

Helping Children Cope with the COVID-19 Pandemic



This tip sheet is meant to help parents and caregivers address their children’s concerns and worries arising from the COVID-19 pandemic and the disruptions of normal life that we are experiencing. These guidelines are intended to help caregivers identify and address signs of adjustment difficulties in children and teenagers and suggest ways to talk to them about their fears and concerns.

Children always benefit when caregivers are able to listen, understand and respond to their thoughts and feelings. While being a parent is not always easy, during stressful times it can be especially hard to know what’s going on with kids. Understanding what our children are experiencing is the first step to knowing how to best respond to their distress. In the table below, some reactions that children and adolescents may be having are presented in the left-hand column and ideas for how caregivers can help children and adolescents are presented in the right-hand column.

I want you to know that:	You can help when you:
<p>I’m worried because I really don’t understand what COVID-19 is.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Remember that avoiding the topic could make me worry more. • Remind me that when I tell you about my thoughts and feelings, you can help me find ways to be less worried. • Ask me to tell you what I have heard about COVID-19 and what I’m thinking and/or feeling. • Based on what I’ve told you, answer my questions simply and honestly, providing me with as much reassurance as you can. • Give me enough information so I feel informed, but not so much that I feel overwhelmed. • Encourage me to talk to you about information about COVID-19 that I may be hearing in the news or on social media.
<p>I’m worried and anxious that the people I love will get sick, or that I will get sick.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Remember that I’m looking to you for guidance and comfort. When you are calm, I feel reassured. • Ask me to share details about my worries about your health, my health, and the health of others whom I care about. • Reassure me that you are taking good care of yourself. • Remind me that we are protecting ourselves and helping to keep others safe by physically distancing. • Let me know that I can talk to you and ask you questions whenever I have these worries. • Help me to create and maintain daily routines so that my life can feel more predictable, and I can feel less anxious. • After we’ve talked about my worries, help me get back to activities that occupy my mind in other ways (music, movies, books, games, schoolwork).

Developed by the Childhood Violent Trauma Center
at the Yale Child Study Center



I want you to know that:	You can help when you:
<p>I keep having a lot of upsetting, negative thoughts that make me feel worse.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask me questions that might help me describe the details of what I'm worrying about. • In response to the questions I have, answer as simply and honestly as you can, based on the facts. • Remind me that many times my worries may be much scarier than the facts, and that when I focus on the facts, I can help myself feel better. • Help me use focused breathing and guided imagery to interrupt my upsetting thoughts.
<p>Since COVID-19 started, I've been feeling clingy and needing to be very near you all the time.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Remember that when I'm acting clingy, it's because I'm anxious. • Remember that if you get frustrated or angry with me, it will only make me more anxious and clingy. • Remember that when you seem anxious and scared, it makes me more worried. When you are calm, I feel reassured. • Remind me that when I'm acting clingy, it shows you that I may be feeling worried. Helping me to talk about my ideas and thoughts can make me feel less scared and worried. • Reassure me that if you're busy now, you'll plan a time soon for when we can spend some time together. • In addition to talking with me, help me find pleasant distractions (movies, music, games, books) so I don't focus on my worries. • Help me to create and maintain daily routines that help things feel predictable.
<p>I'm having difficulty going to sleep or staying asleep.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help me get into a regular bedtime routine that includes consistent bedtimes and wake-up times. • When I'm having trouble falling asleep or waking up during the night, encourage me to stay in bed and rest. Help me try to avoid using screens and instead try listening to music or reading printed materials to help me fall back to sleep. • Help me use relaxation techniques, such as focused breathing, progressive muscle relaxation or guided visual imagery so I can relax and fall asleep.

I want you to know that:	You can help when you:
<p>Sometimes my heart is beating very fast. Other times it feels like I'm breathing quickly, and it feels hard to catch my breath. And sometimes I get bad stomach aches and headaches.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reassure me that sometimes when kids are feeling nervous or worried, they may have reactions in their bodies. • Help me connect the way my body is feeling to what I am thinking about. • Teach me some specific things to do when my body feels this way, like listening to music or exercising, or using relaxation techniques like focused breathing, guided imagery or progressive muscle relaxation.
<p>I feel frustrated that I can't be with my friends, and that there are so many things that I'd like to be doing but can't.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sympathize with me about the frustrations of physical distancing. This may help me open up and tell you more about what is on my mind. • Remind me that we are protecting ourselves and helping to keep others safe by physically distancing. • Encourage me to connect/reconnect with family and friends (phone calls, video chats, virtual movies). • Help me to do the things I like to do in ways that are possible right now (such as playing multiplayer video games, going outside for a short walk, riding my bike, taking advantage of online activities, including virtual story time or virtual visits to a zoo or museum).
<p>I don't feel like doing anything and even things that usually make me happy don't seem to matter right now.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask me if I've noticed that I'm not doing the things I usually like to do as much. • Remind me that feeling down and less interested in things may be part of my reaction to the way COVID-19 has been impacting so much of my life. • Ask me questions that can help me describe the details of my experience and any specific thoughts that may be getting me down. • Remind me that this situation (and the way I feel right now) will not last forever. • Even though I may not always feel like it, encourage me to re-engage in activities and routines, and contact/reconnect with family and friends so that I can feel less lonely and down.
<p>I'm having a hard time concentrating and paying attention.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help me understand that sometimes when it's hard to concentrate and focus on activities, it may be because I'm feeling anxious or worried. • Remind me to tell you when I'm having a hard time concentrating, and then ask me about any ideas that I may be having that are making me worried or anxious. • When you can, spend time with me while I'm doing activities that need my focus/concentration.

