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Health and Lifestyle

News

Some Kids Have Spent Almost A Third of Their Life Under Lockdown And It's Impacting Their Mental Health



By **Jennifer Walker** April 16, 2021



Blake watches his friends play through the kitchen window. Courtesy - Jenny Lacroix

KAWARTHA LAKES – Four year old Blake Lacroix has spent two of his four birthday's under lockdown. His parents say he has lost his confidence, his friends and any sense of normalcy.

For his fourth birthday, Blake wished for nothing extraordinary but a simple game of bowling with his friends. His mom, Jenny Lacroix was heartbroken to tell him that this wish was not a possibility.

Blake has spent almost a third of his life away from civilization and has gone from a happy, playful, confident boy to a lost soul that is petrified to even step foot into a grocery store according to his mom.

“Blake was such an outgoing child, he loved everybody, even if he didn’t know you, he’d talk to anybody,” said Lacroix. “Now he is so scared of everybody.”



*Blake and his mom, Jenny.
Courtesy – Jenny Lacroix*

According to Lacroix, she and her husband tried to enroll Blake into various programs when restrictions were lifted but it was impossible to get him engaged as he was frightened and would scream the entire time.

During the Christmas holidays, Blake’s grandparents moved in with the family as the pandemic grew more and more complex. Lacroix’s mother is also currently battling cancer. As a result, the household has been extremely careful and has always followed restrictions and guidelines.

This means Blake and his little sister Brooklyn rarely leave the house.

“His behaviour has changed dramatically, he’s sad, angry and not understanding why he can’t see his friends, why he can’t

go to swimming, gymnastics, he can't do any of it and he doesn't understand, he's three," said Lacroix. "I've watched my little boy change so much and it breaks my heart, from this social, happy little guy to a sad, emotional child that doesn't understand."

During the course of the pandemic, Blake has developed a stutter, his energy is low and his confidence is nearly non-existent. According to Lacroix, prior to the recent stay-at-home order, Blake's best friends that live across the road saw him outside and ventured over to play. Within five minutes Blake was inside.

Rather than engaging and enjoying the company of his friends, Blake chose to sit on the kitchen counter to watch and play vicariously through the window.

"All I can do is keep him socialized in our little bubble when we can and be open and honest with him if he asks questions about this virus," said Lacroix. "I don't know, there is no answer, I want him and our family to stay healthy, but his mental health is suffering a lot too."

And while Blake has felt many negative effects from the pandemic, his mom noted that her boy has always been a well-mannered, quiet, happy, old soul, a very loving child.

With his fourth birthday quickly approaching, the family is going to do their best in making his day special with gifts, his favourite meals and cake. Hoping that bowling is a possibility for next year.

A study conducted by SickKids Hospital found a significant proportion of otherwise healthy school-aged children experienced deterioration in mental health including depression, anxiety, irritability and reduced attention span

during the first wave of the Covid-19 Pandemic.

The hospital has stated that greater stress from social isolation, including both the cancellation of important events and the loss of in-person interactions, was strongly associated with mental health deterioration.

According to Trevor Hosier, a mental health professional who has worked in the health care field for over 35 years as a Counsellor, Individual, Couple, and Family Therapist, the pandemic continues to leave a path of destruction for many.

"I find that most young people I have had the privilege of working with over the years are by and large a resilient group. They represent our greatest asset as future leaders. That said, the Covid-19 pandemic has certainly challenged all of us in a multitude of ways," said Hosier.

He noted that the pandemic continues to affect many, socially, financially, health wise, emotionally, and more.

"The number of children and other young people I have seen in my counselling practise over the past six months or so has increased. While I cannot offer current national statistics, it is evident that mental health related symptoms and problems have increased among all age groups as the pandemic has progressed," he added.

The children and adolescents Hosier has seen are largely presenting with symptoms and complaints typically associated with anxiety, frustration associated with school activities and adapting to the back and forth between virtual and in-class learning, isolation and loneliness with limited in-person contact with friends and peers on a one-on-one basis or via social events and activities, sadness and low-grade feelings of depression type symptoms.

“It is especially hard on young people who lack social contact and friends at the best of times prior to the pandemic,” he said.

According to Hosier, low-grade depression symptoms can include loss of interest in activities, lack of motivation, negative thinking and more.

“Within the context of home life, many young people are further challenged in that Mom and Dad are struggling too while having difficulty meeting their own needs and battling various stressors,” explained Hosier. “Given the facts of life at the current time one can easily argue it is fully understandable that young and older people alike are hurting to varying degrees. It can be very tough for all and in truth, there are no easy answers or solutions but there are things we can do to help ourselves and our children.”

Hosier noted that parents need to offer ongoing support and compassion not only for their children but also for themselves. As family leaders, parents must find some time to address their own self-care through the basics of proper eating, simple regular exercise, adequate sleep, working on a positive mind set, stress management, and communicating with family, peers, or other social supports, he said.

“Change does not always come easy for some given limited time and tight schedules however positive change can be made and is essential for Mom and Dad’s own ability to manage the hardships they face,” said Hosier. “Additionally, it is essential so as to find the resilience to assist, support, and motivate their children through enhanced patience, tolerance, optimism, and creative interventions. We must lead by example.”

Advice from Hosier: parents can;

- Strive to spend more quality time with their kids.
- Actively listen to their children's struggles and yes, their complaints while offering understanding, compassion, and possible solutions when possible.
- Frequently encourage with hope and optimism for the future.
- Gently assist your children to understand the meaning of gratitude and assist them in finding things to be grateful for even in these times.
- Readily offer praise for any positive behaviour.
- Make family time a priority as possible. Present opportunity for playing together, watching shows together, enjoying games and hobbies.
- Assist with homework and assignments as possible.
- Strive to introduce some humour and joy.
- Brainstorm a list of activities and things to do individually and as a family.
- When safe, and if appropriate, try to create and promote contact for your child with a friend.

"They are not alone! Nor are you... You are going through this together," said Hosier.

If you as a parent are concerned for your child's health in any way or if in doubt, Hosier recommends consulting with your Family Doctor, hospital, or related professional. In addition to any obvious medical emergency or crisis requiring a 911 call, your child's frequent or ongoing crying, persistent trouble sleeping, not eating, comments of self-harm or suicide, indication of drug abuse, self-isolation, ongoing anger, or aggressive behaviour, are reasons to seek professional help. In the case of expressed suicidal ideation or planned intent help should be sought immediately.

“We will get through this challenging time involving Covid-19. Reassure yourself and your family of this periodically. Be of courage and remember, as a parent, you are perhaps the most important, influential leader your son or daughter will ever have,” added Hosier. “Be the best leader you can be, show your kids the way through your example and love. Don’t be afraid to seek help yourself if you feel the need or are having trouble with your own mental health. Never quit the fight.”

Lacroix is searching for creative ways to celebrate Blake’s birthday coming up on April 22.