

# Protecting Mental Health of Young Children and Their Parents During Covid-19

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# Goals of This Resource



- Discuss ways we can help children feel safe and secure
- Suggest ways to be emotionally supportive of young children
- Explore how to build resilience
- Provide fun and also relaxing activities for children
- Place emphasis on self-care for parents

# Assessing Our Current Situation: For Ourselves & Our Children



- We are currently living during a period of prolonged change
  - Children are not able to see their peers and teachers
  - Parents' work lives most likely are very different
  - Children and adults may not get to go to places that they are used to and enjoy
    - Parks, restaurants, grocery store, family friends and relatives, church
- Parents may be working from home and not 100% available all the time (different from typical week-ends)
  - We are relying on our living spaces to serve multiple functions: work, play/learning, relaxation, eating, wellness (sometimes the functions are at odds with one another)
- We are unsure for how long these changes will be in effect
- These changes and uncertainties can lead to stress for ourselves and our children

# Comfort in Routines & Predictability:

## Providing Structure



- Increasing the predictability of a child's day will contribute to lessening of anxiety and frustration
- We can provide feelings of safety and security by giving children structure. Ways we can provide structure and communicate expectations are through:
  - Establishing routines
  - Organizing our belongings and space

# Comfort in Routines & Predictability:

## Establishing a Routine



- Children take comfort in familiarity, some more than others
- Uncertainty can cause anxiety, so having routines and predictability will be reassuring
- Structured days with regular mealtimes and bedtimes are an important part of keeping kids happy and healthy
- Use Visual Schedules
  - Add mealtimes, bath time, and bedtime
  - They will be a reassuring reminder of things that have remained the same
- Allow for flexibility
  - Rigidity can beget rigidity
  - [Supporting Individuals with Autism through Uncertain Times - Build New Routines](#)
  - [How to cope with disrupted family routines during COVID-19](#)

# Comfort in Routines & Predictability: Visual Schedules

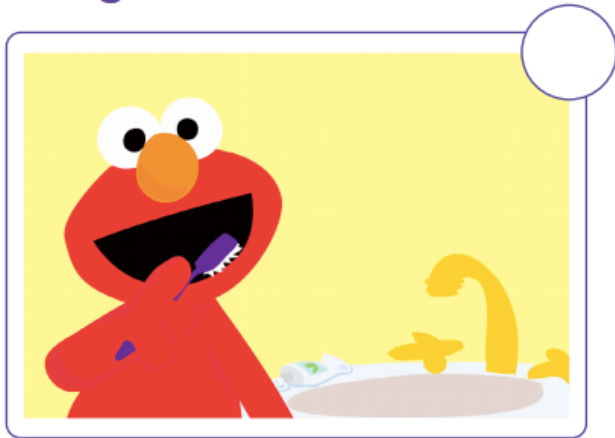


# Comfort in Routines & Predictability:

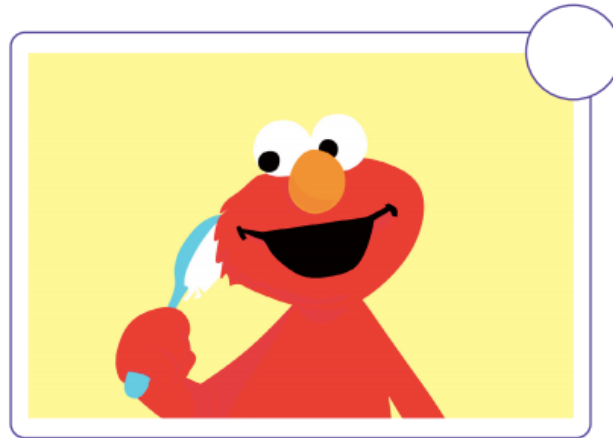
## Visual Schedules

- [Routine social stories and printable visual checklist – from SesameStreet](#) (click this link to create your own checklist)
  - Customizable
  - Morning, Nighttime, Handwashing routines, etc.

### Morning Routine



Elmo brushes his teeth.



Elmo brushes his hair.

