



# How to Support Children (and Yourself) During the COVID-19 Outbreak



<https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/how-to-support-children-and-yourself-during-the-covid-19-outbreak/>

The coronavirus outbreak has changed many things about our daily lives. But even during this uncertain time, it's a sure thing that our children are still learning, growing, and developing.

Everyone can help support a child's healthy development (and it may even help relieve your stress!). Just a few minutes and some simple, free activities can make a difference.

**1** Practice “**serve and return,**” or back-and-forth interaction with your little ones. Even before they learn to talk, infants and children reach out for attention—babbling, gesturing, or making faces. When young children “serve up” a chance to engage with them, it's important to “return” with attention. It can be as simple as a game of peek-a-boo. Or, if a toddler points at a toy, name it out loud as you hand it to the child.

**Why?** [Serve-and-return interactions](#) help build developing brains and [resilience](#), something we all need in these challenging times.



## *Helpful Resources:*

Video: [5 Steps for Brain-Building Serve and Return](#) (Center on the Developing Child)

Handout: [Serve and Return for Parents & Caregivers](#) (Center on the Developing Child)

Podcast: [The Brain Architects: Serve and Return](#) (Center on the Developing Child)

Video: [Mini Parenting Master Class with Center Director Jack P. Shonkoff, M.D.](#) (UNICEF)

Smartphone Apps: [Vroom](#) and [Kinedu](#)

**2 Maintain social connections.** Stay-at-home measures are helping to slow the spread of the virus, protect our health, and protect our hospitals. But, while we are staying apart from each other physically, it's even more important to connect socially, to protect our emotional well-being. Keep up relationships and social contacts—while maintaining physical distance outside your own home.

**Why?** Responsive relationships—like those with lots of give and return interactions (see #1 above)—between children and adults, adults and other adults, and children and other children all help buffer us against [the effects of ongoing stress](#).



#### *Tips & Helpful Resources:*

**Talk with family and friends via video chat or phone.** This is a great way to connect children with other adults (and give you a short break!).

If talking live isn't an option, **write emails or old-fashioned letters to friends and family.** Encourage children to ask questions of their grandparents and other adults.

**Make encouraging posters and signs** and put them in your windows to support your neighbors. This can also be a fun craft project to do with children!

**Go outside and say hello** to neighbors, friends, people passing by. Just make sure to keep at least 6 feet away from anyone who doesn't live with you.

Article: [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): Physical Distancing and Family Wellbeing](#) (Raising Children Network)

Article: [Keeping Classroom Connections Alive](#) (Harvard Graduate School of Education)

Article: [Resources for Supporting Children's Emotional Well-being during the COVID-19 Pandemic](#) (Child Trends)

**3** **Take a break** (with or without children). If you feel overwhelmed, find a way to give your stress response a rest. Take a walk around the block. Try a few minutes of meditation or deep breathing. Call a friend (*see #2 above*).

And, **give yourself a break**. Remember you're not alone—everyone is struggling with these unexpected changes to our lives, and many of us need some extra support from our communities. Be kind to yourself and understand that you can't do it all.

**Why?** When you can find ways to give yourself a break, you'll return to your children better able to meet their needs and support their development.



Photo by Natalia Figueredo on Unsplash

#### *Helpful Resources:*

Infographic: [What We Can Do About Toxic Stress](#) (Center on the Developing Child)

Video: [Stress and Resilience: How Toxic Stress Affects Us, and What We Can Do About It](#) (Center on the Developing Child)

Brief: [The Science of Resilience](#) (Center on the Developing Child)

Article: [COVID-19: Stress and Coping](#) (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention)

Article: [COVID-19: Taking Care of Your Emotional Health](#) (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention)

Tool: [Free Meditations for Reducing Stress](#) (Calm.com)

#### *For More Information & Resources:*

Many communities and organizations offer supports and services such as crisis hotlines, food delivery, and relief funds. If you don't know how to find them, **call 211** in the U.S. and Canada to speak to someone who can help you get connected or visit: [211.org/services/covid19](https://211.org/services/covid19).

The Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University has compiled [a list of additional coronavirus-related resources](#) for parents, caregivers, and others.