



Greenwich Country Day School

Top 10 Ways Parents/Guardians Can Help Support Children and Families During COVID-19

- From the GCDS Mental Health Team with reference to [National Association of School Psychologists](#) and the [Coalition to Support Grieving Students](#)

1. **Take Care of Yourself** - Make sure you are taking time to take care of yourself physically (sleep, diet, and exercise) and emotionally. This also means not ignoring your own fear of loss and anxieties. Understanding your own emotions and behaviors, learning to be empathic and curious with yourself, will be helpful in your parenting during these difficult times. It is also important to make time for enjoyable activities for yourself and your children.
2. **Be Honest** - It is essential that you are honest and direct with children. While it is important to be truthful, it is also important to share developmentally appropriate information. For example, you will be more likely to share more of the details with your high school student than with your elementary student. For younger children you may give them a single piece of information (“You’re uncle is very sick.”) and then follow that up with a question (“Do you have any questions about that?”). It is also important that you are honest and open with your children about what you have discussed with other family members, friends, and the school.
3. **Listen Empathically and Curiously** - Parents will need to “create a space” where children can feel heard. Make yourself available (both with time and emotional bandwidth) in a way that demonstrates genuine care and interest. Know that it is ok to be emotional (as long as you are not inconsolable) and understand that you do not have to have the right words. Just sitting with your child (children) or reflecting back to them what you heard them say is extremely therapeutic. Initiating the conversation with your children, especially the older students is important. Failing to have the conversation may be interpreted by your child to mean that you are unable to provide help, do not see the issue as important, or feel uncomfortable having the conversation. Having the conversation does not make the situation worse. Rather, it is our ability to become comfortable with discomfort that will allow parents and children to work through their fears.
4. **Be A Role Model** - Children observe adults and take their cues from them. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge your feelings as well as openly discussing the effective and healthy ways that you are handling stress. Promoting positive coping strategies by

engaging in behaviors such as creating a schedule and following it, taking care of yourself physically through sleep, exercise, and nutrition, expressing emotions to a loved one, working on controlling what is controllable, and being PATIENT. Parents, you may have to answer the same questions many times, you may have to respond to an emotionally fragile child many times, and you may have to stop what you are doing many times in order to respond to your children in a healthy and effective way.

5. **Acknowledge Changes** - With our current life circumstances, there are clearly changes that we are all adjusting to. Understanding what those changes are for your children and the impact it has on them emotionally, socially, and academically is paramount. With increased awareness, anticipate conversations about the changes they are experiencing and what these changes could look like with the onset of an illness or the fear of loss. With an illness, some children may begin to see themselves as needing to accept new responsibilities or redefining their role in the family. Please keep in mind that fear of loss may also include financial loss, social loss (i.e., loss of relationships with friends in school or out of school), and academic loss (i.e., fear of falling behind). In regard to changes, this is a great time for parents to help children engage in activities that they can control and work on letting go of the uncontrollable.
6. **Empathize With Your Child's Emotions and Behaviors** - Children are likely to have a myriad of emotions, and there is no one correct response. Learn to respect the differences in each child's emotional reactivity without feeling disappointed or personally attacked by them.. While some children will be able to express themselves clearly, others may have significant difficulties. For these children we may see their expression through behaviors rather than words. Your children may be worrying about more than just the fear of loss, they might also be worried about how other family members are coping or disappointing their teachers. As your children progress through this it will be important to keep in mind that the fear of loss, anxiety, or grief does not have a specific timeline. Given this, telling them that they are likely to feel better in a few days will not be helpful. In addition, keep in mind important events (anniversaries, birthdays, holidays, etc.) as these can trigger thoughts and subsequent emotions.
7. **Help Children "Tell Their Own Story"** - As each child will experience their worry and fear of loss in their own way, their journeys will likely look very different. Providing them with the space to go through it differently means you are listening and understanding how they are feeling, what they are thinking, and what is happening to their bodies. Practicing mirror listening and validating here is important. But what happens if your child does not want to discuss anything or even gets angry. The answer is we do not force them and remain calm and compassionate. We then reassure them that we are here for them if they need us and we model this by checking in with them in an empathic way on a consistent basis.

8. **What Behaviors Might Be Expected** - You can expect a lot of different behaviors as we engage in Social Distancing in the hope that family, friends, and community remain safe. Here are a few: confusion, anxiety, irritability, poor concentration, poor academic performance, decreased frustration tolerance, poor sleeping, poor appetite, decreased interest in activities, emotional numbing, mood lability, and depression. Since mood and behavioral lability is expected, rather than becoming angry or anxious, this is the time to practice some of the other Top 10 skills noted within this document. If your child does not express any, this is not a reason to believe there is something wrong. It is recommended, however, that you keep a close eye on your child in order to determine if they are avoiding their emotions.

9. **Things to Avoid** - As was mentioned above in #2, we want to avoid saying nothing. We also want to avoid making minimizing statements (“This is not a big deal.” “You weren’t close with him anyway.”) or as was mentioned above, putting a timeframe on how they may be feeling (“You should feel better in a couple of weeks.”). Over identifying (“I know exactly how you feel.”) is another area that parents will sometimes engage in that we want to avoid. Instead parents are encouraged to ask more questions (“Tell me how you are feeling.”) or use mirror listening (“Wow, you mentioned that you feel completely heart broken.”). Finally, parents will often feel that they have to immediately solve their childrens’ problems in order to make them feel better. Sitting with your children with compassion and curiosity is just as helpful, especially when we do not have the answers. Parents need to learn to be comfortable with their own discomfort. And when you do not know what to say to a scary comment such as “I am just so scared he might die,” avoid giving false hope, and instead let your child know that you understand how they feel by saying something like, “Having thoughts like that can be so scary. Do you want to talk more about that?”).

10. **Monitor Social Media** - Some children will seek information or support from social media. Encourage them to get the facts from the adults and school. In addition, support them as they seek support from a trusted adult or friend. Middle School and High School students are more likely to engage in social media and therefore are more vulnerable to learning incorrect information. It will be important to ask them what they know and have factual conversations when needed.