Helping Young Children Cope with COVID-19: 12 Tips to Help Little Ones Thrive

STAR Initiative

When young children experience a change in their routine, or feel the stress of those around them, they may become confused or distressed. This means that even toddlers and preschoolers are not immune to the changes that COVID-19 has brought to our lives. Because most children 3-years-old and under lack the words they need to share their feelings, they may express stress through behaviors such as frequent crying, problems sleeping, nightmares, clinging to caregivers, aggression, increased temper tantrums, regression in toilet training or language, or loss of appetite. Fortunately, there are many ways that we can support young children during this stressful time.

Tip 1: Explain what is happening. Young children may not understand why things are different. Talking with them will help them feel supported. Keep your explanations simple. For example, say "Right now there is a rule that people need to stay home for a little while. That helps us and our friends stay healthy."

Tip 2: Answer questions. Provide clear, simple explanations for questions.
- *Why can't I play with my friend/that child?* "We have to take a break from playing with other children so we can all stay healthy."
- *Why are you using wipes?* "We wipe things down to keep them clean." (Many young children don't understand germs yet, but if a preschooler does know about germs, you can say "We wipe things down to get rid of germs that make us sick."
- *Why won't my caregiver kiss or hug me?* Provide reassurance that the caregiver loves the child. "We are staying healthy right now by not touching, hugging, or kissing. Soon we'll be able to kiss and hug again." You can also approximate a hug: "For now, let's play a game where we take turns hugging a stuffed animal and we can pretend we are getting hugs from each other." Or "Let's do a special air hug".
- *Why can't I see my caregiver?* If a child is separated due from their caregiver due to COVID-19, you can keep the explanation positive (focus on health) rather than negative (focus on illness or quarantine). "[Your caregiver] is in the hospital so that she can get healthy. Once she feels better she will be back." "You're in the hospital so that you can get healthy. Once you feel better you'll go back home and see [your caregiver]."
- *Why can't I go to child care/school?* "Your child care/school is closed right now. When child care is open again, you can go back and see your friends and teachers. I'll tell you when." Avoid going into details about illness so children don't develop fears about attending child care/school
- *Will I get sick?* "Everybody gets sick sometimes. If you get sick, [your caregiver] will take care of you until you feel better. The doctors and nurses will help you, too."
- *Is that person in a mask a scary or a "bad" person?* "No. The mask covers up part of their face, but that doesn't mean they are scary or bad. They are wearing a mask because they are trying to stay healthy." To help a child with emotion regulation skills

(particularly in a situation when others are wearing masks), you can play a game where you cover everything but your eyes, and the child guesses what you are feeling.

Tip 3: Provide support. During stressful times, what children need most is a caring adult in their life—a safe, secure relationship where they can express their feelings and questions and feel nurtured. It is important to make time to reassure young children and spend time with them, even when we are stressed. In times of intense change, children feel safe and secure when they can trust a caring adult to be there. That's when they become free to be themselves and enjoy playing, exploring, and learning.

Tip 4: Maintain/create routines. Routines are very important for young children, and COVID-19 likely disrupted routines. Creating new routines or re-establishing usual routines can help children feel safe, such as keeping regular mealtimes and bedtimes, and setting a daily time to play games together, read, or sing. Even five minutes of special, uninterrupted time every day with your child can make a big difference. Don't worry about creating detailed activities that cover every minute of the day. Instead focus on transition times, such as waking up, nap time, and bedtime.

Tip 5: Limit media. Limit your child's exposure to media reports about COVID-19. Remember, your child is soaking in the stress adults feel when they're listening to the news. Instead, check news when your child is completely out of the room, and unable to see/hear the TV or radio. This will allow you to control the messages your child is getting.

Tip 6: Limit adult COVID-19 discussion. Discuss your own questions, worries, and opinions about COVID-19 when your child is unable to hear you. Do not engage in conversations about COVID-19 with other adults when your child is present. If a child hears a conversation or must be involved in a conversation, be sure to explain what is happening in simple, age-appropriate terms (e.g., "there is a new rule that parks are closed, so that everyone can stay healthy").
If you are explaining to a child that they have COVID-19, or their parent or caregiver has COVID-19, you can say "You are sick, kind of like when you've had a cold. This sickness makes you feel yucky. We're here to take care of you until you feel better." Or "[your caregiver] is sick, kind of like when you've had a cold. This sickness makes her feel yucky. We're going to take care of her, and you can see her when she gets better."

Tip 7: Increase positive play. Although places in the community that the child can go are now limited, encouraging independent play and adult-child play is important, as play is the #1 way that young children learn about their world and cope with feelings. Allowing children lots of time to play during COVID-19 is like allowing an adult to take a walk outside or read a favorite book. Play is more important than ever! When you join your child in play, provide a range of objects/toys and try to let the child lead the play (e.g., child chooses what to play, sets the pace, adult joins in and follows the child's lead). Play in and of itself increases learning and creativity, and so it is not necessary to drill the child on colors, numbers, or shapes, or correct the child if they do something impossible (e.g., have a car drive on the roof of a doll house). Instead, you can label what the child is doing: "You're putting the doll into bed." "You stacked the blue block on top of the red block!" This shows the child you're interested in what they're doing. Imagine you're a sportscaster narrating a game. Use labelled praise: "You did a great job making that

block tower." "I really liked how you organized all the fruit in the basket." This shows the child that they have good ideas. Above all, you don't need to go out and buy toys – children often have the most fun with everyday things like boxes or pots and pans (e.g., pouring water into pots and pretending you are making soup).

