



NEWS RELEASE

August 3, 2022

CONTACT: Karl Parker

P: 609-802-6232

E: KParker@snjpc.org

Dana Boyd

P: 609-605-2299

E: DBoyd@snjpc.org

Children, COVID and Coping: Tackling the Mental Health Impact of COVID-19 on Children & Families

Voorhees Township, New Jersey – The [Southern New Jersey Perinatal Cooperative](https://www.snjpc.org/) (SNJPC), in collaboration with leading mental health experts from across South Jersey, convened a special panel of clinical professionals and educators in Voorhees Township today to examine the impact of COVID-19 on the mental health of children and families.

“We know COVID-19 has had a significant, dramatic and undeniable influence on the mental health of South Jersey children and families. It’s critical that we confront this reality and work to identify symptoms and paths to treatment for those who may be suffering in silence,” said **Helen Hannigan, Executive Director of Southern New Jersey Perinatal Cooperative**. “As the state-licensed maternal and child health consortium for Atlantic, Burlington, Camden, Cape May, Cumberland, Gloucester and Salem Counties, it’s our duty to bring together the region’s best minds to explore solution-based resources and utilize effective, targeted approaches to help our neighbors confront and navigate these new mental health challenges,” added **Hannigan**.

The conference, held at the Virtua Barry D. Brown Health Education Center in Voorhees Township, featured experts from the Cooperative’s *Clinical and Professional Education* and *Non-Public School Nurse Programs*, mental health professionals from *Cooper University Health Care*, *Rowan University School of Osteopathic Medicine* and the *Camden County Educational Services Commission*.

“While summer is a time to rest, relax and reset, our team at the Cooperative has been busy studying, analyzing and understanding evidence-based data on the increased incidence of adolescent anxiety and the effects on children and the entire family unit. As we prepare our

children for the new school year amid growing COVID transmissions with highly contagious subvariants, our goal is to ensure our professional partners across South Jersey are preemptively and reactively equipped with information and tools to treat the growing mental health needs of those affected by the COVID-19 pandemic,” said **Jennie Sherlock-Loeb, MSN, RNC-OB, Director of Clinical & Professional Education, Southern New Jersey Perinatal Cooperative.**

The Cooperative organized the conference following rigorous peer consultations, observations by nursing staff with the Cooperative’s *Non-Public School Nurse Program* and mental health studies, including findings from [JAMA Pediatrics](#) which estimates incidence of adolescent anxiety doubled during the pandemic and as many as 63.8% of adolescents may be suffering from some anxiety and mental illness.

“Our children have endured so much over the past two-and-a-half years. Catastrophic illnesses, the loss of a loved one, prolonged disruptions from normal routines, social isolation, remote learning, relatives losing employment, the threat of eviction. So many changes all at once and not enough time to process it or develop the tools to navigate these challenges,” said **Brenda Allgood, RN, a certified pediatric nurse practitioner serving as the Coordinator of Southern New Jersey Perinatal Cooperative’s Non-Public School Nurse Program.**

Allgood urged intervention utilizing school-based services, citing expert [commentary](#) published in the *American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* which read in part: ***“Without quick and responsive deployment of effective screening, prevention and evidence-based intervention, we risk leaving rising numbers of children and parents in increasingly stressful environments, ripe to leave a pandemic legacy of toxic stress, mental illness and potentially abuse and neglect.”***

“While it’s incumbent upon parents and guardians to keenly observe their children and be both instinctive and curious about behavioral changes, there is an established infrastructure and protocols are in place at our schools for addressing student mental health concerns,” added **Allgood.** “While schools alone aren’t expected to shoulder this responsibility, our educators are uniquely positioned and qualified to intervene and make a difference, as they are trained and spend extended periods of time with our children.”

“These crises go far beyond what we historically characterize as typical adolescent behavior, which can be both awkward and difficult for most teenagers. What has happened now, is life-altering and can be life-threatening. The sharp increase in incidence of mental health illness has not been met with all the resources it requires. The adolescent anxiety and mental health concerns today have been compounded by disruptions as school schedules are modified, creating a widening and alarming gap in care,” added **Allgood.** “Telehealth visits became the new standard of care for counseling, medication management, vocational interventions and peer support groups. But, there are limitations. Many adolescents don’t have reliable computer or internet access. There are data and privacy issues. And many have said they prefer and benefit from in-person care.”

