



Supporting Children and Teens during COVID-19



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Crisis and COVID-19

A crisis is an event that is so stressful and disruptive that a person may struggle to use their normal coping skills. The COVID-19 pandemic certainly meets the criteria to be considered a crisis.

Children and teens have been dramatically impacted by COVID-19 –schools have transitioned to online formats, families do not leave their homes unless necessary, many households have been impacted financially, children watch the number of COVID-19 cases and deaths rise each day, and many families have loved ones who have become sick with the virus.

It is crucial that adults are equipped to facilitate helpful conversations with children and teens about COVID-19. They have the unique opportunity to help them emotionally and spiritually process all that is happening around them. The way supportive adults respond can help calm fears, create a supportive environment, instill hope, and foster healing.

The impact of a crisis on a child or teen will depend on a variety of factors, including their proximity to the event, the degree to which they experienced fear or loss, previous stressful or traumatic experiences, and the responses of important adults in their lives. The following suggestions can be used to support children and teens as they cope with COVID-19.

Help Children and Teens Process Emotions

It is normal for children and teens to have a variety of strong emotions about COVID-19 and all of the ways it has impacted their lives. Adults can provide a safe space for young people to share their emotions and facilitate interactions that help them process what they are feeling.

Acknowledge losses and grieve them. Any time there is change, there is loss. Even changes that are considered positive, such as graduating to a new grade in school, involve loss. For example, a child may be separated from their friends, lose the classroom where they felt comfortable, or lose their old teacher. COVID-19 has resulted in many changes very quickly, such as switching to online classrooms, canceling group gatherings, social distancing from friends and family members, and more limited recreational activities. It is important for adults to help young people identify the losses associated with COVID-19 and support them as they grieve. Grief is the process of expressing one's feelings about a loss. It is also important for adults to identify the losses in their life and grieve them. Adults will be better able to support young people if they have processed loss in a healthy way.

Accept emotions as they are. Children and teens need space to feel whatever they are feeling without judgement. Because everyone processes emotions and experiences differently, it is im-

portant to allow space for various reactions and give each child or teen the opportunity to express whatever it is they are thinking or feeling. It is normal for young people to have a variety of strong emotions about all of the losses associated with COVID-19. There are no right or wrong emotions and a person's feelings may change over time. When children feel their emotions are welcomed and accepted, they are more likely to grieve and process loss in a healthy way.



Take care of yourself. Adults need to take care of themselves practically, emotionally, and spiritually. Before every flight, the flight attendant instructs adults to secure their oxygen mask before putting on their child's in the case of an emergency. This principle holds true when there is a crisis. If adults do not care for themselves, they will likely struggle to care for the needs of their children and teens. It can be helpful for adults to identify people they can talk to for emotional support and lean on for practical needs. It is also important to take time to be with the Lord and space needed to refuel.

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Work to Strengthen Relationships

Supportive relationships with adults can help buffer the impact of stress during a crisis. Adults can intentionally strengthen their relationship with young people and make themselves available to offer support.

Make time to talk. Ask questions to encourage open discussion. By engaging a young person in discussion, adults can better understand what they are thinking and how best to support them. It is important for adults to listen more than they talk and carefully monitor their own reactions. Adults should reserve their own raw emotional reactions for conversations with other adults who can offer support.

Affirm that you care. Parents can tell their children that they love them. Other supportive adults can affirm that they care and want to be there. It is a powerful experience for a young person to know someone cares for them and enjoys being with them.

Have fun together. It is important to do things that foster positive emotions. While children and teens need space to share difficult emotions, they also need the breaks that fun activities provide. Shelter in place orders offer families opportunities to enjoy time with one another while at home. Try to find activities that your family enjoys together, such as cooking family meals, board or card games, crafts, outdoor activities, walks, or bike rides.

Give some space, but stay connected. Sometimes children and teens need space, and other times they may want to talk. It is important to read their cues to decide what is best in each situation. If a child or teen is struggling to communicate, do not continue asking questions. Sometimes it is easier for young people to express themselves while engaging in an activity or share their feelings non-verbally through drawing, painting, or writing.



Provide Stability and Easing Fears

COVID-19 has disrupted many aspects of young people's day-to-day life. Parents and other supportive adults can help by offering consistent, supportive interactions, validating concerns, and affirming safety.

