



COVID-19: Stress, anxiety & parenting

As families grapple with an ever-changing normal, stress and anxiety can escalate. **Erica Lee, PhD**, and **Keneisha Sinclair-McBride, PhD**, psychologists in Boston Children's Department of Psychiatry, answer frequently asked questions to help families manage during uncertain times.

FAQs

Q: My family is struggling with this new routine. How can I help my children cope?

Create a schedule—but keep it flexible



Lee: Families are out of their usual routines, which can feel unnerving. Where possible, set and stick to predictable routines. Create a schedule together.

Whether your child has distance learning or not, structure and consistency feel comforting. To keep your children's minds and bodies active, aim for a mix of school-related activities and fun. Eat well (include treats), have regular sleeping and waking times and exercise daily, with outdoor breaks that adhere to physical distancing and public health guidelines. Healthy habits help children and teens feel safe, especially during times of stress. The more normalcy people can bring into their lives, the better.



Sinclair-McBride: We're trying to be resilient in positive ways, but perfection isn't attainable or necessary. What works one week may not work as well the next, but sticking to the basics will be a source of security. One week there may be more screen time than you would like. It's OK. There are going to be aspects of this new normal that are uncomfortable and messy, but there will be times of joy, too. Kids grow from messiness and joy.

Balance together time and alone time



Lee: Families benefit from time together and time apart. You can connect in old or new ways—make meals together, play games, do experiments or watch movies. Learn new skills, go for a family bike ride or try a hobby you've always wanted to explore.

Create space for each family member to recharge. Plan solo de-stress time when everyone can go to their own room or a quiet space for at least half an hour for an appropriate activity, such as playing video games, talking to friends or journaling. Teens may especially appreciate privacy, and parents need time for themselves, too. This is true when we're not in crisis and may be even more important if you're together at home all day.

Manage media consumption



Lee: Staying informed is important, but too much information can be overwhelming. Talk to your children about the virus in supportive, developmentally appropriate ways. Keep it simple and clear. Validate any worry or concern; remind them you are there for them; and work together to identify ways to feel better (an activity they love, a video chat with friends, fresh air). Limit media access and frequent updating of news feeds. If news is truly important, parents can be the funnel.

Practice self-care



Lee: When the world feels upside down, it's even more important to practice self-care. Kids pull cues from their parents. Prioritizing your health enables you to be there for your family in the ways that matter most. Sleep, exercise, connect with loved ones. Taking time for things that bring you joy will benefit your whole family.

If you feel stressed, try to talk with your support network away from your children. When you discuss the situation in front of your children, be purposeful and calm. Model good coping skills, and take a break if you're feeling overwhelmed.

Q: My son's an extrovert; my daughter's an introvert. How can I help each build resiliency?

Engage and support



Sinclair-McBride: Staying home all day can reinforce anxiety for anxious or introverted children. Help them balance their time so they aren't only doing one solo activity all day or going a long time without connecting with family and peers. Strive for a mix of screen time, social connection, physical activity, schoolwork and fun projects.

Help extroverted children find creative ways to use technology to stay in touch with family and friends, like hosting a Zoom dance party or creating a cooking show. They can connect with causes they care about, check in on elderly people in their lives or virtually read to younger students. Being of service gives them some control.

Q: My child is immunocompromised and seems especially stressed. How can I help?

Focus on the positive



Sinclair-McBride: An immunocompromised child may feel more stuck than others—try to affirm how unfair that might feel while making their time at home fun. Remind them the whole country is trying to keep vulnerable people safe and healthy. Focus on the factors within our control—healthy hygiene and social distancing. Doctors have been working on these measures with children who have underlying health conditions for a while.

Q: What do you recommend for families that share custody?

Establish a regular routine



Lee: Set up a schedule so kids know when they will have time with each parent. Check in before breakfast and bedtime, or find a regular time to FaceTime or Zoom with the parent who's not in the home. Plan quality time together—an online game, a craft or a virtual dance competition. If there are multiple children, try to get one-on-one time with each.



Sinclair-McBride: No matter how you approach your particular arrangement, try to keep a structure and rhythm to checking in. If you can't be with your child for a short time, remind them, "Even though we're not together physically, we're here for each other." There's also a bright side of our current situation for shared custody families: establishing new ways to connect during this time can positively shape your relationships for years to come.

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