



From the
UCSF Child & Adolescent Psychiatry Portal

COVID-19 Tips for Supporting Families and Caregivers

Tips for Parents on COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented extraordinary challenges for our providers, our patients and families, and more broadly, our communities, nation and world. It has generated tremendous anxiety, fear and uncertainty. As caregivers, we are faced with the need to manage our own and our community's anxiety, and also address the heightened needs of our patients and their families. Schools and colleges have closed, including day programming for children, adolescents and adults with autism. Many parents are trying juggle working from home while overnight coordinating childcare and educational activities for their children and teens. Some parents are simply not able to work, and may not even have internet access, leaving them without any virtual connections to classrooms or visible social support networks.

Generally speaking,

1. **Care for yourself, and help your children do the same.** Adequate **sleep, nutrition, and movement** are great ways to boost immunity, and decrease stress, along with **connecting with others**. Outdoor time in particular can help offset the limitations of “shelter in place.” Family meals, especially dinner, can offer both physical and emotional nourishment. Enlisting support with these and other household maintenance tasks can help everyone feel like they are contributing. Limiting your media exposure to specific times, ideally well before bedtime, can also be helpful.
2. **Check yourself first.** Recognize your own anxiety, and then “**name it to tame it.**”¹ Verbalizing your own fears to yourself or another trusted adult will help prevent you from unintentionally passing along your anxiety to your child. Let your own worries be yours, and leave space for your child, who may or may not share in your worry, and who may or may not have worries of their own. Most children and teens are very **resilient**, and do not have significant anxiety at this time.
3. **Be honest and open with children**, with language and explanations that are appropriate to their age and level of understanding. Being honest may also mean saying “**I don't know.**” and that is ok. Honesty helps children to feel **safe**.

¹ Daniel Siegel MD

4. **Consider your child's temperament and developmental level.** Introverted children may welcome the relative quiet of staying home more, while extraverted children may feel a much stronger urge to socialize. Very sensitive children may be more vulnerable to worry, and to take on the worries of those around them. Some children and teens feel better when they have "all the information," while some get overwhelmed with "too many words." Children who have experienced significant hardship in the past, or who already have significant anxiety, may be more vulnerable to current stress.
5. **Validate feelings.** Some children (and adults) may have big feelings about COVID-19. Take time to check-in with children about their feelings, and acknowledge these feelings by reflecting them back to the child in their own words, in a way that shows you have listened to and understood them.
6. **Focus on what you *can* do:** This includes not only hand-washing and sneezing into a tissue or elbow, but also might include leaving groceries for or sending cards to those who can't go out. Focusing on what you can do helps to decrease the stress.
7. **Be gentle with yourself and others.** Everyone is under a lot of stress. Young children may have more tantrums, older children may be more whiny and act younger, and teens and adults may be much more irritable. Having **empathy** for the "why," rather than reacting to the "what," is crucial.

Young Children: Children under 7 thrive on predictability, closeness to caregivers, and clear expectations. They express themselves through play and art, and their attention shifts rapidly. For children under 7,

1. **Be curious and ready to answer questions.** Children at this age may fear that anyone infected with corona virus will become very ill or die (in reality this risk is relatively low, especially in younger persons). They may wonder if school closing, or not seeing their friends, is their fault, due to a tendency towards "magical thinking" at this age. They need you to explain that this is caused by germs, and that closing school is a way of helping others by preventing the spread of germs. You may also reassure them that there are many people, including postal and grocery workers, garbage truck drivers, doctors, nurses, scientists, teachers, and political and religious leaders who are working hard to help others during this time.
2. **Routine, routine, routine.** COVID-19 has caused school and child-care closures and other disruptions. Creating a new routine at home can be reassuring and help children know what to expect in the midst of a lot of uncertainty.
3. **Limit exposure to media and alarming conversations amongst adults.** Young children will feel the tone, and any associated anxiety, but may be confused by the language, which may create even more anxiety.

School Age Children: Children in this age group may really appreciate being with parents and caregivers more, while still missing their friends and routine activities.

1. Set clear expectations. As with younger children, routine is best. Let them know what the schedule is for school, including breaks, but be prepared to be somewhat flexible when needs change.

2. Social distancing does not mean social isolation. It's important to find ways to check in with friends and family regularly, whether that means calling or video-chatting.

Adolescents: This age group seems to be struggling more right now, which is understandable when one considers what is developmentally expected at this age. Teens are in the process of trying to “separate and individuate” from their parents, which means spending much more time with friends than parents. They tend to take more risks, and they want autonomy, even if it means going against their parents', or even government's expectations. Their reasoning may be based more on emotion than logic, and they may not feel much worry about catching or spreading COVID-19.

- 1. Be honest:** Finding time to watch some reliably sourced media updates together may be helpful in for teens. This creates time together, and lets the source of information, and the stated limits on behavior, come from a source other than you, which may help reduce conflict. Teens may need more information at this age, in order to fully understand the risks. Afterwards you may be able to discuss any questions that they may have.
- 2. Set clear expectations.** It's ok to have expectations for teens to join the family at mealtimes, and to ensure adequate sleep, as well as minimums for academic work and contributions to maintaining your home.
- 3. Recognize need for physical and emotional space.** This need may be much stronger than for younger children, and may be increased because teens don't have their usual time away from family while in school and other activities.
- 4. Connect before you redirect².** Because teens value autonomy so much, It's important to connect, and to validate their emotions and ideas. This may include wanting to hang out with friends, sadness about not getting to see some friends before departing for college, or being upset about not being able to get a haircut. You may also need to validate how hard it is that not all parents are enforcing social distancing in the same way.
- 5. Invite their input into problem solving.³** This helps support their **need for autonomy**, and helps them “buy into” a shared solution. You don't need to accept their proposed solution completely, and you can still add in your expectations and limits, but working together towards a solution really helps a teen feel heard, validated, and valued. It also helps them buy into things much better than a top-down, directive approach.

² Daniel Siegel MD

³ Stuart Ablon MD

Resources:

UCSF's Department of Psychiatry has collected a number of valuable resources, including mental health & wellness apps, coping, resources for clinical anxiety & mental health issues, and practical resources for low-income and other groups:

psychiatry.ucsf.edu/coronavirus

Additional resources that may be helpful:

<https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2020/02/28/809580453/just-for-kids-a-comic-exploring-the-new-coronavirus>

National Child Traumatic Stress Network: https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources/factsheet/outbreak_factsheet_1.pdf

CDC: https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prepare/managing-stress-anxiety.html?CDC_AA_refVal=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.cdc.gov%2Fcoronavirus%2F2019-ncov%2Fabout%2F coping.html

SAMHSA Talking with Children: Tips for Caregivers, parents, and teachers during infectious disease outbreaks:

https://store.samhsa.gov/system/files/pep20-01-01-006_508_0.pdf

The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry:

https://www.aacap.org/App_Themes/AACAP/Docs/latest_news/2020/Coronavirus_COVID19_Children.pdf

Meditation Apps

headspace

<https://www.headspace.com/covid-19>

Calm

<https://www.calm.com>

Insight Timer

<https://insighttimer.com>

10 Anxiety, Relaxation & Mindfulness Apps for Kids

<https://www.simplepractice.com/blog/anxiety-relaxation-mindfulness-apps-kids/>

Learning/Play

Virtual Field Trips

<https://www.weareteachers.com/best-virtual-field-trips/>

Play at Home

<https://www.playworks.org/news/playathome-with-playworks/>

Committee for Children: Social-Emotional Learning Programs

<https://www.cfchildren.org>