
STOP ASSUMING MOST KIDS WILL BE RESILIENT IN THE FACE OF COVID-19: WHEN WE BELIEVE THIS, WE FAIL TO PROTECT THEM AS WE MUST

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A common phrase echoed far too often during the pandemic is that “kids are remarkably resilient”. Repeating this over and over doesn’t make it true. Nor does it shield us from our responsibility to protect children now, when they need us most. Misinformation about children’s resilience has pushed their needs to the back of the line during these trying times, increasing their vulnerability.

The notion of resilience is complex; it is certainly not an innate trait. Resilience implies doing reasonably well in the context of being exposed to threat or severe adversity. This “doing well” depends to a large extent on two things during this global pandemic: the nature (and magnitude) of the trauma children have endured and the security provided by family, schools, and peer relationships. It’s a delicate balancing act. If the potency of the stressors exceeds the healing or buffering power of supportive influences in children’s lives, their ability to cope becomes exhausted.

After a global pandemic spanning two years with no clear end in sight, the risks faced by children, in many cases, are overwhelming the protection provided to them. Some children are experiencing the pandemic with little support against a backdrop of trauma and individual vulnerability. Others live in more predictable, safe, supportive, and structured environments.

The stark statistics of parental death illustrate this. As of February 7, 2022, [5.7](#) million COVID-19 deaths have been recorded worldwide, with Canada facing [34,721](#) deaths. This number keeps climbing, with more than 140 Canadians dying each day as the Omicron surge approaches its peak. Embedded in these numbers are family tragedies. Although no comparable statistics exist for Canada, we know that more than [167,000](#) American children under the age of 18 have lost a parent or primary caregiver. This translates to about 1 in 450 American children facing the “cruellest of pain”. The data also show that

marginalized and vulnerable children experience this stressor more than anyone else. The children of racial and ethnic minority groups, for example, have a [four-times](#) greater rate of parental loss than white children in the United States. Again, we do not have comparable Canadian statistics, but it is unlikely that our most susceptible have been spared from this cruelty.

We know from other major disruptive events such as natural disasters, wars, terrorism attacks, and earlier pandemics what this kind of loss does to children. Parental death impacts all aspects of a child's functioning. These children are more likely to be absent from school, less likely to complete school, and more likely to fail academically. They are also more likely to be depressed, anxious, and have behavioural difficulties. Parental loss even affects the physical health of children, both in the immediate and in the long-term, including increasing the odds that they too will [die early](#).

If a parent's death is devastating on its own, such heartbreak during the pandemic is nested within other stressors – school closures, social isolation, loneliness, racism, and economic uncertainty, among them – that collectively overwhelm the adaptive capacity of most children.

The most consistent assets of resilient children are caring families, healthy schools, and good peer relationships. The pandemic, however, has, to varying degrees, disrupted all these protective factors for all Canadian children, and for so very long. COVID-19 has strained relationships in all facets of life, from old friends to newer ones like classmates, socially distanced and hidden behind masks. Adults, too, have suffered through the prolonged uncertainties and losses they've faced — leading to higher stress and fearfulness. This has often led to shorter fuses and more overt expressions of anger, within families, communities, and society in general. During just the first few months of the pandemic, [data](#) on more than 39,000 children showed a three-fold increase in rates of physical abuse. Domestic violence increased to the point of being described as a "[pandemic within the COVID-19 pandemic](#)". When relationships around children are ridden with strife and anger, the damage is profound.

Resilience is contingent on the adults in the lives of children being healthy. The [science is clear](#) on this front. If we want children to be resilient, we need to take an "upstream," prevention-based approach, with policy makers doing all they can to ensure the well-being of caregiving adults. This is best done by providing supportive, scientifically validated interventions for people in their own communities, including parents at home, teachers, counselors, and other supportive adults at school. For example, the National

Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine recommends the Authentic Connections Groups program that is science-based, relatively low-cost, and has been validated both in-person at the Mayo Clinics in Arizona and Minnesota, as well as in virtual format.

Two years into the pandemic, parents and caregivers are increasingly burned out and emotionally exhausted. Many are [broken](#). They must be replenished if they are to serve as effective buffers for children in the months and years ahead. We are not in the dark on how to fix this. There are plenty of [evidence-based efficacious programs](#) that can help parents. Children must also be replenished by investing in their [mental health](#) and [social-emotional development](#) through school-based programs. This, of course, means that schools must stay open, but to do so, they must first be safe.

Children depend on adults to notice and salve their distress. Instead, our misguided view that they can, and will, tough things out has failed them. It's time to acknowledge their suffering and recognize that even the most privileged cannot be resilient when all their safeguarding systems are failing. It's an impossible ask. And if we continue to delude ourselves with the notion that "kids are resilient," we may hasten a "[generational catastrophe](#)" that could take generations to recover from.

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