

Coronavirus, Kids and Signs of Stress

With the current coronavirus pandemic, your child may experience stress and symptoms of anxiety.

Most children will experience mild or intermittent symptoms, such as having days or times when they eat less, have trouble sleeping, seem more irritable, or express more worries. However, some children may have difficulty adjusting to the changes we are all experiencing due to the pandemic and may need more support to cope during this time.

Signs your child may need more support

It's important for parents to be aware of the common symptoms children exhibit when stressed or feel anxious. These signs may indicate a child needs additional support to manage these feelings. Also, it's important to understand how intense and how often these symptoms are occurring. This can be helpful in evaluating how a child is coping.

Parents should watch for the following:

- **Changes in sleep patterns.** If sleeping less or more becomes a pattern day after day it could be a sign of stress. Children may describe having difficulty falling asleep, or waking in the middle of the night or early morning and being unable to fall back asleep. Younger children may start avoiding bedtime routines or seek out parents in the middle of the night. Others may also start sleeping more, perhaps even through meals, daily routines, or fun activities, or taking frequent naps. Young children who have not done so for a long time may return to bedwetting.
- **Changes in eating patterns.** Patterns of eating less or eating more may also signal a child is anxious or stressed. Children may report not feeling hungry and begin skipping meals or eating smaller portions. Some may demonstrate less interest in their favorite foods. Others may start asking for food more frequently, eat larger portions, and express feeling hungry all the time, even after eating.
- **Increased aches and pains.** It is common for children to experience headaches, upset stomach, and other aches and pains when stressed and anxious. If children are experiencing pains frequently throughout the week and these pains are interfering with their ability to participate in daily routines or favorite activities, then this is a sign that your child may need more support.
- **Increased focus on their body** and looking for evidence of illness. It is common to become more aware of our body and physical sensations within our body when we have worries about our health and becoming sick. However, if your child starts seeking out frequent reassurances about their health, it could be a sign they are having difficulty coping. Examples may include asking to have their temperature taken frequently, asking if they look sick, or spending a lot of their day checking their symptoms and evaluating whether or not they might be sick. This could be an indication your child is having difficulty coping with current stressors and may benefit from additional support.

- **Changes in mood and behavior.** These changes can vary widely so if your child does not seem like their usual self for a few days, talk to them about how they are feeling. Watch for frequent tearfulness, sadness, irritability, anger, and fearfulness as well as increased oppositional, aggressive responses and arguing. Children may also exhibit decreased interest in having fun or taking part in their favorite activities.
- **Increased clinginess/difficulty separating.** When stressed, children often want to be around and feel connected to those who help them feel safe. It is natural for children to want to spend more time with and need extra hugs from their parents during times of stress. However, if children demonstrate intense, prolonged distress when separating from parents, are no longer able to sleep at night in their own room or bed or are unable to tolerate having parents out of view or in a different room, then this is a sign that they may be struggling with their emotions.
- **Withdrawal/isolation.** Many children respond to stress by disengaging. Signs parents should watch for include your child starting to spend more time in their room and refusing to join the family in daily activities, especially those they typically enjoy. They might also become quieter and less interactive, or demonstrate decreased interest in favorite activities. These can all serve as cues for parents that your child is having difficulty coping.
- **Difficulty concentrating.** We are often easily distracted when worried. If worries and stressors are distracting your child to the point that they can no longer complete school assignments or sit through a favorite movie or television show, then they may benefit from additional supports to cope with their stress and anxiety.
- **Increased worries/inability to focus.** It is natural for your child to express worries about the current pandemic. However, if your child spends a lot of their day talking about these worries, or finds it difficult to stop focusing on these worries, then this is a signal they may need support to help with their feelings.

First things first

- Before talking with your children, sort out your own feelings. Discuss your own anxiety and uncertainty with other adults. Kids pick up on attitudes and feelings of trusted adults, so parents need to get support.
- Be sure you have the most current, accurate information available. You can get the latest news and updates on coronavirus on the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [website](#).

Talking to your kids

When talking to children, remember the following:

- Start the conversation by asking your child(ren) what they've heard about coronavirus at school or from friends. Calmly correct any misconceptions or false information. It may

be helpful to provide age-appropriate explanations for words such as virus, isolation, quarantine, or contagious.

- Present factual information. Don't assume that kids, especially under age 8 or 9, will really understand what it means. They need you to put the facts into perspective for them.
- Convey realistic confidence in their safety. Parents need to express more certainty with younger children and deal with real ambiguity in older kids.
- Explain that although kids have likely heard that the virus started in China, their peers from the Asian culture or any other culture do not present added risk for having or spreading the illness.
- Let them know that many people are working to keep us all healthy and safe.
- Remind them of good hygiene habits. The best prevention against a virus is proper handwashing.

More tips

Having a conversation with your children about the facts and reassuring them of their safety is critical. There are other things you can do to reduce anxiety and help the family cope during these situations.

- Watch TV with your kids. Keep the amount of exposure within reason. With the extensive news coverage, children will likely be exposed to repeated images in the media.
- Monitor screen time. As with TV time, limit exposure and be prepared to sort fact from fiction.
- Keep to a routine. The usual schedule can help reduce anxiety.
- Use your family traditions, beliefs and religious practices as sources of strength and a way to find comfort.
- A certain amount of anxiety is to be expected. If your child shows prolonged signs of stress, seek help from your pediatrician or local mental health counselor.

Remember, helping kids feel safe and providing factual information is the goal of the conversation.

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