

# Answering Your Young Child's Questions About Coronavirus

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Here are some age-appropriate responses to the common questions a toddler might have about coronavirus.



Even if you've kept your toddler away from news about COVID-19 in the media or overhearing adult conversations, they are bound to have questions. Here are some age-appropriate responses to the common questions a toddler might have. Most importantly, remember to keep your answers simple and age-appropriate.

- *Why can't I play with that little boy over there?* "We have to take a break from playing with others so we can all stay healthy."
- *Why can't I have a turn with that toy?* "We can't play with other children's toys right now, so we can all stay healthy."
- *Why are we wiping down everything with wipes?* "We wipe things down to keep them clean." You don't need to explain more than this—young children don't understand germs or infection transmission yet.
- *Why is that person wearing a mask?* "Sometimes people wear masks when they aren't feeling well." More on this question [here](#).
- *Why won't Grandpa (or other loved one) kiss or hug me?* Reassure your child that their loved one still loves and cares about them very much. Then you can explain: "When a grown-up has a cold, they can keep others from getting sick by not hugging or

kissing for a while. When they feel better and are healthy again, the first thing they'll do is give you a big kiss!"

- *Why can't I see mommy (or daddy, grandma, etc.)?* If an adult in a child's life needs to be separate from them, children may feel confused about it. Don't worry your young child by talking about sickness or quarantine. You can say, "Mommy needs to be away for a little while, but she will be back soon." Consider ways to stay connected even when physically apart, like video between parent and child. Read more [here](#) on making the most of video chat.
- *Why can't I go to child care/school?* "Your child care is closed right now. Your teacher and your friends are home too, just like you. When child care is open again, you can go back and see your friends. I'll tell you when." Avoid going into details about illness so toddlers don't develop fears about attending child care.
- *Why can't we leave the house? Why can't my friend come over to play?* "Right now, there is a rule that families need to stay home for a little while and be together. That helps us and our friends stay healthy. I know it can be sad when we can't see and play with friends. But there are lots of fun things we can do together at home! Would you like to play chase or do a puzzle?" Check out our [activity guide](#) for play ideas.

Even if your child is too young to ask these questions, you might notice that they still appear curious about all the changes happening around them. You can validate that something different is happening without going into detail. Explain that a change in routine is happening and what your child can expect instead: "You're going to be staying home with Daddy for a little while, instead of going to child care. This morning we'll go on a walk and then we'll have a snack."

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# Young Children at Home during the COVID-19 Outbreak: The Importance of Self-Care

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Self-care is not selfish or indulgent—it's how we keep ourselves well to ensure we are physically, emotionally, and mentally capable of being there for our young children.



Parenting a young child is already stressful at times. That's why it's important to remember to take care of yourself, too. When you feel calmer, it's easier to be there for your children and meet their needs.

## The Case for Self-Care During the COVID-19 Outbreak

Most everyone has heard the flight attendant tell them to put their own oxygen mask on before helping others. The same goes for parenting—your health and well-being is important so that you can nurture your child. Self-care is not selfish or indulgent—it's how we keep ourselves well to ensure we are physically, emotionally, and mentally capable of being there for our young children.

The realities of COVID-19 make self-care even more important. The unknowns of what's coming next can worry even the calmest of parents. If faced with long periods of uncertainty, other stressors may emerge—concern for family members, worries about lost income, keeping the fridge full of groceries, balancing job roles with child care, and more. But young children need their parents to offer a calm, stable, and predictable “home base” for them. It's a challenge, but as a parent, the best way to help your child be at their best is to take care of yourself.

## **Pay Attention to How You Are Feeling**

Take the time to notice your feelings and pause and reflect before responding to sources of stress.

1. Place one hand on your belly and one on your chest.
2. Take a deep breath into your belly and feel your hand rise.
3. Exhale slowly and gently through your lips, like you are blowing on hot soup.
4. Repeat two to four times.
5. Respond to the situation once you've calmed yourself.

