

# Kids battle anxiety, virtual worlds as schools stay shut

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## New Delhi:

A child in Guwahati prods his father to drive him to the gates of his closed school — not to get in, but just so he can see the building and feel it. An eight-year-old in Bengaluru mutes her computer and switches off the camera to dance and play with her dolls during online classes. Like everybody else, a student in Patna is tired of ‘remote education’, and the endless cycle of worksheets on WhatsApp.

School has been out for the past 15 months under the massive overhang of Covid and students of a tender age are facing burn out. Behavioural changes in kids underscore a pattern and reveal deep psycho-physiological symptoms as debilitating as those of Covid. “Jailed” in their homes, they are showing signs — changed sleep cycles, anxiety, irritability, eating disorders and learning disabilities. Parents, counsellors, and psychologists are citing growing instances of loneliness, frustration, obesity and so on among the young generation.

## What parents see

Santana Pathak, an assistant professor of communication at the Narsee Monjee Institute of Management Studies in Mumbai said students are nastier in online conversations. “In the outside world, they would have faced resistance. But a false sense of security has set in from staying inside. They have a feeling they are always right and know everything,” she said.

Some parents said spending most of their time in the company of adults has changed how young children converse. “Their conversations are more mature and they are coming up with complicated words never taught in lessons,” said Abir Phukan, a Delhi-based advocate.

There’s also the additional time spent on electronic devices. T Uday Kumar, CEO of ExcelOn Academy in Chennai, said he would take his daughter in Class IV to play with her cousin, but it didn’t work out as planned. “Her cousin would continue playing games on a digital device and my daughter too ended up doing the same,” he said.

However, for thousands, the phone is the only connection with closed schools. Pankaj Kumar, a parent in Patna said online classes weren’t being conducted in many government schools. “So there is no proper teaching. For the last year it has been just worksheets delivered to my WhatsApp,” he said.

## What experts say

Dr Roma Kumar, a senior consultant psychologist at Delhi’s Gangaram Hospital, said children are getting frustrated due to which they don’t want to attend online classes any more. “In the second wave children also witnessed a lot of deaths around them. Some suddenly found themselves orphaned. This

is making many children depressed,” she said. Dr Kumar said many young adolescents are more socially withdrawn and feel lonely. “Obesity is increasing, sleep pattern has been affected,” she said.

Deepa Chopra Sharma, a counsellor at Amity International school in Pushp Vihar, said many students also face anxiety. “Issues that are coming in are anxiety about exams or results, behavioural problems and sadness of being at home or not meeting friends,” she said.