Validate concerns and affirm safety. For many, COVID-19 has challenged their core sense of safety and stirred feelings of fear and loss of control. It is important to validate young people's concerns and resist the urge to minimize worries your child or teen may have. This is especially true when their concerns reflect the reality of the situation. For example, if a child expresses fear about getting sick, it is not helpful for an adult to minimize their concern by responding, "Don't worry, you won't get sick." It is more helpful when adults validate their concern and tell them what is being done to keep them safe. It is also helpful to empower children and teens to make healthy choices that keep them safe.

- **Tell them what is being done to keep them safe.** There are many things leaders and people in our communities are doing to keep people safe. If a child or teen is feeling afraid, it can be helpful to remind them of a few things:
 - * *Doctors and researchers are working hard to learn more about COVID-19 and develop treatments to help people*
 - * *Leaders have put social distancing rules in place to slow the spread of the disease and keep people from being exposed*
 - * *Hospitals have trained doctors and nurses to care for people who are sick, and most people who get sick recover*
 - * *There are new rules for shopping that keep people from spreading the virus*
 - * *Many schools have shifted to an online format so learning can happen safely at home*
 - * *God is in control of everything that happens, so we are never really out of control or unprotected*
- **Empower young people to make safe and healthy choices.** It is important for young people to identify things they can do to stay safe.

- * *Children and teens can wash their hands regularly and avoid touching their face*
- * *Wearing a face mask when in public helps people to protect one another from spreading the virus*
- * *Staying at home as much as possible slows the spread of the disease and keeps people safe*
- * *Instead of hugging, people can wave hello or knock elbows*
- * *Young people can call or meet up with friends and family virtually instead of in person*
- * *Encourage children and teens to pray to God and ask for protection and help*
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It is also an opportunity to remind them that God is always with them and always cares. He is our ultimate source of safety and protection.

Encourage a normal routine. COVID-19 has disrupted regular routines for many children and teens. Children attend class and complete school work at home.



Parents' routines have also been disrupted. Some parents are working from home while others have been laid-off or furloughed. This disruption of routine can be a source of stress for everyone. Parents and teachers can do their best to help a child or teen develop a regular routine. This can be reassuring and promote physical and emotional health. Once a new COVID-19 routine has been established, it is helpful for families to do their best to support it and avoid additional disruptions, if possible.

Leisure activities are also limited. Before COVID-19, many children and teens engaged in extra-curricular activities, such as sports, music, and clubs during evening and weekend hours. Additionally, many leisure activities, such as playgrounds, playdates, family gatherings and movies, are not permitted. This creates a significant amount of unstructured free time for young people. They may need adults to help them structure their time and find engaging and safe activities. It is important for the parent to know the needs of their child or teen in regards to structure.

Share Information Sensitive

New information becomes available every day about COVID-19. Adults can stay up-to-date and communicate information to children and teens in a sensitive and healthy way.

Be a trustworthy source of information. There is new information about COVID-19 coming out every day from many different sources. It is important for adults to stay up-to-date with the latest information and ensure they are relying on trustworthy sources. It is important to avoid sharing rumors or sensationalistic information, and to refrain from bringing politics or personal beliefs into the situation.

Protect from media overload. There are constantly new updates about COVID-19. While it is important to stay up-to-date, too much time watching the news can also be unhealthy. Make sure to take breaks, turn off the television, and put down your cell phone. It is important to protect children and teens (and adults) from media overload. The younger the child, the more damaging the exposure to graphic images will be.

Share information that is age-appropriate. When parents share information there is an opportunity for young people to ask questions and express feelings. Therefore, it is ideal for them to get much of their information from supportive adults. It is important for adults to consider the age and maturity of the child or teen as they choose what to share and how to share it. For young children, it is important not to share too much information and to stay calm. They need a lot of reassurance and simple statements they can understand. For older children and teens, it is important to only share facts and for adults to avoid predicting the future. It is okay to acknowledge that there is much uncertainty. Give young people space to express their thoughts and feelings about what you share.



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Offer Spiritual Support

COVID-19 creates an opportunity for adults to teach children and teens about God as they talk about all that is happening. Faith offers security and peace at a time when many people are feeling out of control and afraid. Adults can point young people to God and communicate His love and care for them.

