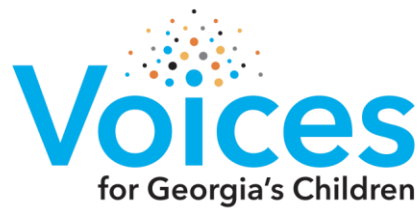




Georgia
Department of
Behavioral Health
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Disabilities



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Georgia Kids and Youth Face Mental Health Crisis *The median age of onset for anxiety disorders is 6 years old¹*

Atlanta, Ga. – Georgia youth are returning to school either virtually or in an environment that is drastically different from the one they left in March. Prior to the coronavirus pandemic, our kids were already facing a mental health crisis – one that is now exacerbated by these uncertain times. More than ever, mental health advocates must come together to ensure youth find the help and resources they need. Voices for Georgia's Children (Voices) and the Georgia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities (DBHDD) have partnered to raise awareness about youth mental health.

Today, Voices and DBHDD are launching the **Free Your Feels** mental health awareness campaign to encourage Georgia's young people to explore their **real feelings** and share them **fearlessly**. Collectively, we can make a positive impact across our state, particularly given the current situation of social isolation and physical distancing.

The year-long **Free Your Feels** campaign equips children, teens, parents, caregivers and educators to **Speak. Listen. Connect**. It empowers youth to *speak* out and express their real feelings, encourages adults and peers to check-in with each other and *listen* judgement free, and *connects* everyone to resources for further guidance or help. We are asking everyone to join the **#freeyourfeels** campaign on social media and cultivate an environment where it is not only safe to express your feelings, but it is celebrated. The campaign builds connection and increases awareness through digital tools, such as social media, the Free Your Feels website, and other resources provided to childcare providers and school districts to share with youth.

"Data shows our children have been in crisis for years," said Dr. Erica Fener Sitkoff, Executive Director for Voices for Georgia's Children. "By freeing their feels, children and teens can get the help they need before it becomes a matter of life and death. We have to dispel the stigma surrounding talking about mental health."

Together, we can create a space for our youth to express what they are feeling without the fear of stigma.

"DBHDD and all of our community partners have worked together to make sure there are resources for youth and their families and most importantly, to connect them with these resources. We are excited to be a part of the Free Your Feels campaign!" said DBHDD Commissioner Judy Fitzgerald.

Layla Fitzgerald, Program Manager for DBHDD's Office of Children, Young Adults, and Families, stated, "We have worked extensively with our partners and youth to create a campaign that resonates with everyone, and improves upon Georgia's system of care for families."

For more information about the **Free Your Feels** campaign, please visit www.freeyourfeels.org. Follow the campaign on Instagram (@free.your.feels) and on Voices' Facebook and Twitter pages.

YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH IN GEORGIA

- Prevention begins early with very young children.
- 1 in 5 kids has a mental illness that would benefit from treatment.
- 1 in 8 teens suffers from depression.
- Half of mental health disorders start by age 14.
- Suicide is the second leading cause of death.
- In 2019, nearly 40,000 students in Georgia reported having attempted suicide on the Georgia Student Health Survey.

¹ Merikangas, K., Hep, J., Burstein, M., Swanson, S., Avenevoli, S., Cui, L., Benezet, C., Swendsen, J. (2010). Lifetime prevalence of mental disorders in U.S. adolescents: results from the National Comorbidity Survey Replication—Adolescent Supplement (NCS-A). *Journal of American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*. 49(10): 980-989