

## **How to Help Children Develop Emotional Resilience during Coronavirus**

**Xiaoyan Zhang and Mary Kate Lee**

A dark cloud of uncertainty looms over our nation, and yet many of us continue to bear responsibility for people who rely on us to take care of them. The great uncertainty we are facing has left many of us anxious, stressed, defensive, and short-sighted. We do not yet know how coronavirus will affect our society in the short term, let alone the world we leave for our children. We understand that children are more vulnerable than adults. They depend on adults for safety and security, and many adults do not feel safe or secure themselves. Children as young as infants and toddlers are keen observers of people and environments, and they notice and react to stress in their parents and other caregivers, peers, and community members. Although the risk of severe illness due to COVID-19 is lower for children, they are more vulnerable than adults to the emotional impact of traumatic events that disrupt their normal lives. Coronavirus has disrupted nearly all aspects of our lives, threatening both adults' and children's sense of structure, predictability, and security.<sup>1</sup>

But there is good news! With consistent support and age-appropriate responses, children can be incredibly resilient. However, children who do not receive appropriate support and nurturance during this time could be at risk of developing significant mental health problems. Even as we continue to juggle multiple competing responsibilities and endure our own stresses and anxieties, parents and non-parents alike need to be especially conscious that we are raising the next generation and shaping how our society's children will deal with future adversities. We are all in this together and must do our part to support America's families during this challenging and uncertain time.

### **Preparing Children for Crisis**

Social and emotional learning (SEL) is defined as the process through which young children (ages 0-5) “form close and secure adult and peer relationships; experience, regulate, and express emotions in socially and culturally appropriate ways; and explore the environment and learn all in the context of family, community, and culture”.<sup>2</sup> Research has shown that improving social and emotional skills in childhood have both short-term effects on children and long-term impacts on adult life. Later life impacts include being more likely to graduate from college, better physical and mental health, and higher paying employment opportunities.<sup>3</sup> Emotional resilience is one important aspect of SEL and the key to ensuring our children are able to adapt to the long-term side effects of coronavirus and future adversities. As a nation we must ask ourselves: *Are we raising emotionally resilient children?* We need to think broadly about how our responses to this pandemic are shaping the adaptability and coping mechanisms of our children.

*As a nation we must ask ourselves: Are we raising emotionally resilient children?*

### **Supporting Children's Emotional Resilience Development at Home**

Social-emotional learning typically takes shape in school, as children learn to appropriately interact with their peers, begin to understand peer group dynamics, and become socialized to interact with

authoritative figures besides their caregivers. In addition, children learn to think for themselves, ask questions, and experience the outcomes of “good” and “bad” behavior. Resilience is built during these years as children learn to adapt to teasing and mistreatment from peers and discipline from teachers. This is crucial for a child’s long term social-emotional resilience. With children being abruptly pulled from their school environment, unable to see friends or share the playground, it is now up to parents and caregivers to help children build this emotional resilience.

This may not seem urgent for parents and caregivers right now, as they struggle to balance the myriad of responsibilities brought on by daily life, including keeping their family safe, keeping food on the table, and working. This pandemic is affecting many groups of people in a variety of ways and intensities. While some families struggle to piece together sufficient work hours to feed their families, others are stressing over whether their spouse has brought the virus home from work with them. Yet others are struggling to work from home full time *and* care for their children (including coordinating school work). This is incredibly stressful for parents. Nonetheless, how we treat our children now has important implications for the future. Our children must be prepared to successfully navigate the aftermath of coronavirus. Below are some simple ways to help provide a nurturing environment for children and grow their emotional resilience.

### **Practice the 3 R’s: Reassurance, Routine, and Regulation**

Are your children behaving differently? Maybe they’re refusing to eat, having trouble sleeping, or are simply inconsolable. Children communicate and attempt to problem solve with these behaviors.<sup>4</sup> The behavior itself is inappropriate, but the reason for the behavior (insecurity, nervousness, etc.) is not. Instead of focusing on fixing and reducing these behaviors, a promising approach to consider is creating a physically- and-emotionally safe environment. By doing this you’re providing children routine and structure, which can help them develop emotional resilience and therefore mitigate challenging behaviors.

#### **Reassurance**

Child care center and school closures can shake children and make them feel like life has become unpredictable. When young children sense this unpredictability, they feel anxious. They may express this anxiety by acting out in a way that can gain your attention, such as crying, throwing a tantrum, and even clinging to you all day long.

- How you respond to crisis greatly influences your children’s response, so try telling your child how you feel in an age-appropriate way. Modeling a healthy expression of emotion will create a safe space for your children to do the same.
- Remain clear and honest about why child care centers and schools are closed. Provide [age-appropriate information regarding COVID-19](#).
- Remember that your child(ren) need to hear hopeful messages. While you may not be able to guarantee that things will be okay, expressing optimism will provide them psychological safety.

#### **Routine**

Routines or schedules are a great way to build structure, which can provide children a sense of safety and normalcy, allow you and your kids to internalize constructive habits, save your mental energy without being unnecessarily worried about how to fill your kids’ days, keep you focused on the present, and increase productivity. Maintain or create a daily routine and try to stick to it as much as possible. Below are tips for creating a routine:

- Decide in advance what activities will be included. You can use your existing routine as a guidepost or [develop one based on the schedule your kids used at child care centers or school](#).

