

How can parents help children cope with COVID-19 disruptions?

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Kelly Tu, a professor of human development and family studies at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, spoke with News Bureau education editor Sharita Forrest about ways parents can help children

cope with the changes and uncertainty brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Parents often believe that children are either too young to be aware of what's going on or that talking about the pandemic will upset them needlessly. Should parents initiate conversations or take cues from their children about whether to discuss the coronavirus and why it's affecting daily life?

With schools being closed, it's natural for [children](#) to question what's going on. These would be good opportunities to talk with children about why they are staying home. Of course, how much information and detail parents share depends on the age and maturity of the child.

Parents should take cues from their children and consider what information is most pertinent. Children vary in how many questions they have or how much they want to know. Start with the simplest answers. See how they respond and go from there. Do they seem satisfied with that answer? Do they have more questions?

For some kids, having more information helps them to process and understand the changes and cope, whereas for other kids, less information is better.

This pandemic is what we refer to as an uncontrollable stressor in the coping field. So, it's helpful to keep that in mind—for adults and children alike—and to identify things that we do have control over, things like [social distancing](#) and good hygiene, and explain that it's important to do these things because that's how germs spread.

Children may be upset they can't do the things they normally do such as seeing their friends, playing on playground equipment or going to the library or museum. But with technology, parents can do things like video chat with friends and relatives or make videos to send back and forth. Or they can consider ways to help their local community, such as assisting neighbors and collecting needed items.

There have been instances of race-related bullying associated with blaming rhetoric about the virus's origins in China. How might parents allay children's fears or anger and turn these incidents into teachable moments?

Monitoring what children are seeing and where they are getting information from can help parents manage the messages that children are getting. It's helpful for parents to first process information from various news outlets and not view or read it with their children. This will give parents time to decide what to share and how they want to share it.

Children are impressionable and learn from the actions of their parents and other close adults. To prevent the perpetuation of race-related bullying and blaming, we can't ignore it.

Teaching kids to be "colorblind" and not talking about race and experiences of inequality among racial and ethnic minority groups can feed into the problem. Research in this area shows that when we ignore the facts and reality, children may feel like race is not something they can talk about, and it undermines the experiences and history of individuals from racial and ethnic minority backgrounds.

Parents can use this as a teachable moment by acknowledging unfair treatment and misplaced blame, and reiterating the facts that germs are

not spread based upon one's race or ethnicity.

What are the signs that a child is becoming stressed and how might parents respond?

Signs that a child might be stressed or anxious include:

- Acting out (more than normal)
- Becoming withdrawn
- Directly expressing stress or anxiety

Parents can regularly check in with their children and be supportive by validating their feelings. For young children, distraction works well.

With social distancing, the disruption to their normal routine may be difficult. Parents can ask their child directly what would help them and make some suggestions that may help to distract them for the time being.

And for everyone, trying to get outdoors, weather permitting, allows for a change of scenery. Fresh air can lift everyone's spirits.

What might parents do if they're feeling unsure about the support or answers they're providing to their children?

Parents are also dealing with the challenges that [coronavirus](#) has presented—from work at home—and may have their own stressors and concerns that are exacerbated by this virus, especially [low-income families](#) who may have relied on resources from the child's school such as meals.

Some parents may not have the flexibility or resources to implement

some of these suggestions, and that's OK.

We are all trying to make the best of a difficult situation. Parents can model how to cope with this situation and maybe let their children do some things that wouldn't normally be allowed.

It's important for [parents](#) to remember they are doing their best, even if it doesn't always feel like it. Parents shouldn't put added pressure on themselves to have all the answers. Acknowledge that and let children know that you as the parent are also figuring out how to cope.

Provided by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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