Tip 8: Get outside. Getting outside, if possible, is a great way to get some fresh air and a change of scenery. Although play dates and playground equipment are no longer possibilities, there are still a range of activities children can do: have races, jump like frogs, look at the clouds and point out shapes, collect rocks or leaves and organize them by size, color, and shape, toss a ball, dig in the dirt, draw with chalk, blow bubbles, play chase, pretend to be different animals, or have a dance party.

Tip 9: Facilitate virtual conversations. Continue to facilitate social interactions for children with loved ones or friends, using methods that make screen time more accessible and beneficial for little ones. These methods include:
- Rather than just talking to the child (or having the virtual partner just talk to the child), try to make the experience interactive. Use songs, dancing, and games like peek-a-boo. Read a book together. Use stuffed animals, dolls, or cars to play together virtually. You can also eat a snack together.
- If technical difficulties occur, explain them to the child. "Sometimes video calls freeze and don't work. We'll give it a minute and see if it gets fixed/we'll try again tomorrow."
- Give children an active role in managing technology. They can practice pressing the call or hang up buttons.

Tip 10: Help children communicate their feelings. You can use age-appropriate ways to help children express how they're feeling.
- Turn on some music and encourage the child to "wiggle their worries out"
- Paint or color a picture to show each other how you are feeling (e.g., color a person half blue for sadness, half yellow for happiness)
- Try using a stuffed animal or puppet, start by asking your child, "This is Oscar the owl. How do you think he's feeling? Oh, maybe he is sad. Why do you think he's sad?" You can talk about or act out your child's suggestion. Young children often prefer to talk with puppets or stuffed animals, and find it easier to express their worries this way
- Make calming routines part of the day by practicing simple yoga moves before nap time
- Perhaps the most important thing you can do to facilitate communication of feelings is to use feelings language yourself:
    - Label your own emotions, and emotions of others that you see in videos, books, or in person
    - Label feelings for the child. For example, "I wonder if you're feeling sad, because you're crying." "I think you look angry right now because you're stomping your feet." "I can tell you're really happy because you're smiling and giggling so much!"

Tip 11: Help children practice mindfulness. Even young children can begin to practice mindfulness, which calms down the nervous system and helps the child feel more centered and secure. There are many mindfulness activities for young children that can be found online. One

example is balloon breathing. Start by placing your hands on the top of your head, and instructing your child to do the same. As you breathe in, filling up your stomach, raise your hands above your head slowly, as if you are blowing up a large balloon. When you are finished with your inhale, your arms should resemble a large balloon on top of your head. When you exhale, slowly bring your hands down towards your head, coordinating your breath with the movement of your hands. Repeat this inhale/exhale pattern as many times as you like, usually 3-5 times total is good for most children.

Tip 12: Do your own self-care. Self-care is not selfish—it's how we keep ourselves well to ensure we are physically, emotionally, and mentally capable of being there for young children. Taking care of children can be taxing during typical times, but when stress is high, such as during COVID-19, adult self-care is especially critical for children's well-being. Self-care activities are different for everyone, but it's important to identify some things that make you feel happy, relaxed, peaceful, or rejuvenated, and are realistic to use. Although we are currently practicing social distancing, quarantining, or you may have a busy work schedule, there are some creative ways to practice self-care. First, think about ways to adapt activities that used to be helpful to you. For example, if you liked going to the gym, is it possible to do a home workout while video chatting with a friend, or going for a walk/run/hike outside? Think "fulfilling" rather than "draining." Instead of swiping through social media or the news which can cause increased tension, read a relaxing book, do a craft or puzzle, watch a funny TV show or cook/bake. Do something relaxing, such as taking a hot bath, gentle yoga, or taking a minute to focus on a tree outside and notice the leaves in the wind. If you have very little time, even 5 minutes of breathing can make a huge difference for your day.

The Big Picture. Connecting with children throughout the day, whether that is in physical ways such as cuddling or playing, or verbal ways such as checking in or reading a story, will help children to manage their stress and regulate their emotions and behaviors. Young children only learn how to regulate their emotions and behaviors with the help of adults. This process is called "co-regulation." Thus, you are the main coping strategy that a child needs to healthily manage the stress of COVID-19.

No matter how stressful things get, how many routines get disrupted, or how many mistakes we feel like we make, if we can make time to be present with our young children, they will feel more safe and secure during COVID-19

Visit zerotothree.org/coronavirus and https://www.nctsn.org/resources/parent-caregiver-guide-to-helping-families-cope-with-the-coronavirus-disease-2019 for more resources and activities.

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