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Less passive screen time, more structure better for kids' mental health during pandemic

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Summary: There are a number of simple, practical steps that families can take -- including reducing passive screen time and news consumption, having a structured daily schedule and getting enough sleep -- that can promote resilience against mental health problems in youth during the COVID-19 pandemic, according to a new study.

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FULL STORY

There are a number of simple, practical steps that families can take -- including reducing passive screen time and news consumption, having a structured daily schedule and getting enough sleep -- that can promote resilience against mental health problems in youth during the COVID-19 pandemic, according to a new study published this week in the open-access journal *PLOS ONE* by Maya Rosen of Harvard University, US, and colleagues.

The COVID-19 pandemic has introduced unprecedented change into the lives of children and adolescents. Many of these disruptions, coupled with pandemic-related stressors, are likely to increase risk for depression, anxiety and behavioral problems in youth.

In the new study, researchers recruited participants from two ongoing longitudinal studies of children and adolescents in the greater Seattle area. 224 youth and their caregivers completed an initial questionnaire assessing social behaviors, psychopathology and pandemic-related stressors in April and May 2020; 184 of these youth and their caregivers completed a similar battery of assessments six months later, in November 2020 through January 2021. Since data on each youth was available from prior to the pandemic, results at each time point could be controlled for pre-pandemic symptoms. The youth ranged in age from 7 to 15 years old, were 47.8% female, and their racial and ethnic background reflected the Seattle area, with 66% of participants White, 11% Black, 11% Asian and 8% Hispanic or Latino.

The number of pandemic-related stressors was strongly associated with increases in both internalizing ($\beta=0.345$, $p<0.001$) and externalizing ($\beta=0.297$, $p<0.001$) symptoms during the pandemic after controlling for pre-pandemic symptoms. Early in the pandemic, youths who spent less time on digital devices ($\beta=0.272$, $p=.0004$) as well as those who consumed less than 2 hours of news per day ($\beta=0.193$, $p=.010$) had lower ex-

ternalizing symptoms, while greater time spend in nature was marginally associated with lower internalizing symptoms ($\beta=-0.124$, $p=.074$). Getting the recommended amount of sleep ($\beta=0.-0.158$, $p=.080$) and having a more structured daily routine during stay-at-home orders ($\beta=-0.164$, $p=.049$) was associated with lower levels of externalizing psychopathology six months later. Finally, the strong association between pandemic-related stressors and psychopathology was absent among children with lower amounts of screen time and news media consumption. The authors write that the study identifies a set of strategies that can be beneficial to families when considering how to support the mental health of their children during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

The authors add: "Mental health problems increased dramatically among children and adolescents during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly among those who experienced high levels of pandemic-related stressors including serious illness or death of a family member, significant financial loss, and social isolation. A number of simple strategies families engaged in appeared to promote better mental health during the pandemic including having a structured daily routine, limiting passive screen time use, limiting exposure to news media about the pandemic, and to a lesser extent spending more time in nature, and getting the recommended amount of sleep."

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Journal Reference:

1. Maya L. Rosen, Alexandra M. Rodman, Steven W. Kasperek, Makeda Mayes, Malila M. Freeman, Liliana J. Lengua, Andrew N. Meltzoff, Katie A. McLaughlin. **Promoting youth mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic: A longitudinal study**. *PLOS ONE*, 2021; 16 (8): e0255294 DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0255294

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