

Kidpower Emotional Safety Tips for Families during the Pandemic

By Jan Isaacs Henry, Executive Director, Kidpower of Colorado

The COVID-19 pandemic and the disruption it causes in our lives can feel overwhelming for both adults and children. **Just as taking care of our physical well-being is essential, so is taking care of our emotional safety.**

Children take their cues from their trusted adults during stressful times about how to respond, and our response can set the tone in a household. Taking care of our own mental health is important to our own well-being, key to helping our children navigate ways to cope with their own feelings about the current situation, and also vital in helping them react to future stressful events.

Our hope is that these ideas and tips from Kidpower can help.

What to expect?

Everyone responds differently to stressful situations.

Avoid the expectation that our family members' responses will be exactly like our own. We will likely look back on this time as a prolonged traumatic event. The definition of a traumatic event is a highly stressful or shocking

experience that causes intense fear or helplessness. How we respond to trauma can depend on our backgrounds, how close we are to the situation, and our mental health history. Current trauma can wake up past traumatic situations and we may find ourselves thinking of troubling events that we haven't thought about in a long time. Understanding this can help us use tools to support ourselves and our loved ones in positive ways.



What might we expect to see in ourselves or our kids? Be prepared for emotional and behavioral changes. We may see an increase in worry; difficulty with sleep, eating, and concentration; nightmares; worsening of current health issues; anger; irritability; and loneliness. Young children's response may look like extra clinginess, regression in behavior or skills, and increased meltdowns. Older children and teens may look like sadness, anxiety, or depression but also may manifest itself as disrespectful or disruptive behavior. Increased tantrums, moodiness, and acting out behavior (in adults and kids) may actually be how anxiety shows up. Some of us may feel it in our bodies in the form of headaches, digestive issues, tiredness, racing thoughts, muscle or joint pain, and increased startle reactions.

So how do we protect our emotional safety?

Be gentle with yourself. There is no way to do this perfectly. And likewise be gentle with your family members. There is no rule book for this event because we haven't experienced this before. You are doing the best you can during a very difficult time. Talk ahead with your family about what all of you

may feel and the importance of recognizing that you are in this together. Make a point to say out loud that you all will make mistakes because stress is running high. Give yourself and your kids a wider berth for mood changes. Identify that big feelings are normal and create a plan for dealing with them when they come up. Allowing ourselves to be human and also to apologize can be very useful, lifelong skills.

Validate and name the experience and the feelings associated with it. Talk with family members and check in often. This is important for yourself and also for your kids. Provide many opportunities to listen to children no matter how small their concerns may seem. In Kidpower classes, we teach parents to ask their kids periodically, “Is there anything you have been wondering or worrying about that you haven’t told me?” And then we ask parents to listen patiently. This is one way to open up the lines of communication so that kids know their parents really care about what they are feeling. Kids may need your help to actually find the names for feelings they are experiencing. There are many helpful, printable charts that you can find online of people’s faces matched up with emotions to help young children identify feelings. Drawing, painting, writing, and music can all be excellent ways to express feelings.

Help young people to express their emotions without making them take care of your feelings. Get support from other adults for your very real feelings so that you can help children understand and work through theirs. When big feelings come up, try to respond to kids in a calm, consistent, and nurturing way. Kids are emotionally safest if they believe their adults are calm and in control. Reassure your child that they are safe, this is temporary, and that it is okay to have feelings. Give extra support and reassurance. And again, recognize that everyone is doing the best that they can.

Connect with others virtually and regularly. While we are distancing physically to maintain the health of our communities, it is important that we do not distance socially. We are social beings and connection to others contributes to our mental health. Reach out virtually, by phone, text, video visits, and in creative ways. This is an opportunity to let others know what they mean to you and this will benefit both of you! One family we know created a birthday video for a 5-year-old who missed having his celebration with friends and families. They asked his dearest people to make a short video of their birthday wishes that they edited together. He had the opportunity to hear songs, poems, jokes, and giggles which lifted his spirits and virtually brought the party to his house. Help children figure out their own fun ways to connect with friends and family. Sending drawings and words of support to people who need it can be helpful. In my area+, families put stuffed bears out on their front porches and in windows so that kids could go on a “bear hunt” to identify and count all of the bears in their neighborhoods while out for walks or drives. This helped create a fun way to feel a sense of community and connection to others.

Establish a routine and be okay with changing it up. Sticking to a regular schedule can be helpful because structure and consistency may be useful during times of stress. Keep regular times for meals and sleep if possible. We all can benefit from having a plan for the day and knowing what is going to happen next. However, flexibility is also equally important. Our children feeling loved, safe, and secure is more important than any set or rigid plans. Parents who are teleworking may find it useful to have a space in the house as a designated workspace that is set up just for that purpose. Kids can also have a space for school work that is specifically theirs. This may be a time that you relax the rules about screen time for kids especially when many parents are juggling working remotely, parenting, and online school. Teens may use their devices as a life-line to friends and sustaining these relationships is important. For

younger children, monitor online activity and content (not all screens are alike), remind kids about online safety rules, and make sure you have parental controls in place. Take breaks for active play and true connection which is what kids need most.

