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Author/s:

Ahmed, S;Mvalo, T;Akech, S;Agweyu, A;Baker, K;Bar-Zeev, N;Campbell, H;Checkley, W;Chisti, MJ;Colbourn, T;Cunningham, S;Duke, T;English, M;Falade, AG;Fancourt, NSS;Ginsburg, AS;Graham, HR;Gray, DM;Gupta, M;Hammit, L;Hesseling, AC;Hooli, S;Johnson, AWBR;King, C;Kirby, MA;Lanata, CF;Lufesi, N;MacKenzie, GA;McCracken, JP;Moschovis, PP;Nair, H;Oviawe, O;Pomat, WS;Santosham, M;Seddon, JA;Thahane, LK;Wahl, B;Van Der Zalm, M;Verwey, C;Yoshida, LM;Zar, HJ;Howie, SRC;McCollum, ED

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Protecting children in low-income and middle-income countries from COVID-19

Salahuddin Ahmed ^{1,2}, Tisungane Mvalo,^{3,4} Samuel Akech,⁵ Ambrose Agweyu,⁵ Kevin Baker,⁶ Naor Bar-Zeev,⁷ Harry Campbell,^{2,8} William Checkley,⁹ Mohammad Jobayer Chisti,¹⁰ Tim Colbourn ¹¹, Steve Cunningham,^{2,12} Trevor Duke,^{13,14,15} Mike English ^{5,16}, Adegoke G Falade,¹⁷ Nicholas SS Fancourt ¹⁸, Amy S Ginsburg,¹⁹ Hamish R Graham ^{20,21}, Diane M Gray,²² Madhu Gupta,²³ Laura Hammitt,⁷ Anneke C Hesseling,²⁴ Shubhada Hooli ²⁵, Abdul-Wahab BR Johnson,²⁶ Carina King,²⁷ Miles A Kirby,^{28,29} Claudio F Lanata,^{30,31} Norman Lufesi,³² Grant A Mackenzie,^{33,34,35} John P McCracken,³⁶ Peter P Moschovis ³⁷, Harish Nair,^{2,8} Osawaru Oviawe,³⁸ William S Pomat,³⁹ Mathuram Santosham,⁷ James A Seddon,^{24,40} Lineo Keneuoe Thahane,^{41,42,43} Brian Wahl ⁷, Marieke Van der Zalm,⁴⁴ Charl Verwey,^{45,46} Lay-Myint Yoshida,⁴⁷ Heather J Zar,^{48,49} Stephen RC Howie,⁵⁰ Eric D McCollum ^{7,51}

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For numbered affiliations see end of article.

Correspondence to

Dr Eric D McCollum;
emccoll3@jhmi.edu and
Dr Stephen RC Howie;
stephen.howie@auckland.ac.nz

A saving grace of the COVID-19 pandemic in high-income and upper middle-income countries has been the relative sparing of children. As the disease spreads across low-income and middle-income countries (LMICs), long-standing system vulnerabilities may tragically manifest, and we worry that children will be increasingly impacted, both directly and indirectly. Drawing on our shared child pneumonia experience globally, we highlight these potential impacts on children in LMICs and propose actions for a collective response.

Current data suggest children are susceptible to severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) infection but are less likely than adults to become severely ill.^{1–4} Although at first glance these data appear reassuring, the child pneumonia, and broader global child health, experience provides a forewarning of what may be coming in LMICs. High-income countries (HICs) have an under-5 pneumonia mortality rate of 3 per 100 000.⁵ In contrast, the rate in LMICs is 200 per 100 000 population, with pneumonia the leading infectious cause of under-5 death globally.⁵ While yet unknown, COVID-19, a viral pneumonia syndrome, may impact children in LMICs more severely than what has been observed to date.

The risk factors for poor outcomes in pneumonia are overwhelmingly more prevalent in LMICs than HICs. These include severe malnutrition, low immunisation uptake, nutritional anaemia, HIV exposure or infection, air pollution, poverty, low parental education and, crucially, limited access to high-quality acute healthcare.^{6,7} In HICs, vulnerable children are being actively ‘shielded’ from infection, but in LMICs, most will remain exposed.

