

Behavioral Health Toolbox for Families

Supporting
Children and
Teens During
the COVID-19
Pandemic

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Behavioral Health Toolbox for Families: Supporting Children and Teens During the COVID-19 Pandemic

This toolbox provides tips on how to navigate some of the emotional responses that families may experience during the COVID-19 pandemic. The purpose of this toolbox is to provide general information about common emotional responses of children, teens, and families during disasters. Families, parents, caregivers, and educators can use this information to help children, teens, and families recover from disasters and grow stronger.

Using this Toolbox

This toolbox opens with an overview of the common emotional impacts of COVID-19.

As outlined in the Contents section on the next page, the sections following provide more detailed information on these age groups:

- 1) Toddlers and preschool children
- 2) School-age children
- 3) Teens

Each age-specific section includes information on common emotional responses, helping children heal and grow, and managing feelings and behaviors children may experience.

Additionally, the document provides impacts of disasters on education and self-care recommendations for parents and caregivers. Additional resource materials are provided in the [Additional Resources](#) section.

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Emotional Impacts of COVID-19 on Children and Teens

The experience of children, teens, and families during the COVID-19 pandemic can be complicated and challenging. Some families will experience job losses and financial worries about basic necessities, such as housing, food, and insurance. Parents, children, and teens may lose contact with friends and family due to school closures and social distancing measures. They may worry about older adults or other family members who might have a bigger risk of serious illness and death. Some families may be caring for sick family members.

Teens may wonder about their future since they are absent from school and missing big events like end-of-season competitions and performances, and even graduation. Divorced parents must co-parent in the times of social distancing and travel restrictions. Families may

have members who already struggle with mental health or substance abuse problems, and these may get worse because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The experience that we are all navigating has an impact on our bodies, minds, and emotions. It can be traumatizing. Trauma happens when someone has an experience that feels as though their life or safety, or the lives and safety of their family or friends, is at risk.

Impacts of the pandemic aren't experienced equally across all communities.

The impacts of the pandemic aren't experienced equally across all communities. Additionally, some people experience persistent stress or trauma related to experiences of ongoing injustice and oppression based on race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, or other aspects of one's identity. This stress and trauma can be worsened due to the stress caused by the pandemic.

Trauma

Children and teens often respond differently than adults to difficult events. You might notice those differences in the ways they talk about the event, and also in the ways they behave. Their brains do not process information and events like adult brains. Children and teens don't have the life experience and reasoning to fully understand some events. For example, most four-year-olds do not understand that death is permanent. Teens may not understand or believe that they can be hurt or die and may take risks after experiencing major negative events.

See Table 1 (p. 5) for common responses of children and teens to disasters. The most common symptoms of trauma in children and teens are changes in eating, sleeping, behavior, and ability to learn. See Appendix A for more details on impacts to sleep. It is also very common for children and youth of all ages to experience some regression (acting like they did as a younger child).

Some examples of regression are:

- A three-year-old who has not breast-fed in a year might suddenly want to breast feed.
- A seven-year-old might start wetting the bed.
- A teen who is mostly cooperative might begin to push back on everything like a much younger child, or who enjoys being independent might start asking you to do things for them, instead of doing them themselves.
- A student who used to do all of their homework without any reminders may suddenly need reminding or persuading in order to complete it.

Grief can take many forms.

Grief and Loss

Grief can take many forms. We grieve the deaths of loved ones. We can also grieve changes in our lives and losing parts of our “normal” lives. Children who feel grief and

loss can react similarly to adults. Children may also grieve in ways that can seem odd or unusual to adults.

For example, it is not uncommon for children to hear about a terrible event such as the loss of a grandparent, and then respond as though they hadn’t heard anything at all. The child might say something like “Okay, can I go play now?” Children tend to think about the situation and understand grief over time. It’s common for children to turn to a trusted adult to ask the same question over and over.

Children who are very young may ask when the person who died is coming back. Just as with adults, children may have an “anniversary response” to an event or loss. An “anniversary response” happens around the time of the event or loss, at holidays and birthdays when the person would have been present, and even during weather events or seasons that remind the child of the person they lost.

Children may become unexpectedly angry, withdrawn, or sad during these times. It becomes more difficult when parents or caregivers are also grieving and may not have energy for a grieving child.

Healing and Building Resilience

Resilience is the ability to recover from a bad event or other challenge. It is something that can be taught to people in all age groups. The four things that build resilience are:

- 1) Learning to be flexible and adapt to change.
- 2) Having strong connections and relationships with others.
- 3) Feeling a sense of purpose.
- 4) Focusing on hope.

In order to heal, children and teens need to:

- Recover their trust in others.
- Recover a sense of safety and stability.
- Regain a sense of control.

See Table 2 (p. 6) for more ways of helping children recover and grow stronger.

Table 1: Common Responses of Children and Teens to Disasters¹

Physical symptoms:

Headaches
Stomachaches

Changes in mood:

Worry for the safety of loved ones
Feeling like life is unfair
Cranky
Feelings of insecurity, anxiety, fear, anger, sadness
Specific fears that the disaster will happen again

Changes in thinking:

Trouble concentrating
Loss of trust in adults' ability to protect children
Loss of trust in the safety and security of the world
False belief that they caused the disaster

Changes in behavior:

Substance abuse
Increased risk-taking activities
Acting like there is nothing good in the future
Acting immature or younger than their age
Avoid talking about unpleasant things
Clinging and dependent behaviors
Changes in sleep and appetite
Extra busy, lots of energy
Increased acting out like tantrums, hitting, crying, or yelling

Changes in social relationships:

Social withdrawal
Increased time spent doing activities with friends and classmates

Table 2: Ways of Helping Children Recover and Grow Stronger^{1,2}

Individual protective factors*

Recognizing that there can be opportunities during hard times
 Problem-solving and emotional coping skills
 Good social skills with peers and adults
 Knowing strengths and limitations
 Feelings of empathy for others
 Believing that one’s efforts can make a difference
 Sense of humor
 Positive feelings about who they are
 Being independent
 Ability to think outside the box or creatively
 Positive emotions like optimism, sense of humor, interest, and joy
 Ability to interact positively with others
 Active coping
 Physical exercise
 Religion or spirituality

