Mental Health: Impacts of Parents' Mental Health on Their Children

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Honors Thesis Research

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Introduction

Trauma. Trauma is not a competition and it looks different to everyone. Trauma is an emotional response to a life event, where one can be left in shock and denial. Starting on January 10, 2020, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reported the outbreak in Wuhan, China, and the world got turned upside down by the pandemic, COVID-19. This epidemic is the modern definition of trauma. Norms changed for everyone, going outside, seeing friends, going to the market, or even to school. This affected children and parents, especially now coming back to “reality.”

Throughout the media, readers and viewers have seen reporting on how children have been struggling and how parents have been struggling, but not how those correlate. Instead, the news media made the executive decision to mainly focus on the epidemic, politics, and the economy (Chipidza, W., Akbaripourdibazar, E., Gwanzura, T., & Gatto, N., 2022).

Being a parent is hard. It's a big responsibility for someone to make decisions for a different person until they are 18 years old (Davis, Morris A., and E. Michael Foster). Children depend on their parents, but parents can also depend on their children. Parents' mental health can have a direct impact on their children, but parents aren’t alone and there are resources to help. The CDC reports that “1 in 14 children has a caregiver with poor mental health.” Parents had to deal with the pandemic affecting their work and social lives, but it also had an impact on their children. The American Psychological Association says that “nearly half of parents (48%) said the level of stress in their life has increased compared with before the pandemic.” With this in mind, in the fall of 2020, the American Academy of Pediatrics declared a national emergency in child and adolescent mental health.

A child's development is really important starting at a young age. "Research tells us that ages newborn to five is that fragile period for brain development," psychotherapist and trauma reprocessing specialist Sara Walters explains, adding, "Adolescence is the next big one." During these two periods of time, children are the least resilient and most vulnerable to the effects of parental mental illness.

Waters told CNN that "our generation and those before us were taught that discomfort is bad. We were taught to try to get rid of negative feelings or numb them out." It's important to understand that this is unhealthy and there is a generational gap that needs to be filled by adults being retaught, she said. Because of "mirror neurons, even children who haven't yet learned language will pick up on parent distress. They pick up on whether they are relaxed or stressed and — whether we like it or not — they will absorb and experience what they feel." This is something that happens within every family and was heightened with COVID-19 isolation.

Looking at how the news media reported during COVID-19 will give an insight into what key stories were missing. The beginning of COVID-19 had the biggest impact on people's perspectives and opinions for the duration of the pandemic. News media has the power to change the reactions of the public, but did they go about reporting in the right way? Overall, in this creative project, the reader will be able to get an inside look and understanding of what is currently happening within family dynamics and the ways it presents itself through reporting and storytelling that wasn't done during the pandemic. It's not a conversation that is too late or out of date, mental health isn't going anywhere.

Literature Review

Reporting During COVID-19

Journalism has been in a state of disruption for decades because of a host of forces, like digital technologies and changing economies as well as COVID-19 exacerbating that trend. Journalism from 2020 reveals patterns of digital news consumption shifting. News media innovation is beginning to accelerate as the public's engagement in news has increased dramatically during the COVID-19 pandemic, and not just for pandemic-related information (John V. Pavlik, 2021). The Pew Research Center reported that time spent on news sites in 2020 was up by 46% compared to 2019. Likewise, the number of visits to news sites in 2020 is up by 57% compared to 2019. During the pandemic, The Atlantic, Business Insider, The New York Times (NYT), and The Los Angeles Times, among others, nearly doubled their traffic (Scire, 2020). With this in mind, public demand for and use of news, especially COVID-19-related, has surged, particularly on digital platforms. Which we will analyze more in depth below.

As COVID-19 continues to present itself years after the start of 2020, as a society the impacts run deeper and go overlooked. As previously stated, the main topics reported on during the pandemic were the epidemic, politics, and the economy. Between January and October 2020, COVID-19 coverage "accounted for approximately 25.3% of all front-page online news articles" (Krawczyk Ket al, 2021).

COVID-19 was the time the media needed to step up. News media reporting is understood to play a central role during national security and health emergencies (Laing, 2011; Klemm et al., 2016; Pieri, 2019). During this time of uncertainty, news coverage could shape public opinions and beliefs through the amount, content, and tone of reporting. With this, news coverage is responsible for ongoing public debates about policy responses, including conflicting priorities relevant to the timing or stringency of implemented policies which we saw a lot of during COVID and people's responses (Laing, 2011; Pieri, 2019). Examples are information

about mandates, masks, vaccines, health topics, and policy responses. During COVID-19 people turned to the news media for a play-by-play of the outside world but were overwhelmed by contradicting topics and opinions. A Pew Research Center survey conducted during the pandemic revealed that over half (53%) of the U.S. population got their news from social media (Shearer & Mitchell, 2021).

