

# Impact of COVID-19 on Children

Since March 2020 we have all been facing several notable changes in our daily lives. As adults, many of us have been able to adapt and overcome these obstacles. While our children may have followed our lead by wearing masks, staying home, and washing their hands, many of them have limited understanding as to why we are doing this. This handout will discuss the social emotional impact COVID-19 is having on children, and how we may help.

## Confusion

Kids are known for their many questions, and we are living in a time where we cannot them. When will this end? Do I have to wear a mask forever? When can I see Grandma? Unfortunately, we don't know. As adults, many of us have been able to handle the not-knowing pretty well. Children already have a hard time understanding the concept of time and abstract concepts. A global pandemic has not made this any easier.

## BIG Changes

### Masks

Children and adults are having to wear masks where ever they go. This stops us from being able to recognize familiar faces, see facial expressions, and pick up social cues. This creates confusion and diminished social emotional learning.

### Family

For many children, especially those experiencing homelessness and poverty, extended family are a key part of their lives. These family members act as social supports and many children have lost access to them.

### Parental Stress

Children's mood is often based upon that of their parents. As early as four months old, infants can recognize tone of voice. Parental stress can also increase likelihood of abuse and neglect.

### Friends

Early friendships have several key functions including: companionship, stimulation, physical support, ego-support, social comparison and intimacy, and affection. Social distancing has affected the quality of children's friendships due to limited physical interaction.

### Outings

Most children get to leave their place of residence at least once a day to go to school. Many more get accustomed to going to the store, park, museum, etc. With most things being closed, an integral part of their routines has been taken.

### Death

It is speculated that children do not fully understand death until age nine. Young children often think of death as reversible or something that can be fixed. As adults, we know that is not true. Children tend to feel sad because others are sad or because they miss the person who has passed, but experience confusion as to why they are not coming back or why it cannot be fixed.

### School

At school, children are able to learn from qualified teachers, socialize, be guaranteed safety and food, and have a routine. COVID has changed school as we have always known it. Each of the previously mentioned benefits have been greatly affected.

### Routine

Through routine, children are able to understand what is expected of them and what to expect from their day. This leads to a sense of calm and fosters independence. Without school, the task of routine falls upon parents. Many parents struggle with this task.

### Scary Conversations

The past few months small talk, the news, etc. have all been about COVID-19. For adults this is a scary topic. For children it's scary and confusing. This can lead to an ever-present anxiety in some children.



## How Can We Help?

### Masks

Talk about masks and why we wear them. Children generally understand the concepts of “safe” and “unsafe”. Incorporate masks into play, learning, and every-day life. This will help normalize them.

Try saying things like “I am so happy to see you! If you could see my mouth, you would see a big smile!” This will help them make the connections of emotions to facial expressions.

### Family

Try to ask the same questions about family members as you would with friends. Just because they are not here doesn't mean they don't love you. Talk on the phone, write letters, drop off artwork, video chat, etc.

### Parental Stress

Just ask! A simple and direct question such as “what can I do to help you?” is sometimes all parents need to tell you how you can support them. Other times, parents are so stressed, they don't know what they need. Offer up specific services. Such as “can I write you a routine” or “would you like to check in once a week?”

### Friends

Talk about friends when they are not around. Explain that just because you can't see them doesn't mean that they do not love you. Ask questions like “If they were here right now, what would you do? Can we do that together?” or “what do you think they're doing right now?”.

If at all possible, try to get them connected via video chat. Community is just as important to children as it is to adults!

### Outings

Bring the outside in! Use pretend play to go to your favorite places. What food would you order, what movie would you see, what friends would come with you, what would you see?

### Death

When a child is afraid that they might die or that a loved one may die, reassure them that they are safe and if they become sick they will be taken care of. If a child is grieving, let them express their emotions, remember the deceased person together, and try to explain what happened in child friendly language.

### School

Reach out to teachers. Ask how to best support children that are learning from home, or if there is anything extra you can do. Some teachers will give you extra classroom supports. Working at home on a computer is hard. Try using the Pomodoro method: work for 15 minutes and take a break for five. If children are still going to school explain how it will be different.

### Routine

Give parents a copy of the schedule you follow with their children. This will give them bones to build their own schedule upon. Make busy bags or books for parents. This will help them know what to do during the educational part of their day.

### Scary Conversations

Limit children's exposure to the news. The news is often scary for young children because it is geared towards adults. Watch the news yourself and then explain. When having adult conversations, try your best to have them away from children. If you are having a scary conversation with a child, be sure that you have time to answer all questions they may have.

## Remember! Little Ears are Always Listening!

From a young age, children understand more than they can express. They are always listening, whether we know it or not. When having conversation about serious topics around children, be sure to take the time to explain it to them in language they can understand. Children also have a hard time understanding sarcasm. An offhand comment such as “We're all going to die anyway”, “I hope they catch it”, “We'll have to wear masks for the rest of our lives” may be taken Literally and add unneeded anxiety to their lives. Be sure to re-assure these worries, even if they do not speak up about them.

## Lead by Example!

Children learn by watching! Practice social distancing, good hygiene, and optimism, follow a routine, express your feelings, reach out to family and friends, etc. If we show them how we have adapted to our new world, they will be more willing to follow suit.