Family protective factors

Positive family environment
 Good parent-child relationships
 Parents who get along
 Having a valued role in the household like helping siblings or doing household chores

Community protective factors

Strong social network of friends and family that can be supportive
 Supportive extended family
 A close relationship with other caring adults like teachers
 Good relationships with friends
 Being around others who are positive role models
 Positive school experiences
 Valued social role such as working a job, volunteering, or helping neighbors
 Extracurricular activities
 Membership in a religious or faith community

Factors which help build family strength

Open and honest communication
 Teaching problem solving
 Sharing family history
 Having a sense of humor
 Developing friendships with others who can be supportive
 Cooperative style of working with others
 Having a sense of spirituality
 Sharing common values

* Protective factors: Characteristics, conditions, or behaviors that reduce the effects of stressful life events. They also increase a person’s ability to avoid risks or hazards, recover, and grow stronger. See the STRONG KIDS model in Appendix C (English) or Appendix D (Español) for more details on helping children feel safe and recover from disaster.

Toddlers and Preschool Children

Common Emotional Responses in Toddlers and Preschool Children

Common emotional responses to disasters in toddlers and preschool children include:¹

- Having a hard time sleeping, being afraid of the dark, having nightmares.
- Eating too little or too much.
- Fear of being separated from parents and caregivers.
- Acting like a much younger child.
- Being jumpy and nervous.
- Playing pretend and telling stories about the disaster.

Children under the age of five years may not be able to share their thoughts and feelings in words, but will often let you know how they feel through their play and drawings.

Young children may shut down, or become quiet, sad, and refuse to talk. They may also change the

subject when someone brings up a topic that makes them scared, confused, angry, or sad. That is another way they may be telling you something is upsetting them.

Give honest and simple answers.

How to Help Toddlers and Preschool Children Heal and Grow

Healing and Building Resilience^{3,4}

Give honest and simple answers.

- Children almost always know about “bad news” at some level. When children know that something bad has happened, but no one explains it truthfully, they sometimes make up a story in their head that is worse than the truth. For example, if their grandmother dies, they may not understand and instead believe that their grandmother did not love them and left them without telling them.
- Share information and answer questions in a simple way that they can understand, based on their age.
- Tell children that what happened is not their fault.
- Once information is shared, listen to them and give them time to talk. If your child feels love through physical touch, give hugs or snuggles.

Establish and stick to a regular schedule.

- Help your child talk to and visit with family, friends, and other members of their community, if this can be accomplished safely.
- Try to have family meals around the same time every day.

- Try to put your child to bed around the same time every day.
- Leave for school or start homeschooling on time and at the same time every day.
- Provide a quiet place where they can take a break. This can be a separate room or a quiet corner of a room.
- Include children at events for saying goodbye to loved ones that have passed away, like funerals and wakes. Leaving your child out of these major events makes them feel alone and left out. It also makes it more difficult for them to accept what has happened. These events allow children to see how adults grieve, which helps them understand that it is okay to show sadness.

Children need extra attention and comfort.

Help Children with Feelings and Behaviors

When children go through a hard time, like living through a disaster, they need extra attention and comfort from their parents. It's important to be patient with upset children who may have tantrums or keep to themselves instead of wanting to be around other people.

It's also important to keep the family rules about behavior the same, if possible. It is important even in situations like the COVID-19 pandemic. When children aren't given clear boundaries and limits

for their behavior, it can make them feel less safe and more anxious.

The foundation for helping children with their feelings and behaviors is to spend time with them, pay attention to them, give them praise when they are doing things you want them to do, ignore most of the behaviors you would like them to stop doing, and learn to talk with them in ways that encourage them to let you know what they are thinking and feeling.

Below are some ways to encourage your child to talk about things, increase their positive behaviors, and help them manage their negative behaviors.

Help Children with Worries

Worry and anxiety are common in disasters and often show up in behaviors, such as avoiding separation, having trouble falling asleep, or expressing physical symptoms like tummy aches. One way to help your child to calm down is by teaching them a couple of very simple skills. Teach the following tools to your child when they are calm, and reward them for practicing them every day. You can do them together! When they become a habit, they can be a great tool for both you and your child to use.

Bubble Breathing: Buy bubbles that come with a bubble wand. Have your child practice blowing the biggest bubbles they can. To blow big bubbles, they need to blow slow and soft with steady breaths. This breathing helps them feel calm.

Special time takes as little as 5 minutes a day.

Scrunches: Have the child lie down on their back. They should curl up and make all of their muscles scrunch up as tight as possible, like a pill bug or a roly-poly. Have them hold their scrunch for a slow count to 3 and then relax. Do this a few times and then have your child check to make sure all their muscles are now loose and floppy. This is a great exercise to do right before bed.

Worry Thoughts: When children are worried, you may see them asking many questions or the same question over and over. This isn't actually them seeking information, but is a way for the child to check in and get reassurance from you. If you find that your child is asking a lot of questions but doesn't feel reassured, try this:

- Help your child identify when they are having worry thoughts. These often start out as "but, what if..."
- When you hear a worry question, turn it around and ask your child to think about what the answer might be to their question.
- Once you've answered a worry question, it's okay to put a limit on the questions. Repeatedly asking and answering the same question does not reduce a child's anxiety. Instead, try "Okay, you can have 3 worry questions before lunch, so think about what you want to ask. After that, no more worry

questions until dinner." This helps the child to push back against his or her worries and develop some feeling of control over them.

- Explain to your child why this is important by saying, "We want you to be the boss of your life and not your worries. When you do brave acts like playing in another room by yourself for a little while, you are the boss of your life, not your worries."
- Build in some rewards for brave acts. This helps your child learn how to face worries, which is the best way to overcome them. Don't push, but do encourage.

