

# Taking Care of your Family's Mental Health in an Uncertain Time

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Where lasting change is possible

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# Through a Child's Eyes

- No school
- No friend gatherings
- No extracurricular activities
- No extended family
- Cancelled plans
- Parents busy, stressed, and/or anxious
- Financial restrictions
- Hyper-focus on health

# Child(ren)'s Emotional Responses to COVID-19

- **Overwhelm:** A lot of change in a short period of time
- **Fear:** Will I/my family get sick or die? Will I ever see my friends again?
- **Anger/Disappointment:** Cancelled plans, limited options
- **Confusion:** Why is this happening?
- **Loneliness:** Unable to spend time with friends, go to school, be out and about

# What You Can Expect

- Decreased ability to self-regulate; increased **reliance** on you to help them
- **Regression** into developmentally younger behaviors
- What you might see **more** of:
  - Tantrums, emotional meltdowns
  - Clingy, not leaving your side
  - Talking back, defiance
  - Aggression
  - Accidents, bed-wetting
  - Changes in sleep
  - Changes in eating habits
  - Reassurance seeking
  - Withdrawn

# How to Support Your Child(ren)

- Be **patient** with your child(ren); they are doing the best they can
- Model a **flexible and hopeful** attitude; your energy becomes their energy
- Model healthy **emotion regulation** and coping skills
- Teach your child(ren) how to be **resilient** in the face of change, stress, and disappointment
  - Flexibility
  - Creativity

# How to Support Your Child(ren)

- Children need 4 main things from parents during times of high stress:
  - **Safety**
  - **Structure**
  - **Connection**
  - **Communication**

# Safety

- Offer **reassurance** that you and they are ok, and that you *will* get through this together
- Remind them this is **temporary**
- Give them **age-appropriate facts** about COVID-19 when needed
- Limit **news and discussions** about the virus when kids are around

# Structure

- Kids do better when they know **what to expect**, even if it's different from what they're used to
- Keep as much of a “**normal**” **routine** as possible, especially at the beginning and end of day
- Create a **structure** for daytime while they're home from school
  - Keep academic expectations reasonable; stressed brains can't learn as readily



# Structure

- Plan ahead for **alone time vs. together time**
  - Have a **family meeting** to discuss everyone's needs
  - Designate **space(s)** in the home people can use for alone time
  - Keep some **calming activities** available in this space
  - Create a **code word** that indicates need for alone time/space

# Connection

- Relationships are **VERY important** to most children – this is where they can experience security and belonging
- Find creative ways to help them **stay connected** with others
  - Virtual play dates over FaceTime or Zoom
  - Marco Polo videos with friends and family
  - Mail cards or handmade gifts to friends, family, nursing homes, doctors
  - Look at photos of family and friends, recount positive memories
  - Attend virtual events hosted by museums, musicians, libraries, local businesses

# Communication

- Don't worry about “**planting seeds**” – if you're feeling it or thinking it, so are they in their age-specific way
- Ask child(ren) **directly** on a regular basis:
  - How are you feeling about all of this virus stuff? about being home? about not seeing your friends and family?
  - Do you have any questions or worries you'd like to discuss with me?
- **Validate** how they are feeling; don't try to convince them to feel something different
  - “I can understand why you feel that way.” “That makes sense to me.”

# Communication

- Offer age-appropriate advice for how to **manage thoughts & feelings**
  - Encourage them to talk about/write down/draw how they're **feeling**
  - Engage in **pleasurable activities** to offset distress
  - Help them **remember past experiences** that were hard but that they survived
  - **Focus on the good** that is coming from this experience; find the helpers

# When to Seek Help

- Significant and persistent changes in **mood or anxiety**
- Atypical **disinterest** in connecting with friends or family
- Significant changes to **eating or sleeping** habits
- Excessive hand-washing or **cleaning rituals**
- Excessive **reassurance-seeking** or clinginess

# Mental Health Resources

- Your Child's **Pediatrician**
- **HealthyChildren.org** - the AAP Parenting Website
- Find a Local **Therapist**
  - Psychology Today – [psychologytoday.com](http://psychologytoday.com)
  - American Association for Marriage & Family Therapy – [aamft.org](http://aamft.org)
  - Association for Play Therapy – [a4pt.org](http://a4pt.org)
  - EMDR International Association – [emdria.org](http://emdria.org)

# Contact Me



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