

Q. & A.

SUPPORTING CHILDREN'S DEVELOPMENT DURING THE PANDEMIC



By Isaac Chotiner

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The clinical psychologist Elena Hontoria Tuerk discusses the biggest threats to the psychological health of young children, how teachers will have to adjust to instructing kids during a pandemic, and the ways in which parental stress can affect kids' growth. Photograph by James Veysey / Shutterstock

Last week, President Trump declared that public schools must fully reopen in the fall, threatening to withhold federal funding if they fail to do so. But neither he nor the Secretary of Education, Betsy DeVos, has offered guidance on how schools can safely resume classroom teaching during the coronavirus pandemic. Meanwhile, some of the largest school districts in the country,

including Los Angeles and San Diego, have announced that they will only hold classes online, while New York City and other districts are planning on partial reopenings.

I recently spoke by phone with Elena Hontoria Tuerk, a clinical psychologist at the University of Virginia who specializes in child and family therapy. During our conversation, which has been edited for length and clarity, we discussed the biggest threats to the psychological health of young children, how teachers will have to adjust to instructing kids during a pandemic, and the ways in which parental stress can affect kids' growth.

I just want to stipulate for readers that we are talking about the effects of no schooling or less schooling on children, which does not mean we are in favor of just sending kids to school even if it is unsafe. The virus is extremely serious, but I don't want you to feel like you have to make that clear with every answer.

Read *The New Yorker's* complete news coverage and analysis of the coronavirus pandemic.

Sure. Totally understood.

What will be your biggest fear if we end up missing an entire school year, and how does it change when we are talking about younger kids versus high-schoolers?

I think of things in terms of the systems that children are involved in—so not just children but the effects on their peer dynamics and, particularly, parents. So my concerns for children mostly have to do with increased parenting stress, and the types of choices parents are having to make when their children are home full time. That is one area of major concern. And that has significant effects on children's functioning.

Could you describe what parenting stress often entails and leads to?

Sure. Parents are not able to access their support systems—the traditional support systems for families, which are grandparents or other supports—and all those things really help parents act in their roles more effectively. They get breaks from their children and are able to access resources and receive reinforcement. So all of those things missing from their lives makes it not ideal for them to do their best parenting and respond in effective ways, and ways that indicate reduced emotionality.

What other concerns do you have?

For younger children in particular, the opportunity to develop peer-negotiation skills, problem-solving skills, the social skills we want them to grow into in those early elementary years—the lack of those opportunities is unfortunate. And it is not to say that those skills cannot be recovered later, but they are a big part of why kids develop into healthy social beings. Also, all of this home life is not ideal for kids facing anxiety, because they are not having opportunities to challenge themselves or do things that might be intimidating. Kids who are more socially anxious are able to really avoid peer interactions right now or really just engage electronically with peers.

And what about older kids?

Speaking to older kids, the opportunities they are missing are really more about differentiation from family life, and having more opportunities to be out of the home, and having more opportunities to be around same-aged peers, and do that healthy exploration and risk-taking that we want them to do as they launch into adulthood. Being home all the time is not ideal for an adolescent.

[Laughs.]

Having you been talking to kids for the past few months, and what have those experiences been like?

Yes, I have been talking to adolescents, and then I supervise cases that the students are seeing. And I think, again, among many kids, the ones who are anxious are feeling great because they are avoiding the things that make them anxious. You are seeing these memes about it being an introvert's dream, and for some of these kids, it is actually harder to do clinical work with them because generating exposures for anxiety-producing events is harder right now. So rather than go up to a kid and talk to them at recess, it's FaceTime a kid you sort of know and have a FaceTime conversation. But this isn't a natural experiment. This isn't what kids would normally be doing to face social anxiety.

And then, with other kids, we see it from a parenting perspective, in terms of the amount of stress it puts on working families. It might be financial stress, or that they don't have their child-care needs met. It is much harder for families to maintain routine and effective strategies, so that they aren't using very punitive approaches to manage children's behavior.

Are you talking to parents, too?

We work with kids with anxiety, but when it comes to behavior management it's almost always parent-directed treatment to help them respond to all sorts of behaviors.

Are parents aware that their parenting is suffering? You read about these experiments where tired people perform worse on tests but don't realize it. Is it like that?

Oh, no. Parents are stressed and they are trying to manage multiple roles. So they are now in the role of teacher, camp counsellor, employee for their job, house cleaner, and parent, and this is a level of engagement with their kids that they are not used to or haven't been used to in many years. So they are very aware they are stressed. And what they have been really wanting from the clinicians is help creating structure and ideas about what life can look like right now to make everyone function relatively well.

You could probably tell I don't have kids from that dumb question. But tell me, what can clinicians do, given that the virus is what it is?

I don't know that you are asking this question, but I have been thinking about it a lot from a policy perspective, because I think those are the real needs we have. One of the things I have been arguing for as part of the next stimulus package is an increase in allocations for the child-care-subsidy program. The federal government provides funds to states. So one thing that I think needs to happen right now, because I doubt schools will reopen, is expanding these child-care subsidies so that we can use them for home-based care, because group child-care settings are not very practical for families right now, and parents are afraid for both their own children but also for beloved staff. And we can't use grandparents, so we don't have the natural ecology we would normally have to lean on in a crisis. So really what parents need in order to be able to function financially, and emotionally, probably, is child care in the home. So people who can act as providers and caregivers and basically act as tutors.

