



Teaching Children and Adolescents Resilience and Managing Anxiety during COVID-19

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Transforming Children's Lives



The Child Mind Institute is an independent, national nonprofit dedicated to transforming the lives of children and families struggling with mental health and learning disorders. Our teams work every day to [deliver the highest standards of care](#), [advance the science of the developing brain](#) and empower parents, professionals and policymakers to [support children when and where they need it most](#).

Our Work

Research



We are at the forefront of neuroscience efforts to find objective biological measures of mental illness that will lead to earlier diagnosis, more individualized treatment methods, and new and better interventions.

Clinical Care



We provide world-class clinical care to children struggling with mental health and learning disorders. We have helped thousands of children get the help they need in our offices and in their communities.

Public Education



We equip millions of parents, educators and policymakers with the information they need to end the stigma and misinformation that cause so many children to miss out on life-changing treatment.



Child Mind
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TAKE A MOMENT

Today's Agenda

- Fostering Resilience and Acceptance
- Stress, Anxiety, and COVID-19
- Looking Ahead and Practical Tips
- Q & A





Fostering Resilience and Acceptance

A small cluster of bright yellow daisy-like flowers with multiple petals and yellow centers is growing out of a crack in dry, cracked earth. The background is a solid blue color.

Resiliency

Psychological resilience is
a person's capacity to
recover from adversity
and bounce back after
experiencing a life
stressor and challenge

Resilience

- Everyday, “smaller” stressors **boost** your capacity to be resilient in the face of greater challenges
 - The Everyday Stress Resilience Hypothesis
- **Internal Factors** of Resilience
 - Characteristics or strengths
 - Cognitive competence
 - Problem solving and decision making
 - Communicate effectively
 - Coping skills
 - Mindfulness
- **External Factors** of Resilience
 - Family, school, social and community factors



Resiliency is a Journey

- Resiliency is not a **trait** that people either have or do not have
- It is thoughts, behaviors, and actions that can be learned and developed



Building Resiliency



SOCIAL
CONNECTIONS



MINDSET AND
FOCUS



REALISTIC
GOALS



MINDFUL
ACTION



REGULATING
EMOTIONS



PURSUING
MEANING



SELF-CARE



Developing Acceptance

- A lot has happened. It's important to **acknowledge** it
 - You and/or your students might be struggling with residual anxiety or depression
- Be **supportive**
 - Build empathy and understanding by listening without judgment
 - Validate the emotions by letting them know you are listening and care

Developing Acceptance

- Provide **Validation**
 - **What** to validate: emotions, behaviors, thoughts, physiological responses
 - **How** to validate: actively observe and listen, reflect accurately and non-judgmentally, communicate validity of a response with words and actions
- Promote **Perspective**
 - Emphasize that things can take time AND can be improving at the same time
 - When students catastrophize (think of the worst-case scenario) or generalize (when one thing goes wrong, assume everything else will, too), GENTLY help them recognize those thinking traps
- Foster a **Growth Mindset**
 - Challenges help me grow!



Stress, Anxiety, and COVID-19

Accepting our “New Normal”



- Understand that uncertainty is stressful
 - This is an invisible threat and anxiety is expected
 - There will be good days and “not so good” days
- It’s normal for children (and you, too) to mourn the loss of typical school and a normal routine
- Remember that our thoughts affect our feelings which affect our behaviors and actions

Typical Responses to a Stressful Situation

- Early Childhood (0-5)
 - Regressive behaviors
 - Excessive crying and/or irritation
 - Clinginess or separation anxiety; need for extra connection
- Childhood (6-12)
 - Unhealthy eating or sleeping habits
 - Poor school performance
 - Difficulty with attention and concentration
 - Irritability and disruptive behaviors
 - Excessive worry or sadness
 - Excessive fatigue
 - Unexplained aches and pains
- Adolescence (13-17)
 - Poor school performance or acting out
 - Difficulty with attention and concentration
 - Excessive worry or sadness
 - Unexplained aches and pains

Appropriately Responding to Stress

- Remember that kids are feeling just as destabilized as we are
 - Expect an increase in disruptive behavior, acting out and tantrums
- Collect yourself and remain empathetic towards children
 - Remind them of behavioral expectations when needed
- Develop a network of support
- Keep things light when you can
 - Remember to create time for fun



What is Anxiety?

