



# HOW TO TEACH KIDS RESILIENCE THROUGHOUT COVID-19

It is normal to feel anxious or worried about what is to come during this time of uncertainty due to COVID-19. Situations like these can be stressful for everyone in a family. Now more than ever, we need to help our children navigate these difficult obstacles and adversities and build their resilience.

Resilience is our ability to thrive or bounce back after a stressful situation. The good news is that resilience can be taught. Resilient children tend to be happier, more motivated and engaged, and adopt a more positive attitude about difficult or challenging situations.

As a parent, you can help promote your child's emotional well-being by engaging them in an environment full of opportunities to learn helpful skills to becoming resilient. Resilient skills can include:

- Emotion identification
- Emotion regulation
- Coping skills
- Practicing mindfulness
- Expressing gratitude

Here's an outline for how you can spend one week focusing on resilience-building for you and your child:

## Monday: Making a Schedule

Whether times are uncertain or not, all children benefit from having a routine in place. Following a schedule provides consistency, structure and predictability. When we don't know what the world is going to throw at us next, building in some routine and predictability serves as a buffer from the outside chaos. Collaborating with your child to create a weekly family schedule could give them an appropriate level of control and influence in their world.

Here are some things to consider when you sit down with your child to create this schedule:

- Establish nap and bedtimes to ensure that the necessary amount of sleep that a child needs is provided even if they don't have school the next day. This routine will also ease the transition when schools do reopen.
- Build in times for healthy snacks and meals
- A few 15-minute intervals of fun (and silly) physical activity and stretches each day



- Homework time
- 30-60 minutes for the resilience-building activities listed below (Tuesday-Sunday)
- Have each member of your family share five self-care activities they enjoy and add them to the schedule for the week. For example, doing a puzzle, reading a book, coloring, walking, digging for worms in your backyard, planting flowers or writing in your journal.

## Tuesday: Emotion Identification

Today is a great day for a family movie night, and what movie does a better job of describing the internal world of a child than Pixar’s “Inside Out”? Consider making a family fort and gathering your favorite movie snacks. After the movie, grab some markers and paper and have your child draw what recent feelings they have experienced. What does that feeling look like? What would it say if it could talk? What does that feeling need to feel better or safe?

Another art activity is to have your child draw out the many faces of emotions, such as, what does a grumpy face look like to them? A sleepy face? A calm face? Draw up to 10 faces and write out the emotion underneath the face. Or, look through magazines and cut out various facial expressions that they see and label them. Does the person in this photo look sad? Does the person in the car look happy? We call these “Feeling Faces.” Children who can identify their emotions adjust better to challenges and are able to communicate their needs effectively.

Brainstorm as a family where to hang up these faces in an easy-to-see place, like on the refrigerator or next to the TV. Refer to your “Feeling Faces” throughout the week by setting an example like, “I am feeling sleepy today because I didn’t sleep too well last night. How are you feeling?” or “It makes me sad when you say mean things to me.” You can have the child point to the “Feeling Face” that they are experiencing if they are not ready to verbally label it.

## Wednesday: Coping Skills

Today is the day to practice different ways to manage big emotions!

### Deep breathing

- Deep breathing is an important coping skill for children and parents. There are several great apps and videos available online demonstrating how to practice deep breathing with your child — such as the Calm app, the Headspace app or the Virtual Hope Box app. However, there’s ways to practice these coping skills without technology.



Some ideas include:

- Practice belly breathing with your child by blowing bubbles or making a pinwheel together and watching it spin by taking a deep breath and releasing it slowly toward the pinwheel. You can also pretend your fingers are birthday candles and have your child take a deep breath to blow out the imaginary candles.
- Sit back to back with your child and practice deep breaths. You can talk about how you are able to feel each other breathe, and then practice syncing your breaths!
- Don't forget to model for them sharing how you felt before and after deep breathing and asking them to do the same with their newly drawn "Feeling Faces."

### **Progressive muscle relaxation**

When we get stressed, we tend to experience muscle tension. Progressive muscle relaxation (PMR) is a great way for children and adults to manage stress and relieve muscle tension by tensing and releasing different parts of their body one by one. There are free PMR scripts online to read aloud, as well as free guided online videos (an example of a PMR script is included in the *Resources* section below). A creative way to teach children PMR is by telling them that you are making the muscles in their bodies go from hard, uncooked spaghetti into relaxed cooked noodles.

### **Grounding**

(No, not the kind where someone got in trouble.) Grounding is any activity that brings your attention to the present moment. One of the best and most readily available ways to do that is to use your five senses (see, touch, hear, smell and taste). You can call it a five senses scavenger hunt! Prompts include asking your child:

- What are five things you see in this room?
- What are four things you feel (i.e., I feel my scrunchie around my wrist)?
- What are three things you hear (inside or outside of the room)?
- What are two things you smell?
- What is one thing you taste?

