

Toddlers to Teens: How to Help Kids Cope with Stress from COVID-19

How parents help should be tailored to a child's needs and age.

- Like adults, kids are struggling right now. But how that struggle manifests and what parents can do to help varies by age.
- Younger children may be regressing and are in need of age-appropriate explanations about what's going on.
- Depression among teenagers may be on the rise as a result of physical distancing and missing events.
- Online counselors and therapists are providing telehealth appointments in a format that's far more comfortable to the younger generation than parents may realize.

All data and statistics are based on publicly available data at the time of publication. Some information may be out of date. Visit our [coronavirus hub](#) and follow our [live updates page](#) for the most recent information on the COVID-19 outbreak.

This is a stressful time for adults worldwide. But with schools being canceled and children being granted a front-row seat to their parents' current struggles, they're experiencing the trickle down effect of that stress as well.

"Kids of all ages are having a tough time," said clinical and developmental psychologist [Nancy S. Molitor](#), PhD. "Every adult, if you're paying attention, has anxiety that's enhanced right now. And the kids are feeling that."

That undercurrent of anxiety in every home — combined with a situation where the rules seem to be changing every day — is inevitably going to impact kids too. But how individual children react to these stressors can vary by age.

Healthline spoke with experts who've shared their recommendations on the best ways parents can help their kids cope with stress and anxiety during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Children 4–7 years old

Ellen O'Donnell, PhD, is a pediatric psychologist at MassGeneral for Children and co-author of the book "Bless This Mess: A Modern Guide to Faith and Parenting in a Chaotic World." She said that early elementary kids are likely showing signs of regression right now.

"There may be more battles over things like food and bedtime," O'Donnell explained.

Molitor agreed, noting that regression is a response parents can expect from their kids as a result of our current situation.

"In a 4 year old, you might see what you saw at 2. You might even see bedwetting. You may not have their full attention. They may be more scared and anxious than normal. You may see temper tantrums and separation anxiety," Molitor said.

Of course, all kids are different. And if yours isn't exhibiting these signs, that's great. But if they are, it's important to know this can be normal right now.

"The most helpful thing parents can do is to stick to a schedule or routine as much as possible," O'Donnell said.

However, she added that doesn't necessarily mean sticking strictly to your pre-COVID-19 schedule.

“In fact, it may be better to establish a new schedule with an age appropriate explanation of why things are going to be a bit different for a while,” she said.

When it comes to physical or social distancing, however, she warned that kids at this age may not be capable of following the rules.

“Unfortunately, this means families with very young kids may need to be more socially isolated than others. It just may not be realistic to expect a 4 year old to remember she can’t hug her cousins on a 6-foot distanced hike,” she said.

Children 7–10 years old

Kids who have graduated beyond early elementary into the later elementary years are likely more aware of how unusual our current situation is.

According to licensed children’s therapist Katie Lear, “They may be very fearful not only for their own health, but for the health of their family members.”

O’Donnell added that kids in this age range are developing their ability to consider other people’s perspectives.

“For this reason, they may be most likely to pick up on parents’ stress and anxiety and to have their own worries,” she said.

Lear, who specializes in childhood anxiety and trauma, said all of this might manifest in these kids expressing concern about their grandparents or releasing their anxiety as anger or irritability.

“If your child seems particularly snippy or on edge, seeing this as the fight part of the fight-or-flight response might make the behavior easier to understand,” she said.

Like their younger siblings, Lear believes these children need age-appropriate information about the coronavirus, how it spreads, and their own safety from getting seriously ill.

“You can open up a conversation about the pandemic with your child by asking them what they have heard about the coronavirus. You may be surprised to hear the rumors and misinformation that has spread between children this age, even with social distancing,” she said.

O’Donnell said it’s important to provide these kids with explanations about physical distancing measures, as well as the need to wash hands and wear masks.

“Emphasize the fact that these are things we do, not just to protect ourselves, but for the good of others,” she said.

As far as how parents can help kids this age, O’Donnell suggested spending as much time with them as possible, remaining available to answer any questions they may have.

Lear added to that, saying she recommends teaching them relaxation techniques that can improve their ability to cope.

“Deep breathing, mindfulness, and techniques like progressive muscle relaxation (tensing and releasing muscle groups in order) can be really helpful in soothing the nervous system,” she said.

She added, whenever possible, it’s also important for these kids to get physical activity — whether that be swimming in the backyard or partaking in a distanced bike ride as a family.

Children 10–13 years old

“Ten to thirteen year olds, in my experience, are the ones who are feeling the brunt of online school,” Lear said. “Middle school is a stressful time for most kids, and right now children are having to navigate large amounts of homework with very little guidance from teachers.”

