Emerging Trends: The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Children

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly affected the wellbeing of children and youth. Loss of parents, caregivers and other family members; social isolation; disruptions in routines and the continuity of learning; limited access to mental health supports; and missed significant life events are among the many stressors brought by the pandemic. Those already marginalized by our systems were hit hardest by the pandemic, including children and youth with intellectual and developmental disabilities, racial and ethnic minority youth, LBGTQ+ youth, youth from families with low incomes, youth in rural communities and immigrant households, youth involved in the justice, foster care, and/or child welfare systems, and youth experiencing homelessness.

Loss of Parents & Caregivers

- 167,082 children across the U.S. lost a parent, caregiver, or grandparent due to COVID-19.ii
- In North Carolina, 3,626 children, mostly children of color, are coping with the death of a caregiver.iii
- Impact of loss of a parent/caregiver can persist throughout life and can negatively impact economic security, mental health, academic achievement, and substance abuse.
- Both exposure to and deaths from COVID-19 have disproportionally heavy toll on low-income families and families of color.iv

State of Emergency in Children’s Mental Health

- National State of Emergency in Children’s Mental Health has been declared by American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) based on dramatic increases in mental health challenges during the pandemic.v
- According to AAP, the worsening mental health crisis is tied to the stress and isolation brought on by COVID-19 and the ongoing struggle for racial justice and represents an acceleration of trends observed prior to 2020.
- Reduced in-person interactions with friends, social supports and professionals like teachers and pediatricians means that it was harder to recognize signs of abuse and mental health concerns.vi
- There has been a dramatic increase in emergency department visits for mental health crises. The number of ER visits for suspected suicide attempts by girls rose by 51% from 2019 to 2021.vii
• Behavior problems reported by schools have increased, including vandalism, fighting, and withdrawal.viii

**Long-term Impact of COVID-19 on Children**

• Chronic stress during childhood without adequate support of adults can lead to toxic stress, or the chronic activation of stress response system.
• Parents and caregivers play a key role in buffering children from the effects of stress but during the pandemic have been overloaded with threats to their own well-being. Their ability to play the buffering role has been compromised.ix
• Toxic stress has lasting, long-term effects on health, mental health, and academic success.

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