## **Imagine Your Child's Behavior as a Communication**

When young children experience a change in their routines, they may be confused or upset. But most children under three lack the words they need to share their feelings. They may “tell” you through their behavior: by being fussy, by withdrawing, by going back to earlier behaviors like wanting their pacifier or waking frequently at night. It's easy to become frustrated, since as adults, we're already managing so much. But when you encounter a challenging behavior, pause to think about what your child might be telling you. How could you respond in a way that meets their needs best? For example, if your child misses seeing their grandparent who provided child care before COVID-19, you can arrange for a [video chat](#) or by explaining the separation. Check out [this resource](#) for questions your toddler might have and age-appropriate ways to respond.

## **Make Time for Self-Care**

You and your child are probably used to having time apart—you at work or school, and your child at child care or with a family care provider. If you're stuck at home due to coronavirus precautions, your family may be together 24 hours a day and it may feel impossible to get a break for yourself. If you co-parent, talk about how you can share caregiving time so that each of you have a little time alone. If you and your co-parent

are balancing work-at-home with child care, collaborate on creating daily schedules that allow each of you to focus on key professional responsibilities while keeping children safe and occupied. Schedules (in terms of who does what, when) may need to change on a daily basis, so making time to plan before bed or during breakfast can set up you up for a successful day.

If you don't have another adult in the home, take advantage of "quiet time." Is your child still taking naps? Use that time for yourself. Is your child too old for naps? Try to arrange a quiet hour or two each afternoon when your child reads in bed or plays quietly. Stay nearby, but take care of yourself. If needed, use the time after your child goes to bed or before they wake up in the morning for self-care as well.

## Taking Care of Yourself

What activities make you happy? Reduce your stress level? Leave you feeling calm and rejuvenated? It's different for everybody. What's important is finding self-care strategies that work for YOU—ones that bring you peace and are realistic to use.

Health precautions like social distancing and self-quarantine present a challenge for self-care, since it may not be possible to go to the gym, exercise classes, book clubs, or sports events. Think about ways of adapting activities to formats that encourage social distancing:

- **Outdoor/group exercise activities:** Exercising outdoors, if it's safe and feasible, is a great solution. Walking, hiking and biking trails are perfect choices. Online videos and apps that provide instructor-led exercise, like yoga or group workouts, are also great resources.
- **Stay in touch with supports:** Technology can take the edge off of feelings of isolation. Can book club meet over video chat? Can you "visit" grandparents the same way? Maybe you and a running partner can motivate one another with shareable playlists and text message support.
- **If you find yourself getting restless, dust off your "when I have time" list:** Most of us keep a mental list of things we want to do "when we have time"—maybe it's learning how to refinish furniture, training to run a 5K, or binge-watching a new series. Whatever it is for you, choose an item from that list and tackle it now. Instructional videos, apps for motivation and support, and experts are easy to find online.
- **Take time to relax:** Sometimes, our minds and bodies just need a break. Meditation, mindfulness, and other replenishing activities (yoga, long baths, etc.) are a great way to let go of the pressures of the day.

And where's your toddler while all this is going on? Think about ways your child can join you in some of your activities. Buckle baby safely into a jog stroller. Put a towel down

next to your yoga mat for a toddler partner. Lie on your backs next to each other and practice deep breathing. While you still need some “alone time,” there are ways to invite our little ones to “share our calm” too.

We are in uncharted territory. Preparing for and living with the impact of coronavirus will have its challenges, and self-care may not seem like a priority. But that’s not true. Keeping ourselves supported and sustained is exactly what we need to ensure our families stay strong. You won’t just feel better, but you’ll be better for your family as well.

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# At-Home Activity Guide

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Play promotes healthy development, even when you're stuck at home.



As more families face social distancing, self-quarantine, and school and work closings as a result of COVID-19, it's possible to feel stressed—not only about health issues, but also with the reality of suddenly being at home for many days with energetic little ones. By planning early for this possibility and having some activities and experiences ready, you can feel less stressed and more prepared!

## Start with a Toy Rotation

If you have a variety of toys, try a toy rotation. Pick a few toys to leave out for your child to play with and put the rest away out of sight. After a week or so, switch out the toys they've been using for the ones stored away, and boom, it feels like they have new toys!

