



**COVID-19 PSYCHOLOGICAL WELLNESS GUIDE:**  
**VIRTUAL SCHOOLING FOR K-12 AND COLLEGE STUDENTS**

Version 1, 8/12/20

Many school districts and colleges have announced remote learning or online instruction for the start of the school year or even the entire fall semester. Other schools have not yet confirmed their final plans or the plans keep changing. Are you a family member of a child, adolescent, or young adult who will be (or even may be) in your care while pursuing their learning virtually in your home? If so, you are not alone in having to navigate a variety of practical, emotional, and developmental challenges, which bring with them a significant amount of stress and anxiety. These challenges are exacerbated if you have multiple children who will be engaged in virtual schooling and if you need to accommodate your own work schedule and demands, along with managing the needs of all family members.

Children of all ages, even older teens and college students, will need support, positivity, encouragement, and empathy from their parents. They also need help coping with the loss and grief that accompanies the upheaval and changes that everyone is experiencing. However, children of different ages also need different things.

Here are some tips to help you and others in your family cope with these challenges and reduce anxiety and stress. Links to helpful resources are provided as well.

**Parent Based on Your Children’s Developmental Needs - Kindergarten & Elementary School**

- Socialize them to new school routines to accommodate the demands of virtual learning
- Provide close monitoring and support
- Offer them a consistent routine and structure to help them function optimally
- Remember, they will be influenced by what their parents foster and model for them

**Parent Based on Your Children’s Developmental Needs – Middle & High School**

- Remember, these students are separating more from parents/families, and their peer relationships increase in importance - the process of virtual learning complicates this
- Be compassionate about their efforts to test the waters of “adulthood” in fairly safe ways while still in their parents’ care



- Be understanding as they learn to make choices on their own, navigate complex peer relationships, and develop a stronger sense of their identity and who they are in the world
- Let them exercise as much control and choice as safety permits in their lives
- Afford them the opportunities to openly express their thoughts and desires
- Validate their strong feelings, such as the intense loss of what they expected their life to be at this stage
- Notice if they are experiencing more than typical age-related anxiety and depression and provide them with support and assistance
- Prioritize open and effective communication and negotiation

### **Parent Based on Your Children's Developmental Needs – College**

- Remember, college students who are forced to take online courses or who choose to do so for safety reasons will be missing out on the college experience they expected to have and may also struggle with how to pursue internships or other opportunities without the infrastructure of the on-campus setting and resources
- Recognize they may have to cope with less independence and privacy, and they may struggle with feelings of depression, anxiety, isolation, or loss associated with unmet expectations for this stage of their lives
- Expect them to manage their schoolwork on their own, but offer extra encouragement and regular check-ins, especially if online schooling is new to them or they have not yet established a college peer group for support
- Readjust family norms and, if applicable, recognize that you may have to forego an empty nest for an extended period

### **Acknowledge the Challenges**

- Recognize that it is hard to meet the educational needs of school-aged children, especially if there are many children in the home at different grade levels. You may have to help teach skills at multiple grade levels during the same day (*Little House on the Prairie* style)
- Be compassionate with yourself if you have challenges understanding and explaining advanced concepts that require in-depth exploration for mastery, especially for older children or for subjects taught differently than when you were in school.
- Acknowledge the difficulty establishing consistent daily routines
  - Try to create a routine, which may be hard to do so with varying demands and multiple schedules



- Be aware that an inconsistent routine may increase stress levels, along with family members' frustration, irritability, and hopelessness/ helplessness
- Be kind with yourself if you find it challenging to meet the diverse learning needs of your children who have special needs
  - Be aware they may need extended support to provide in-home therapies during the pandemic
- Accept that you will not be able to mimic the social environment at school
  - Remember, school provides an important social context for youth and children may long for time to socialize with their friends and engage in extracurricular activities
- Know you are not alone in having difficulty monitoring your children's virtual learning and you may need additional help (e.g., many younger children cannot use a computer or other electronic devices independently and will need a great deal of adult supervision for the duration of the school day)
- Recognize the challenge of orienting younger children to the academic environment
  - Do your best to help children new to school get accustomed to routines (e.g., remaining seated during class, taking turns to speak, or raising their hand)
  - Explain these routines to your children to avoid instances where they just walk away from the computer
  - Set clear expectations and implement a system of reinforcement to help foster adherence to desired behaviors
- Implement strategies to address concerns about extended screen time as a result of the virtual learning environment
  - Remember, even adults report "zoom fatigue" after short periods of time
  - Take short breaks from the computer
  - Use the 20-20-20 rule to prevent eye strain
  - Take 20 seconds to look at something 20 feet away every 20 minutes
- Recognize that younger children may need extra guidance to stay engaged in extended virtual learning activities due to their shorter attention spans
  - Provide them frequent breaks
  - Offer them peer opportunities that the face-to-face environment more easily provides
- Be mindful that it is natural to feel unhappy and frustrated at times with virtual schooling
  - Remember that your response influences your child's attitude towards distance learning
  - Normalize the stress and feelings of loss associated with this time



- Model how to cope with those negative feelings
- Work to display your stronger feelings of anger/sadness and frustrations privately, away from the kids
- Be a sounding board for their concerns and empathize with them
- Show them a model of healthy coping and positivity, while not dismissing the challenges

