



The FRIENDS National Center for CBCAP Parent Advisory Council Newsletter

## The Impact of COVID on Children's Mental Health and Development: One Father's Story



When distance learning became a staple in communities across the country it was another hurdle for families to overcome. It was particularly difficult for families of color. Many families found distance learning to be cumbersome when they did not have the devices or internet service to connect to educational sites.

In 2020 my son's distance learning consisted of very unstable internet connections, constant outages, and lessons that were all over the place. Most of the day consisted of the teacher asking the student(s) to please show your face, stop speaking over other students, and nothing conducive to learning. Many of the families have multiple generations in the home and that made it difficult for children to have a space to be attentive to learning.

When connections were constantly dropped, it became too much for me as a single parent to constantly stop what I was doing to try and reconnect to the educational site. There were days when my son would be engaged in the lesson being taught and the screen would go completely dark. After this happened one too many times, I would just tell my son to do some work in one of his lesson books.

Some of the families don't have people in their households who have an education past high school and didn't know how to log on, how to bookmark, or how to attach an assignment to an email. Many of us take for granted knowing how to navigate the Internet and remote learning brought about the inequities that are inherent in the educational landscape.

With many families living in poverty, the stress that students face makes it impossible for any learning to take place. Many children count on school to eat a meal, to learn how to interact socially and once that is taken away their overall development is stifled. A lack of parental supervision was prevalent in my son's classes, and there were days I



would see my son mentally check out and there was no way to get him to reconnect. There were times when I would hide my presence and listen to his class and know most of the time, we were just checking the present box for attendance purposes.

Families that did not have the means to purchase a device for their children were given devices that had numerous technical issues and were told to make the best of it. These families had children who were still required to pass the standardized testing at the end of the year. When speaking to educators from across the country, many said that if ever there was a time to suspend testing it was then. We all know that it was not up to the teachers, state legislators required the testing to go on. The remote learning dynamic brought to the forefront the widespread inequities in school quality and environments within black and brown communities. Racism may be more visible because of the Pandemic, but to those who experience it, the consequences have always taken a toll on their children's education.

With disparities in resources and strains on budgets, low-income school districts and families need to make sure that their voices

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**Visit the PAC on the FRIENDS website at [www.friendsnrc.org](http://www.friendsnrc.org)**

## There is Hope Through Trying Times: Creating a Positive Outcome from a Perceived Negative Situation

I had the opportunity to interview Elizabeth Reddick, a single mother from Washington D.C., who is currently serving in her first year as a FRIENDS' PAC Member. She is a mother of five with two children remaining in the household. This article hopes to shed light on Elizabeth's experience with her 9-year-old son, who is on the Autism Spectrum, and their experiences during the "COVID-19 Shutdown". I hope to paint a picture of her story and convey how she created a positive outcome from a situation that was perceived as negative.

"A week before Spring Break and here we are facing COVID-19 Shutdown!!!" This was Elizabeth's reaction, as well as most parents' reaction to what was occurring in Spring 2020. Anxieties started to build with pressing questions like, "what will happen next" and "how will I make it through the rest of the school year". Elizabeth was concerned about her son's behavioral issues which he faced while in school and wondered how this would impact his transition to home school. She was only given a packet from the school which made Elizabeth feel that the school system was not prepared and that she was not given the proper tools needed to help her son adequately learn at home, especially with him being on the Autism Spectrum. How could a positive outcome be created out of this situation she was facing?

Being determined to be successful in helping her son thrive at home, Elizabeth started to communicate with his teacher as well as the social worker at the school for more clarity and help. She discovered that her son was given "too easy work", that even a 3- or 4-year-old could understand. Elizabeth felt that not being challenged intellectually and feeling unsafe in his school environment caused her son to have behavioral problems. So, she sought out and found a school that she felt was

more supportive to children with special needs and one that would also create a safe environment for her son to learn and thrive.

Once this change occurred, Elizabeth noticed her son becoming more independent with his learning, as well as, his confidence building. She appreciated how his new teacher, in her opinion, was more involved in coaching and creating an environment for her son to learn in. One concern, with learning at home, was him regressing in his learning. In this newly created learning environment and with a new closely built relationship with his teacher, Elizabeth's son actually improved in his math skills and matured emotionally. How excited Elizabeth was to see what once triggered anxiety for her son, was not an issue for him now! She witnessed how he was able to have more self-control, by not feeling the need to flip over tables when he became anxious or upset. He also became more willing to speak to people when before he had always been an introverted person.

