

A photograph of three children in a park setting. Two children in the foreground are wearing face masks and harnesses, looking towards the camera. The child on the left has curly hair and wears a grey mask and a black harness. The child on the right has straight hair and wears a green mask and a green t-shirt with a floral design. A third child is seen from the back in the foreground, wearing a blue shirt. The background shows trees and a blue water bottle on a bench.

LIFE AFTER COVID

Understanding the pandemic's impact on kids and teens

■ by Jen Howver

Back in March 2020, what began as initial quarantines and lockdowns in response to the COVID pandemic stretched into months-long uncertainty and disruption to our daily lives. Everyone felt the immediate impact, as jobs were lost or moved to a virtual office, and schools were closed and shifted to online learning. But we've yet to see how the pandemic affects kids and teens in the long term. ▶

Photo courtesy of Camp Luther





I spent time talking with David Thomas, the director of family counseling at Daystar Counseling in Nashville, Tennessee, and the co-author of eight books on understanding and raising kids. He is also part of the “Raising Boys and Girls” podcast, along with Sissy Goff and Melissa Trevathan.

We know that many of the kids and teenagers who will be coming to your camps and conference centers in 2021 will be dealing with different issues than in the past. I asked Thomas to shed some light on what they see in his counseling practice and research that’s been conducted. We hope this will prepare you for what to expect when your property opens this year and campers come back.

Overall Impact on Families

Many families viewed the first couple weeks of quarantine as an extended spring break, spending time in their pajamas, playing board games, baking. Initially, people felt “a new kind of connectedness, despite the fear of the unknowns. There was a sense that there’s good coming from this,” Thomas explained. He believes that many expected the quarantine might last four to six weeks. “Nobody imagined we’d still be in this moment four to six months later, looking at a long runway of unknowns,” Thomas said. The only thing that is certain is that we don’t know when we will be back to any sort of “normal” life together.

The most significant thing clinicians are seeing is collective anxiety. We’re all carrying so much unknown, let alone all the other things families are facing. As families faced the loss of jobs or income, tried juggling work and school from home and were facing so much unknown, conflict was amplified (including more cases of domestic violence). As a result of the pandemic, Thomas said he thinks we could see a high divorce rate on the other side of the pandemic. “We’re going to have a lot of kids who sat front row and witnessed their parents’ anxiety, conflict and potentially a separation or divorce.”

Photo courtesy of Camp Zion

“This year, more than ever, the needs will be greater and more significant. Prepare your staff to support and understand the challenges.”
—David Thomas, L.M.S.W.

Anxiety and Depression in Kids and Teens

According to Thomas, anxiety is already a childhood epidemic in our country, but they're seeing even greater numbers now. He explained that without the structure and consistency of school and the cognitive stimulation that helps take kids' minds off their anxiety, it has increased.

Additionally, with many preschool and elementary-age kids, there's already a fear about separating from their parents. Thomas explained that “the fact that parents haven't gone on dates or traveled is going to make it harder for kids to deal with once they start again.”

Fear of sickness is also common among younger kids. The pandemic has exacerbated the fear, according to Thomas. “We're reinforcing that by telling them to wash hands, sanitize, don't touch their face, etc. It will be hard for those kids to come back down from that.”

In adolescents, there's been a higher rate of depression, especially for those who have struggled with not having the relationships that are so important for their identity formation. “This age group already has a tendency to isolate and get into their heads, so the pandemic added to that,” Thomas said. Teens are already questioning who they are and where they fit in the world. Thomas and his partners have heard so many teenagers voicing worry about the state of their relationships. “Even if they're engaged digitally,” Thomas explained, “they're worried because they haven't been together.”

As kids and teens were facing more struggles, mental health professionals had to move to telemedicine, working through screens rather than in-person sessions. This has made it more difficult for people to feel like they can open up and share the same way they would in the privacy of a counselor's office. ►

The reality is, the kids and teens who will step foot on your property next year will have unique challenges.

