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UW Health: Anxiety in children and adolescents on the rise during pandemic; tips for parents and caregivers

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MADISON, Wis. – The pandemic has led to a rise in anxiety and other mental health issues in children and adolescents, and that trend does not appear to be slowing down.

In the fall of 2021, the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and the Children's Hospital Association declared a national emergency on children's mental health.

The report showed a rise in emergency department visits and suicides which paints an alarming picture, according a UW Health Kids experts.

COVID-19 has negatively affected everyone, including children. In fact, according to the National Institutes of Health, approximately 1 out of 500 children in the United States experienced COVID-19-associated orphanhood or death of a grandparent caregiver, and those who lost a loved one were disproportionately children of color.

Additionally, virtual schooling impacted children's development, learning and social interactions. according to Dr. Mala Mathur, pediatrician, UW Health Kids, associate professor of pediatrics, University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health.

"The pandemic also interrupted sports, theater, music and other activities that children enjoyed," she said. "It altered or eliminated milestone celebrations like

birthdays, graduations, and prom, resulting in a sense of loss or grief for many children."

Many children also feared that they or a loved one would get very sick from the virus, she said.

"That is a lot for kids to handle; I am seeing a huge increase of anxiety disorders in my practice, especially during the last two years," Mathur said. "If untreated, chronic anxiety can lead to serious problems like substance abuse, depression or even suicide."

Mathur recommends these tips from healthchildren.org and American Academy of Pediatrics to help kids and caregivers:

- **Connect with your child**: Set aside one-on-one time to be present with your child without screens (no phones, TV or social media). Even 10 minutes a day of quality time can positively impact your child's well-being.
- **Help them manager fears**: Talk to your children, ask them how they are feeling, practice deep breathing and mindfulness.
- **Build healthy habits**: Help you child get regular exercise by playing outside or participating in sports. Encourage healthy eating habits, make sure they get plenty of sleep, limit screen time and make family routines a priority.
- **Get help**. If you or a loved one are experiencing suicidal thoughts, call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 1-800-273-8255.

"If these tips don't seem to be working, or the anxiety seems to be getting worse, get in touch with your child's doctor," Mathur said. "It is also important to connect with your child's teachers or guidance counselor so you can develop an approach to help manage your child's anxiety at school."

A recorded interview with Mathur is available.