



## Erie County Cares

### Back to School and Mental Health: A Parent Resource Guide

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) has had a significant impact on what going back to school means for schools, teachers, students and parents. These are uncertain and challenging times and everyone wants to protect the safety of children, their families, and all the people who work with the children in the schools.

Each school district is making difficult decisions, some will be bringing students back to the classroom, some will use virtual classes, others will have a blended approach. Regardless of the approach your district and your family choose, there will be changes to how your child has experienced school in the past.

COVID-19 and the new school experience can be very stressful on children, parents and caregivers, and teachers and school staff. Fear about getting sick or getting others sick and public health actions including physical distancing, which can make people feel isolated and lonely, can increase stress and anxiety. Recognizing that children, parents and teachers also may have other stressors as a result of COVID-19 can also impact stress levels.

For children and adults, it is important to know how to cope with stress in a healthy way, what you should be watching for that might indicate something of concern, and where to get help and support if needed.

#### Healthy ways to cope with stress:

- **Stay informed.** Know what to do if you become ill and are concerned about COVID-19. Learn about how your school is implementing public health steps to prevent the spread of COVID-19 such as requiring masks and physical distancing strategies. If you have questions, ask them.
- **Take care of your emotional health.** Taking care of your emotional health will help you think clearly and react to the urgent needs to protect yourself and your family.
- **Take care of yourself physically.** Getting enough sleep, try to eat healthy and well-balanced meals, exercise and stay active, drink plenty of water, and limit alcohol and avoid tobacco and drug use.
- **Connect with others.** Talk with people you trust about your concerns and how you are feeling.
- **Take time to unwind.** Try to do some other activities you enjoy.
- **Take breaks from watching, reading, or listening to news stories,** including those on social media. Hearing about the pandemic repeatedly can be upsetting.

#### Ways to support your child

- Talk with your child about COVID-19. Remain calm. Avoid language that might blame others and lead to stigma. Provide information that is truthful and appropriate for the age and developmental level of the child.
- Answer questions and share facts about COVID-19 in a way that your child can understand.
- Reassure your child that they are safe. Let them know it's okay if they feel upset. Share with them how you deal with your own stress so that they can learn from you how to cope with stress.
- Limit your family's exposure to news coverage of the event, including social media. Children may misinterpret what they hear and can be frightened about something they do not understand.
- Try to create and maintain regular routines.
- Be a role model. Take breaks, get plenty of sleep, exercise and eat well. Connect with your friends and family members.
- Spend time with your child in meaningful activities, reading together, exercising, playing board games.
- Teach children everyday actions to reduce the spread of germs. Remind them to wash their hands frequently and stay away from people who are coughing or sick. Remind them to cough or sneeze into a tissue or their elbow, then throw the tissue away.
- If they are going to be returning to school, discuss any new actions that may be taken at school to protect children and school staff.

## What to watch for

### In children behavior changes to watch for:

- Excessive crying or irritation in younger children
- Returning to behaviors they have outgrown (for example toileting accidents or bedwetting)
- Excessive worrying or sadness
- Unhealthy eating or sleeping habits
- Irritability and “acting out” behaviors in teens
- Poor school performance, avoiding school or refusing to do school work from home
- Difficulties with attention and concentration
- Avoidance of activities enjoyed in the past
- Unexplained headaches or body pain
- Use of alcohol, tobacco, or other drugs

### For adults, common effects of stress:

<u>On your body</u>	<u>On your mood</u>	<u>On your behavior</u>
Headache	Anxiety	Overeating or undereating
Muscle tension or pain	Restlessness	Angry outbursts
Chest pain***	Lack of motivation or focus	Drug or alcohol misuse
Fatigue	Feeling overwhelmed	Tobacco use
Sleep problems	Irritability or anger	Social withdrawal
Stomach upset	Sadness or depression	Exercising less often

\*\*\*If you experience chest pain, please contact your physician immediately to determine if medical assessment and/or care is indicated.

### Where to get help:

There are many services available if you or your child need help.

**Crisis Services** 24/7 Crisis Hotline for Adults in Buffalo and Erie County at **716-834-3131**

Spectrum C.A.R.E.S. Team helps families and children in crisis at **716-882-4357**

New York State COVID-19 Emotional Support Helpline 8AM-10PM at **1-844-863-9314**

211 WNY connects people to services, operates 24/7. **Dial 211 or 888-696-9211** and talk to a trained information & referral specialist who is able to identify services in the community and connect you to the help you may need. Information available through 211 include: basic needs, food assistance, free tax preparation, holiday assistance, housing, job training, legal counseling, mental health services, substance abuse services, volunteer opportunities, and more.

The Erie County Department of Mental Health has compiled information about services and other resources at <http://www.erie.gov/mentalhealth>

Your school counselor and pediatrician can help by providing information and referrals