

Views from VanDeWalle

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Back to School – COVID Style & Impact on Mental Health

As August is on the horizon, that means kids will be going back to school and families will be settling into new routines. As a parent of two girls, I completely understand the disappointment of summer coming to a close, but also the excitement of what a new year at school will bring. The year 2020 has provided everyone with many challenges and doesn't appear to be letting up anytime soon. As students and teachers prepare for the 2020-2021, things will certainly look different. Whether it is kids, teachers and staff wearing masks in the classroom or changing the way classes are done and extra sanitization, it will take a while for everyone to develop these new habits.

With any change, there is usually some who suffer from anxiety. I can certainly attest to the anxiety experience this spring with the uncertainty around spring/summer programming and county fair. A new survey commissioned by National 4-H Council and conducted by the Harris Poll, finds that 7 in 10 teens are struggling with their mental health in the wake of COVID-19. This survey conducted in May 2020 was among the first to examine the impact this unprecedented health crisis has had on U.S. teens. In 2019, the World Health Organization announced suicide as the third leading cause of death in teens 15 to 19. With today's added stressors of a global pandemic, economic downturn and recent conversations on racial injustice, teens are seeking out new ways to cope.

This survey polled over 1,500 youth between 13-19 years of age from across the United States and key findings include:

- 81% of teens say mental health is a significant issue for young people in the U.S.

- 55% of teens say they've experienced anxiety, 45% excessive stress and 43% depression

- 71% of those surveyed say school work makes them feel anxious or depressed

- 65% say uncertainty about the future makes them feel anxious or depressed

Teens also reported feeling more pressured to hide their feelings rather than do drugs.

- 67% feel pressure to keep feelings to themselves

- 67% pretend to feel better to not worry anyone

- 65% deal with feelings on their own

46% of teens reported social media as their most common outlet for learning about coping mechanisms for mental health and 43% follow or support someone on social media who openly talks about their mental health issues.

82% of teens are calling in America to talk more openly and honestly about mental health issues in this country. 79% of teens surveyed wish there was an inclusive environment or safe space for people in school to talk about mental health. Finally 70% wish their school taught them more about mental health and coping mechanisms.

This important information is working to be addressed by 4-H, powered by Cooperative Extension which features a community of more than 100 public universities across the nation. 4-H has helps youth develop good decision-making and strong interpersonal skills which are key to



holistic well-being and aims to help young people build a firm foundation on social-emotional health.

In addition to keeping youth safe by social distancing, disinfecting, etc. it will be important for parents to consider how youth might be dealing with the pressure of catching up. Some students might have lost a lot of progress and not have had adequate support at home for a variety of reasons. The American Academy of Pediatrics also reminds parents to ensure your child has had their annual exam, is caught up on immunizations and students at a higher risk medical conditions might need to continue distance learning or have other accommodations.

With the previous statistics discussed providing youth adequate behavioral health and emotional support will be very important. Children rely on parents and trusted adults for their safety and reassurance that you are there for them and your family will get through this together. The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) also suggests to answer questions about the pandemic simply and honestly. Talk with kids about how people are getting sick but emphasize that hand washing, wearing a mask and limiting large crowds of people will help them stay healthy. Also recognize and acknowledge your child's feelings. Keep in touch with friends and family; many people got very creative this spring with video chats. Also, look to the future and tell them scientists are working hard on a vaccine and ways to treat those who get ill. The AAP suggests offering extra hugs and saying "I love you" more often.

As a parent, school administrators, teachers and staff are working hard to make the school year a positive and safe one for youth. As adults, it is important to model good behavior for your children and be flexible. Everyone is learning how to navigate through this pandemic together and remaining calm and keeping a positive is best for everyone.

For more information on strategies for returning to school during COVID-19, go to healthychildren.org and for more information on the Harris Poll commissioned by the National 4-H Council, go to: <https://4-h.org/>.