

# GUIDE TO HEALTH EMERGENCIES

FOR PARENTS & CAREGIVERS



## INTRODUCTION

**Physical distancing and isolation can impact individuals, families and community well-being. It can make access to supports and services like school, childcare and food sources more challenging and prevent loved ones from helping out. If you find yourself struggling to make sense of it all, this brochure might provide useful tips to help you support children of all ages through this difficult time.**

Health emergencies and containment measures can be hard on many families. Usual services like school, childcare, and extracurricular activities can become closed for an unknown period of time. A general sense of abnormality and social anxiety can affect people involved, and create the impression that we've lost control of our lives.

### **How a pandemic situation can affect us.**

Families and communities shouldn't underestimate the cumulative effects of long-term isolation and the disruption of normal life. When routine is disrupted, your sense of security can feel threatened.

People suffer financial hardships when their homes, businesses, or jobs are lost. Confusion can mount as

people seek disaster assistance from local, provincial and federal agencies. In a crisis situation, people are constantly dealing with the unknown. Like other mass-scale events, a pandemic can be particularly difficult for individuals with special needs. As a result, signs of stress may start to show during the course of the event.

### **How can this impact children?**

Children's reactions to pandemics and the aftermath are strongly influenced by how their parents, families, guardians and other caregivers cope. They often turn to these adults for information, comfort, and help. Below are common reactions parents and guardians may see in their children. Symptoms/Behaviour may vary over time, but knowing that these reactions are likely may help you be prepared to support your child.

## COMMON REACTIONS TO EXPECT IN CHILDREN

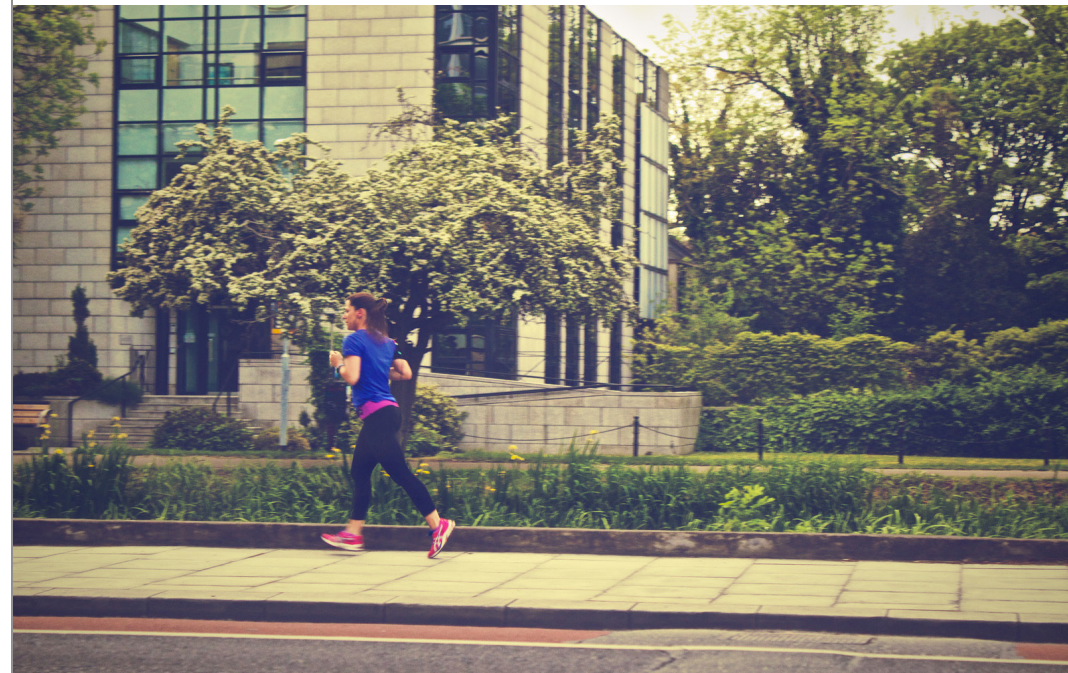
- Feelings of anxiety, fear, and worry about safety of self and others (including pets, livestock and wildlife)
- Young children may become clingier to parents, grandparents, siblings, or teachers
- Distress and anxiety with things associated with a pandemic (also called triggers)
- Changes in behavior:
  - Increased activity level
  - Decreased concentration and attention
  - Increased irritability
  - Withdrawal
  - Angry outbursts
  - Aggression
- Increased physical complaints (e.g., headaches, stomach aches, aches and pains)
- Prolonged focus on the pandemic (e.g., talking repeatedly about it – young children may “play” the event)
- Changes in sleep patterns and appetite
- Lack of interest in usual activities, including interest in playing with friends
- Regressive behaviours in young children (e.g., baby talk, bedwetting, tantrums)
- Increased chance of high-risk behaviours in adolescents

