

Press Release

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FOR IMMEDIATE REALEASE

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SAFE Glen Cove Coalition: COVID-19 Research Study Shows Social Connectedness Associated With Better Mental Health Outcomes in Youth

A recent article published in the Journal of Adolescent Health of longitudinal survey data of more than 3,000 adolescents ages 11-14 recorded before and during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 found that supportive relationships with family and friends and healthy behaviors, like engaging in physical activity and better sleep, appeared to shield against the harmful effects of the pandemic on adolescents' mental health. The research was supported by the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) and is based on data from the [Adolescent Brain Cognitive Development \(ABCD\) Study](#), the largest long-term study of brain development and child health ever conducted in the United States.

Researchers also explored predictors of perceived stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms, and found that girls were more likely than boys to experience psychological distress during the pandemic. Psychosocial factors, including poorer quality and functioning of family relationships, more screen time, and witnessing discrimination in relation to the pandemic, also predicted youth distress.

In this study, investigators analyzed data from a longitudinal cohort of over 3,000 [ABCD Study](#) participants ages 11 to 14-years-old and their families. These young adolescents and their parents completed pre-pandemic assessments by February 2020, which documented baseline parent/caregiver reports of externalizing problems (e.g., acting aggressively, breaking rules) and sleep disturbances (e.g., sleep duration), and youth reports of internalizing problems (e.g., feeling anxious or depressed). Participating parents and youth then separately completed three online COVID-19 surveys, conducted between May and August 2020, which featured more than 200 items across psychosocial and lifestyle domains.

Researchers looked for patterns of positive affect, anxiety, stress, and depressive symptoms across the surveys. They then interpreted the results through an algorithm to provide an overall ranking of variables according to their importance for predicting youth mental health outcomes. The top variables were categorized into eight domains: demographics; coping behaviors (e.g., having a regular mealtime); physical activities; relationships; resources (e.g., unable to afford food), screen time, sleep (e.g., pre-pandemic sleep disturbances), and other (e.g., pre-pandemic psychological problems).

Out of all the possible predictors considered, positive relationship variables, such as talking about plans for the coming day with parents, participating in family activities, and those related to healthy behaviors like physical activities and better sleep were among the top predictors of high positive affect and were also protective against stress, anxiety, and depression. Conversely, more screen time activities, including social media and video games, as well as witnessing racism or discrimination in relation to the coronavirus, emerged as important predictors for negative affect. The study also found that girls, and those who entered the pandemic with existing mental health or sleep problems, appeared to be particularly vulnerable to the negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

According to NIDA researchers, early adolescence is a time when youth are already experiencing rapid change physically, emotionally, and socially, and the COVID-19 pandemic has caused immense disruption to this sensitive life stage. This study helps to understand how modifiable lifestyle factors affect the mental health and well-being of adolescents, and it can inform the development of interventions to protect youth during a major life stress. This is important now, as we continue to manage the pandemic, and also in future crisis response at the local or national level. Researchers recommend parents/adults/caregivers focus on supporting young people's interests maintaining a routine, engaging in exercise and strengthening family relationships.

The Journal of Adolescent Health is a peer-reviewed medical journal covering adolescent health and medicine, including biological, psychological, and social aspects. The journal publishes original research articles, review articles, letters to the editor, commentaries, and case reports. For more information please visit jahonline.org.

To learn more about the SAFE Glen Cove Coalition please follow us www.facebook.com/safeglencovecoalition or visit SAFE's website to learn more about the COVID-19 Epidemic and its correlation to increased mental illness, alcohol and substance use in youth and adults please visit www.safeglencove.org.