

TENNESSEE PARENTS CONCERNED ABOUT EDUCATION, KIDS' MENTAL HEALTH AS COVID-19 PRESSES ON

The spread of COVID-19 has fundamentally changed the structure of children's lives, including the way they socialize, play and learn. To gauge the impact of the pandemic on families in the state, the Vanderbilt Child Health Poll asked a statewide sample of Tennessee parents about their top concerns for the health and well-being of their children in the fall of 2020. Education and school quality topped the list, selected by more than a third of parents in the state. Nearly 30% of parents were concerned about children's mental health.

Less than 40% of Tennessee children are attending school in-person.

The pandemic compelled major changes in the way children accessed K-12 schooling in the last year, with a nearly universal shift to some form of digital or hybrid instruction early on. When asked how their children were attending school, 38% of Tennessee parents indicated their children were learning in-person at school, 31% virtually only, another 15% learning in a hybrid form, and 15% homeschooling.

The poll revealed stark differences in children's mode of schooling by race/ethnicity. Children in Black families were substantially more likely to be attending only virtual school (58%) compared to children in White families (23%); only 16% of Black parents reported that their child was going to school in-person, versus 43% of White parents.

Over 80% of parents had concerns about their child attending school remotely.

Parents' primary concern with children attending school virtually was their child's lack of social interaction with other children their age (52%), followed closely by their concern about a lack of one-on-one attention from their child's teachers (48%). Many parents (42%) noted their children have difficulty paying attention and learning virtually.

Nearly 20% of parents expressed concern about their inability to assist with virtual learning due to work or work-related responsibilities; however, physical space and technology were lesser concerns. Thirteen percent of parents worried about the lack of an acceptable, quiet space for learning, and 8% were concerned about lacking the appropriate technology to support virtual learning (Internet, computer/tablet, etc.).

More than 1 in 5 Tennessee parents are concerned their child has undiagnosed anxiety.

Concerns regarding anxiety in children grew amongst Tennessee parents since the pandemic began. Nearly 22% of parents worried that their child had undiagnosed anxiety in 2020, compared to 14% in 2019. Ten percent of Tennessee parents reported that their child had been diagnosed with anxiety by a medical professional in 2020, remaining relatively unchanged since 2019 (11%).

Parental reports of diagnosed depression in children and concern about undiagnosed depression were similar in 2019 and 2020. Roughly 7% of parents reported that their child had been diagnosed with depression, and 11% reported concern about undiagnosed depression, across both years. Notably, concern regarding undiagnosed post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) rose from 2.4% to 5.3% between 2019 and 2020.

There were substantial differences among parents who reported concern that their child had undiagnosed anxiety, depression or stress by family income. Nearly half of parents (48%) from low-income families (household incomes of <\$25,000 annually) reported concern for these diagnoses compared to less than a third among high income groups.



Implications for Tennessee Children and Equity

Prioritizing the basic needs of children and families (for example, food, housing, and physical and mental health) is critical to supporting communities during the pandemic, and these needs must be met before academic learning will succeed in any school setting (in-person, virtual, hybrid or home). Research indicates that children whose mental health care needs are inadequately addressed are more likely to experience disciplinary problems, to be chronically absent from school, and to leave school without completing.

When COVID-19 shut down schools, it cut off regular access to a host of school-based health and social services that support children's health and help them focus on learning. This is particularly true for many economically disadvantaged children who rely on their school as a source for meals, mental health counseling, and sometimes direct health care through school-based health centers. Research on mental health access in schools shows that 57% of adolescents receiving mental health services in a year received some school-based services, and 35% exclusively used mental health services offered at school. Although a number of mental health agencies have offered continuity of care by shifting school-based services to telehealth, access to the Internet and privacy are significant barriers for children accessing these services.

This poll is a reminder of the pervasive effects of public health uncertainties on the risk for anxiety. Educational policies should consider the disparities in access and identify system opportunities to proactively address parental concerns regarding anxiety and possible trauma. This should include behavioral health programming for school personnel and for parents, guiding parents in ways to provide support for their children and ensuring that parents have knowledge of and access to mental health resources that are culturally sensitive and address the context of public health uncertainty exacerbating financial stability.

