

ADOLESCENTS AND COVID-19: SCHOOL RE-OPENINGS AND MENTAL HEALTH AND ACADEMIC CHALLENGES

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Nearly a year and half later, the effects of COVID-19 continue to unfold; most youth have returned to in-person learning, but the ongoing stress of new COVID-19 variants and changes in school policies regarding safety protocols are posing serious academic and mental health challenges for youth and families. Advocating for adolescents who face these risks is needed as academic problems, depression, and anxiety can impact youths' daily functioning and long-term development.

Background

School closures transformed face-to-face instructions into virtual remote learning during the pandemic. The transition raised concerns about adolescents' access to technology and their educational progress. Less obvious was the impact of remote learning on adolescents' mental health, including anxiety and depression.



Academic Challenges During School Closures

National Data

Barriers to virtual learning (e.g. access to technology) disproportionately affected youth of marginalized backgrounds. According to an ASU Morrison Institute poll, about 53% of parents reported their concerns about their children falling behind in their classes and these concerns were highest among Black and Latinx parents (Longhi, 2020). In addition to parental concern, school closures also had implications for school engagement, particularly for students from low-income backgrounds. During the early stages of the pandemic, only 60% of lower income students not attending in-person school were logging on for online instruction; whereas for 90% of higher income students were logging online (Dorn, 2020).

Local Community Data

The challenges that youth faced nationally were also seen here in our own Tucson community. In Pima County, thousands of high school and middle school students were failing classes during the transition to online remote learning. In Tucson Unified School District, there was an increasing failure rate in middle and high schools, with 32% of students obtaining a failing grade in at least one class (Khmara, 2021). In some schools, the percentage of students failing at least one course was even higher (e.g., 67%).

Mental Health Challenges During School Closures

National Data

During the pandemic we also saw alarming rates of mental health problems, including increased anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideations. In a national survey of parents of adolescents, 54% reported that their teens experienced emotional distress during virtual learning and 25% reported that their teens experienced worsened mental health, particularly depression during the pandemic (Verlenden et al, 2021). According to the CDC, the prevalence of suspected suicide attempts with Emergency Room visits were 50% higher among adolescent girls aged 12 to 17 years old from February to March, 2021 than in the previous year (Yard, 2021). School closures disrupted youths' daily opportunities to engage with peers, leading to high rates of loneliness due to quarantine (Loades et al., 2020).

Local Community Data

Within our Tucson community, similar trends emerged. For instance, Pima County reported a 67% increase in suicide deaths since the transition to remote learning among youth ages 12-17 years old (Pima Country Health Department, 2020). The rates in suicide among Tucson youth continue to remain elevated due to limited mental health services within our city. School counselors at high schools in Tucson Unified School Districts have witnessed an increase in depression and anxiety symptoms among their students (Khmara, 2021).



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Schools Reopening

Across the country, schools are navigating the best ways to support students as they return to in-person schooling. One of the biggest challenges faced by schools is the implementation of COVID-19 safety protocols. Infections are already driving large quarantines, and high incidence rates may once again endanger in-person education despite the tremendous cost to youth (Bazelon, 2021). In Arizona, legislation was passed to ban face coverings and vaccine mandates (SB1824) early in the 2021-2022 school year; however, recent legal challenges have ruled this unconstitutional and many school districts have continued mandating face coverings among their school campuses.

In addition to the concerns regarding students' transition to in-person learning, one of the major concerns is helping students with their mental health. Students are returning to school campuses in need of some guidance on how to navigate their emotional experiences and increased feelings of anxiety and depression.

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How Can Parents Support Youth?

- Normalize talking with your teen about mental health and how the pandemic has been stressful.
- Look out for possible symptoms of anxiety and depression. This includes, tiredness and loss of energy, insomnia or sleeping too much, changes in appetite, or agitation or restlessness. Do not be afraid to seek professional help when needed. La Frontera Arizona can provide mental health treatment services to children, youth, and adults in Pima County. You can reach them directly at: (520) 838-3804.
- If you start noticing more serious signs of mental health problems including self-harm, or if your adolescent talks about suicide, seek help immediately. The 24/7 Crisis Response Center can provide immediate help: (520) 301-2400. Also, the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 1-800-273-TALK (8255) or text "Hopeline" to 741-741.
- Communicate with your adolescent's teachers regularly to understand how your adolescent is doing at school. This communication will help you understand what may be challenging or enjoyable for your adolescent. If there is a language barrier, seek a translator (that can be provided by your adolescent's school) to help you navigate these conversations.
- Be proactive and advocate for your adolescent. You should ask to meet with school counselors/staff if you have concerns about your child's mental health so that you can work collaboratively with the school to set up an optimal learning environment for your student.

How Can Teachers & Schools Support Youth?

- Check-in and communicate often with students and their families. Also, be flexible in the approaches used to connect with families. This can be through the school's online website, emails, phone calls, online platforms for parents to log on to, handouts, or visual announcements that are accessible to parents.
- Don't allow language barriers to limit the communication with families. Be prepared to seek additional support for families who are not comfortable speaking English.
- Be flexible on attendance policies. Students are now strongly encouraged to stay home with any signs of sickness. Consider online learning accommodations when needed.
- Consider extending office hours or availability after school during the week to allow students to ask questions on assignments or address other concerns they might have.
- Create informational sheets or lessons about challenges that are being experienced by students. Include local resources for families, and be willing to discuss with parents.