WHEN SCHOOLS CLOSED ABRUPTLY as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic in spring 2020, students across the country experienced rapid changes with required stay-at-home orders while parents and educators were forced to determine how to care for and educate America’s children under these chaotic conditions. Most school leaders were forced to turn to virtual instructional delivery, paper packets sent home to students, or in some cases, the equivalent of the cancellation of the remainder of the academic year. While much attention has been paid to the educational impact of COVID-19 on students, little research has addressed the social, emotional and mental health toll of this pandemic. At ROX, we wanted to understand how girls are thinking, feeling and behaving since the onset of the coronavirus, and provide data-driven recommendations to teachers/administrators and parents/guardians. Our survey was deployed in May 2020 to elementary, middle and high school girls throughout the country. Surveys were offered via online completion or through a mailed paper/pencil option. A total of 1,273 fifth through 12th grade girls, who attend 88 different schools, completed the survey.

### ISOLATION

- **79%** of girls report that they FEEL MORE LONELY OR ISOLATED than before, with 33% saying they feel MUCH MORE lonely/isolated.

### DEPRESSION

- **1 in 4** girls report that they are SAD OR DEPRESSED FOUR OR MORE DAYS PER WEEK.

### SCHOOL

- **96%** of girls report that they MISS GOING TO SCHOOL with 61% saying that they miss school A LOT.

### SOCIAL MEDIA

- **6+ HOURS**
  - 1/3 of girls report that they SPEND 6 OR MORE HOURS EACH DAY USING SOCIAL MEDIA

The majority of girls spend at least 4 hours/day on social media.

“My family has really been on edge. It feels like there’s a war going on. Most of the time I’m in my room since no one talks to each other.”

- 10th grade girl, Columbus, OH
The disruption to the predictable pattern and schedule of school has proven to be a challenge for many girls. Nearly 40% of respondents report experiencing higher stress levels than they had before COVID-19. More 9th and 10th grade girls report having higher stress levels than before (46% and 49%) as compared to 5th and 6th grade girls (30% and 32%).

While 36% of girls are finding their schoolwork to be harder than it was before COVID-19, the majority report struggling with organization and concentration and only 46% feel that they are doing a good job keeping up with their academics. Girls talked about needing support to:

- Manage their time
- Understand their assignments
- Maintain motivation
- Connect with their teachers
- Stay organized

While girls typically spend 6 or more hours each day physically at school, the amount of time that they are engaged with schoolwork while learning from home varies between 0-2 hours and 10+ hours.

- **0-2 HOURS**: 21%
- **2-4 HOURS**: 43%
- **4-6 HOURS**: 23%
- **6-8 HOURS**: 9%
- **8-10 HOURS**: 3%
- **10+ HOURS**: 1%

In general, girls report that they feel supported by their teachers and administrators during this time of remote learning, but few prefer learning virtually over their traditional in-person schooling.

**LESS DRAMA. It’s been lonely. It’s horrible. It is weird. It has been so boring. I can’t do anything. STRESSFUL. It’s been really hard, I miss my friends & teachers. I am not a fan of quarantine. Boring, very boring. It SUCKS. Rough on my mental & physical health. I’m fine. I hate it. I hate everything about this. I am so bored. It’s been very interesting. There are good & bad things. I am getting to spend more time with my family. MEH.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SINCE COVID-19 BEGAN:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My stress level is much higher than before</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My schoolwork is harder than before</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My schoolwork is organized &amp; I can concentrate</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am keeping up with my schoolwork</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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**OF GIRLS SAY THEY ARE UNCERTAIN OR SCARED ABOUT THEIR FUTURE 58%**

**OF GIRLS SAY THAT THEIR LIFE HAS FELT HARDER THAN BEFORE 42%**

**OF GIRLS SAY THEIR RELATIONSHIPS ARE HARDER THAN BEFORE 37%**

“I feel like the teachers are doing great support wise. Sure there are days where they can give quite a bit of homework or they don’t respond to questions, but overall they are being very considerate during this time which is very helpful.”

- 11th grade girl, Chino, CA
GIRLS ARE THINKING DIFFERENTLY ABOUT THEIR FUTURES SINCE COVID-19

Times of crisis can have a tremendous impact on how individuals think about their lives, their relationships and their futures. Since the onset of COVID-19, girls are thinking differently about their futures, both optimistically and pessimistically. Some are using this opportunity to reflect on what they want to do for their career or the contribution that they want to make in the world, while others are fearing that the plans that they previously had will now be thwarted due to the current state of uncertainty.

Girls who are approaching significant transitions (preparing to transition to middle school or high school, graduating from high school and preparing for college) expressed more concern about their immediate future as they feared missing out on some of their anticipated developmental and social milestones. Their excitement for the future is tempered by the sadness and loss they are currently experiencing.

Girls are looking for reassurance and direction from their teachers/counselors/school administrators and their parents/guardians regarding their safety, their education, their relationships and their future.

Most girls report that they have friends (86%) and adults (90%) who they can talk to about serious issues. While they are intensely missing the social connection and support from their friends, they are using technology and social media to stay connected. Additionally, girls report wanting their parents/guardians to be there to listen to them, to help them with their schoolwork and support them through this crisis. Despite many of the challenges that girls reported since COVID-19 began – including 28% sharing they are getting into more disagreements with their family – 46% stated that they are having more fun with their family.

