

# Supporting Your Child’s Mental Health and Emotional Wellness During the COVID-19 Outbreak

Many parents and caregivers are experiencing an increase in stress, fear, and anxiety from their child or teen during the current COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic. Children and teens are more likely to have challenging behaviors during natural disasters that disrupt their daily lives. Adjusting to distance learning, being isolated from friends, loss of routine, and anxiety about the future can trigger negative behavior as the child struggles to find ways to control the world around them.

Having an awareness of changes in behavior in your child or teen that indicate distress may help support them through this difficult time. Children have different reactions when their world is turned upside-down and most use their behavior to communicate they need help or support.

Some of these behaviors may be new and others may be part of the way your child typically functions but have increased in frequency and intensity.

Some of the more common changes in behavior may include:

- Crying or irritability over minor things
- Worrying excessively
- Frequently complaining they don’t feel well
- Demanding more attention from adults
- Regressing in developmental behaviors
- Self-isolating
- Sleeping more or less than usual
- Losing interest in activities they typically enjoy
- Difficulty focusing and concentrating
- Using alcohol, tobacco, or drugs

You have an important role to play in supporting your child during these difficult times. These suggestions may help:

- **Validate your child’s feelings when they express negative emotions**, even if it does not appear to be directly related to the pandemic. What we see may not necessarily be the real problem.
- **Share age appropriate, factual information with your child.** A child who does not have adequate information may use their imagination to close those gaps. Be available to answer questions and listen to their concerns.
- **Provide routines.** Structure and predictability help children thrive. Regular bedtimes, wake times, and hours for schoolwork provide needed structure at a time where most of their routines have been disrupted.
- **Find ways to help your child have a sense of control.** Allow them to make decisions and have choices. Right now, children are hearing “no” a lot: “No, you can’t go back to school yet,” “No, we can’t go to the playground,” “No, your friends can’t come over.” Allowing your child to make some decisions can help them feel like they have some control.

- **Be extra patient with your child.** This may be easier said than done. Stress can also cause parents to be more irritable or impatient. Model the behavior you want to see. Remaining calm despite the challenging behavior is more effective than an angry or over-reactive response.
- **Have flexible expectations for your child and yourself.** Allow both of you to let go of something you feel you are “supposed” to do. It is not unreasonable to expect that things may not always go as planned.
- **Encourage social connections.** Now, more than ever, it’s important to connect with others. Virtual platforms are a great way to connect with others outside the home. Phone calls, emails, and handwritten letters or cards also help keep children connected to their friends and other family.
- **Take time to care for yourself as you adjust to the changes in your life.** Staying healthy makes you better equipped to care for others. Take the time to congratulate yourself on accomplishments and find something that brings you joy each day.

Parents and caregivers are the best source of comfort and hope for children and youth during these challenging times. It takes time and patience to adjust to significant life changes. The same is true of supporting your child when they have changes in their behavior. Take each day and new challenge as they come. Practicing self-care, attending to your child’s feelings, and understanding their behaviors are essential to support their mental health and emotional wellness.

For additional information, contact PACER Center at (952) 838-9000 or [PACER@PACER.org](mailto:PACER@PACER.org).