

Kids and COVID: How are your kids *really* doing?

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Hi and welcome. Thanks for joining me. My name is Amy Prang. I'm a licensed clinical social worker with more than 20 years of experience in the clinical field. And today we're going to be talking about kids and COVID. How are your kids really doing?

In today's program, we'll discuss

We're going to have an authentic conversation today and talk about the impact that this pandemic has had on your children's mental wellbeing and emotional health. Not to mention the impact of school performance, especially if your children have been attending school virtually or in some type of hybrid type of model.

Additionally, the pandemic has really changed how our children go about maintaining social relationships and friendships, staying connected. So what the picture of how they go about their daily lives is so different from just over a year ago. Let's talk a bit about what this has done, what we're seeing in our homes, and what you can do if you're concerned for your children.

Preliminary data

Well, there's some good news in terms of looking at the early data that's being collected about the overall impact from the pandemic. And some of that good news is that drug and alcohol use among youth and juvenile arrests and incarceration rates are down. Some of the other data suggests that we need to be concerned. Emergency room visits, specifically for mental health related issues, and as the primary reason for the visit have increased. When we look at children between the ages of five and 11, that's a, there's been a 24% increase in mental health visits at the emergency room compared to a year prior. And looking at children ages 12 and above, there's been a 31% increase in mental health related visits to the emergency room compared to a year prior.

Additionally, we have seen that food insecurity has grown and it's increased nearly six, by 6 million. And so, you know, what we know is that with individuals not being able to attend school in person, that the challenge is is that there's no more access to the free or reduced cost lunches at school. We also know that there's an increase in absences at school. Schools

are really struggling to teach remotely or even in person behind plastic shields with masks. We know that youth who are homeless or in foster care or who have disabilities appear, or appearing to be absent altogether from school. Many others are missing classes or not attending with any regularity.

And while you know, this data's very early and it's difficult to truly measure the impact until much later. What Paul Gionfriddo, president and CEO of Mental Health America, believes that children have been hit the hardest with mental health side effects of the pandemic. And he says that they just don't have enough lived experience to have the coping mechanisms to deal with this type of trauma.

Let's be real

So let's be real, as we look across time zones, age groups, socioeconomic lines, our children have really hit this breaking point, and developmental psychologists are actually calling it the pandemic wall because everything that we know for ourselves, for our children has, it no longer exists, right? Our normal lives is gone. And so we're still grieving the end of how our lives used to be. And at this point it doesn't really even matter how dramatically our children's lives have changed. It's just the fact that disruption has become so normalized, and that in and of itself is traumatizing.

Our kids are on this cognitive overload. And psychologists note that what's been hardest for kids is the disconnect of thinking that, you know, being pulled out of school last March was going to be temporary, to where we are today. And I feel like to some degree we're not really acknowledging the reality of our situation. Our children have, you know, they have a basic framework for how they regulate emotions and deal with disappointment. But unfortunately when it's ongoing, they just don't have enough of that life experience. They're not equipped to handle the feelings that go with it.

When, you know, I think back to when last March when virtual learning first started, my kids, I have two children. I have a 12 year old and a 14 year old. My younger son who then was 11 in fifth grade was so excited about the thought of, you know, seeing his friends on video, you know, over the web on the video platforms. And he couldn't wait to turn this camera on and see people. And it was such a novel thing. And I look at where he is now, there has been such a shift. Not only will he not turn his camera on for virtual learning, he has hit that pandemic wall. I see such a change in this bright, bubbly, interested young boy to someone who really is so burned out and struggling to stay connected, not only with his peers but to even stay engaged in the learning.

