

Isolation, disruption of routine hard on children and adolescents

pressherald.com/2020/04/12/isolation-disruption-of-routine-hard-on-children-and-adolescents/

By Eric Russell Staff Writer

April 12,
2020



The Blatchford family at home in Old Orchard Beach. From left: Don, Camryn, Riley and Amy
Derek Davis/Staff Photographer

For 14-year-old Camryn Blatchford, being stuck at home for the past month – away from her friends and her school – has been challenging emotionally.

Resources

There are numerous resources for families looking for ways to manage their new circumstances. Here are a few:

Maine's statewide crisis line: 1-888-568-1112

Maine's warmline (for noncrisis needs): 1-866-771-9276

G.E.A.R. Parent Network hotline: 1-800-264-9224

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network:

https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources/fact-sheet/outbreak_factsheet_1.pdf

The Maine Children’s Alliance

<https://mainechildrensalliance.org/covid-19/>

The Child Mind Institute:

<https://childmind.org/article/talking-to-kids-about-the-coronavirus/>

“I would say the hardest part is that you’re not distracted like you would be at school,” she said. “It’s made me realize how much I like school and how much I count on my friends.”

Her 17-year-old sister, Riley, is missing the last quarter of her senior year and all that goes with it – her softball games, the prom and possibly graduation.

“We didn’t really know when this started how long it would last, but I thought maybe a couple weeks,” she said. “It’s kind of hard to accept that we may never be going back there.”

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With several more weeks of isolation certain, the stay-at-home orders will no doubt be hard on all school-age children, who are used to having regular contact with peers. Some mental health experts are concerned about how the isolation and disruptions of routines could affect a generation of young people.

“The anxiety of the world is palpable and contagious,” said Dr. Sally Ann Cooper, a child and adolescent psychiatrist with Maine Behavioral Healthcare. “For kids, they look to adults for reassurance, and it’s hard to reassure each other right now because there is so much unknown.”

Cooper is worried that the situation could make things worse for children who already are struggling and lead to new problems for others. But she’s trying to look at things through a different lens.

“When we’re able to use coping skills successfully to get through times like these, it can be exceptionally strengthening,” she said. “We can actually build resiliency in times like this. In crisis, there is opportunity.”

ADDITIONAL HURDLES

Families that include children with special needs or behavioral challenges face additional hurdles because their support systems may have crumbled.

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One day a week or so ago, April Fournier's 11-year-old son, Asher, who has autism spectrum disorder, asked for a mental health day. More than two full weeks of disrupted routine was getting to him.

"He knew his brain was full," said Fournier, who lives in Portland. "But it was great to see that he's already learning to advocate for himself. And he had a great day. He was playing with the dogs and singing. We hadn't seen that in a couple days because he was frustrated."

Fournier has three other children – Asher's twin, Mya, and two older sons, 17-year-old William and 19-year-old Zevin – and sees her biggest responsibility as making sure they all come through this OK.

Outside of managing her own children, Fournier has been doing her own job from home. She's a special services manager for a Head Start program in Lewiston and has been making sure the children who have individual education plans or behavioral challenges have support. That's been tough to do remotely.

But she agrees that this challenge provides an opportunity to build resiliency.

"We keep saying that being able to do this will make them all so much stronger," she said. "Any problem is going to seem small by comparison. I know it's so hard for so many people, right now, but look at all the opportunities and skills we're all building."

It's not just children who have special needs who are having to adapt. Fournier said the social distancing has been harder on her older kids.

"There is something very different about not physically seeing your friends," she said. "They used to take the bus into town to go to the comic store. Those things have all been taken away from them."

ONLINE THERAPY

The social distancing rules have made getting help more challenging as well.

Behavioral health agencies that provide services to adults and children, through counseling or other types of therapy, have had to shift nearly everything online. While crisis centers remain open, other appointments are being done over the phone. Most patients have adapted, but there have been difficulties.

