Save the Future of Young Population

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Editor

In Pakistan there are only 250 trained psychiatrists for the entire population. Even children are being brought with mental health issues of various kinds, with some children having had reported that they have been suicidal for a long period. Suicide attempts among 12 year olds or younger have been reported as well.

40 percent of young people aged under 25 suffer mental health issues of various kinds ranging from depression to schizophrenia in Pakistan. Some studies also show that many medical students in Pakistan suffer depression and severe mental health issues, mainly as a result of stress and the pressures they faced.

We need to find out what is happening and why our children are facing such grave crises in their young lives, destroying their happiness at a time of life which should essentially be full of growth, learning, and joy. Several studies from around the world show that social media has played a large part in negatively affecting the mental health.

The American Academy of Paediatrics, for instance, recommends that social media use should be extremely limited among children, and managed by parents when it comes to children above the age of 12.

According to a new research, girls and young women are badly affected by the images of near-perfect people especially of young women posted all over the internet and aspire to look the same way. This is impossible given that many such images are photoshopped or have filters on them which present an image that is simply not attainable.

Parents are mainly responsible for determining what gadgets and websites their children have access to. Ideally, parents should be able to monitor children up till the age when they are mature enough to do so themselves. This could be 16 years for some, 18 for others, and far more for the rest. Even adults struggle with the problems created by the internet. Yet we see a growth in the use of the internet over telephones, tablets, and screens of all kinds. No one tries to stop it and few are aware of the problems that exist. Even in low-income households at least one tablet or smartphone is often available for use by the entire family.

Schools too need to be far more aware of the problems that are growing and taking a high toll on mental health. We have teenagers who have committed suicide because they did not find enough followers over the internet or because their pictures were not 'liked' by enough people. Specialists, who have discussed the problem before the US Congress, as the matter becomes a grave one around the world, have noted that the impact of social media apps such as Facebook, Instagram, and in particular Snapchat where the image disappears within a few minutes, is most harmful of all. There is a need to do more to protect our young people and children. The rate of suicide, as we know, is extremely high in Pakistan as is the rate for attempted suicide. Many such deaths are covered up because of social and religious stigma. But realities have to be faced. We must understand that handing over our phone to a child and watching him/her look at its contents is not an act of entertaining the child. It is almost criminal, because it can damage the child's brain for life.

Psychologists and psychiatrists point out that how children and young adolescents interact with the internet is different from the manner in which adults do. Their brains respond in different ways to the images that flash across screens, and there is always the danger of unintended or intended access to inappropriate content. We, therefore, need a far more vigilant society, which keeps a tighter watch over the mental health of young people. When a 12- or 13-year-old child is suicidal, it implies that there is something wrong with his/her environment. There are also issues related to eating disorders, sometimes pushed forward by the internet and with sites which promote anorexic behaviour. There are a few websites that encourage children and young people to engage in dangerous activities. There needs to be a far greater degree of awareness, notably among parents from low-income groups, about what harm the internet can inflict.

Instagram images and videos is not just a harmless act but can also lead to dangers of all kinds. We need to go back to the time when children were more physically active and learned life lessons in various fashions, including direct contact with parents, other family members and peers. The two years of Covid-19 have further added to the problem. School classes on Zoom mean that there is no interaction with peers or teachers and children live in a virtual world to which they cannot always relate in a healthy or reasonable fashion. It is not their fault.

In our country, we need to pay even more attention to the mental health of young people, consider the suicides that have occurred, and watch out for the role of the internet. We can raise a generation of healthy persons rather than those who are in some way badly affected by the content they consume over internet sites meant to draw in vulnerable persons. All this require more and more attention of the parents towards to their growing children.