# Comfort in Routines & Predictability:

## Pointing out What Stays the Same



- Point out that some things have remained the same which may be comforting
- Note, every day, they will still
  - Eat breakfast, have lunch and dinner
  - Brush our teeth and comb our hair
  - Get dressed
  - Have a bath
  - Read books before bed
  - And go to sleep at night



# A Note on the Importance of Sleep



- Sleep is very important for supporting mental health
- If we are tired, we can be more irritable or stressed
- Maintaining a regular sleep routine will be very important for children and adults
- Try to go to sleep and wake up at the same time every day
- There is a lot happening lately and a lot of information to process. Due to this and stress, we all may be more tired lately
- It will be important to get motor opportunities during the day in order to help maintain good sleeping habits

# Making Sure Our Children Are Heard: Helping Them Label What Is Happening



Becky Kennedy, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist in New York City provided some nice advice:

- Acknowledge the recent changes to your children's lives to validate their feelings, which is important
- Keep an ongoing list of things that have changed and things that have stayed the same
- Brainstorm a list verbally with your children— for example, “You used to go to your preschool, that has changed, but you still have mommy tucking you in into bed every night, that’s the same.”
- Doing this may make children feel less alone in their feelings because they will know others are noticing that things are not the same way they used to be

# Supporting Flexibility:

## Changes in Routine



- Point out what is different and offer playful reasonable alternatives:
  - We cannot go to visit grandma, but we can see her if we call her
  - We cannot go to the playground, but we can do some fun activities inside!
  - We cannot go to school, but we can play school, and I will pretend to be the teacher
  - We cannot go to our favorite restaurant, but we can pretend we are going to a restaurant (take turns playing waiter and set up a visual menu or pretend mommy is the waitress and daddy is the chef and treat your children to a formal meal in mommy's and daddy's restaurant)
  - Pretend to go to the zoo and set up stuffed animals around the house

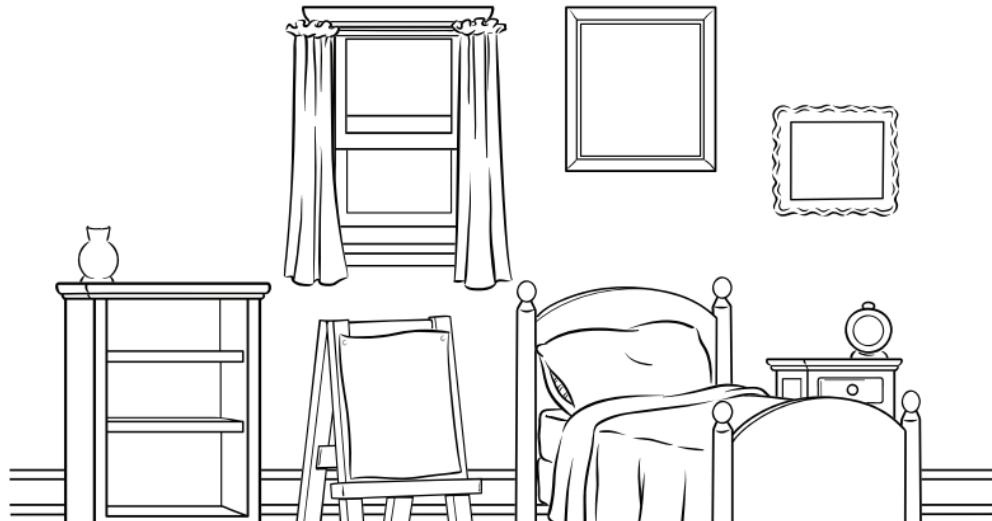
# Supporting Flexibility: Changes in Routine



## A Change of Plans

Sometimes things don't turn out exactly as planned. But they can still be fun.  
Imagine you were planning a picnic, but it rained.

