

What Do Children Need Most From Parents Right Now?

Trust your instincts and honor your family's norms and coping strategies.

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Helping kids cope with the pandemic and the changes it has caused in daily life isn't as easy as parents might like. I interviewed an expert on helping children deal with trauma and grief, Dr. Adam Carter. He is a licensed counselor and a professor at Northern Illinois University who has received grants to develop practices that help kids cope with loss.

What are the biggest concerns that children might express?

Children of any age may be fearful that they or their loved ones may die from COVID-19. The death toll is something that can be found on any television channel and is discussed regularly by well-meaning adults. Adults can help address these fears by talking about how children can help keep themselves safe (hygiene, social distancing) and how adults are working hard to keep them safe.

Children could also be grieving the loss of their "normal." Children's lives are largely regimented, which provides them with predictability, especially for younger children. When that predictability is gone, children may feel a loss of routine and the safety that comes with it. Children may be grieving the loss of their physical interactions with friends. Although their friends may still be alive, not being with them physically can present as a great loss to some children. Children may be grieving the loss of school events such as field trips, school dances, prom, graduation, plays/concerts, etc. Allow space for children to grieve these losses as they are real, and they do hurt. Often these are things children/ adolescents have looked forward to, some for years, and to have them taken away quickly does create a great loss.

How can caregivers help their children address these concerns?

First and foremost, find a safe place to process any overwhelming feelings that you as a caregiver may be experiencing. These are abnormal circumstances that we find ourselves in and it is important that we as adults acknowledge how we are feeling right now. Talk with your children about how you are feeling during these stressful times. At an age-appropriate level, discuss the feelings you are having and how you are practicing self-care to help manage them. Be comfortable saying that you do not know an answer right now. It is better to acknowledge you do not know an answer then try to fill in the blank with something that may not be true.

What can caregivers do or communicate to their children who aren't expressing their feelings or fears?

Children are experiencing a wide array of emotions right now and those feelings are manifesting in a variety of ways. Children could be experiencing fear, loneliness, loss, and anger (just to name a few) and those feelings may be manifesting in less than desirable behaviors ... especially as we are coexisting in close quarters. Check in with your child regularly regarding how they are feeling, but do not force a long conversation if your child is not in a place to have one. Children process emotion differently than adults so the best thing we can do is to honor that and create the supportive space they need to process. Allow space for your child's feelings. Children can appear to display emotions in "spurts" and this is perfectly normal. A child may want to stop talking with you as you discuss world events and choose to go and play; this is how children attempt to make sense of their world.

What is the key message that children need to hear from their caregivers?

As the news/social media coverage of the pandemic plays 24/7, we are hearing a lot about how "ill-prepared" we are to treat the virus. Children need to be reassured that their caregivers are capable of taking care of them and keeping them safe right now. Help children focus on things that are directly in their control right now and offer age-appropriate choices to help increase that sense of control. For example, "Would you like to wash your hands in the bathroom sink or in the kitchen sink?"

What is the key message that you, Adam, would like to share with caregivers?

Trust your instincts and honor your family's norms and coping strategies. One family may need a colorful daily routine chart posted on the refrigerator that covers every waking hour; another family may need to do occasional check-ins with their children throughout the day. Don't compare your own daily parenting and family norms with other families' "highlight reels" that are often the content of parents' social media posts.

What other things do caregivers need to know?

Afford yourself and your children grace during stressful times. There may be times when voices get raised and stress levels become overwhelming, but this does not make you a "bad" parent nor does it make your child a "bad" child. Make it a point to reconnect with your child after these incidents and to apologize when appropriate. Remember that it takes a lot of mental energy for a child to process their new surroundings and the changed home environment, especially during a time of crisis; things that your child may have been able to do quickly before may now require more time than usual. This is very important to remember as children are doing more schoolwork at home; they may require more time and support to do the same quality/quantity of work they were doing before school buildings closed.

Source: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/lifetime-connections/202004/what-do-children-need-most-parents-right-now>