



# California Surgeon General's Playbook: Stress Relief for Caregivers and Kids during COVID-19

## **NAVIGATING STRESS MANAGEMENT WITH KIDS**

Many of us are feeling a lot of stress right now. Even for adults, it can be tough to recognize that what we feel as irritability, difficulty focusing, insomnia or changes in appetite can actually be signs that our bodies are feeling the effects of stress. For kids, no matter the age, their brains and bodies are even more vulnerable to the harmful effects of stress than adults, and most often, they aren't able to recognize or verbalize it. Stress in kids may show up differently than our stress as adults does. This Stress-Busting Playbook can help you understand what to look out for and what you can do to protect your family's health.

Some of the changes happening as a result of the COVID-19 such as frequent worrisome news reports, school closures, not being able to see friends and loved ones can be disruptive and even downright scary for kids. They may have worries about their own health or the health of those they love, such as a grandparent. Or they may feel upset about missing a special event such as a birthday party, music recital, team sports or a planned trip or camp. During this time your child's body may be making more stress hormones than is healthy (or less stress hormones in the case of kids who have a history of major adversity). Prolonged exposure to high doses of stress, can lead to problems with a child's physical and/or mental health, such as asthma, poor growth, depression, or behavior problems. The good news is there are simple things you can do every day, at home, to help regulate your child's stress response system and buffer the negative impacts of stress, keeping them healthy and on the right developmental track.

It may be helpful to remember that the most important ingredient for healthy kids is a healthy caregiver. Kids are wired to be tuned in to emotional signals from their caregivers, so our kids pick up on our energy, especially now when we are all remaining at home together. So while you work to navigate the new normal, perhaps applying for public benefits or working from home while taking care of your kids and family, it is just as important to follow the stress-busting strategies for yourself. Remember to put on your own oxygen mask first, so you can be there to be available for your kids. Review the Californian Surgeon General's [Playbook: Stress Relief during COVID-19 for tips on your own self-care](#) during this time.

Safe, stable, and nurturing relationships and environments in which children feel safe emotionally and physically can protect children's brains and bodies from the harmful effects of stress. You can help your child be healthier by managing your own stress response and helping your child do the same. Healthy nutrition, regular exercise, restful sleep, practicing mindfulness, building social supports, and getting mental health care can help to decrease stress hormones and prevent health problems.

None of this is easy right now and it is easy to feel overwhelmed. Remember your network can still help even when you're apart. So reach out to your schools, friends, family, faith community and neighbors to see what is working in their homes right now and share what's working in yours. Talking to someone you trust is a great way to reduce your stress and stay connected even when we are physically apart.

Start with the basics of routine and then take it step by step to build a program that works for you and your family. Please be kind to yourself. We are all adjusting to a new situation together and that transition is going to take some time.

## **KEEPING AN EYE OUT FOR STRESS IN KIDS**

Many of us are feeling a lot of stress right now. As adults we may be able to recognize and say “wow, I’m stressed out.” For kids, no matter the age, they may not necessarily recognize it, verbalize it and it may not show up in the same way that our stress as adults does.

During challenging times, our bodies may make more stress hormones than usual. This can show up differently for different people. Babies may have differences in the sleeping and eating patterns. Toddlers and preschoolers may go back on a developmental milestones they had already achieved (like sleeping through the night or bedwetting).

One of the most common ways stress shows itself in school-aged kids is changes in their behavior. They may be a bit more irritable, bouncing off the walls, expressing boredom, or having a hard time managing their impulses, paying attention or focusing, or new behaviors may arise. Teenagers and adolescents may become more withdrawn.

However, many kids may show no behavioral symptoms at all. For some kids, increased stress hormones may show up as headaches, tummy aches, difficulty sleeping or worsening health issues like asthma, eczema or more frequent infections. In teenagers, you might see more risk-taking behaviors like using substances such as tobacco and marijuana (including vaping), alcohol or other substances as well as increased interest in sexual contact. Girls may also see changes in the timing or duration of their menstrual period.

It’s helpful to keep in mind that these changes aren’t “just in their heads.” Increased stress leads to biological changes in our brains and bodies that can affect kids’ health, behavior and development. The good news is there are simple things you can do every day, at home, to help regulate your child’s stress response system and buffer the negative impacts of stress, keeping them healthy and on the right developmental track.

If your child has asthma, diabetes or another health condition, it is important to be monitoring that condition more closely during times of stress. Many chronic illnesses are worsened by stress, so building a routine that practices the six stress-busting strategies below can help to combat the impact of the increase in stress hormones.

