activity or resources to cover the above experiences. You can leverage a learning vendor for this purpose or do it on your own.



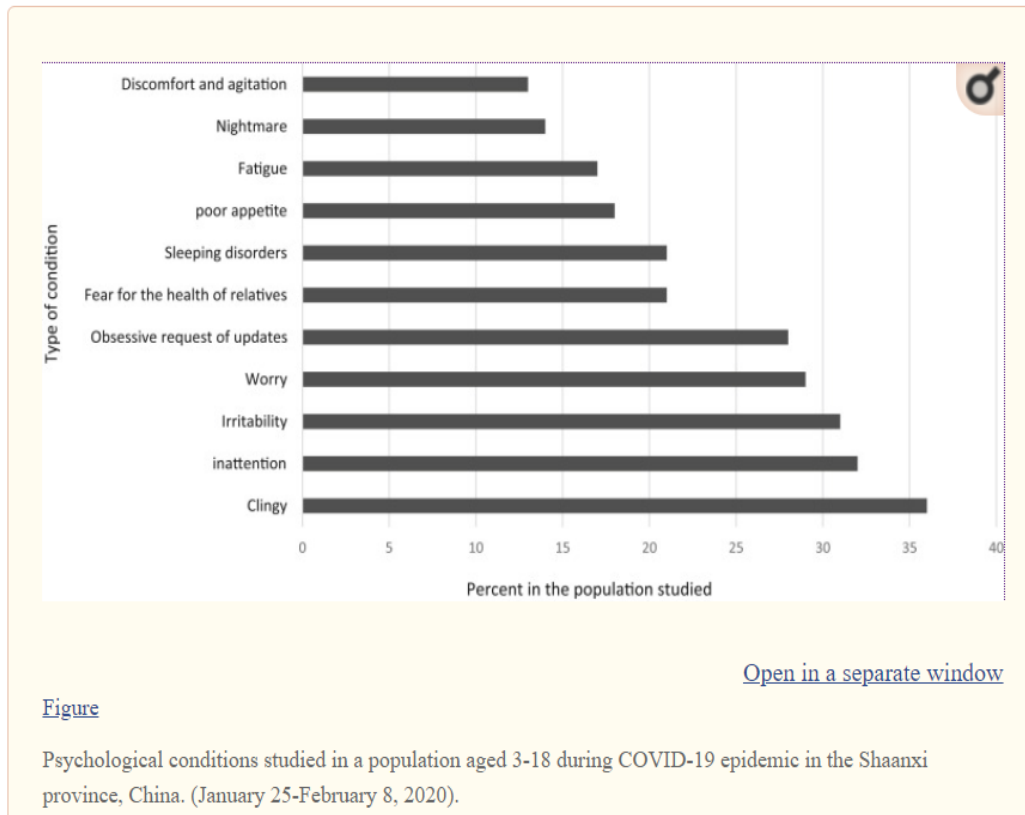
**Picture 17:-** Our Restore Step from 3 R framework.

The point here is that - the restore process is a must. Till the kids are having limited outside world exposure, it must be sustained and persisted.

#### **Rejuvenate what?**

Imagine a nuclear family setup where both parents are working from home in the pandemic. Along with office work, now they take care of household chores too in the absence of house helps. Due to these, the parents are struggling to find time to bond with their children. And the time they find is partially taken over by an online learning medium, an individual activity.

Last year Chinese researchers conducted a study to understand the impact of COVID19 on kids.

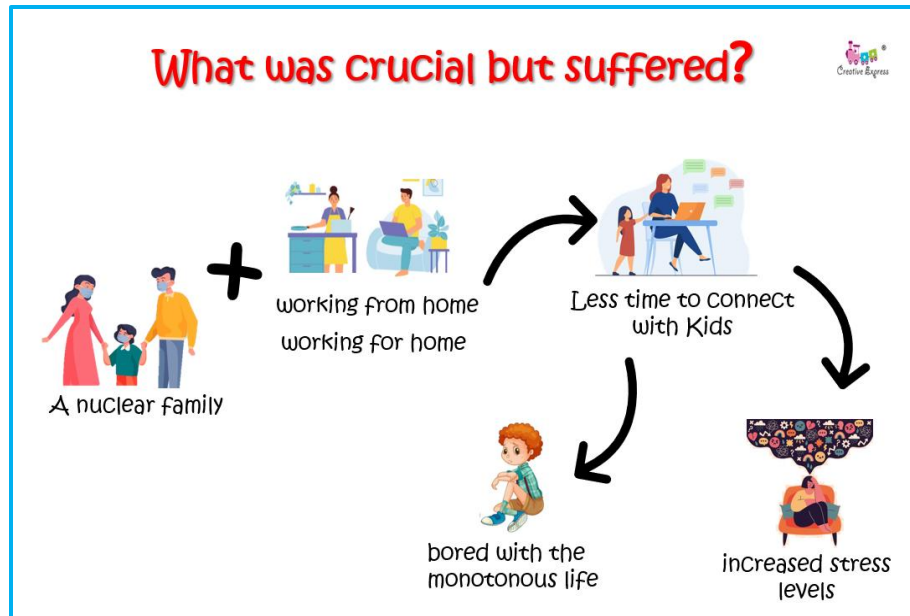


**Picture 18:-** Result of research done in Shaanxi province of China.

As an outcome of this report and analysis parents were advised to increase communication with minors, playing collaborative games, encouraging physical activity, and music therapy. Moreover, report mentioned that parents need to focus on sleep problems and nightmares in children, and forbid augmented sleep during the daytime.

