

Addressing Families' Social-Emotional Needs During COVID-19

The COVID-19 outbreak has introduced a new set of challenges and struggles for students as well as for families as they now adjust to new routines, social distancing, and closures of onsite education and care services. Adjusting to these abrupt changes may also introduce new mental, social, and emotional hurdles to overcome as traditional supports and structures may no longer be available through the same service delivery models on which families have often relied.² While many districts have prioritized and quickly addressed logistical supports to address needs related to academics, nutrition, and facilities, districts must now focus on implementing additional supports address families' social, emotional, and communication needs.³

CASEL CARES: Strategies for Being Your Best Possible

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CASEL has introduced a weekly webinar series for adults to help support and address the variety of social and emotional needs during COVID-19.¹

Click [here](#) to watch the March webinar.

Children's well-being depends on the well-being of their parents and other caregivers. Caregivers must take care of themselves so they have the internal resources to care for others.⁴

As families shift to changes at home and lean on their parents and caregivers who may now be assuming additional responsibilities, parents and caregivers can follow these guidelines developed by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL):

Guidelines for Parents and Caregivers to Establish Socially and Emotionally Supportive Environments



- ✓ Pay close attention to your own feelings of stress or anxiety.
- ✓ Acknowledge and support children in processing their full range of emotions and concerns, while offering calm and reassurance.
- ✓ Provide age-appropriate information and accurate answers about the news while limiting excessive television or social media.
- ✓ Share with children what you're doing to keep them safe.
- ✓ Whenever possible, provide consistency in daily routines including meals and bedtimes.
- ✓ Practice patience when routines are necessarily disrupted, which can lead to potential behavior issues or meltdowns.
- ✓ Help children and adolescents think of creative ways to maintain their friendships and social connections.
- ✓ Come up with fun alternatives to show signs of affection while minimizing the spread of germs.
- ✓ Proactively reach out to schools and community organization to support you in meeting any additional needs your family may have, such as access to meals or support services.

Source: CASEL⁵

Families are now establishing new routines and adjusting to the changes that daily life now requires during COVID-19. As such, they should prioritize their emotional health to cope with the crisis proactively and to identify when further emotional supports within the family require further or more urgent intervention.⁶ As families and adult caregivers adjust to new norms, they can follow the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC's) steps for emotional coping:⁷

Take care of your body – try to eat healthy well-balanced meals, exercise regularly, and get plenty of sleep.

Connect with others – share your concerns and how you are feeling with a friend or family member. Maintain healthy relationships and build a strong support system.

Take breaks – make time to unwind and remind yourself that strong feelings will fade. Try taking in deep breaths. Try to do activities you usually enjoy.

Stay informed – when you feel that you are missing information, you may become more stressed or nervous. Watch, listen to, or read the news for updates from officials. Be aware that there may be rumors during a crisis, especially on social media. Always check your sources and turn to reliable sources of information like your local government authorities.

Avoid too much exposure to news – take breaks from watching, reading, or listening to news stories. It can be upsetting to hear about the crisis and see images repeatedly. Try to do enjoyable activities and return to normal life as much as possible and check for updates between breaks.

Seek help when needed – if distress impacts activities of your daily life for several days or weeks, talk to a clergy member, counselor, or doctor, or contact the SAMHSA helpline at 1-800-985-5990.

Talking to Children About COVID-19

It is important to remember that children look to adults they trust in times of stressful events. While the natural inclination of caregivers may be to shelter children from the realities of the COVID-19 pandemic, experts recommend that it is important to acknowledge some level of concern. There are several advantages to having age appropriate conversations with children about the pandemic that include the opportunity to teach them about positive preventative measures like proper hand washing and social distancing. It also enables parents to create an open dialogue where children are encouraged to talk about their fears, giving them a sense of control and helping to reduce anxiety. By investing in these conversations, adults also have the opportunity to model problem-solving and to focus on the positives like spending more time together as a family and engaging in fun activities together.⁸

