

The Learning Team

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A publication for parents and teachers working together for children's education



**Finding support in
challenging times**

COVID-19, stress and mental health

EDITOR'S NOTE

Let's open the conversation



Lisa Everitt
Editor
The Learning Team

As I write this editorial, it is the one-year anniversary of the lockdown in Alberta caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

It has been a hard year. In my lifetime, and likely for many of you as well, there has never been a time when all of society has been forced to take actions to protect our collective well-being. These actions have not been fully successful. As of [March 20, 2021](#), the Alberta government reported that 931,071 Canadians had contracted COVID-19 and of those, 22,645 people have died.

In addition to the devastation caused by COVID-19 sickness, the shutdowns, re-openings and partial re-openings this year have caused suffering for many working people and their families.

COVID-19 changed our routines: our social networks went virtual, activities like going to cinemas and festivals ended, travel contracted, and in some cases, people lost the ability to work. On the other hand, these limitations caused by COVID-19 have forced us as a society to ponder where our priorities ought to be in order to achieve social cohesion and equitable opportunities. As part of my own contemplations, I have been reminded that life can be pared down to a more basic existence, but that good mental and physical health is essential to a high quality of life. In addition, I have also been reminded of how important it is for people to have social and structural supports to achieve good mental and physical outcomes.

The uncertainty surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic has introduced a great deal of stress into the daily lives of both adults and children. The Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) ([July 2020](#)) reported that "COVID-19 is having a negative impact on Canadians' mental health, with many seeing their stress levels double since the onset of the pandemic." In particular, COVID-19 has impacted vulnerable groups hardest and in many cases, this includes children.

In a report published in February in *Paediatrics & Child Health*, medical doctors Prodanuk, Wagner, Orkin and Noone observed that, during COVID-19, "disruptions are experienced by all children, those who are socially vulnerable – whether it be due to poverty, systemic racism, newcomer status or otherwise – are more greatly impacted." The importance of strong social structures to help children and their families cope with the pandemic has been magnified over the course of this year.

This edition of *The Learning Team* focuses on the mental health of children and how parents, caregivers and schools can work together to understand what is needed for resilience during the hard times caused by the pandemic. In this edition, we look at the connection between stress and the health of children, information and statistics about mental health in Canada, the perspective of school guidance counsellors on child mental health, and the supports that might be available to families as they navigate these challenging times with their children.

It is my hope that, by opening the conversation on the mental health of children and youth, it becomes possible to remove some of the stigma and fear that parents and caregivers have about talking with their children about mental health.

Reference

Prodanuk, M., S. Wagner, J. Orkin and D. Noone. 2021. "Social Vulnerability and COVID-19: A Call to Action for Paediatric Clinicians." *Paediatrics & Child Health* 26, 1: 1-3. <https://doi.org/10.1093/pch/pxaa121> (accessed March 24, 2021).

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Children rely on caregivers to help them navigate difficult times

"The primary factor in recovery from a traumatic event is the presence of a supportive, caring adult in a child's life."

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Lisa Everitt
Editor, *The Learning Team*

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted every member of Canadian society including children. We have learned to wear masks in public spaces, stand two metres away from each other, visit using virtual platforms like Zoom, and do our exercise at home instead of at the gym. In addition, many families have experienced unemployment due to the slowing of the Alberta economy caused by the double whammy of COVID-19 and declining oil prices. This has led to economic stress for parents who may have found themselves wondering where money was going to come from for the next rent or mortgage payment or grocery bill. Finally, restrictions on social gathering and the ability to participate in group activities increased the experience of social isolation for parents and children.

Statistics Canada reported on the state of Canadians' mental health in late 2020. The agency found that all Canadians were experiencing a decline in mental health, but the decline was most notable in youth aged 15 to 24, the youngest age bracket analyzed. In addition, in February 2021, *Global News* reported that in 2020 the number of calls or texts received by the KidsHelp Line had more than doubled compared to the number of contacts received in 2019.