Photo courtesy of CAMP-of-the-WOODS

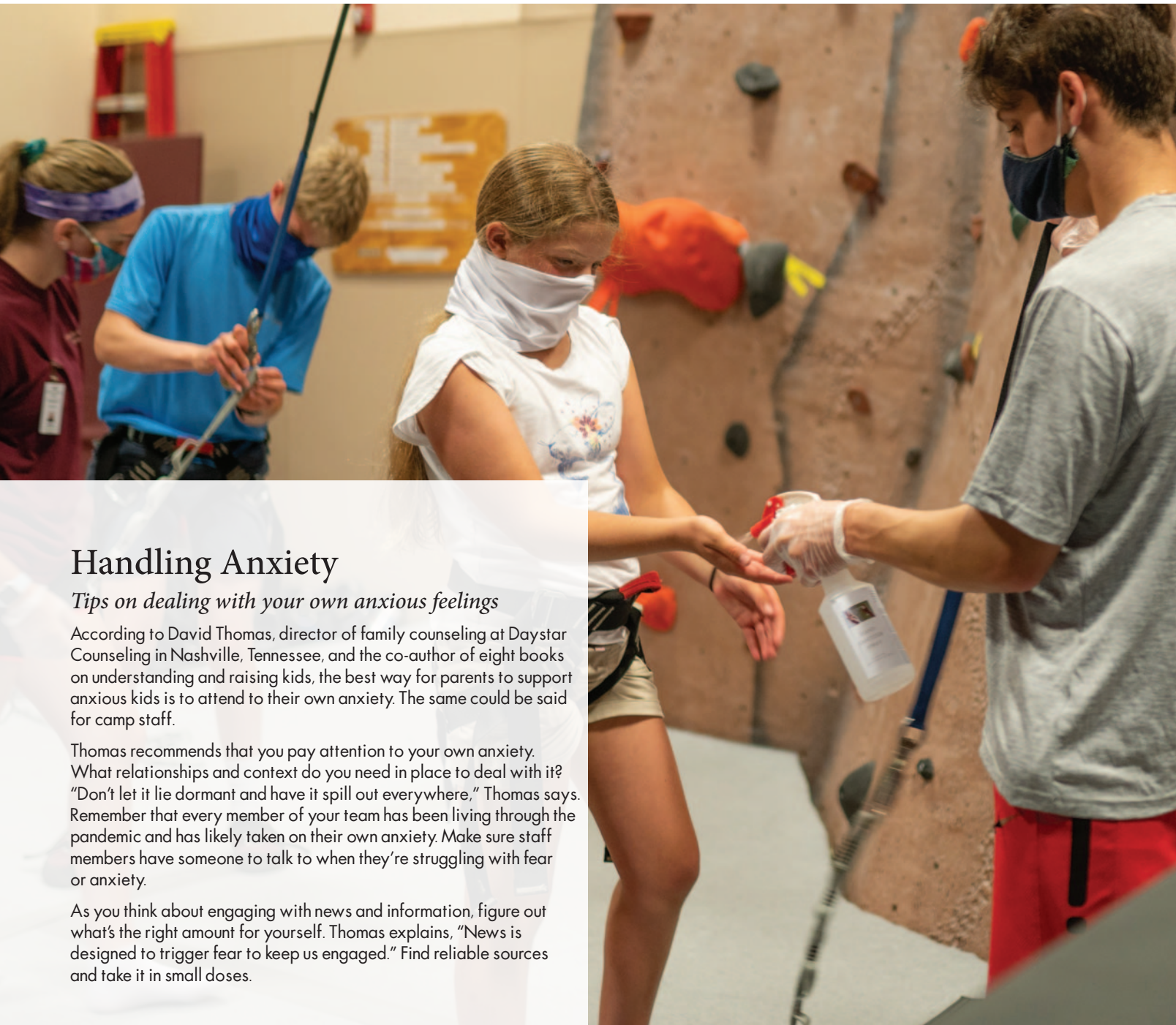
Handling Anxiety

Tips on dealing with your own anxious feelings

According to David Thomas, director of family counseling at Daystar Counseling in Nashville, Tennessee, and the co-author of eight books on understanding and raising kids, the best way for parents to support anxious kids is to attend to their own anxiety. The same could be said for camp staff.