Child-Directed Play or Special Time

A great way to help your child feel more connected to you and learn to share their thoughts and feelings is by using child-directed play, which is also called special time. Special time is when the child gets special playtime, just them and you with no distractions. It takes as little as 5 minutes a day.

Special time helps decrease the frequency of tantrums and aggressive behaviors like hitting. It also helps children follow directions, stay calm, and share thoughts and feelings. Here is how it works:

- Pick a time to play with your child one-on-one, for 5-10 minutes. It works best if you can do this daily, but even once per week will still be great for your child.

- Make sure that the TV is off and your cell phone is put away. Give your child all your attention for this time.
- The rules are pretty simple, but harder to do than you might think. Watch your child play, smile, and make eye contact. Try to only say nice things and give compliments.

Most kids love special time. Special time is set up so that it is hard for your child to have a tantrum or act out. If you are not asking questions, your child can't refuse to answer. If you are not teaching, your child can't ignore you. It is one time when your child can be in control in a safe way. If your child acts out by having a tantrum, hitting, yelling, or acting in an unsafe way, end special time and try again the next day.

Guidelines for Special Time

Do:	Don't:*
Give your child compliments. Say things like, "Great job playing so gently" and "I love that you shared with me."	Give directions. (For example, "Put the car over here.")
Repeat back what the your said to show you were listening. For example, if the child says, "I'm making a tower!" you can say, "Wow! You're making the tallest tower!"	Teach. (For example, "What do you call that shape?")
Describe what your child is doing, as if you're a sports reporter. For example, if your child is playing with a toy car on the floor, you can say, "Now the car crashed into the blocks. Wow, the whole thing fell over!"	Ask questions. (For example, "Why is that doggy over there?")

** These are all okay to do other times, but get in the way during special time.*

Positive Attention

Children love and need attention. Often, if they do not receive enough positive attention for good behavior, they might start doing things to get negative attention. Give lots of attention and praise for behaviors that you want to see more of, like using manners or following directions. Ignore behaviors that you do not want to see.

The best way to give positive attention is with something called *labeled praise*. Labeled praise is when you give your child a specific compliment, instead of just saying “good job.” Labeled praise

means saying, “Thank you for following directions,” “Great job sharing,” or “I’m proud of you for brushing your teeth.”

Other forms of positive attention include any type of praise, hugs, kisses, smiles, and rewards. Some examples of rewards are an extra book before bed, extra cuddle time,

or a favorite snack. Give your child the type of attention they enjoy. If your child does not like kisses, give a hug or a high five instead.

When giving positive attention, make sure to:

- Look your child in the eye, smile, and speak in a way that shows you are happy.
- Be specific about the behavior that you liked, even if it is a small thing. For example, “I like

how polite you are being,” or “Thank you for picking up your toys. That was nice.”

- Give attention right after your child does something that you like.

Help Your Child Manage Negative Behaviors

Children need boundaries to help them feel safe. It’s helpful to understand that stress and trauma caused by the COVID-19 pandemic are things that can lead to negative behaviors. However, allowing children to become aggressive and destructive without intervening can increase anxiety in children.

For behavior that is not aggressive or dangerous, such as whining or arguing, ignoring it can be the best approach (see Table 3 on p. 12 for a list of behaviors). However, when you first begin ignoring, the behavior may get worse. This is normal. If you continue ignoring the behaviors, the negative behavior will likely decrease and go away.

Keep building a strong foundation using the methods outlined above. If your child has negative behaviors that are aggressive or destructive (see Table 3 on p. 12 for a list of behaviors), you may need to help them find different ways of expressing their anger and frustration that do not hurt others or cause damage.

When your child is very upset, it’s not the right time to talk, explain, or reason with them. When they are really upset, the part of their brain that

Children need boundaries to help them feel safe.

thinks logically isn't active. Trying to talk to them may actually make your child even more angry. Time away, such as time-out, will help them calm down and get to a place where they can talk about

what happened. Then, you can help them think about other things they can do when they're upset, instead of hitting or breaking things.

Table 3: Behaviors for Ignore Approach and Time-Out Approach

Ignore these behaviors	Time-out for these behaviors
Whining	Hitting others
Interrupting without saying "excuse me"	Kicking others
Yelling or screaming	Biting others
Stomping	Pushing others
Arguing	Spitting
Saying threats of harm	Throwing toys at others or breaking toys
Saying mean words or swearing	Destroying property
Hitting or biting themselves (without causing harm)	

The negative behaviors in Table 3 are indicators that your child needs some help to contain his or her big feelings. Time-out is just a way of giving your child some time without attention. It allows both you and the child to take a break from interacting and calm down. Parents sometimes have worries that placing a child in time-out will make the child feel abandoned or traumatized because they are upset and crying. Based on many studies of ways of helping children with behavior, there is no evidence that this is the case.

Time out allows both you and the child to take a break.

Children who are given firm boundaries in a positive parenting environment full of warmth, praise, and physical affection tend to be happier, calmer, and less anxious.^{5,6}

Time-out works best for children ages 2–6, if done properly. Below are guidelines for time-out:

- When the child does something aggressive or destructive, give **one** warning only. For example, “You tore up your sister’s drawing. If you can’t calm down and stop, you’ll need a time-out.”[†]
- If the negative behavior stops, praise the child. For example, “Good job calming down. I know you were upset.”

[†] See pages 8–9 for tips on teaching children to self-calm. Teach skills when the child is calm, not while they’re upset.

[‡] Research shows that having a time-out in the child’s room should not lead to them feeling negative about their room in the future.

- If the child continues to misbehave, do not have a discussion or give another warning. Say, “You didn’t stop. Now you need to have a time-out.”
- Take the child to the designated time-out area. This can be a chair in another area or simply another part of your home, such as the child’s room.[‡]
- Don’t respond to the child’s yelling or arguing.
- Time-out does not begin until the child is quiet and in the time-out spot. If the child leaves the time-out spot, take the child back and say, “Time-out can’t start until you’re in the spot and quiet.” Repeat this each time the child leaves. Don’t get drawn into conversations or arguments.
- Once the child is quiet, set a timer for approximately one minute per year of age. For example, if the child is 6, set a timer for 6 minutes.
- When the timer goes off, go to the child to let them out of time-out. The parent or caregiver decides when time-out is over, not the child. Give the child a hug and praise for calming down. “Great job calming down. I know you were really upset.”