What was deemed a negative situation, ended up being a blessing in disguise for Elizabeth and her family. Not only did she feel that her son's stress level was reduced by not being pressured to perform in a school environment, but she felt he also became more self-aware and displayed much emotional growth during this time. Prior to the COVID-19 shutdown, Elizabeth's son was receiving cognitive behavioral therapy and he remained in therapy throughout the shutdown. Elizabeth felt that her son thrived so much at home, he was able to graduate from several therapy classes.

Since Elizabeth had such success with her son, she decided to create some positives for herself. Prior to the shutdown, Elizabeth was in counseling, at Community Connections in D.C., to identify triggers so that she could change her responses.

She decided to take virtual classes, through the D.C. Children's Trust Fund and East River Family Success Center, to grow and learn more about being successful in parenting. During this time, she was able to grow and to learn more about appropriate discipline techniques and discovered that her expectations were not realistic for her children. She also was able to understand that her communication style, while correcting her children, came from her own childhood trauma. This prompted Elizabeth to seek to heal her inner child and face her own demons. Elizabeth wouldn't have had the time to focus on these discoveries about herself if not for the time allotted by the COVID-19 shutdown.

Who could have ever imagined the positive outcomes that surfaced during a time that others viewed as negative!! Elizabeth felt that her time at home was vital for her and her children's understanding of how to communicate with each other and how to express their needs more effectively. The Shutdown brought awareness and healing to Elizabeth's family. We realize that this was not everyone's experience, but reading about Elizabeth's story should prompt us all to have hope that we have the ability to create a positive outcome out of a situation we deem negative.

*by Vadonna Williams,  
FRIENDS PAC Member*



## Finding the Helpers:

### Success Stories and Resources from the Field and Community

#### FRIENDS NC for CBCAP

These are trying times. The COVID pandemic has led many of us to experience tensions resulting from business closures, empty grocery store shelves and school shut-downs all while maintaining social distance, masking and possibly quarantining. During this time family caregivers around the country experienced educating their child from home, sometimes with limited or no access to resources and technology. Parent advisors from the FRIENDS Parent Advisory Council are quick to remind practitioners that schooling from home (a result of pandemic restrictions) is very different than home schooling (a family directed choice by family caregivers choosing to guide their child's education at home). In times of isolation and anxiety, it may not seem as though there are stories of success. However, a timeless quote from the late Fred Rogers tends to emerge again and again: "Look for the helpers." As the impact of the ongoing coronavirus pandemic continues to shape Americans' daily lives – including how our children are educated – it helps to take Fred Roger's advice and identify small victories, stories of success and resources to support families as they address their child's educational and social / emotional needs.

#### Success Stories from the Field

These stories showcase some of the different ways Head Start grantees are working to ensure positive vaccine experiences. Some programs have become vaccination sites or created partnerships with local pharmacies and health departments to successfully improve their staff's access to the vaccine. Others have been using COVID-19 funds to support the vaccine effort, such as offering staff paid leave for the time spent receiving their vaccination or providing transportation assistance to vaccination locations. The stories are available here: <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/about-us/coronavirus/vaccine-success-stories-field>

In addition, Head Start programs and grantees are successfully using and implementing the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) Toolkit for Teachers, School Staff, and Childcare Workers and other resources to increase staff comfortability and understanding of the vaccine.

#### ECD: The Latest Live

The Office of Early Childhood Development hosts a monthly webinar series focused on the latest updates from the Biden-Harris Administration on early childhood policy. Join in to hear about how the American Rescue Plan Act is supporting families and the early childhood community, the Administration's plans to Build Back Better, and how you can support the country's recovery from the COVID-19 health emergency. Speakers will share strategies, resources and technical assistance and include families and practitioners sharing their expertise and experience. The monthly webinar will be a live forum for ACF and federal agency leadership to share progress on implementation and respond to questions that have been submitted. Participants will be able to submit questions when they register to be answered during the webinar. Interested individuals can register using this link: [https://www.zoomgov.com/webinar/register/WN\\_GvTnJfO5QJkbbkezH\\_bQlw](https://www.zoomgov.com/webinar/register/WN_GvTnJfO5QJkbbkezH_bQlw) Participants are invited to attend all of the events in this series but will need to register for each webcast separately. Archived webinars are updates, resources and success stories are available using this link: [https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLypiJrod4Deg76-zbeTsM88L7\\_pM-00pN](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLypiJrod4Deg76-zbeTsM88L7_pM-00pN)

