

How to manage pandemic stressors for children

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Credit: Kelly Sikkema/Unsplash

Since the pandemic began, parents and researchers have been trying to understand how it affects children's mental health. For 18 months, children have dealt with the disruption of their daily lives, fear of

COVID-19 contagion, and sometimes death in the family. The emergence and spread of the coronavirus delta variant has renewed the uncertainty about young people's safety as schools have started to reopen across the country.

In a new paper published in *PLOS ONE* researchers from Harvard's psychology department—research associate Maya L. Rosen, postdoctoral fellow Alexandra M. Rodman, Ph.D. '18, doctoral candidate Steven W. Kasperek, and clinical psychologist Katie L. McLaughlin, the John L. Loeb Professor of the Social Sciences—worked with colleagues from the University of Washington to examine the impact of [pandemic](#) stressors on children's mental health. A goal was to develop a set of practical strategies for caregivers to help young people develop more resilience to potential mental health problems.

"The biggest thing that we hope parents take from the study is that while youth mental health has been negatively impacted by the pandemic, there are some simple steps that families can take that may have a positive impact," said Rosen, the first author on the paper.

To assess the effect of pandemic stressors (including financial, health, social, school, and physical environment stressors) on children's internalizing psychopathologies (such as anxiety) and externalizing [psychopathology](#) (such as behavioral issues), the group recruited 224 participants ages 7–15 and their caregivers from two ongoing longitudinal studies in the Seattle area and assessed their mental health through questionnaires disseminated in the spring of 2020 and the winter of 2020–21.

After creating a composite "score" of pandemic stressors to measure the cumulative effects of the different pressures on each child and their family, the researchers compared the answers given during the pandemic with earlier study results from the same children and determined the

differences in reported psychopathology symptoms during the different study periods.

Those comparisons were the foundation for their recommendations.

Their study indicates that "having a structured routine, limiting passive screen time, and limiting news related to the pandemic, especially in younger children," can be a positive influence on kids' mental health, said Rosen. "To a lesser degree, spending time in nature and getting enough sleep may also be beneficial."

Strategies for caregivers: Less passive screen time

The researchers found that early in the pandemic, [young people](#) across the age spectrum who spent less time on the internet and digital devices exhibited lower internalizing and externalizing psychopathology symptoms. Six months later, they found that children who had more screen time displayed higher internalizing psychopathology.

The same was not true for adolescents, but despite this, the researchers recommended less passive screen time for children of all ages during and after the pandemic.

"One reason that youths with lower screen time use may be buffered against pandemic-related increases in psychopathology is because they are engaging in other behaviors that promote well-being such as getting sufficient sleep, among others," the authors wrote. "Together, these findings suggest some potential benefits associated with limiting passive screen time among youth during the pandemic."

Less news consumption

The group's findings suggest a correlation between consuming media news about the pandemic and higher levels of externalizing and internalizing psychopathology, particularly during the early months of the pandemic.

However, this connection was dependent on age. At the beginning of the pandemic, adolescents who consumed more news (more than two hours per day) showed a reduction in externalizing symptoms of psychopathology. Six months later, they displayed a weaker association between pandemic stress and internalizing psychopathology compared with youth who consumed less news (less than two hours per day).

"It is possible that for adolescents, having more knowledge about the pandemic early on may have been beneficial over time," the researchers wrote.

News consumption did not appear to reduce psychopathology in younger children, leading researchers to suggest that parents should ration younger children's pandemic news consumption and instead talk to them about what is happening, taking care to listen to their concerns and respond in an age-appropriate way.

Structured daily routine

Youths of all ages who had a structured daily routine displayed lower externalizing symptoms six months after the start of the pandemic, compared with children with less structure in their daily lives.

Using evidence from earlier studies suggesting that youth psychopathology is linked to a lack of predictability in daily life, the researchers recommended more structure for children of all ages as a positive approach to building resiliency.

"Although maintaining routine and structure is challenging," due to changes in school schedules and other unpredictable aspects of daily life, the authors wrote, "creating a structured [daily routine](#) for [children](#) and adolescents may promote better mental health during the pandemic."

More information: Maya L. Rosen et al, Promoting youth mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic: A longitudinal study, *PLOS ONE* (2021). [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0255294](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0255294)

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