Supporting Your Gifted Child During COVID-19

As COVID-19 forces us to face new norms like social distancing, remote learning, and shelter-in-place orders, gifted children may exhibit increased anxiety, sadness, intense feelings, and out-of-the-ordinary behavior.

School is suddenly shut. Routines are disrupted. Family members may be sad, sick, or scared. Media coverage is continuous. Our children's worlds have become anything but normal.

During this world pandemic, gifted children may experience intense emotions or anxiety, especially if they react intensely or are considered twice-exceptional under normal circumstances. Most families are at home—perhaps huddled around their TVs or smartphones—so there is little escape for those with a predisposition for asynchrony, emotional intensity, or anxiety.

While gifted children may cognitively process information about COVID-19, it's important to remember that, for some, other areas of development—such as their emotional or social skills—may not be as mature. They may exhibit intense feelings when fearing for their own family, or when realizing others have difficulty getting food, may be sick, and/or can't get tested. Emotions and sensitivities can quickly spiral to worst-case scenarios.

However, families with gifted children and teens can manage intensities and anxieties in a healthy way, and channel energies to support positivity in themselves and in the community.

SET A CALM, REASSURING TONE

Despite our own angst, parents of highly perceptive and sensitive children must try to be calm; it's important to reassure children and remind them of all your family is doing to keep them safe. It's also important to maintain a sense of normalcy in their daily lives. Children take their cues from us— by watching carefully how we behave and react—to guide their reactions. The increased uncertainty that comes with COVID-19 may be challenging for some gifted children. The way we talk about and/or non-verbally react to COVID-19 can increase or decrease our children's anxiety.

Tensions may also run high when families are quarantined together, so it's essential to:

- Stress patience
- Understand that support, not chastising, is what your children need
- Help your children recognize and manage their stress
- Reflect their feelings, be supportive, and do not judge
- Expect that your child may need more affirmations of love and affection; oblige these requests to alleviate anxiety and maintain secure attachment
- Create a chill zone or "signal words" to indicate overload

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

» Part of managing anxiety is managing uncertainty—in high abundance with COVID-19. Find ways to focus on things your children can control, while being mindful of (but not ignoring) those they cannot.

» There is no such thing as a perfect parent—perhaps even more true during a crisis. Do the best you can and recognize that mistakes will be made.

» Be genuine in your words and actions—your kids will love you every bit as much as you love them.

» Eventually, we will all find some equilibrium…and things will return to some sense of normal.

» **Read:** CDC Guidelines for Discussing COVID-19 with Children

» **Browse:** Center for Healthy Minds COVID-19 Well-Being Toolkit

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Support During COVID-19

DISCUSSING COVID-19

In talking with gifted children about COVID-19, parents and caregivers should:

- Be vigilant about gathering accurate information from reliable sources
- Be open with information you have in developmentally appropriate ways *(See pages 3-4)*
- Correct rumors or false information your child has received
- Talk about the likelihood of minimal significant adverse health effects for children
- Allow your child to openly ask questions and express their concerns
- Begin conversations by asking an open-ended question like, *"What do you want to know about COVID-19?"*

Without accurate information, some gifted children may imagine situations that are more frightening than reality. For some highly sensitive children, repeated exposure to the media may be anxiety-provoking. In these situations, it's important to take time to discuss your child's feelings and consider limiting access to potentially upsetting news coverage.

TECHNIQUES TO MANAGE ANXIETY

Avoid Minimizing Concerns. To help regulate emotions, it is important that parents avoid minimizing a child's worries. Saying things like, *"Don't worry about that,"* or *"You're a child, these are adult problems,"* will not help a gifted child, according to Sal Mendaglio, Ph.D. He offers other practical tips in the *Parenting for High Potential* article, "*Management of Anxiety Begins at Home.*"

Use Cognitive (Thinking) Strategies. In his book *From Warrior to Worrier: A Guide to Conquering Your Fears*, Dan Peters, Ph.D., suggests a 4-step approach in helping children manage anxiety:

- **Identify the thought.** Example: *"Will someone in my family get sick from COVID-19?"*
- **Challenge the thought.** *"Do I have evidence to support what I'm thinking?"*
- **Modify the thought.** *"Data shows that the risk of getting sick is low if I practice CDC guidelines. Data also shows that the majority of people who get COVID-19 recover fully and return to their normal lives."*
- **Replace the thought.** *"If my family and I follow CDC guidelines and what the government is asking us to do, there is a low chance that someone in my family will get sick."*

Focus on What Your Child Can Control. Encourage your children to focus on things they can control, such as:

- Keeping a positive attitude
- Having fun—doing things that bring joy
- Being kind to family members and pets
- Connecting with others via age-appropriate social media—virtual playdates and hangouts with friends; FaceTime with grandparents and other relatives
- Finding beauty in each other and nature, such as walking, hiking, and biking (while adhering to social distancing guidelines)

Mindfulness & Breathing Exercises. Studies have shown significant health benefits when mind and body are connected. At home, parents can help their children stay healthy by incorporating daily exercise, regular sleep schedules, yoga, meditation, and other mindfulness practices. Share *Stressed Out? Mindfulness Works!* written exclusively for teens and tweens by Michele Kane, Ed.D.

