

Coping With the COVID-19 Crisis: Distance Caregiver Training

The COVID-19 virus has created an atmosphere of uncertainty and stressors for families, schools, and communities. The crisis generated results from this pandemic involve severe illness and death as well as significant financial stressors due to loss of employment and meeting basic needs.

The challenge for crisis teams is to take an existing crisis intervention program and adapt it to the remote world that currently exists. Thus, in this context, safety and crisis teams need to consider how they will provide support for those impacted by a crisis. In the past, teams were able to directly support schools affected by a crisis by evaluating the impact and delivering appropriate intervention in the school setting. Given the state of uncertainty, crisis teams now are faced with how to effectively evaluate the impact of a crisis and deliver supports in a remote way. Since crisis teams will not be able to have direct, in-person access to students, teachers, and families, indirect universal interventions should be considered. Caregiver training is a universal-level intervention that prepares and empowers caregivers (teachers, parents, guardians) to support the children and adolescents in their care.

This document is a companion to the sample adaptable PowerPoint presentation, [Caregiver Training: How Adults Can Help Support Children in Difficult Times](#), which is available for school psychologists and other crisis team members to download and adapt. If using in relation to a death in the school community, refer to [Responding to a Death in the COVID-19 Context: Guidelines for Administrators and Crisis Teams](#).

When considering the use of a distance caregiver training, crisis teams should:

- Know the district's parameters when providing mental health supports remotely.
- Identify what other agencies are available to help the school community (e.g., community mental health, medical and health agencies) to assist with mental health, housing, food, and safety.
- Decide how the intervention will be delivered (e.g., live webcast, recorded online presentation, both) and what technology is needed.
- Select delivery platforms that best meet the accessibility needs of families in the district.
 - Consider the use of captions when delivering this intervention. Some applications (i.e., latest version of PowerPoint) have a captions feature built into the functionality.
- Be aware of the cultural and linguistic characteristics of the school community and provide translations. Some companies provide artificial intelligence (Google, Microsoft) assisted translation services that provide captioning in a translated language. However, caution should be used when using such services. When translating a document from English to another language, to ensure accuracy, have the document back translated to English. Then have it reviewed by a bilingual school psychologist or mental health professional.

GOALS OF CAREGIVER TRAINING

The goals of caregiver trainings are to assist parents, teachers, and other caregivers to understand the facts associated with the event, recognize common reactions, know how to respond, and know when to seek additional help.

1. **Know the Facts:** When crisis events occur, understanding the facts can help manage concerns, fears, and stress. Rumors often create more anxiety than the facts. Crisis events may include the death of a loved one due to an illness, loss of a pet, or accidental death.
 - Obtaining official facts from reliable sources can help caregivers distinguish facts from rumor. [How to Help Kids Sort Fact From Fiction About the Coronavirus](#)
 - When sharing the facts with children, do so in an age appropriate manner, without scary and gruesome details, and let the child’s questions guide the conversation. Sometimes less is more, so if the child is not seeking more information, do not provide more information. Too much detail can increase threat perceptions.
2. **Know Common Reactions:** One of the challenges is dealing with the ongoing uncertainty and evolving situation. Helping caregivers understand that they will be seeing a range of emotions, which is to be expected, and that these emotions can come in waves, will be important in helping them support the children in their care.

	Common Behaviors	Thoughts & Feelings
Young Children & Preschool (1–5 years old)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Helplessness • Agitation • Heightened arousal • Fears • Sleep disturbances and nightmares • Regression of milestones • Trauma related play • Fears associated with loss/abandonment of caregiver 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Confusion • Difficulty/inability to understand feelings • Inability to talk about feelings • A lack of understanding that death is permanent • Seeking reassurance
Elementary School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Guilt • Traumatic play • Discussing/retelling of the traumatic event repeatedly • Sleep difficulties and nightmares • Anger, aggressiveness, outbursts • Sadness, crying • Increased fears • Separation anxiety; not wanting to be away from parents • Excessive worry 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficulty concentrating • Difficulty paying attention • Difficulty recalling information • Difficulty with organization • Confusion • Seeking reassurance that they are OK, and that friends and family members are OK
Middle and High School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Guilt, shame • Anger, aggressiveness • Withdrawal • Depression • Anxiety, fears, and worry • Revenge fantasies • Suicidal ideation • Substance abuse • Feelings of helplessness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficulty concentrating • Difficulty paying attention • Difficulty recalling information • Difficulty with organization • School avoidance • Confusion • Intrusive thoughts • Seeking reassurance that they are OK, and that friends and family members are OK

3. **Know How to Respond:** Since schools will be experiencing the ongoing stressors related to COVID-19, the goal should be to help caregivers understand how to respond and support their child.
 - **Remain calm and be reassuring.** Children will look to the adults in their lives to help them understand a crisis situation. Practice self-care, model calm behaviors, monitor the used words and your own reactions so as not to heighten fear or stress, and convey that there are ways that they can stay safe and that there are adults working to keep people safe and healthy.
 - **Be available and be a good listener.** Recognize the times children and adolescents are ready to discuss the situation, but don't force the conversation. Normalize their emotions by letting them know they are not alone that others are feeling this way too. Help them express their feelings and let them know that you love and care about them.
 - **Maintain structure while working at home.** Providing structure and routine helps to bring a sense of normalcy which can help to manage stress. At the same time, it is important to be flexible and not too rigid. Things do not have to be perfect, and it is OK if some of the expectations (i.e., chores, schoolwork) are not always met. Providing options can also help them feel a sense of control (e.g., Would you like to do your math or English homework now? Would you like to take a walk or go for a bike ride?)
 - **Encourage healthy habits.** Emphasizing a healthy diet, regular exercise, sleep, and disease prevention practices such as washing hands and covering your nose and mouth when sneezing and coughing.
 - **Be positive and teach gratitude.** Despite the uncertain and difficult times, instead of focusing on the negative, point out the positive things happening (e.g., families get to spend more time together; learning a new game). Encourage gratitude and show thanks for little acts of kindness. A simple activity could be the use of a gratitude journal.
 - **Stay connected as a family.**
4. **Know When to Seek Additional Help**
 - When the reactions become extreme and begin to get in the way of daily functioning or become maladaptive (suicidal ideation, self-injury, substance use, etc.), then it is important to reach out to your school crisis team and community mental health professionals.
5. **Resources for Parents**
 - Positive Coping Resources
 - [Helping Children Cope With the Changes Resulting From COVID-19](#)
 - [COVID-19: Five Helpful Responses for Families](#)
 - [Anxiety and Coping with the Coronavirus](#)
 - [How to Ease Children's Anxiety About COVID-19](#)
 - Grief Resources
 - [Addressing Grief: Brief Facts and Tips](#)
 - [When Grief/Loss Hits Close to Home: Tips for Caregivers](#)
 - [Sesame Street in Communities: Helping Kids Grieve](#)
 - [Coping With Grief – BYU Social Skills: Self Awareness](#)
 - [Being Resilient – BYU Social Skills: Self Awareness](#)
 - [Recommended Books for Children Coping With Grief or Trauma](#)

REFERENCES

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