And it's such a difficult situation. At this point, you know, when I think about him even having to put the camera on for class, the only time he will do it is if a teacher requires it or basically

says that they can't, she's going to dismiss them from class unless they put their cameras on. So what a difference from a boy who was like attending optional, like, little teacher gatherings with friends just to see his friends to now where I can barely get them to stay in a class, let alone put his camera on. So, when we look at our situations, it's time to stop pretending. We need to be realistic about what's actually happening. And for me, I think it's about owning what our actual situation is, being realistic about, not only what do I expect. So there's the typical expectations we have of our kids if they were in school in person, and if things were typical.

But on the other hand, we have to make a shift in what those expectations are because this isn't typical by any means. And you know, when I run into people in the grocery store and people are like, hey, how's it going? You know, naturally we want to just respond and put on that big smile and say, great, everything's going well, kids are great. But I don't do that anymore. You know, I'm owning where we are and everybody's struggling to some degree. And, you know, so when people are like, how's it going? I will honestly say, you know what, it's not going that great. The kids are really having a rough time.

This is, it's not, it's not perfect, because not only does it allow me to just own my situation, and there's no, there's no shame, there's no harm in just acknowledging it for what it is. But I'm hoping that also by being honest and transparent that it allows anyone else that I talk to to also know that they don't have to hide or pretend that their situation is something that it's not. We're in this together, and we need to support each other. And if we're pretending that things are rosy and perfect, we're kind of doing ourselves a disservice and, you know, we're not able to get the support that we need. So it's about, you know, how do we go a little bit easier on our children?

And it's not just to let everything, you know, go out the window, but in terms of expectations but it's modifying our expectations, going a little bit easier, recognizing that things are harder. This is not typical. And also giving our kids some space to express themselves, to talk to them, to ask them, how are, how are you doing? You know, when you notice things in your kids like ask them about that, let them share. Don't just assume because they see aren't talking about it that they're fine. We've got to be able to prompt and ask some of those questions.

When mental wellbeing is impacted

Here's the thing, when we look at how our kids are doing from a mental wellbeing perspective, you know there are things that we can look for and, you know, do you notice that maybe there's new or increased difficulty with concentration, lack of motivation. And that could be when it comes to the virtual learning, it could be just lack of motivation at

home, inability to complete school assignments or household tasks chores on time, missing assignments.

Are they taking less interest or care in just their overall appearance, personal hygiene, change in appetite in any way, maybe increased, you know, they're eating you out of house and home, or decreased appetite? Any sleep issues? Are they talking about difficulty falling asleep? Are they sleeping too much, napping during the day or after school, increased irritability, changing their interests or lack of interest in typical activities that they normally would have done? Again understandably that some activities may have been put on pause for awhile, but are they finding other replacements? Are there things that are still, you know, that they can take part in, what be it virtually or otherwise? Are they staying connected with friends? Are they withdrawing from friends, from family, family at home family relatives at a distance?

So these are really the things that we need to pay attention to. And sometimes it's subtle and it happens so gradually that it's harder to pay attention to. But on the other hand, it may be more obvious. And what are we doing with this information? I have seen the shift in both of my children, everything from, you know, and some of it is part of being a teenager, but some of it is also that they do take less care in their overall appearance, their personal hygiene, the lack of motivation for kids who were generally pretty good about doing household chores. Now it's become a real battle at home in terms of staying on top of them to get things done. And, and we don't ask that much, but there are certain expectations. A lot of missed assignments at school, disorganization, irritability. So it's there. And it, a lot of it is I'm sure due to hitting this pandemic wall, the pandemic fatigue.

What they might be feeling

In times of uncertainty, you know, when there is not that general predictability, you know, you get up, you go to school, you have your routine, you go to your activities and having that structure can be a real challenge. And while we've sort of settled into a new routine, it's different because we still have this uncertainty of, and this longing and waiting for when are things going to go back? When will we get to, you know, do the things that we once really enjoyed? And that really takes a toll. And it's, how are your children expressing that?