#### Resources for Older Youth

Relationships are powerful tools - they have the potential to inspire and motivate, create quality systems of support, and ultimately change lives. For young people, so many of those connections are formed and developed during

their time at school. That's why it's critical that adults are intentional about what those relationships look like and how they are distributed, especially in light of the impact of the pandemic. These stories of success highlight the impact mentors have had to promote positive relationships and experiences for youth: [Mentoring Stories - MENTOR](#)

In addition MENTOR, the national mentoring organization with sites around the country, teamed up with American Student Assistance on a new campaign to provide teachers, administrators, coaches - any adult within a school system

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### The Impact of COVID on Children's Mental Health and Development

are heard when it comes to what their children need to prosper in school. Telling your friend or family member is fine but after those conversations nothing has changed. Educate yourself on becoming an advocate for your child and community. Academic success requires improving health, economic stability and housing along with other factors for families of color. It is essential that people who look like you get a seat at the table.

The factors that influence a child's education are particularly difficult and can be heightened when living in a single parent household. At times last year I felt like I was alone on an island. There were times when I had to just get away mentally and regroup for both of us. Being a single parent is already one of the toughest realities for a person to face. The pandemic brought about a reality that I personally was not really ready to face, but there were people who have been there for me and assisted me as much as possible, and for that I am forever grateful!

*by Anthony Queen  
FRIENDS PAC member*



## The Shortcomings of Standardized Tests for People with Disabilities

Children with disabilities have been disproportionately affected by the flawed policies that influence their academic future and progress due to measures that inaccurately portray their performance, based on a one-size-fits-all approach. Students with disabilities often face many barriers due to the complex challenges that are unique to their specific conditions, whether they are visible or invisible.

Visible conditions include those that are physical such as motor, visual, hearing impairments, and other conditions that require the use of assistive devices or medical equipment. Invisible disabilities are those that are not immediately apparent. They are impairments that significantly affect the individual's quality of life including but not limited to chronic medical conditions like diabetes, renal failure, significant sleep disorders, chronic pain and diseases that can affect the brain, nervous system, or other internal organs.

According to Disabled World, an estimated 10% of people in the United States have a chronic medical condition that is referred to as a hidden or invisible disability. According to the Americans with Disabilities Act, a disability is legally defined as a physical or mental impairment that can significantly impact daily life such as school, work or other daily activities. Many who experience hidden disabilities often face difficulties being understood, because of the perceptions of others. For example, an individual with a medical condition such as chronic pain, arthritis or learning disability often need reasonable accommodations at school or work are often told that their best is not enough and that they should try harder next time or that they do not look sick, or that they are "faking it" as an excuse to not engage in their daily activities without understanding the different reality they experience living with medical, mental or neurological conditions such as seizure disorders,

cognitive impairments, heart conditions, fibromyalgia, chronic fatigue syndrome and others.

Students with learning disabilities like Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) or Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity disorder, Dyslexia and other cognitive impairments are at a disadvantage because of the flawed standards that are solely based on a quantitative threshold that determines a student's performance to pass or fail. One of the most prominent shortcomings of standardized tests for people with disabilities is the failure to account for factors of direct impact that affect the result of testing procedures for students with significant learning difficulties. Other shortcomings include failure to measure real knowledge of subject material using quantitative values. Test scores can substantially increase due to repetition which result in the discrepancies between acquiring real knowledge of the subjects in question and that of practice test sessions based on a 1-size-fits-all curriculum. Also, there are no cost-effective opportunities for remediation in place for when a student fails to pass one of these tests, especially in urban areas with a prevalence of low-income population groups. Studies have shown that the economic costs of helping students with learning deficits to pass tests such as the SATs and ACTs are often overlooked and can be crippling high.

### Impact of Standardized Tests During COVID

COVID has disproportionately affected many at-risk students because of the growing disparities in accessing educational resources, technology, reasonable accommodations, and programs that aid students in receiving a proper education. For instance, students with learning disabilities like ADHD, ADD, Dyslexia, and mental challenges are often given inadequate reasonable accommodations due to the uneven regulations set by each state,



jeopardizing their quality of education which can have detrimental effects on their future development.

Students in low-income households often lack resources, guidance and access to services that facilitate learning. This lack of access and resources can result in children falling behind in the classroom and

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### Finding the Helpers

who works with young people - with tools and resources they can use to build strong, meaningful relationships with all their students during and beyond the pandemic. [Click here](#) to learn more and access these great new resources!

