



## Parent/Caregiver Guide to Helping Families Cope With the COVID-19 Pandemic

Information about COVID-19 continues to evolve and new questions emerge (e.g., testing, vaccines, treatments). As a parent/caregiver, you may be concerned about how to protect and take care of your children and family. Knowing important information about the current status of COVID-19 response efforts and how to continue to manage your stress can help you cope better. This resource will help you think about how COVID-19 has affected your family—both physically and emotionally—and what you can do to help your family cope.

### What You Should Know

- Coronaviruses are a large family of viruses that cause illness ranging from the common cold to more severe diseases. COVID-19 is caused by a novel coronavirus; this means it is a new strain that has not been previously identified in humans. In a pandemic, it is common for the virus to change over time.
- Several vaccines are currently approved in the United States for emergency use for COVID-19. The vaccines are effective in preventing illness, especially serious illness. At this time, it is unclear if the vaccines prevent person-to-person spread. There is no approved available vaccine yet for children under 16, although there are a number of studies currently underway about using the currently approved vaccines for adolescents and children. Given this information, the best preventative strategy continues to be wear a mask and to avoid person-to-person exposure with individuals not living in your immediate household. According to the CDC, we should all wear masks in public settings and when around people who live outside of your household. The use of masks is especially important when social distancing is difficult to maintain.
- To date, young children appear to generally be less affected by COVID-19 than adults. Although less common than adults, older children and adolescents can become seriously ill and spread the disease to family members and others.
- Children with pre-existing illnesses may have different risk for COVID-19, so you should discuss this with your child's medical team.
- According to CDC there are three important ways to slow the spread of COVID-19: (1) Wear a mask to protect yourself and others; (2) Stay at least 6 feet (about 2 arm lengths) from others who don't live with you; and (3) avoid crowds. When there is active community spread, you may also consider reducing contact with anyone not in your immediate household.

## READINESS

### Preparing your Family for the Enduring Effects of COVID-19

Being prepared is one of the best ways to lessen the impact of COVID-19 on your family. Here are some steps that you can take to maintain being prepared:

#### Information & Communication

- Identify how you will keep up with the rapidly changing information on COVID-19.  
In this pandemic, there is rapidly changing health information and a large amount of incorrect or partially correct information that can add to your stress and confusion as a parent/caregiver. Identify a few trusted sources of health information.

The NCTSN relied on the CDC resources to create this document.

Get the most up-to-date and accurate information at:

CDC: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/your-health/need-to-know.html>

CDC: information on children and COVID 2019:

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/specific-groups/children-faq.html>

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/daily-life-coping/children/symptoms.html>

Plan how you want to discuss updated information on COVID-19 with your family. Be sure to include:

- What the current disease outbreak is and updated information (e.g. vaccines, treatments)
- How it is spread
- What are the possible dangers
- Protective steps being taken in the community/nation/global community
- Protective steps everyone in the family can take

- Hold your family discussion in a comfortable place and encourage family members to ask questions. Consider having a separate discussion with young children in order to use language they can understand and to address specific fears or misconceptions they may have.
- Update your list of community resources that will be helpful as COVID-19 continues. Make sure you know their emergency telephone numbers, websites, and official social media accounts. These may include: your family's schools, doctors, public health authorities, social services, community mental health centers, and crisis hotlines.
- Review and update your plan for maintaining contact with friends and family members via telephone and internet as officials continue to recommend reduced exposure to others not in your household and in the event that isolation or quarantine is needed.
- Keep updated with your children's school about changing schedules and distance learning opportunities that may be offered during a school closure. Also, if your child receives additional services at school, ask how these will be handled during a change in school schedule or closure (e.g., meals, access to special education services and/or therapeutic services).

### **Reducing Your Family's Risk: Hygiene, Medical Care & Supplies**

Have all family members practice preventive behaviors including:

- Regularly wash hands for 20 seconds with soap and water (length of the A-B-C song) or use alcohol-based hand sanitizer that contains at least 60% alcohol.
- Avoid close contact with people not in your immediate household ("household pod").
- Stay home when possibly exposed to others or have symptoms.
- Cover the mouth and nose with a tissue or with the bend/crook of the arm when coughing or sneezing.
- Wear masks in public settings and when around people who live outside of your household for anyone 2 years of age and older.

Keep basic health supplies on hand (e.g., soap, alcohol-based hand sanitizer, tissues, and a thermometer).

