

# SUPPORTING YOUNG CHILDREN TO FACE CHANGES

GUIDANCE FOR FATHERS, MOTHERS  
AND OTHER CAREGIVERS IN  
TIMES OF COVID-19



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This document is made available to UNICEF country offices in Latin America and the Caribbean with the aim of being widely disseminated among communities, families, health and education workers, as well as all adults responsible for young children.

This material is intended to serve as a guide to speak about the Coronavirus in a simple, clear and reassuring way, while also addressing the emotions that children may be feeling in early childhood.

Document prepared by Early Childhood Development team in collaboration with the Child Protection, Gender and Education regional teams.

**Editorial coordination:**  
Patricia Núñez,  
Early Childhood Development Officer

**Illustration page 5:**  
Sol Díaz

**Graphic design and layout:**  
MOKA.Diseño



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**Everything is changing very fast.** For everyone, especially for mothers, fathers and other caregivers, this has generated changes in daily life as well as concern and uncertainty. For young children with or without disabilities the rapidly changing situation does not go unnoticed.

Small children perceive when there are changes in their environment and can feel the emotions and tension of the adults around them, but they do not always understand what is happening, which can generate anxiety, worry and fear.

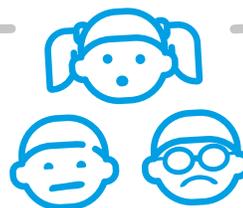
These guidelines are to show you some changes or reactions that can occur in boys and girls and that are EXPECTED given what is happening so that you can better understand, support and comfort them.

To explain what is happening, you can use the Guide *Talking about Coronavirus 19 with young children.*

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## REACTIONS YOU CAN PERCEIVE IN BOYS AND GIRLS



It is important to know that young children, with and without disabilities, can express their emotions in different ways. They are at a stage when they are developing language and learning to identify their emotions, but many times they do not know how to name or express them. For small children with developmental delays and/or disabilities, it may be more difficult to communicate their needs, pain, and emotions.

Many times children will express themselves through reactions or changes that may surprise you; here are some ideas so that you can understand them better and support them.

**All children are unique!** The expressions that we present below\* are examples, and it may be that some of the changes that we show you are already present in their lives, the important thing is to observe the changes that arise from the situation they are experiencing so that you know how to better support them.

### 0 to 2 years



- Sleep problems such as waking up more often, sleeping less or increasing nightmares.
- Increase or decrease in appetite.
- Increased irritability—they may cry more than usual or have more tantrums, sometimes without any clear reason.
- Increased need to be with you or with the adults who care for them.

### 2 to 3 years



- Sleep problems such as not wanting to lie down, finding it hard to fall asleep, sleeping less, nightmares or night terrors, or developing a fear of sleeping alone.
- Increased irritability at this age means that they are more nervous or anxious; they may get angrier or throw tantrums without much understanding of the reason.
- Unfounded fears arise, or irrational crying may occur. Sometimes a child's negative reaction to a situation is disproportionate to the reason that initiates them.
- Increased need to be with you or with the adults who care for them.
- Regressive behaviors may appear: they return to doing things that they used to do when they were younger, for example, they begin to urinate without warning or talking like babies.
- There are children who may even have symptoms of dizziness, headache or stomach ache, but it is important that you consult health personnel if these persist.

### 4 to 6 years



In addition to behaviours above, you may observe:

- Concentration problems.
- Repetitive game playing or drawings.
- Making repetitive sounds.
- Lack of desire to be with other children.

\* Adapted from Farkas, Ch., M. Narea, M.P. Santelices, *Guía para educadores y técnicas auxiliares de párvulos: cómo abordar la actual crisis social en los niños y niñas*, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, Santiago, 2019.

Small children tend to put things in their mouths. Remember that this is the way they are exploring the world, it is part of their development and it is the way they experience smells, textures, etc. At this time this may worry you more than before, but it is important that you do not overreact, explain to them and if you keep everything clean in their play space everyone will be at ease.

## WHAT CAN YOU DO?



- **Explain** what is happening, in language that is simple and that you can understand based on their age or disability. It is very important to give them room to ask questions or raise fears.
- **Comfort them:** hug them, get down to their physical height, tell them you understand how they feel. Surely you are going through similar emotions, only you have more ways to express yourself. If you are maintaining social distance due to some preventive recommendation, then your words, tone and gestures also have an effect of containment and calm.
- **Lovingly handle crying or tantrums:** it is best to welcome it, understanding the emotion involved, and trusting your ability to empathize! It is important to stay calm, get down to their physical level and wait and accompany them until they calm down. Your state of calm will reassure them and little by little you will be able to talk to them to help them understand what is happening to them.
- **Helping children to “translate” what they feel:** help children to understand what they are feeling, naming the emotion and relating it to something that may be happening to them. For this, it helps a lot to do it with reassuring phrases like: “I feel that you are angry because you want to be with your friends, and I understand. Would you like us to call the friend you miss?” If your child has a disability that requires alternative ways of communicating, you can find the way of expressing that is best for them; the important thing is that you help them show how they feel in some way.

