

Going back to school after exposure to violence

ARE THE STUDENTS PREPARED?

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The current times are neither simple nor easily escapable. During the day, you strive to maintain your routines. Yet, there is always that lingering question: What is happening around us? It's a question that gnaws at you, one that cannot be completely chased away. And at night, those questions grow louder, invading our thoughts, and keeping us awake.

Children, too, are not immune. They hear the news, sense the tension, and see the fear in the eyes of adults. The violence and unrest around have even snatched some of their peers. Though these children will try to continue with their lives, the shadow of what they've seen and heard will loom over them. There are, undoubtedly, certain responsibilities that parents and authorities must uphold to protect children's mental health.

Nayeema Islam Antora, Psychologist and Project Coordinator at the Disabled Child Foundation (DCF), provides her perspective on the issue.

"Violence can really take a toll on a child's mental development. When kids are exposed to violence, it can cause emotional and psychological trauma that affects their ability to learn and do well in school," she says.

Articles from World Health Organization (WHO) and U.S. National Library of Medicine report that children exposed to violence frequently face increased stress, anxiety, and depression. This heightened emotional strain can make it difficult for them to focus, process information, and build healthy relationships. Additionally, such experiences can interrupt the development of crucial brain areas involved in regulating emotions and managing executive functions.

According to American Academy of Pediatrics, children who are regularly exposed to violence often experience severe and lasting effects, such as developing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). They may endure emotional and physical "aftershocks" for months or even years. Increased aggression, violence, or self-destructive behaviour can also emerge.

The reason these symptoms are so severe is due to how children experience trauma. While adults might try to use logic to understand chaotic situations, children, with their limited experience, struggle to grasp and deal with such harsh realities. The difficulty in processing their experiences makes the effects of violence on their emotional health and development even more intense.

According to Nayeema Islam, parents are key in helping children deal with the fear of violence. It's important to create a safe and supportive space where children feel okay expressing their emotions. Parents should listen to their concerns, acknowledge how they feel, and reassure them about their safety. Having open and honest talks, tailored to their age and understanding, can also help them process what's happening. They need to know that they are not alone in this and that no matter what happens, they will be protected.

On July 15, student protests demanding quota reforms in government jobs turned violent, prompting the previous government to close all educational institutions. Schools in eight major cities were closed on July 17, followed by a nationwide closure of primary schools due to worsening conditions.

Recent decisions about reopening schools have been troubling. The previous government planned to reopen schools on August 4, excluding certain areas, but this was postponed due to ongoing unrest. After



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a change in government on August 5, the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) announced schools would reopen on August 7, but many remained closed until the Ministry of Education issued a formal directive.

Finally, on August 15, Chief Adviser Dr Mohammad Yunus directed all schools and colleges to reopen nationwide on August 18, though many parents are still hesitant to send their children back.

About reopening schools amid the ongoing unrest Nayeema Islam says, "Going back to school amid violence or after experiencing it can impact children's mental health and social growth. Schools, which should be a safe place for learning and making friends can turn into a source of stress and anxiety if they don't feel secure."

Fahima Bhuiya Sarna, an eleventh-grade student at Tongi Government College, added, "At first, we were unsure whether our classes would start on August 6 as we didn't receive any notice from the college. It's only been a week since I started attending. Now that classes have resumed, it feels good to be back to studying."

Tasnim Sumon, a sixth-grade student at National Ideal School, says, "At the time of the movement, I was disturbed. I was not allowed to go outside, not even to my balcony. My parents strictly forbade me from going to the terrace as well."

"Every night, I could hear helicopters roaming around and gunshots as well. I could not sleep at night. In the daytime, I was anxious about all the news headlines. Now that classes have finally resumed, I fear going outside, and don't feel good about returning to school. Also, there are very few students attending," he added.

Similarly, Ashraf Islam Jarif, a first-grade student at Ideal School and College, Mugda, shares, "I usually go to school by van, but none of the other students who ride with me are attending school right now which is why my parents don't want to send me to school either."

Jannatul Tasnim, a ninth-grade student at Vigarunnisa Noon School, shares, "I haven't attended school since it resumed earlier this month. Many of my classmates haven't attended either. Given the low turnout and the dangerous conditions on the roads, my parents decided not to send me to school."

As prompted by many of the testimonies, despite schools reopening, many parents remain unsure about sending their children back.

Labani Akhter, a parent, expresses her worries, "Although schools have reopened, I'm hesitant to send my child due to the lack of safety in the city. Clashes can break out on the streets in an instant. Even if I send my child to school, I worry anxiously until they return home safely."

"With all the recent changes in government and politics, I am not quite sure about sending my child back to school. I'm not confident that the situation in the classroom will return to normal anytime soon," Nasrin Nahar, another parent shares.

The authorities need to carefully consider their decisions before reopening schools. Ensuring that schools are truly safe is crucial to avoid adding more stress to children during these challenging times.

References

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