

Helping Children Cope with Stressors and COVID-19 Related Fears

The COVID-19 pandemic is stressful. Fear and anxiety about the virus can be overwhelming and cause strong emotions for some children. The following information can help you respond to and discuss the fears and emotions your child may be experiencing.

Validate Their Feelings

Acknowledge your child's feelings. You may choose to say to your child "I hear that you're worried about picking up this virus. There's been a lot of information about it on the news, but let's get some good information." Try not to be dismissive of your child's worries and feelings.

Provide Facts:

The most important thing is to become well-informed and provide fact-based information that is age appropriate. You may choose to talk about it from a germ perspective, and use age-appropriate language to explain the very basic biology of germs. This will help children understand why we wash our hands, why we don't put our hands in our mouths or touch our nose.

Be Mindful

Try to be continually mindful about the conversations, and news programming that can be heard by young children. Physically separate yourself, use a quieter voice, and ask for some space from the child if possible. Topics related to the virus are complex and hard for children to understand. Having conversations or listening to news programs within earshot of a child may cause them unnecessary fear and stress.

Keep in Mind...

Everyone reacts differently to stressful situations. Common reactions to distress will fade over time for most children. If children continue to be very upset or distressed, then parents may want to talk to a professional or have their children talk to someone who specializes in children's emotional needs.

Helpful books and resources for explaining Coronavirus & social distancing to children

- <https://youtu.be/zBBjz16J-nU> (A message from Justin Trudeau for the kids)
- https://youtu.be/DA_SsZFYw0w (A Children's Story About Social Distancing)
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CZhLR5mVhIQ> (Caroline conquers Corona)
- <http://susanperrow.com/stories> ('The Little Gnome Who Had To Stay Home' by Susan Perrow)



These are unprecedented times for everyone. Try to remember that all children will react to this situation differently, and that it is normal and ok.

Below are common reactions to distress in children according to their various ages:

0- 2 year olds: Infants and toddlers may become crankier than usual. They may cry more often or want to be held and cuddled more.

3 to 6 year olds: Preschool and kindergarten children may return to behaviors they have outgrown. For example, toileting accidents, bed-wetting, or being frightened about being separated from their parents/caregivers are all normal. Children this age may also have tantrums or a hard time sleeping.

7 to 10 year olds: Older children may feel sad, mad, or afraid that the negative event will happen again, or in this case, that they or their parents will get the virus. Peers may share false information and parents should correct any misinformation. Older children may focus on details of the event and want to talk about it all the time or not want to talk about it at all. They may also have trouble concentrating.

Preteens and teenagers: Some preteens and teenagers respond to trauma and/or stressful situations by acting out. This could include reckless driving, and alcohol or drug use. Others may become afraid or withdrawn. They may cut back on how much time they spend communicating with their friends and family. They can feel overwhelmed by their intense emotions and feel unable to talk about them. Their emotions may lead to increased arguing and even fighting with siblings, parents/caregivers and/or other adults.

For special needs children: Children with special need such as those with physical, emotional, or intellectual limitations may have stronger reactions to a stressful situation such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Some might have more intense distress, worry or anger than children without special needs because they have less control over day-to-day well-being. Children with special needs may need extra words of reassurance, more explanations about the event/stressor, and more comfort and other positive physical contact such as hugs from loved ones.

