

Emerging from **Isolation:**

The Mental Health Fallout of COVID on Children and Adolescents



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The COVID-19 pandemic has brought almost two years of disruptions and unpredictability. This would be stressful for anyone, but for children and adolescents, the pandemic has touched every aspect of their lives.

"Their whole world was ripped out from underneath them," says Barbara Barlow, executive director of Mental Health America of Fredericksburg—their routines were upended, schools moved online, they were cut off from friends, many children experienced disruptions to food and housing, and all families were dealing with some level of stress.

"And in terms of deaths," says Barlow, "how many kids lost a loved one during the pandemic?"

The answer to this question is particularly troublesome.

Over 167,000 American children under 18 have lost a parent or other in-home caregiver to COVID-19, according to a report in early December by the COVID Collaborative.

More than 70% of the bereaved children are 13 or younger, estimates the report. In addition, communities of color have been impacted the most.

On top of this, children have also lost other relatives, friends, teachers and neighbors to the pandemic.

The group's report was released just two days after the U.S. surgeon general warned of a "devastating" impact of the pandemic on young people's mental health—with increases in feelings of helplessness, depression and thoughts of suicide.

Many children and adolescents struggled with these before the pandemic. In 2016, over 7% of 3- to 17-year-olds had anxiety or a behavioral problem, and 3% had depression, according to a study in the *Journal of Pediatrics*.

COVID-19 has only widened these problems.

"We [MHA-Fredericksburg] are getting calls from all of the school districts," says Barlow, "where the counselors and social workers at the schools are overwhelmed by the mental health needs of the students coming back physically to the classroom."

Globally, depression and anxiety among children and adolescents doubled during the pandemic compared to pre-pandemic estimates, according to an August 2021 study in *JAMA Pediatrics*. Researchers also found that the rates were higher later in the pandemic, and among older adolescents and girls.

Another worrying statistic is emergency room visits, a place of last resort for mental health problems.

During mid-March to October 2020, the number of 5- to 11-year-olds who ended up in the ER because of a mental health crisis increased 24% over the same period in 2019, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. For 12- to 17-year-olds, mental health visits to the ER increased 31% during that time.

Equally concerning is a sharp rise in visits to the ER for suspected suicide attempts—a 51% increase for girls aged 12 to 17 years, and a 4% increase for boys in the same age range. These data come from another CDC study that compared rates in February and March 2021 to the same period in 2019.

Children have also been impacted emotionally and socially by the pandemic. A July 2021 report by the Saul Zaentz Early Education Initiative at Harvard University found that 61% of parents reported that their child's social-emotional development had been negatively affected by the pandemic. These kinds of changes can affect a child's ability to form relationships and manage emotions.

Researchers continue to collect data on the impact of the pandemic on children—including a National Institutes of Health study to track the long-term effects of COVID-19 infection itself on children.

But Barlow says, "at this point, the fact that the pandemic has had an adverse effect on our youth is undeniable."

This may also be the beginning of a mental health crisis among children and adolescents that could last for years. "Just like any kind of trauma, there are long-term impacts for individuals," says Barlow, "particularly when it occurs first while they are a child."

It's not unusual for children to face stress at school, at home or in their community. What's unique about the pandemic is that children have been dealing with so many stressors at the same time. This has impacted their social, emotional and educational well-being.

Still, the tools to help children develop good mental health are the same now as they were before the pandemic. In fact, during times of uncertainty, these tools play an even bigger role in supporting children.

So, there's a lot that parents, teachers and others can do to help children both now and into the future. This will be needed, because the effects of the pandemic will be with us for a long time.

"It's not like we're going to flip a light switch and fix everything," says Barlow. "It's going to take years to help all of the kids that have been traumatized by the pandemic."

One thing adults can do is take care of their own mental health because children are not the only ones who have struggled during the pandemic.

The CDC reported that in early 2021, 42% of U.S. adults had recent symptoms of anxiety or a depressive disorder, an increase from earlier in the pandemic. Globally, seven in 10 people reported struggling or suffering during the pandemic, according to a 2020 Gallup survey.

By managing their own stress and anxiety, building strong social support networks, and seeking out help from a therapist when needed, adults can model good mental health hygiene for children.

Barlow says parents should also create a safe space where their child can be open and honest about what's going on in their life. She emphasizes that this does not mean trying to "impart wisdom" to them.

"It's not so much about telling your kid what they need to do or be," she says. "It's more about listening, so you know who your kid is and what trouble they are encountering now."

If parents don't feel like they can offer that kind of space for their child, for whatever reason, Barlow says another adult can fill that role, such as another adult in the family, a teacher, a school counselor or a therapist.



Warning signs that a child or adolescent is struggling include changes in mood, loss of interest in favorite activities, sleep problems and changes in appetite.

If you notice any of these, contact a school counselor or a therapist. If you are concerned about singling out a child who is struggling, Barlow says another option is for the whole family to meet with a family therapist to learn how everyone can support each other.

Barlow says many parents also have a "gut feeling" that something is off with their child—one that's worth listening to.

"Most of the people I talk to waited long past the warning signs, and they wish they had contacted a therapist sooner," says Barlow. "So, if you have concerns beyond the normal ebb and flow of your child, reach out for help."

Mental Health America of Fredericksburg has resources available for parents, children and adolescents, including:

- **Helpline provider resource**, an information hub and referral source for local licensed mental health professionals and agencies in the City of Fredericksburg, and counties of Caroline, King George, Spotsylvania and Stafford
- **Navigating Trauma for Kids & adolescents: Back-to-School & COVID**, a webinar on how parents and caregivers, teachers and school administrators can support children's mental health
- **Suicide prevention education program** for schools and communities, using the Signs of Suicide (SOS) curriculum developed by Screening for Mental Health, Inc.
- **Talking To Kids About Fear And Violence**, suggestions to guide parents through discussions about fear and violence
- **Teen support group** for adolescents who struggle with feelings of anxiety, stress or depressed mood. 