She said even children who are generally motivated to do well in school most likely lack the executive functioning abilities to self-direct and schedule their own school time right now.

“This can result in avoidance, dropping grades, and fights with parents when it’s time to log on to class or complete work,” Lear explained.

She said helping kids in this age range means keeping realistic expectations about schoolwork and acknowledging the time spent on school more than the end result.

“For example, a child who focuses and puts in good effort for 2 hours each day should be praised, regardless of whether they finished one assignment or four,” she said.

Lear further suggested that parents should encourage good sleep hygiene and help kids this age maintain some semblance of their normal school-day routine.

“Finally, validate how hard this is for your child: It’s really not fair that they have to do school this way. Sometimes, just hearing this validation from a parent can help to calm a child’s frustration,” Lear said.

O’Donnell added that kids in this age group may be a little more reluctant to vocalize worries and fears. But just because they aren’t talking about them, doesn’t mean they don’t have them.

“You can model for them by expressing some of the things you are worried about and how you are handling that worry,” O’Donnell explained. “You can also suggest doing things together to manage stress like taking a walk in the woods, taking a virtual yoga class together, or doing a guided meditation app.”

Children 13–17 years old

Molitor said teenagers are likely experiencing some of the biggest losses as a result of COVID-19.

“They’re losing prom, they’re losing college visits, they’re missing out on the plays they are supposed to be a part of, their final performance as a choir, the sporting events — all these things that they’ve been looking forward to for the entirety of their schooling years,” she said.

These losses, combined with being cut off from their peers, has the potential to impact teens so drastically that even The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) has acknowledged their struggle and published resources for parents concerned about their teenagers right now.

“What I’m hearing from parents is kids are responding with an increase in irritability, sleeping all day and staying up all night, and saying they’re one place, only for the parents to find out they’re at a buddy’s house, breaking social distancing rules, instead,” Molitor said.

Lear said a lot of teenagers are also experiencing feelings of depression, helplessness, and hopelessness.

“Many of my teens are reporting more depression than anxiety about the pandemic. While they may be worried about the effects of the coronavirus, the loss of their peer support system has a much more immediate effect on their lives,” she said.

Teenagers are at a stage in life when they’re naturally supposed to be pulling away from their parents and engaging more with their peers.

But because of COVID-19, they now find themselves trapped at home with the very family they’re supposed to be gaining their independence from, cut off from the peer relationships they care so much about.

“Teenagers hold friendships in much higher regard than younger kids,” Lear explained. “Their friend group is a sort of second family that provides not just entertainment and social interaction, but serious emotional support.”

Lear said many of the teenagers she sees are responding to our current situation by reporting a lack of energy, a loss of interest in hobbies they previously enjoyed, and a general low mood.

“Keep an eye on your teen for big changes in behavior that could signal a depressive episode, such as withdrawing from the family, isolating in their bedroom, and changing their eating and sleeping habits,” she said.

She also suggests supporting teenagers by finding meaningful ways to help them connect with friends from a distance, whether that be playing video games, cooking a recipe together and eating it on Zoom, or going for a walk while talking to a friend on the phone.]

Both Lear and Molitor further suggested parents can help teens recognize they do still have a future and that this difficult time will not last forever.

“Encourage your child to plan a future vacation, daydream about college choices, and think about teams or clubs they might like to join when school resumes,” Lear said.

Molitor also pointed to people and groups going out of their way to remind teenagers there will be life after this pandemic.

She provided the example of a group that encouraged theater kids to send in performance clips that were then shared with Broadway producers.

“These producers actually called some of these kids and asked them what colleges they were planning on attending and offered to help with their future goals once this ends,” she said.

The result was kids being given hope for their futures again.

“Most folks want to help this generation,” Molitor said. “They know they are getting waylaid, and they want to do what they can.”

If you have a teenager who is struggling, she suggested reaching out to people and organizations involved in the things they care about. Some may be willing to help give your teenager a boost.

Like adults, plenty of kids are struggling right now. That is a reflection of the current state of our world, not you as a parent.

But knowing how and when to reach out for help may be the best way you can support your child right now.

“Children who are dealing with anxiety or depression that has become too big to manage on their own can really benefit from online therapy,” Lear said.

“Many child and adolescent counselors are offering services by telehealth right now.”

While it may seem strange to meet a new therapist over a screen, Lear said most kids and teens are far more tech savvy than their parents. As a result, this format comes naturally to them.

And for those who are struggling the most, having the opportunity to discuss what they’re feeling with a professional may just be the lifeline they need.