

**Support Your Children at Home
During a Stressful Time**

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Support Your Children at Home During a Stressful Time

With families of children out of school for an extended precautionary period due to the Coronavirus pandemic, many school districts may be looking for a way to provide parents with guidance and reassurance to help them lower family stress and create a sense of order and security at home during this uncertain time. We know a lot about children's stress and what to do to avoid increasing it, what to do to help children manage it. On the following pages are some guidelines to help parents support their children while they are home from school during the Coronavirus precautionary period. Each module is a different component of support, because you may want to provide this information in smaller organized pieces.

Module I, II, and III in subsequent pages of this document.

Module I

Structure Through Schedules and Routines

For all of us, routine creates a mind and body settling effect. Routine brings predictability and familiarity. Children at home for an extended period will be missing the routine of school, so increase the level of predictable routine in the day at home. Children derive great comfort through their routines and they use the routines of the day to anchor themselves.

Create a schedule for each day and write it down on an erasable white board or large piece of paper. Make the schedule together with the children, perhaps during a morning meeting at breakfast. The act of creating the schedule can be soothing for children, especially as children witness their parents in this organized way, prepared for the day.

It helps that the schedule is visual, written down with words or icons or pictures, so children can soothe their anxiety about what is happening in the day any time they need to by looking at the schedule. Parents can answer questions about the day by saying, "Let's check the schedule." The schedule should be previewed, updated as necessary, crossed off as it is completed and reviewed at the end of the day. These rituals around the schedule help create a sense of control, order and accomplishment.

The schedule should include estimated times for meals and snacks, errands, individual/solitary activities, parent-child activities, family activities, physical activity, quiet time, chores, showers/baths, bedtime, etc. As the schedule unfolds, check things off and show the children that the day is following a fairly predictable course. If children have things they want to do (e.g., watch a show on television, play a game with an adult), instead of saying "no" (because there isn't time right now), parents can say, "Right now we're doing this, so let's figure out where we can put that into the schedule."

Consider routines for several of the items on the schedule. Establish a routine for meal times, for quiet times, for making the schedule, for chores/helping the family, exercise, cleaning up and making things neat, and any other item on the schedule that can be done in a predictable way. During meals, for example, the routine could be that everyone eats at the same time, that electronics are put away, everyone practices politeness and good manners, one person talks at a time and everyone else tries to listen, and everyone does something to help clean up after dinner.

One of the most important routines should be the bedtime routine, a time to settle and relax, be reassured, and put worries aside. If this is done the same way every night and it conforms to good sleep hygiene, it will help achieve a mind and body settling effect, sleep will be restorative, and the stress response will be reset. More detail on bedtime routines can be found in module III, Restore and Reset.

Any situation that needs to be less stressful or better organized or less filled with conflict and problems can be assigned a routine. Routines make problematic situations run more smoothly.

Children derive feelings of security from watching the adults that they depend on. Routines created by these adults can convey to children that the adults are settled and the situation is under control.

Module II

Attunement, Increasing the Quality of Adult Attention

It is easy to become distracted by one's own thoughts, by media, by friends via cell phone. That's inevitable, however, it's important that when you need to pay attention to children that you deliberately shift your focus onto them. Being present and fully aware, being attuned to your child, lowers your child's stress. Children regulate their emotions through the adults who are helping them. If the adult is distracted, detached, not fully listening, not noticing the child's emotion, it is difficult for the child to feel reassured, to self-soothe. Children increase their worry about their own problems when they are in the presence of a detached adult who is only acting as if they are paying attention, an adult who responds without listening or understanding. When children sense that adults are attuned to them they are more emotionally settled, they feel more secure.

When you are attuned to your child you are listening to and looking at your child and responding in a way that convinces your child that you have nothing else to do and nothing else to think about right now except what is right in front of you.

If you are attuned, then you are reading the emotional state of your child and responding in ways that convince your child that you not only understand what they are saying, but you also understand how they are feeling. You are expressing empathy, even if you can't make the situation better.

You can show that you are listening, that you care, by turning your body to your child, bending down to listen, making eye contact, adjusting the tone of your voice, using physical gestures of comfort (a hug, a pat on the back, a rub of the shoulder, etc.). Leave space to listen (as you respond) and slow down your rate of speech so you can measure your child's response as you talk to them and you can adjust what you say and how you say it to ensure that your children are understanding.

