

Addressing change and uncertainty with kids



Keeping up with lockdowns, school closings and reopenings, mask mandates and other elements of the pandemic is tough enough for adults. For kids, who have varying levels of maturity and understanding, it can be even more challenging. That's why open communication and listening are so important right now.

If you have a child or teen in your life, consider these tips for helping them build understanding and resiliency. They're great for parents, teachers, babysitters and other trusted adults.

Start by listening. Before you give information or advice, make sure you aren't making assumptions about what the child already knows or how they're feeling. Listen to your child, give them space to talk and avoid asking too many questions, which can feel overwhelming. Validate their feelings, and answer any questions they have.^{1,2} It's OK to say "we don't know" if the science hasn't been settled on a topic yet.² If your child is having trouble talking about how they're feeling, encourage them to try art or journaling their emotions.³

Be honest and open. Especially for middle-school- and high-school-age kids, hearing about your own feelings can be helpful. While you don't want to worry them, sharing some thoughts and feelings can help them feel like they're not alone. It can also show them that they don't always have to pretend that everything's OK or hide their feelings. Be sure to also share the ways you're coping.³

Stick to a routine. At a time when little feels "normal," routines can be even more comforting than usual for children. If they're doing online school, make sure they still get up on time and follow their normal school calendar.³ Work in breaks for play time, and if weather permits, encourage them to get some fresh air. Make exercise, plenty of sleep and healthy meals part of the routine too.⁴

Teach self-soothing. Just like you may choose a solo run, a hot bath or meditation to clear your mind when you're feeling stressed, kids can find ways to self-soothe. For some, a distraction like drawing or building a blanket fort might work. For others, cuddling with their favorite stuffed animal or spending some time outside may be calming. Encourage them to find ways to relax when uncertainty feels stressful.⁵

Know when to get help. Depression, anxiety and other mental health concerns are common during “normal” times. During the pandemic, the rates have grown significantly. If your child is experiencing symptoms or is having trouble coping with the pandemic, seek professional help. Your employee assistance program can connect you with a licensed therapist.⁵

Resiliency is a skill that can be learned, and the pandemic is a great time to help children discover how to manage stress, anxiety and feelings of uncertainty. But even the most resilient people still experience tough emotions. Be there for your child, and try to maintain a positive outlook.⁴ Reassure your child that their feelings are valid. Then, turn off the news for a while and take a break. Getting some exercise, playing a game or reading together are all great ways to spend time together — during the pandemic and beyond.³

1. Stanford Children’s Health. Talking to Kids About COVID-19. Available at: http://med.stanford.edu/content/dam/sm/elspap/documents/Coping-During-COVID-19_final_updated-2-.pdf. Accessed February 25, 2021.
2. World Health Organization. #HealthyAtHome — Healthy Parenting. Available at: <https://www.who.int/campaigns/connecting-the-world-to-combat-coronavirus/healthyathome/healthyathome---healthy-parenting>. Accessed February 25, 2021.
3. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Helping Children Cope. July 1, 2020. Available at: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/daily-life-coping/for-parents.html>. Accessed February 25, 2021.
4. American Psychological Association. Resilience Guide for Parents and Teachers. August 26, 2020. Available at: <https://www.apa.org/topics/resilience/guide-parents-teachers>. Accessed February 25, 2021.
5. Burch JM. Kids Feeling Stressed? Help Them Learn Self-Care Skills! Magination Press Family. Available at: <https://www.maginationpressfamily.org/stress-anxiety-in-kids/kids-feeling-stressed-help-them-learn-self-care-skills/>. Accessed February 25, 2021.

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