

Children's Reactions to Changes Brought by COVID-19: Developmental Factors

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Infants live within the small world of primary relationships. If their routines are stable, and their interactions with responsive primary caregivers are frequent, they thrive. The increased presence of siblings at home during school hours may be a source of joy for babies, who often find their siblings entertaining. Infants can pick up on parental anxiety during anxious times, and might express more distress and be harder to sooth when they pick up on the anxiety around them.

Parenting Tip: Holding, rocking, and singing to babies can relieve stress, and pull the parent into the infant's small and safe world.

Toddlers are full of energy and motivated to touch and explore their environments. As they approach two, they become motivated to "oppose" and "own." Their new favorite words are often "No" and "Mine," and they are often initially resistant to adult direction. They are in process of trying out and becoming more separate and more autonomous. During this period of development, limits almost always get a dramatic response.

Parenting Tip: Toddlers may resist hand washing and other important measures that are necessary now. Parents should expect toddlers to resist while the adult takes them through the routine. Empathize with sad and angry feelings. Offer other activities and playful routines that allow the toddler to feel masterful. Outdoor play can feel empowering.

Preschool Age Children are often sensitive to changes in routine, and can lose their emotional equilibrium when there are major changes. They thrive when they know what to expect. 4- and 5-year-olds frequently feel competitive with parents who they perceive as very powerful. They may express this by always needing to win, to be first in line, or to prove their strength by identifying with superheroes and other powerful figures. Those developmental issues may intensify when children are feeling anxious or in a state of disequilibrium.

Parenting Tip: When routines change abruptly, offer simple explanations about the changes. Establish new routines so that children feel secure within them. Encourage outdoor play and opportunities for pretend play where children can use play symbols to make sense of what is going on around them. Children are very perceptive about adult emotions! They will notice if you are feeling afraid or worried. Rather than deny negative feelings, offer simple cause and effect explanations. "Sometimes I feel worried about grandma and grandpa because older people sometimes get very sick if they catch the new virus, but I know they are being very careful to stay healthy." Wait until children are asleep before watching or listening to the news.

School Age Children are often very involved in their lives outside of home. They have developed many parts of their identities beyond being daughters and sons. They are also classmates, ball players, dancers, and friends. Isolation can feel depriving and boring to some school age children, who not only miss peers and teachers but miss the activities that

have become important to their emerging identities. Children at this stage can anticipate special events and feel disappointed when there are necessary cancelations. They will be aware of what is going on with COVID-19 once they have learned to read and notice headlines, screens, etc.

Parenting Tip: School aged children will need parents to help them interpret what they are hearing and seeing concerning the virus. Parents can ask children if they are worried, have questions, etc. Help school age children understand that they are helping to prevent the virus from spreading by staying close to home, washing hands, etc.

When children are finished with online school work, suggest practicing skills that give them a feeling of pride and will help them feel ready to return to their activities when the threat has passed. Children who are feeling afraid, sad, or angry about the sudden changes in their lives may regress in the ways that they behave or cope. They may need more reassurance, support during every day routines, and empathic responses from adults. They may benefit from expressive play including acting, painting and drawing, and use of clay. Celebrations of holidays and special events at home are helpful when the usual social celebrations cannot be held within school or religious communities.

Middle School Children may feel extremely frustrated by the need to be isolated from peers. 11-14-year-olds are using the peer group to further develop a sense of self as they slowly move toward older adolescence. They tend to feel easily emotionally vulnerable. Kids at this age may express their vulnerability through dramatic outbursts, or mask those feelings by pretending that the changes brought about by COVID-19 are “no big deal.”

Parenting Tip: Offer support and empathy for children’s reactions to isolation from peers and activities. Check in with middle schoolers frequently to see how things are going for them. Check in on how peer dynamics are unfolding online. Encourage proactive activities that are possible from home, such as fundraising for good causes, virtual sports, artistic expression etc. Encourage outdoor activity so that the screen connections are not the only source feeding their self-image.