

# COVID-19 AND CHILDREN'S MENTAL HEALTH

## BACKGROUND

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a pandemic.<sup>1</sup> To limit the spread of COVID-19, the Ontario government ordered all publicly funded schools to close for two weeks following March Break. On March 17, 2020, a state of emergency was declared in Ontario and the Premier ordered the closure of businesses including daycares, bars, restaurants, theatres and private schools. By the end of March, all provincial parks and outdoor facilities were closed and it was announced that schools would be closed until the end of May. The closure of schools continued until the end of the school year and students received their education virtually. As part of the response to the pandemic, families were asked to remain at home, physical distancing measures were recommended when out in public and playgrounds were closed until municipalities entered Stage 3 of the Government's plan for re-opening. Although public health measures have slowed the transmission of COVID-19, the disruption in daily routines of children and families may have unintentionally had a negative effect on the healthy growth and development of children.<sup>2</sup>

## IMPACTS OF COVID-19 ON CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

COVID-19 has had a substantial impact on the mental well-being of children and their families.<sup>2,3</sup> During the COVID-19 pandemic, many parents have faced new challenges, such as working from home or unemployment, while also caring for and educating their children.<sup>3</sup> Other parents, such as those who are essential workers may have occupational risks and stressors, and encounter challenges, such as limited access to childcare. All of these situations may lead to disruptions of routines and activities, which are essential for healthy child development.<sup>1</sup>

Childhood is a critical period for developing physical, social, emotional, and cognitive skills that will support lifelong healthy behaviours and mental health.<sup>4,5</sup> Unfortunately, the pandemic has meant that many Ontario families are experiencing increased mental health challenges, which may lead to changes in behaviour of their children.<sup>4,5</sup> Some changes that parents have noticed in their children include: irritability; variations in mood, behaviour or personality; difficulty sleeping/ altered sleeping patterns; challenges concentrating, boredom; nervousness, worry, and feeling stressed out (Children's Mental Health Ontario, 2020.)<sup>3,4,5</sup> These changes can be signs of a mental illness, such as depression or anxiety.

The fact that children have been out of school since March break has the potential to increase the incidence of and/or exposure to family conflict and violence, including intimate partner violence and the maltreatment of children and youth in some families.<sup>4,5</sup> Risk factors that may contribute to this include unemployment of the caregiver, financial stress, parental mental illness, including parental substance use. These risk factors can adversely affect the mental and physical health of children.<sup>4</sup> Children and youth who are at risk benefit from schooling as they are able to seek support from teachers and other

professionals. <sup>4</sup> Children are social beings, so interactions with peers and teachers enhance learning, in addition to non-verbal communication skills, empathy, emotional regulation, and executive functioning. <sup>6</sup> Children thrive in positive settings that are based on routines, which support healthy nutrition, physical activity, time outdoors, play, adequate sleep, safety and emotional security, all of which are essential to the mental health of children and youth. <sup>6, 5</sup>

## WAYS TO COPE

It is important to take an honest approach when speaking to your child about the pandemic. Parents should validate their child's concerns and feelings and provide reassurance they will be there when needed. Using appropriate language for your child's age will help them better understand what is happening and can decrease their anxiety. It is normal for younger children to regress and have more tantrums during this difficult time.

Parents should respond in a caring manner and find ways to distract and redirect them. Although routines have been disrupted, it is important to try to create a schedule for your child and keep them busy in order to reduce anxiety. Remember, positive experiences in early childhood support good mental health.

### Ways to support your child

- Be warm, loving and responsive (cuddle and use a soft voice)
- Respond to your child's cues (pick your child up when they cry)
- Talk, read and sing to your child (children need to hear your voice to learn)
- Routines help children learn what to expect (encourage adequate sleep)
- Promote safe play and exploration (encourage regular physical activity)
- Encourage your child to do things for themselves
- Help your child explore their interests
- Take care of yourself (model and practice relaxation and gratitude)

## BUILDING RESILIENCE

There are many ways to help cope with stress. Some strategies for building resilience to manage stress include proper nutrition, sufficient sleep and physical activity, and creating time and space where children can relax. Deep breathing is one of the best ways to manage emotions and cope with stress. Deep breathing exercises can quickly change a stress response into a relaxation response. Visit the [Kids Help Phone - Breathing Balloon](#) to learn more.

### Other healthy ways to cope with stress

- Be physically active
- Spend time outdoors
- Eat a nutritious diet according to [Canada's Food Guide](#) (make eating a social and enjoyable time)
- Get adequate sleep (choose a consistent bedtime)

- Practice relaxation and mindfulness techniques
- Listen to music /do art (engage in a favourite hobby)
- Decrease screen time
- Keep a journal (write worries down so they are not on your mind throughout the day)
- Use humour: watch age appropriate comedy or a funny movie
- Be positive as optimism is key to resilience

## WHEN TO SEEK SUPPORT

All children are different. If you have concerns about the mental or emotional health of your child(ren), support is available. Have a conversation about your concerns with a health care provider and take note of any changes in how your child is acting, feeling or thinking. Provide your child with information and resources on how they can reach out for help. Children may feel more comfortable speaking with someone anonymously.

You or your child can also connect with the school board or professionals within the school for support.

## SUPPORTS IN YORK REGION

If you have concerns about the mental health of your child(ren), support is available.

[Mental Health Resources For Infants and Early Childhood](#)

[Support and Resources For Mental Health in Elementary and Secondary School](#)

## OTHER RESOURCES

[Caring for Kids: COVID-19 and your child](#)

[Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: Talking with children about coronavirus disease 2019](#)

[Children and COVID-19 factsheet](#)

[Kids Help Phone](#)

[School Mental Health Ontario's activities for children that connect to mental health](#)

[Sick Kids COVID-19 Learning Hub](#)

[UNICEF's tips for parents on supporting your children though the COVID-19 pandemic](#)

[York Catholic District School Board](#)

[York Region District School Board Mental Health Resources](#)

# REFERENCES

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