

Stressed adults and anxious young children: Supporting infants, toddlers and preschoolers through COVID-19

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Changes in routine can cause stress and anxiety in infants, toddlers and preschoolers. How young children express their stress can be challenging for parents and caregivers, and when they are also stressed it may be more difficult for them to meet the physical, mental and emotional needs of their children.

- The way infants, toddlers and preschoolers experience and express their stress can look different from how older children and teens express theirs.
- For young children, changes in routine and an increase in unpredictability can be a source of anxiety.
- Nurture the relationship you have with your young child to help them cope with and overcome emotional challenges.
- Strategies to help young children cope with anxiety include: Analyzing the situation, knowing your own limits, reassuring your child, being a role model, tailoring your expectations, and acknowledging and discussing your child's feelings.

The current pandemic has impacted families in different ways and is stressful for everyone. How infants, toddlers and preschoolers will experience and express their stress can look different from older children and teens. In particular, young children can be aware of the feelings and emotions around them. Despite the best effort of parents and caregivers, the pandemic has created a new kind of stress and anxiety for many young children.



Anxiety and young children

Many young children have had to adjust to changes in their routine or an increase in unpredictability. This is a well-known source of anxiety for young children.

In addition, when parents are stressed, it becomes more difficult for them to meet the physical, mental and emotional needs of their children. They may be less available, crankier and less patient.

Young children's reactions to stress may be expressed by behaviours that can be challenging for parents and caregivers. When parents are stressed, unresponsive or detached, their children may also show these emotions and exhibit behaviours that are less likely to lead to positive interactions. A baby may be distracted or feel anxious and appear uninterested in what is going on. This can affect their ability to learn and a parent's level of engagement and patience. Stress and anxiety in young children may also be expressed as tantrums, sleep challenges, opposition behaviours, feeding challenges and hyperactivity.

Helping young children cope with anxiety

You are already in the best position to help reduce your child's anxiety. The best way to help your baby or young child cope with and overcome emotional challenges is by preserving and nurturing the special relationship you have with them as parents and caregivers.

The first few years of your child's life are a period of rapid growth and development. During this time, your relationship with your child and the experiences you provide them are the most influential factors. What you do, and how you respond to your child affects the way they think, feel, act, develop and learn. The best way to help your child manage big, scary and often confusing feelings is to allow your relationship with them to flourish and strengthen. Here are a few strategies you can use on those days when emotions may be high for you or your child.

Analyze the situation: Here are some questions you can ask yourself.

- Have you observed changes in your child's behaviour since the beginning of the pandemic?
- What challenges are you facing and what challenges is your child facing?
- How are you coping?
- Do you have enough support?
- Are there resources in your community that could help you in practical ways, so you can focus on your child more consistently?

Try contacting local services such as the library, your Public Health Unit or EarlyON Centre and ask about ways they can support you, so you feel better equipped to respond to your young child's emotional needs. Although many services are closed to in-person visits during the pandemic, many are offering virtual programming.

Know your limits: Sometimes, when your child is safe by themselves (for example, napping) or being looked after by an alternate caregiver, don't immediately rush back to work or chores. Take a moment to yourself and recharge, to do something that makes you feel better. This self-care pause is not wasted time. It will help you be in better shape to respond to your child's cues and also reduce your stress and therefore your child's anxiety.

Reassure your child: Seeing adults upset or frustrated can be frightening to a young child, who may worry that these adults are mad at them. To help a child feel secure in their relationship with familiar adults it is important they be reassured the adult's negative emotions stem from something other than them. Find several downloadable handouts to support you at:

<https://imhpromotion.ca/Resources/A-Simple-Gift-Videos>

Be a role model: Children (even babies and toddlers) look to the adults in their lives as role models of behaviour. Model self-regulation as best you can by taking a deep breath, keeping calm and speaking to your child in a positive manner. Your child will soon learn to also be calm and use reason when they want or need something. To see examples for children from ages 1 to 5, go to: <https://childrenseechildrenlearn.ca/>

Have tailored expectations: During a pandemic may not the best time to challenge your young child. Make sure you are not inadvertently placing your baby or young child in a situation that is too difficult for them to handle. Remember what your child can consistently do and practice those skills before trying to introduce new challenges. You can find inspiration at:

https://imhpromotion.ca/Resources/Comfort,-Play-Teach/CPT-Ages-StagesMilestones_Full-Set_2019.aspx.

When introducing new experiences or challenges, allow some leniency, especially when your child is upset. Provide support to your child when they struggle instead of showing signs of frustration. Supporting your child will reinforce your relationship with them and give them the confidence to try harder. Connect with your child rather than correcting them! Often when a young child displays challenging or emotional behaviour, it is their way of telling you they need happy time with you.

Name the feelings: Every child's emotions (and yours when appropriate) should be actively acknowledged and discussed. To help young children learn about emotions read or tell them stories about feelings and emotions, or do role-playing, perhaps with puppets? Find more ideas at: <https://www.ecmhc.org/ideas/emotions.html>.

Talking about emotions and why they are happening can be helpful to you and your child. It will help your child learn how to recognize and express what they are feeling and this will help you to be attentive to these emotions and act accordingly. This will help to create a safe and strong relationship between you and your child and create the best conditions for them to learn, grow and thrive.

Resources

More questions? Below are some more resources that may be helpful:

- Healthy Baby, Healthy Brain website <https://www.healthybabyhealthybrain.ca/>
- Child encyclopedia <http://www.enfant-encyclopedie.com/>
- Caring for Kids <https://www.caringforkids.cps.ca/handouts/behaviour-index>
- Harvard Centre for the Developing Child
<https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/how-to-support-children-and-yourself-during-the-covid-19-outbreak/>
- Zero to Three <https://www.zerotothree.org/>

Please visit AboutKidsHealth.ca for more child health information.

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