

Think Tank: Checking in with children's mental health during COVID-19

Speakers:

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Erica Hanlon: Hi, everyone. You are listening to the Think Tank Podcast and today we are talking about children's mental health during COVID-19. My name is Erica Hanlon. I'm a licensed professional counselor and life coach. I'm joined by Lynn Borteck and Angela Bell, and we spoke with some special guests about what it's like to deal with COVID-19 and social distancing.

Children: It is the worst thing I have ever had to do in my life.

Well, I felt a lot of feelings. I felt afraid, scared, sad, and happy sometimes. At the beginning, I was happy because I got to miss school, but as time went on, it just made me feel lonelier.

I feel scared because I'm afraid that I'm going to get it. Second of all, we have to stay at our house a lot. The good thing about it is I can see my dad a lot because he doesn't go to work at all.

It's scary because a lot of people are getting sick and dying. I think about that someone in my family might get sick. A lot of people had to keep a safe distance and wear masks and they can't go to school or gymnastics.

I hate not having to go outside. I've got to be six feet away from my friend whenever I go outside. You can't share toys. That's the total amount of fun because if you don't have something, you can just share.

I miss my friends and church a lot. I have a journal and I track how much people do not have the coronavirus and how people have the coronavirus and how much people are in our country.

It has been weird and scary, and I also have to wear a mask. It doesn't feel comfortable.

I feel that all this stuff is something that needs to be taken more seriously. A lot of people already just lost their jobs and COVID is going to change our world forever.

It was really fun at first, but now it's getting slower to the bottom of my list. I am pretty mad and I'm pretty sad that I cannot play with my friends and that I had to wear a mask.

It's really heartbreaking that just because of a virus that's going out, it has to stop everything that's going around in life, happiness, activity, and healthiness.

If I could talk to COVID, I would say, "How do we defeat you and why have you come here?"

Lynn Borteck: I hope that you enjoyed listening to our special expert guests, the children themselves, and you might have noticed that they have a lot of feelings about COVID-19. They're feeling scared. They're feeling angry. They're feeling like they miss their friends, they miss their activities. There's a lot of brand new experiences and feelings for these kids, and I think they all spoke to that really well. What do you guys think?

Angee Bell: It's interesting to hear all these different responses and how it's impacting them. Obviously a lot of them are you feeling really sad.

Erica Hanlon: Yeah. I mean, I know I'm here with my kids. I have my kids here at home. We're all together a lot, and we're certainly seeing some upset feelings around missing out on things, missing friends, feeling sad, feeling scared. We're seeing kind of all of those feelings.

Angee Bell: Yeah. Yeah. I mean, it's interesting to see that it's impacting kids in a very similar way that it's impacting adults, but I think they have a different way of expressing their feelings. Sometimes adults might maybe close up and become... They're not quite as good at expressing their feelings or they're better at expressing their feelings and they have ways of knowing how to cope with their feelings, where at the same time children may not know how to handle these emotions. I think it's good to kind of understand how we can recognize these kinds of signs and then maybe even what causes them and some things that we can do to help.

Lynn Borteck: Maybe we should talk about what does cause mental health issues in kids and teens. COVID or not during COVID, both. I think trauma is one of them and certainly COVID is a trauma where everything is just so out of

the ordinary. COVID certainly fits right into that category. Dramatic changes and dysfunctional homes, that doesn't have to be during COVID, but certainly home life has changed a lot during COVID for all of us.

Angee Bell: Yeah. I mean, there's so many changes right now. It's dysfunctional home, right? Before when your kids were going to school, they had a schedule, they got up the morning, have their breakfast, maybe get on the bus or walk to school or dropped off. Now everything has kind of changed. Maybe they're able to sleep in a little bit more. Maybe they're not sure when lunchtime is and you are managing that between trying to get on conference calls and different things during the day or even trying to find care for your kids when you have to go out. It's really challenging for the kids because all of a sudden when they may have had a pretty stable environment, all of a sudden things have changed and they're up in the air right now. It's creating this environment where it's going to impact the kids.