There is little question that teachers also have a significant amount of concern about the mental health of children and youth. The Alberta Teachers' Association has been actively conducting pulse surveys of teachers throughout the pandemic. Focused on well-being, the fourth pulse survey was conducted in November 2020 and found that 98 per cent of teachers surveyed had some level of concern about student mental health. In a previous pulse survey conducted in September, one teacher stated that "Mental health concerns are way up for students, families and some staff. As a counsellor, I've never seen a September like this for students and family needs."

While the mental health of Canadians has received significant attention during the pandemic, this conversation is not a new one. Prior to the pandemic, the Mental Health Commission of Canada estimated that 1.2 million children and youth in Canada are affected by mental illness, yet less than 20 per cent will receive

Levels of concern about student mental health issues such as anxiety and depression during COVID-19

TEACHER CONCERN



STATISTICS: ATA PULSE SURVEY
ILLUSTRATION: JOHN LABOTS

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appropriate treatment. By age 25, approximately 20 per cent of Canadians will have developed a mental illness. The medical community has affirmed through research that there is a connection between stress events and future health outcomes for children. As such, particular attention is being devoted to how children's stress reaction is managed and mitigated during stressful events.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, in a paper on the effects of childhood adversity, researchers Jack Shonkoff and Andrew Garner wrote, "significant stress in the lives of young children is viewed as a risk factor for the genesis of health-threatening behaviours as well as a catalyst for physiologic responses that can lay the groundwork for chronic, stress-related diseases later in life." In other words, what happens in the present can impact well-being, both mental and physical, into the future.

Shonkoff and Garner outline three major types of stress responses that children can experience. The first type of stress response, one associated with normal situations where stress may occur, is positive, where a "caring and responsive adult helps the child cope with the stressor," which allows the child to process what has happened to them and their psychological reaction to the stress is diminished back to a baseline level.

Helping your child learn how to regulate their emotions in this time of great disruption and turmoil is aided by having a trusting relationship and positive rapport with your child.

The second stress response, labeled a tolerable stress response, is more serious. Shonkoff and Garner describe tolerable stress responses as the exposure to "nonnormative experiences that present a greater magnitude of adversity or threat," but as with positive stress responses, children experiencing stressful situations such as natural disasters, divorce or poverty, to name a few, benefit from having a caring, supportive adult or adults to help them navigate these difficult situations. In having that support, the children will adapt to the stressor over time and return to a baseline psychological response. In the absence of supportive caregivers, children experiencing unusual events will develop a toxic stress reaction that can lead to changes in their physiology during sensitive developmental periods. In other words, toxic stress reactions, particularly if they are prolonged or frequent, can impact a child's developing brain, leading to poor mental health outcomes later on in life.

In more normal times, but especially during the disruption of COVID-19, parents and primary caregivers are the most important factor in helping children manage stress reactions so they are tolerable. However, this is a daunting task if parents and caregivers are overwhelmed themselves. Therefore, it is of paramount importance that parents and caregivers find spaces in their days to attend to their own emotional health, even if it is only for a few minutes a couple of times a day.

Helping your child learn how to regulate their emotions in this time of great disruption and turmoil is aided by having a trusting relationship and positive rapport with your child. Emotional regulation is helped by providing children with age appropriate information when they ask questions, by asking them to share their thoughts about events in their lives, by ensuring their days are structured and predictable, by ensuring they get enough sleep and by keeping them busy.

Finally, if your child is struggling with their mental health, know it is OK for them not to be OK — these are stressful times. School staff, Alberta Health Services and other organizations such as Kids Help Phone that focus on youth mental health may also provide resources that help you work with your child to sort through the emotions they are experiencing during this time. It takes a community to raise a child, but the primary bond between children and their parents or caregivers is essential to helping children learn how to manage stressors such as COVID-19 so that the stress reaction is tolerable and not toxic.

References

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Students need varied levels of help to address challenges

A school counsellor's perspective

Mary-Frances Fitzgerald
ATA Council of School Counsellors

School counsellors are one of the many social, emotional and mental health support personnel in Alberta schools. Most Alberta school counsellors are found in secondary schools (grades 7–12), but now that many new schools are being built for grades 1–9, we are finding more elementary school counsellors throughout the province. School counsellors, as defined by the Alberta Teachers' Association, are teachers first and have had further training, such as a master's degree in counselling or psychology. Often school counsellors lead, or are a part of, a school health team that oversees the school's overall health plan and works with students in classes, groups or individually.

