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**Assessing the needs for early childhood mental health consultation upon return to school after
COVID-19**

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Abstract

School-based mental health consultation recognizes and understands the importance of children's emotional and behavioral needs in conjunction with educator/caregiver competencies. In early childhood classrooms, mental health consultation utilizes a problem-solving approach, creating collaborative relationships with educators to build their skills and expertise (Duran et al., 2009). Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation (ECMHC) works to maximize the social-emotional skills of all children while minimizing the vulnerabilities of children experiencing behavioral difficulties (Low & Shepard, 2010). As emotional and behavioral challenges are increasing in early childhood settings, it is evident that mental health consultation is becoming increasingly necessary and beneficial (Green, Everheart, Gordon, & Gettman, 2006). With the ongoing nature of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, concerns regarding the mental health of children are continuing to increase. As transitions to in-person learning are beginning, the need for mental health consultation services will continue to increase. The following information will examine recommendations for consultants in addressing mental and behavioral health and social-emotional learning for the return to in-person schooling.

Post Covid-19 Impact of ECMHC

Current research indicates emotional and behavioral challenges are increasing in early childhood settings, making mental health consultation more necessary than ever. This increase is very prevalent with the ongoing nature of the corona virus pandemic and concerns regarding the mental health of young children. Early research has suggested that more than 20% of students exhibited symptoms of anxiety and depression after just 1 month in quarantine (Xie et al., 2020). Many students who were receiving mental health or behavioral supports have not been able to access needed services, thus potentially increasing mental health related difficulties (National Association of School Psychologists, 2020). In previous years, about 20% of children experience social-emotional or behavioral concerns. In light of COVID-19, that percentage is expected to double or even triple afterwards (Costello et al., 2003). That being said, many students will be returning to school with increased social–emotional and mental health issues associated with the effects of the pandemic, which will complicate school function (National Association of School Psychologists, 2020). While research on the effects of COVID-19 are relatively new and growing, the mental health and social-emotional concerns of children must be addressed through the support of increased early childhood mental health consultation services. For schools in the process of fully reopening, there are going to be difficult conversations and changes in their response to the health and safety of children. Though these new changes are geared towards facilitating the physical safety of children and staff, they pose new challenges for supporting the social emotional development of young children in early childhood settings.

Early Childhood Mental Health Concerns

Current research has presented three common concerns for the mental health of young children: increased anxiety, difficulty coping, and increased behavioral difficulties. Generalized anxiety, separation anxiety, and social anxiety are the most commonly diagnosed disorders in early childhood (Brown, McCobin, Easley, & McGoey, 2020). In conjunction with the COVID-19 pandemic, children are specifically facing a greater risk of both social and separation anxiety. For months, while peer interaction remained quite minimal or virtually through the computer, parents and other close family members have

likely been the majority of social interactions that children have had. Due to these differences, children may feel nervous or reluctant to return to school, especially depending on how they adapted to learning at home. Returning back to school will require children to separate from the daily care and interaction of their parents and interact with their peers, teachers, and become re-acclimated to in-person school routines, which can be anxiety invoking for young children. That being said, teachers, mental health professionals, and parents need to be prepared for many different expressions of anxiety (Child Mind Institute, 2020). Evidence of anxiousness in the classroom can include general distress, clinginess, excessive worry, separation fears, somatic complaints, sleep difficulties, and repetitive and perfectionistic behaviors (Mian, Godoy, Briggs-Gowan, & Carter, 2012). For preschool-age children, teachers often may not initially address anxiety. This is because it is frequently difficult to differentiate between common anxieties of early childhood, like being shy, nervous, or scared, and more serious concerns (Brown, McCobin, Easley, & McGoey, 2020). That being said, it is essential that educators and mental health professionals recognize these difficulties and implement necessary supports in order to target serious anxiety behaviors, and subsequently common anxieties of young children following the pandemic.

Additionally, children may also experience difficulty coping with the new normal and transitioning back into in-person instruction. In the past year, children have been attending and receiving school services in an online format. This change may have caused children to feel disconnected from their friends, family, school, and likely impacted what their typical daily routine consists of. The COVID-19 pandemic presents new challenges for children adapting to new changes and facing trauma, grief, loss, confusion, and fears of health/safety. Evidence of this is persistent crying, withdrawal and sadness, anxious behavior, and difficulty concentrating (Child Mind Institute, 2018). Currently there are many unknowns and it is difficult to understand what to expect regarding students' return school. That being said, not all children are going to respond the same. Children will be returning to school with different experiences and understandings of the pandemic. Therefore, Children may find it difficult being physically distanced from friends and teachers while at school (National Association of School Psychologists, 2020). Additionally, they may feel confused or scared by new safety guidelines and

different social expectations. There will be difficulties in addressing and adapting to those changes, but it will be crucial to help children adjust, develop coping skills, and regulate their emotions.

That being said, increased behavioral difficulties are an additional mental health concern for children returning back to school. Children often have difficulty expressing and regulating underlying emotions or feelings of anxiety (Child Mind Institute, 2020). In conjunction with increased anxiety and difficulty coping, young children benefit from recognizing their strong emotions and from learning that they can control them (Brown, McCobin, Easley, & McGoey, 2020). Due to different experiences and understandings surrounding the pandemic, children may feel nervous or overwhelmed when transitioning back to school. Therefore, it will be essential for young children to not only recognize their emotions but also learn to label how they are feelings. Increasing emotional literacy often reinforces the improvement of behavior. By strengthening these social emotional skills, children will effectively both take initiative in seeking help from adults and learn to self-regulate their emotions in the future.