The indirect effects of the COVID-19 response need attention as they are an enormous threat to the well-being of children. These include widespread parental unemployment, disrupted education, food and housing insecurity and threats to vital preventive health programmes, like immunisation, antenatal care, infant feeding and mental health. The acute care workforce may soon be overwhelmed by COVID-19 needs, and we anticipate critical healthcare services being diverted away from mothers and children. Delays in care seeking may worsen, resulting in more severe illness. So, while transmission of respiratory pathogens may be slowed by pandemic response measures, these measures could accentuate well-established risk factors for poor paediatric outcomes and undermine healthcare systems’ abilities to respond.

What can be done to protect children in LMICs? First, we must prevent the collapse of vital acute care (oxygen, antibiotics, personal protective equipment (PPE)), preventive services (immunisation, maternity care, breastfeeding and nutrition programmes, HIV and malaria prevention) and supply chains and take opportunities for system strengthening that could be a legacy of the pandemic. Maintaining a critical workforce in maternal and child health, enabling healthcare workers to use PPE and empowering community health workers to engage with communities in the response are essential. These measures, taken locally with decisive international support, are likely to save more children's lives than advanced intensive care and should benefit children with COVID-19 and other illnesses, including pneumonia.

Second, COVID-19 testing in LMICs needs massive upscaling and outreach. If we are to understand paediatric COVID-19, surveillance systems—both pandemic and pneumonia focused—need investment for rapid scale-up and testing of children with respiratory illnesses for SARS-CoV-2, testing paediatric contacts of adult cases and accurately reporting child deaths.

Third, pandemic lockdown strategies should maintain vital access to care and be tailored to the particular social, economic and health environments of LMICs. This may not mean following the approach of HICs. Rather, LMICs should also build on their experience and expertise gained during other epidemics and make decisions based on their reality, workforce capacity, population density and migration patterns. Examples could be establishing separate areas in clinics for preventative care by dedicated non-respiratory staff, home vaccination visits, outposts responsible for delivery of household essentials to COVID-19 affected households, retraining newly unemployed people to assist with case finding and contact tracing and sewing groups to produce face masks to support widespread mask strategies.

Fourth, research is key to better understanding COVID-19 fundamentals on children, younger and older, including their role in transmission dynamics, spectrum of illness and outcomes, the impact of comorbidities and common coinfections (viral, bacterial, mycobacterial and parasitic) and how broader pandemic responses impact on health behaviours and outcomes. To accomplish this requires COVID-19 surveillance and rapid cycle research on the effects of pandemic response strategies and context-informed modelling using the best available data and locally relevant assumptions. Understanding COVID-19 in children is essential to developing informed, nuanced pandemic responses, including eventual vaccination strategies. These efforts must be country-driven, network-building, joint global initiatives supported by the international community for the benefit of all.

We expect children in LMICs may be seriously impacted by COVID-19, potentially both directly and indirectly. Balanced strategies that protect children

must be central to coordinated and cooperative global pandemic response efforts.

