

MENTAL HEALTH OF CHILDREN DURING THE COVID-19 OUTBREAK

How can the COVID-19 outbreak affect the mental health of young children?

Children respond to stressors in different ways depending upon their age, previous experiences, and the coping mechanisms that they typically use to manage stress. In the present situation, the emotional health of children might be impacted by:

- Their awareness of stress experienced by those close to them.
- Disruption of their regular structure and routine (school, playdates, physical connections, etc.).
- The way information is presented to children. This can play a significant role in impacting their mental health. Giving incomplete or age-inappropriate information can contribute to greater levels of stress in children.

Since younger children thrive on routine, they can experience distress because of a lack of structure. Older children might be especially attuned to the ways in which physical distancing is changing their typical social connections with others outside of their homes. Special attention needs to be directed towards children with special needs, past mental health concerns, and those living in abusive environments. This population is more vulnerable to developing mental health concerns without support and resources.

How can I help my child cope with the present situation?

- Since children need structure, try and work on a schedule for the day that would create a flexible routine for the family and the child. It is important to keep in mind that this routine needs to work best for your family.
- Think of innovative activities and physical exercises that the child can engage in at home.
- Offer support, reassurance, and care by listening to, and recognizing the emotions expressed by young children.

- Talk about the outbreak keeping in mind your child's developmental level, and by following their cues. Encourage the child to ask questions, and answer in ways that balance honesty (for example, we need to stay indoors to make sure we are safe) with comfort (for example, we are doing what we can to stay safe such as washing our hands; the virus is rare among children).
- It is natural for parents to have fears and concerns at this time, and children tend to pick up on their parents' feelings (see **Box 1**). Thus, engaging in self-care and managing one's own mental health concerns will help parents provide a calm and reassuring space for their children.

How can I talk to my child about the COVID-19 outbreak?

- Offer reassurance and comfort while talking about the outbreak.
- Listen to information that the child already knows, and add to it as needed.
- Make sure to check in about possible concerns and worry experienced by the child, and offer a space to talk.

Box 1. Mental health of parents:

Parents might already be experiencing stress regarding various aspects of the outbreak, such as concerns about the economy, jobs, contracting illness, and an uncertain future. In addition, parents are likely to face the responsibility of helping members of their family (especially children) to maintain a regular routine and stay connected with friends and family. In many ways, parents might be expected to continue with their typical responsibilities at work and at home, without being able to access the support that was available to them before the outbreak. These circumstances might contribute to greater levels of stress within the family.

- It can help to focus the conversation towards solution finding and building safety. This helps the child feel empowered.
- Share facts while tending to things that are within control (for example, washing hands to stay safe, physical distancing will keep us safe).
- Be attuned to your own mental health concerns and stress levels as parents, and recognise when you might need some time for self-care in order to engage in these conversations.



When do I reach out for professional help to support my child?

Keep in mind that parents know their child best, and each child responds differently to stress. Parents who have tried strategies to ease and soothe their child over a period of time without success might feel stuck and overwhelmed. Professional help should be sought out if parents have tried different strategies with no reduction in the frequency (number of times behaviour is observed) and intensity (power of the behaviour) of said behaviour over a substantial

period of time (2-4 weeks). Another indicator of needing professional support could be when the child's behaviour disrupts typical life within the family unit.

Where can I find additional information?

- Centers for Disease Control & Prevention's 'Helping Children Cope with Emergencies'. URL: <https://www.cdc.gov/childrenindisasters/helping-children-cope.html>.
- Centers for Disease Control & Prevention's 'Talking with children about Coronavirus Disease 2019'. URL: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/daily-life-coping/talking-with-children.html>?
- World Health Organisation's 'Helping children cope with stress during the COVID-19 outbreak'. URL: <https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/helping-children-cope-with-stress-print.pdf>.
- We are Teachers' 'Things to do during COVID-19'. URL: <https://www.weareteachers.com/things-to-do-during-covid/>.
- Inter-Agency Standing Committee Reference Group on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Emergency Settings or IASC MHPSS RG's 'My Hero is You, Storybook for Children on COVID-19'. URL: <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/iasc-reference-group-mental-health-and-psychosocial-support-emergency-settings/my-hero-you>.
- United Nations Children's Fund's (UNICEF) 'How to protect your family's mental health in the face of COVID-19'. URL: <https://www.unicef.org/coronavirus/how-protect-your-familys-mental-health-face-coronavirus-disease-covid-19>.

Notes:

1. These responses were first published on the Indian Scientists' Response to CoViD-19 (ISRC) website.
2. Source of the image used in the background of the article title: <https://pixabay.com/photos/tree-watering-child-planting-3335402/>. Credits: 9Inw, Pixabay. License: CC-0.

Indian Scientists' Response to CoViD-19 (ISRC) is a group of more than 500 Indian scientists, engineers, technologists, doctors, public health researchers, science communicators, journalists and students who voluntarily came together in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This group can be contacted at indscicov@gmail.com.