

## [PARENTING](#)

### How To Care For Your Kids' Mental Health During The COVID-19 Pandemic

*Experts share ways parents can help their kids cope with social distancing.*

By [Caroline Bologna](#)

03/31/2020 12:01pm EDT



MOMO PRODUCTIONS VIA GETTY IMAGES

Parents have the power to ease the emotional blow of this difficult experience.

It's no secret that traumatic events and disrupted routines can impact children's mental health. In the midst of the [COVID-19](#) pandemic, parents are wondering how this period of isolation and uncertainty will affect their kids.

Fortunately, there are many ways parents and caregivers can ease the emotional blow of this difficult experience.

"During periods of uncertainty and change, what our children need most from us is to feel safe, loved and protected," said [Genevieve von Lob](#), a psychologist and author of "[Happy Parent, Happy Child.](#)"

HuffPost spoke to von Lob and other experts to find out what parents can do to care for their children's mental health during this time of social distancing. Keep scrolling for 14 ways to provide a sense of comfort, safety, protection and support.

## **RAISE THE KIND OF PERSON YOU'D LIKE TO KNOW**

### **Establish Routines**

"Consistency and structure are very calming during times of uncertainty and stress," said von Lob. "So set up a schedule which works for you and your family, ensuring you have regular mealtimes and a consistent wake-up and bedtime."

Breaking down activities into 60- or 90-minute chunks can be helpful for kids, especially if you set a timer to let them know when things will begin and end. Try to schedule activities they like after the ones that they dislike. Getting kids involved in the planning process can also help reduce the shock of this transition and give them a sense of control.

"Set up at least a simple routine," said Natasha Daniels, a child therapist and creator of [AnxiousToddlers.com](https://www.anxious-toddlers.com). She emphasized the power of establishing predictability and normalcy during an unpredictable and abnormal time.

"You can create a routine or stimulate your kids around activities they find fun and entertaining," she added. "Learning life skills, going on nature walks or having a baking class can create some good memories and structure during this time."

### **Encourage Virtual Social Interaction**

"We all do better when we are connected with others," said [Robin Gurwitch](#), a Duke University psychiatry professor specializing in family and child mental health. "Finding ways for children to connect with friends via Skype, FaceTime, etc. is important. Texting, Instagram, and phone or even old-fashioned letters keep us connected. Have a virtual playdate. Play a multiplayer video game together. Connections matter."

Parents can schedule virtual hangout sessions for their kids and friends or relatives and make these social connections part of their daily routines.

"This more assertive contact with loved ones can be a positive outcome of these isolation steps we have to take," said clinical psychologist [John Mayer](#).

### **Validate Their Feelings**

Parents should carve out space for their kids to express how they're feeling during this confusing time.

"Plan a time each day where the family can all check in to see how everyone is feeling and coping. Make it a relaxed atmosphere and answer their questions as well as you can," said [Craig A. Knippenberg](#), a therapist and author of "[Wired and Connected: Brain-Based Solutions To Ensure Your Child's Social and Emotional Success.](#)"

Families can talk about healthy ways to express feelings and encourage each other to open up, as keeping emotions bottled up often makes matters worse. Be careful not to minimize or ignore any

feelings or concerns, even if that requires more patience and attention. Kids need to feel seen and heard.

**“Many experts point to the airplane rule — put on your own oxygen mask before helping your children with theirs. Meeting your own needs allows you to support your kids.”**

“It’s important to keep listening to how your child feels about the current crisis and validate all their feelings including worries, fears, disappointments and frustrations,” von Lob explained. “Acknowledge that you understand how hard it is for them not seeing their friends or relatives or how disappointing it is that events like birthdays and holidays have had to be cancelled.”

### **Make Time For Physical Activity**

Parents should make physical activity part of their children’s routines as well. It’s great for mental health and allows for quality family time.

“Utilize any outside time you have for lots of activity. Run your kids ragged if they are younger especially, so they let off steam,” said psychotherapist [Noel McDermott](#).

Going outside (while keeping a safe distance from others) provides the opportunity to move around and get fresh air. Movement is helpful for older kids as well.

“It may be that screen time rules are more relaxed right now due to the current circumstances, particularly for teenagers, where much of their social life is happening online,” said von Lob. “However, it’s also important for them to take regular breaks to go outside for fresh air and exercise.”

### **Take Care Of Your Own Mental Health**

“Kids are sponges and they can feel our moods. So if we are not OK, our kids are less likely to be OK,” said Natasha Daniels. “One of the best ways we can help our children is to help ourselves during this time. Take time to process your feelings, talk to others and get your own support.”

Emotions are contagious, and kids don’t need to feel afraid for their parents too. Parents should do what’s right for their mental health.

Many experts point to the airplane rule — put on your own oxygen mask before helping your children with theirs. Meeting your own needs allows you to support your kids.

“Remember that kids are resilient and often they are taking their cues in terms of how to respond and cope from the adults around them,” said Stephanie Lee, interim senior director of the Autism Center and senior director of the ADHD and Behavior Disorders Center at the [Child Mind Institute](#).

### **Be Present**

“Being present and available for your kids when you can is the best way to support and help during this stressful time,” said Lee.

Even if you’re busy with work or other tasks during much of the day, you can set aside times when you’re able to offer your full and undivided attention. Children need to know that you are there and that they are safe and loved with you.

