

## Brief 4: COVID-19 & Kids Issue Brief Series

# Caregivers, Kids and COVID-19

## What Parents, Grandparents, Foster Parents & Others Can do to Help

Throughout the pandemic, parents, grandparents, foster parents, and other caregivers have been on the front lines of seeing the effects of COVID-19 on children. In the early days of quarantine, caregivers had to navigate how to keep their children healthy and safe, become stand-in teachers, provide entertainment and stimulation, and support the emotional and mental health of children dealing with changes from COVID-19.

After living in a COVID-19 world for over two years, conditions for children are still unconventional and unpredictable, and the experience of living through a global pandemic during their developmental years could potentially impact them for years to come.

The good news is that adults can help buffer a child from harmful experiences. Guarding against trauma exposure, understanding what trauma is and how trauma can impair a child's development,

and accepting help are tactics parents, caregivers, and other adults can use to safeguard against negative outcomes.

Don't give up! Even though the brain may have been impacted by trauma early on, there is still hope. Our brains are moldable and want to heal. Through resiliency skills, healthy relationships, and learning to trust and feel safe, the brain can re-wire itself and fix the damaged parts.

**"It is important for everyone to know that no matter the experience, there is always hope for a positive outcome. Risk does not define destiny."**

**—Mayo Clinic**



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### West Virginia KIDS COUNT

West Virginia KIDS COUNT provides trusted data about the well-being of children and builds alliances to advocate for what kids need across the Mountain State. We provide state legislators, public officials and child advocates with reliable data, policy recommendations and tools needed to advance sound policies that benefit West Virginia's children and families. We are a part of a national KIDS COUNT network through the support of the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

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## Perspective of a Parent: Talisha Jordan Franklin



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"I feel like the long-term ramifications of three interrupted school years and 'who knows how many more' will have detrimental effects that some kids will never recover from, especially kids who lack resources and support. As a working parent, I feel inadequate and like I'm letting my children down. The uncertainty of not knowing how long the pandemic is going to last leaves me feeling frustrated and angry because any day our lives can be turned upside down again. Then we have to scramble to find childcare for three COVID-exposed kids and support for their schoolwork so we can both keep our day jobs."

# Resilience Trumps ACEs

Learning about trauma in children can empower caregivers to guard against ACEs (Adverse Childhood Experiences), recognize signs of trauma, and find the appropriate supports for a traumatized child. Though families and caregivers may not be able to avoid all toxic situations for children, such as a global pandemic, the sooner they can remove the child or lessen the child's exposure to the adverse experience, the better chance the child has to bounce back in healthy ways. In other words, the better chance the child has to be resilient.

**“Trauma comes back as a Reaction, not a Memory.”**

**—Bessel van der Kolk**

Understanding ACEs helps us grasp the complexity of the effects of trauma. As Dr. Bessel van der Kolk states in the title of his book, “The Body Keeps the Score.” From the time a child's brain and body form, they are being shaped by the child's experiences. Dr. van der Kolk reminds us as parents that though a child may not remember their trauma, a child's brain and body can hold on to trauma into adulthood unless appropriate support from resilience-building efforts are in place.

ACEs can lead to learning difficulties, poor decision-making, and issues with memory, concentration, and attention. A child may show an inability to calm down or stop crying, process fear appropriately, and have trouble eating and sleeping. Conversely, a child may become withdrawn, quiet, or disconnect from their friend(s). ACEs are also linked to childhood health problems like asthma, eczema, digestive issues, and diabetes. The earlier a child is removed from the experience and made to feel safe and cared for, the greater the opportunity to help lighten the impact.



The Mayo Clinic suggests multiple ways to build and strengthen a child's resilience and help lessen the long-term consequences of ACEs.

- » Caregivers using positive parenting skills
- » Healthy connections that build self-esteem and grit
- » Trusting relationships with caring adults
- » Community activities that support health and development
- » Support for the whole family
- » Opportunities to showcase talents
- » Child and family counseling
- » Parental resilience

A John Hopkins Study led by Christina Bethell reports that there are seven positive childhood experiences that can positively impact a child and help them build resiliency that caregivers are uniquely equipped to provide.