Author affiliations

- ¹Proahnmo Research Foundation, Dhaka, Bangladesh
- ²NIHR Global Health Unit on Respiratory Health (RESPIRE), London, United Kingdom
- ³University of North Carolina Project Malawi, Lilongwe, Malawi
- ⁴Department of Pediatrics, University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, North Carolina, USA
- ⁵KEMRI-Wellcome Trust Research Programme, Nairobi, Kenya
- ⁶Malaria Consortium, London, United Kingdom
- ⁷Department of International Health, Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, Baltimore, Maryland, USA
- ⁸Center for Global Health, Usher Institute, University of Edinburgh Medical School, Edinburgh, United Kingdom
- ⁹Division of Pulmonary and Critical Care, Department of Medicine, Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, Baltimore, Maryland, USA
- ¹⁰Dhaka Hospital, Nutrition and Clinical Services Division, International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease and Research, Bangladesh (icddr), Dhaka, Bangladesh
- ¹¹Global Health Institute, University College London, London, United Kingdom
- ¹²Centre for Inflammation Research, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, United Kingdom
- ¹³Paediatric Intensive Care Unit, Royal Children's Hospital, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia
- ¹⁴Department of Paediatrics, University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia
- ¹⁵School of Medicine and Health Sciences, University of Papua New Guinea, Goroka, Papua New Guinea
- ¹⁶Centre for Tropical Medicine and Global Health, Nuffield Department of Medicine, University of Oxford, Oxfordshire, United Kingdom
- ¹⁷Division of Paediatric Pulmonology, Department of Paediatrics, College of Medicine and University College Hospital, Ibadan, Nigeria
- ¹⁸Global and Tropical Health Division, Menzies School of Health Research, Charles Darwin University, Darwin, Northern Territory, Australia
- ¹⁹Clinical Trial Center, University of Washington, Seattle, United States
- ²⁰Centre for International Child Health, MCRI, University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia
- ²¹Department of Paediatrics, University College Hospital Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria
- ²²Division Paediatric Pulmonology, Department of Paediatrics, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, South Africa
- ²³Department of Community Medicine and School of Public Health, Postgraduate Institute of Medical Education and Research, Chandigarh, India
- ²⁴Desmond Tutu TB Centre, Department of Paediatrics and Child Health, Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences, Stellenbosch University, Cape Town, South Africa
- ²⁵Department of Pediatrics, Section of Pediatric Emergency Medicine, Baylor College of Medicine, Houston, United States
- ²⁶Pulmonology & Infectious Disease Unit, Department of Paediatrics & Child Health, University of Ilorin/University of Ilorin Teaching Hospital, Ilorin, Nigeria
- ²⁷Department of Global Public Health, Karolinska Institutet, Stockholm, Sweden
- ²⁸Gangarosa Department of Environmental Health, Rollins School of Public Health, Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia, United States
- ²⁹Department of Global Health and Population, Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, Boston, United States
- ³⁰Instituto de Investigación Nutricional, Lima, Peru
- ³¹Department of Pediatrics, School of Medicine, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tennessee, United States
- ³²Community Health Sciences Unit, Malawi Ministry of Health, Lilongwe, Malawi
- ³³MRC Unit, The Gambia at LSHTM, Fajara, Gambia
- ³⁴Faculty of Infectious & Tropical Diseases, LSHTM, London, United Kingdom
- ³⁵Murdoch Children's Research Institute, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia
- ³⁶Center for Health Studies, Universidad del Valle de Guatemala, Guatemala City, Guatemala
- ³⁷Divisions of Pulmonary Medicine and Global Health, Department of Pediatrics, Massachusetts General Hospital, Boston, Massachusetts, USA
- ³⁸Department of Child Health, University of Benin Teaching Hospital, Benin City, Nigeria
- ³⁹Papua New Guinea Institute of Medical Research, Goroka, Papua New Guinea
- ⁴⁰Department of Infectious Diseases, Imperial College London, London, United Kingdom
- ⁴¹Baylor College of Medicine Children's Foundation – Lesotho, Maseru, Lesotho

⁴²Department of Pediatrics, Baylor College of Medicine, Houston, Texas, USA

⁴³The International Pediatric AIDS Initiative (BIPAI) at Texas Children's Hospital, Baylor College of Medicine, Houston, Texas, USA

⁴⁴Department of Paediatrics and Child Health, Stellenbosch University, Cape Town, South Africa

⁴⁵Division of Paediatric Pulmonology, Department of Paediatrics, Chris Hani Baragwanath Academic Hospital, Faculty of Health Sciences, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa

⁴⁶Respiratory and Meningeal Pathogens Research Unit, Medical Research Council, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa

⁴⁷Department of Pediatric Infectious Diseases, Institute of Tropical Medicine, Nagasaki University, Nagasaki, Japan

⁴⁸Department of Paediatrics and Child Health, Red Cross War Memorial Children's Hospital, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, South Africa

⁴⁹SA-MRC Unit on Child and Adolescent Health, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, South Africa

⁵⁰Department of Paediatrics: Child & Youth Health, University of Auckland, Auckland, New Zealand

⁵¹Johns Hopkins Global Program in Pediatric Respiratory Sciences, Eudowood Division of Pediatric Respiratory Sciences, Department of Pediatrics, Johns Hopkins School of Medicine, Baltimore, Maryland, USA

Twitter Mike English @ProfMikeEnglish, Nicholas SS Fancourt @fantwit, Hamish R Graham @grahamhamish, Shubhada Hooli @ShubhadaH and Eric D McCollum @tinylungsglobal

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ORCID iDs

Salahuddin Ahmed <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6771-0638>

Tim Colbourn <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6917-6552>

Mike English <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7427-0826>

Nicholas SS Fancourt <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1772-9960>

Hamish R Graham <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2461-0463>

Shubhada Hooli <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4596-448X>

Peter P Moschovis <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9664-5959>

Brian Wahl <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0037-7364>

Eric D McCollum <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1872-5566>

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