



Kids' Mental Health: Lessons from the Pandemic

Developmental Milestones

The pandemic and other crises experienced by children and adolescents are superimposed on a child's normal developmental challenges. By knowing what to expect at different stages of a child's development, parents – and other caring adults – may be better equipped to respond to their child's particular needs during challenging times.

Preschoolers (3–6 years)

Children this age rely on predictable routines and consistent loving limits to feel secure. They weave together facts and fantasy to understand what they see and hear. Parents may notice a child's play may include current events and parts of life he or she finds challenging. By observing play, and asking inviting questions, parent can uncover a child's misconceptions or worries. Children of all ages take their emotional cues from parents, but children this age especially rely on a parent's calm voice and body language to feel reassured and safe. In the face of adversity, your child may regress and exhibit earlier behaviors such as more accidents after being toilet trained or more difficulty falling asleep alone. These signs of stress are common and usually resolve with extra attention to stay calm, maintain regular routines, and preview changes with your child.

Paula K. Rauch, MD

Video Segment: *Preschoolers*

👉 Introduction

This is a program about how creating opportunities for children to talk openly can help build their resilience. Understanding a child's experience and how to effectively engage with them strengthens a child's relationship with a parent or another trusted adult. A child's resilience depends on caring adults being tuned into them. In this video segment, we meet Max and his parents who describe their pandemic experiences. We also hear from a mom of two young sons. Dr. Archana Basu, a child psychologist at Massachusetts General Hospital, and Dr. Daniel Dickstein, a child psychiatrist and pediatrician at McLean Hospital, share their insight and guidance. Let's watch the video.

View *Preschoolers* video Length: 14:46

👉 Begin discussion by saying

Let's talk about Max's response to events in the pandemic and how his parents dealt with it.

👉 Ask participants

- Max cried when he told his mother his version of *Peter Rabbit*. That's when she realized he'd overheard conversations about COVID-19. How have you realized your child overheard conversations or picked up on news about the pandemic – or other stressful situations?

- What are ways you engaged your children to identify misinformation or confusion about the pandemic and its impact at home or in your community? How did you reassure them?
Response: Our brains detect and respond to changes in our environment. As Dr. Basu says, “Even infants sense the emotional climate around them and changes in the tones of their caregivers.” We can support children by offering factual, age-appropriate information. Max’s mom acknowledged Max’s worries and offered realistic reassurance by explaining that everyone was working together to stay as safe as possible. Letting Max know he could take steps to stay safe – mask wearing and handwashing – gave him a sense of control.
- As children often do, Max acted out his worries through play by holding a “coronavirus protest.” How did his mom use this opportunity to engage with Max?
Response: Liz joined in the play. She listened carefully to gain insight into Max’s thinking and followed up with age-appropriate information about his misconceptions.
- When hiking, Max steps off the path as someone approaches. His parents worry that learning to keep distance from people in the pandemic may have long-term effects. What long-term impact do you worry the pandemic may have on your child?
Response: Children learn early on about not talking to strangers, so being wary can be protective and a natural part of a child’s development. The key is to stay aware of a child’s new behaviors, engage to understand his or her thinking, and correct misinformation when necessary.
- Max’s grandmother wrote a story comparing COVID-19 to scarlet fever – an illness Max’s great grandmother survived. How have you used storytelling to help your child create a narrative about the pandemic – or any other challenging event in his or her life?
Response: Intergenerational storytelling increases child resilience – particularly when a story incorporates a challenge faced, lessons learned and a positive outcome. This reminds children that their parents and grandparents have struggled and eventually arrived at a safer place.
- Arielle demonstrates that when we experience stressful times, it’s important to talk openly with loved ones and ask for their help. How can this be helpful to children who observe it?
Response: It’s important for adults to model healthy ways of handling stress. We want children to learn that during hard times, people who care for each other ask for and give support. This is an important life lesson.

👉 Remind participants

Some parents worry that talking with children about their pandemic experiences will stir up anxiety or prolong negative memories. The truth is that by discussing what was hard, and lessons learned, children will better understand their experiences. This enhances their ability to face future adversity with confidence – and establishes you as a trusted source of information and support.