

## what are children struggling with

Many children today are struggling with their mental health, learning gaps from the pandemic, and the pressures of a hyper-digital, unequal world. These struggles cut across emotional wellbeing, school, relationships, and basic safety.

### Mental and emotional health

- Rising rates of anxiety, depression, persistent sadness, self-harm, and suicidal thoughts are being reported globally among children and adolescents.
- Conflict, poverty, family stress, and sudden life changes (like the pandemic) increase risk, especially where support services are weak or stigmatized.

### School, learning, and pressure

- Large learning losses from COVID-era school closures have not fully recovered, with measurable drops in skills like mathematics and literacy and many children still out of school.
- Academic pressure, exam stress, and fear of failure add to mental distress, especially where performance is tightly linked to family expectations and future opportunities.

### Technology, social media, and attention

- Heavy social media and screen use is linked to higher risk of anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, sleep disruption, and social withdrawal.
- Children report cyberbullying, constant comparison to “perfect” online lives, and difficulty concentrating or remembering schoolwork as attention shifts to fast-paced digital feedback.

### Relationships, identity, and belonging

- Many children feel lonely or disconnected, even when “connected” online, and struggle with in-person communication and conflict resolution.
- Stigmatized groups (for example LGBTQ+ youth or marginalized communities) report higher levels of emotional distress, discrimination, and suicidal planning.

### Safety, inequality, and big global threats

- Conflict, displacement, and street-connected living expose millions of children to violence, exploitation, and trauma, often without reliable protection or care.

- Climate change, poverty, and economic uncertainty create chronic stress and “background fear” about the future, especially where food, housing, and healthcare are insecure.

If you share a context (age group, country, or setting like school/home), a more focused picture of what those children are struggling with—and what could help—can be mapped out.

Large learning losses from COVID-era school closures have not fully recovered, with measurable drops in skills like mathematics and literacy and many children still out of school. why ?

Learning gaps have been slow to close because the systems that created them are still disrupted, and recovery efforts have been too small, uneven, or late compared to the scale of the loss. The children who lost the most learning also tend to face the greatest ongoing barriers (poverty, stress, weak schools), so they do not “bounce back” automatically.

What caused the original loss?

- Remote learning often had low structure, limited interaction, and uneven teacher preparation, so many students made little or no academic progress while learning from home.
- Access gaps in devices, internet, quiet space, and parental support meant disadvantaged children learned far less than peers, especially in mathematics and reading.

Why hasn't it fully recovered?

- Recovery time and intensity are insufficient: losing the equivalent of several months of learning would require sustained extra instruction (tutoring, longer days, summer programs), but many systems only implemented short-term or patchy measures.
- In many countries, schools reopened without systematically diagnosing learning levels or redesigning curricula, so students were pushed through grades with “unfinished learning” rather than being given time to rebuild foundations.

Ongoing barriers inside schools

- Chronic absenteeism has stayed much higher than before COVID, so even when schools are open many students simply are not present often enough to catch up.

- Teacher shortages, larger classes, and pressure to “cover the syllabus” limit individualized support, with mathematics particularly affected because it builds cumulatively on earlier, now-missing concepts.

#### Inequality and children still out of school

- The longest closures and deepest losses were concentrated in poorer regions, where schools were “first to close and last to open” and where families suffered income shocks, food insecurity, and stress, all of which pull children away from learning.

- Some children never returned because of early entry into work, caregiving duties, early marriage, migration, or a shift to informal or home-based arrangements, which keeps official enrollment and attendance below pre-pandemic levels.

#### Emotional and cognitive aftershocks

- Pandemic stress, grief, and ongoing anxiety have affected attention, memory, and motivation, making it harder for students to re-engage deeply with schoolwork even once back in class.

- Schools often lack robust mental health and counseling support, so many learners are trying to catch up academically while still carrying unaddressed emotional burdens.

If you want, this can be unpacked specifically for India or for a particular age group/subject (for example, primary-school maths), which will look a bit different from the global picture.

**If you were a child psychologist and policy maker, what would you do to be able to fix this problem?**

Two levers change this: intensive, targeted academic support and equally strong support for children’s mental health and motivation, especially for the most disadvantaged. As a child psychologist–policy maker, the approach would be to redesign school time, staffing, and funding around those two priorities rather than trying to “go back to normal”.

#### 1. Diagnose and target, not blanket remedies

- Require regular low-stakes assessments in maths and reading to map exactly where each child is, and use this data to group students for support instead of relying only on age/grade.

- Build national dashboards that show which regions and groups are furthest behind, so extra resources (funds, tutors, nutrition, counseling) go first to the deepest losses, not just to schools that lobby best.

## 2. High-dosage tutoring as core infrastructure

- Fund large-scale, high-dosage tutoring (daily or several times a week, 1:1 or very small groups) embedded in the school day, focused first on foundational maths and literacy where the evidence is strongest.
- Use a mixed workforce: trained teachers plus para-teachers/university students with good supervision and scripted materials, including tech-supported or phone-based tutoring where in-person options are scarce.

## 3. Extend and redesign learning time

- Add learning time intelligently (extended school year, summer programs, after-school blocks) dedicated to consolidation and practice, not more lectures; attendance incentives (meals, stipends, transport) should be built in.
- Simplify and prioritize curricula for a few years, focusing on core competencies instead of trying to “cover” everything, so teachers can slow down where pandemic gaps are widest.

