

Building Positive Conditions for Learning at Home



How You Can Be Ready to Support Your Child

The COVID-19 pandemic has created many challenges for families and caregivers, from loss of typical working situations or loss of job, to finding ways to meet basic needs like food and safety, for example. In addition, most – if not all – of us have lost access to community resources like schools and community centers, and we have had to shift to learning at home. Were you ready to support your child in the shift to learning at home? Did you feel like you had the capacity and the knowledge to support your child’s academic, social, and emotional needs while also juggling your other responsibilities? It is likely that you did not, and that is OK. This is an unprecedented time of change, and we are all learning and adapting as best we can.

AIR experts have assembled a [collection of resources that focuses on building positive conditions for learning at home](#), and this resource focuses on the foundation: YOU. We want to make sure to support you—and ensure that you have the motivation, capacity, and knowledge to take on this task. In this section, we will focus on:

- **Understanding stress and anxiety:** what is it and why does it matter?
- **Using this information:** what are the strategies for making sure that you are ready to support your child?
- **Things to look for:** what is normal and what may be a potential warning sign that something needs more attention?
- **Resources:** what materials are available if you want to explore this topic in greater detail?

As you read through these resources, remember: Every family is different. Everyone’s individual circumstances are different. Everyone brings their unique set of strengths to address life’s challenges. The information we are sharing here is designed to be flexible and adapted in the ways that work best for you.

Understanding Stress and Anxiety

We are all dealing with increased levels of stress and anxiety in the face of a worldwide health pandemic. This means that our brains may not be able to access the tools and tricks we would normally rely on to help us manage that stress. When we can't access those tools, we may be more impatient, have a harder time paying attention, or feel like withdrawing from our family and friends. We may feel worried about meeting basic needs (like food, water, shelter, and yes, even toilet paper), or we might not have the energy to put toward things that don't relate to basic survival. If any of this rings true for you, just know that you are not alone and that **these responses are completely normal.**

Using This Information

You should also know that there are things you can do to protect your mental and physical health. Why does this matter? Your level of stress, your temper, and your ability to connect with your child will either help or hurt your efforts to support them. While it may feel selfish or like it isn't a priority, **taking care of yourself is the most important thing you can do right now.**

Here are a few strategies to help you get ready to support your child's learning at home:

- **Start with your basic needs.** Make sure you get enough sleep, and keep an eye on nutrition. These are "basic" needs for a reason: they matter the most. Tired brains and bodies make it *that much harder* to respond to stress. Where can you make some changes to allow more time for sleep or eating regularly?
- **Cut yourself some slack.** Know that it is okay to relax or change your expectations about what you can and should be doing. It may also mean shifting what you think your "priorities" are to allow yourself room to focus on yourself and things like sleep.
- **Set realistic goals and expectations.** Allow yourself to focus on the things that feel most important in the moment. One strategy is to set a "north star," or one to two concrete things you want to accomplish, and use that to guide your day.

How Stress Impacts Our Brain

When our brain senses what it thinks is danger, it releases a chemical called cortisol. This chemical is what helps us to react quickly and get to safety (what is sometimes called "fight or flight.") When the danger sensation is temporary, our brains react appropriately but when we are under a lot of stress for extended periods of time, our brains and bodies may have a harder time returning to normal. If our brains are triggering our bodies to produce a steady stream of cortisol, that can be very damaging in the long-term.

- **Try to create a routine for yourself (and your child).** Our brains can respond more effectively if we know what to expect. While that may feel almost impossible in a time of uncertainty, trying to create a little control where you can will ultimately be really helpful.
- **Minimize clutter.** Consider taking short breaks to sort or organize what you can, but remember: no pressure! You don't need to be Marie Kondo, but organized spaces can help to minimize anxiety.
- **Find something that brings you joy and do it regularly.** Maybe it's taking a walk, watching TV, baking, or sitting and staring out the window. Even if the time you can devote to a joyful activity is short, and even if you feel like there are other things you should be doing, make time for yourself. Your brain needs it.
- **Get grounded to free your mind (even for a brief moment).** There are many ways to be mindful and quiet your mind. We most commonly think of activities like meditation (silent or guided, alone or by using an app) or deep breathing. However, you can also quiet your mind by taking a walk, journaling, dancing, listing what you are thankful for, or doing yoga. Unplugging from the constant stream of news (on TV, social media) is another important way to settle down. No matter which activity you choose, taking short breaks to be quiet will help your brain focus better after the break. This is also a good practice to try with your child. Pick and try a new practice and reflect on how it went together.
- **Pay attention to your breath.** In addition to mindfulness moments where we set aside time to actively focus on our breath, it is also important to pay attention to your breathing during normal activity. When you feel frustrated, stressed, or anxious, take a deep breath. Try to make sure your exhale is twice as long as your inhale. Our brains don't work very well when we are stressed, and deep breathing activates our brain's parasympathetic nervous systems, which, in turn, activates the relaxation response. This helps to lower our heart rate and calm down. (This is another great strategy to model for or try with your child!)
- **Practice positive self-talk.** Remind yourself that you *can* do this. Humans are hard-wired to survive, and this too will pass. It may feel silly, but tell yourself that you are doing a great job. If you can, remind others, too. Acts of gratitude and appreciation can yield surprising benefits when you do them regularly.
- **Ask for help.** As we experience the trauma of a worldwide pandemic, certain issues may come up: from domestic violence, to loss of income, to dealing with the grief that comes from illness and loss of loved ones. It may feel like we are all struggling, and we shouldn't burden others, but this is a time to come together. Ask for help when you need it. Give help when you can. We really are all in this together.

Things to Look For

As you continue to adapt to the “new normal,” pay attention to changes in your routines and behaviors. Drastic changes in your sleep patterns may be a warning sign of more significant mental health concerns, for example. Listen to your body, and make sure you are giving it what it needs. In addition, pay attention if you begin to feel overwhelming emotions. While sadness, anger, or impatience are normal responses to stress, if you are constantly stuck in a deeply negative frame of mind, this may be a sign that you need additional help from a professional.

Resources

Taking care of yourself and making sure that you are ready is critically important. These resources will help you to get ready to support your child’s learning at home:

- [Coping With Stress During Infectious Disease Outbreaks](#) and [Taking Care of Your Behavioral Health: Tips for Social Distancing, Quarantine, and Isolation During an Infectious Disease Outbreak](#), from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)
- [Checklist for Identifying Unhealthy Thoughts and Coping with Them](#)
- [How Mindfulness Can Help During COVID-19](#)
- [Managing Stress and Anxiety, from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\)](#)
- [Crisis Text Line](#): Text HOME to 741741 to connect with a Crisis Counselor 24/7.
- [National Suicide Prevention Lifeline](#): 1-(800)-273-8255: The Lifeline provides 24/7, free, and confidential support for people in distress, prevention and crisis resources for you or your loved ones, and best practices for professionals.
- [National Domestic Violence Hotline](#): 1-800-799-SAFE (7233). Advocates are available 24/7 and speak more than 200 languages. All calls are free and confidential.