*Draw some rain in the window. What could you do indoors? Draw it in the picture!*



[Change of Plans Printable Worksheet From SesameStreet.org](https://www.sesamestreet.org/parents/activities/Change-of-Plans-Printable-Worksheet)

# Comfort in Routines & Predictability:

## Structuring Our Shared Spaces

- [Michael Swisher from the APCYF presented a webinar](#) on structuring space at home and offered nice tips
- We can communicate expectations for behavior in different living spaces in how we designate that space:
  - For example, if toys are all throughout the house, that communicates that it is ok for children to play with their toys in any space
  - Now more than ever, we have a need to establish boundaries in our living spaces as we are living, working, playing, relaxing, learning, eating, exercising, and sleeping on in one place
  - If possible, designate work areas where there is quiet work and play space
  - Try to have a designated space for toys to go. If you can use visual labels that let children know where they go, they can assist you with cleaning up and it will help them learn to become more independent with clean-up routines.

# Thoughts on Activities



- Keeping things fresh by rotating toys
  - Pick a few toys to leave out for your child to play with and put the rest away out of sight. After a week or so, switch out the toys and the forgotten toys may seem more interesting.
- Provide ways for children to be helpers during the day and give them opportunities to contribute. [Follow this link provided by the APCYF.](#)

## ●● Chore List by Age ●●

### 12-18 MONTHS

#### KITCHEN

Pour glass of water using a small jug  
Scoop cereal into bowl  
Add milk to cereal  
Wipe spills with hand-mitt  
Take plate/bowl to kitchen

#### BATHROOM

Brush hair with assistance  
Brush teeth with assistance  
Wash hands  
Put away bath toys  
Pick up towel and hang on hook

#### BEDROOM

Pick up diaper or underwear  
Put dirty clothes in laundry basket  
Open curtains  
Choose between 2 options for clothes  
Get dressed with assistance  
Take off shoes and socks

### 18 MONTHS - 3 YEARS

All chores for previous ages plus...

#### KITCHEN

Prepare snack or sandwich  
Peel a banana  
Peel a mandarin orange  
Wash fruit and vegetables  
Make orange juice (or other juice)  
Set the table  
Clear the table  
Wipe the table after meals  
Sweep floor using dustpan  
Start coffee maker for parent  
Swiffer the floor  
Wipe cabinets  
Wipe baseboards

#### BATHROOM

Blow own nose  
Brush teeth and parent check after  
Wash body using travel bottles to minimize waste

### AGES 3-5 YEARS

All chores for previous ages plus...

#### KITCHEN

Unload dishwasher  
Help with baking (measuring and mixing ingredients)  
Scrub and peel vegetables (potatoes, carrots, etc.)  
Assist with cooking (stirring noodles)  
Prepare simple snacks

#### BATHROOM

Clean toilet seat after using the bathroom  
Put wet clothing in laundry room  
Wash own hair (with some help)  
Wipe out bathroom sinks

#### BEDROOM

Make bed on own by pulling up sheets & comforter  
Put clean clothes away

# Ideas for Fun at Home



- **Cooking** - America's Test Kitchen's [online cooking classes](#) are geared to kids in the kitchen and offer easy recipes for little chefs with a special “learning moment” teaching a new skill or fact. [Miniature Space](#) is a YouTube cooking channel from Japan, where tiny meals are made with miniature kitchen equipment.
- **#Drawtogether** - Illustrator Wendy MacNaughton's drawing lessons for kids of all ages are available [on her YouTube channel](#). The Crayola Experience has at-home activities for kids on its [website](#).
- **Do some yoga** - [Cosmic Kids Yoga](#) has short and fun videos, each with a colorful story for younger yogis
- **Make encouraging posters and signs** to put in your windows to support your neighbors and frontline workers- a fun craft project



# More Ideas for Fun at Home



- **Take a virtual field trip** - [See the Grand Canyon](#) or take a [train ride in the Alps](#) and have your kids make a postcard from their online adventures
- **Visit the zoo online** - Visit furry, scaly, and swimmy friends with live streams from zoos and aquariums. The Georgia Aquarium has a live webcam of their [Ocean Voyager tank](#) and the Cincinnati Zoo offers “Home Safaris” for meeting the zoo’s residents on [YouTube](#)
- **Enjoy story time** - [Oliver Jeffers](#) reads one of his stories each day on his Instagram. [StoryLine Online](#) is offering [children’s books](#) read by famous celebrities
- [PBS Activity Finder](#)



# Take Advantage of Outdoor Time



For all people, including young children, physical activity can be stress-relieving and important to overall emotional well-being. It also offers a nice change of scenery!