School-Age Children

Common Emotional Responses in School-Age Children

Common emotional responses to disasters in school-age children include:¹

- Acting confused or forgetful.
- Lots of tummy aches or headaches.
- Acting hyper or too silly, like they have too much energy.
- Tantrums, breaking toys, hitting, or kicking.
- Having lots of worries, like being afraid to be alone or asking lots of questions over and over.
- Not doing well in school or having trouble remembering what they learned.

Children age 5 years and older may be *able* to talk about something scary or confusing that happened, but they might not *want* to talk about it. Or, they may have a hard time talking about their feelings.

Children of all ages may have a hard time talking about feelings.

Children of all ages may have a hard time talking about feelings, such as sadness or fear, because they worry that they need to protect their family. They may worry about giving their parents or caregivers another problem to deal with. They also might not talk about how they feel because they think that everyone already knows

what they are thinking and feeling without them saying it.

Pay attention to how your child is acting. This will help you notice if they are experiencing symptoms like the ones above, which could mean they need extra support from you.

- Does your child's actions match what they are saying? It is important to notice if a child says, "I'm fine," but they actually look sad, angry, or confused.
- Does your child change topics a lot when talking? For example, each time a topic comes up that makes them think about something scary or confusing, the child quickly brings up something else to talk about, or might even interrupt with, "Let's play a game," or "I have to go pee."

How to Help School-Age Children Heal and Grow

Healing and Building Resilience^{3,4}

Try to keep a regular schedule of waking, eating, doing activities, and going to bed. Switch between screen time and physical activities. Build in some fun activities during the day, like board games, crafts, and pretend play.

Talk to children in a way that makes sense to them about COVID-19 and why they may not be in school

or having playdates with friends. Give honest answers and information. It is okay to say, “I don’t know, but I will try to find out.”

Help your child think about the future.

- Ask them questions, like “What do you want to be when you get older?”. Then, help them identify things they can do now that will connect to their future.
- For example, if your child says that they want to be a veterinarian or help animals when they get older, you can praise them for always being gentle and kind to animals. Assure them how important that skill is for veterinarians.

Encourage children to share their feelings by drawing, or keeping a diary that they can write or draw in.

Help your child notice the good things.

Help your child notice the good things. Focus on the good things that happen and the good things they do, even the small ones. You might ask, “What was the best thing that happened today?” or “What was something you did today even though it was a little scary?”.

Help Children with Feelings and Problem Solving

Wait until you and your child are both calm before trying to talk about something hard, like bad news or a behavior issue, like hitting. Trying to talk with

an angry child is like trying to teach someone who is drowning how to swim. Your child can’t think clearly when they are angry. Most children get even angrier when someone is trying to talk to them. This is a time when their brains are in “fight or flight” mode. This is not a good time for teachable moments, like helping them learn from their mistakes.

To talk with your child about their feelings, try this:

1. First, listen and use body language that show them you are paying attention, like turning your body to face them, looking them in the eyes, and nodding as they are talking.
2. Summarize, or repeat, what you think your child is trying to say. For example, “It sounds like you’re pretty frustrated with what your sister/brother did.”
3. Do not try to provide a solution or lecture your child about what you think they did wrong. Instead, be curious about how your child thinks they might solve the problem. For example, you can say “What would you like to do to solve the problem?”.
4. Ask for several ways to solve the problem. Explore with your child what might happen with each option. For example, “If you hit your sister/brother, what do you think will happen then?”. Continue talking about the different ways to solve the problem. This helps your child pick the best choice and make a plan.

5. Listen quietly without interrupting if they want to talk about what happened or how they are feeling.
6. Sometimes asking about how another child would feel in their situation may help them open up. For example, an adult might guess what is going on by saying “I’ve heard from other kids that when their mom and dad got a divorce, they got really mad and sad” or “I was thinking if that happened to me, I’d be feeling really scared.” Talking about things in this way helps your child share their thoughts and feelings.

Help Your Child Feel Calm with a Relaxation Script

Try this relaxation script to help your child feel calm. Practice this twice a day at convenient times, like after lunch and before bedtime. Use a calm, even tone and speak slightly slower than usual.

- Start with saying, “Find a comfortable place to lie down. Keep all the muscles of your body loose and relaxed, then tighten up only your feet. Count slowly to 3 and then relax. Now, keep all the muscles in your body relaxed and loose, but tighten up only the muscles in your legs. Count slowly to 3 and relax.”
 - Do this with their arms and hands, and then with their face and head.
 - Once you have gone through all the muscle groups, check and make sure your child isn’t tightening muscles anywhere. One way of doing this is by gently lifting up your child’s arms and then legs. Encourage them to make sure they are all really floppy. Pay special attention to the forehead which is often the last to relax. If your child responds well to touch, you can help your child relax and smooth out their forehead by gently stroking it.
- Now, say, “Put one hand on your belly and one on your chest. Breathe in through your nose and out with your mouth, softly and slowly. As you breathe, try to keep the hand on your chest still. Let the hand on your belly rise up when you breathe in and lower down when you breathe out.”
- “Closing your eyes, imagine a set of steps going down. Try to see them as clearly as you can. Are they made of wood? Are they painted? What color are they?”
- “Imagine walking slowly down the steps and at each step, imagine you become even more relaxed. When you get to the bottom step, imagine a door. What does the door look like?”
- “Go through the door and step out onto a beautiful beach. The sky is blue and you have the beach all to yourself. Picture your swimsuit and towel. Imagine lying down on the towel. Feel the warm sun on your face, your shoulders and arms, and your legs. Feel the warm sand beneath your towel, warming your back and legs.”

- “Imagine the warm sun rays melting any pain or feelings of worry out of your stomach. You can imagine the fears and bad feelings just melting out and down into the sand. Stay on the beach as long as you want.”