Find Ways to Make A Difference. Help your child channel their energies by getting involved within your community:

- Write thank you letters to first responders
- Organize online fundraisers
- Donate to a food pantry
- Read aloud via video chat to younger children
- Make cards/draw pictures for neighborhood elderly or shut-ins
- Ask teens to organize and host virtual talent shows or themed family dinners

Look for other *Timely Information for Parents (TIP) Sheets* on various topics for nurturing gifted children at bit.ly/NAGC_TIP.

FOR MORE INFO

Web

Child Trends—*Resources for Supporting Children's Emotional Well-Being During the COVID-19 Pandemic*

Healthy Minds—tryhealthyminds.org

National Association of School Psychologists—*Helping Children Cope with Changes Resulting from COVID-19*

Yale Center for Emotional Health—Suggests using the "RULER" strategy to help children manage emotions

Apps

For kids, found on your App Store:

Calm

DreamyKid

Headspace: Guided Meditation & Mindfulness

Insight Timer

Mindful Powers

Relax Melodies

Super Stretch Yoga

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Supporting Gifted Children During COVID-19 & Other Crises

By Developmental Stage

During times of crisis, such as dealing with the coronavirus pandemic, children of ***all ages*** need lots of love and attention from their parents. Parents can also support their children by keeping as many familiar routines as possible, creating new routines where necessary for structure and comfort, and helping children talk about their feelings.

Parents should refer to these tables to assist in identifying behaviors, a typical child's reactions to crisis, and age-appropriate strategies. Keep in mind that many gifted children exhibit ***asynchrony,*** meaning they may be developmentally farther ahead or, in some situations, lagging behind their age mates.This chart was compiled based on an average child's behavior and/or reactions. Parents should adapt based on their own gifted's child's development.

	Child's Behavior	Child's Reaction to Crisis	How Parent Can Help
Pre-School Ages 3-5	Begins to be own person Likes to pretend & play grown up Curious about the world Begins to explore while staying close to parent	Afraid of being left alone May have a setback eating, sleeping, or toilet training May revert to clinging or baby talk May become aggressive or give in easily to appease others and decrease conflict	Structure provides predictability Provide appropriate notice of new & changing routines Make playtime fun, spend time having fun, & be creative (e.g., indoor scavenger hunts, "pretend" vacations, etc.)

	Child's Behavior	Child's Reaction to Crisis	How Parent Can Help
Early School Ages 6-8	Begins to do for self Starts to understand feelings Begins to develop friendships Can handle some responsibility Begins independent exploration Asks more questions	Often cries or withdraws Wants to please & tries to be a good helper May act out for lack of words to express complex emotions May regress in self-help skills	Help your child to identify & label feelings Provide appropriate notice of new routines, clarify rules, & appreciate your child's efforts Spend 1-1 time to reassure of their worth & competence (ability to do things) Facilitate family playtime, exercise (yoga, indoor dance parties, walks), & mindfulness

	Child's Behavior	Child's Reaction to Crisis	How Parent Can Help
Older School Ages 9-12	Able to learn new ideas Begins to have logical thoughts Begins to understand fairness & see other perspectives Begins to understand differences between right & wrong	May: • feel powerless • feel anger about the situation • complain about headaches/ stomachaches • have trouble with schoolwork or classmates • worry about others' health & safety • have sleeping & eating disturbances • do research about COVID-19 & pandemics	Provide a consistent schedule with clear rules & predictability Help your child talk about feelings & normalize those feelings Arrange for video chats with friends & loved ones Encourage journaling & bibliotherapy (reading fiction/non-fiction books about resilient individuals who have overcome hardship, challenge, & crisis)

Framework courtesy of Edward R. Amend, Psy.D.

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Supporting Gifted Children During COVID-19 & Other Crises

By Developmental Stage

(Continued)

Adolescents Ages 13-18

Child's Behavior	Child's Reaction to Crisis	How Parent Can Help
Begins to want independence Spends greater amount of time with friends Looks to family for support Begins to focus on future	May: • have trouble with schoolwork or classmates • withdraw & become depressed • become angry or hurt & pursue unhealthy behaviors • grieve over loss of school time, social events—fear of missing out • worry about others' health & safety • have sleep & eating disturbances • fret over inability to help	Help teen talk about feelings & listen to complaints Respect teen's feelings & be honest about yours Do not burden a teen with your anxieties Encourage video chat with peers Create schedules & expectations with their input Be sure to check in with their mental health Encourage them to find ways to problem-solve community needs (while practicing CDC guidelines)

Post-HS/ College Ages 19+

Child's Behavior	Child's Reaction to Crisis	How Parent Can Help
Seeks independence Questions how things are done Feels invincible Feels helpless due to unexpected change in circumstances	Quick to become angry or emotional Big reactions to small stressors Increased emotional response May challenge authority & make unhealthy choices Fear of missing out Worries about others' health & safety	Empathize with the challenges Raise concerns about poor choices & discuss healthy alternatives in a gentle way Reinforce CDC guidelines and help them process their feelings of missing out vs. the "right thing to do" in times of crisis for the greater good Encourage them to be a leader and serve as a positive example for younger family members and/or friends Help them stay connected with others through video chats or social media

Framework courtesy of Edward R. Amend, Psy.D.

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