

Helping Kids Cope with Stress Amidst COVID-19

While you may be feeling the strains of the tenuous situation with COVID-19, your child may be feeling it too. Children can display stress in many different ways, such as wanting to be alone, needing more attention, moodiness, inflexibility, and increased distractibility. The good news is that there are many things you can do to help support your child during this time.

Here are some guidelines as to how best to support your child in coping with stress related to COVID-19:

Start a Conversation with Your Children

Find out what they know.

It may not always be apparent, but those little eyes and ears are constantly soaking up bits and pieces of information around them. Saying something simple as, “What have you heard about the coronavirus?” or “What questions do you have about the coronavirus?” shows children and adolescents that it’s okay to talk about the coronavirus and it’s not so scary that even the grownups don’t want to talk about it.

Share information using developmentally appropriate language.

Focus on answering your children’s questions but do not provide more details than they are asking about. Focus on providing messages to help your children feel safe, such as “we’re doing all we can to stay safe,” but be truthful. This will help maintain that you are a reliable source of information for your child.

It’s okay if you don’t know the answer.

Children ask some tough questions! Use those moments as an opportunity to show your child how to find the answer together. Ensure you are getting information from reputable sources, such as the CDC or other government or state websites. If you can’t find an answer to their question, it’s okay to let them know that you don’t have the answer but will let them know as soon as you find out.

Let children talk about their fears.

It’s natural for children to worry, so letting them know that it’s okay for them to come to you when they have those feelings builds trust and a sense of safety. Be careful not to invalidate their worries or fears (e.g., “Don’t worry about it”), and instead acknowledge them (e.g., “I can tell you’re really worried about what could happen”).



Show them what they can do!

Stress and anxiety can stem from feeling helpless and out of control so reminding children of what they CAN do at this time to stay safe can help assuage their worries. Remind them of how they can stay safe and healthy through frequent hand washing and social distancing. Empowering your children to help others in the world, for example, by donating to a food bank or writing letters to healthcare workers or first responders, shows them that they can help, too!

Establish Daily Routines

Set up a daily schedule similar to their school days.

Schedules help ease stress by providing children with a roadmap of what to expect and what is expected of them during their day. This also helps give them a sense of control particularly during a time of uncertainty and unpredictability. Developing a schedule at home that is similar to one of their school days will help with adjusting to the transition of learning at home and returning to school in the future.

Maintain typical sleeping and eating routines.

When children and adolescents are at home all day, it can be easy for them to feel like they are on summer vacation. Bedtimes are often shifted to much later in the evenings, which can make it harder for parents to implement typical routines during the daytime. Additionally, an overly tired or hungry child can become more easily overwhelmed, which could lead to emotional meltdowns. Establishing regular snack and mealtimes as well as routine sleep and wake times will help decrease physical and emotional stress on your child.

Get your children's input.

Work with your children to find out what they would like to do in their day and integrate those (realistic) activities into their schedule. This will help with transitions, particularly between preferred and less preferred activities.

Make time for play!

Playtime is crucial to a child's development, so ensure you also make time to play with your child as part of their daily routine. That special time, even if it's for 15 minutes, will help to strengthen your bond with your child and will help them feel loved and safe, which ultimately will help them cope with stress.



Find ways for continued active social interactions with family and friends.

It's important for children to stay socially connected to their family and friends, as socialization can be a source of support and coping. Ensure that social interactions through online modalities, whether via video conferencing or online gaming, are part of your child's daily routine. These active interactions tend to work better to reduce stress and worry. Find creative alternative ways to continue to celebrate important traditions, holidays, and milestones in their lives.

Get physical!

Exercise and physical movement is also an important piece to integrate in a child's daily routines. Research has shown that engaging in physical activities can help combat the effects of stress. With the limitations of social distancing, you'll have to find inventive ways to get their bodies moving, such as morning stretches, online exercise videos, dance parties, and/or walks around the block.

Take Care of Yourself

Find your own supports.

One of the best ways to help your children cope with stress is to ensure you are also mindful of your own mental health needs. Remember, kids are always watching and learning from adults, so they are taking their cues from you as to how to respond to this stressful situation. If you are stressed and anxious, they can sense that too. Talk to a trusted friend or family member about how you are feeling or reach out to a mental health provider if needed.

Take a break.

With your child home with you all day, you constantly wear multiple hats as a parent, teacher, chef, cleaner, etc. It's exhausting! It's okay to take a break and take some space to cool down. Not only does it provide a time and space for you to relax when you are feeling overwhelmed, but it also models good coping for your children when they are over stimulated or stressed.

Limit you and your children's exposure to the news and social media.

While it's important to stay abreast of the changes happening in response to COVID-19, frequent exposure to news coverage can increase you and your children's anxiety. It's best to take periodic breaks from the news and social media and to limit your children's exposure to news media together. We know that stress and worry increase the more time people spend with the news and social media during stressful times. Instead, take time to engage in relaxing or fun activities when you're starting to feel stressed.



When to Seek More Help

Drastic changes in a child's mood, eating, and/or sleeping patterns, increased irritability or tantrums, decreased interest in socializing with friends or family members, decreased enjoyment in preferred activities, and/or increased questioning or seeking of parental reassurance may be signs that more help is needed. If you have concerns about your child's behaviors, you should contact your primary care physician or a mental health professional for further consultation.

<https://blog.chocchildrens.org/helping-kids-cope-with-covid-19-stress/>

