



Frequent Protests on the Mental Health Effects on Early Childhood Development

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Abstract

Nearly 8% of children worldwide experience mental disorders, yet few receive professional support, an issue more acute in Nepal, where mental health remains stigmatized and underfunded. Frequent strikes and protests, often organized by political groups and teachers' unions, have become a persistent feature of Nepal's socio-political landscape, disrupting children's education and emotional stability. This qualitative study explores the impact of such political unrest on early childhood development (ECD) and mental well-being. Drawing on literature reviews, field observations, and interviews with parents and caregivers in Kathmandu, the research reveals how repeated school closures and community tensions create chronic stress for children. Many lose access to safe learning spaces, regular routines, and emotional security factors vital for cognitive and socio-emotional growth. Parents report heightened anxiety, restlessness, and behavioral changes in their children during prolonged disruptions. The findings emphasize that early instability can have long-term effects on brain development, learning capacity, and emotional regulation. Addressing these challenges requires integrating psychosocial support into education systems, promoting teacher-parent cooperation, and ensuring policy responses that minimize disruption. Protecting young minds from the ripple effects of political instability is essential not only for child well-being but also for Nepal's sustainable social and educational development.

Keywords: Early childhood development, Mental Health, Protest



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Background

Nearly 8 percent of children worldwide experience mental disorders, yet the majority never receive professional help. In Nepal, where mental health remains stigmatized and underfunded, the risk is even higher (Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, 2022). The cause may be that Nepal has experienced an alarming frequency of protests and strikes. The Nepal Police recorded nearly 3,963 protest events within ten months, ranging from transport blockades and sit-ins to full-scale national shutdowns (Pokhrel, 2025). These protests are often organized by teachers' unions, political parties, trade unions, or marginalized groups seeking policy change or recognition of grievances. The transition from monarchy to a federal democratic republic and the continued challenges of implementing the 2015 Constitution have left many sectors feeling unheard and excluded from decision-making processes (Dhakal, 2025). Moreover, youth-led movements, particularly those opposing corruption and government censorship, highlight growing frustration among younger generations who see protest as their primary means of civic expression (*Why GenZ Has Taken over the Streets in Nepal*, n.d.).

Teacher strikes are not new in Nepal. They have become a recurring feature of our education landscape. While the reasons for demand for better salaries, working conditions, and government reforms are often justified, the consequences of these repeated disruptions fall most heavily on those least responsible: the children. Each time a school closes, thousands of students lose not only classroom time but also their sense of routine, structure, and emotional security. For children in ECD stages, these early years are critical for mental, emotional, and social growth. The classroom is their safe space-a place to learn, play, and trust. When that space is repeatedly taken away, the effects are profound. Children may become restless, anxious, or fearful. Parents, especially working mothers and caregivers, face additional stress trying to balance their jobs with unexpected childcare responsibilities. For families living on daily wages, each school closure can mean lost income and heightened frustration. Educational institutions are forced to close, disrupting students' learning and contributing to psychological stress among children and their families. Repeated exposure to unrest normalizes instability, undermines public trust in democratic institutions, and hinders sustainable development (Coe et al., 2019). The prolonged stress and insecurity in early childhood can affect brain development, leading to issues such as anxiety, emotional withdrawal, and difficulties with learning. Young minds can grow in peace is a responsibility that belongs to everyone.

Methodology

After participating in an interaction session organized by the REACH Network-Moving Minds Alliance, I gained a deeper understanding of the concept and multidimensional nature of ECD.

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This engagement helped me frame my inquiry into how frequent strikes and protests in Nepal affect children's mental health and early development. To explore this connection, I adopted a qualitative approach that combined literature review, field observation, and semi-structured interviews. Both grey literature (such as newspapers, online reports, and policy briefs) and peer-reviewed academic articles were reviewed to build a comprehensive understanding of how social instability influences early learning and mental well-being. The literature search focused on two key themes: the impact of frequent social disruptions on child development, and the psychosocial effects of stress and instability on young children and families. Complementing this desk research, I conducted field observations in selected child care centers and residential neighborhoods in Kathmandu during periods of strikes and protests. These observations provided real-world insights into how disruptions affected children's routines, play, and emotional responses. In addition, in-depth interviews were carried out with parents and caregivers of young children to capture their lived experiences and coping strategies during times of unrest. These conversations offered valuable, human-centered perspectives on how families navigate uncertainty while trying to maintain stability for their children. Together, these data sources allowed for a nuanced understanding of the relationship between political disruptions and early childhood mental health in the Nepali context.

Results

The psychological toll of political disruptions is often invisible but profound. Children may not understand why streets are empty or why their parents are anxious, but they still feel the tension. Protests turn confrontational, and some children have witnessed violence or heard frightening sounds of clashes nearby. Others lose their school as a daily anchor, a place where they learn, play, and feel cared for. When parents lose income or face uncertainty during strikes, their worry often spills into family life, deepening children's sense of fear and confusion.

Consequences

The consequences of these disorders include the impact during childhood and the persistence of mental ill health into adult life. In childhood, the impact is broad, encompassing the individual suffering of children, as well as the negative effects on their families and peers. This impact may include aggression toward other children and the distraction of peers from learning. Children with mental and developmental disorders are at higher risk of mental and physical health problems in adulthood, as well as an increased likelihood of unemployment, contact with law enforcement agencies, and the need for disability support.