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“I think this whole experience has really opened my eyes to try new things and to not take things for granted. It makes me want to take advantage of every moment when things do go back to normal.”

- 9th grade girl, Columbus, OH
SCHOOLS SHOULD ENSURE ADEQUATE SOCIAL & EMOTIONAL LEARNING SUPPORTS FOR GIRLS, INCLUDING THE CONSIDERATION OF MENTAL HEALTH SCREENINGS.

It is clear from the research that the isolation and disconnectedness that girls are experiencing as a result of COVID-19 has had a substantial impact on their mood, motivation and engagement. In general, girls more than boys, tend to define themselves in relation to others. Their relationships are significant sources of support and being disconnected from some of their most primary sources of stability and encouragement can be detrimental to their mental health. With nearly 80% of girls reporting more isolation since COVID-19 began, it is important that schools ensure they are adequately attending to the potential mental health threats that can accompany unsupported virtual learning.

With time to consider how virtual, hybrid or remote learning may look for the 2020-21 academic year, schools can ensure that their social/emotional learning and school counseling programs are even further bolstered to ensure ample accessibility for all students. The existing mental health concerns of girls may be amplified as a result of COVID-19 (isolation, depression, anxiety, etc.), yet access to supportive counseling and intervention services has become drastically limited. Schools can take extra effort to ensure that students are connected to school staff and supportive adults for both their academic and non-academic needs, prioritizing safety and mental health as a key consideration in the development of education plans for 2020-21.

SUPPORT GIRLS TO SET GOALS, DEVELOP PLANS & THINK OPTIMISTICALLY ABOUT THEIR FUTURES.

Developmentally, the adolescent years for girls are full of critical milestones, including learning how to navigate relationships and social situations. The onset of the pandemic has impacted girls’ progression through many developmental milestones and has stymied some of their social and interpersonal growth. With a return to pre-COVID-19 normalcy likely several months or even years away, we must recognize that there will be long-standing social and emotional effects on girls. Working specifically to help girls think about and plan their futures at a time when life seems so uncertain is a daunting, but important priority. Help girls identify what is hopeful, what excites them and how they want to contribute to the world so they can see beyond the current circumstance and create a future that is full of promise.

HELP GIRLS USE TECHNOLOGY IN HEALTHY WAYS TO CULTIVATE SUPPORT AND CONNECTION.

Girls are using technology at unprecedented rates — for academic learning, social connection and extracurricular activities. Social media and videoconferencing have replaced in-person connection, and for many girls this access to technology has been supportive and sustaining. However, the same technology challenges, such as cyberbullying and sexting, that existed prior to COVID-19 remain and may even be amplified due to the increase in time that girls are spending engaged with technology. Fostering open dialogue with girls about their evolving use of technology and helping them sustain safe and supportive connections with others is a critical task.

For additional tips & resources visit: https://rulingourexperiences.com/covid19
PAY ATTENTION TO CHANGES IN HER BEHAVIOR, APPEARANCE AND PERFORMANCE.

While the onset of summer and loosening of some state restrictions may have brought some much needed reprieve from the virtual schooling and limited social interactions that girls were experiencing, it is unlikely that life will completely return to "normal" within the coming months. With the lack of predictability on the progression of the virus as well as the uncertainty regarding how states, cities, schools and communities will respond, it is important to attend to the changing conditions and keep a close eye on how your girl is responding to the dramatic changes. Look for key signs of distress such as drastic mood swings, increased isolation, sleeping or eating much more or less than usual, diminished hygiene or self-care and lack of interest in things she previously enjoyed. While this may sound like typical adolescent behavior, if it is out of the norm for your teen, it may be time to seek outside mental health support.

ACKNOWLEDGE THE SENSE OF GRIEF THAT SHE MAY BE EXPERIENCING AS A RESULT OF LOST/DELAYED ACTIVITIES.

COVID-19 precipitated massive restrictions, cancellations and postponements of major life events. From proms and graduations to vacations and weddings - few were spared from COVID-19 related disappointments. For your girl, the disappointment and sadness that that she is feeling is real.

The hallmark events of the teen years are much anticipated and often planned months in advance. We have to recognize the developmental and subjective nature of many of these life events and activities. As adults, we've likely had the chance to participate in more exciting events than our prom or high school softball playoffs, but for many teens these culminating activities are much anticipated and can be defining moments in their development. Rather than tell her that it’s not a big deal, let her openly express her frustration and grief to you and ensure your response is caring and empathetic.

ALLOW GIRLS TO HAVE A ROLE IN ESTABLISHING FAMILY RULES, EXPECTATIONS AND BEHAVIORS SURROUNDING COVID-19.

Without warning girls were sent home from school, isolated from their friends and support systems and removed from many of the activities that brought them happiness and joy. This sense of having little or no control can be frustrating and anxiety-provoking, particularly when rules, regulations and policies are simply forced upon you. As your family determines how you will collectively move through the pandemic, solicit input from your daughter regarding her thoughts on social distancing, visiting friends, attending events, wearing masks, etc. Use these opportunities to give her back a sense of control as well as an appropriate level of responsibility in the shared family decision-making process.

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Hinkelman, L. (2020). Findings from 1,273 U.S. girls on school, technology, relationships and stress since COVID-19. Ruling Our eXperiences (ROX), Columbus, OH.