## WORDS OF ENCOURAGEMENT AND ADVICE

- **Remember, no one knows your child as well as you do;** family is the most important support network for children.
- **There is no right or wrong.** Everyone reacts differently and copes in their own unique way.
- **Spend time talking with your children.** This will let them know that it's OK to ask questions and express concerns. Because pandemics include constantly-changing situations, children may have repeated questions.. Try to remain flexible and open to answering any questions and providing clarifications, while reassuring your children that they are safe.
- **Limit exposure to media and social media.** Ensure a daily set amount of time to provide factual information and discuss the news, using an appropriate level of language.
- **Try to answer questions** briefly and honestly, and ask your children for their opinions and ideas about what is discussed. For younger children, try to follow pandemic conversations with a favourite story or a family activity to help them feel safe and calm.
- **Visit a doctor or other health professional if you are concerned** about someone in your care; don't wait to seek help.

## SELF-CARE FOR ADULTS IN A PANDEMIC SITUATION

- **Limit exposure to media.** Pandemic situations can evolve rapidly, but getting a media update once a day is probably enough. Dedicating a daily set amount of time to new information can help strike a balance between staying up-to-date and avoiding the stress associated to being exposed to too much information.
- **Take care of yourself.** Make sure you take good physical care of yourself: including eating well, sleeping well, getting exercise, and receiving proper medical care.
- **Listen to each other.** Parents and other caregivers need to provide support for each other during this time.
- **Put off major decisions.** Avoid making any unnecessary life-altering decisions during this stressful period.
- **Remember that you are going through an abnormal situation.** Give yourself time to think, adapt and cope.





# YOUNG CHILDREN 1-6 YEARS OLD



## THINGS TO BE AWARE OF AGES 1-6

Young children are less verbal than older children. They express themselves through self-talk, play, songs, drawings and conversations with adults and each other. Take time to listen to and observe them. These activities are a window into their thoughts and feelings. Here are some other ways they may show you how they feel:

- Crying
- Whining
- Bed-wetting
- Thumb-sucking
- Wanting to be held
- Clinging to caregivers
- Stomach aches
- Headaches
- Isolating themselves from others
- Staring into space/showing no emotion
- Eating problems
- Nightmares
- Sleeping problems
- Crankiness
- Tantrums
- Being stubborn
- Fear of the dark

## HOW YOU CAN HELP

### AGES 1-6

- **Don't be alarmed.** These reactions are some of the ways children express their feelings after a significant disruption in their lives or comfort themselves when they are upset. They are important and common signs. They tell you that your child needs help.
- **Do not overreact.** If you punish or nag the child, their behaviours may last longer and they will not get the help they need.
- **Spend extra time paying attention.** Help children feel understood and loved. Let them know that you are not upset with bed-wetting, thumb-sucking or nail-biting. Reassure them that you know that it's only happening because they are upset. Remind them repeatedly that they are safe.
- **Catch them being good.** Praise for good behavior brings positive results.
- **Children who cling need to be reassured.** Leave them when you must, but reassure them that you will be back.
- **Comfort and hold them.** Children need physical closeness, holding, comforting, and reassurance. This helps them feel safe and secure.
- **Protect children from further anxiety and fears.** Very young children need to be protected from media coverage because they are not old enough to understand the events. Be there to explain any fearful situations they may encounter.
- **Spend more family time together.** Children need their parents, family members or familiar adults around them during a stressful event. If family members are not available, time and reassurance from other adults is very important.
- **Maintain familiar routines.** Mealtimes, exercise and regular bedtime hours are comforting for children. Familiar routines reinforce a child's sense of security.

