



GUIDANCE FOR SUPPORTING YOUNG CHILDREN THROUGH COVID-19



Defending the Early Years

www.dey.org

RESOURCES & RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PARENTS AND EDUCATORS



We are in unprecedented times now. As parents and teachers of young children, we are struggling. We are trying to work from home while caring for young children. With children no longer in school, we worry that they will fall behind. When we are separated from grandparents, other family members, and good friends, how can we reassure our children that their loved ones are safe? What can we do when we have so many hours to fill with our children at home? What can we do to help them stay active and engaged and to thrive? **What about screen time? We know too much is not good for young children**, but how can we get any work done if we don't use screens to entertain them?

Defending the Early Years (DEY) doesn't have all the answers, but from our knowledge about young children and their development, we can offer some thoughts and suggestions.

FALLING BEHIND

We urge you not to worry about your children falling behind academically, now that they are no longer in school.

During these times, **your child’s emotional well-being is much more important.** Remember that every other child in the country is in the same situation. Once schools resume, knowledgeable teachers will meet the children where they are individually. In addition, many, many states have cancelled testing for the year so no need to be concerned about that.

COMMUNICATING WITH GRANDPARENTS, FAMILY, & FRIENDS

It’s important to reassure young children that their grandparents, friends, and family members are safe, especially when they are used to seeing them frequently. Skype or Facetime calls are the best way to do this, as children can see, talk to, and listen to their loved ones. Of course, young children may rarely sit still for a long conversation. Instead, consider doing one or more of the following during screen visits.

- ◆ Read aloud children’s books.
- ◆ Tell stories from your own childhood or make up new ones.
Do fingerplays (Where is Thumbkin? Itsy Bitsy Spider, Five Little Monkeys Jumping on the Bed, Here is a Beehive, and Two Little Blackbirds)
- ◆ Show family photos and talk about the people in the photo, how they’re related to the child, and what they were doing, etc.
- ◆ Tell stories about when you, or their parents were children
- ◆ Sing songs, play an instrument, and encourage children to join in.
- ◆ If the child is a new reader, ask him or her to read to you.
- ◆ Or watch the child play and perhaps comment on what he or she is doing from time to time—just as you would if you were actually in the room. In fact, some grandparents are “babysitting” from afar like this, allowing the child’s parents to get some work done.



ROUTINES

Establishing routines are important in helping kids build resilience and helping provide them with a sense of security. Young children thrive on routines and knowing what to expect each day.

Your old routines may not work in these topsy-turvy times, so setting up a daily routine is helpful. Figure out what will work for your family, including regular mealtimes, work time, play time, outdoor time, together time, alone time, and screen time. Of course, you want your routines to be flexible enough to allow for spontaneity and creativity. And don't forget regular bedtimes. Getting enough sleep is crucial to staying healthy.

Even if your children can't read yet, it is helpful to make a chart of your daily routine and explain it to them. Perhaps, you can illustrate your plan with photos, either your own or cut from magazines. Sometimes a kitchen timer can work wonders. Tell the children that you are setting the timer for when you need to work. When it dings, you will come and check in with them, help them find other projects to play with, provide a snack, answer question, or whatever they may need.

During these upsetting times, you might consider adding a special treat during the day – read a chapter book together, play a board game, enjoy a special dessert. Special treats will help children have positive memories of this challenging time.

It is crucial that young children continue to play during this time. Play helps children work through what is happening around them and make sense of their world.

This is also a good time to help children learn to entertain themselves, with support from you.



PLAY

Encouraging children to play during this time is important. Children use play to try out new roles, to experiment, to imagine, to solve problems, and so much more.

Play also allows a child to reduce stress, providing an outlet for anxiety.

Play is a skill that needs to be strengthened, especially so for children who had busy schedules prior to this pandemic. This is a good opportunity to help them learn how to entertain themselves without screens or scheduled activities. There is a long-term benefit in doing so.

Here are some resources for encouraging meaningful play at home, produced by our sister organization, **TRUCE** (Teachers Resisting Unhealthy Children's Entertainment):

- **TRUCE Play Boxes.** Collect items around a theme (Office, Baby, Vehicles, College, etc.). Bring a different box out each day. Put it away at the end of the day. Consider making up a medical box, with masks, rubber gloves, child's doctor kit, and bandages which might help children work out through play what they are experiencing around them now.