## **STRESS-BUSTING FOR KIDS**

### **STEP 1: TALK ABOUT WHAT’S GOING ON**

- No matter the age, uncertainty can create anxiety. As parents and caregivers, it’s important to talk to children about emergency situations in age-appropriate language and approach the discussion in a calm and sensitive way to help them cope.
- Starting the conversation can be the hardest part. One tip to make it easier is to start by asking what they have heard about coronavirus and if they have any questions or fears.
- Take some time to correct any misinformation and share age-appropriate, honest facts.
- Follow up these details by focusing on the things we can control to help us stay healthy and help other people stay healthy - proper handwashing, covering coughs and sneezes, disinfecting surfaces, and physical distancing and wearing masks when we are outside and around other people for essential reasons.
- Help them understand why they are not able to see their friends, grandparents, teachers or other loved ones in-person right now — because staying at home helps keep everyone healthy right now while we fight the coronavirus.
- You can empower them with a sense of purpose by letting them know that, even though it’s kind of a pain (or especially because it is kind of a pain), their actions are protecting the most vulnerable that could get sick. Express how proud you are of your kids for being part of the solution.

## **STEP 2: KEEP KIDS CONNECTED TO THEIR NETWORKS**

- Social supports are a vital part of kids' development and mitigating the negative impacts of stress. Finding ways to keep your kids connected to their friends, cousins, teachers, grandparents, coaches, aunts, uncles, and so on, is critical.
- Video chat play dates, write letters to send, text silly pictures back and forth, video messages, whatever works – but helping kids stay connected to their networks is as important for them as it is for you.

## **STEP 3: BUILD A ROUTINE FOR YOU AND YOUR FAMILY**

- During times of uncertainty, it is especially important to stick with normal routines – predictability and structure help kids self-regulate.
- Share the schedule with the kids, as this helps to reduce anxiety, fear of boredom and reduce challenging behaviors as you move throughout the day. With older kids and adolescents, it's great to build the schedule with them so they have a sense of control and self-determination.
- Your schedule should include set wake up and bedtimes, regular meals (including snacks), quiet time for schoolwork and reading as well as regular movement and exercise.
  - o As you make your plan, make sure elements of the six stress-busting strategies are included to help regulate the stress response system. The six strategies are:
    - Supportive relationships – stay connected to our communities
    - Exercise – 60 minutes a day (doesn't have to be all at once)
    - Healthy Sleep – practice good sleep hygiene including going to bed and waking up at the same time each day.
    - Nutrition
    - Mental and Behavioral Health Support
    - Mindfulness — like meditation or prayer
- Keeping regular hygiene – shower, brush teeth, getting dressed in clean clothes – are also important for health and well-being.
- It is important to remember, especially if you are working from home, that play is an important part of kid's "job". We shouldn't expect kids to be focused on learning tasks 8 hours per day. Opportunities for exercise, creativity and play are critical for behavior, learning, and development throughout the day.
- If you are able to go outside, do so and get everyone's bodies moving. It's great for everyone's physical health and mental health too. Remember to keep physical distancing practices of at least 6 feet from others.
- Included in this playbook is a "Self-Care Template for Kids" that can help you start building your program.

## **STEP 4: KEEP TO YOUR ROUTINE**

- Start your scheduled routine. Keep an open mind about what is working, what isn't and what is realistic for you and your family. It might be helpful to take notes or keep a journal of what works for you.
- Check in with your kids (and yourself!) regularly to see how it's going.
- Not every moment of every day needs to be scheduled, so take a moment to reflect on your program and how it's working for your family. If you need to change things about it, go ahead and do so. Let your plan evolve to ensure it is working for you. If it's not, feel free to change it up, but ensure elements from the six stress-busting strategies remain.

## **Six Stress-Busting Strategies For Kids**

Safe, stable, and nurturing relationships and environments in which children feel safe emotionally and physically can protect children's brains and bodies from the harmful effects of stress. You can help your child be healthier by managing your own stress response and helping your child do the same. Healthy nutrition, regular exercise, restful sleep, practicing mindfulness, building social supports, and getting mental health care can help to decrease stress hormones and prevent health problems.



### 1. SUPPORTIVE RELATIONSHIPS:

- a. Double down on supportive relationships within your household and help your kids maintain connections with friends and loved ones outside of the home by phone, video chat, old-fashioned letter writing or age-appropriate social media. Turn off media and devices for high-quality time together making art, dancing, cooking or reading at home. Remain in touch with mentors, friends, and family by phone or video chat, including schools and community- or faith-based organizations.

