THE GREAT
DIGITAL_DIVIDE

SOME HAVE MANY . MANY, HAVE NONE!

Poverty raises its head in the digital world too. The lack of access to the digital world and to devices is as big a threat as hunger. The COVID 19 Pandemic is unfolding real time this new divide and the accompanying 'Learning crisis'

At Shanti Ashram we are working actively to bridge the divide for our Children. Can you help bridge the divide? Let's collaborate.

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Shanti Ashram
Gandhian center for development, learning and collaboration

Children's Day 2020
14th-20th November

Bridging the Digital Divide

A Comprehensive COVID-19 Response: Ensuring Social Safety Nets for Children

Data at a Glance:

133	5610	18,504	330
Training sessions	**Online links connected**	**Participants**	**Active days on the online platform from June**

Over the last 6 months, Shanti Ashram has implemented an innovative and comprehensive response to the COVID-19 pandemic's effects on the lives of children. Adopting technology has enabled us to play a lead role in child participation, and we have been able to engage thousands of children through our online programs since June. Our sessions are both complementary to their formal education and supplementary to their development and well-being. As the pandemic follows us into the new year, we will be steadfast in our mandate to uplift children and constantly innovate to ensure that we give them the best care.

The Learning Crisis during COVID 19

India started a nation-wide lockdown at the stroke of midnight on 25th March 2020.

Schools and colleges across the country were amongst the first to initiate precautionary closures, with Tamil Nadu closing a fortnight before on March 15th. Millions of children faced a new situation where they are not only at home but mostly confined indoors, their daily association with fellow children disrupted while adults watched on with heightened anxiety. The struggle of children in families living in poverty is further compounded. Loss of livelihoods has been most significant in the informal sector of employment and this has a direct and consequential effect on vulnerable children and women.[1]

In the most fragile education systems, this interruption of the school year will have a disproportionately negative impact on the most vulnerable learners, for whom the conditions for ensuring continuity of learning at home are limited. Their presence at home can also complicate the economic situation of parents, who must find solutions to provide care or compensate for the loss of school meals. There is growing concern that if these learners are not properly supported, they may never return to school. There are possibilities that these challenges may also contribute to increases in child labour and child marriages. The disruptions caused by COVID-19 to everyday life meant that as many as 40 million children worldwide have missed out on early childhood education in their critical pre-school year from poor and disadvantaged families.[2] **They thus missed a stimulating and enriching environment, learning opportunities, social interaction and in some cases, adequate nutrition. This is likely to compromise their longer-term healthy development. Similar analyses are also applicable to all children.**

The Social Cost of the Digital Divide

Poverty, powerlessness and disease combine to form a vicious cycle in the lives of vulnerable children. The COVID-19 pandemic has created the largest disruption of education systems in history, affecting nearly 1.6 billion learners in more than 190 countries and all continents. Closures of schools and other learning spaces have impacted 94% of the world's student population, up to 99% in low and lower-middle income countries.[3] The ability to respond to school closures

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[1] Shanti Ashram archives

[2] United Nations, "Policy Brief: The impact of COVID-19 on children", available at https://unsdg.un.org/sites/default/files/2020-04/160420_Covid_Children_Policy_Brief.pdf.

[3] Policy Brief: Education during COVID-19 and beyond, United Nations, August 2020

changes dramatically with a country's level of development: for instance, during the second quarter 2020, 86% of children in primary education have been effectively out of school in low-income countries compared with just 20% in countries with high-income.[4]

The move to providing education online amidst the pandemic has greatly affected the access to education for those from vulnerable communities. We have seen in our service villages that a majority of children do not have access to a smart phone or a computer, and the internet connectivity in these regions is patchy and unreliable. Online education can also bring issues of online safety, bullying and hate speech closer to the lives of children. In countries and regions with ongoing conflicts and disasters, the COVID-19 pandemic is happening at a time when education was already facing disruptions due to insecurity, strikes, or climatic hazards.

