

Emotionally Managing COVID-19: A Parent and Caregiver's Guide

The COVID-19 pandemic is impacting the mental health of children, youth, their caregivers, and families, and we expect these challenges to increase mental health needs both now and in the future. Under the best of circumstances, being a caregiver can be difficult, and the pandemic and its associated effects can make it even harder; and with the right supports, caregiving, even in a pandemic, can be both manageable and fulfilling. We have compiled the information below to help parents and caregivers recognize common reactions that children and youth may experience, as well as tips on supportive response.

Common Behavioral Reactions Among Children and Youth:¹

- **Preschool age children:** Fears of being alone, bad dreams, bed-wetting, appetite changes, temper tantrums, or difficulty separating from caregivers;
- **Children ages 6-12:** Irritability, aggression, nightmares, sleep disturbance, changes in appetite, physical symptoms such as stomachaches and headaches, withdrawal from peers, or forgetfulness with respect to chores and schoolwork.
- **Adolescents ages 13-18:** Physical symptoms such as headaches and rashes, sleep disturbance, changes in appetite, agitation, apathy, isolation from peers, ignoring advice on their personal health, excessive concerns about stigma and injustices.

Provide reassuring and accurate information about COVID-19 to help children and youth understand their current reality.

- **Parents and caregivers can reassure children through their own emotional tone:** Try to stay calm; children will react to and follow your reactions.
- **Be reassuring and honest:** The most important thing across all ages is that

children know you are focused on helping them be okay. It's also important to be honest and factual when responding to their questions.

- **It's okay not to have all the answers:** Remember that you may not have answers to all their questions, and that's okay.
- **Focus discussions on what the family is doing to stay safe:** This includes hand washing and social distancing.

Maintain healthy lifestyle habits and daily routines:

- Do your best at keeping your child's regular sleeping routine.
- Help your child follow proper hygiene practices – e.g., make sure they are brushing their teeth and hair – and consider making a checklist to help them get into a new home routine.
- Encourage children's participation in household chores.
- Limit their exposure to news and social media.
- Practice relaxation techniques, such as breathing exercises, meditation, yoga.

Schedule time with your children and do your best to be present with them during your time together. Through positive relationships with parents and caregivers, children learn to trust others, regulate their emotions, interact with and develop a sense of the world (e.g. whether it is safe or unsafe), and come to understand their own value as individuals.²

Find ways to stay connected as a family:

Schedule fun family activities; some could count as classes for school-age children!

- Walks or bike rides (*this could count as PE class or recess*),
- Game night with board / video games,
- Working on a puzzle,
- Cooking together (*this could count as a science lesson*),
- Eating meals together,
- Movie night,
- Completing a craft activity as a family (*this could count as an art class*),
- Completing a science experiment, and
- Having a family dance party (*this could count as a music class*).

Make time to take care of yourself and seek help for your own needs as a caregiver. Taking care of yourself by engaging in self-care and leaning on others for support is important not only for your own mental health, but also for your family's well-being. Parenting right now is

really hard, so show yourself compassion. Some key strategies that can help you feel more in control during this time include:

- Limiting exposure to news and social media,
- Making time for exercise,
- Eating healthy meals regularly,
- Getting plenty of sleep,
- Making time for activities you enjoy,
- Connecting with others – e.g., set up a video call with family and friends or text your best friend, and
- Avoiding increased use of alcohol or tobacco.

If your own anxiety or sadness worsens or feels unmanageable, it is important to know that additional mental health resources are available. In addition to your local primary care and behavioral health care providers, there are additional support lines available, such as:

- **Texas Health and Human Services** COVID-19 Mental Health Support Line at 833-986-1919, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.
- **The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)**, also has a 24/7 Disaster Distress Helpline at 1-800-985-5990, or text “TalkWithUs” to 66746.
- **The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline:** 1-800-273-TALK.
- **Veterans Crisis Line:** 1-800-273-8255

¹ The National Child Traumatic Stress Network. Parent/Caregiver Guide to Helping Families Cope With the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19). https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources/fact-sheet/outbreak_factsheet_1.pdf

² The National Child Traumatic Stress Network. What is Child Trauma? Available at: <https://www.nctsn.org/what-is-child-trauma/trauma-types/complex-trauma/effects>