“Kids are having a harder time with telephonic sessions,” said Mike Mitchell, CEO of Crisis & Counseling Centers, which offers crisis, outpatient and family services in central Maine. “We’ve had a couple kids who refused to do them. Some that may have to do with their particular issues – if they are socially anxious or have a hard time with change.”

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Jennifer Pelletier, program manager for Tri-County Mental Health, which has outpatient locations in Lewiston, Oxford, Bridgton, Farmington and Rumford, said that not being able to do things in person has been harder on younger children. For teenagers and especially seniors in high school, Pelletier said her agency has been trying to do outreach.

“Some of these kids who were at a point where they are expecting to graduate or play in their last sports games or go to prom, none of that is happening and there are a lot of emotions that go along with that,” she said.

Cindy Seekins, director of Crisis & Counseling’s GEAR Parent Network for parents of children with behavioral health needs, said her organization has seen a tenfold increase in calls to its 1-800 number.

Her eight staff members have experience – all are parents of children with mental or behavioral health needs – and are certified by the National Federation of Families for Children’s Mental Health.

“The two things they are calling for are emotional support and resource information, and to register for educational workshops, which we’re doing online,” Seekins said.

Seekins said the normal participation for one of GEAR’s webinars is about 15 people. Lately, she said, it’s been between 40 and 50. The topics range from helping children manage meltdowns to assisting children with learning disabilities.

“For some kids with behavioral health concerns, they are doing better because school is a stressor to them; some are picked on because of their disability,” she said. “But some kids are not doing as well because their needs are not able to be met.”

RESILIENT STUDENTS

Melissa McStay, a social worker at Deering High School, said much of her work has been focused on basic needs, like food drop-offs. Late last month the district was busy distributing wireless hotspots to areas where students might not have access to the internet at home.

“Some of what is creating anxiety is people adapting, so I think we’re going to find our stride,” she said. “It’s normal for them to have a range of feelings. I think there is a lot of grief. I think with our seniors, there are a lot of questions about where their various rites of passage will be impacted, and we don’t have all the answers.”

But McStay said students are resilient.

“Some kids have had worse things happen to them,” she said.

So, what can be done to keep kids in a healthy frame of mind?

Cooper said the internet can be problematic for kids because of the volume of information and the questionable accuracy of some sources.

“I’d be steering kids away from internet surfing,” she said. “And I’d limit the amount of media streaming into the home overall, because it lets in a lot of potential worry. Part of our jobs for kids is to keep the home feeling safe.”

She said parents should encourage kids to take on projects and set goals each day.

“One of the most important things to keep in mind right now is the self-care advice,” she said. “For families, there is so much pull on all of us to get from day to day, but the self-care is such an important modeling thing for moms and dads. If kids see adults take care of themselves, that goes a long way.”



The Blatchford family (from left: Riley, Don, Amy and Camryn) say they're doing more things together but that the uncertainty is unsettling. *Derek Davis/Staff Photographer*

UNCERTAINTY UNSETTLING

Teenage sisters Riley and Camryn Blatchford said being cooped up in the same house together has had it ups and downs.

"I think we'll all build from this, so we'll have a better sense if we have to do it again," Camryn said.

The Blatchfords, who live in Old Orchard Beach, are like a lot of other Maine families navigating life in this unprecedented pandemic. They are using technology to keep up with friends and are doing things as a family, such as puzzles and board games, that they might not have found time for otherwise. But the uncertainty is unsettling.

"I think it's just the stress of not knowing where we go from here," said the girls' father, Don, who is a detective with the Scarborough Police Department.

Amy Blatchford said she has taken her daughters out for "drive-bys" to see friends from a distance. She said she still sees other teenagers hanging out together in groups, against the guidance from medical professionals and orders from the governor.

"It shocks me to think that's still happening," she said. "We're taking all the precautions and

treating this as something serious. Our girls have done a great job with that.”

Riley, who is nearing adulthood, said she has sensed that the period “feels like something we’ll be talking about for years.” But she’s looking for the bright side.

“I feel like now I’m not going to take anything for granted,” she said.

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