

Helping Children Cope with Stress and Worry during COVID-19: Information for Families of Children with Congenital Heart Disease

Many children and teens are feeling stressed and worried about the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19). This is natural. These feelings can be even stronger for children and teens with congenital heart disease (CHD) and their siblings. When we don't know much about something, like this virus, we can feel unsafe. However, there are things that parents and family members can do to help children and teens handle these feelings in a healthy way.

The Cardiac Neurodevelopmental Outcome Collaborative (CNOC) put together this information for families of children with CHD. Remember, we all handle challenging situations differently and it's important to do what feels right for your family.

- 1) Try to remain calm and reassuring** when talking with children and teens. Children and teens are looking to adults for information on how to react to COVID-19. Remind children that adults are working to keep them safe and teach them what they can do to help (washing their hands, keeping distance from others outside of the household). Try to limit adult conversations and media (television, radio) about COVID-19 around children.
- 2) Make yourself available for questions** about COVID-19 and follow your child's lead. Your child or teen is likely to have questions about COVID-19 and may ask these questions at times when you are in the middle of other things. Try to follow your child's lead and, if possible, take a break from what you are doing to answer your child's questions. Be honest and give accurate, developmentally appropriate information. It is better for information about COVID-19 to come from trusted adults instead of social media or your child's friends. Some children may not have questions or concerns and that is okay too. Every child is different and will handle this situation in different ways.
- 3) Keep a routine and set limits on behavior.** Predictable routines and limits on behavior will help children feel safe. Even though your child or teen may not be leaving the house, encourage them to continue their morning and bedtime routines (meals, showering, getting dressed, etc). It is also important for children and teens to know that adults are still in control and will respond in their usual ways if children and teens act out. You can let your child or teen know that it is normal to feel a lot of different emotions during this time (worried, sad, lonely, angry, bored), but that they still need to control their behavior.
- 4) Help your child stay physically fit.** Find ways for your child and family to be physically active (go for a walk or bike ride if you are able to keep distance from others, find free family-friendly physical activity videos online). Teens may benefit from yoga, breathing, mindfulness, and guided meditation exercises (<https://www.headspace.com/covid-19>, <https://blog.calm.com/take-a-deep-breath>). Your child is more likely to eat healthy if there are healthy foods in the house. The body and mind are connected, and your child's physical health will affect how they handle stress and worry.

- 5) **Help your child stay connected** with friends and family members. Use apps on your phone or tablet to help your child stay connected. Teens will likely do this on their own but children may need help setting up virtual play dates or video chats with grandparents.
- 6) **Have your child talk to a mental health professional.** Your child may be able to speak to a mental health professional (psychologist, social worker, therapist) using online video meetings, without having to leave the house. This is called telehealth. If your child or teen is experiencing a lot of anxiety, depressed mood, or changes in behavior (for example, panic attacks, crying a lot, behavior problems, trouble sleeping or not feeling hungry like they used to), talking to a mental health professional may help. To find a mental health professional, contact your insurance company for a list of mental health clinics that take your insurance. Call the clinics to find out if they provide therapy using telehealth and have experience working with children and teens. You can also call your child's primary care doctor or your child's cardiologist or heart doctor's office for suggestions of where to call. Many hospitals have social workers and psychologists on staff who may be available for telehealth or may be able to help you locate someone who provides telehealth services.

The links below have information about helping children and teens handle COVID-19 related anxiety:

- Center for Pediatric Traumatic Stress: <https://www.healthcaretoolbox.org/about-us/14-health-care-toolbox/tools-and-resources/602-covid19-children-and-families.html>
- National Child Traumatic Stress Network: <https://www.nctsn.org/resources/parent-caregiver-guide-to-helping-families-cope-with-the-coronavirus-disease-2019>
- SAMHSA: <https://store.samhsa.gov/product/Talking-With-Children-Tips-for-Caregivers-Parents-and-Teachers-During-Infectious-Disease-Outbreaks/PEP20-01-01-006>
- National Association of School Psychologists: [https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources-and-podcasts/school-climate-safety-and-crisis/health-crisis-resources/talking-to-children-about-covid-19-\(coronavirus\)-a-parent-resource](https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources-and-podcasts/school-climate-safety-and-crisis/health-crisis-resources/talking-to-children-about-covid-19-(coronavirus)-a-parent-resource)
- Information for families of children with developmental disabilities: <https://www.smore.com/udqm2-covid-19-preparedness>
- Information for families of children with autism: <https://afirm.fpg.unc.edu/supporting-individuals-autism-through-uncertain-times>
- American Academy of Pediatrics Video on Talking with Children about COVID-19: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FcYZWiF3PNc>
- Online books/comics that help explain COVID-19 to young children: <https://akidsbookabout.com/>
<https://www.flipsnack.com/KeshetChicago/coronavirus-social-story/full-view.html>
<https://nursedottybooks.files.wordpress.com/2020/03/dave-the-dog-coronavirus-1-1.pdf>
https://drive.google.com/file/d/1PYrKYfOBa4p-azl5z_46KJMbi1FSmL_Y/view