→ **Give yourself spaces to be very present in interactions with children:** surely you will be combining household chores, your work and you also have to take care of the children. This is a lot to do at the same time, and it is important that you do not overdo it. Something that can work for you is to start the day with an activity where you are available for your children. Start the day with them and offer them your love; it will have a positive impact throughout the day. And as you move through the rest of the day, you can combine your tasks and responsibilities with times for children. But remember not to demand too much of yourself. Do what you can and that will be fine.

→ **Work together to build family agreements:** taking into account that this is a new scenario, it may mean many days at home. In situations where there are several people living together, each with their tasks and responsibilities, an activity that can be very fun is sit together and agree on “coexistence agreements”. This exercise can include expressing feelings, emotions and needs, and all they can vote and establish agreements and protocols for the family. It is also an opportunity to include children’s participation and support in some household chores that they can do according to their age.

→ **Provide interesting and fun activities:** something that helps children feel good and adapt to changes is encouraging play and activities that they find interesting. Through games they will also express emotions in addition to having fun and feeling calmer.

You can find activities to do with children with disabilities in *Learning together at home.*

Learn more



→ **Take care of daily routines:** it is important to establish daily routines at home, which can help children feel safe. Maintain their sleep schedules (children need to rest!), keep meal times, and have some daily activities planned. But it is also important to be open to changes in routine, if you see that children need other things. There may be days when kids just need to play games, read a book with you, or watch a movie as a family, and that is fine. The important thing is to see what your son or daughter needs because perhaps they feel more secure and protected with fixed routines or perhaps what they need is free play time or to connect with their friends by phone or virtually. Here we give you an entertaining table idea, but each family has their own routines and schedules.

# Routines at HOME

9:00 WAKE UP



9:30 HEALTHY BREAKFAST



10-11 LEARN NEW THINGS  
(could be preschool or school activities)



11:00 FREE PLAY

13:00 LUNCH



14:00 REST AND CREATIVITY



16:00 ENTERTAINING EXERCISE



17:00 SNACK

18:00 KITCHEN ASSISTANT



19:00 DINNER

20:00 BATH

20:30 SLEEP



It is important that household chores and childcare responsibilities are distributed among all adult household members. This is an opportunity to review how household chores have been distributed appropriately.

Historically, the responsibility for care and housework has fallen mainly on women. Men and women have the opportunity to make an equitable distribution of household chores, thus they will be setting a positive example for children and they will also ensure that they all have the necessary space for self-care and work, if applicable. That way everyone will be better at taking care of themselves.

Children can also contribute to household chores, depending on their

age and possibilities. It is important that there is also an equitable distribution of tasks between boys and girls and that it makes them feel that they participate in family activities and can enjoy it.

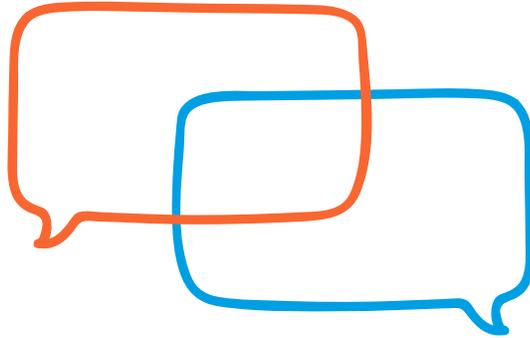
In the case of families with only one person in charge, it is important to seek the support that you may need and avoid overdoing yourself. This is a unique situation and we are all doing the best we can. Try to give yourself space to do things that you like, or organize a support network with family or friends who can help you with household chores and caring for your children or family, seeking help if you need it.



Remember to give yourself self-care spaces and do things that you like. Children perceive and feel the emotions of the parents, so it is important that you give yourself spaces of self-care and to do things that you like, such as watching movies, dancing, singing, and talking to your friends. In this way you can be well and calm, and you will be helping your son or daughter to be calmer.

Rest, take care of your sleep hours, eat well, do some exercise that you like, and keep in touch with your loved ones.

**No one is perfect and you are doing your best.**



**If you feel you need help,  
don't hesitate to ask for it.  
Lean on your surroundings  
and communicate with  
other families or friends  
who are experiencing the  
same challenges as you.**

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Latin America and Caribbean Regional Office  
Bldg. 102, Alberto Tejada St.  
City of Knowledge  
Panama, Republic of Panama  
P.O. Box: 0843-03045  
Telephone: +507 301 7400

[www.unicef.org/lac](http://www.unicef.org/lac)  
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