



From the Editor

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The Coronavirus: Exposing Our Nation's Vulnerabilities

On March 11, 2020, as the number of known coronavirus cases surpassed 120,000 worldwide, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the coronavirus a global pandemic (Ghebreyesus, 2020). The term moves the needle from “epidemic,” which refers to a large disease outbreak within a particular population or region, to “pandemic,” which indicates the sharp, simultaneous spread of a disease in multiple areas, regions, or countries. The declaration reflects concern from WHO that countries are not working quickly and aggressively enough to contain the virus (Horton et al., 2020).

The coronavirus is officially named severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus (2 SARS-CoV-2) and is responsible for the disease COVID-19, which stands for coronavirus disease 2019 (WHO, 2020). According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2020), on evidence gathered so far, there is no indication that children are more susceptible to the virus than the general population. In fact, reports from countries throughout the world show that most confirmed cases have occurred in adults. Children with confirmed COVID-19 may present with mild symptoms, and although severe complication (e.g., acute respiratory distress syndrome, septic shock) have been reported, they appear to be uncommon. However, as with other respiratory illnesses, certain populations of children may be at increased risk of severe infection, such as children with underlying health conditions.

Effect of COVID-19 on Children and Their Parents

Although our nation's children and teens are unlikely to have major if any physiological effects from the virus itself, implications of the indirect impact on their well-being from efforts to slow the spread of the virus is enormous. As we move from attempts to contain the virus to adding community mitigation in a growing number of populations, many systems currently in place to support our youngest citizens are showing their vulnerability to continue to do so.

Two of the most concerning issues are school closings and parental lack of paid leave, the latter of which, like many issues, has a greater impact on children of parents with low-paying jobs and those living in poverty. According to *Education Week* (2020), the number of school closings is rapidly rising; in just one day (March 10 to March 11), the number of K-12 school closings in the United States grew from 621 to 1,561 in response to the coronavirus outbreak.

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To keep the number as timely as possible, *Education Week* is updating the school closure map twice a day.

School closures can mean lost learning time for young people, from the kindergartener learning to read to the college freshman trying to juggle classwork and a part-time job to help finance a steep tuition payment. For the over 30 million students around the country who qualify for free or reduced-cost school lunches through the National School Lunch Program (USDA Food and Nutrition Service, 2016), school closure can mean going to bed hungry. Of the 2.5 million children in the United States who are homeless (American Institutes for Research, 2020), about half are students who rely on schools not only for food, but also for health care and even a place to do laundry. Daycare centers, preschools, and other early childhood education and care providers are also being affected.

Such closures have working parents scrambling for solutions (North, 2020). In some cases, employers are permitting parents to work remotely from home to be with their children. However, some jobs cannot be done from home, such as those of the restaurant worker, hospital cleaner, or bus driver. Many jobs do not offer paid time off, meaning parents can lose pay for the days they don't work or possibility even lose their jobs entirely. Other employers provide paid sick days but do not allow parents to use those days to take care of their child or other sick family member.

In past situations of school closure (e.g., snow days), parents have sometimes resorted to solutions such as dropping their children off at a shopping mall or movie theater for the day. Parents often have taken turns with other parents to share looking after each other's children. However, such solutions defeat the purpose of school closures: to decrease the number of individuals in a confined area.

Extended vs. Nuclear Family

In the not so distant past, most families could turn to extended family members for assistance with child care. Although this is true for some fortunate families today, for many others, this is not the case. According to Brooks (2020), the family, once a dense cluster of many siblings and

Figure 1. COVID-19 Resources for Children and Teens

How to Make an Improvised Paper Towel Mask

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cZGU2vWHKC8>

Although we have been told that masks are usually not needed and most kinds available to the public aren't particularly effective in halting the spread of the coronavirus, wearing a mask can be helpful in keeping children from touching their faces. This short video describes a quick and simple way children can make their own mask with just a paper towel, two rubber bands, and a stapler.