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I want you to know that:	You can help when you:
Watching or hearing the news makes me more worried and anxious.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Try to help limit the amount of talk and news about COVID-19 that I'm hearing and seeing.• Let me know that I can talk to you about any questions or worries I may have about what I've heard.• Remind me to get involved in activities (music, movies, games, schoolwork, walking) so that I don't have to get stuck on my worrying thoughts that may be stirred up by the news.
I get irritable easily, and sometimes I can get really angry.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Try to remember that when I'm irritable or angry it may be because:• I'm frustrated that I can't see my friends.• I'm fed up with all of the changes and limitations.• I'm worried and anxious and I hate feeling that way.• Remind me that I'm not alone and that talking to you about my feelings can help me feel less irritable and angry.• Help me to re-engage in activities and routines to help things feel more predictable.

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RESOURCES

Relaxation Techniques:

Focused Breathing

For older kids

- Relaxation Tip card:
https://nyulangone.org/files/Relaxation_Tip_Card--landscape-format.pdf
- 3 Breathing Exercises to Calm Kids of All Ages:
<https://www.parent.com/3-breathing-exercises-to-calm-kids-of-all-ages/>
- 4-7-8 Breathing Exercise by GoZen:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UxbdX-SeOOo>
- Mindfulness with Belly Breathing:
<https://www.pbs.org/parents/crafts-and-experiments/practice-mindfulness-with-belly-breathing>

For younger kids:

- Learn to Belly Breathe with Rosita:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xq3DwzX6MUw>
- Sesame Street: Common and Colbie Caillat – “Belly Breathe” with Elmo:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mZbzDOpyIA>

Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR)

- Progressive Muscle Relaxation Video for Kids
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cDKyRpW-Yuc>
- PMR Tip Card
<https://www.cci.health.wa.gov.au/~media/CCI/Mental%20Health%20Professionals/Panic/Panic%20-%20Information%20Sheets/Panic%20Information%20Sheet%20-%202005%20-%20Progressive%20Muscle%20Relaxation.pdf>

Mindfulness/Meditation apps and videos:

For older kids:

- Stop, Breathe, and Think (there are adult and kid versions of this app)
- Headspace (there are adult and kid versions of this app)
- Calm

For younger kids:

- Breathe, Think, Do with Sesame
- Sesame Street Monster Meditation #1: I Sense, with Cookie Monster and Headspace
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J9nE4RE8uiQ>

RESOURCES

Trouble Sleeping:

- Sleep Hygiene for Children:
<https://www.seattlechildrens.org/pdf/PE1066.pdf>
- Sesame Street Monster Meditation #2: Goodnight Body, with Elmo and Headspace
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yhRWp0wOLyo>

Talking with Kids about COVID-19:

- Supporting Kids During Coronavirus (COVID-19) (National Child Traumatic Stress Network)
<https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources/fact-sheet/supportingchildren-covid-factsheet.pdf>
- Talking to Kids about Coronavirus (American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry)
https://www.aacap.org/App_Themes/AACAP/Docs/latest_news/2020/Coronavirus_COVID19_Children.pdf
- Talking with Children about Coronavirus Disease (Center for Disease Control)
https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/daily-life-coping/talking-with-children.html?CDC_AA_refVal=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.cdc.gov%2Fcoronavirus%2F2019-ncov%2Fcommunity%2Fschools-childcare%2Ftalking-with-children.html
- Sesame Street: Talking with Children about COVID-19
https://cdn.sesamestreet.org/sites/default/files/media_folders/Images/PDF3V3.pdf?ga=2.240171201.317656769.1588079371-2146768227.1588079371

Self-Care for Parents and Caregivers

- Understanding and Coping with Reactions during a Pandemic (Yale Child Study Center). English and Spanish language versions are available.
<https://medicine.yale.edu/childstudy/communitypartnerships/cvtc/>
- Sesame Street: Self-Care for Parents
https://cdn.sesamestreet.org/sites/default/files/media_folders/Images/PDF3V3.pdf?ga=2.240171201.317656769.1588079371-2146768227.1588079371

If you think you or your child need mental health support during these difficult times, please contact your primary health care provider or local mental health agency.