

Using play to support children during COVID-19

Play is a vital part of child development and wellbeing. Like leisure activities and hobbies for adults, play is a way for children to relax and cope with stress. It gives them the opportunity to be creative and test out their problem-solving skills and provides a sense of accomplishment and confidence in their own abilities.

Play can also be beneficial for your own mental health. It's a chance to take a break from the worries of COVID-19 and focus on something that is fun and nurturing for you both. It offers a chance to step into your child's world and share the wonders of their creativity and imagination. Playing together strengthens the parent-child relationship, which helps build children's resilience and lays the foundation for mental health throughout their lifetime.

While social distancing rules are in place, children are unable to play with their friends in the way that they are used to. This makes play time at home especially important. The following five tips can help you use play to support your child's mental health during COVID-19.

1 Make play part of your routine

Routines are an important source of safety and stability for children. While things are probably different for your family right now, it is especially important to schedule regular times to play together. This doesn't have to be a large chunk of time – even five minutes of undivided attention 3-4 times a week can make a big difference to your child's wellbeing.

Be clear with your child about when these play times are going to be and let them know that during these designated times, your focus will be entirely on them. You may need to get creative if you are juggling working from home and caring for your children. Mealtimes can even be a good place to schedule some fun activities, creative play or board games. Whatever you decide, setting a clear timeframe for play can be especially useful if you are working from home, because it lets your child know that during the designated play time, they will have your full attention.

It can be useful to set up some of your own rituals to avoid being distracted by your phone or other devices during play times. Some parents find turning their devices to silent or off and putting them in another room helps to reduce the temptation to keep checking or responding to notifications.

2 Create a safe space

Children need somewhere they feel they can be creative, relaxed and engage with what they enjoy. This can be in a room at home, in your backyard, or out in nature. While social distancing restrictions are still in place, beaches, creeks, and national parks are great locations for children to be able to play freely and creatively.



3 Follow your child's lead

'Child-led play' involves sitting back and letting your child choose how you will join in. They are the leader, director, and decision-maker. Letting your child take the lead gives them a sense of validation and shows them that they are strong and capable and that you trust them. It also gives you a chance to learn more about your child – what they enjoy doing, what they're concerned about, and how they cope with solving problems on their own.

Child-led play will look different depending on your child's age and developmental stage. If you have a baby, you can set out a few different toys and let your child decide which ones they pick up and look at, and how long they spend playing with them. Primary school-age children love their parents to be really involved in their play – joining in as they play pretend or helping to build or create something with them. Whereas adolescents may prefer you to simply show an interest in their activities, asking questions and having a conversation together about them. No matter the child's age, the key is to follow their lead and let them show you how they would like you to be involved.

4 Share a story together

Stories offer children a way to make sense and meaning of what is happening to them, through the safety of a fictional character they can identify with. They have a clear beginning, middle and end, and can help children to talk about otherwise difficult emotions and feelings. Telling and re-telling stories can help children to find resolutions for their own experiences.

Reading, writing and sharing stories is an easy way to connect with your child and find out what is going on for them. Your child may find that making up their own story helps them to process the worries they might have about the coronavirus. If the story becomes distressing or the child seems stuck on a particular part, you can offer some support and structure to help move the story towards a positive end. You might find it useful to ask children about their own strengths and problem-solving abilities at these times. If there are times where your child has overcome something challenging, you could ask them how they did this, and how they might use the same skills and resilience to overcome the problem in their story.

5 Be kind to yourself

It's normal to feel stressed, worried or anxious during uncertain times. Remember that this situation is completely new – you might be struggling to make sense of things yourself, whilst also trying to maintain a sense of normality and help your children understand what is happening.

It is also normal to find child-led play a bit challenging at first. Parents are used to being in charge, so shifting the power to your child might feel a little odd. Your child's interests or style of play may also be different to your own ideas and experiences, and you may find yourself wanting to step in and guide your child towards playing in a way that feels more 'natural' to you. If you are finding it difficult, speak to your GP or practitioner about strategies you can use to make child-led play easier.

