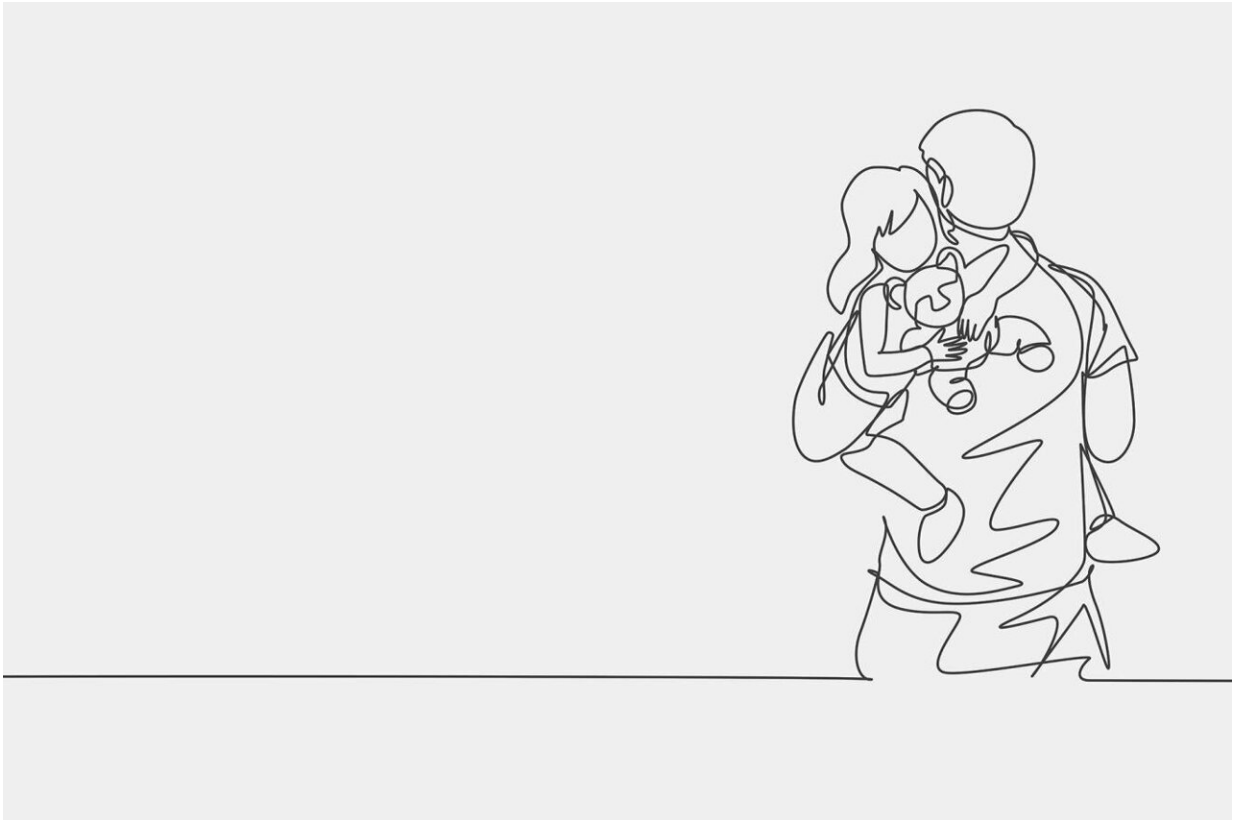


Parenting in a post-pandemic world

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If you're a parent or child caretaker, the news can feel especially daunting in these post-pandemic times. Math and reading proficiency levels among fourth- and eighth-graders across the U.S. [dropped precipitously](#) between 2019 and 2022. High school graduation [rates dipped](#) in almost half of the country's states in 2021. In October, a panel

of health experts recommended that all children ages 8 to 18 receive routine screening for anxiety during visits to primary care doctors.

Just how worried should you be? And is there anything you can do to help your kids?

Be worried enough to be aware of what's happening, said licensed clinical psychologist Eileen Crehan—but not outrageously worried. And, yes, there are things you can do to help.

Crehan, who, in addition to her work as a clinical psychologist also serves as assistant professor in Tufts' Eliot-Pearson Department of Child Study and Human Development, explained that there have been negative effects from the pandemic, but many of them are unlikely to persist.

And the fact that everyone had roughly similar experiences over the past few years is significant. "If half of the kids went through a shutdown and changes in the [school setting](#) and half didn't, I'd be more worried," said Crehan. "But within age ranges, there is developmental consistency."