Recommendations for Return to School

Schools are uniquely positioned to provide mental health services and social emotional supports across many children's needs where it is the most accessible. Many schools already implement multidisciplinary supports and decision making through Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS). An MTSS framework help to equip schools with essential personnel to support and implement necessary recommendations across various domains. School psychologists, school counselors, and school social workers are specifically trained in the mental wellbeing of young children and how to support their social emotional needs, while offering guidance to school's administrators, educators, caregivers, and parents in fostering those skills (National Association of School Psychologists, 2020). These services will be essential in transitioning back to in-person schooling as all children have been affected by COVID-19 in some way, so services should be provided, or at least offered, to all children. Increased anxiety, difficulty coping, and increased behavioral difficulties are expected to be prevalent concerns of young children going back to school, in addition to other behaviors where severity can vary. Furthermore, it is important for schools to offer recommendations for early childhood mental health consultation on a school-wide or

class-wide scale. Providing these strategies in this way promotes an inclusive approach for intervention and prevention for children's physical and emotional safety, addressing both minor and more serious concerns. Likewise, this assists mental health professionals from running the risk of becoming overwhelmed and exhausting resources (National Association of School Psychologists, 2020). Instead of screening each individual child, which would be difficult to do, providing support for all students can assist the screening process for children that may benefit from more intensive supports, while also fostering the social, emotional, and academic achievement of all students.

The recommendations that were assessed are maintaining openness and communication, the opportunity for social emotional programming, and practicing mindfulness. Maintaining open communication allows for a unified support system for the child between teachers, parents, and caregivers. Positive, responsive relationships serve as protective factors when a child is feeling anxious, as they nurture the relationship with the child and offer motivation in connecting to other social supports (Zero to Three, 2020). Additionally, fostering an open and communicative relationship with the child can be beneficial as a preventative measure for all children in having meaningful and supportive conversations early. It is important to encourage children to reach out when things become challenging and feel comfortable in sharing ideas and strategies to address those challenges (Zero to Three, 2020). This encourages expression of their feelings, as well as reinforcing their progression of other social emotional skills. By implementing this recommendation, teachers, parents, and caregivers can become accustomed to the needs of their child and assist young children in feeling safe and secure in seeking help when those needs arise.

Another recommendation for ECMHC is the opportunity for social emotional programming. Social and emotional learning (SEL) is a process that helps children practice necessary life skills including awareness of one's own emotions, developing relationships with others, encouraging decision making. With direct instruction and play, teachers and mental health professionals can incorporate social emotional programs throughout their curriculum that help foster resilience and target both emotional regulation and coping skills through a traditional learning environment (Brown, McCobin, Easley, &

McGoey, 2020). Developing social skills is imperative for child development and success, but there may be new guidelines that limit interactive play. Social emotional programming can help facilitate new ways of learning and playing that are physically safe and help raise both awareness and the understanding of emotions surrounding these changes. Educators can incorporate collaborative activities in line with existing guidelines that allows for the safe collaboration of children and their peers, while learning social emotional skills in a fun way. It is necessary that children receive repeated and consistent teaching and practice in order for these strategies to be effective in managing symptoms of anxiety (Brown, McCobin, Easley, & McGoey, 2020). Additionally, the use of routines, both inside and outside of the classroom, is an effective strategy for social emotional health and development. Creating a routine and supporting the development of new routines helps alleviate anxiety, maintain control, and regulate emotions (Child Mind Institute, 2020). Teachers and caregivers can use visual schedules to cue the children and prepare for expected transitions (Zero to Three, 2020). Facilitating routines would be beneficial in creating a safe and structured physical and emotional environment through offering reassurance and regulation. When children are stressed, their bodies respond by activating the expression of their anxiety and other emotions. To help them manage these reactions, it is important to both validate their feelings and encourage them to engage in activities that help them self-regulate (Child Mind Institute, 2020). By offering the children a sense of predictability, adults are able to assist them in establishing a reconnection with peers and integrating back into in-person learning safety.

One of these social emotional strategies that could be incorporated is practicing mindfulness. Mindfulness is both a self-care strategy and learning tool that helps a child bring awareness to the thoughts and feelings they have inside them, in accordance with what is going on externally. Teachers and caregivers can use deep breathing or meditative exercises with children to facilitate calming the body and practicing self-regulatory behaviors. Mindfulness has shown benefits in modeling and practicing these social emotional skills which encourages a child to talk about the source of their anxiety or can assist the child with labeling their feelings and subsequently their behaviors (Child Mind Institute, 2020). When a child is feeling anxious or frustrated, mindfulness can be integrated for a child to practice alone, with their

peers, and with their parents. Mindfulness can offer a sense of control over what many children, and adults, feel that they cannot (The Child Mind Institute, 2020). This can encourage expression of emotions, facilitate the acceptance of those emotions, and alleviate anxious behaviors.

Conclusion

While COVID-19 affect research is relatively new, early childhood mental health consultation is very necessary and beneficial for children returning back to in person schooling. Implementation recommendations such as maintaining openness and communication, the opportunity for social emotional programming, and practicing mindfulness will be useful in targeting increased anxiety, identifying the cause of anxious expressive behavior, and developing coping skills. Early childhood mental health professionals have a responsibility to implement recommendations that increase prosocial support and prevention efforts in order to maximize ECMHC benefits in returning to school. With time and practice, schools can hope to see improvements in a child's ability to initiate coping mechanisms for anxiety and both understand and regulate their emotions. It is important to understand that all students will react to anxiety, trauma, and grief differently upon returning to school, but by administering these recommendations to everyone, not only are we able to provide support and prevention efforts for every child's wellbeing, but also screen for those that may benefit from more intensive supports.

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