Sometimes they may also be feeling incredibly overwhelmed or confused by information that they are hearing, you know, in passing on the TV, in the media, online, likely on YouTube. My children certainly pick up a wealth of information from YouTube that, you know, I wish it was not their sole source of, of information or, you know, other social platforms. What are they hearing from their friends? And, you know, are we asking questions so that we can fill in the blanks for them, put them at ease, you know? Because

that loss of control, that uncertainty that children are feeling, and this can be whether they're young and elementary school or younger, but this can also be through middle school and high school, but they're going to exhibit these feelings very differently. But some feelings that they may have could be, you know, that confusion, overwhelm. When you see irritability, it could be that there are feelings of anger, anxiety, sadness, grief, fear, worry.

You know, for some children, it, you know, for high school students we think about them feeling anxious or worrying about how is this going to impact their future, you know thinking toward admission to college, and their academic performance. You know, depending on whether schools are fully open, hybrid or still virtual, that continued uncertainty brings feelings of loss, friends and you know, that routine, that predictability, and for some even that safety that they rely on because maybe home environments are not their sole source of security and safety.

As a parent who has two kids in middle school, and so one is now in sixth grade, came from fifth grade to sixth grade. He didn't even have an opportunity to meet new kids this year because everything's been virtual. And so here we are already towards the end of March, and as they get ready to go back in person five days, five, half days a week, I think about, he doesn't even know his classmates short of you know, the virtual, small learning groups. He never got to meet other, you know, the elementary schools that merged into the middle school. He missed out on so much. And I can't imagine the anxiety, the overwhelm of what that might be like. And even as he thinks about moving into seventh grade, assuming that things have a little bit more flavor of normalcy. And there's so much that our kids are going through that there's nothing normal about the situation.

Academic performance

As we move on and think about what about, you know, as their emotional health is taking a toll, what does that say? How does that impact academic performance? You know, the long-term impacts are still unknown. And, but it's gonna come as no surprise that some studies have, are showing that there are changes in academic achievement between last year and this fall. We do know, as we gain experience with this virtual learning and remote instruction, there will be opportunities to close the gaps and make improvements along the way, but it's still not the same as, you know, what our children can get when they are fully in person.

We, you know, reading success remains fairly close to on track, but math seems to be taking the biggest hit. There's going to be a lot of work that has to be done to really not only understand what needs to happen to repair and recover in the longterm. But I think one of the biggest challenges is going to be the amount of coordination and resources that will be

required to not only keep students engaged now in that virtual learning environment, but also then to get them geared up to actively participate once they returned to in-person, and then also start to remedy any of those gaps that we start to see as we go along the way. Technology definitely has its limits, and especially for working parents, there's an extra layer of complexity, depending on the grade and the age and maturity of your children. You know, for many that, that ability to provide constant oversight and direction, it's not an option.

I think about my husband and I have this constant conversation about, we feel like we're playing detective all day long while we're also trying to work from home, but it's are the kids actually in front of their computers where they need to be, did they, or are we going to get another email from the teacher that says, where was your son today? We, he was logged in, but when we called on him, he didn't answer. And you know, that's a big problem, but how do you constantly balance that? I've got two middle-schoolers. What about younger kids?

You know, you hope that there's some sense of independence there, but on the other hand, it's they do need this kind of ongoing redirection and reinforcement. This is not great. And it makes it the whole thing extra complex and very difficult. And it's not, you know, in many cases, it's not about how capable our children are, but rather that this, the impact of this situation is really impacting overall performance.

Socialization

And then we also look at just what are the impacts from a social perspective. This was a hard time for young individuals, you know, with, with physical distancing still in place and in many situations, the ability to connect socially has really, really been impacted. I don't think I really need to say it, but I will, that socialization, it's critical for child development. Our children thrive on interactions from other people and that's also how they learn.

