



AMERICAN
PSYCHOLOGICAL
ASSOCIATION



LEARNING AT HOME

Fostering Children's Emotional Well-Being During COVID-19

As families grapple with the COVID-19 pandemic, parents and children alike are being confronted with a number of emotions. Some emotions may be positive – such as a child being excited that their big brother is home from college. Other feelings may be negative – such as an adolescent feeling angry that they are not allowed to go to their friend's house due to parental concerns about health. Regardless of the feeling, we can attend to children's emotional well-being.

The idea of emotional well-being recognizes that our emotional experiences are important and influence other aspects of our lives. Below are several tips with examples of how we can help foster children and adolescents' emotional well-being during this challenging time.

TALK ABOUT YOUR VALUES. Children may wonder why parents are emphasizing school work or, more generally, why they do the things they do. Talking about the reasoning behind a choice can help children understand their parents' values.

Example: Through a community organization a family made sandwiches on several occasions for people who are homeless. Before, during, and after, the parents discussed their values with respect to giving to others in need.

ESTABLISH AND MAINTAIN A ROUTINE

In times of stress and turmoil, a routine can help satisfy our human desire for comfort and predictability. Establishing and maintaining routines can help children cope and can make schoolwork time more productive.

Example: Every weekday, the children have breakfast, draw for a half an hour, do a Khan Academy lesson, and work on a longer-term project, like International Week. During International Week, each sibling presents what they've learned about a particular country and helps make a family meal representative of their country.

MAINTAIN RELATIONSHIPS, AS POSSIBLE, WITH FAMILY AND FRIENDS. Many normal parts of children's lives have been upended. There are many friends that they are no longer able to see. Providing continuity in relationships can help children feel better now and in the future when they return to school.

Example: Parents arranged for their son and a friend to play the Pokémon card game over Zoom. They also read the same book and talk about what they liked.

TALK ABOUT YOUR FEELINGS AND CREATE SPACE FOR CHILDREN'S FEELINGS. We all experience emotions, some positive, some negative. Adults may feel that they should "put on a happy face." Though we do not want to expose children to negative feelings that are strong, frequent, or unregulated, it is okay to let children know when you are feeling frustrated, down, or sad.

Example: When a mother realized she was not going to be able to visit her sister, she expressed to her child that she was really disappointed. When her child expressed sadness about not being able to play with friends, the mother acknowledged these feelings and connected them to her own experience.

HELP CHILDREN SEE FEELINGS IN OTHERS. It can be challenging to notice and understand that two people in the same situation may feel differently about it. By noting when another person may be feeling a way that is different than your child, you can foster empathy and perspective-taking skills.

Example: When on a Zoom call for school, some of the children didn't have anything positive to say about being at home, although this child was fine schooling from home. Afterwards, the parents pointed out that sometimes we feel differently about things than others, and that we can even feel differently about the same thing on different days.

RECOGNIZE AND CONVEY THAT (MIS-)BEHAVIOR IS OFTEN ROOTED IN EMOTIONS. When feeling sad, angry, or even hungry, a person may withdraw, lash out, or be disagreeable. Making this connection between emotions and behavior can help parents and children better understand the behavior, and help the child change their behavior.

Example: After her sister repeatedly said disrespectful things to her brother, the mother realized that her daughter was upset because the week-long, school-based art class she had been looking forward to had been cancelled. The mother talked with her daughter about her feelings by saying "It is understandable that you would be upset and disappointed." She then talked about what needed to change in her behavior by saying, "Just because you are upset, it is not okay to lash out at other people. Let's talk about other ways to handle your feelings."

PRACTICE GENEROSITY AND THANKFULNESS. We all have something to give others, whether that is a bag of flour, help on a homework assignment, or mowing a lawn. When people give to others and recognize the good things in their lives, they are happier and more satisfied. Helping children to see these things in their own lives can help them be happier and get through tough times.

Example: Parents worked with their children to write a note of thanks every week. The family talked about what they were thankful for with past teachers and coaches. Each child decided on a person and wrote a note and included a picture to be sent.