

Guidelines for Helping Kids Cope with Uncertain Times

The global health crisis affects everyone in some way and parents all over the world are wondering, “What do I tell my kids about this? What do I do?”

Children have an incredible capacity for strength, and parents can play a powerful role in helping their children cope with these extraordinarily uncertain times. Here are some practical guidelines for helping you help your kids.

1. Be honest about your emotions while modeling strength

Because our children copy our behaviors, they will learn to respond in difficult situations only as well as we do. Children who see their parents become overwhelmed with anxiety, fear, and grief will also become overwhelmed. At the other end of the spectrum, parents who stuff their feelings inside will deprive their kids of the opportunity to learn healthy expression of feelings.

The key is being honest about your emotions while showing that your family remains strong. For example, you can hug your child and say:

*This is a very sad time.
Sometimes I feel like crying about it and it also makes me a little afraid.
But I know that we will be okay...because we are strong.*

2. Limit your children’s exposure to media coverage

Turn the television and radio off when your kids are in the room. Repeated exposure to visual and spoken images of a crisis can create more anxiety and fear. Younger children who don’t understand how to put media coverage in perspective can become overly concerned and frightened.

3. Give them the facts about the event

Don’t try to keep the current situation a secret! First, it’s simply impossible to do. Second, humans create information when they lack it. When children only get bits and pieces of bad news, they “fill in the blanks” with their imagination. Typically, their fears, or the rumors that they might hear from their friends, will produce more anxiety than hearing the truth.

Children, even children as young as two years old, may need you to lay out the facts about the event. Tell them the basics while leaving out more sensitive details. Remember, your tone of voice must communicate compassion as well as strength.

4. Listen, listen, listen

There is nothing powerful for comforting a child than an open ear, heartfelt understanding, and a warm hug from a parent.

5. Let them know that they are safe

Our children need to hear about the thousands and thousands of wonderful people who are working day and night to keep us safe and healthy. Despite any fears or doubts that we might have, our kids need to hear and feel that they are safe.

Make your reassurances short and to the point. When parents spend too much time, say too many words, or exhibit too many emotions trying to reassure kids that they are safe, then the message can backfire. Your message will be more powerful and believable if it is very brief and to the point.

*There are thousands of people working to keep everyone safe and healthy. We are going to be okay.
Have a good day with your schoolwork. I love you.*

6. To the greatest extent possible, maintain daily routines

Daily routines give all of us a sense of predictability, control, and safety. When we stick to them, we also communicate to our youngsters that we are strong enough to keep going—and they are too!

7. Involve them in helping others

There are few things more therapeutic than helping others. Even actions that may seem small, like writing letters of support or sending a box of food to healthcare workers, can mean a great deal.

An elementary school principal who followed these tips voiced amazement at how they work. “I can’t believe how well our students are dealing with the crisis. The teachers were calm and so were the kids. Everyone is very concerned, but we are going to make it through!”

One last thought—following these guidelines can help, but it is just as important to take good care of yourself. The healthier you are, the healthier your kids will be.



Thanks for reading! Our goal is to help as many families as possible.

Dr. Charles Fay