Recommendations for Age-Appropriate Explanations

Age Group	Explanation
Early Elementary School Children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide brief, simple information that balances COVID-19 facts with appropriate reassurances that adults are there to help keep them healthy and to take care of them if they do get sick. Give simple examples of the steps people make every day to stop germs and stay healthy, such as washing hands. Use language such as "adults are working hard to keep you safe."
Upper Elementary and Early Middle School Children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> This age group often is more vocal in asking questions about whether they indeed are safe and what will happen if COVID-19 spreads in their area. They may need assistance separating reality from rumor and fantasy. Discuss the efforts national, state, and community leaders are doing to prevent germs from spreading.
Upper Middle and High School Students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Issues can be discussed in more depth. Refer them to appropriate sources of COVID-19 facts. Provide honest, accurate, and factual information about the current status of COVID-19. Engage them in decision-making about family plans, scheduling, and helping with chores at home.

Source: National Association of School Psychologists⁹

Regardless of the child's age, it is important for adults to be good listeners and to encourage them to talk about what they are thinking and feeling. These conversations provide an opportunity to correct misinformation and help alleviate the fear and anxiety they may be feeling.

Additional Resources for Adults:

- [How to Talk to Your Kids About Coronavirus](#) PBS Kids
- [Talking to Kids About the Coronavirus](#) Child Mind Institute
- [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): How to Talk to Your Child](#) Kids Health
- [Talking to Children About Coronavirus \(COVID 19\)](#) American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry
- [Talking to Children About COVID-19](#) Sesame Street

Resources for Kids:

- [Coronavirus](#) BrainPOP
- [The Kids Guide to Coronavirus](#) Nickelodeon
- [ROBert explains the corona virus to children](#) PLAYMOBIL®

Communicating with Social and Emotional Needs in Mind

When communicating with families to provide information and updates regarding COVID-19, districts should implement a cohesive, fast, and ongoing communication strategy to ensure that families receive accurate information addressing how developments may impact all components of student and family life that the district touches. When keeping families' social and emotional needs in mind, developing a responsive and thorough plan for communication plan can help to alleviate the stresses of uncertainty.¹⁰ To communicate to families and the community with social and emotional needs in mind, districts can mirror similar communication practices as practices through a trauma-informed lens. Specifically, districts can focus on the following communication practices and considerations:

Communication Consideration	Districts should...
Physical Safety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Emphasize their prioritization of physical safety and clearly communicate the reactive practices and preventative measures they are implementing or have already implemented. Solicit feedback from stakeholders to determine if there are any unmet needs.
Emotional Safety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Manage expectations by communicating quickly to demonstrate a concern for mental and emotional wellbeing. Be flexible yet communicative when needing to shift responses or actions as developments continue to unfold. Consider nonverbal communication or other communication taking place in platforms that may not be as easily visible. Dedicate time to soliciting families' social and emotional needs and perceptions during the crisis to understand where needs may be or may have shifted.
Peer Support and Relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Encourage families to continue to lean on each other for crucial social support. Provide families with platforms to communicate with each other and to share information in real time.
Trust and Transparency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Communicate with families regularly and be transparent in those communications, even if the message is uncomfortable to give. Explain the rationale for decisions, even if families indicate dissatisfaction or push back against necessary practices. Provide an easily accessible and publicly available place to communicate information and alert families when updates have been made. Ensure that communication from the district is sensitive, consistent, and cohesive to help establish trust.
Voice, Choice, and Empowerment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To the extent possible, involve families in decisions that they can influence. Provide families with a choice among options, when possible. Solicit ideas and input from families that may help inform and tailor the communication approach.
Cultural Responsivity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recognize the differences in how various groups or subgroups may respond to the crisis or to communications. Review potential outcomes and consequences of communications or decisions for various subgroups. Consider the various populations throughout the district and what their unique needs or mindsets may be.
Collaboration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consider the impact of the communications and decisions on other organizations in which families are involved. Actively collaborate with those other organizations to develop community- and family-minded pieces of communication that reflect similar messaging. Initiate new or alternative approaches to partnerships or collaborations with families or family organizations in the community that can provide insight into their needs.

