

Solutions Newsletter

January 2021



Effective School
Solutions

Solutions is a newsletter published by ESS for parents, guardians and caretakers. Each issue highlights an important topic related to children's mental health and provides practical applications for parents in the home environment.

Preparing for the Mental Health Pandemic

This January begins a new year like no other in our lifetimes. At the same time that effective vaccines increase hope that the devastating COVID-19 virus will be contained, we are faced with the realization that waves of pain are yet to come.

Long before the COVID-19 crisis emerged, mental health professionals had noted the rising mental health concerns in K-12 students, 1 in 5 of whom have a diagnosable mental health disorder. These symptoms have increased in children even though rates of mental illness have remained steady in other age groups. Research studies have suggested several factors that contribute to this increase in children's mental health problems, including the isolating effect of technology, student anxiety about issues like school shootings and climate change, and disruption in sleep patterns and social interactions due to the use of technology. When we add to this the trauma associated with COVID-19 - fear of illness, learning setbacks, social isolation, family deaths and illness, job loss and money problems – we have all the ingredients for a perfect storm.

ESS conducted a nationwide survey of school professionals to assess the impact of the pandemic. Eighty-three percent (83%) of people who responded reported that they are observing moderate to severe mental health challenges with students, and 71% reported that these challenges are somewhat worse or significantly worse than one year ago. And, if you as a parent are feeling stressed, you are not alone. According to the American Psychological Association's annual "Stress in America" report, "American parents are, on average, feeling significantly higher levels of stress than adults without children. Parents report stressors related to education, basic needs, access to health care services and missing out on major milestones."

So, what can parents do to safeguard their children's (and their own!) mental health as we move into the New Year?

Monitor Symptoms. In addition to a worsening of existing symptoms, watch for COVID-related warning signs in your children. **With preschool children**, watch for fears related to separation from parents or caregivers; frequent crying and/or screaming; poor eating habits and/or losing weight; nightmares. **With elementary school children**, watch for increased anxiety or fear; feelings of guilt or shame; difficulty concentrating; difficulty sleeping. **With middle and high school students**, watch for depression or feeling alone; the development of eating disorder symptoms or other self-harming behaviors; beginning to abuse alcohol or drugs; becoming sexually active.

Prioritize your own self-care. Make healthy food choices, get enough sleep, exercise, seek support from family and friends, learn a mindfulness technique. Make time for activities that you enjoy and that boost positive emotions. Don't resist asking for help; it is a sign of strength, not weakness.

Review the mental health and educational services already being provided for your child. Determine with ESS and other service providers whether existing services need to be increased (e.g., safety checks, tutoring, speech therapy), and also what new services might be available. Are there newly formed short-term counseling groups on grief/trauma/anxiety/substance use that are being offered? Are there additional social-emotional learning classes? Are new parent support services in place?

Lower your threshold for reaching out to teachers and healthcare professionals if you have questions or see changes in your child's status, and **schedule regular check-ins with service providers.**

Ask for technical support. Since it is unclear when students might transition back fully to in-school classes, make sure you get the help you need with the devices and technology being used for remote learning.

Encourage district leadership to provide on-site crisis assessment and re-entry services as an alternative to suspensions and other disciplinary actions that can increase a child's trauma response. Discuss with school leadership how these problems might be handled in the future in a more trauma-sensitive way.

Help your child practice social-emotional (SEL) skills. Familiarize yourself with your child's current SEL curriculum; encourage the expression of thoughts and emotions, without judging; practice mindfulness or self-soothing techniques with your child.

Resources:

[Stress in America™ 2020: Stress in the Time of COVID-19, Volume One \(apa.org\)](#)

[Stress in America™ 2020: Stress in the Time of COVID-19, Volume Two \(apa.org\)](#)