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ECD: Global and Nepal Context

ECDs	Global	Nepal
Cognitive development	Research shows that 90% of a child's brain development occurs by the age of five, with the period between ages one and three being particularly crucial for cognitive growth.	
Health	Globally, 2.3 million children died in the first 28 days of life in 2022.	23 babies out of 1000 live births lose their lives before their first birthday
Improved nutrition	Globally in 2022, 149 million children under 5 were estimated to be stunted (too short for age), 45 million were estimated to be wasted (too thin for height), and 37 million were overweight or obese. 3 in 10 people worldwide, or 2.1 billion, lack access to safe, readily available water at home, and 6 in 10, or 4.4 billion, lack safely managed sanitation	2 in 5 children under 6 months are not exclusively breastfed; 1 million children under 5 are stunted 8 in 10 people live without access to safe drinking water service
Improved prosperity and cohesion in societies	3 out of 4 children aged 1-14 experience violent discipline at home	8 in 10 children aged 1-14 experience violent discipline at home
Improved survival	4 in 10 children aged 2-4 are not engaged in early engagement and responsive care	1 in 5 children aged 2-4 are not engaged in early engagement and responsive care
School readiness	49.1 % of the children assessed were found to be developmentally on track, 45.3% on progressing and 5.6% on struggling category.	The physical domain (69%) had the highest on track percentage while socio-emotional (34%) scored the lowest. 2. Children who spoke a language other than Nepali performed lower (44.6% on track) compared to their Nepali-speaking peers (53.5% on track).
School performance in children and adolescents	89% of children in high-income countries benefit from early education, only 35% of children in low-income countries have the same opportunities.	5 in 10 children from poor families don't access early childhood education



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Globally, early childhood development is recognized as crucial since 90% of brain growth occurs by age five, yet disparities persist between and within countries. In Nepal, infant mortality remains high (23 per 1,000 live births) despite global progress, and malnutrition is a major concern, with 1 million children under five stunted and 2 in 5 infants not exclusively breastfed. While 149 million children globally are stunted, Nepal also faces severe water and sanitation challenges, with 8 in 10 lacking access to safe drinking water. Violent discipline affects 3 in 4 children worldwide, but the rate is even higher in Nepal (8 in 10), reflecting social and behavioral issues. In terms of cognitive and school readiness, globally about half of children are developmentally on track, while in Nepal, physical development fares better (69%) than socio-emotional (34%), and non-Nepali-speaking children perform worse academically. Access to early education also remains unequal-only 35% of children in low-income countries and just half of poor children in Nepal have access-indicating that while Nepal shows progress in some areas, significant gaps remain in health, nutrition, education, and child protection.

A Ripple Effect of Protest

Teacher strikes have become an almost seasonal occurrence in Nepal's education system. While the reasons are complex, ranging from salary disputes to systemic neglect, the consequences reach far beyond classrooms and blackboards. Each time schools close, thousands of children across the country lose crucial learning time. For older students, this means delayed syllabi and postponed exams. But for those in ECD stages, the damage goes deeper into the fragile roots of emotional and cognitive growth. Educational psychologists warn that early childhood (ages 3-8) is a formative period for social and mental development. Disruptions in learning environments can trigger anxiety, insecurity, and behavioral regression. For many children, the classroom is not just a space for education; it's their only stable environment. In rural and low-income households, mothers and grandmothers shoulder the burden, balancing household chores, daily wage work, and restless children who cannot understand why their teachers aren't teaching. Repeated disruptions to schooling can intensify symptoms of anxiety, depression, and behavioral disorders. Some children withdraw socially; others express their stress through aggression or distraction in class once schools resume. Over time, this emotional turbulence can persist into adulthood, manifesting as chronic stress, poor self-esteem, and difficulty maintaining focus or stable employment. The consequences ripple beyond the individual: classrooms become harder to manage, families face emotional strain, and communities bear the cost of unfulfilled potential.

Call to Action



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Addressing these challenges requires a multi-sectoral approach. Governments and education stakeholders must prioritize strategies to minimize academic disruptions during strikes, such as implementing alternative learning platforms and ensuring psychosocial support for affected students. Community-based interventions counseling programs and child-friendly safe spaces can help mitigate psychological harm. Additionally, teachers and parents should be trained to recognize early signs of stress and provide emotional reassurance during unstable times. Policymakers must acknowledge that the cost of prolonged strikes extends beyond lost instructional hours it jeopardizes the mental and emotional well-being of the next generation.

Conclusion

Mental health, however, is still rarely part of the education discourse in Nepal. We talk about test scores, infrastructure, and curricula-but seldom about the emotional cost of our failures in policy and governance. High-quality early childhood programs can yield a \$4 - \$9 return per \$1 invested (Rolnick, 2008). Nepal cannot afford to let political and institutional unrest rob its youngest generation of stability, trust, and hope. If teacher strikes continue unchecked, the true cost will be measured not in lost lessons but in lost childhoods. Education and mental well-being are not bargaining chips; they are fundamental rights. While teachers' concerns deserve genuine attention, their strikes should not come at the expense of the nation's youngest learners. The government, trade unions, and education authorities must prioritize dialogue, mediation, and fair negotiation rather than disruption. Moreover, investment in ECD is one of the wisest choices a country can make. Studies show that every dollar spent on high-quality early education yields a return of \$4 to \$9 through better health, learning, and productivity outcomes. Nepal's policymakers must see this not as charity, but as nation-building. Schools must also integrate mental health support through counseling, teacher training, and awareness programs to help children process uncertainty and stress. A compassionate education system is not only about teaching letters and numbers; it's about nurturing resilience and emotional intelligence.

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