Education

ARE THE KIDS ALRIGHT?

How to best keep tabs on your child's mental health

BY DEBORAH ANDERS

Whether you're a first-time parent or a veteran family caregiver, navigating the social/emotional well-being of a child can be challenging, even under the best of circumstances. What is normal behavior for one youngster may not be for another. Throw in adolescence, along with a heavy helping of raging hormones, a protracted pandemic and the pitfalls of social media, and it's harder than ever to sort out your child's mental health.

"Every parent knows their child best, but patterns are important," said Jennie J. Kramer, Founder and Executive Director of Metro Behavioral Health Associates in Scarsdale. "Is there a chronic change in sleep habits, eating habits or mood? Certainly, the obvious cues are frequent symptoms of not feeling well, both real and imagined, an inability to go to school and, perhaps most important, a shift in communication with parents. For instance, are they usually talkative and forthcoming, but now withdrawn?"

In some ways the onslaught of the pandemic, Kramer said, has changed everything. "As you can imagine, it has either enhanced or greatly strained relationships, especially at home.

"Social media, while rather useful for some things, has also been a game-changer. It has brought bullying to a new and exaggerated level that is much harder for kids to manage. It has also greatly contributed to body image issues and insecurities."

Still nurturing: For preschools, what's old is new again

BY LAURIE SULLIVAN

The start of the new school year brought with it a new kind of rhythm to nursery schools.

Though approaches vary from school to school, the one constant on the minds of parents and teachers has been: How can we keep kids safe in the face of a pandemic, yet make like as normal as possible for them?

With daily health screening, social distancing, mask wearing, frequent hand washing, disinfecting and some alteration to a school's drop-off and pick-up routine, preschools have been given a tall order in trying to make the indoor and outdoor classrooms relaxed, nurturing and learning friendly.

Creating individual free to learn play spaces

Many schools have reassessed and redesigned their indoor and outdoor play and learning spaces and found extra play space. Even though it was taken some creativity, finding a way to safely split time inside and outside has been a key factor in parents allowing their kids back to school.

Children have also shown a remarkable resilience during COVID-19 and are eager to get back to a more normal schedule. Though policies and procedures put in place vary from school to school, a few things are constant throughout the region.

Whether they like it or not — kids and parents — the kids have gotten used to wearing masks and some of the preschools in the area find that even when mask breaks are given, some of the older kids opt to leave their masks on. For the youngest learners, they've only known school with masks.

Many schools too have either revamped their HVAC systems to include better air filtration systems, or simply added air filtration machines to help with their mitigation strategies.

And the concept of bringing the indoors outside to make the most of outdoor playtime is a solid one many schools are capitalizing on, even in colder temperatures.

At Temple Beth Shalom in Hastings, director Kate Loewengart explained how they've taken advantage of using indoor equipment outdoors, giving the kids a wider choice of play available to them. "We allow them to develop their self-led skills," Loewengart said of the myriad outdoor programs available to the kids.

Not only were outdoor spaces revamped to accommodate a separate outdoor space for each class, kids get to play with toys that offer them different sensory experiences. "It's been a huge positive for us," Loewengart said. "We're using environmental learning too."