Anxiety is a normal and adaptive system in our body that tells us when we are in danger. It's not just a psychological state, it's a physical experience.

Fight or Flight Response



Helpful Anxiety vs. Unhelpful Anxiety

- Sometimes our bodies warn us about danger that is not real, like a false alarm
- Anxiety becomes problematic when it gets in the way of a child's ability to function
- Consider these factors:
 - **Intensity:** What is the degree of the child's stress?
 - **Duration/Flexibility:** Can the child recover when the source of stress goes away?
 - **Impairment:** Does the stress interfere with the child's daily life?

Characteristics of Helpful vs. Unhelpful Anxiety

Related to specific situation

Relative duration to situation

Relative proportion to situation

Realistic

Unexpected

Out of proportion

Unrealistic

Unwanted and uncontrollable

Doesn't go away

Leads to avoidance

Anxiety Disorders

Anxiety disorders have a couple things in common:

Difficulty tolerating uncertainty
Avoidance that impairs functioning



We can't make anxiety go away, but children can:

Learn to recognize when they're feeling anxious
Learn to manage their symptoms without avoiding what makes them anxious

Reassurance Seeking

A form of accommodation frequent in children with anxiety

Seeking comfort that their fears won't come true, or that everything will be ok

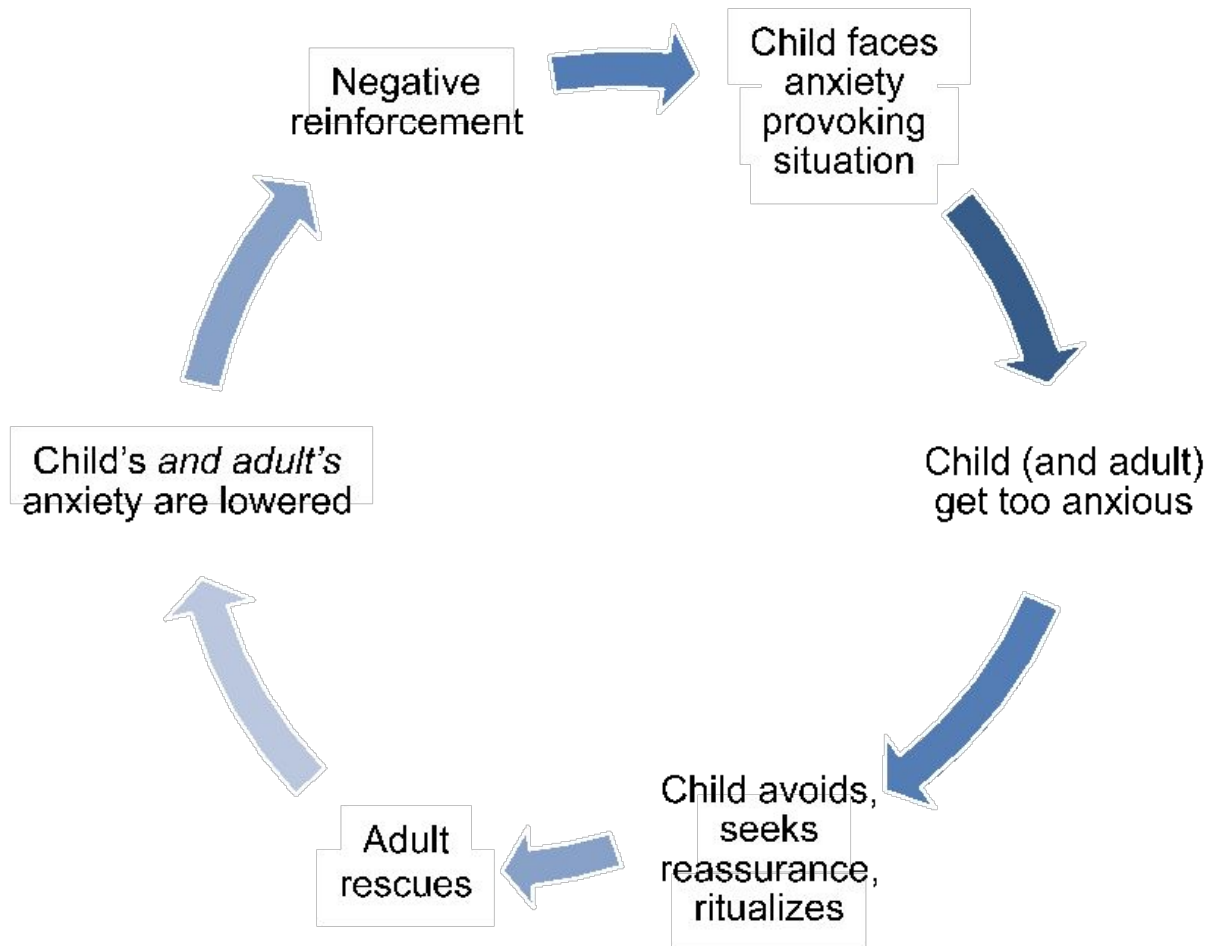
Repeatedly asking questions that have already been answered, or that they know the answer to

