



STEPPING STONES TRIPLE P GUIDE

# Parenting children with a disability during COVID-19

**COVID-19 represents a challenge to all families that is unlike anything we have ever experienced. Parents of children with a disability face a number of additional, unique, stressors. Most parents, when confronted with a highly stressful situation like this, have a basic concern for the wellbeing and safety of their children.**

Children with a disability may fall into the “high risk” category when it comes to COVID-19 due to secondary health conditions, adding to parents’ stress. Additionally, while social distancing has been recommended as the best strategy to avoid transmission, that advice may not be realistic for people who care for children with a disability who may require therapy or assistance with daily tasks. Parents may also be concerned about their ability to obtain important medical supplies as resources become scarce. Under these circumstances, it is quite understandable that we, as parents, might be experiencing a range of uncomfortable feelings (including anxiety, anger, sadness); as well as uncertainty about what to do and how we can cope.

To care for children effectively, parents must also look after themselves. It is also important to remember (and to remind children) that communities are working together to keep people safe (e.g. healthcare workers who are looking after people with the virus; supermarkets bringing in new rules to allow more vulnerable people to do their shopping safely). This guide helps parents to support their children with a disability and look after themselves during this difficult time.



## Reassure your child that your family is your top priority

In all your interactions with your child, stay as calm and comforting as possible. Explain to your child that they should let you know if they are feeling unwell. Communicate through your actions and your words that it is part of your job as their parent to do everything within your power to keep them safe and that this is exactly what you are doing. For example, say or communicate something like *I’m your parent, it’s my job to keep you safe and we are doing everything we can*. Parents can use this as an opportunity to review the concrete ways that they are ensuring a safe environment (e.g. *seat belts keep us safe and so does washing hands*). This will help them to feel safer and to better understand why you must observe the restrictions being placed on all families by government authorities (e.g. not going to the local park and keeping them away from social gatherings with friends). Some children may benefit from pictures to help them understand the symptoms of COVID-19 and the things we must do to stop it spreading.

[www.triplep-parenting.ca](http://www.triplep-parenting.ca)

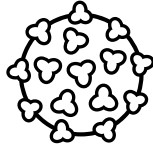


## Parenting children with a disability during COVID-19

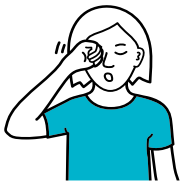


### Use pictures to explain COVID-19

The Coronavirus or COVID-19 is a virus.



It can make people:



feel tired



feel hot



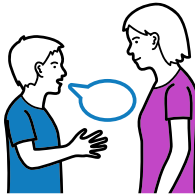
cough



feel like it is hard to breath



have a sore throat



Let me know if you feel unwell or have any of these things.



### Take care of yourself the best you can

It is entirely reasonable to feel anxious, distressed, confused and angry at times during the current situation. Dealing with your own emotions effectively means that you are better placed to support your children. In dealing effectively with your own emotions,

you are also setting an excellent example for your child. Some useful general strategies for dealing with strong emotions include:

- paying attention to your emotions and your thoughts
- taking a break from interacting with your family members if you are not in control of your emotions (e.g. you might say *I'm feeling upset at the moment and I can't be as calm as I would like in this conversation*. Young children and children with language delay can benefit from parents modelling the use of images depicting emotions, as well as coping behaviours. So, *I'm going to take 10 minutes to give myself a chance to calm down*)
- talking to supportive friends and family
- slow, deep, breathing
- exercise
- practising mindfulness

If your regular respite options are no longer available, find ways to do what you can to help you look after yourself. This might mean scheduling short periods of time away from the stress of the situation to do something you enjoy, such as having a quiet cup of tea, listening to music, reading a few pages of a novel, singing, dancing, gardening or drawing.

Keep healthy and safe (good personal hygiene, exercise daily, eat well, get enough sleep, avoid using alcohol or drugs to lessen stress). Avoid behaviour that might increase your stress. For example, while it is helpful to keep informed about COVID-19, constant checking for updates can increase your stress.

Your disability support provider(s), disability or condition-specific organisations and support groups can often also provide helpful information, and social support. Contact these organisations to see if they have online support groups or provide access to useful information and resources. For additional support, please contact a local Triple P provider.



### **Make sure your children know you are open to their questions and worries**

Most children will not be as preoccupied with COVID-19 as adults. However, it is essential that children know they can express their concerns to parents and have their questions answered truthfully. Let your child know that when it comes to COVID-19 and this difficult time, you are there for them (e.g. *If you have any worries or questions about what is going on at the moment with coronavirus, you can always come find me and we can talk it through*). It is a good idea to follow their lead. With children who seek out a conversation, this involves providing only as much information as they have asked for. With children who do not seek out a conversation, be on the lookout for signs of distress or changes in behaviour (e.g. a child who becomes more clingy or aggressive). Although there may be other reasons for these changes, keep in mind that they may be related to COVID-19.

