



How to Support Our Kids During the COVID-19 Outbreak

Presented by: Dr. Robin Alter

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Answers to Participant Questions

I want to thank everyone for attending our Webinar and for all their timely questions. I have tried to answer all of them, although when similar questions were asked, I combined them with one answer. My responses are meant to be general guidelines and not specific to individual children or families, as everyone is unique. Professionals need to use their own judgement when deciding what to say or do with their clients, and parents also need to adapt these recommendations, keeping in mind what they know and understand about their own children or youth.

"Stay Calm and Carry On!"

-Doc Robin

1. How can I provide support to families I work with without in person programs?

Do phone calls, zoom or skype if you can, e mails and text messages are also very helpful. Clear it with your agency re the privacy restrictions, but if the client is OK with it, I would hope that the agency would be willing to prioritize what is important here. Privacy concerns are less important than being emotionally grounded and safe. Privacy is supposed to protect us, but if it interferes with our emotional well-being and our safety than it should be relaxed.

2. It is pretty hard to enforce a schedule with teens. Should we just let them have time to catch up with their friends and socialize on line?

Of course we can have more flexibility at this time, but we really should maintain some standards and hold on to a certain level of normalcy. It is advised that you have a schedule, but make a loose one. Maybe more time for social connecting and also for sleep, but also include time for work and clean up, as well as personal hygiene. Perhaps some family time as well. There is time for everything. Build it into a loose schedule.

3. Teenagers who don't take the virus seriously. How can I talk to these teenagers?

Some people will simply not get it from words alone. Try to show them graphs and charts, graphic images of what's going on in all the world. Some people just don't get it until it hits them directly. Tell them this is now the law, because the world has decided that life is more important than money, maybe for the first time ever, and if they go out they are not only putting themselves



at risk but putting others at risk. In Toronto now everyone will be fined \$1000. That may not mean much to them if they have no money, but it speaks to the seriousness of the offense. Ask them how they think they will feel if they find out they are responsible for other people dying, when all they needed to do to prevent that was stay home.

4. How do we build awareness and knowledge without inducing fear and stress?

This is a very important question and I'm glad it was asked. In my workshops I talk about the difference between Fear and Anxiety.

Fear— normal and sensible response to something that could realistically cause harm
Important and useful purpose

Anxiety— Fear response to events or things that are NOT dangerous, or much less harmful than the person imagines. (Like claustrophobia— fear of small spaces that really won't hurt you, or a trip to the dentist.

Stress—A physiological response to an external threat, can be real or imagined.

What we are all dealing with now is Fear and it is appropriate to feel that. Our lives are really in danger. The Fear that we feel is motivating us to take action. Our action is staying home, physical distancing, etc. This is important. We don't want to take that fear away until the danger is gone. If we relax, we are likely to do things that put ourselves and others in danger. Fear is working for us now. We need to keep it working.

5. What are signs of stress in a child?

Any sign of distress— crying, screaming, yelling, misbehaving, resisting, but also shutting down, withdrawing. There is also immediate stress and long term stress. Immediate signs of stress are often cries for help from the adult— “I can't cope, can you help me?”

But if a child is under chronic stress, for many weeks, they may shift and become depressed, give up asking for help and just resort to their own devices, which may either be aggressive behaviour— “I guess I have to take matters into my own hands,” or withdrawn, depressed behaviour “I'm just going to give up.” Other signs to look for are changes in their normal demeanour or behaviour, poor sleep, loss of appetite.

6. What if this becomes the norm for many months? Can you please share tips for adults and children studying on line.

This may very well be the norm for many months. If you are studying on line, please advise people to set up a schedule for themselves, which includes, breaks, stretch breaks for their bodies, breaks for their eyes, they need to be shut for a few seconds every hour, and breaks for their spirit and soul. Reward themselves after they've done a difficult job, with something they like to do.