Make sure you have a supply of medications taken regularly.

If your child takes medication for a chronic condition, talk with your child's medical provider about plans to get a supply at home that will last through any period of home isolation for your family.

Have your family work together to gather items that might be needed during extended quarantine or isolation periods. Have a supply of disposable masks or clean reusable ones regularly. Other items include drinking water, nonperishable food, and cash. Be sure to have activities, books, and games for children. Remember to include batteries in your item list, if those are needed for certain activities and games.

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### Coping with the Stress during a Pandemic like COVID-19

Even if your family is prepared, the pandemic can be very stressful as it extends in time and can impact communities differently. To help your family cope with this stress, these recommendations can help:

#### Information & Communication

- Keep updated about what is happening with the pandemic in your community and additional recommendations by getting information from credible media outlets, local public health authorities, and updates from public health websites (e.g., CDC).
- Seek support and continued connections from friends and family by talking to them on the telephone, texting, or communicating through email or social media. Schools may have additional ways to stay in contact with educators and classmates.
- Although you need to stay informed, minimize exposure to media outlets or social media that might promote fear or panic. Be particularly aware of (and limit) how much media coverage or social media time your children are exposed to about the pandemic.
- Email, messaging apps, and texting may be the best ways to stay in contact with others during COVID-19, as the Internet may have the most sensational media coverage and may be spreading rumors. Check in regularly with your children about what they have viewed on the Internet and clarify any misinformation.
- Focus on supporting children by encouraging questions and helping them understand the current situation.
  - Talk about their feelings and validate these
  - Help them express their feelings through drawing or other activities
  - Clarify misinformation or misunderstandings about how the virus is spread and the public health response measures like mask wearing, testing, vaccinations, and quarantining
  - Provide a bit more attention, comfort, and patience during stressful times
  - Check back in with your children on a regular basis or when the situation changes

**NOTE:** During the pandemic, racism, stigma, and discrimination have occurred against individuals who live in affected communities; against health-care workers and other essential workers; against individuals or families recently ill; and against several ethnic minority groups. Ask your children if they have experienced this themselves or if a friend has. Talk to them about their feelings, ways to address such situations, and discuss the value system of your family.

#### Scheduling & Activities

- Keep your family's schedule consistent when it comes to bedtimes, meals, and exercise.
- Make time to do things at home that have made you and your family feel better in other stressful situations, such as reading, watching movies, listening to music, playing games, exercising, or engaging in religious activities (prayer, participating in services on the Internet). Consider interactive games that can be played with an app or virtually, such as Dance Party, charades, and scavenger hunt of typical household items.
- Have quiet, alone time for each member of the family. During this time consider relaxation techniques, yoga, reading, listening to music, meditation, journaling.
- See what activities have been offered by your children's school or in your community that will keep your children engaged. Many are being adapted in adherence to current COVID-19 guidelines.
- Recognize that feelings such as loneliness, sadness, boredom, fear of contracting COVID-19, anxiety, stress, and panic are normal reactions to a stressful situation such as a pandemic.

- Help your family engage in fun and meaningful activities consistent with your family and cultural values.
- Rites of passage and key school milestones are important for children’s and adolescents’ development. Think creatively about ways to adapt celebrating birthdays, graduations, and school performances. Do your best to extend invites of virtual celebrations and performances to extended family, so that other loved ones can share in your children’s successes.
- Consult with clergy about variations of religious rituals that may be possible over the telephone or video conference platforms. Many religious groups have been compassionately flexible in adapting to the pandemic.

### Hygiene & Medical Care

- Find ways to encourage proper hygiene and health promoting behavior with your children (create drawings to remember family routines; sing a song for length needed to wash hands like the A-B-C or Happy Birthday song, twice). Include them in household jobs or activities so they feel a sense of accomplishment. Provide praise and encouragement for engaging in household jobs and good hygiene.
- Reassure your children that you will take them to the pediatrician and get medical care if needed. Also, let them know that you will get them tested if they are exposed to someone with COVID.

