

Stressful times: Approaching children's mental health in the COVID-19 era

HOW TO TALK: Parents need to be empathetic and honest when children express worries

By MALLORY DIEFENBACH
mdiefenbach@batavianews.com

Feb 3, 2021



BATAVIA — With violence and uncertainty dominating the news cycle over the past few weeks — from COVID and its staggering death tolls to the deadly Capitol riots — it can be hard for adults to process, and even more so for children.

The question becomes, how do you approach current events for young people in a time in which the stress and

crises seem neverending? And how do you help kids maintain their mental health?

Parents can help their children navigate the often-disturbing environment.

When talking to children about what's happening in the news, parental responses need to be age-appropriate — how you would explain something to a 15-year-old would be different than how you would a 6-year-old, said Director Lynda Battaglia of Genesee County Mental Health and Community Services.

“It’s important if kids bring something to their parent or they mention something ... and they ask you about it, the parent stop what they are doing and have that conversation with them,” Battaglia said. “That is a really good opportunity, it’s like a window, and parents should jump on that. You want to stop what you are doing and give your child your attention because what they’re asking is important.”

A parent’s responses should be important and thoughtful, she said. A good place to start is to ask the child what he or she already knows or has seen.

This allows the parent to start where his or her child is. Responses should also be kept simple and direct, and parents should keep to the facts of the situation.

“You should speak on what you know and what you think — what the facts are versus what your opinion is,” Battaglia said. “If you are talking about your opinion on things, it has a tendency to really derail the conversation if a child asks a question.

“You want to focus on the question at hand and answer as honestly and factually as you can at their level of understanding,” she said. “... If you don’t know an answer, it’s OK to say, ‘I don’t really know the answer.’”

The conversation should also be kept two-way and follow the child’s lead — when the child is done, he or she is done. There isn’t a need to push it further because the child might be thinking about one thing in particular.

“It’s good to validate their feelings,” Battaglia said. “If they say something like they are worried or they are scared, you should validate how they feel because what they are feeling is not wrong, even if you don’t feel like that.

“That is their independent feeling, and we should validate how they feel,” she said. “We should also reassure them that right now in our home, today and where we are right now, we’re safe. Just to reassure them right now in the moment even though we’re talking about it, they’re safe right now.”

And if a child contracts COVID, Battaglia advises to reassure the child the doctors will take care of him or her, and everything is being done which the doctors can do and the child will be OK.

Battaglia said it’s important — even for adults — to not be so attached to the news and not have it playing at all hours of the day. She said that children are always paying attention and always listening, even when you think they are distracted and doing something.

If the news is in the background, they’re paying attention to what’s being said — it will catch their attention. So it’s important to be aware what child is in the room and what is playing on TV.

“For younger children to see such violence on TV, it can be very traumatic for them,” Battaglia said. “It’s going to increase that fear, that worry. So I think parents need to make an effort to be aware of their surroundings and whose in the room when they are watching the news.”

Battaglia said there has been an overall increase in demand for mental health services across the board — not just locally, but across the state and nation.

The demand has increased significantly for a lot of different reasons: there are people who have been impacted personally by COVID or lost someone to COVID and was unable to attend a funeral or wake to say goodbye.

There has been an increase of anxiety, worry, fear and depression due to the isolation; and what the frontline workforce and essential workers have to do on a daily basis, and the exhaustion they're going through of having to go through nearly a year of social distancing, shutdowns, financial uncertainties, and perpetual coronavirus worries.

The effects of the pandemic have rippled across all ages and occupations. The ripple will continue to be seen for a long time even as things open up again.

“There has been an increase in suicide overall because of the pandemic for reasons I mentioned before,” Battaglia said. “And even an increase in suicide due to violence that we're seeing on TV, and for the individuals who were present at the capital.”

She said some things people can do to keep themselves grounded is to take care of themselves and to lean on the supports in place. It's important to stick to their routines and don't overindulge in substances like alcohol. Get enough sleep and do something which they enjoy.

With all the stressors, Battaglia said, there have been an increase in people seeking mental health services when they didn't need to seek it out before.

“I think there is a stigma associated with getting treatment for mental health, and that stigma has been around for a very long time,” she said, adding it's OK for people not to be OK.

It's OK for people to get help and need medication assistance.

“I think one of the misconceptions is if you go into mental health treatment ... it's forever,” she said. “For some folks it might be that's what they need, but for some other folks it is a snapshot in time for them.”

People can get help for mental health from the following locations:

- 24/7 Care and Crisis Helpline — (585) 283-5200, text line: 741741 (For Genesee, Orleans and Wyoming county residents);
- Finger Lakes 24/7 Life Line crisis number (Livingston) — 211 or 1-877-356-9211
- Genesee County Mental Health Services — (585) 344-1421;
- Orleans County Mental Health Services — (585) 589-7066;
- Wyoming County Mental Health Services — (585) 786-8871; and
- Livingston County Mental Health Services — (585) 243-7250 or (585) 335-1711.