### Finding Success Engaging Families and Schools in Partnership

Through global research and convenings, the Parents as Allies research project aims to find promising new strategies cropping up around the globe, and then synthesize and share this knowledge to help build stronger school-family and teacher-parent partnerships worldwide. This initiative is all about building on the imperfect but increased communication that began happening between schools and families out of necessity during the pandemic. Follow their progress here: [Two months, 200 new ideas and a chance to revolutionize parent engagement in education | Pittsburgh is Kidsburgh.](#)

*Compiled by MaryJo Alimena Caruso,  
FRIENDS T/TA Coordinator*



## Parent Leaders in Action



Valerie Lebanion and Joanne Hodgeman presenting at the Prevention Mindset Institute (PMI) in Baltimore, MD.



Joanne Hodgeman presenting at the PMI



Vadonna Williams presenting on a panel at the Alabama CTF grantees meeting.

**In addition to supporting the work of FRIENDS and CBCAP, the FRIENDS Parent Advisory Council members are active in their states and communities. Take a look at the PAC's recent efforts and achievements!**

**Marcela Henao**, PAC member from New Jersey, is a Certified Sexual Violence Advocate-Volunteer at Union County Rape Crisis Center (RCC) as well as a Union County Council for Young Children (UCCYC) Parent Leader Facilitator for the Virtual Children's Café. Marcela is a Parent Advisor at Ascend at the Aspen Institute, has provided training on the Five Protective Factors, and has provided testimony to funders.

**Valerie Lebanion**, PAC member from Kentucky, serves on Kentucky's Continuous Quality Improvement Team. Valerie is a Trainer of Trainers for the Nurturing Parenting Program and is a parent representative on the FRIENDS' Prevention Mindset Institute.

**Anthony Queen**, PAC member from Michigan, has been nominated to serve on the Board of Commissioners of Grand Rapids, Michigan.

**Raven Sigure**, PAC member from Louisiana, has been promoted from Parent Partner to Parent Partner Training Coordinator with the Extra Mile Resource Center Region IV. Raven has recently completed the Iowa Building a Better Future, Train the Trainer Training, and is now training new parent partners throughout Louisiana.

**Melissa Zimmerman**, PAC member from Arizona, is a Protective Factors Trainer and Flourishing Families Trainer for Prevent Child Abuse Arizona. Melissa recently spoke at Lighting Arizona Purple during Domestic Violence Awareness Month and co facilitated a webinar on shared parenting for West Virginia family resource center directors in October 2021. She graduated in December 2020 with a Masters of Criminal Justice Degree and is currently working on a Master of Social Work Degree.

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## The Shortcomings of Standardized Tests...

during testing which was seen during the ongoing pandemic. Due to the abrupt transition to virtual education, students with disabilities were greatly affected due to the lack of flexibility in teaching methods which cannot be replicated in a virtual setting, especially for skills that require in-person instruction. To illustrate, teaching basic math concepts like geometry to a visually impaired or blind student requires in-person instruction due to the use of braille and other adaptive aids.

Testing centers like the College Board had originally planned to administer tests remotely but canceled due to security concerns. Often times, online platforms that provide testing are not accessible and fail to accommodate the assistive aids for people with disabilities, further excluding said population groups from performing in an equal playing field. In other words, standardized testing magnifies the existent disparities in access to quality education, further widening the gap in education between minorities including those with disabilities.

Many programs that provide educational support services for those with disabilities have been disrupted during COVID-19, and policies should adapt to the evolving needs of disabled students by ensuring that remote testing platforms are universally accessible for students. Standardized testing can negatively affect the students' self-confidence, mental well-being and attitude towards learning because of the influence created by a defining label that fails to consider the different learning styles and abilities that compensate their challenges. Labeling students with learning or mental disabilities as disordered without clearly evaluating and understanding their specific needs for reasonable accommodations is a missed opportunity for potential growth and achievement.

*by Pricilla Garces,  
Disability Advocate*



## Understanding Dyslexia and Impact of COVID

Dyslexia, the most common learning disorder worldwide, continues to be misunderstood and under-identified throughout the world especially in underserved, vulnerable communities. What is Dyslexia? Per the accepted definition published by the International Dyslexia Association, "Dyslexia is characterized by difficulties with accurate and/or fluent word recognition and by poor spelling and decoding abilities. These difficulties typically result from a deficit in the phonological component of language that is often unexpected in relation to other cognitive abilities and the provision of effective classroom instruction. Secondary consequences may include problems in reading comprehension and reduced reading experience that can impede growth of vocabulary and background knowledge." How common is it - depending on the researcher, it spans from 8% to 17% of the population that present with reading weaknesses in varying degrees (Pediatrics In Review, Drs. Sally and Bennett Shaywitz, May 2003). Most states in the United States have Dyslexia laws, with the exception of Idaho, but other than promoting the definition of Dyslexia, the laws vary from state to state in terms of services and mandates.

