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GUEST COLUMN: How to support children in a time of crisis

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Throughout the pandemic and the youth mental health crisis that have unfolded over the past two years, we have been on the “front lines” in several ways. As hospital leaders, we lead teams of medical experts who treat kids for COVID-19 and record-breaking levels of depression and anxiety. As fathers, we have seen firsthand the many ways that the uncertainty, disruptions and isolation of the past 24 months have affected children and teenagers. And as members of the Colorado Springs community, we continue to see troubling levels of behavioral disturbance, depression and suicide attempts among kids.

Children's Hospital Colorado is seeing twice as many patients reporting anxiety, depression and feelings of isolation than before the pandemic, and suicide is the top cause of death for Colorado kids 10 and older. Children and teens in our state have never needed our support more than they do right now.

There is so much that seems out of our control, and it can feel overwhelming. Yet, it's important for all of us to focus on what we can do to support the young people in our lives. While Children's Colorado and others continue to advocate for policy solutions and expanded mental health infrastructure, there are four things that you — as parents, relatives, educators, neighbors, mentors, coaches, faith leaders and more — can do to help the kids around you.

First, promote open communication and trust in your relationships with the young people you know. You can ask how they're feeling, what's on their mind and what they're looking forward to. Be vigilant about signs of depression and anxiety. If you notice a child is often irritable or tearful, consistently appears withdrawn or unmotivated, no longer seems to enjoy activities that they used to love, or feels sad for days at a time, talk to them about it (and if you're not their parent, reach out to their parents or caregivers, too).

Second, if you think a child might be suicidal, ask them directly and be prepared to offer help. Sometimes people worry that by asking they'll plant the idea of suicide, but you'll actually create space for support. To find behavioral health services, start with your pediatrician. Therapy has become more widely accessible via telehealth during the pandemic and all Coloradans under 18 are now entitled to three free behavioral health sessions through the I Matter program.

For urgent, confidential advice about an adolescent or teenager who is suicidal, call the Colorado Crisis Line or the National Suicide Prevention LifeLine. Also, ensure that all firearms, poisons, medication and other dangerous items are locked away and inaccessible (and alert any other adults around the child).

Third, to help kids maintain a positive mood, our behavioral health experts at Children's Colorado recommend limiting screen time. Social media and too much time spent online increase feelings of isolation, anxiety and depression. Technology is a mainstay of kids' lives, but social media and gaming can lead to online bullying that sparks violence or self-harm, as well as addiction that prevents kids from showing up for life in a healthy way.

The fourth things adults can do to help kids: Create opportunities for healthy activities. Encourage exercise, especially outdoors, and plan in-person social activities and creative ways to explore the world.

Whether you're a teacher, coach, parent, faith leader, mentor, relative or concerned citizen, you can help kids by encouraging connection and healthy activities, keeping an eye on their moods, and taking action to get help when they need it.

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