



Kids' Mental Health: Lessons from the Pandemic

Developmental Milestones

The pandemic and other crises experienced by children and adolescents are superimposed on a child's normal developmental challenges. By knowing what to expect at different stages of a child's development, parents – and other caring adults – may be better equipped to respond to their child's particular needs during challenging times.

Elementary School–Age Children (7–12 years)

Elementary school-age children are learning many new skills in the classroom, in afterschool activities and in relationships with peers. Peer relationships, including establishing a best friend or friends, are important. Supporting these connections during a challenging time is key. Children this age are hopefully learning that when they try hard, their skills improve. Parental support is often needed for a child to persevere and achieve this goal. At this age, children are tuned into rules and fairness. When they believe others aren't following the rules, they are distressed – particularly when “rule breakers” appear to escape consequences. It is common for children to question rules, especially when other families live by different rules. You can explain how you make important decisions while modeling respect for those who make different choices. This can be challenging when parents, too, feel frustrated by others' decisions.

Paula K. Rauch, MD

Video Segment: *Elementary-age Children and Preteens*

📌 Introduction

This is a program about how creating opportunities for children to talk openly can help build their resilience. Understanding a child's experience and how to effectively engage with them strengthens a child's relationship with a parent or another trusted adult. A child's resilience depends on caring adults being tuned into them. In this video segment, we meet children and parents who describe their pandemic experiences. Dr. Paula Rauch, a child psychiatrist at Massachusetts General Hospital, is also featured. Let's watch the video.

View *Elementary School-Age Children and Preteens* video Length: 18:47

📌 Begin discussion by saying

Let's talk about the children's comments and how their parents responded.

📌 Ask participants

- Jaziel was surprised and upset when soccer was cancelled, and classes went remote. How did his mom Kristel respond – and how can this strategy be applied to any disappointing experience?

Response: Kristel gave Jaziel time alone to pause, calm himself, and figure out his feelings. Then, together, they could talk about next steps that might help him feel better. Not every child can calm him or herself in every situation. But it's important to give them the space to try, so this becomes a habit for life. Even suggesting to an upset child that he take a couple of breathes can help him self-regulate and feel calmer.

- When Stephen feels anxious, Kristel tunes in and spends extra time with him. How is this helpful to a child?

Response: By acknowledging Stephen's struggles, Kristel validates his emotions. As a result, he is comfortable sharing that he feels "insanely lonely" and this helps Stephen feel less lonely and anxious. Open communication also will help Kristel notice when her son may benefit from professional help.

- What strategies have you used to encourage your child to open up when he or she may not feel like talking?

Response: It's helpful to identify times your child is most likely to talk – during a walk or while you're making dinner. Sometimes you can let your child initiate conversation. Other times you can ask open-ended questions: "What was the best part of your day?" "What was most frustrating?"

- Charlotte found listening to the news to be overwhelming. At times, she asked to limit news exposure or to avoid certain topics during family dinners. When there are high-stress world events, how do you balance the realities of those events with the need to create a safe, secure environment for your child?

Response: Charlotte wasn't asking her parents to ignore or deny news events. Charlotte recognizes it's important to have time when she isn't flooded with upsetting news. Having a balance is key. Parents can help children identify relaxing activities that help them shift gears, such as hiking, listening to music, or playing a game with a sibling or friend. Parents model how to make emotionally healthy choices when they do the same.

- Children need a trusted source of information to help them make sense of their world. How do you discuss news events, in age-appropriate ways, so children have context for their experiences and feel secure?

Response: It's important to check in to learn what your child is hearing about current events. You can discuss what may be upsetting them and where to find quality information. Children this age can benefit from creating an action plan in response to upsetting news, such as moving a scheduled event outdoors vs indoors or donating to the Red Cross to support victims of a tragedy. Even small actions you take together can improve your child's emotional well-being.

- Charlotte cited the social injustice protests as a source of her worries. How did your child talk about the confluence of global events during the pandemic?

Response: When children struggle, they may be responding to a combination of events. Helping children tease out the source of their distress can help them feel less confused and overwhelmed. Open communication provides an opportunity to identify what is front and center from a child's perspective. You can only identify a child's true worries – which may vary day to day – through ongoing, honest dialogue.

- What role does social media play for your child as he or she learns about current events and interacts with peers?

Response: Social media has both risks and rewards. Dr. Rauch says parents need to help children seek a healthy balance. Many children maintain important connections with peers through social

media. Victoria uses it to support her friends. But interactions are not always positive. Some children recognize that at times they feel worse on social media and will benefit from parents' encouragement to take a break from it.

- When children learn they can positively impact their world they develop agency. Agency is feeling empowered to make meaningful changes in your world. It's the opposite of feeling helpless. One way to develop agency is by doing things for others. How have you encouraged your child to make a difference in another person's life?

- It's important for parents to model healthy responses to stress. How have you talked candidly about your own emotions while conveying a sense of hope?

Response: As Dr. Rauch says, it's important for children to understand that emotions are natural and come in waves. She offers this example, "I was expecting an important call this afternoon and it didn't happen. I feel annoyed. I am going to listen to my favorite music to let this frustration wave pass."

👉 Remind participants

When there is a sustained change in a child's mood, which lasts more than a couple of weeks, and the parent's support isn't changing that, it's time to seek guidance of a pediatrician or a mental health professional.