

# Parenting Children Who Have Experienced Loss and Grief While Navigating Coronavirus

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## Staying Physically Healthy

TAKE WALKS OR RUNS OR HIKES OR BIKE RIDES. THESE ARE POWERFUL PARENTING TOOLS UNDER ALL CIRCUMSTANCES

AS POSSIBLE, GETTING OUTSIDE WILL BE A GREAT CHANGE OF PACE AND IMPORTANT FOR CHILDREN'S DEVELOPMENT

IF YOU HAVE ACCESS TO A GARDEN, DIG AWAY AND GROW NEW LIFE THIS SPRING

IF YOU MUST STAY INDOORS, CONSIDER MINDFULNESS APPS OR YOGA CLASSES ONLINE

READ INSPIRING BOOKS AND WATCH FUNNY OR UPLIFTING MOVIES

The reality of a global pandemic brings up anxiety for nearly everyone. Few of us have experience with pandemics, and there is no clear roadmap for this one. All the “what if’s” swirling around may be causing you poor sleep, difficulty focusing, mood swings, even a physical reaction in your body like headaches or stomachaches or just sheer exhaustion. You may even find yourself moving through emotional states similar to a grieving process. Many have been experiencing shock and denial the past few weeks, perhaps trying to go about business as usual. As the realization of the restrictions set in, many are experiencing anger, sadness or depression. All of these feelings are to be expected during a crisis of such proportions and are likely a healthy way of moving towards acceptance of the situation and creating a “new normal” for yourself and your family. Acknowledge these experiences for yourself, be kind to yourself, and stay steadfast. Now more than ever is the time to keep your own oxygen mask on. Give yourself permission to take good care of yourself during this time, and you will be in a much stronger place to fend off the virus and continue to care give to your loved ones.

For children who have experienced separations, loss and trauma, the impact of this pandemic may include any or all emotions that everyone else is experiencing, yet also run deeper. Survival instincts that children and youth learned very early on may exacerbate or return. Behaviors like food hoarding or withdrawing into beds or bedrooms, yelling, blaming or being highly insensitive to others may resurface or develop. Other children may exhibit more concerning behaviors like self-soothing through head-banging or even high-risk behaviors like self-harm. Remember that children who have experienced separations, loss and trauma may have learned to emotionally catastrophize because they truly lived in harm’s way and/or deprived conditions. The despair and distrust learned from those experiences could easily get tapped as a result of this crisis, which will most often play out behaviorally.

These kinds of responses show us that children are more than typically anxious and possibly, in a state of fear about the effects of COVID-19. When people are experiencing anxiety, such as with this pandemic, we’re worried something bad *could* happen. Fear is different than anxiety because it comes from the experience that something bad *is* happening. While your family may not currently be in immediate danger, your child’s past may tell them otherwise. Their former life experiences may be tripped up in their brains and bodies and cause them to now experience the past as if it were happening in the present.

Before the concern of this virus, you may have noticed this reaction occur with just the slightest amount of “threat”, like when plans got cancelled, or not having the right cereal for breakfast-big reactions to minor stressors.

These reactions may not seem to make sense, but they actually make perfect sense to a child who is searching for control amongst what feels like chaos. And, these days, it’s certainly been easy to see and sense the chaos in the world. So, it is logical that control and fear (possibly even terror) could heighten. Remind yourself that an increase in behavioral concerns are not children’s fault-they are likely reactions to fears about losing you and/or all that they have with your family. They could even be scared about their birth families becoming sick or not having enough food. As always, what they need is our support, emotional stability and compassion.

Acknowledge the fear that this situation could be bringing up for your child(ren):

- ❖ It is important to say out loud. It *is* scary.
- ❖ Ask about specific concerns and if the child does not verbalize any, be sure to regularly pepper reassurances into daily life that remind the child that they and the family are safe.
- ❖ Keep verbal messages simple, concrete, and focused in the present- you are safe, here now, with our family.
- ❖ Be reassuring-we will be doing everything humanly possible to continue to keep you and the whole family safe (we have so much food stocked now, we could never run out!) Even if any of us get sick, we will take care of each other just like always. We will get through this and go back to doing everything like we used to.

Consistency and predictability are critical components of keeping children who have experienced separations, loss and trauma, safe and stable. Yet, a major disruption in routines is a reality that children and families are dealing with across the country right now. It will be very important to create a new schedule and routine, rather than treating this school break like a vacation. Vacations and weekends may be fun when they are planned and have an order. But, the spontaneity alone of how quickly the virus is impacting communities will cause children to feel unsettled.

