

COVID & Your Children's Mental Health



What should parents know?

There is no question that pandemic related stress has impacted the mental health of our children and teens. While mental health challenges vary person to person, there are common symptoms.

Be able to **recognize behavior signs of fear and stress** depending on your child's age group. Significant changes in your child's behavior (compared to pre-pandemic behavior) may indicate your child needs professional help to cope with their distress.

Yellow light behaviors: If these behaviors occur, **keep a close eye on your child and watch for changes**. It is possible that these temporary differences are due to COVID and lockdown, and will diminish naturally once the lockdown is over.

Red light behaviors: These behaviors are NOT normative, even during the COVID pandemic, **and you should consult with a pediatrician, teacher or therapist**, depending on the area(s) of concern.

Warning Signs: Ages 0-5

Physical Health

- Small transient changes in sleep and appetite
- Small transient changes in elimination behavior
- Occasional sleep disturbances (nightmares, difficulty settling down for the night, waking up in the middle of the night)
- Occasionally complains of body aches, headaches, stomach aches

- Very disturbed patterns of food intake and elimination; excessive control over food intake, withholding of elimination
- Very dysregulated sleep, continuous nightmares, inability to fall asleep and/or stay asleep alone (especially if your child had been able to do this prior to COVID)
- Frequently complains of pain, especially if not consistent with reality (e.g. leg hurts but nothing happened)

Educational Needs

- Transient lack of interest in learning, reading and being read to
- Occasional inability to concentrate while learning a new task
- Occasional forgetfulness

* At this stage in their child's development parents are still learning and it is too early to determine red light behavior signs.

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What should parents know?

Some of the challenges your children face due to Covid and lockdown relate to:

Lost security and safety (e.g., housing and food insecurity, increased exposure to violence and online harms, threat of physical illness and uncertainty for the future)

Missed significant life events (e.g., grief of missing celebrations, vacation plans, and/or milestone life events)

Changes in their routines (e.g., having to physically distance from family, friends, worship community)

Breaks in continuity of health care (e.g., missed well-child and immunization visits, limited access to mental, speech, and occupational health services)

Breaks in continuity of learning (e.g., virtual learning environments, technology access and connectivity issues)

Source: [cdc.gov](https://www.cdc.gov)

Con't Warning Signs: Ages 0-5

Social-Emotional Health

- Duration, severity and intensity of mood changes are more pronounced than prior to Covid
- Regression in ages and stages: a behavior that was firmly established as something that a child can do on his or her own is no longer an independent behavior at least some of the time
- Excessive clinginess or excessive isolation and desire to be alone
- Occasional loss of interest in activities and people that used to be of interest
- Sometimes seems low energy, sad, weepy
- Makes occasional negative comments about him or herself and their abilities

- Mood so volatile that the entire household is "hostage" to one child
- Regression in ages and stages is pronounced
- Unable to separate from caregivers for even a short time
- Scared of adults other than caregivers (beyond the normal "stranger danger")
- Believes everyone is a threat/infected
- Believes there is no safe place anywhere and refusal to leave the house, even with normal precautions in place
- Overly concerned about everyone's health, unable to stop after repeated reassurances
- Refusal to engage with adults and children, regression of already learned social skills and graces

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How can parents help?

Children and teens of all ages benefit from stability and support. The CDC recommends parents follow these steps:

- Maintain a normal routine
- Talk, listen, and encourage expression
- Give honest and accurate information
- Teach simple steps to stay healthy
- Be alert for any change in behavior
- Reassure children about their safety and well-being

Source: [cdc.gov](https://www.cdc.gov)

Warning Signs: Ages 6-11

Physical Health

- Small transient changes in sleep and appetite
- Small transient changes in elimination behavior
- Occasional sleep disturbances (nightmares, difficulty settling down for the night, waking up in the middle of the night)
- Occasionally complains of body aches, headaches, stomach aches

- Very disturbed patterns of food intake and elimination; excessive control over food intake, withholding of elimination
- Very dysregulated sleep, continuous nightmares, inability to fall asleep and/or stay asleep alone (especially if your child had been able to do this prior to COVID)
- Frequently complains of pain, especially if not consistent with reality (e.g. leg hurts but nothing happened)
- Concern over weight and appearance that is persistent and not consistent with reality (e.g. thinking that they are fat when weight is within normal range)
- Relying on medication (even over the counter) to get through the day (to settle stomach pain, painkillers etc.)

Educational Needs

- Transient lack of interest in learning, reading and being read to
- Occasional inability to concentrate while learning a new task
- Occasional forgetfulness
- Trouble organizing themselves and getting lost among online work, different submission portals etc.
- Trouble adjusting to schedule changes, online and offline learning etc.

- Shutdown with school work, refusal to show up to school (even virtual)
- Refusal to do homework, even if knows material
- Refusal to ask for help of tutoring
- Significant drop in grades
- Comments that "school is stupid" and "it doesn't matter"

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How can parents help?

Talk to your children about their experience with COVID and lockdown. Young children may not know how to verbalize their feelings, and teens may hide their feelings out of embarrassment, guilt, or shame. Try these conversation starters:

- What worries you most about COVID-19?
- Have you been feeling nervous about going back to school because of COVID-19?
- When our minds are stuck on bad things, it can be really hard to focus on other things. Have you ever felt this way? What kinds of things does your mind get stuck on?
- People can be angry, sad, or worried when something bad happens. Those feelings can make you feel confused or uncomfortable. Tell me what you have been feeling since the changes started.