They learn everything from just appropriate behavior and manners and social interactions, but it's also just what shapes, you know, how we learn to cope with different situations. When we look at really young kids, it shapes everything like how do you learn the basics, like sharing and interpersonal boundaries and social etiquette, but also that's how language development takes place. That's also where trust and empathy starts to develop. And now we're, you know, there's this deprivation of these interactions that are typically had as our children, you know, move through the different ages and have an opportunity to be out and about in the community. Not to say that they're not getting some of these things at home from us, but it's about having exposure to a wide variety of different interactions.

And, you know, depending on the age of your children and their, you know, and limited access to adults and children alike, there there's definite potential for deficits. For some families, you know, it's about taking those mitigated risks and allowing interactions, whether

it's with pods of other families who, you know, are kind of have similar safety guidelines as you do, or limiting certain activities, because it's just essential. And that's a very individual decision, but something that, you know you'd have to kind of balance out the pros and cons. It's really been a delicate and sensitive time for families. And we have to support each other, even if our opinions differ in terms of, you know, the choices and taking those mitigated risks. Everything we do for ourselves and for our children is making the best choice that we can, given the information we have.

And each of our stories is very different, and that's okay. We can't control, you know, what other people do, but we can control what we do and what our families do and how we react and respond. And so we also have to be thoughtful about that. It's interesting, as I, you know, look at the situation for both of my middle school boys, they're both very social, but in very different ways. You know, my older son is outgoing. He's very vocal, quite boisterous, likes to be the center of attention. My younger son is quiet, much more of an observer, has a, you know, a group of like five very close friends that he interacts with regularly. And with the physical distancing, they've responded quite differently in terms of, you know, how to maintain social relationships.

For the younger one, it was really, you know, essential that he stayed connected to those friends. That was his lifeline. And he did that by, you know, I never for, you know, being the mom who coordinated all the play dates, my younger son took it upon himself to start coordinating his own interactions with friends, be it dedicated game time, like through video games where they could interact on FaceTime, or going for bike rides and things. He started being like the little mayor in coordinating these activities among his core group. And my older son was just like, yeah, whatever, you know the friends will be there when they're, when they're there. And it was just really fascinating to watch in terms of how they needed and crave that social interaction.

And I'll tell you, we're typically quite strict about the amount of electronics and gaming time and all of that good stuff, but the pandemic has really taught us to be flexible and kind of go out of our parental comfort zone with this. And what I read in some of, in a variety of different articles from the experts is that this was not a time to ground our teens and young ones from phones and computers and electronics for more than a day at a time. It's about kind of setting limits in appropriate ways, but barring technology altogether is actually quite detrimental because for our kids, this is often their, the sole purpose is to connect socially to others and taking that away can have a really negative impact.

You know, of course it goes without saying that you know, as parents, you have to use your judgment in terms of monitoring those social interactions, making sure things are appropriate, apps and so forth. You know, you have to use that at your own discretion but also making sure that our kids still have that lifeline to their social connections.

What can you do

So what can you do? You know, as we've talked about some of these different pieces, and if this raises potential concerns and things that you're seeing in your own children, there are things that you can do.

Supporting your children

And that's not to say, you know, I've had questions that, what if I'm not seeing these things? Does that mean something's wrong? No, if you're, you know, some children are managing just fine and that's fabulous. For others, you know, it really varies. But it's really about supporting your children, acknowledging the situation for what it is. And, you know, depending on the age, it's okay to share your own feelings, your own frustrations, your own sadness, anxiety, worries, but in a reasonable way.

It's not about oversharing or overburdening your children, but rather letting them know that they are not alone, that it's okay to feel this way. And that it's quite normal during difficult times for people to have a variety of different emotions and kind of compare stories. Ask them how they're doing, and ask the deeper questions. It may even be helpful for them to kind of reminisce about pre pandemic life. What are things that they miss, things that they look forward to getting back to, and let that, if they have questions, you know, answer in an age appropriate way, but don't feel like you have to filter or protect them from information.