- To maintain social distancing, children should not have play dates or touch playground equipment.
- However, they can run, bike, go on family walks and play "I Spy," dig in the dirt, decorate your driveway with sidewalk chalk, roll down hills, jump, set up a treasure hunt in the yard, or lie back and look at the clouds.
- Activities that are usually done inside can also be moved outdoors, weather permitting, you can read books, build with blocks, and color.
- When coming back inside, make sure to wash hands thoroughly!

# Providing a Sense of Safety & Security:

## Staying Connected



- Stay-at-home measures help to slow the spread of the virus and protect our health. However, as we stay away from each other *physically*, it's important to connect *socially* to protect our emotional well-being.
- Just like for adults, it can be difficult for our children when they cannot spend time with friends
- It can feel good for us as adults to connect to our friends and family and be assured that they are well-the same applies to children. Try to keep connections open for children:
  - Schedule times on the visual calendar to call family like grandparents or cousins
  - Consider arranging virtual play dates with children in their class, a virtual "show and tell"
  - Have children draw pictures for their friends that you can take a picture of and send to their family, by phone or mail
  - [13 Activities to Make the Most Out of Video Chats With Kids](#)



# Providing a Sense of Safety & Security: Staying Connected



Elmo has a virtual playdate

# Providing a Sense of Safety & Security: Supporting Emotions



- These are challenging times for everyone, including children
- Depending on developmental levels, children are going to have a range of feelings and reactions in response to the circumstances, e.g., confusion about why everyone is at home, sad or frustrated they cannot see friends, worried someone in their family may get sick, upset by parents' stress or distress, and overwhelmed by media coverage
- Children—especially younger children may have difficulty understanding or verbalizing their feelings (fear, anger, disappointment) and may cry, have tantrums, or act out
  - They may not make the connection between their routine being off and feeling angry or disappointed. Talking with your children about their feelings will help them cope. Children need accurate and age-appropriate information as well as opportunities to ask questions.
- Avoid being surprised or upset in response to your children becoming emotional and instead use a calm and reassuring tone. First find out what your child knows and then explain things in a way your child can understand.

# Children's Possible Responses to Stress:

## Behaviors You May Notice



- Children may become more clingy (and show more sibling rivalry) or they may be withdrawn
- They may have difficulty sleeping
- Children may be more irritable or aggressive
- They may be more active because they are getting less movement during the day
- Children may demonstrate more developmentally immature behaviors and show regression, which is expected in times of significant change. Try to be understanding, nurturing, and flexible and not punitive during stressful times. Practice positive reinforcement as much as possible. Postpone major transitions such as potty training or moving to a bigger bed for the time being to keep constant those things that are within control.

# Providing a Sense of Safety & Security: Supporting Behavior



- “I know you are sad you can’t go to the playground. That's ok & I am here for you. When you are done crying, we can think of something fun to do inside.”
- Ask them how they are feeling. Listen and validate how they feel. Offer your love and support and provide reassurance.
- Provide guidance for emotional expression
  - Children will need to be taught limits when they are not in an emotional state
  - Give them plans for what to do when they are angry or sad
  - Let them know it is ok to be angry, but it is not ok to hit
  - Model appropriate management of emotions
  - Teach deep, slow breathing that eases up body’s stress system



# Helping Children Feel Empowered: Giving Reasonable Choices



- There is a lot we cannot control in our current situation
- Giving children choices can give them a sense they have some control
  - Let them pick between some predetermined, reasonable options, something special for their day such as a pajama day or breakfast for dinner
  - Let them chose which stories you read to them for bedtime
  - When they have free play time, give them several options about what they can choose
  - These options may look different during work hours when you are on conference and video phone calls. During such times, consider options of Play-Doh, coloring, and looking at books.
  - As a side note, offer choices but limit them to two or three so your child does not feel overwhelmed by the decision-making process

# Providing a Sense of Safety & Security: Creating Calming Activities at Home



- Children and parents need some quiet time each day to recharge and relax. Parents may need to work as well.
- Ideas for Quiet Times for Children:
  - Looking at books (together and alone)
  - Coloring
  - Puzzles
  - Block building
  - Pretend play with stuffed animals, dolls, trains, cars, or kitchen items for “playing house”
  - Play-Doh
  - Or brainstorm a list of activities together, write/draw them on slips of paper, put them in a jar, and have your child pick one. Your child will take pride in having helped to create the list.