Source: [cdc.gov](https://www.cdc.gov) [healthychildren.org](https://www.healthychildren.org)

Con't Warning Signs: Ages 6-11

Social-Emotional Health

- Duration, severity and intensity of mood changes are more pronounced than prior to COVID
- Regression in ages and stages: a behavior that was firmly established as something that a child can do on his or her own is no longer an independent behavior at least some of the time
- Excessive clinginess or excessive isolation and desire to be alone
- Occasional loss of interest in activities and people that used to be of interest
- Sometimes seems low energy, sad, weepy
- Makes occasional negative comments about him or herself and their abilities
- Believes friends are all doing "fine" and would not want to see him or her

- Mood so volatile that the entire household is "hostage" to one child
- Regression in ages and stages is pronounced
- Unable to separate from caregivers for even a short time or wants to isolate most of the time
- Scared of adults other than caregivers
- Believes everyone is a threat/infected
- Believes there is no safe place anywhere and refusal to leave the house, even with normal precautions in place
- Overly concerned about everyone's health, unable to stop after repeated reassurances
- Refusal to engage with adults and children, regression of already learned social skills and graces
- Excessive and consistent use of screens to soothe him or herself and confusion of online reality and real life
- Excessive concern with following all rules and protocols for safety and inability to switch gears even after reassurance
- Any unusual repeated behaviors (touching, counting, nail biting, hair twirling)
- Consistent negative self concept and desire to self-harm or end their life
- Refusal to discuss fears, concerns or moods
- Signs of smoking, vaping, drugs (yes, it can start this early!)

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How can parents help?

If you and your children are in need of help, please do not hesitate to reach out to us.

Contact Dr. Natasha Kendal and Associates at drkendalandassociates.com/contact-us/

Warning Signs: Ages 12+

Physical Health

- Small transient changes in sleep and appetite
- Small transient changes in elimination behavior
- Occasional sleep disturbances (nightmares, difficulty settling down for the night, waking up in the middle of the night)
- Occasionally complains of body aches, headaches, stomach aches

- Very disturbed patterns of food intake and elimination; excessive control over food intake, withholding of elimination
- Very dysregulated sleep, continuous nightmares, inability to fall asleep and/or stay asleep alone (especially if your child had been able to do this prior to COVID)
- Concern over weight and appearance that is persistent and not consistent with reality (e.g. thinking that they are fat when weight is within normal range)
- Excessive desire to exercise and "burn calories" or lack of interest in healthy movement, even walking, biking and playing outside
- Frequently complains of pain, especially if not consistent with reality (e.g. leg hurts but nothing happened)
- Relying on medication (even over the counter) to get through the day (to settle stomach pain, painkillers etc.)

Educational Needs

- Transient lack of interest in learning, reading and being read to
- Occasional inability to concentrate while learning a new task
- Occasional forgetfulness
- Trouble organizing themselves and getting lost among online work, different submission portals etc.
- Trouble adjusting to schedule changes, online and offline learning etc.

- Shutdown with school work, refusal to show up to school (even virtual)
- Refusal to do homework, even if knows material
- Refusal to ask for help of tutoring
- Significant drop in grades
- Comments that "school is stupid" and "it doesn't matter"
- Refusal to look forward to life after school, engage in college conversations



Check out these resources for additional information:

[cdc.gov/mentalhealth/stress-coping/parental-resources/index.html](https://www.cdc.gov/mentalhealth/stress-coping/parental-resources/index.html)

[healthychildren.org/English/health-issues/conditions/COVID-19/Pages/Signs-your-Teen-May-Need-More-Support.aspx](https://www.healthychildren.org/English/health-issues/conditions/COVID-19/Pages/Signs-your-Teen-May-Need-More-Support.aspx)

Con't Warning Signs: Ages 12+

Social-Emotional Health

- Duration, severity and intensity of mood changes are more pronounced than prior to COVID
- Regression in ages and stages: a behavior that was firmly established as something that a child can do on his or her own is no longer an independent behavior at least some of the time
- Excessive clinginess or excessive isolation and desire to be alone
- Occasional loss of interest in activities and people that used to be of interest
- Sometimes seems low energy, sad, weepy
- Makes occasional negative comments about him or herself and their abilities
- Believes friends are all doing "fine" and would not want to see him or her
- Mood so volatile that the entire household is "hostage" to one child
- Regression in ages and stages is pronounced
- Unable to separate from caregivers for even a short time or wants to isolate most of the time
- Believes everyone is a threat/infected
- Believes there is no safe place anywhere and refusal to leave the house, even with normal precautions in place
- Overly concerned about everyone's health, unable to stop after repeated reassurances
- Refusal to engage with adults and children, regression of already learned social skills and graces
- Excessive and consistent use of screens to soothe him or herself and confusion of online reality and real life
- Excessive concern with following all rules and protocols for safety and inability to switch gears even after reassurance
- Any unusual repeated behaviors (touching, counting, nail biting, hair twirling)
- Consistent negative self concept and desire to self-harm or end their life
- Refusal to discuss fears, concerns or moods
- Signs of smoking, vaping, drugs (yes, it can start this early!)
- Unusual spending patterns and desire to self-soothe with online shopping