

Children and COVID-19: How to help kids cope and practice safety

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Many children may be confused and frightened about the COVID-19 pandemic, but parents can do a lot to help children cope and stay safe during the outbreak, a University of Mississippi psychology professor advises.

Stephanie Miller is also director of experimental training in the Department of Psychology and research director of the Cognition Underlying Behavior Lab, where she studies the development and cognitive processes of young [children](#). She serves as principal investigator for a research study looking at how toddlers begin to control behavior and solve problems, supported by a \$100,000 grant from the National Institutes of Health's Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development.

Miller has published articles in leading [academic journals](#) in her field, including the *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology and Developmental Psychology*.

To help [parents](#) and other caregivers, she offers the following framework and explains what

preschoolers can grasp about COVID-19:

Q: There's a lot of information in the media about explaining COVID-19 to children. Are there special challenges with preschoolers, meaning children ages roughly three to five?

A: Children's emotional experiences are shaped by their age and cognition. Preschoolers likely don't think logically or abstractly like adults, so you have to tailor answers to their age. The most important thing is being reassured that their parents love them and are there for them.

Q: What can parents and other caregivers say about COVID-19 that preschoolers will understand?

A: Preschoolers know what "sick" means. They've all had a fever or a cough, so that's a good basis of knowledge to start from. They will understand, "We have to wash hands a lot so we don't get sick."

Explain to them early on what a virus is. It's important to answer their questions and to be honest and accurate while speaking to them on their level. If you don't give children information, they may imagine something worse than the reality.

Q: What if they cannot see a special friend or relative, like a grandparent?

A: It's the same principle. Start with what they know: "We can't visit grandma now because she is sick," or "We can't play with your friend right because you or she might get sick." They can understand social distancing if they know that people are doing this to stay healthy and not spread the virus.

Q: What is the hardest thing about "sheltering in place" for preschoolers?

A: It's difficult for them when their routine is

disrupted. They rely on continuity. It will help them deal with a disrupted schedule if parents keep the same routines at home, like going to sleep at the same time and having the same bedtime rituals.

Preschoolers need to have a context for new routines, like washing hands more than usual. A basic message might be: "We are still learning about this virus. It may make some people sick, but most people will be OK. One way of not getting sick is washing our hands."

It may also be helpful to do some of the type of activities they do at school, like a simple art project or playing with blocks.

Q: How can you tell if a child this age is stressed?

A: Often, if they're stressed, they will act out. They won't be able to recognize a specific emotion and express it in words, so you have to look at behavior. A child may act out if they are upset, for example, being irritable or breaking rules.

Q: What is the most constructive response to acting out?

A: It is important to remain calm and don't take their acting out personally. If it is safe to ignore their behavior, you can ignore it. If their behavior is dangerous, respond calmly and in the way you normally do for that behavior.

It is also helpful to do things when they aren't acting out to help them cope, like playing with them, helping them relax and helping them get active energy out in safe ways.

Q: A lot of parents are working from home now and need to get things done. What's a realistic amount of time that a preschooler can stick with an independent activity?

A: Preschoolers are still developing [self-control](#). It's very hard for them to do activities on their own.

Much of what they do at school is structured for them so they will have trouble entertaining themselves for long periods of time. Even if they

have toys, it is important to keep checking in on them, as many children at this age may have trouble keeping focus on the same thing for longer than 15-30 minutes.

It is also important that parents also cut themselves some slack during these unprecedented times. There may be more screen time or less [educational content](#) than you might like, but these are unusual times and we may have to restructure the day to focus on safety.

Q: How is staying home for self-quarantine different for this age than being on a vacation and at home?

A: Transitions to a new routine are generally difficult, and remember that they haven't had any time to prepare and are still adjusting. Usually, children know when a school break or family vacation is coming up, but in this situation, the change has been sudden. That can add to their stress.

Q: Is it OK to watch the news in front of a preschooler?

A: It's important to be cognizant of what is on TV, and it's a good idea to limit their exposure to [social media](#) and news shows.

Q: What else might be a challenge for them?

A: Anything new and sudden stresses may stress young children. It's important to link something they already have experience with when you talk to them about this virus so that they can comprehend what a parent is saying.

And each child is different. Age isn't necessarily in lockstep with development. Know your own child.

Provided by University of Mississippi

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