If your child uses additional or alternative communication, it may be useful to use your child's communication system as well as a display of pictures depicting words that they might need to use to ask questions or tell you things that they already know about. Use pictures like those in this guide to help with conversations about COVID-19.

When your child wants to talk about their feelings, stop what you are doing and give them your full attention. Avoid telling your child how they should feel (*Don't be silly. You don't have to worry about that*). Instead, let your child know it is OK to be worried, sad, angry or disappointed. Drawing can be a good way for children to express themselves and for parents to support conversations. Common sources of concern, frustration or sadness might include worrying about parents, grandparents', or one's own health; what

can be done to avoid getting sick; missing spending time with special carers such as grandparents; falling behind with schoolwork if they are not attending school; not being able to spend time with friends or not being able to play with others. Children may have anger too and misdirect this towards parents. Parents should recognise this if it happens, listen, and support all feelings that are expressed. Reassure your child that people around the world (healthcare staff and scientists) are working to help each other and to develop medicines that will help everyone.

Let your child know what is going on around them in relation to COVID-19. However, it is important not to talk to them too much about it—this can increase children's fear and distress. As adults, it can be hard to focus on anything other than the current situation. But we need to make sure this does not colour our interactions with our children. Follow your child's lead—this will help you to spend about the right amount of time talking to them about COVID-19, while also helping you to think about other things. You need to be thoughtful too about the conversations you have in front of your child and limit your child's media exposure around COVID-19.





## Be truthful in answering children's questions

General guidelines for answering children's questions include:

- 1 Find out what they think they know about the issue (e.g. from TV, through social media or their friends) before answering.
- 2 Keep your answers simple and appropriate to your child's developmental level.
- 3 Get your information from reliable sources (e.g. UNICEF and the World Health Organization websites).
- 4 If you don't know the answer, offer to try to find it out for them. If they say *Don't bother*, you can probably leave it. However, if the answer is important to you personally, you might say *That's an interesting question. I'm going to look up the answer because I'd be interested in knowing it.*
- 5 Don't make promises you can't keep (e.g. *Things will be back to normal by your birthday.*)



## Get advice from your child's teachers, therapists and health care providers

Contact your child's educational and therapy providers about how their services may change and whether distance or online services are available. If your child cannot attend their usual day-placement or therapy services, find out what activities are recommended over this period. If your child has a short- or long-term health condition, talking with your child's healthcare provider can guide decisions about how to manage their condition and access any needed equipment, medications or other supplies.



## Maintain everyday family routines

We all do better when we have some structure around us (particularly in times of stress and uncertainty). As much as possible, stick to your regular family routines (e.g. mealtimes, bedtime routines). You will also be introducing

new routines (e.g. more regular washing of hands, keeping more distance than usual between yourselves and others if outside the home, managing a situation where you are working from home while your child is also at home). Some children find it easier to adjust to changes in routines if they are involved in planning these changes. However, even if you do involve them, you can expect that some changes may result in a temporary increase in distress or arguments between parents and children (e.g. the need for more instructions and monitoring around hand washing, the need to wear a mask during some activities outside the home, respecting social distancing on return to school). It might take a little time for the family to adjust to the new routines—be as kind and patient with both yourself and your child as you can.

It is useful to work out a timetable or schedule for each day to help you and your child cope with being at home during this time. Keep the difference between weekdays and weekends. You may want to adapt some of the daily routines they are used to from their school

## Parenting children with a disability during COVID-19







or day placement (if applicable). If your child usually attends school, during weekdays include activities as recommended by your school. Keep in mind that home learning during this time will not be the same as a regular school day. Have realistic expectations (both for yourself and your child) around home learning.

Drawing up a timetable for the day could be an activity that you do with your children each morning (you will most

likely also benefit from having a timetable). For children who understand best with pictures, you may save time by laminating pictures representing frequent activities and using hook-and-loop fasteners to arrange the pictures in the order that the activities will occur. Children can learn to follow schedules if they are prompted to return to the timetable after each activity, note or point to the next activity, and then to participate in that activity. An example timetable for half a day is show below.



### My Morning Timetable

Time	Activities
7.00	 Wake up  Wash hands  Get dressed  Have breakfast  Feed dog  Wash hands
8.00	 Free time (pick from activity list)
8.45	 Math school work (online/workbooks)
9.15	 English school work (practice spelling words)
9.45	 Free time (pick from activity list)
10.15	 Science school work (do an experiment with a parent)
10.45	 Wash hands  Snack
11.30	 Free time (pick from activity list)
1.00	 Wash hands  Lunch

The timetable might not always go exactly as planned. That's OK. Having a timetable is about providing some structure and guidance for the day. When things don't go to plan, be patient with yourself and your child; and work together to think about how to make it work better the next day.



