

Are the Kids Alright?

Post (or Late) Pandemic Assessment

SAIS Institute for Heads

MICHAEL THOMPSON, PH.D. June, 2002

Parents and Educators Have Been Worried About Children's Health and Mental Health from the Start of the Pandemic.

- Parents have worried that their children were being TRAUMATIZED. They have seen them anxious, angry, sad, upset, isolated and discouraged
- Parents have themselves been VERY ANXIOUS and have brought their worries to their child's school

We Have Been Through a Lot, But the Vast Majority of Children Have Not Been Traumatized.

- The Pandemic has been grueling, isolating and scary.
- We have all had to talk to children about life and death and safety AND SO MUCH UNCERTAINTY
- Trauma has become the all-purpose psychological term for distress. We are all PTSD.
- trauma has a particular meaning in psychiatry
- WE ARE NOT SEEING TRAUMATIZED CHILDREN IN SCHOOLS
- What Is Trauma?
- Trauma is **an emotional response to a terrible event like an accident, rape or natural disaster**. Immediately after the event, shock and denial are typical. Longer term reactions include unpredictable emotions, flashbacks, strained relationships and even physical symptoms like headaches or nausea.
- TRAUMA IS DOSE-RELATED
- OVERWHELMING...HELPLESSNESS...SHOCK

WHAT PROTECTS CHILDREN IN A STRESSFUL TIME?

- Children exposed to natural disasters, war, terrorism and severe political violence have The

World's Psychological Immune System Turned Out To Be More Robust Than We Expected

- *The Pandemic Did Not Affect Mental Health the Way You Think* by Lara Aknin, Jamil Saki, and Elizabeth Dunn *The Atlantic*, 2021
- *The Lancet's COVID-19 Commission Mental Health Task Force reviewed more than 1,000 studies from around the globe*
- *A study of 50,000 people in the U.K. showed that in April of 2020, 27% showed clinically significant levels of distress compared with 19% before the pandemic. By the summer of 2020 psychological distress returned to pre-pandemic levels*
- *Life satisfaction remained the same on the Gallup World Poll*
- *Suicides did not increase in 21 countries. Declined in California*

The Pandemic Has Hit Different Populations Unequally

- According to Boston University Professor of Psychology Donna Pincus
- **“The mental health impacts of the pandemic seemed to ripple along the fault lines of inequality...leaving many children who were already at a disadvantage suffering the most.”**
- Is there a child mental health crisis in the U.S.? Yes, a pre-existing crisis: too few therapists, too few hospital beds.
- Surgeon General Vivek Murthy issued a report in December, 2021. Citing Increases in depression, anxiety and suicidal ideation from 2010 to 2019.
- A cry for help': CDC warns of a steep decline in teen mental health
More than 4 in 10 told the health agency they felt “persistently sad or hopeless.” An increase from 37% pre-pandemic to 44% post-pandemic.
- The most vulnerable teens lived in homes where:
 - 1) family members died of Covid
 - 2) there wasn't enough to eat
 - 3) children exposed to domestic violence or abuse.
- “All students were impacted by the pandemic, but not all students were impacted equally,” The CDC's Ethier said.

Some Suggestions for Programs to Support Mental Health in Schools

- **Support starts at the top.** Regular, support groups for heads of school led by veteran retired heads or by veteran clinicians with school experience.
- **Caring for the caregivers.** Regular support groups for counselors in international settings led by senior mental health professionals.
- **Training teachers** the “therapeutic moment” in the classroom in order to help anxious or sad children feel safe and connected.
- **Training administrators** in managing parent anxiety and conflict between adults in the community.

What Should Schools Be Doing?

- “Schools nurture many of the adaptive systems in the individual that generate capacity for resilience over the course of development.” Ann S. Masten, Distinguished McKnight Professor, University of Minnesota
- **POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS WITH COMPETENT AND CARING ADULTS**
- **WARMTH**
- **STRUCTURE AND PREDICTABILITY**
- **HIGH EXPECTATIONS**
- **BUILDING MOTIVATION SELF-EFFICACY THROUGH ROLE-MODELING, SCAFFOLDING, INDIVIDUAL GOAL-SETTING AND GUIDED MASTERY EXPERIENCES.**
- **A CHANCE FOR CHILDREN TO TELL THEIR COVID COPING STORIES**

Anna Freud wrote, “Good teaching is good therapy.” Some children will also need therapy. All children need good teaching.