



850 Brook Forest Ave.

815-469-1500

Westsidechildrenstherapy.com

COVID-19 Q&A with Westside Children's Therapy

Welcome to Shorewood! Can you tell us a bit about Westside Children's Therapy?

- Westside Children's Therapy is a pediatric therapy provider that assists children with overcoming challenges and realizing strengths using a variety of approaches. Most clinics offer Physical Therapy, Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA), Occupational Therapy, Speech Therapy, Feeding Therapy, and Counseling. Westside Children's Therapy is known for its warm and welcoming environment. The staff work hard to create a positive atmosphere and that is family-centered and inclusive. Children and their families can expect to be treated with compassion and respect as they enter Westside's doors and participate in the wonderful services each location has to offer.

How do you think the COVID-19 Pandemic has had an effect on people, especially children's, mental health?

- The COVID-19 Pandemic has had a significant impact on people of all ages. Many people have experienced an increase in stress, anxiety, and/or depressive symptoms as they continue to navigate the unknowns of the virus and its deep effects on society. Social connection is severely lacking, and the virus has overtaken most conversations that do exist. Parents and guardians have had to wear many hats as they try to complete their own work as well as assist their children with participating fully in E-learning. Children continue to ask heartbreaking questions, many of which we cannot yet answer. Many people struggle with the sadness of missing their friends, family members, and little interactions that used to occur daily. Administrators, directors, managers, etc. are faced with the difficult decisions of balancing safety, security, and keeping their businesses alive.

People of all ages have lost loved ones due to the virus and are faced with the challenges of grieving and understanding the nature of the pandemic. The fear of contracting the virus and/or infecting others is great as well, and the added uncertainty of how the virus affects the human body leaves many people feeling anxious and insecure.

Children do not currently have the opportunities for socialization they need for comfort and support. They experience stress as they try to adjust to a virtual learning environment that often exists within their own homes. They are confused, scared, and overwhelmed, and the ever-changing nature of the pandemic creates added frustration, sadness, and fear.

What are some at-home tools adults can use to help improve or maintain their mental health during this pandemic?

- Adults can improve or maintain their mental health during the pandemic by being open and honest about their thoughts and feelings. Seek support by texting or calling a friend and bonding over the shared frustrations, fears, and insecurities about the pandemic. It is amazing what feeling validated can do. We need to normalize our experiences because many, if not most, people are trying to overcome the same challenges.

At home, find healthy opportunities to generate a sense of accomplishment. There are many home workouts, interesting recipes, DIY projects, and hobbies to try. Consider using this time as an opportunity to reassess and express your values. If you value compassion and giving to others, take this time to write letters to loved ones or send care packages to people in need. If you value family time, use this experience as an opportunity to engage in more creative ways to interact with your family members. I recommend family game nights or cookoffs! You can also design scavenger hunts for your children or significant others. If you live alone, host social hours on Zoom. There are many fun and hilarious games to play virtually with your friends. Keep in mind that this time can also be used to enjoy space alone. Be mindfully present to sounds or songs, sensory experiences, and/or spiritual practices.

Remind yourself that “your best” may look different each day. There may be days when you feel so exhausted that all you can do is watch Netflix and eat cookies. That is amazing. There may also be days when you are incredibly productive and finish your entire to-do list. That is amazing as well, but no more amazing than giving yourself time to relax and “just be.”

Above all, remember that this is not forever.

What are some at-home tools parents can use to help their children cope with the COVID-19 pandemic?

- I highly recommend being as honest as possible with children about the course of the pandemic. It is okay to tell them that you do not have the answers and that this is sad and frustrating for you, too. Encourage your children to express their thoughts and feelings using art, music, play, and conversation. I often have my pediatric clients “draw their worries” and explore possible solutions using coloring. Praise your children for continuing to do their best. Remember, like you, their best is going to look different each day.

Continue to provide opportunities for children to be social. Schedule virtual play dates, or teach them how to write letters to others. FaceTime, phone calls, and Facebook Messenger are also great options! One family I know purchased walkie talkies for her son and his neighbor so that they could communicate daily after school!

I also recommend keeping children active throughout the day when possible. Encourage outdoor play and exercise. Take your children on leisurely walks, or create a scavenger hunt around your home. Physical activity improves mood and boosts physical strength.

Are there any tools for parents to help their children adjust with transitioning between e-learning and in-person schooling?

- I believe it may be helpful for parents/guardians to sit down with their children and generate a list of what is helpful for them at school as well as what works for them during E-learning. For example, a pediatric client of mine has the family's Alexa programmed to remind him when his Zoom meetings are during the day. Another child created his own "Stop" sign and attached it to his computer to remind him to stay focused on school rather than play videogames during his classroom Zoom meetings. You and your child can generate this list and develop E-learning rules and school guidelines from that list. Children are often more motivated to follow the rules when they take part in creating them. Find what works for you and your family during E-learning and document it.

Visuals are also wonderful reminders to stay on track during school (virtual or in-person). Visual timers for Zoom meetings can help children see how much time is left before they have a break. You can also get creative and co-design with your child a fun schedule with pictures that they can view throughout the day to keep them on track. Again, your child may buy into this more if he/she/they are part of creating it!

Be honest with your child about the school's plan for returning to in-person learning. If the return date is unknown, it is okay to be honest with your child about this and explain reasons why there is still uncertainty. When the school decides to return, prepare your child for what this may look like. Create a list of "knows" and "don't knows" so that your child has a better sense of what to expect upon returning to in-person learning. For example, your child may find comfort in knowing that his/her/their teacher will be present to answer questions and plan fun activities. However, your child may not know if the school allows mask breaks or if the students can sit together at lunch. Planning ahead may help ease your child's anxiety about returning to in-person learning. For the list of "don't knows," generate possible solutions and ways for managing stress.

If residents are looking for more than at-home solutions, are there services that Westside Children's Therapy is able to provide?

- Westside Children's Therapy offers counseling services for children experiencing a wide range of challenges. Westside's counselors can provide opportunities for your child to learn stress management strategies as well as build social skills, decrease anxiety or depression, and engage in healthy emotion regulation techniques. Counseling offers a safe space for children to express their thoughts and feelings and work through difficult life experiences. Counselors build strong therapeutic relationships with their clients that serve as a solid foundation for creating change.

Besides services to aid in Mental Health amid the COVID-19 pandemic, what other services can residents find at Westside Children's Therapy?

- Westside Children's Therapy offers services from a wide range of disciplines. Most locations offer Physical Therapy, Occupational Therapy, Speech Therapy, Feeding Therapy, and Applied Behavior Analysis. Each discipline approaches the child's challenges from a different angle. However, the therapists from each discipline collaborate and consult with each other to best meet the child's needs.