## 4. Put mental health and SEL into the timetable

- Ensure every school has access to mental health professionals or trained counselors, and integrate structured social–emotional learning (SEL) lessons that build self-regulation, coping, and peer relationships into weekly timetables.
- Train teachers and tutors to recognize distress, normalize help-seeking, and use simple SEL practices (check-ins, reflection prompts, calming routines) inside academic lessons so emotional safety and learning happen together.

## 5. Support teachers so they can actually deliver

- Provide ongoing coaching and professional development on formative assessment, differentiated instruction, and trauma-informed classrooms, plus mental health support for teachers themselves to reduce burnout.
- Simplify administrative burden and align incentives: evaluate schools on growth (catch-up gains) and well-being indicators, not just raw exam scores, and protect time for tutoring and SEL from being squeezed out.

## 6. Bring families and communities into the recovery

- Run clear public campaigns explaining learning loss and recovery plans, and give parents simple tools (SMS tips, radio, low-tech homework guides) to support reading and numeracy at home.

- Use community spaces and NGOs for evening/weekend learning hubs, especially for children who dropped out or work during the day, blending education with meals, safety, and social support.

## 7. Protect the most vulnerable kids

- Offer conditional cash transfers, school feeding, and flexible schedules to keep at-risk children (girls, migrant kids, children in poverty) in school instead of being pulled into work or early marriage.
- Create rapid response systems where schools track chronic absenteeism and trigger home visits, social-worker involvement, or community mediation before children disappear from the system.

If you share a specific context (for example, Indian government school, low-fee private, or urban vs rural), these principles can be turned into a more concrete, design-style “blueprint” for that setting.

**As a child psychologist and policy maker, fix this problem by creating the most universally available solution that is applicable across the board keeping in mind diverse income groups and availability of resources**

A universally available solution has to work in a village with only feature phones and a city school with tablets, and it has to support both learning and mental health together. A practical way to do this is a three-layer system that any country can adapt: (1) simple diagnostic + grouping, (2) low-tech tutoring and parent support, and (3) community-based mental health and wellbeing.

### 1. Simple diagnose-and-group as a default

- Use ultra-short skills checks (5–10 minute reading and maths tasks) done on paper or by phone to sort children into broad levels (e.g., “needs basics”, “on track”), not by age.
- Train teachers and volunteers with simple rubrics so this can run in any setting—government schools, NGOs, community classes, or radio clubs.

### 2. Low-tech tutoring that reaches almost everyone

- Build a national or state “phone + SMS tutoring” backbone: interactive voice calls, audio lessons, and structured SMS or WhatsApp nudges that guide 10–20 minutes of daily practice at home.

- Prioritize feature-phone-friendly formats (voice calls, IVR, SMS) because mobile access is far more equal than internet; evidence shows such low-tech tutoring can raise literacy and numeracy at very low cost.

### 3. Parents as co-teachers using micro-activities

- Send parents one tiny, concrete learning activity per day by SMS/WhatsApp or community notice board, such as counting household items, telling a story, or reading a sign together.
- Pair each activity with a short encouragement message (“you matter for your child’s learning”) to build parental self-efficacy, which research links to better child outcomes even in low-income settings.

### 4. Community learning circles for the most vulnerable

- Wherever schools are weak or children are out of school, create small “learning circles” run a few times a week in community spaces (anganwadis, temples, mosques, youth clubs, panchayat halls) by trained local volunteers.
- Equip volunteers with a simple, scripted toolkit focused on foundational skills, play, and group games so that instruction quality is not heavily dependent on their own education.

### 5. Built-in mental health and emotional safety

- Attach a basic, culturally adapted SEL routine to every session or phone script: check-in (“how are you feeling?”), one regulation skill (breathing, stretching, drawing), and one peer-support or gratitude question.
- Run periodic community sessions that normalize stress and teach caregivers simple ways to respond to children’s worries; community-based mental health education has shown benefits in low-resource areas.

### 6. Minimal data system to guide resources

- Track only a few indicators everywhere—attendance/participation, basic reading level, basic numeracy level, and a brief wellbeing rating—and aggregate them at school/ward/district level.
- Use this data to route extra support (more calls, more volunteers, school feeding, cash/in-kind support) toward pockets where many children remain far below foundational levels.

### 7. Design for diverse income and tech contexts

- In low-income, low-connectivity settings, emphasize: paper/blackboard, community circles, radio/IVR, and SMS; in higher-income contexts, layer on apps, rich media, and in-person high-dosage tutoring with the same structure.
- Keep all content modular and open-licensed so governments, NGOs, and schools can remix it into local languages and cultures without needing new proprietary platforms.

This kind of universal backbone—diagnose, low-tech tutoring, parent micro-support, community circles, and embedded SEL—can sit “on top” of almost any school system and still function when schools are weak, under-resourced, or temporarily closed. If you share a specific country or region, the same skeleton can be turned into a more detailed, context-specific program design.

As a child psychologist and policy maker, fix this problem by creating the most universally available solution that is applicable accross the board keeping in mind diverse income groups and avialability of resources

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