

New initiative shining light on pandemic-related challenges for youth

By **Sam Odrowski**

The COVID-19 pandemic is impacting everyone differently and a local health group is working to understand how youth are coping.

The Hills of Headwaters Collaborative's Child and Youth Mental Health and Addictions (CYMHA) sub-committee recently launched a call-to-action campaign where they're asking Dufferin/Caledon youth ages 4-18 to provide input on how they manage the fear, isolation, anxiety and change related to the pandemic.

Submissions will be accepted until March 31 and can be a piece of art, song, short story, a poem, or video. To submit something, visit: www.covidlessons-kid2kid.com. Everyone who submits something will receive a \$5 Tim Horton's Gift Card as a token of appreciation.

"We're looking to get input directly from the children and youth from the community, as to what their experience has been with COVID-19 and the changes that have happened, and how they're coping during the pandemic, and what's working for them," said Jenny Aguiar-Winter of Dufferin Child and Family Services (DCAFS), who helped to organize the initiative.

"From those submissions, we're looking to create mental health resources for the children and youth in the community, pretty much looking at creating what we're calling, "COVID lessons for kids by kids."

The mental health resources for youth, created through their submissions will be shared in various social media posts and community videos to help reach children in the community who are in need of ideas and inspiration at this time.

All qualifying submissions will be posted online as part of a project gallery when the campaign launches.

The goal of the initiative is to see how the Hills of Headwater Collaborative could help children with their mental health, considering all of the changes that the pandemic has brought about.

"Children and youth as a whole have been impacted significantly by this pandemic. From a developmental perspective, they have lost so much in terms of typical opportunities for socialization and the emotional growth that comes from connecting with peers in person," said Jennifer Moore, DCAFS executive director.

"We have seen a significant increase in our calls for crisis services as well as an increase in our calls for parental support. At the same time, we have seen many examples of resilience, adaptability and hopefulness that have left us as adults quite inspired."

Aguiar-Winter says she's hoping those who participate see this initiative as a creative outlet for expressions, where they can let their imagination guide them. It's also a way for youth to help others that may be struggling to adapt to all of the changes created by the pandemic.

"What we're looking to do is really tap in to what they've kind of learned and what they're taking from this experience and what their new normal kind of looks like," said Aguiar-Winter.

"We just thought since we're looking to help the children and youth that might be having a challenging time, who better to ask how they're kind of coping than the kids themselves?"

The kids helping kids component of the initiative is important because youth are more likely to listen to one another, Aguiar-Winter noted.

?Kids and youth, they respond to other children and youth. So, instead of having an adult giving them some tips, sometimes it comes across a little easier and is taken in when it's coming from other children and youth of similar ages and similar demographic,? she explained.

?It's coming from a peer, as opposed to an adult, so we're kind of hoping that they can teach us some things on how they kind of coped with everything this past year.?

The initiative launches the first week of May as part of the Hills of Headwaters Collaborative Ontario Health Team's Mental Health Awareness Week initiative.