- “Once you are finished, imagine going back through the door and up the stairs. Once you are at the top, open your eyes, take a big breath, and stretch from head to toe.”

Teens

Common Emotional Responses in Teens

Common emotional responses to disasters in teens include:¹

- Worry
- Sadness
- Guilt, anger, fear, feeling let down
- Fear that there is no future for them
- Changes in social behaviors, like not seeing friends or changing friends
- Staying busy to avoid feelings
- Substance (alcohol or drug) abuse

Teenagers are generally quick to recover, but they also may experience a more intense set of

reactions to traumatic situations than adults. This is because their brains are still developing and they don't have a lot of life experiences yet. Teens may respond in a couple of ways:

Acting “out.” On one end of the spectrum is acting “out.” This may include things like trying substances, using substances at a

greater rate, or attacking others or fighting. They may also swear, take more risks than usual, break rules, or do illegal acts.

Acting “in.” The other side of the spectrum is the opposite behavior, which is withdrawing and wanting to be alone. They may seem quieter, show less emotion and expression (flat), and be physically less active.

Both acting “out” and acting “in” can be common responses to traumatic events for teens, but the intervention is the same for both — connection. Connection can be enhanced through the development of relationships with family members, friends (who are good influences), groups or clubs, and pets.

How to Help Teens Heal and Grow

Increase Recovery and Healing³

- Encourage teens to express their thoughts and feelings by being an active listener.
- Educate them in common responses to trauma and ways to practice self-care.
- Discuss (without lecturing) the dangers of unhealthy ways of coping, such as alcohol or drug use, getting involved in violent or illegal activities, and being in unhealthy relationships.
- Provide information on healthy ways to deal with stress.
- Discuss the importance of choosing friends who help with good decisions, rather than lead

Teenagers may experience a more intense set of reactions.

them into negative patterns or unhealthy ways of coping.

- Allow them to assist in supporting younger children and other community members.
- Encourage them to become an active part of the community recovery process. For example, they could help start a garden, pick up trash and debris, organize activities for younger children and peers, or help neighbors with grocery shopping.
- Talk with teens about their future. For example, ask “What do they want to be doing in the next year? What about the next 5 years?”, “What are they doing now that is helping them reach that goal?”
- Encourage relationship building with their family members and friends.
- Encourage activities that bring them a sense of happiness or peace, like athletics, arts, and academic subjects they enjoy.

Help Teens Feel Calm — Relaxation and Mindfulness Tools

Encourage your teen to find ways to reduce their feelings of stress. For some, this may be learning some simple breathing and relaxation practices. For other teens, doing something active may help them cope better. This can be walking in nature, running, lifting weights, or other ways of moving their bodies. There are online or mobile apps to help teens (and parents) to feel less stressed. A few examples are:

- <https://my.life/>
- <https://www.headspace.com/>
- <https://www.calm.com/>
- <https://liberatemeditation.com/>

The Impact of Disasters on Education

Common Emotional Responses in Children

Children often struggle with their behavior, mood, and learning when they are in the middle of a disaster, or just lived through a disaster. Common, short-term responses you might see include:^{4,4,7}

- Difficulty paying attention, having a hard time focusing on schoolwork.
- Trouble remembering what they learned, trouble remembering to complete tasks.
- Having too much energy, acting too silly.
- Feeling really tired all of the time, having a hard time sleeping.
- Having stomachaches or headaches.
- Being cranky, having tantrums, or crying often.
- Blurting or having a hard time thinking before they speak or act.

How to Help Children Learn

Ways that parents and caregivers can help their students learn during the COVID-19 pandemic and while educating their children from home:^{4,4}

1. First, have patience with yourself and with your child. Don't expect your child to be able to do everything that they used to do, like showering, brushing teeth, and getting dressed without help, or doing homework by

themselves. Offer praise for even small things, like staying in their chair or double checking their work.

2. If there are online classes that your student should be attending, check to make sure they are logging in, paying attention, and completing work. Offer rewards for doing these things, like favorite snacks, a low cost phone app they've been wanting, a free pass for a home chore, or a later bedtime one night.
3. Think about doing a regular "feelings check-in" using the [Window of Tolerance](#) or Zones of Regulation (Table 4, p. 21) as a guide. Parents and caregivers can do this at the start of the day to help your student understand how they are feeling and help you both understand how those feelings may impact how well they are able to learn that day.⁸
 - a. The Window of Tolerance can be used to help students understand their current ability to deal with what's happening in their life and how easily they may be pushed off balance.
 - b. The Zones of Regulation uses the colors blue green, yellow, and red to identify their "zone". Each morning, have everyone (including yourself) say out loud, one at a time, what their emotional zone currently

is. Talk about how it may impact how they feel and how they learn.

Table 4: Zones of Regulation

Color	Level of Alertness	Feelings
Blue	Low state of alertness	Bored, tired, sad, disappointed, sick, depressed, shy
Green	Perfect state of alertness	Happy, positive, thankful, proud, calm, content, ready to learn
Yellow	Higher state of alertness	Excited, silly, annoyed, worried, embarrassed, confused, nervous
Red	Too much alertness	Upset, angry, aggressive, mad, too excited, terrified, out of control

Help Children Set Goals

Help your child develop self-awareness by setting personal goals. Self-awareness is learning and recognizing their own thoughts and feelings. Have your child set their own personal goal for the day. This could be something like making their bed, doing one kind thing for their sibling, staying on track when doing math, or asking a question if they do not understand an instruction.

At the end of school time, your child can decide if they met their goal. If they didn't, they can examine why or why not, then make a plan to meet the goal the next day. For example, they can plan to use a coping skill, such as holding a stress ball or fidget spinner, to help them concentrate when doing their online math class.

Self-Care for Parents and Caregivers

Take care of yourself. Keep things positive.

Parents and caregivers are the most important people in their child's life. Taking care of yourself is one of the most important ways of taking care of your child. Parents can sometimes feel guilty if they take time for themselves and set boundaries. But, if you

don't take care of yourself, it will be harder to care for your loved ones. Taking care of yourself will help you to be there for the long haul.

