

The Long-Term Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Children

While children are normally asymptomatic with COVID-19, they are experiencing emotional and behavioral symptoms. With changes in their ability to socialize, go to school and play sports, children are now forced to transition to being home most of the time with little opportunity to see their peers in person.

Steven Shapiro, DO, Chair, Department of Pediatrics dives into the evolving situation of children now and how this will likely impact them in the long-run.

An Unusual Time

The pandemic has created a very unusual time for children to grow up in. Young kids who are used to leaving for school every morning are attending virtual school without changing out of their pajamas.

Teenagers, 14 to 17 years old, struggle without social contact. High school graduates, are missing out on lifelong memories and milestones such as prom and graduation. These are things they fantasize about for years, which the COVID-19 pandemic has ripped from their fingers. High school graduates may even have difficulty transitioning to their next chapter of life because they did not have the chance to 'officially' finish their old, high school careers.

"For safety precautions, during our preventative health visits teens are no longer allowed to bring their parents into the office," Dr. Shapiro says. "We are bringing 13-year-olds in the office by themselves for an appointment. They're feeling alone without their parents by their side. We speak to parents while their children are in the office."

A cloud of fear looms over the year 2020. Children and teens are growing up in this cloud, knowing the fear that surrounds COVID-19.

Increased Parental Stress

"Parents are now experiencing additional stress. Not only do they have to work from home, do chores around the house and take care of their kids, they also have to help teach their kids," says Dr. Shapiro.

Grandparents who live in the home with their grandchildren are assuming a more visible role. However, grandparents are struggling to step in and help out when they don't live in the same household.

Children with Disabilities

"A child suffering from a disability needs to be in school," Dr. Shapiro emphasizes. "The services that are provided to them at school like physical, occupational and speech therapy, cannot be replicated to the same degree at home. If they are virtual, their educational plans must be reviewed to see if any services can be offered to them virtually."

Children with disabilities may also be struggling with the transition from in person to virtual learning. While other children may not be struggling as greatly, students with disabilities often thrive with a set

routine. Changing their routine could be a very difficult thing for them to comprehend and manage. That's why parents of children with disabilities should try to create structure with routines and designated learning spaces.

Importance of In Person Learning

While virtual school is a safe option during the pandemic, attending school in person in some sort of hybrid situation is a better option for the emotional and behavioral health of children.

"People need to focus on the facts, not the fear of COVID-19," Dr. Shapiro says. "The facts are that this is a novel virus that we have learned much about; the illness in children is treatable but is very contagious and we will have a vaccine eventually. That's not the issue. The issue will be apparent when we look back at what this pandemic's havoc produced."

Children who will have grown up during the COVID-19 pandemic are more likely to discuss what they didn't get to do. When they speak to the next generation of students, they will talk about what they missed out on like sports, social events and school in general. Their childhood memories will be more lacking than that of the next generation.

"Schools are the magnifying glass for behavioral health issues, such as anxiety, depression and even suicide. Teachers are typically the first to report these types of issues and suspected child abuse situations. Since the pandemic began, child abuse reporting rates have actually gone down, likely because teachers are not witnesses to report. In the long term, suicide rates are most likely going to increase because we missed the opportunity to help," Dr. Shapiro emphasizes.

Parents can attempt to counter behavioral health issues by keeping a structured routine for their children at home. Young children are wired to be told what to do. You need to create a defined space for them to do their virtual work and have their devices set up. Let them choose where they want to be in the house and then set up their space from there.

Teach your children proper hygiene in anticipation of a return to school. The best way to keep them safe is to help them develop skills including hand hygiene and how to handle social distancing situations like the school bus or playground are very important.

Parents need to trust their teachers and educational leaders, now more than ever, before they decide it is the right time to send their children back to school. There needs to be a certain level of trust between teachers and parents for children to return to school safely.