Erica Hanlon: Right. I mean, kids thrive on routine. For a lot of people, I know in my house, routine has changed a lot. I'm trying to balance working full-time, my husband's at home working full-time, and I'm also trying to make sure that kids are in the right video chat room in their classes at the right time and doing their assignments and doing all these things. They're not able to do a lot of the activities and have that routine that they had before. Everything looks really, really different.

Angee Bell: Yeah, and still get along with each other, right?

Lynn Borteck: Oh my gosh, right.

Angee Bell: When they're supposed to be doing their school.

Lynn Borteck: Forget it. Forget it. Getting along?

Erica Hanlon: I will say, my children have been getting along remarkably well, but of course, they are together all the time. I mean, obviously there are a lot of arguments and a lot of disagreements and that causes stress for me, as well as for them. It's just a lot of stress in the home. I think kids they're going to also respond to your stress. If you're feeling really stressed and worried about things like, I don't know, the stock market, sick family members, what's going on with work, trying to adjust to work at home, all of these kinds of things, your children pick up on that and sometimes they can be the emotional barometers of your household. You might see some changes in their behavior.

Lynn Borteck: For sure. They feel everything that we adults, as hard as we might try to hide our own feelings, kids really have a way of reading parents through body language or what's left unsaid or whatever. They really do look to the adults in their life to kind of set the scene and set the mood.

Erica Hanlon: Let's talk about what kids need to be mentally and emotionally healthy, which is even more important right now during this time that's really stressful for everybody.

Angee Bell: I think being there for your kids and showing them that you love them and you're ready and to help them however you can is important. Really showing and expressing your love just not only from you, but other family members. Maybe you can't go and visit your family, but definitely connecting with them either through video conferencing or phone calls, having phone calls with different family members can really help them feel connected and have a chance to talk. Sometimes kids don't always want to talk to you as their parent, but they may feel more comfortable talking to an aunt or an uncle or the grandparents. It's great to make sure you're staying connected with your family.

Erica Hanlon: 100%. I know my parents have been doing reading time with my kids by video chat, so the kids are reading to my parents. They each kind of get like 10 or 15 minutes and that's been really nice and the kids have been really enjoying that.

Angee Bell: That's great. That's awesome.

Lynn Borteck: I think what the kids also need, and sometimes we as adults overlook it, is that they need time to play. These are serious times for us with a lot of concerns and so forth, but kids need time to play. They need time to get it out physically. They need to have fun. They're kids. I think that that's something that really also keeps them emotionally and mentally healthy and keeps them being kids at a time when it's probably really hard to be a kid.

Angee Bell: That's such a great point. I mean, they're home and you want to keep them busy. You're trying to keep them connected to school maybe, and you have to realize that they're still kids. They want to get out. They want to play outside. They want to play with others, and they may not have that opportunity. We have to find different ways to connect them with other kids.

Lynn Borteck: Well, virtually. I mean, online and stuff like that.

Erica Hanlon: My kids are doing video chat calls with their friends and doing some of those things that they've really liked. There's also like a kid specific like Messenger app that we just downloaded where parents can oversee it and it's safe. You decide who they can connect with and they can do like text messaging and video chat. It has all these fun and silly filters on it. My kids are loving that right now.

Angee Bell: That is great. That's awesome.

Lynn Borteck: The other thing that I've seen is parents setting up outdoor play times that are socially distant, so that whether it's older kids sitting and chatting in the driveway and being far enough apart or playing in the backyard, but each kid has half of the backyard and they play whatever kind of running games or races or whatever they do, just hang out and be kids, that there are ways for them to play together and still stay safely apart.

Angee Bell: Yeah, that's a great idea.

Lynn Borteck: The other thing is that kids really need, where we're talking about what do they need to stay mentally and emotionally healthy, they need to feel that they're secure and that they're stable. That's a challenge at these times. I think that they really look to us as parents and important adults in their lives to let them know that things are going to be okay because they really need to have a sense of security. Otherwise, like anybody else, that can contribute to being emotionally not so healthy.

Angee Bell: It's also that maybe lack of stability, right? We were talking earlier about having dysfunctionality now that everything has changed, and they may not feel as stable, which makes them possibly feel insecure. Perhaps even trying to set up more of a stable environment for them, setting schedules and things like that. I've heard of a lot of parents doing that. Even though you don't have to be at school at 8:00 in the morning or whatever, it might still be a good idea to get up then and do your breakfast then, do your chores when you would do your chores, take lunch at a normal time. My sister, she's got three little boys at home and she's mapped out like a full calendar of things every day.