As part of your routine, make sure you balance relaxation and getting some form of exercise or healthy movement. While you may not have access to your usual activities, both remain important forms of self-care and physical stress release. And, for children who have experienced trauma, exercise can also be a meaningful way for their body to continue to heal.

### **Talking About COVID-19 With Children Who Are In Foster Care Or Adopted**

Find the balance between talking openly about the pandemic and allowing kids plenty of time away from those concerns. As always, considering a child’s developmental age is very important in figuring out how to have meaningful conversations.

As with their foster/adoption story, this virus should be explained in ways that the individual child can understand, not giving too little or too many details for their level of understanding. With your words and body language, show the conversation is open for future questions/concerns, try giving the child a bit of control by asking them how much/when/if they’d like to be updated, and be sure to follow through. Just as when children grieve, know that they will probably not be thinking about COVID-19 as

## Stay Consistent and Stable

### CLEARLY OUTLINE THE NEW HOUSEHOLD ROUTINE

Identify time for schoolwork, screen time, play time, downtime, chore time, etc.

### FACTOR IN SOME FORM OF REMOTE ENGAGEMENT WITH OTHERS

Children of all ages need social interaction regularly. Keep in good touch with other children, teachers, social workers or therapists, family members, etc. (This is especially critical for a child in foster care or more newly adopted, when the constant intimacy of being homebound with just your family members may feel overwhelming.)

frequently as adults. They will be more focused on what is right in front of them, learning and growing and bickering with other children all the while.

### ***Talking with Younger Children about the Pandemic***

It may help to show younger children the concreteness of your readiness and to discuss plans if people get sick.

It may be comforting for them to help stock or organize the extra supplies in the house, and you can use this as an opportunity to stay lighthearted, playing nurse, doctor, store stocker! Others may do better with distraction and very little to no talk of the virus, especially birth to five-year-olds.

Keep news programming to a minimum around children, especially young ones. (And, for yourself, resist the urge to continue hearing the news on a loop- check in for what you need to know and maximize the little time you'll have away from children taking care of what you need to, including yourself!)

Remember that younger children believe the world revolves around them, and especially given the low self-worth of children who have been routinely hurt, they may wonder what they've done to cause the virus or make it worse. This can be particularly true if they contract the virus and then others in the household get sick. It will be critically important to reassure children before, during and after these scenarios.

Use affirming messages, reminding them it was not their fault, it could have come from anywhere, and many people are getting it everywhere. Use silly humor where appropriate to give examples and lighten the mood.

Remember that children are children. Forgetting, playing, and hanging out with friends will all be important as with any other time. Allow for this by getting creative about virtual or open-air play dates. Monitor them as you always would.

### ***Talking with Older Children about the Pandemic***

Tweens and teens do not likely benefit from guarded information the way that younger children do. If they are developmentally able to understand the concept of illness and contagion, they are likely going to look up viruses on the internet and become over or ill informed.

Create space and talk openly about whatever is on their mind and what questions they may have. Do not assume they feel safe or protected

because they say they're fine, reassurances will be as meaningful for them as for younger children, just phrased at their level.

For those who continue to think about the virus extensively, consider books and movies that discuss global crises that have inspirational characters and hopeful endings.

With plenty of time now on their hands, older children may feel more relaxed or more precocious or both. Free from the pressures of schoolwork and/or a social life, the down time can actually help quiet stress levels for youth. Let them take some time to relax from those pressures, while keeping them accountable to the routine consistency of remote learning, chores, etc.

This is an opportunity for parents and caregivers to thoughtfully approach and strengthen relationships with older children in ways they may not usually have time and focused attention for. These moments will be particularly powerful if you are in a relaxed mood, stay affirming and have no agenda to these activities. Consider listening to what music kids are into at the moment, searching websites together about things they're interested in, playing video games, wondering about friends or romantic interests, or musing about future hopes and dreams without the prompt of academic concerns or lecturing.

For older children and especially those in foster care or newly adopted, know that the reality is being hit home hard that you are indeed a true family because you are constantly in close quarters. If the child was not ready for this, or simply just has plenty of time to think now, thoughts of birth families could be occurring more strongly than usual. They may choose to use increased time and access to social media and websites as an opportunity to search or communicate. It will be important to keep a gauge on this and continue to open these conversations about it as always.