

Guide to Coping with COVID-19: Kids and Families Edition

April 10, 2020

Understanding all of the information and recommendations for you and your family during this time can be confusing and overwhelming. Your family doctor is the best source of advice on your family's health during the COVID-19 pandemic. We hope that this guide will give you additional tools to make decisions on how to stay healthy, safe, and supported during this time. More planning resources are available [here](#).

If you have a fever or cough, you might have COVID-19. Most people have mild illness and are able to recover at home. Anyone who is sick with a cough or a fever should consult with their health care provider and stay home until their symptoms resolve. Trouble breathing is a more serious symptom of COVID-19 that means you should get medical attention. If you think someone in your household is sick and might have COVID-19, contact your health care provider immediately to discuss symptoms and next steps.



This is scary. How do I tell my kids what's going on?

- Don't be afraid to talk about it. Invite them to tell you what they know and how they feel about it, but don't force them to talk.
- Show that you hear and understand their thoughts, feelings, and reactions. Be reassuring.
- Focus on what you're doing as a family to stay safe.
- Give easy to understand explanations for your child's age and developmental level.
 - **Toddler/preschool:** Emphasize washing hands for 20 seconds. Practice a simple song with them so they can understand how long that is. Explain that adults are working hard to keep everyone healthy and safe.
 - **Elementary age:** Give simple explanations. Use tools such as [this cartoon](#) or [this podcast](#). Ask if they have questions. Be honest and stick to the facts.
 - **Middle school:** Answer questions and let them discuss feelings of anxiety or worry. Help them understand how to get reliable information from the media. Encourage acceptance of all people that are hurting right now and try not to blame certain people or populations for what is happening.
 - **High school:** Discuss questions about health, the economy, and the impact on your community, the state, the country, and the world. Let them talk about their worry, anxiety or fear and remind them these are normal reactions. Stick to the facts and point them towards reliable sources of information. Discuss the difference between being informed and media over-use that can create too much anxiety.

My child is really worried about catching the virus or someone they love catching the virus.

- Remind them that people are working hard to stop the spread. Kids are staying home from school, adults are staying home from work, stores and restaurants are closed – all to help keep people safe.
- Set up routines and schedules at home, and keep your child focused on these. Knowing what to expect at home will be comforting. Set timers and give regular reminders for upcoming transitions and before you change activities throughout the day.
- Your child will observe your behaviors for cues about how to manage their own feelings. Try not to show them any anxiety you may be feeling. Try to avoid discussing your worries with other adults while children are present. If you show them that you are calm, they are more likely to be calm.
- Limit the use of media/social media and consider not allowing media/news exposure at all for younger children.

Can we get together with another family for a playdate?

Unfortunately, no. It is extremely important to observe social distancing, even with people you know well and see often. Children and adults can be infected with COVID-19 and spread the virus to others for several days before showing symptoms. The only people it is ok to be near and play with are family members you live with.

OK, but is it alright to take the kids to the playground?

Unfortunately, no. It is nearly impossible to keep a safe distance of at least 6 feet between children playing together on a playground structure. Playground equipment is used by multiple individuals and cannot be effectively sterilized between uses. COVID-19 can live on surfaces for several days.

So, what CAN we do?

Pretend it's 1990, not 2020. Take walks and play outside. Cook or bake together. Have a family movie night. Have a family game night with charades, Pictionary, card games, or dust off those old board games or puzzles. Be creative and identify ways to have a virtual play date.

During this time, it is very important that you and your children remain physically active. This will help improve everyone's mood and will help you sleep better. Here are some ideas for "PE class at home":

- Jumping rope, jumping jacks, push-ups, pull-ups
- Simon Says, but with exercises ("Simon Says do 3 squats")
- Go on a scavenger hunt through the house or yard
- Hopscotch, relay races, obstacle course, tag
- Play catch

Remember that cooperative games should only be played with members of your household!





My teenager is extremely bored, complaining, and wants to sneak out to see his/her friends.

For teenagers and young adults, friends are extremely important. Teenagers may show their frustration in different ways. Some may get angry and argue, while some may get sad and withdrawn. Acknowledge that you know it's frustrating and upsetting to be cut off from their friends and encourage them to utilize video hangouts in place of in-person get-togethers to stay connected. Explain to your teen that although they may not feel sick and their friends also do not feel sick, they could have the virus and spread it without ever knowing that they are sick.

In general, this is a good time to relax rules (such as screen time, social media, video games, specific apps or websites that are normally limited) to keep your teen connected with peers. Show that you hear and understand their disappointment at missing important milestones such as high school sports seasons, prom, theater productions, and graduations. Help them to plan for future events so they have something to look forward to.

Help! We're stuck at home and my kids won't stop fighting!

