



UMB News

Face to Face: Children, Families, and COVID-19

February 12, 2021 | By [Alex Likowski](#)

Less than a year *before* the start of the COVID-19 pandemic a global company CEO expounded the virtues of telework in *Forbes Magazine*. Less stress. Greater flexibility. And of course, more time with family. So, as we were locking down at home 11 months ago – with telework, remote schooling, and everything else – you might’ve been excused for thinking that maybe a little lockdown might be just what many stressed out American families needed. Eating together. Family game night. Who knows, maybe even time for arts and crafts.

That was the sort of idyllic image behind this April 9th headline in the *Wall Street Journal*, “Amid Life in Lockdown, There’s Joy in Having the Family Together.” Now, in fairness to the author, many families *are* finding some joy together during this time, and even some comfort in sharing our sense of vulnerability with those we hold most dear.



(l-r) Lisa Berlin, Bruce Jarrell, and Brenda Jones Harden

Last week, less than a year *after* the onset of the pandemic *The New York Times* published an entirely different take on what’s really happening in American homes right now. Under the heading, “The Primal Scream” the Times writes, “It’s not

just the working from home, the record unemployment or the remote schooling. This is a mental health crisis, too.” One of the three working moms who are the focus of that story says, “I wish I had the *energy* to scream. All my energy just goes into getting through every day, until I can go to sleep.”

Mothers, especially uncoupled mothers, are really at the brink. For three months just before the pandemic, and only for the second time in US history women held more jobs than men. But not anymore. By the end of 2020 women lost some 5.4-million jobs – a million more than men. About a third of women age 25 to 44 who lost their jobs said the real cause was a lack of childcare. In fact, all of December's 140-thousand lost jobs were held by women.

The pandemic hasn't exactly been a picnic for kids, either. A closed school damages more than just their education. Schools are where they develop socially and emotionally. It's where they can avoid a traumatic household. And for far too many, it's the one place where they *might* get enough nutritious food to stay healthy.

As a result, Brown University's Susan Duffy, MD, told National Public Radio last week, "Across the country, we're hearing that there are increased numbers of serious suicidal attempts and suicidal deaths" involving kids. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, since the pandemic began, the share of kids' visits to emergency departments attributed to mental health reasons has also risen substantially.

Add to that the increased risk of sleeplessness, dry eye disease and myopia from excessive screen use, worsening diets as parents resort to fast food and snacks to manage behavior, and according to a Washington Post report last week, even a greater threat from sexual predators lurking online.

Here in Maryland, concern about kids has prompted at least one interesting idea. A bill in the Maryland Legislature would allow students to skip school once a quarter for mental health reasons – no doctor's note required. Chief sponsor Del. Alonzo Washington from Prince George's County says more than two thirds of teens are experiencing anxiety and depression, and 1 in 6 say they have considered suicide.

Joining UMB President **Bruce E. Jarrell, MD, FACS**, on his discussion program, Virtual Face to Face with President Bruce Jarrell were two University of Maryland School of Social Work (UMSSW) professors with deep experience in the area of families and trauma. **Brenda Jones Harden, PhD**, is the Alison Richman Professor for Children and Families at UMSSW. She directs the Prevention and Early Adversity Research Laboratory, where she and her research team examine the developmental and mental health needs of young children who have experienced early adversity.

And joining her was **Lisa Berlin, PhD**. Her research focuses on early child-parent attachment as well as programs and policies to support early parenting. Currently, Dr. Berlin directs the Baltimore Babies Project, a randomized evaluation of the Maryland Family Connects nurse home visiting program for Baltimore City families with infants.

Watch the entire discussion, including questions and answers from the audience by accessing the link at the top of the page.

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