



Supporting children’s mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic:

Resources for parents

Prepared for the Hennepin County Children’s Mental Health Collaborative – August 2020

There is no question that 2020 has brought significant challenges for children and families. The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted children’s academic growth and social relationships. With months of social distancing and changes in their routines, many children are experiencing stress and anxiety. A May 2020 Gallup poll of 1,200 parents of children in grades kindergarten found that almost one-third said that their child was “already experiencing harm” to their emotional or mental health because of social distancing or closures. Most other parents expected to see mental health impacts within a few weeks (14%) or a few months (29%).¹

Despite these challenges, there is much that we can do as parents to support our children during this time, not only to reduce their stress but also to strengthen their resilience and coping skills. This resource document is intended to provide parents with general recommendations for supporting their children’s mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic. Links are provided to additional resources, including mental health services and supports.

Signs of stress

The COVID-19 pandemic has created incredible stress for children and families. Children are facing possible fears related to their own health or the health of loved ones. School closures and activity cancellations have reduced opportunities for children to engage in learning or socialize with friends. Children and youth may be experiencing financial repercussions of parental unemployment or other economic hardships. Not all children and teens respond to stress in the same way. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention² recommends watching for the following changes:

- Excessive crying or irritation in younger children
- Returning to behaviors they have outgrown (for example, toileting accidents or bedwetting)
- Excessive worry or sadness
- Unhealthy eating or sleeping habits
- Unexplained headaches or body pain
- Irritability and “acting out” behaviors in teens
- Poor school performance or avoiding school
- Difficulties with attention and concentration
- Avoidance of activities enjoyed in the past
- Use of alcohol, tobacco, or other drugs

Tips for supporting children and youth

Many agencies have prepared guidance for supporting children’s mental health through the COVID-19 pandemic. Several recommendations emerge consistently from these resources. The following recommendations have been promoted by the World Health Organization³, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention², the Minnesota Department of Health⁴, the National Child Traumatic Stress Network⁵, the National Association of School Psychologists⁶ and others.

Maintain routines

COVID-19 has disrupted many of our routines, which can be stressful for children. It is important to maintain familiar routines as much as possible. If social distancing and closures have disrupted routines, try to create new ones. For example, try to maintain basic daily routines, such as bedtime schedules and expectations for chores. With school-age children, create a basic structure for the day and week.

Talk to your children about COVID-19

Children may have questions for parents about COVID-19. It is important to honestly answer questions and share facts using age-appropriate language. While reassuring them that they are safe, let them know that it is okay to feel upset. Share with them how you deal with your own stress, so that they can learn effective coping



strategies. Clarify misinformation or misunderstandings about the virus. Limit their exposure to news coverage related to COVID-19, including social media, to reduce the likelihood of them misinterpreting information.

Resources

Talking with children about coronavirus: Messages for parents, school staff, and others working with children (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention)

Talking with children: Tips for caregivers, parents, and teachers during infectious disease outbreaks (US Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration)

Talking with kids about the coronavirus crisis (Child Mind Institute)

Talking to children about coronavirus (American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry)

Practice self-care

Parents are also under significant stress, with many navigating working from home, child care, and distance education. This can be a tremendous amount of pressure, and it is important to prioritize self-care. Parental self-care can not only increase our capacity to support children, but also models effective coping and positive health strategies.

Focusing on sleep, exercise, and healthy eating is important. It is also important to connect with friends and family members. The National Child Traumatic Stress Network⁵ offers these tips:

- Modify your daily activities to meet the current reality of the situation and focus on what you can accomplish
- Shift expectations and priorities to focus more on what gives you meaning, purpose, or fulfillment

- Give yourself small breaks from the stress of the situation
- Attempt to control self-defeating statements and replace them with more helpful thoughts

They further highlight the importance of managing stress if the family has experienced a serious illness or the death of a loved one. Recommendations for self-care include reaching out to friends and family, finding ways to honor the death of the loved one, and seeking religious/spiritual help or professional counseling for support.

Resources

Supporting mental well-being during COVID

(Minnesota Department of Health)

Find your happy place: Tips to reduce COVID-19 stress

(Minnesota Department of Health)

Self-care in the time of coronavirus

(Child Mind Institute)

Self-care for resilience toolkit

(Mass General Clay Center for Healthy Young Minds)



Engage in positive activities

While access to recreational and cultural events may be more limited, it is important to engage in positive family activities. The National Child Traumatic Stress Network⁵ offers the following recommendations:

- Make time to do things at home that have made you and your family feel better in other stressful situations, such as reading, watching movies, listening to music, playing games, exercising, or engaging in religious activities.
- Have children participate in distance learning opportunities that may be offered by their schools or other institutions/organizations.
- Help your family engage in fun and meaningful activities consistent with your family and cultural values

References

The following resources were used in the preparation of this document.

