



THE IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC ON CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

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In what has been described as an unprecedented period in our history families were forced to make decisive decisions around education, work status, vaccination status, socialization, finances and so much more. Children were hurried into transitioning from in-person school to virtual learning, participation in extracurricular activities were snatched away, access to peers and other social supports yanked. Children were now home with parents 24/7 for those who were working from home and for others they had to watch their parents' step into the unknown each day to go out to work; some being left behind with minimal supervision and support.

In my work with children and families, I have had the opportunity to hear and witness some of the impacts of the pandemic on families. While there are some positive aspects, we also recognized that there were some significant challenges faced by children and families. A courageous group of parents have agreed to share their experience in hopes of shedding light on what they dealt with, interventions that have worked for them and their families and some of the long-term consequences. Please note that identifying information has been modified to protect the privacy of families.

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group of parents have agreed to share their experience in hopes of shedding light on what they dealt with, interventions that have worked for them and their families and some of the long-term consequences. Please note that identifying information has been modified to protect the privacy of families.

Story of Grace:

Grace works full time in social service and was required to work outside of the home. Dad works as a teacher and was working from home throughout the pandemic. With 3 teenagers, ages 17, 14, 14; the family had quite some adjustments to make.

Sanjay: What was your child's level of socialization/participation in extracurricular activities prior to the pandemic and how did they respond to the changes during the pandemic?

Grace: Our 17-year-old was very active in school, as a member of the high school football team. As a result of the pandemic, he stopped playing as contact sports were discontinued when he returned. Our 14-year-old son did not play sports when COVID began but did start playing town football this past fall and I feel became much more engaged in the activity due to the lack of contact throughout the end of the previous year.

Sanjay: How did the pandemic impact your child's academic performance?

Grace: My 17-year-old did not struggle with the changes made in academic life after COVID hit. He adjusted well to home schooling and chose to finish last year as a remote student. He returned to school this fall as a senior and found it a little harder to not have some of the freedom that came with remote learning. He enjoyed some of the self-direction that remote assignments allowed. His grades stayed on target and improved throughout the last two years.

Our 14-year-old son with special needs (behavioral) did not fair well remotely. He often would fall asleep and not participate in the expectations of class online. As a result of his needs and inability to remain on task, he returned to in person learning quickly when children with his needs were able to do so. This kept him on task and up to date on expectations in learning.

Our 14-year-old daughter previously A-B student absolutely tanked in her attendance, performance, and grades. She did minimal work, used the internet in distracting and sometimes unhealthy ways, and did not get assignments completed. She had a hard time recovering and adjusting to high school during the first two semesters this fall. She has since regained her performance, but motivation continues to be a little bit of a struggle.

The child most impacted by COVID in our home was our 14-year-old daughter. She shifted from the happy go lucky social child into a child who had a great deal of anxiety in social situations and depression. It took a great deal of work to get her back on track, and only with the consistency of

school and expectation of attendance, was this able to happen. It took 2 terms to get her mental health as well as her academic performance back on track. She has been able to become more social and participate in activities that were limited during COVID.

Our 17-year-old remained unaffected and the 14 year old male was able to maintain schooling for most of the time so the disruption to his mental health was minimal.

Sanjay: Were there any noticeable changes to your child's/children's mental health during the pandemic and how did you respond (did you seek treatment for your child)?

Grace: The main change was for our daughter, and we did not seek treatment. We monitored her closely and offered as many social activities as possible that we could per guidelines. Fortunately, she was able to express herself and work through feelings and emotions during this period without additional help.

Sanjay: How did the family as a whole deal with the demands of parenting during the pandemic?

Grace: My husband was impacted the most as a remote teacher. He had to teach his class while trying to monitor our kid's performance and emotions. I was considered an essential worker as a clinician, so I worked out of the home during the entirety of the pandemic. As parents we tried to get out of the home and have as much fun as we could while maintain safety. We got together with friends within my work and family bubble and did this often, adding activities that were engaging and felt less restrictive.

Sanjay: What would you identify as some of the pros and cons of the pandemic on your family?

Grace: Pros were that it forced us to rely on one another exclusively. It also made the children more aware of how to function as a responsible member of the community and how to protect those more vulnerable. It slowed our lives down in a way that enhanced some of our connection to one another and allowed us to become closer to the people that matter in our lives.

The main cons were the lack of the routine that was established in the schools that the kids attended. Without this I feel that additional fear was added to an already unknown level of uncertainty during the pandemic. We as parents were no longer the knowing people that the kids could rely on for answers since us, like the rest of the world had no idea what was coming next.

Story of Kerry:

Kerry works full-time outside the home throughout the pandemic. Kerry found herself in an untimely situation where she was not only navigating work stressors, pandemic life, parenting a teenager with serious mental health needs, but was now also navigating the breakdown of her marriage.

Sanjay: Could you tell us about your daughter and how she was functioning prior to the pandemic?

Kerry: My daughter was 13 years old at the start of the pandemic, now 15 years old. Her mental health was generally stable. She did have mild anxiety symptoms with some nightmares and flashbacks related to past trauma but manageable. Never took any psychotropic medications and did not receive counseling services. She was in dance classes 6 days a week and was very social in school and in the community.