Trust in the Media

The need for trustworthy news and reliable information about the pandemic was extremely important and had effects on parents' mental health, especially mothers. Research indicates that the public wants news it can trust, but the public also has seemingly become fatigued regarding pandemic news (John V. Pavlik, 2021). In the early period of COVID-19, there was a problem with having a prominent “voice” to guide the public on public health, scientific, and medical topics. Authors Chipidza, Akbaripourdibazar, Gwanzura, and Gatto from Cambridge University Press said that “experts may have missed an opportunity to establish themselves as trustworthy and credible sources for information at the beginning of the pandemic”.

Politicians appeared in news coverage more often than scientists did during the duration of COVID-19, and there was still a lack of a prominent voice to have authority over the situation our world was facing. Even Anthony Fauci, the Former Chief Medical Advisor to the President of the United States, wasn’t a strong leading voice as the Trump Administration remained wary of the scientist's findings and advice.

During the duration of the pandemic, the United States of America was led by President Donald Trump until January 2021, when President Joe Biden took office. At the beginning of the

pandemic, Trump assumed the position of a powerful voice and representative of the country and government. When looking at Trump's public statements during this uncertain time, "nearly six-in-ten U.S. adults (57%) say the President has been delivering the wrong message about the coronavirus outbreak to the country, and two-thirds say Trump and his administration only sometimes or hardly ever get the facts right about the outbreak. The survey also finds large partisan gaps when it comes to the administration's credibility and messaging about the pandemic" (Jurkowitz, 2020). This is all-important, as Jonathan Collins believes that if the public senses uncertainty from policymakers and/or believes that policymakers don't have the citizen's best interest at heart, could lead people avoiding to comply with mandates. The downside to avoiding mandates is that a substantial part of the national U.S. response to the pandemic involved social distancing and mask-wearing. This was highly politicized and polarized, as President Trump stated that although both were recommended by the CDC, neither was required and from the start, he stated he did not think he would wear a mask. For most Americans, "President Trump's COVID-19 messaging is seen as flawed, and even considered as misinformation; they looked instead to the news media for more reliable information, although partisan differences exist" (John V. Pavlik, 2021). Hart et al. (2020) found that other coverage also has often been highly politicized and polarized and skewed by the medium of news delivery. Eliminating bias and perceived bias are relevant here and are important to help raise ethical standards and practices which are some of the key factors in building trust.

Reporting on Reopening Schools

When the time came to discuss the policy on reopening schools, the CDC and President Trump were largely at odds. With this divide in opinions as well as the position of power, people

had a wide variety of opinions. August 2020 is a great example of the division between the CDC and President Trump, as in January 2021 there is an immediate harmony between the newly inaugurated President Biden and the news media coverage of COVID-19. As covered, there needed to be a trustful voice for the people and the new presidency allows for a new shift.

Within the first 100 days of Biden in office, he made the reopening of schools for in-person instruction a top priority. The difference between the previous reporting and power of voice which was president Trump was that Biden consistently emphasizes the need for health and safety restrictions as a central part of his plan. At this time, reports from mainstream news outlets circulated more updated information on the weaker impact of COVID-19 on children and the negative impact of COVID-19 on the American economy. We saw Biden come in with full force having more of an aggressive stance on reopening than the CDC. This shift in perspective changes the trust in information from the CDC and makes it an unrelated predictor of support for reopening schools.

Even though the president's voice changed and how it relates to the public was altered, “political conservatives expressed trust in news coverage of COVID-19 at a much higher rate (50%) than liberals (7%)”(Collins, 2022). If we analyze this, it seems most likely that the media coverage that favored reopening was likely predominantly happening on conservative-leaning outlets. As such, trust in the news as a motivating factor for supporting the reopening of schools appears to largely be a phenomenon amongst political conservatives. From the beginning of the pandemic, people already had decided who they trusted and where they got their information from.

