

Supporting our communities

Enhancing children's well-being in times of crisis

Children and young people are emotionally vulnerable during times of crisis, which can include natural disasters or in changed family and community circumstances.

A child's reaction depends upon their exposure to the event and the amount of support provided during the crisis and after the event.

The influx of ever-changing information, changes to routine and ways of living can be stress-provoking for many children and young people.

What can I do to support a child during crisis?

Discuss and seek to understand the child's and others concerns, priorities and wants, where possible, is one way of understanding the impact.

It can be helpful to be as prepared as possible for change to minimise stress and reduce the likelihood of conflict. Accommodating the changes that may be asked of us all come with potential opportunities and impacts.

Consider how your child responds to stress?

These are all normal responses your child might exhibit:

- **Be more emotional** – some children might have a feeling of being completely overwhelmed with emotion.
- **More likely to take it out on others** – some children might raise their voice suddenly, march around the house, slam doors or even become angry and violent.

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- **Become avoidant** –some children could feel overwhelmed and believe it's all too hard, so they just want to hide.
- **Pretend everything is fine** – some children can put on a brave face and act like everything is fine but deep down they feel like they are drowning.

Constantly worrying about the future creates stress. Negative self-talk or negative thoughts can have a big impact on the way we deal with stressful situations.

What can I do to support my child?

Help your child to focus on things they can control by concentrating on the following:

- **Encourage routine:** Study time, play time, down time, exercise time, and connecting time can be scheduled to provide routine and stability – find out what is important to them.
- **Focus on activities:** Discuss how helping around the house, learning a new skill, cooking a family meal, doing an activity that gives us peace or joy are all things you can control and take your mind away from uncertainty.
- **Set goals:** Achieving goals whether through daily or weekly tasks can help to stay focused and to succeed in something bigger and more purposeful.
- **Develop rituals:** Every morning set a routine to get the most out the day. During the day, encourage your child to be involved in activities to ensure that they are feeling at their best.

Consider how you will manage limited resources to ensure your child feels that their needs have been met but they also understand the needs of others.

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Supporting younger children to have positive mental health habits

You can use these tips to help you reintroduce peace, calm and habits for positive mental health in school-aged children.

1. **Breathing exercises** – deep inhale followed by a deep exhale. This gets rid of the body's build-up of cortisol (the stress hormone) and is an instant calm. Make it into a regular game and watch kids start to self-manage this exercise when they feel stressed!
2. **Play the 'my favourite place' game** and get everyone to close their eyes and imagine they are in their favourite place. Make sure everyone is hearing, seeing and feeling everything around them. Just five minutes is enough!
3. **Create a free-play art session** where the children get to express exactly what they are feeling right now – no judgements (options 1-3 make a great combined exercise!)
4. **Use music as a stress reliever**, either to calm, combined with quiet closed-eyes time, or to create an upbeat, happy, dancing around the room exercise.
5. **Embrace the therapeutic effect of blowing bubbles** (this works for kids of any age – including the grown-ups!). The deep breath exercise of blowing the bubbles combined with the distraction of the bubbles, is an instant stress reducer.
6. **Get outside in the fresh air** – rain, hail, or shine! Movement and activity outside provides instant stress relief. Combined with a discovery or learning exercise allows the brain to forget about stressful thoughts.
7. **Think about fun resources that you might need to entertain the kids** including books, board games, educational materials, and craft supplies. Your child's school might have worksheets and resources to borrow.

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There are also great online resources and Facebook groups to support you.
Some examples include:

<https://www.wbir.com/article/news/education/resources-to-keep-your-kids-entertained-and-learning-while-theyre-stuck-at-home/51-3a73c594-a52c-4cdc-8ed9-4334fa64bc20>

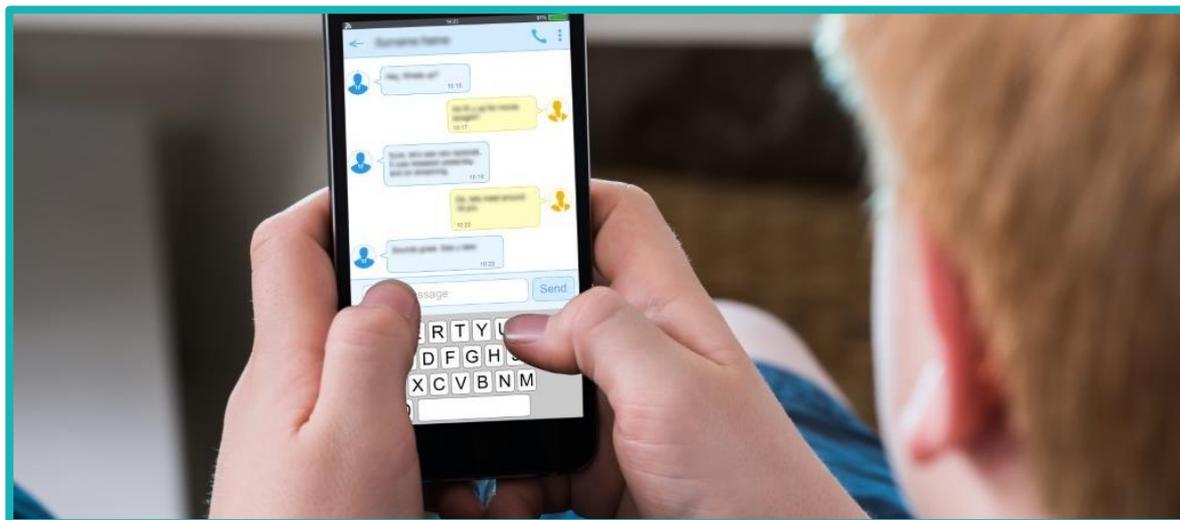
<https://www.theartnewspaper.com/feature/artful-resources-to-keep-kids-entertained-at-home>

