

Supporting children's mental health during a pandemic

April 1 2020, by Dave Rideout



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Knowing how to talk to your children about risks is difficult at the best of times, let alone during a global pandemic. Now, as most of us social distance to give health care workers the best chance to confront the COVID-19 outbreak, it's important that we help children understand why it's important for us, our friends, and our neighbors, to stay home.

"Children notice disruptions in [daily routines](#) and they pick up on parents' anxieties, which are both unavoidable during a stressful situation like this one," says Tess Clifford, Director of the Queen's Psychology Clinic. "There are, however, ways we can communicate and educate that can help our [children](#) cope with the uncertainty surrounding COVID-19 and our response to it."

Dr. Clifford suggests providing age-appropriate information to your children, putting it in terms that express the need to keep one another safe while sparing the more alarming details. Remind them that grown-ups are working hard to help others stay healthy, by washing hands regularly and keeping space from others. Should they ask about risks the outbreak poses to them, it's okay to talk about how most children affected by COVID-19 only experience mild symptoms.

Explanations can help, but they don't eliminate all uncertainty. Dr. Clifford says that parents can still expect difficult behaviors from their kids.

"Tantrums, disrupted sleep, increased clinginess, acting younger or more emotional; these are all signs that your child is experiencing stress, but there are things you can do," says Dr. Clifford. "Talking to them about how you're feeling and about what you're doing about your emotions encourages children to talk about theirs."

Most importantly, Dr. Clifford recommends doing what you can to keep yourself calm, as children often take emotional cues from their parents.

"Make sure to keep your own mental health in mind as well. Deep breathing, guided relaxation, and meditation can be very beneficial, and keeping in touch with others, whether its online video chat or on the phone, is so important," says Dr. Clifford. "Develop new routines with your kids. Make time for fun and connection."

When parenting meets working from home

With many people now working remotely, more parents are having to juggle productivity and all-day childcare on their own.

"For parents working from home, it's all about setting reasonable expectations," says Dr. Clifford. "It won't be possible to focus as much on work as you're used to, so zero in on the essentials. Prioritize connecting and showing love to your children, and make plans to have fun with your kids before and after your working periods."

Dr. Clifford suggests asking your kids about the activities they most enjoy at school, and try some of them when designing your family's new routine. She also advises [parents](#) to be flexible.

"Our daily schedules are atypical lately, so it's okay to bend your own rules about [screen time](#), food, and behaviors," says Dr. Clifford. "Stay focused on your family's health and wellbeing first and foremost and, where and when you can, build in opportunities for learning and fun."

Provided by Queen's University

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