### 3 SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY LERNER CENTER FOR PUBLIC HEALTH PROMOTION

- Invite your child(ren) to help you create the routines by asking them to draw or label, depending on their developmental stage.
- Make the schedule visible to them so they feel included.
- Don't forget to account for transition times between activities and time in the morning to review the schedule together.
- The schedule doesn't have to be perfect or regimented. It functions as a roadmap for you and your child(ren), gives both of you structure, and keeps you on track.

#### **Regulation**

Parents can support children's development of self-regulation (i.e., how children manage and express emotions). Young children experience many of the same emotions as adults, but they often lack the self-control and language skills to express their feelings. Instead, children often act out these emotions in very physical ways, such as screaming, yelling, yanking, stomping and throwing toys. When children are stressed, their bodies respond by activating their stress response systems. Stress can become toxic to children if no supportive relationship is available.<sup>5</sup>

- **How to help children manage these reactions<sup>6</sup>**
  - Help them validate their feelings. For example, they have not seen their teachers and friends for weeks. They may feel scared or lonely. Acknowledge these feelings and share with them that you miss your friends too.
  - Teach them words for talking about feelings by using pictures, books, or real-life examples.
  - Share strategies they can deal with feelings by involving them in discussion.
  - Encourage them to engage in activities that help them self-regulate.
  - Limit screen time or TV consumption (especially the news).
- **Some strategies children can use to handle their feelings include**
  - Taking a deep breath when frustrated or angry
  - Physical activity to alleviate physical symptoms of anxiety (this could include stretching/yoga, running, playing)
  - Getting an adult to help resolve a conflict with siblings
  - Asking for a turn when others won't share
  - Asking for a hug when sad
  - Finding a quiet space to calm down when distressed
- *Practice, practice and practice* - take every possible chance to encourage your child to talk about feelings and practice their new strategies for expressing emotions appropriately.

#### **Taking Care of Yourself = Taking Care of Your Kids**

Your children will notice if you feel anxious, depressed, hopeless, and/or chronically fatigued. It is common to experience these feelings, especially during such an uncertain time. Remember that in order to take good care of your children and be a positive role model, you must take care of yourself. This is not just an ordinary snow day or spring break. Taking care of yourself is crucial because we do not know how long this will last. As circumstances change each day, it is more important than ever to [think about our long-term mental health](#).

#### **What Can Non-Parents do to Help?**

The children we raise today will become tomorrow's leaders. It is in all of our best interest to help build strong adults, regardless of whether we have children of our own. The saying "it takes a village to raise a

child” is as pertinent now as ever. So what can non-parents do to help our friends and family members with children during these times?

- Reach out to families with children to check on their wellbeing and offer support (emotional, financial).
- Offer to grocery shop so parents do not have to bring kids with them to stores.
- Offer to take care of dinner one night per week. If you live close, you can make food and drop it off on the doorstep. You could also arrange for local restaurant delivery.
- Stay in touch virtually. You can offer to hold a video chat with children. This can give parents a little free time while also helping children stay connected with people other than their parents. For younger kids, this may include reading them a book or singing songs.
- Advocate for policies that help strengthen families, including policies that will matter well after the coronavirus has subsided. Such policies include increasing the minimum wage, mandating paid family and sick leave, expanding health insurance coverage, and offering universal pre-K.

## References

1. The Importance of Family Routines <https://www.healthychildren.org/English/family-life/family-dynamics/Pages/The-Importance-of-Family-Routines.aspx>
2. Yates, T., Ostrosky, M.M., Cheatham, G. A., Fetting, A., Shaffer, L., & Santos, R. M. (2008). Research synthesis on screening and assessing social-emotional competence. Retrieved from Center on the Social Emotional Foundations for Early Learning [http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/documents/rs\\_screening\\_assessment.pdf](http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/documents/rs_screening_assessment.pdf).
3. Improving Social Emotional Skills in Childhood Enhances Long-Term Well-Being and Economic Outcomes (2017). The Pennsylvania State University. Retrieved from <http://prevention.psu.edu/uploads/files/rwjf438495-WellBeingEcon.pdf>
4. Powell, D., Dunlap, G., & Fox, L. (2006). Prevention and intervention for the challenging behaviors of toddlers and preschoolers. *Infants & Young Children*, 19(1), 25-35. <https://doi.org/10.1097/00001163-200601000-00004>
5. Center on the Developing Child: Toxic Stress <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/toxic-stress/>
6. Family Tools for Social and Emotion Learning at home <http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/resources/family.html>

## Acknowledgments

The authors thank Professor Shannon Monnat for her feedback on an earlier draft.

## About the Authors

Xiaoyan Zhang is a PhD candidate in the Department of Human Development and Family Science and a Lerner Graduate Fellow at the Lerner Center for Public Health Promotion in the Maxwell School at Syracuse University ([xzhan147@syr.edu](mailto:xzhan147@syr.edu)). Mary Kate Lee is the Program Coordinator of the Lerner Center for Public Health Promotion ([mlee77@syr.edu](mailto:mlee77@syr.edu)).

The mission of the Lerner Center for Public Health Promotion at Syracuse University is to improve population health through applied research and evaluation, education, engaged service, and advocating for evidence-based policy and practice change.