### 2. EXERCISE DAILY:

- a. Engage in 60 minutes of physical activity every day. It doesn't have to be all at one time. Dance party in your bedroom, 35 jumping jacks here and there, 20 minute hula hooping contest, film a TikTok and share it out, power walk around the block twice, running, bedtime yoga, 10 pushups, do some double dutch jump rope, the list can go on and on. Bottom line – get your and your kids' bodies moving and heart rates up to burn off stress.

### 3. HEALTHY SLEEP:

- a. Get sufficient, high-quality sleep. This may be particularly hard right now, but things that help are going to sleep and waking up at the same time each day.
- b. Making a routine of reading a book to or with kids before bed.
- c. Create a calm place for sleep that is cool, quiet and free of distractions
- d. Turn off electronics at least a half hour before bed.
- e. Limit food and beverages containing caffeine, like soda and chocolate.

#### **4. NUTRITION:**

- a. This is not about losing weight. This is about ensuring you are getting proper nutrition to help combat stress. Keep regular mealtimes, includes snacks for kids. Minimize refined carbohydrates, high-fat, high-sugar foods and reduce your alcohol intake.
- b. General rule of thumb includes 5-9 servings of fruits and vegetables per day and foods rich in omega-3-fatty acids, including fish, nuts and fiber.

#### **5. MENTAL AND BEHAVIORAL HEALTH SUPPORT:**

- a. Engage in mental health care for yourself and/or for your child.
- b. Minimize the amount of exposure/consumption of news or other media content that feels upsetting for both you and your child.
- c. If your child currently sees a mental health professional, ask that those sessions can continue via video or phone sessions for psychotherapy, psychiatric care or substance use treatment. There are new laws to support your provider to do phone and video visits.
- d. Keep your own mental health appointments via video or phone calls, as well.
- e. Have open conversations as a family about emotional and mental health
- f. If you do not have a regular mental health professional, here are some resources to help you get started [Insert links]
- g. If you are feeling like you or your child is in crisis [you can get help here](#).

#### **6. MINDFULNESS, MEDITATION, PRAYER:**

- a. Practice mindfulness, such as meditation, yoga, or prayer for 20 minutes, two times a day. Apps like Headspace and Calm are easy, accessible ways to get started. Meditations can be found online, as well. Both have specialty programs for kids of all ages.
- b. Mindfulness can help strengthen the brain pathways that actively buffer the stress response, helping you regulate body more easily.
- c. Take moments throughout the day with kids to notice and talk about how we're feeling, both physically and emotionally
- d. Talk about, write out or draw five or more things we are all grateful for each day

### **SOME ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS**

To combat stress, creating an outlet where kids can put their energy is incredibly helpful. Outlets like exercise, artwork, play and creativity are helpful here. Your stress-busting routine is the solution to help get everyone back on track. And, as always, addressing that there is something different and asking your child how they are feeling and checking in on what's going on is key.

A few additional reminders:

- Quality-Time Together - This increase in family time may be a window of opportunity to spend more time together. So look for positives in solidifying family cohesion if you can.
- Play – Finding ways to play and laugh is super important for our mental and physical health. Turn off the news and watch a silly movie, call a friend and talk about times you laughed the hardest, figure out what impressions you can do, play the floor is lava. Remember that part of kids' "jobs" is play. This is a task that is something kids need for their development. These are serious times, but you can still be silly. It will be good for everyone.
- Adjusting our expectations – We recognize this is temporary and that during this time we may not be as productive as we had hoped every day. That is OK. Caregivers are balancing household responsibilities, ensuring your kids are doing their distance learning and work stress

and more. All of these things can be incredibly intense. Give yourself permission to let go of judgement that you aren't doing it "right" or doing enough. Do the best you can to work the program you develop to minimize stress for you and your kids right now.

- Asking for help or take a moment – open up the communication in your house about times when we need help. Whether you have a special code word or just the reminder to yourself. If you need a moment, communicate it and take the moment. If you are having a really hard time, that's normal and unfortunately right now, expected. [Services and numbers you can call for support are here.](#)

## **SELF-CARE TEMPLATE FOR KIDS**

During this time your child's body may be making more or less stress hormones than is healthy. This can lead to problems with a child's physical and/or mental health, such as asthma, poor growth, depression, or behavior problems. Safe, stable, and nurturing relationships and environments where children feel safe emotionally and physically can protect children's brains and bodies from the harmful effects of stress. You can help your child be healthier by managing your own stress response and helping your child do the same. Healthy nutrition, regular exercise, restful sleep, practicing mindfulness, building social supports, and getting mental health support can help to decrease stress hormones and prevent health problems.

