

# Developing a Better Understanding



*Children of all ages have displayed noticeable symptoms of pandemic-related stress since early 2020.*

*Disruption in routine, social isolation, cancelled events, and stress at home can have adverse impacts on children and teenagers.*

*Parents, caregivers, and teachers should address and respond to new or worsening symptoms in children, including: trouble sleeping, poor appetite, increased irritability or aggression, fear, clinginess, and decreased concentration.*

*At home, parents and caregivers should model healthy examples for coping with stress, and talk to their children about their emotions.*

*In addition to professional treatment, parents can introduce free support services, like Crisis Text Line, to their older children. These services can also support parents as they navigate their child's behavioral health needs. Text 4Hope to 741741 to connect to Crisis Text Line.*

## Addressing Stress in Children & Teens

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, health problems, social isolation, and economic hardships have created stress, anxiety, and other behavioral health concerns across populations. While various studies and surveys have sited a major increase in the number of adults reporting symptoms of an anxiety or depressive disorder since the pandemic began, what is perhaps even more concerning are the behavioral health challenges emerging in children of all racial and ethnic groups, socioeconomic classes, and ages.

Children experienced major disruptions to daily life beginning in early 2020. In addition to school closures, social isolation, cancelled events, and changing household dynamics, children have also been impacted by their surroundings. Where parents and caregivers are experiencing their own mental health challenges, increased stress, and income insecurity, children are exposed to increasingly stressful environments without the escape of school and social activities.

Concerns about rising mental health issues in children under the age of 18 existed before the pandemic. In the United States, between the years of 2018 and 2019, among children ages 3-17 years, an estimated 8% (5.2 million) had anxiety disorder, 4% (2.3 million) had depressive disorder, and 9% (5.3 million) had attention deficit disorder (ADD) or attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Existing mental health issues have been exacerbated by the continued uncertainty and hardships related to the pandemic, while symptoms have also emerged in children where no behavioral health challenges had been present before the pandemic (Kaiser Family Foundation).

Studies show a consistent increase in parents' concern for the mental health and well-being of their children. In May 2020, just after the pandemic began, 29% of parents of children under the age of 18 felt their child or children's mental or emotional health had been harmed (Kaiser Family Foundation). A few months later, in July 2020, the number of parents reporting this same concern increased to nearly 50% (The Urban Institute).

### Signs of Stress in Children & Teens

While some stress is normal and healthy, new or worsening behaviors might indicate that a child is experiencing unhealthy levels of stress. Parents and caregivers should watch for:

- Increased irritability or aggression
- Clinginess
- Trouble sleeping
- Poor appetite
- Fear
- Decreased concentration

While such symptoms are not specific to any one group of children, certain populations have been impacted more severely by pandemic measures overall. Children who come from low-income families, have uninsured parents, or identify as black or non-white Hispanic, are more likely to have limited access to mental healthcare. Additionally, adolescents and LGBTQ+ youth, who have increased behavioral health risk factors outside of the pandemic, are considered particularly vulnerable to pandemic-related mental health consequences. The social and emotional development of children under the age of three is also a concern that is particularly challenging to address, due to a lack of communication skills in the children themselves and continued isolation measures.

### *Helping Children and Teens Cope with Pandemic-Related Stress*

#### **Recognize and Address Fear and Stress**

Pay attention to changes in emotions and behaviors. When a child is increasingly upset or worried, is having difficulty concentrating, or is developing unhealthy eating and/or sleeping habits, parents and caretakers should acknowledge these signs of stress. The child's age will dictate how stress should be addressed. For very young children, quality one-on-one time, encouragement, and positive play in regular, predictable intervals can create stability and diminish fear.

Children who can describe and discuss their emotions should be encouraged to do so. Children often need help identifying what is causing their stress and creating a plan for feeling more prepared for these situations in the future. By encouraging children to discuss their difficult emotions at home, parents can foster trust and reinforce that the home is a safe space. Older children and teens may be stressed about the disruption to their routines and social isolation, but can also develop fear specific to a COVID-19 diagnosis. Experts recommend that parents give their children honest, accurate information about the pandemic, remind them that they are safe, and teach them the best ways to prevent the spread of the virus (Centers for Disease Control).

#### **Lead By Example**

Children develop long-term tools for managing stress when the adults in their lives model healthy coping. By carving out alone time, establishing a self-care routine or hobby, creating opportunities for social connection, eating healthy foods and getting enough sleep, and talking honestly about their feelings, parents and caregivers can teach children about regulating their emotions, coping with stress, and vocalizing the need for emotional support. Remember, adults can teach children about stress without unloading their own stresses and fears onto the child.

#### **Seek Out Professional Help**

Every child has a unique stress threshold. Even when parents create healthy examples, communicate with their children about stress, and establish routines in the home, some children need professional guidance. Parents and family members should make professional treatment an option to children, without creating guilt or shame for the child, and without placing blame on themselves.

Left untreated, extreme stress in a person of any age can cause long-term impacts on their physical and mental health. For children especially, who have not yet developed the skills needed to cope with stressful and traumatic events, timely mental health treatment can reduce the risk for mental illness and substance use disorder in their teen and adult years. Pediatricians, school guidance counselors, and local Alcohol, Drug Addiction, and Mental Health (ADAMH) Boards can all be great resources to parents trying to identify the best treatment provider for their child.

Free support resources, like Crisis Text Line, can supplement professional treatment and the steps parents have taken at home to support their child, and can also help parents navigate their own emotions.

Anyone over the age of 13 can text Crisis Text Line to discuss their emotions with a trained volunteer, who can help move them from a “hot moment, to a cool calm.” The Crisis Counselor may recommend professional treatment to the user if they feel the individual needs more support.

**CRISIS TEXT LINE |**

Text **4HOPE** to 741741.  
Free. Confidential. 24/7.

### *Sources*