Example Communications with Social and Emotional Family Supports

Throughout the COVID-19 crisis, districts have implemented different approaches to embedding social and emotional supports effectively into overall communication plans for families. To demonstrate what including and prioritizing social and emotional supports for families can look like during the crisis, please refer to the following COVID-19 communication plans at the following districts or education organizations by clicking the links below.

[Cypress Fairbanks](#)

[Independent School District](#)

The district provides a short resource page to include:

- Frequently updated messages from the superintendent;
- Online learning curriculum materials;
- FAQs in both English and Spanish;
- Information on the Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA);
- Updates on school meal pickup; and
- A list of reputable mental health resources.

[Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction \(OSPI\)](#)

The OSPI provides districts as well as families with guidance and resources including:

- Frequently updated information on supporting various student groups;
- Academic resources to support ongoing learning aligned with state learning standards;
- Parent guides to understand the school's role during closures; and
- Guidance on preventative COVID-related practices addressing social and emotional needs of students and families.

[Hingham Schools](#)

The district provides updates resources specifically to support parents, families, and other caregivers to include:

- Guides to discussing COVID-19 at home with students of various needs;
- FAQs for families and community members;
- Weekly updated student emotional health resources;
- Academic and general learning engagement toolkits for families; and
- Contact information for local and distance mental and medical supports.

Virtually Supporting Families' Social and Emotional Needs

In addition to establishing socially and emotionally supportive environments at home, family members may also be experiencing their own mental health needs to be able to continue to best support their families. The following resources provide parent and caregiver-centered supports in which families can consider engaging to support their own social and emotional needs.

- [Care for Caregivers: Tips for Families and Educators](#) (National Association of School Psychologists)
- [Live Daily Facebook Video Chats with Child Mind Institute Expert Clinicians](#) (Child Mind Institute)
- [What's Available: Second Step Resources During the COVID-19 Pandemic](#) (Second Step)
- [CASEL Cares: Sow Now What? Supporting SEL at Home](#) (CASEL)

¹ “CASEL CARES Initiative: Connecting the SEL Community.” The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, March 2020. <https://casel.org/covid-resources/>

² Bartlett J., Griffin J., and Thompson D., “Resources for Supporting Children’s Emotional Well-being during the COVID-19 Pandemic.” ChildTrends, March 2020. <https://www.childtrends.org/publications/resources-for-supporting-childrens-emotional-well-being-during-the-covid-19-pandemic>.

³ “CASEL CARES Initiative: Connecting the SEL Community.” The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning., Op. Cit.

⁴ Quoted verbatim from Bartlett J., et. al., Op. Cit.

⁵ Bolded text quoted verbatim from “CASEL CARES Initiative: Connecting the SEL Community.” The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning., Op. Cit.

⁶ “Taking Care of Your Emotional Health.” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, September 2019. <https://emergency.cdc.gov/coping/selfcare.asp>

⁷ Figure adapted from bulleted list, quoted verbatim from Ibid.

⁸ “Helping Children Cope With Changes Resulting from COVID-19.” National Association of School Psychologists, 2020. <https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources-and-podcasts/school-climate-safety-and-crisis/health-crisis-resources/helping-children-cope-with-changes-resulting-from-covid-19>

⁹ Table quoted verbatim from Ibid.

¹⁰ “COVID-19 Considerations for a Trauma Informed Response for Work Settings (Organizations/Schools/Clinics).” Trauma Informed Oregon, 2020. <https://traumainformedoregon.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Considerations-for-COVID-19-Trauma-Informed-Response.pdf>

¹¹ Ibid.