One year into the COVID-19 pandemic, students of all ages are still adapting to continuous changes to school delivery methods and in-school protocols. Now that students are back in schools, parents are still coping with cohort isolations when students must stay at home for 14 days. Teachers who must also isolate are coping with similar isolation issues by teaching at home or adapting substitute teacher plans.

Now that vaccinations are on the horizon, we see possible hope for a return to a new normal; however, at the same time, the COVID variants are causing rising case numbers, which is disconcerting. This year school counsellors have been following up with non-attenders, phoning families affected by COVID-19 and covering classes for absent teachers, all while helping those who need support.

At home and in school, many students have found it difficult to concentrate or engage in the lessons, and are prone to increased boredom, irritability and restlessness. Some students feel isolated and lonely, while others have worries that they do not know how to describe. For some students, the concerns are mild, and they have supports and emotional health tools so they can recognize for themselves what is occurring and can self-regulate. For other students, the concerns become moderate or severe and cause interference with their coping and learning.

If students have moderate or severe mood changes, it is not their fault. We say that the mood has control over the child and that we need to help the student have control over the reactive mood or concern.

Teachers are often the first to notice these nuances and changes in student behaviour and can spot those who are being challenged in self-regulating. The moderate and severe changes are demonstrated by behaviours ranging from withdrawal to acting out. When this occurs, most teachers of all levels will have a discussion with the student's parents and will also check in with the school counsellor.

Anxiety, depression, isolation

In one Edmonton high school, the counsellor reported that there has been a significant increase in anxiety and depression, and feelings of isolation – for example, in students who do not feel connected to the school community or have a close friend at school. She also shared that the feelings of isolation are particularly noticeable in the Grade 10 population, as many students enter the school without knowing anyone else because the students come from all across the city. Masks, cohorts and very little opportunity to socialize has taken its toll on all students. In another high school the counsellor is overwhelmed by the number of students who are anxious about post-secondary and career counselling.

School counsellors have long understood and promoted the positive impact of building relationships and remaining active to support student mental health. One important idea is to provide students with personal agency by using the supports that are available to them. We encourage parents and their children to visit the Kids Help Phone website and scroll through the resources with their child. Doing this together demonstrates that the parent is willing to learn just as their student is willing to learn. Students aged five to 25 can explore the website and call or text in. The website is fun and informative.

For secondary schools, the organization Teen Mental Health offers a range of helpful information on its website <https://mentalhealthliteracy.org/>. Another excellent Canadian resource for students and parents is <https://jack.org>.

The ATA's Council of School Counsellors seeks to maintain and improve guidance programs and services throughout Alberta's schools.

The value of school counsellors

In Alberta, school counsellors are certificated teachers who have received additional professional development or graduate-level training that prepares them to support students' personal, social, educational and career development, as well as promote students' mental health and well-being.

School counsellors work with



COLLEAGUES

They offer classroom guidance by developing structured lessons or units of curriculum to help students build critical personal and life skills for their future success.



STUDENTS

They provide counselling one on one or in groups to respond to students' unique needs or to crisis situations.



FAMILIES

They support families by collaborating with parents and connecting them to appropriate community, health and mental health care resources.

May 3-9, 2021

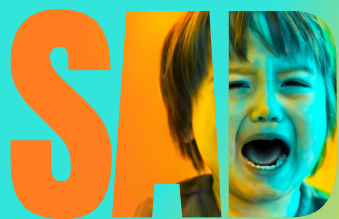
Visit mentalhealthweek.ca for info and tools!



HAPPY



AFRAID



SAD



ANGRY

Name it, don't numb it.

#GetReal about how you feel.

For Mental Health Week, which runs May 3 to 9, the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) is highlighting an initiative entitled *#GetReal about how you feel*.

The CMHA website states: "It's hard to deal with our emotions when we don't know what we're feeling. You may have been taught to push your bad feelings away, but research shows that understanding and naming our feelings can make sadness, anger and pain feel less intense."

