

When Things Aren't OK With a Child's Mental Health

August 25, 2020

Last week, to write about the [risks of summer](#) — the recurring safety issues of children being out in the sun, or near the water, I talked to safety-minded pediatric emergency room doctors about what was worrying them, as they thought about the children they might be seeing during their shifts over the coming weeks, and I specified that I wasn't asking about Covid-19 infection — I was asking about other dangers to children, in this summer shadowed by that virus.

But among their concerns about drownings and fractures, the emergency room doctors kept bringing up mental health as a worry. At a time when we are all definitely not safe and not OK, we have to find and help the children who are hurting most.

Dr. Maneesha Agarwal, a pediatric emergency physician and assistant professor at Emory in Atlanta, said that although the lockdown and social distancing have been hard on children, “we initially saw a lull in children coming in with mental health problems.” There was less bullying, because school and social interactions had stopped, and children were being supported by their families.

But she was concerned that returning to school could bring a new wave of bullying, particularly around pandemic-related issues, whether because of lockdown-related weight gain, or because of changes in family circumstances, with parents losing jobs and families more stressed.

Dr. Maya Haasz, an attending physician in the pediatric emergency room at Children's Hospital Colorado and an assistant professor at University of Colorado School of Medicine, brought up the vulnerability of children who already had mental health concerns, especially depression and anxiety, and emphasized the need for parents to ask children about their moods, mental health and low moments.

“Our whole society is stressed,” said Dr. Sarah Vinson, an associate professor of psychiatry and pediatrics at Morehouse School of Medicine. She said that for some children, “school was their refuge,” and being home was a deprivation, while, “for other kids, school was where all their stress was held, they're much happier to be at home.” Now, those children may be headed back to school, facing old anxieties, as well as all the new stresses of school during the pandemic.

Dr. Adiaha Spinks-Franklin, a developmental behavioral pediatrician at Texas Children's Hospital and an associate professor at Baylor, said, “parents are reporting an increase in anxiety levels for children who were already kind of anxious in their temperament, and kids who previously had not had anxiety have developed anxious behaviors.” Some parents are reporting their children have germ fears, she said, or fears of other people, or obsessions with following the pandemic news. She's seeing more issues with sleep, she said, and more symptoms of depression, usually connected to social isolation.

Nadine Kaslow, a professor of psychiatry at Emory School of Medicine, said, “I'm concerned we're going to have a generation of compulsive hand-washers, scared of people, anxious and depressed.”

There's a lot more tension in many homes, she said, with parents trying to juggle multiple responsibilities, and children may be witnessing conflict between their parents.

Parents need to help children talk about their feelings, Dr. Kaslow said. Some parents of younger children find it helpful to use [feelings charts](#), available on the internet. If kids consistently can't point to things they enjoy, think about looking for additional help.

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