As early as preschool, children begin to become aware of their differences when compared to their peers. "Mom, my friends can write their names, but I can't remember the letters in my name or write them." "Why is it so hard for me to finish reading a chapter that my friend read in 5 minutes?" Dyslexia has been found to be a highly genetic learning disorder with inheritability over 40%. The severity of Dyslexia can be reduced if the child is immersed in a rich oral language environment and receives **explicit** daily instruction in letter name/sounds and phoneme awareness in pre-k and kindergarten early childhood.

Despite the flurry of US laws that recognize this common reading dis-

order, and in some states mandate the screening of Dyslexia, recent studies have shown that the Dyslexia laws have not led to increased identification of Dyslexia especially among African American and Latino children. (Journal of Learning Disabilities, April 2020; Odegard, Farris, and Middleton) Unidentified or poorly remediated Dyslexia puts a child at risk socially and emotionally. Left untreated, children with dyslexia are at risk for drug and sexual abuse due to the acquired poor self-image. In fact, research has found the following, "the odds of a sexual abuse allegation was 2.5 times greater for children with a LD relative to children without a LD." (Helton, Kerr, Gruber; October 2017). Speaking from experience, misconceptions about learning disorders have led some dyslexic children to be mistreated since they were considered damaged in some way. In those instances, they were considered an embarrassment to the family and thought of as "stupid" by their teachers. Dr. Jerome Shultz in his book, *Nowhere to Hide: Why Kids with ADHD and LD hate school and what we can do about it*, provides an in-depth examination of the negative consequences of kids left unidentified and untreated.

As we start a new school year, it is imperative that all children in Pre-K through 2nd grade undergo

early screening of basic language and reading skills in order to identify those children who are below benchmark when compared to their peers. We know that many children lost ground due to the pandemic, but typical children will pick up new learning quickly, while students with Dyslexia will not. While it is never too late to teach someone to read, the earlier a student is identified for support, the sooner the emerging gap with their peers can be closed thus avoiding the development of social emotional struggles that left unchecked lead to depression, withdrawal, and school avoidance. Left unidentified and/or unremediated, the whole family is impacted, not just the child. Parents, you are on the front lines when it comes to identifying Dyslexia. Please check out the links below to learn more about your state's Dyslexia laws and access the International Dyslexia Association's free parent Dyslexia handbook. Advocate for your child, and educate your child's teachers since they may not know the signs or are dismissing the significance of the warning signs for dyslexia.

<https://dyslexiaida.org/ida-dyslexia-handbook/>

<https://improvingliteracy.org/state-of-dyslexia>

by Susan E. Miller, Assistant Director  
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## The Impact of COVID on Special Populations: Examples from around the United States

As schools reopen, addressing COVID-19-related trauma and mental health issues will take more than mental health services

[As schools reopen, addressing COVID-19-related trauma and mental health issues will take more than mental health services - Child Trends](#)

**What Latino Families Need Now: The Nation's Most Comprehensive Study of COVID-19 Impacts on Latino Communities and How Policy Makers Should Respond**

<https://nationalsurvey.ap-od.org/>

**How to Address the Devastating**

**COVID-19 Impacts on Latino Families. Latino Parent Voices: Policy Recommendations**

[https://nationalsurvey.ap-od.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Policy-Report\\_APOD\\_web2.pdf](https://nationalsurvey.ap-od.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Policy-Report_APOD_web2.pdf)

**The Impact of the Pandemic on Households with Children and Youth/Children with Special Needs**

[impact of the covid-19 pandemic on children youth and families .pdf \(harvard.edu\)](#)

[Survey gives snapshot of pandemic life for families, children with special health care needs | AAP News | American Academy of Pediatrics](#)

Visit [www.friendsnrc.org](http://www.friendsnrc.org) for more information and resources on parent leadership.



FRIENDS Parent Advisory Council members (from l to r, top row): Eileen Graham, Marcela Henao, Bruce Bynum, Raven Sigure, Heather Stenson, Vadonna Williams (from l to r, bottom row) Valerie Lebanion, Melissa Zimmerman, Joanne Hodgeman, Anthony Queen, Elizabeth Reddick.

### About the PAC

FRIENDS has established a Parent Advisory Council to provide useful overall program direction and guidance to the activities of the National Center. Committee members share their experience and expertise in child abuse prevention and family strengthening through their active participation in FRIENDS workgroups and the annual Grantee's meeting, development/review of FRIENDS written materials, and by providing resource center staff with consultation and advice.

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