- **TRUCE Guide for Using Children's Books to Promote Play.** This guide helps promote quality play, using children's books organized around themes that are interesting to children, such as playing with cardboard boxes, stories about playing with capes, wands, and dress-ups, or even playing when feeling bored.



- **TRUCE Family Play Plans**, use everyday materials like cardboard boxes, string, playdough, bubbles, forts, socks, gardening, mud, water, and chalk for play ideas at home. Note that Spanish versions of the Family Play Plans are available at <http://www.truceteachers.org/family-play-plans.html>

A few other play ideas:

- **Water play** is soothing for all young children. Encourage them to stand at the kitchen sink with items to wash (little cars, baby dolls, etc.) or item to explore, such as measuring cups, sponges, turkey basters. Or try extending bath time at the end of the day.
- **Art projects.** Provide a revolving array of art materials each day – crayons, paints, chalk, collage materials, or paint with water books.
- Make a batch of **playdough** and provide additional materials like cookie cutters or rolling pins to extend the play. Here is a **no-cook playdough recipe, made with jello**



- Put together a box or basket of **dress-up materials** – hats, scarves, gloves, crowns, capes, whatever you have around. Children will enjoy making up stories with their own props.

- **Pitch a tent** inside the house to serve as a hideout, fort, or play house. Or construct one, using sheets and blankets over a table or other furniture.



- Try very hard to **get outside every day**, whether for a walk around the block, a visit to a nearby park, or a even ride in the car. Fresh air and exercise do wonders for both adults and kids.



TIME TO TEACH SKILLS

With more time available, **this is an opportunity to teach your child some new, everyday skills that you might not ordinarily have time to teach.** Involving children in household chores helps them feel that they are contributing to your family's well-being. For example, you could teach:

- Cooking; depending on the child's age, from preparing a simple dish to preparing a whole meal
- Baking; start with a cake mix or easy cookies
- Sewing; how to sew on a button or make doll clothes
- Knitting or crocheting
- Planting a garden or a window garden
- Playing a musical instrument; ukuleles are easy to learn and inexpensive to buy and there are tutorials on YouTube. Or fill several glasses with different levels of water, so each glass sounds a different note when you tap them with a spoon
- How to do laundry, including sorting, washing, folding, and putting away
- How to wrap a gift
- Writing a letter; maybe start a correspondence with grandparents or classmates.
- Basic first aid
- Vacuuming
- Cleaning a bathroom
- Doing dishes
- Making a bed
- Building with tools; hammering or screwing a screw
- Caring for a pet





SCREEN TIME

These are unusual times that call for unusual solutions. We all are relying on screens during the coronavirus epidemic more than ever-- for work, for school, for communicating with loved ones, for news, and for entertainment (and distraction). Once the virus subsides, we can all return to less screen use. For now, when choosing programming for young children we can look for meaningful stories that are:

- Ad-free
- Violence-free
- News-free
- Free of adult conversations

When all else fails, consider screening reruns of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood!*

One option - Campaign for a Commercial Free Childhood is suggesting *Screen-Free Saturdays* during this time. Here they offer *101 Screen-Free Activities*.

Watch Dr. Susan Linn and Audrey Duck's video "Talking About Coronavirus" [here](#). If you think your children would enjoy a video chat with Audrey Duck, you can email Audrey to schedule your visit at audreydduck@gmail.com.



Photo by Susan Nolan

TALKING WITH CHILDREN

Many adults are feeling unsettled and anxious during this coronavirus pandemic, and many children are, too. **Kids' lives have changed suddenly—their routines are different, they aren't going to school or day care, they can't play with friends, and they are told to keep a distance from other people.** Children can pick up on our anxieties and they may be scared or confused by overhearing adult conversations or seeing scary news reports.

We don't always know what our children are feeling because often they don't tell us directly. Sometimes **we learn about their concerns by watching what themes come up when they play, tell stories, build, or draw.** If we do notice that a theme enters their play, let's say a child builds a house "where the virus can't get in," that is a chance for us to start a conversation with them. And sometimes children do tell us their worries, or ask questions directly, and that opens the door for us to talk with them.

