



**COVID-19 PSYCHOLOGICAL WELLNESS GUIDE:**  
**PARENTS OF HOSPITALIZED CHILDREN**

**Version 2, 4/20/20**

During the COVID-19 crisis, some children and adolescents will require inpatient medical care for health needs unrelated to COVID-19. Are you a family member of a child or adolescent who requires hospitalization right now? If so, you are probably aware that while anxiety is typically high for pediatric inpatients, it is likely to be heightened when youth are hospitalized during a pandemic because of fears of being infected by the virus and the restriction of visitors. Unfortunately, many of the activities and outlets utilized to help pediatric patients adjust to the hospital setting are either significantly reduced or placed on hold due to physical distancing guidelines and reduced in-hospital staff support. Here are some tips to help you and others in your family improve your child's hospital adjustment and reduce their anxiety, worry, and stress. Helpful resources are also included.

**Promote a Healing Environment**

- Advocate for creating a setting of peace, comfort, and reassurance in the hospital
- Bring favorite items from home to decorate the hospital room
- Reassure your child that they are safe and the medical team is there to help them get better and eventually return home
- Monitor your child's exposure to anxiety-inducing medical information, as children may have difficulty putting information about their own medical state into context, which may increase their anxiety
- Engage your child in relaxation exercises with you
  - Use an app (e.g., Breathe, Think, Do with Sesame) or You-Tube channel to support activities like breathing, meditation, progressive muscle relaxation, guided imagery, yoga, and other relaxation exercises
- Enjoy pleasurable activities with your child
  - Schedule fun activities for your child while they are hospitalized
    - Consider doing arts and crafts, playing games in the room, and watching videos
    - Learn about and participate in any fun activities that the hospital may be organizing, such as virtual bingo



- Keep regular routines while your child is in the hospital as much as possible - schedules help children feel safe and normalize their situation
  - Try to create and follow a schedule that includes times for meals, school-work, and fun
  - Prioritize as much as possible regular, reasonable bedtimes and wake times to ensure children are getting enough sleep, in addition to keeping blinds open during the day
- Model calm behavior and self-care
  - Be conscious of when you start becoming worked up in response to news or other situations that are currently going on, and try to calm yourself
  - Show your child what it looks like to take good care of yourself, like taking a few deep breaths or taking a break when you notice yourself becoming more anxious
  - Consider allowing other caregivers to give you a break, even for an hour - feeling burned out can be harmful to your own mental and physical health
- Take care of yourself! – children do as well as their caregivers
  - Make time to stay connected, get rest, have regular meals, and engage in relaxation exercises to de-stress
  - Engage in physical exercise, if possible, such as taking a brief walk around the hospital campus or stretching

### **Keep Your Child Connected with the Outside World**

- Encourage your child to connect virtually (e.g., Facetime, Google Hangouts) with loved ones who are not able to visit due to visitor restrictions or shelter-in-place orders
- Ask extended family members and friends to send texts, cards, and letters that include messages of care and hope

### **Support the Expression of Feelings**

- Normalize for your child that it is okay to be scared, worried, or even sad
- Assure your child that they are not alone with their feelings
- Encourage your child to think about the things that they enjoy and help them identify distracting activities



- Provide your child with outlets to express their feelings
  - Suggest creative projects
  - Encourage them to write if they don't like talking about their feelings

### **Interact in Age-Appropriate Ways with Your Child about COVID-19**

- Talk with your child about COVID-19 at a level of detail that is age-appropriate - although it can be a natural instinct to shield children from fears, not acknowledging a difficult situation can make children even more anxious
- Give developmentally appropriate information -teenagers may understand more detailed information about a virus and healthcare providers' efforts to address it, but younger children may just need reassurance that they are safe
- Consider a simple script to help with the conversation that will need to be modified based on their age- "There is an illness going around, similar to a bad flu, and doctors are working really hard to help people in the world feel better. What have you heard? How has this made you feel?"
- Monitor the ways in which children receive information in the hospital and encourage them to ask you any questions about what they have heard
- Limit their exposure to the news on the TV, internet or from others about the pandemic - it can be difficult to put the current situation in context, which can be anxiety producing
- Address any questions they have or misinformation
- Review for your child the things they can do to keep themselves safe
  - Wash their hands when appropriate
  - Try to be careful and not touch surfaces including door handles when outside the room
- Tell your child, if age-appropriate, about the efforts others are making to help people who are having difficulties due to the virus



## **Helpful Resources**

- The National Association of School Psychologists provides further recommendations ([Helping Children Cope with Changes Resulting from COVID-19, NASP](#))
- ADAA provides tips for parents communicating with an anxious child or teen about COVID-19. Children may be concerned, frightened, or confused. Parents can help them by answering their questions calmly and in a way that's focused on the facts, while also letting them know that it's okay to feel the way they do. ([How to Talk to Your Anxious Child or Teen About Coronavirus, ADAA, Richa Bhatia, MD](#))
- Livescience offers a kid's guide to understanding the coronavirus. The guide contains school age-appropriate language, pictures to capture your child's attention, and answers to commonly asked questions: <https://www.livescience.com/coronavirus-kids-guide.html>
- CDC gives tips for helping children cope with emergencies and developmental norms for children's reactions to an emergency. [Helping Children Cope with Emergencies, CDC](#)
- If you are feeling overwhelmed by emotion or thinking of harming yourself or others, you may wish to call the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's (SAMHSA's) Disaster Distress Helpline: 1-800-985-5990 or text Talk-WithUs to 66746. (TTY 1-800-846-8517)