



# Loyola University New Orleans Play Therapy Center

## Anxiety in Children and Teens in the Midst of Coronavirus (COVID-19)

This can look like: irritability, moodiness, worry, fear, tummy-aches, disruptive behavior, not listening, avoidance, clinginess, crying in situations they don't usually cry in, they might be shaky or their skin might be warm to the touch (from, [Kids Health](#))

Young Children (Developmental Age 3-7):

[NPR's Just For Kids: A Comic Exploring The New Coronavirus](#)

1. Keep things simple and honest.
  - a. For young children, about 10 words or less is a good rule of thumb! Try to keep your explanation around 10 words. They are mostly seeking reassurance, so focus on those communications!

Examples: "I will take care of you"  
 "A virus is like a cold"  
 "People are working together to keep us safe"  
 "I am making sure we are all safe"

2. Validate their concerns or feelings.
  - a. It's normal to feel stressed, concerned, anxious, and confused.  
 Example: You feel worried, You are bored. You wish you could go back to school.
3. Give them space to talk/question further.
  - a. Reflecting feelings can help your child share further what they wish, want, need, or perceive.
4. Manage your own feelings.
  - a. If you are anxious, your child will be anxious too!
5. Turn off the news when young children are awake and around
  - a. Even if they are busy with other things, the news is scary for young children. They repeat the same story, over and over and young children may think the same event is happening repeatedly. It is best to watch or listen to news during adult time!!

A lot of the symptoms are similar to the **flu** (which you might have had before!)



Dry, itchy cough

Fever

Kinda hard to breathe

Most people who have gotten sick with this coronavirus have had a **mild** case.

And there aren't a lot of cases in **kids**. If kids do get the virus, it tends to be **very mild**.



[How to talk with kids about it](#) by Adrienne

[Hollingsworth, AMFT](#), with Tina Payne Bryson, LCSW, PhD, and edited by LeAnne Steen, Ph.D.



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### [What to do \(and not do\) when children are anxious](#) by Clark Goldstein, PhD

#### Older Children (Developmental Age 8-12)

1. The goal isn't to eliminate anxiety, but to help the child manage it.
2. Don't avoid things just because they make the child (or you!) anxious.
3. Express positive - but realistic - expectations.
4. Respect feelings.
5. Don't ask leading questions.
6. Encourage the child that anxiety passes...**BREATH!**
7. Think things through with the child.
8. Try to model healthy ways of managing anxiety.
  - a. exercise, reading, deep breathing, mindfulness



### [Anxiety in Teens](#) by Karen Young

#### Teens (Developmental Age 13-17)

1. Anxiety has nothing to do with strength, character, or courage.
2. Sometimes, it drops in for no reason at all.
3. Anxiety is SUPER common
4. Everyone experiences anxiety on some level - your parents and teachers, everyone! Think of it on a spectrum.
5. Anxiety can look like negative thoughts or excessive worry. Anxiety can feel like things are out of control. Anxiety can physically present itself as a racing heart, rapid breathing, forgetting to breathe, butterflies in your stomach, nausea, crying, tense muscles or shaking, feeling dizzy or lightheaded, or feeling angry. Anxiety can look like biting your nails, picking at your skin, pulling your hair, avoiding people/places, trouble sleeping, or an upset stomach.

### **Managing Anxiety**

Understand it - why does it feel the way it does? Anxiety happens because your brain thinks there *might be* something it needs to protect you from. Your body gets a rush of chemicals to make you more alert.

1. Mindfulness Practices  
Here and Now, Think of Comforting Thoughts
2. Exercise
3. Breathing Exercises  
Deep belly breaths! Count to 5+ then, release!
4. Healthy food
5. Self-compassion & Empathy
6. Limit media coverage in the home & car (turn off the news)



Coping Strategies and Games!

From: [Coping for Kids](#)

- Name: 5 things you see, 4 things you can touch, 3 things you can hear, 2 things you can smell, and 1 thing you can taste (right)
- Squeeze something soft or squishy! Like your favorite stuffed animal or a stress ball
  - Name your favorite animals!
  - Color a picture or write a story
    - Take 5 deep breaths!
  - Listen to calm, relaxing music
    - Drink some cold water
      - Blow bubbles
    - Star breathing (below)

5 4 3 2 1 Grounding Exercise

5 4 3 2 1 Grounding Exercise

Eye: 5 boxes

Hand: 4 boxes

Ear: 3 boxes

Nose: 2 boxes

Lips: 1 box



- Get enough sleep
  - Go for a walk
  - Play a game
- Read your favorite book
  - Do yoga or stretch
- Call a friend or family Member



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### 6 of Garry Landreth's, "Rules of Thumb" as useful parenting reminders during COVID-19

1) Focus on the donut, not the hole.

Remember to focus on what is going well and notice it to yourself and out loud to your family! Focusing on what is there (the donut) rather than what is missing (the hole) will help you create a sense of security and comfort for yourself and the family, together. All families have strengths and noticing the strengths in those relationships will help you focus on the donut!

2) Be a thermostat, not a thermometer.

When your child becomes escalated, anxious, upset, or even tantrums, try to stay calm. Being the thermostat of the house, allows your child to regulate back to you more quickly. If you find yourself getting escalated, take a break, walk out to the porch, ask another caregiver to take over (if available), or just hide in the bathroom for 5 minutes!

3) It is not so important what you did, but what you do after what you did that really counts.

Sometimes, even though we try to be the "thermostat", we just lose our cool and follow the child(ren) into an escalated state. We might find ourselves yelling or even threatening our kids! If this happens, you can fall back on this rule of thumb. Once you calm down, even a few hours later, you can apologize to your child(ren). You can model to your child(ren) how to recover a relationship, when you feel like you broke it, or damaged it. Relationships have ruptures, of course, Being able to recover from a rupture is a healthy coping skill that lasts a lifetime. Rather than beat yourself up for being human, model how to say, "im sorry I said that" or, "I am sorry I yelled earlier", will help your children learn the same skill, as well.

4) If you can't say it in 10 words or less, don't say it!!

Young children cannot hold attention of long, drawn out, rational explanations of what is happening right now. They mostly want to know they are SAFE. Remember that children do not typically develop abstract thinking skills until the age of 11-13. So, concrete, simple, to the point, honest (but not scary), and short information is best.

5) Children are great perceivers but poor interpreters.

"Children are like sponges", how many times have you heard that? And, it is true, they do perceive a lot of what is going on. Including your reactions! Unfortunately, they often do not *interpret* those perceptions, accurately. Using reflective listening skills (stating back what you hear, or see in their play) can help them open up about their interpretations and perceptions. They tend to have egocentric thinking that is highly imaginative and anchored in a fair amount of fantasy. Children can think that they caused a pandemic because of a wish they recall making last month! Because, if you wish the wish with all your heart, it might come true! So, wishing they didn't have to go to school, for instance, might feel like they caused something, that they obviously did not (pandemic). Be aware of the fact that they might be worried about things they are mis-interpreting about this time.

6) Don't try to teach a child to swim when they're drowning!

If a child is having a tantrum or difficult behaviors. Try to focus on reflecting the feelings and experiences, rather than teaching, in those moments. You can always circle back to the behavior, choices, or other reasons that things went wrong at another time, when they (and you) are calm. Trying to teach when a child is metaphorically "drowning" will not work. Their computer brain is offline and they cannot process your words. Focus on reflecting feeling, like, "you are so angry right now", or "you are frustrated by the school project and you want me to know that", rather than fixing or teaching in those moments!



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