When we engage in conversations with children, we want to **listen carefully to what they are saying.** It's often helpful to **ask questions that are open-ended** that allow children to tell us more about what they are feeling and thinking. If a child says, "The coronavirus is mean," we can ask, "What do you know about the virus?" Or, "Can you tell me more about how the virus is mean?" Whatever the child says next will help us continue the dialogue, keeping to this question and answer style.

Sometimes children express confusion. A child might say, "I can't hug my stuffed animals because they might have the virus." Then we can give some information that can help clear up this confusion. It's best to **state things simply and in a concrete way.**

Children's concerns usually relate to themselves and don't encompass the whole picture as we adults see it. We can reassure them with a statement like, "There is no virus on our stuffed animals or toys or anything in our house. Everything inside our house is safe from the virus." This kind of

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answer focuses on the concrete, here-and-now situation and gives information that can make sense to a child.

Young children have a strong need to feel safe and secure, and sometimes reassurance is what's most helpful to them. Because young kids don't think logically like we adults do, scary things can seem more powerful and can feel overwhelming. The

best kind of reassurance we can give children affirms their safety right now and stresses that we are able to keep them safe. We can say things like, "We are safe now and healthy. Many people are working very hard to make sure we stay safe and don't get sick."



Some of us may wonder how honest to be with children in talking with them about this pandemic. Some adults feel that they must tell children the truth as they see it. But young children don't reason as adults do, and they can't make sense of scary information in a larger context. **Honesty is important, but it's best if we can remember to phrase things in terms kids can understand and that won't scare them.**

At DEY, we know how challenging it can be to talk with children about difficult things. That's why we worked with Dr. Susan Linn to create the video that accompanies these materials. In it, **Susan talks with Audrey Duck about the coronavirus.**

It's a good example of how a caring adult can answer a young child's questions and provide much needed reassurance. Susan listens to Audrey's questions, confusions, and feelings, and she addresses each of them directly and simply. She accepts Audrey's feelings and empathizes with them, and explains the reality of the situation they are in. Susan reassures Audrey that she is safe and that many people are

working to keep her safe and healthy. **This video provides a helpful model for all of us to see how we can talk with young children about the challenging situation we're all in.** We hope that watching it with your family will open doors for you and the children in your lives to talk together about the coronavirus and its impact on our lives.



Find "Talking About the Coronavirus" video here.

TIPS FOR PARENTS FROM A VETERAN PRESCHOOL TEACHER

1. **Boredom is the gateway to creativity.** Allow your child to get bored. Wait it out. Creativity is on the other side if they believe that you will not entertain them.
2. **Provide access to open ended materials.** Make it ok to explore items that may be typically off limits. For example, the sheets, couch pillows, pots and pans.
3. **Observe.** Step back, be quiet, and observe what interests your young child. What do they do when no one is telling them what to do? Then, alter or add, based on what you learned.
4. **Engage.** Look for appropriate times to engage. Read out loud together, even if they can read to themselves. Turn on the music and dance. Enter their world.
5. **Rest and reflect.** Allow children to get to know their own rhythms...by allowing them to rest and reflect when their body and mind needs it. Even if it seems to be most of the day!
6. **Diet.** Make sure they are eating food, not just junk. Junk diets produce junk attitudes and behaviors.
7. **Make room.** Make room for the children you have. They are children. Do not expect adult behavior out of them. Readjust your perspective and expectations and make room for the messy, the loud, the need for co-regulation, the emotions, balance! (But allow the fun stuff.)
8. **Love yourself.** You cannot do this if you are burnt out and broken down. Remember to love yourself. Sit back and watch that movie, eat that ice cream, take that shower. Give yourself a break.
9. **Slow down.** Use this as a time to slow down.
10. **Just be.** Be together, be apart, be engaged, be reflective, be productive, be unproductive, be creative, be connected, be disconnect, be in the moment, just be.

Bonus tip: Any and all tips can happen out of doors.



Kisha Reid is the teacher/director of Discovery Early Learning Center in Maryland.

MAKE THE BEST OF THESE UNCERTAIN TIMES

We at Defending the Early Years know that these are stressful times but perhaps most challenging for parents of young children who are trying to do the impossible – to care for young children and work from home, while worrying about finances, everyone’s health and safety, and many other concerns.

We hope that these ideas and resources will help you to navigate these uncertain days, have helped reduce the stress, and that you and your family remain safe and well.



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