

MMHPI COVID-19 Response Briefings

Staying Mindful of Child Development When Discussing COVID-19¹

May 14, 2020 Version

During times of uncertainty and crisis, it can be hard to know what to say and how to comfort children. This tip sheet is meant to serve as a guide to help parents and caregivers talk to their children in a developmentally appropriate way that takes into account each child’s unique personality, along with their cognitive and emotional maturity.

Children 0-2	
Cognitive Development	Parent and Caregiver Tips
Infants are most focused on physical interactions with their immediate environment. Learning happens through their individual experiences, and they gain knowledge through their senses and motor movements.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This important time of child development sets the foundation for your relationship with your child. • Both caregivers and infants should stick to feeding and sleep routines. • Spend daily time talking about pleasant topics, singing, and expressing positive emotions to your infant. • Most importantly, make loving eye contact and provide positive touches.
Emotional Development During this stage, children develop a sense of trust through reliable care and affection from caregivers.	

Children Ages 2-6	
Cognitive Development	Parent and Caregiver Tips
This stage of cognitive development typically includes preschool through kindergarten. During this stage, children make remarkable advances in language, although most children during this stage still do not grasp the concepts of time or cause and effect.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wait for your child to ask questions before assuming they need information about COVID-19. Provide simple responses to questions about the changes in their daily routine. • If they ask questions about COVID-19, give a 1-to-2-sentence, factual, confident, and calmly delivered response, and then pause. • Let your child digest the initial bit of information; if they are able to form additional questions, they may be ready for additional information. Often children in this stage are satisfied with a small bit of reassurance and confidently delivered information. They can then move on to other things.
Emotional Development During this stage, children’s emotional development is focused on gaining a sense of autonomy and independence. They often want to assert control over their environment, leading to a sense of purpose.	

¹ When referring to this resource, it is important to understand that cognitive and emotional development do not always progress predictably and simultaneously; therefore, a child may be more advanced in one domain than the other domain. Also, child development should be tied to age ranges, rather than a specific age.

Children Ages 7-12	
Cognitive Development	Parent and Caregiver Tips
<p>This stage of cognitive development usually corresponds to the elementary through middle school grade levels. During this stage, children begin to realize that their thoughts can differ from the thoughts of others. Children during this stage become more able to differentiate fantasy from reality, however, most cannot think abstractly or about hypotheticals.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is no “one time” to talk about COVID-19. Talking about a new illness that dramatically changes how we live for the foreseeable future is best thought of as a series of small conversations. • Let your child’s questions guide the content of what you share and answer their specific questions. When answering questions, parents and caregivers should remain calm and express confidence that their child is safe. • Be mindful of information children are receiving from television, radio, and online. • Model and encourage healthy habits, such as washing your hands and covering your mouth when you cough or sneeze.
<p>Emotional Development</p> <p>During this stage, children are aware that they can experience more than one feeling at a time and are motivated by a sense of competence as they experience increased academic and social demands.</p>	

Youth Ages 13-18	
Cognitive Development	Parent and Caregiver Tips
<p>This stage of cognitive development usually corresponds with the high school grade levels. Youth think in a more complex and organized way; youth are able to form a hypothesis and consider abstract concepts.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listen to your teenager’s concerns. Youth at this age will be missing important experiences due to school and extracurricular closures, so it is also important for a parent or caregiver to convey an understanding of this loss, and allow their teen to talk about any stress and grief they may feel. • When discussing COVID-19, speak factually, and provide honest and accurate information. • Encourage your teenager to help keep things clean around the house or send appreciation letters to health care workers or police officers to give them a sense of purpose and importance.
<p>Emotional Development</p> <p>Youth at this stage are usually motivated to develop a sense of personal identity and independence. Peer relationships and interactions often become very important. They tend to perceive themselves as “invincible” or at low risk to threat.</p>	

Parents and caregivers should pay attention to their own mental health and limit online or television exposure when children are present. Spend daily, unstructured time with your child, allowing them to choose the activity without your cell phone nearby. Parents and caregivers can find opportunities to praise children for their responsible behaviors, such as maintaining their hygiene, making their own lunch, or completing homework, to further support the child’s sense of self. For more information visit: <https://www.texasstateofmind.org/covid-19/>.