

COVID-19 brought 'historically difficult period' for parents; more of them seek coaching



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Cincinnati Enquirer

Published 10:00 p.m. ET May 24, 2022 | Updated 5:26 a.m. ET May 25, 2022

Lucas jumped up and down, elated when his grandma came to visit. It was his usual reaction to such an event.

But what happened next hit his mom hard: "He grabbed me by the face and said, 'Mommy, grandma does love me!'"

Johnnie and Matt Raymond of Miamisburg knew their son missed his grandparents. It was 2020 and COVID-19 restrictions had left people with questions about how to live their lives. The pandemic had stripped him of their visits of about twice a week and replaced them with one in several months. Lucas was hurt. Over time, his anxiety surfaced in other ways, including outbursts from which he could not easily recover.

The Raymonds were experiencing what a lot of parents did during the pandemic: Stressed children coupled with new stresses of their own. They asked their pediatrician how they could help Lucas. She recommended a parenting coach from Beech Acres Parenting Center who worked in her TriHealth Mason office.

Nonprofit parenting center Beech Acres launched Parent Connex in 2016, but the program saw a 33% rise in clients from 2019 to 2021. Its cases continue to grow.

"Through the pandemic, school-at-home, work-from-home and all the social disruption of the last two years, parents have endured a historically difficult period with their children," said Jill Huynh, program director and vice president of Parent Connex.

Pandemic induces stress in moms, dads, kids

COVID-19's impact on mental health hasn't subsided. Kids struggled, and that has repercussions. Some suffered isolation, some had trouble with virtual learning. And some had mental health crises.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention report that child emergency department visits for mental health conditions jumped in 2020.

And in 2021, a national emergency for children's mental health was declared by several pediatric health organizations, and the U.S. surgeon general released an advisory on kids' mental health.

Parents suffered, too. The Kaiser Family Foundation reported in August 2021 that more than half of parents surveyed said their mental health was negatively impacted by the pandemic, which makes parenting harder.

In the Cincinnati region, the number of parents who got help from the Beech Acres parent coaching service rose from 675 in 2019 to 899 in 2021. This year, Beech Acres expects to have 1,000 parents in the program, Huynh said.

The CDC designated Parent Connex as an evidence-based strategy in the fall of 2020. Its approach includes helping parents identify their strengths and applying them to their response to their struggling children. Coaches become confidantes and supporters as well as experts who help parents with their knowledge of child development, Huynh said.

Mom says coach helped with 'extreme emotional outbursts'

The organization embeds its coaches into pediatric offices for patients' parents and sometimes in business offices as an employee benefit. The goal is to provide a smooth path for parents to get help. The coaches are in pediatric practices in Hamilton, Warren, Butler and Clermont counties in southwest Ohio. They're partnered with all TriHealth pediatric offices. Referrals for coaches also come from Northern Kentucky practices.

Sessions can be by phone or in person. The first visit is free, and subsequent visits are \$95, but Beech Acres does not turn away anyone who cannot afford the service, said Huynh. For these parents, coaching costs are covered with grants and subsidies.

Dr. Jon Mumma, a TriHealth pediatrician in Anderson Township, has had a parent coach in his office since the program's start. He said it just makes sense. Pediatricians have about

15 minutes with each patient for a routine checkup, and the parent often asks a question about how to cope with the child's behavior.

"Those things come up as 'Oh, by the way ...,'" Mumma said. "The level of conversation distracts from everything I have to do." He says having a coach in his office "gets parents in the right place" quickly.

Johnnie said she and her husband tried every approach they could think of to work with Lucas. His out-of-character behaviors started when his daily routines were stripped but continued after he was able to go out from time to time. Lucas would be excited to go, but after about a half an hour he'd cry and beg to go back home, his mom said.

"He started having some extreme and emotional outbursts that just weren't something that we were really prepared for," she said.

Dave Brewer, their parenting coach, got to know the Raymonds and spent time learning about their approaches with Lucas. Together they came up with strategies to better respond to Lucas. They did the same with their baby, Elliot, who was born into a pandemic-driven life on May 23, 2020. Now 2 years old, he's shy about meeting people, his mom said.

Lucas is a happier little boy now, at 4, his mom said, adding that she and his dad are feeling better, too. They've even seen times when Lucas will calm down himself, using steps that his parents have taken with him. Once recently, instead of melting down, he raised his arms, took a breath and left the room to go think about why he was frustrated. When he returned a few minutes later, he and his mom talked about what had happened.

"Dave really validated what we were going through," Johnnie Raymond said. "I feel like he's become almost a part of our family."

<https://www.cincinnati.com/story/news/2022/05/25/covid-19-parent-stress-rises-coaching-program-sees-client-jump/7192635001/>

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