Taking Care of Kids' Mental Health in the Pandemic

Even before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, our children's mental health was a growing concern to medical experts worldwide. And today, it is an even greater challenge.

"We are seeing significant increases in the need for acute psychiatric stabilizations and immediate interventions in our local hospital systems and emergency rooms," says Raul Poulsen, M.D., a child and adolescent psychiatrist with the University of Miami Health System.

Recent data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reports that mental health-related emergency room visits for children ages 5 to 11 increased 24% from April to October 2020, compared to the same time in 2019. And for children ages 12 to 17, the increase in emergency room visits was even higher, at 31%.

Children's mental health was already an issue

In their 2015 Children's Mental Health Report, the Child Mind Institute called childhood behavioral health disorders a "public health crisis that must be addressed." They also noted that mental health disorders are the most common types of disease among American children.

Recent statistics from the CDC add weight to this claim. According to their statistics, 5.3% of children in the U.S. had anxiety or depression in 2003. By 2007, that number had risen to 8 percent, and it rose again to 8.4% by 2012. What's more, 9.4% of American children have ADHD and many children experience two or more
mental health disorders simultaneously.

**Social isolation is a problem**

There are several reasons for this increase, but the primary one is isolation, says Dr. Poulsen. "One of the most persistent issues that affects the risk for mental health exacerbations has been the social isolation of our youth that is required for reducing the spread of the virus," he says. "Maintaining family, peer, and school connections has been proven to be a protective factor against depression, and the pandemic has significantly impacted these connections for our youth."

Many children are experiencing family and economic hardships during the pandemic. This may be impacting their emotional, psychological, and social well-being. "With the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, economic hardship is being felt in many households, especially those with single-family households and families in low socioeconomic status," says Dr. Poulsen.

Finally, many children lost access to care due to increased safety measures officials implemented during the pandemic. "Another issue that has been associated with worsening mental health in our children is the lack of access to care or disruption in treatments to those who require follow-up treatments," says Dr. Poulsen.

**Here's how you can help**

If a child you know is struggling with emotional, behavioral, or social issues during the pandemic, there are several things you can do. First, prioritize their care, even if
it takes a pandemic-friendly form, such as a video call. "If your child has been suffering from chronic mental illness, it is imperative to secure appropriate follow-up with your health care team to minimize the impact on your child," he says.

Along similar lines, help your child maintain their social connections. Here again, this may need to take an unconventional form, such as video chats or social distancing outdoors. But, your child may need support and encouragement to make this a reality.

"Another measure that can be maintained through the pandemic is keeping social interactions with support systems in the community, family, and schooling, while still following CDC social distancing guidelines," says Dr. Poulsen.

Wyatt Myers is a contributing writer for UMiami Health News.

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