NPR's Coronavirus Comic

<https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2020/02/28/809580453/just-for-kids-a-comic-exploring-the-new-coronavirus>

NPR created a comic for children based on NPR education reporter Cory Turner's radio story about the coronavirus. He asked some experts what children might want to know about the new coronavirus discovered in China. To make this comic, NPR used his interviews with Tara Powell at the University of Illinois School of Social Work, Joy Osofsky at the LSU Health Sciences Center in New Orleans, and Krystal Lewis at the National Institute of Mental Health. The radio story is available in this link, along with a print and fold zine version of the comic and directions on how to fold it. It is available in other languages, including Braille.

Get the Facts on Coronavirus

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kIL5m5XznNY>

CBC News medical contributor and family physician Dr. Peter Lin breaks down the facts about what it is, where it came from, how it spreads, and what you can do to protect yourself. Dr. Lin speaks in terms school-age children and above can understand.

extended kin, has fragmented into even smaller and more fragile forms. The nuclear family, the initial result of that fragmentation, seemed okay at first. But then, because the nuclear family is so brittle, the fragmentation continued. Nuclear families in many sectors of society fragmented into single-parent families, single-parent families into chaotic families or no families. According to Brooks:

We've made life freer for individuals and more unstable for families. We've made life better for adults but worse for children. We've moved from big, interconnected, and extended families, which helped protect the most vulnerable people in society from the shocks of life, to smaller, detached nuclear families (a married couple and their children), which give the most privileged people in society room to maximize their talents and expand their options. The shift from bigger and interconnected extended families to smaller and detached nuclear families ultimately led to a familial system that liberates the rich and ravages the working-class and the poor (p. 4).

Our Nation's Vulnerable Systems

Without a doubt, this public health crisis has exposed the vulnerability of many of our nation's systems: public health, education, economic, and perhaps as important, the family system. For the past 50 years, federal and state governments have tried to increase marriage rates, push down divorce rates, boost fertility, etc., to mitigate the deleterious effects of these trends, with the focus on strengthening the nuclear family, not the extended family (Brooks, 2020). The people most vulnerable from the decline in family support are children.

Brooks (2020) argues that it would be difficult for most Americans to go back to the former extended family system

because we value privacy and individual freedom too much. Yet we do see some revival of the extended family with young adults moving back home and a growing number of older adults moving in with their adult children or moving nearby to be close to their grandchildren.

Recent signs suggest the possibility that a new family paradigm is emerging; Americans are experimenting with new forms of kinship and extended family in search of stability (Brooks, 2020). Some changes are in part out of necessity, but others in part by choice. Single mothers are finding other single mothers interested in sharing a home through the website CoAbode (<https://www.coabode.org/>). Kin, a co-housing community for young parents, features individual family living quarters but also shared play spaces, child-care services, and family-oriented events and outings. A co-housing community called Temescal Commons has 23 members aged 1 to 83 years who live in a complex with nine housing units of small apartments for middle- and working-class residents. The residents consider all children all of their children.

Some of these new family paradigms will join extended families in helping our nation's young people and families through this current public health crisis. During this difficult time, we need "all hands on deck," with caring adults providing not only practical services, such as childcare, but softer services, such as listening to children's concerns and providing developmentally appropriate information to help them feel safe among all the confusion and fear surrounding this moment in time. As pediatric nurses, this is one area where we can help by providing information about appropriate resources to help in this regard. Three resources that could be helpful are suggested in Figure 1.

Hope for the Future

It is my hope that as we look for ways to improve our public health, education, and economic responses in preparation for other crisis events, we'll also consider the vulner-

ability of our family systems. By developing strategies to support both existing family systems and the creative ones to come, we can help young people and their families, regardless of their social, education, economic, or emotional determinants of health, to have an equal opportunity to successfully navigate the next crisis, whatever that crisis might be. ■■■

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