

Supporting Young Children Isolated Due to the Coronavirus

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The coronavirus (Covid-19) is a major epidemic. Luckily few young children have fallen ill. Most of the sick children have had mild cases. However, young children are highly affected by the quarantine and the anxiety of their parents and other adults. Adults may think that children will not notice all the changes and the stress, but they are very sensitive to what is going on. Here are some of the ways children react to the stress and some of the things you can do to help them.

Common Reactions in Children

Frequent crying; difficulty staying still; problems falling asleep and staying asleep; nightmares; clinging to their caregivers; fears of being alone; repetitive play (they may repeat over and over again what they have heard; they may try to take special care of their dolls or stuffed animals and hide or cover them). Some children may become very aggressive and angry. Others may withdraw from contact. Some may act like younger children, lose their toilet training, want a bottle rather than drinking from a glass, want to eat baby food or refuse to eat, talk like a much younger child.

Young children are very sensitive to the stress experienced by their caretakers. It affects their ability to act in their usual ways and affects their emotions. Most often, they cannot talk about their fears and distress. Caretakers can protect them from some of the stress the adults feel, but caretakers must be aware that the children are upset.

Things You Can Do to Help Your Children

1. Routines are very important for young children. Disasters, forced isolation, and other traumatic situations often break their usual routines. Creating new routines or re-establishing usual routines can help children feel safe. Keeping regular mealtimes and bedtimes, setting a daily time to play games together, read to them, or sing songs together all help.
2. Support from parents or caregivers is very important during periods of stress and during the time after the acute disaster is over. Parents may be physically present but not available emotionally because they are so stressed themselves. It is important to make time to reassure young children and spend time with them.
3. Explain why things are different. Young children may not understand why things have changed (like why they cannot go outside or play with other children) but talking with them will help them feel supported by you. Help the children in a way that is appropriate for their age. Keep explanations simple.
4. Take care of yourself. This is very important. Even if young children are not directly exposed to the trauma, they can recognize stress and worry in older children and adults in the house.

5. If young children have been sent to stay with family members somewhere else talk to them using electronic means as often as possible during the day and at bedtime. If they are at home, try to arrange for them to see other children using a cell phone.

Young Children at Home during the COVID-19 Outbreak: The Importance of Self-Care

Self-care is not selfish or indulgent—it's how we keep ourselves well to ensure we are physically, emotionally, and mentally capable of being there for our young children.

Parenting a young child is already stressful at times. That's why it's important to remember to take care of yourself, too. When you feel calmer, it's easier to be there for your children and meet their needs.

The Case for Self-Care During the COVID-19 Outbreak

Nearly all of us has heard the flight attendant tell us to put their own oxygen mask on before helping others. The same goes for parenting—your health and well-being is important so that you can nurture your child. Self-care is not selfish or indulgent—it's how we keep ourselves well to ensure we are physically, emotionally, and mentally capable of being there for our young children.

The realities of COVID-19 make self-care even more important. The unknowns of what's coming next can worry even the calmest of parents. If faced with long periods of uncertainty, other stressors may emerge—concern for family members, worries about lost income, keeping the fridge full of groceries, balancing job roles with child care, and more. But young children need their parents to offer a calm, stable, and predictable “home base” for them. It's a challenge, but as a parent, the best way to help your child be at their best is to take care of yourself.

Pay Attention to How You Are Feeling

Take the time to notice your feelings and pause and reflect before responding to sources of stress.

1. Place one hand on your belly and one on your chest.
2. Take a deep breath into your belly and feel your hand rise.
3. Exhale slowly and gently through your lips, like you are blowing on hot soup.
4. Repeat two to four times.
5. Respond to the situation once you've calmed yourself.

Imagine Your Child's Behaviour as a Communication

When young children experience a change in their routines, they may be confused or upset. But most children under three lack the words they need to share their feelings. They may “tell” you through their behaviour: by being fussy, by withdrawing, by going back to earlier behaviours like wanting their pacifier or waking frequently at night. It's easy to become

frustrated, since as adults, we're already managing so much. But when you encounter a challenging behaviour, pause to think about what your child might be telling you. How could you respond in a way that meets their needs best? For example, if your child misses seeing their grandparent who provided child care before COVID-19, you can arrange for a [video chat](#) or by explaining the separation. Check out [this resource](#) for questions your toddler might have and age-appropriate ways to respond.

Make Time for Self-Care

You and your child are probably used to having time apart—you at work or school, and your child at child care or with a family care provider. If you're stuck at home due to coronavirus precautions, your family may be together 24 hours a day and it may feel impossible to get a break for yourself. If you co-parent, talk about how you can share caregiving time so that each of you have a little time alone. If you and your co-parent are balancing work-at-home with child care, collaborate on creating daily schedules that allow each of you to focus on key professional responsibilities while keeping children safe and occupied. Schedules (in terms of who does what, when) may need to change on a daily basis, so making time to plan before bed or during breakfast can set you up for a successful day.

If you don't have another adult in the home, take advantage of "quiet time." Is your child still taking naps? Use that time for yourself. Is your child too old for naps? Try to arrange a quiet hour or two each afternoon when your child reads in bed or plays quietly. Stay nearby, but take care of yourself. If needed, use the time after your child goes to bed or before they wake up in the morning for self-care as well.

Taking Care of Yourself

What activities make you happy? Reduce your stress level? Leave you feeling calm and rejuvenated? It's different for everybody. What's important is finding self-care strategies that work for YOU—ones that bring you peace and are realistic to use.

Health precautions like social distancing and self-quarantine present a challenge for self-care, since it may not be possible to go to the gym, exercise classes, book clubs, or sports events. Think about ways of adapting activities to formats that encourage social distancing:

- **Outdoor/group exercise activities:** Exercising outdoors, if it's safe and feasible, is a great solution. Walking, hiking and biking trails are perfect choices. Online videos and apps that provide instructor-led exercise, like yoga or group workouts, are also great resources.
- **Stay in touch with supports:** Technology can take the edge off of feelings of isolation. Can book club meet over video chat? Can you "visit" grandparents the same way? Maybe you and a running partner can motivate one another with shareable playlists and text message support.
- **If you find yourself getting restless, dust off your "when I have time" list:** Most of us keep a mental list of things we want to do "when we have time"—maybe it's learning how to refinish furniture, training to run a 5K, or binge-watching a new series. Whatever it is for you, choose an item from that list and tackle it now.

Instructional videos, apps for motivation and support, and experts are easy to find online.

- **Take time to relax:** Sometimes, our minds and bodies just need a break. Meditation, mindfulness, and other replenishing activities (yoga, long baths, etc.) are a great way to let go of the pressures of the day.

And where's your toddler while all this is going on? Think about ways your child can join you in some of your activities. Buckle baby safely into a jog stroller. Put a towel down next to your yoga mat for a toddler partner. Lie on your backs next to each other and practice deep breathing. While you still need some "alone time," there are ways to invite our little ones to "share our calm" too.

We are in uncharted territory. Preparing for and living with the impact of coronavirus will have its challenges, and self-care may not seem like a priority. But that's not true. Keeping ourselves supported and sustained is exactly what we need to ensure our families stay strong. You won't just feel better, but you'll be better for your family as well.

Looking for more information? Visit zerotothree.org/coronavirus for our latest resources and updates for families.