

Handling developmental regression in children during COVID-19

May 18 2020, by Dr. Nancy Close



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Many parents are noticing regression in their young children's development during the current COVID crisis. They describe tantrums, refusal to do schoolwork, toileting accidents, baby talk, intense and

unpredictable emotions, hyperactivity, sleep difficulties, and more. These are difficult, unpredictable, and scary times and regression in a child's development adds significantly to parents' already high levels of worry. Knowing the role regression has in development can alleviate some of that anxiety and help parents understand the feelings, thoughts, and struggles that may be driving the regression.

Children are naturally motivated to move forward in their development. They enjoy exploring and mastering challenging tasks. They experience joy in this mastery. Young [children](#) change and grow so rapidly in the first five to six years of life. There are many times during these years that all children experience times of regression. Regression is a very normal and natural part of development. It can occur before a child makes a developmental leap forward or it can occur after a child has made that leap. Regression can give a child the chance to prepare for movement forward or to consolidate gains.

During any regression children may lose a skill they have just recently achieved. Normal regression—which is strengthening for development—is often short lived. Some typical regressions occur around the birth of a sibling, beginning school, becoming toilet trained, after a separation from a parent, or experiencing an unexpected change in routine. It can also happen when children feel overwhelmed by typical developmental conflicts like "Do I become a big kid or stay a baby?" "Do I share my toys, or do I keep them for myself?" "Is it OK to have big mad feelings?" Children also regress when they feel stress.

Stress during this difficult time of extreme upheaval is being experienced daily by children and adults. It is no surprise that regression in young children may be more extreme and longer lasting than usual. Parents may wonder what they can do to support children.

- Try to be comfortable knowing that regression will happen. Try

not to be shocked by it and reassure your child, as well as yourself.

- Recognize that your child is struggling. Say to your child, "I noticed you are using a lot of [baby talk](#), I wonder if it is feeling too hard for you to have all of these changes happening."
- It is helpful to offer some special cuddling time, to look at baby pictures and recall stories of when the child was a baby and celebrate how much your child has grown and changed since infancy.
- It is also helpful to support and celebrate a child's attempts to achieve a new milestone or embrace a challenge.

Even though normal regression may be a bit more extreme during this pandemic, it is important to remember that the natural motivation to explore, learn, grow, and master is strong in children and will emerge again and bring them much excitement and joy.

Provided by Yale University

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