



NEJRSP EDITORIAL: THE MULTI-SYSTEM IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON CHILDREN

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While COVID restrictions have started to lift for Community Based Services, clinicians have had to continue to balance the need to provide critical mental health services while minimizing health risk to youths and families. Outreach therapists are now dealing with complex family issues related to the challenges of a post-holiday 2021 pandemic surge. The surge in COVID-19 cases has required a reassessment for in person mental health sessions and our role as mental health providers serving children during this time.

COVID-19 has had a multi-systemic impact for many families. These families have had to handle a baseline of anxiety and uncertainty around the virus. As an outreach family therapist, I have seen this collective change be overwhelming for many families. For some, it has involved a loss of control and a sense of vulnerability. Caregivers are now required to balance the typical challenges of parenting, keeping their children safe, supporting their children's mental health, and sustaining their work responsibilities (Masten & Motti-Stefanidi, 2020).

There have also been disruptions in children's environment for typical social emotional development. Closures of schools, youth's centers, childcare centers, and many other settings have been a part of an effort to contain the virus (Masten & Motti-Stefanidi, 2020). These environments are critical for social learning and emotional well-being in early adolescents (Spiteri, 2021). For some kids, these settings provide a structure to their days that they would otherwise not have. What's more, some of these youths live under chronic pre-existing strains, including structural racism and oppression, which have impacted families for several generations.

In the same storm, but not in the same boat.

It has become clear that the youth we serve are suffering the impact of the two pandemics, COVID-19 and systemic racism. Those with vulnerability related to the social determinants of health quickly became the victims of this virus, and the related disruption in typical social emotional development. Stressors related to prolonged isolation, anxiety, family loss of income/employment, the loss of a loved one, are all adverse childhood experiences. I have

noticed a theme of increased anxiety, depression, and irritability in young children. While these are some presenting concerns, it has become vital in my work to look at these cases through a trauma informed lens.

Young children's socio-emotional needs might be different as a result of the trauma they have endured during the pandemic. It has helped to keep in mind that these disruptions in socio-emotional development can result in presenting concerns. Play has been limited in many ways for young children, and some have physically separated from their peer group (Spiteri, 2021). There may have been a lack of emphasis in social-emotional development in young children these past two years. While this experience is subjective and developmentally bound, some kids might not have the tools to handle these changes.

As a caregiver myself, I have had to deal with these changes in my 9 year old daughter's life. While driving her to school after winter break, my daughter asked me why there were only 8 kids in her class when there are normally 23. She had a worried look while trying to understand why her classmates had stayed home to quarantine. It was important for me to acknowledge her experience and provide space to talk about this change. As her dad, I might not be able to protect my child from the effects of COVID-19. However, I can validate her experience and support in highlighting her reliance during this time.

What have your experiences been in working with young children during this time? Share your knowledge as we understand the multi-layered impact of COVID-19.

References

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