Another form of grounding is mental grounding. Examples include:

- Counting backward from 100 by intervals of 1, 2, 3, 7, etc.
- Naming as many colors or states you can in 60 seconds, or
- Reciting lyrics to your favorite song.

Plan throughout the day to practice this skill with each other, especially when someone is starting to feel stressed or anxious. If you are worrying about the future, then the present is where you can do something about it!



## Thursday: Family Coping Box

Grab a shoe box and some construction paper and start building a family coping box. A coping box can include tools that different family members can utilize when feeling stressed. The family box should be located somewhere that everyone can access it easily. Decorate the outside of the box and begin identifying items you all would like to place in the box. You can even refer to your five senses and include items that feel soft, taste good or smell soothing. Here are some other ideas:

- A soft stuffed animal
- Word searches
- A pleasant-smelling candle or lotion
- A book of yoga poses
- Chewing gum
- Play dough
- A list of songs that bring joy
- Fidget toys
- Stress balls
- A bottle of bubbles
- A pinwheel

You can also go online for free printable visual calming tools to include in the coping box. In addition to a family coping box, children may also like to make their own coping box and keep it in their bedroom. Encourage your child to use the coping box when they are starting to feel agitated, stressed, sad, mad or restless.



## Friday: Conflict Resolution and Accessing Social Support

With many adults working remotely and children home from school, you might feel like you're living in tight quarters right now. Under these circumstances, it is natural for disagreements and conflicts to occur. One way to manage conflict is to establish communication rules (a handout on these communication techniques is included in the *Resources* section below):

- First, check in with yourself and identify what you feel upset about. Are you upset about one thing that has happened or a couple of things that have piled together?
- Bring it up to the person you are upset with and make sure to discuss one issue at a time. For example, "I am upset that I have been washing all the dishes every day."
- Be careful to not use degrading or derogatory language and to not raise your voice. The goal here is to have a productive and healing conversation.
- Use "I" statements when expressing how you feel so you are taking responsibility for your feeling. For example, say "I feel hurt when..." or "I felt disappointed when..." instead of saying "You made me mad..."
- Be mindful of not interrupting each other. You can set a one-minute timer to let everyone have their time to speak.
- Take a timeout when things start getting heated. Identify a length of time you need a break for, so the other person knows you are planning on returning to the conversation. For example, "I am feeling overwhelmed right now and need a 15-minute break from this conversation."
- Remember that you are working toward a compromise or at least a shared understanding of the situation, so go into this conversation with that mindset.

Another way of teaching your child conflict resolution skills is to teach them when and how to ask for help. Feeling connection is very important during this time. Children are now isolated away from people who they might have normally confided in — whether it's friends, other family members or their teachers. How can parents help their children know when to ask them or their siblings for help? Starting a conversation and making a family helping plan together could be one way. You can have each person write out who they would go to when they are feeling mad, sad, happy or anxious. You can say they can go to anyone, and maybe there is a specific person in the family that understands a certain emotion better. They can even call or FaceTime with a specific person that isn't in the home or talk to a pet if the dog is someone that brings comfort to them! You could also make a "Connections Calendar" and include windows of 10-15 minutes of your child's time to connect with someone on their social support list, like a grandparent or a friend. Get creative because we may be staying inside for a while and who we can turn to for support during this time is important.



## Saturday: Mindfulness

Mindfulness is a powerful tool to help us slow down, pay attention and be fully present in the moment. Sometimes this can be tough to teach to a child, so we want to make sure we manage our expectations, but there are also creative ways to help them understand helpful components of mindfulness.

The idea is that our attention is a muscle, and we want to practice strengthening it. When we choose *where* we want to put our attention, it gives us greater opportunity to then choose *how* we want to think about something. When something like COVID-19 makes our physical world a lot smaller, it can be comforting to exercise what is in our control.