Self-Care Tips

Here are some things you can do to stay healthy.

Take care of yourself. Everyone says this to caregivers, and it is one of the hardest things to do. Little ways to practice self-care may include:

- Shower daily and change into fresh clothes.
- Try to get enough sleep.
- Ask for help around the house from your partner, older children, and other sources of support. Team up to get work done.
- Schedule time away to get a break and recharge, even if it is only for 5 minutes. Sit outside and drink tea, take a bath or shower, watch a movie or read a book, or have a call with a friend.

- Take the time to engage in an activity you enjoy. It will help your brain reset by forgetting about stress and worry for a little bit.

Keep things positive. Thoughts, feelings, and behaviors within people are all connected, just like gears in any system. By changing one, you can change the other two.

Feelings are the easiest to notice, but harder to change than thoughts, so start with thoughts. For example, if you find yourself thinking, "I'm so overwhelmed. Nothing is working out the way it should," try replacing that thought with a positive one, such as, "I'm feeling overwhelmed right now, but I am strong and I'm going to keep trying. I have resources I can use to get through this."

Changing behaviors can change your mood. For example, try doing just one small thing:

- Choose something that is simple, such as taking a 10-minute walk each day.
- Ask yourself what might get in the way of doing what you chose.
- Ask yourself how you might benefit from doing what you chose.
- Make a plan for when you will do what you chose. Try adding it to your calendar.
- Try it out. If it ends up not working, choose something else that will be easier for you to do.

Healing and Building Resilience

Managing Grief

In addition to navigating your own trauma related to the COVID-19 pandemic, parents and caregivers are also navigating significant grief and loss. It is important to note that the grief and loss process doesn't only apply to the death of a loved one.

Many people go through this process when there is something else that has been lost.³ Some examples include:

- The loss of part of your identity (such as losing a job).
- The loss of a meaningful object (such as a property, home, or pet).
- The loss of meaning (which may take place after a life transition or move).
- The loss of an idea or principle (thinking that something like this would never happen).

If your family has suffered a death, remember that there is no right or wrong way for people to process grief and loss. It is common for people to go back and forth through many of the steps of the grief and loss process before arriving at a place of peace and acceptance.

There is no right or wrong way for people to process grief and loss.

One way to help heal through grief and loss is through practicing **HEAL**. Use the following steps to help work through grief and loss:

H = Honor the loss by participating in rituals, ceremonies, or other events. An important part of healing is honoring the memory of the person or idea that was so significant, rather than avoiding memories. Write in a journal, share stories, or look at pictures to reflect on memories.

E = Express emotion. There are no wrong emotions. Being angry is a common emotion that many people experience in grief. In the case of losing a loved one, it is common for people to feel angry toward that person and then feel guilty for being angry. This is normal, and it is okay to talk about these feelings.

A = Acknowledge the obstacles that are blocking you from healing. Most people tell themselves things that prevent them from really accepting the loss. Recognizing those obstacles tends to remove them and helps with healing. Common obstacles that get in the way of acknowledging (and then accepting) the loss include:

- Avoiding or denying the loss.
- Wishing things were different than they are.
- Wondering what could have led to a different outcome.

L = Live. On some days following a loss, all someone can do is make it through the day. Over

time, as the healing process continues, it becomes important to focus on life and active living, rather than just surviving or existing. Focus on active living by engaging, learning, participating, doing, and feeling.

Other Ways to Heal and Build Resilience^{3,4}

- Talk about how you are doing with a trusted friend or family member.
- Pay attention to your mood and physical health.
- Try to avoid unhealthy coping, such as too much alcohol or smoking.
- Take a break when you can.
- Stay physically active when you can.
- Ask questions and seek information that is important to you.

Additional Resources

- STRONG KIDS Model: Helping Children Feel Safe and Recover from Disaster (See Appendix C for English and D en Español.)
- [Parent and Caregiver Guide to Helping Families Cope with COVID-19](#) (link includes guide in English, Chinese, and Spanish)
- [Helping Families Deal with the Stress of Relocation After a Disaster](#)
- [Coping with Stress During Infectious Disease Outbreaks](#) in English
- [Coping with Stress During Infectious Disease Outbreaks](#) en Español
- [Taking Care of Your Behavioral Health During Infectious Disease Outbreaks](#) in English
- [Taking Care of Your Behavioral Health During Infectious Disease Outbreaks](#) en Español

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Appendix A: Impacts of Disasters on Sleep and Tips for Better Sleep

Sleep may be impacted during any time of family stress. There are many changes that families are experiencing during the COVID-19 pandemic. These changes may lead parents, children, and teens to having trouble getting to sleep, having trouble staying asleep, or waking up a lot. This appendix provides tips for better sleep for preschool children, school-age children, teens, and parents.

Preschool Children

Preschool children need about 12 hours of sleep a night. Many children don't nap after they reach age 5. Parents can still do an hour of "rest time" so that everyone can take a break and a child can play quietly.

Children ages 3–5 often experience trouble falling asleep and nightmares. Waking in the middle of the night is also very common for children this age. Often, children are afraid of going to sleep or afraid of the dark due to their discomfort with being away from a parent. It can also be the result of young children's imaginations that lead to scary thoughts.

Tips for helping preschool children sleep better:

- Try to keep a regular sleep schedule where children wake up and go to sleep at the same time each day.

- Follow a bedtime routine that is slow and calm. The end of the routine should be in the child's bed.
- The room where the child sleeps should be cool, quiet, dark, and free of TV and other electronic devices.

School-Age Children

School age children (ages 6–12) need about 10 hours of sleep each night. They can be distracted from sleep by TV, internet, and social media. Drinking beverages with caffeine can cause trouble sleeping, including nightmares and difficulty falling asleep. Poor sleep can lead to behavior issues and difficulty learning. Children with anxiety or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) can have even more trouble falling asleep.

