

It is illegal to post this copyrighted PDF on any website.

Addressing the Experience of Children and Adolescents During the COVID-19 Pandemic

As I consider the effects of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) crisis on children and adolescents, it is impossible to separate their experiences from those of their families. The impact of COVID-19 is not uniform across families, and the contrast is often stark.

Some families have lost loved ones, others live in regions yet untouched by the virus. Some children have parents who work on the front lines in COVID-19 settings, others have parents who now work from home or have recently been terminated from their employment. Families with resources are able to insure adequate supplies, while others struggle to feed their children. Sheltering at home provides children with additional opportunities to interact with friends via technology or isolates those without access to it.

These varying experiences of children in this COVID-19 pandemic means that it is essential for clinicians who treat children and adolescents to talk with both the youth and the parent about the impact of this crisis on the life of the family. Symptoms of depression and anxiety or hyperactivity may be situational for the child or adolescent and may resolve over time or with a supportive intervention. There will be those youth who develop major depression and anxiety disorders or have exacerbation of a current psychiatric disorder and will require medication and/or evidence-based psychotherapy.

A singular focus on the child or adolescent will miss a critical component in the youth's outcome—the family. If parents and siblings are overwhelmed by the COVID-19 crisis, their emotional stress may fuel the child's depression, anxiety, or other psychiatric disorder. A brief inquiry by the clinician about the mental health status of each family member would enable a discussion about the importance for family members to seek treatment, if needed.

Parents may want to know how to help their child cope with this new world of COVID-19. Foremost is that parents should address the two issues that are intolerable to people of any age: uncertainty and isolation. The child or adolescent should be reminded that the current situation is temporary and that they will be able to resume the enjoyable parts of their life. Efforts should be made to spend more time than usual, if possible, with the child and to encourage thinking about or contacting relatives. These are stressful times, but family connection is a soothing comfort for children.

Karen Dineen Wagner, MD, PhD

Section Editor,
Focus on Childhood and Adolescent Mental Health

© Copyright 2020 Physicians Postgraduate Press, Inc.

J Clin Psychiatry. 2020;81(3):20ed13394

Published online: April 21, 2020.

To share: <https://doi.org/10.4088/JCP.20ed13394>

You are prohibited from making this PDF publicly available.