Sanjay: Were there any noticeable changes to your child's mental health during the pandemic and how did you respond? (Did you seek treatment for your child?)

Kerry: Her levels of stress increased during the pandemic with the lack of socialization. She begged to go out and be with her friends. She began sneaking out of the house in the middle of the night to hang out with friends and started using drugs. She began watching more online videos that negatively impacted her health and included videos on how dancers utilized Bulimia/Anorexia to control their weight thus beginning an eating disorder in her.

Once the pandemic began, her mental health rapidly declined. She had to begin counseling and be placed on psychotropic medications. She began using drugs, sneaking out the house, having sex, starting cutting, became increasingly depressed, had frequent panic attacks, attempted suicide numerous times, chronic passive suicidal ideation, was hospitalized 4 times per suicidal ideation, began to have psychotic symptoms when overly stressed. Previously had no diagnosis, now diagnosed with PTSD with psychotic features and Anorexia.

Sanjay: How did the family as a whole deal with the demands of parenting during the pandemic?

Kerry: As a parent, I did the best I could. My child was a teenager, so I did not have to worry about childcare. I ultimately became separated from my husband, not solely due to the pandemic and parenting, however, it was a factor.

Sanjay: What would you identify as some of the pros and cons of the pandemic?

Kerry: The only benefit I could say was that her grades improved during the pandemic as she had more time to focus on academics.

With the rapid decline in my daughter's mental health, she will most likely never be the same and I know it was the pandemic that triggered it all. She had consistently been busy with dance and being able to socialize with peers were her main coping skills. The swift cut off of all activities and social outlets allowed for underlying mental health symptoms to surface. Now that we are back to less restrictions her mental health has gotten better but is not back to pre-pandemic stability. We

are now dealing with the aftermath of all of this.

Story of Kimberly:

Kimberly and her husband are full time working parents of 2 children ages 11 and 13. Both parents are considered essential workers and therefore were required to work in-person throughout the pandemic. The family does have some support from other family members generally, but with the risk of infection that layer of support became limited.

Sanjay: What was your child's level of socialization/participation in extracurricular activities prior to the pandemic and how did they respond to the changes during the pandemic?

Kimberly: Both our children were very active in sports prior to the pandemic and had a very active social life. As the months progressed our 12-year-old was growing increasingly anxious to the point of panic attacks. Pre-pandemic they had mild anxiety symptoms which were manageable. We made the decision to have them in therapy for panic attacks and generalized anxiety and social issues that increased during the height of the pandemic. They responded well to therapy and have been doing much better since; however, they continue to wear a mask to school even though these restrictions have been lifted.

Sanjay: How did the family as a whole deal with the demands of parenting during the pandemic?

Kimberly: We managed! The first 6 months were the hardest. Even though my children were older they were never left alone prior to the pandemic. We had no childcare for the spring of 2020 and for the summer of 2020. When school resumed, we often were doing schoolwork with our kids until 9 pm because they struggled to complete work assignments outside of the classroom. We found that our 14-year-old was struggling with school in 2020-2021. Excelled while in class (2 days a week) regressed while out of class 3 days a week.

Sanjay: What would you identify as some of the pros and cons of the pandemic as it relates to your family?

Kimberly: The pros are my kids, especially my youngest is independent. They have learned to cook and enjoy this. The cons are our children were left alone, a lot. Too much. Our 11-year-old had increased anxiety and panic attacks. They feared that their parents would get COVID 19 and die. This anxiety was generalized to many other things.

As parents we often worked 40+ hours, then came home to do hours of schoolwork. For the most part, our lives have returned to normal. Our oldest is back to excelling at school and our youngest now has skills to manage their anxiety.

Story of Jen

Jen is a 17-year-old immigrant who left her country at age 12 and relocated to the U.S. with her younger sibling. Jen has been living in a foster home since she moved to the country. Both her biological parents had passed away before the pandemic.

Sanjay: Could you speak to us on how you were able to navigate your way through the last year of high school while going through the pandemic and how you dealt with the changes?

Jen: I lost the opportunity to socialize during the pandemic. I noticed that it was starting to impact my social skills as I started to become less outgoing and noticed that I was also starting to fall behind on schoolwork.

Sanjay: Did you notice any changes to your mental health?

Jen: I realized that my mental health was also starting to decline and recognized feelings of isolation, anger, and sadness mounting. I took the opportunity and became more in-touch with myself and would go on frequent walks, engage in board games with the family, watched movies, developed skills around being more responsible and grew more appreciation for family time.

Despite the stressors being experienced, Jen was able to graduate from high school, enroll in college, bought her first car and is also now working part-time.

Conclusion

While many were eager to return to a life of “normalcy”, for others life will forever remain changed. The pandemic has afforded opportunities for some families to become closer, learn more about each other, created opportunities for career change and self-exploration. The pandemic may be over or partly over, but for many the long-term effects linger and will be something they will have to navigate post pandemic. It is my hope that families will be able to move forward and receive all the support that they may need in doing so.