

# School & Local News

## Dealing with Anxiety & Emotional Distress in your Child During 'Pandemic Learning' - Two Professionals' Insights

By Nichole Richardson

The last of our area's public schools began the 2020-2021 school year on Monday, Aug. 31. In an email from Ferguson-Florissant Superintendent, Joseph Davis, "As we prepare for the start of a school year like none other, I want to acknowledge that together we are facing many challenges...I realize there is so much that is new, and the stakes are high." Indeed. And not just in the education realm.

Since the pandemic began, child psychologists have noted a substantial rise in cases of emotional distress, worry, anxiety, and anger management issues in children. This is especially true in children who were already struggling in these areas, such as those with ADHD.

These students "are finding it especially difficult to cope with boredom, maintaining attention for homeschool/virtual learning, and the increased focus on chore completion and following directives from parents," explained Jennifer Marks, M. A. -Sociology, PsyD, licensed clinical psychologist, certified clinical trauma professional, and owner of her own practice in Florissant. "A large part of ADHD is emotional dysregulation. When these children are struggling with all of these new stressors it becomes even harder to regulate their emotional reactions."

The ongoing fluidity of Covid-19 has heightened stressors leading to worry or depression, in both adults and children. Social distancing, isolation, and unanswerable questions can all come to a head, and in turn, even cause those without previous issues, to become significantly impacted in areas of mental and emotional wellbeing. "The unknown nature of the pandemic fits directly into their cycle of worry and their efforts to assert and maintain control in their lives," said Marks.

With all these factors it is imperative to watch for signs of distress in those you know, in both the older and the younger. Parents can alleviate some of these unhelpful feelings by validating their child's emotions, experiences, and thoughts. Though it may be hard for a parent to see their child upset, they must realize this is the time to teach distress tolerance and emotional acceptance.

Many child psychologists use variations of the same common principles when helping a child to get through tough times such as these. "Our therapists use a three-step approach for working with overwhelming emotions: Identify and Empathize, Calm Down, and Game Plan," said Anxiety Specialist Kelsey Torgerson Dunn, MSW, LCSW, at Compassionate Counseling St. Louis. She suggests discussing with your child what they are feeling and leave room for them to correct you, if need be, so that the focus is narrowed down and truly identified.

Once you have validated the child's emotional experience, it's time to affirm that experience by empathizing with their situation and recalling a time they overcame another obstacle. Another appropriate response is demonstrating techniques to calm down. "This works really well when you do it at the same time as your child, rather than just telling them what to do," said Torgerson Dunn.

Deep breathing exercises or family walks can do wonders on the psyche. "Only once their bodies are feeling more calm and regulated can you figure out problem solving steps."

Emotions can be extremely concerning, but they are a commonality to us all. However, there are some signs that may mean your child is experiencing a mental health disorder. "It becomes more of a concern if you have a hard time managing your child's anger, if they become destructive, or if your child is getting into trouble in other environments, like school or daycare," said Torgerson Dunn.

Not all meltdowns mean mental disorder. "It's important to refrain from being caught up in the idea of a diagnosis. If a child is in distress and a parent is at a loss or needs guidance on how to help the child then the parent does not need to feel hesitant about reaching out for help or resources," said Marks.

In regards to keeping a child engaged and behaving during online learning, it is important to remain positive and calm. "Parents should always start by focusing on the positive behaviors and encouraging those to continue. If you're still noticing unhelpful or disruptive behaviors, use logical consequences, and stay calm throughout the process. If you're frustrated, you're just going to amp up your child's frustration, too," said Torgerson Dunn.

Even with all these strategies, sometimes discipline is still needed. "In situations in which discipline is warranted it is important that rules and boundaries be clear and consistent. Children should be made aware of the potential consequences of their actions in advance as much as possible...Set the expectation, inform of the consequence, and be consistent with follow through," advises Marks.

"In more severe cases of avoidance [of wanted behaviors] parents may assist their children in overcoming their fears by helping them to take smaller steps towards the bigger goal. Parents can help their children identify smaller fears to overcome and then utilize those smaller successes to affirm and encourage their children to conquer the big goal. This is called exposure and it's often used in therapeutic settings to overcome anxiety and phobias," explained Marks.



New Kindergardener at Duschene Elementary, Gage A. Koetting (5) enjoys meeting his teacher and classmates on his district provided Chromebook.

Overall, this pandemic has changed the way the world works, plays, thinks, and learns. As tough as all these sudden and drastic changes have been for adults, they are even harder for a child to grasp. Though it may appear like your child is trying to be disruptive for fun or stop you from doing things, it is not the case! Try to be very mindful of the words you use with children about themselves so they don't become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

"Please remember that anxiety really is overwhelming!" cautioned Torgerson Dunn. "Our top tip for parents is to not label the emotions, behaviors, or even thoughts as bad or good...labeling these as bad often gets internalized, and your child ends up thinking they're bad, too. Instead shift your language from good/bad to helpful and unhelpful, and help your child steer through their choices."



Fifth grader at Combs Intermediate, Macy Richardson, (10) takes a short break from virtual school on the first day, Aug. 31, 2020.

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"LET'S KEEP THE KIDS PLAYING" during this unusual time.

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### Community Reinvestment Act Strategic Plan Public Comment Invited

Stifel Bank & Trust and Stifel Bank intend to file a Community Reinvestment Act Strategic Plan with the St. Louis Federal Reserve Bank. The proposed CRA strategic plan is available during regular business hours at Stifel Bank & Trust headquarters located at 501 North Broadway, St. Louis, MO 63102. Upon verbal request, Stifel Bank & Trust will mail a copy of the proposed plan to any interested party. These requests should be directed to the CRA Officer at (314) 317-6900. We welcome written comments from the public on this plan and will consider all comments received in the development of the final plan. Written comments on the plan can be emailed to the CRA Officer at: Info@StifelBank.com, or mailed to the attention of Stifel Bank CRA Officer 501 North Broadway, St. Louis, MO 63102. Comments must be received by October 2, 2020