

Tips for parents and caregivers during COVID-19 School Closures: Supporting children's wellbeing and learning



If your child is very distressed and you feel that you are unable to cope, contact a social worker or health provider in your community to ask for help and, if necessary, for a referral to additional sources of support.



(Insert contact number/helpline if available)



Note for distributing organizations:

These brief tips are for fathers, mothers or other caring adults supporting the wellbeing and learning of girls and boys affected by COVID-19 school closures. Not every idea or approach suggested will be relevant or possible in every situation.

These messages focus on supporting parents and caregivers in order to improve both wellbeing and learning outcomes for children. They are designed to compliment government-developed distance learning materials, where available.

Additional resources to accompany this guidance:

SMS Key Messages [To be developed]

Radio Key Messages [To be developed]

My Hero is You, how kids can fight COVID-19 [children's book](#) (IASC)

Individual learning and recreation kits, if available.



Why do you need these tips?

Helping parents and caregivers manage school closures

- Schools closing in your community due to COVID-19 can be stressful for the whole family.
- Supporting your children can feel overwhelming, especially as we don't know how long schools will be closed. It is normal for you and your children to feel stress, fear and uncertainty.
- Many parents and caregivers will now have additional responsibilities and tasks due to the virus.
- Remember that your family is not alone - many, many children around the world are not able to go to school because of COVID-19.
- These practical tips will support children's wellbeing and learning and help you take care of your own wellbeing during this stressful time.

Why can't we go to school?

Helping children understand why schools are closed

Explain the virus:

- Explain what coronavirus is using simple words: "You know what it's like to have a cold or the flu — how sometimes you get a cough or have a fever? The corona virus is a bit like that.
- Reassure that most people who have COVID-19 stay at home, rest and get better. Some people who have the virus can get very sick and need more help, sometimes from doctors and nurses.
- Explain that it is important for us to stay at home to protect our older family members, neighbors, friends and community – this is why schools are closed – to keep us all safe at home.

Answer questions:

- Ask children what they already know and if they have any questions. Listen carefully to children's fears and gently correct any misunderstandings they might have.
- Although it can be overwhelming, it is important to answer your child's questions about the virus. Be as honest as you can be, and if you don't know the answer, say so.
- Tell children you will let them know as soon as you have more information about schools reopening.
- Tell children that it is common to feel confused or afraid – tell them that you are there to protect and help them. Do not make false promises, for example about people not getting ill.

Working together to stay healthy:

- Explain that some people are working as doctors and nurses to take care of people who get sick. Other people are studying the virus to find ways to stop it.
- We also have a very important job to do: to stay at home and keep healthy. This is why we cannot go to school.
- Reassure your child that the schools will not be closed forever, and that you will help them to continue learning until they are able to go to school again.

Coping with closed schools

Caring for your children and yourself

Managing stress:

- This is a new and stressful situation – a range of reactions are completely normal for children and adults. Boys and girls and children of different ages will react in different ways. Some common reactions: change in sleep patterns, anger, fear, withdrawal.
- Try to be patient and find ways to manage stress for the whole family. Your family probably already does things that help you all to relax – singing, games, dancing or slow breathing can help everyone (see activities below for more ideas).
- If children are feeling very upset, you can say: "What you are feeling is very hard right now, but it is very common to react this way when you are afraid/angry/sad. Many boys and girls are experiencing the same feelings as you."
- For younger children, continue to engage in playful activities. For older children, try and talk to them about ways to manage their distress.
- Staying connected to friends, teachers, grandparents, or distant family can also help children cope – write or draw pictures to give later, send messages or speak on the phone.

Positive Care:

- Instead of scolding or punishing, use positive words to encourage your child. If you are frustrated with how your child is behaving, take a pause and breathe deeply before you respond. Show your child the behavior you want to see, for example talking respectfully or solving arguments peacefully.
- Reassure your child that going to school is very important and many people are working hard so that the schools can reopen as soon as possible.
- Explain that until schools reopen, there are lots of things to do together so they continue learning.