Set boundaries around media exposure including social media. While it is important to stay informed, too much media may increase anxiety for yourself and your kids. The World Health Organization recommends that people seek news updates no more than twice a day. Social media often promotes worrying information and is rife with disinformation. Be mindful of conversations between adults that kids may overhear and that may promote worry.

Identify ways that are personally helpful for you and your family to reduce stress. This can help boost our immune systems too. Allow yourself opportunities for sleep, exercise, fresh air and sunshine, breathing and stretching, meditation, and breaks from screens. While we are grateful for opportunities to connect with others for work and socialization through screens, we need to take breaks from them because they can be exhausting. Make a list of stress reduction and mindfulness activities that work for each family member as one size does not fit all. In our Teenpower workshops, we teach teens skills to feel calm inside particularly in situations where they may be triggered. One of these techniques is called “getting centered”. We coach students to sit in a chair, close their eyes, and simply feel their feet on the floor. We ask them to turn inward to notice the sensations in their bodies, any tightness or tension. We coach them to pay attention to their breathing and then take a long, slow breath in through their noses, first filling their lower lungs and moving to their upper lungs. Then holding their breath to a count of “three” and exhaling slowly while relaxing the muscles in their faces, jaws, shoulders and rest of the body. These types of deep breathing exercises are researched-based techniques that help us regulate. There are many available online apps that may be useful to help teach and coach.

Slow down and recognize the opportunities in a difficult situation. This pandemic will have far-reaching impacts on our lives, some of which are positive. Animal shelters are reporting empty cages because so many animals are being adopted. Some friends are describing having time to do things they never had time to do before both in the work setting and with activities or hobbies. Some are reaching out to others that they haven’t talked to in a very long time and deepening those connections. Families are doing things together that seemed to have slipped through the cracks of our very busy lives like hiking, biking, reading books, doing puzzles, and making art. And many are engaging in acts of kindness, empathy, and generosity. Even if we are physically distanced, it seems like many of us are slowing down enough to really see each other. In my own family, we have had weekly zoom calls with family members, ages 5 to 94, in locations all over the world. We do not believe we would have had these virtual group gatherings if not for the current global crisis.

Try to find alone time. This is easier said than done when there may be multiple people in a small space or little ones who require a lot of attention. The ways we may have done this in the past may not be available now. We have to make intentional plans about self-care. This could be as simple as a walk, a shower, a drive, or reading a novel. If you have a partner at home, switch off childcare duties if possible so everyone gets a break, even if brief. Allow all family members to take on jobs so that one person isn’t shouldering all of the responsibility and each person can take a break. Kids also need time to play or read alone, and do school work on their own.

Find healthy ways that you and your family can be in control. The current health situation can leave people feeling helpless and out of control. All family members can benefit from opportunities to regain their sense of control. Shift the focus to what you CAN do. This may be as simple as giving kids choices like which game to play, what direction to head out on a walk, or what to have for dinner. Research shows that volunteering is good for your health and gives you meaning and purpose. Gestures to both help others and show gratitude to responders on the front lines can be also helpful. Some communities have put handmade hearts in their windows to communicate appreciation to those people performing essential duties. We have heard heartwarming stories of friends involving their families in sewing protective masks, checking in on neighbors, dropping off food to elderly friends, writing letters to first responders, and virtually volunteering. Sit down with your family and discuss a family plan for making a difference. This can be helpful to counteract the feelings of helplessness we may have.

Make future plans. When we feel less in control, it can be helpful to think about next steps both close in and further away in time. Have a family conversation about what you would like to do in the next few days and also for when the health related restrictions are lifted. What might be a fun walk to take outside? Can we do an online exercise class together? How about a board game tonight or an inside scavenger hunt? A cooking project or a science experiment? For future planning, what might our family do for a vacation, a sports activity, or an in-person reunion when we are able?

Get help when needed. Asking for help for yourself or your children is actually a great sign of strength. Your mental health is every bit as important as your physical health. Recognize that this time is hard for everyone and you are not alone. Mental health providers are actively providing support through technology and you can be directed to resources through your own physician, your child's school system, or mental health organizations. For immediate support:

<https://coloradocrisiservices.org/>

<https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/>

At Kidpower, we are deeply committed to doing our part to help by greatly increasing online services so that everyone, everywhere can learn the skills, strategies, and safety plans we teach. Visit our [Online Learning](#) page for webinars, online workshops, and videos for you and your loved ones.

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