She's pretty good at it because the kids were actually doing partial homeschool before, so they would do a few days homeschool and then a few days at an actual school, and they really are missing the actual school part a lot. It's great to have that schedule so that you can stay on

track and keep the kids feeling like they know what's going to happen next.

Lynn Borteck: I think that goes right along with being consistent as parents. Even though this is such an unusual time, remembering that it's still okay to discipline your child, like we were talking about the arguing between kids and stuff like that, kids still need to be disciplined. They still need to have rules and stuff like that. I think that's another factor in keeping them mentally well is to be giving them consistent messages, consistent support and discipline.

Erica Hanlon: I mean, we're doing a lot of discipline in my house. One big thing we're running into right now is dishonesty. My kids, there are three of them, and then my husband and I are very busy. We are really encouraging a lot of independence and we're asking, "Well, did you do this thing or did you do that thing," and they are lying about it. They're saying yes they did it and they didn't. We are seeing like we're doing some time outs for the younger one, early bedtimes, loss of privileges, loss of like desserts. Most creatively, I put my son to work and made him clean the toilet, which we needed to be done anyway. Kind of did two birds with one stone there, learned a lesson and got a nice clean, sparkly toilet.

Erica Hanlon: Yeah. I mean, discipline has been really helpful and we're having to try different things as far as getting the routine down and the scheduling down because all three kids have their own schedules. We've got different whiteboards, go in for different kids. One of my daughters ended up with her own like notebook where she's writing everything down. It's been a lot of like trial and error over here to see what works and what doesn't work.

Angee Bell: It's got to be hard, right, because they're going through change and you expect that they're going to act out a little bit, right? It's kind of expected when you go through a different change. Where do you set that limit, right? Okay, you act out once, maybe I'll let it slide this time, but then the next time it's like, okay, that's enough. That's enough sliding.

Erica Hanlon: Oh, I'm tough. I'm mean. Some people would probably think of me as being a mean mom. I'm very empathic and you get punished. I know this is really hard for you and let's talk about it and now what's your consequence going to be? This is the consequence. All right, and I'm doing this because I love you. You're welcome.

Angee Bell: It's got to be done that way though, right? You got to do both.

Lynn Borteck: What do you think we need to be on the lookout for in kids right now as a sign that they really are in distress, mental health or emotional distress, during this unique COVID time? What do you think some of the signs could be?

Erica Hanlon: For I think really any significant change in your child is going to be a flag that something's going on. I mean, we're definitely seeing some things especially with our youngest. She started having nightmares and coming into our room in the middle of the night. We've seen a real uptick in tantrums. I mean, those are just a couple of things that we've seen. I think kids are under stress, right? Recognizing any significant change right off the bat and then exploring it I think is helpful.

Lynn Borteck: Right, or like moodiness when a kid hasn't usually been moody and suddenly they're moody or they're really observably sad or depressed or like a big ball of anger all the time, something like that, or they just are biting their nails for the first time or showing signs of just being worried and anxious.

Angee Bell: You can also find signs sometimes if your child draws a lot or likes to color. Sometimes if they start to draw things that are a little bit more maybe violent or have a more negative expression to them, it might be a good opportunity to talk to them about those drawings as well. If you're seeing any of these things like across the board in multiple areas, then that might be a clear flag.

Erica Hanlon: Yes, 100%. Especially for teenagers, that's a big red flag, because teenagers might not like you very much if you're the parent, which is developmentally appropriate. But if you're seeing them withdraw not only from you, but also from their friends and then they're also like not doing it things that they usually like to do, even given the restrictions going on right now, that's something to look for. It's not just the change in one area. For teens especially, it's if you've seen those changes across like multiple areas in their lives. We asked our special guests what they are doing to help them cope with all the feelings that they've got going on related to the changes in COVID-19 and they had some really interesting ideas.

Children: I've been getting to go outside a lot and made my own obstacle course. We've also been staying inside and playing a bunch of card games.