Tips for helping school-age children sleep better:

- Keep a regular sleep schedule where children wake up and go to sleep at the same time each day, even if they aren't in school.
- End TV and any other screen time an hour before bedtime.
- Computers and phones should not be left in the room where the child sleeps. If possible, these items should be stored in parent's room.

Teens

Teens need 8–10 hours of sleep at night. During teen years, teens often feel like waking up later and falling asleep later. Poor sleep is a special risk for teens. Poor sleep can be a risk for depression and anxiety.⁹ School, athletics, and other stressors can lead to more trouble sleeping. In turn, poor sleep can lead to more injuries, obesity, and risk taking behavior.¹⁰

Tips for helping teens sleep better:

- Keep a regular sleep schedule where teens wake up and go to sleep at the same time each day, if possible.
- Avoid naps.
- Exercise, but not right before bedtime.
- Finish getting ready for bed (brush teeth, wash face, bath or shower) at least an hour before sleep.
- Turn off TV and other electronic devices at least an hour before trying to sleep. Put phone and other mobile electronic devices in another room.

Parents

Parents can help children sleep better by modeling good sleep habits. There are many stresses from the COVID-19 pandemic that parents may be feeling, such as working from home, losing a job, supervising a child's schooling at home, worrying about the economy, and fear of getting COVID-19.

Tips for better sleep:

- Try to have a regular sleep and wake schedule.
- Build in some kind of exercise into your schedule, such as a daily walk.
- Turn off TV and other electronic devices an hour before going to sleep.
- Avoid caffeine in the afternoon.
- Avoid drinking too much alcohol. Alcohol can interfere with sleep.

For more information on sleep, see [CHOC Children's Sleep Hygiene for Children](#) and [Seattle Children's Sleep Hygiene for Young Children and Teens](#).

Appendix B: Tips for Families of Children & Teens with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

Key Considerations

- Many of the topics described in this toolbox also apply to children and teens with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). However, there are additional considerations that are unique.
- In one parent survey, nearly 94% of families with children with ASD faced increasing difficulties managing daily activities. This was especially true around free time and structured activities. Over a third of families were dealing with intense or frequent behavioral problems.¹¹
- Those with ASD who had behavior problems before the COVID-19 outbreak are twice as likely to experience more intense and more frequent behavior problems.¹¹
- Children and teens with ASD often find changes in routine stressful.
- In addition to homeschooling, specialized services and healthcare support may be necessary but difficult to access during this time. These may include educational, behavioral, occupational, or physical therapy services.
- Caregivers may not be able to get respite services that would allow breaks from their caregiving responsibilities.
- Children with autism may have other medical conditions that put them at higher risk for becoming infected with COVID-19.
- The child or teen may be resistant to recommended or required health measures. Wearing a cloth face covering and maintaining the recommended physical distance from others may be difficult. This could increase their risk for infection and the risk of infecting others.¹²

Explaining COVID-19 to Your Child

- Listen. Before explaining, find out what your child's concerns are. Their question may have an easy answer. Give a clear, simple explanation and be open to more questions.
- Explain the need for staying home as much as possible to avoid getting sick.
- If you are not sure of the answer, say "Let's find out!" and make it a search you do together.
- Keep your explanations basic enough that your child can understand, but do not give too much information which could lead to additional worry or anxiety.
- See [Autism Resources during COVID-19](#) for resources to help with these discussions, including social stories, videos, and other media.

Managing Behaviors

- Stay connected to their behavioral health provider and other services (such as occupational and physical therapy) through a telehealth videoconference or phone visit. Telehealth interventions result in promising, modest improvements in learning under the circumstances of limited access to in-person services.¹²
- For nonverbal children or those that have difficulty sitting through a telehealth visit, ask your behavior support team for tools or techniques that might be useful, such as pictures, visual schedules, and games.
- Set reasonable limits for screen time while encouraging interactive games with family and friends to avoid the risk of isolation.¹³
- Use calming techniques as described in this resource.
- Create a new daily routine based on necessary changes due to the pandemic. Be consistent with the routine. Make sure everyone in the family is on board with how to respond in the same way to identified behaviors.
- Take time to think about factors that might contribute to a problem behavior. For example, has there been a recent change at home? Is your child's sleep pattern different? Is he or she physically active enough? Does the behavior occur at certain times of the day? Keep track of these issues and discuss with

your child's therapist to develop changes or strategies.

- Share special interests with your child and plan special activities around these interests, such as trains, maps, electronics, and animals.¹⁴
- Help your child connect with family, friends, and classmates. This can be done by virtual means through videoconference or by exchanging letters, drawings, or audio recordings.
- Remember these basics: adequate sleep, nutritious meals, and regular physical activity.

Self-Care for Caregivers

- Be patient with yourself, your child, and your family. The right routine is the one that works for your family.
- Children often sense a parent's stress. Be kind to yourself. If there are two adults at home, support each other by taking turns as the main caregiver and provide breaks for each other. If you are a single parent, seek out a family member or friend who can assist you.
- Limit the amount of your own exposure to stressors, such as disturbing news.
- Set realistic expectations and priorities. Set realistic goals by determining the most important things to do in a manageable timeframe. For example, think about the best way to use your time for the next hour.

- Seek your own virtual support group with other parents who have similar needs. For example, Autism Speaks is trying to establish parent support groups and teen support groups. For military families, Tricare is now covering parent education and training. Other parents may have helpful or creative strategies that you may find useful with your own child.

Autism Resources during COVID-19

Interagency Autism Coordinating Committee
(U.S. Department of Health and Human Services)
[Coronavirus Resources](#)

Autism Speaks

[COVID-19 information and resources for families:](#)

- Staying safe during reopening.
- Webinars, parent guidance, training modules, and teaching stories.

[COVID-19 information and resources for adults on the spectrum:](#)

- Videos on wearing cloth face coverings for autistic adults and a motivational speaker with autism sharing tips for others with autism.
- Coping with disrupted routines in COVID-19 and developing new routines.
- Dealing with employment and unemployment.

[COVID-19 information and resources for educators and health professionals:](#)

- Information and resources for educators and interim guidance for administrators.

