Boston Children's Hospital | Division of Developmental Medicine
Until every child is well

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD): Behavioral Tips for Parents During COVID-19

There are a number of behavioral approaches that can help your child better manage their ADHD. In fact, you may have been using many of these strategies before COVID-19. But dealing with ADHD and challenging behavior during these stressful times can require some unique approaches. Below are some tips and resources that you may find helpful. You may want to try these on your own, or you may want to get help from a professional, like a psychologist or your child's pediatrician.

How can I maintain structure and routines with everything so different?

Structure at home is the "magic ingredient" for behavior management. All kids need structure, but this is especially true for children with ADHD and especially true during COVID-19. Of course, your child's schedule is going to be very different from what it was before COVID! Work with your child or teen to create a daily schedule. Hang the schedule on the refrigerator on in a place where they are going to do their virtual schoolwork.

Here are some ideas from the American Academy of Pediatrics to help you create a daily schedule:

- Wake up, get dressed and have breakfast at the normal time
- Decide where everyone can do their work most effectively and without distractions – best, if possible, to not work in your child's bedroom
- List the times for learning, exercise and breaks.
    - For younger children, 20 minutes of class assignments followed by 10 minutes of physical activity might work well
    - Older children and teens may be able to focus on assignments for longer stretches, taking breaks between subjects
    - Include your hours as well, so your children know when the work-day is done
- Schedule time for nutritious lunches and snacks. Many schools are providing take-home school meal packages for students who need them
- Don't forget afternoon breaks as well!
- Have dinner together as a family and discuss the day
- Enjoy more family time in the evenings, playing, reading, watching a movie or exercising together
- Stick with normal bedtime routines as much as possible during the week to make sure everyone gets enough sleep

Be Flexible but keep important rules!

It's important to be flexible when it feels like things are changing all the time! But it's also important that children and teens understand and follow important rules. Also, problems can come up when behaviors are inconsistently reinforced. Even if you ignore it some of the time, your child may be likely to continue the negative behavior.

- Set house rules that you, your partner, your children and teens can agree to
- Agree on rewards for following the rules and consequences for breaking them (for example, limiting screen time)
- Keep them simple – pick the ones that really matter – even in the best of times, complicated rules can be tough to follow
- Put rules on a display so everyone can see them

Be Clear with Instructions

Following instructions can be difficult for children with ADHD. When giving instructions, try to remove distractions and make eye contact with your child or teen. Speak slowly in short, simple, and clear sentences with one task at a time ("pick up your clothing from the floor and put them in the hamper" instead of "clean up your clothes"). Give warnings when asking your child to stop something they enjoy or when breaks are about to end and it is time to get back to schoolwork.

Limit Conflicts

If there's behavior that is not violating rules but is bothersome, trying to ignore it – and if you cannot, discuss why it is bothersome with your child or teen without raising your voice or snapping at them. Even minor things can get very annoying when families are spending so much time together! Maintaining routines and keeping your child occupied can help decrease conflicts. Try to avoid situations which can make your or your child anxious or upset. If you find your child is getting upset, try to distract them. Talk about something they enjoy or find funny. If possible, set a quiet and safe space at home where you or your child can go to calm down.

It's important to always stay cool! If you try to manage your child's behavior when you are upset, your child will miss the message. If you feel yourself starting to overreact or get upset, take a breath and collect your thoughts before continuing. And don't forget to **take care of yourself, especially during stressful times.** Try to eat healthy, exercise, get enough sleep, and take breaks. If more than one parent is home, take turns watching the children if possible.

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Focus more on the quality of screen time than the quantity

While screen time limits are important, during times when children are doing schoolwork or meeting friends online makes limiting screen time really difficult. This is especially true for children with ADHD who may have difficulty in keeping track of how much time they are spending on screens. Instead of focusing on how much screen time, focus on the **three C's: child, content, and context.**

- **Child:** you know your child best! Help them choose content and amount of screen time that works best for them. For example, if your child is anxious, avoid too much news or scary videos. If your child likes music find videos that encourage singing like musical soundtracks (or dance, which has the added benefit of keeping them physically active!). Especially if your child has ADHD or other difficulty in tracking time spent, try to keep track for them to make sure it's not too much.
- **Content:** Use tools like Common Sense Media to see suggestions on age-appropriate and positive media content. If your child or adolescent likes video games, that's ok as long as they are engaging in them socially with friends (who they know in "real life" and are around their own age).
- **Context:** How you interact with your child or teen around media use. Try to show an interest in what they are doing or what they are interested in. Ask them to explain to you what they're watching. And try to turn connect their media use with something "real" – for example, watching a cooking video and then cooking together, or watching a musical soundtrack and singing together. And remember, **no** screen time for an hour before bedtime!