Point to God who offers hope and comfort. God is the source of all comfort, healing, and hope. Encourage children and teens to honestly share their thoughts and feelings with God and ask Him for help. Remind them that God cares for them, is always with them, and has a good plan for their future. Older children and teens may question why a good God would let bad things happen. This is an opportunity for adults to help older children and teens begin to explore these tough questions.

Be careful with “Christian-ese”. Well-meaning Christians may offer answers in the form of Bible verses, prayers, and the suggestion to attend church. Phrases such as, “You just need to trust God”, “Pray about it and you will feel better”,

“God is in control”, “It was God’s will”, “At least...”, or “He’s in a better place now,” are generally not helpful when a person is grieving or struggling. Children and teens may hear such statements as discounting their emotions. Of course, if a child or teen asks for prayer or Scripture, it is important to offer spiritual support. This support should be offered in a sensitive and discerning manner.

Pray. While there are many things adults can do to support children and teens, God is the ultimate source of help. Prayer is powerful –it changes our hearts, accesses God’s power, and brings us into God’s presence. Adults can pray for young people during COVID-19 and can also encourage them to talk to God about their feelings and ask for help. Families and churches can pray together too.



Child Development and Crisis Situations

At different stages of development, children and teens react to crisis differently and need different types of support. It is important to match your questions and responses to each child or teen's age and maturity level:

Pre-School Age



Children ages 3-5 will be most affected by stressful events that impact their day-to-day lives (either directly or because an event impacts a caregiver). Often, they will not fully understand the event, but will see the way it impacts their routine and the emotions of the adults around them. Young children may regress and resume behaviors such as thumb sucking, bed wetting, or may become fearful, clingy, withdrawn, throw tantrums, or act out the scary event through play.

When talking to a young child, get down to their eye level and speak in a calm, gentle voice using small words they can understand. It is important to assure young children that they are safe, speak in simple short sentences, avoid unnecessary separations, maintain routines, and offer extra assurance through physical affection, words, and extra quality time. It is important to limit the information young children receive about stressful events and affirm their safety.

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Elementary Age



Children ages 6-12 will be impacted similarly to younger children. They may regress, become more fearful, isolate from friends, disengage from previously enjoyable activities, or struggle in school. They may also act out more, become hyperactive, feel responsible for the event, or complain about physical symptoms such as headaches and stomachaches. They may act out the event during play or retell the story over and over. At this age, children have a greater understanding of the world and know that bad things sometimes happen.

It is important to answer questions and help children separate fantasy from reality so they have a realistic understanding of the situation. Adults can provide opportunities for children to experience control and make choices in daily activities. While they need accurate information, it is important to consider which pieces of information will help them process the situation and which will overwhelm them. Similar to young children, elementary-aged children may need extra reassurance, affection, and quality time with supportive adults.

Middle- and High-School Age



Teens react to crisis situations similarly to adults do and will have a greater understanding of the event than children. Adolescence is a time when teens are already experiencing a number of life changes, so it may be even more difficult for them to cope. After a crisis, the world may suddenly seem like a scary place. Teens may feel intense emotions, have trouble sleeping and experience physical symptoms such as headaches or stomachaches, have difficulty concentrating at school, and may act out more often or isolate themselves from peers. Older teens may deny their reactions to themselves and their caregivers. They may respond with a routine “I’m OK” or even with silence when they are upset. Or, they may complain about physical aches or pains because they cannot identify what is really bothering them emotionally. Sometimes, teens become more argumentative or engage in risky behaviors, such as drugs or alcohol, to cope.

It is important for supportive adults to be available to talk when a teen is ready to do so. It is helpful to ask a teen what they think has happened and what other kids at school are saying. If they know upsetting information that is true, don’t deny it. Help them to have a realistic understanding of what happened, and gently correct any incorrect information. Often, teens want to talk about the situation as well as explore existential questions related to God, danger, pain, and suffering. Teens also benefit from engaging in fun and recreational activities with supportive adults and peers.

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Professional Help

The more directly a child or teen has been impacted, the greater the need for intervention. The number of protective factors (e.g. support) versus risk factors (e.g. lack of support) can also have an impact. If after a few months a child and teen still seems overwhelmed by the event or situation, or is exhibiting a number of the symptoms described above, consider getting help from a professional counselor. Look for a counselor with experience working with children and teens and who has training in helping people who have experienced a crisis or trauma.