### **Create Consistency and Routine**

- Keep on a schedule and routine to establish some sense of normalcy
  - Have a set bedtime and waking time
  - Package breakfast, lunch, and snacks the night before
  - Have set times to eat
  - Have set times your child can check in with you during the day, so they are not interrupting your work or meetings
- Establish breaks for both parents and children during the work/school day
- Make sure all family members understand and adhere to the routine, which can include little rituals to start or end the school/work day

### **Create a Learning Environment at Home**

- Create boundaries to help separate school and home life, which will enhance well-being
  - Create boundaries around time...*When* will schoolwork get done? If possible, determine when children will need to log in for their schoolwork
    - Make a calendar
  - Create boundaries around space...*Where* will schoolwork get done?
    - Carve out a designated spot where children will do their schoolwork
    - Make it as clear of distractions as possible.
  - Have your child be involved in creating their personal workspace and setting up the area/supplies

### **Manage Simultaneous Work Demands**

- Acknowledge the challenge of trying to work and monitor your child's schooling at the same time
  - Do not expect perfection from your child or yourself
  - Accept that your professional productivity and your child's academic mastery may not be at the levels they would be if it were not for this pandemic
  - Know that you are not alone in that; many families are dealing with the same thing
  - Remember, parents worry their children will "get behind," but, since everyone is dealing with this issue, get behind whom?



- Notice when you are feeling anxious or guilty that you are not fully present at work or with your children due to the competing demands of both, which may be associated with less work efficiency and quality for both you and your children
  - Be compassionate toward yourself about the guilt you feel about work when you are with your child and your worries about your child when you are trying to work
  - Recognize that you can't be two places at once, but if you are finding yourself focused on things other than what you are doing in the moment, then you are really not in either place ever
  - Work to attend to whichever demand is in front of you at that moment and to be intentionally present.
- Problem-solve options with your support system
  - Determine if you and your partner share proctoring the children's learning
  - Figure out what other adults can you bring in to help
  - Consider creating a micro-schooling environment where several families within a bubble of safety take turns monitoring their children's schooling so the other parents can have designated periods to focus on work
    - Organize these around children's ages for efficiency
    - Use adults with different skill sets for different subjects
  - Join neighborhood pages/chat groups to help facilitate support
- Problem-solve options with your job
  - See if you can you have more flexible hours and deadlines so you can do your work at times that are more convenient for your family
  - Meet with your supervisor/leadership to discuss personal options
    - Be aware, you might be surprised with the level of flexibility offered!

### **Foster Socialization**

- Help your children maintain connections with peers, which is important for school-aged children as well as college students
  - Be aware that microscooling situations have the inherent benefit of time with playmates
- Schedule virtual playdates on a regular basis
- Consider holding outdoor, physically-distanced activities with a small set of families within your bubble

### **Cope with Frustration and Stress**

- Monitor the potential to take out the frustration and ongoing strain and demands of



virtual schooling on your children or partners and/or turning to maladaptive coping strategies

- Remember that your own and your children's stress and emotions will feed off each other, which can relieve or worsen things
- Create regular breaks for all family members, where there isn't a focus on work, school, or household chores/demands, which are key for everyone's well-being
  - Do some alone (when you need a moment of solitude) or do some as a family
- Find what works for you, but here are some options (and some can be done even for brief periods):
  - Remember to breathe! - sometimes we are so in motion and focused on tasks that we forget to breathe deeply and fully
    - Practice deep, diaphragmatic breathing
  - Stretch your body
    - Practice brief yoga stretches, which can set your day and/or night off right
  - Move your body
    - Get up and walk around on a regular basis (set a time if you need to!)
  - Take a break from screen time
  - Take breaks to dance to a fun family song
  - Listen to music, which can soothe, energize, inspire, or help release
  - Engage with nature
    - Go for a walk for 15 minutes where you look at the trees and sky and listen to the birds
    - Plant a garden of flowers or vegetables
  - Engage in loving touch
    - Hold and hug each other
    - Remember, loving touch releases chemicals that nurture and soothe
  - Find humor
    - Create a ritual around a joke-of-the-day to foster positivity
  - Practice gratitude
    - Share what you're grateful for each day
  - Post inspiring/comforting quotes around your home
  - Talk to friends/family for support
    - Share your stress
  - Focus on the positive
    - Celebrate having more time to spend as a family
    - Make it as fun as possible
    - Do family projects



- Organize belongings, create masterpieces
  - Sing, laugh, and go outside, if possible, to connect with nature and get needed exercise
  - Allow older children to connect with their friends virtually.
- Identify projects that might help others
  - Write letters to the neighbors or others who might be stuck at home alone or to healthcare workers
  - Send positive messages over social media
  - Read a favorite children's book on a social media platform for younger children to hear

### **Helpful Resources**

- The American Psychological Association (APA) provides recommendations about how to manage children's behavior during online learning ([COVID-19 Virtual Learning and Education: Behavior Management](#))
- The National Association of School Psychologists provides further recommendations ([Helping Children Cope with Changes Resulting from COVID-19, NASP](#))
- HealthyChildren.org is a parenting website backed by the American Academy of Pediatrics (<http://www.healthychildren.org/English/health-issues/conditions/COVID-19/Pages/Working-and-Learning-from-Home-COVID-19.aspx>)
- The Suicide Prevention Resource Center (SPRC) has links with archived webinars for families with school-aged children as well as college students. ([Resources to Support Mental Health and Coping with the Coronavirus \(COVID-19\)](#))
- Anxiety and Depression Association of America (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](#))
- 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)