Reporting on Kids' Mental Health Returning to School

We have looked at how journalism and news media focused on a lot of the same topics, lacked authority, and reported poorly, but there were some articles surrounding kids returning to school. Around March 2019, schools started to switch to online formats for extra quarantine safety. Two years later the transition back to reality is happening; schools, teachers, and counselors are ready to try to be proactive in the beginning weeks and have a sense of understanding and open arms. NPR focused on the importance of mental health check-ins with students and how that can be an easy first step. In this article, Dr. Tami Benton, psychiatrist-in-chief at the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, and the president-elect of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry highlighted that kids were “actually starting to develop their own approaches to assessing the social-emotional development” (Rhitu Chatterjee, NPR). This topic is common in the mental health field and is thrown around a lot with kids returning to school. Children's social and emotional development during the early childhood years relies on the foundation for their development through childhood, adolescence, and beyond (Halle, Churchill, 2016). This should be people's main priority for future generations, yet it was barely reported. This lack is due to a lack of reporting as well as the “weak consensus in the field about which constructs and measurement approaches should be used to capture children's social and emotional development” (Carter et al., 2004, Zaslow et al., 2006).

Children went through such an unknown time that even parents didn’t know how to navigate, but what concerned most adults were “the number of significant self-harm and suicidal ideation that we've seen in an emergency room," says Dr. Smriti Khare, the pediatrician and the chief mental and behavioral health office at Children's Wisconsin, in Milwaukee. The exact

statistics were that they “saw a 40% rise in visits to the ER after the start of the pandemic in 2020 compared to the year before”(Rhitu Chatterjee, NPR).

As previously mentioned, in the fall of 2020, three professional organizations including the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry declared the state of children's mental health a national emergency. These issues could look like self-harm and suicide or can lead to “kids with elevated levels of anxiety and stress, and we were seeing students manifesting mental health symptoms that had not existed before the pandemic," said Robert Mullaney, superintendent of Millis Public Schools in Massachusetts” (Rhitu Chatterjee, NPR). With these concerns on the rise, the need for resources for these kids is important. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, “Only about half the schools said they were equipped to address students' mental health needs.”

What is Mental Health?

The CDC defines mental health as including“our emotional, psychological, and social well-being. It affects how we think, feel, and act. It also helps determine how we handle stress, relate to others, and make healthy choices.” Mental health is vital at every stage of life, from childhood and adolescence through adulthood.

With the rise of social media and the impact of COVID-19, everyone worldwide was doing a striking amount of communication through a screen. According to the website Security.org, “seventy percent of parents estimated that their kids spend at least four hours a day with screens. Before the pandemic, 60 percent of parents estimated that their kids spent three hours or less in front of screens.” With increased screen time, as of early January 2020, 44% of all internet users in the U.S. said they had experienced online harassment. “The most prevalent

type of online harassment was offensive name-calling, making up 37 percent of all instances," according to the same website (Security.org, 2022).

Mental Health Care

Access to mental health care is limited. The news highlights the struggle for access to resources to help these kids. CNN and the Kaiser Family Foundation surveyed mental health issues in America. According to the survey reported through CNN, "More than half of Americans (55%) think most children and teenagers in the US aren't able to get the mental health services they need" (Brenda Goodman, CNN). "Nearly half of those parents, 47%, say the pandemic has negatively affected their kids' mental health, with 17% saying it had a major negative impact"(Brenda Goodman, CNN). It's obvious that parents are aware of their children being impacted by the pandemic, but they are also nervous about depression, anxiety, alcohol and drug use as well as worry in upper-class households with self-harm and eating disorders. It's a universal feeling for a parent to want to see their child succeed and live a long, healthy life.

The focus is on how parents can't find help for their children and with insurance, still, no one is available. The American Psychological Association estimates that half of the children in the United States who have a mental health disorder do not receive the treatment they need, a circumstance that experts say only got worse during the pandemic. According to the CNN report, even if a therapist was found they would probably have "no capacity for new patients", a waitlist of "five to six months", and an unpayable cost (Brenda Goodman, CNN).

Parent Struggles During COVID

COVID-19 was a time when the television screens, radio stations, and social media were starting to acknowledge a variety of frontline workers of the pandemic, like “first doctors and nurses, but the list soon expanded to include social workers, retail workers, truck drivers, transit workers, firefighters, letter carriers, restaurants staff, pharmacists, first responders, and sanitation workers”(O'Reilly, 2020). Finally, people were getting more awareness from the media, and stories of different experiences were being told. The pandemic had a mantra that Jackie Dunham, a mother referenced in the research, recognizes that we are all in this together, but that statement lacks the empathy to reach all groups, especially marginalized groups. “The people that are impacted most will always be the most marginalized” (O'Reilly, 2020).

