

PRINT SCRIPT-Pandemic fuels regressive behavior in children

Tips to manage behavior and learning challenges

Parents with young children are seeing a variety of regressive behavior that pediatricians and therapists are tying to the trauma of the COVID-19 pandemic. These behavioral changes are taking a variety of forms depending on the age of the child and the circumstances in the household.

For example, formerly happy-go-lucky toddlers are now clinging to parents or whining and 6- and 7- year-olds who used to sleep through the night are now climbing back into the bed of their parents or they're having problems falling asleep. Kaleena Williams, MSW, LCSW, a psychotherapist at OSF HealthCare in Monmouth, Illinois, says some regressive behavior is expected when children experience change such as the introduction of another sibling or a caretaker change.

But pediatricians, as well as parents, are reporting high levels of stress and anxiety that seem to be driving an increase in regressive behavior in children of all ages. Williams says in some cases, 7- and 8-year-old children, who used to be pretty agreeable and had no problem following rules, are now acting like they're going through the 'terrible twos.'

"So some other regressions might also be extreme on the other end of that – having those tantrums, having that breakdown, not being able to get back into the swing of daily and normal routine."

According to Williams, the brain is impacted by stress, including unexpected change. Increased stress hormones (adrenaline, cortisol) can target certain areas of the brain that influence behavior. For example, the area that acts as the brain's alarm center can cause children to become more reactive, anxious and scared. This can also heighten responses in children who already have been diagnosed with anxiety or attention deficit disorder.

"You're also going to see irrational thinking or a lot of difficulty processing what's actually going on in our environment," she explains.

When the brain is in overdrive, the ability to remember what's been learned can also lead to regressive behavior. For example, older children may start using "baby talk" or they can't follow simple instructions. It's the same kind of effect some adults are reporting as they refer to having brain fog or not being able to experience time the same way during the pandemic as they once did. So, Williams suggests modeling self-care by eating well, exercising and going to bed at the same time every night.

Parents working from home need to build in breaks and have a schedule kids can see. Williams says it helps kids know when they'll be able to engage parents to ask for help, share a snack, or even to take a quick walk down the block and back.

Keeping a routine is equally important.

Williams emphasizes, "When we have all the inconsistencies and the unknowns about how the environment outside of our homes is looking, that is one thing we can implement within our homes – keeping that consistency with our structure and our routine so that we have that sense of security and stabilization for our kiddos during this timeframe."

Build a toolkit for yourself and your kids

Regressive behaviors are a signal that children may be in need of additional support. That can be hard when parents themselves have their own struggles. Williams believes it's OK to acknowledge personal struggles, using age-appropriate language. After that, she suggests talking to children about how together, they are going to build a toolkit to take better care of themselves.

"That can be done with progressive muscle relaxation. That can be done with deep breathing. That can be done with grounding exercises just to make sure we're staying in the here and now. What are some things

we're seeing around us? And when we're doing those things, it's a great time to also be bonding with our children."

Journaling, creating a gratitude jar and finding time for a creative outlet such as drawing, painting, dancing, or crocheting can also help. In her office, Williams has her own art on display and she thumbs through a sketch pad she uses when she needs a brief respite from work. Drawing, she says, can transport her briefly to another, less stressful environment.

Strategies for coping with regressive behavior should include using empathy, increased physical touch and comforting hugs, and other positive reinforcement. Williams says good communication will be important as we transition to more relaxed measures and children are reintroduced to a different type of pandemic-era school and social situations. Children should know what's expected as far as masking, distancing and other behaviors.

"Even though we've had holidays before, we've had school before, we've gone to the doctor before, we've done all of these things – everything right now as we transition back, as we transition into the 'new,' it's a new experience and it's full of new expectations for them."

Increased social anxiety is one of the most reported issues. Ease children back in slowly. Williams says start now. Include kids on social Zoom sessions with far away relatives and invite fully vaccinated friends or relatives for an in-person visit that includes some type of fun activity that can include children.

Most kids are resilient, and supportive parenting should be able to mitigate any lingering effects from the trauma of the pandemic. However, Williams says if regressive behavior or learning doesn't resolve itself within a reasonable time, reach out to your pediatrician or a licensed therapist.