Speaking of Bedtime – Keeping Sleep Routines is Key!

- Getting enough sleep is a really important part of self-care, especially during stressful times. Pre-schoolers (under age 5) should get 10-13 hours of sleep, school-age kids (6-12 years old) should get 9-12 hours, and teenagers (13 to 18) should get 8-10 hours. Not getting enough sleep can make it more difficult to focus during the day and can increase stress and anxiety. Keep to a regular daily routine and try to prevent screen time for an hour before bed. If discussions around COVID-19 make your child anxious, try to avoid those discussions in the evening. Some children and teenagers need to have their devices charged in a common area overnight so they are not texting or checking social media before bed. If necessary, discuss and set that expectation with your children beforehand so they do not see it as a punishment but as a way to help them with sleep.

Keep Active!

Staying active and getting exercise is really important for all children, especially those with ADHD! You can take advantage of physical education ideas that your child's school posts or watch some exercise videos that can help stay active during the day (some resources below). As the weather gets nicer, go outside and take walks but remember to wear a mask!

Be in Touch with Your Child's Teacher(s)

Collaborate with your child's teacher(s) to find a healthy balance of motivated participation, work completion (up to the child's ability), and mental health. There probably is no perfect balance, so be flexible but you know your child best! If doing schoolwork from home is particularly difficult for your child, discuss it with their teachers and try to work on a fair balance. Also, it may not be possible to balance your child's schoolwork with other demands that *you* may have! Your child's pediatrician and social work teams may also be able to help if necessary.

Keep in Touch with Friends

While physical distancing is necessary to prevent the spread of SARS-CoV-2 (the virus that causes COVID-19), maintaining connections with friends and loved ones is very important. Try to schedule time for virtual playdates or video chats with family.

Work on Coping Skills Together

Everyone deals with stress and anxiety differently, but children often model their response on their parents. Focus on the positive and take time to talk with your children about their fears and anxieties – be honest and share yours! You can say things like "Yes, I am also worried about the virus, but I know there are things we can do to protect ourselves and our family." Find things that help you and your decrease stress – like deep breathing exercises – and try them together after working on a tough assignment or if they are feeling anxious about COVID-19. Share what works for you on decreasing stress, especially with older children and teenagers, to help them build resilience and their own coping skills for dealing with stressful times.

Dealing with Teenagers

Your teenager may need slightly different techniques. While many of the above suggestions work for teenagers, there are a couple of additional steps to try with them. One is to allow downtime and alone time. Set time during the day where they can unwind on their own – but keep some family time (like dinner) and engage with them then. Allow your teen to stay connected online – but as always, remind them to be careful with privacy settings and who they're sharing information with! And stressful times can increase the risk of depression or anxiety in teens. Keep an eye out if your teen seems to lose interest in things they used to enjoy, have excessive anger or personality shifts, seems very moody or sad, or has changes in sleep patterns. Remember, if you have any concerns you can always reach out to your teen's pediatric or mental health teams even during the pandemic – most clinics can offer virtual visits or telephone calls to check in.

Resources

This Family Education Sheet is available in Spanish.
This Family Education Sheet is designed to supplement Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD): Behavioral Tips for Parents, written by Dr. Jason Fogler, PhD. Please see that education sheet for more ADHD specific information and resources. Below are some resources specifically for COVID-19.

General COVID-19 Information:

Emotional support for Parents, Children, and Teens

Parental Stress Line

Parent Support Group – free, confidential service, available 24/7.

Call: 1-800-632-8188

NAMI Helpline:

The National Alliance on Mental Illness provides advocacy, education, support and public awareness.

If you're in a crisis, call: 1-800-950 6264 or text "NAMI" to 741741.

How to Cope With Anxiety Related to Coronavirus (COVID-19)

This website suggests ways how to cope with stress during the pandemic. It's appropriate for families and providers.

verywellmind.com/managing-coronavirus-anxiety-4798909

MASS 211:

A program of local United Way and The Commonwealth of Massachusetts providing free and confidential advice

www.mass211.org

Family Resource Centers:
Massachusetts Family Resource Centers (FRCs) are a statewide network of community-based providers offering multi-cultural parenting programs, support groups, early childhood services, information and referral resources and education for families whose children range in age from birth to 18 years of age. Find your local center at: https://www.frcma.org