The pandemic didn’t just affect the children of the world, but also the parents. With COVID-19, mental health practices have to look different in a very mentally difficult time, The New York Times changed the viewpoint of the parents’ struggle. “Traditional therapy is fantastic,” but it’s not realistic or accessible for everybody,” Lucy Rimalower, a licensed marriage and family therapist in Los Angeles added. Rimalower said asynchronous options like therapy apps that allow you to massage therapists, rather than have a 50-minute video session, may be helpful for parents strapped for time”(Jessica Grose, NYT).

Before the pandemic, parents already had enough pressure to make choices for their children, but now with the extra challenges of the pandemic, parents have to focus on their children’s health and remote education.

In the Jessica Grose NYT article, she highlights that research from the American Psychological Association showed that in April and May of 2020, “parents with children at home under 18 were markedly more stressed than non-parents” and “sixty-three percent of parents said they felt they had lost emotional support during the pandemic” (Jessica Grose, NYT).

One would think that getting sick during the pandemic was everyone's biggest fear, but for parents, it was clear that struggling to meet their children's basic needs was leading to the greatest ongoing emotional turmoil. "Over 60 percent of caregivers who are experiencing extreme financial problems reported emotional distress, compared with just over 30 percent of caregivers who have no financial issues" (Jessica Grose, NYT).

Parents were now looking for a new support system and all they had was the people surrounding them. This meant that "people were finding their little ones to be a source of comfort" (Jessica Grose, NYT). Once again, for parents and children, mental health issues are connected and need to be understood from a worldview.

Method

My creative project will be written as a long-form, problem-solution, article. With this, we will look at the impact of parents' mental health on their children, to find out if there is a way to educate parents that there is a way to get help, in order to, as a community, help future generations through reporting. I will incorporate methods of feature writing, narrative storytelling, and explanatory reporting. It's important to me to highlight what the news media didn't do during the time of COVID-19. This includes the mental status of parents and children, how those two factors impact each other, looking at statistics to help support anecdotes, and finding what parents and children need.

There is no bond like that between a parent and child; I want to show this scientifically as well as emotionally. It takes a village to raise kids, and we get to see what this village is made up of and if it is helping or hurting them, in the long run. I will achieve this through interviews with parents, children (of the parents), school counselors, and psychologists, as well as attending

parenting events. By conducting these interviews the story will go from there. I want to put myself into parents' shoes and then be able to take the shoes off to take a step back to reflect. Going to parenting events and adding resources to my paper will make the project itself a resource for those struggling or trying to be educated. My goal is to help others understand that they are not alone and that there are action items. Everyone is different, but overall people work the same. I want to use a theme of empathy and understanding throughout this piece, which is something that I believe some adults are lacking in comparison to our young generation.

Contribution

In the fall of 2021, I reported on how elementary school kids were doing with returning to in-person school post-pandemic. This opened my eyes to how much is going on in education and in the mental health world that is being overlooked. The people that know the most are the people living it and not everyone is in school or a parent. There needs to be awareness.

With this said, counselors have seen students returning to school without the necessary tools. Children need their parents to be there as role models and support systems. As I was thinking about this project I kept thinking, “how can parents handle this pressure when they aren’t okay themselves?” Since I have been reporting on education and different mental health topics, I know there is a problem that needs awareness.

While thinking about this topic for over a year, I realized there might be another deeper connection, my mom. I, an only child, was raised by a single mom who had me as her best friend. I knew everything going on in an adult's life before I can remember.

Circumstantially, I heard about cheating, drugs, alcohol, and finances. At the ripe age of thirteen-years-old, I was helping my mom pay the grocery bills. This doesn't affect my

appearance, but now as I am an independent adult I can see the fallout of knowing too much too young. This is not negative, but circumstantial. I can separate how my mom had the worst situation and dealt with it the best she could. But, what if there were resources, a community, and an open conversation? Would things have panned out differently? This is something we will never know. All we can do is look at parents' mental health and how that impacts their kids.

Parents don't have to be alone in the journey of raising kids, but that can also complicate things. With what we have in the media, we have heard a lot about the rise of mental health issues, and children struggling with school, social, and behavioral problems. In this creative project, the reader will be able to get an inside look and understanding of what it's currently happening within family dynamics and the ways it presents itself through reporting and storytelling.