### Self Care & Coping

- Modify your daily activities to meet the current reality of the situation and focus on what you can accomplish.
- Shift expectations and priorities to focus more on what gives you meaning, purpose, or fulfillment.
- Give yourself small breaks from the stress of the situation.
- Attempt to control self-defeating statements and replace them with more helpful thoughts. Here’s a helpful [checklist](#) for identifying unhealthy thoughts and coping with them
- Remember, you are a role model for your children. How you handle this stressful situation can affect how your children manage their worries.
- If your family has experienced a serious illness or the death of a loved one, find ways to support each other, including:

Reach out to your friends and family, talking to them about the death of your loved one. Use telephone, email, or social media to communicate if necessary.

Find ways to honor the death of your loved one. Some activities may be done as a family, while additional activities may done individually.

Seek religious/spiritual help or professional counseling for support. This may be available online or by telephone during an outbreak.

## HELPING CHILDREN COPE

Your children may respond differently to the pandemic depending on their age. Below are some reactions according to age group and the best ways you can respond:

AGE GROUP	REACTIONS	HOW TO HELP
PRESCHOOL	Fear of being alone, bad dreams Speech difficulties Loss of bladder/bowel control, constipation, bed-wetting Change in appetite Increased temper tantrums, whining, or clinging behaviors	Patience and tolerance Provide reassurance (verbal and physical) Encourage expression through play, reenactment, story-telling Allow short-term changes in sleep arrangements Plan calming, comforting activities before bedtime Maintain regular family routines Avoid media exposure

<p><b>SCHOOL-AGE</b> (ages 6-12)</p>	<p>Irritability, whining, aggressive behavior</p> <p>Clinging, nightmares</p> <p>Sleep/appetite disturbance</p> <p>Physical symptoms (headaches, stomachaches)</p> <p>Withdrawal from peers, loss of interest</p> <p>Competition for parents' attention</p> <p>Forgetfulness about chores and new information learned at school</p>	<p>Patience, tolerance, and reassurance</p> <p>Play sessions and staying in touch with friends through telephone and Internet</p> <p>Regular exercise and stretching</p> <p>Engage in educational activities (workbooks, educational games)</p> <p>Participate in structured household chores</p> <p>Set gentle but firm limits</p> <p>Discuss the current situation in your community and encourage questions. Include what is being done in the family and community</p> <p>Encourage expression through play and conversation</p> <p>Help family create ideas for enhancing health promotion behaviors and maintaining family routines</p> <p>Limit media exposure, talk about what they have seen/heard including at school</p> <p>Address any stigma or discrimination occurring and clarify misinformation</p>
<p><b>ADOLESCENT</b> (ages 13-18)</p>	<p>Physical symptoms (headaches, rashes, etc.)</p> <p>Sleep/appetite disturbance</p> <p>Agitation or decrease in energy, apathy</p> <p>Ignoring health promotion behaviors</p> <p>Isolating from peers and loved ones</p> <p>Concerns about stigma and injustices</p> <p>Avoiding/cutting school</p>	<p>Patience, tolerance, and reassurance</p> <p>Encourage continuation of routines</p> <p>Encourage discussion of pandemic experience with peers, family (but do not force)</p> <p>Stay in touch with friends through telephone, Internet, video games</p> <p>Participate in family routines, including chores, supporting younger siblings, and planning strategies to enhance health promotion behaviors</p> <p>Limit media exposure, talk about what they have seen/heard including at school</p> <p>Discuss and address stigma, prejudice and potential injustices occurring during the pandemic</p>

### SEEKING ADDITIONAL HELP

If you or a loved one is having a difficult time coping with the pandemic and want to seek outside help, there are ways to get that help. For example:

- Get support regarding your anxiety or stress from a trained counselor at SAMHSA Disaster Distress Helpline by calling or texting (800) 985-5990 (For Spanish, press “2”).
- Contact your physician or your insurance company (if they have a consultation line) to ask health-related questions or to seek mental health support.
- Learn more ways to help your family. Additional resources can be accessed at:
  - [www.NCTSN.org](http://www.NCTSN.org): Covid-19 Resources
  - [www.healthychildren.org](http://www.healthychildren.org)
  - [www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/specific-groups/children-faq.html](http://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/specific-groups/children-faq.html)

*Last updated: January 21, 2021*

**Suggested Citation:** Brymer, M., Schreiber, M., Gurwitsch, R., Hoffman, D., Graham, M., Garst, L., & Speier, A. (2020). *Parent/Caregiver Guide to Helping Families Cope With the COVID-19 Pandemic*. Los Angeles, CA, and Durham, NC: National Center for Child Traumatic Stress.