**When children are busy, they are less likely to be bored, anxious, sad or get into trouble.**



### Have a family plan of action

Plans are very helpful in times of anxiety and uncertainty to remind family members how they have agreed to behave and why. Each family needs to develop their own plan. The plan is likely to include regular handwashing, keeping a distance between yourselves and others, and physically staying away from vulnerable family members and friends. Children have an important part to play by following these rules. It may be helpful to use pictures to explain and remind everyone of the plan. Where possible include kindness to others in the plan (e.g. offer to pick up and leave groceries for an elderly neighbour or someone with special needs). In this way, you are also showing your children one of the qualities that you want to encourage in them. Where you can, involve your children in the creation of the plan. As government recommendations can change (e.g. new travel restrictions, school closures, and eventual gradual relaxation of restrictions), update the plan as needed. Keep your conversations around the plan brief and matter-of-fact.

*Our family plan in pictures:*



Wash hands often



Stand further away from people



Stay home



Shop for others



### Have plenty of interesting things to do at home

When children are busy, they are less likely to be bored, anxious, sad or get into trouble. Work with your

children to come up with a list of 20 or more activities that they can do. Make sure that you include physical activities to keep children active—there are many that can be done either inside or outside.

Activities might include boardgames and puzzles, playing with blocks and playdough, cooking, drawing, painting and craft activities, dancing, completing an online exercise session, kicking a ball, building an indoor cubby-house using cushions, creating an obstacle course, playing hide-and-seek, listening to music or a podcast, and sensory play. Put a copy of the list somewhere in the house where your children can easily see it (e.g. on the fridge). This may be a good time for you to teach your child a new skill (e.g. learning to kick a ball or to use a camera).

Make sure the activities are not just variations on screen time. However, at times like these, it's OK to loosen up on your usual screen time rules and allow more than usual. Some screen time could include other family members or friends (e.g. having a family movie night, playing online games with friends, talking to family or friends online).



### Take notice of behaviour you like

During this difficult time, think about the values, skills and behaviours you wish to encourage in your children. There are many opportunities to teach your children important life skills (e.g. being caring, helpful, cooperative, getting on well with siblings, taking turns). Pay careful attention to your children's behaviour during this time. Use praise, attention, and rewards to encourage the behaviour you like. Give them positive

## Parenting children with a disability during COVID-19

attention, letting them know you are pleased by telling them what they have just done. For example: *You are being so patient waiting for your turn, That's a lovely picture you've drawn for your grandmother, or Thank you for playing quietly while I was on the telephone.*



### Help children learn to tolerate more uncertainty

The COVID-19 crisis is creating uncertainty for everyone. As parents, we need to find a way to accept this uncertainty ourselves. Then, through our actions and words, we need to demonstrate this acceptance to our children (e.g. *We don't know when this is going to be over. I know it's hard to not know. We just have to remind ourselves that we are doing our best to stay well and safe, and that the whole world is working together on this problem*). Schedule coping and calming activities into your child's day and consider ways to teach new calming skills such as slow breathing and muscle relaxation. Big changes to children's lives can be hard and often scary. They can also create opportunities for learning new skills (e.g. different ways of communicating with friends and loved ones). If you have serious concerns about your child's emotional health, seek professional support.



### Prepare a plan of care for your child

Establish a plan of care for your child and other family members in case you become ill. Typical secondary

caregivers, such as grandparents, may not be available. You may find it reassuring to have a plan worked out in case you need it. This may involve contacting your child's disability support provider or family and friends who you know could help you if you needed it. Gather information together that may be helpful for someone who would be able to care for your child for a few weeks. Information and documents about your child's medications, routines and preferences, what help they need to participate in important activities, as well how to contact people who provide medical or therapy services for your child would be useful.



### Reach out and connect with loved ones

Social/physical distancing does not have to mean that you, your children or your extended family members have to feel alone or isolated. We are all in this crisis together. Make greater use of phones, online communication tools (video conferencing) and social media to keep in touch with family, friends, and neighbours. Children love being experts — some children may have knowledge of social media and can teach other family members how to use these tools to stay in touch. Finally, remember to communicate your love and joy of getting to spend extra time with your child at this time.

**Get more tips and strategies online to help during this crisis: [triplep-parenting.ca](http://triplep-parenting.ca)**



**Trevor G Mazzucchelli, PhD** — is a Clinical Psychologist and an expert in raising children who have a developmental disability.



**Matthew R Sanders, AO, PhD** — is a Clinical Psychologist, Founder of Triple P, and one of the world's leading experts on parenting.



**Vanessa E Cobham, PhD** — is a Clinical Psychologist and an internationally recognised expert in child and adolescent anxiety and posttraumatic mental health (specifically disasters).

© 2020 The University of Queensland