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Creative Project

The stressors of the COVID-19 pandemic took a huge toll on parents' mental health. Those impacts trickled down to kids.

Mental health providers are trying to help parents and kids recover from a myriad of disruptions over the last few years by looking at the family as one functioning unit.

By Jayden Goodman

Jenna Ferguson was 10-years-old when Colorado's most destructive wildfire ripped through her community in Dec. 2021 — leaving friends displaced and more than 1,100 homes destroyed. The abnormal winter wildfire was fueled by 125 mph winds — a sound that still haunts her.

A few months after the fire, Jenna Ferguson's mom, Amanda, noticed that her typically chatty daughter was quieter than usual and appeared withdrawn.

"(She) was huddled like she was frozen," she recalled of her daughter, who sat in the backseat of the car as they were on their way to softball practice. At that moment, Amanda Ferguson realized that her daughter might need more help than she could provide. Looking back, she realized that her daughter might have been triggered by the wind — the same winds they felt on the day of the Marshall Fire.

Amanda Ferguson called local therapists and was placed on a waiting list for 12 weeks—until, finally, she got her daughter an appointment for "play" therapy. The sessions were expensive but worth it because they helped Jenna process her emotions related to the Marshall Fire and her fear of wind, as well as her father's death when she was four and the chaos created by the COVID-19 pandemic. Her mom had already been in therapy for years — both before, and then after, her husband's death. But the pandemic, and the Marshall Fire, had brought on new challenges, and she knew that there was more she could do for herself to better support her daughter.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on people's mental health. As the world went into lockdown, many people were forced to isolate themselves from their friends and loved ones, which led to feelings of loneliness and depression. Others lost their jobs or experienced financial hardships, which caused significant stress and anxiety. No one's experience was the same through the chaos. And the stress that parents felt had a trickle-down effect on kids.

Kirby Soltis, a therapist based in Boulder, Colorado, had only been licensed for a year when the COVID-19 pandemic hit in March 2020. Suddenly, the young therapist was inundated with patients seeking help for heightened stress and anxiety. Parents and kids alike were both struggling—but in some cases, kids watching their parents struggle added an extra layer of challenge.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, (CDC), "1 in 14 children has a caregiver with poor mental health." And according to a new study by Mental Health America, Colorado ranked 51st among all states, including the District of Columbia, for adult mental health in 2022. In October 2021, the American Academy of Pediatrics declared a national emergency in child and adolescent mental health, due in part to the stressors brought on by the pandemic.

Jennifer Ryan, a licensed school counselor based at Louisville Middle School, said there are a couple of kids in "intensive outpatient programs" who haven't returned to school yet.

The Pressures of Remote Learning

Rojita Abujam, a stay-at-home mom of an only child, said she appreciated how much awareness there was for how much parents were struggling, but found that "the support was not there."

"You can't beat anyone for that because there was no support for anyone," she added. "No one knew what was going on, but it was a lot harder on parents."

She recognized that having her husband working from home and being able to be attentive to her daughter was a privilege, but does not mean that the lockdown was easy.

Some families had two working parents "and needed those two jobs to financially take care of themselves," Abujam says. Abujam thinks that families overall " had a really, really rough time," as so "there were many cases where [parents] tried to get a nanny." This is something a family wouldn't get judged for, but in times of isolation, "neighbors judged them." Abujam saw this all over her parent groups on Facebook. The juggle of what to do became too much for some.

School closures were also simultaneously disrupting children's routines. Abujam's daughter, who was 4 at the beginning of the pandemic, attended online schooling at a private Montessori school for around 3 months. The classes were split up into pods. This wasn't what everyone thought was the right idea, but those four hours in the day "really, really helped" with Abujam's mental health, she said.

On the other hand, single mom and nurse practitioner Amanda Ferguson said that her daughter "doesn't like when she's off her routine." With no choice, Ferguson had to have her daughter Jenna move schools during the pandemic, since she works full-time and is studying to get her doctorate. She couldn't do hands-on learning with her daughter during the day and still be able to provide for her household.

Nearly 93% of people in households with school-age children reported their children engaged in some form of distance learning from home, but lower-income households were less likely to rely on online resources, according to the United States Census Bureau.

Parents had a wide variety of experiences and challenges during the pandemic. Those differences — often showcased through social media — made parents question whether they were doing the right thing, which took a toll on their mental health. It's a phenomenon that researchers refer to as the Social Comparison Theory.

According to Psychology.com, 10% of thoughts involve comparisons of some kind.

