

COVID-19 CRISIS COPING- GUIDELINES FOR PARENTS & CARETAKERS

Practical Measures to Preserve and Protect Children's Brain and Body Health



As we all work together to adjust to the new reality of the COVID-19 threat, structuring children's daily and weekly schedule in a way that maintains as many routines as possible will be critical to ensuring continuity in their development, and buffer the impact of chronic stress on a developing brain.

Children can be empowered by us asking for their ideas about how to incorporate the basics into brain and body health practices. These events can leave children feeling powerless and needing a sense of control over their lives, too. The more they participate, the more likely they are to invest.

As we implement best practice for protecting ourselves and containing the spread of this virus, it can be helpful to think in terms of protecting children from both physical illness and the effects of chronic stress. When setting up expectations and structure for your child's day at home, ask them to fill in their ideas of how to attend to each of the following domains of brain and body health and hygiene.

HYGIENE =

A SERIES OF PRACTICES PERFORMED TO PRESERVE HEALTH

1. EMERGENCY HYGIENE PRECAUTIONS

Expect all family members to follow all CDC COVID-19 specific precautions, to include:

- Extended and frequent handwashing
- Use hand sanitizer as a secondary defense with prolonged hand washing as primary
- Wash your face with soap and water throughout the day and after contact with a new person
- Refrain from touching your face
- Limit touching surfaces outside the home and wash hands immediately when unavoidable
- Daily showers
- Brush your teeth after each meal
- Avoid crowded areas
- Maintain at least two arm's length distance from others outside the home



2. SLEEP HYGIENE

Prioritize good sleep hygiene by enforcing consistent “settle in, device-free” bedtime routines.

Sleep hygiene is our best defense against chronic or toxic stress (brain health) and environmental toxins (body health). Solid uninterrupted sleep allows the body and mind to reset and refuel; build up a reserve for our immune system; fight infection; process and store new learning; process and make meaning of events and psychological conflicts, and to release tension. During high stress times, think of sleep as a circuit breaker and follow the recommended hours as if they were “shut off to reset or reboot” instructions for the home or computer.

Whatever tensions or emotions we have at the start of sleep come with us when we drift off, which can cause sleep disruption or nightmares. When we first settle our minds (turn down lighting and remove noise and conversation (stimulation)), we are setting up sleep for a full and successful reset. Meditation and soft music can also calm both brain and body during this wake-sleep transition. Set up a routine designed to take calm, not stress, into your overnight reset.

Establish and enforce a bedtime routine for kids and teenagers that starts with a quiet activity. Set a ‘lights out; devices off’ bedtime expectation. Adolescents need as much sleep as younger children; their sleep-wake cycle is different (later bedtime; later wake time) but a consistent sleep routine and schedule is just as important. Guidelines below are from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

AGE	HOURS
Toddlers	11-14
Preschoolers	10-13
School-age (6-12 years)	9-12
Adolescents	8-10
Adults	7+

3. BODY HYGIENE

The unstructured days to come may make it hard to maintain daily hygiene. Set the same expectation as you would for a school day to maintain basic grooming and hygiene. This should include getting up and dressed/clean for the day before starting the learning part of the day (“school” remains their day job). This good habit is recognized as a staple for successful and healthy adults. For kids, good habits later in life are best established as early as possible and is not likely to occur if parents do not expect them to practice.



4. BRAIN HYGIENE

Stress interferes with healing and recovery and reduces immune system potential.

Art, movement, laughter, and play reduces stress and strengthens our immune system! Build in time for “free art” and “free play.” “Free” activities are those that a child chooses without adult directions or instructions.

Adults can help by providing materials and leaving them to either create on their own or to invite your engagement. Think of unstructured time or “free play” as an opportunity for children to work out problems and explore solutions on their own. Adults too often get in the way of this process by wanting to “help” or “teach.”

Structured play and adult-led activities (i.e., sport, board games, art projects, a playful parent) can promote family health and foster a child’s experience of the home as a safe and secure respite from external stress, and their experience of the parent as capable of putting down worries and making time for fun and family connection.

5. SOCIAL HYGIENE

Expect older children and adolescents to prioritize friend relationships and to feel eager to connect with their peers in some way, and often. They are more likely to invest in family time when their social world is maintained. Remember, they need peer support as much as we do. As kids get older, parents are resources and protectors while friends increasingly become emotional lifelines. Their expressed urgency to do so is more a developmental need than a desire.

Adolescents are not always rejecting you or avoiding family connection; they are biologically driven to prepare for leaving the home and family to launch into adulthood. They need guardrails during this transition but think of the urgency (and all the challenging ways they express it!) as preparation for being on their own. During this period of fear and uncertainty, the “need” will want to be met by connecting to their peer world with a device. They do need limits and breaks so there is enough time for other brain and body health needs, and they start to practice balance.

6. SCREEN HYGIENE

Older children will want more screen time and feel excited about the opportunity to spend more time doing the things they like. Try and relax screen time “rules” to allow for kids to do more of what they enjoy, combatting the stress that they are under. While we are all aware of the risks of ‘too much’ screen time, loosening the time restrictions makes sense under these circumstances.



You can strengthen your relationship by ‘doing’ as much as by talking. Show interest in their favorite games and ask them to show you what they like about that game, or to show you how to play. They just may invite you into their game world if they are sure you want to enter just to see what interests them and enjoy what they enjoy rather than criticize or judge the activity as unproductive. Just like adults, kids need something of their very own to look forward to during their “work/school” day.

7. EMOTIONAL HYGIENE

Play, laugh, connect and check in on the size and type of their unique ‘worries’

Big or small, we all need both space and grace at this time of disruption, uncertainty and anxiety. Emotions will run high and there will be friction and tension within the family system. A smooth transition or quick adjustment during this time would be abnormal!

Uncertainty gives way to rigidity; rigidity of one will increase tension for all. Anticipate frustration and conflict and prioritize time and space to adjust expectations. Life is different; flexibility and letting go can protect the psychological health of your family.

Without a balance between individual and ‘whole family’ needs and wants, inside can become as stressful as outside. When all members work to accept their own needs and wants cannot be met without compromise and deference to the ‘whole,’ you can set up this challenge for success and this crisis can be transformed into an opportunity for personal and family growth.

8. CARETAKER HYGIENE

Kids won’t get through this without you, so you’ll need to take lots of little brain and body breaks for your own self-care. Establish downtime or quiet time for your children, then model it by doing the same.

Schedule and model stress breaks or brain breaks to regroup, even if for short periods of rest or silence so your brain can make room to cope with the big and little ways children will express their needs and share or show their frustrations!

Take good care of each other and yourselves,

Dr. Jennifer Shaw and the Gil Institute Family