

Managing Stress and Talking With Children About COVID-19

A Guide for Parents and Families



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So much has changed for children and families over the past several weeks—schools are closed, families are cooped up in their homes, and play dates have gone virtual. There is worry in the air.

Just like their parents, children may be feeling unsettled and uneasy about these changes and the uncertainty of the coming weeks. We know that for children, the loss of consistency, predictability, and security that has come along with this global crisis can be very stressful, leading to difficulties with managing their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors.

So, what can parents do to help?

Maintain Routines and Some Sense of Consistency

Maintaining limits and structure—even, and especially, in the midst of big changes and stressors—is part of what helps children feel safe and confident that there are grown-ups in charge.

- Maintain bedtimes, morning routines (breakfast, body stretches, getting dressed), and evening routines (bath time, family mealtime, putting on fresh pajamas, reading a story together) as much as possible.
- Work with your child's school or use online resources to develop a daytime routine that is built for your family's needs. It should provide structure and include pleasurable activities. Many athletes, artists, authors, and community resources (zoos, aquariums, libraries, houses of worship) are using internet platforms to connect with children and communities. Investigate which groups might be doing things your children are interested in and add these to the schedule.

- Think ahead about behavioral or emotional troubles you can already predict and try to identify ways to prevent them. Think about how you can structure school, play, and sibling interactions in ways that are most likely to be successful.
- Even if you are working from home or in an essential function away from home, schedule predictable times in each day when your child can count on receiving positive adult attention from you or an important caregiver. The feeling of security that comes with knowing they will get to spend time with you helps them tolerate the parts of the day in which you are not able to participate as actively with them.
- Help children get their basic developmental needs met. Keep them connected with peers they may be missing using virtual means, and ensure they have opportunities to move their bodies.
- Remain open to the fact that children may have behavioral regressions or difficulty managing and keeping routines during this time of great stress. Make efforts to be encouraging, to hold boundaries, and also to validate the frustration and confusion that children may be feeling.

Create Space for Children to Ask Questions and Get Information

Your child probably has a lot of questions about what is happening. Even as you may be experiencing your own stress and emotional exhaustion, make time for your child's questions and validate their feelings, worries, and curiosity. Children's questions are just as valid as your own.

- Children know when "something is up," and it is our job as adults to make space for them to get answers. When they know something is up and adults do not talk about it with them, their worries can increase.

- During a calm moment, ask your child what questions they have.
- Your child may ask questions that seem very specific or very sophisticated for their age. Think about what someone at your child’s developmental level might be trying to learn by asking their questions, so that you can answer with developmentally appropriate information.

FOR INSTANCE:

If a 7-year-old asks what would happen if you, the parent, were to get sick, consider what that child is trying to find out (“Will you be safe, and will I be safe?”). Do not answer with details about what might happen to you, but reassure them with the information they need. Sample responses below.

“Lots of people who are getting sick are feeling well enough to stay at home, so even if I were to get sick, I would still be your parent and I would keep taking care of you. Many people are getting better even after they get sick.”

“I am the grown-up and it’s my job to make sure you’re safe. Right now, everyone in this home feels just fine, and we’re doing all the things we’re supposed to in order to stay healthy. Let’s keep washing our hands and spending time inside together.”

FOR INSTANCE:

If your child asks questions you do not know the answer to, you can be honest and reassuring at the same time. Sample responses below.

“I’m not sure about that. Let’s see if the CDC knows the answer.”

“I’m not sure about how many ventilators there are in New York City, but right now, we’re all safe and healthy, and grown-ups like doctors and parents and teachers are doing everything they can to help people stay safe.”

- Your child might ask the same question more than once. Try to continue to answer calmly and thoughtfully. If a child is dwelling on reassurance-seeking questions, consider talking with a therapist about ways to help them manage their anxiety.
- Try to keep access to news coverage to a minimum, as it is often sensationalized and scary for children. Instead, filter the information so that it is developmentally appropriate. Use trusted sources, like the CDC, for your information.
- Young children may focus most on the ways a situation could affect them, their parents, and their world. Reassure them that the people in their world are safe and doing everything they need to do, and that lots of grown-ups are working hard to keep kids and families safe. Remind them that we can all help by washing our hands and playing inside at home.

- Your child might be more worried about the changes to daily life—like not being in school, missing friends, or being stuck in the house—than they are about COVID-19. This is developmentally appropriate, not an example of your child being selfish. You can help by reminding your child of the things that are the same as they were before: they still have you as their parent to take care of them, they can participate in fun activities, they can talk to their friends, and they will go to school again one day.

Be Aware of Affect and Tone of Voice

Children watch adults very closely and learn from them about how to feel and react. If we, as adults, are expressing a lot of worry, our children will pick up on this worry and may take it on, as well.

- Pay attention to how you are speaking with other adults, even when you think children are busy, asleep, or not able to hear you.
- **Give yourself a break. This is a time of immense stress, transition, and uncertainty for everyone. Learning, discipline, and family time may look very different than usual right now, and that is okay.**
- Your child will gain the greatest security from knowing that you are present, that you love them, and that you want to help them feel safe.
- Take care of your own stress management. The dedicated materials below can help you meet your emotional needs.
 - www.mountsinai.org/about/covid19/staff-resources/well-being/mental-health
 - www.apa.org/helpcenter
 - www.psychiatry.org/psychiatrists/covid-19-coronavirus
 - www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/daily-life-coping/managing-stress-anxiety.html

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