There are positive and negative effects of these comparisons; research shows that people who regularly compare themselves to others may find the motivation to improve, but they may also experience feelings of deep dissatisfaction, guilt, or remorse, and engage in destructive behaviors like lying or disordered eating.

One of Soltis' areas of focus as a therapist is addressing caregiver burnout, which is a sense of dysregulation in your emotional and bodily systems that stems from putting others' needs above your own.

These systems can be affected when there are stressful events that disrupt balance and the caregivers don't get the help they need, or if they try to do more than they are able, physically or financially.

The goal for Soltis is to help her patients "regain a sense of balance and peace" by using Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, Person-Centered Therapy, and Acceptance and Commitment Therapy.

She knows the work she does with parents trickles down to the children in the home.

Kids "hook into their parent's regulation system, so if mom lives in this world highly anxious, kids are gonna feel that same way," she said. "Some people also might call that generational trauma."

Parent and Child Relations

Children are the least resilient and most vulnerable to the effects of parental mental illness up until age five, according to Nicole Walters, a psychiatric mental health nurse practitioner who also teaches at Regis College in Denver. That's "a fragile period for brain development," she said. "Adolescence is the next big one."

According to Regis College, "children are sensitive receptors of parental distress — which may stem from such sources as social isolation, economic hardship, divorce, or acute or chronic mental illness — and, as a result, may be vulnerable to developing mental disorders themselves." This helps explain the effect COVID-19 had on parents and children.

Louisville Middle School counselor, Mrs. Ryan, saw the impact parents' mental health had on her students.

The kids are "going to notice if mom is upset or mom is scared or mom is anxious about something," she said. "They're going to notice."

Even though Ryan knows that children are going to pick up on their caregiver's emotions, she said that "the one thing that [people] forget about kids is how damn resilient their kids are." She added that parents are also resilient, but also "hold on to a lot of things too, that you don't always want to see."

Abujam said she tried to "be mindful of even if [a kid is] only six years old, I don't know if they understand things, feelings, moods, emotions." To her, it is important to "just always communicate."

Play Therapy

A big part of Soltis's therapy practice is using play to help children shift their nervous system and find regulation through connection, mindfulness, and attunement. This helps kids work through big emotions through play, and Soltis sees what shows up for them in the world. This can happen when kids start playing with swords and testing the limits of hitting and boundaries. Some kids might start off hitting harder.

Being a single mom, Amanda Ferguson said she and her daughter have always been close — especially since her husband's death. Every night, they sleep side by side. Jenna Ferguson jokes that she's often woken up by the sound of her mother snoring.

Amanda Ferguson said that after her daughter's 45-minute play therapy session, she had a one-on-one call with the therapist to talk about what she's observed in her daughter and to talk through what that means.

Jenna Ferguson's favorite part of play therapy was the sand pit because she could build things with it. Amanda Ferguson says that in Jenna's therapist's perspective, the sand opens up the conversation. She talks about how "it was crazy how much [the therapist] could pick up on just from how Jenna plays because they just watch them and see if they get an invite to play with them."

Amanda Ferguson said she saw a change in her daughter's willingness to express herself, be more confident, speak more in class, and how to live with the wind.

"I don't get pushed around anymore," Jenna Ferguson said proudly. "And I don't agree as much."

Amanda Ferguson has been in therapy herself since her husband died. She and her husband were in counseling prior to getting married, so this wasn't a new concept for her. Before COVID-19, Ferguson already had her fair share of hardships, and after her husband died she looked to her husband's family to learn how to cope.

When she asked a family member about his experiences with grieving, she recalled him responding by saying, "I kind of just checked out and got drunk and people took care of my kids." But that wasn't an option for Ferguson. Looking at her husband's identical twin who was angry, she also realized she didn't want to live an angry life. So she went back to therapy.

After moving to Colorado from Nebraska to be closer to her family, Amanda Ferguson found a new therapist.

Soltis said that it is important to find a therapist that works for you and that everyone works differently. To Amanda Ferguson's surprise, she talked more about how she was raised, her grandma, and her childhood.

Now being around 30 years old, the past was more prevalent in her mind than she was aware of.

Ferguson said she tried to be there for her daughter by getting help to grieve so that she could help Amanda talk about it as well.

Importance of Regulation

Soltis talks a lot about emotional regulation.

