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CORONAVIRUS

As more children test positive for coronavirus parents face tough decision about school

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After Etzia Hamilton developed a cough, her intuition kicked in.

The 40-year-old mother of three from Lehigh Acres noticed her youngest son, Jayvion, 9, was not himself.

“I knew something was fishy when he put his video game down and took a nap,” she said.

In a matter of days, she learned she and her son were both infected with COVID-19.

Nearly 1 in 3 children under 18 have tested positive for the disease and there no signs the steady uptick will slow down. That’s not helping to ease anxiety as all families face tough decisions soon about sending their children to school next month or enrolling them in virtual classes.

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Most children get infected through someone in their household, experts say.

Lee County has the seventh highest positivity rate among children in the state, at 46.3%. The positivity rate is based on the number of positive tests against the total number tested.

Collier County is 12th with a 42.7% positivity rate, according to state Department of Health data.

That's well above the state positivity rate of 31.1%. To date, 16,797 children in Florida have the disease out of 54,022 tested.

In Lee, 639 children have been infected out of 1,381 tested. In Collier, 674 have been infected out of 1,578 tested.

One glimmer of hope comes from early studies in Europe that show children infected with COVID-19 tend not to spread it to others, according to Dr. Dana Crater, a pediatrician with Physicians Primary Care in Lee County.

“It is encouraging so far,” Crater said. “Studies are showing kids are less likely to contract it, less likely to get sick and less likely to transmit to others.”

While the state health department is responsible for contact tracing, families are doing their own, Crater said.

“I think parents feel very vigilant about contacting other parents,” Crater said. “I have been super impressed with how parents with kids who test positive are staying home and isolating.”

Word of children testing positive gets around at summer camps which face pressure to act promptly.

That was the case last week when Creative Theater Workshop, a children’s theater camp in Fort Myers, shut down after two students tested positive.

The recreational STARS Complex in Fort Myers also ended its summer camp Friday after at least two people tested positive, including a teenager who worked with children.

More: City of Fort Myers cancels summer program at STARS Complex

Children who are hospitalized due to COVID-19 tend to have underlying risk factors like obesity, asthma or other chronic conditions, Crater said.

At Golisano Children’s Hospital south of Fort Myers, 122 young people under the age of 20 have been admitted for COVID-19 since mid-March, according to Alyssa Bostwick, program development coordinator.

“On average we see one to eight patients hospitalized per day who are COVID-19 positive,” Bostwick said. On Friday, Golisano had six patients with the disease, she said.

Memorial Day get together

Hamilton doesn’t know where she was exposed to the disease.

She works at a medical practice that follows all the prevention guidelines of masks, hand washing and social distancing.

Her symptoms began a few days after Memorial Day weekend when her family went to a small holiday gathering.

Her two oldest sons, Julian, 14, and Adriyan, 18, attended but didn't spend as much time with her as Jayvion.

"Jayvion got it through me. Yes, I'm pretty sure," she said. "He was with me in the car when I had active symptoms."

Hamilton got her positive test for COVID-19 on May 29, two days after developing a cough. Sheer exhaustion, another symptom, kept the single mother in bed one full day.

She took Jayvion for testing June 1. Sure enough, he was positive. Her two older sons were negative.

Hamilton and Jayvion isolated in her bedroom for two weeks.

Jayvion had a fever and bad sore throat. He never lost his appetite. He slept a lot. They kept entertained by video games, Netflix and FaceTime.

"We watched movies and we played a phone game," Jayvion said.

What bothered him the most was missing his youth basketball team.

"I had to miss practice three times a week," he said.

Hamilton said her two older sons pitched in and left water and food outside the bedroom door.

Jayvion never felt sorry for himself, Hamilton said. If anything, he was more worried because he has a history of asthma.

Jayvion's symptoms lasted four days. Her own symptoms of body aches, headache and fatigue were short-lived.

By day seven, Hamilton briefly ventured out of the bedroom when nobody was around and always in a mask.

"It was kind of strange wearing a mask in my own home," Hamilton said.

Both are recovered. Jayvion needed a negative test before he could go rejoin his basketball team practices.

“I have a tournament in two weeks in North Fort Myers,” he said.

Hamilton faces a decision about school next month for all three of her kids.

She likes the structure of school, especially after finding how tough it was last spring to do virtual school.

“I am inclined to send them back to school,” she said.

Children follow parents

Explanations are varied among physicians why more children are becoming infected with COVID-19.

When the state began re-opening in May, state data showed infection began ticking up dramatically among adults as they lost their guard to wear masks and social distance.

Florida is among states that is an epicenter for COVID-19 in the U.S. and hit a new record Thursday with 156 deaths and nearly 14,000 new cases.

On Friday, the state reported 11,466 new cases for a cumulative of 327,241 cases since the pandemic began and 4,805 deaths.

It's the parents who become sick with COVID-19 who bring their children for testing, said Dr. Jose Salazar, a pediatrician with Healthcare Network in Collier.

He is based in Immokalee which has seen a nearly 200% increase in community spread to 1,837 cases from 611 cases on June 1, according to state data.

It's no surprise more children are being infected, Salazar said.

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The Healthcare Network has tested 277 children in Immokalee and 70 have been positive, according to the group. That's a 25% positivity rate.

In Naples, Healthcare Network has tested 378 children and 62 have been positive, a 16% positivity rate.

A half dozen Immokalee children with COVID-19 have needed to be hospitalized but most children have had mild symptoms, Salazar said.

“Kids' immune systems respond more rapidly and children don't complain about symptoms,” Salazar said.

Children under 2 are not going to wear masks but it's easier when they are 3 and older, he said.

“We have to convince parents that is the first step,” he said. “I have seen more people in Immokalee wearing masks.”

Parents had been letting their kids go out more but that's changed since the numbers have risen so much recently, said Crater, the Fort Myers pediatrician.

“I am finding that parents are responding to the current spike in adult cases by continuing to be careful about allowing their children to venture too far outside of their own family bubble,” she said. “And some who had become a little more lax about it are now tightening the rules a bit again as they see their friends and coworkers testing positive.”

Her group practice of 14 pediatricians with four locations in Lee has seen a combined 60 to 70 children with COVID-19 since the pandemic began. Most children have been mildly ill with low-grade fever and a runny nose.

She doesn't see people blaming parents when a child becomes infected with the disease.

“I see more worry about it than judgment,” she said.

The NCH Healthcare System in Collier said 101 children have tested positive since testing began early in the pandemic.

About 25% of the cases in children have been since late June, according to Chris Raphael, director of critical care.

“A majority of parents are reporting that an adult member of the household has COVID symptoms or a positive diagnosis when the child presents for care,” Raphael said.

Most of the children with COVID-19 have had mild illness, he said.

Dr. Emad Salman, medical director of Golisano children's hospital, said young people don't see themselves as vulnerable to the disease.

Families as a whole are tired of being home and are going out more, Salman said.

One plus is that children coming into the emergency room at Golisano for any number of reasons are wearing masks, he said.

Parents of children in treatment for cancer are cautious and have them in masks for check ups, he said.

“Fortunately we have not seen any oncology patients be positive for COVID-19,” Salman said. “They are a very vulnerable population. Their families are already in tune with avoiding crowds and taking precautions.”