

Tips for Helping Children with COVID-19 Exposure or Infections



Center for Cognitive and Behavioral Therapy and Central Ohio Primary Care:
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What is Childhood Stress?

To understand childhood stress, in general, let's talk about stress itself. Stress is an uncomfortable, heightened sense of upset that can combine sadness with fear. Usually, stress also releases bio-chemicals into our systems that lead to physical signs of stress: muscle tension, nausea or heart-burn, faster breathing, increased heart rate, flushing around the face or neck, crying out-of-the-blue, exhaustion, headaches, or problems with sleep (unable to sleep or sleeping far too long). In most situations, children feel stress in reaction to an event or person, and parents can help by dealing with the problems causing the stress.

What is Stress from Exposure to, or Infection with, COVID-19?

Being exposed to, or being infected with, COVID-19 creates a potential for trauma-like reactions. With a pandemic, until the virus is no longer a substantial threat to our health, the stressors (being exposed or testing positive) tends to keep going. The *enduring* stressor results from constant disruptions to life (e.g., school modifications, quarantine, wearing masks), on-going news coverage, and questions about potential re-infection or the possibility of infecting others if someone is exposed or tests positive.

Who is Affected by the Stress in the Family?

Everyone in the family can experience stress from the impact of the virus, including both the illness itself and the mitigations strategies (e.g., masks, social distancing, staying home). Parents become stressed by disruptions to income, work routines, increased childcare duties, and fears of themselves (or loved ones) becoming infected. Stress in parents usually reduces their ability to handle childrearing occasionally, leading parents to be less calm, quicker to react, and exhausted.

The younger the child, the more likely they will react to the stress with fears of being ill, dying, or giving it to someone else. Children faced with family members having a severe illness often begin to blame themselves ("I gave it to grandmother."), fear catching it through impossible scenarios ("I talked to grandmother on the phone, I'm going to get it through the phone lines."), or avoid contact with the family (e.g., hiding under the bed or in a closet, refusing to visit health family members). Older children will focus on issues of unfairness when they or someone they know becomes ill. Also, teens will push back against the interventions (e.g., masks, staying at home) based on their developmentally appropriate impulsiveness and strivings for greater independence.

When parents are stressed out and exhausted, and their children are equally distressed, all while being in the same house day-in and day-out, emotions can run high. If your family is experiencing these problems after being exposed or a member has been infected, here are some TIPS on what to do.

TIPS for Managing Stress from Exposure to, or Infection with, COVID-19?

Grief/Sadness: Normalize the sadness and grieving parents or children feel due to loss of contact with friends, knowing someone who may have passed away, or disruption to work relationships. Parents can encourage each other to talk privately with one another about their stress and the feelings of loss, while at the same time reminding each other that relationships and face-to-face contact will return. Parents can also help children express these feelings. Children can talk about their grief, make drawings that describe it, or listen to stories of others who felt sad but survived. As with adults, children benefit by not just talking about their difficult feelings, but also coming up with ideas about the future returning to normal.

Irrational Guilt: Many of us, children included, may feel guilty if we were exposed or became infected. Ideas like "I should have never gone to the store that day," or "If my children get sick, it is all my fault." Voicing these concerns helps us test if our ideas make sense, and, more importantly, to re-think them. During a pandemic, the chances of exposure or illness are much higher than they normally are. That means that if we are exposed or become infected, it likely occurred because the virus is so easily caught and hard to fight off. Teaching children to understand that the virus makes us ill, rather than we make each other ill, is an important way to move away from excessive or irrational guilt.

Fear of Re-infection: Children often persist in worriers about getting ill again or giving it to others. While there may be a chance of re-infection, there are also steps to prevent that from happening. The important prevention strategies also reduce the chances of getting ill a second time: these include wearing masks, frequently washing hands, not touching the face, social distancing while out, and staying home whenever possible. These steps prevent re-exposure or re-infection.

Managing Isolation: Technologies now permit each of us, including children, to stay in contact with others. Encourage the use of facetime or video check-ins to put faces to voices. Use of video games to have social contact is common among teens. Parents should find ways to get out of the house with their loved ones, going to parks or playgrounds. Social distancing and using sanitizer help prevent being infected (again?) while out and allow everyone in the family to feel re-engaged with the workaround them.

Resources and Referral

Resources: The CDC has resources at this webpage: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/daily-life-coping/managing-stress-anxiety.html>, as does the American Academy of Pediatrics: <https://www.healthychildren.org/English/health-issues/conditions/COVID-19/Pages/Parenting-in-a-Pandemic.aspx>.

Talk to your pediatrician if these tips don't help. Your doctor can refer your children to a behavioral health provider at CCBT if that next step is warranted.