Things that have helped me are getting attention and getting time together. My parents asking what makes me comfortable and playing

with my brother and sister and being with my puppy and seeing my friends on video calls.

To express myself, I find it very helpful to talk to people. Because if you talk, it can help you understand more of how you feel once you're describing it to someone else. Another way I like to express myself is through art because I feel like you can express a lot of emotions through facial expressions, scenes, and other things.

I go outside and play and take some break sometimes. Play on the swings. They have a Frisbee golf course and it's pretty hard and fun. We play sometimes at night, maybe one or two rounds of Canasta.

What helps me really get through this is getting distracted by something else and then when I get distracted through that, I will get discharged about this whole coronavirus. Stuff that I like to do is mostly have movie night. That gets me pretty distracted sometimes and that makes me happy.

I do just a bunch of crafts projects. I enjoy hand knitting.

Sometimes just write about this stuff in the journal I have on my desk.

I try to do something else that makes me happy. I like to do arts, so sometimes I draw.

I play piano and it kind of calms me down when I play it. I've enjoyed learning some new pieces.

Lynn Borteck:

I think it's important to point out the adults really play a really big role in answering kids' questions, giving kids assurance that things will be okay, that kids need that assurance from parents, even if parents are feeling a little bit out of sorts themselves and a little bit worried. For children, they need to hear from their parents that things are going to be okay. Why don't we talk about what tools and methods kids can use to help themselves feel better when they're nervous or upset? I think the first one would be to share their feelings and talk to a trusted adult, that can be mom, dad, grandma, grandpa, whoever they can talk to, and have the person listen and get empathy from the person and also reassure them.

Erica Hanlon:

I think that's going to look a little bit different based on the age of the child. I think younger children, they will probably need really direct questions about how they're feeling and they might not say a whole lot.

Again, providing that comfort and being able to pick up on a lot of those cues is helpful. If they can express their feelings, they might not express it through talking about it. You may see things like through their drawings or their art, or if it's a teenager, maybe it's through things that they write, but being able to get those feelings out in a way that is safe and is okay and doesn't get judged.

Angee Bell: I think also having the opportunity to be distracted, right? Because they are feeling a lot of feelings and sometimes that can be overwhelming. I mean, even writing them down or talking about them or coloring, drawing pictures about them, I think that's a really great way to express the feelings, but then I think it's also good to, to find some distraction because sometimes too much thinking about COVID and the changes and what's going on can cause some anxiety and some stress. People in general, right? Watching too much news for adults isn't healthy. It's definitely not necessarily good for kids to overthink about it too much. They can find different ways to distract themselves either through funny movies or funny videos, educational videos.

I know there's a lot of neat things online right now, a lot of different museum tours and things like that. That's always great. Pets are fantastic. If you have a pet, it's great to play with them and take care of them, love them, take them on walks, things like that. I know I myself have been a little stressed lately and I got a surprise of some baby ducklings the other day. I've realized just having my baby ducklings over the past few days that I haven't been thinking about the stress, all these stresses around me, because I've been taking care of these adorable little fluffy ducklings. It's great. It's a great way to be distracted.

Erica Hanlon: I love that. I keep seeing that a lot of shelters and like animal rescues are actually running out of pets because lots of people are adopting pets right now, which I think is fantastic.

Angee Bell: Oh, that is great. That's awesome.

Erica Hanlon: I know. Except our dog, he looks depressed because he can't go to doggy daycare or to the dog park right now. I've been thinking, do we get him like a little brother or sister so he's not so sad and depressed and lonely? But I have decided that's not a wise decision.

Angee Bell: Extra baby to take care of.

Erica Hanlon: Yeah. One thing that has been kind of funny is my son asked to start a YouTube channel, which I was not so sure about, but my husband and I talked about it. We realized probably nobody will even see it, and we decided it would be a good opportunity for our son to learn like how to operate a camera and how to do like movie editing. It's actually an opportunity to maybe learn some skills, as well as develop a new hobby.

Angee Bell: That is so cool. What is his YouTube videos going to be about?

Erica Hanlon: Oh, they're going to be so boring, so boring. They're all going to be like videos of him playing video games.

Angee Bell: That's a thing that. That is a big thing these days. My son loves those.