According to research from the National Library of Medicine, parents' ability to emotionally regulate themselves can help them pass on those skills to their kids. But that's often easier said than done. If a parent is dysregulated, they are less able to support their child who might also be dysregulated and looking for help. Being responsible for two people's emotional regulation can be exhausting for parents, especially if they don't have the skills needed.

There are more symptoms of dysregulation than one might think, according to Soltis.

The most common responses to dysregulation are freezing, fleeing, or fighting. These "hyper-arousal" symptoms create perceptions of threat or challenge within the body.

A more healthy emotional response is referred to as the ventral vagal response, which occurs when the body is in a state of relaxation. This response is associated with a feeling of calmness, safety, and connection with others.

The dorsal vagal response is a type of physiological response that occurs when the body is in a state of shutdown or freeze. The dorsal vagal response is part of the body's stress response system and is often activated in situations where we feel overwhelmed, helpless, or threatened.

Soltis brought up the function of the vagus nerve, as she uses practices to help to regulate emotions through breathing and rubbing of the thighs. The Cleveland Clinic defines the vagus nerve as "the main nerve of your parasympathetic nervous system." This system controls specific body functions such as digestion, heart rate, and the immune system. These functions are involuntary, meaning you can't consciously control them–the opposite of the sympathetic nervous system.

Soltis uses worksheets to help parents understand the steps of regulation that can help structure parents' responses as well as the child's reactions. First, it is important to get down to the children's level and help regulate and calm their fight, flight, and freeze responses. The next step is to relate and connect with the child through an attuned and sensitive relationship. The last step is to support the child to reflect, learn, remember, articulate, and become self-assured.

Jenna Ferguson said that she often gives her mom a hug or takes deep breaths to help herself calm down and remind herself that everything is okay.

Parents' Response and Actions

Solstis said it's important to share work with the caregivers, "as things might look different at home."

Amanda Ferguson reflected on how Jenna's therapist "would be like, 'Well, I think that she's feeling this way.' Then at home, 'I was like, I didn't realize I was doing that.'"

She listened and reflected on her behavior as well as Jenna working on hers. She also found out more about herself from Jenna's sessions. "I would see patterns from my childhood. So it was very eye-opening," Amanda Ferguson said. "So I was like, 'Okay, what can I work on? Like, how can I help her?"

Soltis role-played questions she asks parents.

"Ask yourself, 'How do your kids' behaviors impact you?' Also, think about what feelings come up for you," she said. "Is it a feeling of embarrassment? Shame? That you're a bad mom?"

"Asking these questions is [about] helping to explore," she added.

It's important to help parents to regulate during times of intensity. She suggests that if the child is screaming to breathe, remember that this is the child's thing and not your own, then proceed to respond.

Abujam was a therapist long before she was a parent. She no longer practices, but her experience has enabled her to help other parents reflect. She said her weaknesses as a parent are accepting the problem and trying to improve it. Even though this is her "weakness," she knows that it's the "first step is acceptance."

She said it's important for parents to remember that they aren't perfect and are allowed to make mistakes, as long as they own up to it.

Amanda Ferguson said that's been a hard lesson to learn, since past generations, which she calls "the silent generation," didn't necessarily practice that behavior.

Sotis uses the phrase, "Mommy acted really big" to help express parents' feelings.

She stresses that it's okay for parents to feel big emotions and that she helps facilitate that. "If you're able to connect with parents to help them realize what their triggers are, that in itself can make a difference," she added.

Connect With Kids

Amanda Ferguson made her own realization about Jenna while driving with her in the back seat silent. “This is the age group where the kids are not forthright in having a conversation, ” says Ryan.

Ryan recommends being “purposeful and present and not putting the music on to drown out their conversation. It's the time to eavesdrop.”

Ryan sees herself as the “weird one who could tell you every kid's name” and says that she interacts with the students at drop-off, recess, lunch, and after school. She says that kids see her office as a safe place, because “sometimes it's easier to not talk to a parent or guardian.”

“They do unload some pretty heavy stuff,” she added.

In the morning, Ryan observes the carpool lane, and the kids “get out of their car with their phone and their earbuds,” not connected to the world around them. Ryan believes that a car ride is the best time to catch up with your kids, just like Ferguson, and Ryan explains that personally “I'm not a chauffeur. I'm your mom.”

On the other hand, Ryan recognizes that this is not one-sided. The counselor/mother catches herself slipping up too, by going to her phone and even has to set screen time limits for herself. Sarcastically, she reminds herself, “heaven forbid that the kitchen doesn't get cleaned.”

