Anxiety is a basic human instinct that exists to alert us to potential danger. Unfortunately the number one mental health issue for children in the United States is having such an excess of anxiety it’s classified as a disorder. Periods of transition, stress, and upheaval of routine can negatively influence a child’s wellbeing if he or she is unable to effectively cope.

The COVID-19 pandemic is a bundle of transition, stress, and routine disruption, and everyone is feeling the effects in different ways. Children are isolated from their friends and from the routine of school and extracurriculars, and some fear for the health and safety of themselves or their loved ones. Here are some things to watch for and ways to help your child through big feelings.

Recognizing Signs of Anxiety

Not all brains are created the same, and neither are the worries inside them. Different children have different anxiety triggers and there are countless ways children display panic.

Because there are so many ways to respond to feelings of anxiety, warnings often slip by under the mask of “bad” behavior. Common responses such as impulsivity, refusal to participate, inability to focus, anger and tantrums, trouble sleeping or eating, or general opposition can appear as willful defiance. However, major changes in behavioral patterns usually indicate severe stress.

These changes often result when children don’t realize that what they’re feeling is anxiety. Many may not have the language skills or ability to express what’s going on inside of them, or they may not be able to tell the difference between anxiety and other feelings. Behaviors can result as a way to cope with this internal strain.
How You Can Help

✔ Model how to identify and manage feelings and practice healthy coping skills to remain calm yourself. Your child senses emotions and your stress will heighten theirs.

✔ Never assume the worst. Give your child your open ears and mind and listen without judgement.

✔ Remember it’s hard to manage our own feelings and actions when we’re stressed, imagine what it’s like for a child who hasn’t mastered coping yet. This can help you respond in a more nurturing and understanding way.

✔ Seek to learn what triggers worry or stress. Understanding your child’s anxiety traps can better prepare everyone to avoid them.

✔ Anxiety is not always rational, validate and accept the feeling anyway. Allowing your child to express their emotions without telling them how they should or shouldn’t feel will create a safe space to let the emotion out.

✔ Help your child be self-compassionate. Express that everyone feels this way from time to time, and it takes practice for us to learn how to manage this kind of emotion.

✔ Proactively teaching your child to be mindful of feelings is paramount in handling anxiety. Once a child is aware of feelings they may have, they are better equipped to manage them.

✔ Help them learn they are not stuck with feelings. Instead encourage flexible thinking; teach them emotions can be noticed, evaluated, and changed.

✔ Mindfulness techniques are among the most beneficial to reducing feelings of stress. Breathing exercises, naming 5 things they can sense, and muscle tensing and release exercises are all excellent practices for children of all ages.

✔ The goal is self-management, not protecting your child from feeling any strain. Life is filled with difficult experiences and helping kids manage feelings of anxiety also means helping them learn how to be comfortable with some discomfort.

✔ Finally, give them all your love. Extra long hugs are especially helpful and calming!