We found substantial differences in educational experiences based upon children's race. Given that parents report their children have difficulty paying attention in the virtual classroom and that there are a greater proportion of Black children reportedly receiving virtual education, there is a need to address the interface between the negative impact on learning opportunities, anxiety, and the loss of social-emotional learning that can disproportionately affect Black children.

As state legislative leaders convene at Governor Lee's request to address urgent issues facing Tennessee school children, they might reconsider the governor's February 2020 proposal to create a mental health trust fund that would expand school-based behavioral health programming in all 95 counties.

EDUCATION RESOURCES

PodUp: <https://podupnow.com/> • helps connect families with caregivers, teachers and other families

Partner Pods: <https://partnerpods.org/> • helps connect families with other families, educators, therapists or teachers, and children with friends

Khan academy: <https://www.khanacademy.org/> • a free education tool that covers a variety of topics through learning videos and exercises

Education.com: [education.com](https://www.education.com/) • a free website full of worksheets, learning plans, activities, and games

Learning hero: <https://bealearninghero.org/> • tips and support for parents with kids learning at home

Readwritethink: <http://www.readwritethink.org/> • classroom resources for at home learning & parent & afterschool resources

National Center for Education Statistics: <https://nces.ed.gov/nceskids/> • games and quizzes to build math skills

US Department of Education: <https://www.ed.gov/coronavirus/resources-for-learning-at-home> • A number of resources for parents and interactive lessons for kids

We are Teachers: <https://www.weareteachers.com/resources-learning-at-home/> • online resources, virtual field trips, hands-on activities, and tips for families

Best for All: <https://bestforall.tnedu.gov/> • video lessons, interactive resources, and professional development tools



MENTAL HEALTH RESOURCES

TN Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse

Services Helpline: 1-800-560-5767. Access to an advocate who will listen to your concerns and provide information about available resources in your area. Helpline available Monday - Friday, 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. CST.

Any type of crisis, free 24/7 support: Text "TN" to 741741

TN Mental Health Crisis Line: Call 1-855-274-7471

TN 211: <https://tn211.myresourcedirectory.com/>

Child Mind Institute: <https://childmind.org/> • education and information about children's mental health and remote learning (some articles also in Spanish)

National Alliance on Mental Illness: <http://www.nami.org/Support-Education/Mental-Health-Education>

Effective Child Therapy: <https://effectivechildtherapy.org/> • Offers free tools to help assess mental health and advice on how to find and select a therapist:

Boston Children's Hospital: <https://youngwomenshealth.org/> • <https://youngmenshealthsite.org/>

American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry: https://www.aacap.org/AACAP/Families_and_Youth/Resource_Libraries/-covid-19/resources_helping_kids_parents_cope.aspx • Resources for helping kids and parents cope amidst COVID-19:

American Academy of Pediatrics: Resources specific to kids and coping with COVID-19 in English and Spanish.

<https://www.healthychildren.org/English/health-issues/conditions/COVID-19/Pages/Signs-your-Teen-May-Need-More-Support.aspx>

<https://www.healthychildren.org/English/health-issues/conditions/COVID-19/Pages/ADHD-and-Learning-During-COVID-19.aspx>

<https://www.healthychildren.org/English/health-issues/conditions/COVID-19/Pages/Working-and-Learning-from-Home-COVID-19.aspx>



Lead Authors: Carolyn Heinrich, PhD; Catherine Fuchs, MD; Mia Letterie

Project Leads: Stephen Patrick, MD, MPH, MS; Kim Lovell, MPH, MBA

Contributors: Kecia Carroll, MD, MPH; Alese Halvorson, MSc; Laura Henkhaus, PhD; Sarah Loch, MPH; Melissa McPheeters, PhD, MPH; Tamarra Spalding, MPH; Amanda Stone, PhD; Joe Zickafoose, MD, MS

www.childpolicy.org/poll
@VUMCchildpolicy



VANDERBILT
Center for
Child Health Policy