



## Psychologist warns of mental health costs of keeping kids out of school

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[Emma Smith](#) · CBC News · Posted: Jul 09, 2020 4:01 PM AT | Last Updated: July 9



A Dartmouth, N.S., psychologist is urging the provincial government to find creative and safe ways to get kids back to school. (NarongchaiHlaw/Shutterstock)

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As the province decides on a back-to-school plan for the fall, health experts are warning of the mental health risks of keeping kids out of the classroom.

Without the routine and social connection that school brings, many kids and teens have reported feeling sad, stressed and anxious since the pandemic cancelled in-person classes in mid-March, said Dr. Kiran Pure, a clinical psychologist in Dartmouth, N.S.

Even though public health restrictions have begun to lift, her small team of psychologists is still working "basically non-stop and it's been a lot of mental health support."

Pure said she's been struck by the intensity of the mental health challenges some kids are experiencing, especially those with existing conditions.

"We've seen a lot of general anxiety, stress, withdrawn behaviour, apathy. A lot of kids sleeping in until ... the afternoon because they feel like they have nothing to get up for," she said.

Earlier this month, Nova Scotia's education minister said he's working on three back-to-school options for the fall, ranging from in-person classes only to entirely remote learning as well as a hybrid option.

Pure wants the province to bring kids back to classrooms in some capacity, whether that means having smaller classes or staggered times that kids are at school.

"It's hard to know what that looks like in the midst of a pandemic, but I really think it's vital and we have to be creative in how we get kids back to school. It's really, really important," she said.



Kiran Pure, a child psychologist in Dartmouth, said as public health rules get lifted, there's uncertainty among kids about what the rules are.  
(Melinda Watt)

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## **A 'crisis' in children's health**

Most of the kids she sees aren't worried about getting the coronavirus. Instead, they tell her about missing their friends and teachers and feeling anxious that they don't know when that will ever change.

Pure also treats teens and young adults and said she's seen an increase in suicide attempts during the pandemic.

"These would be young people with existing issues of anxiety and depression where the COVID-19, social isolation, just lack of control has made things that much worse for them," she said.

The CEOs of some of Canada's top children's hospitals are also sounding the alarm about the impact of COVID-19 public health restrictions, warning of a "crisis in children's health with potentially catastrophic impacts."

Dr. Krista Jangaard with the IWK Health Centre told CBC's *Information Morning* that schools provide vital social interaction and development for kids.

She urged Nova Scotia to "come up with something that will actually allow kids to be together as much as they can and still live within what we need to do for public health."

## **What parents can do**

COVID-19 has added stress to people's lives while also taking away many of the activities they used to cope with stress, said Dr. Simon Sherry, a psychologist and professor at Dalhousie University.

He said anxiety levels among young people were already on the rise before COVID-19 arrived in Nova Scotia this spring, in part due to increased time on social media.

He advises parents to put limits on screen time and to plan safe ways for children to see their friends.

With so much uncertainty in the world, he said it's also important for parents to give their kids opportunities to make decisions.

"Allow them to have some control and some efficacy of decision-making in relevant family matters because they've lost so much control," he said.

Pure said in the last couple weeks, kids have told her they feel worried about the growing number of cases in the U.S. and that it could happen here. She encourages parents to limit how much kids watch the news, especially news out of the U.S.

## **Parents need help, too**

Pure said she's heard from many parents who are feeling overwhelmed trying to balance work and teach their kids who are lonely and sad.

"In September ... if there are more restrictions in place, what provisions do we have for families, parents and children that allow some buffer to their anxiety and stress?" she asked.

Both Sherry and Pure say it's still unclear how growing up in the age of a global pandemic will affect children and youth's mental health in the years to come, but both agree that kids are a resilient bunch.

"Children have remarkable strength and ability, I believe, to be resilient," Pure said. "I see that, but I think that they need to be back at school. They need to have friendships."

Department of Education and Early Childhood Development spokesperson Gary Andrea said the province knows the best place for students is in the classroom and it's important for their development.

"The department recognizes the importance of structure and routine to students' overall wellness and this is being taken into consideration in the development of our reopening plans," he wrote in an email.

Andrea said school psychologists and mental health clinicians continue to work with students and services, both virtually and in person.

He said the province expects to announce a reopening plan by the end of the month.

## **Where to go for help**

People can contact the Kids Help Phone at 1-800-668-6868 anytime of day. The province's toll-free Mental Health Crisis Line is 1-888-429-8167 and available 24 hours, seven days a week.

The Nova Scotia Health Authority's new online mental health services can be accessed here: <https://mha.nshealth.ca/en>.

If you're experiencing an emergency, call 911.