

## Tackling pediatric mental health

With COVID-19 vaccines and treatments widely available, some children across the United States are getting their first taste of normal. But some pandemic habits – staring at a screen all day, lounging on the couch, snacking on junk food – may be hard to break. The physical concerns of these behaviors, like weight gain, are apparent. But experts say sloth-like behavior can impact your mental health too, leading to a lack of motivation and even full-on depression.

Mia Harrier is the community health specialist at [OSF HealthCare Sacred Heart Medical Center](#) in Danville, Illinois. She and fellow OSF Mission Partner (employee) Jake Ozier have been taking the [OSF Care-a-Van](#) to youth groups this summer, advocating for activities that can improve a kid's mental health. The youngsters leave with a prize like a bocce ball kit to continue recreation.

“As adults, we've been able to make our adjustments [to COVID] because we've been around for a long time. Our brains are through developing,” Harrier says. “However, with children throughout the pandemic, it kind of took some of those opportunities that you typically have away. So they're in this place where they've experienced a lot of confusion, a lot of fear, a lot of uncertainty. So their responses to that have been really varied, and it can go into some things like undue anxiety or some depression.”

Here's what Harrier says kids and parents need to remember:

- Aim for 60 minutes of exercise per day. Harrier says playing around other kids is better than playing alone so the youngsters can gain social skills.
- For ages 8 to 18, limit recreational screen time (like television or video games) to two hours per day. For ages 3 to 7, it's one hour. Kids under two should avoid screen time and media devices altogether.
- Replace sugary drinks with a healthier option. Harrier recommends cutting up fruits or vegetables and placing them in a cooler of water. Mix it around, and you have a fruit or vegetable-flavored drink.

“If they have younger siblings, it's good for them to know and helps them to be a little bit more responsible for these things that we're teaching them,” Harrier says.

As a former teacher, Harrier knows all about short attention spans in children. So when it comes to getting that message about mental health care across, she advises parents and educators to make it a two-way conversation.

“Making sure that they're really engaged, that we're asking them questions for them to respond to,” Harrier says. “We're asking them questions like ‘what do you think about this?’ or ‘what's your opinion?’ So, making it very much about them and where they stand on all of this.”

Harrier adds that repeating the message about good habits as kids age reinforces that they're the right things to do.

If a child you know is showing signs of a mental health issue, Harrier recommends talking to your primary care provider or a [behavioral health navigator](#) (BHN). BHN is free service in all the communities OSF HealthCare serves. It aims to get people on the right track to recovery and can provide advice on things like insurance and transportation to appointments.

If a child is in crisis, such as talking about or carrying out self-harm, call 9-1-1 or 9-8-8, [the new digits](#) to the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline.