



Our tips for GPs: Supporting families and young people during COVID-19

Identifying children and young people who need additional support

Children and young people may be experiencing changes in mood and behaviour in response to COVID-19 related changes and disruptions. This can include increased levels of stress within the family environment.

It is normal for children and young people to feel sad, scared and angry during this time. Many young people will navigate these changes with resilience, whilst others will require additional support to cope.

Some signs that young people are having difficulty coping, and may need further support

Signs and symptoms of depression – e.g. low mood, loss of pleasure in activities, changes in sleep and appetite, irritability.

Anxiety that is severe, ongoing, or resulting in behaviours that impact others or cause distress.

Difficulties coping with increased stress – e.g. indecisiveness, somatic symptoms (feeling sick, headaches), increased tearfulness, changes in bedwetting, difficulties calming down, irritability etc.

Changes in behaviour – e.g. increased defiance, aggression, impulsivity etc.

Tips for key populations

Families

Increased stress often makes it difficult for parents to practice positive parenting strategies. In turn, positive child behaviour decreases, and negative behaviour increases, creating a vicious cycle and further increasing stress.

Home-based learning is a frequently cited stressor for families. Some parents have high expectations of themselves or their children's capacities at this time,

whilst others report having "given up" on learning. If overwhelmed with home learning, we recommend that children aim to achieve a literacy related task, a maths-based task and a fun learning task (based on the child's interest) within a day. We have also developed a specific tip sheet that addresses this topic.

Monitor parents' mental health – when child behaviour is the presenting issue at our clinic, we often see indications that parents could benefit from their own mental health support.

Consider referring parents/carers to a psychologist – If waiting times are long, please consider recommending an online evidence-based parenting program. Please see some examples in the Resources section below. These programs are often a great "foundation" for further tailored support from a psychologist.

Neurodiverse young people

Neurodiverse young people (e.g. those with Autism Spectrum Disorder, ADHD, Intellectual Disability etc.) may be experiencing COVID-19 and its repercussions in a range of ways:

- Some may be functioning well at home as a result of reduced social demands. Others may be experiencing heightened anxiety about returning to school and resuming normal routines.
- Neurodiverse young people may be struggling with the changes in routine: for many neurodiverse young people, routine provides a sense of safety and the right conditions to thrive.
- Neurodiverse young people with behavioural challenges may be experiencing an escalation in family stress. This may be due to parents / carers having less respite now that life is centred in the home.
- Young people with attention difficulties may be experiencing additional learning challenges without their usual structured and familiar learning environments.

Please monitor changes in mood and behaviour. Any deterioration in these will need support to prevent serious mental health conditions.



Young people with a history of mood disorder

Young people with a history of mood disorders should be monitored closely.

As usual, please consider the possibility of increased suicide risk:

- Young people with a history of anxiety and depression, *as well as those without*, can experience suicidal ideation.
- In addition to signs and symptoms of mood disorders, suicidal ideation can include: Talking about feelings of not wanting to be here anymore, feeling they're unable to cope, feeling like there is nothing good to live for anymore.
- Please assess for this and refer to a professional or crisis team as appropriate.
- Please bear in mind, many young people previously treated for depression may have difficulties implementing previously developed coping skills and safety plans. For example, social and sporting activities that were previously used as coping mechanisms may be no longer accessible due to restrictions. This means they may need support to review and update their coping and safety plans.
- Some young people with anxiety related to school and life outside the home (e.g. social anxiety, separation anxiety, some specific phobias etc.) are likely to experience escalations in anxiety as COVID-19 restrictions ease.

Anticipated challenges going forward

Again, the link between stress and rates of mental health issues is clear. Please remember, all young people, and especially neurodiverse young people, are at risk when stress levels escalate. We anticipate that as our communities start to emerge from COVID-19, the following additional stressors may lead to increased problems:

- Children struggling with frequent changes to school attendance and routines
- Increased rates of school refusal and feelings of judgement with social anxiety

- Separation anxiety in both parents / carers and children. Parent/caregiver anxiety further magnifies separation anxiety in children. This also often leads to greater complexity when planning/implementing treatments.
- Possible grief-related challenges if families are unable to attend funerals and participate in other special events and rites of passage.
- Possible increases in family breakdown and trauma linked to increased exposure to family violence.

Resources

There are numerous resources available, but we wanted to alert you to the following:

[Emerging Minds - Supporting children during the Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) pandemic](#)

This resource aims to assist parents and carers to best to support their children and reduce worry and distress. It contains a video, factsheets, and tips about what you can expect and how you can help children cope.

[Triple P](#) have created additional COVID-19 related resources. They also provide online parenting courses.

[Parentworks](#) is another resource we highly recommend to families who need support managing challenging behaviour.

These programs are often a great "foundation" for further tailored support from a psychologist.

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