

Tip Sheets

Supporting Children in Uncertain Times: Responding to the Coronavirus

How Do Uncertain Times Affect Children?

When children are unsettled, they may show their feelings through behaviors like crying, fighting with siblings, clinging to caregivers, regressing to previous milestones, and having tantrums. Even if children are not showing obvious signs of distress, do not be fooled into thinking they aren't affected. If you are feeling the effects, the children around you are too, no matter how young they may be.

How can we help children cope with feeling unsettled? We can be an anchor by providing structure, reassurance, and safety. With this safety net, children gain back a sense of normalcy.

What Caregivers Can Do

We may feel helpless, but there are many ways adults can support children. During stressful times, all children can benefit from the following:

Keep predictable routines and schedules.

Let children know what each day will include. Picture schedules may help younger children adapt to the new schedule of staying home. Tell babies what you are going to do next, so they aren't surprised by a sudden action on your part. For example, "I'm going to pick you up to go to the changing table." Tell toddlers, "We will go for a walk and then take a nap." Older children are more ready to hear about the whole day.

It is normal and okay if days do not go well; everyone is adjusting to these new routines.

Provide opportunities to play, inside and outside.

If you notice children becoming emotionally overwhelmed, offer walks, time outside, or running games. Remember that you are learning how to organize schoolwork. Keep expectations low at first, and give everyone plenty of leeway. It will get easier with practice!

Plan activities to keep children engaged.

Music, art activities, games, and sensory experiences will often capture children's imagination. Playing with water, sand, shaving cream, and playdough can lengthen their attention spans and help calm them down.

Give extra attention, patience, and love to children.

Listen to their concerns. Acknowledge and name their feelings. Answer their questions as simply as you can. Toddlers and preschoolers will need only a small amount of information such as, "Yes, everyone is staying home right now, because it is our way to help everyone stay healthy and safe." Offer reassurance such as, "I will be here to take care of you." Older children will ask more questions. Adults can answer honestly and simply.

Offer opportunities for them to help.

Children gain a sense of control when they assist in some way. They can help with tasks like cooking, setting the table, watering plants, and drawing chalk messages on the sidewalk. In childcare, schedule time for children to help with daily tasks like weather, line leader, and setting out snacks.

Teach children good health practices.

Let them know that practices such as handwashing and covering your mouth with your elbow when

you cough help them stay healthy and well. Model these practices during the day.

Restrict media accounts about the virus.

Even if you think children aren't listening while you are watching, they can sense your fear and anxiety. Screen time, however, can be used to communicate with family and friends. Online talent shows, birthday parties and story times should be scheduled with loved ones.

Teach children calming techniques.

Deep breathing and calming exercises, as well as experiences where children can push or pull (such as pulling a wagon and pushing against a wall or floor) help children feel more in control of their bodies. Think about obstacle courses or creating a blanket tunnel for them to crawl through. Hugs and safe touches are reassuring to children and adults.

You create the child's sense of security.

Avoid physical separations from the children in your care, especially at first. Infants and toddlers especially, cannot understand why everything is turned upside down, and they need to know you are close by. You are their sense of safety and normalcy. In childcare, schedule consistent caregivers who are responsive to children's needs.

Take Care of Yourself

Perhaps you are feeling you can barely take care of yourself, let alone young children's many physical and emotional needs. Remember, no one has received training on how to handle the current challenges that are arising. During this time, monitor yourself carefully. When you are getting overwhelmed remember the things that are helpful for children are helpful for you too!

- Focus on what you can control.
- Schedule time for walks, reading, or other calming activities.

- Maintain some daily routines even if you have to create new ones.
- Email, text, or use apps like Facetime and Zoom to connect with people you care about. Schedule times to talk with friends and family about your challenges. Cry if you need to!
- Laughter is a great antidote for stress and anxiety. Find reasons to smile each day.

No one has to do this perfectly. Be honest with yourself so you can be honest with the children in your care. You can help children successfully weather a challenging time by providing responsive support and love to the children in your care. These are skills for life they can use during other times of stress.

Additional Resources

Supporting Children's Emotional Well-Being
During the COVID-19 Pandemic

<https://www.childtrends.org/publications/resources-for-supporting-childrens-emotional-well-being-during-the-covid-19-pandemic>

Zero to Three: Tips for Families: Talking About the Coronavirus.

<https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/3210-tips-for-families-coronavirus>

For more information, visit www.inclusivechildcare.org.

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