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FAMILY CORONAVIRUS COVERAGE

How to keep kids positive through the pandemic

Plus, why staying positive might help them become better learners.

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When New York writer Nora Zelevansky learned her six-year-old daughter was playing “hotel restaurant,” the details surprised her. “She said that everyone needed to be laid off, that she was going to get fired too, that there wouldn’t be enough money, and that one of her stuffed animals was hoarding food,” Zelevansky says. “Usually her stuffies are donning capes to save the world or dressed up for birthday parties. They’re not getting fired from their jobs.”

May is Mental Health Awareness Month, and parents are understandably concerned about the [impacts of COVID-19 on their children’s own mental health](#). They have good reason. Kids already have a hard enough time regulating feelings because the frontal lobe (the part of the brain that controls rational thought) develops through adolescence. But research also shows that trauma—like intensified fear surrounding a life-changing event such as the pandemic—can affect brain formation, leading to problems with regulating emotions later in life.

“Studies are starting to show that when we’re more positive, it increases interconnectivity between nerves in the brain,” says Ashok Shimoji-Krishnan, a child and adolescent psychiatrist for Kaiser Permanente in Factoria, Washington. That means kids’ brains work better when they’re thinking positively. So kids who are in a positive frame of mind are more able to handle, say, a tricky distance-learning assignment.

Positive thinking also increases the levels of feel-good hormones like serotonin and norepinephrine, which prime the brain to seek more of the same positive vibes. “By being positive, we promote more positivity down the road,” Shimoji-Krishnan says. Here are some ideas from the experts on maintaining your child’s positive outlook.

Signs to look for

Zelevansky tried hard to shield her two children from scary details. “But I had no idea how much they were absorbing,” she says. The trick is to look for subtle signs that your kids might be sliding into negative thinking.

“Anxiety looks different in kids than adults,” says developmental psychologist Cynthia Smith, director of graduate studies for the Department of Human Development and Family Science at Virginia Tech in Blacksburg. “You might see kids being more emotional

and clingy, or asking a lot of questions.”

Shimoji-Krishnan, who’s also the child mental health lead for Kaiser Permanente—Washington Region, agrees. “Younger kids might be more overt, with more tantrums, whining, and crying. They might be more on edge. They might question a bit more, argue a bit more.”

Older kids will likely show subtler signals. “They might not be interacting as much with the family, playing their favorite video games, or hanging out with their friends online,” Shimoji-Krishnan says. “You might see more withdrawal, quietness, irritability, and emotionality.”

Yet all kids seem to have one reaction in common. “Kids who are sliding down into negativity might not sleep as much, or oversleep all the time,” Shimoji-Krishnan says. “Some kids might eat a lot more than usual. They might crave sweets or carbs. Or they might not want to eat as much.”

How you can respond

The most important thing parents can do may be the hardest: staying positive themselves. Shimoji-Krishnan says it’s critical to try to manage moods when we’re with our children because mood is, well, contagious.

“Kids feed off what they see,” he says. “It’s really important that parents take the time to check themselves. If parents can’t keep themselves calm, they’re going to struggle with calming anyone else down.” As a father of young children, Shimoji-Krishnan acknowledges that this can be tricky. He suggests reaching out to a partner or friend, or grabbing a moment to process things before you interact with children.

Then, just do what you’ve been doing: Make yourself available.

“For younger children, playing games with them will mean a lot because they’re missing out on the classroom socialization,” says Smith, who’s also the head of Virginia Tech’s Children’s Emotions Lab. “Try to find some dedicated time to be with them, and let them take the lead. Asking, ‘What would *you* like to do?’ gives them a sense of control when everything feels a bit out of control.”

Through play, kids will often act out what they’re feeling or thinking. “So you can comment, ‘I noticed you’re playing that someone is stuck in the house. What were you thinking about?’” Shimoji-Krishnan says. “That can be an opportunity for kids to comment in a really neutral way without pressure to answer.”

If your child doesn’t have much to say, that’s OK. “Let them talk at their pace,” Shimoji-Krishnan adds. That goes especially for teens. “If you overstep your boundaries, they’ll shut down,” he says. Instead, find out what they need. “Say, ‘I’m really glad you want to talk to me. Do you want me to listen, brainstorm with you, or offer suggestions?’ That way, you know what the guardrails are.”

Keeping up a routine, even a loose one, can make a big difference too. “Kids might be acting out because they’re out of their routines,” Smith says. “They’re missing their teachers, they’re missing their schools.”

Shimoji-Krishnan emphasizes scheduling—not overscheduling. “Just something that tells kids what the plan is can be helpful—like, ‘We have TV time here or an art project here,’” he says. “And have breaks with open time.”

Top ways to get happy

One idea for keeping kids positive is to help them practice gratitude. “That’s one of the best ways to change their mindset,” says Fimi Haddadian, a school psychologist and co-founder of Bluejack Kids, a center for social emotional learning for elementary students in Encino, California. In fact, multiple studies show that feeling gratitude might also boost heart health, make people happier, and even improve sleep.

Haddadian recommends that right before bed, kids name three things they're grateful for from the day. Teens might want to keep a gratitude journal.

Helping others is an easy way to reverse negativity. According to a 2017 study from the journal *BMC Public Health*, volunteering is directly related to better mental health and less depression. "Every day at 2 p.m., my 12-year-old daughter does a virtual art activity with her five- and six-year-old cousins," Haddadian says. "She feels like she's helping the kids, and they look forward to it." Parents can also consider having kids write letters or draw pictures to seniors in nursing homes or children in hospitals, sew non-medical masks to donate, or clear out a closet for items to give to a family shelter. (Here's what you should know about DIY masks and ventilators.)

Parents can also encourage kids to replace negative thoughts with alternative positive ones. "Have kids write down the negative thought on a balloon," Haddadian says. "Then they pop it and replace the thought with a healthier one." So if the first thought was "My friends will forget about me," the positive replacement might be "I can call my friends now, and we'll be back together as soon as it's safe." Kids are literally popping away the negative thought and reinforcing the positive.

Children can even give their negative inner voice a name. "It's a way to become conscious of it," Haddadian says. "I call mine 'Bertha.' So I'll say, 'Oh, there's Bertha again, telling me to feel scared.'" A child might respond, "Bertha, I'm strong. I can get through this."

And in a really panicky moment, parents can help kids with a simple breathing exercise, which can calm them down and make room for positive thoughts. "Pretend you're smelling the flowers, then blowing out birthday candles," Haddadian says.

Zelevansky has been doing guided meditations with her kids at night and says that's helped, as have regular chats. "The truth is that we all have good days and bad during this," she says. "So all we can do is keep giving them hugs. And I try to tell them several times a day: You are safe."