

Helping Children Through Stressful Times

Children of any age may experience stress during difficult times. The COVID-19 pandemic has been an extremely stressful experience for everyone. Children have had to face illness in themselves and their loved ones, separation from family and friends, and major disruptions in their normal home and school routines. Children may experience stress in many ways. This may depend on their age and development. Below are some of the signs of stress in children of different ages and suggestions for supporting them based on their age.

What are the signs of stress in early childhood (ages 0-5)?

- Infants, toddlers, or young children may not show as much progress or have developmental delays as they grow.
- Fussiness and irritability, startling and crying more, or being more difficult to soothe
- Difficulty falling asleep and waking up more during the night
- Feeding issues or digestion concerns (stomach problems)
- Separation anxiety or seeming more clingy (not wanting to leave caregiver) or withdrawn (distant, or scared to explore new environments)
- Trouble with regulation of their emotions (having a hard time calming/controlling emotions) or temper tantrums
- Challenges with using the toilet or toilet training
- Difficulties communicating their needs
- While playing, they act out themes that show signs of distress (e.g., illness, death, separation)



How can I help children ages 0-5 with stress?

- Talk about big feelings that your baby, toddler, or young child might have.
- Name the feeling and tell them it is okay to have the feeling: Example: "It seems like you are feeling sad. It's okay to feel sad."
- Create a *feelings chart*, offer books about empathy, or create an *emotion thermometer*. These tools help to talk about feelings and emotions.
 - For an example of an emotion thermometer, please see this website:
 - <https://children.wi.gov/Pages/FeelingsThermometer.aspx> (available in multiple languages including Spanish, Arabic, and Burmese)

- Calmly take deep breaths so that you are modeling self-calming. At first, very young children may need you to help them before they learn how to soothe/regulate themselves.
- For infants, consider infant massage (example: lie baby on his/her back or hold baby, and gently rub your baby's hands or feet)
- Sing or play relaxing music
- Create a calm environment (example: lower the lights)
- Learn to read your baby, toddler, or young child's cues (example: What are they trying to communicate to you?)
- Use books, art, or play as an outlet for young children to express their big feelings and thoughts



- Be available to answer any questions for your young child
- Maintain routines and social contact (virtual is ok). Visual schedules or calendars can help young children know what to expect.
- Talk about it, read about it, and play about it to help young children process information and prepare for transitions (moving from one activity to the next).

What are the signs of stress in children ages 6-12?

- Having a hard time focusing
- Struggling to relax
- Extreme emotional reactions, such as anger or crying
- Changes in eating habits
- Refusing to do chores more than usual, not doing homework, or other forms of acting stubborn.
- Increased aggression towards caregivers or siblings
- Showing new fears or old fears have come back
- Symptoms of depression or extreme sadness
- Needing to be physically near a parent/caregiver



How do I help children ages 6-12 with stress?

- Allow your child to participate in decision making and scheduling. It may feel that nothing is in their control during the pandemic.
- Giving children choices for simple activities can help their mental health. For example, you may ask your child, “Would you like to go outside for a walk or would you like to play a board game with me?”
- Talk to your child. Your child may have questions about what is happening, but they may not know how to ask.
 - Find a quiet place, ask them how they are doing, and, most of all, encourage them to come to you anytime they need to talk.
 - Let them know that you are always there when they need you.
 - Listen without judgment when they decide to open up to you.
 - When they have finished sharing their thoughts, let them know you love them.
 - If needed, help them make a plan to manage their struggles.
- Be their role model. Our children see our reactions and feel our energy.
 - Try to practice techniques to reduce your stress with your children.
 - It is okay for children to know that adults have stress too.
 - We can help them control their stress by showing them how we try to control our own.
- Create daily routines. Routines can provide children comfort in what to expect during times when so much is not known.
- Read with your children!
 - Reading is a good way to spend quality time with your child.
 - Reading can also help reduce stress by lowering heart rate and blood pressure.
 - Many authors are also offering online story times and activities that you and your child can watch and do together at home.
- Get up and move. Physical activity can also help reduce the physical effects of stress. Go outside and get some fresh air when the weather allows. Run, play, laugh, and have fun.