We know their toys will only entertain for so long...and then boredom can set in. Boredom for infants and toddlers may not look the same as it does for us. Signs your little one is bored:

- Fussing or whining
- Struggling to focus or engage in play
- Becoming more aggressive

## Parent-Child Play Ideas

As you look for activities to do with your child, consider offering different types of play to meet their needs and keep the fun going. Independent play (when children play by themselves with you nearby) is also an important type of play—and parents shouldn't feel guilty about giving their babies and toddlers a chance to play on their own.

Here are some different ideas for play that you can try with your young child:

**Outside time:** Getting outside will probably be refreshing and a great change of scenery for all of you. Though to maintain [social distancing](#), playdates are a no-go. Avoid touching playground equipment. Instead, run, roll down hills, jump like kangaroos, or lie back and look at the clouds. [Wash hands thoroughly](#) after returning home from any outdoor play.

For infants:

- Bring their stroller outside for a walk or a story.
- Lay a blanket on the grass for tummy time.
- Enjoy bubbles, listen to music and sing together, talk about what you see outside.
- Park the stroller or hold your baby so they can watch an older sibling or other children play.

For toddlers:

- Play 'I spy' (keep it simple, "I spy something blue", "I spy something that moves").
- Collect rocks or leaves, then sort them by size, color, and shape.
- Kick, roll, or toss a ball back and forth.
- Dig in the dirt (don't forget buckets, bowls, measuring cups, spoons, gardening tools, whatever you have!).
- Play with sidewalk chalk: draw pictures, trace one another's outline, and more.
- Paint with water. Fill a cup with water and give your child a brush to "paint" the sidewalk, door, etc.
- Blow bubbles.
- Play "I'm going to catch you."
- Pretend to be the different animals you might see in your neighborhood: Birds, squirrels, rabbits, deer, etc.

Most play that happens inside the house can also happen outside, so if the weather allows, bring some blocks outside, read together outdoors, color, or paint a cardboard box in the yard.

**Physical Play:** Little ones need to move and work their bodies...and voices. They will need opportunities to be loud, run, climb, and jump. This may happen outside or inside. Here are some ideas:

- Turn on some music and have a dance party.
- Put couch cushions on the floor and crawl, walk, or jump from one to the next (don't touch the floor, it's hot lava!).
- Use a bedsheet as a parachute (open it wide and raise it up above your heads, then bring it down to the floor). For infants, raise and lower a light blanket over them while playing peek-a-boo.
- Build a fort with sheets, blankets, couch cushions, pillows, chairs, and more. You can even "camp-out" indoors!
- Create an obstacle course using furniture, pillows, and toys.

**Quiet Play:** Children (and you) will also need some quiet time each day. This is great for relaxing, recharging, and maybe even allowing you to get some work done.

- Read together or independently (toddlers can flip through books and talk about what they see in the illustrations)
- Coloring
- Puzzles
- Block building
- Sorting objects
- Pretend play with stuffed animals, dolls, trains, cars, or kitchen items for "playing house"
- Stickers on paper – you can draw large shapes, letters, or numbers on paper and your child can line the shape with stickers
- Tape on paper – you can cut short pieces of masking tape and your child can stick it to a piece of paper (sounds boring, but little ones love it).

Remember that one of the most favorite types of play for children is helping you with "real" work. Think about whether your toddler can help with meal preparation, setting the table, sorting or putting away laundry, cleaning up (for example, putting shoes in the closet) or putting new toilet paper rolls in a basket in the bathroom. These tasks may take a bit longer with our toddlers, but it's fun for them and also teaches the value of cooperation.

## **Thinking About Your Daily Routine**

Try to keep daily routines as stable as possible during this break. As much as possible, try to stick to daily routines, with wake-up times, meals, naps, and bedtimes as usual. Children thrive on predictability, and it's good for their caregivers, too. (It's much easier to deal with a long day with little ones if it's divided into smaller, more manageable pieces.)