Lynn Borteck: It's a start. You never know. He could wind up being a meglo-millionaire because people pay money to go into a stadium and watch kids do that. If you do it on YouTube, think about it. All he needs is a couple of sponsors.

Angee Bell: Oh, yeah. It's all over YouTube.

Erica Hanlon: Yeah. He was asking me questions about it and I finally had to say, "Listen, I am not your target market, so you don't want to ask my opinion."

Angee Bell: Oh man. I am a huge advocate of reading books, have been my escape forever. Not just an escape, but it's a way of fueling my imagination. There's so many great books out there. I think it's so cool how a lot of authors are doing online readings of their books too. That's amazing. It's just great to not only get to hear the book, but hear it read by one of your favorite authors is such a neat experience right now.

Lynn Borteck: Another pretty obvious way for kids to burn some stress is to get active. Some kids will tend to want to just kind of lay around all day at a time like this, but it's really important for them to get outside, burn off some energy, shoot some hoops, throw a baseball around or a football around or do something so that they are getting their bodies moving, which always improves people's moods. It really makes you feel better.

Angee Bell: Yeah. It's interesting because I've seen some kids who are doing like gymnastics or something. They're actually doing the video gymnastics now where the teacher gets on the video conference and the kids can

join and still do the gymnastics in their house or outside in the front yard.

Erica Hanlon: Oh, that's my daughter.

Angee Bell: Yeah!

Erica Hanlon: That's my daughter. For her birthday we got her, because she's had a quarantine birthday, poor thing, we got her a gymnastics bar. It has been like the new most favorite toy ever. But yeah, she's doing gymnastics almost every day with her coach by video call.

Lynn Borteck: That's funny because there's a little girl down the street that I pass every time I go for my walk. I go every day for a walk. She's a budding gymnast and she actually gives shows out on her side lawn. Every time I go by, I stop and watch her do her somersaults and her handstands and everything. People walk by and clap for her and all that. It's great for her. Great for us too.

Angee Bell: That is so cool. That's nice.

Erica Hanlon: My kids are also doing music lessons. They're doing their music lessons virtually. In fact, my son was supposed to have a recital recently. What we did was we video recorded his recital, his performance, and we sent it in and they're going to do like a big video stream of everybody's recital performances.

Angee Bell: Oh, very cool. My nephews are doing piano lessons and violin lessons through video conference with their teachers. They're still staying on track with that. It's a good distraction. It keeps them busy, and they enjoy it. Those are all great things that kids can do, but what can parents do to really help meet the kids' mental health needs?

Lynn Borteck: I think they can start by encouraging the kids during this time. We talked about reassurance, but I think see it's important for them also to be encouraging, so that even with home schooling and e-schooling is hard, but if parents are encouraging, that might be helpful. Also, remembering that as their kids are doing these new things, things that are totally unusual and out of the ordinary, they can help them build the children's confidence because it's like, hey, look, you're doing it. It's great. I think that that kind of encouragement, it helps build self-esteem. It helps them be calm and feel good about some of the changes that they're making.

Angee Bell: I think that goes along with like complimenting them or giving them praise, making sure you're telling them that they did a good job. Don't go overboard. Every little thing that they do, great job, but I think it's good to recognize when they do good work because this is a hard time for them. When they accomplish something, it's good for it to be pointed out.

Erica Hanlon: I think one of the best things that parents can do is simply role model managing stress.

Angee Bell: Yes.

Erica Hanlon: Because we're all stressed out too. If we can manage it ourselves and role model it, it's going to make it easier for them. If we are like freaking out, then they are going to freak out too. It's really important that we're taking care of our own mental health needs as well. I realized just the other day my child was yelling something and I was like, "Stop yelling." I thought, wait a second, Wait, wait, what did I just do? What was that all about?" I think we have to like make sure that we're also role modeling what we want to see our kids doing and that we're managing our own stress and anxiety right now.

Lynn Borteck: Along those lines, I think it's a good idea to, the same way we need to monitor our TV and news intake, I think we need to be mindful of the fact that if we're constantly have the TV going on with bad news, bad news, bad news, scary stuff, that the kids are soaking that up too. I think that we need to set boundaries in terms of our own and our children's consumption of what the media is saying about COVID.

Erica Hanlon: Yeah.

Angee Bell: Such a great point.

Erica Hanlon: I know a lot of our guests talked about missing their friends and not being able to play with their friends right now, but I think that really speaks to the importance of getting creative around how you can encourage your child to still be social. Maybe that looks like video chat with their friends. Maybe that looks like phone calls. Maybe it looks like playing outside in a way that is still safe for everybody, but still being able to provide those opportunities for socialization.

Angee Bell: I thought it was interesting, some of the kids talked about the safety requirements, wearing a mask, things like that. I think that's great that parents are really kind of letting the kids know what they need to do if

when they go outside and if they do play with other kids at an appropriate distance, that kind of thing.

Erica Hanlon: While we have I think agreed that some level of stress and even distress is probably to be expected during this time. I think it's important to talk about what do you do if you feel like your child really needs professional help.

Lynn Borteck: I think it's important to remember that professional help is available even now with social distancing because if a child needs some kind of counseling or connection with some kind of expert adults or even their pediatrician, it can be done on the phone or on a video chat or something like that. It's not like help is out of reach even now.

Angee Bell: It's important to stay connected with the other adults that are in the kid's life. That might be the other parent. It could be maybe the teachers are seeing different things through whatever online program they're using or communication that they're using. If there's any other kind of caregivers in your kid's life, it's good to stay in communication, keeps the communication going with them, and make sure that if they're detecting anything to let you know as well.

Erica Hanlon: You have resources available to you. There are national hotlines that you can look up that you can find for things like suicidal ideation or those kinds of things, but you also have access to employee assistance programs where you can get counseling for your children. You can find in network therapists with your insurance company. You can go to places like Psychology Today to find a therapist. Then, of course, if you're really concerned about the child doing something to hurt themselves or somebody else immediately, then you would want to call your doctor or 911 or call some kind of emergency hotline at that point.

One of my daughters is, she has threatened suicide several times, saying things like, "I wish I could die, or I'm just going to kill myself." We've always taken those threats really, really seriously and sat down and had a conversation with her to really determine if this is a serious risk or if she's expressing herself basically inappropriately. It's always been the latter. A lot of kids don't know how to express themselves appropriately, but still you want to take it seriously because kids are also impulsive. Kids might say, "I'm going to do this," and then they do it because they aren't thinking through the consequences. If you hear any threats, it's always really important to sit down, talk to them and try to determine the level of seriousness.

If you feel like you are not qualified to determine the level of seriousness, then you absolutely want to get on the phone with some kind of professional to help you out with that. I will say one positive outcome of all those conversations I've had with my daughter is that she had a friend who made a similar statement to her and she went and told an adult at the school right away back when they were still at school.

Angee Bell: Oh, that's great.

Erica Hanlon: Yes. Sometimes when you're having those conversations and you're like, "Oh God, there's nothing good about this," there may be something helpful that comes out of it. To wrap it up, we have some amazing advice from our special guests about what kids and other people can do to help get through COVID-19 and this special time.

Children: Parents could spend time with the children more often, like not be on the phones all day. I mean by that like spend time with them in a good way.

Right now parent can just make sure that kids are wearing masks, giving them some healthy food, something that's at least healthy enough, or make sure they're six feet away from their friends.

Just stay at home and convince your parents to wear a mask. Convince parents to not buy so much toilet paper and also to pray.

They can make sure that their kids are wearing masks and make sure that their kids are comfortable and make sure that they give kids attention, so then they're not scared.

Not be scared and just not think about the bad things. Just think about the good things. I would also recommend them to go outside more and enjoy the weather.

If I had to give advice to the kids all around the world who are feeling like I'm feeling right now, I would probably tell them to talk to an adult about it because adults know a lot more than you can think. They understand you because they are also going through the same thing you were going through. When you talk about it and instead of putting it away in a little cupboard in the back of mind you, it's not disappearing. It's still there. Once the cupboard gets too full, it all starts to fall out and then you just kind of fall apart at the seams. It's just always amazing to talk to people.

Erica Hanlon: All right. Thanks everybody for tuning in today, and we will be back next month. Talk to you then. Bye.

Angee Bell: Bye y'all.

Lynn Borteck: Bye, bye.

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