- We all need a break to be alone sometimes, especially when we are around the same people every day.
 - Give your child a special “safe place” in the home, if possible.
 - This can be somewhere safe where they can go when they need to take a few minutes to escape.

What are the signs of stress in adolescents (12 years and older)?

- Having more physical symptoms such as headaches, stomach aches, nausea, back pain, fatigue, and other pain in the body.
- Sleep problems, such as trouble falling asleep, trouble staying asleep, or overall restless sleep
- Changes in appetite (up or down)
- Depressed mood
- Feeling agitated or irritable
- Less participation in exercise or hobbies
- Not wanting to be around friends or loved ones
- Poor motivation in school, or avoiding or skipping school
- More concern about ongoing problems in society, including racism and discrimination



How do I help adolescents with stress?

- Be patient with your teenager and accept their concerns, fears, and emotions. Let them know they are not alone in these difficult times.
- Provide hope and comfort for how they are feeling and seek more help (medical or mental health evaluations) when needed.
- Continue consistent routines, including regular exercise, good nutritional habits, consistent sleep cycle, and participation in safe hobbies and activities.
 - It can be very rewarding for adolescents to contribute to this routine. They may feel a sense of responsibility and self-confidence.
- Encourage participation in family activities including mealtimes, family walks, chores, and games. Allow adolescents to have some personal time on their own.



- Encourage adolescents to stay in touch with loved ones and friends via phone, texting, video chat, email, etc.
- Have open discussion with family members and friends about the pandemic, racial injustices, and other current events (but do not force discussions).
- Try to watch, listen, or read media and news for only a few minutes daily.

Additional Online Resources

- **Talking to children about COVID-19:**
 - <https://www.pbs.org/parents/thrive/how-to-talk-to-your-kids-about-coronavirus> (also available in Spanish)
 - <https://www.chla.org/careless-corny-book-kids-about-the-coronavirus> (also available in Spanish)
 - <https://www.healthychildren.org/English/health-issues/conditions/COVID-19/Pages/Building-Resilience-in-Uncertain-Times.aspx> (also available in Spanish)
 - <https://www.healthychildren.org/English/family-life/Media/Pages/Talking-To-Children-About-Tragedies-and-Other-News-Events.aspx> (also available in Spanish)
 - Resources specifically for teens:
 - <https://www.healthychildren.org/English/health-issues/conditions/COVID-19/Pages/Teens-and-COVID-19.aspx> (also available in Spanish)
 - Recommendations for children with autism:
 - <https://www.autismspeaks.org/news/tips-managing-children-home-during-covid-19> (also available in Spanish and Vietnamese)

- COVID-19 and Mental Health:
 - <https://www.healthychildren.org/English/health-issues/conditions/COVID-19/Pages/Signs-your-Teen-May-Need-More-Support.aspx> (also available in Spanish)
 - Feelings thermometers:
 - <https://children.wi.gov/Pages/FeelingsThermometer.aspx> (available in multiple languages including Spanish, Arabic, and Burmese)
- **Ideas for daily activities:**
 - <https://biglifejournal.com/blogs/blog/stay-at-home-printable-pack-families>
 - <https://www.gonoodle.com/>
 - <https://www.gonoodle.com/tags/W2gjaX/vamos-gonoodle>
 - Siblings:
 - <https://pathways.org/siblings-playing-together/>
 - https://www.healthychildren.org/English/family-life/family-dynamics/Pages/Sibling-Synergy.aspx?_gl=1*9137op*_ga*Mjc5MDI0OTQzLjE2MzIxNzE2ODY.*_ga_FD9D3XZVQQ*MTYzOTE3NzQzNC4xLjAuMTYzOTE3NzQzNC4w&_ga=2.47176103.1410937876.1639177435-279024943.1639171686 (available in Spanish)

***References available upon request.**