



The Pandemic and Kids' Mental Health

Trauma or a Hard Time?

Jeanne Blake: What's the difference?

Dr. Paula K. Rauch: Traumatic events are difficult situations in which children feel helpless, hopeless and alone – without ways to problem solve. A hard time may be similarly adverse, but the children feel connected and supported. Experiencing an event as trauma, you feel like a victim. Experiencing an event as a challenge, you build life skills and go forward knowing adults listen and support you. This increases children's confidence to face challenges ahead. Some children may experience the pandemic as a trauma. Others may not.

Jeanne: What's the best way to ensure experiences are not traumatic for children?

Dr. Rauch: Spend extra time talking together about pandemic related changes, and also all the things that are of interest or concern to a child.

Jeanne: What activities help foster resilience?

Dr. Rauch: More important than a specific activity is encouraging a child to learn something new or solve problems. Something new could be baking or playing an instrument. A new solution might be helping a child see that his morning goes better when he puts his clothes out the night before. These small experiences of empowerment help children feel they can make things happen. It's the opposite of feeling helpless, and the best resilience enhancer.

Jeanne: What's your advice for parents whose children experienced earlier trauma?

Dr. Rauch: Often, when parents are worried about previous trauma, their first thought is, I want to protect my child from hearing scary things. So they exclude children from important conversations. This error of kindness can leave their child more alone to process difficult circumstances. Instead, I encourage adults to invite children to talk about things they're worried about and remind them of all the things you're doing together to be safe.

Watch for opportunities to express gratitude: Note a sunny day, feeling safe on a comfy couch. This is different than saying to a child, "Oh, don't be afraid." Being told *how* to feel doesn't really work. Hearing this from a parent does: "I can tell you're worried, but I feel safe here in our living room."

Jeanne Blake, founder of Blake Works and creator of *The Pandemic and Kids' Mental Health*, is a leadership communication coach, author and award-winning science and medical television journalist.

Dr. Paula K. Rauch is a child psychiatrist at Massachusetts General Hospital and Associate Professor of Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School.

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