Age-Appropriate Information about COVID-19

- Boston Children's Hospital COVID-19 Parent Information Page: http://www.childrenshospital.org/conditions-and-treatments/conditions/c/coronavirus
- It's okay to be scared: talking to your children about COVID-19 – tips for talking to your children about COVID and scary events https://discoveries.childrenshospital.org/talking-to-kids-about-covid19/
- KidsHealth: Understanding Coronavirus https://kidshealth.org/en/parents/coronavirus-landing-page.html
- Talking to Your Children About COVID-19 https://discoveries.childrenshospital.org/talking-to-kids-about-covid19/
- COVID-19 Information for multiple ages in many languages https://covid19healthliteracyproject.com/

Parenting During COVID-19:

- COVID-19: Stress, anxiety & parenting – tips from BCH psychologists Drs Erica Lee and Keneisha Sinclair-McBride on helping parents cope with stress and anxiety during COVID-19
- https://drive.google.com/open?id=1GjCaqlGaRy_9hRpq8Oq9a3o1-1hHMTnz
- Positive Parenting in a Pandemic – tips from the American Academy of Pediatrics on helping your family through the outbreak
- https://healthychildren.org/English/family-life/family-dynamics/communication-discipline/Pages/Positive-Parenting-and-COVID-19_10-Tips.aspx
- Discipline Looks Different in a Pandemic – tips for maintaining discipline but being flexible during COVID-19 (free article, registration required)
- https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/17/parenting/coronavirus-discipline-child.html
- Parents Need Stress Relief Too – tips for helping parents cope (free article, registration required)
- https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/18/parenting/parents-need-stress-relief-too.html
- Tips for building resilience in children during times of crisis, from the American Academy of Pediatrics https://www.healthychildren.org/English/healthy-living/emotional-wellness/Building-Resilience/Pages/How-to-Support-Your-Childs-Resilience-in-a-Time-of-Crisis.aspx and https://www.healthychildren.org/English/healthy-living/emotional-wellness/Building-Resilience/Pages/Building-Resilience-in-Children.aspx
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Teens and Stress:

- COVID-19 Resources from the Center for Young Men's Health (https://youngmenshealthsite.org/coronavirus-resources/) and Center for Young Women's Health (https://youngwomenshealth.org/coronavirus-resources/) with tips for teens on handling COVID-19 related stress and staying active
- Teens, social distancing, and anxiety in the time of COVID-19 – https://discoveries.childrenshospital.org/teens-social-distancing-covid-19/ - tips and brief video with advice on helping teens cope with COVID-19 stress
- Teens & COVID-19: Challenges and Opportunities During the Outbreak https://healthychildren.org/English/health-issues/conditions/chest-lungs/Pages/Teens-and-COVID-19.aspx
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Keeping Routines:

- Help your kids stay busy and happy at home during COVID-19 shutdowns https://discoveries.childrenshospital.org/keep-kids-busy-during-covid/

Resources for Learning:

- Working and Learning from Home During the COVID-19 Outbreak https://healthychildren.org/English/health-issues/conditions/chest-lungs/Pages/Working-and-Learning-from-Home-During-the-COVID-19-Outbreak.aspx
- ASK resource list <waiting on permission to share>
- Home-Schooling Tweens and Teens During Coronavirus Closings (free article, may need registration) https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/12/well/family/coronavirus-school-closings-homeschooling-tweens-teens.html
- Tips on staying focused and free schedule maker online https://www.nirandfar.com/schedule-maker/
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Staying Fit:

- Getting Children Outside While Social Distancing for COVID-19 https://healthychildren.org/English/health-issues/conditions/chest-lungs/Pages/Getting-Children-Outside.aspx
- 87 tips and games for kids to burn energy at home
- https://whatmomslove.com/kids/active-indoor-games-activities-for-kids-to-burn-energy/
- Family Dinner Project – tips on healthy cooking at home and staying active https://thefamilydinnerproject.org/blog/pandemic-2020-our-stuck-at-home-guide-to-food-fun-and-conversation/
- List of healthy eating and home exercise sites and videos from the Boston Children's Hospital Optimal Weight for Life Program https://drive.google.com/open?id=1L3Lun1kWWutYsLJcSH8i5XLIPAeFnakl

Media Use:

- Common Sense Media - https://www.commonsensemedia.org/ - tips on appropriate media use by age
- Tips from the American Academy of Pediatrics on making a family media use plan https://www.healthychildren.org/English/media/Pages/default.aspx
- Center on Media and Child Health – tip sheets on media use by age with COVID-19 specific tips (video and information sheet) https://cmch.tv/wp-content/uploads/Talking-to-Kids-About-COVID19-US-Version.pdf
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