

Coping with Challenging Behavior during Challenging Times

[Excerpt from an article by Jennifer Fiechtner]

Stress often translates into an uptick in challenging behaviors. What can caregivers do to help?

The current COVID-19 crisis has drastically changed daily life for many children and families. Children who once spent much of their days in early childhood programs are home with their parents who may also be coping with teleworking or sudden unemployment. Children who remain in the early childhood setting because their parents' work is deemed essential, may also have big changes both at school and at home.

Those of us who work with young children know stress often translates into an uptick in challenging behaviors. Tantrums, meltdowns, sleep disruptions, and regression are all ways that children may show that they are having a hard time. So, what can parents and caregivers do to help? Here are three ideas for supporting children's emotional development and managing challenging behaviors during challenging times, whether you are at home caring for your own children or working in early childhood programs supporting parents in vital roles in your community.

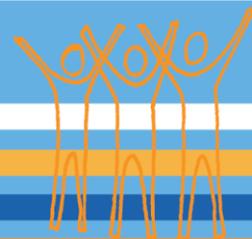
1. Create a predictable, flexible schedule that minimizes transitions.

Young children aren't planners—under normal circumstances, they don't think much about the future unless they are worried about it. But, when daily routines are drastically changed, children's worries about what comes next may show up in their behavior.

A predictable schedule with enough flexibility to accommodate your daily life can help! Children love to know what comes next—when you do the same things in the same order as consistently as you can, it helps them to relax. Make sure your schedule includes long stretches for free play, either with you or on their own, minimizing how often you ask them to switch from one task or location to another. Whether at home or at school, keep this routine streamlined, providing extra time for activities that reduce stress for children, like gross motor and sensory play. If children seem engrossed in an activity, see if you can extend it, even if it shifts your schedule a bit.

Tell children what is happening and what will happen next, offering more reminders than you usually might during this unusual time, and when there are changes to the usual order of events, be sure you let children know in advance. For preschoolers and older children at home, a visual schedule can also help them understand what to expect. It doesn't have to be anything fancy—if you have a printer, you can print black and white images of your own child eating breakfast, brushing their teeth, or doing other daily activities, and then arrange them in sequence in a place they can see them. You can even draw pictures if you don't have a printer! Then, point out the pictures as you prepare to move from one activity to the next.





2. Adjust your expectations—accommodate regression and meet children where they are.

Many families are dealing with enormous changes in their daily lives, juggling the responsibilities of working and schooling from home while trying to manage the stress of sharing spaces in ways they are not used to. Children and adults alike miss their friends and their daily routines. Living with uncertainty and anxiety around the pandemic takes a toll on our emotional energy. We are all doing the best we can in very challenging times.

Children don't necessarily understand what is happening in the adult world around them, and they may not have the language to express their worries. But, they are exquisitely sensitive to the tenor of adult emotions, and even infants may know that something isn't quite right.

A very common response to stress in children is regression. Some common areas for regression include sleep, toileting, problem-solving, and independence. Children may be clingy or demanding, or revert to behaviors you haven't seen in awhile, like climbing in bed with you at night. Even language might regress—you might hear "baby talk", or find that early literacy or math skills seem to have suddenly disappeared.

Try not to worry about these changes. Instead, meet children where they are. If your three-year-old suddenly wants to be rocked to sleep again, try to accommodate her if you can (or offer a compromise: "I can rock you for five minutes, and then I will tuck you into your bed and kiss you goodnight.") Forgo structured academic activities—instead, spend more time reading together and talking about things you see and do together, building language, literacy, and math skills in your everyday interactions instead. Offer familiar foods, keep your days simple, and offer lots and lots of opportunity to play. Take the opportunity to nurture your little ones and hold them tight just a little longer. Over time, most children will go back to their more grown-up ways as things start to feel more normal.

3. Attend to your own emotional well-being.

Author and advocate L.R. Knost wrote, "When little people are overwhelmed by big emotions, it's our job to share our calm, not join their chaos." This can be exceptionally difficult to do when we don't have much calm to share! During challenging times, it is critical that adults caring for children also care for ourselves so that challenging behaviors don't overwhelm us when they arise.

The best way to attend to your own emotional well-being varies widely, depending on your temperament and circumstances—there is no one-size-fits-all solution. For most people, extra attention to good sleep, nutritious food, and healthy movement are a good start. Reaching out with phone calls or video chats to people who can support and nurture us emotionally is also a great strategy for maintaining emotional balance, as is limiting time spent on social media. No matter which strategy you choose, the most important thing is that you take time daily to recharge, even if just for a few minutes.

To read full article: www.communityplaythings.com/resources/articles/2020/coping-with-challenging-behavior-during-challenging-times