Thomas recommends that you pay attention to your own anxiety. What relationships and context do you need in place to deal with it? "Don't let it lie dormant and have it spill out everywhere," Thomas says. Remember that every member of your team has been living through the pandemic and has likely taken on their own anxiety. Make sure staff members have someone to talk to when they're struggling with fear or anxiety.

As you think about engaging with news and information, figure out what's the right amount for yourself. Thomas explains, "News is designed to trigger fear to keep us engaged." Find reliable sources and take it in small doses.



The Impact of Social Distancing

While Thomas doesn't question the health experts who have recommended social distancing, he has concerns about how it may play out in kids' social and emotional development.

"Kids haven't been able to interact with friends and peers," Thomas pointed out. "That's the birthplace of where so much social and emotional development happens. They need interaction to learn to share, negotiate and deal with conflict."

Thomas told a story he heard from a parent of a new kindergartner. The boy was crying, telling his mom that he felt like he doesn't have any friends. When the mom asked why, her son answered, "Because I can't even hear their names because of the masks." Thomas explains that boys, especially, already struggle with nonverbal cues. Not being able to see people moving their mouths and keeping distanced only makes it more difficult.

According to Thomas, nurture is an important component for elementary-age kids. "It's foundational for them to see big smiles on teachers' faces to know that they're pleased, and the kids are doing well." Unless teachers use clear masks, and sometimes even if they are, kids are having a harder time with this. Even simple touches on the shoulder or high-fives aren't happening. These are simple things that connect kids to their teachers, and they don't get to experience that at this point.

At the other end of the education spectrum, college freshmen are entering a whole new world without their parents being able to accompany them to their dorm room and help set it up. Thomas said a parent he knows had to drop his son off at the curb of the dorm building with all his stuff and leave. Imagine the feelings that college freshman experienced doing that all alone.

Going Back to Camp

"I am so hopeful kids can be in camp settings, away from screens, outside next summer," Thomas said. "I hope they can have a full-immersion experience of interacting with peers."

The reality is, the kids and teens who will step foot on your property next year will have unique challenges. Thomas offered some insight into what those might look like.

Separation anxiety

Thomas encourages camp staff to pay attention to the anxiety. "It may be harder than ever for kids of any age to separate from their parents and go to camp." He notes that even adolescents are "out of practice" since there haven't been sleepovers or school overnight trips.

Social awkwardness

"Expect that kids may look a little more cautious and clumsy in connections," Thomas explained. "They have missed a lot. For us to assume that they're on pace [with social development] isn't realistic." Keep in mind that connections may not happen as easily. Kids may have forgotten how to engage in normal interactions.

Spiritual needs

So many kids have struggled to connect with online church. Many churches stopped children's programming or only offer it online. According to Thomas, kids can only extract so much and struggle to connect. "Kids are famished for the experiential element that connects them to God."

Red flags

You may have campers arrive who are experiencing a more serious need than others. Thomas offered advice on what to look for. Younger kids give indicators that there's a more serious level of stress or anxiety through aggression, baby talk, bed-wetting, and issues falling or staying asleep. Teenagers are a bit trickier since you have to look past the typical teenage isolation, sadness and angst. Thomas says to watch for self-harming behaviors or teens talking about self-harming or suicidal thoughts. Those are big red flags, and you should look at layering in additional support.

Thomas recommends that camps consider bringing in mental health experts as part of staff training. "This year, more than ever, the needs will be greater and more significant," Thomas explained. "Prepare your staff to support and understand the challenges." ■



Jen Howver was once a camp kid who later spent two summers working at a camp in Michigan, where she met and later married her husband, Jay. Fast forward more than 25 years and now Jen works as a marketing consultant and editor of InSite magazine. She and Jay live in Monument, Colorado, with their daughters, Noelle and Chloe, and way too many pets.