Kids are losing big time on the emotional connection. It's not because parents are not spending time. The learning activities that families are involved in are not facilitating this bonding.

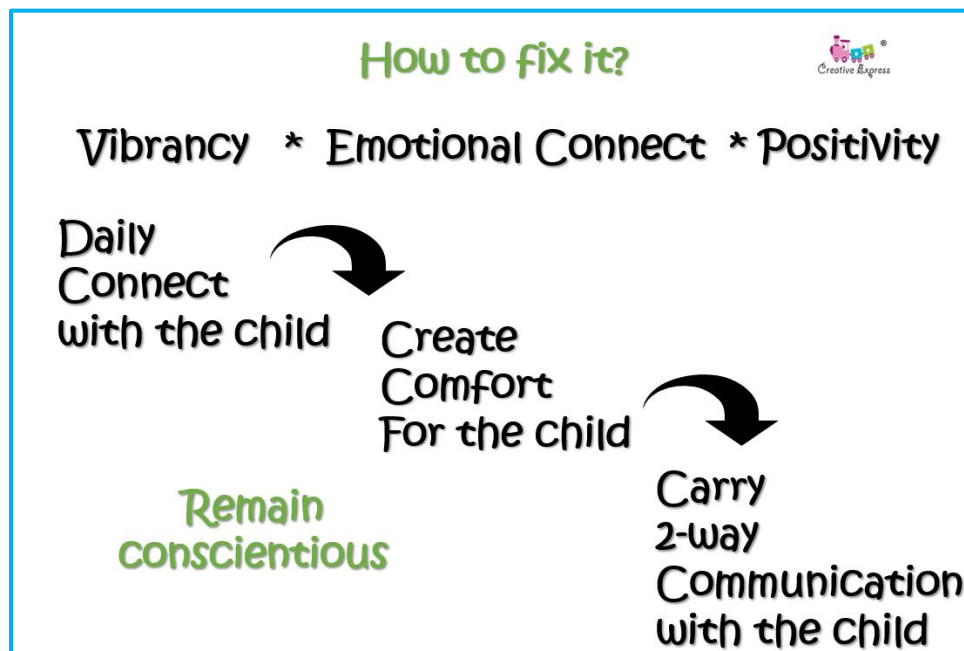
The increased stress levels due to the current situation are also creating an adverse environment at home.



**Picture 19:-** How pandemic impacted families and preschoolers.

Kids are also bored with the monotonous life around them. There is not much to look forward to in the day.

We need to revive and bring the simple pleasure of living back into their lives by empowering caregivers and parents with the right resources. Each one of us who is part of this early learning eco-system must help parents create a cost-effective stimulating environment in their home. There have to be activities and games that facilitate a daily connection with the child. It will generate a feeling of comfort around the child. In a comforting and connected environment child will start to communicate openly.



**Picture 20:-** Excerpts from Business Insider India article

It needs to be a sustainable model and must scale as the child grows and crosses developmental milestones. It will be an ongoing process, and we need to ensure that all development aspects are covered.



### Conclusion:-

In this report, we have focused on early childhood learning. Initially, the impact of the pandemic last year was perceived to be limited to the medical condition, and all the focus was on building internal immunity of the human body and following protection norms.

Gradually the indirect and invisible effects of pandemic started manifesting. It took more than a year to relate what is happening with our little kids to pandemic precautions and safety measures. Kids turned crankier, started having difficulty in sleeping. They were bored with home-cooked meals. Some are not interested in learning, and many became screen addicts. Even the parents who followed no screen time policy before the pandemic had to give tablets and mobiles to their kids to participate in academics.

Parents whose children can access online lessons are not pleased with this experience either. The massive increase in screen time is of great concern for parents. It includes not just the time they spend attending virtual school sessions, but also the time spent on digital homework as well. Moreover, since there are no physical activities that they can engage in, most of the kids remain glued to the screen all day long for playing video games or watching cartoon shows.

**Picture 211:-** Excerpts from Business Insider India article.

When the first lockdown opened in India around July 2020, we got different requests for DIY kits, learning game creations, fun activities for family time, etc. Initially, we also worked on one request at a time. Slowly the dots started to connect. We realized that there is a bigger problem to be tackled.

“One study has found that a majority of participating parents report that their children are keeping in regular contact with family and friends via video-chat and are getting regular physical exercise, factors that can support the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people.