- Many siblings fighting with each other after playing nicely for a period of time may actually be fighting for their caregivers' attention. Especially now when adults may be working during the day, consider whether your children may need a moment of your attention if you can spare it.
- Catch them doing something right! Praise them when you see them sharing, taking turns, behaving kindly towards each other, or playing together nicely. Give specific praise: "Great job taking turns!"
- Coach your children, often the older sibling in particular, on how to respond in a productive way rather than worsening an argument.
- Make a plan for avoiding frequent sources of conflict. Set a timer for taking turns. If a fight is over a specific toy, give a warning that if they cannot play cooperatively with the toy, the toy will go to time out until tomorrow.

Help! How do I homeschool my child(ren)?

What we are doing now is very different from traditional homeschooling. Don't feel you have all the responsibility for educating your child.

- Be sure to use any online resources your child's school district has provided.
- Set a schedule each day and create a distraction-free space where your child can focus on learning.
- Only a few hours of work each day are needed, but you will want to divide it across the day if possible to maximize your child's ability to focus.
- Consider pairing schoolwork with rewards – remember, this is not forever – such as screen time or the child's choice of activity for a set amount of time (e.g., 30 minutes of work for 15 minutes of free time) or even a treat or candy.

Ultimately, if you are experiencing many battles over schoolwork consider prioritizing your relationship with your child and harmony in your home over academic achievements during this stressful time. If you find yourself unable to provide any academic support to your child at home either due to your child's behavior or due to limitations with your own schedule or health, contact your child's school for guidance.

Here are some fun but educational ways to keep kids busy:

- [Huge list of indoor activities for kids](#)
- [Take a virtual field trip or a virtual museum tour](#)
- [Free coloring pages at Crayola.com](#)

I'm not used to being around my family this much. I can't handle this much frustration.

- This is not the time to try to win that Parent of the Year award! Put away your Pinterest Parent badge and make “good enough” your motto. We all want to be our best parenting selves, but sometimes the best thing you can do is decide not to fight a battle.
- This is a good time to relax rules about screen time and electronic devices.
- When you feel overwhelmed, reach out to your spouse/partner or a trusted friend or family member. Your feelings are normal, and it helps to share those with someone who will listen nonjudgmentally.
- Take breaks outside or in your car if you need to. It is ok to tell your children, “I need some space.”
- If you find yourself overwhelmed, please call the The Nebraska Family Helpline. The Helpline provides a single point of contact, 24/7, for families concerned about a youth experiencing mental or behavioral health issues. The helpline can also connect families with Youth Mobile Crisis Response anywhere in Nebraska. The Helpline can be reached at 888-866-8660.
- If you are in danger due to domestic or interpersonal violence, please see [these resources](#).

Common Behavioral Reactions to Emergencies and Distress by Age

You may observe the behaviors below in your child(ren), and/or they may act in other ways that show you they are distressed. These are normal reactions to being in an abnormal situation. Offer extra comfort and support to all children during this time, do your best to be patient, maintain routines, and avoid media exposure.

Infants to age 2: May be more cranky. May cry more than usual or want to be held and cuddled more.

3 to 6 years: May return to behaviors they have outgrown (e.g., bedwetting, separation anxiety). May have tantrums or difficulty sleeping.

7 to 10 years: May feel sad, mad, or afraid. Parents should correct misinformation children may have learned from peers. Older children may focus on details of the pandemic and want to talk about it all the time, or they might not want to talk about it at all. May have trouble concentrating.

Pre-teens and teens: May act out (reckless driving, drug or alcohol use). Or they may be afraid to leave the home. May withdraw from friends or family. May appear they do not care, which can hide real worries. May feel overwhelmed by intense emotions and feel unable to talk about their emotions. May experience increased conflict with loved ones.

Children with special needs: May have stronger reactions to threatened or actual danger. May have more intense distress, worry, or anger than children without special needs because they have less control over their day-to-day well-being than others. May need extra words of reassurance, more explanations about the event, and more comfort and other positive physical contact such as hugs from loved ones.



Any Problem Any Time: The Nebraska Family Helpline at (888) 866-8660 makes it easier for families to obtain assistance by providing a single contact point 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Trained Helpline operators screen calls to assess immediate safety needs, identify the potential level of a behavioral health crisis, make recommendations or referrals to appropriate resources, and help callers connect to emergency resources or providers. The Helpline is supervised by licensed mental health professionals.

The Helpline can be reached at (888) 866-8660.

Family Helpline operators also can connect eligible families to the Family Navigator Service. This service helps families move through Nebraska's child- and family-care system more efficiently to get the assistance they need. Available within 24 to 72 hours after a Helpline referral, Family Navigator helps families identify existing community-based services and provides support from people who have had personal experience in the system.



More information on coping by age and how to help can be found in [this guide](#) (p. 4-5).