- Sit on the floor facing your child. You can sit on a cushion or pillow. You can use a bell or a singing bowl (there are free ones online) to call your child into focus and attention. Encourage your child to listen to the bell until it is no longer chiming or singing. It may only last a few seconds, but those few seconds of their complete attention is very powerful. Make it a game and have them raise their hand when they can't hear it anymore and see who has the better hearing.
- Make time for a mindful walk. Mindful walking around the house is a walk where you notice every step you are taking. You notice how the floor feels under your feet, how your legs feel as they move, and what noises you hear around you as you take each step slowly. Pay as much attention as you can to the experience. Remember to ask how they are feeling before and after the activity to see how and if the activity made a difference for them.
- Eat a snack mindfully. Or, maybe just the first bite of a snack! For example, if the snack is an apple slice, have your child examine the apple as if they are an alien from outer space seeing an apple slice for the first time. What does it look like? What does it feel like? What does it smell like? Does light shine through it? Take a small bite but don't swallow just yet. What is this bite like? Chew slowly. Take it all in. Talk about that bite afterward. What are new things they have discovered about the apple?
- Finally, my favorite mindfulness activity is loving-kindness meditation. It is the practice of sending positive thoughts and wishes to yourself and others. It is an especially powerful meditation right now. Since we can't be with many of the people who we love, we can send them kindness and well wishes instead. Close your eyes, imagine the person or pet you care about and say aloud or silently, "May you be safe. May you be healthy and strong. May you be happy. May you be peaceful and at ease." These wishes can also be sent to yourself. Have your child pick four wishes they would like to send and practice saying these with them. We can also send these wishes to people all over the world who we don't know, but who are also experiencing the impact of COVID-19. Science has shown that the power of thought can change how we feel and lead to changes in those around us, so if we engage in positive thinking, we can find ourselves and others around us in a positive mood!



## Sunday: Gratitude

To end the weekend on a good note, let's engage in practicing gratitude for all the things we have and get to experience. Research has found that teaching gratitude to children increases their happiness, optimism and generosity. Some gratitude activities include:

- Start a new family tradition before each meal by having family members say one new thing for which they are grateful. For example, "I am grateful that this morning Mom helped me find a YouTube video."
- Encourage your child to keep a gratitude journal and to write three things every day they are grateful for. At the end of the week, everyone can share their reflections.
- Grab a few mason jars or tissue boxes and have each person decorate the outside of theirs, including their names. Use strips of paper and markers or pens and have each family member writes five positive things about everyone in your family and put it in their gratitude jar or box. Some inspiration can include empowering quotes that remind you of that person, things you are grateful for about that person, or a positive memory with them. Pull out a strip of paper from your gratitude jar/box on particularly tough days when you need some extra encouragement.
- Pick out or create your own empowering mantras or positive affirmations and write them down. Place them somewhere visible in the house. Practice reciting them to yourself. My personal favorites are, "This too shall pass," "With change comes opportunity," and "I will be OK."

It is important to note that while you engage in all of these activities with your child, make sure to have it be a technology-free time, where cell phones and tablets are placed on silent and you are providing your child with your full attention. Listen and reflect on what your child is saying while engaged in the exercises. When your child says, "Mom, I am using the red marker to draw a red, mad face!" you can respond by saying, "You're picking the red marker to draw your mad face." Provide praises throughout the activity because who doesn't feel good when their positive behaviors are being noticed? You can use unlabeled praises like, "Good job!" or labeled praises like, "Good job drawing all your different faces!"

Feel free to continue to repeat elements of this weeklong schedule as many times as you want. You can advance to different "Feeling Faces," add new items to the coping box, and practice mindfulness and gratitude daily. The reinforcement of these skills is what helps make it stick for children, so the more practice, the more we are increasing their resilience — or their capability of taking on challenging situations.



## RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Additional resources for developing mindfulness:

<https://www.calm.com/> - A meditation and relaxation app

<https://nfrc.ucla.edu/focus-on-the-go> - games and resources to help kids understand feelings words and problem solving

<https://nfrc.ucla.edu/focus-on-foster-families> - candid videos and online tools designed to support foster youth and their families

<https://www.headspace.com/> - A meditation app

[https://depts.washington.edu/hcsats/PDF/TF-](https://depts.washington.edu/hcsats/PDF/TF-%20CBT/pages/4%20Emotion%20Regulation%20Skills/Client%20Handouts/Relaxation/Relaxation%20Script%20for%20Younger%20Children.pdf)

[%20CBT/pages/4%20Emotion%20Regulation%20Skills/Client%20Handouts/Relaxation/Relaxation%20Script%20for%20Younger%20Children.pdf](https://depts.washington.edu/hcsats/PDF/TF-%20CBT/pages/4%20Emotion%20Regulation%20Skills/Client%20Handouts/Relaxation/Relaxation%20Script%20for%20Younger%20Children.pdf) – A progressive muscle relaxation script

Fair Fighting Rules

<https://www.therapistaid.com/worksheets/fair-fighting-rules.pdf>

Books that teach resilience:

“Bee Still: An Invitation To Meditation” by Frank J. Sileo

“Grow Happy” by Jon Lasser and Sage Foster-Lasser

“The Hugging Tree: A story About Resilience” by Jill Neimark

“Today I Feel Silly: And Other Moods That Make My Day” by Jamie Lee Curtis

<https://blog.chocchildrens.org/how-to-teach-kids-resilience-throughout-covid-19/>



CHOC.ORG