With the campaign, the CMHA is focusing on how naming, expressing and dealing with our emotions – even when they're uncomfortable – can make us feel better.

"When we understand and work with our emotions, this helps protect our mental health, during tough times like the pandemic and throughout all stages of life. And, when we understand how we are feeling, we're better able to understand and empathize with others, too. And that helps create a climate of support and acceptance.

Heavy, painful feelings lighten when we put them into words. This Mental Health Week, don't go uncomfortably numb. #GetReal about how you feel. Name it, don't numb it."

A #GetReal Toolkit is available at mentalhealthweek.ca.

The power of hope

SHARP-SMH stands for Strengths, Hope, and Resourcefulness Program for School Mental Health.

SHARP-SMH is a positive psychology, strengths-focused program for fostering student and teacher mental health and well-being. SHARP-SMH is an empirically supported program of interventions and practices developed at Hope Studies Central, an internationally recognized research lab in the Faculty of Education at the University of Alberta. The program's goal is sustainable, effective mental health programming in schools.

The need

- Seventy per cent of teachers identify a need for more knowledge about mental health.
- Fifteen to twenty-five per cent of children and youth suffer at least one mental health problem.
- Seventy per cent of adult mental illness has its onset during childhood/adolescence.

The program

Hope is a vital resource for healthy development and for learning to face difficulties in life. Life's challenges are most easily faced from a perspective of hope and strength. We all have strengths, though many of us find it difficult to name and use them to our advantage. Hope enables us to envision a positive future and gives us the motivation to work toward it. Twenty-five years of hope- and strengths-focused research have generated an extensive collection of field-informed tools that can benefit the mental health of teachers and students.

Evidence-based programming

The research supporting SHARP-SMH is robust. Hope is a strong predictor of positive outcomes including academic achievement, positive affect, resiliency, motivation, athletic performance, physical health, psychological adjustment, enriched relationships, lower substance use in youth (alcohol and cannabis), and developing career goals and moving toward these goals. Hope predicts flourishing, and research suggests that it is easier to implement than resilience. Meta-analyses underscore the benefits of positive interventions.

The SHARP-SMH website has several read-along videos and a list of recommended books.

Hope is an Open Heart
Lauren Thompson

A Flicker of Hope
Julia Cook

Thank you, Mr. Falker
Patricia Polacco

Brothers in Hope
Mary Luana Williams

What Do You Do With a Problem?
Kobi Yamada

If You Hold a Seed
Elly MacKay

The Red Tree
Shaun Tan

The Grateful Book
Angela Kohler

Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes
Eleanor Coerr

Terry Fox: A Story of Hope
Maxine Trottier

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Important links

Canadian Mental Health Association

<https://cmha.ca/news/covid-19-and-mental-health>

Teen Mental Health

<https://mentalhealthliteracy.org>

Kids Help Phone

Info and tips available for kids
<https://kidshelpphone.ca>

Call Kids Help Phone at
1-800-668-6868.

Alberta-wide mental health resources

- <https://alberta.cmha.ca/covid>
- [COVID-19 TEXT4HOPE](#) – Alberta Health Services
- [It is Imperative to Act Swiftly to Mitigate the Effects of COVID-19 on Mental Health](#) – by Paul Gionfriddo, president and CEO, Mental Health America
- [6 Tips to Respond to Employee Anxiety about COVID-19](#) – CMHA National
- [The Dos and Don'ts of 'Social Distancing'](#) – *The Atlantic*
- [Talking with Children about Public Health Emergencies like Coronavirus](#) – My Workplace Health
- [How to Stay Emotionally Healthy During the Coronavirus Outbreak](#) – *Psychology Today*
- [The New Mental Health Research on Coronavirus](#) – *Psychology Today*
- [Mental Health Considerations during COVID-19 Outbreak](#) – World Health Organization

CALL FOR HELP

If you or a loved one is experiencing mental health distress during this time, please call **211** (Alberta only) or the Mental Health Help Line at 1-877-303-2642.

Source: <https://alberta.cmha.ca>