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Title: Mental Health and Well-Being in Young Children; A Mission to
Save Our Children

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Mental Health and Well-Being in Young Students: A Mission to Save Our Children

Our current generation of young students are in a mental health crisis—who is going to start a movement to save our children? As the number of students battling mental health issues rise, so do their mortality rates. Rates of suicide among children 5 to 11 have risen on average 15 percent a year from 2013 to 2020 (Sparks, 2022). Read that statistic again, ages five to eleven are committing an irreversible action. As of 2020, suicide has become the 10th leading cause of death for those ages 5 to 9, according to the most recent data from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and Prevention (Sparks, 2022).

How does the recent COVID-19 pandemic affect the ongoing mental health crisis of our youth? Research by Fong and Iarocci finds that pandemic-related social isolation and quarantining is resulting in significant anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, and fears in children and adolescents (Fong & Iarocci, 2020). Studies were completed on health datasets to compare all shifts in suicide-related behaviors over the years. Hill and colleagues analyzed the results of regular screening for suicide in 20,000 youth participants, comparing it to the percentage of youth reporting suicidal thoughts and attempts from the month of March to July of 2020 with the same time span in 2021. Hill and others found increased statistics of suicidal thoughts from March to July of 2020 and increased suicidal attempts in February to April and July 2020 (Meade, 2020). To spark a movement, we must gain understanding and knowledge as to what our youth is currently undergoing. Next, we will uncover the sources of stress for young students related and unrelated to the recent pandemic, COVID-19.

Many individuals within older generations ask the question, “Children are so young, what do they truly have to worry about?”. Children have a daunting task of taking on their own

personal responsibilities, feelings, and those passed on from their parents, families, or caregivers. Young students deal with emotional and physical issues within their home life and living situations. According to American Psychological Association, school is another frequent source of concern for kids; being social and attempting to make friends, dealing with bullies, and being in a proper classroom environment all relate to a student's well-being (APA, 2019). Meeting unrealistic expectations is a new stressor for students as social media and their correlating trends are on the rise. Children feel a new weight of trying to carry the best bookbag, the cutest pencils, a lunchbox filled with name-brand food, and completing each trending TikTok trend. Additionally, the pandemic brought an entire list of new stress sources to the table. The National Library of Medicine created a list of pandemic-related sources of stress for children. This list included increased social isolation, safety and health concerns, taking on the stress of parents and caregivers, family conflict/child abuse, uncomfortable living situations, loss of prosocial activities, virtual school and classes, screen time, and decreased access to medical and mental health care (Meade, 2021).

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, research recorded in April 2022 shows that 44% of young students are being offered diagnostic mental health assessments and treatment (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024). What about the other 56% of the young student population? In the years of 2021 and 2022, the recorded major limitations of providing mental health resources to students was due to the lack of access to a licensed professional and funding (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024). The current issue is that our students are suffering, and schools do not have the appropriate resources to support this issue. State governments are failing to fund the most important part of a school—the students! A new report for North Carolina public school funding from 2023 tells that North Carolina gave

only 2.32% to support the K-12 school systems; ranking lowest in the country (Rao, 2023). How are administrators, educators, faculty, and students supposed to function and learn with the lack of funding amongst the public-school systems? Furthermore, this is not the only issue the state government faces regarding the school systems.

How are our educators expected to pour into students when they are not receiving adequate support for themselves? A related issue is the current teacher shortage; a whopping 86% of districts had trouble filling their open positions for the 2023-2024 school year (Schermele, 2023). Commonly seen in elementary grades, teachers spend their lunches carrying the workload of other positions that are unfilled due to the teacher shortage. Planning time, lunch breaks, and after-school time is spent planning and completing each task that was left unfinished throughout the busy school day. The PEW Research Center finds that 88% of elementary grade teachers do not have enough time during regular school hours to complete their tasks (PEW Research Center, 2024). The same research center also found that 81% of elementary teachers find their job highly stressful, 75% found it to be extremely overwhelming (PEW Research Center, 2024). Elementary educators had the most alarming statistics by far on each of the surveys relating to teaching experience and feelings towards the field. Educators deserve increased support, resources, funding, and staff to contribute to a positive learning experience for our children.

As discussed previously, mental health concerns can begin as soon as five years old in our current generation of children. This could be due to factors related to recent life-altering events, increased pressure and stressors related to school, and educators' feelings of burn-out and hopelessness. We must take the initiative to save our children, the future generations of students, and even our own kids that we send to school daily. Do educators know the warning signs of

depression and anxiety in young students? Do teachers in various focus areas (art, PE, library, music, etc.) know how to spot the warning signs and inform the school psychologist? A quote from Kevin Hollis, a public-school representative in Connecticut, states that “You should train anybody that kids have access to, because kids don’t necessarily go to a teacher” (Sparks, 2022). Increased funding would bring awareness opportunities to faculty, educators, administration, and even the parents of young students. Each member of a school’s staff should take a mandatory mental health awareness and prevention course, including how to spot the warning signs for several mental illnesses and abuse.

The required curriculum should include healthy discussions about mental health and students’ well-being, instead of keeping it concealed. Let us give students an opportunity to open up about their true feelings—it may save a life. A simple discussion can save our children. Classrooms can sometimes serve as a safe space for young children that they may not experience elsewhere. Every staff member, even lunch and custodial staff should be equipped with the knowledge it takes to recognize the signs and save a child. Administrators could bring in local mental health organizations to their area for a school assembly idea. School systems could also implement an increase in support for their students of color, given the recent controversy surrounding Chinese and Chinese American students and the COVID-19 pandemic; as well as students who may identify as a part of LGBTQ. Instead of giving students who cause trouble detention, instead offer intervention with a counselor and find the root issue rather than fueling the fire. Clinicians, whether they work for the district or a partnering agency, can observe the child on the playground and in the classroom (Rix, 2022). Observation and the art of noticing is crucial to improving a student’s well-being. Poor mental health can interfere with a student’s ability to learn, ability to behave properly, be engaged, and be social with peers (CDC, 2023).

With proper funding, adequate care for our current and future educators, and awareness techniques, we can work together to save our children.

Dedication: Lily Claire Butler

I want to dedicate my honors project to my dear friend, Lily Butler. I dedicate my life to honoring her life and spreading mental health awareness. Lily was a bright light and kind soul to all who knew her. She passed away in July of 2021 after a long-fought battle with issues surrounding the topic of mental health and related issues. There are no words to describe the type of person Lily was. Kind, gentle, caring, trustworthy, true friend, are just a few. Also, funny, talented, down-to-earth, and an angel on Earth are a few more! She was truly so special, and I am honored to have known her for a small amount of time. Her parents, Chip and Carol Butler, still continue to honor her memory daily, and annually with a Run with Lily event. It is a 5k race dedicated in her honor, as Lily loved to run more than anything! Our community comes together to support in raising money for a local organization that provides therapy surrounding mental health concerns. I will continue to attend this event, and hopefully others reading this will think of Lily and her beautiful spirit will live on!