

The effect of social distancing on kids' mental health



Kids are resilient and often rebound easier than adults during difficult times. COVID-19 social distancing guidelines may be hard on some kids. They may feel sad and miss their friends.

Kids may worry about family finances if a parent is out of work because of COVID-19. Or they may not have access to well-balanced meals. Children with existing mental health concerns or special education needs may not have access to needed resources.¹

All of this change and uncertainty means that some kids may experience increased stress and anxiety or feel depressed. Signs of depression in kids can include:

- Sudden anger,
- Avoiding friends and family,
- Feeling sad or hopeless,
- Changes in eating or sleeping habits, or
- Frequent headaches or stomachaches.²

While every kid may handle stress or feeling depressed differently, parents can help their kids' mental health.



Play together

Plan activities that include the whole family. Working together or having family game night helps kids practice social skills, such as taking turns and negotiating.³ The family gets a break from screen time to connect and have fun together.



Talk about how they feel

Give kids a safe place to talk about their feelings without fear or judgment.⁴ Let them know it's OK to feel sad about friends or activities they miss. Kids may just want an outlet to express how they feel or they may want help to work through their feelings.



Establish a routine

A predictable routine builds structure for kids and sets clear expectations.⁵ A family schedule could include time for work and learning, but also time for household chores, meals, exercise and fun.



Go outside

Take walks as a family or encourage kids to play outside, while keeping mindful of social distancing guidelines.⁵ Play catch, kick around a soccer ball, throw a frisbee or fly a kite. Playing outside gives kids a break from being cooped up indoors.



Let them connect online

Kids can talk to their friends on the phone or online, especially older kids who may be more active on various social media and messaging apps.³ Parents should use their best judgement on social media usage, but also understand that it provides kids a way to connect with their friends.

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LCN-3061570-042720

PDF 5/20 **Z01**

Order code: GP-CVKID-FLI001



¹ Lee, Joy, "Mental health effects of school closures during COVID-19", The Lancet, Child & Adolescent Health, April 14, 2020, [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanchi/article/PIIS2352-4642\(20\)30109-7/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanchi/article/PIIS2352-4642(20)30109-7/fulltext).

² Kapalu, Christina Low, "Anxiety and depression red flags while social distancing", Children's Mercy Kansas City, April 1, 2020, <https://www.childrensmercy.org/parent-ish/2020/04/Anxiety-Depression-Red-Flags/>.

³ How COVID-19 Could Affect Kids' Long-term Social Development, Healthline, <https://www.healthline.com/health-news/social-distancing-effects-on-social-development>.

⁴ Mostafavi, Beata, "8 Ways to Help Teens Cope with Social Distancing Blues", Michigan Health, April 7, 2020, <https://healthblog.uofmhealth.org/childrens-health/8-ways-to-help-teens-cope-social-distancing-blues>.

⁵ Marder, Jenny, "Keeping up kids' mental health during coronavirus", National Geographic, March 26, 2020, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/family/in-the-news/coronavirus/kids-mental-health-coronavirus/>.

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