

How To Teach Kids To Cope With Uncertainty

COVID-19. The election. 2020 has brought one unknown after the next. So how can we raise kids who are experts at living with uncertainty?

By

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Uncertainty is difficult to cope with. But parents can help their children manage it well. The world around us is always filled with uncertainty, but for Americans, the year 2020 has been one for the books. The election. The COVID-19 pandemic. We've received a real-time crash course in how to manage not knowing.

And unfortunately, that's something we humans tend to [really struggle with](#).

[Studies show](#), for example, that people generally feel more stressed when they're facing the *possibility* of something bad happening than when the bad thing is a certainty. Recently, research has found [a clear link](#) between uncertainty and fear around the coronavirus and issues like anxiety and depression.

But managing uncertainty is a skill that can be learned. And mental health experts say there are a few simple strategies parents can use to help their children navigate the present moment, as well as to prepare them for a lifetime of unknowns. Here's how.

Start by simply talking about what uncertainty is and what it feels like.

Experts consistently say that one of the most powerful ways parents can help their children [develop emotional intelligence](#) is to teach them to identify their feelings. Kids need to learn how to notice their emotions and to name them, which is a process that can begin at a really young age.

"It all starts with helping kids build their own language for their emotional experiences," explained [Kelly Moore](#), a New Jersey-based psychologist. Often, that means helping them identify what is happening in their bodies (as strong emotions tend to produce physical reactions), she said.

Moore noted that children who are grappling with a lot of uncertainty might notice that their hearts are racing, they're getting sweaty, or a lot of questions are running through their minds over and over. They might also start asking you a lot of questions, she added.

Uncertainty and stress might manifest itself in different ways in older children, said psychologist [Robin Gurwitch](#), a professor in the psychiatry and behavioral sciences department at Duke University Medical Center. Tweens and teens might seem irritable, she said. They might appear more forgetful and they could have problems concentrating.

Always be honest about the limitations of what you know.

Parents have an understandable impulse to want to shield their children from stress and uncertainty, but experts warn against making up answers or providing false reassurance. It's OK to say that you don't know the answer or that you don't know what will happen.

"Parents can be honest with their children without the need to provide false information," said [Steven Meyers](#), a professor of psychology at Roosevelt University in Illinois. You can certainly talk about possible or likely outcomes, he added. You can even talk about what you hope will happen. But trying to protect your child from uncertainty altogether is not helpful to them.

What you're looking for is the "sweet spot" between protection and exposure, Moore said. You don't want to completely shield your child from the uncertainty that surrounds them, because then they will have no ability to cope as they grow into adulthood. On the flip side, you don't want to let them watch the news for hours on end or spend too much time ruminating on how COVID-19 could impact their school year.

"You want to say, 'We don't always know what's going to happen. But we're here to support you,'" Moore said. You're not necessarily going to fix the problem or provide them with a sense of certainty, but you can give them space to talk about how uncertainty feels.

Modeling calmness can be an important tool for parents who hope to teach children to cope with uncertainty.

Model calmness yourself.

"We are our children's first mirrors," Moore said.

So it is important for parents to be mindful of how we personally cope with uncertainty, even in moments when we think our children aren't watching or listening.

"A more even-keeled, honest explanation from parents allows children to better manage their own feelings to distressing news and information," echoed Meyers.

But again, modeling calmness is not the same thing as pretending that everything is OK. You want to validate emotions — both yours and your kid's, Gurwitch said — and then project confidence that they (and you!) can find ways to cope.

Then help them identify activities that make them feel calm.

In 2020, many parents have recognized just how key it is for them to have healthy emotional outlets, whether it's meditating or picking up the phone to confide in a friend.

Parents can help their children find calming strategies that really work for them, too.

"Whether it's listening to music, playing music, yoga, going out for a run or a walk, petting your animals, watching your fish tank — what are those strategies?" Gurwitch said.

One way to help your kiddo figure out which strategies really click for them is to talk to them about moments when they've felt worried or unsure before, and ask if they can recall what helped them feel better, Gurwitch said. They can turn to some tactics that have worked in the past as well as develop new ones that hopefully will carry them through their lives.

Develop some structure around them.

"It's really important to create predictability and routine in your household," Moore said. To the extent it's possible, follow a bedtime routine, she urged. If your child is learning remotely this year, try to give them a general sequence of events they can expect.

The idea is to help them feel rooted as much as possible, so they're in a better position to cope with the unknowns when they arise. You are validating that living with uncertainty can feel stressful and frightening, while also encouraging your child that they can get through it.

As Meyers said, "Parents can provide children with reassurance that they love them, can listen openly to their concerns, can share information that they do know — and can explain that not knowing is part of life."