

“Mostly, I miss my friends...”

Even though we’ve been on this COVID road together for a number of months, our thinking and behaviors still have to readjust to new guidelines and demands from time to time. But one aspect remains constant and frustrating in the midst of this pandemic - distancing from friends. Not having the ease, the frequency and the routine of interacting with friends can bring on stress. A young child’s response is often anger and irritability. When stressed, “regressions” are normal (acting younger than one’s age).

How do kids of different ages experience this crisis?

- Preschool children look to adults, especially their parents, as to how to react to and deal with stress. Parents are their role models and protectors.
- School-age children do more things on their own. During times of stress, it is important to continue their normal routine as much as possible. The “normal” shifts, with many new changes suddenly becoming routine!
- Adolescents may become too dependent, or withdrawn. It may be that they try testing the limits of social distancing. Many adapt well, stating that they are just going to “do the social distancing thing and wait it out!”

What can parents do?

- Deal with your anxiety by talking with your partner, other adults, or with a professional.
- Discuss the issues with your children when you are calm. Answer questions simply, honestly, and age appropriately.
- Limit your child’s exposure, and yours, to the news, repetitive warnings and pictures.
- Share with your child why social distancing is important outside the family.
- Some children may need repeated explanations as to why schools are closed, why they cannot have a real birthday party, or why play-dates have to be “virtual,” or outside and from a distance.
- Listen to your child’s fears and take them seriously. Acknowledge that we want to be careful because of the “sick bug.”
- Younger children may want to draw (either spontaneously or ask them if they want to draw) what they think the sick bug looks like.

- Older kids may ask questions about the symptoms; speak about the realities of the virus more scientifically.
- Look to websites such as the [American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry](#)
- Stress that medical experts are doing what needs to be done to make sure that all of us will be safe.

Missing our friends is a big deal! In-person play-dates are still canceled, playgrounds are still closed, and birthday parties are now “car parades.” Families have to adjust to the “for now normal,” while helping their children stay socially connected. As Dr. Jeanette Betancourt, leader in education and childhood development acknowledges- “Since children are spending a lot of time at home these days, they’re likely to really be missing friends from school and other parts of life. It is helpful to share with your child that you miss your friends too as a way to reinforce that these feelings are OK. There are ways to help children stay socially connected, even when they’re physically apart.”

Betancourt shares 5 ways to stay connected.

- 1. Make the most of ‘virtual’ play dates-** Video chatting is a great way to keep in touch with friends and family, but there are things you can do to help children make the most of their virtual play dates. Too many children on one screen can get chaotic, so consider limiting it to four children per call. Play with silly filters available on many video chat apps and encourage children to make up stories about their new characters or settings. Play a simple game of show and tell, or share a special snack together. In one-on-one virtual play dates, children can each create something on their own---for instance, one child can build a block house and another can use play-dough to create people and pets that will live inside.
- 2. Involve the grownups-** Invite a grandparent or other grownup to host “story time” or lead a family game of charades. At meals, set your screen up at the table, so that a friend or family member can “join” and chat with you.

- 3. You don't need to remain on a screen to stay close-** Encourage children to draw pictures and send them by mail to friends and family members. Make a fun video on a phone and send them to friends in texts or emails. For older kids, set up a shared Google document with a friend and take turns writing parts of stories.
- 4. If children are seeing friends at a safe distance outdoors, help them choose new ways of saying hello-** Children can shake both hands in the air as they do a wiggly dance, or make up their own special "hello" dances. Children can make a heart shape with their hands, blow kisses, or give themselves a hug, and pretend they're hugging their friend. To remind kids what six feet looks like (on a porch, for instance), you might put down masking tape or duct tape.
- 5. Mark milestones like birthdays or preschool graduations with something special-** For birthday parties, host a video party and invite an adult friend or family member to dress up in a silly costume, lead children in song or circle games, tell jokes, or anything that might happen in person. Look at photos of friends and talk about special times they shared and what they'll do when they see each other again. If your child is graduating preschool, create a "graduation certificate" together as a family. Take a picture to share special messages of congratulations back. It's important to celebrate milestones and keep close, even when we're apart.

School will soon dismiss for summer break. We don't yet know what restrictions may be lifted, and what may remain in place. But together, you, your children, family members and friends CAN stay connected! Be well, be safe... Our Lady of Guadalupe, pray for us!

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