Support in Schools

Ryan said that her school is in the unique situation of being more proactive than reactive.

“We were very lucky to have administrators who support a full-blown, push-in counseling curriculum,” said Ryan, referring to the Boulder County School District.

Jenna was not the only child spooked by the Marshall fire. In response, the surrounding school districts brought in more mental health workers in February 2022.

These additions to the schools were made possible with the help of grants from FEMA and the Community Foundation of Boulder County. At Louisville Middle School alone, around 60 families lost their homes.

“I'm just sad that it took that long” to get the mental health resources, Ryan said. “How would we have done this without another person and a half? I think burnout would have been large, which

it already is. They are all overworked. Their caseloads are too big. They're just clocking in, with significant emotional disorders left and right."

The school hired mental health advocate Suzy Kennedy to help the families navigate after the disaster and worked to connect with the kids through group talks and other activities.

"There was a lot of denial from parents at first," Ryan said. "This was the first time we really noticed not acknowledging the mental health aspect."

She said there is a sixth grader at the school who has had multiple suicide risk assessments. Ryan sadly said that "[the sixth grader] has come to the point where she was one away from me calling the police."

She added that the mom's response hasn't always been appropriate. "The mom comes in saying, 'Okay, we'll get through that. We just need to talk, let's go home,' with no follow-up assessment."

Ryan recommends that the child should be taken for an evaluation at a hospital and to try to line up therapy. She doesn't think that the kid can just figure this out on her own without knowing the tools she needs.

The student feels comfortable going in to try to ask for help. Ryan wishes there was more that she could contribute, but "we're so limited in what we can do and we can provide all the resources," but that only goes so far.

At the End of the Day

There are a variety of resources available, not without their limits, for parents to learn more about mental health and emotional regulation.

But Ryan knows that for the strategies to work, people need to follow through with them.

But she sees more and more parents open to the idea of engaging in therapy.

Soltis reflects on the fact that there are parents who are good at coping and tend to be trauma-free, but they can still endure life's ups and downs. Resources can help them through navigating the downs and help their children through the process with them.

Ferguson will tell Jenna, "I gotta lay down for a few minutes," and says that she's getting better at expressing these feelings with her daughter to make sure she is doing what helps her and keeps

her regulated. This helps the way she also responds or acts towards Jenna. Ferguson has her days when she'll "usually ignore it and kind of push it down." But she continues to work on it.

Soltis believes that finding joy is just as important as being aware of one's trigger. Having parents think about what brings them joy helps them to "tap into the understanding that parenting is the hardest job."

Ferguson said it's hard to continue working on herself while balancing graduate school, helping her daughter stay on top of her coursework, starting a business, and working full-time. Still, sometimes she feels like she isn't doing enough to improve her mental health — and therefore her daughter's. But she tries to remind herself that she's doing the best she can and that it's a lifelong learning process.

She said she's gotten better at finding time to relax. Travel is a big aspect of how she accomplishes her "me time," whether it is with her friends or other families. She says that "getting to the mountains usually helps me," and with an extra bonus, "my favorite massage lady is up there," for the best of both worlds.

Abujam says she "keeps sane" by meditating every day and trying to do more yoga.

When she has bad days, she said she tries to be more aware of how it might impact her daughter. She believes her daughter, even at six, can tell that she's trying–and helps her regulate by "giving her a big hug. Abujam tries her best to let her child learn and grow on her own, without trying to control her behavior or decisions too much.

"A parent is almost like a gardener," Abujam said. "You water your plant, you put it in the right amount of sunlight, and you don't push that plant to be a different kind of plant."

Extra Resources

1. National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) – NAMI is a nonprofit organization that offers support, education, and advocacy for individuals and families affected by mental illness. They have resources specifically for parents, including support groups and educational materials.
2. American Psychological Association (APA) – The APA provides resources for parents on their website, including articles on parenting and mental health, tips for managing stress, and information on finding a therapist.
3. Child Mind Institute – The Child Mind Institute is a nonprofit organization that provides resources for children and families struggling with mental health and learning disorders. They offer a range of resources for parents, including online workshops, webinars, and resources on specific mental health issues.

4. Parent-Child Interaction Therapy (PCIT) – PCIT is a type of therapy that focuses on improving the relationship between parents and their children. It is effective in treating a range of mental health issues, including anxiety, depression, and behavioral problems.
5. Online support groups – There are several online support groups for parents, such as the Parents Support Network, where parents can connect with others who are going through similar experiences and find support and encouragement.