

POLICY BRIEF

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Understanding and Responding to Mental Health Needs of Very Young Students: Holding a COVID-19 Perspective

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Both children and educators may have overwhelming and upsetting feelings during this worldwide pandemic. Grounding policy and practice responses in developmental neuroscience can ensure that educators, schools, and families have the tools to help children be resilient and establish schools as an essential partner in healing.

Substantial advancements in neuroscience have clearly identified the impact of early experiences and environments on the developing brain. The earliest relationships with caregivers can promote healthy brain development, affect how young children build social and emotional skills, and set the stage for language and literacy development starting at birth and beyond. It is in society's interest to strengthen the foundations of healthy brain architecture in all young children to maximize the return on future investments in education, health, and workforce development.¹

These considerations have never been more important than in the time of COVID 19. Children's development has not paused, and these young children, their families, and teachers need support as never before. The stress of this extraordinarily stressful time gets worse for those dealing with poverty, racism, or violence. Because of these systemic inequities, both immediate and long-term impacts will not be evenly distributed.² Data gathered during the pandemic indicates that parents experiencing job loss, job insecurity, high community mortality, and lack of access to resources are reporting more mental health issues.³ These are the family circumstances affecting many school children.

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School becomes a touchstone for millions of children as a place of safety and stability when home is not always so. Educators and educational settings have always played a significant role in supporting children's emotional well-being in addition to their academic growth. Therefore, it is important to ground any school district or building policy in best practice information. Fortunately, like the strides made in understanding core brain development and functioning, great progress has been made in understanding the nature of toxic stress, adversity, and trauma on the developing brain and body. Understanding how this pandemic relates to trauma and affects children's growth, development and relationships will set the stage for effective, responsive educational systems of care.

The [National Child Traumatic Stress Network \(NCTSN\)](#) provides current, topical data-driven information about trauma and its effects of people of all ages. Traumatic reactions can include a variety of responses: intense and ongoing emotional upset, depressive symptoms or anxiety, behavioral changes, self-regulation difficulties, social and attachment problems, regression or loss of previously acquired skills, academic difficulties, nightmares, difficulty sleeping and eating, and physical symptoms, such as aches and pains. Educators can expect to see some of these behaviors in some or most of their students depending on the experiences these children had prior to the abrupt changes wrought by COVID-19.

However, it is critical to remember that even when children experience a traumatic event, they do not always develop traumatic stress. Many factors contribute to symptoms, including whether the child has experienced trauma in the past. Protective factors at the child, family, and community levels can reduce the adverse impact of trauma. Close, caring relationships with important adults in children's lives have been shown to reduce the likelihood that traumatic events result in child traumatic stress.⁴ School leaders can plan now to create opportunities for protecting children from the effects of these experiences by:

- Designating an adult with who each child can form or deepen a relationship in the school setting can serve as a buffer to traumatic stress.
- Restoring a sense of safety through consistent, predictable routines throughout the school day reassures children and adults alike.
- Building emotional literacy and allowing the expression of feelings helps children gain emotional regulation.

Mental Health Consultation as a Resource for Collaboration

Mental health consultation focuses on building the capacity of the adults in children's lives so children are supported in all settings where they learn and grow, including preschool, childcare

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and home visiting programs. Mental health consultants are highly trained licensed or license-eligible professionals such as clinical social workers or psychologists with specialized knowledge in childhood development, the effects of stress and trauma on families and caregivers, and the impacts of adult mental illness on developing. Mental health consultants partner with schools to promote social and emotional well-being of all children and help teachers and administrators identify children who are struggling with mental health issues, trauma, or other family concerns and are in need of extra intervention. This approach has been shown to reduce suspensions and expulsions in the early years, reduce behavior concerns and improve children's social and emotional skills, in addition to reducing childcare provider stress, burnout and turnover.⁵ While funding and scope of this approach may differ from state to state, the [Center of Excellence for Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation](#) can provide resources and network linkages for schools.

Mental Health Toolkits and Activities

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the pace at which schools are taking steps to recognize and respond to the mental health needs of young students. The [Colorado School Mental Health Toolkit](#) is an example of a blueprint for school mental health services that can guide community members, schools, local leaders, and districts through 10 best practices, including strategies for implementing, funding, and sustaining mental health services in schools. The [toolkits](#) bring critical attention to the role played by schools during and in the aftermath of disasters and make the case for schools to implement practices such as screenings, suicide prevention, and wellness plans. Teachers can incorporate educational activities that are developmentally appropriate for young students, foster positive, supportive relationships, and focus on young students' emotional and physical well-being. These [activities](#) are applicable in digital or in class formats, making them especially suited for planning during this time of so many unknowns.

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¹ National Scientific Council on the Developing Child. (2010). Early experiences can alter gene expression and affect long-term development (Working Paper No. 10). Retrieved from <http://www.developingchild.net>

² Shonkoff, J. (2020, March 20). *Stress, resilience, and the role of science: Responding to the coronavirus pandemic*. Stress, Resilience, and the Role of Science: Responding to the Coronavirus Pandemic, Center on the Developing Child. <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/stress-resilience-and-the-role-of-science-responding-to-the-coronavirus-pandemic/>

³ Pfitzer, S. (Host). (2020). *COVID-19 special edition: Mental health in a locked-down world*. [Audio podcast]. Center on the Developing Child. [https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/the-brain-architects-podcast-covid-19-special-edition-mental-health-in-a-locked-down-](https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/the-brain-architects-podcast-covid-19-special-edition-mental-health-in-a-locked-down-world/?utm_source=announcement&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=covid_podcast_5)

[world/?utm_source=announcement&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=covid_podcast_5](https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/the-brain-architects-podcast-covid-19-special-edition-mental-health-in-a-locked-down-world/?utm_source=announcement&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=covid_podcast_5)

⁴ Colorado Department of Human Services. (n.d.). *K-5 educator toolkit*. <https://www.nctsn.org/resources/coping-hard-times-fact-sheet-school-staff>

⁵ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). (2014). *Expert convening on infant and early childhood mental health consultation*.

https://www.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/programs_campaigns/IECMHC/iecmhc-expert-convening-summary.pdf