Caring for yourself:

- As parents or caregivers, your own wellbeing is very important, especially during this stressful time.
- Your children will feel more relaxed and will be better able to cope with the situation if you yourself are able to stay calm and healthy.
- Explain to your children that sometimes you also feel uncertain, frustrated or worried.
- Show your children how you take care of yourself when you feel this way – do whatever helps you cope the best and is healthy. Or you can try: listening to music, singing, exercising or dancing, talking or sending messages to your friends and family (see activities below for more ideas).

Keep learning!

Help your child continue learning even when schools are closed

You are already their teacher:

- As a parent or caregiver you can support children's learning even if you are not a trained teacher.
- Even a few minutes every day sitting with your child and discussing what they were learning in school is useful.
- Adults can take turns – it does not need to be only one person helping a child learn.
- Remind your child that they are still a school student, even if the school is closed.
- Supporting children to continue learning will help them feel positive about the future and ready to return back to school as soon as they reopen.

Structure the day:

- Continue your household's usual daily routine, close to the school hours if possible.
- Create a schedule with input from your child to give structure to the time between sleep and meals.
- Allow for normal chores and play time. Play is one of the best ways for children to learn and to support their wellbeing.

Keep learning simple:

- Your children may have access to learning materials through books, radio, television or the internet. If you have these resources, don't put too much pressure on yourself or your children to complete all available tasks.
- If you do not have access to learning materials, you can still help children learn:
 - *Talk to your children about your daily tasks.*
 - *Share positive memories from your own childhood.*
 - *Explain what you liked to learn at school or from your own parents or other family members.*
 - *Count aloud together, invent games or songs, or discuss a big idea or tradition.*
- Encourage your child to practice skills and knowledge that they already have.
- While academic learning is important, remaining safe and well is the most important priority for everyone. Learning how to cope with this crisis is also important learning.

Children learn from children:

- Encourage children living together to learn together. Older siblings can help explain difficult subjects to younger children. This supports joint problem solving and reinforces learning for both.
- Give your children a task to work on together. For example: draw a map of your community, list all the animals found in your area, build the tallest tower with stones, write and draw a family story.



Activities for Wellbeing and Learning

Helping children develop social emotional skills

These learning activities can be done at home without textbooks and are designed to complement formal distance learning programmes. Working on these kinds of activities will improve your child’s wellbeing and support their learning in academic subjects.

You can choose or change the activities so they are suitable for the age and interests of your child:

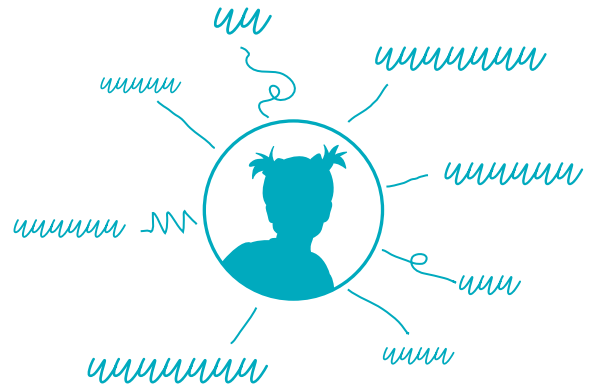


Oral or written journaling

Both you and your child can talk through your feelings: “Today I am feeling...”, “Today I am grateful for...”, “I know I am strong because...”, “When I grow up I want to...”, “If I were the leader of this country I would...”, “My happiest day was...”. For children with more advanced writing skills, taking time to reflect and express their thoughts and emotions on paper can be a great way for them to manage stress.

Word or picture web

In the middle of a piece of paper, your child can draw a picture of themselves or write their name. Draw lines coming from the center and ask your child to write words or draw pictures to describe how they are feeling about the pandemic. Once finished, ask your child to explain their drawing. Discuss how their feelings have changed before and during the pandemic and give support.