They need information. It's okay to share, but not doing anything that's going to be overly scary. Yes, people have died from the virus. Yes, people have gotten very sick. Do we need, you know, depending on the age, do you need to tell them that, you know, thousands and thousands of people have died? That might be too much, but yes, but also letting them know that we're also hopefully trending in a good direction. Vaccines are available, that, you know, people are doing what they need to do to stay safe. It's also about how do we check in regularly, not just assuming that things are fine.

Schedule a time to have these conversations, and also making sure that, you know, we are not only encouraging self care for ourselves because it's so important, but also encouraging self care for our kids. And that could be, that's everything from making sure that they have good sleep routines, that, you know, they're not staying up extra late because school is virtual, that they're, you know, we're still setting boundaries in terms of getting healthy sleep, adequate sleep, that there's nutritious food available, doesn't mean that yummy snacks can't be had here and there, but also setting limits that they're not just eating out of boredom because they're spending a lot more time at home. Are they getting enough physical activity?

Getting fresh air, getting outside? Are they moving, not just sitting, you know, sedentary all day long? This is really hard. And you know, also for ourselves, what are we doing in the along those same lines but also making sure that everyone's doing things that help us feel rested, recharged, energized, and whether that's alone or together. I'll be perfectly honest, we were not designed to have this much together time with our children. Has nothing to do with love or like for our children, but, or our significant others. But, you know, we do need space. Space is healthy. I look forward to when they all can leave my space. I work from home full time as it is. They are in my workspace. I look forward to when they can all go away, and then rejoin me at the end of the day. I love them all dearly, but too much together time. Anyone with me? So you know it, but we have to support one another.

How you can help

Part of supporting is just making sure we keep those lines of communication open, have those good conversations, also acknowledge their feelings, not to dismiss or tell them not to worry about things, or not to think about that. They're going to. It's okay. My younger son, as he's preparing to go back to school, he's worried that he there won't, you know, three feet apart is dangerous. He's worried that he could get sick. And so we acknowledged, we validated his concern. It was reasonable, but we also reassured him that there's new CDC guidelines that say that for students in a classroom setting, three feet apart is perfectly safe and acceptable.

And so it's about what can we do to alleviate some of his fears so that it doesn't create this buildup of anxiety to when he finally does go back to school. Ask your kids, what do, what do you need? How can I help you? What would be helpful? If necessary, you know, we don't have to have all the answers. We may need to bring in outside supports, whether that's leaning on other family members and friends, school support, but also reaching out, you know you can contact Resources for Living. Our work life counselors are available. Our clinicians are available to help you problem solve, to work through and think about what would be most helpful.

And it's also okay to seek professional help, be it for yourselves or for your children. There is no, you know, there's no shame in saying I need a little extra help. I don't have all the answers, but there are professionals who do. And you know, it's the greatest gift you can either give yourself or your child if you know they're struggling. And these are really hard times.

Resources

There are lots of resources available. This is just a short list for you, but everything from once again, Resources for Living, Mental Health America has lots of great resources. If you feel like you or your children might be in crisis, the suicide prevention lifeline, or the crisis text line. There's great resources for college age, transitioning young adults through the Jed Foundation for individuals, LGBTQ youth, the Trevor Project, and certainly staying up to date through the CDC on the latest, in terms of how the virus is trending, safety protocols and so forth.

“Cherish every moment with those you love at every stage of your journey”

What I do want to wrap up and leave you with is that, you know, cherish every moment with those that you love at every stage of your journey, even those days that you want them to go away, because it all goes so quickly. And it's about just taking that extra deep breath and you know, accepting it for what it is, being realistic.

And, you know, not setting ourselves up with expectations that we can't meet. We're human, we're not superhuman. And we're doing the very best that we can. So have a little compassion for yourselves, for your children. We're going to get through this. Things will get better. We have to be patient, but also supportive and work together. You can do this.

Thank you for attending

Thank you so much for joining me. I hope that this was helpful. Be sure to check out our other webinars, and I wish you all a great rest of the day. Take care everyone. Bye bye.

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