



# How to Ease Anxiety for Kids With and Without Special Needs During Coronavirus Isolation

This can be a challenging time for all families, especially ones with children with special needs. Here are expert tips on how to take care of yourself and manage your child's anxiety (no matter if he has special needs or not!).

By [Jacqueline Neber](#) March 24, 2020

Life is a little harder for every parent these days, now that schools are closed (everything is closed!) and kids are home. And for parents of kids with special needs, a break in the routine can be even harder to manage, and it can be even harder to continue services and supports at home than it is to continue general education. Plus, it can be harder to know how to comfort your child if he is anxious about the coronavirus. [Joshua Rosenthal, Psy.D., clinical psychologist and the President of](#)

[Manhattan Psychology Group in NYC](#), offers tips on how parents can ease anxiety in their kids with special needs, create routines at home, and focus on helping themselves so they can best help their children. Experts have also shared their advice on managing anxiety for all kids—and everyone in the family!

## Don't be afraid to talk to your child with special needs about coronavirus.

"Depending on the type of special need, the developmental level of the child, [her] age, and [her] level of functioning...you're going to communicate the same types of things, just using different language," Dr. Rosenthal says. "It's good to explain to the child or to the adult with special needs that things are different, what the plan is going to be going forward, and why the plan is like that going forward." He advises parents to start a conversation and be honest, but not too honest—don't make it seem like the world is ending. Use language that resonates with your child.

## Follow the "Four Ms" strategy to model calm, maintain normalcy, move, and monitor news consumption.

Louisa Benton and Kelli Teglas, the executive director and director of events and strategic partnerships, respectively, of the Hope for Depression Foundation, advocate for parents to use the "four Ms" to re-establish routine and stay connected. It's vital for parents to first model calm for kids.

"Children are looking to parents to know how to respond and act in this time," Benton says. "It's important parents take care of their own mental health and get the break they need so that they can model calm for the kids."

"Put the oxygen mask on yourself first, and then take care of your children," Rosenthal adds. Try to avoid unhealthy coping mechanisms like excessive screen time, overeating or drinking, and overworking. However, it's okay to let your kids know you are stressed or anxious. Take time for yourself, and keep talking, because that helps kids express themselves. For kids with special needs, he continues, watch out for changes in your tone and behavior that could affect them.

As much as it's possible, maintain routine in the house—and including staying in touch with your community as part of that routine, Benton points out. "We can't be physically together, but there are many ways to reach out to community through Facebook groups, play games and activities online with friends and family members."

John McGeehan, the founder and CEO of [The Dorm](#), emphasizes that "there's a big difference between social distancing and social isolation." Teens are particularly susceptible to staying in their home all day when home, not communicating, and staying plugged into their devices. Now is not the time to allow that to happen. Parents can model calm in more ways than one: during this time, model healthy social interaction, and keep in mind that this can be as traumatic for your kids as it is for you.

The third M is movement. Benson says, get out of the house—going for a walk as a family will help kids open up and talk about their feelings, which might be much harder to do when facing you across the dinner table.

Finally, monitor your kids' news intake.

"The news cycle is very repetitive and depending on the the source," Benson said, "It can also be sensationalistic. It's very important that the information the child is receiving is very measured and very accurate.

## Validate your kids' feelings about what's happening—particularly those of your college student.

"As I look at university students going home because semesters are cancelled, seniors may not actually have a graduation...there's a huge loss factor socially for a lot of young people," McGeehan says. "They got ripped away from their community and friend group. They're back home with mom and dad and everyone's on high alert."

Make sure your student knows that you know this is a loss for her; don't dismiss the sadness and grief she may be experiencing. Think about how you can work together as a family to validate everyone's feelings and create an open environment to discuss them.

For kids—and adults—with preexisting mental health conditions, it's especially important to watch for symptoms that might be getting worse during this time, and keep up your contact with psychologists and health care providers. McGeehan suggests parents pay extra close attention to kids' sleep hygiene.

A positive in this? More mental health services are moving online, and insurance companies are likely to cover video conferencing sessions with therapists. [Hope for Depression has put together a resource guide for people looking into teletherapy](#), and Benson shares that the Anxiety and Depression Association of America has also put together a state-by-state guide to finding online help. The Dorm has also moved its mental health programming online and adding programming that allows young adults to build community virtually. To check out those services, head to the Dorm's website.

1 in 5 people in America cope with a mental health issue every day, McGeehan advises parents to remember. And since this time throws a wrench in our regular

coping mechanisms, it's important to seek help and support each other. For kids who have anxiety, Benson says, and who seek reassurance frequently, don't give in to the temptation to provide that reassurance.

"[Reassurance] will actually create more anxiety," she says. "So channel that need for reassurance into productive activities and group activities for the family."

## Create routine in place of school or work, and get creative to overcome boredom and anxiety.

For kids with special needs, a break in their daily routine can be especially disruptive. Try to fill the void with scheduled activities. Make sure your child is up and dressed at a normal time and eats breakfast—and then, you can have him work on reading or math activities if he's school-aged, then have a scheduled lunch time, then go back to [activities and fun](#). Dr. Rosenthal also recommends incorporating physical exercise into your child's routine. If you can afford to order (and have space for!) jump ropes, or a trampoline, or other exercise equipment, exercising can help with your child's anxiety. And if your child's school is offering any kind of online curriculum, use it. Plus, check out these [subscription boxes](#) being offered at a discounted rate to some stress-free fun as a family.

If your adult child's workplace is closed, see if the workplace offers online continuing education or learning opportunities to make up for on-site work that's now impossible to do. If not, you can find plenty of learning opportunities online. Create opportunities based on what your child is interested in. If she loves learning about cars, Dr. Rosenthal suggests, have her create a report on different types and present it to you.

The last piece of the puzzle for the whole family is getting creative so you don't go insane. Try homeschooling, at-home workouts, games and activities, and more as the days progress. Benson emphasizes this is a great time to learn new skills.

Moreover, establishing routine between yourself and your partner will help your kids stay on track and foster everyone's relationships.

"It's in those cracks where we lose our routine where the anxiety creeps in. So parents can work together to come up with a daily schedule," she says. "Everybody needs to work in a huge amount of compassion and adaptability into this equation. But if parents can work in a routine, that's gonna help their relationship and help ease kids' anxieties."

Another positive that might come out of this situation? Letting your kids teach you about connecting with others online. They are the masters, after all.

"Now more than ever, a lot of us are wondering how we're going to connect and find community online," McGeehan says. "Young people can teach us how to adjust and find that community virtually."

## Don't sweat the small stuff in this uncertain time.

"This week is going to be really tough because everyone's in a transition period," Dr. Rosenthal says. "Next week will be much more manageable, because everyone will have worked out the kinks of school and activities. This week is going to be particularly rough. I wouldn't set expectations too high for getting it down perfectly. If you need to put on an extra movie here or there, don't sweat it."

He also advises that this could be a time of unprecedented connection between family members—especially parents, who have it more difficult than most. This is an opportunity to band together with family, friends, and coworkers.

"This is a great opportunity for people to look at themselves and their relationships, and lean into the fact that this is going to be challenging and redefining for however many months this lasts until things are calmer," Dr. Rosenthal says. "But if you can make it through this tough, stressful time, you'll come out much stronger."

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