



STAR Initiative

Separated? Strategies to Help Young Children Who Are Away from Their Caregivers During COVID-19

Whether you are a parent whose young child is separated from another parent, caregiver, or other relative or loved one, or a professional working with separated families, you likely have a great desire to ensure that the child in your care is able to manage this challenging situation and cope effectively. There are multiple reasons why a separation may occur, including quarantine, safety precautions due to a caregiver's job, or a caregiver or child's serious health condition.

Separations can be particularly hard on little ones due to their complete reliance on the adults in their life for comfort, safety, and love. It can be confusing and distressing to be unable to see a caregiver anymore. The following five tips may help to ease the stress. There are also strategies you can use for managing challenging behavior that may come up.

Tip 1: Keep communication flowing between yourself and the caregiver. As busy as things are, connecting with the child's caregiver at least once a day if possible will ensure that you are both on the same page. The child's caregiver will greatly appreciate staying informed about how the child is doing, and you may receive some helpful tips yourself (e.g., "Oh, she really likes the sleepy time book to help her settle down!") You can also be sources of support for each other as you manage this major stressor.

Tip 2: Use technology to stay connected. If you can set up a regular time for video calls, or even a phone call, that's great. It may be hard to set up a specific time for the video call due to your work schedule, emergency demands, or interruptions. It may be helpful to create a list of potential good and not-so-good times to call. When you can't connect, consider sharing a photo of the caregiver with the child, or read a note that the caregiver wrote to them. When the caregiver and child are chatting, help them to keep it short and sweet:

- Young children have short attention spans and may not want to talk to their caregiver for a long time. This can be upsetting for caregivers, and it may be helpful for you to say something like "Kids really have short attention spans don't they? Don't worry, she talks about you a lot and I know she loves getting to see."
- Having shorter calls more frequently can be useful.
- Rather than leaving the child on the video or phone call alone, help facilitate interaction. Use these times to share stories, talk about the child's day, sing songs, and try other games (like rhymes or peekaboo) that are fun for the child.
- It can be helpful to remember that life may be feeling pretty unpredictable for the child right now, and if the child is asleep, cranky, or doesn't want to talk, rescheduling may be better, and reminding the caregiver that this is a chaotic time for the child too, and it's important we follow their lead.

Tip 3: Encourage the caregiver to send the child special messages throughout the day (if possible). The caregiver can send you messages or emails for you to relay to the child. For example: "Tell Maya I'm listening to her favorite song from Moana!" Try audio messages or

videos which may be even more accessible for younger children. For example: “Mommy is busy at the hospital today but I wanted to tell you how much I love you”; “I hope you’re having a good day with Auntie today. Daddy loves you and can’t wait to see you once you feel better.” You can also have the caregiver send photos or videos. It may be helpful for the caregiver to include one of the child’s toys that can be cleaned in the picture with them. This can help a child make a connection that part of them is still with the caregiver.

Tip 4: Have the child create special messages for the caregiver (if possible). Ask the child, “Would you like to draw a picture for Mommy that we can save for when she’s back home?” Get creative and keep an art folder to show the caregiver during video calls (or to surprise them with when they return home). Ask the child to tell you about their picture and write their words on the picture to share with their caregiver.

Tip 5: Create a book with the child explaining what is happening. ZERO TO THREE has an excellent book template that was originally designed for military families with deployed parents and can be used for current caregiver/child separations: <https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/425-over-there-activity-book>. The child can read this story as much as they want, and it helps the child imagine exactly what their caregiver is doing, and recognizes how the child might be feeling. You can print out photos to use in the book, or children and caregivers can draw their own pictures. If you aren’t able to have the child create a book, it can still be helpful to write down a simple explanation for the child, that you can read to the child as many times as necessary For example: “Mommy is in the hospital so that she can get healthy. She is resting, and she eats lunch like you do! You will get to see her when she is feeling better. For now, we can play a game or make mommy a card.”

How to manage behavior. Being consistent and clear in how you manage child behavior can help negative behaviors from escalating, and help young children understand what is expected of them. This is always important, but in times of stress or transition, or if you are not the child’s primary caregiver, these actions may be especially useful.

- Make commands most effective by first getting the child’s attention (say their name) and wait for them to look at you. You will need to be near the child (e.g., not in a different room).
- Provide clear, simple commands, one instruction at a time. Wait five seconds before giving another command. For example: “Pick up your doll. [once doll is picked up] Great job listening! [wait] Now put the doll in the basket.” Avoid questions, for example “Do you want to clean up?”
- Choose your battles. It can be helpful to determine which behaviors you absolutely need the child to complete. In other words, don’t give a command if you are not willing to ensure that it is followed through on. Following through may mean helping the child complete the task if needed. For example, you might say, “put the books in the basket like this [demonstrate].” Make sure the task is developmentally appropriate for the child.
- Reward the child for doing behaviors you want them to. For example, let the child know that they can earn a sticker for cleaning up their toys, and then provide the sticker as soon as they have finished.

- Provide labelled praise once the child has completed a task. This type of praise describes exactly what you liked. For example, “Nice job picking up your toys right when I asked you to.”
- Reinforce good behavior by telling children what you want them to do instead of what you don’t want them to do. For example, instead of “Stop climbing on the furniture,” say “Keep your feet on the floor.” Instead of “No screaming!” say “Use your quiet voice inside.”
- Use when/then statements to help children understand what is expected. The first part of the statement explains what has to happen first in order for the second part of the statement to take place. For example, say “when you pick up these blocks, then you can play with the trucks.” “When you finish your sandwich, then you can eat dessert.”
- To help children have a greater sense of control, provide the child with choices that you are equally happy with. For example, say “would you like to wear the red shirt or the blue shirt?”.

How to manage dysregulation. If a young child in your care becomes dysregulated (e.g., crying, screaming), following these steps can be helpful for calming and soothing the child, as well as boosting your relationship.

- Move your body close to the child (if possible), rather than trying to respond to them from across the room. This will make communication easier, and allows the child to see you are present and available to them. Move slowly and calmly.
- If there is a clear problem that caused the dysregulation, help the child solve it. For example, if they are unable to put shapes in a sorter toy, slowly turn the shape while the child remains holding it, and help them place it in the sorter. If there is not a clear problem (e.g., the child is crying and you don’t know why), move on to the next step.
- Reassure the child. For example, say “It’s okay, I’m here with you.” “I’ve got you, you’re alright.”
- Label the child’s feeling (this creates a sense of understanding and support, and builds their emotional vocabulary and understanding and helps the child learn that emotions are okay). For example, “You seem sad because you miss your mom. It is sad. Would you like a hug/to cuddle your bear?”
- Once you have soothed the child, you can distract with a toy or cheerful game (just make sure not to do this too soon, as soothing is most important).
- Check if the child is tired, hungry, or wet, and address those needs.

How to manage aggression. Sometimes when young children are distressed or dysregulated they may act aggressively towards themselves or others. These steps can help in stopping aggressive behavior and preventing it in the future.

- Get down on their level, cover and hold their hands in yours (or feet if kicking).
- Give direct eye contact while stating in a firm but calm tone “no hurting.”
- Look away from the child while still covering their hands for a few seconds, then return direct eye contact and state “no hurting, gentle hands”.
- As you let go it can be helpful to redirect the child to another toy.
- Repeat this as needed.

Separation from a caregiver is a big, stressful event in a young child's life. Remember that the most important thing you can do is to spend time with them. Talk, play, share a meal, sing a song. Your presence will help them feel more safe and secure during COVID-19.

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