¹ US parents say COVID 19 harming child’s mental health (Gallup)

² Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19): Helping children cope (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention)

³ #Healthy at home: Mental health (World Health Organization)

⁴ Tips and resources for children and parents during COVID-19 (Minnesota Department of Health)

⁵ Parent/Caregiver guide to helping families cope with the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) (National Child Traumatic Stress Network)

⁶ Helping children cope with changes resulting from COVID-19 (National Association of School Psychologists)

⁷ Tips and resources for children and parents during COVID-19 (Minnesota Department of Health)

The **National Center for Traumatic Stress**⁵ provides this additional guidance for tailoring responses based upon the age of the child.

Age group	Reactions	How to help
Preschool	Fear of being alone, bad dreams Speech difficulties Loss of bladder/bowel control, constipation, bed wetting Change in appetite Increased temper tantrums, whining, or clinging behaviors	Patience and tolerance Provide reassurance (verbal and physical) Encourage expression through play, reenactment, story-telling Allow short-term changes in sleep arrangements Plan calming, comforting activities before bedtime Maintain regular family routines Avoid media exposure
School-age (ages 6-12)	Irritability, whining, aggressive behavior Clinging, nightmares Sleep/appetite disturbance Physical symptoms (headaches, stomachaches) Withdrawal from peers, loss of interest Competition for parents' attention Forgetfulness about chores and new information learned at school	Patience, tolerance, and reassurance Play sessions and staying in touch with friends through telephone and internet Regular exercise and stretching Engage in educational activities (workbooks, educational games) Participate in structured household chores Set gentle but firm limits Discuss the current outbreak and encourage questions. Encourage expression through play and conversation Help family create ideas for enhancing health promotion behaviors and maintaining family routines Limit media exposure, talking about what they have seen/heard including at school Address any stigma or discrimination occurring and clarify misinformation
Adolescent (ages 13-18)	Physical symptoms (headaches, rashes, etc.) Sleep/appetite disturbance Agitation or decrease in energy, apathy Ignoring health promotion behaviors Isolating from peers and loved ones Concern about stigma and injustices Avoiding/cutting school	Patience, tolerance, and reassurance Encourage continuation of routines Encourage discussion of outbreak experience with peers, family (but do not force) Stay in touch with friends through telephone, internet, video games Participate in family routines, including chores, supporting younger siblings, and planning strategies to enhance health promotion behaviors Limit media exposure, talking about what they have seen/heard including at school Discuss and address stigma, prejudice and potential injustices occurring during outbreak

Source: Brymer, M., Schreiber, M., Gurwitsch, R., Hoffman, D., Graham, M., Garst, L., & Speier, A. (2020). Parent/Caregiver Guide to Helping Families Cope With the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19). National Center for Child Traumatic Stress

Resources

- **COVID-19 Resources for Parents and Teens.** The Society for Adolescent Health and Medicine provides information about teen mental health and coping, parenting resources, and other topics.
- **TPT | Now** series on coping with COVID. TPT | Now, the Minnesota Department of Health, and Well Share International partnered to create a series of videos related to mental health and COVID-19. Videos are available in English, Hmong, Spanish, and Somali.
- **Supporting families during COVID-19.** The Child Mind Institute has compiled links related to COVID-19 and children’s mental health. Resources include links to parenting resources, self-care guides, telehealth, and more.
- **Tools and resources for families and caregivers during the COVID-19 public health crisis.** The Seattle Children’s Hospital and Devereaux Advanced Behavioral Health present resources about COVID-19 and disability, coping strategies for caregivers, activities to do at home with children, and more.
- **Sesame Workshop Caring for Each Other Initiative.** The Sesame Workshop Caring for Each Other Initiative seeks to support families during the COVID-19 health crisis with a broad variety of free resources.
- **Disaster mental and behavioral health and COVID-19 and tips and resources for children and parents during COVID-19.** The Minnesota Department of Health website provides links to a variety of child and parent resources.



Author

Cheryl-Holm-Hansen, PhD
Community Research Solutions
chery@community-research.solutions
<https://www.community-research.solutions/>



To access mental health support

If you would like to talk to a mental health professional, or connect your child with services, here are some places to start.

COVID Cares Stress Phone Support Service

Any Minnesotan experiencing stress can call 833-HERE4MN (833-437-3466) for free telephone support from 9 am to 9 pm daily. The service is a collaboration between the Minnesota Department of Health, the Minnesota Psychiatric Society, the Minnesota Psychological Association, the Minnesota Black Psychologists, and Mental Health Minnesota.

FastTrackerMN.org

This website can be used to search for psychiatric and mental health services availability.

Hennepin County Children’s Mental Health Collaborative

The Collaborative’s website provides links to numerous behavioral health resources. You can also connect with the Parent Catalyst Leadership Group for information about support services and to connect with other parents.

Initial Contact Front Door Services

Front Door screeners connect clients to community resources or other providers, provides education and consultation, and provides intake into county-operated programs. Call 612-348-4111 or email socialservices@hennepin.us to learn more.