Supporting teens

During a crisis, young people may spend more time with their phone or devices if they have them.

If you are concerned by this, encourage limiting daily social media use by using screen time apps and creating a schedule for other activities. Suggest that they unfollow unhealthy sites and snooze friends or extended family members who may be causing distress with posts.

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It is important that young people create a daily routine that allows self-care and exercise of the mind and the body to help deal with the mix of emotions. Support your children to focus on what they can control now, rather than what they cannot control.

Some tips to help support well-being are provided:

- **Check in and ask about how their eating habits and sleep is going.** Sounds simple however, some healthy nourishment and a good night's sleep will always make children feel better.
- **Encourage breathing.** A useful exercise is "Take a deep breath, breathe in, out and repeat". This simple exercise that you can do anywhere, any-time, reduces the cortisol in your body and helps replace it with the happy hormones.
- **Use mindfulness activities.** Ask the question "What's your favourite place in the world? The beach, your friend's back yard pool? Now use the exercise where you suggest that they close their eyes for 5 minutes and go there imagining all the sights and sounds that make it the best place to be. Ask if they feel better?"

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- **Spend quality family time.** Get together at dinner, talk about the day, and have some light-hearted banter.
- **Encourage getting into the flow.** Whether your child is the sporty, arty, crafty or the musical type. What is that thing that takes your child somewhere else? The mental distraction and physical distraction help to clear the mind and promotes a better night's sleep.

Possible reactions of children and young people



If you are concerned, it is important to talk to your General Practitioner (GP) or school counsellor. A referral can be made to a qualified counsellor such as a psychologist or social worker with specialist skills in seeing children and adolescents. Your child can also call the Kids Helpline for support.

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For children

Kids Helpline – 24/7

1800 551 800

A counselling service for kids and young people.

For young people

Interrelate

1300 473 528

Children and young people's response and adaption will be influenced by their developmental stage, previous experience, and individual personality. Below is a list of signs to look for that might indicate your child is being affected by this stressful and traumatic situation, and how you can provide support.

Pre-school age: Children 2-5 years

Possible reactions	How to support
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fear of being alone • Disrupted sleep/changes to sleep patterns/nightmares • Speech difficulties • Loss of bladder/bowel control, constipation, or bed-wetting • Change in eating patterns, including loss of appetite • Increased temper tantrums, whining, or clinging behaviours 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Patience and tolerance • Provide reassurance • Encourage expression through art and crafts, play, storytelling • Allow short-term changes in sleep arrangements • Facilitate calming and comforting activities before bedtime • Maintain regular family routines • Avoid media exposure • Regression in child development (e.g. crawling rather than walking)

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School age: Children 6-12 years

Possible reactions	How to support
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Irritability, whining, aggressive behaviour • Clinging behaviour • Change in sleep pattern/nightmares • Loss of appetite • Physical symptoms (headaches, stomach aches, etc.) • Withdrawal from peers, loss of interest • Competition for parents' attention • Forgetfulness about new information (e.g. chores, what was learned at school) • Increased statements of worry or fear 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Patience, tolerance, and reassurance • Play sessions and staying in touch with friends • Regular exercise and activity • Engage in fun activities (puzzles, games) • Participate in structured household chores and maintain family routines • Set gentle but firm limits • Encourage expression through play and conversation • Limit media exposure • Talk about what they have seen/heard including at school • Reward positive behaviours often

Adolescent age: Young people 13-18 years

Possible reactions	How to support
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Physical symptoms (headaches, rashes, etc.) • Sleep/appetite disturbance • Agitation or decrease in energy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Patience, tolerance, and reassurance • Encourage continuation of routines

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ignoring health promotion behaviours• Isolating from peers and loved ones• Avoiding/skipping school | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Encourage discussion of COVID-19 experience with peers and family• Stay in touch with friends through online, phone, video games (in moderation)• Participate in family routines, including chores, supporting younger siblings, and planning activities and strategies to enhance health promotion behaviours• Limit media exposure, talking about what they have seen/heard including at school• Address any stigma or discrimination occurring and clarify misinformation |
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Children with disabilities

Children with disabilities will likely act based on their developmental age. Reactions may include a combination of those previously mentioned.

The best way you can help is by providing increased access to comfort measures and offering factual information with short, clear answers to questions within the scope of their understanding.