[The Autism Response Team \(ART\)](#) is an information line for the autism community. Team members are specially trained to provide personalized information and resources to people with autism and their families.

- 1-888-AUTISM2 (1-888-288-4762)
- En Español: 1-888-772-9050
- help@autismspeaks.org

National Autism Association

[COVID-19 Resources for Families and Individuals](#)

- Teaching tools
- Tips for caregivers and individuals
- How to practice social distancing
- Local resources
- Information on stimulus payments

Autism Research Institute

Coping with the COVID-19 Pandemic: [Resources for Individuals and Families](#)

- Story-sharing
- COVID-19 webinars
- Video aids
- Preparing for return to school

Autism Society [COVID-19 Toolkit by Topic](#)

- Mental health and respite
- Modifying routines
- Lifestyle supports
- Education
- Public policy
- Coronavirus information series (Facebook Live)

Autism Science Foundation [COVID-19 Resources](#)

- Families
- Researchers
- Service Providers
- Webinars

[The Mighty](#)

An online community of over 290,000 autistic voices and the people who support them.

[Sesame Workshop](#)

“Caring for Each Other” section with videos, games, and materials for children and families.

[Wrightslaw Yellow Pages for Kids – Washington](#)

Resource for a wide range of professionals with expertise and interest in ASD.

Helping Children Feel Safe and Recover from Disaster

To have STRONG KIDS after a disaster, it is important for providers and caregivers to work on the following:

- **S = Safety** in their environment. Tell your children what to do if another emergency happens (like a fire, earthquake, or getting separated from family).
- **T = Trust.** Children need to trust that adults will care for them and keep them safe. Hold your child's hand to remind them that you are present. Give your child a tight hug and frequent cuddles to regulate your child's "fight or flight" response by calming their heartbeat and their breathing.
- **R = Routine** is essential for helping children to feel safe and adjust after a trauma. Routine means having a consistent bedtime every night, having meals around the same time of day, and maintaining school attendance.
- **O = Orientation** towards the future is important. Talk with your children about going back to school, seeing friends, playing, or making favorite meals.
- **N = Notice** what your children are doing. Make sure you know where your children are and who they are with. Decrease unsupervised time for children under 12 years of age.
- **G = Give** children information. Age-appropriate honesty and explanations about what's happening and what to expect are an important part of helping children feel safe and process traumatic experiences.
- **K = Knowing** your child's strengths. Talk with your children about the skills and behaviors that they are good at or enjoy doing. Praise your child for taking deep breaths when worried, for sitting quietly and playing, for holding your hand, for using manners, for going to school, etc.
- **I = Inhaling and exhaling.** Practicing coping skills is important, even for little ones. Coaching kids to practice taking deep breaths and to think good thoughts can go a long way in helping children feel calm.
- **D = Direction** towards healthy behaviors. Encourage children to talk with you about how they are feeling and any worries they have. Help them eat nourishing foods and get enough sleep at night.
- **S = Specific response.** Children pick up on parents' emotions. Try to stay calm in front of your child to increase their feelings of safety. It's okay to cry and express emotion. We want to show children how to grieve and that it's okay to be sad, but you don't want to become so upset that your child becomes scared or has to comfort you.

Ayudando a que los Niños se Sientan Seguros y Recuperados por Desastres

Para tener STRONG KIDS (niños fuertes) después de un desastre, es importante para los proveedores y cuidadores que trabajen en:

- **S = Seguridad** en su medio ambiente. Dígale a sus niños que hacer en caso de que pasara otra emergencia (ej., incendios, terremotos, separación de familia).
- **C = Confié.** Niños necesitan estar confiados de que los adultos los van a cuidar y mantener seguros. Agárrale la mano a tus niños para recordarles que estas presente. Dale un abrazo fuerte y acarícielo frecuentemente para regular la ansiedad e intranquilidad del niño, calmando su ritmo cardiaco y su respiración.
- **R = Rutinas son esenciales para ayudar a que los niños se sientan seguros** y para que asimilen después de un trauma. Las rutinas significan que vallan a dormir al mismo tiempo todas las noches, que tengan las comidas en el mismo tiempo todos los días y que vallan a la escuela.
- **O = Orientación** para el futuro es importante. Hable con sus niños acerca de regresar a la escuela, ver a sus amigos, jugar o hacer sus comida favoritas.
- **O = Observe lo que sus niños estén haciendo.** Asegúrese de saber donde están sus hijos y con quien están; disminuya tiempo no supervisado para los niños menores de 12 años.
- **P = Provea información a sus niños:** Honestidad apropiada para la edad y explicaciones acerca de que esta sucediendo y de lo que sucederá son importantes para ayudar a que los niños se sientan seguros y puedan procesar experiencias traumáticas.
- **S = Sepa las fortalezas de sus niños.** Hable con sus niños acerca de habilidades y comportamientos que ellos son buenos o que disfruten utilizándolos. Felicite a sus niños por tomar respiraciones profundas cuando están preocupados, por sentarse callados jugando, por agarrar sus manos, por usar sus modales, por ir a la escuela, etc.
- **I = Inhalar y Exhalar.** Practicar habilidades de afrontamiento es importante, hasta para los niños pequeños. Enseñar a que los niños practiquen respiraciones profundas y a pensar en pensamientos positivos, pueden ser muy valiosos en ayudar a que los niños sientan calma.
- **D = Dirección** hacia comportamientos sanos. Aliente a que sus niños hablen con usted acerca de cómo se sienten y de algunas preocupaciones que tengan. Ayúdelos a comer sanamente y a que obtengan suficiente horas de sueno.
- **R = Respuesta Especifica.** Los niños saben reconocer las emociones de los padres . Trate de permanecer calmado en frente de sus niños para incrementar los sentimientos de seguridad. Esta bien llorar y expresar emociones, queremos mostrarle a los niños como sobrellevar una pena y que esta bien sentirse triste, pero no queremos llegar a ser tan molesto que sus niños se asusten o que lo tengan que consolar a usted.

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