

Why pediatricians are worried about kids during the time of COVID-19^[1]

Every day, we see children and teens with excessive worry, behavioural outbursts, low mood and stress.

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EXCERPTS

I am a pediatrician in Ottawa. I strive daily to provide well-rounded health care for kids. Pediatricians know that childhood is a crucial period of social, emotional, cognitive and physical development. Experiences in childhood shape the adults our children become. Kids' day-to-day routines have been disrupted by this pandemic.

COVID-19 poses a risk to children. This risk is about much more than contracting the virus itself.

Health care services and tests are delayed. Opportunities for regular physical activity have been altered. The kids have missed school. Their ability to socialize and play as they typically would has been hindered. Interruptions in their daily routines disrupt their physical and mental health. Kids' emotional development must not be forgotten.

It is well established in medical literature that toxic stress in the developing brain weakens its architecture, leading to lifelong problems in learning, behaviour, physical and emotion wellbeing, and overall mental health. Sustained stress leads to poor learning, poor memory and emotional dysregulation. Pediatricians have seen notable increases in screen time and sedentary behaviour reported by our patients and their families.

Every day, we see children and teens with excessive worry, behavioural outbursts, low mood and stress.

Dr. Daniel Siegel, a clinical professor of psychiatry at the UCLA School of Medicine, cites the importance of maintaining a child's emotional well-being and social competence. Emotional intelligence and social competence both provide a strong foundation for future cognitive ability, and the "bricks and mortar" in the architecture in a child's brain. We must stop to think about what the foundation of our world will look like, if the children and youth of today are subject to more toxic stress.

While I speak of kids in general, I must highlight kids who are living in special circumstances. These are kids who don't eat when schools are closed because financial means are lacking at home. These are kids who are physically and emotionally safer being in school than they are in their own homes. There are kids in Ottawa who find stability, nourishment and safety in the school systems. These children will endure more toxic stress if schools close again.

We must think of these kids, and ask ourselves as a society, what can we do for them?

Teachers play a large part in the detection and reporting of children they suspect are suffering from maltreatment at home. In 2018, 48,000 child protection investigations were initiated by schools. School closures may have led to a reduction in the number of reported child maltreatment cases in 2020. In Ottawa, reports to the Children's Aid Society decreased 30 to 40 per cent in 2020, compared to 2019. We know through published medical literature that cases of child maltreatment are going up in the face of the pandemic.

We also know that in the coming weeks, cases of COVID-19 in Ottawa are projected to increase. Kids are not in control of the risk for toxic stress that they are exposed to as a consequence of this pandemic. Kids do not have the ability to widely have a voice of their own.

We are part of their voice. Can we work together to keep our schools open? Can we be responsible as a society to ensure schools stay open to feed those children who have no food at home? Can we remember those children whose only access to psychological or developmental supports are currently accessible only through the schools?

Kids have a right to a predictable education, consistency and safety. Let's work together as a city to physically distance, curb the spread, and keep our kids in school.

Dr. Kelley Zwicker is an Ottawa pediatrician, with an interest in advocating for accessible pediatric care. She is a member of the Ottawa Community Pediatricians Network, a group that represents pediatricians across Ottawa and the surrounding area.

Region: Canada^[3]

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