

Helping Address the Needs of Children During the COVID Crisis

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Impact on Parents and Caregivers

- Who are the parents/caregivers?
 - Us, Our Adult Patients, Families of Our Child Patients
- Parent/caregiver stress can negatively impact usual parenting
- Contributors to stress:
 - Finances / loss of employment
 - Lack of usual supports due to “social distancing”
 - Having to take on the role of “teacher”
 - Ways children and teens express distress and attempt to cope
- (e.g., dysregulated behavior, irritability)
- Parental stress contributes to:
 - Increase in domestic violence and child abuse following disasters
 - Increase in use of alcohol and substances in teens and adults following disasters

Impact on Children and Teens

- What children experience is impacted by their developmental status, temperament, psychological make-up, premorbid functioning, family functioning, family resources, and recent and past experiences of loss
- Child & Teen responses are therefore varied in type and intensity
 - Irritability and mood symptoms
 - Emotional and behavioral dysregulation
 - Pushing back on limits (such as not being allowed to spend time with friends)
 - Difficulty falling asleep and staying asleep; nightmares
 - Anxiety; difficulty separating; fear of being alone ☐ Repetitive play
 - Aggression, anger
 - Withdrawal

What is helpful to address the needs of children in our current situation?

1. Establishing and Maintaining New Routines
2. Being emotionally available to the child/teen and fostering social bonds at a distance
3. Modeling and Encouraging Healthy Coping Skills
4. Providing age appropriate Information and Explanations

This is especially true for children with special needs – emotional, behavioral, developmental, and/or medical challenges

Establishing and Maintaining New Routines

- All people, especially children, benefit from routines
- School/Childcare provides a major source of routine and structure for children
- that is now missing or very limited
- **Parents/caregivers need to establish a new routine**
- Routines may include mealtimes, bedtime, school work, playtime/relaxing, time with parents/caregivers, reading, screen time
- Premack Principal (high probability behaviors can reinforce low probability behaviors):
Time for schoolwork followed by time for relaxation/entertainment/play
- In stressful uncertain times, youth look for control, one way of giving control is collaborating with them on the new routine
- Not looking for military precision, looking for creating expectations of what will happen in a time when there are so many unknowns

Being emotionally available and fostering social bonds

- Children need a secure relationship where they can feel safe and express feelings – anxiety, frustration, disappointment
- It is important to “listen” to children, including very young children, and be “present”
- At a time when parents are often preoccupied with other demands, this is a challenging task
- Aiming for physical distancing not emotional distancing, we want to enable contact by phone or screens with significant others, including extended family members and peers (teen screen time)

Modelling and Encouraging Healthy Coping Skills

- Coping statements
 - Talk back to worries – “I’m feeling scared and I can handle it.”
- Coping ahead
 - It helps to anticipate that you might have some discomfort, and plan what you can do to counteract it, knowing that if you can push through it, it will get easier.
- Mindfulness
 - Tune into our emotions and experience them without judgment
- Acceptance of feelings
 - Acknowledging the discomfort without fighting it. “Instead of trying to push the feeling away and get rid of it, hold onto it and tolerate it and get through it.”
- Physical exercise
 - Walking, running, dancing, exercising- be creative
- Sleeping and Eating
 - Consistent sleep schedules and mealtimes

Explanations

- Make time to explain what is happening and answer questions of younger children; make time to have discussions with older children and teens
- Limit exposure to media (TV) reports about COVID-19 for you and them; even very young children will feel the tension you feel in response to news reports and react to the dramatized style of news anchors
- Inform about coronavirus in language they can understand; reassure them that few children have developed coronavirus and it's usually mild if they do
- Explain why they can't go to childcare, preschool, or school – as a way to keep everybody healthy