- **Create an environment in which children feel safe enough to ask questions.** Young children don't need detailed information about the events but they do need to talk about their feelings. Let children know that they can ask questions. Ask them what they have seen, what they have heard and how they feel about it. Answer questions honestly, but make sure the information is suitable to their age level. Also, remember that they are listening when you talk to others about the events. Reassure them that people are doing everything they can to make them safe.
- **Tell children how you feel.** Let them know that it's okay to have feelings of fear, sadness or anger, and that there are healthy ways of expressing and coping with these feelings. This helps them feel less alone, and free to talk about their own feelings. They will feel more secure knowing you can handle what is happening.



# OLDER CHILDREN 7-11 YEARS OLD



## THINGS TO BE AWARE OF AGES 7-11

Older children may also show signs of being upset during a stressful event. At this age, the fears and anxieties expressed show that the child is aware of possible dangers to themselves, their family and friends. Real or imaginary fears that seem unrelated to the events may also appear. Here are some common reactions that they may have:

- Fear of being injured or separated from parents, family members or others
- Eating problems and stomach aches
- Fear of noises or the dark
- Anger and irritability
- Rivalries and quarrels among brothers, sisters or friends
- Nervousness
- Headaches
- Crying
- Sleeping problems such as nightmares
- Withdrawal
- A return to earlier behaviours such as bed-wetting, thumb-sucking, and clinging



## HOW YOU CAN HELP AGES 7-11

- **Take childrens' fears seriously.** Don't force a child to be brave. Respect their feelings and try to understand them.
- **A child who is scared is really scared.** Do not show anger or ridicule. Avoid saying things like, "It's silly to be scared."
- **Telling your children that it's OK to be scared is comforting to them.** Reassure them that they are safe.
- **Listen to children and ask them what they have to say about their fears, their feelings, and their thoughts on what has happened.** Check in with them regularly. This will help them to better understand the situation and deal with their emotions. They will be able to express fears that may be unfounded, giving you the opportunity to explore their fears and reassure them. If possible, include the whole family in the discussion.
- **Try to explain the events as well as you can.** Children, like adults, are more frightened when they do not understand what is happening around them. Set a consistent time every day dedicated to discussing the situation. Involve children with age-appropriate language, and avoid harmful constant exposure to media and social media. Acknowledge what's frightening about the situation. If you don't know the answers to their questions, it's OK to say that there are some things about the situation that you don't know or understand, and seek out the answers to share with them.

- **Provide reassurance.** Children usually need reassurance about their personal safety and the safety of their loved ones. They need to know that people are doing all they can to make our country and our world safe.
- **Parents, family members and adults are role models.** It is important to let kids know what you think and feel. It helps them feel less alone if they know that their feelings are similar to yours. It is important; however, not to overwhelm them. If you are too upset, share your reactions with another adult.



# TEENS 12+ YEARS OLD



## THINGS TO BE AWARE OF AGES 12+

**Adolescents may be strongly affected by the pandemic and its containment measures. This may challenge their coping skills. Teens are generally more aware of and interested in world events than younger children. They are also able to imagine frightening events in more detail, and may become very interested in or upset about the situation.**

Teens are already dealing with the many physical, social and emotional changes of adolescence. As they struggle to develop their own identity and values, they typically question and “try on” attitudes that range from cynicism to idealism.

Emergencies can undermine their belief that the world is a safe place, that adults and institutions can be relied upon, and even their confidence that life is meaningful and that there’s hope for a better community and society.

It’s normal for teens to have feelings of worry, confusion, sadness, anger or fear in times of emergency. Teenagers often behave as if they are invulnerable. They may pretend not to be affected or concerned in an effort to remain “above it all” and “cool.” Don’t let this fool you. Teens may be scared, confused, worried and in need of your help. They need the adults in their lives to pay attention to their feelings and reactions.



