

Who is That Masked Man?

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A man dressed as Spider-Man entertains quarantined children in Stockport, Britain/ (REUTERS/Phil Noble)

The Covid-19 pandemic has arrived in the U.S. by stages. For some of us, the gradual tightening of rules and subsequent rearranging of our daily lives may have been easier to process than a sudden draconian “Stay at home!” pronouncement. For all its “slow rollout,” though, we have to admit that our lives have changed fundamentally during the last three weeks. To think that Aldo’s Risk Management Committee met as recently as March 10 to discuss whether we should cancel the Junior field trip to Mexico! By the end of that week, we were to learn that school would be cancelled till April 6. Spring Break had barely ended when we received word from the governor that New Mexico public-school courses would go online for the rest of the school year and students wouldn’t be returning to their classrooms in April or even May. Limits on the size of acceptable gatherings shrank from 250 to 25 to 10 and now to 5 in a matter of days. We are left with the eerie sensation of foreseeing our future by observing the pandemic’s swath of destruction in other countries, like Italy, whose “rolling peaks” have preceded ours.

Earlier this week, the Aldo community experienced another turning point when local health officials reported the first Covid-19 case in Grant County. The Grab-&-Go school

lunch team at Guadalupe Montessori had discussed wearing masks since meal distribution began March 23, but last Thursday we made a decision to begin wearing them. The next day, the President announced, citing the CDC, that “the use of non-medical cloth face coverings [is] an additional voluntary public health measure”—then added, “It is voluntary. You do not have to do it.” When I made my weekly shopping trip to Albertsons after lunch distribution, I found that about a quarter of us roaming the aisles were wearing masks, ahead of the presidential recommendation. We went from memes and cartoons about “masked superheroes”—healthcare workers, food handlers—to *wearing masks ourselves*. The weird and poignant image of quarantined children watching Spider-Man perform a power-kick in their front yard is yet another aspect of the “new normal” we’ve all had to adapt to.

And it’s made me wonder: How are these changes in our daily lives affecting young people, who are likely living through their first “national crisis,” who may be experiencing the threat of illness not with a cool analysis of statistics and a calculation of infection probability but rather as a threat to their lives, or at least to the lives of the people they love most—maybe an octogenarian great grandmother who lives with them who is many times more vulnerable to the virus than they are?

At the risk of being another source of overwhelming information myself, I’d like to share with you an excerpt from a longer article titled “Helping Children and Teens Cope with Anxiety About Covid-19,” which features gentle guidance from Dr. Jennifer Blossom, a psychology postdoctoral fellow at Seattle Children’s Psychiatry and Behavioral Medicine Clinic. Her first piece of advice is, “Get the facts about Covid-19,” and recommends the Centers for Disease Control website (<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/>) as an eminently reliable source.

What follows is advice about addressing children’s and teen’s anxiety, which can be substantial these days, whether they live in a Covid-19 “hotspot” like Seattle or a relatively remote town like Silver City. Even before the pandemic began, reliable sources have cited an “epidemic of anxiety” among school-age children and adolescents, with some 7% of children between 3 and 17 years old having *diagnosed* anxiety (according to the CDC). The Covid-19 pandemic seems destined to increase those startling numbers. From Dr. Blossom:

“Check in with your child and ask what questions they have.

- Once you have some information as background, check in with your child or teen. Choose a time that works for you – some families avoid talking about tough topics right before bedtime.
- Start by asking what your child knows about the situation. Listen more than you talk and try to validate their feelings. The COVID-19 situation is rapidly changing and there is still a lot to learn.

- “Ultimately, a big driver of anxiety is uncertainty,” Blossom said. “Parents can validate that sitting with uncertainty is hard for their child (and themselves) while also sending the message that their child can still participate in routine activities.”
- Be honest and give simple answers to their questions. You can correct misinformation, but avoid telling them not to worry.
- “Anxiety makes us overestimate risk and underestimate our ability to cope.” Blossom explained. “The goal is to help your child realistically evaluate risks based on available information.”
- You might say, “We can do things to try to stay healthy, like washing our hands regularly and avoiding touching our faces,” “It’s true that some people have died from this, and most people who get this illness are OK,” or “Doctors and scientists are working hard to learn how to stop it from spreading.”
- Ask your child or teen to come to you with questions or concerns as the days go by. They may hear things from kids at school or see things online and wonder if they’re true.
- If your child’s school has been closed, they may have concerns about grades, sports seasons and canceled field trips or events they had been looking forward to. Hear out their concerns. Ask for their ideas on what pieces they can control.”

Advice columns nearly always make parenting seem easier than it is. If I may sum up Dr. Blossom’s Covid-19 message in a sentence: *Hopeful truth-telling is our best strategy.*

(The complete text of Dr. Blossom’s advice can be found at <https://pulse.seattlechildrens.org/helping-children-and-teens-cope-with-anxiety-covid-19/>)