

# PARENT RESOURCE

## How Covid-19 may Affect Your Child's Feelings and Behaviors as They Grow

The pandemic has ended, but many of us, including our young children, may still feel some of its impacts. Recognizing how the COVID pandemic may have affected our children can help us better understand and respond to their feelings and needs.

We are only now learning about how very young children have been impacted by the COVID-19 global pandemic. Infants and toddlers who were born and lived during the early months of the pandemic were likely uniquely affected because they were experiencing the changes and emotions that came with the pandemic without having the language and developmental capacity to understand what was happening at the time. In this document we share some of the ways children may have been impacted, how this might “show up”, and things you can do to help. Above all, we want to be kind to ourselves. COVID was incredibly hard for all of us, and as parents we do the best we can to protect and care for our children. Recognizing what the experience may have meant for our young children doesn't mean we are to blame—none of us controlled the pandemic! But it does help us think about how we can help.

### ***What kinds of experiences did infants, toddlers and preschoolers have during the COVID pandemic?***

Parents might find it hard to believe that something that happened to your family a few years ago when your child was so young is impacting your child now. But in many ways, it was even harder for very young children during the pandemic because they didn't always have the words or understanding of what was happening. They may have felt the worry and anxiety in their bodies, but were not able to tell others, or even understand themselves, these feelings.

- During the pandemic many parents and caregivers were worried and scared. Young children can feel this, even when we worked very hard to make sure they felt safe and protected.
- Children may have stopped seeing people they knew and loved, including family members, friends, and teachers. There were many disruptions in routines, like going to school.
- Children and families were more isolated, and so interacting with others outside the home may have felt a bit less familiar.
- People wore masks, and these may be associated

unconsciously with worries about getting sick. They may have had fewer opportunities as little people to see others' full facial expressions.

- When people they knew were sick, others may have been very worried or scared about the illness.
- Some children may have experienced the loss of loved ones. They may have been aware of this loss, or it may have impacted them because other people in their life were understandably grieving. Often family members could not participate in the usual rituals associated with loss, such as attending funerals.
- Many children had parents who had to work out of home during the height of the pandemic, and those parents may have at times felt understandably scared, a feeling that children may have picked up on.

We also know that this time was incredibly difficult for parents too! You might find that you sometimes still have feelings of sadness, loss, or fear as you think about this scary time. And your family might continue to have experiences of COVID or other illnesses that bring back familiar feelings of fear, worry and isolation. When COVID surges it may bring up reminders of losses or other feelings related to those hard times.

It can feel surprising to think that young children might “remember” – either consciously in mind, or as feelings that they hold in their bodies—but young children do remember and can be affected by many things they experience when they are very young. It is interesting to note that many people will talk about “COVID puppies,” that is puppies who grew up during the pandemic. They might notice that these puppies are



now, as older dogs, more likely to be more anxious around other people or dogs because of how COVID changed their early socializing. Of course, children, even babies, are far more complex in their thinking than puppies, and this makes the point—we can all be affected by early experiences. Teachers, parents, and mental health specialists who work with young children tell us that they see that some young children who grew up during the pandemic are having a harder time in the classroom, at home, or in other environments. There are many ways this can show up, for example, more anxiety about separating from parents, bigger worries about illnesses, or showing big behaviors and acting out.

## How Do Young Children Experience Stress?

Very young children often feel the stress in their bodies - tension, upset stomach, heart racing, etc. They often can't tell us about their worries in words. When they can't share their fears, worries and anxieties with us through language, children often act them out. When children don't have ways to manage their experiences, worries can come out in challenging behaviors such as temper tantrums, hitting, whining, sleeping and eating problems.

### What you might notice:

There are many ways this can “show up” for young children. Some examples include:

- Anxiety when they or anyone around them gets sick
- Having a hard time with transitions - especially leaving parents if they spent most or all of their time with parents during the pandemic
- Difficulty regulating emotions - once their bodies feel the anxiety or fear, they are reminded of that feeling from when they were very little and had no words to process what was happening

### What can you do?

- Pay special attention to times when your child or others around them get sick. Do they seem to have more instances of acting out during these times? Or retreating into themselves? Reassure them that they are safe.
- Pay special attention to unexpected disruptions in the routine - perhaps put words to what you imagine they might be feeling.
- Talk with them about the time when COVID-19 happened, through reading books or just remembering together. They will likely find comfort in having some words for their experiences.
- Remind them that you were there to take care of them, that there were lots of doctors and nurses and scientists who were working hard to keep everyone safe and healthy.

- Offer sample language, “When you were just a little baby, there was this yucky new germ called COVID-19 and we had to do some things to stay safe and healthy, like.. [add words specific to child's experience here].” Every family has their own unique stories and experiences of this time.

Having feelings understood and getting help with coping with big feelings can help children feel more regulated and less anxious. When we open the door to talk about feelings and experiences we can learn about any misunderstandings, offer honest reassurance, and let them know their feelings are ok and that we, as adults, are here to help.

## A Special Note on Coping with Grief and Loss

Even very young children can mourn a loss. They may even have sad feelings about a person they did not know well, but who their parent loved and grieves. We can help young children with these feelings by acknowledging the loss, talking about feelings, and finding ways to remember loved ones. There are many helpful resources that can help you find ways to talk about grief and loss. These include books such as: *The Invisible String*, *The 10th Good Thing About Barney*, *Goodbye Mouse*, *Something Very Sad Happened*, and *Goodbye: A First Conversation about Grief*. There are also videos that can be helpful at Sesame Street Workshop <https://sesameworkshop.org/resources/grief-and-change-caused-by-covid-19/>

These conversations may feel hard for the parent who is mourning, and parents may also worry that talking about loss and grief might upset their child. But usually offering understandable explanations, and acknowledging children's feelings of loss and sadness, helps offer comfort knowing they can share these feelings with their loved one(s).

### Getting Help

While we all experienced the pandemic, every child and family experience is different. If you have concerns about your child's feelings and behaviors, or just want help, and better able to manage their feelings, you can always seek support from teachers, pediatricians, or other mental health providers. They can help you think about how to best help your child with the feelings and needs they are expressing.

Above all, remember that you are not alone! By offering understanding and support, you can help your child make sense of their story feel understood.