## HOW YOU CAN HELP AGES 12+

- **Provide honest reassurance.** Offer reassurance based on the real steps that are being taken to address the situation, not on wishful thinking.
- **Listen to what they have to say about events and how they perceive them.** Listen patiently. Provide them with factual information and help them distinguish opinion from fact. Try not to lecture or interrupt them.
- **Use humour.** Especially among their peers, teens may crack jokes about tragedies in an effort to distance themselves from their fears and from the emotional shock of disaster. This is a normal reaction. Discourage disrespectful jokes while not cutting off lines of communication. There will be less of a problem if teens have the chance to discuss their thoughts and feelings with you in an atmosphere of respect.
- **Deal with anger.** Know that some teens express their fears through anger. Deal with this calmly and set appropriate boundaries around it together.
- **Provide affection.** Be patient with teens and yourself. Give your family time to cope. Find simple, daily ways to show teens that you love them.
- **Encourage comforting by friends.** If teens have friends who are strongly affected by the situation, help them find ways of comforting these friends. They may be afraid to cause more pain by calling or texting with them, so offer guidance in how to offer comfort through communication. On the other hand, they may identify too closely with their friends' pain and spend too much time with them. Balance and keeping up with normal routines is essential.
- **Limit media coverage.** Help teens limit their exposure to news coverage of stressful events. Teens should not be shielded from the facts, but watching too much coverage of catastrophic events can put them in an emotionally overloaded, anxious state. Watch news coverage together and talk about what you are seeing, hearing, and feeling.

- **Encourage smart use of social media.** In times of physical distancing, teens might be spending more time than usual on social media. Staying in contact with friends should be encouraged; however, use of social media can also expose them to an overwhelming amount of information, some unreliable or unnecessarily—amplifying fear and anxiety. Discuss with your teens how they can use their technological literacy to stay in touch with friends while avoiding harmful exposure to too much information.
- **Maintain family routines.** Maintain family routines within your home environment, especially sleeping, eating and exercise. Make time in your schedule to talk about the situation and plan how to respond positively. Maintaining routines are an important way of ensuring that basic needs are met and provide a sense of safety.
- **Support decision making.** If teens are quite upset by these events, it may not be a good time for them to make important decisions. Encourage them to take the time they need to think things over and be involved with the decisions that they can influence.



- **Ensure appropriate adult behavior and responses.** Tell teens how you think and feel about the events so they can understand them better. They will gain confidence in their own feelings if you show them that you can cope with your feelings in healthy ways. Talking to teens' friends about their responses to the situation may also help.

- **Vulnerable teens.** Stressful events and an ongoing climate of uncertainty and worry can have a greater impact on teens who are vulnerable. These are teens who may have experienced serious bullying, difficult family separations, death in the family, family violence, sexual assault, a traumatic refugee experience, clinical depression, anxiety disorder or other mental illness, a history of drug/alcohol abuse, and/or self-injury or suicide attempts. Some vulnerable teens may experience a return or worsening of mental health problems or unhealthy behaviours, up to and including suicide attempts. Seek help if you feel your teen is vulnerable.



## IMPORTANT RESOURCES

**Canadian Red Cross**  
1-800-418-1111  
[www.redcross.ca](http://www.redcross.ca)

**Public Health Agency Canada**  
1-844-280-5020  
[www.publichealth.gc.ca](http://www.publichealth.gc.ca)

**Wellness together Canada**  
<https://ca.portal.gs/>

**Kids Help Phone**  
Hotline 24 hours:  
1-800-668-6868 or text  
WELLNESS at 686868 (children)  
or 741741 (adults)  
[www.kidshelpphone.ca](http://www.kidshelpphone.ca)

**First Nations and Inuit  
Hope for Wellness**  
Help Line (24 hrs/7 days)  
1-855-242-3310

**Caring for Kids:  
Information for parents from  
Canada's paediatricians  
(Canadian Paediatric Society)**  
[www.caringforkids.cps.ca](http://www.caringforkids.cps.ca)

**Canadian Association for  
Suicide Prevention**  
[www.suicideprevention.ca/need-help](http://www.suicideprevention.ca/need-help)

**Canadian Mental Health  
Association**  
[www.cmha.ca](http://www.cmha.ca)

**Canadian Psychological  
Association**  
1-888-472-0657  
[www.cpa.ca](http://www.cpa.ca)

**The National Child Traumatic  
Stress Network**  
[www.nctsn.org](http://www.nctsn.org)

**Salvation Army Community  
& Family Centres**  
1-800-725-2769  
[www.salvationarmy.ca](http://www.salvationarmy.ca)

**YMCA Canada**  
[www.ymca.ca](http://www.ymca.ca)



**CANADIAN RED CROSS**  
**REDCROSS.CA**