Respond in a timely way by temporarily making a deliberate shift in your attention away from what is preoccupying you. If you find yourself staring off, catch yourself and bring your focus back to your child, and don't look past the child while talking. Move to a quiet place if there is too much confusion around you.

When you are reading to your child, playing a game with your child, doing an activity with your child, riding in the car on errands, watching TV, taking a walk, be sure to comment on the moment. Make a remark about how nice the moment is, bring the child into the present with you ("I like this walk, because I get to talk with you about whatever you want and we don't have to worry about anything else right now.").

Put aside your phone if you plan to be attuned to your child. If you are immersed in an activity with your child, try not to continually break away to carry on adult conversations with others in the room.

Listen with patience and respond thoughtfully. Clarify what you think the child is trying to tell you, so you're sure you understand, before offering a response that can seem dismissive. Restate what you need to say if you see signs of confusion.

If you are unable to provide the quality of attention that your child needs at the time, let your child know when you can ("As soon as I finish this call, you and I can talk take that walk.").

Highly attuned time with your child helps your child with emotional regulation, with resetting your child's stress system, and it increases feelings of security while creating a set of memories that can be comforting and recalled later for a soothing effect ("That was so much fun watching that show with you. We both laughed so much.").

Module III

Quiet Time, Solitary Time, Restore and Reset

Stress causes emotional reactions, tension in the body and changes in mood. Over time the body will reset itself but there are things we can do to assist with the resetting process, using various restorative breaks. It is important to remember that good stress management is not achieved by eliminating stress. It is important to eliminate sources of stress whenever possible, but stress is inevitable. It is the sustained and chronic stress that we should be most worried, so interrupting stress and allowing the body to reset its stress response should be the focus of helping children manage their stress.

Sometimes stress is reduced by solving a problem, and if that's the case a resetting process isn't always necessary, but often problem solving is difficult when stressed, so it may be helpful to have a child complete a restorative break before trying to solve a problem.

In the schedule of the day, try to ensure that there is some solitary time, quiet time, time away from others, time away from media, time away from adult discussion, time away from noise and other sensory overload. This can be used as needed, when you see signs of stress or overload and it can be scheduled into the day (e.g., once in the morning and again in the afternoon).

Try to designate a place in the house that children can go and engage in independent activities to promote distraction. If the mind can become distracted with a focused activity (e.g., coloring, doing puzzles, solving mazes, searching for hidden pictures as in "I Spy" books, doing a craft, etc.) the mind can stop perseverating on worries and stressful topics. While the mind is on the focus topic, the body will relax.

Parents can set an example by taking the same type of breaks themselves. Children readily absorb the stress of their parents. Even without paying attention to it, the child's brain is reading the stressed state of the parent and the parent's stress is added to the child's stress. The opposite is also true. If parents can present in a calm manner the child can use the parent's calm to settle some of their own stress.

Together with your child, take a few deep breaths. Deep breaths activate the calming system in the body. It is better to model this rather than tell the child to take deep breaths. Just watching a parent do this in a calm and restorative way helps the child regulate their own breathing process.

Sleep is a restorative activity and it should be protected and supported. Ensure good sleep hygiene by establishing a regular bedtime and bedtime routine. This routine should include a period of wind down and settling activity before going to bed, even if that means watching a show on television (of course, the type of show can make a difference as well). The routine should also include putting things away, changing out of clothes, washing up and brushing teeth. When these things are done in a scheduled and routine way they condition the body and the mind to gradually power down for the day, a steady and gradual process, step-by-step. Perhaps the routine includes reading before bed or being read to. This can be a nurturing activity that helps the child feel cared for. Maybe soft and gentle music is playing and a night light is left on. The house should be quiet and the lights in the bedroom should be dim during the bedtime routine.

Going outside in the fresh air and sunlight and taking a walk in natural surroundings (e.g., walking among trees or flowers or other examples of nature) can be a resetting experience because experiencing nature reduces stress hormones.

Exercise is also a way to reset and restore. Exercise can be put into the schedule of the day and the parent and child can do this together. Simple exercise routines can be done inside without the need of any special equipment.