Still, Crehan noted, for children—and teenagers—who are struggling socially, emotionally, or academically, there are steps that parents can take to help ease the transition from pandemic living to the current state of affairs. Here's her advice:

Model talking about it. "There was so much missed social time," Crehan said. She's seeing the effects even in her college classrooms, where sophomores and juniors are still uncomfortable with social aspects of college life: "They don't know how to just hang out with people in the atrium," Crehan observed, "or call a friend to go get coffee." The effects might be even more deeply felt among [younger children](#) and teenagers, who lack experience with small, day-to-day interactions, especially in transitional moments, like between classes, at lockers, and in the

cafeteria.

One way to help young people manage [social anxiety](#) or uncertainty? Get them talking about it—and an effective way to do that, Crehan said, is to model talking about it yourself. "Share your experiences," she advised. "You might say something like, 'I went to the office today and I realized that I don't remember how to make small talk any more. Has that kind of thing happened to you?'"

Start small. You might have an urge to counter the effects of the pandemic years by going big with social occasions. But it's better to progress bit by bit. Rather than throwing parties or lining up large-group playdates, start with arranging for one-on-one time with a peer or even just a playground outing that allows your kid to be in a group while not necessarily interacting directly with others.

"Your children just might not be ready yet for the stimulation of a big group. That doesn't mean they won't ever be," Crehan said. Letting children engage with others in contained and controlled ways until they are ready will lead to more effective adjustment.

Understand social media—and not just the downsides. Social media for kids, especially for teenagers, gets a bad rap. There are indisputable reasons why: It's been shown to lead to increased depression and anxiety in some situations, and that can have serious consequences. According to Crehan, though, it's not all negative: "Social media exists, and it's a reality that many kids use it to connect with one another. As long as we can encourage and teach kids to use it safely, it's not inherently bad. It's just another tool in the socializing toolkit."

The key, Crehan offered, is for parents to be on the same platforms their kids are on. "Use the tools they're using, both so that you can keep an eye on them and so that you have some sense of what's happening and

you can talk about what comes up. Let [social media](#) offer you a view into your kid's life."

Follow-up after anxiety screenings. In October, when the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force (a nongovernmental group that offers advice about [potential benefits](#) of and drawbacks to preventive health services) recommended that all children ages 8 and above be screened for anxiety in routine health appointments and that teens be screened for depression, alarms about the youth [mental health crisis](#) in the U.S. started ringing.

Screenings, said Crehan, are a step in the right direction. "Anxiety and depression, especially for kids who are not involved in some kind of mental health services, get overlooked a lot," she noted. "I'm all for screenings—as long as we are careful in our follow-up."

Crehan emphasized that there's a shortage of mental health providers for children right now: "I can't tell you how many people need providers and can't get one," she said. She noted that many pediatric practices employ a behavioral health expert, and that if a screening shows a need for further consultation, that expert can be a useful person to start with.

What's really needed, though, is a system to address where all the screening information is going to go, Crehan said. It's possible that the new recommendation will help lead to the proper infrastructure.

Consider evidence-based therapies—including group interventions. For a lot of [young people](#) emerging from the pandemic, socializing is one source of anxiety—and germs and concerns about safety are another. There are evidence-based programs, such as Facing Your Fears, that take a cognitive behavioral approach to helping children and teenagers work through anxiety of that sort. Though those programs weren't necessarily developed specifically for COVID-19, they target the

same skills kids need to get past their pandemic-related fears.

Many such programs are group interventions. "Don't shy away from these!" Crehan advised. Some parents worry that group tactics won't be specific enough for their child, but the benefits of the group format often outweigh that possibility.

"A group format means, first of all, that a lot more people can access the given intervention, which is crucial, especially considering the current provider shortage," Crehan explained. "But, more than that, in a group setting participants can learn from each other." In addition, group therapy settings offer safe, structured ways to ease back into social situations.

Consider hiring tutors. A certain amount of slippage in [academic achievement](#) is to be expected, given how suddenly schools had to prepare for virtual learning and parents had to turn living rooms into classrooms. But it's possible to gain lost ground over time, and, unless a child's confidence has been crushed, it's probably okay to wait a little and see if grades improve over time.

"The important thing is to think beyond the headlines to what the news means for your kid," Crehan says. "If their grades are lower and their [self-esteem](#) is lower, then, as a mental health professional, I would say getting a tutor is probably the way to go—the important thing is to have someone there supporting the rebuilding of their confidence.

"As for grades, we have to realize there were other tasks of living that kids had to attend to for a period of time—and maybe that's okay," said Crehan. "For some families, there was more time together than they would have had previously. There were certainly stressors that went along with this! But parents and children can also reflect on what they learned about each other and steps they took to keep each other—and

others—safe."

Provided by Tufts University

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