Provides short term relief from anxiety, but maintains it in the long run

Accommodations

- Adults may inadvertently play a role in children's anxiety symptoms by:
 - Participating in a child's anxiety behaviors
 - Helping children avoid anxiety-provoking situations
 - Changing routines to avoid triggering children's anxiety
 - Answering reassurance seeking questions
 - Taking on extra responsibilities
- Accommodations help children avoid doing what they fear → Avoidance maintains anxiety in the long run because kids do not learn that their fears do not come true
- Anxious children need to learn that they can face their fears independently, using coping skills

Negative Reinforcement Cycle of Anxiety



Anxiety and COVID-19

- How might COVID-19 affect kids with anxiety?
 - There is a lot of uncertainty, which can be difficult for kids with anxiety to tolerate
 - Big changes in daily routine, schedule and expectations
 - Lots of media coverage about people getting sick, worry for themselves and family members
 - For some kids, food and economic insecurity or uncertainty
 - Adult anxiety levels are elevated
 - Adults may be more likely to accommodate anxiety behaviors and answer reassurance seeking questions



Looking Ahead and Practical Tips

When to Seek Additional Help

When symptoms are:

- Outside of what we would expect for a child this age
- Getting in the way of school performance, relationships with family or peers, and/or ability to participate in usual activities
- Present across settings
- Persistent over time

How to Help Anxious Kids



- Model coping & resilience
- Remain (or appear) calm
- Normalize & validate reactions
- Maintain or re-establish routines & expectations
- Provide comfort & age-appropriate information
 - Remain informed using credible sources
 - Limit media exposure and correct inaccurate information
 - Ask what questions kids have
- Support of a primary caregiver or trusted adult

Talking to Kids

- Find a calm, undistracted time to help children understand their feelings
- Reassure children that they are safe to the extent possible
 - **Validate** fears and feelings of uncertainty
 - **Balance** with information about safety
- Kids feel better when they are kept in the loop, but keep it simple
 - Help children understand what is happening and keep the dialogue open
- Be **pro-active** and ask kids how they feel and what questions they have
- Be **patient** and remember kids take in information a little bit at a time
- Use clear, direct, age-appropriate language
 - Avoid euphemisms
 - Let children's questions guide you

General Rules for Handling Anxiety



Do:

- Express positive and realistic expectations
- Respect the child's feelings
- Encourage the child to tolerate their anxiety
- Think things through with the child
- Model healthy ways of handling anxiety

Don't:

- Avoid things just because they make a child anxious
- Ask leading questions
- Reinforce the child's fears
- Accommodate anxiety behaviors
- Give excessive reassurance

The goal isn't to eliminate anxiety, but to help children manage it.

Prioritizing Compassionate Self-Care

- During this time, everyone's stress is running high. We need to prioritize compassionate self-care now more than ever before:
 - Intentionally create time for yourself
 - Be thoughtful of how you're treating yourself and your body
 - Reconnect with activities that you once loved
 - Limit consumption of news
 - Be realistic with your expectations
 - Set boundaries with yourself and others, understand when you're getting too much information
 - Prioritize kindness and self-compassion





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