1. Being able to talk with family about their feelings
2. Feeling supported by family in difficult times
3. Participating in community traditions
4. Feeling of belonging in high school
5. Feeling supported by friends
6. Having at least two non-parent adults who genuinely care
7. Feeling safe and protected by an adult at home

While parents, guardians, and caregivers can only directly ensure a couple of things on the list, they can still have an impact on all seven. Caregivers model a healthy relationship for a child and show them how to connect with others in a meaningful and positive way. Parents also introduce children to tradition that can give them a deeper sense of family and community and instill life-long positive memories for children. By getting them involved in the community, through things like traditions, sports, or extracurricular clubs, children are introduced to more trustworthy and caring adults that they can turn to besides their parents.

# Self-Care: You Can't Pour from an Empty Cup

Parenting and supporting children who have experienced trauma such as COVID-19 can be challenging and draining for any caregiver. Feeling depleted, frustrated, overwhelmed, and helpless is common for parents as they try to do the best for their children all while parenting through a pandemic.

It is so important that adults take care of themselves amid taking care of the child. Like a flight attendant instructs passengers to always put on their oxygen masks before putting one on a child, parents and caregivers must first put on their oxygen masks of self-care.

Because self-care is different for everyone, adults must do what nurtures their body, mind, and spirit. For some, a nature walk, gardening, writing in a journal, spending time with family and friends (without children), re-establishing a routine, reading, or spending time with adults of the same faith can be refreshing and energizing. Do what works for you as an individual and have no guilt for doing so.



## Practicing self-care doesn't have to be a full-time job...

### Self-Care Habits to practice with Your Kids

- » Take belly breaths
- » Get silly and laugh
- » Drink more water
- » Be proactive
- » Incorporate rest
- » Get the wiggles out
- » Write or color it out
- » Take a break
- » Have a healthy snack
- » Clean things up
- » Try affirmations



#### If you have 1 minute

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Breathe | Laugh | Drink a glass of water  
Take your vitamins | Text a loved one | Light a candle

#### If you have 5 minutes

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Take a shower | Blend a smoothie | Listen to your favorite song | Sit in the Sun | Clean something up

#### If you have 10 minutes

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Play a game | Meditate | Get your heart rate going  
Write in a journal | Read a chapter of a book

#### If you have 30 minutes

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Make yourself a meal | Watch a show | Listen to a podcast | Declutter a room | Take a power nap

# Get Empowered by Getting Support

Together, we can launch healthy children. Traumatic experiences such as COVID-19 can have lifelong implications for a child's health and future success. However, we do not have to accept that for our children in West Virginia. We can act today to create bright futures for all children throughout the state.

Just as it takes well-trained engineers, mathematicians, scientists, and astronauts to launch spaceships, it takes parents/caregivers, educators, business and medical professionals, and other ACEs informed caring adults to stop toxic stress and combat its impact today so that all WV children can live healthy and happy as they launch into adulthood. When we work together, we build stronger children, schools, and communities.



It is OKAY to ask for help. Whether your child is experiencing a negative shift in their mental health, you are struggling financially during COVID-19 times, or if the responsibility of a caregiver is weighing on your own emotional well-being, it is important to ask for help!

There are supports for parents/caregivers, children, and families throughout our state. Your child's pediatrician, your primary care physician, your child's school, and faith leaders are ready to embrace families no matter how difficult the situation. They can provide connections to mental health professionals, support groups, financial aid, food resources, parenting classes, and other supports families need to be resilient.

West Virginia schools, the WV ACEs Coalition, and the WV Healthy GrandFamilies Program help families understand and work through ACEs. Universities and medical professionals provide valuable information about ACEs. The WVU Center for Excellence in Disabilities (CED) provides education, training, and support groups that help strengthen families' protective factors. The first step in getting help is letting someone know you need help.

## Upcoming in the 5-Part COVID and Kids Issue Brief Series:

### Brief 5

#### A Family-Centered Approach to Service and Resource Delivery Amid a Pandemic

Recommendations for Child Serving Professionals



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