

Virginia Chapter

American Academy of Pediatrics

DEDICATED TO THE HEALTH OF ALL CHILDREN®



VA Pediatrician Survey: The Effect of COVID 19 on Children in Virginia

In the nine months since the issuance of the COVID-19 emergency declaration, our patients have experienced a major disruption in their lives, including disruptions to academic structure, participation in activities, peer interactions, lifestyle, and overall physical and emotional health. To better identify and address the concerns of our patients and providers in Virginia, the Virginia Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics conducted a survey in December 2020 of 203 pediatric providers in the Commonwealth of Virginia. The results of the survey, which are summarized below, found that, in general, pediatric providers are seeing an alarming decline in mental, behavioral, academic and general health of their patients.

Among the 203 pediatric providers, 98%, reported an increase in child and adolescent anxiety and 95% reported an increase in depression. Even more concerning is the increase in suicidal ideation in children and adolescents with 58% of providers reporting an increase. This is in line with what others are reporting throughout the country. Nationally, there are published reports of increased suicide-related behaviors since COVID-19, including an article published in *Pediatrics* in December entitled: "Suicide Ideation and Attempts in a Pediatric Emergency Department Before and During COVID-19" (Hill RM, et al. *Pediatrics*. Dec. 16, 2020). In this study, rates of suicidal ideation and suicide attempts were higher in 11-21 year olds in the months in 2020 compared to 2019.

Behavioral problems have also increased since the pandemic. In Virginia, 86% of the 203 providers have seen an increase in child and adolescent behavior problems. Parental stress is high with 99.5% of Virginia providers reporting an increase in parental stress. Eighty-three percent of providers are seeing an increase in parental unemployment, 56% of providers are seeing an increase in food insecurity and 45% are seeing an increase in housing insecurity. One of the major stressors among parents is juggling work with their children's virtual learning. In fact, 60% of providers are regularly hearing from parents that they are struggling with this. This finding is consistent with other reports. In a National Survey published in *pediatrics* in July 2020, more than 25% of parents reported worsening mental health since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. One in 7 parents reported worsening behavioral health of their children and 1 in 10 reported that parent/child relationships were affected. These results are published in *Pediatrics*: "Well-being of Parents and Children during the COVID-19 Pandemic: A National Survey," (Patrick SW, et al. *Pediatrics*. July 24, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2020-016824>).

Other findings of this survey include an increase in substance abuse. Of the 203 respondents, 29% reported seeing an increase in adolescent drug, alcohol or marijuana use. Also, 43% of providers are seeing an increase in eating disorders. These mental health findings are very concerning.

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Given the dramatic rise in child and adolescent mental health problems and reported difficulties with virtual learning, it comes as no surprise that we are also seeing a rise in academic difficulties in Virginia. Indeed, 97% of providers are seeing increases in reported academic difficulties and 94% of providers reported that children and adolescents are struggling with virtual learning. 51% of providers are seeing an increase in newly diagnosed ADHD.

These findings raise concerns about the potential for academic slide. There are also concerns about equity gaps in education with private schools open and public closed. Even among public schools, there are gaps emerging with some states opening public schools and others not. Children with special needs, such as autism are an especially vulnerable population. Sadly, 59% of providers are seeing a decline in social and behavioral progress in children and adolescents with autism. Of note, 61% of providers are reporting decreased utilization of therapies due to their virtual nature now (ST, OT, PT, ABA) and parents not feeling that they are helpful.

The survey results also raise concerns about worsening social determinants of health and risks of abuse. Seventeen percent of providers reported an increase in child abuse and 1% reported a decrease. According an article published by the CDC in its MMWR Weekly Report (written by Elizabeth Swedo et al, Vol.69/No. 49 December 11, 2020), ER visits for child abuse and neglect for those under age 18 dropped by 53% since mid-March compare to the year prior. This raises concern for under-reporting of abuse, since patients are not being seen as frequently by their pediatricians or their teachers.

Many providers are concerned about a decrease in overall child and adolescent general health. In fact, 93% of providers report seeing a decline in daily minutes of physical activity in children and adolescents, with 84% reporting an increase in obesity. Further, 81% of providers are seeing an increase in sleep problems in their patients.

The results are the survey are alarming. To help our pediatric patients and their families cope with the stressors caused by the pandemic, we encourage families to watch for signs of mental health and substance abuse problems and convey those concerns to their providers. We also encourage schools to develop mitigation strategies that allow students back in the classroom as many of the problems caused by the lack of socialization, learning difficulties with virtual learning and equity issues can be addressed by getting children back in school.

We appreciate everyone who helped complete this survey.