Here are some goals your family can set together to support your child's health. [*Check the goals that you are choosing or write in others that will work for you and your family in each category!*]

- Supportive relationships.** We've set a goal of...
  - Using respectful communication even when we are upset or angry
  - Spending more high-quality time together as a family, such as:
    - Having regular family meals together
    - Having regular "no electronics" time for us to talk and/or play together
    - Talking, reading, and/or singing together every day
  - Making time for me and my kids to call or video chat with friends and family to maintain healthy support systems for myself and our family
  - Connecting regularly with members of our community to build social supports
  - Asking for help if a relationship or environment feels physically or emotionally unsafe
    - The National Domestic Violence hotline is **800-799-SAFE (7233)**
    - The National Sexual Assault hotline is **800-656-HOPE (4673)**
    - To reach a crisis text line, **text HOME to 741-741**
    - Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline: You can call 1-800-4-A-CHILD
  - Create your own goal: \_\_\_\_\_
- Exercise.** We've set a goal of...
  - Limiting screen time to less than one hour per day
  - Walking at least 20 minutes every day
  - Finding a type of exercise that we enjoy and doing it together as a family. Examples include long walks, dancing, sports (shooting hoops, playing catch, etc.), hula hooping, jump rope, running, jumping jacks, push-ups and sit ups, yoga, or Zumba.
  - Getting my child involved in physical activities like sports, dance, or other form of regular exercise – while still practicing physical/social distancing
  - Create your own goal: \_\_\_\_\_

- Nutrition.** We've set a goal of...
  - Eating a healthy breakfast daily (with protein, whole grains, and/or fruit)
  - Drinking water instead of juice or soda
  - Eating at least 5 vegetables and/or fruits every day
  - Choosing whole wheat bread and brown rice instead of white bread or rice
  - Limiting high sugar and/or high fat foods
  - Create your own goal: \_\_\_\_\_
  
- Sleep.** We've set a goal of...
  - Turning off screens 30 minutes before bedtime
  - Helping my child go to bed at the same time every night
  - Making a routine of reading a book to my child before bed (or, if older, letting my child read to me)
  - Creating a calm place for sleep
  - Using mindfulness or other stress reduction tools if worry is keeping my child up at night
  - Create your own goal: \_\_\_\_\_
  
- Mindfulness.** We've set a goal of...
  - Taking moments throughout the day to notice how we're feeling, both physically and emotionally
  - Talking about or writing out a list of five or more things we are all grateful for each day
  - Practicing mindful breathing or other calming technique(s) during stressful situations
  - Creating a regular routine of prayer, meditation, and/or yoga
  - Downloading a mindfulness app and doing a mindfulness activity every day
  - Create your own goal: \_\_\_\_\_
  
- Mental health.** We've set a goal of...
  - Having a conversation as a family about emotional and mental health
  - Learning more about mental health treatment options (e.g., counseling, therapy, psychiatric services)
  - Identifying a local mental health professional
  - Scheduling an appointment with a mental health professional or keeping regular appointments
  - If I am feeling like I or my child is in crisis, I will get help
    - The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline is **800-273-TALK (8255)**
    - To reach a crisis text line, **text HOME to 741-741**
    - SAMHSA Disaster Distress Line **800-985-5990**
  - Create your own goal: \_\_\_\_\_

Remember, the most important ingredient for healthy kids is a healthy caregiver. Here are some other goals that you can set for yourself to help your whole family be healthier.

- Self-Care.** I've set a goal of...
  - Making a plan for what to do when I'm feeling stressed out, angry, or overwhelmed
  - Planning with my partner, friends, or family to get the support I need
  - Seeking help if I am not emotionally or physically safe
  - Making regular video or phone appointments with my mental or behavioral health provider(s)
  - Identifying my strengths and learning more about building resilience



- Calling **211** if I need help meeting basic needs such as food and shelter
- National Parent Helpline: Call 1-855-427-2736
- Create your own goal: \_\_\_\_\_

**For more information, please visit:**

For resources related to COVID-19, <https://covid19.ca.gov/>

From **First 5 California**: <http://www.first5california.com/>

From the **American Academy of Pediatrics**: <https://www.healthychildren.org/>