



Handle with care: Ways to support your child's mental health

This pandemic has lasted much longer than many of us expected. Despite our best efforts to help kids adapt and stay well, there are still challenges. Some children continue to learn remotely. Others have gone a long time without play dates, after-school activities, or visits with extended family. In the face of so much disruption, it's natural to worry about how your kids are holding up.

When it comes to mental health, the day-to-day ways that you care for your child matter. Your support nurtures their well-being and helps

them cope with life's ups-and-downs. You play a key role in noticing problems and responding to them. As the pandemic carries on, here are some tips to help you care for your child's mental health.

Check in

Every day, take a few moments to check in with your child. Ask them about their activities and interests, and how they've been doing. Encourage them to talk about their thoughts, feelings, and emotions.

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Checking in with your child can feel more natural while you're doing an activity together, like eating a meal, driving, or walking the dog. If it seems like they just aren't comfortable opening up with you, help them find a trusted adult they can turn to if they need help, like a teacher, coach, grandparent, Elder, or faith leader.

Reassure your child that you're there for them, no matter what. Give them your full attention—really listen to what they say. It's okay for your child to feel sad, mad, or upset about something. You may not agree or understand, or it may seem silly to you, but their difficulties are real to them. Try not to judge. Instead, show empathy and compassion.

Surround them with calm, warmth and safety

As much as you can, provide a positive home environment that nurtures your child's healthy growth and development. Here are some things you can do:

- Love and accept them
- Encourage and support their interests, efforts, strengths, and passions
- Create predictable routines and set clear boundaries
- Help develop their social emotional skills, like how to handle challenging emotions, set goals, and solve problems
- Involve them in decisions that affect them
- Support and model healthy habits, like eating well, staying active, and getting enough sleep

- Unplug from technology as a family, especially at mealtimes, bed time, and during play
- Go outside together—unwind, move your bodies, and spend time in nature

Help them learn about stress

Teach your child that stress is a natural response to challenging situations. Help them figure out what stress looks like and feels like for them—for example, they might feel nervous, shaky, or nauseous. Stress looks different for everyone. Recognizing it is the first step in handling it.

Help your child explore different ways to cope with stress. Role model the techniques that work well for you, and give them an opportunity to learn and practice what works for them. Here are some techniques you can try together:

- Physical activity, like running, dancing, or stretching
- Calming activities like yoga, art, or music
- Going outside, even for just a few minutes
- Breathing exercises like starfish breathing or box breathing – learn how with this 5-minute video: [Stress explained: Elementary edition](#)

For more information about mental health, visit:

- [Stress in children and teenagers](#)
- [Your child's mental health](#)

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Be proactive about mental health

You know your child best. Ask yourself how they are doing at home, at school, and with friends. Watch for changes in the way they think, feel, or act. Keep an eye out for physical signs of distress, like headaches or tummy aches, sleeping problems, or lack of energy.

If your child is experiencing distress that's intense, long lasting, or causing problems in daily life, there are caring professionals and programs that can help. Many are low-cost or free.

- Your family physician can be a great first point of contact. Ask them about local options, like psychologists, social workers, support groups, or community organizations.
- Your child's teacher may be able to help. Ask them about supports for mental health at school, like counsellors, success coaches, or child and youth specialists. Many schools also offer mentoring groups or peer support networks.

- You can visit ahs.ca/helpintoughtimes for a directory of services, phone numbers, and virtual supports for handling financial pressures, unexpected challenges, and stressful situations.
- You can call **811** to speak with a registered nurse, any time of day or night.
- Your child can contact Kids Help Phone any time, to talk about anything:
 - By phone: **1-800-668-6868**
 - By text: Text **CONNECT** to **686868**
 - Through Facebook Messenger:
Visit KidsHelpPhone.ca/Messenger

If your child is talking about suicide or has engaged in suicidal behaviour, don't leave them alone. Call **811** for support. If anyone is in immediate danger, call **911**.