



The Pandemic and Kids' Mental Health

Talking About That Light at the End of the Tunnel

Jeanne Blake: With vaccines available we hear a lot about the light at the end of the tunnel. You wisely remind us that the end of the pandemic will be gradual, not a quick flip of the switch. It's important we explain that to children.

Dr. Paula K. Rauch: We're all so eager to get back to normal, we may forget to help children understand that when we emerge from this tunnel there will be a new landscape. Adults will face a lot of changes related to work. The same is true for children returning to school. Children will be more resilient if we pre-process with them how aspects of life may be different during this transition. Even if we don't anticipate the changes exactly as they will unfold, imagining change together helps children cope better.

Jeanne: What are some ways we can talk about this with children?

Dr. Rauch: You can uncover misconceptions by asking a child to describe how they'd explain something to another person. For example, you might ask preadolescents how they'd explain what lunchtime might look like with social distancing. For a child who's hard to engage, especially a teen, you can say, "If you share your concerns with me, we can problem solve together. If I have to guess what you're thinking, I'll worry *about* you rather than problem solve *with* you. If I miss the mark I'm likely to annoy you." Teens don't ever want their parent to be more annoying.

Jeanne: A parent recently asked how to talk with their child about resuming in-school learning when there's a chance that they'd have to go remote again.

Dr. Rauch: Parents can say, "Look at all we've been through this last year and what we figured out to do together. Going forward, it certainly won't be exactly as it was before. But bit by bit, it will be better. And you know what? If we have to go remote again for a week or two, I have confidence you can manage that challenge."

Jeanne: The key is open communication.

Dr. Rauch: It's really an error of kindness when adults want to bubble wrap children and not talk about the hard stuff. This excludes children from anticipating and problem solving with a parent. We're all going to be living with continued uncertainty. New situations will inevitably arise. Preparation will help us feel less surprised. There were lots of surprises last year, but we can plan better for the months ahead.

Jeanne Blake, Blake Works CEO and creator of *The Pandemic and Kids' Mental Health*, is a leadership communication coach, author and award-winning science and medical television journalist.

Dr. Paula K. Rauch is a child psychiatrist at Massachusetts General Hospital and Associate Professor of Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School.

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