"This country is experiencing a mental health crisis and the gaps in care that existed prior to COVID-19 have only grown wider. Collaboration across disciplines is how we work toward providing timely and effective support for people experiencing mental health challenges. I am very honored to be a part of the Southern New Jersey Perinatal Cooperative's efforts in this goal," said **Trista Henry, MA, School Counselor, Camden County Educational Services Commission.**

Today's conference also included a presentation featuring mental health resources for new parents and families that have welcomed a baby during the pandemic, helping professionals understand how the COVID-19 pandemic has changed the experience for becoming pregnant and being pregnant and its impact on parental mental health and how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected postpartum care.

"The key takeaway today and for the foreseeable future: early identification of signs and symptoms leads to improved outcomes for our children and families. As this pandemic evolves, we need to ensure greater and more equitable access to mental health care services and providers. While not all mental health scars can be fully healed, we can make meaningful strides to alter the legacy of this pandemic and the devastation it has caused to the mental health of our loved ones. Our professional partners who joined us today and those who could not be in attendance are committed to that goal," concluded **Allgood.**

Allgood reminds professionals and parents to take note of changes in adolescent behaviors, including but not limited to:

- Change in the teen's previous attitude and behavior
- Significant distress and/or problems at home, school or with extracurricular activities
- Feelings of sadness, hopelessness, shame or guilt
- Anger, frustration and irritability
- Loss of interest or pleasure in usual activities
- Conflicts with family and friends
- Low self-esteem, exaggerated self-blame or criticism
- Sensitivity, needing constant reassurance
- Trouble thinking, concentrating, making decisions
- Tiredness, loss of energy
- Insomnia or sleeping more than usual
- Changes in appetite: weight loss or gain
- Physical symptoms: headaches, frequent aches/pains
- Social isolation
- Changes in academic performance
- Less attention to hygiene

In addition to calling for policy change/adaptations during heightened COVID transmission periods that would allow schools to remain safely open following CDC guidelines, **Allgood** also urges approaches and interventions for parents, including:

- Screening teens for mental health issues, anxiety
- Focus on decreasing social isolation & loneliness caused by school closures and home confinement
- Parental responses to stress are significant - children take cues from parents/adults; parents, guardians, adults should be mindful of their responses to stress, especially in the presence of their children
- Include teens in family decision making when possible – give them a feeling of control
- Set routines, provide structure
- Monitoring use of social media, as it is difficult for teens to set boundaries on their own
- Increase physical activity, encourage teens to explore sports and/or the creative arts

Broadcast-Quality Links to Videos of Today's Conference:

⇒ Click [here](#) for video/b-roll of conference

⇒ Click [here](#) for video interviews with: **((names & titles below are in the order of appearance in video))**

- Helen Hannigan, MGA, Executive Director, Southern New Jersey Perinatal Cooperative
- Jennie Sherlock-Loeb, MSN, RNC-OB, Director, Clinical & Professional Education, Southern New Jersey Perinatal Cooperative
- Brenda Allgood, RN, MSN, CPNP, Nonpublic School Nurse Coordinator, Southern New Jersey Perinatal Cooperative
- Gwendolyn Messer, MD, Child Psychiatrist/Psychiatrist/ Pediatrician, Cooper University Health Care
- Trista Henry, MA, School Counselor, Camden County Educational Services Commission

###



The Southern New Jersey Perinatal Cooperative, established in 1982, is a private, non-profit coalition of healthcare professionals and consumers licensed by the New Jersey Department of Health as the maternal and child health consortium serving South Jersey. We educate and engage our community to improve the health of pregnant individuals, infants, children and families across Atlantic, Burlington, Camden, Cape May, Cumberland, Gloucester and Salem Counties in South Jersey.

MAIN OFFICE
 2500 McClellan Avenue, Suite 250
 Pennsauken, NJ 08109
 856.665.6000
info@snjpc.org

CAMDEN OFFICE
 808 Market Street, 2nd Floor
 Camden, NJ 08102
 856.963.1013
info@snjpc.org

ATLANTIC COUNTY OFFICE
 605 W. California Avenue
 Absecon, NJ 08201
 609.345.6420
info@snjpc.org