# Providing a Sense of Safety & Security: Creating “Calming Corners” at Home



- If the house can be loud or busy at times, consider creating a quiet space for kids
- Provide calming activities in a basket in a calm corner in the house
  - You can build a makeshift tent with blankets and pillows or just pillows
  - Make it inviting and peaceful
  - This is not an area of punishment but an area to seek peace and control



# Providing a Sense of Safety & Security: Communicating with Your Child



- **Practice "Serve and Return"** or back-and-forth interactions. When young children “serve up” a chance to engage with them, it is important to “return” with your attention. "Serve-and-return" interactions help build developing brains as well as [resilience](#), which is critical during these challenging times.
- **"The single most common factor for children who develop resilience is at least one stable and committed relationship with a supportive parent, caregiver, or other adult."**
- Such relationships protect children from developmental disruption and help build their ability to regulate behavior, which enables them to respond adaptively to difficult situations. Resilience is built on [supportive relationships](#), adaptive skill-building, and positive experiences.
- Video: [5 Steps for Brain-Building Serve and Return](#) (Center on the Developing Child, Harvard University)

# Providing a Sense of Safety & Security: Answering Their Questions



- Very young children may not ask very specific questions
- Remain calm and reassuring
- Remember that children will react to both what you say and how you say it. They will pick up cues from the conversations you have with them and with others.
- Answer questions as simply as possible in a developmentally appropriate way
- Do not offer statistics or numbers or share your fears. A little bit of a response to the question may be enough to satisfy your child.
- Resources for talking with your children about the Coronavirus:
  1. [Coping with Covid](#)
  2. [How To Talk With Your Kids About Coronavirus](#)
  3. [Talk With Your Kids](#)
  4. [Rainbows in Windows \(an online book about Coronavirus\)](#)

## Rainbows in Windows

A book about  
big imaginations,  
big feelings,  
and sheltering in place  
during a pandemic.



Written by: Yumi  
Illustrated by: Karo Oh

# Providing a Sense of Safety & Security:

## Filtering out the Media



- Limit television and news on in the background. Try to look at this at night after the children have gone to bed.
  - These images can be scary and confusing for young children
- If they happen to see an image, focus on the positive and on the helpers



When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, 'Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.'"

-- Fred Rogers

# Building Resilience:

## Being forward thinking!



- Make plans for when things will return to normal. Be honest and let children know that the doctors will let us know when it is safe to return to places they enjoy like playground, school, playdates, and family visits
- Help children make a list of things they would like to do but cannot do now
- Planning for the future and thinking of these times will help bring hope and promote positive feelings

# Self-Care for Parents During the Virus



- Young children are very sensitive to the stress experienced by their caretakers. It affects their ability to act in their usual ways and affects their emotions. As much as possible, parents need to model a sense of calmness and make efforts to manage their own potential stress.
- Parents need to take care of their own mental health in order to be able to meet the mental health needs of their children. Make self-care a part of your daily routine and take a break when you feel overwhelmed:
  - Exercise, meditation, yoga, go on a walk, call a friend, do a puzzle, read a book, take a bath (show your kids this is your toolkit to feel better and help them come up with their own)
  - Model these positive coping strategies and model a visual chart of things that relax you and make you feel better
- You are also allowed to go easy on the rules
  - Have a picnic on the living room floor. Turn down the lights and make it cozy. It will be relaxing for you *and* help the kids drop off into a solid nap afterward.
- It is normal to feel a little stir-crazy right now
- Resources:
  - [Parenting During Coronavirus](#)
  - [Child Mind Institute: Parenting Challenges](#)
  - [Virtual Calming Room](#)



# Virtual Support for Parents

- Using technology to connect to other parents (calling others or using FaceTime)
  - What activities are they doing with their kids?
  - What has been working well for them?
  - Share experiences and struggles
  - Share bright spots