A Comprehensive COVID-19 Response at Shanti Ashram

Over the last 150 days, we have developed and actively implemented an innovative hybrid model for the education and training of children at Shanti Ashram. Even in the first week of getting back to onsite work at the Ashram in May, the leadership team brainstormed the new context of programme implementation and the critical need to provide child development services. We created up to 15 touch down points with our staff team. Two key decisions were made to significantly increase the integration of technology into our existing models and to combine the pool of field staff for programme implementation. Accordingly, shared communication and collaborative implementation of programmes for vulnerable children were initiated in May 2020. We have completed 150 days of education and training so far, i.e. roughly 3-4 online programmes a week. Typically, a staff of the Ashram organizes the particular programme in the identified service villages while following physical distancing norms and wearing of masks. The session is conducted from the Ashram and led by a core team of experts who are assisted by a technology platform. After the session, a question and answer session is held and an onsite session takes place as follow up action. The students are the key participants in these sessions, and even act as moderators and teaching buddies for their peers. **Children remain at the centre of all the Ashram's activities.**

The comprehensive interventions we have implemented for vulnerable children during COVID-19 on an urgent footing and true to the mandate of the Bala Shanti Programme are in the following areas:
- o   Education
- o   Health
- o   Nutrition
- o   Leadership building
- o   Peace Education

Besides concrete community service, we have also, over 6 months, created nine public interfaces for engagement, education and course correction during COVID-19:
1. Experiential Workshops for Rural Children
2. Interactive Knowledge Updates
3. Interactive Sessions
4. Leaders Dialogue
5. Leaders - Touch Down
6. Meet the Experts
7. People's Awareness Building
8. Practice Oriented Courses
9. Roundtables

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[4] United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). COVID-19 and human development: Assessing the crisis, envisioning the recovery. 2020 Human Development Perspectives, 2020, New York: UNDP, available at http://hdr.undp.org/en/hdp-covid.

Who did we serve?
Care of the most vulnerable children and women in the service villages of Shanti Ashram was the main thrust of this outreach to bridge the digital divide. The inclusion criteria included children living in

- Mother headed families
- Families living with HIV
- Families cared for by grandparents in the absence of (living or deceased) parents
- Extreme poverty (living on less than $1.90 per day per person)[5]

As per the 'Annual Status of Education Report' published by Pratham in September 2020, 5.3% of rural children aged 6-10 years have lost out on school enrolment this year because of COVID-19 related school closures.[6] Only 11% of rural children have direct access to online classes. This is just the tip of the iceberg, of what the 25 crore enrolled school students are experiencing during this ongoing COVID 19 pandemic.

In the midst of this acute learning crisis, Shanti Ashram & the International Center for Child and Public Health (ICPH) took active steps to respond, develop and implement these comprehensive interventions for vulnerable children during the pandemic. We could not have done it without our field teams, our partner schools both public & private and our enthusiastic volunteers – children themselves in most instances.

We dedicate this service scroll of achievement in 'bridging the digital divide' to children, particularly vulnerable children as India celebrates her National Children's Day on November 14th and the global community comes together to observe the Day of Prayer & Action for children on November 20th, 2020.
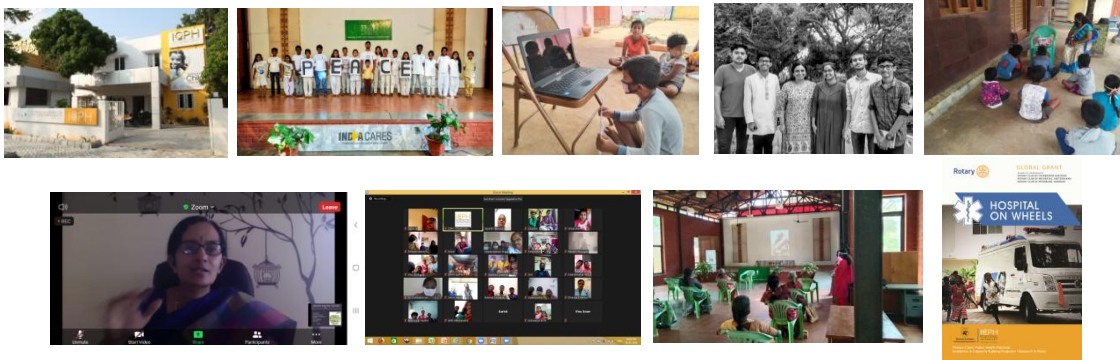
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Children's Day, November 2020, Shanti Ashram

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[5] World Bank definition, available at https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/poverty/overview
[6] Available at http://www.asercentre.org/Keywords/p/371.html