Helping Children Cope with an Unexpected Emergency Period at Home

Regardless of your child’s age, he or she may feel upset or have other strong emotions during a time of extreme change. Some children react right away, while others may show signs of difficulty much later. How a child reacts and the common signs of distress can vary according to the child’s age, previous experiences, and how the child typically copes with stress.

Children react, in part, on what they see from the adults around them. When parents and caregivers deal with an emergency calmly and confidently, they can provide the best support for their children. Parents can be more reassuring to others around them, especially children, if they are better prepared.

People can become more distressed if they see or hear repetitive reports in the media. Early on, consider limiting the amount of exposure you and your loved ones get to media coverage.

What You Can Do to Help Children Cope.

Manage your own stress level! When you are prepared, rested, and relaxed you can respond better to unexpected events and can make decisions in the best interest of your family and loved ones. Watch out for “Catastrophizing” which can be driven by our anticipatory anxiety. Try to keep a sense of perspective and engage in solution-focused thinking and balance this with mindful acceptance. (Mark Reinecke, PhD, Child Mind Institute)

During:

- Stay calm and provide verbal assurance. Talk to children about what is happening in away that they can understand using age appropriate simple terms.

- Having a plan will increase your children’s confidence and help give them a sense of control. Keep as much of the child’s routine as consistent as possible. Kids should get up, eat and go to bed at their normal times if possible. Discuss plans to structure time spent at home together. Develop a loose daily schedule and post it to provide structure and predictability. (Sample schedule attached.)

- Communicate with the teacher if possible and see what letters, numbers or learning themes you can work on during the home period. Workbooks are good but making learning fun around the house can be just as effective, e.g. post letters or numbers
up on kitchen cabinets to reinforce frequently. Incorporate new activities into the routine such as family game night or family bake night.

- Build in activities that help everyone get some exercise (without contact with other kids or things touched by other kids, like playground equipment). Take a daily family walk or bike ride or do yoga — great ways to let kids burn off energy and make sure everyone is staying active.

- Maintain as many connections for children as possible, i.e. facilitate phone calls or Facetime calls to playmates from school to check in.

- You can help your children feel a sense of control and manage their feelings by encouraging them to take action during this period. For example, preschoolers can draw or have a parent write cards to their school friends. 
  https://www.cdc.gov/childrenindisasters/helping-children-cope.html

After

- Provide children with opportunities to talk about what they went through or what they think about it. Encourage them to share concerns and ask questions.

- It is difficult to predict how some children will respond to unexpected emergencies and traumatic events. Because parents, teachers, and other adults see children in different situations, it is important for them to work together to share information about how each child is coping after a traumatic event.

Common Reactions

For infants to 2 year olds
Infants may become more cranky. They may cry more than usual or exhibit clinginess and want to be held more.

For 3 to 6 year olds
Preschool and kindergarten children may return or regress to behaviors they have outgrown. For example, toileting accidents, bed-wetting, or being frightened about being separated from their parents/caregivers. They may also have tantrums or a hard time sleeping.

For 7 to 10 year olds
Older children may feel sad, mad, or afraid that the event will happen again. Peers may share false information; however, parents or caregivers can correct the misinformation. Older children may focus on details of the event and want to talk about it all the time or not want to talk about it at all. They may have trouble concentrating.
At this time, everyone can feel anxious. So, parents, be kind to yourself and explore ways to find a reasonable flexible response to a very unusual and challenging life situation.

References:

Mark Reinecke, PhD in “Supporting Kids during the Covid-19 Crisis,” by Rae Jacobson, Child Mind Institute, 3/16/20.

CDC, “Helping Children Cope with Emergencies.”
https://www.cdc.gov/childrenindisasters/helping-children-cope.html