7. How much information do you give 3 to 5 year olds?

I think you give as little as possible to get compliance and cooperation. You can tell them there's a sickness in the world, if they understand sickness, and that we are doing things differently so that we don't get sick. You can explain to them about how sickness is contagious, using the metaphor I suggested with how crayon or marker spreads from your hands to your clothes. But that we can get rid of it by washing it well with soap and water. The sickness goes away when we wash with soap and water. But we can't see the sickness like we can crayons, so that's why we have to stay home. This won't last forever, and after many days, the people in charge will tell us when we can go back to day care or school, but until then we have to do what we're told. Just like you have to listen to mommy and daddy, we have to listen to the government now because they are doing the best they can to keep us all safe and we are lucky that they are doing a good job.

8. Can we offer the KHST program through our organization?

Yes, all of our program guides are available to purchase on [The Psychology Foundation of Canada](http://ThePsychologyFoundationofCanada.com) site. If you would like to receive training in Kids Have Stress Too! or Stress Lessons (for grades 9-12), you can reach out to pamelasariyannis@psychologyfoundation.org and she will coordinate an online training session with you and your organization. We also provide many tip sheets and booklets free of charge on our website. If there is something specific we can help you with, please let us know!

9. What if stress is causing us to be aggressive?

Aggression can definitely be a result of stress, but that doesn't mean it should exist without limits. If it is verbal aggression, the target, the person who is being attacked, can leave the room and protect themselves from being hurt by the aggressive behaviour. If it is physical aggression it should not be allowed. You can label it, and sometimes that helps the brain to calm down. But the targeted person needs to say "I can't allow this," and do whatever they need to do to keep themselves safe, move into a safe space, call someone for help.

10. The mother of a 21 month old has died. How can it be explained to the child?

There is lots of stuff on the internet about this. I would just add that many times children don't respond to death the same way as adults do. In fact they don't have as strong a reaction, because they don't understand the implications. An adult understands that death is final and that the person won't be there for the rest of that child's life. But the child only understands that Mommy isn't here right now, someone is telling me something bad and I want Mommy because I feel scared. The child will likely forget what you've said the next day, and continue to ask for Mommy. Try to be calm and reassuring. Listen to what they say and try to respond, but also to what they do, trying to interpret their behaviour and respond to that as well. Be sure to say that Mommy loves you even if she can't be here right now. Talk about who is there to take care of them. Be as reassuring in as concrete way as possible. Offer hugs and cuddles, give food. Use a calm, soothing voice. Such a sad situation!



I don't know of any resources on how to answer questions from preschoolers about COVID 19, but the TV stations have offered some reports.

<https://globalnews.ca/news/6754047/kids-put-their-covid-19-questions-to-the-experts/>
<https://winnipeg.ctvnews.ca/province-answers-questions-from-kids-on-covid-19-1.4879271>

11. How can I maintain a sleep routine with my child at this time?

Many children don't want to go to sleep, or would prefer to sleep with their parent(s). They are simply not motivated to sleep on their own, so you have to motivate them, through some external means. You can try logic and reasoning, such as you'll have a better day if you sleep where you're supposed to sleep, but this rarely works. The motivation for this change comes from the adults, who know their sleep will be much better. Set up a chart and keep a record of where they sleep. If they get so many check marks, there is a reward— something they want. Sometimes just keeping a visible record can be motivating. Everyone in the family then can see, because the record is visible, what happened in the night. For the most part, children begin to make this change when the adult reaches their limit and says sleep is too important— we all need to get our sleep.

I was working with a family with many children and the youngest, age 3 was sleeping in everyone's bed except her own. We asked everyone to scale, on a 10 point scale, how upset they were that the 3 year old wasn't sleeping in her own bed. Everyone scaled it at 10 or even higher, even though that was off the scale. The 3 year old was very interested in their responses. When asked, "Did you know how everyone felt, how upset they were?" She responded, almost tearfully, "I didn't know. I didn't know," as she shook her head in disbelief. Everyone had been telling her in words, but the clinical team suspected that she was so cute that they probably gave her mixed messages, talking very nicely and sweetly to her, so she wasn't really getting the message. That night she slept in her own bed.