So this child-care-subsidy program could be expanded. States already have the infrastructure for this, and the training materials for people who want to be registered as providers, and a way to disburse these funds. So what we really need is to expand the eligibility criteria so that families can identify a provider that they want to be in the home, and then that person can act in this role.

If kids do start going back to school, but with more caution, like smaller classes or groups or everyone wearing a mask, what are your concerns about what that will mean for kids, even with school?

We are in uncharted territory, so I can't give you longitudinal data. But I will say that kids in general are resilient and adaptable, and just in my own experience as a parent this summer doing some distance swim-team things, kids don't have great body awareness when they are younger, so they do creep closer to one another. But kids are creative and make do, and so I am not worried about them not being able to function or adapt to this. I think people figure things out and they make do. And I think that even if there are some developmental skills that kids are not getting in terms of eye contact or paying attention to facial expressions with masks, or being at a distance, I have no reason to think they couldn't recover those skills later, or get them through their home life.

What will a lack of school mean for kids who are homeless or food-insecure, especially?

If you have kids whose main source of stability is the school setting and the predictability of that structure and environment, and the relationships they have in that environment, taking that away—and I don't want to just throw the word traumatic around—is highly disruptive and anxiety-producing. So never mind just the basic needs of food and care and other supports they might get. The idea of a real lack of a sense of home or safe space is devastating for kids, particularly if the other people they are around are under a lot of stress or in unpredictable circumstances themselves. These kids have to be attended to. But the way we have to attend to them has to be safe, which is why I go back to how we can provide care and education in a way that meets public-health needs but is also providing meaningful help to families.

How are the kids you talk to dealing with living through the pandemic, schooling aside, with so many deaths and pain? How much anxiety is there about living in this time?

The one great advantage we have from this experience is that it is a shared experience, so, unlike other forms of traumatic change in life, this is not something where the child is utterly disconnected from what other people have experienced. So, for example, if a child experiences a fire in their home, that is not something that is happening to everyone. This is something kids can talk about with one another, they can validate one another's emotions, and they can crowdsource support for how to spend their time.

The thing I think kids are missing is their friends, and the opportunity to be around people outside of their family who might understand them in ways their family doesn't, as well as opportunities for recreation. All of that being so limited is hard on them. This is obviously very challenging for kids. But I do think the fact that this is something we are all going through can really be a place for them to experience resilience. They are going through this, but we are all going to do this together. I think that has real advantages. This form of adversity, when it is shared by a community, can really benefit kids' character. It makes them part of a larger civic life that they can actually be a productive and helpful part of. So I don't see it as all bad. There is something to shared adversity when it is not too extreme that can actually help kids grow.

Are there some particular long-term effects we should be looking out for if kids have to experience this status quo for a really long time?

It is going to look so different depending on kids' circumstances. There are going to be some who will adapt and maybe lose out on some skills, but maybe develop some other really important skills, like the ability to entertain themselves and be creative and use their imaginations. And there are some kids who are undergoing incredible stress who will show the effects of a traumatic experience. So there is no way to talk about this on a population level. But the best thing we can do for kids is validate that this is an incredibly difficult, unexpected experience, and help them understand ways to do the best they can within that, and show how they can contribute to things going better. I really am encouraging parents to make their kids part of the team. If they have to take on extra chores because everyone is pitching in right now, that is a great character-building experience for them to have. So I think in some ways we have lived in such a child-focussed culture for so long, where we are so worried about what we are giving to kids and whether they are doing enough activities, that I feel like for some more privileged families, this is an opportunity to step back and ask about developing their characters, and have them help out in an emergency situation.

If you could give advice to elementary-school teachers when kids do come back, what would it be?

I think that if we do, in fact, have masks on when kids go back to school, there are certain tonal changes we might want to make. So that means more exaggerated body language and more expressive voices to convey information that might be missed by not being able to see someone's mouth or eyes well. And just like being home was an adjustment, it will be a major adjustment for these kids to be back in a school setting, especially one that is different. Teachers are pros, and they know how to handle this way more than I do, but kids will need to adjust, and that takes time, and validating their experience of things being hard and being different, and being patient with that process. Childhood is a long game. It's not about us doing everything perfectly in the next six months. It is about us creating environments for them where they can thrive long-term in whatever circumstances that looks like. We have to create the environment for whatever situation we're in to work.

How old are your kids?

Ten and seven.

What's been your biggest shortcoming as a parent in the last four months?

Oh, gosh, so many things.

List them all.

[Laughs.] Just being mindful of my own stress in how I respond to my children. If I am thinking something through or doing something for work, and they ask me something, my response will not be as warm as it could be, or just sort of snappy. And I think that comes from being with your kids all the time. People need breaks. But I think mostly it is just having to monitor what their day looks like, and making sure they are spending their time in a way that is beneficial for their development. So getting outside, trying to maintain some routine with chores and instruments and that kind of stuff, rather than letting the day fall away with electronics and not doing much. But some days that is O.K., too. Parents have to do what they can.

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Isaac Chotiner is a staff writer at The New Yorker, where he is the principal contributor to Q. & A., a series of interviews with major public figures in politics, media, books, business, technology, and more.

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