STUDENTS’ MENTAL HEALTH AND LEARNING

Covid-19 has impacted students’ well-being, mental health, and learning since the pandemic began in March of 2020.

Researchers say the pandemic has had a profound effect on the mental health of children.

Surveying more than a thousand parents and 350 children, Dr. Daphne Korczak, a child and adolescent psychiatrist at Toronto’s Hospital for Sick Children, found that roughly [**70 per cent of children**](https://www.cp24.com/lifestyle/health/kids-are-not-all-right-mental-health-among-ontario-children-deteriorating-1.5293103) experienced a deterioration of their mental health since the pandemic.

Their research showed that many students experience an increase in depression, anxiety, and irritability. Parents and students also reported being less able to buffer the day-to-day frustration than before the pandemic began.

Pandemic depression can make students less able to tolerate disappointment and less motivated to get involved in activities. They also report being restless and bored. Issues with mental health can lead students to experience less resiliency when tackling new problems or recovering from learning setbacks.

**MENTAL HEALTH CAN IMPACT LEARNING**

Mental health can play a large role in how students learn. According to Dawn Shickluna, Ph.D. from U of T’s [**Ontario Institute for Studies in Education**](https://www.utoronto.ca/news/u-t-prof-puts-students-well-being-syllabus), managing trauma—such as experienced by students during Covid-19—affects students’ ability to be present and learn. Students need to feel safe and supported when learning.

* Approximately 20 per cent (one in five) of children and youth have a mental health problem [***(Waddell et al., 2002)***](http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/document/reports/SupportingMinds.pdf).
* Mental health problems can seriously impair children’s ability to be successful at school.

Taking care of mental health is as important as taking care of physical health. Practicing self-care and using wellness tools daily can help students of all ages become more aware of their mental health and help them be able to verbalize if they are feeling unwell mentally.

**8 WAYS STUDENTS CAN PRACTISE SELF-CARE DAILY** FOR IMPROVED MENTAL HEALTH:

NUTRITION.

Nutrition plays a significant role in how students learn and how they feel. Healthy foods support and nourish the brain and body, increasing alertness and helping students learn. Brain-boosting foods that are high in protein will give your child energy and keep his or her mind sharp during the test. A good breakfast will also ensure your child doesn’t feel disoriented or lightheaded. Ensure your child isn’t snacking on foods too high in sugar—this will help ensure they don’t crash midway through the test or start to feel jittery. A full balance of vitamins and minerals keeps the brain happy, allowing students to perform at their best.

SLEEP.

Lack of sleep can do more than simply make kids grumpy the next day—it can substantially impact academic performance. Sleep hours correlate with students’ school performance. When teens don’t get enough sleep (nine hours), it causes learning problems—one statistic says that at least [**20 per cent of high school students**](https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=6896471)fall asleep in class on a typical day! Children’s brains are in a growth stage until the age of 21. The majority of that growth occurs while children sleep, so even [**a short reduction in sleep time**](https://www.oxfordlearning.com/sleep-habits/)—as little as 15 minutes—can have a detrimental impact on academic performance. Getting enough sleep and following a sleep schedule with bedtimes and wake times can help students feel well and become more productive.

EXERCISE.

When students exercise their bodies, they are also exercising their minds. Being active regularly can help sharpen a student’s focus and memory, allowing him/her to become more attentive in the classroom and better recall the subject. Making sure your[**student is regularly active helps lay the groundwork for effective learning**](https://www.oxfordlearning.com/the-role-of-fitness-and-exercise-in-education/) by giving them the energy and focus they need to do well in school. Free, unstructured play is an essential part of development, helping children learn to explore, take risks, question, experiment, discover, and develop self-confidence.

ORGANIZATION.

Being organized can reduce stress levels long term by requiring less last-minute scrambling in various everyday situations helping students feel prepared and ready for the day. Students lose fewer assignments and are better prepared for class when they had a sense of order. Organization is a prerequisite for school success in every grade and every subject. One of the easiest ways for students to increase their organization is by using an agenda. Students receive a lot of information during each school day. Using an agenda helps them sort, categorize, and remember that information. It helps them to keep their priorities in order. It helps them learn how to prioritize their responsibilities. But most importantly, it reduces stress so students can learn more efficiently.

WRITING.

Whether journaling thoughts, chronicling the day, attempting poetry, or starting a novel, old-fashioned pen and paper have an immense impact on emotional well-being, helping students organize their thoughts and even improve their moods. Some studies show that [**writing about being grateful**](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/11/12/writing-health-benefits-journal_n_4242456.html) before bed can improve sleep, lead to better classroom performance and a sense of well-being.

MONITOR TECHNOLOGY USE.

Too much screen time can impact children’s social development and lead to social anxiety and create adverse effects on sleep habits and attention span. Children need a variety of online and offline experiences, including opportunities to let their minds wander. Screen time that promotes socialization, such as FaceTime with friends or a video conference with the teacher, is beneficial. Activities in which children feel engaged, such as playing video games interactively, are better than passive and solitary screen time, such as watching YouTube videos.

MINDFULNESS.

Mindfulness involves focusing awareness on the present moment while acknowledging all thoughts and feelings. When your child is distracted, encourage him or her to take a 5-minute break to sit quietly and take a moment for him or herself. Then, ask your child to consider what may be causing the distraction and ask them how they can get back on track.

FOLLOW A ROUTINE.

Routines are important for students of all ages. Routines provide structure to the day and bring calm and consistency to a child’s life, helping them understand what happens next.

By promoting focus, even simple routines can act as anchors to maintaining good mental health by dealing with stress and ensuring that self-care and good habits are happening daily.

**MORE SUPPORT**:

Covid-19 has impacted students’ well-being in many ways, including their learning habits.

If your child needs additional support for coping with mental health, please reach out to community supports such as the local health unit in your area or one of these two National Youth Support Providers:

**KidsHelpPhone** Text 686868 or call 1-800-668-6868