12. There's been some regression in the bedtime routine since the school routine has stopped. How can we get back on track?

Regression is very common among young children in times of stress. Don't worry about it too much. Try to have more of a routine at home during this time and perhaps the bedtime routine will follow suit. However you made it happen before, just repeat that. Progress often takes the route of 3 steps forward and 1 or more steps back, then get moving forward again.

Can you give some advice on how we can make bedtime easier for our daughter? She doesn't like the separation.

A good routine, which includes talking about the day, putting the day to rest, mentioning what you're looking forward to tomorrow, and deal with any issues that came up today which may or may not be resolved. We need to say good-bye to the day. Then mention all the love that's in the child's life, all the people who love her and are caring for him/her. If there are serious separation issues, parents can leave the child with an object of theirs, or an item of clothing, that may or may not even have their scent. You can also mention that even though you're in the next room you'll be thinking about them. I often recommend a routine where you put your worries in a box. This



day is over and you can't do anything about anything now, but tomorrow we can get back to solving problems. Right now, let's put those worries in the worry box so that they don't keep you up. I have an article on sleep on my website www.docrobin.com

13. How can I help cognitively challenged adults understand the seriousness of the situation?

Yes, this can be challenging, but tell them there is a situation happening, which we have never experienced before. There is an illness which is spreading and there are new rules so that we can keep ourselves and others safe. These are the rules– in simple terms. If we break the rules there are steep fines, so that everyone does this.

14. How can I help my daughter with school being closed and missing her friends?

Let her know she is not alone. Everyone is going through this. A lot of schools are offering school on line. Hopefully your daughter's school is one of them. Friends can be contacted through the internet– Zoom, Skype, e mail, text, social media, etc. Keeping our connections is an important way to improve our mood and reduce our stress. Also important to maintain somewhat of a routine or schedule. One of the advantages of school attendance is that it structures our day. Without the external structure we need to provide our own. Every day should have a schedule, even if it changes every day.

15. My husband and I are now working from home. We have 2 kids under 4 who demand our attention. How can we handle this?

Kids this age have very short attention spans and often want to be with or near their parent(s) and also emulate their parent(s). If she needs to work on a computer, set up a work station for him, nearby. Tell him, we both have to work now. I am going to work and you are going to work. Give him an assignment-- something he can do, blocks, trucks, whatever engages him. These are the rules-- while we're working, no talking. Be very explicit and forthright in giving him instructions. You do your work and I do mine. Figure out what his attention span is and then use a timer, so he can see how much time is left. It needs to be visible to him. This might give her small chunks of time, not unlimited time. So he will work for 15 minutes, then the timer goes off and she praises him for his work, checks on what he's done. Then do it again. She might be able to get an hour this way. Don't give up on it if it doesn't work the first time. At 4 they often need concrete rewards. So instead of just praise give him a sticker or a chip, or something he can see and touch and remark on how many chips he's earning.

The other thing they can do is take turns, if there are 2 parents. One hour is for Mom to work and the next is for Dad to work. They are doing two jobs right now, their paying job and their child care job. It's very difficult to do two at once.

Another way to make it real for him is they could both get dressed for work. Leah puts on her work clothes, and they decide which clothes Wes wears for work. That way, it is very visible that they are in work mode



16. How long do kids need to exercise indoors these days?

The recommendation is that kids get 1 hour of exercise each day, whether it's indoors or outdoors.

17. Should I be concerned my 7 year old daughter has no questions about COVID-19? She seems to be doing very well.

If she's doing well, you should be less concerned. She may not be able to formulate her questions. You could try other means to engage her in a conversation— role playing, drawing, just basic expression of feelings, use a feeling chart off the internet and ask her which pictures describe her right now. This might give you an opening.

18. How can I help my kids understand what is going on? They are 13, 10 and 8.

Carry on, Keep on Keeping On, maintain a positive attitude and continue to enjoy life, even within the confines of your home. Our kids will be paying attention to how we are coping, how we are behaving, and take their cues from us. So let's be good role models for them and be brave.