



BRAIN HEALTH BOOST



COVID-19's Impact on Youth Brain Health

*The Brain Health Initiative (BHI) is working to develop brain healthy communities, creating a culture that promotes brain health protective factors and decreases risk factors, thereby improving brain health, optimizing brain performance, and preventing and fighting brain illness across the lifespan for the Florida Suncoast region and beyond. **Today, we are looking at the impact the COVID-19 pandemic has had on the brain health of our young people.***

COVID-19 has impacted every one of us, from young to old. For nearly two years, our lives have been disrupted by fear of being exposed to or contracting the COVID-19 virus. While the emergence of effective vaccines allowed the return to school, work, and other social activities, we are still feeling the effects of lost social connections.

Financial, health, social, school, and physical environment issues during the pandemic impacted our families and affected the learning and behavior of our children and adolescents. In addition, children and adolescents experienced school closings, stay-at-home orders, loss of social interaction, and disruption of normal routine. Research shows that as a result of these stressors, more young people are experiencing anxiety and depression since the pandemic began and those numbers are not decreasing.

A recent [Population Health Forum](#) from the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health addressed the impact the pandemic has had on the brain health of our kids. During the program, the results of a meta-analysis of 29 studies from around the world involving 80,000 children, found that the incidence of anxiety and depression in youth and adolescents has doubled since the beginning of the pandemic.

Dr. Sheri Madigan, clinical psychologist from the University of Calgary and the Alberta Children's Hospital Research Institute, presented the findings of the global studies meta-analysis. She said the studies show one in four young people reported they are experiencing depression, and one in five reported they are experiencing anxiety. Prior to the pandemic those numbers were closer to one in 10. The analysis also found that girls are struggling with their anxiety and depression more than boys, and older teens are struggling more than younger children.

Dr. Madigan said while kids are naturally resilient to these brain health stressors, research suggests that as the pandemic drags on, they are not rebounding. It is important for us as parents to support our children to look for strategies to help strengthen their resilience to these stressors.

WHAT YOU CAN DO TODAY TO PROTECT YOUR BRAIN HEALTH

There are things you can do to support the brain health of your kids and your family doctor or pediatrician can be a good source for evaluating and recommending strategies to protect their brain health. A recent article in the [Harvard Gazette](#), and the BHI recommend these strategies for strengthening your child's resilience.

- **Support participation in school and social activities.** You want to protect your children from exposure to the COVID-19 virus, but social interaction is critical to their brain health. Encourage your kids to follow CDC guidelines for wearing a mask and social distancing at school and events. Vaccines have been approved for children 12 and older to help protect teens so consider having your child vaccinated.
- **Limit screen time.** Research suggests that children who spend more time in front of a screen are more likely to experience anxiety, depression, and behavioral issues. When kids aren't online they are usually participating in more positive behaviors so get your kids away from the screens and interacting with family and friends.
- **Make sure they get enough sleep.** School-age children and teens need eight to 12 hours of sleep for optimal brain health. Being tired can impact their ability to focus, learn, and remember, as well as have a negative impact on their mood and sense of well-being. Help your kids establish a brain healthy sleep routine that includes a regular bedtime and turning off electronics an hour or two before bed.
- **Spend time in nature.** Research shows that spending time in nature reduces stress and anxiety. Schedule a family fun day outside and maybe add another brain health booster, exercise, to your plans.
- **Limit exposure to the news.** Too much news coverage can be overwhelming for you and your kids. Instead, try talking to them about what is happening in the world. Listen to their concerns and respond in an age-appropriate way.
- **Maintain a structured routine.** Kids need predictability in their lives and a structured routine can help your children be more resilient. This may be challenging during times of uncertainty, but it can help the brain health of your entire family to stick to a daily routine.
- **BE BRAIN HEALTHY and adopt a lifestyle** that includes thoughts, behaviors, emotions, responses, and language that promote brain health protective factors:
 - Stress resilience
 - Nutrition
 - Physical activity
 - Sleep
 - Social connection
 - Emotional wellbeing

- Meaning and Purpose
- Cognitive stimulation and creativity
- Engaging with nature
- General health
- Positive impacts

About the Brain Health Initiative (www.brainhealthinitiative.org)

The Brain Health Initiative (BHI) is a cutting-edge approach to protecting brain health, promoting brain performance, and preventing and fighting brain illness across the lifespan. The BHI is creating brain healthy communities, cultures that foster brain health protective factors and address risk factors, thereby improving brain health and optimizing brain performance outcomes for the Florida Suncoast region and beyond. Join the ***Be Brain Healthy*** movement, ***because brain health matters, and lifestyle makes a difference.*** To view all Brain Health Boosts [click here](#).