

Tips for Supporting Kids and Teens During the COVID-19 Outbreak

Kids and teens can often become emotionally confused and frightened during times of uncertainty or unfamiliar events. It is important to remember that young people might react differently to these events than adults. Some may respond immediately, and others may show signs that they are having a difficult time later. Either way, there are steps that parents, caregivers, teachers, and other adult helpers can take to help children and teens cope with the COVID-19 pandemic:

Be a Good Listener

Many children want to communicate about information or situations that are distressing to them. Sometimes it is easier for them to do this by writing, drawing, singing, or playing. Accept whatever feelings the child shares and tell them it is OK to feel sad, upset, or stressed. If a child or teen does not want to talk about it, don't pressure them. Let them know that you are available if and when they do want to speak about it.

Use Clear, Honest Information

Though you may be trying to protect kids and teens from information about the pandemic that you may feel is overly distressing for them, assume that they are receiving information about it on their own. Invite kids and teens to share their understanding of what is going on, and gently correct misinformation using clear, honest communication that is age appropriate. Provide clear and honest information about the risks of the pandemic to their own safety and that of your family. Remember that kids and teens may be getting information from many sources: friends, social media, TV, etc. Try to watch news coverage on TV or the internet with them so that you can be there to answer any questions they may have.

Trusted news sources include: the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; the World Health Organization; the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services.

Take Breaks

Try to take breaks from talking about or listening to information about the pandemic, so that kids and teens don't become overwhelmed. Brainstorm a list of other topics you can talk about, or activities you can engage in as a means



of distraction. Help kids and teens to free themselves of worry before bedtime, by writing out their worries or concerns to discuss another day or by supporting them to use stress-reduction techniques (e.g., warm bath, reading a book, taking deep breaths).

Engage In Self-Care

Help kids and teens to take care of themselves by taking care of yourself! The reactions of children and teens to a stressful event are strongly influenced by how parents, relatives, teachers, and caregivers respond to the event. Adults can model for kids and teens how to take good care of themselves by modeling good self-care. If you are in good physical and emotional health, you are more likely to be readily available to support the children you care about. Maintain predictable routines as much as possible, eat healthy meals, get enough sleep and exercise.

Coping Skills

Support kids and teens in identifying a list of coping skills they can use during times of heightened stress. Be sure to write them down.

These may include: playing a favorite game, getting a hug, having a cry, petting an animal friend, playing a sport, watching a favorite TV show, listening to music, or taking deep breaths.

Helping to maintain regular routines, rules, and boundaries will also help kids and teens to feel a sense of predictability and safety during an uncertain time. Create a schedule as a family so your child can know what to expect.

For 50 examples of relaxation strategies kids of all ages can use, visit gozen.com/50-calm-down-ideas-to-try-with-kids-of-all-ages/.

Engagement

Encourage positive actions for children and teens. Children may better cope with a pandemic by helping others. They can write supportive letters to those who have been sick; they can organize a drive to collect needed supplies to send to affected areas, or they can take action by promoting healthy habits that prevent the spread of illness (e.g., hand-washing, etc).

Remember that children and youth are very resilient and they will typically adjust well during times of stress, particularly with the help and support of caring adults. Teachers and other school professionals also play an important role by reinforcing normal routines to the extent possible. In some instances, children and teens may have trouble getting past their responses to an outbreak, particularly if a loved one is helping with the response or if family members become very ill. If children or teens show prolonged distress over time, consider connecting them to a mental health professional. If a child has experienced the death of a loved one to the illness, consider working with a professional who knows how to support grieving children. Transitions GriefCare is available to provide resources and support. Please visit transitionslifecare.org/families/grief-care/ or call 919-719-7199.

Adapted from: *Talking With Children: TIPS FOR CAREGIVERS, PARENTS, AND TEACHERS DURING INFECTIOUS DISEASE OUTBREAKS*. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. Available at https://store.samhsa.gov/system/files/pep20-01-01-006_508_0.pdf