

Pandemic: Are the kids OK?

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The COVID-19 pandemic is especially adverse for children, according to Kaiser Permanente Northwest pediatricians, who said they are seeing significant weight gain in children as they come in for their annual well-child physicals.

Inactivity, lack of sports, play, physical education (PE), stress, and unhealthy eating habits are combining to reverse recent improvements in childhood obesity rates, the doctors report. The percentage of children considered obese is expected to jump in 2020, after declining slightly in the past 10 years.

Remote learning downside

“Many kids are doing a lot of online learning and that is contributing to them being very sedentary,” Kaiser Permanente Northwest Chief of Pediatrics Dr. Lisa Denike said.

Schools that are offering online physical education classes and the few that have in-person PE classes is encouraging, Denike said, because that allows children to have some physical activity during their day.

Denike also encourages parents to take their children for daily walks around the block or at local parks.

“That gives the family a chance to get outside, get some fresh air and spend time together,” she said. “Not only does that give the kids some physical activity, it gets them off their screens and gives them direction time as well.”

For both parents and children, high stress and anxiety resulting from the pandemic can lead to eating disorders, according to Denike, who recommends that parents follow regular scheduled meal times and help their children avoid grazing or snacking in-between those meals.

“That can be really helpful to avoid that extra calorie intake,” she said.

Denike said the added responsibility of being a parent, working and being a teacher at home due to the pandemic can be very challenging and hard at the end of the day to plan and develop healthy meals and that leads many to seek quick fast-food meals or having processed food delivered that a family may not otherwise eat.

Lifelong impact

Without the needed daily physical activity, Denike said children face obesity and that could lead to inducing COVID infections and other serious health issues.

“As kids become more obese, they increase their chances of contracting Type 2 diabetes and prior to COVID we were seeing more and more of that develop,” she said. “Developing that during childhood can lead to lifelong serious diseases developing in later adulthood, such as kidney problems, high blood pressure and heart disease.”

Practice family routines

Doctors are also seeing a rise in mental health issues among children and teens, ranging from sadness and stress to anxiety and depression.

“The first thing we all need to do is to take a breath and acknowledge how difficult these times are for everyone right now,” she said. “This is a huge change for us. So, look at developing strategies and what is in your control and what can you can do. Focus on responsibilities at home and the practical things that can be accomplished.”

Denike encourages parents to work with their children and write down sleeping, meal and activity schedules on a chart and place that chart on a wall for all to see and to follow.

“Having a schedule that parents can reinforce is a huge help,” she said. “That’s in our control and the more that we have in our control the better we will feel. Our kids will feel that as well. When we are stressed, they feel that.”

Pandemic anxiety, stress

The Kaiser Permanente Northwest doctors said they are also seeing a rise in mental health issues among children and teens, ranging from sadness and stress to anxiety and depression. Denike said the pandemic

could also provide an opportunity for parents to practice resilience.

“It gives us a chance to talk with our children about what they are afraid of and what they are worried about and to reassure them, and goes a really long way,” Denike said. “Being together more and to communicate is positive, letting your children know that you may have some worries too, and helping them learn positive coping skills to ease their concerns is very helpful.”

Denike encourages parents to be aware of the social media that their children may have access to.

“Know what social media platforms your children have access to,” she said. “Just because it is online doesn’t mean it is factual. Just starting there is important and it is important to check in with you kids and give some undivided time every day, even if it is just a few minutes.”

Denike recommends that parents check the American Academy of Pediatrics website, aap.org, which offers valuable information about social media and other topics to keep children safe and healthy.

“It is important for us to use the upcoming holidays to build new traditions with our families,” Denike said. “Kids love to be creative, so talking with your kids about new traditions that you can have with your family is a good way to stay connected during the pandemic.”

Through family conversations and checking resources, Denike said she believes parents and children will be able to develop concrete and tangible solutions for their well-being during the pandemic and any other challenging times.

Kaiser Permanente is one of the nation's largest not-for-profit health plans, serving 12.4 million members. In the Northwest, it has medical offices and outpatient facilities in Portland, Eugene and Salem.