**However, this was not the case with pre-school age children in the survey, where parents had concerns about their children’s lack of communication with others outside the household.”**

- Excerpts from an article on [mentalhelath.org.uk](http://mentalhelath.org.uk) -

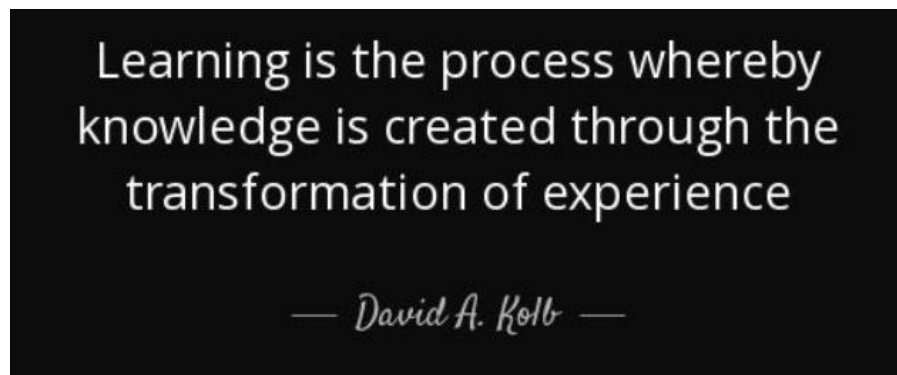
After talking to many parents on what issues they are facing and what they expect from a bespoke fun learning provider, we concluded that it’s a problem impacting a large kid’s population across the globe. Hence, we put our methodology in a 3-step framework called the 3 R framework for early childhood learning.



**Picture 22:-** Our 3 R framework poster.

This framework allows early childhood caregivers, parents, teachers, and other support systems to follow a process and identify elements for creating a conducive environment at home. We urge all stakeholders to start leveraging the ideas mentioned in the “3 R framework for early childhood learning in pandemic era and beyond”. Together we can help build a nurturing development environment at their home till they get the allowance to step out and roam freely in the world.

Closing this with a quote from famous educational theorist David Kolb.



**Picture 23:-** David Kolb Quotes.

### Limitations

There are limitations to the observations made in this report. These are listed below:

1. We have adopted a structured approach to searching the relevant research studies and articles. But it cannot be termed an exhaustive search; we may have missed reading a few of the relevant research papers.
2. For the article and research referred here, we have not carried out any additional empirical studies.
3. Comparison of the findings of various reports and research papers mentioned here is not feasible due to differences in methodology and measurement tools.
4. The implementation of the 3 R framework in our organization is also in the nascent stage. It is the process we have finalized to follow with our parent community. We will be doing a formal assessment of the impact of this a year later with enough data to carry out an analysis.

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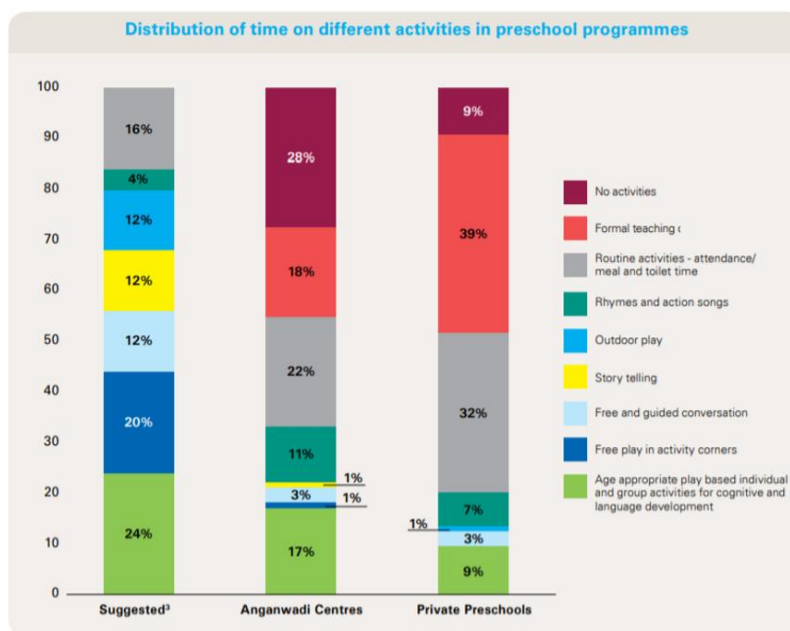
#### Note :

All pictures used in the article are taken from author's paid Freepik subscription.

#### Appendix:-

It is our first thought paper in this series, and we intend to come with a more detailed version framework and the processes as we continue to work with our parent community.

At the end we share this chart from UNICEF. It is showing a recommended distribution of activities in a preschool program and a comparison of Indian Anganwadi and regular school system.



Picture 24:- UNICEF preschooler activity distribution.

It clearly shows that formal teaching is not a part of suggested activities in a pre-school setup. But we are putting so much focus on reading, writing and arithmetic skills in pre-school years. In the pandemic era and post pandemic we must shift focus from academics to experiential learning. It's time that we consider 3 R framework for learning instead of the traditional 3 Rs of learning.



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