Feelings Faces

Children can create drawings of faces, each expressing a different emotion – happy, sad, angry, worried, etc. At the beginning of each day you can ask your child to select the face that shows how she or he is feeling today. After your child selects one of the faces, give her or him the opportunity to explain why she or he is feeling this way.





Belly breathing

Practice this to help your children (and you!) feel calm. Say in a calm slow voice and practice alongside your child: "Put both your hands gently on your bellies. Sit up straight but relaxed. Close your eyes if you like. Now let's breath in slowly and feel our bellies fill up with air. Our bellies should get nice and round. And now breath out and feel your bellies get small again, slowly." Count from 1 to 5 slowly while you both breathe in, and then count back from 5 down to 1 as you both breathe out. Repeat 4 times. When finished, ask your child how he or she feels. Share how you are feeling too.

Muscle relaxing

Ask your child to sit in a comfortable position. Ask them to pretend to be "frozen" by tightening their arm. Then, ask them to slowly "melt" by relaxing their arm, and imagine their stress or anger melting away. You can repeat this exercise with different body parts - such as clenching your fists, then relaxing them; shrugging up your shoulders, then letting them drop down; tightening your leg muscles, then relaxing them.



Family questions

Ask each member of your family to answer one question about each other. You can turn it into a game by guessing who each person is describing. Here are some questions: "My favourite thing about you is...", "Something I learned from you is...", "I am proud of you when...", "I look forward to seeing you because...".

Telling a story

Reading a book, telling traditional folktales or help children who are fighting to resolve their conflicts is a great way to talk about relationships, conflict and cooperation with children. Talking about these topics during the pandemic is especially important, it can be stressful for children to stay home, not see friends and have a very different routine. Those stresses can lead to feelings of frustration for everyone and fights among siblings. Explain to your child that you all have to be more patient and kinder with each other, and quicker to say I'm sorry when you've done something to upset someone:

- If there is a conflict in a story being told here are some questions to ask: What caused the conflict?*
- What do you think will happen next? Would you have made the same decisions, why or why not?*
- Do you agree with the way the conflict was solved? How could things have been done differently?*
- If a story or task requires people working together: What are some of the ways we cooperate at home? What are some of the ways we cooperate when we play a game or sport? What happens if someone doesn't cooperate? What can we do if one person isn't cooperating?*





Setting goals

To help children cope with life changes due to the pandemic, it can be helpful to set short-term goals so they can experience success and feel a sense of accomplishment. Together you can set a daily or weekly goal. After the goals have been set, if possible, write it down where the child can see it. This will help the child remember that they are working towards something, which can influence their decisions. Encourage, celebrate successes, remind them that you are proud of them.

Making choices

It is important to practice making good decisions, but to do this, children need opportunities to make choices. Everyday there are many small decisions your children can participate in making, and by involving them in this process, you are empowering them: which task to do first, which fruit to cut? Washing hands for 20 seconds is very important during the COVID-19 outbreak – ask children to help you choose a song to sing while they wash their hands.



Going back to school

Helping children prepare for school reopening

- Continue to reassure children that schools will open again. When official reopening of schools is confirmed, help children prepare to return to school by sharing information with them on when and how this will happen.
- Children may feel nervous or reluctant to return to school, especially if they have been learning at home for months.
- Remind children that they will be able to play with their friends, see their teachers and continue learning new things.
- Reassure children about safety measures in place to keep students and teachers healthy and remind children that they can also help prevent germs spreading by washing their hands with soap and coughing and sneezing into their arm.
- Prepare children so that they understand that schools may need to close again if more people get sick. Reassure them that if schools close again it is so that our communities stay safe and healthy. Continue to remind them that learning can happen anywhere - at school and at home.
- Reassure children that you will continue to support their learning even after they return to school.

Developed in collaboration:

