

The Pandemic that never ends...

A surge in teen suicide attempts and other mental health crises recently prompted Children's Hospital of CO to declare a state of emergency. In April 2021, emergency department visits were up by 90%, and there were limited mental health resources to meet the need.

The Denver Post article by Lindsey Tanner, "Kids struggle to cope as society opens up" (June 30, 2021) shares the stories of teens across this nation facing similar tragic experiences. They described self-destructive and suicidal thoughts; feeling worn down, almost like running in a marathon; finding it difficult to motivate themselves and having no energy for happiness.

Though we do not know the specific facts of each youth's situation, one can assume that some, if not most, of those young people come from intact, healthy families. For all of us, adults and children alike, the Pandemic has wreaked havoc never before experienced. We are all now challenged to get back to "normal." That normal may remain elusive. It is not as if we can flip a switch. We have all been forced to make changes. For those who became sick, or died, families are changed forever. For those who lost businesses or livelihoods, the changes have dramatically altered their lives.

Now imagine the toll taken on kids and teens who in the midst of this unique and horrific crisis were not in healthy families. Perhaps they were living with violence in their homes and were not protected. What if they were rescued from the violence, but placed with strangers in foster care, after being separated from their siblings?

For the children who are abused or neglected in our community, the Pandemic is seemingly ever present. The same grief, anxiety, depression, and isolation exists for many, if not most of the 4500 children in foster care. Even when these kids are placed with good alternative families, they rarely get the mental health or other services they need to heal from the trauma of the abuse, or the separations that occur. (See S. Cancel, et al, Aged Out: How We're Failing Youth Transitioning out of Foster Care, December 17, 2020)

For the families who step up to help these kids, be they kin or foster parents, they too often are denied the supports necessary to help the child heal and establish relationships that can insure growth and development in the midst of such a personal crisis.

Our nation has not served children well in this Pandemic. The lack of mental health services, the closing of schools, the isolation and separation from peers, the undeniable depression and overwhelming uncertainty made it so much worse.

As we slowly come out of this Pandemic, let us be mindful of our children. Let us consider the day-to-day business of "being a child." Our children need the ability to laugh and have fun. Let us be thoughtful, creative and generous in giving kids opportunities and experiences suggesting a bit of normalcy, and perhaps even an opportunity to laugh.

For children in healthy families, they can more easily be spared the worst of the Pandemic. For children who count on the government to keep them safe, healthy and educated, the pandemic may never end. So let's not count on the government. Let's count on each other to change the world for foster kids.