“Offer comfort and reassurance of their safety,” said [Denise Daniels](#), a child development expert and creator of [The Moodsters](#), a brand focused on fostering emotional intelligence in kids. “Increase physical contact during times of uncertainty. Talk about all the people that are working hard to keep them safe.”



OLIVER ROSSI VIA GETTY IMAGES

“Being present and available for your kids when you can is the best way to support and help during this stressful time,” said Lee.

### **Share Information**

Information can be empowering, so be sure to share age-appropriate facts with your children and encourage them to ask you any questions they may have.

“Take a breath and jump in,” Gurwitch advised. “It is as simple as, ‘There has been a lot of talk about coronavirus. That’s why we are all staying at home. Tell me what you know about it.’ This allows parents and caregivers to listen to what their children know and correct any misinformation.”

Parents can be a trusted source of information for their kids, and they know their children well enough to gauge how much detail is helpful and how much is overwhelming.

“With anxious children who are asking lots of questions such as when school will start or when they will see their friends again, be honest,” von Lob said. “Let them know that you do not have any definite answers at the moment but that you will keep letting them know as you soon as you find out.”

## **Limit News Exposure**

Of course, it's fine to get updates, but both kids and adults need to take periodic breaks from news coverage of the pandemic.

"Be conscious of your children's exposure to the news and remember to regularly switch it off, as it has the potential to feed more feelings of fear and overwhelm," von Lob noted.

"Turn off the news, laptops, radios, no matter how you get the information — take a break," Gurwitch advised. "Engage in family activities or calming activities."

## **Share Coping Mechanisms**

Parents can encourage their kids to turn to favorite coping behaviors and share ideas for new ones.

"Curl up and read their favorite book," suggested Denise Daniels. "Write in a feelings journal. Listen to calming music. Draw pictures of what they're afraid of and talk through those feelings. Encourage kids to tell themselves to be brave and that they be OK."

She also recommended designating a calming corner — a soothing place in your home or apartment where kids can go when they're feeling overwhelmed or stressed.

"When a child is upset, rather than sending them to their room or to a time out, they can determine when they are feeling upset or overwhelmed, and they can choose to use go to calming corner to relax and find their calm," Denise Daniels said.

## **Emphasize What Can Be Controlled**

With so much out of their control, children will benefit from talking about the ways they can help keep their family safe and healthy.

"With anxious children, it isn't always helpful to keep talking about their fears and worries," said von Lob. "With these children it can be better to focus on concrete, practical things which are within their control, such as reminding them of the recommended hygiene strategies such as washing their hands for 20 seconds or longer."

Parents may also reassure their children that scientists, doctors, world leaders and other courageous people are working hard to come up with solutions.

"It's also good to remind them that whilst this is a difficult situation, we will all get through this, it will not last forever and things will get better again," said von Lob.

## **Talk About Giving Back**

Another way to empower children is to talk about ways your family can help each other and people in your community.

"Making your empathy a verb by doing something for others is among the best tonic for alleviating stress," Knippenberg noted.

**"Ask yourself, what do you want your kids to remember when this is over?"**

“Consider actions that may help others,” Gurwitsch suggested. “For example, they may bring up the trash cans for an elderly neighbor. Volunteer to walk the dog. If the family bakes treats together, deliver some to a neighbor’s porch. Send homemade cards of thanks to hospital workers and first responders. Yes, it is not fun when we cannot see our friends. Yes, it is upsetting not to have prom. Yet, who are we taking these measures for? Grandparents, friends who may be sick, other family members.”

### **Use Resources**

There are many resources online to help parents and their kids get through this difficult experience. The National Child Traumatic Stress Network has a “[Parent/Caregiver Guide to Helping Families Cope with COVID-19](#)” as well as a brochure with [simple activities](#) for kids during this time and a [self-care checklist](#).

Kid-focused organizations like the [Child Mind Institute](#) and [Common Sense Media](#) created new sections on their website with resources for parents and kids.

The CDC’s [coronavirus hub](#) has helpful information for families as well, and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration has a [Disaster Distress Helpline](#).

### **Adopt An Adventure Mindset**

“As hard as this is, try and maintain an adventure mindset. This means accepting the various stresses and finding ways to make something meaningful out of it for your kids,” said Knippenberg.

Spending so many hours cooped up with kids with no clear end in sight is understandably stressful, but parents can alleviate the situation by trying to appreciate this bonus time they have with their children.

“Ask yourself, what do you want your kids to remember when this is over? The special time together snuggled up in bed, an outdoor adventure or learning how to play one of your kid’s electronic games are things they will remember long after the stress of the pandemic is gone,” Knippenberg noted.

### **Give Yourself A Break**

“Don’t put too much stress on yourself to be that perfect parent during this time,” Knippenberg said. “You just need to err on the side of being good enough.”

Thanks to social media, many parents are feeling the pressure to create a perfect homeschooling schedule, entertain their kids at all times, cook elaborate meals, plan craft projects and more, all while maintaining a veneer of ease and calm. But it’s OK to recognize that you’re neither a teacher nor chef, and things are stressful enough without that added pressure.

“Be flexible with academics. Your kids are under the same stress you are and they might be distracted and unmotivated to do schoolwork,” said Natasha Daniels. “That’s OK. There will always be time to catch up.”

McDermott recommended taking time as a family to sit and spend time together with no set plan or activity.

“Try to slow the pace down and don’t over heat the situation you are in,” he said. “Learn forgiveness and letting go of things beyond your control.”